

**UCLA**

**UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations**

**Title**

The Pious Disadvantaged: An ethnographic study of African American Muslims in South Central Los Angeles

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3787p48z>

**Author**

Prickett, Pamela Jean

**Publication Date**

2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Pious Disadvantaged:

An ethnographic study of African American Muslims

in South Central Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Sociology

by

Pamela Jean Prickett

© Copyright by  
Pamela Jean Prickett  
2015

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Pious Disadvantaged:  
An ethnographic study of African American Muslims  
in South Central Los Angeles

By

Pamela Jean Prickett

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Stefan Timmermans, Chair

This study examines the everyday “doing” of religion in a setting marked by poverty, violence, and racial segregation. Drawing on more than five years of ethnographic and historical research in an African American-led mosque in South Central Los Angeles, the study offers an on the ground perspective of how a marginalized population constructs and maintains a religious community, especially in light of ongoing urban change. Bringing together insights from the sociology of religion and urban sociology, the study also analyzes how members constructed systems of religious social support to combat inequality, investigating the ways hierarchies of place, race, gender, and class come to impact the forms and effectiveness of organized religious support. The study proposes two key theoretical interventions to understandings of religion and place. First, it extends research on urban religion by advancing the concept of *pious*

*disadvantage*, an idea that captures how members struggled to balance their religious ideals with the structural realities of urban poverty. Their struggles created a distinct type of lived religious experience in which individual hardship was woven into congregational life. The study makes a second intervention by arguing that we need to think of Islam not as a global religious tradition with more than two billion believers worldwide, but as a source of identity lived within the contours of daily life. This requires that we give closer attention to how structural locations frame religious experience, as well as how believers respond to these framings. Seeing religion as something that is done by people rather than to them helps us move away from essentializing notions of religious identity and towards a deeper understanding of how marginalized populations engage religious frameworks in the organization of daily life.

The dissertation of Pamela Jean Prickett is approved.

Jack Katz

Karen Leonard

Stefan Timmermans, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE: RAMADAN IN SOUTH CENTRAL.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: A RUDDERLESS SHIP?.....	42
CHAPTER THREE: HALAL HUSTLING.....	86
CHAPTER FOUR: RESISTING PATRIARCHY.....	120
CHAPTER FIVE: CONSTRUCTING ETHNIC BOUNDARIES WITHIN ISLAM.....	142
CONCLUSION.....	166
REFERENCES.....	175

## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

### Figures

Figure 1: Map of South Central Los Angeles.....	30
Figure 2: Photograph of sunflower plant on property, 2008.....	75
Figure 4: Diagram of prayer hall.....	104
Figure 3: Photograph of handwritten request for money.....	128
Figure 5: Photograph of inside prayer hall.....	129
Figure 6: Photograph of donated goods, July 2014.....	142
Figure 7: Photograph of donated toys, September 2009.....	159

### Tables

Table 1: African American and Latino Populations of Los Angeles County, 1950-2013.....	73
--	----



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first note of gratitude goes to the believers at Masjid al-Quran in South Central—the women and men in the community who put up with my questions and note taking for more than five years and who today offer hugs when I visit. A special thank you to Sisters Ava and Aisha for their love, support, and motherly protection over the years. I already miss our late night movie marathons inside the masjid and our adventures around town in Ava’s van. Thank you to my dear friend Sister Shaheedah, who has grown into an amazing young woman during the seven years I have known her. Although she was too young at the start of this project to have a strong voice in the dissertation, my hope that she (and thousands of young women and men like her) will experience a life filled with greater opportunities than previous generations of young people in South Central provided much needed “real life” motivation.

I am indebted to my dissertation chair and graduate advisor, Stefan Timmermans, for his ceaseless support over the past eight years. Stefan is a dedicated, challenging, and sympathetic mentor. He serves as a model for graduate advising, and like all his students I have aspired to live up to the high standards he sets. In truth, I would not have moved to South Central had the suggestion come from anyone else. Karen Leonard has been an advocate for this project from the beginning and took time to line edit the entire draft. I am deeply grateful for her unyielding support. Jack Katz has an unmatched ability to make students question their data from new angles, and I expect his insights on the practice of sociology as an exercise in comparison to impact many future projects. Mignon Moore offered the right mixes of humor and honesty at key moments in the long process of graduate study. Though he was not on my committee, Bill Roy

was instrumental in helping to shape my sociological imagination through his teaching and advising.

I have benefited from the support and advice of numerous friends and colleagues at UCLA. Marie Berry, my fellow dissertator and officemate, deserves special recognition. Our “power hours” in the office and writing retreats made it possible to enjoy my final year of graduate school. I owe Marie for helping me to see the dissertation as one small part of a long intellectual journey. Thank you also to: Zsuzsa Berend, Sarah Morando Lakhani, Laura Orrico, Zeynep Ozgen, Gabriel Rossman, Jim Stigler, Forrest Stuart, Julia Tomassetti, Danielle Wondra, and the participants of the Religion and Ethnography Working Groups. The staff in the Department of Sociology, especially Wendy Fujinami, provided critical assistance and support. I also benefited from several fellowships and grants at UCLA, including a Dorothy L. Meier Dissertation Fellowship.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family and closest friends. For more than twenty years Prisdha Avril de Guzman and Dona Kim Murphey have shared my ups and downs and I am truly grateful for their love and friendship. Thank you to my parents, my grandmother, and my in-laws. A special note to my partner, Ejaz, who patiently accepted that “one more hour” in the field often turned into three or four and who agreed to raise our family closer to the mosque. I became a mother during this project, a personal transformation that changed me in unexpected professional ways. I believe I am a better sociologist as a result of taking on the awesome responsibility of molding another person’s social and moral foundation. This dissertation is dedicated to Sariya, who makes me laugh every day.

**PAMELA J. PRICKETT**  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Department of Sociology

**EDUCATION**

Ph.D. Candidate **University of California, Los Angeles**, Sociology, Expected June 2015

M.A. **University of California, Los Angeles**, Sociology, 2009

M.Sc. **London School of Economics and Political Science**, Global Media and Communications, with Merit, 2006

M.A. **University of Southern California**, Annenberg School of Communication, Global Media and Communications, 2005

B.S. **Boston University**, College of Communication, Broadcast Journalism, Summa Cum Laude, 2000

**AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION**

Religion, urban and community sociology, ethnography, Islam, gender, race/ethnicity, poverty and inequality, cultural sociology, media, qualitative research methods

**PUBLICATIONS**

Prickett, Pamela. 2015. "Negotiating Gendered Religious Space: The Particularities of Patriarchy in an African American Mosque." *Gender & Society* 29(1): 51-72.

Prickett, Pamela. 2014. "Contextualizing From Within: Perceptions of Physical Disorder in a South Central L.A. African American Mosque." *City & Community* 13(3): 214-232.

**FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS**

Excellence in Teaching Fellow, Sociology, UCLA, 2014-15

Graduate Student Travel Grant, Sociology, UCLA, 2014

Dorothy L. Meier Dissertation Fellowship, Sociology, UCLA, 2013-14

Maurice J. and Fay B. Karpf Peace Prize Award, Sociology, UCLA, 2013

Graduate Student Travel Grant, Sociology, UCLA, 2013

Graduate Fellowship, Sociology, UCLA, 2013

Collegium of University Teaching Fellowship, (CUTF), UCLA, 2012-13

Graduate Fellowship, Sociology, UCLA, 2011-12

Graduate Research Mentorship, Graduate Division, UCLA, 2010-11

Graduate Summer Research Mentorship, Graduate Division, UCLA, 2010

Graduate Student Travel Grant, Sociology, UCLA, 2010

Graduate Summer Research Mentorship, Graduate Division, UCLA, 2008

Graduate Fellowship, Sociology, UCLA, 2007-08

## **TEACHING**

### **UCLA, Department of Sociology, Instructor**

Poverty Research in the U.S. and Beyond, Fall 2014, Winter 2015

Sociology of Gender, Summer 2014

Production of Poverty Knowledge, Winter 2013

### **UCLA, Department of Sociology, Teaching Assistant**

Sociology of Mass Communication, Fall 2008, Winter and Spring 2010

Sociology of the Family, Spring and Fall 2009

Social Organization of African American Communities (Department of African American Studies), Winter 2009

### **USC, Annenberg School for Communication, Teaching Assistant**

Communication as a Social Science, Spring 2005

Media and Society, Fall 2005

## ONE

### RAMADAN IN SOUTH CENTRAL

“Dear believers,” Imam Khalid looks up from his notes and into the audience of men sitting on the floor in front of him, his gaze then moving to the women sitting in the back. “Ramadan is the month the Qur’an was revealed. It is the month of patience, the month of sympathy. We sympathize with the less fortunate of the immediate community and in the world.”

Imam Mustafah Khalid has led the small but dedicated community at Masjid al-Quran (MAQ) in historic South Central Los Angeles for more than forty years.<sup>1</sup> In that time, this community of African American Muslims and their organizational home of the masjid (mosque) have survived the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs, and the violent civil unrest that emerged after both federal policies failed to make their urban community safer or healthier (Sides 2003). Believers remember watching as rioters pushed pianos and big screens down the street during the 1992 uprising, buildings around them burning, all the while remaining confident that “no one would mess” with them or the mosque.

In return for Allah’s grace, believers renew their commitment with their Creator during the holy month and in so doing join more than one billion fasting Muslims around the world. From before the first light of day until sunset, believers abstain from all food and drink, going upwards of 18 hours without even a sip of water. The hunger and thirst that fasting bring remind community members to give alms and to show compassion for the less fortunate, those in and

---

<sup>1</sup> “South Central” serves as shorthand for an area of Los Angeles spanning more than 50 square miles south and southwest of the city’s downtown business district. The area is loosely bordered by I-10 on the north, I-105 on the south, La Cienega Boulevard on the west, and Alameda Street on the east (Ong et al. 2008). Colloquially, the term also refers to unincorporated areas, like Athens and Florence-Firestone (Sides 2012). In 2003 the City of Los Angeles officially changed the name of the area to “South Los Angeles” or “South LA” but believers continued to use South Central. Most other names of places, organizations, and individuals have been changed.

out of the community who face hunger on a regular basis. “It challenges you as a human,” described one member. “If you think you better than the poor, your belly’s hungry too.” In other words, members make this act of self-sacrifice a deeply conscious social practice.

For the women and men who attend MAQ, located in one of the city’s poorest and most segregated neighborhoods, and who everyday traverse an urban landscape as religious and racial minorities, Ramadan provides a much desired opportunity to pause from everyday life and to reflect on the past year, not unlike western traditions around New Year’s Eve or the ceremony of Chinese New Year. Fasting aids in this process, as it slows down the body and forces believers to break from their routines. They rise before dawn to fill their bodies with water and food, nap in the late afternoon when the body feels weakest (if work schedules permit), and stay at the masjid late into the night for dinner, prayer, and camaraderie.

For many outsiders to Islam, including Western journalists, it is the ‘lack of’ food and drink during sunlight hours that seems most challenging. Every year, major U.S. newspapers profile fasting Muslim Americans, focusing on how they manage work and school, often devoting special attention to athletes who fast amidst the extreme physical exertion of professional sports (Borden 2012; Nazish 2014). Yet, as important as what believers *refrain from* during Ramadan is what they *engage in* for thirty days and nights—engaging in greater acts of charity, or zakat, and striving to improve their social behaviors. Zakat is one of the five basic pillars of Islam, understood broadly as a 2.5 percent tax on personal wealth that a believer may distribute or donate to an organization that promises to help the poor. While it was not always easy for members of this struggling community to give, they committed during Ramadan to give *something*. Emphasizing the point, one sister said, “I’m po! Take the O and the R off. It’s po!” However, based on the teachings of the late Imam Warith Deen Muhammad, who led thousands

of members of the Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam, she said you “can always give one percent....Even if you have \$5, give a nickel.” This, she declared, signals your *intent*.

Believers organized their lives in and out of Ramadan on the principle that intentions matter, and it was intention that Allah looked for when deciding whether to accept a believer’s fast, *dua*<sup>2</sup>, or zakat. They hoped for the best and then accepted that forces outside their control could impede their good intentions, because in the end it is Allah’s will that decides what is meant to be. At the same time, this prick of fatalism was matched by an equal emphasis on action and the *making* of good intentions. Explained Imam Khalid, “Religion...is like a verb, not something to say but something to do. It’s like soap. Only works when we use it.” His words echo those of sociologists who emphasize that as important as what people say they believe in is what they do, in religion and all areas of social life (Avishai 2008; Jerolmak and Khan 2014; Mahmood 2005; Prickett 2015).

During Ramadan, believers intended to do more to help the less fortunate in and around the community, but how to translate these good intentions into action was anything but easy in a landscape where needs far outweighed available resources. This tension between members’ pious wishes and their structural positioning in national hierarchies of race, class, and place surfaced each time a delivery truck arrived with food from a wealthier Muslim community. In their competing visions of what sympathizing with the “less” fortunate should mean, some members believed the food should go first to fasting Muslims, those within the community who also faced hunger outside Ramadan. Others believed it their Islamic duty to first serve the dozens of non-believers around them, who also lined up with hopes of free food to feed their families. There was no easy way to predict which side believers would align themselves with in this moral

---

<sup>2</sup> A prayer of supplication

dilemma, as their diverse religious interpretations reflected the diversity of the larger urban community around them (Gregory 1998; Harding 2010).

Religious historian Robert Orsi has said that “people reveal who they are and the qualities they value in religious celebrations” (1985: xvii). In the “sacred theater” of these celebrations, the faithful become both actor and audience (ibid), with believers working out how to balance their good intentions with their available tools for action. Fasting may be the individual’s training, but as the imam sagely warned members that hot August afternoon in the long-short hours before the fast, the struggle is how to organize a *shared* Ramadan experience. “Everyday we are challenged during the fast,” Imam Khalid tells those sitting on the floor in front of him. “[But] Islam doesn’t believe in isolation. Our test is living a community life.”

Understanding how and why believers at Masjid al-Quran were so faithful about intent goes to the heart of what it means to try to live a pious life in a setting marked by poverty, violence, and racial segregation. Islam informed believers’ desire to “make” good intentions, but their lives as African Americans in South Central often shaped the specific content of these intentions. Amid recent calls for sociologists to play closer attention to religion and its influences on local communities (Cadge, Levitt, Smilde 2011; Edgell 2012), this dissertation combines insights from the sociology of religion and urban sociology to understand how religious communities respond to and are shaped by their environments (McRoberts 2003; Wellman and Corcoran 2013). Religious traditions, however “global” in their ideological identifications, are lived in the local (Knott 2005). Yes, more than one billion Muslims around the world fast at the same time, but how they break their fasts and how they practice zakat happens within the contours of daily spatial, political, and social realities (Rouse 2004).



In looking at the pattern of striving and struggling that believers at MAQ engaged in during Ramadan and other times of the year, I also hope to extend our understandings about the role of culture in the reproduction of inequality by showing *how* good intentions become thwarted by poverty, violence, and segregation (Lamont and Small 2008; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). Each of the following chapters examines a different aspect of community life, including its history, economic activities, gender relations, and understandings of race. I start though with Ramadan, when believers' intentions grew grander and their actions to sympathize with the "less" fortunate intensified daily struggles.

### **On the Eve of Ramadan**

In the weeks leading up to Ramadan, believers emphasized their hopes for all that the holy month could bring to their individual and family lives. They framed Ramadan as a "self-development" program, discussing their desires to cleanse their bodies and spirits. Imam Ahman, the youngest imam at MAQ, said that during the fast believers acquire "an urge for natural foods...[it] helps with sluggishness and weight." He added, "Society sees us fasting and looking better and healthy. Then they begin to study for themselves and, Inshallah, find Islam. Fasting is the single greatest healing therapy." But in what hinted at deeper problems lurking underneath the surface of excitement, the masjid also circulated a flyer advertising a drug and alcohol treatment program. The program ran year-round, but Imam Ahman billed Ramadan as the best time to participate because "fasting makes it easier to recover from addiction."

As members at MAQ prepared for Ramadan in 2009, they knew roughly when fasting would begin, but because Ramadan "rotates" every year by 10 or 11 days they waited for Imam

Khalid's specific instructions (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006). Important to Khalid and his supporters was that the community decide for itself when to begin fasting based on a very local sighting of the moon from a rooftop in South Central, as opposed to looking at a Gregorian calendar or to what Muslims around the world do. On Friday, August 21, Imam Khalid announced at the start of the weekly khutbah (sermon), "Fasting must begin tomorrow. There are no 31 days allowed. Taraweeh salat<sup>3</sup> begins tonight. The day begins at night at sunset."

As these words suggest, the days flip during Ramadan, with the bulk of social activity falling in the night when believers come together to break their meals at iftar, a nightly community dinner. This is just one of many ways Ramadan structures a new temporal landscape for the group (Zerubavel 1989, 2003). The rest of life—that is, life outside the masjid—went on hold for thirty days, with believers limiting themselves to home, work, and school. Sister Haleema explained, "Ain't no circulating or goin' no where." Ramadan is a time for good habit-forming, and, as she told her teenage granddaughter one year, you are less likely to do so if you spend your time running around the neighborhood with non-Muslims.

With their shared emphasis on good behavior, believers look forward to the period when "Shaitan (Satan) is locked up." Imam Khalid told believers on the eve of Ramadan 2009, "The things we do that are Shaitanic *we* brought to Ramadan... what is here is our residue." The implication of Shaitan being locked up is that believers have no one to blame but themselves when they failed during Ramadan, suggesting an exaggerated sense of agency that heightened the sense of failure or disappointment when events did not go as planned. The neighborhood did not change during Ramadan, only believers' intentions within it. They still faced the highest unemployment rate in the city along with higher rates of poverty, crime, and violence.

---

<sup>3</sup> Qur'anic recitation and prayer performed nightly during Ramadan

Approximately 45 minutes after beginning his khutbah that afternoon in 2009, Khalid stepped aside and Brother Sulayman made the call to prayer. At 1:44 p.m. the twenty women in the back section of the prayer hall stood up. In the front, forty men organized themselves into several diagonal lines, facing northeast towards Mecca. Copying the movements of the imam, the believers bent forward for the first rakat (prostration), resting their hands on their shins. In the middle of the prayer a police car passed, its siren drowning out Khalid's prayer instructions in Arabic. Four minutes after beginning the jumah (Friday) prayer, believers finished and filed outside. At the same moment several loud popping noises filled the air, creating a moment of confusion and alarm:

“Pop! Pop! Pop!”

A brother shouts, “Those were gunshots no doubt!”

A Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) helicopter begins circling overhead, getting closer and closer to where the believers stand. Some of the brothers walk towards the open gate and look at the commotion across the street. I join the men, looking at two Los Angeles Police Department cars parked in the middle of the busy intersection. The cops are handcuffing a young black man in a white tank top, pushing him up against one of the cars. A few of the sisters look through the fence but none come to the gate to join me. At some point during the commotion Sister Ava walks in from the street and says she was going past when the cops starting storming the house. She got frightened when she heard the loud popping sound, complaining that the police “didn't have to scare us like that.”

Later Brother Elijah and I cross the street to get a closer view of the raid. As we watch the officers in full riot gear with rifles in hand march several young black men out of a house, Elijah starts venting. “They do that to terrorize the neighborhood.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“They’re scared. There’re more of us than them.”

His defiance grows and Elijah begins to argue with a female officer who wants us to leave. “You afraid of us?” She tells him no but we have to move. Elijah taunts her further, “Don’t know what we’ll do?” I grab his arm and say, “Let’s go.” I knew that Elijah had many years before gone to jail and I wasn’t interested in him getting arrested because *I* wanted to get closer to the raid.

Like many of the older members who make up the MAQ community, Elijah was once a member of the Nation of Islam, when the group faced regular harassment from LAPD and the FBI. Although he now practices a more mainstream version of Islam, or “al-Islam” as believers referred to it, Elijah cannot help but remember his history in America’s hierarchies of race, class, and gender when he watches the police parade young black men on the streets of South Central.

Most of the women took a different view that day. Sister Marie said she was glad the police got the men in the house. “They’re usually gone by then.” Sister Ava, who expressed anger at the police for scaring her as she walked from her house to masjid was neither angry nor surprised about the arrests. She said the same house has been raided before, got boarded up, and then drug dealers went back at it again. “They’ll be back,” she said. A lifelong resident of South Central, Ava saw the raid as one of many in a system where no one wins. The fact that her

youngest son was in state prison on a drug-related offense did nothing to curb her criticism of the people sold drugs.

Before the raid, Ava and I talked about how brazen the men in the house were with their activities, dealing in front and flooding the block with flashy cars. Brother Naeem commented separately about how dangerous the house was with all the “transients” that went in and out. He warned me because a few weeks before I, a blond, blue-eyed Caucasian woman, had moved into the neighborhood.<sup>4</sup> Yet for all the attention the house generated earlier in the week, believers seemed neither surprised nor particularly interested in the spectacle across the street. Searches and arrests may be daily occurrences on the streets of poor urban spaces like South Central (Goffman 2009), but that day’s raid was unusually dramatic. A riot truck the size of a fire engine, painted in black and white and bearing “LAPD” across its side, sat in the middle of the road blocking traffic through the busy intersection, as did several police cars around the corner.

The raid stands out to me all these years later precisely because of believers’ disinterest. Most took a brief look but quickly returned to their regular conversations. Elijah was alone in expressing public resentment, and even he may not have gone to get a closer view had I not asked him to accompany me across the street. No one else from the masjid joined us, and only a handful of the more than 60 believers in attendance bothered to step out of the gate to watch from the sidewalk. Unlike believers, dozens of residents left their homes and businesses to watch the spectacle on the street—including a father who hoisted his two-year-old son atop his shoulders for a better view.

---

<sup>4</sup> I lived one half-mile from the mosque from August 2009 to September 2010, later moving to a neighborhood seven miles away but still within the greater South Los Angeles area.

The lack of interest displayed in the raid seems doubly ironic to me because 47 years earlier it was masjid members who had a “stand off” with police during a raid that turned deadly. Police shot and killed one brother, paralyzed another, and injured five more; all were unarmed. Once the focus of police harassment during their days in the Nation, believers now seemed engaged in a strategy of conflicted ignoring, recognizing that the police scare and terrorize residents but choosing not to let the craziness of the street invade their sacred masjid. This was especially true on that hot August afternoon, hours away from the start of Ramadan. Believers were more concerned with what was happening inside the gates than what lay outside, a boundary they sought to draw every day by living an Islamic “way of life.” Emphasizing this perceived dichotomy, days later another sister pointed to the street and said, “That’s the hood, outside these gates.” She added, “We ain’t part of that.”

### **Piety amidst Disadvantage: In but not “of the hood”**

Every day believers saw and heard signs of distress as a result of living and worshipping in a depressed urban area. Police helicopters, ambulance sirens, and fire engine wails frequently drowned out the imams. When driving or walking to MAQ, believers passed people sleeping at bus stops, under store awnings, and in small encampments between buildings. Houses all around the neighborhood needed repair, uncollected trash cluttered sidewalks, and stray dogs roamed in and out of yards, including the masjid’s. Some believers commuted from outlying suburbs, including Imam Khalid, but by and large most masjid-goers lived in South Central, where rates of poverty and violent crime are among the highest in the city. And so, unlike many black urban churchgoers who commute to places like South Central only on Sundays (McRoberts 2003),

many believers at MAQ had to make sense of the particularities of the street in their routine movements to and from work, home, school, shopping, and worship.

From the street, the mosque, or masjid as members always referred to it, was unrecognizable as a place of worship. Surrounded by a wire fence, the lot included a masalah (prayer hall), small house, dirt yard, and narrow gravel parking lot. The masalah was composed of a simple stucco structure with two sliding glass entrances (one for men, or “brothers,” one for women, or “sisters”). Brothers performed wudu (ritual cleansing before prayer) at an outdoor sink near a second men’s side entrance. For the first three years of the study, sisters used a small powder room inside the house for wudu, but they later helped finance the installation of a portable shed next to the house that contained a sink and foot washing station. The small house contained staff offices, kitchen, brothers’ bathroom, sisters’ powder room, and a bedroom for an elderly brother who lived there.

In spite of its simple appearances, the masjid was a place of “maximum collectivity” for community members (Kahera 2002). In addition to being open for the five daily prayers (fajr, dhuhur, asr, maghrib, and isha), jumah services on Fridays, and two adult classes on Sundays, believers used the space as a recreation center throughout the week.<sup>5</sup> Brothers played dominoes under a portable tent many weekday afternoons, and sisters used the masjid as a meeting point for social get-togethers as well as a place to bring their children and grandchildren after school. During Ramadan, some of the men who did not work spent entire days sitting outside the prayer hall, reading or talking to one another. Some of the single members lived alone in small studios or single room occupancy hotels (SROs), making the masjid a spacious and therefore more

---

<sup>5</sup> There is no quorum required to hold salat inside the masjid, as there is in other religious communities (Tavory Forthcoming). At MAQ, the gates are simply unlocked by one of the brothers living on the property or the staff and the prayer space open to anyone who wishes to perform the ritual.

desirable place to wile away the hours before iftar. Still others lived with non-Muslim kin and expressed embarrassment at having Muslim friends visit and see their crowded living conditions. In and out of Ramadan, for members of this mostly low-income community, the masjid was sometimes the only safe space to meet up with friends. I spent many of my evenings there while a resident of the neighborhood, gathering with a small group of sisters and their children. We set up portable heaters to keep us warm as we spread out on the floor to talk, eat, and watch movies on a television-VCR unit Sister Ava kept in her van.

The masjid was also where many found their husbands and wives, sometimes marrying and divorcing within the African American Muslim community three or four times. This made believers more than religious kin and turned the closed community into a web of connected families. For example, Imam Khalid's most recent wife, Sister Dina, had a daughter married to one of Sister Aisha's sons. For families like theirs, the masjid provided a space to extend jumah into a family gathering, and they often brought children and grandchildren to play basketball or to eat together after services. For believers like Sister Aisha, it was important that children spend their time with other Muslim children, and rather than go to a park in the neighborhood where homeless people may build camps or youth may smoke weed, they went to the masjid.

Best estimates suggest there are more than one million African Americans who practice Sunni Islam, many attending mosques in neighborhoods like MAQ's. The code for those women and men is not one built around 'the street' but the Qur'an (cf. Anderson 1999). Sister Aisha raised 11 children in South Central, including five sons (ages 24 to 44). Over dinner one Ramadan, she told me, "I thank Allah that all of my kids stayed Muslim...and that none of them went to jail!" I told her that was no small thing, given the statistics, and she shouted, "Yes! They are from, you know, the hood, but not *of* the hood."



But for every believer as fortunate as Aisha, it seemed I met two or three more like Sister Ava, for whom the boundary between in and of was less clear. Once divorced and once widowed, Ava spent most of her adult life working two or more jobs at the same time to feed and clothe her children. All four of her sons had served time in prison; each of her three daughters was pregnant before full adulthood. Ava could not deny that her children grew up amidst difficult social conditions, but she believed firmly in a strict moral code in which selling drugs was indefensible. She refused to accept that her sons had no other choices, pointing instead to her own work ethic and frugal living as evidence that one can survive in the hood without succumbing to drug-dealing, prostitution, or begging. Like many believers, Ava drew a distinct boundary between her own “hustlin’” (of cakes and homemade dinners) and the illicit activities she saw around her. Ava, like her best friend Aisha, credited Islam as her guiding moral force, telling me, “I thank Allah everyday I’m Muslim.”

Now both in their 60s and living without their husbands, the women spend many of their days together going on “adventures” through the neighborhood, scouting for deals at different stores and visiting friends and family. In their moments together in and out of the masjid, the women affirmed their Muslim sisterhood and supported each other’s efforts to remain separate from the danger and vice in the neighborhood. At lunch after the raid, Aisha’s oldest son reminisced about how he and his siblings frequently spent the night with Ava when they were young, watching movies in her living room and eating her signature chili mac. It was one example of many in which mothers in the community saw the masjid and Muslim community as safe family spaces. Sister Aisha said, “Our kids grew up together. That’s community.”

Once the epicenter of black urban life in Los Angeles, South Central is increasingly a Latino-dominated space. Believers need only look around the masjid to see that their neighbors

no longer look, talk, or eat as they do; even fewer identify as Muslim. As the proportion of residents has changed from 80 percent black or African American to less than 10 percent, believers have turned inward to the Muslim community for greater social support. At the same time, this places additional burdens on the organization and the networks of believers who consider it their home away from home. These burdens emerged clearly during the holy month of fasting, as believers' efforts to organize the nightly ritual of iftar demonstrate.

### **Doing Iftar in South Central**

Ramadan served as an annual reminder of the distinction believers strove to create between themselves and “the hood.” The flipped days of fasting, nightly prayers, and efforts to limit one's movements reaffirmed to believers their distinction as Muslims in a non-Muslim landscape. Even the breath changes, believers pointed out (or, more accurately, warned as I made known my intentions to fast). But while the boundary between the masjid and the hood strengthened with the bodily and temporal changes during Ramadan, the month just as often revealed the porousness of the boundary. After all, this was also the month of sympathizing and reaching out to the “less” fortunate in the community and world. This manifested in an organized effort every night to feed the poor in and around the masjid at iftar.

More than any other ritual at MAQ, iftar fostered a spirit of togetherness for members of this minority faith. As Imam Khalid said to the congregation on the night of the first taraweeh in 2009, “If your family's not here, come [to iftar].” And for believers who could not attend jumah because of work, iftar provided an opportunity to reconnect with the community, especially during the summer months when dinner started past 7 o'clock. The night of my first iftar,

Brother Naeem pointed to the tables of believers and said, “It’s beautiful. This is the socialization part. And it will only get bigger as time goes on.” Sister Sultanah expressed a similar feeling of joy about iftar, laughing and saying, “Wish we could do Ramadan all the time. I think that’s what Allah is working us to...It’s the bomb! The men be falling on each other and hugging.”

These positive perceptions of the “socialization” that iftar promises contributed to an overall feeling of excitement and hope during Ramadan that further cemented the moral distinctions believers felt between their community and that of the larger “hood” community around them. Sitting at dinner one night, Brother Naeem announced to the table that Brother Saddiq’s car was broken into last night at a masjid in another part of South Central, and Saddiq added that another sister’s car was broken into on the same street two nights ago.

Naeem: Sixty-six’s?

Saddiq: No, Van Ness Gangsters.

Naeem: Same thing. Maggots.

In fact, the night before someone had broken into Sister Betty’s car, parked on the street outside the gates of MAQ. The masjid operated an informal security team, with a handful of brothers patrolling the property during dinner and prayer, but it was an ad hoc system that could not combat all crime and revealed the limits of their group efforts. I draw out this conversation because of the extreme disgust Naeem exhibited about gang members. Given this, it may surprise readers that Naeem happily invited these “maggots” in for iftar, along with suspected pimps, addicts, and prostitutes. While Muslims around the world participate in the ritual in different

ways, at MAQ it was important that the community welcome non-Muslims from the neighborhood to receive a free meal. This was how many believed the community earned its blessings from Allah during Ramadan. The community's self-designated iftar czar, Naeem explained the process to newcomers this way:

We serve the community first, then elder sisters and sisters, then kids, then the elder brothers and us [brothers]... We need money to feed 40 to 50 people a night. If you want to sponsor an iftar, sign up in the kitchen... We'll be here every night. We look forward to feeding you. As-salaam alaikum.

In the context of Brother Naeem's description, "community" meant people from the neighborhood, including African American and Latino neighbors who lived on the streets around the masjid or in surrounding houses. That believers would invite in the same people they worked so hard to distance themselves from speaks to their collective commitment to making good intentions. While zakat is an obligation, iftar is not. In one of the few studies to explore the dynamics of Muslim giving, historian Amy Singer explains:

During Ramadan, large-scale demonstrations of generosity, in addition to the minimal zakat al-fitr are not uncommon. Wealthy people may set tables that accommodate whole neighborhoods and welcome passersby for the iftar meal to break the fast... While not a strict obligation, the sponsorship of meals to break the daily Ramadan fast appears to be a practice that in some places came to be expected (even today) from practicing Muslims of rank and wealth (2008: 78-9).

Yet, the MAQ community was far from wealthy. Only a small proportion of regular members could afford the \$80-120 it cost to sponsor an iftar, and more often multiple families co-sponsored to cut costs. By comparison, in one Los Angeles Islamic center run by Arab and South Asians, iftar sponsorship cost more than ten times as much, with a minimum donation of \$1400 expected for food alone.<sup>6</sup>

To keep their costs down, believers shopped at discount grocery stores, scouring store flyers days before for the best deals on meat, fruit, and vegetables. With between 40 and 60 people expected every night, the roughly \$2 per head meal consisted of the same basic combination most nights: a piece of baked chicken or fried fish, a scoop of white rice, a small iceberg lettuce salad, and maybe a side of bean soup or canned green beans. Believers prided themselves on being able to provide this “spread” every night of Ramadan, having done so for decades. They pointed out that many communities offer dinner only on weekends or the last ten days of the fast, including other mosques in South Central as well as larger Islamic centers like the one described earlier.

Naeem enjoyed drawing out how different the guests were from believers, emphasizing that despite their perceived differences all were welcome to receive food. At the microphone one night, he bragged, “Oh, we doin’ some da’wah (proselytizing). I mean we’re getting some hardcore neighbors and they’re staying and eating with us. (Audience laughs). Some of them smell like things they shouldn’t be doing, but don’t kill them. (More laughs).”

---

<sup>6</sup> I attended another masjid for three months before focusing on MAQ. During that time I signed up for the organization’s listserv, which I received throughout the study. The figure of \$1400 comes from emails sent to potential sponsors on the list.

When inside MAQ, guests often displayed deference towards believers, acquiescing to requests that they pull up their pants or leave their bottles and cans outside. One of the men from a barbershop across the street, an “O-G” (original gangster) named Blue, brought his group of underlings through the line, teaching the men to step back for sisters and snapping at the men when they cussed. Everyone I talked to suspected that the men sold drugs out of the shop, and some expressed frustration that the men were allowed to come on the property. But the men acted respectfully, and Blue offered both the Muslim greeting (As-salaam alaikum) and often placed a dollar or two in the zakat basket. When doing so he even copied the words of believers, saying, “Here’s a ducket for the bucket.”

Rather than express resentment for the ways believers demanded “decent” behavior (Anderson 1999), the guests seemed to respect their Muslim neighbors. For example, one night I heard a voice calling me to the gate, where I found a woman I recognized as one of the prostitutes in the neighborhood. She had joined the iftar line several nights before but on that night preferred I bring her a plate outside the masjid as she felt her scant clothing might offend believers. It is possible she just needed food and did not feel she was in a position to be able to talk back, but even so, such displays of deference towards believers affirmed the latter’s sense of propriety and superiority. When I asked Brother Fareed in the masjid office if he ever worried about the men from the barbershop causing trouble he said no, adding, “They know better.”

Of course, not everyone demonstrated respect, in part because the masjid invited guests with drug and alcohol problems whose intoxication impaired their faculties. When this happened, tensions developed over what was the Islamically appropriate way to act. The problem became clear one night in 2008, as my field notes demonstrate:

A disheveled man in tattered pants, face streaked with dirt, stumbles through the wrought iron gate onto the property, trailed by a similarly unkempt man. Some of the clean-shaven men in collared button-down shirts look up at the man they know as Chester, but others seem too tired to bother. Chester begins to reenact a scene with his friend from the street, pulling his friend's arms behind his back and slapping on invisible handcuffs. Chester is slurring his words as he pretends to arrest the other man. The two men laugh, throwing their head backs. Their chatter momentarily disrupts the calm of the masjid, and a few moments later the men settle at a picnic table.

Chester seems restless and barely two minutes pass before he is up again, moving towards a long empty table. This close to sunset, the food should be here but believers are still waiting for the pans of chicken, rice, and bean soup. Brother Fareed, the 74-year-old masjid treasurer, dressed in powder-blue suit and wide necktie, yells at the approaching Chester, "Get back!" When Chester stumbles back to the picnic table he has trouble figuring out how to pull his legs over the bench to sit. He stands with one foot on the bench, prompting Sister Haleema to snap, "Turn around and get your foot off! You're making the seat dirty!"

*"Allahu akbar. Ash-hadu an-la ilaha illa allah. Ash-hadu anna Muhammadan-Rasulullah..."* At these words announcing the end of the fasting day, the silent women and men slowly crowd around two smaller side tables to feast on sliced oranges and Medjoun dates. Chester and his friend remain at the picnic table while the believers then move inside for prayer. Following mahgrib, they file back out to again wait for dinner. It's now dark, and more guests have

come in from the nearby streets. They cluster at the edge of the parking lot away from the believers.

A car turns into the gravel lot and Brother Saleem hurriedly exits the driver side, opening the side doors to several men who have rushed towards the car for the delayed food. The men transfer half a dozen large silver pans to the long table. Brother Fareed tells me to grab a soup ladle from the kitchen, and when I return Chester is slumped over on the ground. From behind me I hear someone explain, “He tripped on the cord” (referring to the flood light clamped to the tent). Chester struggles to get back up, relying on the aid of two men from the masjid, propping him up with their shoulders and over to the crowd of guests at the opposite side of the property.

Just then Brother Malcolm marches forward, shouting, “Get him out of here! He’s drunk!” Before Malcolm can reach Chester, though, Brother Elijah navigates between the men, yelling at Malcolm to stop. Elijah grabs Chester by his coat sleeve and tries to pull him back towards the masjid. All the while Chester looks oblivious to the scuffle. He smiles and chuckles as he sways between the men.

Malcolm shouts, “He’s drunk! He shouldn’t be up there near people!”

Elijah bites back, “It don’t matter! You don’t treat no one that way! He’s hungry!” Another brother comes over to plead with Malcolm to calm down, but he won’t.

Malcolm hollers back, “He’s not Muslim!”



“No,” Elijah responds bitterly, “*You’re a Muslim!*” After he calls Malcolm a “savage,” Sister Haleema pleads with the men to stop. Only when someone brings Chester a plate, and he leaves the grounds, do Malcolm and Elijah back down.

The fight over how to handle Chester highlights two critical points. First, believers varied in their interpretations of how to perform zakat in an environment where drug and alcohol addicts can (and do) wander in from the street, a problem pastors complained of in McRoberts’ (2003) study of black storefront churches but which that study’s wide-angle lens on a religious district with 23 different congregations was not designed to examine in detail. Within the single MAQ community, believers made sense of and responded to intrusions from “the street” in competing ways. Malcolm believed it wrong to serve someone who was drunk, while Elijah believed it the obligation of Muslims to serve anyone in need. What explains their differences, for the men seemed more similar than different? Both worked off the books, both volunteered as masjid security, and both had been members of MAQ for decades. The brothers even lived next door to each other and shared rides to the masjid. Yet, they varied considerably in their perceptions of Chester’s deservingness for aid (Gans 1972). In fact, it is my contention that there is no one explanation for this variation and that the men’s differences in thought and behavior underscore the need for researchers to give greater attention to diversity *within* black urban populations rather than the dominant frame that situates “the black urban poor” outside “mainstream society” (Gregory 1998; Hunter 2013).

Second, the fight between Malcolm and Elijah over what it means to be Muslim reveals the ways context impacts the concrete doings of religion in a neighborhood marked by poverty

and institutional neglect. The neighborhood chipped at believers' attempts to construct a boundary of moral distinction between themselves and "the hood," albeit in different and often gendered ways. At a community meeting the next morning Imam Khalid told the believers, "We had a brother come here last night that they tell me was drunk. What do we do? We feed him!" The imam jovially added that the man was sober enough to find the masjid so hopefully some day he will be sober enough to find Allah. By contrast, later in the month Sister Aisha, fed up with the smell of alcohol on guests' breaths and their stumbling around the property, set up a small folding table in the parking lot with a stack of "to-go" plates. Aisha said some of the "hard-headed" brothers argued with her over it, but the sisters said it was a good idea (although they did not help Aisha and she only repeated the act sporadically through the years). In another example of the strain between brothers and sisters during Ramadan, the food was late that night because the husband and wife who sponsored iftar were fighting. Sister Samia said she came home and found Saleem with his feet up. "Maybe something's wrong with me," but it set her off. The following Ramadan they were separated.

Perhaps because of not-so-subtle hints like Aisha's to-go plates and the public squabble between Malcolm and Elijah, guests rarely ate their food at the masjid. More often, they grabbed a plate and left the grounds. But even when guests left their presence could be felt by what they took with them. Most nights the food was plentiful and sometimes so much so that believers complained of waste, pressuring Brother Fareed to drive to Skid Row to hand out the leftovers. Other nights of the more than 120 iftar dinners I observed, food ran thin, revealing the financial and emotional strain the large dinners caused on the community. Because he served himself last, Brother Naeem was the first to go without dinner on the nights of want. Ten days after the

incident with Chester and just two nights after Aisha's to-go plate attempt, I recorded the following:

More guests walk up to the line but Naeem tells them the masjid is out of food. The men wait a moment, then see the picked over aluminum trays before heading back to the street. An emaciated black man with white hair, tight stained jeans, oversized coat, and tennis shoes too small to fit around his bare heels emerges behind the group of exiting guests, and shuffles past the gates. He lingers in the parking lot, unable to stand still. Naeem notices the man and motions for him to come over to the table. Naeem scrounges up a last and final plate, giving it to the man before he too leaves. A few minutes later, Naeem sits down at our table eating just a piece of bread and some dates. He comments to Sister Haleema that he would rather give his plate to a guest. She offers her extra plate (she usually saves one or two to take home), but he says no. Naeem adds, "I really appreciate it but I'm fine." Then he says there is a "prison mentality" tonight and a sister at the table vigorously nods her head yes. Naeem continues, "The brothers came through and ate and then went back for seconds even though guests were still coming for food...[They're] buzzards." Just then I look up to see a brother hunched over the lamb picking the bones of the carcass with his fingers. A moment later another brother approaches the table and does the same thing.

Naeem left early the next several nights, telling me it was because of this "prison mentality," whereby some believers tried to get as much food as possible whether they needed it or not.

Naeem left early and avoided eating at the masjid those nights because he did not want people to “put that spirit in me.” There was little Naeem or anyone else could do about the “buzzards” or people who brought a “prison mentality” spirit to Ramadan because iftar was open to all. But, interestingly, these men did not bring out Naeem’s sense of moral superiority, as the neighborhood guests did. Rather, the presence of a “prison mentality” within the community frustrated Naeem and made him retreat from the masjid, dampening his enthusiasm for the beauty of the “socialization” he harped about on the first night of iftar.

According to some estimates, as much as one-third of the African American prison population is Muslim, with many converting inside prison walls (Leonard 2003: 8; also Dannin 2002). Sister Ava dubbed these men “jailhouse Muslims,” and new ones showed up every Ramadan. Believers pointed out the men’s shaved heads and muscular builds as telltale signs. Some of the men also exhibited aggressive or strange behaviors, as one year when a brother came around claiming he was “leader of the Muslim world” and heir to the rightful queen of Pakistan. He argued (loudly) with any member who disagreed with his claim, but few members made the efforts to argue and instead laughed off men like him. Naeem recognized that the men struggled to adjust to life on the outside, saying in some ways it was “easier in there” (prison). “There’s nowhere to go so you’re contained,” but outside the men faced more “distractions.” Yet, as common as it was to have ex-convicts at MAQ, the masjid did little to help the men in any formal or visible manner, aside from a meal during Ramadan, hot shower, or the drug and alcohol support group. To do more might have exposed the moral failings of their fellow Muslims and further weakened their sense of distinction. At the same, believers expected the men and the drama they brought to Ramadan, even admitting to wanting it a little. Sister Lisa joked that they like the “crazies” down at MAQ. “It’d be boring without them!”

“Poor people helping poor people”

Some years it was Naeem who retreated; other years he tried to prevent others from retreating. At the microphone one night in 2013, Brother Naeem said, “Let’s not be discouraged by small numbers. Let’s keep doing what we’re doing.” His comment prompted looks of confusion among the sisters and whispers of “What?” Later, Sister Natalie provided some context, explaining to us that the morning before they had a food giveaway at the masjid. Natalie said she used to receive a box from a South Asian Muslim man who delivered to her house along with about 13 other elderly believers. But the man called and told her it was getting to be too many and she would have to come down to the masjid to collect her boxes this year. The masjid was supposed to save boxes for the Muslims on the list, but Natalie said that yesterday “Naeem messed it up” by giving the food away to non-Muslims. She said it was just like when he told the guys from the barbershop to get in the front of the line, or the others coming from crack houses down the street. “They be lit up,” Natalie said, and he would usher them to front of the line. “That ain’t right and I told him.” She complained that she had “heart palpitations” after what went down over the boxes. Sister Ava went to a giveaway earlier in the month and said, “It was bad.” People from the neighborhood showed up drunk and turned irate about the wait. Both times it seemed that the truck was supposed to arrive at 9 a.m. but did not get there until after noon.

The following weekend I went to a giveaway, having promised Sister Natalie I would get her box and deliver it to her apartment. I arrived just after 11 a.m., knowing from my contacts in the office that the truck would not arrive until noon. As I drove up, I saw seven women and men sitting under the tent and a few others lined up outside the closed gate. The women inside wore

head coverings, while the women outside wore shorts and sleeveless shirts. It was several more hours before I had Natalie's box in hand, as I had to wait for the late truck and then through the chaos that ensued. The South Asian Muslim brother driving the truck was not sure how to distribute the boxes, and the brothers at MAQ quarreled over who should lead the process. Meanwhile, people on the street were shouting through the gate, complaining about their treatment. Dozens of Muslims showed up who did not attend MAQ but had been told to go there for their promised boxes. Brother Malcolm yelled at Brother Sulayman and tried to get him kicked off the lot. And amidst all this one of the community's part-time imams, Brother Wallace, stepped in to help in handing out boxes but not before taking one. He walked up to his wife, who was sitting next to me, and said, "When you go out to the car, take this." Then he put one of the boxes on the ground next to her.

"Where are we going to put that?" she asked. "We don't have room."

He replied that whatever they could not fit in the fridge would go in his stomach. In plain view of everyone, the brother helped himself to a box of donated goods before all the people on the list or the people standing outside got theirs.

The erosion of the spirit of Ramadan that arose from what believers called a "prison mentality" suggests that the moral distinction believers tried to construct between themselves and what they perceived as those "in the hood" was not impenetrable, at least not in a community where members also struggled. Every night, every year, more believers came for dinner than attended isha (evening prayer) or taraweeh (Qur'anic recitation), suggesting a greater need (or want) for free food than desire to worship. Believers intended to define themselves "over and against the street" like the churchgoers in McRoberts' study who saw "the street as the profane gone tragically wrong" (2003: 82-3). But as MAQ believers' doings during Ramadan illustrate,

the problems of the street were *their* profane problems. As much as they wanted to separate the sacred from the hood, the strains of trying to sympathize with the “less” fortunate and the disagreements over how to accomplish this brought into focus the limits of their good intentions.

As I waited for Natalie’s box that afternoon I sat next to a brother whom I did not recognize but who told me he used to go to MAQ until there became “too many chiefs, not enough Indians.” Obviously skeptical about my presence at the masjid, the brother asked me what “opinions” I had of the community. By this stage in the project I felt confident that my findings put into question the government’s growing reliance on neighborhood organizations in the fight against poverty (Allard and Small 2013). I told him one of my findings was that the push to move social services to religious organizations fails to recognize that communities like this are small and too strapped to be the final resort. They cannot cover all the needs of the believers let alone the neighborhood. He nodded, agreeing with my assessment.

Social scientists have long stressed the importance of religious organizations among African American communities, believing participation leads to greater access to social, economic, and educational services (e.g. Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). The growth of federal funding towards faith-based antipoverty programs rests on the assumption that religious institutions are better able to help the poor than other grassroots organizations (Owens 2007). But newer research calls into question the assumption that churches in black communities are oriented towards helping the people around them (McRoberts 2003) or that trust enables systems of equal exchange (Smith 2007). Furthermore, a small but growing body of scholarship on religion suggests participation carries possible negative social-psychological effects, as when poor believers feel stigmatized within their religious communities or burdened by competing demands for time, money and energy (Sullivan 2012).

While the literature on civic religion portrays institutions like MAQ as voluntary, we might question how voluntary it really is for believers like Sister Natalie, who faced “heart palpitations” trying to get a box containing two chickens, a roast, rice, corn oil, and dates to eat with her granddaughter in their shared one-bedroom apartment. As the world Natalie knows in South Central shrinks, she relies on the MAQ community for greater support. Her struggles then become part of the worship experience, impacting fellow Muslim brothers and sisters. As one member astutely noted, it was “poor people helping poor people.”

The repeated struggles the community faced in organizing the boxes of food for poorer Muslims puts into greater perspective the warning Imam Khalid gave to believers on the eve of Ramadan some four years earlier: “Everyday we are challenged during the fast...[but] Islam doesn’t believe in isolation. Our test is living a community life.” Living a community life in an environment like South Central means that piety exists alongside—not against—poverty.

### **Towards a theory of Pious Disadvantage**

William Julius Wilson (1987) coined the term “truly disadvantaged” to capture American society’s most downtrodden, giving emphasis to poor black urban populations he characterized as cut off from mainstream society by larger economic and social forces. Wilson argued that during the 1970s black middle-class outmigration coupled with long-term changes in low-skilled labor transformed certain urban areas into pockets of concentrated poverty where crime, joblessness, welfare dependency, and single mother-headed households became more prevalent and more acceptable. The theory was compelling in part because of its simplicity, leaving space for future generations of poverty scholars to examine each component and each missing



component. Criticisms aside, Wilson's work remains important for the more than 25 years of urban poverty research it inspired (Newman and Small 2001).

However, one of the major problems with subsequent research has been the trend toward collapsing of blacks in poor urban spaces like South Central into a singular category of "the" truly disadvantaged (Gregory 1998). Gregory argues that this narrow emphasis creates the illusion of a binary between "the black poor" and the often evoked but "seldom defined 'mainstream culture'" (1998: 8). As the following chapters demonstrate, believers do not fit neatly into either category. They distinguished themselves from the poor around them, but at the same time invoked Islam as a source of difference separating them from 'mainstream' American (white) society. To be fair, Wilson himself did not say all urban blacks are members of the underclass, describing instead the "life chances of truly disadvantaged groups *such as* the ghetto underclass" (1987: x, emphasis added).

Unfortunately this acknowledgment of the variability of residents in neighborhoods like South Central has received less scholarly and public attention than those Wilson said adapt to concentrated poverty through certain "ghetto" modes of culture, such as participation in systems of crime and violence. The biggest consequence of this limited view of the so-called "ghetto" is that it obscures the social, economic, political, and cultural complexity of black urban communities (Gregory 1998). For African Americans in South Central, this complexity exists within increasingly constricted physical and social spaces, thereby affecting *how* they work together to make life more viable and fair (Hunter 2013).

Figure 1. South Central Los Angeles (also known as South Los Angeles)



Source: Google maps

For many Americans, South Central evokes images of riots and gangs, both because of real-life events in 1965 and 1992 as well as the media-created imaginings by nearby Hollywood film, television, and music producers (Bennett 2010; Ong et al. 2008). As Bennett argues, “South Central has never merely existed; it has been invented and imagined, erased and resurrected through an intersection of competing names, narratives, images, and geographic spaces, some real and some merely represented” (2010: 217). Until very recently, media portrayals of South Central depicted the area as dangerous and black, belying its actual demographic composition since the 1980s (Ong et al. 2008).

In spite of greater public awareness of the changed racial composition of South Central, the area remains one depicted as decaying, blighted, and out of control (Gold 2008; Prickett 2014). Given the area’s longstanding association with crime and gangs, the people living in it have become unjustly labeled as “ghetto” and potentially dangerous (Bennett 2010; also

Harcourt 2001). The problem is so acute that in 2003 the City of Los Angeles renamed the area “South Los Angeles” to erase the persistent stigma (see Figure 1). Yet, even as believers strove to create a distinction between themselves and those “of the hood,” they refused to use the new name. Over time I came to see members’ conscious rejection of the new name as indicative of a larger effort to stay connected to the legacy of South Central as a dynamic, culturally black urban space (Sides 2003). As I explain elsewhere (Prickett 2014), members saw themselves as firmly rooted in “South Central,” hanging on to the idea that it could once again be a locus of black city life.

The dramatic transformation of South Central from majority black to majority Latino occurred in less than twenty years. As we will see in Chapter 2, these demographic changes created new social, economic, and political challenges for remaining African American residents and organizations that have altered their conceptions of community. For MAQ, the influx of Catholic and Evangelical immigrants from Central America also transformed the religious ecology of the neighborhood, producing new obstacles to fundraising and member recruitment. The imam’s wife once commented that the masjid’s “Mexican” neighbors were scared of believers. “They think we’re terrorists (a sister across from her laughs). No, seriously.” Then she added, “Fine with me. They leave us alone cuz they’re afraid we’ll blow them up.”

As much as South Central has changed in the time since MAQ opened, much about it has remained the same. People of color comprise 98 percent of the area’s population, including the highest concentration of African Americans in the city. In addition to a lower median income relative to the city as a whole, rates of homeownership and educational attainment are low when compared to nearby areas. Almost one-third of residents of greater South Central live in poverty, and in the census tract where MAQ is located, the rate is over 40 percent. Residents still face

higher rates of unemployment, greater dependence on government assistance, substandard housing options, overcrowded and low-performing schools, and a greater chance of being victim to violent crime when compared to other parts of the city and county (Ong *et al.* 2008; Sides 2012). In 2008, one-third of homicide victims in Los Angeles were black despite comprising only nine percent of the city's population (Leovy 2012: 192). And while murder rates have fallen when compared to the 1980s and early 1990s, today in parts of South Central young black and Latino men die at a rate of two per week, "often bleeding to death on public streets" (ibid). As Leovy deftly notes, residents feel this "crisis of basic physical safety" every day (ibid: 201).

Young black men were notably absent from the masjid throughout my fieldwork. Despite comprising the key demographic of the Nation of Islam, the movement through which many members at MAQ (or their parents) found Islam, rarely did younger men attend the mosque by 2008. I saw little boys come and then disappear when they hit their teen years. Some were "lost" to the streets, as members lamented of the children in middle and high schools who joined gangs or sold drugs. Some young (and not so young) men from the community went to prison, only to return looking well past their youthful years. Sadly, some died. In a strategy that speaks to families' desperate desires for something better for their men, Sister Aisha's youngest son moved to Arizona while still a teenager to escape the threat of violence from gangs.

On one level the members at MAQ represent a population of African American women and men vulnerable to poverty, violence, and segregation. This vulnerability was evident in the frequent requests for gas money, bus fare, or a bummed ride, or the need to split apart families to avoid jail or death. For some members, like Elijah, the line between Ramadan and the rest of the year blended because they often limited themselves to one meal a day to save money. Collectively, there was an institutional vulnerability in the masjid's ongoing struggles to pay its

bills and maintain the property (which I examine in detail in Chapter 2). These shared experiences informed believers' interpretations of Islam, and Islam informed the ways they navigated life in South Central, in turn creating a distinct type of lived religious experience in which individual hardship was woven into congregational life. I term the convergence of religion and urban poverty *pious disadvantage*, and the concept aims to capture the pattern of striving and struggling found within the MAQ community.

Simply put, by coming together to practice Islam as a community of African Americans in South Central, their individual struggles became the community's struggles. Believers approached Ramadan with the best of intentions, but they continuously found their efforts overwhelmed by the problems of the neighborhood. Some responded by pushing for further separation from the undeserving poor around them, while others thought it more Islamically appropriate to feed the most needy. But even in doing this, internal systems of hierarchy were exposed, leaving believers like Sister Natalie with a negative view of Brother Naeem.

Finding a tension between the religious community and its environment is not the surprising element here (cf. McRoberts 2003; Wellman and Corcoran 2013). What is unexpected is just how difficult it was for believers to try to overcome disadvantage despite a long, well-defined system of religious social support. No matter how hard they worked to make a different way of life, believers found their efforts repeatedly thwarted by the poverty, violence, and racial injustice around them. The problems believers at MAQ confronted in the doing of religion remind us that "agency contextualizes and makes visible structural conditions" (Hunter 2013: 208). With the grace of Allah, believers strive for something better for themselves and each other, but the persistence of their struggles over more than five decades of community-building reveals the limits of individual (or even group) agency. And still the women and men at MAQ do

not stop trying, because they believe their piety is greater than any disadvantage in front of them. “When we begin to imagine the urban black populace, as heterogeneous and sometimes discordant, and all the while agentic,” then Hunter argues, “we can begin to determine the true relationship that urban minorities share with the city” (ibid: 210).

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

The limits to agency that believers confronted during Ramadan reveal the pattern of striving and struggling that was emblematic of their everyday lives. My goal in the chapters that remain is to explore how this convergence of urban poverty and everyday religion played out in community life the rest of the year. Chapter 2 examines MAQ’s more than 50 years of history in South Central, situating believers’ attitudes and actions within larger patterns of neighborhood change. I also address the transition members made moving from the Nation of Islam to al-Islam under the leadership of Imam W. D. Mohammed.

Chapter 3 shows how the legacy of the Nation’s emphasis on righteousness continues in the economic activities at MAQ. I term their systems of exchange *halal hustling* to capture how believers hoped their moral means of commerce would lift them economically and morally but found their hopes dampened by mistrust of each other and of leadership at the masjid. This work fits in a larger body of literature on patterns of trust and reciprocity within urban communities. In Chapter 4 I analyze gendered systems of support, with an emphasis on the ways sisters used their engagement in the masjid to further their own ends. Chapter 5 then looks at patterns of racial boundary-making between African American and “immigrant” Muslims and draws out the moments when believers felt their relations with other ethnic Muslims violated their self-

conceptions of moral worth. Together the chapters reflect the pattern of striving and struggling found within the community during Ramadan.

As important as what this dissertation is about is what it is *not* about: this is not a story about “Black Muslims.” The term is a misnomer, coined by a sociologist back in the 1960s, to refer to the members of the Nation of Islam. Imam Khalid explained, “C. Eric Lincoln gave us that name through the book *Black Muslims in America*.” It was “not a name of our choosing,” or one that members actively promoted. While many at MAQ came through the Nation, they never saw themselves as part of “the hate that hate produced,” the title of a 1952 CBS documentary that brought the group to national attention. Believers told me that most Americans misunderstood the Nation, and so I try to bring into focus what they perceived as the positive contributions of the Nation of Islam and later al-Islam. Members at Masjid al-Quran have not abandoned the battle against racial injustices they began in the Nation of Islam, but their tools have changed to align more with traditional Qur’anic exegesis. If anything, their renewed emphasis on moral means of hustling and efforts to define the terms of the charity they receive demonstrate that the war is still going on in what Imam Khalid described as “reaching hearts and minds” of people in the black community.

Neither is this a traditional study of Islam, because there is little focus in subsequent pages on September 11<sup>th</sup>, terrorism, or Islamophobia. These did not emerge as important events or problems in believers’ everyday conversations or in their efforts to engage Islam as much as poverty or racism. To my knowledge no one else has examined in close detail the specific ways that poverty shapes how contemporary African American Muslim communities worship. I hope that offering this complicated tale of life inside the MAQ community will compel others to explore the intersection of religion and social inequality in new settings.

## **Data collection**

Gaining access to the mosque was easier than one might expect. Just as anyone may attend an iftar at MAQ, everyone is welcome to attend jumah. It was gaining access to believers that proved more difficult. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, news stories have emerged about the placement of undercover U.S. law enforcement officers in mosques across the country, including recent accounts of FBI informants at a Southern California Islamic center (e.g. Watanabe and Esquivel 2009).

I contacted leaders at MAQ, explained my research interests, and secured their consent before my first visit. However, before I went, I was warned of the types of perceptions believers might have of me. In a phone interview, a young African American imam in Texas said he knew some of the leaders associated with the masjid in Los Angeles and that, as former members of the Nation of Islam, the folks at MAQ would probably not want to welcome a Caucasian woman into their community. When I called MAQ the first time, I spoke to a man I would later come to know as Fareed Jr.—son of the masjid treasurer and office manager. I explained my intentions, and he said I was welcome to stop by, though he warned me that some in the community would not like my being there. But “don’t mind them,” he advised.

I was nervous about how I would be perceived, taking extra care to dress conservatively and wear my black headscarf at all times (I would later be teased for wearing lots of black in those first months). I believe staff appreciated that I wore respectful clothing without having to be asked, and for that it helped that I had experience in other mosques. But my clothing could do nothing to obscure my glaring whiteness—or as one of my advisors, Mignon Moore, liked to point out: I am not just white, but a blue-eyed blonde woman. I am the very epitome of the lily-white Southern Girl, with my Texas roots further complicating believers’ perceptions of me.



I took the long-term approach to data collection, spending the first several months simply hanging out and trying to build rapport with believers. I answered their repeated questions about my scholarly intentions, my family, and my religious upbringing. During this time, I jotted field notes or dictated my observations into an audio recorder in my car immediately after I left the site. Then I transcribed and expanded these observations into complete field notes upon return to my office or home. As believers eased to my presence and referred to me as “Sister Pamela” I began to take observational notes in public view. However, I rarely took notes when engaged in one-on-one conversations, sensing it made both believers and me more guarded in interactions.

From May 2008 to August 2013, which spanned six Ramadans, I attended a variety of religious and social events at MAQ, including: jumah (weekly Friday services), taraweeh (Qur’anic recitation), community meetings, and various fundraising events, including barbeques, banquets, and festivals. During my first Ramadan, I spent 30 out of 31 nights at the masjid, participating in the nightly iftar dinner, staying through taraweeh, and often well into the night. In total, I attended 120 iftars over the next five years, providing countless opportunities to meet Muslim women, men, and children.

In many ways iftar provided the perfect setting to interview people without the awkwardness of a formal interval format. Over plates of halal soul food, I exchanged stories with believers about our experiences growing up, our views of politics, and even our retail and food preferences. From these conversations, I learned about the community’s sense of shared history, common understandings of how the institution operated, and ways in which believers perceived the neighborhood both now and over time. I collected incomplete life histories of many regular attendees and often reflect on this data to understand the historical significance of believers’ experiences in the Nation of Islam—I say “incomplete” because their lives have continued to

transform since my fieldwork and will continue to do so, particularly as members of the aging community transition beyond an age most Americans recognize as the “golden years.” As I finished the dissertation in spring 2015, two of the regulars returned to Allah (including former muezzin Brother Sulayman).

I also observed believers before and after Friday services and at special events. I spent many weekday evenings and total weekends there, even when there were no scheduled activities or services (except salat). At these times, I was “hanging out” with women and men in the kitchen, offices, and on the grounds outside. As Alan Wolfe has noted, rare is the mosque in the United States that devotes itself only to prayer, as in many Muslim-majority countries (Wolfe 2003). In the American context, mosques operate more like churches, providing social services and organizing routine community events. These functions develop in part because believers have more choices to “shop” different mosques but mainly because mosques in the United States are voluntary and therefore privately funded (ibid). In Saudi Arabia, for example, the government funds local masjids and salaries for imams.

In August 2009 I decided to move to the neighborhood to immerse myself better in the community and everyday life in South Central. I struggled to find an apartment I could rent because many of the listings were in Spanish and I did not feel confident negotiating a lease in the language. It was during my second Ramadan that I tried to move, and I felt confident I could draw on some of the members for help. I was receiving more invitations to events and gatherings outside the mosque, suggesting to me that I was gaining more access to members’ outside lives. However, when I tried to draw on connections at the masjid to find a place to live, knowing that some of the believers served as informal landlords, I came up empty-handed. Brother Naeem recommended an agent, but the agent did not specialize in the area around the masjid. When I

told Naeem this, he asked, “You want to go deep into the hood?” Yes, I said, with my first preference to rent a room from a believer, to which he shook his head and said, “People respect you but you push it too far.” I asked him why it was pushing if I needed a room and someone needed a little extra cash. Then he tried, in a somewhat roundabout way, to say I was a target and I made other people a target.

I pressed further, “Why?”

Naeem reached out and touched my bare wrist and glided his finger back and forth three times. “Because of that” (my skin). He said he had a room, but “God, if something happened to you...” Then he shook his head. “People will feel bad if you get hurt.” Naeem did not actually live in the immediate neighborhood, something I learned later. At the point it was enough that he was a divorced man and I an unmarried woman. To live together would have been inappropriate in a community that deeply values marriage and sexual propriety.

Eventually I located a room advertised on Craigslist and moved in with a Mexican-American family. Believers found this odd. They said I should have gone through the Muslims, as if it was a choice. I remember feeling that I was an accepted nuisance but still had miles to go before I would feel a member of the community. In the end, I am not sure I ever was a true member of the community because I refused to “take my shahada,” despite repeated pressure from believers to make the Muslim declaration of faith.

### A Note about the Author’s Intentions

Early in my first year I tried to engage Brother Amin in a conversation, finding it difficult to cultivate organic conversation with the polite but reserved man. On a quintessentially sunny

Southern California day made warmer by the stale air of South Central, I watched Amin fold t-shirts with Islamic phrases and symbols and place them neatly on a table. Like a lot of members in those early days, he seemed skeptical of my “project” (and me). Rumors swirled that I might be FBI, and plenty of believers made jokes about me as the Jane Goodall of Islam, who came “to study a tribe that’s never seen the white man,” to quote Brother Fareed Jr.

I drew on Amin’s skepticism as a window to explain my scholarly motivations. I told Amin that I thought most Americans were unaware that the majority of African American Muslims no longer belonged to the Nation of Islam but instead practice Sunni Islam. Amin nodded, “Yes, that’s our fault...we didn’t do everything that W. D. Muhammad told us to do, like go out and engage with all the communities around here.” He expressed hope that a book about African American Islam written by a Caucasian woman could provide a counterbalance to the hegemonic (and demonized) narrative constructed about Islam by its critics in the United States. In the end, I think this is why most believers came to accept my presence as a “white girl” and “non-believer” for more than five years.

Because of my “outsider” status, I have taken what I hope is the greatest care to limit my analyses to that about which I had substantial data and was able to cross-reference with independent sources. Still, it may bother some readers that I am a white Christian-raised woman writing about African American Muslim men and women. I hope what I have written helps to assuage some of these concerns. It has been my commitment throughout the project to present a balanced perspective on community life at MAQ, showing where members strove and struggled (and sometimes triumphed). I wish Amin could be here to assess how well I have fared in the endeavor. He died from a stroke in 2009, at the unfair age of 58.

Amin and his Muslim brothers and sisters at MAQ may have been too optimistic, or perhaps I oversold the project, but either way we engage in this endeavor together. I may be the author, but it is my sincere hope that the voices of the women and men at the masjid reign supreme, giving readers a fresh glimpse into a social world unknown to most Americans. Theirs is a story about the way Islam is being lived on the ground in an urban setting marked by struggle, resistance, and delayed hope.

## Two

### A RUDDERLESS SHIP?

Tuesday, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The evening started for me like any other that first Ramadan. I arrived at the masjid just before sunset, ready for iftar. But a few moments later, as I made my way to the communal area outside the prayer hall, Brother Naeem approached and asked if I had heard the news about Imam Mohammed. I had not.

Naeem explains that Imam W. D. Mohammed, the revered 74-year-old African American Muslim leader based in suburban Chicago, passed away today—or, “returned to Allah” as I would later teach myself to say. I tell Naeem I’m surprised because I did not hear anything about it on the news, and I listened to NPR while driving to the masjid and most of the day while working. Naeem shrugs. “They were probably talking about Obama and McCain right?” Then he changes the subject, telling me about the other masjid he went to last night.

A few moments later we hear the muezzin make the call to prayer and head into the masallah. After maghrib, Imam Khalid approaches the microphone and announces what the believers in attendance already seem to know: Imam Mohammed passed this morning, although the cause is still unknown. “I talked to Elijah Muhammad Jr. today. The circumstance as known now is that Imam Mohammed was home alone where he was planning to be picked up to perform a janaza (funeral).” According to Khalid, when the

brothers went to pick him up, they found him unresponsive in his hot tub, which Khalid quickly adds, “he had for his health.”

“But he was not sick. He was not ill of any kind. He was sittin’ in the Jacuzzi but did not drown.” Calmly, Imam Khalid urges the believers, “Remember what it says in the Qur’an. He gives life and gives death.” After a brief pause he adds, “Nothing stops because one of us passes away.” Khalid says he will leave tomorrow for Chicago and plans to pass along any news to Brother Fareed. “Go eat your food and say a dua<sup>7</sup> for Imam Mohammed.” Then, with a firmer voice, “We are still going to be our own man and own woman,” assuring members that even if help is brought in “our leadership is solid... whoever comes in is gonna be a part of the Elijah Muhammad past.” He reminds believers, “Crying is okay but grieving is not.” Grief is a sign of not letting go. Allah controls who dies, so we have to accept it and move on.

Back outside, I find Sister Haleema. She looks saddened, but when I ask if she is sad she shakes her head no, adding, “I’m not sad, I’m just...” She pauses, never returning to her sentence. Instead she calls Brother Sulayman over to talk. Sulayman, whose “people” (family) are back in Chicago, tells Haleema that the janaza is planned for Thursday morning but “some people” are discussing.

Haleema: Discussin’ what?

Sulayman: Well there’s something over it.

Jimmie Jr.: A cloud.

---

<sup>7</sup> Act of supplication. Used at MAQ to refer to a prayer that asks Allah for something (blessings, improved health, etc.)

Sulayman: Yeah, a cloud over it.

Sulayman says it happened so suddenly there are “questions.” But, not wanting to desecrate the body with an autopsy, “they’ll” probably “forgo” trying to stop the janaza. Haleema, who claims to be the “first one local who heard” about the imam’s passing, makes an opaque reference to her son’s death a few years ago, saying something about “not having a choice” with an autopsy.

Later, while waiting for dinner under the tent with Naeem, he asks, “Will you include a chapter on Imam Mohammed?” I tell him it may not be a chapter but I will mention Mohammed and the leadership of the Nation. Nervous that he will feel offended, I am instead surprised by his response. “I think it would be more interesting,” Naeem suggests, “to see the reactions [to his death].” He explains that what “should” happen is the janaza within three days and then people will move on to the estate, which “should” be split between the wife and kids as laid out in the Qur’an. Naeem suspects some family members “will get emotional” and may fight the division, but that’s not what “should” happen.

The news of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed’s passing brought more believers to iftar than typical for a Tuesday night. Many wore long faces, and some of the sisters had tears in their eyes, including Sister Ava; but, following the directive of Imam Khalid, there was no sobbing, no shouting, no conspicuous grieving. The most visible sign of loss was the embracing among believers: men hugging, women hugging, men and women hugging each other. As they embraced, believers asked one another, “How did you hear about Imam’s passing?” And



followed up with, “Where were you?” It reminded me of how my mother spoke about the day of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination and the years afterward, remembering ‘where you were’ when hearing the news and the patriotism it fostered. Of course, unlike JFK, for whom the country stopped to mourn, there was little public fanfare about the passing of Imam W. D. Mohammed. I doubt most Americans would even recognize his name, even if they know something (at least loosely) about his father, the late Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

However, for members of MAQ and the estimated hundreds of thousands of African American Muslims who followed the teachings of Imam Mohammed, his death may be most comparable to the sense of loss and uncertainty Catholics feel when a pope dies. Of course, as Imam Khalid pointed out in the days that followed Mohammed’s passing, there is no pope in Islam. The lack of a central religious authority makes Islam a decentralized religion and means that local forms of leadership and organization are of added significance to social scientific studies of Islam (Williams 2011; Wolfe 2003). In the case of African American Muslims, leadership includes national-level figures such as Imam W. D. Mohammed and beforehand his father, as well as masjid-level leaders like Imam Khalid, who serve as intermediaries between community, national, and global interests. Thus in the American context mosques tend to resemble churches, where imams lead “congregations” that offer financial support in exchange for a voice in how the mosque is run (Woolfe 2003: 228). By contrast, in Muslim-majority countries mosques often receive public funds, making imams more like what we think of as government employees.

For our purposes, what this translates into on the ground is a greater emphasis on Muslim American leaders who represent the specific social, political, and economic interests of congregants, often resulting in patterns of ethnic-based leadership. This helps explain why two-

thirds of mosques in the United States serve a single ethnic group (Bagby, Perl, and Froehl 2001: 19). Of the remaining one-third, the most common combination is Arab and South Asian; African Americans overwhelmingly attend separate African American-led mosques, like MAQ. Nearly all such African American Muslims (89 percent) attend an urban mosque, with an estimated 27 percent attending a mosque in an inner city environment, like MAQ's (ibid: 26).

I am certainly not the first scholar to highlight this extreme racial/ethnic segregation among American Muslims and the uneven distribution of political and economic power concomitant with the isolation of African American Muslims to inner-city religious communities (cf. Karim 2009; Leonard 2003; McCloud 1995). Indeed, Rouse (2004) and Curtis (2002) have drawn out how the experiences of African American Muslims as separate and unequal contributes to theological differences among ethnic groups of Muslims in the U.S. In Rouse's anthropological study of African American Muslim converts in Los Angeles, the tension manifests in a distinction between interests aimed at supporting the *ummah* (worldwide community of believers) and those that support *asabiya* (nation-building). Rouse explains the distinction as one "rooted in ambivalence between, on the one hand, desiring the political power that results from engaging in local struggles, and on the other hand, desiring international legitimacy and religious authenticity" (2004: 86). Curtis identifies the distinction as one pitting particularism (i.e. race-specific traditions) against universalism (i.e. Islamic orthodoxy).

However, these are largely elite-based frames for understanding the supposed tension between religious orthodoxy and racial belonging found among African American Muslim communities. In everyday terms, believers at MAQ framed the distinction as one of balancing "religion" and "culture," with most of the members I studied accepting that religion is ultimately more important but not necessarily incompatible with culture. I return to distinctions between

religion and culture in Chapter 5 when examining the patterns of racial and ethnic boundary formation that took place at the masjid, but for now let us suspend presumptions that religion and race are in dialectical opposition. Instead, let us explore how members reacted to the loss of their esteemed African American Muslim leader, the man they credit as shepherding them into “al-Islam.” By examining the community’s actions to create a certain type of collective memory about Mohammed and his father, we will better understand their past experiences, their present-day problems, and their hopes for a better future.

Sunday, September 14, 2008

Five days after Imam Mohammed’s death, the community gathered for a special meeting. Imam Khalid called for it from Chicago, eliciting Brother Louis Abdullah to inform the believers. Louis did so simply by announcing at iftar the night before that Imam Khalid would like to speak to the community at noon on Sunday, with no additional explanation offered.

Arriving just before noon, I count 15 believers clustered inside the masjid, including Louis, Sister Haleema, Brother Fareed, his son Brother Fareed Jr., Brother Shaheem, Brother Jarrel, Brother Tay, Sister Natalie, and Sister Sultanah. Sitting on the floor next to them, Imam Khalid opens:

“Since our community was established in 1931 we have had a succession of the same leadership. It started with the honorable Elijah Muhammad and continued with his son, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. But it also

ended with Imam Mohammed...I know we feel like we're rudderless and have nothing to focus on—[a few “yes’s” ripple through the audience]—but we do what people focused on when Prophet Muhammad died.”

What people did during that time was move forward by living in accordance with the Prophet's practices (sunnah). Khalid continues, Imam Mohammed “pointed us to [this] Islam.” He turned temples into mosques and “decentralized” the organization because he did not believe in one person as leader.

“Now what has changed?” Khalid asks. His voice soft, at times too low to compete with the sounds of the street. “Every change that happens is started by Allah. The Qur'an tells us Allah has plans, so his plan supersedes all else. Sometimes even good things do not happen because Allah is not ready.”

Over the next 45 minutes, Khalid recounts the history of the community, starting with Elijah Muhammad's beginning and his efforts to grow the Nation in Detroit and later Chicago. During that time, Imam Khalid recalled how the Los Angeles chapter had to write to Chicago for permission on everything. “It could take a long time. Or there may never be a response. So that held back progress in some ways. Imam Mohammed said, ‘I'm not gonna let it do to me what it did to my father,’ so he decentralized. All the centers that were connected to [MAQ] became [their] own.” Khalid continues, “So Elijah Muhammad was in the toolkit of Allah. Imam Mohammed was too. He was our leader. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad started with nothing in Detroit by Master Fard. Allah had to approve of that.” Then, as he would repeat often over the years, Imam Khalid

recognized their shared history as members of the Nation, saying, “We never would have entered Islam another way!”

By now the crowd has grown to 30, with Brother Naeem entering late and making salat before joining the group. Khalid does not pause, “No other Muslims knew our needs,” referring to Muslims in Africa, Asia, and Saudi Arabia. “[Elijah Muhammad] wanted us to learn Islam our own way first...He wanted us to rule ourselves!” This prompted several shouts of “Yes!” from listening members. It was a history many of the “pioneers” in the audience had lived through, the term pioneer referring to members of the community who came through “the first,” or Nation of Islam. Imam Khalid added that it was then W. D. Mohammed who in 1975 helped followers get on the right path towards al-Islam, showing them how to be their own leaders.

Let me pause for a moment and point out that Khalid opened this special meeting about Imam Mohammed by going back in time to the late imam’s father, Elijah Muhammad. Khalid often did this when lecturing to believers, referencing their shared history in the Nation of Islam in order to highlight how far they had come—spiritually, socially, and politically—as a community of African American Muslims. The year 1975 marked a major turning point, because it was the year Mohammed attempted to turn the followers of Elijah Muhammad towards a radically different way of thinking about Islam.<sup>8</sup>

What did Imam Mohammed do in 1975 that members perceived as so radical? First and foremost, he sought to disaggregate images of God and theological depictions of Allah in human form

---

<sup>8</sup> Precise figures for how many members the Nation had at that time are impossible to know. The organization was, as part of its written creed, secretive and would often exaggerate its numbers. Figures ranged from a few thousand to 30,000. Regardless, the numbers were large enough and Muhammad powerful enough that the FBI targeted the NOI in its COINTELPRO operations (see Curtis 2002: 112; also Gardell 1996).

(i.e. Fard as a diety), two practices understood by many Muslims as idolatry and thus blasphemous. As Imam Khalid reminded believers that Sunday afternoon, Imam Mohammed “went right to work taking us out of that thinking, that God was a man. Allah is beyond man.” In particular, Mohammed told believers to stop worshiping his father, Elijah Muhammad, who until then was seen as “*the* Messenger to Allah” (Lincoln 1961/1994, emphasis added). Mohammed also ordered that temples sell all their chairs so that believers could “learn salat as Muslims around the world do it.” And, perhaps most controversially for members of a Black Nationalist movement, Mohammed “opened doors to non African American people. You can’t keep anyone out.” He did this, Khalid said, “at the expense of losing some of the hard shell people.”

This latter part of the 1975 transition—trying to erase the racial dynamics of past patterns of religious tradition—remains difficult for many believers to accept still today. Whereas in 1975 believers saw themselves engaged in a war of black versus white, today’s struggle for racial harmony has many more shades. In addition to the daily reminders of their socioeconomic oppression as minorities within a poor minority neighborhood (that is, African Americans in a now majority Latino South Central), believers at MAQ also faced concerns that wealthier Arabic-speaking “immigrant” Muslims would acquire control of the community.

This was a pressing concern on two levels. First, there is little doubt that Arab and South Asian Muslim Americans dominate public discussions about Islam. We need only turn on the television or open a newspaper to see how often the media and policymakers frame Islam as a foreign religion, all but ignoring the long history of African American Islam. This contributed to perceptions among MAQ members that they faced an uphill battle to establish their authority on Islam, even if they discussed in private a conviction that they were best suited as the country’s “indigenous” Muslims to teach non-believers about Islam.

Secondly and perhaps more importantly to the social organization of community life, members feared losing authority over the actual physical masjid. The community's dwindling membership numbers and ongoing financial struggles added legitimacy to their concerns, as did an experience in the early 1990s when the community made a deal with foreign Muslim investors only to wind up with nothing but a hole—literally, a hole eight feet deep and measuring nearly an acre in size. As I have explained in detail elsewhere (Prickett 2014: 225), a group of Saudis offered MAQ money to build a new masjid after the original building, declared structurally unsafe, was torn down. As part of the agreed architectural plans, leaders mobilized to have a large hole created for a future subterranean parking garage. But the investors later backed out, leaving the community with a massive hole that filled with rain the first year and became known, quite disparagingly, as “Lake Quran.” In the words of Imam Khalid, “We were the laughing stock of the city.” But members persevered, as Khalid's legend goes, because they maintained a commitment to their belief that African Americans are “a beautiful but strange people” who do best when managing their own communities. He called on this racial pride once again on that September afternoon in 2008.

Attempting to assuage fears about the possibility of an ‘outsider’ taking over in the wake of Mohammed's passing, Imam Khalid now declares, “We don't need to go outside our community to do this! We have grown enough we can do this ourselves. This is what Imam Mohammed said week before last.” He tries to convince the small crowd that the community is not lost despite feeling rudderless. “Our leadership is indigenous Muslims and will remain indigenous.”

Just when the meeting seemed to be reaching an end, Khalid's voice suddenly turns loud. Not muffled by competing noises now, he warns, “Shaitan (Satan) is always

there... You have to wade through the muddy waters.” But, he adds, “We can protect each other.” Then he calmly reminds believers, as he so often did, that “Islam is a way of life” and this is “a balanced community.” He adds, “We’re still *his* community, we’re still following that, we’re still following the Qur’an.”

His words echoed those of the deceased Imam Mohammed, who throughout his leadership encouraged African American Muslims to be both self-reliant and skeptical, as they were in the Nation, but within an orthodox Islamic framework (Leonard 2003: 57; also Curtis 2002).

I noted at the time that this was the most intimate interaction I had observed yet between Imam Khalid and believers. I could comfortably make the same claim seven years later. Often aloof, Imam Khalid maintained both physical and social distance from the masses at MAQ. He preferred to eat iftar in his office, away from the communal tables where believers sat, instead receiving a hand-delivered plate from his wife or one of the brothers in the serving line. He refused to discuss politics with anyone who did not vote, telling me, “I’ll talk to them about religion” but they are “not qualified to talk about [politics].” And when he lectured or delivered announcements, Imam Khalid stood tall, letting his lankiness assume an almost magisterial quality over the adoring believers looking at him. But that day in 2008, sitting on the floor, his shoulders slightly deflated, Imam Khalid seemed more human—the captain of an unmoored ship, drifting towards a distant horizon.

### **Living Religious History**

This chapter looks back on the community’s more than 50 years of collective memory to understand why members felt rudderless in 2008. The death of Imam W. D. Mohammed



represented a ‘natural’ rupture point in their social trajectory, creating an analytic opening to assess how believers made sense of five decades of combined leadership under Elijah Muhammad and his son, Warith Deen. This leadership was important for how it helped to shape the social organization of the African American Muslim community at large, including an emphasis on economic uplift that reverberates in teachings at MAQ today.

My main argument in this chapter is a simple one: we must look back at the organizational history of Masjid al-Quran to understand the present (and future) of the community—one that proudly declares itself to be rooted in the legacy of South Central as a black urban space. As we will see throughout the chapter, members reworked their collective past into the worship experience, with these recollections giving meaning and context to their contemporary interpretations of Islam. Perhaps the clearest evidence of this shared history is in the forms of agency believers strove to enact, as well as the struggles they repeatedly confronted: their voracious efforts to promote economic mobility yet ongoing financial worries; their aims to institute traditional gender roles as a way to lift black families, often unmet because of men’s inabilities to serve as providers; and the continuing significance of race in interactions with other Muslims, despite teachings that said Islam is a colorblind religion. These are the “muddy waters” of living and worshipping in South Central and the conditions through which members of MAQ must navigate.

Compounding the everyday problems of poor urban life was the shift believers experienced as a previously growing force of Muslims who charged *themselves* with the responsibility to rule the streets of a once black neighborhood, turned into a dwindling population of African Americans following a minority faith in a religious ecology that favored their new predominantly-Christian Latino neighbors (Prickett 2014). And further complicating

all of these local concerns was the rising tide of anti-Islamic sentiments in the U.S. that presented new political and social challenges for Muslims who sought to integrate their religious identities into secular daily life (Rinaldo 2013).

At the same time, believers understood these challenges—some present when the community formed in the 1950s, some that developed over time—as opportunities to prove what it means to “do Islam” as African Americans and as women and men in South Central. Only by putting into social context the ways that believers have been engaged in this pattern of striving and struggling for the past 50 years can we appreciate what it meant for Imam Khalid to tell believers that the loss of their esteemed leader, Imam Mohammed, would not spell the end of the community’s sovereignty as African American *and* Muslim. And only then can we reassign agency to their practice of a race-specific form of Islam that becomes negated by scholarly attempts to put religion and “culture” in opposition.

### **The Legacy of “the First”, 1931-1956**

As Imam Khalid alluded to in his special meeting, the Nation of Islam began in Detroit with “just a handful of people.” That handful of people included W. D. Fard (pronounced Fah-rahd), “a mysterious peddler-turned-prophet,” and Elijah Poole, “a Southern migrant with aspirations to religious preeminence” (DeCaro 1996: 21). Poole, who would later change his slave name to match that of Islam’s holy Prophet Muhammad, believed Fard a deity from Arabia sent to awaken black people to their rightful religion. Fard recruited an estimated 8,000 followers in Detroit, including Poole, before moving to Chicago in 1933 to escape police harassment (Essien-Essien-Udom 1962: 44). We know little about what happened in Chicago in the coming years,

except that Muhammad (Poole) took over leadership of the organization around the same time that Fard disappeared, never to be seen or heard from after 1934 (Lincoln 1994/1961: 15).<sup>9</sup>

During the next several years the group known colloquially as a “Moorish cult” or “black voodoo cult” began to recruit more black men and women from the streets of South Chicago. Muhammad’s teachings asserted that the man whom he referred to as Master Fard “had been a divine manifestation, and that Muhammad himself was Fard’s sole representative, the ‘Messenger of Allah’” (DeCaro 1996: 28). Muhammad claimed, “I know Allah, and I am with him,” adding “all blacks represent Allah...for all blacks are divine” (Lincoln 1961/1994: 68-9). In representing God in black form, Muhammad sought to redefine blackness as the “primogenitor of all that exists” (ibid: 69), and by doing so Muhammad framed the Nation of Islam as a tool for teaching black people to love themselves and to feel empowered to “do for self.”

With the rising influence of the Nation, Muhammad gained public notoriety and, quickly thereafter, drew the attention of multiple arms of law enforcement, including the Chicago police and then federal authorities (Essien-Udom 1962). In May 1942, federal authorities arrested Muhammad for encouraging draft resistance, and he served four years in a federal correction institution in Michigan. Rather than spell the end of the movement, Muhammad’s time in prison allowed him time to teach, said Imam Khalid. Muhammad began a prison ministry from his cell, teaching religion, philosophy, and black history to fellow black inmates. Prison ministry would prove critical to the movement’s growth over the coming decades, and it remained important for

---

<sup>9</sup> According to Lincoln, opponents of Elijah Muhammad pushed him out of the Detroit temple and to Chicago, while Essien-Udom describes Fard and his disciple as going together. Both scholars portray the movement as one in flux until Muhammad took clear control and raised the Nation’s economic profile, with the latter becoming emblematic of Muhammad’s strategy for organizational growth.

recruiting new members under Imam Mohammed. Even today, two of the six imams who regularly led jumah services at MAQ worked as Muslim prison chaplains. One of these men, born in Syria, said he saw men inside seek a new life through Islam, tearing off the shackles of their past lives and everything associated with them, including Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

While incarcerated, Elijah Muhammad leaned on his wife to maintain the organization. Sister Clara Muhammad became “Supreme Secretary” and was responsible for relaying orders from her husband to ministers and also visiting other incarcerated members. Gibson and Karim write, “It is arguable that without Clara’s leadership during this time, the Nation would have ceased to exist” (2014: 9). Sister Clara provided a role model for how many women in the movement understand their expected participation, believing sisters should display modesty in dress and behavior and above all be supportive of black men as part of the mission towards racial solidarity. This legacy of Sister Clara as an ideal type of sister lived on for decades, with Imam Mohammed always expressing deep respect and deference for his mother.

When Muhammad left prison in 1946, he returned to his position as head of the organization, Membership numbers had dwindled to an estimated 400 people, mostly men, but upon his release from prison Elijah Muhammad revised his theological messages to focus on economic uplift. Moving away from the mysterious doctrines of early years, Muhammad said, “We have to have businesses” and “you have to produce jobs for yourself” (Gibson and Karim 2014: 10). He opened a restaurant and grocery store, serving as the butcher and teaching his children how to butcher the meat to sell. This emphasis on action and practical mechanisms for

---

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the prison chaplain also said conversion to Islam presented a safe passage out of gang life inside because other inmates respected what the “Black Muslims” did for racial solidarity. In this way, the conflation by many Americans of African American Islam and the Nation of Islam benefits inmates who wish to break from previous social contacts inside prison walls by integrating into a new religious group.

black progress reverberated in Imam Khalid's teachings 50 years later. He said in 2010, the "best of us are those that are most useful," incorporating the insights of Elijah Muhammad into mainstream Islamic thought.

At this point, the Nation of Islam began to experience moderate growth, with a small but loyal following based in the Midwest and East Coast. Then in 1952, as Imam Khalid put it, "Malcolm came onto the scene." Born Malcolm Little, the hustler-turned-minister learned about the Nation of Islam while incarcerated in a Massachusetts state prison in 1947. Upon release, Malcolm Little traveled to Chicago to find Elijah Muhammad and to ask what he could do to spread Islam. He traveled to Detroit, Philadelphia, and eventually to New York and back up through New England. It was at the Moorish Temple in Connecticut that Imam Khalid said his mother first saw the charismatic minister and decided all 13 of her children had to hear him. Khalid said his mother "wouldn't rest until each of us had gone to temple once to hear Malcolm." While at first Khalid resisted, he eventually went in 1955 and what he heard "was so powerful." Khalid emphasized that the movement focused on actions and not just ideas. He like that the Nation was both a religious *and* social movement, where members engaged "hard work" as a practical tool to fight racism and poverty.

Members transformed themselves spiritually, socially, and physically. Gone were the "zoot" suits popularized by African American musicians in the 1940s as well as other clothing associated with street hustlers (Kelley 1994). Enter the single-breasted suits, skinny ties, and black-rimmed eyeglasses, such as those epitomized by Malcolm X. Brother Naeem joked that he first entered the temple in Los Angeles in the early 1970s dressed like a pimp. He later learned that such presentations of self were strictly banned. The Nation's internal police force, the Fruit of Islam, had "soldiers" who checked members before they entered the mosque to ensure that all

men and women were properly dressed. Literally, MAQ had a “check room” where members underwent physical inspection before entering the masjid. Women had to display modesty, covering their heads, arms, and legs. Men were expected to wear suits and look clean and pressed. One brother described the process as one that took the “rough edges” of members and “smoothed” them out. Leaders also encouraged marriage, a disciplined diet, and abstinence from alcohol and drugs, all of which Muhammad framed as tools to learn to love oneself and stood in opposition to the ways whites had taught African Americans to see their blackness.

The same rules of self-discipline applied to youth growing up in the Nation of Islam. They attended Muslim parochial schools, called the “University of Islam,” in what believers boasted was the “largest black education system” in the United States, with over 1000 total students across an estimated 14 schools. Curricula included courses on black history and religious theology, advancing the race-based agenda of Elijah Muhammad. Like their parents, who were expected to line up in the checkroom before entering the temple, children lined up every morning for assembly and prayer. Brother Sadiq, a former teacher at the school and father of six, said, “We had an assembly... You came in late [snaps fingers], drop, give me ten, in your suit.” He said the Nation focused on “results, not excuses” for *all* its members. The University of Islam parochial schools, renamed after Sister Clara Muhammad when Imam W. D. Mohammed took control in 1975, taught these children of South Central to love and respect an essentialized view of blackness. According to Lincoln, parents perceived the messages taught in the Nation schools as a “welcome change from the white-oriented teaching in nearly all public schools” (1961/1994: 120).

Elijah Muhammad and his ministers also transformed the ways that followers earned money. The organization began selling newspapers in the early 1960s and by 1975 reached a

circulation of over 500,000. Imam Khalid remembered going door to door in his hometown of New Haven selling the paper, saying this was the single most important way that the Nation spread its message to black urban communities. Clearly, the Gramscian argument that elites use the media and other “ideological sectors” for control was not lost on Muhammad (Scott 1985). He masterfully combined print media, religion, and education to engineer a different kind of consent of rule within black urban communities, drawing heavily on his newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, as a medium to advocate separation from mainstream (white) America. He singled out Christianity as responsible for the perpetuation of white-domination by encouraging “black passivity” (Harris 1999: 44), writing that Christianity was a “slave religion” used by whites to deny blacks their divine nature (Curtis 2002: 74). According to Curtis, Muhammad claimed that whites had successfully used Christianity to “decimate the black family...making ‘Uncle Toms’ out of black men and ‘Jezebels’ out of black women.” Muhammad further framed Islam as a vehicle for black self-reliance while Christianity led to ‘lazy, careless, and dependent’ behavior among blacks (ibid).

This position was nothing short of radical, given the deep religious commitment of African Americans who identified with the church. According to political scientist Frederick Harris, Muhammad’s words constituted the “most biting and public criticism of Christianity’s effect on mainstream black thought and action” (1999: 43). The messages published in the newspaper created what Imam Khalid called an “effect,” encouraging believers to join the movement and to help it spread. Years later, when pushing the paper (renamed *Muslim Journal* under Imam Mohammed, Khalid pleaded, “[We] cannot let this paper die.”

As important a role as the newspapers played in the organization’s growth, what most Americans remember are the “corps of bow-tied men hawking bean pies” (Curtis 2002: 72).

Believers made the small custard pies with white navy beans and whole-wheat flour and they thought the pies to be cleaner and healthier than the sweet potato pies popular with Southern-born blacks. Brother Naeem boasted, “If there are two things *this* community gave society, it’s Islam...and bean pie.” Members went into the streets of South Central to sell the pies on corners and to local businesses, leading to interactions with non-Muslim African Americans. These interactions helped members gain the trust of their black neighbors and family, who believers said were never as distrustful of the Nation as whites suggested. Pride in their past explains why, more than thirty years after transitioning to Sunni Islam, community members continued to sell bean pies, sometimes competing with each other for space to do so (discussed in Chapter 3).

Rather than disown them for leaving the church, believers said their Christian family members accepted their decisions to become Muslim because doing so “saved” them from a life of struggle on the streets. Brother Naeem said joining Islam was the best decision he made and his mother recognized this. Others recounted similar stories in which Islam made them turn around their lives, with the Nation helping members to develop a sense of individual worth beyond what was prescribed by white-dominated society. They framed their commerce (then and now) in contrast to the criminal enterprises in the neighborhood, which many members engaged in prior to finding Islam. Some were ex-convicts; others worked as “pimps, prostitutes, pool sharks, or gamblers” (Lincoln 1961/1994: 24). Members were “rehabilitated and put to work” because, as both Lincoln and Imam Khalid said, idleness was not allowed (ibid). Leaders enforced these restrictions through an informal court system. If found guilty, members were “given time,” for minor offenses, like sleeping in the temple or chewing gum, to more egregious errors such as drug use or fornication outside marriage. “I don’t remember anyone getting 30



days,” with Khalid adding it was usually 90 days of excommunication ordered. This gave members time to “learn to obey.”

Believers felt that most Americans misunderstood the Nation, thinking the focus was on black hatred of whites when instead they learned ‘love of self,’ a radical ideology for poor, disenfranchised blacks at that time. Imam Khalid reinforced this idea when he told believers, “Islam has taken us from such a low position in society...to one where we respect ourselves.” Even years later when they emphasized their allegiance to Sunni Islam, believers respected their history in the Nation as a critical part of their religious and social development. A pioneer and part-time imam in the community, Brother Louis said, “[Elijah Muhammad] had a plan to bring us to Islam, an awkward plan but it worked. It was Allah’s plan. Under our own color, under our own leadership.”

### **Temple #27 and the Rise of a ‘Ghetto’ Counterpublic, 1957-1975**

The Nation grew rapidly during the late 1950s and early 60s as a result of the appeal of Elijah Muhammad’s ideology to marginalized black communities. In 1956 there were ten temples, concentrated in the Midwest and along the East Coast. By 1975, there were more than 100 temples throughout the United States, including Temple #27 of Los Angeles, established in 1957 on South Broadway in South Central (Sides 2003; Turner 1997). As with many of the local chapters of the Nation of Islam, members had little choice but to set up shop in one of the poorest and most blighted areas of the city. Until World War II, few blacks in Los Angeles lived or worked outside of South Central. Even after the federal Housing Act of 1949, black residents continued to live behind a visible color line, segregated by restrictive covenants and redlining to the dense area south and southwest of the downtown business district. Few members could

remember a time when whites resided in South Central, although many Caucasians lived in its western and southern regions until the 1960s.

Forced residential racial segregation allowed city officials to all about ignore the problems of Black Angelenos by keeping them physically contained to an undesirable part of the city. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city diverted municipal funds (earmarked for traffic safety, sewage, street repairs, etc.) away from poor black areas to wealthier white neighborhoods. City officials also “ignored or relaxed zoning ordinances to accommodate commercial growth in residential areas,” which allowed several chemical companies and food processing plants to set up in the area around Temple #27 (Sides 2003: 113). The industrial debris and hazardous waste these plants produced turned South Central into the “dump-yard of the city of Los Angeles,” driving down property values and creating public health crises (ibid). Along with its physical deterioration, South Central offered fewer employment, transportation, and retail options to residents.

Ironically, all of this helped Temple #27 to strengthen its foothold in South Central during the 1950s and 60s, creating new jobs and retail for blacks trapped in a depressed urban environment. In his famed 1961 account of the Nation, C. Eric Lincoln wrote

The Muslim leaders tend to live and to build their temples in the areas from which they draw their major support—the heart of the black ghetto. The ghetto houses the most dissident and disinherited, the people who wake up to society’s kick in the teeth each morning and fall exhausted with a parting kick each night. These are the people who area ready for revolution...in the segregated black ghetto, the

vision of a “Black Nation” within a surrounding and hostile “white nation” takes on a semblance of reality (1961/1994: 24).

Muhammad and his followers focused on kicking back at white America with economic force, believing that they needed to create their own distinct black economy. This emphasis on economic separatism distinguished the Nation of Islam from other black political movements of the 1960s, and for a while it worked. Under the leadership of local ministers, Temple #27 members established fish and soul food restaurants, grocery stores, and bakeries. These brick and mortar operations, combined with the bowties and bean pies, raised the profile of Muslims in Los Angeles. Temple leaders walked through the streets of the neighborhood recruiting poor, disenfranchised black residents. Building on the distinctly racial religious theology of Elijah Muhammad, leaders reinterpreted the problems of the 1960s inner city—unemployment, municipal neglect, commercial divestment, poor housing—into opportunities for black residents to reinvent themselves as “soldiers” for the movement. New recruits heard that the black man would rise out of poverty through self-discipline and knowledge, not via dependence on government assistance. As Michael Dawson argues, the Nation viewed politics “as an extension of righteous behavior, a tool with which to achieve the race’s destiny” (2001: 108). Therefore members did not seek new laws to govern change but advocated instead for the principle of self-determination to govern each individual, and all this should occur within an Islamic framework. Said Imam Khalid, “We didn’t eat pork and didn’t sell it. We didn’t smoke and we didn’t sell cigarettes. We didn’t sell alcohol. They said you couldn’t survive in business if you didn’t sell those things. We showed [them] wrong!”

Not everyone could be so easily proven wrong, though. Many in the city perceived the Nation as “aggressive” and “militant” (Sides 2003: 174). Within a few years of founding the temple on South Broadway, members found themselves in several physical confrontations with members of law enforcement. In 1961 members of Temple #27 clashed with white security guards outside a grocery store on Western Avenue. According to Josh Sides, “six Muslims (five of them under the age of twenty-five) attacked the guards, stomping and beating them” (2003: 173). The event contributed to perceptions that the Nation promoted violence, despite members’ persistent claims that there were “no weapons” allowed.

For the next several years, LAPD engaged in a “campaign of repression” against Temple #27 and its members (Sides 2003: 173). The campaign included surveillance as well as organized violence, and the campaign reached its climax in 1962 in what believers described as a “fierce run-in” with LAPD outside Temple #27. LAPD officers raided the temple, supposedly in search of weapons, and when they met resistance from the men on guard outside the building they opened fire. According to several community members, the police “shot up the masjid” for no reason, killing one brother, paralyzing another, and injuring five more. The police never found any weapons on the men or in the building, and by all published accounts it was indeed an attack, although a jury of whites would later rule the shooting justifiable in the trial that followed.

The shooting outside Temple #27 in Los Angeles became a turning point in the history of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X helped establish and build the community, and he was close to the murdered brother, Ronald Stokes. Malcolm perceived the act as a personal attack on his religious beliefs. This was evident at the funeral for Stokes, where Malcolm X told the audience of more than two thousand mourners:

They were praying when they were shot down. They were saying, “Allahu akbar.” And it shook the officer up cuz they haven’t heard black people talk any kind of talk but what they [whites] taught. And two of the brothers who were shot in the back were telling me as they lay on the sidewalk they were holding hands. They held hands with each other, saying, “Allahu akbar,” and the blood was seeping out of them where the bullets had torn into their sides and they still said, “Allahu akbar.”<sup>11</sup>

After the funeral, Malcolm pressured headquarters to fight back with physical force against the police in Los Angeles. Eljiah Muhammad rejected the notion, advocating instead for patience and encouraging Malcolm to channel his energies into growing the economic strength of the movement. Their divergent views on how to pursue justice after the Los Angeles temple shooting contributed to Malcolm’s later retreat from the Nation. According to Richard Brent Turner, the men’s “different reactions to the murder of Ronald Stokes demonstrated clearly the ideological rift that was growing” within the organization (1997: 206). “And the ideological position that each of these leaders held represented the potential for formulating two different visions of religious identity for the Nation of Islam” (ibid). It would not be until Imam Mohammed took control nearly 15 years later that some of this potential became actualized.

While Nation leaders quarreled, back on the ground in Los Angeles members of Temple #27 thought “the war was coming” with LAPD and that more violence and death were

---

<sup>11</sup> I transcribed the words from a clip of Malcolm X speaking at the funeral of Ronald Stokes, including in a documentary written, directed, and produced by several members of the community.

imminent.<sup>12</sup> Imam Khalid said it was the success of the Los Angeles brothers in “reaching hearts and minds” of people in the black community that threatened police. He emphasized that officers found no weapons the two other times they “broke in” to the mosque in the 1960s. The Nation did not teach violence, Khalid said, further stressing that they lived in the neighborhood and for the most part “prevented violence.”

Few scholars have devoted attention to this moment in the city’s history of racial oppression, in part because the police department and the whites that dominated it successfully framed the Nation of Islam as a militant group, rather than a religious movement, and subsequently minimized the shooting in accounts to the press. Instead, the arrest of Marquette Frye by a California Highway Patrol officer in August 1965 became the watershed moment where racial injustice manifested in social unrest, culminating in six days of rioting in and around Watts that would summons the attention of the country and world towards the plight of poor blacks in South Central. It caused more damage than any of the riots in more than 100 cities across the United States during the 1960s, leading to 34 deaths, over 1000 reported injuries, and property damage estimated at \$40 million (Abu-Lughod 2007: 213).

Even if the city forgot about the 1962 shooting of an unarmed African American Muslim man, believers did not. The event remained significant enough in the collective memories of members that 46 years later when I first entered the masjid they shared the story, recounting the loss of the brother and pointing to this past violence by LAPD as proof that African Americans have always faced discrimination from law enforcement. This was often in response to questions I asked about September 11<sup>th</sup> and whether the terrorist act brought additional police attention to the community.

---

<sup>12</sup> This came from an interview in the same documentary.

Despite the violence and intimidation they faced, members of the African American Muslim community in Los Angeles continued to build their economic empire under Nation auspices. During the same time that poverty and unemployment were rising in Los Angeles and making life more difficult for many black Angelenos (Sides 2003), black-owned Muslim businesses thrived. Sisters cooked food, made uniforms, and taught children, while brothers sold newspapers and ran businesses; none was over the age of 35. When Imam Khalid took control of the temple in 1973, he added a dry cleaning business and led the community's successful fish importing operation. The Nation imported thousands of pounds of whiting fish every week from Peru, which they received at the Port of Los Angeles and transferred to its warehouse in South Central. These transactions brought African American Muslims into contact with foreign entities, a far cry from the perception of the inner city 'ghetto' as isolated and disconnected.

In fact, the community was experiencing so much growth—financial and otherwise—that members needed more physical space to hold meetings and to educate children. The Los Angeles chapter of the Nation of Islam purchased a new building about two miles further east, in one weekend transforming a building designed for dance hall parties into a religious and educational facility. Khalid boasted that they did not wait for city permits before making the changes, although such defiance would later prove costly after a protracted dispute with the City of Los Angeles over the use of a commercial property for schooling. They ignored the city and pushed forward with their efforts to exert more control in the neighborhood, later buying up additional land on the block.

Believers perceived their actions in the early 1970s as building black solidarity and contributing to racial uplift. They organized bazaars, plays, conferences, festivals, and other events, often inviting non-Muslim African Americans from across the city to participate. An in-

house production team captured these events on film for broadcast on local public television. The bazaars in particular created a space for black visibility in the city, drawing the attendance of African American entertainment and sports celebrities, as well as local politicians, including the city's first African American mayor, Tom Bradley. In Imam Khalid's recollections, these events were not so much about teaching religion as they were about building history, culture, and business. The intent, he said, was to create a sense of "belonging" and "togetherness" built on "racial pride." Epitomizing the bootstrap ideology of Elijah Muhammad, Imam Khalid said, "We achieved success because of hard work." This was a mainstay of the Nation and how many believers I met over my years of fieldwork described their time in "the first."

### **"The Transition," 1975-2008**

By the start of 1975, the Nation of Islam "was enjoying unprecedented prosperity" (Lincoln 1994/1961: 264). Under the control of Muhammad and his "royal family" based in Chicago, the Nation owned a bank, a publishing facility, an airplane, refrigerated trucks, an import business, orchards, dairies, thousands of acres of farmland, apartment complexes, a mansion in Arizona, and hundreds of small businesses, like the those in South Central (ibid; also Gardell 1996). This was in addition to the more than 100 physical temples, contributing in all to an estimated empire worth between \$80-110 million. Imam Khalid noted in a community meeting that it took scientists 40 years to build a rocket to go to the moon, but it only took 40 years for Elijah Muhammad—a man whose family was "born into slavery"—to build a community worth \$100 million. The Nation of Islam and its network of communities constituted "the most potent organized economic force in the black community" (Lincoln 1961/1994: 89).



So, it would be nothing short of astonishing for believers to watch this all disappear over the next few years, following the death of Elijah Muhammad on February 25, 1975. Plagued by lifelong respiratory problems, the 77-year-old died of congestive heart failure the day before 20,000 followers would gather in Chicago for the annual Savior Day's celebration to commemorate founder W. D. Fard. These loyal women and men received the news of Muhammad's passing and learned that his son, then known as Wallace Deen Muhammad, would succeed as leader. "The Nation of Islam was at a crossroads," wrote Lincoln in the postscript to his famed account of the movement (1994/1961: 263).

Wallace Deen took the stage that February day and announced the beginning of a series of dramatic changes to the organization of the Nation of Islam and to its theological foundation. He explained that W. D. Fard was not God in flesh but a "manifestation" of God to Elijah Muhammad (Curtis 2002: 113). He argued that "being black did not mean that one was a god or even a member of the chosen race; being black meant having the 'black mind,' which was a symbol for closeness to God" (ibid: 113). He told followers they needed only the Qur'an to achieve this closeness. Imam Khalid was among those in attendance for the Savior's Day celebration, later becoming one of the seven original ministers who stood on the stage and declared his allegiance. Choking back tears, he said, on that "first day" in 1975 there were "15,000 ears [that] opened to Islam."

Like Khalid, many believers recounted 1975 as the year of their (second) new beginning, both in their personal relationships with Allah and in their understandings of religious community. Rejecting the term conversion, believers instead called this their "transition" to al-Islam. Many adopted new Arabic surnames, replacing "X" with names such as Muhammad, Hasan, and Abdullah. Over the next several years, W. D. Muhammad, who changed his name to

Warith Deen Mohammed to further distance himself from his father's legacy, encouraged African American Muslims to look towards al-Islam as a "way of life" where racism has no place. He also implemented several practical changes, including the renaming of temples into masjids and re-designating ministers as imams. He ordered the removal of all chairs so that believers would "learn salat as Muslims around the world do." These alterations to the style of ritual changed the rhythm and tempo of community life by reorganizing the mosque to be open for the five daily prayers and jumah on Fridays. Believers, who previously fasted at Christmas time, now began to fast during the holy month of Ramadan and in so doing joined more than one billion Muslims who follow a lunar calendar to determine holidays and celebrations. And the University of Islam schools became "Sister Clara Muhammad" schools, keeping a connection to Elijah Muhammad but drawing new attention to the importance of women in the community.

Imam Mohammed then began opening believers to a new world in which they saw themselves as members of a global religious tradition. He encouraged interethnic dialogue between "indigenous" and "immigrant" Muslims, arguing that Islam is a colorblind religion. Just one year after hosting a "Black Business Bazaar," MAQ's members organized a bazaar that included immigrant Muslims, shifting the focus from "buying black" to "supporting Muslim businesses." A video of the event featured a light-skinned teenage boy receiving a scholarship, a symbolic gesture of the community's new efforts towards greater racial inclusion.

Imam Mohammed also wanted believers to fulfill their religious obligation of making the holy pilgrimage called hajj, in part to strengthen their authority on Islam. In 1976 he took 300 people to Mecca and selected Khalid to lead one of the delegations—a trip sponsored by the royal family of Saudi Arabia. Hajj became a new marker of religious commitment, but even with their relative financial improvement few of MAQ's members could afford the costly trips.

Working-class and poorer members came to rely on immigrant Muslim sponsors to finance their pilgrimages, highlighting critical class disparities between the two groups that remain important in contemporary community life (see Chapter 5).

Yet, even as Imam Mohammed was directing African American Muslims to fellowship with Muslims of other ethnic backgrounds, Mohammed also taught his followers to determine for themselves what is and is not Islamic, breaking with a tradition Malcolm X established in the mid-1960s of seeking the guidance (and approval) of Arab religious leaders in the Middle East (Curtis 2002). Believers took Imam Mohammed's directive one step further, telling me that African Americans showed immigrant Muslims in the United States how to run a successful grocery store in the inner-city without the need to sell "swine," alcohol, or cigarettes.

Imam Mohammed struggled with how to nudge the members of the Nation of Islam towards a race-inclusive ideology while at the same time recognizing their unique experiences as 'black' Americans. Believers resisted, especially when Imam Mohammed insisted on opening the masjid to whites. Brother Amin said, "We lost a few people. Some people were still hanging on to their old beliefs and ways." While Imam Khalid portrayed the transition as taking place overnight (and perhaps personally it did), Amin admitted that it took closer to "a year and a half" for most of the members to transition; but, surprisingly he said, there was "no bloodshed" for such a "big revolution." Many attributed the relative peacefulness of the transformation to the calm leadership style of W. D. Mohammed.

Mattias Gardell (1996) has suggested that the "mainstreaming project" of Imam W. D. Muhammad would have failed without a concomitant rise in the social positioning of members, achieved both through their Puritan-like ascetism and the general progress of the overall African American community during the 1970s. However, as a large portion of the movement underwent

this “subtle class shift” (Mamiya 1982), a rift began to develop between those members who were experiencing modest upward mobility and those who remained poor. The schism widened when in the next year the Nation of Islam faced economic collapse. Despite the appearance of extreme wealth, Muhammad’s death exposed that the organization was deep in debt. Imam Khalid said, “We were told to sell businesses and we did.” The money went to the people running them, leaving some members better off than others.

While Imam Mohammed may have been an excellent spiritual leader to believers, he made critical missteps in the legal process of disaggregating business holdings. Khalid explained, “We did make one big mistake. We didn’t close out the temple as a corporation.” When leaders transferred the businesses to individuals, the temple was left with a “staggering” tax bill and faced a \$200,000 lien on the property. “In the end, everything we worked so hard for [was] deemed personal.” After taxes, whatever was left went to attorney fees. Not wanting to focus on the negative, Khalid said that was “the nature of these things.” It seems likely that not everyone at MAQ back then took this sanguine a view about the community’s losses, but they did not blame Imam Mohammed. Instead, they spoke longingly of their days in the Nation, often referring to pioneers by what they sold (e.g. Brother Nathaniel who “used to have the bakery”). The fact that believers did not riot or shed blood after losing what was once the “most potent organized economic force in the black community” stood as a testament to the strength of Mohammed’s leadership. .

### **There goes “the ’hood”**

As members debated how best to deal with the demise of the community’s financial stability over the next several years, the neighborhood around the masjid changed in ways that made past

strategies of recruitment and fundraising less tenable. Whereas the neighborhood was over 80 percent black or African American when the community purchased its new building in 1973, by 1990 the black population dropped to 30 percent. In addition to a loss of wealthier black residents who migrated to better-off neighborhoods west of MAQ, new Central American immigrants moved in and came to dominate the neighborhood. A similar demographic shift occurred throughout the county (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1. AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO POPULATIONS OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY, 1950-2013**

Year	African Americans	Percentage of total population	Latinos	Percentage of total population
1950	214,897	5	249,173	5.7
1960	459,806	7.5	582,309	9.6
1970	755,719	10.7	1,288,716	18.3
1980	924,774	12.3	2,071,530	27.5
1990	931,449	10.46	3,359,526	38
2000	930,957	9.5	4,242,213	45
2013	924,967	9.2	4,856,079	48.3

Sources: Kun and Pulido (2013), U.S. Census, and American Community Survey.

Gone were the fish fry and soul food restaurants that members recall frequenting, or in some cases owning. The streets around the mosque became home to *pupuserias*, *carnicerias*, and *panaderias*. The influx of Latino immigrants and the transformation they initiated—what Sides (2003) terms the “Latin Americanization” of South Central—likely prevented the area around the masjid from becoming the vacant wasteland South Chicago was in the 1980s (Wacquant 2008),

but it also created new obstacles for believers to find jobs or secure housing, particularly as Spanish became the dominant colloquial language.

At the same time, large companies that once provided decent-paying jobs for undereducated workers, including Goodyear and General Motors, relocated their manufacturing facilities from central Los Angeles to areas too far to be reached without an automobile. With few public and private transportation options, residents were unable to get out to jobs in outer ring areas (Sides 2003: 114). A growing numbers of residents (including poorer believers) struggled to make ends meet in the constricted local labor market and found themselves increasingly dependent on government assistance to support their families (Abu-Lughod 2007; Grant et al. 1996; Laslett 1996; Sides 2003).

Finally, compounding these instabilities was the emergence of the crack-cocaine trade in the early 1980s and the related rise of gang violence in South Central, which helped spawn close to two decades of historically high homicide rates (Costa Vargas 2006; Davis 1990). The MAQ community felt the threat of violence firsthand when it lost yet another brother, this time from a stray bullet during a gunfight between warring gangs in the early 1990s. The man was painting the fence around the masjid when he was shot and killed. Members planted a sunflower bush in his honor, where it remained in 2008 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Sunflower plant, 2008



Source: Author

Some members responded to these social changes by moving out of Los Angeles, like the many African Americans who relocated to the surrounding counties of San Bernardino and Riverside (Costa Vargas 2006: 58). A few continued to attend MAQ for religious services and special events, commuting as far as 90 miles each way, but their attendance was understandably sporadic. Others who had moved to the relatively wealthier neighborhoods on the western edge of South Central started attending newer mosques in the commercial corridors of Crenshaw and Leimert Park. MAQ faced the challenge of sustaining its shrinking African American Muslim community in a new religious ecology that increasingly favored Latino Christian denominations (Flory et al. 2011).

Those who remained struggled to make sense of the newly unfamiliar neighborhood, which no longer looked or felt like *their* South Central. While looking over my shoulder to her house down the street, Sister Rasheedah recounted that once the “Hispanics moved in” she stopped leaving her door unlocked the way she used to when the area was “all black.” Then later in the same conversation she blamed former black neighbors for introducing her then-teenage daughter to crack-cocaine in the 1980s. Trying to reconcile these contradictory experiences she said today she has “some Mexican American” neighbors who look out for her but laments that it “isn’t the same.”

Whether the influx of Central Americans to South Central in the 1980s and 1990s led to an actual increase in crime is less important here than the perception that the neighborhood was no longer as welcoming to African American residents. We might think of this as the shrinking of an imagined community, where the number of people with whom members felt they could identify grew smaller. Ironically, the sense that the neighborhood was inhospitable probably helped the mosque hang on to members who, like Sister Rasheedah, found themselves spending more time at the mosque to be around people with whom they identified. Emphasizing this perceived dichotomy of where safety now laid, another sister pointed to the street and said, “That’s the hood,” while inside the gates of the masjid believers expected safety and serenity.

Believers worked to distinguish themselves from the neighborhood outside the gates, which they understood as involving many activities that were un-Islamic. However, as we saw during Ramadan and will see again in following chapters, despite their best intentions to prevent problems “out there” coming “in here,” many believers experienced similar problems to their non-Muslim neighbors, including substance abuse, joblessness, welfare dependency, the mark of a criminal record, and untreated mental illness. They felt conflicted about these problems, with



some trying to start drug and alcohol treatment programs and others trying to ignore that their Muslim brothers and sisters suffered from such illnesses. Those in who lived in the immediate neighborhood and in other poor sections of South Central faced these problems everyday, while wealthier members could escape them when they left the masjid. Such differences in experience reinforced the class divisions that were deepening within the black community at large.

Then in April of 1992, almost to the day thirty years earlier that Ronald Stokes died, the community watched as the streets around them burned in the costliest and most deadly civil uprising in U.S. history. The 1992 riots/unrest that began in South Central and spread to pockets throughout the city started after the acquittal of four police officers caught on tape violently beating Rodney King. Like the Watts riots three decades earlier, young black (and now also Latino) men expressed their anger at the ongoing abuse of law enforcement through physical confrontation. In the violence that ensued between residents and officers, at least 52 were killed and more than 2,000 were injured. The city also had over \$1 billion in property damage, with many buildings in South Central burnt to the ground. Brother Fareed said he stood at the fence of the masjid watching cars go by throwing bricks in nearby businesses and then driving back to “take stuff.” “They saw us but didn’t bother [us].” Fareed attributed his safety and the security of the masjid to their history as “Black Muslims,” because many residents feared the mysterious but strong men at the masjid.

However, it may be that there was no reason to attack the masjid, because what had once been a block of Muslim-owned buildings was by this point a nearly vacant acre lot of dirt and trailers with little of material value to take. The once grand three-story building they so proudly purchased in 1973 and hustled to pay off had suffered serious structural damage from earthquakes in the 1980s. The city declared the building unsafe and ordered that the community

undergo large-scale (and expensive) repair. The loss of their commercial enterprises just ten years earlier combined with the shrinking size (and pocketbooks) of its members made the repairs untenable. In 1988, MAQ was forced to tear down their brick building.

The community stood at a crossroads: sell the land to “get out of the ghetto,” as one staff member framed it, or attempt to rebuild in what was now a sizeable plot of empty land in the middle of an urban field of gangs and industrial waste. Members decided to stay, believing it a wiser investment. Said Imam Khalid, “Our motto was, ‘Don’t move. Improve.’” Leaders rallied members to pitch in where their individual skills were needed by hammering, painting, installing electricity, and laying carpet, to construct what was supposed to be a temporary prayer hall fashioned from a former school trailer. Leaders framed the teamwork as evidence of the community’s strength and proof that in their commitment to Allah, they could overcome any disadvantage. But the prayer hall would prove to be a minor obstacle after what developed next.

With the immediate problem of where to hold services resolved leaders began the arduous task of trying to raise funds for a new mosque. They secured promises from a group of Muslim foreign investors to help build a new structure; but, as I explained earlier, this project left MAQ with a massive hole that filled with water and became known as “Lake Quran.” MAQ waited years before an immigrant Muslim from another mosque donated the dirt and trucks needed to fill the hole. In the process, the community spent thousands of dollars in permit fees, first for zoning approval from the city to begin excavation for the garage and later for permission to refill the hole with dirt after the project was, according to official city documents, “abandoned.” These expenses would be significant for any small organization, but proved especially cumbersome for a community that collected only \$600–\$1200 per week.

Throughout this MAQ maintained its dedication as a “Warith Deen Community.” The fellowshiping with immigrant Muslims that Mohammed encouraged had contradictory results. On the one hand, the debacle with the Saudis weakened morale for several years, evidenced by Khalid’s statement that MAQ was a “laughing stock.” Leaders called on this historical moment in later years to prove the religious strength of the community and its ability to persevere in the face of struggle, rallying believers around a shared religious-racial identity. On the other hand, other immigrant Muslims also came to the community’s rescue, enabling MAQ to fill the Lake. MAQ came to rely on outside benefactors many times over the coming years as they sought to rebuild their once grand community.

With the Lake behind them, leaders turned once again to Imam Mohammed for advice on where to start in the rebuilding process. He advised MAQ to build a school, emphasizing that education was of utmost importance in Islam and key to the future of the African American community at large. Khalid called on members to give for what was supposed to be a private Islamic school. He also sought donations from other Muslim communities, both in the U.S. and overseas. The plans were drawn up in 1999 and after several years of delays the school opened in 2006. However, in that time the community realized there were too few members to finance a private parochial school, and they were forced to lease the building as a public charter school. It opened with a student population that was 22 percent African American, the other 78 percent being Latino. By 2011, those numbers were 16 and 83, respectively. Although the resident imam’s wife worked at the school and several of the board members came from the MAQ community, many believers felt they had “lost” the school to the now Latino neighborhood.

Almost ten years after the school opened, the community had yet to initiate Phase 2 of the architectural plans, which included a new mosque and recreation center. Leaders were struggling

to find the money to finance it, with believers feeling tapped out after the school and the availability of overseas funding limited due to political changes in money transfers from Muslim countries after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Amazingly, no one expressed disappointment with the advice Imam Mohammed gave to build a school before a masjid. Several believers had choice words for Imam Khalid, with some accusing him of malfeasance, but towards Imam Mohammed they professed undying support.

Maybe for those who once worshipped his father it seemed sacrilegious to express anything negative about Mohammed, but even those who did not come through the Nation recognized the need for African Americans to maintain strong black leadership within the larger Muslim community as a result of their shared experiences living under racial oppression. Brother Louis explained it this way. “Most of *us* came through [Elijah Muhammad, W. D. Mohammed, and Imam Khalid]. No Arabs, no Pakistanis. We don’t want them as our head. We love our brothers, we love ‘em. But they’ve not been through what we been through, having everything taken from us.”

### **Reconciling the Past Today**

For years believers understood their participation at the temple as part of a movement that was focused as much on social problems as it was about religion. Elijah Muhammad reconceptualized black identity as “black superiority” and called for followers to reclaim this understanding of blackness (Curtis 2002: 75). Summing up this sentiment, Imam LB said in a khutbah:

“Now dear believers, as we conclude, Mr. Honorable Elijah Muhammad taught his community at that time lessons. And there’s one I want to share with us that stands out in my mind for me in the form of a question. And the question was asked, “*Who is my own self?*” And the answer was, is, my own self is a righteous Muslim. That is, our nature, that is, our creation. And Elijah Muhammad was pointing to the essence of life, the essence of all life. But in particular he was addressing a following, a community of believers, African American people, eh, that were very loyal to that following, that community. Praise be to Allah.”

Obviously, this teaching is in tension with the universalism idealized in conceptions of a worldwide community of believers (*ummah*), but believers felt they needed this specifically racialized (and nation-specific) path to find true Islam. Said Brother Det, “We are loving humanity, but we didn’t love everyone back then.” Looking at me, a blonde, blue-eyed woman, he said, “We were treated so bad.”

Then under the direction of Imam Mohammed believers “found” Sunni Islam and begin to reframe their understandings of the world and the self. In less than a decade, he dismantled the “black particularistic tradition of Islam” that had been one of the most visible and powerful ideologies among African Americans. Mohammed sought to fill this with Sunni Islamic traditions and practices. He “claimed an important right” by arguing that African Americans “should find an Islam whose meaning would be determined within the black community and whose focus would be on the betterment of black life” (Curtis 2002: 127). Betterment for blacks, believers at MAQ now argued, comes through participation within “the religion” rather than as a group defiantly positioned as outsiders. At a memorial for the late leader in 2009, Khalid said,

“What he did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be with us in 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, and 23<sup>rd</sup> centuries...for our children.”

With humor, believers sometimes laughed off the more unusual aspects of their beliefs in the earliest days, including the idea “the mothership” would come on the Day of Judgement, and instead they focused on how they needed the Nation of Islam in order to reconcile their essentialized experiences as black Americans with the colorblind universalism they hoped for through global Islam. And that is why the moment of Imam W. D. Mohammed’s death felt like a turning point, yet one where members felt unsure where the tide would take them.

### **Unspoken Loneliness and a Community Still in Transition**

Following Brother Naeem’s advice on that September night in 2008, I studied the reactions of MAQ members to the death of Imam W. D. Mohammed. Contrary to Brother Sulayman’s estimation that the imam would immediately be buried, in accordance with Muslim tradition, the Cook County medical examiner performed an autopsy on the 74-year-old man. The results shocked me. The autopsy suggested that Mohammed died of a possible heart attack *days before* being discovered. If we accept Imam Khalid’s account, it was then that a group of Muslim brothers found the body—not Mohammed’s fourth wife, Khadijah, or his many children or grandchildren who lived in the Chicago area. It seemed a sad ending for a man described by the *New York Times* as the “Top U.S. Imam,” and a man revered by millions of Muslims around the world.

Yet, importantly, I did not learn the melancholy news at MAQ, instead reading about it later in obituaries in the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times*. Not once in

more than five years of hanging out at MAQ did I hear a believer or leader mention the autopsy or reports of his being dead for several days, and I observed and participated in thousands of conversations. I find it unlikely they did not know—Brother Fareed was a voracious reader, never without a copy of some newspaper on his desk in the main masjid office. Imam Khalid was considered part of Mohammed’s inner network, as was Sister Haleema. And many more believers had direct connections to the Chicago African American Muslim community, including Sister Aisha, whose husband served on the security team that traveled with Imam Mohammed.

I think believers preferred to remember the leader in his glory days, just as they approached ‘community’ and ‘neighborhood’ as ideal types. Nostalgic about their activities in the Nation and the days when South Central was “all black” (Prickett 2014), believers actively drew out positive accounts of the past and ignored its blemishes. And who could blame them? With a past defined in many ways by struggle and loss, perhaps ignoring that the man who led their transition from the Nation of Islam to al-Islam died alone is an act of religious and racial perseverance. For this reason I did not insert the subject into conversations or ask believers directly about the circumstances surrounding the imam’s death, instead letting their omissions stand as an important finding.<sup>13</sup>

With many believers now in their 60s and 70s, death seems imminent to many. Ask a brother how he’s doing, and he will probably mention his gratefulness to Allah for being alive another day. An average of one to two believers “return to Allah” each month, and many die alone, like Imam Mohammed. One sister’s body sat in the morgue unclaimed for more than one

---

<sup>13</sup>Actually I asked Ava about WDM being dead for several days (in 2015 when writing this chapter) and she said, “Uh-huh. In the hot tub.”

Pamela: Nobody ever said anything down at the masjid.

Ava: Nope.

No further explanation offered, but I think this confirms my argument.

month, until the masjid could raise the more than \$2000 needed to pay for her janaza. Brother Sulayman passed in 2015, and his family in Chicago could not afford the burial, so it fell on community members to raise funds. Fareed was estranged from his sons, and Elijah only talked about his children once in seven years. The community was their family, and with as much as they have lost, believers did not want to lose more. That is why they keep the history of the Nation of Islam and its leaders in their collective memory.

Similar to the ways sociologist Mary Pattillo (1998) found that church-going African Americans draw on the style, form, and content of their sacred lives in their secular activism, the masjid culture that believers constructed provided a set of tools they drew upon as they navigated daily life in and around South Central. Integral to this culture was a sense of shared past, which affected how they saw their community's positioning in a changed urban landscape. It shaped how they earned money and who they spent time with in the neighborhood. Similarly, neighborhood changes affected how believers understood their shared masjid culture. The black population in Los Angeles began to shrink just as the community tried to rebuild from its staggering losses of the 1970s and 80s. This demographic shift has made it harder to sustain a black community and black identity in the city, in part because of the reduced political power accorded a shrinking black constituency.

I once asked Brother Fareed, "What's the biggest issue facing the community?" He replied, "What you said: building a community." He went on to say we are all just people, and no one is better than anyone else. "You aren't better than me, I'm not better than you." But to get to that point, where members could understand their worth, Fareed explained, African American Muslims needed W.D. Fard and Elijah Muhammad. "A lot of people think the Nation taught hate," he told me, "[but] the Nation did not teach hate. It taught self-love."



Though we call something “history” when it happened decades earlier, remembrances of the past, like Brother Fareed’s reference to the teaching of self-love in the Nation, are integral to contemporary lived religious experiences. Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) point out that actors construct shared story structures in temporal dimension, with clear beginnings and ends, leading to the argument that future actions “depend in part on how [actors] imagine each new event as part of an ongoing trajectory” (ibid: 914). So too do they use such moments to re-imagine their trajectories, demonstrating a need to make sense of the past before coordinating action toward the future—a future that everyday reminds believers they live as minorities but through their oppression found their “rightful religion” in Islam.

## THREE

### HALAL HUSTLING

#### The Marketplace

Brother Sharif stands outside the prayer hall, at his feet a large plastic cooler. As the believers file out of jumah, a sister stops and asks Sharif what he has this week. He opens the lid and points to the plastic bags of frozen lamb and chicken sausages. She hands Sharif several dollar bills and walks away with a bag.

Six feet away, Brother Fareed slumps down into a metal chair under a portable tent. On the table in front of him is a wicker basket with a typed sign reading “Zakat.” Inside the basket are several dollar bills and a few with Lincoln’s face. A brother stops by the table. “As-salaam alaikum, Fareed. How you been, Brother?” “I can’t complain,” Fareed replies. Every now and then someone drops a ten or twenty into the basket, or hands Fareed a check, and for that receives a carbon copy receipt with “tax-deductible” stamped on it.

Just then Sister Ava turns her rusted car into the gravel lot, kicking up dust. She scrambles out of the driver’s seat and around to the back door, pulling out a large black plastic crate and yells at Elijah to get the other crate. When he doesn’t reply, Ava shouts louder, “Elijah!” He turns, and watches Ava point to the car. Elijah ambles over, leaving his open van parked in the corner of the lot. Elijah grabs the second crate and carries it to

where Ava is standing next to Sharif. Ava is already collecting money from the waiting customers, handing out clear plastic containers with generous square slices of icing-covered cake. Elijah returns to his metal clothing racks and cluttered table of used children's shoes, toys, and small kitchen appliances, humming a blues tune as he folds shirts. Asked if people are buying today, he smiles and draws out his words, "Money is funny." And after a long pause he adds, "They lookin' but ain't buying. Their money is funny."

Ava tells her customers the price for a slice is now \$3, because of rising food costs. Some of the men around her grumble, but one brother smiles and asks if she takes Visa, Mastercard, or the "We be broke card." "No, baby," she tells him, just cash. Sister Aisha walks over and reaches inside the crates, pulling out several slices. Ava doesn't flinch. Instead, when Aisha picks up a slice of lemon, Ava asks, "That for Bat Mama? How she doin'?" Aisha explains they had to put a padlock on the gate to the house because her mother-in-law "got out" again, dressed up in her Sunday best. Then Ava's best friend promises to go to the ATM at the police station in a minute to get some cash for the cakes.

In the paved parking lot next door, Brother Amin has set up a long table to display several books, their covers faded and edges curling. The books have titles like *Elementary Teachings of Islam* and *The Prescribed Prayer Made Simple*. Also on Amin's table are several t-shirts, which he is selling for \$15 each. One is black with a white crescent moon and star that says beneath, "Peace be upon you." Another is white, short-sleeved and carries an image of clasped hands, "New Africa" printed in red, green, and yellow on the front. All look to be XL or XXL. Scattered around the table are a few

purses, tags still on the handles. When a few believers finally make their way to his booth, Amin lifts a briefcase from underneath the table and places it on top, opening to reveal several “Islamic watches,” as he calls them, with attributes of Allah written on the faces in Arabic.

Brother Malik walks the property, carrying a cardboard box with copies of the most recent issue of the *Muslim Journal*. Several believers stop him, paying \$1.75 for the Illinois-based weekly newspaper affiliated with Imam W. Deen Muhammad’s loose association of African American-led mosques. A member of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, better known as the Black Press of America, the *Muslim Journal* features articles, editorials, and advertisements catering to the African American Muslim community. Inside the front page is a highlighted box that reads, “What is ‘G-d’? Imam W. Deen Muhammad, leader of the largest indigenous group of Muslims, has explained that in order to show due reverence to the Name of G-d Almighty, that we not use any spelling that could in the reverse mean ‘dog.’” Imam Khalid likes to recount his days of going door-to-door selling the newspaper, rising up through the ranks of the Nation. He reminds believers at the end of every jumrah to get their copy.

A crowd has formed at the back of a van in the paved lot, customers eager for the Obama t-shirts and bean pies. 11-year-old Marcus asks his grandmother for money to buy a pie, but she says he doesn’t need the sugar. The imam’s granddaughter runs up to me and pleads for two dollars. I turn to her grandmother and ask if it is okay to buy the little girl a pie. She says yes and then adds, “Oh they drive me crazy with that over there.” Next to the van is a small folding table stacked with piles of miniature sweet potato pies, bean pies, and fruit cobblers. I start to pull out my wallet when the “Cookie Guy” turns to

me to say another customer is first, pointing to a light-skinned man about four feet away. “I try to keep everything in order,” Cookie Guy explains. After the other customer gets his four bottles of water, Gina grabs her fruit pie. A man standing next to me announces that he will buy pies for the other kids lingering around the van.

Ava finds me and whispers that she needs to go back home to finish a cake for someone. She was supposed to have it done by 11 but got caught up with making cakes for jumah. Now the guy is pissed and calling her cell. I ask if she needs me to watch her stuff, but she’s already asked “Imam’s grandson” to finish selling the cakes. The nine-year-old boy is holding up a cake slice and asking a brother, “Sure you don’t want to try this other one?”

Someone taps my arm, and I turn to see little Ali holding two small boxes in his hand. One is labeled “Inspired by Paris Hilton” and the other “Inspired by Chanel.” I ask him how much the soaps are and he tells me \$3.50. He said he’s helping his dad out today—and dressed for the occasion, wearing a light grey pinstripe suit. The brand tags are still on the sleeves of the suit jacket. I tell Ali thank you but I’m going to pass today. Later, I see him sitting by a table of wares, his suit getting wrinkled from slumping over in the chair. Sister Haleema marches up to him. “What are you doing, boy?” Then adds, “Get selling! Get to selling! Make sure you give your dad that money!” He doesn’t move, and she snaps, “What did I tell you, boy?”

A typical Friday at Masjid al-Quran included any one or all of these economic activities.

“Vendors,” like those in the above composite, set up portable tables and tents outside the prayer hall and from these “booths” sold a variety of religious and secular goods to their Muslim

“customers,” transforming the masjid into a veritable marketplace. The goods consisted mostly of food and drink, clothing, toiletries, new and used books, newspapers, and audio recordings of Friday khutbahs (sermons)—recordings that came on cassette tapes until 2010 when they moved over to CDs. Many of the items had a subtle religious quality: chicken sausages as an alternative to the pork ones sold in local stores, gelatin-free desserts, and fish dinners with collard greens not tainted by bacon or ham stock. Other products were more overtly religious, such as books illustrating how to pray and head coverings for men (kufi) and women (hijab). Believers also sold ethnic clothing, handmade jewelry, and essential oils. Some items fused religious and racial meanings, like t-shirts printed with African symbols, or the small bean pies that originated in the Nation of Islam. Believers also sold services on-site, offering members a place to get a shoeshine or haircut; others handed out business cards or flyers for their car repair and travel services.

The sale and consumption of these goods was so ubiquitous that believers became identified by what they sold. There was the “Cookie Guy” who resold cookies and pies from a local bakery; Sister Ava, the “Cake Lady,” famous for her gelatin-free cakes and pies; “Brother Rashid with the juices”; and, “Sister Sara with the purses,” who took over the business when her husband, Amin, died unexpectedly at the age of 58 in 2009. This economic activity helped members identify the vendors, so much so that their Muslim names were sometimes forgotten. On one memorable Friday afternoon, Imam Khalid stood at the microphone after prayer to announce details of an upcoming janaza (funeral). He said the brother’s name, “Brother Abdul Muhammad,” but this elicited murmurs “who?” Imam Khalid added, “The brother with the cookies every week,” which prompted smiles of recognition that quickly faded.

Leaders not only sanctioned the activities but also encouraged their presence at the masjid, drawing direct connections between enterprise and piety. Said Imam Khalid to a crowd

of believers one Friday, “Whatever we’ve done in the past we can do better. We can always do better. There’s A-plus and A-minus, so if you got a B you can do better. If you run a mom and pop store you can do better, get more patronage. If it’s a Muslim business bring a flyer to the office because we need to develop culture, saluting people who believe.” With a rising voice, he continued, “Expect more out of self, get more. Do good as Allah has done good to you. Can anyone say Allah has not been good? So you don’t have money, you made it to jumah, you are here.” Explicit in this excerpt is that “culture” involves the support of Muslim believers, but also implicit is the link between believing and selling—and not just selling but working hard to take one’s business to a higher level of success; attendant to this is the implication that one may not earn much from efforts but it is the intent that matters to Allah.

The message that money and religion exist alongside one another was repeated time and time again in religious teachings. Said Imam Ahman in 2011, “We want to compete on a material and spiritual level.” Doing so, however, challenges conventional academic and legal wisdom that economic activity exists in a separate sphere from that of religion, and it confronts head on a key organizing principle of sociological theory of religious life: money and religion are incompatible social phenomena. Put another way, money corrupts religion. Weber wrote, “Money is the most abstract and ‘impersonal’ element that exists in human life. The more the world...follows its own immanent laws, the less accessible it is to any imaginable relationship with a religious ethic of brotherliness” (1946: 331).

Around the world, this distinction is woven, to different degrees, into laws that separate religion and economic life. Constitutionally, a number of countries, including India and Singapore, mandate total separation of church and state, and in the United States the separation between economics and religion is critical to how we organize civil society (Ecklund 2006).

Religious organizations may acquire tax exemption status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, in effect receiving a subsidy from the federal government to control land and resources. Tax exemption reinforces the idea that the work of a religious organization is sacred and thus should be immune to the laws of the market.

Contrary to academic and legal efforts to separate religion and money, believers invested considerable time and effort to merge these supposedly separate spheres. Members used economic activity—and specifically the making of money—to establish, maintain, and, at times, dissolve social relations with religious kin. “Including economic transactions in social relations,” writes economic sociologist Vivian Zelizer, “generally magnifies the effort that people invest in defining and disciplining their relations” (2005: 34). With this relational work, as Zelizer might expect, “new definitions of proper behavior” came into play. Bringing economic activity into everyday religious community life deepened members’ bonds to one another and to the masjid, but it also created suspicion, distrust, and perceptions of exploitation that undermined expectations of intimacy between religious kin. Continuing a legacy started in the Nation of Islam, believers fused this commerce with the “doing” of religion, making economic participation a means of proving one’s righteousness. In doing so together they also reinforced their distinction as a community of believers separate from the informal economic activities of “the hood,” as the next section makes clear.

#### Drawing Moral Distinctions through Economic Activity at the Masjid

The relational work to determine what was permissible to buy and sell in the market, as well as when and how, occurred within an Islamic moral framework, not by official laws or the laws of



the street (Anderson 1990). No one sold haram (forbidden) items like pork or alcohol, and during Ramadan vendors stopped selling most food and drink. Community members expected that a believer who brought something to iftar was doing so to share as part of their charitable giving. In fact, there was little consumption of any kind at the mosque during Ramadan, with Eid al-Fitr marking the mosque as once again open for trade. Even then, there were some in the community who suggested to vendors that it “ain’t right” to sell drinks on the day celebrating the end of fasting, as believers monitored each other’s participation through their varied religious interpretations.

Believers also positioned their economic actions at the masjid as moral by putting them in opposition to what was happening in the hood around them, where people were “gangbangin” (loitering in groups on street corners), “slangin” (selling drugs), “getting drunk”, and “hookin” (prostitution). This meant no hanging out on the street corner, the locus of underground economic activity in the neighborhood (Anderson 1978), a moral distinction made clear in the following khutbah by Imam Khalid:

“In the old scripture we were told that idleness is devil’s workshop (sic). And you can look at people who are idle, who don’t do anything (pause) productive, and you can see in their life the devil is working, Shaitan is working on them. (Voice rising) Look at the idle people who just stand on corners. What are they doing? They’re talking nothing and either half drunk. They either smoking something that is bad for their health or drinking something that is bad for their health, and speaking something that is very foolish. They are not productive people. Muslims are not like that! Muslims are people of action, not inaction, but action! We get

married! We take care of our wives! We take care of our children! We take care of the house, of the family...”<sup>14</sup>

It was not uncommon for believers to doze off when he lectured, but on this otherwise unassuming February afternoon in 2011, Imam Khalid generated several shouts from the audience, echoing what Timothy Nelson (2005) calls the “emotional” style of worship service in many black churches. The community’s head religious authority drew a clear boundary between the action of Muslims and the idle play of people on the street corners around them, which worked to further a sense of moral superiority among believers.

In addition to connecting believers through their common faith and folk understandings of Muslim culture, the masjid marketplace provided believers opportunities to “take care” of themselves and their families in religiously meaningful ways. This was critical especially to believers who wanted to distance themselves from their past entrepreneurial ventures, when some may have made money through less “Islamic” means. Take for example Brother TJ, who I met in 2008 as he was approaching three years out from an eight-year term in prison for selling drugs. With quickened speech pattern punctuated by shoulder sways and hand jabs, TJ told me he was originally sentenced to “25 to life” but spent his time inside learning about the law. Now living “in a room” downtown, TJ said he was volunteering with an organization on Skid Row that helped inmates receive legal advice. TJ found it difficult to change what he called his “hustler mentality” to a “business mentality,” but he was working to develop a travel website, which he proudly showed me on the laptop he was carrying around the masjid along with a small duffle bag stuffed with hats, hair accessories, and other items for sale. Sounding sincere about his

---

<sup>14</sup> I transcribed his exact words using an audio recording of the khutbah, which I purchased from the masjid for \$5.

business ventures, TJ chimed that a man's "gotta do, gotta do," emphasizing his intention to be a person of action.

Like TJ, Brother Jimmie Jr. saw himself as an entrepreneur struggling to make it after his old "hustlin'" days. "I was supposed to be a lawyer," he told me. "I was even a paralegal for 2 years but you know..." Now in his mid-40s, Jimmie was starting over, his aging Mercedes the only remnant of past success, having lost everything, including his wife and kids, to drugs and "girls." A loud, animated fast-talker, Jimmie had plans to start a contractor business, falling back on the trade skills his mother made him learn in his youth. Until then Jimmie relied on the small work the masjid gave him, painting or doing minor electrical installations, as well as the money his parents gave him. Dressed in a light gray pinstripe suit, threads fraying around the buttons, Jimmie said he's not planning to "get rich" because "I've been there, done that." He pointed to his car. "You know what I'm sayin'?"

Borrowing from Duneier (1999), it seems reasonable to assume that the entrepreneurial aspirations of men like TJ and Jimmie helped fill a void left in their daily lives by the removal of drugs. What else might they do to become "self-respecting, productive" members of society (ibid: 79), particularly in light of their identification with Islam? But visions of financial success were often just that—more anticipated than real (Valentine 1978: 34). A year after sharing his plans to get his license reinstated and start the business, Brother Jimmie quietly downgraded to a small used pickup truck, which he parked on the street outside his parents' cottage down the block from the masjid.

Striving but struggling, believers maintained a spirit of commerce and in doing so reinforced the prominent American myth that a bootstrap mentality can help one rise out of poverty (Harris-Lacewell 2004). Brother Elijah said, "Some days I set up and spend 6 or 7 hours

here and don't make a dime!" Yet, in truth, men like TJ, Jimmie, and Elijah had nowhere else to be, except on the streets or maybe home alone. In an era of heightened surveillance and order maintenance policing, even the selling of mundane and licit goods and services is increasingly impossible without unwanted attention (and aggression) from law enforcement. The private space of the masjid permitted believers a certain measure of safety, allowing them to earn money in an environment where work prospects were bleak. As Sister Ava liked to joke, "The only jobs in L.A. the ones you got to make up."

Of course, not just any job would do. Whereas TJ and Jimmie framed their present-day economic efforts in opposition to the immoral acts of past years, for Ava it was the lure of possible wealth from illicit activity that made her work at MAQ more meaningful. On Eid al-Fitr 2012, Sister Ava and Brother Hasan shared a booth, splitting the vendor fee. Ava sold her cake slices and Hasan sold his mini bean pies, which he made in the kitchen of the house he shared with his adult sister and her four kids. When Tiffany came by to offer some of the sweet potato pie she made to share with friends at the event, resident baking expert Ava tore off a bite and declared the pie was good. "All it needs," Ava added between smacks, "is to be warm...and I need a glass of milk." Tiffany joked that back in her "wild days" she and a friend used to put Grand Marnier in their sweet potato pie. Ava added, "Or some rum!" We all laughed, and then Hasan shifted the conversation back to the present, saying his cousin is trying to convince Hasan to make the bean pies with "cannabis butter." Ava replied that some in her family also have tried to get her to put weed in her cake, telling her she could make \$400-1,000 for a big pan.

Believers used opportunities like this to publicly reaffirm their religious commitment to Islamically permissible, or halal, entrepreneurial activities. "I'm so glad I'm Muslim," Ava would say when talking about her family members or old friends from the projects who were

involved in drugs and violence. I knew from repeated conversations with Ava that she had not sold drugs in decades, and only then did she sell “some pills” once or twice. She liked to remind me that she refused to talk to her sons when they were in prison for dealing. Instead, Ava, like Hasan, spent Fridays selling to Muslims and the rest of the week “hustling” her cakes to employees at local businesses, including a post office and nearby psychiatric hospital, as well as to vetted referrals from her family or close friends. Like Ava, between Fridays Hasan traveled to other mosques and local black-owned or operated businesses to sell the remainder of his pies.

Other members also went to great lengths to maintain the system of commerce at MAQ. Until his unexpected death, Brother Amin commuted 90 miles each way nearly every Friday to sell his books, watches, and purses at this mosque and to this particular Muslim community. Amin exemplified what Imam Khalid meant when he told believers that the “bounties of Allah” would come but “you must seek it.” Believers expected their actions would lead to blessings in two primary ways: by selling, one was working to support oneself through morally dignified means; and in buying from another Muslim one was supporting the efforts of religious brothers and sisters to get ahead.

With this economic activity, the mosque became more than a space to worship; it was transformed into a hub for a particular form of moral commerce. And while the commerce was technically illegal because much of it occurred “off the books,” believers were less concerned with official state policies of right and wrong and more so with religious interpretations. For example, selling food stamps was acceptable, but drugs and alcohol were not. How did this moral distinction matter more generally for how believers organized their lives? They carried the method into other realms of economic activity (Pattillo-McCoy 1998). Ava said, “Now, I’ll see

three or four movies on the same ticket,” but if a customer complained about a cake being dry or off, she would return his money or bake him a new one.

The entrepreneurial practices of “running” and “supporting” Muslim-owned businesses evoked for believers memories of how things were in “the first” (Nation of Islam). The late Honorable Elijah Muhammad told followers to patronize black-owned businesses as a way of resisting white domination, using organized economic activity to counter the state’s exclusionary practices (Wacquant 2008). And it worked. In less than 40 years, Muhammad amassed an economic empire worth an estimated \$80-100 million, operating a network of companies, including grocery stores, gas stations, warehouses, bakeries, and retail stores around the nation (Gardell 1996; Lincoln 1961/1994). The umbrella organization helped finance the creation of Muslim businesses in majority-black neighborhoods across the U.S., namely Chicago, Detroit, Harlem, Philadelphia, and Oakland.

In Los Angeles, members ran a successful fish import business, at one point importing more than two million pounds of fish from Peru to be resold in the Western region. The local community ran another 20 businesses and owned the temple property, a warehouse, and several residences. Said Imam Khalid of that time, “We had a system and method going that was out of this world,” employing more than 100 people. The temple was an “employment office,” he said, because no one was allowed to “hang out.” The community even had an official security branch, coined the Fruit of Islam, to guarantee no one deviated from the prescribed moral guidelines which, according to Mamiya (1982: 147), created an ascetic, Puritan-like ethic that encouraged thrift over “foolish pleasures like dancing or sporting events” and “frivolous things like cars, clothes, and records.” Mamiya continues, “Even eating was strictly regulated; all Muslims were enjoined to eat only one meal each day. It was a rigorous ethic without much humor” (ibid).

The ascetism was of particular material and symbolical importance because of who composed the rank and file members of the Nation. Leaders recruited “addicts, prostitutes, convicts, unskilled workers, and unemployed blacks” from the streets of America’s poorest black neighborhoods (Gardell 1996: 117). Teaching and then regulating these women and men to marry, study, and work, always within the immediate community, seemed to work. As Gardell notes, “Members became increasingly healthier and wealthier.”

Then, in 1975, when Muhammad’s son, Warith Deen, came into control of the national organization, he instructed local leaders to separate business activities from the mosque structure, stating that “material empire” was not the main objective of Islam (Gardell 1996: 110). As I detailed in Chapter 2, the Nation sold its holdings and used the money to pay off debts that until then had been hidden from members. According to Imam Khalid, temples were told to sell their businesses, which they did, giving the profits to the individual believers who built and managed them. But this did not leave the masjid with revenue streams to pay off its staggering \$200,000 debt; nor did the sale of these businesses provide enough for believers to live off for the future decades. The customer base for these businesses eroded as a result of demographic changes in South Central such that by 2008 few believers operated stores or restaurants.

Somewhat surprisingly to me, the dramatic loss of the community’s brick and mortar operations did not dampen believers’ hopes that religious commerce could both build community and enable self-sufficiency. Whereas my training as a sociologist leads to see the collective loss as the state’s systematic disavowal of the efforts of a marginalized population to construct its own racialized American dream, believers painted a much rosier portrait of Muslim commerce as a liberation strategy. They even evoked memories of past commercial success as proof of the power of hard work, remembering Brother Nathaniel’s bakery, Sister Aisha’s corner store with

her husband, and Brother Jimmie’s fish restaurant—some of them once located on the block around MAQ, their now empty spaces serving as markers of a time long gone (Prickett 2014). They also reminisced about the days of the Fruit of Islam and on more than one occasion lamented there were no longer “soldiers” to patrol the streets around the masjid. Pointing with her head towards the Latino man selling homemade pork rinds from a cart parked on the sidewalk outside the masjid, Sister Lisa said it never would have been allowed during the Nation.

### Suspicion, Distrust, and Perceptions of Exploitation

Despite constructing a local empire that helped its members gain greater economic independence, MAQ saw its members return to the cycle of striving and struggling that characterized the lives of others in the neighborhood. But members refused to see themselves as facing the same financial future because of their Muslim ascetism. It was one thing to help a needy man from the street during Ramadan, and an entirely different matter to feel connected by fate to him. “Culture does not always keep pace with economic change,” writes Robert Orsi (1985: 99). In his historical account of Italians in Harlem at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Orsi argues that a community faced with change “may find itself with a set of cultural norms that do not...allow them to cope with economic failure” (ibid). In this case, rather than reach out to build a bigger network for support, believers retreated inward into the community, relying more on their systems of exchange and reciprocity with Muslim kin.

At the same time, the emphasis on making money at MAQ—and using religious brethren to do so—had unintended consequences that revealed a deeper struggle over how to balance individual needs with those of the religious community. Sister Hafsa and I were sitting in traffic



one Friday night, on our way to a masjid fundraiser at a hotel several miles away, when she suddenly realized she no longer had the plastic bag containing her after-jumah purchases. She began frantically searching around her seat, repeating, “I can’t believe I did that. I can’t believe I did that.”

“Why can’t you just get it tomorrow?” I asked.

“Because,” she said, “it will be gone. People always take your stuff there.”

I reached behind my driver’s seat and into my purse to grab my phone. I pulled up Ava’s number and handed the phone to Hafsa. “See if Ava’s still at the masjid.” In a panicked voice, Hafsa asked Ava to look for “a plain bag, you know, like from the store,” with “two pies and some avocados.” I could tell from listening in that Ava found the bag and, after Hafsa begged her to hide it somewhere so no one would find it, Ava promised to take it home. Ava said she would bring it to Hafsa at the masjid tomorrow. Hafsa ended the call and relaxed back in her seat.

Once she was calm, I pressed Hafsa. If someone at the masjid finds the bag, with only the bean pies and avocados, won’t they keep it for a day or so in case a fellow believer comes back for it? Hafsa did not directly answer my question but instead told me two stories. The first involved a sister who misplaced her scarf inside the masjid prayer hall. When she told another sister about it, the second woman pulled a scarf out of her bag and said, “Like this?” She thought someone left it because they no longer wanted it. In the second instance, “The Cookie Guy,” the year before his death, had his stock of cookies stolen when he went inside to pray.

Hafsa added, “You think just because they’re Muslims they won’t steal.”

Fears of possible victimization at the masjid violated Hafsa’s expectations of intimacy with her religious “brothers” and “sisters.” The intensity of her reaction to the possible loss of those

simple goods—two mini pies and a handful of avocados—also revealed just how precious even small amounts of money were to members.

I began to see other markers of the thin degree of trust within the community that, when coupled with competition for finite resources, heightened my awareness of the suspicion believers had of one another. Women carried their handbags with them at all times, or didn't bring one at all. Staff installed locks on the kitchen cabinets. Every time Imam Khalid's wife, Sister Dina, prayed, she handed me her keys, not willing to leave the keys to her car, apartment, and office unguarded for the five minutes of salat. And when longtime member Brother Raqman held up a worn gray leather bi-fold one afternoon, asking, "Someone's wallet?" Brother Rashad "with the juices" turned and with widened eyes said, "Yeah!" He grabbed the wallet, turning back around and crouching over to count the cash inside.

At first, knowing the high crime rates in the neighborhood, I assumed members were responding to concerns about the potential for outsiders to enter the grounds. But as time wore on and I became privy to more backstage conversations between believers, I heard murmurs that hinted at cracks in community trust. While Hafsa acted discretely and refused to provide names when discussing theft, others were less delicate and rumors frequently swirled about who was "not to be trusted" and therefore should be avoided.

I also saw how believers cultivated ambiguity about their available means, in and out of trade in the marketplace. It went beyond jokes like asking if a vendor took the "we be broke card" and suggested deliberate efforts to construct elaborate stories to obscure wealth. Longtime community members were especially vague in their dealings, even when such behavior seemed preposterous given how well known they were to their Muslim brothers and sisters of several decades. Brother Naeem, for one, boisterously referred to himself as a "hood rat" and announced

loudly several times in public settings that he was “poor.” In fact, on one memorable night he exclaimed, “I couldn’t get more poor!” Yet, he was a college-educated high school administrator, employed full-time at school just south of the city. Why would he say he was poor when he clearly had to be earning a more than decent income?

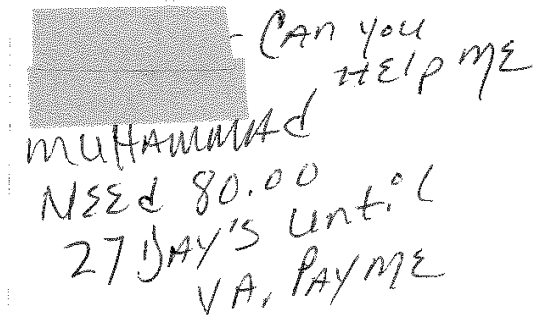
I believe Naeem felt constrained, both because he had limited assets (he rented an apartment in a part of the city called “The Jungle”<sup>15</sup>) and many demands for support from kin (including two ex-wives); but, compared to many of the members at MAQ, Naeem was relatively wealthy. At least he was wealthy enough to share with me that he would retire in 2015—retirement a “luxury” not available to other members. However, by emphasizing publically that he was “poor,” Naeem reduced his chances of becoming a mark (Goffman 1952).

I took my cues from believers like Naeem and learned to become vague in conversations about money (or hints of money). I even went so far as to lie on several occasions to prevent appearing moneyed, such as when I went on vacation and stayed in a nice hotel or when I moved to the neighborhood and believers bluntly asked how much I paid for rent (after I told someone it was \$400 and they said “whew!”). At the same time, my whiteness and education combined to make me an obvious mark—I was usually the only white person at functions, and I was perceived as having money because I was (admittedly) privileged to be a full-time student. My first Ramadan, a man I’d seen a few times but did not know by name, approached me and said, ““Sister Pamela, read this when you get a chance.” He handed me a small torn piece of paper (Figure 3), which I read later during dinner:

---

<sup>15</sup> “The Jungle” is what locals call the area of Baldwin Village in South Central, a set of low-income apartment complexes known for having gangs, drugs, and high rates of violent crime (Hunt 2010: 6).

Figure 3. Handwritten request for money



A handwritten note on a piece of paper. The top part of the paper is redacted with a grey box. To the right of the redaction, the text reads: "Can you help me". Below this, the name "MUFHAMMAD" is written in all caps. Underneath the name, it says "NEED 80.00" and "27 DAY'S UNTIL" on the next line. The final line reads "VA, PAYME".

I found the \$80 amount exorbitant compared to the usual dollar or two asked of me by children, or the \$5 requests sometimes made over the microphone to the community at the end of taraweeh for a believer short on gas or bus fare. I asked around about the man, but no one claimed knowing him. When he came up to me later that night I told him, “I’m sorry brother. I can’t help you out. I don’t have anything tonight.” He looked at me with disgust, turning away and reciprocating my avoidance the rest of the evening. He did not attend iftar the next night, and I never saw him again at the masjid or anywhere in the neighborhood.

Returning to my notes from the previous night, I found that I had a brief conversation with the man who I noted as walking with a limp and having yellow saturated his eyes. He told me he was going to the VA hospital for surgery that week and patted his stomach. Trying to be polite, I said the community would be thinking about him, but I later noted that no one else talked to him, actually going out of their way to avoid him. Brother Naeem, for example, refused to shake hands when the man offered.

Then the requests for my “help” grew more elaborate. Rather than ask me directly for money, believers tried to draw me into activities that obligated me to interact with them on a

more regular basis. Three times my first year of fieldwork I was approached with a “business opportunity,” usually by a man within the community who wanted me to help him secure grant money and in exchange I could “make a killing” by taking a percentage of the grant (the assumption being that as a graduate student I would be an expert on proposal writing). The men generally approached me when I was walking alone to my car, away from other believers. In one of those cases, the brother—a longstanding community member—handed me with a handwritten “email,” as he described it [sic]:

THIS LETERR IS FROM YOUR FRIEND X OF MASJID AL-  
QURAN. AS-SALAAM-ALIKUM. SO WHATS UP PAM,  
REMEMBER LAST TIME WE TALKED I REMINDED YOU I  
MAY NEED YOUR HELP. WELL NOW IS THE TIME...

Then the letter explained his need for help locating statistics on the lack of jobs in the area and, as he put it, “Data on how it effects a cummunity [sic]...Articles. Professors. ? Help”

As I did once before, I offered help in the form of “free” research assistance, explaining that I was forbidden to make money on my research “per UCLA rules” (my simplified explanation for Institutional Review Board policies against financial conflict). Months later when I followed up with the brother, he was still struggling to get a contractor’s license, having lost his original license years before due to a series of professional and personal struggles. When I asked if he was doing any of this to help the masjid, he said no. “I don’t want no haters gettin’ in it.”

My lackluster approach to entrepreneurship, demonstrated in my polite refusal of pitches and repeated disinterest in bringing stuff to the masjid to sell, meant that over time no one else

tried to start a business with me. More than a few believers joked that as a sociologist I “liked” poverty. On one such occasion I joked back that I didn’t have money because I didn’t like it, to which Brother Fareed curtly said, “I don’t trust no one who says they don’t like money.” Of course, that did not stop him from asking me for money on behalf of the masjid. I was pressured to contribute directly through cash donations and indirectly by purchasing tickets to the fundraising events I asked to observe. This informal “pay to play” policy continued throughout my fieldwork, and by my own estimates I spent more than \$700 on banquet tickets, iftar sponsorships, and zakat. This was in addition to the money I spent every week in the marketplace.

Had it only been those employed in formal labor market jobs who drew requests for money, I might have written off the equivocation as a strategy of wealthier members. After all, who hasn’t told solicitors outside the grocery store that they have no spare change? But poorer members also went to great lengths to appear without resources (Stack 1974). When Sister Ava bought a van from Aisha, she asked her friend to tell people that it was a gift. Ava did not want anyone in mosque administration to know she had \$800 to buy the van. She guessed that if Fareed found out, he would “hit [her] up” for more money.

Ava seemed almost paranoid about the men in the office, or so I would have thought had I not experienced first-hand the “shady” ways in which they acted:

Fareed swaggers up to me and brushes my arm with his hand. “Hey there, young lady,” he says. “It’s your lucky day. I just found this envelope with \$40,000. You seem like a real nice person, so I tell you what, I’ll split it with you.” Then he pauses for dramatic effect. “See, I said it was your lucky day.” Standing as tall as

his short stature will allow, he continues, “I’m going to ask you to hold this and then I’ll come back and get it, okay? Hey, what’s your name and address?” Then he pretends to write on the imaginary envelope he’s holding. “Oh, by the way...you got a bank account? You do? Alright then let me take that down...”

I smile and jest, “You’ve worked this out.” Fareed just laughs. But I’m incredulous. “There’s no way people fall for that con. That’s ridiculous.”

“Oh they do,” Fareed promises. “They want some of that fast money. Ain’t no money for free. Let me tell you something: the banks like that. They know about the forgery and they like it. They in it too.”

We continue to debate the merits of his hypothetical scam a bit longer. Fareed explains that it was “just talk” to earn a living and throws it back to me. “That’s what you do. That’s what sociologists do. They talk for a living.”

“Yeah, but our talk isn’t illegal,” I retort. Fareed just laughs and shakes his head.

Months before this charade, a confidant warned me, “Don’t sign anything [Fareed] gives you.” Though the confidant did not elaborate on why, feeling it was inappropriate to talk badly about a Muslim brother, I later learned that Fareed had spent time in federal prison for a forgery-related crime. He discussed this past in vague terms, never disclosing how deep into criminal enterprise he was, but he did admit to me that he never really worked in the formal labor market. I pressed him further and he said, “I worked once for a year. That was in 1955.” He said he was in the army and after that “punched the clock for one year and that was it.” Then he joked, “Ain’t no one got rich carrying a lunch pail.” I asked him what he did afterwards to make a living, to which he replied, “You don’t want to know.”

Though Fareed claimed (more than once) that his old ways were in the past, believers joked about the 74-year-old man's trustworthiness behind his back. When the nephew of a longstanding community member stopped by one afternoon to visit people in the community, he saw Fareed walking across the property and said, mockingly, "Fareed still trustworthy?" Everyone burst into raucous laughter. Ava, who was standing in the group, said, "Oh yeah, when Fareed comes around everyone be like (puts her hands tightly over her pockets to cover them up)."

The bittersweet laughter that followed served as a reminder of how odd it was to have a man once convicted of bank fraud serving as masjid treasurer. On more than one occasion I watched as Ava handed a \$10 bill to Fareed for her week's zakat and, when asked if she needed a receipt, told him whatever he did with it he would have to answer to Allah, the insinuation eliciting either a rough chuckle or exasperated "Pssh." However, Ava also shared with me that she went to Fareed for help every now and then when she could not pay her bills. He also turned a blind eye when Ava "borrowed" food supplies from the masjid kitchen.

Beyond the jokes, some were clearly unsettled by Fareed's hands-on role as masjid treasurer. In one rather heated community gathering, held in response to another believer's public accusations of misconduct in the office, a brother shouted that Fareed should not be treasurer when he was arrested for scamming people. Fareed was not present at the meeting, and in accordance with community interpretations of sharia, he had to be able to defend himself against any accusations for the discussion to continue, in effect shutting down the accuser. I saw the tactic of avoidance employed many times throughout the five years when a rumor circulated about a leader's virtuousness.



The fact that members openly distrusted Fareed made it all the more surprising to me that there was little in the way of public record of major donors. Unlike in many churches, synagogues, and mosques, where the names of major donors are often acknowledged in congregational bulletins and email blasts, at MAQ people within the community who gave significant sums to the organization did not want others to know. In five years I only twice heard Imam Khalid acknowledge specific dollar amounts of key contributors. The omissions suggested that believers were more concerned with cultivating uncertainty about their economic status than receiving accolades or creating a paper trail to hold the office accountable.

This long series of stories about Fareed and the administration's fundraising efforts leads me to a key point about the economic activities at MAQ: believers framed their own actions as moral and legitimate, but they were hesitant to accept the same behaviors of others, especially leaders. As in Carol Stack's (1974) famed account of 'swapping' among women in a poor black community the Midwest, resources were limited, and what there was in this closed circuit became redistributed among participants (see also Zelizer 2011). When it was their turn to benefit from the masjid's resources, believers took what they could—donated meat, rice, cooking oil, toys, used clothes, laundry detergent, zakat—but when they were not on Fareed's good side (or he on theirs), members accused him of basing his decisions on who he wanted to help rather than who needed help the most. This gave them a respectable reason to limit their donations or pull back from the community, possibly to take their entrepreneurial activities elsewhere, away from "the haters." It was a means of accounting for failure or, at a minimum, a way to avoid the perception of flaw (Goffman 2009; Liebow 1967).

For these reasons I term the economic activities at MAQ *halal hustling* to highlight their religious influences but also to capture the moral ambiguity believers felt about the unevenness

of exchange. Because some readers may construe ‘hustling’ to be too pejorative to use in this setting, especially in light of the structural locations of the actors, it is important that I explain how I decided on halal hustling.

First, I use the term hustling in the way believers often did, to mean proactive (and sometimes aggressive) efforts at making money. This then conveys the importance believers placed on individuals as agents of action and change. Remember Ava’s words that “the only jobs in LA the ones you got to make up.” In no way am I implying that women and men at MAQ are hustlers, only that they engage in hustling, the gerund signifying that these are actions members do (not characteristics of who they are). The juxtaposition of the two words is also important: halal is first, because it is foremost a system of exchange governed by religious interpretations; and hustling comes second because it is in relation to the understanding that these should be safe activities at the mosque but often turn oppressive.

Second, to call the activities I chronicled at MAQ something less pregnant with moral ambiguity—such as selling or vending (Duneier 1999), enterprises (Portes 2010), or simply transactions (Zelizer 2005, 2011)—would, to borrow from Wacquant (2002), “sanitize” believers’ actions and their impact on patterns of community trust and reciprocity. There was an undercurrent of suspicion that clouded many interactions at MAQ, including those that on the surface seemed unrelated (such as Imam Khalid’s authenticity as a religious teacher, challenged multiple times because of his dealings with Fareed). Failing to acknowledge and analyze these negative dimensions would undermine my ethnographic authority (Clifford 1983). I considered using Venkatesh’s preferred term of “underground” (i.e. underground halal economy), but in the end decided this would obscure activities that happened in the open and formed a constitutive part of the community’s presentation of itself. In believers’ eyes, activities at the masjid are not

comparable to the shady underworld of drug dealing and prostitution, but neither are the activities without elements of exploitation.

Third, the ways in which believers depended on their money-making at the mosque further designates that these activities were a response to economic marginalization, not an act of religious sublimation. Underneath the moral superiority was a tint of desperation, further magnified by the lack of resources in the community. When one's economic livelihood depends on the willingness of others to relinquish the cash in their pocket, religious participation becomes a little less voluntary and more a means of survival dependent on a (potentially) predatory system of exchange.

### The Masjid's Money

Is the money exchanged at MAQ a compensation for a desired good or service, or a gift bestowed upon a worthy Muslim brother and sister (Zelizer 2011)? When the recipient is the masjid, is the money an entitlement to be distributed within the community? Federal tax code suggests the answer lies somewhere between gift and entitlement. It does not make sense to offer a tax exemption otherwise. Even so, we know from the anthropological tradition of studying exchanges that gifted money is never neutral or impersonal (e.g. Mauss 1954, Stack 1974). Consider this pitch for money in 2009:

After jumah, Imam Khalid returns to the microphone. He makes the usual announcements about upcoming events, and then he updates the audience on his efforts to get a building permit from the city. "We spent three hours downtown

today and they still haven't given us a permit...and, we still need that fire hydrant." He adds, "When I first told you about it last year, the cost was \$16,374. But it's gone up \$5,000 this year!" Several loud sighs fill the prayer hall. He tells the remaining audience of believers, "This is what they're charging us. We couldn't get around it. If you wanna wake up and come down at 7:30 am with us [to the city offices] you are welcome. Just bring enough quarters. Bring enough for 4 hours. At \$1 an hour that'll be \$4."

Khalid's pitch developed an antagonistic tone, challenging believers to go downtown and find out for themselves. He later said, "We've got the paperwork in the office, you're welcome to look it over!" By then it was too late to convince Ava, who walked out of the prayer hall after a steady stream of exiting believers. Her exasperation with the ongoing calls from leaders for more money for various permits and paperwork had been building for months (maybe years). Two months earlier, she told me several believers were getting tired of leaders "always hittin' us up for money." It's always something, she added—first the school, then this or that. "Where does it all go?" she loudly asked. We were standing in the kitchen just a few feet away from the staff office at the time of the conversation. She complained that the office did not post expenses or collections, as was done at her friend's mosque. When we started talking she was using a hushed tone but by the end her voice was raised and defiant. She called the men in the office "shady," and teased me, "If you are FBI, go back and tell them!"

Not long after this conversation staff began posting balance sheets in the office for believers to see the incoming and outgoing dollar amounts. When I asked Ava about it, she said, "That don't mean nothin'." In her eyes, Fared would never be able to shake his shady past. It

did not help that she witnessed firsthand his unpredictable patterns for distributing mosque resources. In private he would give her \$5 when she could not pay her bills and then in public charge her \$1 for using the masjid phone to call directory assistance.

Requests for money, and subsequent spikes of exasperation among believers, continued throughout my fieldwork. Sister Aisha half-joked with the imam's wife about his soft voice, telling her, "The only time you can hear [Khalid] is when he's asking for something." And what he asked for at the end of nearly every jumah could sometimes seem suspiciously high—more than \$21,000 for a fire hydrant and permit in the above excerpt. Another year it was \$2600 for two window air conditioning units. While these may have been legitimate figures, they felt high to members of a community that spent \$100 to feed 35 people during Ramadan and where few members could afford the \$65 it cost to attend the annual fundraising banquet.

Were it just that leaders asked frequently for money, maybe their actions would not have generated so much distrust. After all, every religious organization in the U.S. needs money from its members to survive (Wolfe 2003). But a lack of transparency over where the collected funds went clouded leaders' repeated requests. Also strange was the need to raise funds to cover property taxes. As a religious non-profit, wouldn't MAQ be exempt from this tax? I investigated and learned that the organization lost its tax exemption status, but I did not share this information with anyone in the community. Rather, I waited to see how matters would play out and for the next three years no one openly questioned the discrepancy. Then in 2012, Brother Hasan said he discovered that the 501(c)3 under which the masjid was registered lost its eligibility for tax exemption after failing to file the proper renewal paperwork three years in a row. Hasan's quest for information also revealed that Imam Khalid was head of a separate non-profit organization that held the deed to the school property next door built in 2006 with community funds (see

Chapter 2). According to Brother Hasan (and supported by my notes), the rental income had thus far never appeared on one of masjid balance sheets.

Rather than immediately share this information, however, Hasan sat on it until what he felt was the appropriate time to start a petition for the removal of the masjid administration. He held weekly community meetings to discuss his findings, many of which I attended, but the meetings quickly turned chaotic. Believers shouted at Hasan and each other, accusing Hasan of turning on Imam Khalid to try to get his own hands on the money from the school. In one meeting, another brother threatened to physically harm Hasan.

Approximately six months after Hasan originated the petition and stirred up enough discontent to organize a committee to reframe the masjid's by-laws, he was publicly kicked off the committee. He stopped attending MAQ, except for special events, and moved his bean pie business to other mosques. The committee continued to meet but the momentum died and eventually all efforts to address the alleged corruption of the masjid administration faded.

“Like crabs in a barrel...”

Sister Lisa was one of the first believers to work with Hasan to raise alarm bells and demand greater transparency about mosque finances. She ran a booth on Friday selling boxed lunches and baked goods. Within weeks of Hasan's public removal, Lisa began selling her own bean pies. It was a clear sign of betrayal to some believers, including Hasan's mother, who until that point described herself as Lisa's "biggest customer," spending \$20-40 per week on food for her children and grandchildren.

Lisa started her business selling individual-sized sweet potato pies and brownies but over two years the menu expanded to include soup, fried fish or chicken dinners, cookies, and different types of pies. Her booth took on the nickname “Café Lisa,” complete with portable bistro tables and folding chairs. One sister joked that Lisa was running a Starbucks, the common feeling that Starbucks charged too much for coffee you could get at McDonald’s or 7-11. As the operation grew it took more time to set up, and believers regularly commented—out of Lisa’s earshot—that she did not always go inside to pray.

At the same time, there was becoming less space in the market for other food suppliers. Brother Jimmie and his grandkids sold homemade chicken sandwiches but stopped a few months into Café Lisa. And Sister Ava, who was until then the main catering option on Fridays, slowly pulled away from selling her dinners, only occasionally bringing her two black plastic crates that she haphazardly threw onto a picnic table next to Lisa. Ava’s masjid attendance became more sporadic too, her perception of the community tainted by Lisa’s encroachment on her customers. Accusations that Lisa was purposely driving Ava out of the market were hard to make; it seemed that Lisa was just hustling harder. Then Lisa started selling homemade “lemon dream pies,” a knock-off of the gelatin-free lemon meringue pies Ava was famous for in the community. Ava said Lisa was “biting off” her, and she threatened to “take [Lisa] down” by bringing more of her own food to sell. This was not a physical threat so much as a desire to prove her cooking was better than Lisa’s, with the reputation of each sister tied to their catering successes.

The problem is that Ava needed the money more than Lisa. Lisa worked for the city in a middle-management bureaucratic position. She had a husband who also worked full-time for the city, as well as two grown daughters at home bringing in money from their service jobs. When the economic downturn led to severe budget cuts for the City of Los Angeles, Lisa and her

husband were forced to take unpaid furloughs. They felt the pinch in their paychecks but continued to live in a nice home in the suburbs. Ava, by contrast, lived a few blocks from MAQ in an aging house where three other grown siblings lived, along with Ava's grandson and a rotating guest list of family squatters. Ava made less than \$900 per month from SSI and food stamps. Lisa was able to buy a new car, affording the payments with the money she earned from Café Lisa. Ava struggled to pay off the \$800 debt she incurred with her friend for the auctioned Plymouth minivan with rusting paint and peeling interior cloth that she called her "work van."

Ava liked to say it was "like crabs in a barrel" down at the masjid. As soon as one person started to climb up, the others in the barrel tried to grab hold to follow, only to end up pulling everyone back down. The analogy describes well Lisa's actions towards Ava: Ava had risen to top as "Cake Lady," making upwards of \$100 per week selling food. Then Lisa came along and over the process of two years slowly ate away at Ava's business as well as drove out other food vendors, including Brother Jimmie, who sold simple foil-wrapped chicken sandwiches from a barstool perched next to the masjid. Well into his 80s, Jimmie lived one block away in a simple cottage with his children and grandchildren. It was Jimmie's son, Jr., who had dreams of starting his own non-profit job training program in the neighborhood.

Then, according to Ava, Lisa grew too "greedy" and thought her financial success a license to exert control in other community affairs. In multiple conversations among different believers, I heard members make disparaging remarks about Lisa and her activities. She was "stealing" business and becoming "buddies" with shady characters who, along with Lisa, were trying to "stir up shit." However, the final straw came during Ramadan 2013 when Lisa and one of her "buddies"—a woman accused repeatedly of conning believers out of money—distributed a flyer at the masjid that presented Imam Khalid as less than scrupulous. The flyer, which I



obtained, accused the imam of not fulfilling his promise to complete the bylaws in time and “with concerns about integrity and internal committee tensions” announced that Sister Lisa “resigned” as Chairperson for the Bylaws Committee.

Shortly thereafter rumors swirled that Lisa had been “kicked off the lot,” the final straw being that she was working to have the annual Eid al-Fitr festival moved to a park, collecting funds to spend as she wanted. These funds previously went to the masjid as part of the sadaqa (voluntary tithing) every attendee was expected to pay. Without a financial incentive to attend, Lisa cut back her participation, only sponsoring one iftar at MAQ that Ramadan, whereas in past years she cooked (and paid for) three or four nights. By 2014, Lisa no longer attended MAQ, instead having a friend within the community sell a smaller selection of her pies, cookies, and brownies each week. I heard through multiple sources that Lisa was attending a different masjid in the area, where she was selling and running for committees again.

With Lisa gone, Ava began to sell dinners and cakes again but in a more muted fashion. She tried briefly to revive the possibility of working for the school next door, announcing in front of a large group, “I’m ready to go on the books!” But either Dina would not hire her or Ava decided against a permanent job, because she ended up catering only a handful of meetings and ad hoc events. Each time she relied on Aisha to help her cook and serve the food, telling me Allah sent her an angel with her friend.

In 2014, at the age of 67, Ava battled a series of health problems and pulled back further from the community. She was tired of all the “backbiting” in the community and singled out Imam Khalid as a primary source of frustration. “I’m so ashamed of him,” she confided. Ava wanted the imam to retire to allow the community to heal and move forward. And, yet, for all his faults, she also said Imam Khalid was really a “good man,” pointing out all the times he was nice

to her mother or the way he asked Ava to act as a guardian for me. Her ambivalence about the resident imam must be understood as part of the working out of piety and disadvantage.

Connecting back to what I said in Chapter 1 about intent, Sister Ava saw herself as engaged in a moral struggle to live an Islamic way of life, which she did with her Muslim brothers and sisters. This bond was stronger than the strife she faced when one of those religious kin violated her trust. Shaking her hand close to her body she said you just have to “shake the jinn” (evil spirits) away, because that is how you know who the angels in your life are.

### The Cycle of Commerce and Competition

Commerce was woven into the worship experience, with the supporting of Muslim businesses and the seeking of Allah’s bounties signals of religious intent. In this way, members demonstrate their piety to one another through the exchange and making of money at the masjid. This kind of “worshipping” created insiders and outsiders, with those on the inside feeling morally superior to people on the outside. At the same time, this closed circuit of commerce produced competition among believers and required relational work to create limits. A member could not boast or push too hard, otherwise they found themselves on the outside like Sister Lisa or Brother Hasan.

Those on the inside struggled to balance their competing interests in halal ways.

For his part, Fareed thought members were holding back, telling me, “People who come here got money. They got money. But they hearts ain’t in the right place.” He expressed frustration with the masjid’s inabilities to pay its bills, which waxed and waned over the years. During lean times he instructed believers (in his characteristically brisk way) to close the doors of the prayer hall to prevent the heat from escaping during winter or the cold air during summer,

afraid of even small amounts of waste. Believers reacted not by dipping into their pockets to give more but instead by drawing out Fareed and his shady past as reasons for the community's financial strain. Whether or not leaders skimmed from masjid coffers is less important on a broader sociological level than the perceptions of corruption and their consequences on community life. At the same time, greater transparency in record keeping may have reduced masjid disputes and the schism that led to Hasan and others leaving in 2012.

No one suggested the selling at MAQ should stop. Everyone seemed to agree with the basic premise that African Americans need to establish more economic force to improve their social conditions. Connecting this back to what I explained earlier in the dissertation, this focus on economic empowerment was a direct legacy of the community's history in the Nation of Islam. Running and supporting Muslim businesses made the women and men people of action away from the devil's work on street corners, and it offered a dignified way to live off the books (Duneier 1999). Ava wanting to go on the books at an age when most American workers expect to retire shows that she was struggling to make ends meet, but it also represented the striving that made her feel blessed to be Muslim.

## FOUR

### RESISTING PATRIARCHY

Few topics within the study of religion arouse as much debate as that of women's limited access to formal spaces of power, especially when the religion under discussion is Islam. Yet, for all the problems believers at Masjid al-Quran faced, one of the unique and inspiring characteristics about community life was the openness with which men and women interacted in public. I was able as a woman researcher to observe patterns of cross-gender interaction in ways that may not have been possible in a religious community with more rigid gender segregation. Women and men talked openly on the sidewalks surrounding the prayer hall, inside the kitchen and masjid office, and in the parking lot. In the marketplace, men and women vendors worked alongside one another, and both men and women shopped at the same booths, standing in line together and chatting while they waited. Men and women also hugged and even kissed cheeks as friendly gestures, especially if they had not seen each other for an extended time.

During these interactions, certain "group styles" of interaction came into play that reveal shared assumptions about what constituted Islamically appropriate modes of gender behavior (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Believers—women and men—took pride in pointing out to me that women in the community dressed in ways that reflected a shared ethos of "balance" between Qur'anic exegesis and American cultural patterns. On the rare occasions a woman came to the masjid in a *niqab* (face veil), I saw sisters look at each other and roll their eyes, later echoing the words of the imam: "That's not the religion. That's their *culture*." Most of the women mosque participants wore head scarves in the West African tradition (Karim 2009), covering their hair and the tops of the ears but leaving their necks exposed. And in social gatherings outside the

mosque, I regularly saw women from the mosque without head coverings, instead proudly displaying coiffed hairstyles or fashionable wigs. I came to see these practices as “everyday acts of resistance” to the perceived hegemonic ideologies of Muslim traditionalists (Bartkowski and Read 2003).

Still, women attended in noticeably smaller numbers, a gender difference true of nearly all mosques around the world. Islam is one of the few global religious traditions, along with Orthodox Judaism, in which men attend worship services in far greater numbers than women. Search for images of mosques around the world, and what you find are pictures of men filling prayer spaces. Women participants are smaller in number and often in separate, smaller spaces (Karim 2009). By contrast, women fill the pews of most churches, a pattern particularly true of African American churches. As a result of the occupation of smaller physical and symbolic spaces, some scholars argue that Muslim men are more religious than Muslim women, despite Muslim women worldwide reporting higher measures of religiosity (Sullins 2006: 845). Why this seeming paradox?

Many Islamic scholars say the answer rests in Islamic texts, which they interpret as mandating congregational prayer for men and not women. Even accepting this dominant interpretation, we have little explanation for why so many women do go to the mosque, including many African American Muslim women (Karim 2009). Other observers (and many media pundits) argue that Islam is a patriarchal religion that places greater emphasis on men’s participation. They point to sex segregation in the mosque and the systematic exclusion of women from leadership roles (i.e. imam) as evidence of women’s oppression, a bias that contributes to public perceptions that Islam suppresses women’s interests (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Korteweg 2008; Ong 1995). As Mahmood so eloquently

explains, any study of “Muslim women” must at some point engage with “all the assumptions this dubious signifier triggers in the Western imagination concerning Islam’s patriarchal and misogynist qualities” (Mahmood 2005: 189; see also Abu-Lughod 2002).

Early on I was determined to avoid a study of “Muslim women,” feeling that too much scholarship on Islam focused on gender at the expense of other pressing issues in the community, such as class polarization and racial discord. However, on reflecting on the corpus of notes for the project, I found myself repeatedly coding phrases such as “sisters only” or “brothers only” when I described spaces in the masjid. Analysis revealed that group styles of interaction varied within and between these spaces, suggesting I delve further into my data from the masjid to better understand the relation between space and gender. I also looked closely at when and where conflicts between men and women occurred, noting that space was a frequently contested terrain. As I engaged a diverse range of literatures on Islam, gender, race, and urban poverty, I began to ask what these contestations over space reveal about broader systems of power within the community.

In this chapter I argue that African American Muslim women’s mosque participation constituted a form of socially engaged religious conduct. In their negotiations of different spaces, at times in direct conflict with men trying to occupy the same spaces, the women reinforced shared gender and racial identities. However, their efforts were not always successful, and the women found themselves with less access to institutional resources than certain men. I discuss how the women leaned further on their network of African American Muslim sisters for support in these struggles, thereby enabling themselves and each other to resist racial, economic, and gender oppressions (Collins 2000; Bartkowski and Read 2003). After my time at Masjid al-Quran I cannot claim Islam is any more patriarchal than other religious traditions. Instead, I

found instances in which patriarchy manifests in observable ways, what I later describe as *particularities of patriarchy*. But, instances of patriarchy can be found in any religious organization, indeed any organization (Butler 1990).

### **Theories of religion and space**

Religious traditions, however “global” in their ideological identifications, are lived in the local (Knott 2005). Veiling, for example, takes on different meanings for women depending on their exact location at the moment of performance – wearing a veil in Egypt helps a woman “fit in” while in the U.S. it “differentiates” her (Read and Bartkowski 2000: 403-04). African American women converts to Islam find in the Qur’an a blueprint to navigate their daily lives, yet struggle to transcend the material and social realities of the poor urban landscape around them (Rouse 2004). Even the absence of space plays an important role in how women construct their religious selves. Finding no physical place inside a mosque to pray because men occupy every available inch forces some women to leave (Karim 2009: 178). All of these examples reveal that women’s abilities to engage religion at the local level are further contextualized within and across different spaces.

Understanding the role of space in religion helps us better situate religious action in everyday life in two primary ways. First, it directs scholars towards the varied ways people construct religiosity through local patterns of social interaction, as opposed to top-down approaches that theorize religion as a set of beliefs and practices imposed on believers. Second, attention to how religion is spatially structured provides a framework for assessing women’s agency. Control of space accords the ability to regulate, discursively and materially, those within

it (Morin and Guelke 2007: xix). An analysis of religious spaces emphasizes how gender relations are constructed differently across settings and how such constructions enable and constrain women's movements (Massey 1994). It also avoids essentialized notions of religion as innately patriarchal or misogynistic by reconnecting agency to subjectivity (Korteweg 2008).

Feminist geographers typically conceptualize space more as categories than actual physical localities (Morin and Guelke 2007); but, as the earlier example about veiling demonstrates, physical space roots religious conduct in specific places at particular moments. The structure of a space, both architecturally and socially, suggests what actors expect appropriate behaviors by men and women to be (McDowell 1999), and the structure can maintain or challenge existing hierarchies (Kahera 2002; Spain 1992). On a practical level, physical spaces are eminently observable and permit researchers to document how gender relations are created, maintained, or transformed in religious institutions (Moore 1995). For example, Sullins (2006) has suggested that physical segregation of the genders during religious practice and ritual, along with the systematic exclusion of women from leadership roles, privileges men's participation in orthodox Muslim and Jewish communities.

Given that most American mosques segregate worshippers by gender and that the spaces women occupy are often smaller and less desirable, such as basements or balconies (Baghby, Pearl, and Froehle 2001; Karim 2009), Sullins may be right to expect women's activities in the mosque to be less empowering. However, research suggests African American Muslim communities differ from other Muslim communities. Their mosques generally do not have partitions, enabling women to move more freely within them (Karim 2009). African American Muslim women also attend the mosque more often than other ethnic Muslim women, suggesting



they may have more opportunities to expand the meaning of the mosque in their daily lives as a result of their fluid movements (Bhimji 2012).

Religious communities have long provided African American women safe social spaces away from the physically and symbolically unsafe spaces to which they have been subjugated throughout U.S. history (Byng 1998: 484). Higginbotham (1993) documents how women in the Black church empowered all African Americans against racial subordination by serving as models of respectable behavior during and after Reconstruction. During that time, African American women broadened the church's reach to become "the most powerful institution of racial self-help" in the larger black community (Higginbotham 1993: 1). Frederick (2003: 4) argues that even though the organization of the church is "far from ideal," it remains a spiritual structure that supports, nurtures, and validates women. Both scholars argue that African American women exert agency through their efforts within religious communities to improve their lives and the lives of those around them. Critically, this occurs *not* through dramatic protest but through everyday forms of resistance, such as raising funds to provide social services to other members.

The work of African American women in the church serves as a useful reminder that the enactment of religious identity is an intersectional process requiring women to negotiate multiple, competing identities. African American Muslim women bring to their religious communities a diverse range of racial, class, and gender experiences, as well as those of being a religious minority in a social landscape sometimes hostile towards Islam (Byng 1998). At the same time, African American Muslim women believe their religious identities enable them to maintain a humanist vision in the face of discrimination, providing a framework to resist multiple oppressions (Byng 1998). Rouse explains that the performance of an Islamic identity

pushes African American Muslims “into the contentious arena of religious identity politics...but then again one must remember that African Americans are already deeply engaged in racial identity politics” (Rouse 2004: 177).

Persistent racial and class inequalities in both the American *ummah* (community of believers) and larger U.S. society serve as daily reminders to African American Muslims of their marginalization. This shared history binds African American Muslim women and men together and encourages them to incorporate strategies for racial and economic liberation into their constructions of religious community (Byng 1998; Rouse 2004). This helps explain why most African American Muslim women choose to worship in majority African American mosques (Karim 2009). What remains less clear is how African American Muslim women reconcile their competing identities as they struggle against patriarchy in the mosque while also seeking to use the mosque as a tool to combat other forms of oppression.

Forming a religious self occurs through individual acts of observance and performance (Avishai 2008), as well as by working with other women to fight social injustices (Rinaldo 2013). Such a constructivist approach to religion extends conceptions of women’s agency beyond compliance or resistance to include the multiple processes through which women actively construct their religiosity (Avishai 2008). These processes vary by institutional and structural context. From her interviews with Orthodox Jewish women in Israel who observed *niddah* (Jewish laws of menstrual purity), Avishai found some women reacting to the “threat” of secular Israeli culture by deepening their religious engagement, specifically through embodied practices that excluded them from certain social interactions. However, in the already secularized environment of Brooklyn, New York, Fader (2009) found Hasidic women striving to increase their interactions with secular institutions in order to free their men to focus on religious studies

(Fader 2009). Fader's study provides evidence that the contextual gendering of space includes different expectations for how women and men will enact piety.

In this study, the local context of the mosque, structural locations of the actors, and racialized understandings of Islam invoked in social practices are critical to understanding how African American Muslim women "do religion" (Avishai 2008). Like Avishai, I argue that religiosity is a social construction grounded in observance and achieved through performance. I focus on how women negotiated religious spaces at the mosque as a means of socially engaged religious conduct and in so doing helped each other resist multiple oppressions. The structure of a religious community may look patriarchal and exclusionary but, as I will show, women's agency is reflected in how they navigate together the daily contours of community life.

### **A Space For Meaningful Worship**

From the street, the masjid was unrecognizable as a place of worship. Surrounded by a wire fence, the lot included a *masalah* (prayer hall), small house, dirt yard, and narrow gravel parking lot. The *masalah* was comprised of a simple stucco structure with two sliding glass entrances (one for men, or "brothers," one for women, or "sisters"). Brothers performed wudu (ritual cleansing before prayer) at an outdoor sink near a second men's side entrance. For the first three years of the study, sisters used a small powder room inside the house for wudu, but they later helped finance the installation of a portable shed next to the house that contained a sink and foot washing station. The small house contained staff offices, kitchen, brothers' bathroom, sisters' powder room, and a bedroom for an elderly brother who lived there.

Like any religious organization, the masjid existed first and foremost as a space of worship (Sullivan 2011), and in this capacity men dominated. Only men served as imams, giving khutbahs (sermons) and leading congregational prayer. Only men performed the adhan (call to prayer), a sacred duty of additional symbolic importance in this setting because the first muezzin in Islamic history was a former African slave (Dannin 2002). Only men taught official religious classes. While at different times over the five years of the study I observed women form informal religious education classes, coming together to discuss the Qur'an and to give each other lessons about important women in Prophet Muhammad's life, such groups typically waned after a few weeks or months. The groups also failed to gain the legitimacy of being noted in the monthly community bulletin.

This patriarchal division of religious labor was reflected in the spatial layout of the prayer hall, or *masalah*, which was divided into two sections: the "sisters' side," which measured approximately 400 square feet, and the "brothers' side," roughly 520 square feet (see diagram below). Though I have designated them as separate boxes, in reality this was one open space, with only a half wall where the bold line is indicated and as seen in the photo below (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 4. Diagram of prayer hall (Sisters' area in white; Brothers' area in gray)

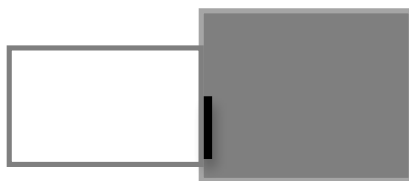


Figure 5. Inside prayer hall (from sisters' perspective facing forward)



Source: Author

The division was reinforced by two parallel lines of black gaffing tape on the floor at the front of the sisters' area placed to help guide women believers on where to face during prayer (put in place after photo taken). While there may have been some implicit negotiation over the exact boundary before the tape was placed, after its arrival men did not sit past the line. If one did—generally a non-African American participant—he was urged to move forward, oftentimes by fellow brothers.

While the sisters' side was technically smaller, it was surprisingly large given women's lower attendance. On a typical Friday afternoon, between 15 and 20 women sat in the sisters' area, while three or four times that many men clustered in the brothers' portion. Unlike many

mosques where women worshippers find themselves praying in basements or hallways (Karim 2009), it was men who sometimes had to make *salat* (prayer) outside on the sidewalk or lawn. With the exception of densely crowded prayers, say on a large holiday like Eid al-Fitr, I rarely had to squeeze into the women's space, more often than not getting plenty of room to relax on the floor against a wall. Brothers sat through the khutbah with folded legs, their knees or shoulders centimeters from a neighbor.

However, the sisters' disproportionately large spatial representation in the *masalah* did not always enhance their ability to participate in the worship experience. Because they worshipped behind the men, facing northwest towards Mecca, they had to look at the backsides of the brothers during services. If asked about this, sisters agreed that their positioning should be insignificant, because believers were supposed to focus on their *eeman* (faith) instead of what was happening around them, but I also heard them sometimes complain to each other about having to see men's "cracks" when the latter bent for prostration (see also Karim 2009). The arrangement of women behind men also impeded the sisters' abilities to hear key components of worship services. Poor acoustics inside the masjid coupled with the competing sounds of sirens, helicopters, buses, and booming stereos, frequently drowned out the voice of the imam.

Sisters came to the masjid despite these obstacles to worship and, once there, worked to make the prayer hall a sacred space that facilitated women's engagement in religious self-making. The following excerpt illustrates this well:

The *masalah* is quiet, save for Imam Khalid's soft voice speaking about the importance of *taqwa* (God-consciousness). Although the service started at 1:00, and it is now 1:28 p.m., believers are still trickling into the masjid, including one

younger non-African American male. As many believers do before they sit for the khubtah, he starts to move into salat position, bringing his feet together and correcting his posture. Before the man can begin his prayer, a sister sitting in a chair about six feet behind him clears her throat loudly and says, without moving her body an inch, “As-salaam alaikum, Brother.” The young man turns round, looks at the sister humbly as he lowers his head, and then moves far to the left out of the sister’s way. The sister says nothing else, just continues to look forward towards Imam Khalid.

To accommodate the sister, the brother had to wedge himself against a crowded group of men on the north side of the masjid. On that day only 15 sisters were in attendance (13 who prayed), while the men’s area had at least 60 brothers.<sup>16</sup> The sister’s heightened position in a chair would have enabled her to see over the man once he sat down, but she did not wait.<sup>17</sup> She publicly enforced her right to be able to see the imam, an act that demonstrated to anyone watching she was neither subordinate to nor intimidated by the men worshipping in front of her.

Sisters also exhibited a sense of right to engaged worship when they asked for the microphone to be turned louder or approached an imam after services to question his interpretations. They even policed the space’s sacredness with each other, as happened on one memorable occasion when a sister asked another sister to stop talking on her cellphone. The

---

<sup>16</sup> Women who were menstruating did not perform salat, but some still came to the mosque because they valued other forms of participation on Fridays (e.g. the marketplace in Chapter 3).

<sup>17</sup> Women had a choice to sit on the floor or in one of the four rows of plastic chairs set up in the middle of the sisters’ area. These chairs were intended for elderly sisters who could not perform *salat* standing up, but many middle-aged sisters with more minor bodily ailments, such as bad hips or weak backs, also used the chairs for prayer.

latter, a light-skinned woman in a long black dress and matching *jilbab*, went outside and continued to talk loudly in Arabic.

Attendance and engaged worship were two of the ways sisters in this study ideologically distanced themselves from other ethnic Muslim women and, in so doing, sought to highlight the piety of African American Muslim women as active mosque participants. Sisters noted that most of the men who arrived late were Arab or South Asian and suggested the men went there only because it was close to their workplaces. This was in contrast to sacrifices sisters made to be able to attend the Friday midday service, taking time off from work, shuffling family obligations, and sometimes traveling long distances to worship at this particular masjid, though they could have attended one of a dozen mosques in greater Los Angeles. They chose this mosque because they identified with the quiet sanctity of the sisters' space, as was evident in a conversation I observed between two sisters one evening. Both complained that at "immigrant" mosques women talk in the *masalah* and "let their kids run all over the place." Added one of the sisters, "I hate that when trying to make prayer." Then she joked, "The women are just so glad to get out of the house," echoing stereotypes about Muslim women as oppressed while rejecting this version of Islam for herself or her masjid. Double resistance to patriarchy in the masjid and to what sisters perceived were misguided cultural interpretations of the religion by immigrant Muslims solidified racial bonds among sisters and encouraged them to push back against the possibility that Islam constituted an oppressive force.<sup>5</sup>

Women's active participation during worship services demonstrated that the masjid was "an important performative space" (Chong 2008, 121) where women negotiated multiple social identities. Even though their designated space was smaller, the sisters made it a meaningful place



for religious conduct. Individual efforts to enforce the sacredness of the sisters' space benefited the women as a whole, because it furthered every woman's capacity to engage Islam.

### **A (Safe) Space All Their Own**

One evening while I helped a sister clean up the kitchen following a community event, a brother walked in and politely asked us if he could use the sisters' bathroom because the men's was occupied. When he came out, he was drying his hands on an American flag handkerchief and joked, "You don't have any paper towels in there. I have to wipe my hands with the American flag. Blasphemy!" The sister and I laughed, but the joke served as a subtle reminder that for women to have resources—even those as simple as paper towels for their bathroom—they had to fight for them.

Money was a constant source of tension at the masjid because there was never enough to cover even basic expenses. These shortages reflected the larger financial insecurity of the community. The ability to spend masjid funds rested in the hands of Resident Imam Khalid and his right-hand man, Brother Fareed. These two men decided if, when, and where money would go, often with a lack of transparency that frustrated believers of both genders. Women learned to work within this power system, using informal channels with the men to lobby for money for certain events or activities. They also counted on Imam Khalid's wife to serve as a champion for sisters' causes, a role she relished when heading the annual women's conference or helping her husband decide how to remodel portions of the masjid. Women generally did not concern themselves with the quality of men-only spaces, focusing instead on parts of the masjid women used, thus reinforcing gender divisions.

When I started my fieldwork, a small group of sisters spearheaded an effort to remodel the bathroom, worn and in need of repair, by getting the masjid to install a new sink and toilet. Sisters took turns cleaning it and buying replacement bottles of hand soap that were nicer than the discount-brand the office bought. Not long after the remodel, sisters started “catching” brothers sneaking out of the women’s bathroom. Two women, including the imam’s wife, put a new lock on the bathroom, keeping the keys away from male staff and taking turns to unlock the door every morning. Although the lock lasted only a few weeks, it sent a message to the brothers that this space belonged to the sisters and indicated to all members that the women were united in their efforts to stop men’s appropriation of women’s resources.

Women also mobilized to create new gender-specific spaces for intimate religious practices. Like salat, *wudu* (ritual washing before prayer) involves moving and bending the body. Not wanting to do these physical movements in front of men, women relied on the sisters’ bathroom as a private space to “make wudu.” But the bathroom was small and had only one sink. After discussions among the sisters, a concerted effort was made to install a proper wudu station. The women collected money to purchase a storage shed and oversaw its installation. Plumbing for the special sinks for washing feet came later, and although there remains no cooling or heating system, once complete the women were proud of their accomplishment to create a space exclusively designed so sisters could engage more deeply in Islamic practice.

Sisters’ efforts to police men’s movements in gender-specific spaces grew more extreme after installation of this wudu station, which sat next to a popular fig tree. This created tensions between men and women believers, captured in this excerpt from Ramadan in 2012:

Several sisters are standing outside and talking while taraweeh prayer is going on inside. Together we've been watching a brother who the sisters often complain is creepy because of his physical appearance and odd ramblings. The brother starts to walk towards the sisters' wudu station and Sister Lisa says, "What's he doing? No! No! That's not right. He can't be over there!" She decides she's going to rush over there and stop him, with Sister Aisha running after her and shouting that she's coming too! The sisters go up to the man and have some kind of back-and-forth. The brother eventually walks off, away from the wudu area. Lisa and Aisha come back to where we're standing, and (imitating a deep male voice and arching her back) Lisa chants, "I want a fig. I want a fig." Then returning to her normal voice and relaxed posture, she says that sisters need to be part of security too, to which one of Aisha's daughter mumbles, "We are security."

Even though no sisters were using the shed at the time, the man's trespassing violated a sisters-only sacred space. The irony is that I rarely observed women use the shed, or what Sister Ava mockingly termed "the outhouse." Despite this, the wudu station is important because it represented women's abilities to come together to create new, safe spaces for religious ends within the existing institutional structure.

Women's efforts to protect the space exhibited a claim of authority over men, if only for a short time. Following the incident, I pressed Sister Lisa on who she thought has final authority to determine access to the masjid. She replied, "No one. The community does." She rejected the idea that only men leaders or security could make those decisions, but her assertion suggests an exaggerated sense of agency in the case of access. Sisters complained repeatedly to Imam Khalid

about the brother in the previous excerpt and asked that he be “kicked off the lot,” in part because the man failed to observe an appropriate physical distance when he talked to women. Time and time again the sisters complained that they had to be security even though it was the responsibility of the men to protect women.

### **The Limits of Appropriating Space**

Informal power has its limits (Harris 1999), and the concentration of religious authority in the hands of a few male leaders (especially Imam Khalid) accorded certain men tangible benefits not extended to women. Sisters had less overall access to the masjid at night, when a key was needed to enter the grounds and buildings. As a result, women were less able to appropriate the masjid as a domestic space, while certain men lived there for little or no rent. This gendered division of access matters to our understanding of the ways material resources may become encoded in religious space as well as the role of religion in systems of social support in general.

The sisters who put the lock on the bathroom did not seem to mind when respectable brothers asked permission to use it. Rather, the lock was intended to keep out a specific group of men who lived at the mosque and who the sisters saw as appropriating too much of the masjid for personal use. Brother Bill lived in an old RV on the street in front of the masjid, running electricity off the prayer hall in exchange for guarding the property at night, and “Old Man” Taleem had a bedroom in the small house. Both men used the masjid kitchen and brothers’ bathroom as their own. Brother Taleem had been there so long that no one I asked remembered exactly when the special living arrangement started for the 93-year-old. Sisters, on the other hand, did not have official permission to live or sleep at the masjid, resulting in a less equitable

distribution of this specific social service provided by the mosque to its struggling community.<sup>18</sup> It also meant that patriarchy, oddly, gave men more opportunities to domesticate the masjid.

This is not to say women never appropriated the masjid for personal use. Some of the sisters I came to know well over the years retreated there to escape “drama” at home. Between 2009 and 2010 I regularly met Sisters Ava and Aisha at the masjid to hang out. We ate, talked, and watched movies, often until 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. If we got there after *isha* we had to call Brother Elijah or Brother Bill to let us in. Imam Khalid caught wind of our activities and had several “talks” with Ava, who each time ignored his instructions and said we would do what we wanted. I believe the get-togethers stopped mainly because I became pregnant and my friends worried for my safety in the neighborhood at night, not because Ava or Aisha feared Imam Khalid. Our actions constituted “small acts” of resistance (Frederick 2003) to what the sisters saw as Imam Khalid’s attempts to control access to the *community’s* masjid.

Critically, Ava would not have been able to use the masjid after hours without the assistance of Bill or Elijah. As fellow residents of the neighborhood, they understood each other’s struggles in ways that crossed gender lines. When Ava was “at war” with her adult sisters and brothers, who all lived together to save money, she often retreated to the masjid to find peace or to sleep. She relied on one of the brothers staying there to guard her, sometimes all night, in exchange for food or rides. However, as hectic as Ava’s family life was, she never *had* to live there like some of the brothers in the community. When sisters lost their housing they could stay with another sister or married couple, but a brother staying at the home of a single sister or even a married couple was less common because it violated sexual norms.

---

<sup>18</sup> One of my informants suggested that in the past sisters had been allowed to stay at the *masjid* (some with their children in tow), but in five years of fieldwork I never observed this, and from everything I could gather it had been many years (decades, in fact) since a woman believer “lived” there.

By granting brothers greater access to the mosque, leaders may have unintentionally undermined the men's incentives to develop wider networks of social support that could have helped them in meaningful ways. Brother Wali lost his job in 2012 and began living out of his car on the masjid lot. Later that year his car broke down and he watched patiently by the open hood as several brothers leaned in to assess the repairs. I asked Wali if any had offered to help him fix the car. He said, "No [but] that would be a beautiful thing, wouldn't it?" It did not seem in his worldview to consider using his Muslim brotherhood as an extended network of "fictive kin" (Stack 1974).

Sisters, on the other hand, had constructed a tight sisterhood of fellow Muslim women or *Muslimahs* to whom they were able to turn for social support outside the masjid. When Ava's car was giving her trouble, Aisha helped her buy a new one. When Aisha's husband out of state took ill, she asked Ava to cook meals for her children and invalid mother-in-law while she cared the man. As lifelong residents of the neighborhood, the women first sought the safe social space of the Muslim community to construct a stronger moral self alongside others experiencing similar struggles. Through thirty years of friendship and collective struggle, Ava and Aisha, like other women in the community, learned to manage their experiences as minority women in a minority religion by working within the masjid's existing power structure. This sisterhood constituted a way of engaging Islam that helped them resist gender and economic oppressions in and out of the organization.

## **Doing religion in social context**

The sisters asserted their rights to be engaged pious actors in spite of their smaller numbers and spaces in the masjid. Admittedly, the most sacred space in the masjid was the most segregated, but the arrangement afforded women a designated space that they actively protected. Sisters also exerted power in the community by creating new sisters-only spaces, as establishment of the wudu station demonstrated. Even when their access was restricted after hours, women found ways inside by relying on their class solidarity with particular men. For these reasons, I hesitate to say Islam in this case was a “patriarchal religion” (cf. Bartkowski and Read 2003). Instead, my analyses suggest there were particular instances in which patriarchy manifested in observable ways.

I also cannot comfortably claim that this mosque was “unquestionably men-dominated” as some scholars have written about men-led organizations in other conservative religious traditions (cf. Chong 2008). Where I found sisters fighting men’s domination was in their attempts to appropriate the masjid as a personal space. I do not know of another study about American Islam that documents the mosque as a place of residence for the down and out, but in this case the intersecting forces of race and poverty led some believers to rely on the masjid as a living space. Men leaders attempted to condition access by gender, but in so doing they mobilized women to cultivate a strong support system outside the mosque that over time has proven more meaningful than the limited opportunities for support brothers had inside the masjid.

The particularities of patriarchy in this setting may constrain sisters’ abilities to negotiate spaces in certain ways, but they do not stop the women in their goals to engage Islam. Their

creative responses to men's maneuverings are further proof that women can "do religion" in institutions led by men. In many ways the actions of African American women in the mosque mirror those of African American women in the church, whose aims are not to feminize leadership but instead work within existing organizations to create stronger communities (Frederick 2003; Higginbotham 1993).

In the U.S. context, where Islam is not only a minority religion but one often marginalized in public spheres as misogynistic (Rinaldo 2013: 192), African American Muslim women face the possibility that their religious identity may compound intersecting racial, class, and gender oppressions (Byng 1998). But they also "surrender" to Islam, in part, as a means of resistance to racism and economic exploitation (Rouse 2004: 216), suggesting their negotiation of an Islamic identity demonstrates a "capacity for action" not captured in conventional framings of Islam and gender (Mahmood 2005: 18).

An intersectional frame like the one used here recognizes that religious identity exists alongside other social identities. In negotiating these multiple, competing identities in contested spaces like the mosque, women work to overcome different forms of oppression. In the worship area, the women distinguished their patterns of worship from those of "immigrant" Muslims, a pattern that we will see in the next chapter was repeated among men. At night class inequalities mattered more for how women chose to exercise their agentic potential. These negotiations are further proof that piety is grounded in everyday observance and conduct (Avishai 2008; Mahmood 2005), to which I add piety is as much a social process intended to engage religion through interaction as it is an achievement of personal conduct (Rinaldo 2013: 92).

By considering how pious women position themselves with respect to others occupying similar spaces, we see that gender is not just a project of understanding the social meanings



attached to sexual difference (George 2005: 22). Gender also involves the articulation of racial and class differences that shape one's capacity to act. African American Muslim women may be better able to resist patriarchy, and therefore set their own terms and limits within community life, by performing a distinctly African American Muslim identity positioned against that of "immigrant" Muslims. Such everyday acts of resistance may undermine efforts to create an ummah (wider Muslim community) by promoting racial exclusion over gender inclusion (Karim 2009), but my evidence suggests African American Muslims rely on their local communities in distinct ways because they face different oppressions. Research that acknowledges the contours of religious social difference avoids homogenizing religions and the people who identify with them (Korteweg 2008).

Previous research suggests that the majority of U.S. mosques use the most conservative worship arrangement of complete gender segregation during worship (Karim 2009), so the experiences of women in this study may be more the exception than the rule. However, through their micro-level maneuverings of space we see how the dominant "paradox" approach in the sociology of religion, which sees women's participation as a form of submission to patriarchal religious systems, belies a more nuanced and important social phenomenon at play. Religion does not inherently "do" anything to people who practice it—rather, in this case, African American Muslim women and men "do religion" in a context shaped by multiple oppressions.

## FIVE

### CONSTRUCTING ETHNIC BOUNDARIES WITHIN ISLAM

Almost a year after my official fieldwork ended, I visited the masjid to take photographs of the property for a forthcoming article (Prickett 2014). It was mid-Ramadan and believers were gathering for the evening's iftar. When they entered the property they saw a large donation in a corner of the lot (picture below).

Figure 6. Donated clothing and goods, July 2014



Source: Author

The piles of clothes arrived earlier in the day from an unknown donor. Having seen numerous scenes like this in past years, I expected believers to walk over and pick through the bags for what they wanted. Rather, I heard members comment with anger:

Elijah: They need some place to dump it. So they dump it here.

Naeem: Ain't that right? This is the Goodwill.

Elijah: And we got nowhere to put it. Bins already full.

Dina: That's disrespectful. That's what they think of us. We need to stop accepting that stuff. That's not who we are.

Several others nodded and added “uh-huh.” No one witnessed the “dumping” but everyone in attendance assumed it was the immigrant Muslims who routinely dropped off donations during the holy month. Elijah’s comment about the bins suggested he expected most of the goods to go in the masjid trash, knowing the imam would not want them left out in public view and aware of no empty space to store the goods.<sup>19</sup> Elijah’s comment stood out in particular, because I knew he happily accepted donated goods from other believers (and me) to re-sell. Indeed, someone whispered later not to be fooled by Elijah’s remarks because he would be the first to pick through the piles after dark. They thought he was fishing for permission to take the stuff by threatening to throw it away. Even so, I had never before heard him talk that way about donations from immigrants.

---

<sup>19</sup> As the article I discussed earlier explained, the city cited the masjid in past years for open-air storage and leaders wanted to avoid other costly citations.

Believers enjoyed receiving free clothing and household items, especially some of the sisters who lived on fixed incomes. They found it challenging to afford festive yet modest clothes for masjid celebrations, often wearing traditional South Asian garments such as *shalwar kamiz*. Even Dina and Naeem, who were both well off compared to many members, took donations from the masjid to share with family and friends. So, why were they angry? Why would they throw the clothes in the trash?

As I listened to people continue to discuss the donation I realized that it was not the donation itself so much as *how* it was offered that offended believers. Piles of haphazardly stacked garbage bags left in the parking lot for believers to sort through and organize reflected both blind charity, whereby donors assumed the community needed charity rather than asked, and the assumption that believers had time for the hours of unexpected labor required to organize the goods for distribution. In both ways the donation denied the community the ability to decide for itself what it actually needed. This “gift” reinforced believers’ perceptions that their Muslim brothers and sisters from immigrant-led communities looked down on them, a sentiment captured best in Sister Dina’s comment, “That’s not who we are.” In other words, it constructed a hierarchy of power in which members of Masjid al-Quran *received* charity, while immigrant Muslims *gave* charity. This translated a difference among Muslims of different backgrounds into an inequality, something the literature on American Islam discusses but is rarely able to capture in action.

The MAQ community often did rely on the help of their immigrant religious brethren, as seen with the food giveaways in Chapter 1 and the dirt to fill “Lake Quran” in Chapter 2, but these previous acts of charity were given in consultation with the community. Consultation

allowed MAQ members to assert their agency by identifying the community's needs, creating a partnership between different communities of believers. By contrast, the "dumping" on this evening made MAQ look like a "Goodwill" center and shone a spotlight on the community's poverty rather than its piety. This violated the moral distinction believers strove to create between themselves and the poor around them. Such an uninvited act of charity made community members feel like lesser Muslims—a particularly discouraging sentiment in a community already subjected to greater economic and racial oppression than wealthier Arab and South Asian Muslims (Karim 2009; Rouse 2004).

Religious congregations are the most ubiquitous institutional form in the United States, and within these spaces participants "generate, sustain, remake, or eliminate racial identity and meaning" (Emerson 2006: 156). This, Emerson argues, makes congregations fundamental to processes of racial formation and exclusion (also Omi and Winant 1994). While many religious traditions teach tolerance and brotherly love, they also exist within systems of racial categorization that place some categories squarely above others. In the Muslim American community this means African Americans face subordination as religious *and* racial minorities, and those who live in spaces like South Central also face marginalization as a result of their residence in a place at the bottom of America's hierarchy of place (Sampson 2009; Sharkey 2013).

As I explain next, members of MAQ framed Islam as a religion that recognizes racial difference but sees all believers as equal. However, as numerous studies on American Islam note, the persistence of ethnic tensions between African American and immigrant Muslims undermines this ideal (Karim 2009; Leonard 2004). Arab and South Asian Muslims, the two other largest Muslim ethnic groups in the U.S., share similar

socioeconomic characteristics that put them ahead of African Americans in terms of median household incomes, occupational levels, and educational attainment (Leonard 2003: 14). This chapter brings to light moments where these differences surfaced as a salient boundary between African American and immigrant Muslims, finding that the distribution of zakat formed a key locus of tension. Like the ways outreach to the neighborhood during Ramadan brought out the porousness of the moral boundary that believers strove to create between themselves and the neighborhood, interactions with immigrant Muslims over the reception of zakat at MAQ reminded believers of their lower positioning in America's hierarchies of race, place, and class. After examining these moments of racial tension, I situate my findings in a larger body of work that examines how religion reinforces existing social inequalities (e.g. Emerson and Smith 2000).

### **“There's no room for racism in Islam”: Hopes of Equality**

On the eve of my first Ramadan at MAQ, Imam Khalid distributed a photocopied printout of the Prophet Muhammad's last sermon. It read:

All mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood.

Imam Khalid drew reference to this sermon many times over the years, also offering the life and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (sunnah) as proof that Islam is a colorblind religion. Khalid taught that Allah made the world into nations and tribes but in spite of these differences, “We are all neighbors.” Importantly, he did not teach there was no race, only that there was no superiority of one race over another. To deny the significance of essentialized notions of race would have contradicted the lived experiences of believers and discounted their legacy in the Nation of Islam. Khalid also called on the work of Imam W. D. Mohammed, who told believers they had to live with other Muslims (as well as Jews, Christians, and “disbelievers”). Perhaps Imam Ahman captured the sentiment of hope best when he said in 2011, “There’s no room for racism in Islam.”

Believers clung to the ideal of Islam as a religion of racial equality, telling me that there are no pictures or images of the Prophet Muhammad and therefore he cannot be identified as white, Arab, or black. This is partly why cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad—typically depicted in a robe and turban to signify stereotypes of Arab culture—offend so many Muslims around the world. The cartoons and the vast public attention they often receive contribute to public perceptions that Islam is an Arab faith, a belief held by most Americans that is categorically inaccurate (Pew Research Center 2012).<sup>20</sup>

Believers understood the tremendous symbolic power of portraying a savior or prophet as one ethnicity or skin color. Their explanations as to why images of the Prophet are blasphemous developed from their experiences as African Americans living in a white-dominated society.

---

<sup>20</sup> The depiction of the Prophet as Arab also marginalizes the nearly 1.5 billion Muslims around the world who do not live in Arab or Middle Eastern countries, a problem acutely felt for the Muslim women and men living in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Asia-Pacific region who together comprise more than three-fourths of the world’s Muslim population.

Brother Fareed Jr. (son of the masjid treasurer) thought that the portrayal of Jesus as white and idyllic has been used against blacks and that without an image of the Prophet to idolize, there can be no one race that “holds it over another.”

Yet, even as they tried to position Islam as a colorblind religion, they complained that Arabs and Arab-Americans themselves violate this ideal by seeking to assert cultural dominance over other Muslims. For a while Sister Mariam attended the Saudi-funded “big King Fahd” mosque in Culver City—in part to get away from the drama of community life at MAQ. She stopped going to King Fahd after some of the sisters there pulled her aside to say she needed to have her ankles covered, showing me where her skirt hit about three inches above the ankles. “How you gonna tell me what to do?! In *my* country?”

Believers expressed frustration that immigrants assume African Americans know less about the religion as a result of their histories as “converts” (Karim 2009). They complained that immigrants want to correct their stances during prayer, which I observed once when a Moroccan sister told a line of sisters they should line up a certain way. All of the women in the line, I might add, were second generation African American Muslims and, while younger than the woman giving directions, had grown up practicing Islam. Contributing to these layers of ethnic tension were believers’ feelings that Arab Muslims look down at African American Muslims for their limited knowledge of the Arabic language (see also Karim 2009: 41), a difference reinforced by the community’s need to import Arabic speakers during Ramadan to lead taraweeh. Experiences led believers to see themselves fighting misconceptions about their faith on two levels: the misconception held by many Americans that they are members of the Nation of Islam and therefore hate whites (as discussed in Chapter 2), and the misconception that they know less



about Islam than immigrant Muslims. As one sister said, “I’m tired of it...What do they think? We just came to the religion yesterday?”

Nor did these tensions stop once they left the United States. Another space in which believers felt discriminated by other Muslims was on hajj. In his biography, Malcolm X waxed poetic about his experience walking side-by-side with men of all skin colors while on hajj (Malcolm X and Alex Haley 1964: 340; also Curtis 2002). Yet believers fortunate enough to make the holy pilgrimage said they found themselves discriminated against there too. Sister Mira made hajj in 2007 and, like most of the believers from MAQ who do so, traveled with an African American-led tour group. She heard in advance that Africans are treated the worst when ethnic groups try to get into certain sacred spaces, like the Prophet’s tomb, and so her group tried their best to blend in with Indonesian women. Sisters Ava and Aisha went on hajj together in 1993 and recalled watching Saudi television replay images of “the beating of Rodney King,” which perpetuated negative perceptions of black Americans and South Central in particular (Hunt 1997). So, even these privileged moments abroad away from the national system of racial formation in the United States reaffirmed to believers their essentialized understandings of race and reinforced feelings of racial subjugation within Islam.

I observed isolated moments of pride about diversity within Islam, as when Brother Naeem said of a Pakistani woman who visited every Ramadan, “This is their community too.” Yet even in his boasting he used “their” to refer to the sister (Shaista), lumping her with all other immigrant Muslims. In private conversations with Sister Shaista, I learned that she did not regularly attend a mosque but made an effort to visit MAQ and to sponsor iftar because her father had attended when he lived in South Central

in the 1970s. In fact, Shaista said her dad “helped start this mosque” but stopped coming because of cultural and political differences.<sup>21</sup>

My first year Shaista came with a male friend, another Pakistani American Muslim, who together drove (in his BMW) more than 30 miles each way to deliver pots of homemade curries and rice. The man stopped coming in later years, and while Shaista would not tell me why, I suspect it had to do with the treatment he received from some of the brothers, including one who called Shaista’s friend a “faggot” for wearing tight jeans. Sister Ava said it “hurt [her] soul” the way the brothers treated the man. I asked Ava why she thought the believers were not nicer to Shaista or her friend, instead ignoring them or not really talking with them. Ava said of the believers, “Cuz they’re assholes.”

Not everyone was cold to Shaista or her friend. Like Sister Ava, many believers advocated for fellowshipping with Muslims of all ethnicities, but these members often complained they had to go to other mosques to do so, finding the community at MAQ resistant to change. In addition to blatant displays of hostility (e.g. homophobic slurs), believers constructed boundaries through subtle behaviors. For instance, sisters referred to one African American brother in the community not by name but as “the brother with the immigrant wife.” This impersonal language paralleled believers’ use of “they” and “their” when describing immigrants and together with displays of hostility contributed to the construction of immigrants as the ‘other’ Muslims. Within American Islam, “racialized boundaries run not between black and white but between African American and immigrant” (Karim 2009: 37).

---

<sup>21</sup> Given that no one in the community discussed her father’s role when recounting their history, I suspect it was primarily financial.

## **Frames of difference**

In general my fieldwork was limited to conversations with African American Muslims, who comprised the overwhelming majority of MAQ participants. Indeed, there were only a handful of non-black participants who I would classify as (sometime) members. The immigrant Muslims who attended jumah rarely stayed long enough afterward to purchase goods from vendors or socialize with other members. Nor did Arab or South Asians participate in the biannual Eid celebrations at MAQ, the biggest events of the year. Sister Mira explained that immigrants want to pray, eat, and leave, but “we make a day of it,” with inflatable jumpers for the kids, music, maybe a film, and other cultural festivities.

I attended a small number of fundraisers organized by Arab and South Asian Muslim-led communities over the years, and in these moments away from MAQ felt more able to question immigrants about their perceptions of African American Muslims. At one such event I talked with a community health worker who told me her organization—a clinic built by Muslim physicians—did not engage in much outreach with the African American-led mosques in South Central. She described their problems as “different,” attributing the differences mainly to poverty. For example, she said organizing a book fair does not work because people in the area cannot spend “even \$6 on a book.” They may be single with kids and thus “can’t spend” money. The sister expressed gratitude that she did not have to live in South Central, singling out a recent police raid on a crack house near the clinic and the abundance of fast food restaurants as evidence that residents of South Central live in undesirable conditions. Her views of South Central parallel the stereotypes many Angelenos hold about the area, which they perceive as full

of gangs, drugs, and broken families (Bennett 2010; Hunt 1997). In her study of mosques in Chicago and Atlanta, Karim found immigrant Muslims holding similarly negative views about people in “the inner city,” with South Asian immigrant women especially frank about their efforts to integrate into white rather than black communities because of the latter’s lower social standing in the U.S. (2009: 231).

Believers at MAQ recognized that African Americans face higher rates of poverty and its related social problems, discussing them in private conversations and with me when pitching the promise of Islam as a tool for ameliorating social ills. But believers did not want to be reminded of these problems by racial outsiders and especially not during their worship experience. Sister Mariam pulled me aside one day livid about the ways Syrian-born guest imam Sheikh Burhan—invited by his friend Imam Khalid to give a monthly khutbah—talked about unwed African American mothers and their “illegitimate children.” Mariam mimicked Burhan, “You have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy. You have the highest rate of [incarceration]? We know that!” Then added, “Tell us some solutions.” Other sisters also complained about the sheikh’s negative portrayal of African American families, showing their disapproval by not attending jumah when he taught, or by waiting outside during his khutbah and coming in only for salat (prayer). These small acts of resistance furthered their sense of racial solidarity and reinforced felt differences with immigrants.

I visited Burhan at the prison he worked in three times, gaining access to follow the chaplain through the yards and into worship services (including a simple Eid celebration in 2009). All of the inmates were African American and many grew up in South Central, which I think skewed Burhan’s perceptions of African Americans. He emphasized (repeatedly) the violence and sexual abuse the men faced as youth, often referring to the men who grew up in

South Central as those who lived in the worst conditions. Burhan said the men “want to divorce their previous lives,” which is why they come to Islam in prison. “It’s a chance to start anew.” But when the sheikh shared these stories during his khutbahs, in effect conflating the space of the prison with the masjid, believers took offense to the portrayal of the inmates’ problems as *their* problems. This violated their efforts to separate the moral order of the Muslim community from that “of the hood.”

At the same time believers did not want to abandon all bonds of racial unity, feeling their experiences as African Americans cut across religion. Many believers lived with African American family members, often to reduce living costs. They may have shared different religious beliefs and sought to create a moral distinction between themselves and non-Muslim kin, but believers also recognized that American society saw them foremost for their skin color and lower economic position. Imam Khalid said in a public lecture one year, “This is where we feel most comfortable, in communities populated by African Americans. African Americans don’t believe all the things being said about the Muslims. What they say doesn’t make us nervous because we know [what] our friends, family, acquaintances think about us.” As Khalid’s works make clear, African American believers resist religious oppression by aligning themselves with other African Americans.

### **Frames of Resistance**

Defining “other” Muslims through stereotypes cut both ways, with MAQ members employing the trope of foreign Muslims as terrorists to criticize immigrant Muslims. After Sister Mariam complained about Sheikh Burhan’s reference to unwed mothers, she said he should look towards

his own country where there are “Arabs killing each other.” In defense of the problems in African American Muslim communities, Mariam said, “But we’re not strapping bombs to our bodies, blowing people up on the street.” Another member wrote in his self-published memoir, “I am even more ashamed of my Muslim brothers who commit murder than I am of gangbangers because gangbangers have no book.” Drawing reference to the Qur’an, the brother’s words stake a firm moral claim that Muslims who kill are worse than young black men in South Central who kill over gang or drug turf. And since believers perceived themselves as morally superior to gangbangers, the implication is that believers are better than any Muslims who may speak Arabic and have been born into the religion but “murder” each other.

In addition to framing immigrants as terrorists, believers used gender stereotypes to emphasize their differences with immigrant Muslims. In Chapter 4 I explained that women at MAQ resisted patriarchy by positioning their active mosque participation in opposition to that of immigrant Muslim women, making jokes about women trapped at home. I also found men positioning themselves against immigrant Muslim men, who they framed as the real oppressors in Islam. A conversation with Brother Naeem in 2008 exemplifies this strategy:

Naeem comments that I have developed a “glow” since my first visit. I tell him, “I feel comfortable here. I went to some other [mosques] but never felt the same.”

“Where’d you go?” he asks.

I tell him I can’t reveal the names per IRB rules, adding only that they were mainly “immigrant or with Arab-run leadership” and I did not feel as comfortable.

“That’s cuz they women haters,” Naeem says. “In Saudi Arabia too. You know? I never knew this but [my ex-wife] told me Saturday night how when we were in Saudi Arabia last year she was walking in the street and this bus driver pushed into her with his bus (uses hands to indicate the bus tapping her). She never told me that, probably cuz I would have hit him.”

Naeem’s declaration that Arabs are “women haters” serves to differentiate American Muslims from foreign Muslims, whom Naeem sees as culturally corrupt. His claim that he would have hit the Saudi bus driver also ties masculinity to the protection of women, rather than their subjugation. In framing foreigners as oppressors, he also asserts his right to use an American identity as a source of authority, which although African Americans are discriminated against in the United States offers greater basic liberties, like religious freedom to worship, dress, etc., than in some Muslim-majority countries.

Believers felt that immigrants tainted the religion when “they” conflated gender traditions with Qur’anic exegesis. Even Sister Ava, the community’s most vocal advocate for ethnic and racial harmony, phoned me fuming one day about a fellow sister and friend who was “all covered up now,” with nothing but her face showing. The change in dress came after the sister went on hajj with a group of immigrant Muslims, violating the norm of traveling in an African American-led tour. In an angry voice, Ava shouted, “That’s not Muslim!” After a pause, she more calmly added, “That’s their *culture!*” And it was this separation between “culture” and religion that Imam Khalid drew on to rally believers not to give up hope after Imam W. D. Mohammed’s death in 2008. At the same community meeting I examined in detail in Chapter 2, Khalid said, “We have our own food, our own clothing. We don’t want to give ourselves in to

what *they* want.” Then he added, “We like how we look... You can’t escape you and how you look. You can have on— What’s that thing? A burqa?—but that’s not Islam!”

As this section demonstrates, despite their desires to frame Islam as a tool for racial equality, hierarchies of race and place color the lens through which practitioners of Islam understand each other. Immigrant Muslims framed their differences with African American Muslims as stemming from poverty. Given that South Asian and Arab immigrants enjoy greater class privileges than African Americans, the frame goes beyond being one of differences within Islam to one that reinforces existing social inequalities. Believers used a frame separating cultural tradition and religion to resist negative perceptions of Islam as oppressive or violent as well as to exert religious authority. Yet, in their efforts to correct misconceptions about Islam as part of “their culture” believers perpetuated stereotypes of foreign Muslims as “murderers” and “women haters,” reinforcing differences rather than uniting believers under the ideal of the ummah. At the same time, the masjid needed immigrants to financially support the organization, as well as to further the community’s idea of a broader Muslim ummah. This placed believers in the awkward position of having to recognize their poverty just enough to warrant the aid but not enough to discount their moral worth. How they did this is the focus of the next section.

### **The Dialectics of Donations at MAQ: The need for immigrant help and the push to define the terms of that help**

In 2009 believers gathered to celebrate the dedication of the community-built charter school next door to the legacy of Imam W. D. Mohammed. The ceremony included an unveiling of a plaque to honor key donors. Of the 12 names of persons and organizations listed on the plaque as “major contributors,” half were immigrant, including two overseas foundations. Two more



names are ambiguous and could have referred to immigrants (e.g. “Muslim Businessmen and Women”). Out of the four individual contributors listed, two were African American and only one of those a regular MAQ member (Sister Haleema). The other was a famous Muslim athlete not present at the ceremony. The MAQ community was listed last, after the nonprofit that Imam Khalid and his wife created to operate the school.

At the ceremony, Imam Khalid described the long process to get the school built. “We did not have any money at the time [in the 1990s]...but we had hope and faith,” he said. Then Khalid thanked the donors who helped make it possible, listing amounts of \$600K, \$295K, and \$230K from Saudi men and women. He introduced and thanked two South Asian donors, who each spoke for several minutes. Khalid explained the community then borrowed another \$200K from a mosque east of Los Angeles and received money for 25 computers from the athlete. Then Khalid said, “Beside every good man is a good woman,” before introducing Sister Haleema, who Khalid explained sold her house to give the masjid the additional \$85K needed for completion of the project.

The school represents the crown jewel of believers’ collective efforts over the past two decades and their biggest contribution to the neighborhood since the 1970s, but in this moment of celebration the community could not escape its dependence on immigrants. The community’s lower socioeconomic standing within the greater Muslim community was made very public, all the more memorable because of the financial transparency Khalid offered. As I discussed in Chapter 3, leaders rarely spoke about the specific dollar amounts of contributions. The only MAQ member to receive individual recognition that day as a major donor was Sister Haleema and her amount paled in comparison to those given by Arab and South Asian outsiders. She also

had to sell her house to release the funds, further sharpening a lens on MAQ's unequal economic standing.

### Charity through Cooperation

While her husband cultivated relationships with wealthy immigrants to raise funds for large construction projects, Sister Dina fellowshiped with other faith communities to benefit smaller giveaways at MAQ. This included toy drives as well as neighborhood outreach events in which believers distributed food, clothing, and school supplies to people from the neighborhood. Dina relied on donations from immigrant Muslims and Mormons (who donated backpacks stamped with "Church of Latter Day Saints").

In contrast to the anger Sister Dina expressed in the opening excerpt, in 2009 she gratefully received a large donation of toys to give to children in the MAQ community (see photograph below). The toys were gone within minutes, demonstrating a joint need and desire. This donation differed in two key ways: the toys were brand new, and thus not the unwanted goods of other Muslims, and the toys were given to Dina in advance, allowing her time to organize with other sisters how best to distribute them. Dina chose to hand them out during the annual Eid al-Fitr celebration, which contributed to the sense of excitement for the day.

Figure 7. Donated toys, September 2009



Source: Author

Believers understood they needed the financial support of immigrant Muslims, but they wanted to define the terms of that support. When other Muslims “dumped” goods—albeit probably doing so with good intentions to help the “less fortunate” within the umma—it exacerbated inequalities between African American and immigrant Muslims, as this excerpt from 2008 makes clear:

I’m sitting at the table with Shaista, her friend, Sister Haleema and Brother Saddiq. A few feet away Ava starts going through a box of clothes crammed into a pile against the masjid. Haleema says, “No, Ava, those are mine.” Ava just keeps digging. Haleema says, “No, Ava. I’m serious. She brought them for me.”

Ava looks at Shaista, who puts her hands up and says, “I’m staying out of this. I just brought them.” Her friend looks at her and both make a face (widening their eyes). Then Shaista turns to Haleema, “She did bring me a cupcake so you know...” Now Haleema seems pissed, stiffening up, but then Ava gives such a dirty look that Haleema stops talking. Ava keeps digging through the box on top and pulls out some South Asian-styled clothes.

Ava stayed outside during prayer, continuing to search through each box in the donation pile. She said she was tired of people taking donations for the believers and selling them or giving them for favors, implying some men use the goods to “get some.” Then she ranted to me about Haleema and Elijah, saying they’re greedy and grab stuff before others have a chance to look. Indeed, when Haleema came out of the prayer hall and saw Ava with her stack of sorted items, she kept talking about the clothes (to no one in particular) saying things like “I can give that to my twins.” Rather than improve the material standings of “the community,” Shaista’s blind charity that evening exposed inequalities within the community. Tensions developed among believers with competing interests, leading to fights over who should get what and to feelings of marginalization among the most disadvantaged within the community.

Less fortunate members expressed frustration about the ways middle-class members held their class status over others. Sister Dina accused Ava of taking goods she didn’t need, telling her, “You’re not poor.” Ava shot back, “You don’t know my situation! I’m on a fixed income. What I got to do, show you my checks?” Ava told me later she took goods to share with her neighbors, a family of undocumented Latino immigrants. She often did this, taking goods for others she knew in the neighborhood or in her family who she perceived as less fortunate than

herself (despite the fact that she lives on a fixed income of less than \$900 per month). For Ava, these actions fall within an Islamic framework that grants her autonomy to decide also how to distribute mosque resources for zakat—she did not trust the masjid to distribute to the truly needy.

People who gave assumed everyone at MAQ was poor and that whatever goods were given would go to “less fortunate” Muslims. However, not everyone at MAQ was poor and even those who were experienced different needs. Donors demonstrated a failure to recognize this variation within the African American Muslim community when they “dumped” goods off at the masjid. It offended believers who did not perceive themselves as needy (or needy enough for used goods).

People who donated goods in consultation with Sister Dina or her husband were unlikely to understand the intense suspicion and distrust that many believers felt towards masjid leadership (as discussed in Chapter 3). In their acts of generosity, they unintentionally exposed internal systems of inequality in which those at the bottom of the class hierarchy assumed those in positions of power did not distribute donated goods in a just manner.

Either case—blind charity or charity in partnership—reinforced to believers that their location in South Central made them worse off than their Muslim brothers and sisters from wealthier communities. Blind charity appeared as pity, feeding existing hierarchies of power; charity in partnership, in which mosque leaders could identify what they needed, minimized feelings of marginality but also exposed internal hierarchies. Believers did not make disparaging comments about Mormons, even when their donations required extensive labor to unload the delivery truck. This supports my argument that it is because immigrant Muslims and African

American Muslims share a religious identity—a religion believers hoped could bring racial equality—that intensified feelings of difference and perpetuated inter-ethnic tensions.

Interactions like that between Haleema and Ava over the donation that Shaista brought made it difficult for me to identify a believer's class position. One minute Haleema was described as a major donor giving thousands of dollars to MAQ, and the next she quarreled with Ava for a box of used clothes. It would seem unfair to expect a fellow Muslim from another community coming by to drop off food or clothes to disentangle the contradictory class signals. At the same time, these other Muslims did not stick around to try, leaving before iftar or taraweeh, and believers at MAQ perceived this lack of interest in learning about the community as insulting. Such detached giving violated believers' twin hopes of equality and autonomy, emphasizing differences between Muslims and reminding believers that they need immigrant aid but immigrant Muslims do not need or even want to be around African American Muslims. This was especially evident on that July night in 2014, when the donors did not stay long enough to even show their faces. It stripped the community of its collective dignity, uniting Elijah, Naeem, and Dina in a common feeling of resentment.

**“The hand that picks the cotton now picks the president”**

According to a recent poll, only 38 percent of Americans say they know a Muslim (Pew Research Center 2014). The same poll found that Americans hold lower views of Muslims than any other American religious population, including atheists. The poll did not break down Muslims by race or ethnicity but had it asked about knowing an African American Muslim, the number would probably be much, much smaller. Combined with their lower economic and

education levels, it is not surprising that African American Muslims feel marginalized as religious minorities. This feeling of marginalization intensifies when reminded of their dependence on immigrant Muslims for financial aid.

As their references to Prophet Muhammad as a beacon of racial equality suggest, believers hold high hopes for what Islam promises for African Americans. After the election of Barack Obama to President, believers' hopes surged. They said he was going to help with race relations in this country. And one sister rejoiced, "The hand that picks the cotton now picks the president." Then come the daily reminders from the neighborhood of their marginalization, to which believers responded by constructing a boundary between those inside the masjid and those "in the hood." But as members of their same religion come into the sacred space of the masjid, believers are yet again reminded of their lower social standing in America's hierarchies of race, class, and place, admittedly differences they helped reproduce by framing foreign and immigrant Muslims as the 'other' within Islam. Combined, the experiences undermine the ideal of Islam as a color-blind religion, showing once again that good intentions cannot overcome structural inequalities.

In his presidential address to the Association for the Sociology of Religion in 2010, Rhys Williams argued that a new, distinctly 'American' version of Islam has emerged that is changing the public sphere in the United States. He urged scholars to pay attention to how the religion is "being crafted—on the ground and in community-based organizations—*by second and third generations of post-1965 immigrants*, and how that interacts with the imposed images, stereotypes, and understandings of the larger non-Muslim American population" (2011: 131 emphasis added). Recognizing that African Americans have practiced Islam since their forced

migration to the U.S. during slavery, Williams nonetheless argues this historical precedent was not enough to make Islam an American religion. He writes

Thus, despite the existence of Muslims in America for some time, I argue that a truly American Islam is a product of the second and third generations of post-1965 “new” immigrants and is currently in formation. This development is due in part to the rapidly increasing numbers of these post-1965 families, and in part because many of the second and third generations now have the education and middle-class status to begin to make claims on, and demand respect from, the American public sphere (ibid: 128).

In making this argument, however, Williams supports the type of limited view of Islam that believers at Masjid al-Quran fought so firmly against. As members pointed out, they have been engaging Islam in their community work for decades with little help or attention. Advocating for research on immigrant Muslims precisely because they have attained more perpetuates the sense that African Americans are somehow “lesser Muslims” as a result of their higher rates of poverty. It brings to mind the words Brother Louis spoke (in Chapter 2) to defend the community’s need to maintain black leadership: “No Arabs, no Pakistanis. We don’t want them as our head. We love our brothers, we love ‘em. But they’ve not been through what we been through, having everything taken from us.”

With the exception of a handful of studies, little research has examined the experiences of the more than one million African Americans who have transitioned to Sunni Islam. This dearth of research is all the more surprising given the profusion of studies about American Muslims



since September 11<sup>th</sup>. But in taking account of the perceptions and actions of African American Muslims at MAQ, I hope this chapter will encourage further scholarship on the ways religion “helps to create racially distinctive networks and, in using them as the basis for congregational and denominational growth, helps maintain and justify them” (Emerson and Smith 2000: 161). Until social scientists take more seriously the ways religious communities contribute to existing systems of racial inclusion and exclusion, the hopes of believers at MAQ will remain just that—hopes, not realities.

## CONCLUSION

Brother Fareed and I sat in the masjid office watching television. The six o'clock news started and one of the first stories in the top block was about a shooting in South Central. Three Latino men were killed near a gas station, with the reporter implying that the men were hanging out when ambushed. Fareed looked at me and said in a sarcastic tone, "Yeah, everyone was nice who died, right?" He said they had to be "doing something." Whatever they were doing, it was clear from Fareed's lack of sympathy that it was not the right thing to do.

This dissertation set out to explain what believers at Masjid al-Quran understand as the right things to do in the context of daily life in a poor urban neighborhood. I argue that Islam informed the ways that believers made sense of the landscape around them, but so too did the environment affect the specific ways in which believers drew on Islam. Individual struggle became woven into the worship experience at MAQ, as believers saw their struggles for a better life part of what it means to do Islam. They organized their lives around the idea that making good intentions matters and that doing so keeps the pious morally set apart.

When everything else failed—jobs, schools, police, welfare systems, and the basic municipal systems needed to keep citizens safe and healthy—believers held tight to their claims of moral worth. This enabled them to feel a sense of control amidst rapid urban change in which familiar sights and sounds declined. Believers' efforts to maintain their moral worth required that they draw boundaries through relational work with others in the neighborhood and with each other. But when the line between the masjid and "the hood" blurred and the problems of the street become the problems of the community, moments of moral crisis between members threatened to overwhelm even the best of intentions.

In her study of poverty in a rural town in Northern California, Jennifer Sherman (2009: 4) argues, “More than anything, morality’s power lies in its ability to create and sustain...social divisions. It is for this reason that morality is often the most potent and visible in situations where few other types of social distinctions exist.” She continues, “When jobs, incomes, and other sources of identity are stripped away, it is still possible to find ways to define themselves and their entire community as morally upstanding” (ibid: 6). Whether rural or urban, poverty is not devoid of morality. Instead, morality becomes an axis of difference “for whom there are few other forms of distinction available” (ibid: 4). In the case of MAQ, morality existed within an Islamic framework.

Breaking with tradition, this is a dissertation about a religious community with very little reference to scripture, except in the context of believers’ everyday talk. I have not quoted the Qur’an, and only once did I quote from what is believed to be the Prophet Muhammad’s last sermon (which has handed out to believers). Instead, my focus has been on action and the “doing” of Islam, because if there was one message that Resident Imam Mustafah Khalid emphasized above all others, it was that belief without action is meaningless. “Islam requires that we *act* on what we say we believe,” he told believers while standing at the holy mihrab. His words align well with recent efforts in the sociology of religion to examine how the faithful enact piety through observance and “live” their religion in and out of organized settings. Though not an entirely new approach, given that Geertz previously wrote it is “out of the context of concrete acts of religious observance that religious conviction emerges” (1973:112-3), the idiom of lived religion pushes scholars to develop a consciousness of the varied ways religion is enacted and practiced apart from doctrine. Seeing religion as something that is done *by people* rather than *to them* also helps us move away from essentializing notions of religion, which privileges elite

voices such as theologians and spiritual leaders. As I have argued, the doing of religion depends on the characteristics of the spaces where people live and enact piety.

From the doings of the men and women at MAQ we see how Islam is lived on the ground in places like South Central. This living of religion in a setting marked by poverty, violence, and segregation is what I have sought to capture with the term *pious disadvantage*. The theory draws attention to the pattern of striving and struggling that defined the shared religious experience at MAQ, including believers' aims for a better life through Islam and the problems they confronted in the making of those good intentions. Tensions developed during Ramadan and throughout the year when believers' good intentions became thwarted by poverty, racism, and institutional neglect. These tensions cannot be attributed to the particularities of Islam. Instead, these tensions "must be identified by characteristics of the religious group *and* its environment" (Wellman and Corcoran 2013: 517, emphasis in original). This leads me to the first point that I hope readers will take away from this dissertation. No religious tradition or group exists in a social vacuum, and religion must be understood within the context of daily life where place matters and increasingly more and more (Sharkey 2013).

Second, I hope that scholars will take greater care to recognize the variability in the cultural modes and patterns of decision-making among residents in spaces like South Central—spaces too often lumped under the generic and stigmatizing label of "ghetto." Once helpful for drawing attention to the systematic violence and state coercion that forced black Americans into a confined geographic space, the trope of "the ghetto" now detracts more than it clarifies. It has become an adjective to describe certain behaviors and by implication a certain 'kind' of poor black person (Sides 2012: 5). At MAQ, these were the kind of people from whom believers sought to differentiate themselves. For example, in the opening chapter it was Chester who many

members saw as *being ghetto* and therefore “of the hood.” To argue that Chester and believers were united because they are both in the ghetto would associate Brother Malcolm and Chester as one population in South Central, an act of analytical closure that denies Malcolm’s claim of moral superiority. Let me be clear, I am not saying that Malcolm is right in suggesting his moral worth is greater than Chester’s, but I am arguing that we strip Malcolm of all agency when we refuse to acknowledge his claim.

In trying to explain the behaviors of a narrow subpopulation of the urban poor, have we forgotten that most residents of poor urban neighborhoods are not criminals, drug dealers, addicts or welfare moms? It is damning of American society that one in three African American men will go to prison at some point in their lives, and we benefit from trying to understand their experiences along with the impacts of their absence on poor urban communities. But also compelling is what the other two-thirds have to do to stay out, such as split their families apart so their young men can get away from threats of violence. As Gregory so succinctly points out

The tendency to view the black poor as collectively weak and ineffective or, in its updated version, as socially isolated and institutionally disabled by joblessness and by the exodus of the middle classes, has not only obscured the struggles that black urbanites have continued to wage against racial injustices; more broadly, it has also elided the role that relations of power and political processes play in determining the significance of race, class, and place in contemporary American society (1998: 10).

Race, class, place, and their intersections remain significant social divisions in part because most Americans do not understand the struggles of black urbanites who are working against injustices with the best of intentions but often find their efforts thwarted by forces outside their control or forces too great to be resolved through individual and small-group efforts. Even those who do not subscribe to a particular theology create moral distinctions, as Elijah Anderson's work on "decent" families demonstrates, and it is residents' patterns of striving for something better and struggling against the odds that should be in the minds of anyone concerned about inequality in America.

The doings of the women and men at Masjid al-Quran in historic South Central Los Angeles—their praying, giving, hustling, and supporting—are evidence of the range of attitudes and actions of black urbanites. In bringing to the urban poverty literature an in-depth look at the long-term struggles and triumphs of a religious community in a poor urban neighborhood, this dissertation has shown what it means to strive against, struggle within, and sometimes triumph over disadvantage, all the while doing so within a framework defined by good intentions.

In Chapter 1, believers came together to observe the holy month of fasting and to reach out to the "less fortunate" in and around the community. The data I presented show how believers' efforts to position themselves in opposition to "the hood" are not without shortcomings, as the problems they encountered in their efforts to provide food both to guests and the Muslim community revealed. At the same time, the needs of believers like Sister Natalie remind us that the poor rely on their religious brethren to help them make ends meet and will likely continue to do so in spite of conflict.

Chapter 2 examined the community's more than 50 years of shared history in South Central, situating their attitudes and actions within larger patterns of neighborhood change. The dramatic demographic shift that occurred at the same time MAQ tried to rebuild itself after losing everything presented new constraints on recruitment and fundraising. That MAQ continues to exist in 2015 against these odds is all the more evidentiary of believers' agentic potential. Their efforts in later chapters to make money and to maintain an essentialized understanding of blackness within the American ummah can only be understood as part of their legacy of racial and economic struggle.

Continuing a legacy started in the Nation of Islam, believers fused commerce with the doing of religion, making economic participation a part of worshipping. Chapter 3 revealed the need and desire to make money through Islamically appropriate means as well as the consequences of creating a closed system of commerce. Bringing economic activity into everyday religious community life deepened members' bonds to one another and to the masjid, but it also created suspicion, distrust, and perceptions of exploitation that undermined expectations of intimacy between religious kin. This manifested most clearly in believers' suspicions about the financial doings of leaders. I termed their activities *halal hustling* to capture that these actions existed first and foremost as part of their efforts to survive through moral means but also undermined the very foundation of trust necessary to grow a religious community, helping also to explain why donations from immigrant Muslims did not always lead to actual support of those most in need in later parts of the dissertation.

Speaking to a long and heated debate about women in Islam, Chapter 4 then argued that sisters at MAQ exerted influence through both formal and informal means, drawing on each other to create safe spaces for worship, socialization, and material support. Their doings

contradict dominant frames in the sociology of religion that pits women's religious participation in a binary of resistance or accommodation. However, as their lack of access to the masjid at night suggested, the sisters struggled against patriarchal obstacles due to men's greater institutional control. This led the women to develop deeper and ultimately more effective systems of gendered support, which stood in contrast to the muted patterns of sharing and friendship among brothers.

The final chapter explored how believers understand their position in the larger Muslim American community. I focused on the moments of tension between believers and their "immigrant" Muslim brethren, who MAQ depended on for financial support. These moments, which manifested most clearly over donations of blind and cooperative charity, made believers feel they were seen to be like the poor around them. This violated their conceptions of individual worth. Chapter 5 also emphasized that African American Muslims face multiple forms of oppression as religious and racial minorities, and I argued that because of this scholars must not contribute to the further subjugation of African American Muslims by ignoring their contributions to the public sphere.

What remains for the women and men at Masjid al-Quran is unclear. There is no defined succession plan for when 76-year-old Imam Khalid retires or returns to Allah, and the community's financial standing remains unstable. A recent survey found that the number of African American mosques in the U.S. declined from 2000 to 2010 (Bagby 2012), suggesting that the MAQ community is not alone in its struggles to maintain either its property or black-led ownership. Combined with the continued demographic changes in South Central and Los Angeles County at large, the believers face an uphill battle to



sustain their community. The following and final excerpt I offer in this dissertation hints at future interactions to come:

Naeem, Shaheem, and I are playing bones (dominos). A Latina girl, maybe 9 or 10, walks in from the street and asks if we are selling food today. Naeem tells her “yes we are.” The girl looks back at her mom, who is standing about ten feet away in the parking lot next to a stroller. The girl asks if it’s free and Naeem says he’ll get her a couple of plates. He stands up and goes to Hafsa and tells her he’ll buy two plates for the women. When he rejoins the table, the little girl comes closer.

Girl: Are you Christians or Muslims?

Naeem: We both. We humans.

Girl: But are you Christians or Muslims?

Naeem: We Christian, we Muslim, we everything.

Sabir (to girl): Are you Christian or Muslim?

Girl: Christian only.

Then she walks away towards her mother. Ten minutes later, Styrofoam plates in hand, they leave.

Naeem’s simple but revealing answer drove this dissertation. Believers just want to be seen as human, but as happened with the little girl they found themselves repeatedly reminded of their differences in the course of interacting with people outside the community. I hope I have succeeded in my intention to bring to light a balanced perspective on believers’ doings as Muslims in South Central Los Angeles by complicating the boxes we try to put them in as

members of a marginalized urban space or adherents to a faith increasingly demonized in the West. A statement I made at the end of the introductory chapter bears repeating: There is a story about the way Islam is being lived on the ground in an urban setting marked by struggle, resistance, and delayed hope. Believers have not given up on their hopes despite the odds, and neither should we.

**THE END**

## REFERENCES

Abu-Lughod, Janet L. 2007. *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*.

New York: Oxford University Press.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its others." *American Anthropologist* 104: 783-90.

Allard and Small. 2013. "Reconsidering the Urban Disadvantaged: The Role of Systems, Institutions, and Organizations." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2013 647: 6-20.

Anderson, Elijah. 1978. *A Place on the Corner*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

----1990. *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

----- 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Avishai, Orit. 2008. "'Doing religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency." *Gender & Society* 22: 409-33.

Bagby, Ihsan. 2012. *The American Mosque 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque*. Washington, DC: Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Bagby, Ihsan, Paul M. Pearl, and Bryan T. Froehle. 2001. *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait*. Washington, DC: Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Bartkowski, John P. and Jen'nan Ghazal Read. 2003. "Veiled Submission: Gender, Power, and Identity among Evangelical and Muslim Women in the United States." *Qualitative*

- Sociology* 26: 71-90.
- Bennett, Dionne. 2010. "Looking for the 'Hood and Finding Community: South Central, Race, and Media." Pp. 215–31 in D. Hunt and C. Ramon (eds.), *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bhimji, Fazila. 2012. *British Asian Muslim Women, Multiple Spatialities and Cosmopolitanism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Borden, Sam. 2012. "Observance of Ramadan Poses Challenges to Muslim Athletes." P. B18 in *New York Times*, August 1.
- Bulanda, Jennifer Roebuck. 2011. "Doing Family, Doing Gender, Doing Religion: Structured Ambivalence and the Religion-Family Connection." *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 3: 179-97.
- Byng, Michelle D. 1998. "Mediating Discrimination: Resisting Oppression Among African-American Muslim Women." *Social Problems* 45: 473-87.
- Cadge, Wendy, Peggy Levitt, and David Smilde. 2011. "De-Centering and Re-Centering: Rethinking Concepts and Methods in the Sociological Study of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50 (3): 437–449.
- Chong, Kelly H. 2008. *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clifford, James. 1983. "On Ethnographic Authority." *Representations* 2: 118-146.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Second Edition. New York: Routledge.
- , 2004. *Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.

- Costa Vargas, João H. 2006. *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Curtis, Edward E. 2002. *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Dannin, Robert. 2002. *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, Mike. 1990. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Verso.
- Dawson, Michael C. 2001. *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- DeCaro, Louis A. 1996. *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X*. New York: New York University Press.
- Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Ecklund, Elaine Howard. 2006. *Korean American Evangelicals: New Models for Civic Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Edgell, Penny. 2012. "New Cultural Approaches to the Study of Religion: New Directions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38: 247-265.
- Eliasoph, Nina and Paul Lichterman. 2003. "Culture in Interaction." *American Journal of Sociology* 108: 735-94.
- Emerson, Michael O. 2006. *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Emerson, Michael O. and Smith, Christian. 2000. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fader, Ayala. 2009. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in*

- Brooklyn*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Frederick, Marla. 2003. *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Flory, Richard, Brie Loskota, and Donald E. Miller. 2011. *Forging a New Moral and Political Agenda: The Civic Role of Religion in Los Angeles, 1992–2010*. Los Angeles, CA: USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.
- Gans, Herbert. 1972. "The Positive Functions of Poverty." *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (2): 275-289.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- George, Sheba Mariam. 2005. *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gibson, Dawn-Marie, and Jamillah Karim. 2014. *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam*. New York: New York University Press.
- Gilkes, Cheryl. 2001. *If it wasn't for the women...: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Goffman, Alice. 2009. "On the Run: Wanted Men in a Philadelphia Ghetto." *American Sociological Review* 74 (3): 339-357.
- Goffman, Erving. 1952. "On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure." *Psychiatry* 15 (4): 451-463.
- Gold, Scott. 2008. "Living with Staggering Violence; In South L.A., Gunfire, Graffiti and Drugs Prevail." P. B1 in *Los Angeles Times*, March 28.
- Grant, David M., Melvin L. Oliver, and Angela D. James. 1996. "African Americans: Social and

- Economic Bifurcation.” Pp. 379–411 in R. Waldinger and M. Bozorgmehr (eds.), *Ethnic Los Angeles*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Gregory, Steven. 1998. *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore. 2006. *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harcourt, Bernard E. 2001. *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harding, David. 2010. *Living the Drama: Community, Conflict, and Culture among Inner-city Boys*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harris, Frederick C. 1999. *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harris-Lacewell, Lacy. 2004. *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. 1993. *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hunt, Darnell. 1997. *Screening the Los Angeles “Riots”: Race, Seeing, and Resistance*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- , 2010. “Introduction: Dreaming of Black Los Angeles.” Pp. 1-17 in D. Hunt and C. Ramon (eds.), *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hunter, Marcus. 2013. *Black Citymakers: How the Philadelphia Negro Changed Urban America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Jerolmack, Colin and Shamus Khan. 2014. "Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy." *Sociological Methods & Research* 43: 178-209.
- Inglehart, Ronald and Pippa Norris. 2003. *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kahera, Akel Ismail. 2002. *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Karim, Jamillah. 2009. *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. 1994. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press.
- Knott, Kim. 2005. *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*. Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing Ltd.
- Korteweg, Anna. 2008. "The Sharia Debate in Ontario: Gender, Islam, and Representations of Muslim Women's Agency." *Gender & Society* 22: 434-54.
- Kun, Josh and Laura Pulido. 2013. *Black and Brown Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Cooperation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lamont, Michele and Mario Luis Small. 2008. "How Culture Matters: Enriching our Understanding of Poverty." Pp. 76-102 in A. Lin and D. Harris (eds.). *The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Laslett, John H. M. 1996. "Historical Perspectives: Immigration and the Rise of a Distinctive Urban Region, 1900-1970." Pp. 39-75 in R. Waldinger and M. Bozorgmehr (eds.). *Ethnic Los Angeles*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.



- Leonard, Karen Isaksen. 2003. *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Leovy, Jill. 2012. "Homicide, the New LAPD, and South Los Angeles." Pp. 191-208 in J. Sides. (ed). *Post-Ghetto: Reimagining South Los Angeles*. Berkeley: Published for the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West by University of California Press.
- Liebow, Elliot. 1967. *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Lincoln, C. Eric. 1961/1994. *The Black Muslims in America*, Third Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdsman.
- Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence Mamiya. 1990. *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Malcolm X. 1964. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X with the Assistance of Alex Haley*. New York: Castle Books.
- Mamiya, Lawrence H. 1982. "From Black Muslim to Bilalian: The Evolution of a Movement." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21 (2): 138-152.
- Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1954. *Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- McCloud, Aminah Beverly. 1995. *African American Islam*. New York: Routledge.

- McDowell, Linda. 1999. *Gender, Identity, & Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McRoberts, Omar. 2003. *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Moore, Henrietta L. 1995. *Space, Text, and Gender: An Anthropological Study of the Marakwet of Kenya*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Morin, Karen M., and Jeanne Kay Guelke. 2007. "Introduction" to *Women, Religion, & Space: Global perspectives on Gender and Faith*. In K. M. Morin and J. K. Guelke. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Nazish, Kiran. 2014. "For Muslims in New York, Observing Ramadan Is a Blend of Rituals Far and Near." Pp. A25 in *New York Times*, July 24.
- Nelson, Timothy. 2005. *Every Time I feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Church*. New York: NYU Press.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1995. "State versus Islam: Malay families, women's bodies, and the body politic in Malaysia." In *Bewitching women, pious men: Gender and body politics in Southeast Asia*, edited by Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ong, Paul, Theresa Firestine, Deirdre Pfeiffer, Oiyen Poon, and Linda Tran. 2008. "The State of South LA." Los Angeles, CA: UCLA School of Public Affairs. Retrieved October 28, 2008 ([www.spa.ucla.edu/pdf/StateofSouthLA-FinalReport1.pdf](http://www.spa.ucla.edu/pdf/StateofSouthLA-FinalReport1.pdf)).
- Owens, Michael. 2003. *God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-state*

- Collaboration in Black America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Orsi, Robert. 1985. *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Pattillo-McCoy, Mary. 1998. "Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community." *American Sociological Review* 63 (6): 767-784.
- Pew Research Center. 2012. "The Global Religious Landscape." Washington, D.C.
- , 2014. "How Americans Feel About Religious Groups." Washington, D. C.
- Portes, Alejandro. 2010. *Economic Sociology: A Systematic Inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Prickett, Pamela. 2015. "Negotiating Gendered Religious Space: The Particularities of Patriarchy in an African American Mosque." *Gender & Society* 29(1): 51-72.
- 2014. "Contextualizing From Within: Perceptions of Physical Disorder in a South Central L.A. African American Mosque." *City & Community* 13(3): 214-232.
- Read, Jen'nan Ghazal and John P. Bartkowski. 2000. "To Veil or Not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas." *Gender & Society* 14: 395-417.
- Rinaldo, Rachel. 2013. *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rouse, Carolyn Moxley. 2004. *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sampson, Robert. 2009. "Racial Stratification and the Durable Tangle of Neighborhood Inequality." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621: 260-80.

- Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sharkey, Patrick. 2013. *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sherman, Jennifer. 2009. *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sides, Josh. 2003. *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- , 2012. "Introduction: A Brief History of the American Ghetto." Pp. 1-9 in J. Sides (ed.). *Post-Ghetto: Reimagining South Los Angeles*. Berkeley: Published for the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West by University of California Press.
- Singer, Amy. 2008. *Charity in Islamic Societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Small, Mario Luis and Katherine Newman. 2001. "Urban Poverty after The Truly Disadvantaged: The Rediscovery of the Family, the Neighborhood, and Culture." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27: 23-45.
- Small, Mario Luis, David Harding, and Michele Lamont. 2010. "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629: 6-27.
- Smith, Sandra Susan. 2007. *Lone Pursuit: Distrust and Defensive Individualism among the Black Poor*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Spain, Daphne. 1992. *Gendered Spaces*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Stack, Carol. 1974. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper & Row.

- Sullins, D. Paul. 2006. "Gender and Religion: Deconstructing Universality, Constructing Complexity." *American Journal of Sociology* 112: 838-80.
- Sullivan, Susan Crawford. 2011. *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tavory, Iddo. Forthcoming. *Summoned: Identification and Religious Life in an Orthodox Jewish Neighborhood*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tavory, Iddo, and Nina Eliasoph. 2013. "Coordinating Futures: Toward a Theory of Anticipation." *American Journal of Sociology* 118 (4): 908-942.
- Timmermans, Stefan and Iddo Tavory. 2007. "Advancing ethnographic research through grounded theory practice." In *Handbook of grounded theory*, edited by Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz. London: Sage.
- Turner, Richard Brent. 1997. *Islam in the African American Experience*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Essien-Udom, E. U. 1962. *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Valentine, Bettylou. 1978. *Hustling and Other Hard Work*. New York: Free Press.
- Venkatesh, Sudhir A. 2000. *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- 2002. "'Doin' the Hustle': Constructing the Ethnographer in the American Ghetto." *Ethnography* 3 (1): 91-111.
- 2006. *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2008. *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*.

- Malden, MA: Polity.
- 1998. "Inside the Zone: The Social Art of the Hustler in the Black American Ghetto." *Theory, Culture & Society* 15 (2): 1-36.
- 2002. "Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography." *American Journal of Sociology* 107 (6): 1468-1532.
- Watanabe, Teresa, and Paloma Esquivel. 2009. "L.A. area Muslims say FBI surveillance has a chilling effect on their free speech and religious practices." *Los Angeles Times*, March 1.
- Weber, Max. 1946. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wellman, James K., Jr. and Katie Corcoran. 2013. "Religion and Regional Culture: Embedding Religious Commitment within Place." *Sociology of Religion* 74 (4): 496-520.
- Williams, Rhys. 2011. "Creating an American Islam: Thoughts on Religion, Identity, and Place." *Sociology of Religion* 72 (2): 127-153.
- Wilson, William Julius. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wolfe, Alan. 2003. *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zelizer, Viviana. 2005. *Purchase of Intimacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- , 2010. *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1989. *The Seven Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 2003. *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press.