NOMADIC SUBJECTIVITY AND MUSLIM WOMEN: A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF IDENTITIES, CULTURES, AND DISCOURSES

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This dissertation (auto)ethnographically explores Muslim women’s identity formations and negotiations within an American context. A relational examination and application of the Communication Theory of Identity is used to describe and challenge the ways in which scholars understand cultural identities in discursive webs of contestation. Fifteen Muslim women from Northwest Ohio share their stories and experiences to demystify their often misunderstood and misrepresented identities. They speak of women’s rights and empowerment that they achieve through and with Islam. Through their voices, I challenge hegemonic notions of Islamophobia, nationalism, an immigrant sociological narrative, citizenship, and bullying. I advocate Braidotti’s nomadic subjectivity as we reframe and grow in our becoming together as more socially aware, culturally accepting, and understanding the diversity that exists even within our own communities.
To William Eugene III, Norah Ivie, Kassim, Sarah, Zach, and Mimi. May you all continually

become together in ways beyond any of my and your wonderful parents’ imaginings.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, multiple religious co-cultures and speech communities exist simultaneously within the larger American culture. Many of these cultures—particularly those of a religious nature—communicate different and sometimes conflicting worldviews while still inhabiting the same geographic space. In a post-9/11 United States, Islam is still at the forefront of media and global talk, and while increasing attention is paid to overcoming misunderstood stereotypes associated with the religion, much of the discourse is still negative and stigmatized.

Northwest Ohio, in particular, has a large, diverse Muslim population, who has been here since at least the early part of the 20th century (Tye, 2010) contributing greatly and beneficially to the regional community (Abu-Absi, 2010). They have served as doctors, teachers, engineers, scholars, academics, neighbors, friends and countless other professions and roles in our communities. However, Muslims of all backgrounds, “immigrants and women of color, recent arrivals or American born, are all finding that the level of prejudice against Islam is on the rise in the United States” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006). Despite the rising level of anti-Islamic sentiment pervasive in the United States (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006), Islam is still the fastest growing religion in Europe and the U.S. (Esposito, 2002; McGinty, 2006). There has been a noted increase of conversion to Islam since 9/11 despite anti-Islamic sentiment in the United States (Haddad, 2007).

Studies have shown that politically and legally, there have been significant increases in debate around Muslims and Islam in the western world since 2002 especially (Ehrkamp, 2010), and that most legislation functions to limit the freedoms and rights of those who adhere to Islam. Despite these impediments to participate in the open enactment of their (Muslim) identities that so many Americans enjoy, or that we at least purport can be enjoyed in the U.S., countless
Muslim women have and do feel empowered to participate publically in various professions and projects and “have contributed in especially significant ways in the negotiation of what it means to be Muslim in the American context” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p. v). Furthermore, “Muslims know that if they are to have a significant voice in helping shape American attitudes and policies, they must not isolate themselves but become more publicly active” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p. 18).

There is a general lack of understanding of the dynamics that exist within the Muslim community, including those between different denominations of Islam (e.g., Sunni, Shi’a, Sufi, Ahmaddiya, etc.), different geographically based cultural practices of Islam, and the interactions between those who are born into the religion and those who convert to Islam. Gaining an understanding of the interactions that occur within the Muslim community can greatly benefit our understanding of the diversity that exists within communities, thereby further encouraging a (re)thinking of often essentialized conceptions of cultural identities.

Women in particular are converting to the religion at much higher rates than men (Ahmed, 2010) at an estimated ratio of four women to one man (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006). The fact that women are coming into Islam despite popular anti-Islamic discourses that position Islam as treating women as second-class citizens (Haddad et al., 2006) or as oppressed by the religion and male Muslims appears contradictory, or at the very least lacking in a full understanding. This demands further investigation into the lives of Muslim women so that we may grow in our understanding of the diversity within our communities. By bringing attention to how they construct their Muslim identities in everyday, mundane, often over-looked yet salient communication practices, we gain not only enhanced theoretical understandings of identity processes, but more importantly we can learn new ways to break free from old, oppressive habits.
of (re)creating marginalized others. In doing so, I present how cross-cultural migrations or intercultural movements can be reconceptualized in more inclusive ways that extend beyond notions of state- and nationhood. A nomadic philosophical approach to subjectivity is appropriate given these aims because nomadism assumes that identities are fragmented and dispersed yet “functional, coherent and accountable” since they are embedded and embodied (Braidotti, 2006, p. 4). This means that we are all nomads in that we all embody varying and fragmented identities at any given moment. These identities constantly shift, negotiate, and cross borders thus transpose boundaries, “playing the positivity of difference as a specific theme of its own” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 5) versus merely weaving together different strands of identities.

Speaking from a nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 1994), I problematize issues of assimilation, acculturation, and host-culture receptivity in the context of Muslim women’s experiences in the United States and challenge notions of nonwest (Muslim)-west (non-Muslim) dichotomies.

Religion and women’s rights have also commonly had a tempestuous relationship among feminist scholars in the west. While many women have used religion as justification for egalitarian endeavors, much twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist scholarship in the United States functions from a secularist or adamantly oppositional religious framework. This coupled with the already existing anti-Islamic discourse in the US, further exacerbated by the attacks on September 11, 2001 and subsequent events, has led to a vast misconception of Islam and feminism being oxymoronic. Despite these wide misconceptions, however, Muslim women in Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian, and western countries have worked through and with their religion toward feminist ideals since the beginning of the twentieth-century (Saadallah, 2004). While there are several feminist discourses relating to Islam (Islamic, Islamist, and Muslim) which function in different ways, it is my goal to contribute to the already existing strides being
made by Muslim women to dismantle the notion of the incommensurability of Islam and feminism. Focusing on a community of Muslim women in the Midwest United States, I argue that Islam is seen and used by these Muslim women as an ontological, epistemological, and praxiological source of empowerment and collective agency.

The goal of critical research and inquiry is transformation; an ethnographic study of Muslim women in the U.S. helps us understand and bring attention to how the historical facets of feminist, secular, and other competing discourses (e.g., nationalism and Islamophobia) influence the current constructions of women’s empowerment and feminism among Muslim women. Also, it increases our awareness of how Islamic feminist discourses and discourses of empowerment within Islam (that do not necessarily claim the title “feminist”) may gain more prominence among the competing hegemonic discourses, thus offers insight on how to transform existing modes of oppression.

Empowering Muslim women in the United States to voice and enact agency and find positive meaning in their faith is a necessary demand in today’s geopolitical climate. This study focuses and advocates for such inquiry in the United States; however, it undeniably has global and universal reach as Islamophobia, anti-Islamic sentiment, and women’s inequality are pervasive and in many ways growing throughout much of the world. The debate of Islam in the United States and much of Europe, in particular, has intensified since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, infiltrating media, political, and everyday social discourses, giving a rise to suspicion, intolerance, and hate.

Islamophobia can be referred to as “a discourse that reifies and essentializes negative images of Islam, Muslims and their cultures, resulting in unfounded fear of actual Muslims” (Bouma, 2011, p. 433). However, I do not believe that Islamophobia is a single discourse; rather,
there are multiple and varying discourses that accomplish similar tasks, namely “othering” Muslims and in doing so regulating specific notions of freedom, democracy, and citizenship. These discourses include those that exoticize Muslims, particularly women, and those that fanaticize the religion (Brown, 2006). Discourses that continually “other” Muslim women as oppressed, disempowered, or in need of saving and construct Muslims in general as suspicious, dangerous, or primitive pervade the United States’ media, politics, and interpersonal encounters. Representations of Muslim women have historically and continue to be viewed as objects of an “Orientalizing gaze” (Said, 1978), which contribute to discourses that continually reify Islamic cultures as inferior to or separate from the west. Attending to the voices of Muslim women in communities in Northwest Ohio provides an excellent opportunity to counter these hegemonic discourses.

I do not believe the responsibility lies solely on Muslims to correct misrepresentations of themselves created mainly by others. I believe non-Muslims have a responsibility to aid in this reclaiming of diversity and appreciation as well. Therefore, this project is my attempt to support and enact what I consider to be a social and human responsibility. Because of women’s active participation in the reshaping of the images hegemonic discourses presented of Muslim women both from within and outside Muslim communities, it is vital that we listen and attend to, and document their narratives as we witness and participate in this transnational, transreligious becoming. More importantly, we must embrace that in learning about supposed “others,” we learn about ourselves since the lines between self and other are always subjective, in flux, and ever-changing, always contributing, reifying, and transforming understandings and enactments of culture. Becoming, then, is never an isolated process and we must invite the opportunity to become together. This is where ethnography can no longer exist without autoethnography and I
document this methodological *becoming* through processes of research and friendship between these Muslim women and me in Northwest Ohio.

In the very acts of discussing and seeking to understand Islam and what it means to be Muslim from women’s perspectives, we can create spaces of empowerment for Muslim women in the complicated webs of misunderstanding and anti-Islamic sentiment. It is through such telling and listening that these women can further counter Eurocentric discourses, and thus enact agency, that work to dislodge western imperialism even within the borders of Europe and the United States.

Though I am housed in the communication discipline, I aim to enliven a transdisciplinary feminist venture that challenges, decenters, and destabilizes hegemonic or complacent forces in our social world. Employing Muslim women’s resistance as the tapestry upon which I can describe social lives and processes, I weave threads of gender, race, class, nationality, ethnicity, culture, economics, and faith to demonstrate the multifarious processes that form an interconnected web of material, which we call our lives. The product is never finished though; it is always changing, becoming something better, with threads changing hues, textures, or moving in sometimes perceivably contradicting ways. Through this, I want to revitalize notions of empowerment, action, and hope to encourage the sentiment of doing good and working well for the world. I want to promote a transcendence of reciprocity that we work towards doing good and understanding what good will come to mean (because it is always becoming something better) because we can, not because of what we can individually get out of it. This nomadic (Braidotti, 1994) approach to the complexities and intersections of innumerous identities, cultures, and discourses enable us to better see ourselves in the past tense, as what we can attend
to and analyze is always a snapshot of past occurrence. But, with this knowledge, we are also able to envision, if we allow it, a vibrant sense of what we can become.

I feel the examination of and request to take part in aspects of Muslim women’s lives creates an opportunity to further unpack and expand space for productive conversation and dialogue within our society. Consistent with the axiology of feminist and critical philosophies, this ethnographic work has notable potential to dismantle and decenter hegemonic discourses relating to religion, democracy, gender, culture, and ultimately what it means to live. While undoubtedly ambitious, I firmly believe this research project can contribute to a growing and necessary conversation of understanding, appreciation, and self-reflectivity; such work encourages us to always be aware of our own *becomings* (Braidotti, 1994). This work is not only for Muslim women, nor only for non-Muslims; it is for all of us to (re)consider, reflect, and act on aspects of our lives that we undervalue or take for granted.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The aim of this dissertation is to demystify the lives of our Muslim neighbors within our own communities and invite true conversation and dialogue within our society. In order to grow, we must interrogate hegemonic discourses aimed at marginalized groups that ultimately disempower us all. This review of literature serves to provide a scholarly understanding of the task at hand and the challenges we face in engaging in such pursuits. I first define identity, culture, and community and how they interact with each other and are influenced by both hegemonic and empowering/counter discourses within the context of this study. I then discuss notions of Islamophobia as a discourse and anti-Islamic rhetoric as a tool within it. I attend to issues of selective secularism, democracy and exceptionalism, capitalism, modernity and religion, multiculturalism and difference, dialogue, tolerance, and notions of western and nonwestern that are rhetorically positioned and infused to propagate hegemonic discourses such as Islamophobia. I then present current literature on Muslim identities both within the United States and globally. This discussion includes a critical examination of cultural adaptation, host-culture receptivity, and assimilation. I then move to elucidate current scholarship on and arguments within feminism and Islam. Finally, I describe the Relational Communication Theory of Identity informed by a post-structuralist/postmodern feminist lens used in the current study to examine the lives and understandings of Islam by these fifteen Muslim women of Northwest Ohio.

Identity, Culture, and Community

The study of the experiences of Muslim women in the United States requires us to attend to the cultural and relational qualities of identity that occur through communication. To achieve better understandings of those within our community, we must encourage the sharing of the co-constructed narratives these women tell of their lives. We must critically examine and seek to
understand the daily enactments and negotiations of identity these women perform as perceived minorities in the United States. In doing so, we gain added perspective to the present discourses that are about and surround Muslim identification while gaining practical and theoretical methods, through enhanced knowledge, of how to transform hegemonic discourses that perpetuate and amplify negative perceptions of Muslims. Here, I present current notions and my use of key terms that form the foundation of this study. I present and interrogate these terms while critically examining the current literature pertaining to Muslim identities, particularly those of women.

In seeking to understand the social world, we unavoidably come into contact with notions of identity, culture, and community, whether those notions are our primary focus or perceived to be merely demographic features. I argue that any instance of social reflection or examination is inherently a reflection, examination, or enactment of culture, community, and identity. Inquiry, then, into the social world is inherently laden with discursive power and agency, enacted by characters from all positions: those studied, those not studied, the researcher, and the cultures and communities that surround those individual and collective actors. In this section, I articulate my current understanding of identity, culture, and community through an applied discussion of US Muslim women’s experiences in the current political climate of the United States. I will then advocate certain theoretical conceptualizations of identity through interpretive/critical inquiry that I, as a communication researcher, can use to destabilize and contribute to current thought of Muslim women in the United States. Though my focus is directed towards Muslim women and issues/actors surrounding/interacting with this identification, I act towards contributing to and/or creating ways in which to see ourselves and perceived “others” that transfer beyond notions of religion or any articulated single identity characteristic. Like what I will argue of identity, culture,
and community, even inquiry, if anything, is always a relational communicative, discursive process that is in need of continual reflection and change if it is to be useful, beneficial, and empowering.

My understanding of identities are largely informed by notions of culture and community. Because I assume that identities, culture, and communities are inherently linked, I cannot speak of one without implicating the others. For analytic purposes, I will attempt to distinguish them from each other; however, it is imperative to understand that I argue for a layered approach to culture (Faulkner & Hecht, 2007). A layered approach assumes that culture exists in and is enacted by individuals as well as collective groups and communities. This allows us to not only seek understanding from participants at face value, it allows us to attend to the contradictions or tensions and subsequent negotiations people enact between discursive pulls from communal, relational, and personal entities. Therefore, I approach my research with the belief that culture exists and is enacted on multiple levels and I can describe and critique how discourses are used to influence conceptions of being. Understanding these communicative processes, I can then propose ways of (re)thinking or understanding ourselves in new, transformative ways that can empower us into new ways of becoming (Braidotti, 1996).

Identity

I conceptualize identity as a process of cognitive understanding of a perceived self, other, relationship, or group comprised of ascribed and avowed identity markers that indicate a social and/or personal placement/location and experience in the world. Identity includes personal, relational, spiritual, and social/communal elements that are invoked consciously and unconsciously that function in spaces between and outside of differentiation to and familiarization with others. Identity is inherently relational (Urban & Orbe, 2010) and though we
often understand ourselves to be a “self” or individual that interacts with other “selves,” I challenge this notion, as do many others (e.g., St. Pierre, 2011; Braidotti, 1994, 2006). I advocate instead for a subjectivity that emphasizes “the interconnectedness between identity, subjectivity, and power. The self being a sort of network of interrelated points…” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 31) and therefore not the “humanist ‘I’” that assumes a fixed, located identity (St. Pierre, 2011).

Identity operates in spaces that span the notions of similarity and differentiation. This means that based on context, degrees of similarity and differentiation may be perceived differently since identities are enacted differently (Braidotti, 1994). Identity rests on contingency, not fixity (Braidotti, 1994), and I do not believe that similarity and difference are oppositional nor should they only be viewed in terms of a polarized spectrum. When scholars have examined cultural identities, for example, framing culture as group membership “tend(s) to divide rather than allow one to identify with overall commonalities” (Hecht, Baldwin, & Faulkner, 2006, p. 53). For instance, differences are often spoken of as either incommensurate or that cooperation happens in spite of differences, or that differences need to be negotiated. I am not denying that these cases do, indeed, exist and are sometimes the most productive, peaceful options. However, I am hopeful and have seen differences valued and used as complementary features where, it is through the acknowledgement and appreciation of the differences that other possibilities exist, such as in local Toledo interfaith fora.

I believe it would be fruitful to be open and attend to moments where communicative partners would not describe their interactions with difference as negotiation or incommensurable because this could instigate a shift of thinking that reshapes dichotomized thinking. Dichotomizing limits identity and human potential as a whole—it does not speak to what can happen outside of this discursive spectrum or how the different identifications interact
simultaneously and relationally with other entities and elements. This perspective of identity/subjectivity falls in line with what Braidotti (1994) calls nomadic subjectivity: “nomadic consciousness combines coherence with mobility. It aims to rethink the unity of the subject, without reference to humanistic beliefs, without dualistic oppositions, linking instead body and mind in a new set of intensive and often intransitive transitions” (p. 31).

Identity is a complex dynamic process that continues whether an actual person is present or not; therefore, identity is also enacted from and upon a person or group through perception. Identity is also consciously or unconsciously political due to its relational and perceptive components. Identity is constantly in motion due to the relational component—identity does not exist in isolation either from other human beings or a perceived world around us. Along with Urban and Orbe (2010) advocating that identities are always communicative and relational, Sillars and Vangelisti (2006) argue “it is difficult to set clear boundaries on communication as a subtopic under personal relationships because relationships are entailed in all acts of communication and communication is the central process giving shape to relationships” (p. 331). Furthering these notions, I argue that identities are situated in and flow within streams of discourses, therefore are relational because they are embedded in and influenced by communication that already has occurred. Identity is inherently relational and historical—one’s perception of identities is heavily understood and influenced by specific avowed and ascribed locations within historical moments. This means that while being constantly changed, reassessed,

\[1\] I maintain that identities are still relational whether an actual person is there or not. This is because our cognitive understanding of ourselves relies on either messages we have received from others (relational and/or communal), therefore causing us to invoke memories or images of others as we articulate understandings of ourselves. Also, in terms of spirituality, an actual person does not need to be present in order for us to be thinking of ourselves in relation to something outside or within us. For Muslim women, this can mean that their personal identities can be heavily influenced by the notion of God, thus are indeed relational though often we think of spirituality as personal.
and even transformed, our understanding of identities are simultaneously empowered by historical moments that initiate this movement and confined to specific moments based on unbreakable (though shiftable) relational linkages at the time. This means that identities are pervasive, interconnected relational and spatio-temporal constructions that add meaning and help (or hinder) us to make sense of our world.

**Culture**

Similarly, culture is complex, dynamic, multifarious, and inherently relational. I see culture as a spatio-temporal process of identification with a collective in which people of varying degrees of interaction and identification\(^2\) (re)create, perpetuate, challenge, and transform collective norms, systems, and rituals through communicative interaction. Culture then, is a communicative process through which we organize how we relate to each other and locate ourselves in relation to others (Gonzalez, Houston, & Chen, 2012). Culture is also made to be an environment or climate of meaningful practiced and/or accepted behaviors, or a “community of meaning and a shared body of local knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2012, p. xv); it is in this space of behavioral/thoughtful creation, practice, and regulation that people establish linkages with,

\(^2\) I refrain from using the terms “member” and “non-member” because I believe that this idea does not speak to the complexity of identification with communities or cultures. I believe that we often assume a member fits a certain criteria of perceived fixed beliefs and attitudes that in reality do not always accurately reflect the numerous selves. Also, those who are not members are often positioned as oppositional to those who are members, which is just as inaccurate and lacking. Furthermore, if we participate in this dichotomizing language, though admittedly hard not to do, we continue to hinder the potential that exists to enhance, acknowledge, and embrace diversity and contradict our assumptions of fluid, shifting arbitrary boundaries that we all cross or at which we stand at intersections. Processes of ascription do, indeed, happen and function to sort members from non-members; however, it is in our communicative reactions to such ascription or essentializing that agency exists. Ascription is not always out of malice; in fact being acknowledged as a member of a particular group can be empowering. However, encouraging more reflection and inquiry into what it means to be part of a group or how groups can function together for shared aims can aid us in overcoming limiting notions of “us” and “them.”
constantly shift boundaries of and between, or work against the accepted rules and norms of the particular culture.

In this way, culture is also dependent on discourses of interrelated thematic codes (Carbaugh, 1988) that are enacted symbolically by people to “conceive of and evaluate moments of everyday life, thus laying bases for a common identity (Carbaugh, 1990, p. 2). Cultural codes are shared and (re)constructed “subsystems of symbols, symbolic forms, and meanings; the meanings consist of cultural premises (combination of belief and value) that express the meanings of the symbols and forms, as well as their sociocultural functions” (Scollo, 2012, p. 9). What complicates the conception and analysis of cultures is that they are constructed in “conflicting, often contradictory ways, according to the interests and values of those discourses as they struggle to legitimize themselves as privileged forms of representation (Collins, 1989; p. xiii). Additional to the view of culture as a process, it can also be viewed as systems of interrelated discourses (Scollo, 2012) that function on different and sometimes competing levels. This means that though cultures function discursively to describe and enact shared systems of being and identification, they are also discursive sites that contest, challenge (and thus can transform) meaning (Sorrells & Nakagawa, 2008). Cultures are not static nor are they totalized systems in and of themselves (Collins, 1989); rather, they exist inside and within/among people, socially constructed and malleable through discourse.

Numerous cultures exist simultaneously in the same geographic/material areas. One inevitably belongs to multiple cultures through processes including being born into a culture or inheriting cultural aspects (e.g., Karim, 2005), avowing one (or several) as your own through assimilation or acculturation, or others perceiving and ascribing you to particular cultures (Chun & Choi, 2003, Croucher, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2009; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Karim,
2005; Kastoryano, 2002; Kim, 1976, 1977, 1988, 1994, 1995, 2001; Kramer, 2000, 2005a, 2005b, Murphy & Esposito, 2003). This also means that culture is an historical production that is always in movement (Clifford, 1986); to be born into, acculturate or assimilate to, or be ascribed a culture means that it has to existed prior to one’s location in it. Therefore, culture is, as identities are, “contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and explanation—both by insiders and outsiders—is implicated in this emergence” (p. 19). Because culture is historical and dynamic, we have to understand that the dynamism is enabled by the assumption that culture is also socially constructed (Philipsen, 1992). It is constructed through people’s use and manipulation of historically transmitted cultural codes that shift and change based on the shifts and changes of discourses in which they are embedded and to which they react. Identity comes into play through these communicative interactions and placements because it shapes and is shaped by webs of interconnected cultural influences and discourses.

Along with being surrounding by multiple cultures in our geographic areas, we also belong to numerous cultures simultaneously that do not act separately from others, even though at times the valence is higher for one of our cultures than others (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011). For example, at particular moments, we can closet or conceal certain parts of our identities or cultural belongings and “pass” or function under the radar of others being able to ascribe particular identities to us. At some moments, we may do this by amplifying the presentation of one (cultural) identity (for example that of an American student) by enacting more overt cultural codes pertaining to that collective while downplaying others (perhaps by not speaking of our religiosity or, in the case of Muslim women, not donning hijab which has become a more easily identifiable indicator of being Muslim). These types of concealment or closeting as a means to manage identities have been found to exist especially when the threat of discrimination, stigma,
and prejudice exist (Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010; Meyer, 2003). What we can attend to as researchers is the processes of negotiating and representing our identities through different acts that can and do reframe, maintain, or transform cultural assumptions and norms. Because Muslim women in particular are so often a stigmatized and othered in our current geo-political climate, we can attend to the identity negotiations these women enact in response to, with, or in opposition of anti-Islamic rhetoric and Islamophobic discourses. Here, we have the opportunity to attend to intersections of multiple stigmatized identities (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005) that will aid us in gaining a better understanding of how communicative identity processes work and more importantly, destabilize and dismantle these hegemonic discourses.

Culture and identity are inherently related to power and agency because of the collective; how much power we give to particular cultures through acknowledgement and normative ascription impacts how we perceive our own identities and those of people around us (Shome, 1996). Culture has a collective regulating feature (discursive power) and our actions towards the concepts within culture (agency) can allow us to, or inhibit us from, observably transforming it. Furthermore, it is vital to understand that even those who project membership to a particular culture or those who happen to inhabit a cultural space are diverse. This means that there is absolutely no complete sameness across and between members of cultures; every person comes from different cultural backgrounds and experiences that inevitably influence their interactions within cultures. Thus, our identities are comprised of multiple cultural influences and even those which we reject, through reference or absence, influence how we act today within those we accept. Shome (1996) refers to this as diasporic identity:

With increased globalization of the world, whereby people, technology, ideas, cultures and ethnic groups constantly cross borders (although not often physically), everyone is at
cultural intersections…. Given this, it is no longer possible to conceive of cultures and cultural identities homogenously, for each of us in some ways occupies borderland territories. (p. 52)

Community

Along with identity and culture, the concept of community plays a vital role in understanding our social world. Like identity and culture, I view community as inherently relational. A community is part of culture in that it is a collective process that does, indeed, hold cultural values. A community is created through material and non-material communicative interactions that are influenced by and influence cultures within and surrounding it. Faulkner and Hecht (2007) defined community as “a group, shared identities, a sense of membership, who ‘we’ are and the way people organize themselves” (p. 385) This definition includes both the positive aspects of community, such as support and inclusion with or relating to others viewed in similar ways (by enacting shared and agreed upon values, norms, and beliefs) and negative aspects including upholding certain values or enforcing certain norms at the expense of others. A community has discursive regulating features (think of home owners’ associations, schools, taxes, community meetings, etc. along with everyday talk) that can function both in empowering and oppressive ways for those within the community. While in my definition of community diversity inherently exists, communities are also given the power to manage what that diversity looks like which can promote varying levels of empowerment or oppression to identities and cultures within the community. For my research, I embrace Faulkner and Hecht’s definition of community and the aforementioned discursive assumptions relating to it as a starting point, but what I want to argue for through critical analysis of those within our Northwest Ohio community is the need to shift to a definition of community that is ideally a culturally diverse safe space in
which one feels inclusion with and support of diversity, and a motivation to uphold, improve, and ensure its longevity.

These definitions of identity/subjectivity, culture, and community help me position my studies of Muslim women in Northwest Ohio at this current historical moment. Muslim identity, though not a singular identity, can and does heavily influence US Muslims’ experiences in the US and in their local communities, especially in a post-9/11 world. Although anti-Islamic sentiment existed in the United States before September 11, 2011, the political and public reaction to the attack on the Twin Towers ignited a shift or at the very least amplified existing fear, anger, and/or othering towards Muslims both coming into, outside of, and already existing in our local, national, and international communities. Terms such as terrorist, Islamic jihadist, Al Qaeda, and Taliban entered American parlance at exponentially higher rates than before, working as a discursive mechanism to further produce an American cultural climate of suspicion, fear, and anger towards Muslims. As a result of these discursive enhancements and changes in popular political talk, a cultural view of Muslims in the United States has changed to one of increased marginalization. This requires feminist and critical scholars to further examine the identification processes in play, specifically from Muslim women whose bodies are often used as the battleground of such public, political debate, to counter (mis)understandings and misrepresentations of what being Muslim means that are being produced and buttressed by anti-Islamic discourses.

Identity and Discourse

The communicative processes that are used to (re)produce or transform discourses include language as well as nonverbal and physical performances/productions that imply, suggest, or demand a rhetorical perspective. Identities (including religious/secular identities) are
constructed rhetorically\textsuperscript{3} through communicative acts with others (therefore relational). These identities inevitably influence social political processes through discursive and symbolic means due to the politicized nature of identification, culture, and discourse. Spector (2000) argues that struggles center on the control of symbols of culture; how we are defining our culture and who gets to be a part of that culture then become embodied in discourse and rhetoric. Here, I will make an argument for how I have witnessed Islamic/Muslim identities impacting political—especially democratic—processes through these means in the United States. In this discussion, I will make a case for how my proposed research can address and work to destabilize oppressive discourses that function through rhetorical means to further marginalize Muslims in the US.

\textbf{Islamophobia and anti-Islamic rhetoric.} It is common in US media to witness an anti-Islamic discourse through language and rhetorical enactments. Bouma (2011) articulated Islamophobia as “a discourse that reifies and essentializes negative images of Islam, Muslims and their cultures, resulting in an unfounded fear of actual Muslims” (p. 433) and is “aimed at eliminating the other from the society” (p. 438). This discourse includes messages promoting the idea that Islam is a violent religion, that followers of Islam seek converts through coercion, it is irrational and incommensurate with democracy (Daniel, 1989; Lyons, 2009, 2011), among numerous other messages continually (re)produced through anti-Islamic rhetoric. Lyons (2011) argued that anti-Islamic discourses have existed in the west since the crusades. Islamophobia has been sustained through rhetorical claims that work to instill fear in those who have little to no

\textsuperscript{3}This means that identities are constructed through language to constitute our understanding of our own and others’ characters, cultures, and communities (White, 1985). I expand this notion to include modes of communication beyond language, including nonverbal and non-linguistic enactments of identity, culture, and community. We can critique moments of this constitutive rhetoric by understanding that such enactments do not just describe how a rhetor or rhetors create representations of an audience, but that constitutive rhetoric can promote and shape certain subject positions of its addressees (Charland, 1987), that can be both empowering and oppressive.
contact with Muslims and legitimize state violence against Muslim nations (Bouma, 2011). In Australia, a country grouped with the United States as a western entity, anti-Islamic discourses have been found to have the effect of generating fear of Muslim neighbors and community members and discouraging people from associating or interacting with Muslims more than those of other faiths (Bouma & Ling, 2010). What is dangerous about these discourses is that they further marginalize, essentialize, and limit the freedom of perceived others through often-unexamined hegemonic messages. This “negative othering” (Bouma, 2011) not only marginalizes Muslims in so-called western nations, but aims to erase their existence or at the very least attempts to force the closeting (Faulkner & Hecht, 2006) of their religious identities.

The United States is not exempt from Islamophobic discourses that are (re)produced and sustained through anti-Islamic rhetoric. Terms such as “Islamic jihadist,” “terrorist,” and “Al Qaeda,” are prominent language used in popular media and political contexts to produce and sustain this discourse. Immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center, President Bush invoked the rhetorical strategy of paralleling an instigated War on Terror with the crusades. Similarly in 2002, John Ashcroft, the US Attorney General at the time, stated, “Islam is a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for him. Christianity is a faith in which God sends his son to die for you.” (Eggen, 2002, p. A2) thus invoking and perpetuating anti-Islamic rhetoric to distance Islam (as evil) from Christianity (as good) and forwarding an Islamophobic discourse. There are also performances such as Terry Jones’ burning of Qur’ans that rhetorically function to promote and add breadth to the anti-Islamic discourse in this country. The debates and protests functioning around the creation of an Islamic Center near Ground Zero also function rhetorically within this discourse. In these examples and numerous others both in popular and academic media, externally imposed identities collide with self-identification.
These identifications function politically by regulating communicative behavior. The label “Muslim” is no longer (if it ever has been) viewed only as a religious identification; rather, it is a term loaded with often-pejorative meaning. The rhetorical positioning of Muslim with the terms described above dictate behaviors and perceptions towards Muslims by non-Muslims that influence how Muslims perform their religious identities safely in public spaces. This hegemonic discourse is enacted through rhetorical devices to limit freedoms of marginalized groups (Muslims) and elevate/maintain the (non-Muslim) status quo.

Selective secularism. In research examining identities of the people of Southern Thailand, many of them Muslims, researchers found religious difference was used to legitimize group and self-imposed borders between communities (Camroux & Pathan, 2008). This seems similar to the collective imaginings projected by those invoking anti-Islamic discourse in the United States where religious difference (Muslims being the prime “difference”) indeed legitimizes a cultural grouping of non-Muslims: most commonly Christian or, closely following and sometimes used synonymously, secular. I am not conflating Christianity and secularism, but, I believe secularism is rhetorically (mis)used to advance an inequitable perspective that privileges those who have been historically in power (overwhelming Christian)⁴. Keyman (2007) argues:

Secularism is used by the state as an “effective technology of the government of the self” by creating a boundary between the public sphere and the private sphere, in which religious claims to identity are confined as private, individualistic and particular. Thus,

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⁴ It is not my intent to position Christianity as oppositional to Islam or vice versa; rather, I am saying that the argument for secularism, which advocates a separation of church and state is not free from a Christian influence in its framework.
the state attempts to prevent the claims to religious identity and group rights from entering into the public sphere. (p. 219)

This means that secularism is a discourse that rhetorically functions to regulate boundaries of practice of identities, which is ultimately a structural imposition of differentiation; you can be religious, but you have to do that in your own time, in private. However, we see countless public acts of religion by those in power everyday, especially surrounding the re-telling of 9/11. The hyper-patriotism that followed the terrorist attacks gave permission to more public religious, non-Muslim demonstrations that were and are acceptable because they are not rhetorically positioned as deviant like Islam is. It is acceptable for the President to say “In God we trust” and encourage prayer for American troops and the US; this even goes unacknowledged by the public. It is normative and not seen as a threat to secularism because it is not coming from other religious identifications.

At the same time, Asad (2003) warned:

[L]iberalism is a kind of redemptive myth. I point to the violence intrinsic to it but caution that liberalism’s secular myth should not be confused with the redemptive myth of Christianity, despite the resemblance between them…. I simply want to get away from the idea that the secular is a mask for religion, that secular political practices often simulate religious ones. (p. 26)

This means that while it sometimes appears easy to conflate Christianity (or a dominant religion) with secularism, it is important that we be self-reflexive and aware that secularism is not or should not be automatically viewed as religion in disguise. This complicates analyses, especially given the privilege we witness of Christianity to Islam in the US; however, it is imperative that as I try to dismantle binary notions and dichotomous othering, I do not automatically fall into the
trap of recreating an opposition between secularism as a dominant masked religion and a marginalized religion.

In these ways, I believe the notion of secularism absolutely impacts political processes of democracy here in the US because what we are saying either by overtly participating in these actions or being complicit in them is that we respect religious difference *so long* as they fall into an acceptable framework that we have created (which tries to exclude Muslims and other marginalized religious groups). The discourse promotes a secularism advocating a personal religion, a separation of church and state with certain public acts of religion because they have a normative position. So the question is about how we can open up, reclaim, or re-enact secularism or a whole new system that creates space for religious diversity that does not neglect of demonize the meaning religion plays into so many people’s lives.

Overall, this means that a separation of church and state (secularism) as practiced in our democracy in the US is not entirely separate; religions are absolutely used as powerful cultural motivators. My point with this discussion is not to say that we need to enforce a true secularism where religion and political proceedings are completely separate and distinct. I believe that is impossible because of the interconnectivity between all modes of identification and discourse. Our communicative choices, both in public and private then are always related in some way to our identities and are always rhetorically positioned and enacted in relation to discourses surrounding us; “identities and difference construct and determine to a large extent the space of agency and the mode of participation in which we act as citizens in the multilayered polities to which we belong” (Yuval-Davis in Paasi, 2002, p. 7). If we are silencing and regulating the behavior of certain acknowledgements and practices of religious identity while permitting others, we cannot be a truly democratic state.
Democracy and exceptionalism. Although making reference to Turkey, there is something we can glean from Casanova (2001) here in the U.S. when he says “a Turkish state in which the collective identities and interests of these groups cannot find public representation cannot be a truly representative democratic state, even if it is founded on modern secular constitutional principles” (p. 1064-1065). Here, I define democracy as a form of government that empowers all eligible citizens to have an active voice in social, economic, and cultural decisions (laws) in their collective lives. Within the U.S. Constitution that assumes a democratic state, all citizens are inherently given the freedoms of speech, press, religion, assembly, petition, and political expression, which enables them a free and equal practice of self-determination. Though we do have some Muslims in public office, they become defined and exceptional because of or despite their Muslim identities. However, we are quick to point out those labels of such figures whereas with others, who are not of “different” or rhetorically deviant religions go under the radar, unacknowledged. Though some of those figures are religious, their public actions are not held in reference to their religions.

I am not automatically deeming notions of democracy, modernity, dialogue, or multiculturalism as negative. Indeed, I believe in theory there can be much potential in striving towards these sentiments if we broaden the definitions and allow for movement within them as we become aware of power disparities functioning in the process. My argument is that to allow for these kinds of movements, transpositions, and flexibility, we must constantly reassess and problematize for whom they are working and toward what goals, and who in the meantime they are disempowering or marginalizing—and more importantly how we can adjust such that no one is disadvantaged. An identification process we have to acutely be aware of is the production of exceptional subjects, or in some ways what Badran (2008) would deem the rhetorical
construction of a Moderate Muslim. This is the idea that a person of a marginalized group, such as a Muslim, becomes exceptional in that she embodies qualities that are in highly regarded accordance with dominant discourses. She is accepted and even acclaimed because despite or even because of her Muslim identity, she has or is accomplishing tasks that satisfy a more dominant public. This is not to say that what an exceptional woman accomplishes is not noteworthy or valuable; however, her actions can be co-opted and set a standard by which other Muslim women then feel pressure or have a hard time living up to. When everyday Muslim women are constantly compared to the exceptional women and can never live up to those standards, they can feel further marginalized and perhaps even that how they believe and enact Islam is not what is accepted by a non-Muslim majority.

An added danger with exceptionalism is that it does not necessarily happen consciously or with direct intent. The ascriptions are a result of countless interactions and relational influences. One influence is that of capitalism and market forces. As femininities as a whole are increasingly mediated through capitalist endeavors, women’s identifications, lives, and senses of belonging are influenced in complex ways (Gokariksel & McLarney, 2010). This results in a constant (re)definition and negotiation of identities as women come into contact with the constant flow of discourses around, about, and through them, especially those that pertain to marketed senses of womanhood. In the context of my project, this means that “as Muslim women stake out their own positions, they actively engage with given Islamic practice and knowledge as well as with modalities of capitalism. They often navigate between certain Orientalist stereotypes that marketed images sometimes challenge and sometimes reify” (p. 3).

Capitalism. Ultimately, this means that identities are complex and cannot be removed from social forces such as the market, and that while often we view market forces as subjugating
women, women can concomitantly use them to mark agency and empowerment. For me, this means that I cannot automatically fall into the trope of condemning capitalism. At this moment in time, though we can work to change how the market looks and acts, I cannot pretend that I can just do away with this force. So, what is important is to see how Muslim women negotiate and enact identities of empowerment within, through, and despite capitalism while at the same time attending to how capitalist mentality can so heavily influence and construct notions of exceptionalism and essentialism. Gokariksel and McLarney (2010) capture the universal reach of capitalist forces interacting with faith-based identities that provides support for and further informs my research:

...Muslim identities, like secular ones, are expressed through commodities.... While some conceptualize Islam and consumer capitalism as antithetical or as involving a one-way relationship in which capitalism transforms Islam, we approach their relationship as one that is more complex and multidirectional. (p. 5)

This fosters the need to be aware of the complexities of discourse and identity and the importance of attending to transdisciplinary issues such as past/modern history and economics because like I argue of democracy, modernity, and empowerment, Islam is not oppositional to capitalism. The discourse that purports that Muslim societies must institute capitalism, ignore the long history of capitalist production and consumption that have existed in these areas. This discourse rhetorically positions Islam and capitalism as antithetical; imperialist notions that capitalist marketing is an antidote or antecedent to spreading democracy. Such discursive constructions deny Muslim women of their economic histories and agency within those spaces. It can also further fortify notions that to be the exceptional Muslim woman, you must play into and
take part (only) in a market that upholds acceptable westernized notions of either assimilating to western practices or partaking in only acceptable forms of Muslimness.

For immigrant Muslim women in particular, such portrayals and demands of market activity also influence political and civic engagement, calling for models of Muslim women as “supercitizen immigrants” (Ehrkamp, 2010). The construction of exceptional/supercitizen Muslims and Muslim immigrants “allows the majority of society to project their expectations and ideas of democracy onto other Muslim migrants, without having to enact democratic citizenship themselves” (p. 28), further crystallizing hegemonic forces while simultaneously increasing the perceived disparity between Muslims and non-Muslims. Furthermore, the whole activity of demanding model Muslim citizens without living those same expectations and demands undermines equality that is rhetorically attributed to democracy in that a greater divide is created between those who have to be active citizens (Muslims/immigrant Muslims through assimilation, acculturation, conformity) and those who do not (born-Americans, non-Muslims) (Ehrkamp, 2010). This calls for researchers to bring attention to acts of policing and regulating citizenship and agency through a discourse of democracy and empowerment “that does not simply demand equality, but that creates equality by focusing on similarities rather than trying to discipline perceived cultural difference” (Ehrkamp, 2010, p. 28).

Therefore, I spoke to Muslim women about their identity negotiations while not neglecting the capitalist history in their lives or how they may use some aspects of the market for empowerment. I problematized and attended to these performances by putting them into conversation and layering them with notions of democracy and citizenship. At the same time, I worked to challenge both capitalist/democratic citizenship structures themselves as rhetorical tools to reinforce hegemonic discourses and to further demonstrate how capitalist/democratic
notions can and do create new marginalizations (such as the exceptional Muslim woman). When exceptionalism becomes something that can be sold disguised as the embodiment of diversity, neoliberalism, and democracy, the ‘ideal’ or ‘exceptional’ regulates and enacts politics on women’s bodies.

**Modernity and religion.** Because the US was founded in relation to religious principles, I think it is important to acknowledge that modernity is not oppositional to religion. Similarly, we need to work to destabilize the rhetorical positioning of Islam as backwards and not progressive: “Islamic identity claims and their plural and multi-dimensional nature do not constitute an anti-modern discourse about religious self, but rather a politics of identity operating within modernity and demanding recognition” (Keyman, 2007, p. 217). If other religions (i.e., Christianity and Judaism) with greater acceptance can be aligned with modernity, so too can Islam. Rather than acting as if religion is antithetical to progression, I believe secularism needs to be reassessed and make room for acknowledgement of ALL religious and spiritual influence because it does already exist. As Back, Khan, Shukra, and Solomos (2009) warn, we must beware of “sleepwalking into segregation” (p. 4) by acknowledging the presence of collective actions of faith groups in politics and admitting that that is not necessarily a destructive thing. Making room for this acknowledgement and consideration, I believe, can open up discursive spaces for a more democratic politics in the United States. For researchers, we must acknowledge the interconnections between religion and secularism that has been made invisible in the present moment (Halperin, 2004). Furthermore, while the appropriation and exploitation of minority bodies for hegemonic gain is not limited to any one group, at this moment in time, we must interrogate the use of Muslim women’s bodies as objects upon which unjust politics are being played. Muslim women’s bodies are being used to construct social, religious, and spatial
boundaries of citizenship and liberal democracy to forward an agenda that homogenizes the concept of liberal democracy by excluding Islam from it (Ehrkamp, 2010).

For instance, Germany and France have gained notable media coverage for their statewide laws banning headscarves for students and/or teachers in public schools and Muslim women who veil in general in various public spaces. In France, Muslim (especially migrant) women’s veiling as an enactment of sexual modesty (advocated in the Qur’an/by Islam) challenges French liberal democratic conceptions of equality (Scott, 2007). By targeting, in particular, women’s visible expressions or symbols of faith with the argument that such expressions contradict liberal democracy or are oppressive, a discourse is created and reinforced that limits women’s freedoms and the equality they should have with those of other faiths who can don observable religious symbols.

This is often enacted through the rhetorical strategy of positioning Islam almost exclusively with Muslim immigrants from other, “oppressive” homelands. For example, Ehrkamp (2010), when speaking specifically about Muslims in Germany, argued that public and media discourses continually depict Muslim women from non-western countries as oppressed, aligning their oppression directly with the countries from which they come. By positioning Germany with non-immigrants in opposition to the oppressive countries from which the immigrant Muslim women come, Germany is painted as a better, more enlightened space, forwarding an Orientalist/neo-imperialistic discourse. Ehrkamp (2010) elucidates that the relationship between multiculturalism and gender positions agency, equality, and freedom as “superior Western opposites of a non-Western (minority or immigrant) culture” (p. 17). This means that in order to maintain the hegemonic positioning of Islam as contradictory to western ideals, images of Muslim women as oppressed victims in need of saving are continually invoked
to normalize a the discourse that condemns Islam and Muslims as inconsistent with modernity and democracy (Razack, 2008). By repeatedly (re)creating and consuming these rhetorical messages, the negative perceptions of Muslim women crystallize or are made static, thus making it ever more difficult to transform hegemonic thinking. This rhetorical action is furthered by insisting that immigrants’ neglect to leave their perceived oppressive faith that is a product of/associated with their oppressive countries means that they are deficient in their integration (assimilation/acculturation) into German (modern, liberal, democratic) society. Employing terms of integration and assimilation function to buttress a restricted definition of what it means to be a liberal, democratic citizen of the west.

**Multiculturalism and rhetorical construction of difference.** Additionally, notions of multiculturalism are (mis)used in some circumstances to regulate or police features, as is described by Ehrkamp (2010) in Germany: “Contemporary German public discourse rarely mentions multiculturalism and cultural diversity, unless these terms are used to discipline difference. For example, ‘multiculturalism’ appears most often as a negative term in arguments against multicultural society” (p. 14). The rhetorical strategy of positioning Islam as antagonistic to democratic ideals further marginalizes Muslims and disempowers their rights to faith and citizenship. Also, it is such Eurocentric discourses of an (inferior) Islam that rhetorically position women into a subordinate category (Javed, 1994). Arguing that it is Islam that oppresses women, these hegemonic discourses work to maintain western imperialist notions that undeniably interconnect with notions of democracy, citizenship, and empowerment. Such rhetorical and discursive strategies can have devastating consequences of universal magnitude in that the shift of the argument from culture to democracy through the channel/topic of human rights functions to protect a specifically imagined notion of democracy. When democracy is rhetorically
positioned as under attack from Islam, the defense against such an attack is a complete end of
tolerance (Ehrkamp, 2010). Such actions undermine philosophical ideals of liberal democracy
such as citizenship and equality by reinforcing a confined definition of what counts as
democracy.

At the same time, there are discourses acting alongside the anti-Islamic discourse that
counter anti-Islamic messages. Muslims in the U.S. have spoken out against terrorists groups
who purport Islamic justification and Muslims have said that their religion aligns itself in many
ways to the hopes and desires of other religions (peace, a belief in the same god, etc.). Islamic
centers around the country have held (though many did this before September 11, 2001)
publicized interfaith dialogues as well to bridge misunderstandings and show an appreciation for
and belief in the principles of our American democratic society. International, figures such as
Pakistan’s late Benazir Bhutto have stressed that Islam is consistent with democracy and the
hope that democracy with an acknowledgement of faith can create an appreciation for cultural
diversity (Loveridge-Sanbonmatsu, 1993). What is evident in perusing major media outlets
though, is that the anti-Islamic discourse has been given more voice and heightened airtime than
one presenting Islam as a religion of peace. Therefore, discourses are intrinsically laden in power
relations. Discourses and rhetorical devices used in their support are not always enacted
consciously; which can speak to the hegemonic power discourses can have.

For instance, the headscarf that some Muslim women don (for a multitude of reasons)\(^5\)
has been appropriated to rhetorically speak to the oppression of Muslim women (Hesford &
Kozol, 2005). Unfortunately, the continual and loud messages produced by members advocating
this discourse have influenced many of those who have never viewed themselves as anti-Islamic

\(^5\) See, for example, works by Croucher, 2009; Roberts, 2006
or prejudiced. A climate of suspicion and fear has been created and reinforced by the discourse where often when a woman is seen walking in hijab in this country, reactions of bystanders include a reverting of the eyes, discomfort, suspicion, or at the very least awe and an instant assumption that this is an oppressed Muslim woman. This is not to say that every person experiences this when a woman wearing hijab walks by; what I am saying is that directly and indirectly, a proliferation of anti-Islamic discourse has and continues to influence our society. We are all connected to the discourse, though in varying degrees and with different positions towards it, as we are with any and all discourses surrounding us. Our actions and reactions (consciously and unconsciously rhetorical) to one inevitably impact others acting alongside or counter to it. Discourses cannot be perceived to function in isolation. Even silence acts rhetorically because it can and does infer an acknowledgment of, resignation to, or complicity with several discourses.

Other rhetorical devices used to construct difference include identity labels, truth talk, and distrust (Witteborn, 2011). These communicative mechanisms are used to orient certain topics and identities within the discourse and are employed in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of the discourse. For instance, labels are frequently used to signify association, meaning they are bound by political, historical, spatio-temporal meanings that are given meaning and make sense within particular discourses and are changed or solidified both within the discourse and in reaction to the influence of others’ discourses.

What Witteborn calls “truth talk” (p. 116) is a rhetorical strategy of constructing social truths that base ways of knowing on personal and group experience which create a social (cultural) memory. This means that the positions of a cultural identity are constituted and reinforced through this performance by recollection and continual reference to this memory and
is commonly used in reinforcing a binary/oppositional position towards another group. In anti-Islamic discourse in the US, I believe this is enacted in many ways by the constant re-telling of the attacks on September 11, 2001, where the actors (Islamic terrorists), action (terrorist attack), and result (deaths of over 3000 Americans) are used to maintain an “other” which is Muslim, foreign, and a threat to the American way of life. Rhetorical choices invoking notions of “freedom,” “patriotism,” “secularism,” etc. further recreate and reinforce at least two constructed cultural groups, terrorists and Americans, which are often pitted as mutually exclusive. Those falling under the label of terrorists are likely Muslim, Muslim extremists, Jihadists, etc. leaving little room for discussion or dialogue of broader views of the terms.

This is also where a rhetorical construction of distrust comes in to play. By constructing a lack of trust towards other groups, the group in power is strengthened and maintained. The power of discourse lies in the ability of such talk and narratives to anchor themselves within the minds of people to the point where we often function and respond to and in accordance with these narratives without constant critical reflection. We are complicit in accepting the narratives used to normalize our conduct due to our perceived need to be part of a non-marginalized cultural group. This is similar to the effect of ingroup favoritism that Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that states that people are more likely to give preferential treatment to those who are perceived to be in the same ingroup. Those in power use rhetorical devices to maintain a hegemonic hold over such complicity. At the same time, as actors within these discourses, we often neglect to perform our agency or do so through complicity with the oppressive regimes because it is in maintaining the discourses that we are satisfied with our own privilege and perceived power. All of this is to say that rhetorical strategies are used to produce group identities as “ontological certainty based on historical, sociopolitical, ideological, and,
sometimes even, biological truths” (Witteborn, 2011, p. 120). These ontological “certainties” are produced and reinforced in discourse. When these truths are created through metaphors and notions of threat, defensiveness, and cynicism, which are often invoked in anti-Islamic discourses, conditions for social transformation are incredibly hindered.

**Dialogue.** These processes of othering have thus led many scholars and activists to work to counter these rhetorically constructed positions of difference by advocating a stance of acknowledging and embracing difference as positive. Guided by the desire to build and affirm diverse communities through dialogue, we face a practical challenge. While noble and definitely ideal on part of researchers, constructed ontological certainties of cultural groups in practice often respond to difference in mostly separating qualities (Witteborn, 2011). If these embedded ontological differences are so crystallized (through constant reinforced rhetorical devices in discourse) in the identity politics of groups before attempted dialogue even starts, the chances of transformation and mutual respect are greatly challenged.

This further leads me to question the rhetorical use of “dialogue” and advocate a constant reassessing of what dialogue means and looks like, especially as it is invoked in American/Western European democratic contexts. Several scholars draw attention to the valorization of the concept of dialogue without critical examination of what it means, how it is used, and towards what goals it is oriented (e.g., MacLennan, 2001; Peters, 1999). Peters (1999) says, “In certain quarters, dialogue has attained something of a holy status. It is held up as the summit of human encounter, the essence of liberal education, and the medium of participatory democracy” (p. 33). This plays into our current US context surrounding Muslim identities and (anti)Islamic/secular discourses because often, the west (i.e., United States and other European countries) has engaged in, or at least has purported to engage in practices of dialogue to promote
democracy when and where democracy does not exist. The terms “dialogue” and “democracy” are used in conjunction with the United States and American intervention and have therefore positioned political areas that are not democratic as othered and flawed or at least of diminished value.

It is interesting, though when national and international entities invoke dialogue as a goal because it is often used in conjunction with other terms (e.g., capitalism) that are inherently contradictory to dialogic ideals. For instance, the European Union defines intercultural dialogue as “an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect” (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 10). While I agree that these notions are admirable and we should strive towards such communicative interactions, I don’t believe they are enacted in ways truly conducive to the openness and mutual respect and understanding that they advocate. The democracy that is rhetorically devised by powerful global figures advocates capitalism, which is inherently about competition. This can also be conceptualized as neoliberalism that has been pervasive in western democracies to provide subjects a view of their decisions as their own choices, when those choices are ultimately designed and organized by those in power (Scharff, 2011). The rhetorical design of neoliberal democracy is enacted through a discourse of individualism, which promotes the idea that structural inequalities can and should be overcome by individuals as if they are individual problems. Rhetorical constructs of empowerment and choice then become responsibilities and problems of individuals that act in isolation and should be overcome in individualist ways (e.g., competition, doing whatever you need to do to succeed, even at the expense of others). Therefore, those participating in the performative act of self
through neoliberal choice appear to be acting voluntarily but are ultimately performing a compulsory individuality; those acting against the discourse are merely tolerated (Scharff, 2011).

So, if dialogue is thought to bring “a sense of constructing through discourse a shared culture or community in which we can release dependency on competition and exclusionary hierarchy and instead open up the possibilities of increased collaboration, partnership, and inclusion” (MacLennan, 2011, p. 148), then this notion of dialogue contradicts the enacted neoliberal democracy that is propelled by capitalism. Or, what it can mean is that collaboration, partnership, and understanding difference can occur only within certain boundaries that still maintain a neoliberal perspective of democracy. Asad (2003) further argued “[N]egotiation simply amounts to the exchange of unequal concessions where the weaker party has no choice” (p. 6). Although much of what I’m articulating here sounds condemning and cynical, I am not pessimistic about the possibilities that lie with dialogue. Indeed, I agree with scholars such as MacLennan (2011) that “we must do the work of building a shared sphere of intersubjective understandings, but the differences of culture constitute an ever-present challenge to intersubjectivity” and that we must “embrace difference rather than erase it or assume its undesirability in efforts of dialogic processes, all the while building intersubjectivity on a foundation of expanded conceptions of conflict, equality, inclusion, and connection” (p. 148). However, I believe much more work is needed to understand what “embrace” means and in what ways it is enacted. I believe it happens on many smaller, localized, interpersonal levels (as evidenced in work of scholars such as Lowry & Littlejohn, 2006; Neumann & Wolling, 2009); however, discourses are powerful and continue to work in ways that marginalize and silence certain others. We must be wary of using dialogue as merely a rhetorical performance that pays lip service to actual attention to differences, concerns, and grievances of rhetorically constructed
differing identities. I believe the notion of dialogue has been used to mask real possibility for understanding and transformation in larger political arenas. This demands a constant reassessment of dialogue, the ways in which it is defined and enacted, and the sustaining consequences of such interactions.

**Tolerance.** Similar to dialogue, rhetorical usage of the term “tolerance” should be questioned in our political discursive climate. Tolerance, though a step up from hate and rejection, is still disempowering and limiting because it “constitutes a practice of power and regulation by drawing a line between the tolerable and intolerable” (Scharff, 2011, p. 125). What is merely tolerated is not necessarily what is accepted or embraced. Due to this mentality underlining the concept, it seems that tolerance would hardly be an effective means or starting point at which dialogue can be productively performed. Tolerance still relegates those being tolerated at deviant, marginal, and undesirable, which does not allow members of these groups equal footing in dialogic proceedings.

**Western and nonwestern.** Another rhetorical strategy employed within discourses in the United States surrounding Islamic and religious/secular identities is the use of western and non-western labels. In Islamophobic discourse in the U.S., Islam is automatically assumed and, I argue, rhetorically positioned to be non-western. This rhetoric includes images of veiled, “oppressed” women and Arab looking men that results in the othering and continuing stereotype of Muslims being foreign. This positioning promotes discourses that elevate non-Muslims and marginalizes Muslims by aligning Muslim identity with non-western, non-democratic, and therefore behind western neoliberal political notions such as secularism. The anti-Islamic discourses that exist rhetorically “other” Muslim and non-western women and paint them as oppressed. Western subjects are formulated as the “knower” and the liberated (Scharff, 2011, p.
Scharff (2011) further argues that when the “Western self is…produced as an effect of the Western discursive production of its Others” (Frankenburg, 1993, p. 16), the other (non-western) is disempowered. This also disempowers western Muslim women and/or Muslim women who live in the west by essentializing them and displacing them into a non-western category, or at the very least removing them from the “enlightened” western category to which they do actually belong in all other ways. This is disempowering because though American Muslims are legally citizens, the discursive mechanisms of hegemony that play out in everyday life (e.g., social interactions, access to education, jobs, utilities, and information) work against them due to their being marked as non-western.

**Summary.** As scholars, I believe we have an opportunity to dismantle or at least agitate hegemonic discourses at work by interrogating identity and cultural rhetorical constructions while examining our own participation in these structures. It would be helpful to start with viewing diversity as a concept and space through which we can dismantle “structures and arrangements that block such processes, as well as promoting environs and practices that invite modes of being that are yet to form (Rodriguez & Chawla, 2008, p. 35). This would require problematizing rhetorical devices that have been used to marginalize others even in the guise of acceptance, tolerance, dialogue, etc. We need to investigate and challenge notions of modernity/progression/democracy as well to avoid exclusion while advocating for inclusion. We have to be careful to reflect on how we are framing inclusion. Modood and Ahman (2007) warn:

In theory and in practice…while minority racial and ethnic assertiveness (not to mention women’s movements and gay pride) were encouraged by egalitarians, religious assertiveness, especially on the part of Muslims—when it occurred—was seen as a
problem: not as a strand within equality struggles but as a threat to multiculturalism. (p. 189)

While this statement is made in the context of the modern UK, we too need to be aware of such rhetorical performances that we may be perpetuating. In the next section, I will put these problematized notions into conversation with existing literature on Muslim identities and communities, further advocating that research needs to look at rhetorical and discursive tools in play that limit our understanding and valuing of those in our own communities.

**Muslim Identities**

There is a growing body of research pertaining to Muslim identities, particularly in what is considered the west (the United States, Canada, Europe). While the research is vast, often the studies focus on a few limiting categories such as immigrant Muslims (e.g., Furseth, 2011; Hu, Al-Qubbaj, & Cutler, 2009) and thus issues of assimilation and acculturation, and the hijab (e.g., Furseth, 2011; Gurbuz & Gurbuz-Kucuksari, 2009; Mishra & Shirazi, 2010). While these are not the only categories researched, the classification strategies or exceeding focus on them are limiting because they reinforce the idea that Muslims are foreign or incommensurate to what it means to be American. I am not saying the aims of such research and implications of these studies are what are reinforcing the ideas. My endeavors are highly motivated by such previous projects, which have and continue to aim at demystifying Muslim identities in the west. Though many have argued the need to look beyond the veil/hijab (e.g., Ahmad, 2008; Bhimji, 2009; Croucher, 2009), it is still a symbol that has been rhetorically used and understood by much of the American public to impede dialogue and genuine attention to our Muslim neighbors. However, maintaining the foci on these popular notions of what and who Muslims are, I fear, can and does reinforce an Orientalist perspective, at least superficially.
When talking about Muslim identities, I also implicate non-Muslim identities because I believe that we all are diasporic, multi-cultured, and continually negotiate our cultural and relational identities. Because we all perform these processes in myriad ways, though at times about different beliefs or ideals, we are all nomads. Being nomads too means that we are all advantaged and disadvantaged in different ways at different times dependent on context and how our identities are read or marked, thus indicating a dialectic way of being. This means that we need to rethink the idea that Islam is incommensurate with American identity, as something foreign because there is no singular American identity. To challenge the common conceptions of Muslims and Islam in the west, I first discuss the research that focuses on Muslim identities, particularly in the west. Next, I provide an in-depth discussion of women who have converted to Islam who are known as reverts. Then I converse with research on assimilation and acculturation as it has been conceived of in intercultural contexts. Finally, I present research of Islam and feminism, as this is a critical area that has focused issues of power and agency for women. These processes of identification, interwoven with the rhetorical and discursive themes formerly discussed, complicate the boundaries and thus encourage transformation or at the very least, a shift in thinking of hegemonic or complacent normative views of Muslims in contemporary American society. Ultimately, in pursuit of encouraging openness, true dialogue, and an invitation to valuing others, I argue that identities must be looked at through relational, intercultural communicative processes.

**Muslim Identity in the U.S.**

In this section, I speak specifically about Muslim identities, but it is vital to understand that this focus is not advocating that being Muslim comprises one’s whole identity or that it is the primary identity marker which all Muslim women use. Although I largely focus on religious
and gender identities, I also hope to join Kirmani’s (2009) call to offer to readers the necessary understanding that there are multiple identifications within Muslim women’s narratives of themselves that accompany their identifications as Muslim women. I am in full agreement with Kirmani (2009) when she argues that identities are always relational. This means that religious identities cannot be divorced from social factors such as age, class, race, education, nationality or region. This also means that religious identities cannot be understood apart from other religious parties. Similar to personal identification, Islam itself “cannot be viewed in isolation of other societal factors such as political systems, kinship systems or the economy” (Kirmani, 2009, p. 60). This further speaks to both identities and discourses being relational in nature, and thus in need to be examined as such. Furthermore, Muslim communities are not homogeneous but any means. Like I argue of any and all communities, the diversity within them is extensive, and although we may share similar labels such as being Muslim, women, etc., our enactments and understandings of those identities are vast. Furthermore, identities are laden with social, communal, and personal meaning. Like we will see from these women’s narratives, Islam provides a framework from which they gather strength and positive insight to continually become better people.

Though there is a large body of research detailing demographic features of Muslims in the United States, I will only articulate some of these ideas as to form a general understanding of the community within the United States. As stated above though, it is not my intent to essentialize any Muslim or Muslim woman; those who contribute to the community are complex and diverse. While reading this section, it is important to keep in mind that in North America, Muslims comprise the most diverse population in Islamic history (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006). So, though these are some general trends, it is important to not automatically assume
these factors of any individual Muslim; rather, my request is that such information encourages others to ask their Muslim friends, neighbors, and acquaintances (as well as any other person in the world, frankly) what their stories are and what is meaningful to them in any and every capacity.

Islam is an Abrahamic faith like Christianity and Judaism. These faiths believe in the same god and share similar histories/stories. The Qur’an is the word of God, revealed to Muhammad, the last Prophet of God. Islam does believe in and shares the stories of Jesus, though, like Muhammad, Jesus is a prophet of God. There are an estimated 1.3 billion Muslims in the world who live in over 57 countries with substantial populations existing in Europe and North America (Organization of the Islamic Conference, 2012). This means that Islam is undeniably understood, interpreted, and enacted in myriad ways. While reference to the Qur’an as the book of the religion and hadith (recorded sayings of the Prophet) is paramount, inevitably there are manifold articulations of the faith. Many Muslims view Islam as “a dynamic and flexible system, rather than a static and rigid set of rules and regulations, and want to open up avenues of participation in which women as well as men are the public faces of Islam” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p. 20). Such dynamism and growth in the faith is seen in acts of women reinterpreting Islamic structures across the globe. In the United States, this means that there has been and will continue to be a constant (re)defining and breadth of enactments pertaining to Islam. Similarly, “there are contentious debates and disagreements between and within Islamic communities and groups in many Muslim countries regarding the relationship between religion, culture and society, as well as the role of religion in government (Hu et al., 2009, p. 58). This exists, too, in the United States advancing the notion of the diversity of those who adhere to the faith. Though estimates vary on the Muslim population in the US, a Pew poll (2007) suggests
that Muslims could number from 2.35 million to 6-7 million. Vital to this though, is the reminder that not all Muslims enact their faith in the same ways (Nagel, 2005).

According to a 2009 Gallup poll, Muslim Americans are one of the most educated religious groups in the United States. Many immigrant Muslim women have described themselves as becoming more devout Muslims and/or more faithful to Islam after moving to the United States (Hu, Pazaki, Al-Qubbaj, & Cutler, 2009). Many Muslim women are concerned about misrepresentations of themselves, claiming that there are missing images of highly educated Muslim women such as doctors, political activists, and engineers that live and come from both the United States and, in the case of immigrant women, their homelands (Hu et al., 2009). To many, motherhood is a large component of Muslim identity, though child rearing is considered to be an equal responsibility between wives and husbands (Hu et al., 2009). There are Muslim women who believe that Islamic principles are feminist in nature or at least support feminist philosophies (e.g., Hu et al., 2009), and there are Muslim women who view Islam and feminism as incommensurate.

Several scholars warn of essentializing Muslim women, particularly in the west, as a singular identity marker. Perhaps forwarded with good intentions of demystifying negative notions of being Muslim, we have unintentionally contributed to a discourse that limits the agency, voices, and diversity of communities of Muslim women. Cooke (2008) coined this term as the “Muslimwoman.” In discussion of the hijab mainly, she argued that the veil has been rhetorically used and created by outside forces (being Islamist men or non-Muslims) as a symbol of essentialized difference to further other these women. Rhetorically tying hijab/the veil to Muslim women to create an isolating discourse of Muslimwoman reifies a boundary between us

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6 Discussed in further detail in Islam and feminism section.
and them. This has devastating effects: “[T]he Muslimwoman erases for non-Muslims the
diversity among Muslim women and indeed, among all Muslims” (Cooke, 2008, p. 93). The
essentialized view of a singular Muslimwoman that is forwarded in western societies especially
presents Muslim women as automatically oppressed.

Although Cooke (2008) argues that some Muslim women are trying to reclaim or subvert
the Muslimwoman marker, Badran (2008) argues that reclaiming of such a singular title is not
beneficial; rather, we must discuss Muslim women as Muslim women and continually attend to
the diversity and agency enacted in subverting and challenging hegemonic anti-Islamic
discourses. While Badran agrees with Cooke that the term Muslimwoman is and has been used
negatively by Islamist men and non-Muslims to conflate gender and religion into a singular
identity, she further explains that the west’s use of the term or similar sentiments reify how the
Islamists have used such notions to suggest that the Muslimwoman is protected by men and
compliant. In essence, the employment of such sentiments by the west does work for those
Islamists, thus functioning against the west’s argument that Islam is the force oppressing its
women and that the west is liberating. Badran contends though, that Muslim women are agents
of empowerment and resistance despite such rhetorical/discursive representations:

While the Muslimwoman was mobilized in the (neo-Orientalist) West as the designer
icon of ‘Islam/ic oppression’ and prima facie evidence of everything wrong with the
religion and its followers, Muslim women globally (in the East and West) continued to
exhibit a woman-sensitive and gender-egalitarian version of Islam through their literary
and artistic production…as well as through their hermeneutic production and sharia
activist, otherwise known as Islamic feminism. (pp. 103-104)
She is careful to explain though, that this view of agency and recognition of the diversity of Muslim women is contextual:

One size can never fit all: women, experiences, needs, desires, and inclinations are simply too diverse…. If anything, women across class lines are becoming even more diverse and creative in their ways of living and expressing their religion, and in shaping their cultures and lives. As we move further into the twenty-first century, in both the East and the West, growing numbers of Muslim women are being energized and emboldened by the new Qur’anic discourse of gender equality and justice and becoming part of the Islamic feminist surge as women increasingly decide for themselves how to be Muslims and how to be women within their diverse contexts. In the West…the Muslimwoman model is unsustainable no matter how much women try to uphold it. Muslim women’s daily needs and inclinations have caused them to present themselves and to perform in diverse ways as they juggle multiple identities and needs. (Badran, 2008, p. 104)

Using this discussion between Cooke (2008) and Badran (2008) as a catalyst, I would like to engage in the dialogue by attending to women’s narratives in Northwest Ohio to contribute to this understanding of diversity and in what ways it is enacted and changing. It would also aid in further understanding collective identifications (or supposed singular ones) and how they interact with the dynamics of individual (yet still relational) ones.

Although I stress the importance of not essentializing Muslim women, there are complicated factors in manufacturing a cultural identity, especially in response to Islamophobia and anti-Islamic sentiment. Muslims are acutely aware of the diversity within their Muslim communities and have acquired and enacted tolerance for differing religious thought within them. However, because their collective identity as Muslims has been increasingly threatened, they
understand the urgency in trying to “fashion a common identity whenever possible to stress those things that do unite them in the bonds of Islam rather than separate them religiously, culturally, ideologically, or in any other way” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p. 16). Realizing they are being watched and monitored, many Muslims have had to take on the responsibility of acting as representatives of the religion in public settings, especially women who veil since they are more easily identified. Therefore, outward acceptance of the diversity within Muslim communities is hindered because of essentialized anti-Islamic notions, which Muslims do, indeed, react to and negotiate out of necessity. This movement often becomes tangible in processes of or resistance to assimilation as will be addressed in the findings of this work. By virtue of merely being in public, they are aware that they must perform in ways that ease feelings of fear and suspicion. In these performances, many are strongly motivated to prove that being both American and Muslim orientations are mutually supportive, not exclusive (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006).

**Muslim Reverts**

Cross- and interdisciplinary scholars have focused on converted Muslim identities, their conversion processes, and cultural adaptation/assimilation of Muslim immigrants. I argue that components of the field’s understandings of cultural adaptation/assimilation need to be reexamined and broadened to speak to the complexity of cultural migration and diasporic identities. While this study is not limited exclusively to women who revert to Islam, it is vital that I attend to these women because of the growth in their numbers and because of their potential to bridge the polemic notions of west/non-west.

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7 Henceforth, reversion/revert will be used to describe, as a gesture of respect for the faith and its followers, women who convert to Islam. In Islam, those who convert to the faith are referred to as “reverts,” as it is believed that everyone is born a Muslim; however, some are not privy to that language/knowledge upon birth or are brought up in a different faith, therefore revert back to Islam when they acquire it.
Previous research has been conducted in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany on female reverts to Islam. In Sultan’s (1999) work examining both male and female Swedish reverts, she found two “spheres of attraction” (p. 325) that aided in the decision to revert to Islam. These two attractive features of Islam were “the conception of an essential womanhood and manhood as well as of the patriarchal nuclear family” and “the idea of a stable system of norms (above all on private morality) and the idea of Islam as the objective truth” (p. 325). The security that Islam offered to the family unit and an answer for truth aided in bringing three women in her study to revert to Islam. Sultan offers some indication as to why some women may revert to Islam. The same has been articulated in some ways by participants in my pilot studies, particularly surrounding the idea that Islam is pro-family (cite). However, the perceived patriarchal nature of Islam has been contested by many Muslims, speaking to the numerous meanings associated with religion. This is an important element of my research as I aim to expand these spaces and conversations of agency and empowerment within Islam as it is articulated by and meaningful to Muslim women, both reverts and those born into the faith.

Nieuwkerk (2006, 2008) also sought to understand reasons women revert to Islam. She examined biographical themes that led to reversion by Dutch women. In her aim to reexamine rational-choice theories that view religion (Islam) as a commodity where active actors make rational choices, she found that the three Dutch Muslim women in her study rationally chose Islam because it offered “systemization of life conduct” (p. 440), “religious space for oneself” (p. 441), a discourse of equity between women and men, and “Islam is experienced as empowering” (p. 445). This contributes to this particular study because it offers some added understandings of why some women may revert to Islam, how reversion influences their identities, and speaks to how even women born into Islam may view and appreciate their religion.
McGinty (2007) examined Muslim reverts in Sweden from a feminist approach. After interviewing two Swedish female reverts to Islam who also identified as feminists, she argued “that it is through their feminist understanding that they integrate seemingly irreconcilable gender discourses” (p. 474) and “through the conversion they explore an alternative femininity.” These themes indicated that the women did not see their Muslim identity as one condemned to existing within patriarchy, opening up a space of reexamination and conversation if we think about the reasons for reversion that Sultan (1999) presented. This research contributes to my study by providing more insight into themes I have and will continue to encounter. Furthermore, it addresses the discursive elements of my study, constructed both from within and outside Muslim communities, in its reference to Islam and feminism as not being antagonistic or oxymoronic.8

There also is ample research coming from the United Kingdom on Muslim relations and identities as, like the United States, the Muslim population is quite notable and continuing to grow—along with anti-Islamic sentiment. Al-Yousef (2006) examined identity and faith negotiations in Muslim-Christian marriages in Britain. Of the 230 couples in the study, none reported the Muslim (man) having converted to Christianity, speaking to a gendered component of faith negotiation that is not inconsistent with my own experiences in pilot-studies in the United States and as is often understood among many interfaith marriages. Though this component was not explored in detail in this study, what it does lend to my project is the need to explore those aspects of reversion.

Al-Yousef (2006) also presented findings that are aligned with studies of women who revert to Islam (with or without the relational dynamic of a Muslim husband) who experience

8 Discussed in further detail in the section on Islam and feminism
negative reactions from the families they were born into. Furthermore, the author discussed the strong negative reactions from many Muslim families when a child decided to out-marry (marry a non-Muslim). These sentiments included a perceived loyalty or lack thereof of the children, along with some parents’ sense of failure to bring up a child in the faith. Though these experiences are painful or at least uncomfortable, there are positive possibilities through continued acts and examinations of such negotiations. These negative and/or ambivalent reactions are highly influenced by discourses that are sometimes in conflict with each other, for instance that of affective individualism that says one should marry someone with whom they fall in love, and a cultural faith-based one that rewards bringing up children in the faith. Al-Yousef more eloquently addressed the potential in such interfaith encounters:

In contemporary multicultural Britain, alongside the discrediting of racially exclusive attitudes, an axiom of public discourse is that the social engagement of different groups on the basis of equality is crucial to the common good. Interfaith marriage is an incidental outcome of this involvement…. In terms of cultural affirmation and engagement this becomes a positive paradigm: a location where goals of tolerance can be realized. In this new context, intermarriage, however challenging to an absolute model identity like that of normative Islam, can also be an opportunity for minority faiths. (p. 319)

I argue that this not only pertains to marriage, but to all other relational aspects of life: interfaith friendships, families, schools, and the list goes on. Modood (1997) argued that processes such as the consideration of out-marriage for Muslims fits a post-modern model of hybridity and internal negotiation. I believe other acts of interfaith relationships can contribute to our understandings of hybrid, nomadic, diasporic identities. Theoretically speaking, inquiry along these lines will give us a more complex, dynamic understanding of identity processes. In pursuing and transforming
discourses that encourage understanding, listening, and appreciation, we must examine acts performing in these ways so that we may uphold the idea that we are working with each other based on the sentiment that we are in this together (Braidotti, 2006).⁹

Research on Muslim reversion in the United States exists, though it has yet to come out of the communication field. Roer-Strier, Sands, and Bourjolly (2009) examined family reactions to African American adult daughters’ reversions to Islam. After interviewing 17 family units, they found a wide range of emotional responses from the families to the daughters’ reversions, addressed challenges the daughters faced after converting, and revealed that over time, “the families showed marked changes, predominantly in the direction of increased respect and acceptance” (p. 220) for the daughters’ decision of reversion. Like McGinty (2007), these researchers expand the understandings of motives for reversion by addressing also the communicative processes they encountered and engaged with from relational and cultural entities. This article offers insight again into how women come to make the decision to revert and also addresses the communicative interactions and problems faced when sharing their decisions with family members.

It is imperative to have a general understanding of why women in the west, especially the United States, are reverting to Islam. It is through the process of reversion that they take on a Muslim identity. Simultaneously, the adoption of this Muslim identity contributes to their understanding and enactment of being Muslim. Most of the research has focused on the interactions and tensions faced between women who have reverted and non-Muslims, specifically their family and friends who knew them prior to conversion. This has importance to this research project as it provides a fuller understanding of discursive contributors (both

⁹ I discuss this in further detail in the methodology section regarding nomadic subjectivity/ethics.
counter-discourses and supportive discourses) that influence women’s Muslim identities. Coupling this knowledge of dynamics within the Muslim community with the knowledge of tensions they face outside the community aids in providing a holistic understanding of identity construction and negotiation women enact both as being Muslim and in situating themselves within their new Muslim identity and Islamic culture. Furthermore, layering the stories of women reverts with those who are born into the faith in this study, can offer us more holistic insight into the multiple, diasporic and nomadic Muslim identities that interplay with, challenge, and transform the numerous discourses surrounding Islam in the United States.

**Cultural Adaptation and Host-culture Receptivity**

There is an abundance of research in communication on cultural adaptation, acculturation, and assimilation. Most adaptation and assimilation research focuses on cultural moves based on geography or into areas where one moves from one ethnic culture to another. However, I argue that cultural migration is not exclusive to international spaces. In this particular project, this means that not only is the relocation from one (perhaps Muslim-dominant) country to another evidence of migration, but so too is a woman’s reversion to Islam. Reversion is a cross-cultural migration from a previous culture of non-Muslim being to that of a Muslim identity. Therefore, when Croucher (2003, 2006b) and Kramer (2003a) assert that cross-cultural migrations continue to become more accessible, I include migrations from one religion to another in this conceptualization. Because of this continually occurring process of migration many are moving from a life without Islam to one with it, an understanding of cross-cultural and intercultural adaptation and assimilation will “continue to be an issue of paramount importance” (Croucher, 2009b, p. 302). Also, building to an understanding that we must expand the definition of migration to include those who are born in the US, Muslim and non-Muslim, will transform our
traditionally binary of “us” (born in the US or Muslim) and “them” (those who immigrate or are Muslim). This will aid us in decentering hegemonic discourses that position Muslims and/or immigrants (not mutually exclusive) as negatively different and incommensurate with being wholly American.

The most well-known and cited sources of communication research of cultural adaptation and assimilation are Gudykunst and Kim. These two researchers define assimilation as “a ‘convergence of strangers’ internal conditions with those of the native and a minimum maintenance of the original cultural habits” (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, p. 360). From this understanding, many scholars in this area contend that for someone to adapt to a new culture, s/he must completely abandon her/his previous culture in favor of the dominant (new) culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Kim, 1976, 1977, 1988, 1994, 1995, 2001). However, others have argued that the process of adapting to a new culture does not necessarily require the arrant discarding of one’s original culture (Chun & Choi, 2003; Croucher, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2009; Kastoryano, 2002; Kramer, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Murphy & Esposito, 2003).

It is from this second perspective that I position a woman’s conversion to Islam in dialogue with intercultural communication research. Rather than completely disposing of previous cultural practices and perspectives that contribute to one’s identity, I see converts to Islam, immigrants who are Muslim, and even Muslims who have already been in the U.S. but have had to grapple with enhanced forms of anti-Islamic sentiment as adapting through a fusion of their original and new (or newly [re]constructed) cultural norms (Croucher, 2006b, 2008; Gadamer, 2003; Kramer, 2000, 2003a) or cultural hybridity (Kraidy, 2005). This fusion and hybridity occurs through communication and communicative interactions with others of the host-culture (the new culture into one is entering). It is important to note, however, that much of this
research has focused on the communication process a perceived newcomer goes through to assimilate to the host-culture. It does not take into account the receptivity of members of the host-culture to the newcomer.

While Kim (1976, 1977, 1988, 1994, 1995, 2001) argued that one assimilates when they completely take on the attributes of the host culture, therefore implying a finite point in which the newcomer is fully part of the new culture, there is no statement of how the host-culture sees that person. So, while in theory a person may follow a process of acculturation as prescribed by such scholars with the end product of being able to proclaim membership of the new culture, original members of that host-culture may not view the newcomer as truly being a member of their culture. Furthermore, the idea of choice is limited in such assumptions of assimilation/acculturation. We cannot forget that Muslim women in particular, are subject to extremely difficult and often forced choices of what aspects of the host-culture they will adopt, adapt, or reject while maintaining their relational sense of community from previous journeys: “choices prove to be very hard to make in what is recognized as a complex two-way process of acculturation between individual choices and the affiliations an individual has with…her community” (Marcotte, 2010, p. 358).

Therefore, intercultural communication research on adaptation/assimilation influences my research in two ways: 1) I am redefining (and in doing so broadening) cross-cultural migration to include those converting from one or no religion to another and those who have already been in a culture (American) who are newly “othered,” and 2) I am further challenging conceptualizations of cultural assimilation/adaptation by examining how one redefines and represents herself in the reversion to Islam or in interaction with discourses of othering, and in examining how the processes are viewed and engaged by members of the host-culture (born-
Muslims). Furthermore, I challenge the idea of a singular host-culture, as if we are to assume that we are all nomads in becoming (Braidotti, 2006), live at intersections of identities, and are all of diasporic identities, this means we encounter numerous host-cultures daily and simultaneously. Or, this could mean that there is no true host-culture in terms of stasis, because to assume that a culture is wholly finite at any particular moment contradicts the idea that we are always in a process of becoming.

Some research exists that addresses Muslim migration and European reversion in terms of acculturation and assimilation. Dris-Ait Hamadouche (2009) argued that “neither the assimilation model, nor the integration model has prevented national tensions or violent actions” (p. 339). While this scholar was addressing tensions between non-Muslims and Muslims rather than tensions within the Muslim community, her argument further illustrates problems with current notions of the processes of assimilation into host-cultures, providing further justification for research examining this additional component of assimilation.

In the field of communication, we believe that identity is communicatively constructed through discourse. The discursive construction of converted Muslim women’s identities, though addressed in other fields (and thus without focus on communication acts), is an area that demands examination from communication scholars. Also, it is necessary to further (re)examine notions of cultural adaptation/assimilation in terms of religious conversion, host-culture receptivity, and the interactions between converts and members of the host-culture so that we can gain a more informed understanding of intercultural communication processes and identity construction.

I argue that identities and culture are relational processes. I support qualitative inquiry that examines these concepts from a philosophical position advocating for an interconnected
subjectivity that transcends humanist conceptions of the self. I believe employing communicative frameworks for understanding processes of identification, that still have the flexibility to change as people and the world change, can provide valuable insight into understandings of our social worlds that are never finished. Conducting such inquiry can help us move forward and hopefully improve our relational conditions because it will help us further understand that “interconnectivity is not simply a matter of drawing lines between dots; it is about changing the nature of the dots together” (Eisenberg, 2001, p. 549). In context, inviting ways of changing the nature of how we view our relational selves, Muslim and non, has the potential of enabling us to break free of discursive structures that limit these relationships from being rewarding and productive. Our task is to continually promote creative spaces by challenging already existing (oppressive) discourses where relationships can be acknowledged and embraced in new ways to promote appreciation and empowerment of perceived differences.

Feminism and Islam

There has been extensive scholarship articulating the multiple feminist discourses surrounding Islam and Muslim women by Muslim and non-Muslim academics. Much of the literature compares the different feminist discourses working in conjunction with and in competition to each other, particularly in Muslim countries. What is lacking in the literature is an ethnographic examination of how feminism is working on the grassroots level for Muslim women, specifically in the Midwest United States, which has one of the largest concentrated Muslim populations in the country. It is important to note here that though I discuss several types of feminisms (Islamic, Islamist, and Muslim), they are defined and situated differently by those who advocate different discourses. Sometimes Muslim and Islamic feminisms are used interchangeably by scholars and sometimes not. Islamist feminism is almost always situated
differently because it is rooted in the fundamentalist Islamist movement. In my use of the terms “Islamic feminism” or “feminism through Islam,” I am speaking to the plurality of these discourses of empowerment that women find through their faith. In my use of these terms in the context of the women of this study, I am speaking to how these women understand Islam to imbue them with equal/equitable rights to men, the agency they have in their lives to make decisions for themselves which include those of education, occupation, marriage, and practice of faith, and the empowerment they garner from their relationship with God both as women and as submitters to God.

Many in the United States automatically discount Islam as having anything to do with women’s rights, much less feminism. Saadallah (2004) made room for Islamic feminism in what we understand in the west as third-wave feminism. Sadallah qualified her definition of Muslim feminism by separating Muslim feminism from Islamic and Islamist feminism, stating that it refers to “a feminist movement which emerges from Islam, both as a religion and as a belief structure which is historically and culturally reinforced” (p. 217) and has been active in Arab countries since the beginning of the twentieth century. While there has been much debate on whether Islam and feminism can exist together, the author stressed that “the argument for Muslim feminism should be based on the notion of empowerment and a rights-based approach, one which refutes the criticism that it is only culturally relativist manifestation” (p. 217) and “it is important to identify Muslim feminism as a tactical change in the feminist movement rather than as a non-feminist project” (p. 217), thereby sanctioning space for this one of the multiple pluralities of feminism.

Muslim feminism is different from Islamist feminism in that it is a discourse that engages with Islamic sources while “reconciling Islamic faith with international human rights” (Karam in
Saadallah (p. 218). Saadallah (2004) furthered the distinction between Islamist and Muslim feminism by stating “Muslim feminism is, for the most part, a quest for equality, equity, and empowerment within an Islamic context. Muslim feminists…are dismantling the status quo of male-dominated Islamic interpretation and acculturation which serves to reinforce women’s subjugation” (p. 219). Muslim feminists focus their attention on the interaction between the Text (Qur’an), interpretation, and practice that produces the complex religious discourse that defines Islamic societies that work to oppress or liberate women. Overall, Saadallah argued that third wave feminism makes space for Muslim feminism because it “allows for a pluralistic approach to the feminist project” (p. 224) and therefore should not reject Muslim feminism (as oxymoronic). She stated “The impact of Muslim feminism is more comprehensive than secular feminism, which has been resisted in Muslim societies because of its identification as a Western intrusion and thus a threat to its ‘authenticity’” (p. 224). Therefore, this tactical shift of feminism has to be acknowledged within a more holistic discourse of feminism because it is working towards emancipation and liberation of women. So, the problem in this argument has been that many western feminists have not seen Muslim feminism as feminist because of the general view that Islam is patriarchal and incommensurate with feminist thought.

Timmerman (2000) described Islamist feminism, which is different from Islamic and Muslim feminism in that it is associated with fundamentalist Islam. Timmerman discussed how the images of Muslim women are central to western and Islamist discourses that exist today. For westerners, a Muslim woman’s image is representative of her (perceived) oppression as indicated by the veil. However, within Islamist movement, it can be seen and women see it as a mark of nationalism and empowerment. The author described the history of Middle Eastern countries and colonialism and how due to colonialism, women (and men) found empowerment and identity
through the image of veiled Muslim women because it so differentiated them from the image of the western woman. The author particularly described how in Turkey, a country different from many other Middle Eastern countries because of the “female issue” having become more detached from Islam, women’s status in society has been raised by granting access to education and the public sphere. This rise in access permitted women to view the veil as an “embodiment of the dignity and authenticity of the Islamic nation” (p. 22), where it offered fashionable Islamist dress while offering practical benefits such as being cheaper than western clothing, protecting women against male harassment, and granting them greater social freedom (they can interact with men without having to worry about being viewed as immoral, claim legitimate space outside the family to enter “without recriminations” [p. 24] into the public domain). So while many westerners view the veil as oppressive to women, this author argued that women find it empowering while also exhibiting nationalism that very much differentiates them from previous colonial burden. This article is helpful to feminists because it puts Muslim women’s actions into perspective, that perhaps they are exerting agency when “we” think they have none, and that they are creating an empowered space for themselves that cannot function within our current frameworks of what constitutes freedom, equality, and feminism. It also de-essentializes images of a singular Muslim woman that needs to be saved; rather, Muslim women have many choices, one of which is whether to veil or not without outside retribution of being any less Muslim. This is important to note in this study because the veil has become a very powerful image in the American public eye when it comes to Muslim women and is often associated with their oppression. This may be indicative of the competing dominant discourses Islamic feminism faces in this country.
Islamic feminisms in Muslim countries. In a discussion of secular and Islamic feminism in the Middle East, Badran (2005) provided an historical review of the different feminisms emergence and activism in the area, noting that secular feminism is traced mainly to the late nineteenth century whereas the emergence of Islamic feminism occurred more observably in the late twentieth century. She presented these two feminist discourses as separate yet “speaking” to each other; they had previously worked with and in response to each other. There are distinctions made between secular and Islamic feminism which is rooted in the Qur’an, but of value of the article for this proposed study is the statement that “Islamic feminism, although it has large and ever-increasing numbers of women and more and more men producing and carrying its message, unlike secular feminism it does not have a large social movement behind it” (Badran, 2005, p. 23). This supports this research by necessitating the examination of how Muslim women are enacting their agency through everyday actions without a unified, named movement through which they are working. This particular article does have gaps in that it essentializes Islamic feminism in the Middle East as a whole and also inaccurately depicts, according to many, the timeframe in which Islamic feminism emerged. However, it adds to the conversation that there are multiple discourses at play and diversity of thought in communities.

El Guindi (2005) focused on presenting the differences and similarities between feminist discourses that exist in Egypt: western-influenced feminism, Egyptian feminism, and Islamic feminism. The author very much supported Islamic-Egyptian feminism and scolds many feminists’ critiques of feminism in this area because the western bias of feminist theory blinds them from understanding feminism in Egypt. She argued “feminism itself is grounded in culture and that feminists from any society or any particular cultural tradition hold and internalize premises and assumptions stemming out of their culture that shape their orientation to feminist
issues” (El Guindi, 2005, p. 53). The western-biased feminist thought, she argued, holds a hegemonic character that results in racist arrogance against Islamic and Egyptian feminists. This rift in feminist understanding within Egypt is a result of colonialism where westernized thought became a luxury and thus influenced some women feminists negatively by taking them out of their cultural context (she calls these “westward-looking” feminists) and inaccurately critiquing Islam. Westward-looking feminists of Egypt, then, persuaded by western/secular notions of feminism, did not know Arabic or Islamic study and therefore could not understand nor critique Islamic feminism. As a result of this secular/western feminism meeting feminists in Egypt, El Guindi distinguishes Egyptian feminism as rooted in culture which works for the many of the same goals as western feminism but comes from a different background that influence those goals. She articulated that the colonial feminist discourse that arose still exists within westward-looking feminism and has become “an alternative form of dominance that gives its men and women a sense of superiority. By adopting it, Egyptian men accepted and Egyptian women reproduced their own subordination within their culture as well as their country’s subordination to European dominance” (2005, p. 68).

El Guindi most advocated an Islamic feminism. She believed that in order for any of these strands of feminism to succeed, women must have primary Islamic knowledge in Arabic, which Islamic feminism has. She described this branch’s goals as having been more successful though unattended to by other feminists because outsider feminists are working from frameworks (western) that do not adequately describe the Egyptian culture. This article contributes to the proposed study by presenting some competing feminist discourses in a Muslim country. There may be some transferability of such lack of consensus within the Muslim community in the Midwest as many Muslim women are first or second generation Muslims in the US, or if they are
not directly from abroad or related to someone who is, there is a good chance that they are surrounded by such women with these thought processes. These personal and discursive relationships will inevitably influence or at least be present in the community’s understandings of feminism and Islam.

Osman (2003) also described contemporary Muslim feminism in Egypt. The author presented that Muslim feminism is composed of three elements: 1) it is rooted in a “clear demarcation between Middle Eastern and Islamic traditions” (2003, p. 74) and there is a clear distinction between Islamic and Western traditions, 2) it is rooted in the Islamic faith with imperative relation to the Qur’an, and 3) the unit is of importance is the family versus the individual. The author said that despite Western feminists’ critical and sometimes condemning views of Muslim feminism (and whether it is really feminism), Muslim women are “constructing and reconstructing a new feminism that is all their own” (p. 73). Muslim feminists believe that secular and western feminism has failed in the Middle East because it is detached from an inseparable cultural element, Islam, and that women’s rights are sanctioned fully by the Qur’an; the misinterpretation and incorrect practice of Islam has led to women’s subordination. So, Muslim feminists advocate for going “back” to a true, authentic Islam where women’s rights are very present and respected.

Osman (2003) noted that Muslim feminists fight and always have advocated for many of the same issues as secular/western feminists (education, voice, etc. which, according to them, are all granted within the Qur’an); however, they differ in that while western women have had to “carve out” a niche for themselves in the male world, women always had it in the Islamic world (in the home) and that their rights were of notable value there and should still be alive there (women were created to raise children). Women can still become educated and work in the
public sphere, however, their priority is to raise children if they have them and that is empowering. This “family feminism” “emphasizes a concern with well-balanced families and societies over well-balanced individuals” (Fernea in Osman, 2003, p. 76). This article articulated what Muslim feminists in Egypt strive for and justified their title of feminism when many strands of feminism do not see what they are doing as feminist action. This contributes to the proposed study by providing an Islamic feminist framework functioning in Egypt that may exist or at least play part into an Islamic feminism being constructed in the United States.

Moving from Egypt to India, Vatuk (2008) presented a “nascent” Islamic feminist movement in India. The goal of the movement was to achieve gender equity under Muslim Personal Law (MPL), which extends to marriage/divorce law, custody, education, and economic equity of women. Based heavily in the Qur’an, the women’s activists vied for equity and opportunity and accused the male elite as perpetuating an incorrect interpretation of the religion that condemns women to subordinate positions. The author explained that this movement has not yet made huge strides (hence, “nascent”) but they are gaining visibility and making small yet influential strides towards changing Muslim Personal Law. Vatuk described this work as “not yet an organized ‘social movement’ (p. 492) but there are many small groups and individuals working towards similar goals and spreading awareness of the ‘correct teachings of Islam’ and women’s rights.

Vatuk (2008) described several groups and non-government organizations working towards women’s rights in India (several are Mumbai-based which can have some significance). The movements are also composed of non-Muslim women too (she mentions the organizations have a “few Hindus” and secularist women) because of the value of “communal harmony” (p. 496) projected by these women. The author also briefly mentioned a difference between women
activists who are “Islamic feminists” and “Muslim feminists.” She described Muslim feminists as “believing women who agree that Islamization has been detrimental…to women and approach issues of legal reform from that perspective but also often use familiar cultural concepts and religious phrases in order to promote their reformist goals more effectively to a Muslim audience” (pp. 508-509). She described Islamic feminists as those who “sincerely believe that Islam already provides women all the rights they could possibly require” (p. 509) and there is no need to go beyond Shari’a law (whereas Muslim feminists will go against or work to reform Shari’a). So, while Islamic feminists support pro-woman legislation, they do not want state intervention. The author also articulated problems the women’s activists faced such as hesitancy or rejection of the title “feminist” due to stigmatized presentation of being too western by the public, male elite/scholarly ignorance (though they have been successful in engaging dialogue), familiar and community criticism, etc. This article gives substantial insight into a movement that has not been in action for long (or at least not in public awareness) and can serve as a good indicator or reinforcement of how an Islamic feminist movement starts and is (or not) successful, especially when the arguments are embedded in religious thought.

Zia (2009) provided a history and critique of women’s and feminist movement in Pakistan, another Muslim country. The author argued that the empowering strategies used by Islamic feminists working within the framework of religion have been successful and have subsumed all other forms of feminist expression. Zia presented that 9/11 in the US did not create “new” religious identities for women in Pakistan, rather the war on terror has definitely influenced women’s political identities by polarizing them into modern, liberal Pakistani women and talibanized, regressive, conservative women. She described 9/11 as an event that sped up the dichotomized relationship between women in the movement and that westernized views of the
two types of women have negatively influenced cohesive progression. The author discussed secular and Islamic feminisms within Pakistan starting in the 1980s when the urban-based women’s movement started which took ideas and looked very much like (in composition) the movement in the US. Zia discussed external critique of the movement but focuses mainly on internal critique where women’s definitions and definitions of “secular” and “Islamic” feminist organizations within the movement have impeded its progression. She called for a reexamination of method and definition so that full support of women’s rights and methods of achieving it are articulated such that the women aren’t turning on or dismissing each other (violent groups vs. non-violent were discussed). She projects the future of Islamic feminist movement in Pakistan: “there is every possibility of the fruition of such a new, radicalized, religio-political feminism dominating Pakistan’s political future” (p. 45). This contributes to this study by providing yet more insight into contributing Islamic feminist discourses that exist among Muslims and by presenting how the movement is working and changing within a Muslim country today. This may have implications into what I find in the Midwest United States.

Mojab (2001) critically examined Islamic feminism and western feminist theory with particular attention to feminist action in Iran. The author argued that Islamic feminism is oxymoronic and was introduced and has continued to become a hyped term among academic feminists while completely lacking in reality and praxis. Mojab addressed that though there are Islamic feminists who advocate the reinterpretation of the Qur’an to substantiate gender equality, she said the issue extends beyond the interpretation of the text to both religious and governmental realms. She critiqued purported Islamic feminist scholars as being a group of mostly secular feminists living in the west who “treat Islam as the only authentic, indigenous road to gender equality and justice” when “‘Islamic feminism’ justified unequal gender relations”
(pp. 130-131) because it is embedded in patriarchy. She supported her argument by attending to legal actions in Iran, which have maintained patriarchal power and gender inequality because they are based in Islamic law. She argued that because the state is an Islamic one, there is no escaping the patriarchy of the system because it is in religion and government. The institution of religion (Islam) plays the significant role in the struggle over power and therefore gender inequality cannot be “reduced to individual, cultural, or religious identities” (p. 135).

Through Mojab’s (2001) examples, she maintained that “feminist” interpretations of the Qur’an and law will not lead to gender equality until a radical revision or complete discarding of theological bases occur. Because the law is not neutral (religiously in particular; what she calls “legal positivism”) as many Islamic feminists seem to act upon or speak from without realizing the law is not neutral, their efforts will not succeed or if they do, it will be artificial because the patriarchal law will somehow manipulate the new, “feminist” law to still fit within the patriarchal framework. Overall, Mojab argued “the union of state and religion clearly shapes the status of women not as citizens but as subjects of Islamic patriarchy in Iran” (140) and though feminist academics who have focused on “identity, culture, language, discourse, desire and body…have made enormous contributions to our understanding of patriarchy,” “politically…they lag behind liberal feminism” (pp. 142-143). This contributes to this study by presenting complications Islamic feminists face in the Muslim country of Iran, which may have an impact on how the discourses play out here in the US.

Ahmadi (2006) further described current Islamic and secular feminist practice in Iran working together to create a new feminist discourse. Ahmadi identified secular feminism as important yet inadequate in Iran because it does not have enough power to create change in the religious social structure of the country. She argued that Muslim feminists and especially those
of elite classes have had great pull in improving women’s conditions because of their “insider” voice. Ahmadi defined Islamic feminism through Badran (2002):

A feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm…. I include here both those Muslim women activists who identify themselves as Islamic feminists and those who do not, and also those women who are in power and those who are not. Islamic feminism…is a global phenomenon. It is not a product of East or West. Indeed, it transcends East and West…Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries whether they be from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities. Islamic feminism is also growing in Muslim Diaspora and convert communities in the West. Islamic feminism is circulating increasing frequency in cyberspace. (Ahmadi, 2006, pp. 35-36)

She critiqued much of western feminist discourse that argues against Islamic feminism because their feminism does not understand their cultural/religious contexts. Furthermore, because western feminists have focused on Islam (from an “Islamophobic stance), they have neglected to see the Iranian women’s grassroots intellectual and practical struggles working to reconstruct gender. This action by western feminists serves as a new colonization of feminist thought, but Islamic feminism exists, is substantial, and does have a place within the global discourse of feminism.

Ahmadi (2002) discussed the successes the Iranian feminist movement have made within the last twenty years: 1) more women speaking out for equal rights, 2) more women working on religious and cultural levels for change, 3) women have NOT disappeared from public life, 4) more reinterpretation of Islamic texts through feminist lenses, 5) opportunities have been made open for Islamic feminists to have open dialogue with religious clerics. She attributed this
success to the emerging cooperation between secular and Islamic feminists within Iran who also take part in learning about western feminism. The new Islamic feminist discourse being constructed in Iran is postmodern in nature in that it invites multiple truths, standpoints, and methodologies while all working towards progressive global equal rights. This movement is hopeful because it exemplifies the possibility of cooperation and transformation of previously perceived irreconcilable aims to overcome patriarchy. Also, it speaks to the potential of secularism and religion being compatible or functional together in particular ways, thereby challenging current discursive arguments that Islam is antithetical to secularism.

Contributing the knowledge of how discourses are constructed, Tohidi (2002) examined the state of Iran and Azerbaijan’s women’s/feminist movements. Tohidi’s contextualized women’s feminists movements in these countries based on their historical backgrounds that make what is experienced there somewhat different from what feminist movements have encountered in the US. These events included Iran’s era of the Shah, revolution, anti-/pro-western debates due to those conditions, and Soviet/post-Soviet Azerbaijan. By presenting the influence of these historical activities, Tohidi stressed the importance of understanding that women’s movements, while similar in many ways in terms of goals, do experience different successes and difficulties. The author argued that while globalization is hugely examined negatively through critical lenses, globalization has aided in the progression of women’s movements in these areas, particularly Iran. Tohidi stated:

As in other countries, it is the history, internal developments, and dynamism of each society, particularly the social praxis of women, that have played the main role in shaping the course of women’s movements in Iran and Azerbaijan. But external factors also, both
during colonial times and in the present era of globalization, have influenced women’s movements and feminism in Muslim and non-Muslim societies. (851-852)

Tohidi also addressed Islamic feminism in Iran and Azerbaijan by discussing how a global feminist discourse is being constructed. While many feminists have spoken out against the essentializing of women’s issues and movements, she argued that it does have a place by allowing women exposure and opportunities both within their local communities and internationally to participate in feminist conversation. She provided an argument for (re)defining global feminism that does not universalize feminism in an abstract manner just for certain groups that can act exclusionary, rather one that can “account for universal commonalities and the significant role of the global factors that interplay with the local in shaping the objectives, priorities, and strategies of the women’s movement and feminism in any given context” (p. 856). She proposed the metaphor of weaving and webs to conceptualize global feminism where “the world’s women’s movement need not be ‘one’ but can be many, modeled on the female symbol of the web or the patchwork quilt” (Eschle in Tohidi, 857). This article contributes to the proposed study by validating that discourse is constructed within particular contexts but does not function in isolation from other global or transnational discourses. While Tohidi focused on the historical implications of the feminist discourses in Iran and Azerbaijan, this study can work in the same way to describe how similarly motivated discourses function and are creating in the Midwest US. Furthermore, the discourses and activities of this area undeniably influence and are influenced by other regional, national, and global discourses of feminism, women, and Islam.

Ong (1999) examined the Muslim women’s/feminist movement in Malaysia during the late 1990s. Ong compared Malaysia to other Muslim countries where feminists struggled against Islamic patriarchy and governments do little to help. She particularly focused on a feminist group,
The Sisters of Islam who not only sought to express a female voice in the religion but to also renegotiate kinship codes, gender relations, and citizenship within it. The author mainly argued that local feminism is shaped and aided by a wider structure of state power, in much part due to government wanting to gain global capital. As a result, this group used Islamic texts (the Qur’an and hadith) to support and legitimize their rights as women while also gaining the support of secular feminists. In doing so, the groups worked together with the common mission of gaining governmental support for equality. This is important for this study because it provides an example of a grassroots Islamic feminist movement in practice, which combined several forces, religious and secular, to strive towards a common goal. Also, it speaks to political and governmental influences and discourses, which can aid and hinder social transformation.

Another country that has been heavily influenced by western notions is South Africa. Jeenah (2005) presented a history of feminism in South Africa as emerging out of the national liberation struggle (anti-apartheid movement). He traced the progression of discourses in working to achieve rights (originally against apartheid) as stemming from a nationalist discourse, then to human rights discourse, then to a women’s rights discourse. Throughout these discourses, Islamic influences existed, therefore was made able to integrate into the women’s rights movements in the country. This resulted in a noticeable Islamic feminist discourse. According to Jeenah (2005), this Islamic feminist discourse in South Africa was:

[A]n ideology which uses the Qur’an and Sunnah to provide the ideals for gender relationships, as well as weapons in the struggle to transform society in a way that gender equality is accepted as a principle around which society is structured. Secondly, it is the struggle of Muslim women and men for the emancipation of women based on this ideology…. Islam is a force of empowerment rather than of disempowerment. Islam has
been used for the disempowerment of women as well. This approach then brings into sharp focus the issue of interpretation of Islamic scriptures. (p. 30)

This article contributes to a larger discourse of Islamic feminism occurring around the world, not just in the US or in the Middle East and also articulates how an Islamic feminism is being understood and acted upon based on its historical context. This contributes to the present study by providing insight into how the discourse may be functioning differently because of its context yet still maintain an overall Islamic framework.

Lengel (2004) explored Muslim women’s discourse of resistance to hegemonic power over them in Tunisia. In her ethnographic study in Tunis, Lengel attended to women musicians and performers and how through their art, they created a liminal space where they could enact resistance and find voice and agency. Through song, these women were able to articulate subversive sexual messages of resistance and rebellion. She presented how all women’s space in Islamic cultures generally give women the power of poetic license and where women face problems is when they leave the protected women’s sphere with their poetry. Though in these outside, unprotected areas they are tested and face opposition, their art forms have and are creating space for them to enact their freedom, defiance and agency. This article contributes to my understanding of Islamic feminism by contributing to the argument that Muslim women, still adhering to and understanding Islam as compatible with their individual identities, carve out spaces for themselves in a hegemonic social/religious structure.

**Islamic feminisms in western/non-Muslim countries.** While a large amount of research has been dedicated to Islamic feminism in Muslim countries, there is some research on how feminism works among Muslims in western countries. Bhimji (2009) presented how British-born South Asian Muslim women in two areas of England made religious spaces sites where they
could enact agency, transform their identities, and collectively study Islam. The author argued that the mosque was not just a religious site to these women, rather were created, discursive religious and social spaces where women could gain empowerment. The author presented that much Islamic women’s/feminist scholarship focuses on visible symbols of Islamic enactment, such as the veil, which is important yet denies attention to social processes that play an incredible role in Muslim women’s identities. One of the author’s main arguments against the racism and negative stereotypes associated with Muslims and Muslim women was that the mosque, a traditionally and outwardly-viewed male-dominated space, could be a space of empowerment for women where women recreate and transform the discourse of the space such that it is also a women’s space. This demonstrates an Islamic feminist discourse that exists in a non-Muslim country and problems it faces with competing dominant western discourses that are also present in the United States.

Franks (2005) further examined Muslim women in Britain and Canada who choose an Islamic revivalist path in western, secularized contexts and the strategies they have used to obtain Islamic rights after Sept. 11, 2001. The author compared Islamic feminism to western feminism and described some hesitancy or complete admonishment of Muslim women activists to take on the title of “feminist” because of the imperialist implications it has on their culture. However, Islamic feminists and Muslim women working for women’s rights work for several things: 1) reinterpreting the Qur’an due to its misinterpretation in a patriarchal, male-determined Islamic history, 2) claiming a place of legitimacy as un-oppressed women who are Islamic in western, secular areas, and 3) increased women’s rights in the home, work, property, etc. Franks articulated that Muslim women used Islam as a foundation for their empowerment because it has been misinterpreted by Muslim men (the religion itself was meant to empower women) and like
second wave western feminists, they believed in their identity as women that God-bestowed
differences were created for functional and meaningful purposes and difference does not
automatically correspond to inequity. This article provides insight into Muslim feminist identities
and women’s activism among Muslims in western, secularized contexts, which is important
because it may predict similar struggles and creations that exist in the Islamic feminist discourse
in the Midwest US. Also, it demonstrates transferability in Islamic feminisms both in western
and non-western contexts, speaking to the transnationality of (Islamic) feminisms.

McGinty (2007) addressed intersections of feminism and Islam among women Muslim
converts in Sweden. Because current western media and thought oxymoronizes Islam and
feminism and much academic thought of religion and feminism is skeptical, even antagonistic,
the author worked to illustrate how many women who convert to Islam do so willingly and use it
to further their own feminism. She particularly examined two converts who self-identified as
feminist and had done so before their reversion. The narratives told by the women described their
feminist understandings as influenced and aided by their faith and that through such Islamic
feminist positions, they could offer commentary and critique of both western and Islamic
discourses. The women described their Islamic woman identities as spaces “in which resistance
against patriarchal ideas can take form” (p. 474). A very striking and important claim that the
article made that much feminist scholarship neglects to address is that Islamic feminism is not
separate and isolated from other kinds of feminism, and Islamic feminists are using their religion
as a framework, much like other feminisms use their particular frameworks, from which to
progress a global women’s rights movement.

**Summary.** Through the vast and growing amounts of literature on how women are
enacting Islamic feminisms and/or agency and empowerment through and coupled with their
faith, it is vital that we understand that Muslim women are not all nor always passive subjects. Indeed, by the amount of literature alone, it is undeniable and Muslim women are becoming more audible in the public realm. However, we are all immersed and inextricable from the relational discursive elements of our society. Though Muslim women may strive for more voice and louder ones at that, the fight against competing discourses of anti-Islamic sentiment run and hold strong, thus the need for activism (Hammer, 2008).

Activism is defined broadly and does restrict groups to a specific method through which to activate change. Activism will always change based on the articulated and changing needs to overcome oppression and marginality and needs to change so that we do not fall into hegemonic practices similar to those we work to overcome. Activism is also something that requires more than just one group. Embracing Braidotti’s (2006) sentiment that we act because “we are all in this together,” my aspiration is that my research be included in this activism to overturn anti-Islamic sentiment in the United States. Though I am not currently Muslim myself, I am a woman who knows in empathic ways what it feels to be marginalized and not listened to. I also know that I have met some beautiful, brilliant, amazing women who happen to be Muslim and/or are who they are because of their faith (and myriad other qualities) who deserve to be heard, understood, and valued. Whether I am viewed as an advocate for or in solidarity with these women, I, as well as these women, would argue that this activism, though on the surface looks like it is about faith and intolerance, stands as a symbol for the countless other acts of mistreatment, intolerance, and hate. What we stand for is transcendence from processes of discrimination and othering that ultimately disempowers not only those that are the direct targets of such sentiment, but all of us. We are in this together, and together, we work tirelessly, though at times quietly and very locally, to always become something better.
Theoretical Framework

A relational communication theory of identity informed by a nomadic philosophy (Braidotti, 2006) is a useful theoretical framework to investigate Muslim identities in the United States. Because I assume that identity and culture are inherently relational and communicative, attending to and interrogating the articulated and constructed meanings of identity provide us an understanding of how discourses are being created and enacted.

Communication Theory of Identity

Hecht’s (1993) communication theory of identity (CTI) suggests that identity is “intrinsically communicative and relational” (Urban & Orbe, 2010, p. 305). The Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) sees communicative interaction as central to identity formation and enactment. It seeks to examine culture based on the premise that communication is situated as the core of identity and intergroup activity. CTI looks at the ways in which identity is created, maintained, and negotiated through communication, which in turn defines group membership, hierarchies, and interaction. Identity consists of four layers which are created and reinforced through communicative practices.

It is important to understand that CTI describes the dynamics of culture, group dynamics, and individual and social identity. Hecht, Jackson, and Pits (2005) define culture as providing “our norms, values, and practices; it defines our communities and our relationships” (p. 22). While much communication research has been done on culture through different perspectives, the intergroup perspective “examines the roles that language and discourse play in creating membership and the dynamics of hierarchies that exist between and among groups” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 23) where the main interest is the group. Given this context for CTI and its cultural component, there are eight assumptions from which this theory functions:
1. Identities are composed of four properties (layers): individual (personal), enacted, relational, and communal.

2. Identities are enduring, changing, and are negotiable.

3. Identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual.

4. Identities can be interpreted from both content and relational levels.

5. Identities are composed of subjective and ascribed meanings and are codes that are expressed in conversations and define group membership in communities.

6. Identities have semantic properties that are expressed through core symbols.

7. Identities have semantic properties that are expressed in meanings and labels.

8. Identities have prescribed modes of appropriate and effective communications.

(Witteborn, 2004)

These assumptions set the foundation for the theory that describes internalized and externalized identity created by and that creates communication.

CTI is based on the premise that identities are internalized and externalized through communicative processes. Based on the assumption that “symbolic meanings of social phenomena are created and exchanged through social interaction (Hecht, Jackson, & Pitts, 2005, p. 32), social interaction is internalized as identity when an individual forms symbolic meanings and associates these meanings with her/his sense of self. This means “when people place themselves in socially recognizable categories, they confirm or validate whether these categories are relevant to them through social interaction. Thus, identity is formed and reformed by categorization through social interaction” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 32). At the same time, identity is externalized communicatively because social interactions mandate expectations and motivations
of the individual based on their relationship to the group, thus influencing the person’s communication and externalizing their social identity. More concisely, CTI proposes:

Social relations and roles are internalized by individuals as identities through communication. Individuals’ identities, in turn, are acted out as social behavior through communication. Identity not only defines an individual but also reflects social roles and relations through communication. Moreover, social behavior is a function of identity through communication. (Jung and Hecht, 2004, p. 266)

This simultaneous dynamic of identity formation, maintenance, and modification is then deconstructed into four layers: the personal, enactment, relational, and communal.

The personal layer of identity situates the individual as the locus of identity. This layer includes the individual’s self-concept, self-image, self-cognitions, feelings about the self, and spiritual sense of self-being. Examining this level allows researchers to understand how a person defines herself in general as well as in particular situations. For example, Amani, from this study, identifies as highly career-driven. This self-concept would be located in the personal layer of identity as it describes how she views herself based on her personal goals. Her career goals and dedication to her job impact how she acts and the choices she makes in her communicative activities with others (thus influence her enactment, communal, and relational layers of identity).

The enactment layer positions communication as the locus of identity. When examining this layer, the researcher sees the performance of the self as enacted through communication. This very much aligns itself with Goffman’s (1959) contributions of the presentation of self. This means that identity is expressed in language and other communicative acts. Using the same example of Amani, she may choose to wear tailored, ironed, professional clothes on workdays while speaking in an enthusiastic yet serious tone to communicate her professionalism and
authority in the work place. The ways in which she enacts her professional work identity then impact how she is viewed by others in the workplace (relational and communal layers of identity) and affirm her feelings of adequacy and value as a good, ambitious employee (personal layer of identity).

The relational layer posits the relationship as the locus of identity. This means that identity is a product of negotiation between the individual and the relationships she forms with those around her. The relationships are formed through communication and become interdependent, thus identity is defined by the relationship. In other words, identity is seen and created in reference to others. For example, Amani may have a close working relationship with her boss where she is viewed and has accepted the role of being the right-hand woman, especially during stressful situations. This means that during crises, she is called upon even at most inopportune hours to travel to remedy situations which she gladly does because of her career ambitions and because of the relationship she has with her boss. At the same time, Amani is also a very devoted sister who wouldn’t miss a single piano recital of her brother’s. When a call from her boss begs her to fly to California in a matter of hours to fix a company blunder but her brother’s recital is later that night, she’s in a position where her relational identities must be negotiated based on different needs at the time.

The communal layer locates identity as existing within the group. Group members share characteristics and have collective memories upon which the group identity is established. This goes beyond the relational layer in that it sees identity as formed by a collection of relationships (the collective) and their experiences rather than as a single relationship. Amani may identify as a member of her company’s culture, a Muslim community, a Toledoan (from Toledo), Palestinian, a volunteer; the list goes on. All of the different groups of which she is a part have
collective memories upon which a group identity is founded which influence how she identifies at particular moments based on context and which interpenetrate her other layers of identity.

The four layers of identity posed by CTI work simultaneously and though are broken down into these categories, are inextricably intertwined to constitute identity. While the layers can be analyzed as functioning independently of each other, they actually and necessarily work together, which is described as the “interpenetration” of layers. The layers work dialectically with one another. In different social interactions, the dynamics of the layers change to meet the needs of the situation and thus promote certain areas of identity over others based on the context.

**Relational communication theory of identity.** While CTI focuses on the location of self within four interpenetrating layers of identity (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993), one of which is a relational layer, I argue that inverting the relational layer with the concept of self and thus centering a relationship in this model could provide a worthwhile understanding of how relationships are communicatively constructed (see Appendix). What this means though is since we have turned Hecht’s model to view it from a different angle, it is imperative that we recognize the communal, enacted, and personal layers of identity between people as constitutive of a relationship. In this way, we can attend to the relational discourses at play that Muslim women articulate as informing their thought processes of identification. By listening to individual representations of identities from women, we can gather stories that speak to the diversity of cultures within our communities while describing discursive strategies being used and created to maneuver *becoming* subjectivity (Braidotti, 2006) in the United States.

From my proposed perspective, communication is the means by which messages are exchanged between relational partners that are then used to build, sustain, or change the relationship. Communication by outsiders (interpersonal/public) and its intrapersonal influence
impacts how the relationship is viewed by subjects, resulting in subsequent communicative actions of identification with those relational forces (communal, relational, enactment). Based on how those messages are perceived to relate and interact with the subject’s perceptions of herself (self-identity) and the relationships of which she is part, she makes decisions based on her perceptions, values, desires, etc. that then influence future communicative interactions with others and herself. This multi-directional process illustrates the assumption that identity, culture, and communication are simultaneously creating and being created by each other. This understanding of the role of communication in relationships is supported by Sillars and Vangelisti (2006) who argue “it is difficult to set clear boundaries on communication as a subtopic under personal relationships because relationships are entailed in all acts of communication and communication is the central process giving shape to relationships” (p. 331).

To exist, these constructs must exist simultaneously and be understood as interdependent, much like two or more people must exist and be understood as interdependent in order for a relationship to exist.

Furthermore, such theories of communicative identity need to be flexible and require a constant rearranging and reframing of our negotiated selves and interconnections (Kraus, 2006). Identities must be understood as multi-voiced and that we have “many selves” that cannot be “understood as a single closed unity” (Kraus, 2006, p. 104). These notions are inherent in a nomadic subjectivity of becoming. For now, using a framework of a relational communication theory of identity, philosophically informed by these ideas, continue to add to our understandings of the social world of which we are a part.

**Through a feminist lens.** Additionally, this theoretical perspective is feminist in nature because I am arguing for an understanding for and appreciation of identities because diverse and
always in movement, thus *becoming*. It is antiquated now to further pursue notions of identity as static and wholly achievable in a form of finality. While I will interview and interact with Muslim women and describe their identities and relational communicative processes that enact identities, what I will be marking is merely a cartography of where we will have been. This means that whatever I present and write will always have to be understood as past tense since even at the moment that I write it, the women are already further *becoming*. However, by mapping such processes, after time, we can notice some trends and also seek to understand ourselves better while reflecting on our journeys. In doing so, I engage Kirmani’s (2009) approach to processes of identity infused with feminist thought in that I, too, use the narratives of self-identified Muslim women “to challenge and deconstruct the category of ‘Muslim women’ as a stable marker of identity” (p. 50). I insist that all women are complex, contradictory, multi-faceted beings in constant becoming that negotiate and act within particular social (thus relational) contexts of which they can never be fully removed. It is in these processes of negotiation, resistance, and transformation that we can attend to processes of becoming infinite other identifications with new meanings.

**Discourses and Subjectivities**

Analyzing the communicative processes Muslim women use to negotiate their identities in response to numerous interconnected relational forces, we can start to identify how Muslim women can and are empowered agents in the United States to offset repressive discourses in our country (and beyond) that are dedicated to disempowering and othering them. We can also gain further insight into the shifts of discourses that are at work in this particular historical moment that can aid us in overcoming and demystifying dangerous stereotypes of cultural groups within our communities that deserve respect and value. St. Pierre (2011a) argues:
Of course, post-structuralism will refuse qualitative inquiry when it assumes that humanist “I.” *In this way, conventional humanist inquiry and poststructuralism are incommensurable; they cannot be thought together*…I argue that it’s time to practice another deconstructive approach, which is to overturn and leave behind the failed structure so that something else can be thought. (p. 53)

This is a pivotal argument that informs my theoretical approach to inquiry of Muslims within the US: we cannot pursue qualitative research endeavors if we assume that there is a fixed, knowable “I.” As I have argued of my definition of identity (which I am defining in terms of subjectivity versus a separate identifiable being which we can describe in static terms), post-structuralist subjects refer to the “ongoing construction of human being—the always already partial, fragmented, in-process nature of human being that is…both subject to the disciplinary and normalizing aspects of power relations, discursive formations, and practices and able to resist subjection” (St. Pierre, 2011a, p. 46). Since I conceptualize identity/subjectivity as a process, a relational communication approach accommodates the constant movement of *becoming* while still being able to articulate or at least provide a past-tense cartography of how discourses are interacting with each other in very material communicative ways that manifest through identifications and cultures.

I know that I am constantly changing as I move forward with my research, as are the women with whom I seek to understand. This understanding though is not a fixed, endpoint; that does not exist as it is always changing and moving in non-linear ways. I know, too, that any report I give of how identities are being constructed will always be located in the past; identity is retrospective when we are describing how it works (Braidotti, 1994). In the moments that we are describing the processes that occurred, new or continued processes are occurring that are
inevitably changing those very identities, no matter how seemingly small those changes may be. I believe a relational post-structuralist theorizing of these processes can function in a way that permits the flexibility of those changes.

This requires, though, that the thought processes behind the inquiry are continually reflected upon and changed as we change and the world around us changes. Otherwise, we fall into the traditional humanist trap of essentializing an “I” or any way of being as something that is cemented and extractible from any and everything around it. As St. Pierre (2011a) states, “We have to learn a new responsibility both for how we produce ourselves as subjects and how, in relations, we produce others, how we subject them” (p. 49). This also speaks to an ethics of accountability (Braidotti, 2006). Against the conventional execution of humanist qualitative inquiry, I never assume that I am self-contained or self-aware to the point where I can step outside of my “real” self and reflect upon it (St. Pierre, 2011a, 2011b) as a separate entity. Rather, I see myself as a subject within the research that I conduct and my experience in this research is completely intertwined with those with whom I interact. The goal of such exploration is to demonstrate how subjectivity is created within everyday living rather than existing prior to interaction; it is here that the critical/feminist notion of freedom “becomes viable through cultural practices, both existing and invented, in the course of everyday living” (St. Pierre, 2011a, p. 48) and agency can be “found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed” (Butler, 1995, p. 135). So yes, I do reject conventional humanist inquiry because its scientific approaches are separated from its philosophical assumptions; however, I embrace qualitative inquiry informed by post-structural aims at overturning “the failed structure so that something else can be thought” (St. Pierre, 2011a, p. 53) and decentering normalized ways of thinking. This can be

10 Discussed in more detail in methodology section
and needs to be done in qualitative scholarly work, especially looking at issues of discourses in the US surrounding Islam and Muslims, because though we sometimes do hear and see stories that go against the anti-Islamic narratives, we still struggle with the idea of breaking free of those structured ways of thinking that anti-Islamic discourses powerfully enforce.

Based on the existing literature and demand for more scholarship inquiring into the complexity of Muslim identities in the current US climate, I posed the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do Muslim women (re)construct and negotiate their identities in relation to the discourses that surround them in the US?

RQ 2: How do Muslim women participate in, influence, and work to transform discourses impacting Muslim identification?

RQ 3a: How do Muslim women describe themselves as enacting agency and being empowered through their multiple identities?

RQ 3b: What potential lies in these identification processes to overcome polemic discourses about Muslims in the US?
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

I use ethnographic methods to gain an understanding of how Muslim women in Northwest Ohio articulate, enact, develop and transform their identities in daily life. In particular, I attend to how women describe their understandings of Islam, its influence on their lives, and how others, both Muslim and non-Muslim, interact with such identity avowals and ascriptions. In doing so, I am able to gain further clarity of the communicative processes these women engage in and experience in relation to cultures, communities, identities, and discourses currently being performed and evolving in the geopolitical context of the post-9/11 world. With this knowledge, I am able to critically examine and challenge notions that disable or hinder a truer dialogue and appreciation of diversity in the United States. I use (auto)ethnographic writing through a pleated text (Richardson, 1997) to engage readers on a journey of understanding culture, our many selves, and transforming and expanding our notions of diversity.

Influenced by Kirmani (2009), I aid in the reconstruction and re-insertion of Muslim women as empowered women with agency into our current geopolitical contexts through the use of their own stories and our co-constructed narratives through interviews. I do this to destabilize, challenge, and stimulate more critical reflection of notions of static and stable group boundaries (in this context of Muslim women). Through this interrogation and discussion, I contribute to the breadth of scholarship that continues to pursue the multifarious and active nature of discourses. In line with such scholarship, I challenge those discourses that negatively influence our becomings by describing how discourses and the rhetorical constructions of identification within them undeniably influence our personal narratives. At the same time, I am encouraged by the fact that in this space we can also critically reflect and actively take part in (re)creating new discourses or transforming others that do enable us and empower us to be excited about and less
hindered in pursuing our own becomings. Using the often invoked and articulated static category of Muslim women, I present how our own narratives interact with discourses, even those that try to limit our agency, and how our identities are never static and are thus powerful vessels of potential.

The interdisciplinary compilation of research on Muslim identity is not small by any means and continues to grow (e.g., Ahmadi, 2006; Ahmed, 2010; Badran, 2002, 2005; Bhimji, 2009; El Guindi, 2005; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Franks, 2005; Jeenah, 2005; Karim, 2009; Lengel, 2004; McGinty, 2007; Mojab, 2001; Ong, 1999; Osman, 2003; Saadallah, 2004; Timmerman, 2000; Tohidi, 2002; Vatuk, 2008; Zia, 2009). While many of these studies are ethnographic and are informed by critical-cultural and feminist philosophies, continued ethnographic work is needed to add to the current breadth and ever-evolving movement of identities and culture. Ethnography is a methodology that can be used as an inter/transdisciplinary endeavor that aims to decenter hegemonic ways of thinking through advocacy, participation, and critique. As Conquergood (1985) cautioned though, it is vital that we accept that understanding does not end with empathy. It is our task to seek understanding knowing that how we understand identities and cultures in one moment is never the same as the next. By the time we identify an understanding, it is already in the past. However, being able to map these shifts in understanding can enable us with reflective and communicative tools to ensure, if anything, that we constantly challenge stagnancy and unreflective complacency.

My understanding and use of ethnography is heavily influenced by interpretive, critical and feminist scholarship. Interpretivist, critical, and feminist scholars advocate philosophical foundations that differentiate them from traditional social scientific approaches, and while these paradigmatic identifications are sometimes positioned as different from each other, I embrace the
notion that they can be used simultaneously to answer particular questions of constructed meaning, discursive realities, and the role and expression of power. The integration of interpretive and critical perspectives is supported by scholars (e.g., Collier, 2009; Halualani, Fassett, Morrison, & Dodge, 2006; Jaworski, Ylanne-McEwen, Thurlow, & Lawson, 2003; Madison, 2005; Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002).

Ethnography is an inductive qualitative approach to understanding the meaning that is created by subjects while simultaneously taking part in the creation of meaning as a researcher through acts of listening, conversing with and merely being present with those from whom you are seeking meaning, retelling stories, writing about, and editing (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Gobo, 2008; Rose, 1990). What makes feminist or critical ethnography different from other forms of ethnography is that it assumes that within our construction of meaning, power is generated and influences how we understand each other relationally (through identity and cultural discourses), thus it impacts how we communicate and make sense of our world. Feminist critical ethnography is appropriate for my line of inquiry because this methodology allows me to identify and destabilize the historical constraints of feminist, secular, Islamic, anti-Islamic, and other competing discourses. I can better understand and influence the current constructions of Islam and Muslims in the US by interrogating how these evolving discourses interact, thereby influencing perceptions of identities. Doing so will thus offer insight into how to transform existing modes of oppression that are continually being (re)created and reinforced in our current political climate. Critical ethnography requires us to “attend to how our subjectivity in relation to the Other informs and is informed by our engagement and representation of the Other. We are not simply subjects, but we are subjects in dialogue with the Other” (Madison, 2005, p. 9). And this is why I am so present in this work.
Interpretive, feminist, and critical ethnographies work from the perspective that we are already embedded in systems of meaning and making sense of those constructed webs and interconnected/interactive discourses. “Critical ethnography is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among the Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other’s world” (Madison, 2005, p. 9). This demands that we are held ethically accountable for the undeniable relational quality of our interactions with research subjects (and those we encounter in our world as a whole) in our ethnographic pursuits. Therefore, we must acknowledge our influence by looking specifically at how meanings are used to create, maintain, challenge, and transform power relations. Through my ethnographic research, I join the conversation and work towards engaging in new ways of viewing our subjectivities in order to free us from some constraining ideological forces—something for which feminism has historically provided an epistemological, ontological, axiological, and praxeological space to do based on its grounded, partial, and accountable universalistic aspirations (Braidotti, 2006). Braidotti (2006) advances a call to researchers: “What we need to invent is both new concepts and connections among concepts” (p. 181). Addressing issues of US Muslim/non-Muslim women’s communicative performance of identities is my transdisciplinary attempt to make connections among concepts while broadening or refocusing some lenses as a response to her call.

Critical/feminist ethnography also enables us to pursue strengthened pragmatic, action-oriented approaches to achieving universal feminist goals from a local level. By attending to and understanding the diversity that exists in our own communities (e.g., learning of the multiple identities, enactments and understandings of American Muslim women and their views of Islam) and the ways in which commonalities exist through diversity in philosophically profound ways,
we can achieve coalitions through solidarity that transcend a western/nonwestern divide. As Matsuda (1993) articulated, “The deeper worth of coalition is the way in which it constructs us as ethical beings and knowers of our world” (p. 291). This is not to say that coalition building and developing an understanding of members of our communities is painless; rather, “the discomfort brings with it an opportunity for learning” (p. 292). By engaging in these conversations, we are working towards decentering hegemonic thought. By denying ourselves the opportunity to participate in such conversation, we are only perpetuating an oppressive thought regime, even if it is supposedly feminist.

**Reflexivity**

I take a deep breath,

holding

it as I survey the coffee shop…

::exhale::<br/>

good. She’s not here yet.

I always try to be at least 15 minutes early to interviews so that I get here first, partly to assume the professional etiquette but if I were honest, mainly so that I can spot a lost-looking person searching for me from a parked position versus having to embarrassingly go around asking, “Are you Sara? Are you Sara?”

I dread that because I know the go-to assumption is that Muslim women wear hijab. For my research and my appreciation for diversity, I love and embrace the fact that there are so many Muslims in my community.

This poses the dreaded fear in me though, that if I am late, there could be more than two hijabis at the one meeting location, making me have to choose between them, figure out which is
Sara. Or even worse, what if there is a woman in hijab, but it turns out not to be Sara because Sara doesn’t even wear hijab? I would be accused, if only by myself, of profiling! AH jeez! Why didn’t I think to ask for her cell phone number so I could just text her, “I’m here! I’m sitting in this spot.” Uggh! Now the very stereotypes and assumptions that I’m trying to contest are the ones I’m automatically thinking. What kind of person am I?! Oh God, why do I use this method? I’m such an introvert. Why do I put myself through the pain of having to awkwardly meet people? Why, why why, why didn’t I think to do this, what am I doing here, SHI—

“Excuse me. Are you Marne?” comes a soft, friendly, clear voice from the front of me. I had immersed myself so far in my self-doubting episode that I hadn’t notice her approach the table.

“Yes, Hi! Sara?” I respond, smiling, excited, and without a hint of worry or nervousness—the house lights have dimmed, the curtains have opened, the mask is on, the performance commences.

I don’t really need the mask. The role I’m playing in this production is me. However, I was told I could wear the mask; I AM the “researcher,” they said. So as the Researcher, it’s inevitable, indeed okay that I do establish some distance. “Don’t go native.” However inside me, something doesn’t settle with this. The mask is too tight, I can’t see very well through the holes, or perhaps it’s more that I don’t perceive Sara seeing me well as I ask her questions. Maybe she squints at me, like she wants to know what I’m asking, like she wants to know from whom the question is coming. The mask doesn’t have a mouth hole, making it difficult for her to hear me, or the eyeholes aren’t big enough for her to see the expressions I have in response to what she’s saying. All she sees is a mask: stoic, bland, impersonal, damn near creepy in its failing attempt to mimic the real.
My feminist ethic starts knocking at my heart as well. Though we are only a question or two into the demographics of the interview, my heart yearns to connect. I ache to throw off these heavy garbs of a costume and this stifling, putrid plaster smelling mask that makes me sweat under my eyes and nostrils, to breathe the air she breathes, share in her voice, feel her energy…and she smiles kindly at me, despite this manufactured front. There is no doubt: I am unquestionably, horrifically shy, but this personal trait is so completely overrun by the desire, no, the NEED to connect with this woman. How can I NOT connect with her? There’s no way I can get the story right without knowing her, and how can I know her if I’m in costume the whole time? Moreover, how can I ever expect her to trust me if I am inauthentic with her?

Screw this—I’m coming out ::queue the music (Diana Ross)—

I fling the robes off me!
throw the mask like a frisbee into the invisible audience!
and stretch in delight, hailing a huge sigh of relief and freedom!

The music halts. The applause abruptly stops. And I’m thrust back into the reality of the moment.

Sara is sitting across from me at the two-person coffee shop table inside the bookstore. We are surrounded in the comforting aroma of new books and fresh coffee beans. Her eyes are wide and gentle, her smile welcoming. Her wavy, shoulder length red hair is tied loosely back into a ponytail. A bright sundress that makes you think of spring drapes her medium frame. She’s the kind of person that just glows…you don’t know what it is specifically about her, but she glows and though she doesn’t literally do it, you think she’s skipping when she walks.

She.
is.
white.
And I am…
happy?
surprised?
relieved?
that she is white.
She has no accent. She is absolutely the opposite of what I am expecting.

I mean, I knew coming into this that her name was “Sara.” But I know a lot of second or third generation immigrant women with anglicized names, or even first generation that acquire a new name for whatever reason, a lot of times ease for the Americans that can otherwise not pronounce their real names. I’m definitely in need of a self-check here. I feel guilty that I am relieved. Though I grew up as a racial minority, though I have always had a diverse group of friends, I am relieved that this first participant in my research, a Muslim woman, is white and American. Because she is white and American, I assume we have had similar experiences, that we culturally understand each other. I don’t feel that we are “others” to each other. She just happens to have converted to Islam and I have not, at least not at this point in my life. How can I assume this based on not knowing this woman?

We progress through the interview, becoming more and more conversational as we continue to loosen up, relax, get to know each other as she asks questions in return. We become more comfortable in our seats, our hands start flying about as we talk, laugh, and lean more towards each other in the telling of stories.
I want to be her friend. She is a beautiful, amazing, smart woman. Suddenly, I’m stabbed in my side by Conquergood. And I hear:
::high pitched nagging voice (okay, I know that’s not Conquergood, but the cartoon version of him definitely sounds like this in my mind)::
“Enthusiast’s Infatuation! Enthusiasts Infatuation!”
Whoa, whoa, whoa, WHOA!, Sir!
I’m not saying we’re EXACTLY the same. I’m not saying that she’s infallible. I’m not saying she isn’t subject to hegemonic discourses and/or perpetuating them.
::sigh::
I realize though, that one interview isn’t enough, especially if I want to overcome this romanticized notion I have of her. I marvel at this amazing person that I am in awe of, I admit it. She’s the kind of person that you meet and are instantly the schoolgirl on the playground asking, “Please, please, PUH-LEASE be my friend.” Fortunately, it appears that the sentiments are mutual, or at least that she appreciates me to the point to not dismiss me from her life immediately. In fact, she starts to ask me about my family, where they are located, how often I get to see them. I explain to her that this is the furthest away I’ve ever been from them, and it is difficult at times.
She goes into mother hen mode.

I see her arms transform into wings as they develop and spread, her chest protectively puff out.

I look down at her in amazement.

Indeed, she is shorter than I, probably weighs less than I too, but in that moment, she’s definitely a mom.
And moms have that essence about them, that no matter what their real physical stature, when they are in mom mode,

you are small.

She wraps her wings around me and says, “Come to my house for family night. This Friday. Around 6.”

OMG OMG OMG OMG!

I just got invited to family night!

1. She’s awesome and I get to hang out with her more.
2. Hell yeah, great ethnographic time for my research.
3. I’ve just shared a connection with someone that is going to last…all because of a research project.

THIS is why I do this.

The mask lies to the side of the stage. All is dark around it, save a reaching trace of light escaping a security lamp in a distant corner. The subtle glare of the light on the mask unveils a superficial crack and crumbled fragments from its expulsion. The light fades into darkness as the sound of cracked ceramic is swept into a dustpan.

* 

In striving to gain understanding of communities and cultures, it is imperative that I acknowledge that though I may try, it is impossible to entirely allow community members to speak for themselves. This results in issues of representation, or speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991), a concept that has been a major contribution of critical and feminist scholarship. My interactions and presence inevitably influence what is said and not said, what actions take place,
and my interpretations of these communicative acts are inherently filtered through my own subjectivity. As informed by feminist scholars, the challenge that I face in (re)presenting Muslim women “is how to avoid reproducing the spectacle of victimization while also not erasing the materiality of violence and trauma, recognizing the interdependence of material and discursive realms” (Hesford & Kozol, 2005, p. 13). This requires that I constantly (re)consider and address what I choose and choose not to present, what I choose to accentuate, what is viewed to have more qualitative meaning at a particular moment in time surrounding a particular focus.

This reassessment and reflection is a requirement for ethnography (and all modes of research) because “all methods and modes of inquiry…are susceptible to perversion (Broome, Carey, de la Garza, Martin, & Morris, 2005, p. 152). More importantly, it is my belief and that of many social constructionists that my own transformation of thinking through my engagement with people is the goal of scholarship and can serve as an honest example of how seeking understanding can and does promote genuine understanding and connection between people of seemingly different groups (Zielke, 2006). Mohanty (2003) describes it in this way:

[D]ifferences are never just “differences.” In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. It is this intellectual move that allows for my concern for women of different communities and identities to build coalitions and solidarities across borders. (p. 448)

Ethnography allows us to explore these notions and participate in their (re)creation.
A prime issue that I had to grapple with during this project is what Conquergood (1985) called “enthusiast’s infatuation.” This concept is a pitfall that some researchers fall into when representing or thinking about others by over-eager identification with others. Though benign in nature, it glosses over real material and philosophical differences that are important to note in truly understanding cultures. So, for instance, how this played out in terms of my research project was the excitement I felt in the presence of women I considered to be brilliant, beautiful, powerful—all attributes that I still fully believe—but where the enthusiast’s infatuation comes in is when we rely so much on these ideas that we forget that they are human and thus fallible, can make mistakes, are subject to hegemonic discourses, complicit in them, and so on. Knowing that we can all succumb to such excitement during research processes, it was important that I set up relationships and structures to ensure that my ethics were in check and that I was not acceding to this pitfall. I participated in constant member-checking with colleagues, the actual participants to ensure that I was understanding them correctly, and Islamic scholars. I conducted constant critical journaling to monitor my reflections. I also actively participated in constant conscious mental processes, asking myself questions such as “what lines am I crossing?”, “What lines can I ethically bend here?”, “What purpose does self-disclosure serve in this instance?” I sought out mentors on several different psychological levels as well to maintain my many subjectivities; I cannot make the statement that it was to “stay true to myself or who I am” as I believe this is a trite statement and ontologically opposes what I am advocating as a nomadic ethicist. Rather, all the member-checking and mentors that I sought aided me in understanding that I was maintaining a subjective, multiple truthfulness to the person whom I was and am constantly becoming. As I believe good research should do, it was inevitable that I would be transformed through this process. I will be honest in saying that my enthusiast’s infatuation is an ongoing
process to be managed; the reason I have chosen to be an (auto)ethnographer is because I get to interact with amazing, brilliant people on a daily basis which is a never-ending source of motivation and enthusiasm. So I do not believe “overcoming” it is possible, but I do believe in the ongoing process of ensuring that critical, reflexive, ethical work is done.

These considerations of representation of those involved in ethnographic research demand certain critical/feminist ethic that is required to evolve as the persons involved in research and the surrounding world evolves. The aim of Braidotti’s (2006) nomadic/transpositional philosophy centers around a nomadic subjectivity that aims at sustainable social justice and transformation through an ethics of accountability. Informed greatly by Deleuze (1973, 1985), nomadic subjectivity is a materialist approach to affect through non-essentialism. As a space of contestation that follows no technological directives and refutes moral imperatives, a “non-unitary subjectivity…means a nomadic, dispersed, fragmented vision, which is nonetheless functional, coherent and accountable, mostly because it is embedded and embodied” (p. 4).

This ties to the idea of transposition, an “intertextual, cross-boundary or transversal transfer” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 5) which provides a creative, nomadic, discursive, material, coherent understanding of subjects without falling into dangerous and limiting habits of convention and hegemonic practices. It opens up opportunities for new ways of knowing while extending the notion of interrelatedness and interconnectivity. It is not enough to think of beings as individuals with a near-illusion of agency because this can and has allowed us to trap ourselves in a hegemonic structure of neo-liberalist, individualized capitalism. Adopting a post-structurally informed nomadic/post-humanistic vision of subjects provides an ethical and political foundation for social justice and sustainable transformation: “a sustainable ethics for a
non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others…by removing the obstacle of self-centred (sic.) individualism” (p. 35). This means that our interconnections with others form our ethical bonds, producing a “we are in this together” attitude towards life. In a transposition, we shift our idea of the subject away from a unitary vision to a non-unitary selfhood of multiple belongings composed of constant flows of transformation that are thus always becoming. A self or an identity is never static; rather, “selves” are always becoming together. Applying this lens to research and everyday life in general necessarily requires us to rethink our approach to research and formulations of knowledge.

An example of how these philosophical assumptions function in my ethnographic endeavors of Muslim women is evident in my attempts to destabilize the dichotomous rhetorical construction of west/nonwest in anti-Islamic discourse. Not only do I have to take into account my representations of Muslim women with whom I interact in endeavoring to overcome the western/nonwestern binary, I need to account for and be reflexive of my interactive and representative choices to ensure that I do not continue to participate in the dichotomization of these perspectives. When engaging with Muslim and Middle Eastern women (not to be used interchangeably) Abu-Lughod (2001) suggested:

First, we have to ask what Western liberal values we may be unreflectively validating in proving that ‘Eastern’ women have agency too. Second, and more importantly, we have to remind ourselves that although negative images of women or gender relations in the region are certainly to be deplored, offering positive images or ‘nondistorted’ images will not solve the basic problem posed by Said’s analysis of Orientalism. The problem is about the production of knowledge in and for the West…. As long as we are writing for
the West about ‘the other,’ we are implicated in projects that establish Western authority and cultural difference. (p. 505)

She then proposed that a solution to addressing our western authority and cultural differences is to “refuse the tradition/Western modernity divide,” (p. 508) which is what I attempt to do here in the U.S. I believe that we can take on such tasks while still being in a western country such as the United States. There are numerous thought processes that are influenced by discourses that are traditionally seen as nonwestern and there is also much heterogeneity in perspectives held by people who happen to live in western countries but do not advocate or live out a strictly western way of being. For my research, these types of warnings inform my thought processes in balancing my own living in, under, and outside a solely western gaze.

Along with Abu-Lughod’s suggestion, I believe that applying aspects of Anzaldúa’s (1987) “new/mestiza consciousness” can aid this contemporary feminist challenge of destabilizing the western/nonwestern dichotomy as it exists in even feminist scholarship. Anzaldúa argues that “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” (p. 256). I feel that this is something that American Muslim women do every day in a multitude of capacities. American-born Muslim women straddle more than two cultures because of an ascribed, outside, non-Muslim force suggesting that Islam is not western or is in competition with western modernization. Foreign-born American Muslim women face this and discourses supporting cultural norms carried over from their home countries, western or non. Women who live in the US who have converted (reverted) to Islam also straddle several cultures, especially when taking into consideration ties held with members of the religious cultures from which they came who knew them pre-conversion. I feel that these
women, too, necessarily take on or perhaps were born into a mestiza identity, especially given the anti-Islamic discourse that has permeated post-9/11 America.

Furthermore, these dynamic, multi-faceted enactments of mestiza identities and identities in becoming help us understand not only our own identities, but how we are intertwined and embedded in webs of discourses:

Moving out of the boundaries of looking at women solely in relation to the themes laid down by the dominant discourse on ‘Muslim women’ sheds light on the complex ways in which gender relates to religious identity alongside the various other identification women articulate in their narratives. The adoption of such an approach is critical at a time when… the image of the ‘Muslim Woman’ is increasingly being used in order to justify various forms of violence and oppression. (Kirmani, 2009, p. 60)

While Kirmani speaks specifically about Muslim women and as my study is focused on identifications with Islam, I argue that such inquiry has universal reach due to the fact that women historically and presently have been subjected to violence and oppression through discursive and rhetorical constructions of or associations with femininity. An ethnographic approach to understanding how women create, negotiate, and transform their identities in response to these simultaneous and competing discourses is a interpretivist/critical and feminist endeavor because this kind of ethnography is done with the aim of emancipating all those, Muslim and non, implicated in such oppressive discursive entanglements.

**Method**

These philosophical assumptions and research goals guide my study of Muslim women in Northwest Ohio. Understanding the meaning that is constantly being (re)created by and for these women is best examined through ethnographic means as they provide an articulation, elaboration,
and clarification of the women’s narratives in situ. I gathered the women’s stories and experiences primarily through in-depth, ethnographic interviews. Interviews lasted from one to five and a half hours in length. With several women, I was able to engage in participant observation of their lives in activities to which they invited me. These included activities that were overtly religious, such as Friday prayers at the masjid; social, such as family and community celebrations; public, such as school events; or private, such as one and one conversations taking place at bookstores or on bike rides. Total hours in the field surpassed 1000 over a yearlong period not including the three previous years of pilot study fieldwork. These two methods of data collection allowed participants to describe, in considerable depth, their ideas and beliefs of Islam and being/becoming Muslim and provided observable practices that further (re)constructed discourses and provided meaning to their lives.

**Participants**

I sought participation of adult (over 18 years of age) women in the Northwest Ohio who self-identify as Muslim through convenience and snowball sampling. This type of sampling was appropriate for the study because it has been recognized as one of the best methods of gaining participation surrounding highly sensitive topics or elusive/hard to reach populations (Gobo, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), such as members of religions that are stigmatized. In the two years prior to this study, I had conducted several pilot ethnographic studies that had provided me the opportunity to gain numerous friends and acquaintances within the local Muslim community. These women and men had been open to my research and had invited me to solicit their aid in the current project. Therefore, I contacted these community members as well as others through the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo and various academic channels to invite more participants to take part in this study. Ultimately, 15 Muslim women of varying backgrounds and
identifications volunteered for the study. A more detailed description of each of them is provided in the analysis section.

**Ethical Considerations**

I have discussed in detail the ethical considerations I must take in terms of my positionality as a researcher. To fulfill these research ethics requirements, I obtained consent from and have maintained the confidentiality of voluntary participants in my study. After obtaining approval from the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB), I proceeded to solicit participation, collected the narratives of women who participated, conducted participant-observations, and analyzed the data. I maintained participant confidentiality through a coding scheme that was only decipherable by me. Prior to the interviews, each participant received a coded number that did not correlate alphabetically. It was coded based on a scheme only known by me. The participants' names were not recorded on the audio tapes; the code was used to identify different participants' audio tapes. Also, pseudonyms have been used in this written document as to further ensure their confidentiality. Furthermore, slight details in their narratives have been altered to maintain confidentiality while maintaining narrative truth to the story, meaning that the qualitative nature of the story hasn’t changed; only identifying factors. The coding key was kept in a locked safety deposit box at my home to ensure no outside access to transcripts, audiotapes, and fieldnotes.

Before engaging in participant observation and ongoing ethnographic interviews with the women, I formally interviewed participants one-on-one in private areas they chose so as to enhance their comfort and encourage an honest, open, and safe space for the discussion of their lives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). While the planned interviews were conversational and thus open to spontaneous lines of discussion and inquiry, an initial interview guide follows:
1. What does Islam mean to you?
2. What does it mean to you to be Muslim?
3. What does it mean to be Muslim and American and a woman?
4. How does Islam function in your everyday life?
5. How would you describe your experience of being a Muslim woman here (United States, Northwest Ohio, other geographic/spatial areas of life)?
6. Has your understanding of Islam ever changed? If so, how?
7. What actions do you enact that you consider to be motivated by your faith?
8. What do you believe the general public misunderstands about Muslims?
9. What do you believe needs to happen (by Muslims and non-Muslims) to overcome misunderstandings of Muslims?
10. How do you envision Islam’s place in the United States?

Follow-up and verification questions were used as needed.

**Data Analysis**

Quality and verification of my findings and analyses were obtained by going back to participants for clarification and affirmation of the gathered data. This member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was done by transcribing all interviews and providing each participant with their interview transcript to ensure that I had accurately recorded and interpreted their stories and actions. With each participant’s approval, I proceeded with the analysis. In addition, I shared my insights from my field notes. The feedback from participants is included in my final report.

After obtaining approval of the transcripts from the participants, I analyzed the interviews and fieldnotes by systematic coding of themes emerging from the data. The themes truly did
emerge from the women’s narratives and indicated a very tangible engagement with discourses of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and a pro-woman Islamic discourse emerging from an American situatedness. For example, themes of a sociological immigrant narrative, citizenship, and the meaning of *hijab* all repeatedly emerged from the women’s narratives, demanding my attention as a researcher. The themes were also theoretically informed by the proposed relational communication theory of identity to speak to processes of identification at play. For example, when women talked about the centrality of their relationship to God in their faith, it became apparent that faith was no longer only nor primarily located within the personal layer of identity; rather, faith had to be understood from a relational layer.

**Summary**

Overall, employing the ethnographic methods of interviewing and participant-observation adequately contribute to our understanding of Muslim women in Northwest Ohio. This methodology allows us to gain a glimpse into the everyday lives of our neighbors while providing in-depth meaning of communicative identity practices that are (re)enacted with, within, and against discourses surrounding them, including anti-Islamic ones. Being able to seek an understanding of those experiences from the women themselves in their own words and attending to their (re)actions to rhetorical positionings and discourses surrounding or about them helps us critically examine disempowering forces at play and how women enact agency through and despite them.

**Cast**

**Crystal:** Crystal is an African-American Muslim woman in her twenties. She was born on the East Coast of the United States and has lived between there and Ohio her whole life. She was born into a nuclear Muslim family though her extended family is described as being
half Muslim, half Christian. For a brief time in her teens she left the faith, but then reverted back to Islam within a year. She is currently working on Master’s degree at a local university and outwardly identifies as a feminist.

Angel: Angel is a second-generation Lebanese American woman from Toledo. She is in her early twenties and is pursuing a degree in a male-dominated field at the local university. She has two toddler-aged daughters who enjoy Dora the Explorer. She lives with her husband who also attends the university and her husband’s parents.

Rashida: Rashida was born and raised in Toledo to immigrant parents from Lebanon. She is in her thirties and has three elementary-high school aged-children whom she homeschools. She travels often to college campuses to speak on the topic of Islam and women and Islam.

Sara: Sara was born and raised in Ohio to a Christian family. She reverted to Islam in her early twenties after the loss of a friend and extensive study of the faith. She is married to her husband, Mo, who was born into a Muslim family. His parents are immigrants from Lebanon. Sara and Mo have three children ranging from elementary to middle school in age.

Jane: Jane was born in the United States into a Christian family. She is in her early twenties and had just reverted to Islam almost two years prior to our meeting. She decided to revert to Islam after exploring religion on her own and meeting two friends who were Muslim. She currently attends college and is living with her parents and sister in a suburb of Toledo.

Lindsay: Lindsay is another woman in her twenties born in Ohio into a Christian family. She reverted to Islam almost four years prior to this study after studying the religion and
exploring other faiths. She is currently finishing her graduate degree at the local university and identifies as a feminist. She is married to a man who also reverted from Christianity to Islam at the same time that she did.

**Anne:** Anne, who is in her late forties, reverted to Islam in the 1980s after she met her husband who was Muslim. It wasn’t until they decided to have kids that she considered reverting though they talked extensively about religion years prior to children. She was born into a spiritual family, attended numerous denominations of Christian churches, but never particularly identified with any one. She, her husband, and three of their four children (all in high school or college) live in a suburb of Toledo. Their fourth child who is in his mid-twenties lives in Qatar while he studies/partakes in an internship for college.

**Sam:** Sam is an Indian-American woman in her mid-fifties. She immigrated to the United States over 30 years ago and her children have all been born in the U.S. She works at a local research university as a doctoral fellow in the sciences. Originally Hindu, she reverted to Islam after meeting her Muslim husband and experiencing dissatisfaction with the role of women in Hinduism.

**Ibtisam:** Ibtisam is a Pakistani-American woman in her late-fifties. She has been a citizen of the United States for decades and prides her family on being a multigenerational, multi-faith household. She lives with her husband and aging parents. She has two grown children.

**Zaina:** Zaina is a Lebanese-American woman in her early thirties. She and her husband just had their first child less than a year ago. While she is now a stay-at-home home, before that, she and her husband worked together at a business they established together.

**Heather:** Heather is a revert to Islam from Catholicism. She is in her forties and originally from the East Coast. She reverted to Islam after meeting her husband and finding out they were
pregnant with their first child. She found Islam to make more sense to her than Catholicism and wanted to instill those values in her children. She works as an art teacher at the Islamic School.

**Noor:** Noor is a Palestinian-Lebanese-American woman in her early twenties. She attends the local university and lives with her family, though she is recently engaged. She identifies as a feminist. Her parents immigrated from Palestine and Lebanon to the United States and live in a middle class neighborhood.

**Amani:** Amani is a Palestinian-American woman in her early thirties who works at the corporate education level of a multinational company. Her home is in Toledo though she travels often due to work. She is very active in opportunities to talk about Muslim identity on college campuses and in public fora.

**Liyana:** Liyana is a Palestinian-American woman in her late thirties who lives in Toledo. She works for a large local business as an IT specialist. She married a non-Muslim, white man who reverted to Islam upon marrying her. They raise their three children as Muslim and are active in their home practice of the faith.

**Amal:** Amal is in her early twenties and is Somali-American. She is originally from Columbus and is in the Toledo area working on her Master’s degree in multicultural education. She practices her faith at home and does not regularly attend a mosque/masjid in the local area.

**We:** While I discuss the theoretical use of “we” in the preceding chapters, I want to emphasize the use of it here as well. “We” includes: me; you, as readers; the women of this study; women in general; Muslim women; Muslims in general; non-Muslims; academics; all of us *becoming together through this journey.*
CHAPTER IV: MUSLIM WOMEN'S BECOMINGS

The women’s narratives (re)create and work to sustain a pro-woman Islamic discourse among the many complementary or competing feminist and competing hegemonic discourses within their American yet diasporic and transglobal lives. With the undeniable proliferation of media usage and information expedience and exchange, we can no longer say that our lives are solely influenced by and within an American context. However, by virtue of actually living in the United States, particular options and cultural opportunities are available that nonetheless enable certain understandings, performances, and agencies of faith.

This chapter will discuss and critically examine the narratives of these women. The stories they share are meant to demystify common misunderstandings and destabilize hegemonic strongholds on perceptions of Muslims in general and Muslim women specifically. The women’s experiences are shared through the presentation of how they articulate the function of Islam within their lives, how they understand their rights as women within Islam, and how they distinguish religion from culture. I also present how the women describe common misconceptions attributed to them and the pervasive misrepresentations portrayed by media. I then illustrate how such misrepresentations contribute to an Islamophobic discourse that works to disempower Muslims and Muslim women by making processes such as democracy and citizenship difficult if not impossible to attain. Then, I share how the women speak out and resist Islamophobia while also critiquing their unconscious complicity in other hegemonic discourses that align with Islamophobia. I end the chapter with an applied discussion and critique of the complexities of relational identities in the midst of discursive spaces. The goal of this discussion is to broaden the scope of Communication Theory of Identity to include discursive analyses because discourse is inextricable from identity formation and understanding. Also, the applied
discussion demonstrates the discursive influences and myriad identity negotiations present in many of the women’s lives in a single incident that unfortunately is not an incident exclusive to one family.

**Function of Islam**

Islam functions as a central feature in most of these women’s lives. To this group, Islam is “a way of life” more so than it is a religion that is merely one part or piece of identity; rather, it infuses every component of their identities. Amal explained, “Everything that I do revolves around Islam. I try to base my life practices on the religion and see how it fits within the religion rather than making Islam fit into mine.” This comes through a submission to God that can be enacted in several ways that, as the women articulate, are of a similar philosophical vein such as constantly trying to improve and further educate themselves, honoring contracts, and striving to be kind, patient people.

With Islam as a foundation and as a guiding philosophy, women perform everyday actions motivated by their identification to/with Islam. In living out what Islam encourages them to do, the women perform their Muslim identities. To Lindsay, an Islamic way of life means to do “my hardest to keep improving myself everyday and to remember God as often as I can” through submission to God. To her, this means participating in her daily prayers, wearing hijab, not taking part in a party/alcohol-laden lifestyle that may put her in compromising positions, especially with someone of the opposite sex who is not her husband, and continually engaging in education both within the faith and other areas of interest (e.g., pursuing further college education). By keeping God on her mind throughout her daily activities, Lindsay feels compelled to constantly improve herself in these ways that are both personally appealing and spiritually preferred/required. As a result of this thinking and the conscious choices she makes to satisfy her
desire to meet the expectations of God, she performs her Muslim identity simultaneously with her other identities (e.g., student, wife, friend), which she negotiates and understands as being conducive to and guided by her understanding of Islam.

Sam gave an example of this submission when a family member asked her to take some vacation time off of work to visit extended family for a special occasion. Sam had already committed to working in her science lab during that time period. Sam explained that an Islamic way of life means following the Qur’an in these common dilemmas where personal gratification collides with work demands: “God clearly tells in the Qur’an that when you sign a contract, honor your contract.” Therefore, in keeping aligned with her faith, she declined the offer to see family and followed through with her commitment to her employer. To Sam, the performance of her Muslim identity includes keeping her word in relationships that extend even beyond family. While in this situation, Sam negotiated her relational identities of being a family member, employee/scientist, and Muslim, she ultimately chose to follow through on her commitment made to her employer which is supported and mandated by her faith, her Muslim identity. This demonstrates that these three relationships are not entirely separate; Sam’s Muslim identity undergirds her other relational identities as an employee and a family member. Her Muslim identity enabled her to make the “right” choice given the context of the situation (the visit to see family would have been for pleasure rather than sickness or something to that effect). Sam would argue though, that Islam commands an incredible respect for the family; however, by performing in line with her understanding of the proper performance of a Muslim in this particular context, she was doing more good for her family by not seeing them because she was enacting what Islam truly teaches, and that is to honor one’s commitments.
Like Lindsay and Sam, other women in the study shared how Islam encourages them to become better people within their families, neighborhoods, and communities. Heather added that living Islamically means that “It’s more than going to the mosque and praying… just being a good person, being kind, being good to your neighbors, being charitable… raising my kids a certain way.” Here, Heather indicated that part of performing as one who embraces Islam is acting kindly towards others and being outwardly engaged with the community versus insular (e.g., giving charity and even having a relationship with neighbors). Similarly, Amani presented that this lifestyle offers:

A way to be a good person. ‘Cause a lot of stuff that I’ve taken after growing up, and I do in my normal, everyday life is stuff that Islam has taught me. And people see it as just nice acts of kindness and being courteous and respectful to your elders and there’s been a lot of instances where I’ll do something in public and people will be like, “Wow, that’s really nice,” you know? And I think back on that and I’m like, well it’s because of the way my parents raised me based on what we learned in our religion.

Amani described that being raised in a Muslim household enabled her to embody aspects of a “good” person. These qualities include courtesy, kindness, and respect towards elders. What is important to note in these conversations is that the women identified qualities of a “good” person that are not wholly exclusive to Muslims and that is purposeful. The women explained that the reason they choose these terms and express it in this way is because these are characteristics and qualities that any human being could identify with and ideally feel compelled to embody. What distinguishes these women’s understanding of these concepts from non-Muslim others is not the meaning of the terms themselves; rather, the motivation from which to perform and embrace them come not only from a general sense of wanting to do good in the world, but also from a
spiritual/religious understanding that these are the things that God wants them to do and how God asks them to interact with others. And it is through such acts that the women perform good deeds to gain admittance to Heaven. While the women themselves, both through their Muslim identities and their personal beliefs (not to be read as mutually exclusive) do embrace an altruistic sense of being and contributing to the world, the actual practice of altruism is difficult for anyone. What helps these women in situations of ambivalence or frustration is knowing that God is holding them accountable to act in these positive ways.

Additionally, Islam provides structure and guidance that ushers in such lifestyles, which the women appreciate and again, helps them to stay focused on God, which hopefully results in their continued and increased practice of good deeds. Amal spoke highly of the schedule that Islam gives her to follow in terms of prayer times (five times a day at specific times of the day) and rules to follow in that it “gives me kind of organization [sic.] over my life.” Similarly, Liyana considered what Islam gives her family: it “gives us structure and guidelines to stay on the straight and narrow…. My faith kinda keeps me grounded.” The women adhered to varying levels of structure—some women were very strict in their praying five times a day at correct times while others were more flexible in terms of prayer times and how to pray, some women attend the mosque regularly and others go only on holidays. How they decided on what structure was right for them is based on their personal relationships with God, family/work/time circumstances, sentiments toward communal practice of the faith, and other various reasons (e.g., what they personally needed in terms of structure over their own lives). However, what is common among the women is that regardless of the outward performance of the rules of Islam, or how those rules are understood/interpreted, the women presented Islam as being an extremely positive influence in their everyday decision making processes.
The one woman for whom Islam was not a central component of her life, attributed the lack of centrality to her newness to the faith. Having reverted relatively recently to Islam (two years prior to the interview), Jane expressed uncertainty in her performance of being a “good” (read: proper) Muslim. Jane articulated Islam in this way:

It’s a way of connecting with other people. It’s a way of connecting closer to God. It’s a way of making better choices. It’s a way of speaking. It’s a different way of life. And that’s what it means FOR me, not TO me.

Islam was attractive to her because of the clear rules and structure she interpreted from the texts and leaders of the community. While Jane expressed the same sentiment as the other women in terms of developing a closer relationship with God through Islam, she mentioned others that are not overly emphasized, talked about, or phrased in the same way as the other women.

Primarily, Jane talked about Islam as being a way through which she can connect with other people, so it becomes a social outlet for her. This is something that the other women did not mention. In fact, when I talked with other women about reasons to revert or things to take into consideration when making the decision of whether or not to revert, they urged me to be sure that the primary reason did not include the social component. In other words, while the women view the Muslim community as welcoming and embracing of newly reverted Muslims, if one of the main reasons for the reversion is to connect with others, then the true point of that decision has been missed. To revert to Islam means to truly embrace a submission to God, and ultimately that relationship is paramount—Muslims are human and while members of Muslim communities can be welcoming and become friends, so too can they become ostracizing and difficult to identify with. If that lack of community deters one from the faith, then the
relationship with God is seen as not central to the person’s orientation, perhaps indicating that the reversion was a premature choice.

Aside from the social component, Jane hesitated to describe herself as a “true” Muslim because she is still implementing what she considers the rules of the faith into her life. In other words, she hasn’t achieved the “good” Muslim status that she ascribes to her Muslim revert friends who are highly involved in the Muslim community, are or were married to Muslims, attend the mosque, pray five times a day, do not eat pork, and wear *hijab*. Jane said that part of her journey includes “trying to dress modestly, trying to eat correctly” and negotiating the feeling that “if I ever decided to wear *hijab*, I wouldn’t be able to wear it at [her non-Muslim] family functions.”

Jane said that though getting up to do prayer and not eating pork are difficult practices to implement, she is achieving success in some areas where Islam helps her make “better choices.” This happens through patience. Jane described: “If someone gets me angry, I try to take a step back and think, ‘Okay, this isn’t the way to respond. You know you can’t get angry at them.’” During this process, Jane is particularly critical of herself, and she admitted that this makes it difficult for her to actively take part in conversations about Islam with non-Muslims or rectifying the misconceptions/misrepresentations of them.

In situations where Islamophobic language has been present, Jane has been unsure and ambivalent about speaking out. She said, “I wouldn’t [speak out] only because I don’t think that I’ve been in the religion or in the…dynamic long enough to know enough to respond.” She also hesitated to present herself as an example of an American Muslim woman; if this option were made available to her, she said, “I don’t think I would do that myself. I think I would bring [friend] in because she’s more of the representation that I feel because she was raised Muslim
whereas I’m just a convert.” What is interesting in Jane’s story is that she consciously embraces Islam and willingly admitted to the everyday challenges she faces in adhering to the structure she yearns for from this faith, yet is critical to the point of self-censure when it comes to representing Islam. This isn’t a negative critique; rather, what she offered was something very different from the other women in this study who have had the luxury of being in the faith for a much longer time than Jane has. And sure, personality characteristics can most certainly play a part in one’s confidence as she embarks on a new trajectory or newly titled trajectory. But maybe this speaks to a hierarchy of knowledge felt by some coming into or within Muslim communities that makes it difficult to feel authorized to speak up for other Muslims. Jane does struggle with the ongoing process of evolving into a more practicing Muslim, but she has willingly made the choice to take this journey and, while she was critical of and diminished her revert identity, is actively engaged in her spiritual growth.

All of the women described Islam as a positive foundation and influence in their lives to help them become better people. Through its emphasis on peaceful and compassionate human interaction and gender equity/equality, Islam provides the women with a sense of empowerment. Sam described how she has become “more strong and if anything, I have become more calm” since reverting to Islam and growing in her faith over the past few decades. Zaina said that Islam has offered her peace and community because it is “our faith that brings us together in good times or bad.” Sara described Islam as a tool for peace and tolerance, wherein her family specifically is learning how to use Islam as a tool to get through hardships, and it is working. To Liyana, Islam has come to mean free will and compassion. Noor described Islam as providing her with a more informed “women’s standpoint” that praises “modesty,” “peace,” and self-respect.” A self-identified feminist, Noor feels empowered by her faith as a woman. Rashida
eloquently described Islam as “finding that place of peace in yourself and in the world with everyone around you: your neighbors, your family, obviously yourself first and foremost or you can’t have anybody else.” Aligned with the others, Angel described Islam as promoting “peace between mankind” where “women and men are equal” and “women were (are) treated with respect.” All of these definitions and articulations of what Islam is, how it is enacted, and what it does for these women are working collaboratively to create and/or contribute to a pro-woman Islamic discourse situated in an American context in Northwest Ohio.

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As I sit here re-reading that last phrase, “pro-woman Islamic discourse situated in an American context in Northwest Ohio,” I am doubtful about how to articulate that idea, how to order those terms. Should I have Islamic first since Islam is first identity marker or the foundational marker for these women given this project? But wait, what about when Ibtisam said she was American first? So if I don’t put that first, I would be silencing her voice. And if I put American first, I can re-re-re-re-re-re-re-colonize these women in a project that pushes to decenter that central, supposedly-diverse-but-in-so-many-inconvenient-hegemonized-“fixed” identity marker. And what about the woman part? I’m inclined to put it first because we’re all women—that can be something that unites us. But then what does it mean to be a woman? Ugh, Judith Butler. Stop messing with my head. And if in Islam men and women are equal but in the cultural enactments of it they are not, then wouldn’t placing women in front of men be privileging a certain sex/gender/construct before another thereby reconstituting an arbitrary hierarchy? So how do I say this without suggesting some prejudice, some bias, some unchecked power play of a researcher preaching co-construction but inevitably subjugating the narrative? Do I change the order every time I say it? Will the readers/committee members/editors beg for
consistency? Is this a space and opportunity for resistance? Or would it be merely relegated as an indecisive annoyance?

After weeks of sitting on this thought, interrogating it and in moments, trying to completely avoid it altogether, I eventually decide to leave it as it is, “pro-woman Islamic discourse situated in an American context in Northwest Ohio.” Here are the reasons for my choices. I choose to emphasize pro-woman before Islamic to describe the discourse because while I strive to stay true to the women whom I represent and in doing so grapple endlessly with issues of overstepping my bounds, fear of misrepresenting/retelling their stories, and endless doubt of my ability to do their stories and their lives justice, I also have to keep in mind that this work is also for readers. Though it is unlikely that a reader would get this far into the work without having some inclination to read about something to do with Islam, one concern that I have is that the word “Islamic” may deter some people from proceeding to the next page due to negative associations attributed to the term. By putting “pro-woman” in front of it, I hope to present a less-heard perspective about Islam that may generate more, if not initial, interest in these women’s stories and my reflections of them. Also, though not all the women personally identify as feminist, they do most adamantly speak about women’s rights, equity/equality, and empowerment that is given to them through the Qur’an, arguing that before today’s understandings and practices of Islam came into effect, women’s equality and rights already existed via the Qur’an over 1500 years ago. Inherently, these women argue, Islam confers women with rights; therefore, I understand or have negotiated my placement of these terms to not be completely inaccurate of these women’s experiences. I do want to emphasize though that these identities are not fixed and so based on context, women may identify themselves or the discourse as Islamic first or pro-woman first. What I’m trying to articulate here is the difficulty
in assessing and labeling such discourses and identity categories because they are so fluid and by labeling, we run the risk of essentializing. With this caveat and disclaimer though, it is my hope that readers do not glance over this statement and know that though I do apply labels for discussion sake, the core of what I’m arguing in this work about discourse and identity is that those very items are always in flux and always becoming.

Women’s Rights and Islam

The women in this study (re)created and participated in a pro-woman Islamic discourse that is situated in an American context in Northwest Ohio. They did this through the way they talk about Islam and their identities and interactions within the faith, how they perform their myriad identities in combination with and/or undergirded by their Muslim identities, and through their interactions with others (none of which are mutually exclusive). All of the women agree that in Islam, women and men are equal. They presented Qur’anic/historic support for this conviction and explained how the messages and stories shared in the Book play out in our current times. Their interpretation of the rights and perceptions of women projected in the Qur’an are read in context, meaning that the women were straightforward in saying they do not adopt a literalist translation. Women demonstrated agency to explore and understand their faith for themselves and to live out that faith in ways that they see as compatible with their understanding of the Qur’an. Furthermore, this speaks to an ability to embody and outwardly perform Islam in a multitude of ways that others in the same geographic area may choose to enact differently. Even among this group of women, their rights and agency as women are performed in numerous ways that are different from each other, yet all of which are affirmed as acceptable by Islam and done so by empowered women. While the women embody a variety of
individual identities that they enact differently, they speak and act from an ontological position that (re)creates a pro-woman Islamic communal identity.

The women reported being very aware of a discourse circulating in the U.S. perpetuating the idea that Muslim women are oppressed and have limited, if no rights within Islam. To this, the women were quick to respond. Lindsay, a self-identified feminist, explained that, “the Qur’an sets out a lot of rights that women have.” Sam added, “I’ve read repeatedly, repeatedly to KNOW what my rights are because the rights given to me by Islam are far more than what any constitution in the world gives to its female citizens.” Heather agreed with Sam by sharing “Muslim women have more rights than non-Muslim women.” Amal further explained:

‘Cause in the eyes of God we’re all equal, regardless. And it also gives me choice, right? So if I wanted to wear hijab, I wear hijab. If I don’t want to wear the hijab, I don’t have to wear the hijab. If I wanted to say, I’d like to become a leader, I COULD become a leader if I wanted to.

Anne also demystified the notion that Islam is inherently sexist by explaining “At hajj, you’re praying side by side, everybody’s all together—men, women, everybody, they’re not even separated.”

In these excerpts, Lindsay, Sam, Heather, Anne, and Amal refuted accusations of the faith as a whole being anti-woman. The women exercised their agency within both their Muslim identities and within their identities as American citizens in that they are able to 1) educate themselves about their faith (e.g., Sam arguing “I’ve read repeatedly, repeatedly…”) and 2) make room for their Islamic rights within and compared to their rights within an American framing of women’s rights. When Amal explained that she has choice, something that is highly valued within an American context, she drew a connection between the two presumably
opposing entities, Islam and a democratic nation, and implored others to reconsider notions of perceived oppositional difference.

Crystal expanded this notion of equality to other areas of identity including race, ethnicity and class. What makes Islam different from others faiths for her is that there is no intermediary between her and God. For Muslims, a person is ultimately accountable for her actions to God and no one else. A Muslim’s relationship with God is ultimately just that; where spiritual guides, family, and others may surely influence conversations and understandings of the faith, when one speaks to God, she speaks directly to God rather than through someone else. This means that anyone has access at anytime to God and that no one person has priority over another for this access. Crystal explained:

In Islam, anyone can have that direct connection with God…. Most prophets, if you look at their stories, a lot of times it’s about fighting the status quo, fighting against these established classes, powerful classes…sense of trying to create a more, I guess a more egalitarian society in terms of economic inequalities…. In terms of race too…Islam is very unambiguous about it; everyone is equal…that we’re all equal…in the eyes of God. And we should be equal in each other’s eyes as well. Even in terms of gender, even though I still feel like we have a way to go in that regard, I think Islam started to get the ball rolling in that regard and even though we may have backtracked a bit for a few centuries…in the Qur’an I think it definitely opened up a path to creating more gender equality…. The Qur’an addresses men and women specifically and in terms of spirituality, we’re both equal…. I think we’ll come to see Islam as being inherently about creating social justice and social equality…. The ideal is unambiguous…between races
that everyone is equal; there should be no distinctions. That we should celebrate each
other’s cultures.

Here, Crystal spoke of the multiple aspects of identities, including gender, that Islam addresses. Overall, she argued, the mission of Islam is to provide a way of life through submission to God that pursues equality for all. She invoked the history of Muslim Prophets and their pursuits of equality or acting in service for the marginalized as exemplars of how Muslims should act today and what motivates those in the faith. She disclosed a critique that the faith as an institution has “backtracked” in terms of difference in many ways, but that in its original incarnation and in the way it should be viewed today, the Qur’an advocates for equality.

The women shared examples of specific rights that Islam provides them, regardless of them living in the United States or not. It is important to note, however, that the examples that they emphasized are ones that particularly speak back to Islamophobic discourses that perpetuate this idea that Muslim women are oppressed or have limited rights due to their faith. Lindsay shared what Islam has to say about women’s rights in marriage: “I…have the right to tell my husband as a woman in my marriage contract that I WILL be the only woman he will ever be with. That is my right as a woman.” This particular statement confronts the message that is often heard that Muslims are polygamists. Heather also talked about women’s rights in marriage by explaining that it is customary for Muslim women to keep their own last names when they get married, thus invalidating the idea that through marriage women become the property of their husbands.

Several of the women talked about their rights to ownership. For instance, Liyana said Muslim women “have the right to own property; I have the right to my own money” and that when it comes to marriage, “whatever a woman comes into a marriage with, it always belongs to
her; her assets are her own.” Sam explained that within a marriage, “My money is my money and my husband’s money is also my money. My husband’s money is his money and my money but my money is not his money.” Similarly, Anne shared, “What money I have is mine. And what money HE makes is ours…. I don’t have to share that money. That’s my right.” Jane confirmed this when she stated, “Any money she [a wife] earns, she keeps for herself. She does not have to help pay the bills with it.” She also followed with, “If you’re Muslim and you get a divorce, the husband is required to support you [financially] even if the judge doesn’t say so.” This understanding comes from the Qur’an, which explains that the husband is the primary financial provider for the family. This means that when the husband makes money, his money is to go to supporting the family as a whole. If the woman decides to work or has money coming into her possession though, that money is exclusively hers to do with it as she pleases. That means that if she wants to contribute it to the family finances, that’s fine so long as it is her choice. If she chooses to save it or spend it on something for her, that’s her right as well since Islam states that that money is hers alone.

These notions destabilize an anti-Islamic discourse that positions women as having no rights to ownership or money. However, they ignore the proposition that women could be primary breadwinners in family units. Furthermore, same sex relationships are completely discounted in this conversation. This isn’t to say that women in Muslim families are not breadwinners nor that same sex Muslim relationships do not exist; rather, these cases were not brought up in the interviews. Unfortunately, during the time of the interviews, I neglected to ask the women about cases where they were the primary breadwinners. Furthermore, while this dissertation journey was taking place, I was also partaking in the journey of coming out as gay myself. Going through that initial process left me uncomfortable and unconfident in approaching
questions of same sex relationships with the women in this study. I realize that this is my own heterosexist/homonormative bias playing out here and I did then as well; however, because the issue of same sex relationships was not the core question of the project, I chose to stay silent on the issue and I am acutely, guiltily aware of the problematics involved in those decisions. Alas, we all have areas of growth as researchers and as human beings in general. These are questions that do demand research and I sincerely plan on pursuing in subsequent work. All of this is to say though, that in the talking about Muslim women’s inheritance and earnings, a traditional heteronormative family unit is privileged even through the women’s discussion of empowerment.

The women also discussed other rights that Islam offers them that non-Muslim women do not automatically receive or that they understand non-Muslims to think that they, as Muslims, are not entitled to. Heather brought up the issue of inheritance, and that within Islam, daughters are entitled to an inheritance from their parents. Sons are too, and while sons do receive more money in their inheritance, it is because they are to share it with their families, including their sisters. So the inheritance is not wholly theirs. On the other hand, the daughters’ inheritance is wholly their own, meaning they have full control over that money and are not required to share it.

Several women talked about the emphasis of education in Islam for both women and men. Of Muslim women in the United States and in Northwest Ohio in particular, Heather said “Most of them are really well-educated…. There’s a very high percentage of professional Muslim women in this country. You know, they’re all doctors and all very well-educated.” In talking about a young Muslim woman she admires, Anne stated, “That daughter is really, really an activist…she knows everybody! She does all this political stuff, she’s smart and she’s very, very involved in the community, religious/political.” Amani described the effect of the educational and financial rights that Islam offers her:
I feel very strong and confident as a Muslim woman in society and I feel like my religion actually, because they, they focus on rights of the woman to own property and be educated and have their own income…. I feel like it empowers me….

In these statements of women’s rights within Islam, the women articulated their understanding of the faith while also speaking back to an Islamophobic discourse that circulates around them. For instance, when Heather talked about most of the Muslim women being very well-educated, she spoke of the access that women have had and do have in achieving knowledge despite messages constantly portraying that schooling is unavailable to Muslim women, especially in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Muslim majority countries. While I am cognizant that the argument can be made that those headlines and news reports do locate those activities predominantly in those countries, the power of transglobal discourses in undeniable and often when a person hears “Muslim,” those images are the first that come to mind, therefore painting an inaccurate picture of all Muslims, especially many of those who live within our own communities. Similarly, when Heather described women having occupations such as doctors or Anne talking about her admiration of a Muslim woman political activist, they are speaking back to a discourse that projects Muslim women to be silent, subservient, and confined to the home. Amani took it a step further by outwardly saying that she embodies these powerful characteristics motivated by an agency provided to her through Islam. She not only speaks back to but also directly confronts a discourse that describes her as being unable to be who she is and unable to do the things that she does on a daily basis. In the process of speaking about their rights, these women embody a performance of speaking out against a hegemonic discourse that works to subjugate their agency. Furthermore, they (re)create and contribute to a pro-woman Islamic discourse that fights against and competes with an Islamophobic discourse, working to disempower Islamophobia through
everyday performances that deflect its accusations and misrepresentations of these women being without agency.

This is not to say, however, that the Qur’an doesn’t set out certain roles for women and men. This speaks to a difference between equality and equity, and while the women exclusively use the term “equality,” I take the step to suggest that in terms of gender roles, the Qur’an, at least from these women’s perspectives, provides equity for men and women. However, how men and women are viewed in the eyes of God and how they should view each other (and based on any other identifiable characteristic, be it race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, etc.) should be understood in terms of equality. The women in this study understand that the Qur’an provides guidelines for specific roles for women and men based on inherent strengths (women being more centered on child-rearing and men being financial providers). So while the roles are indeed different, the women argue that they warrant the same amount of respect and the same effort of work, thus equity.

At the same time, Islam privileges the role of the mother specifically. Amal explained:

There’s a saying from the Prophet, may peace be upon him, that said that paradise lies under the feet of your mother. It’s a figure of speech, of course…and that means that you really have to respect her. The HIGHEST respect that you can possible give to anyone. For these women, Islam not only makes the distinction between roles and rights for women and men, but it is through the discussion of gender roles that family roles are also set forth and vice versa. This is apparent through the previous discussion of the man’s role in the family (to provide) and the woman’s role in the family (to nurture). However the Qur’an goes further to say that the role of motherhood for women is a particularly revered position that demands the utmost respect. This suggests that even within the Qur’anic discussion of equity and equality, there is
still a hierarchy in terms of familial roles/respect, and the women stress the fact that the role of
the mother is one that is particularly emphasized in the Qur’an. This can indicate a specific
Qur’anic source of empowerment for these women who experience gender discrimination on a
daily basis by virtue of living in an American culture that devalues women—something that
Islamophobia accuses Muslims and Muslim countries of doing to Muslim women as well. This
action of reclaiming the Text is particularly important because it demonstrates a true
commitment to and belief in their faith and their ability to use their ever-growing knowledge of
Islam to dismantle cultural appropriations of both Islam and women’s propriety in transglobal
(including American) contexts that work to oppress them.

The women elaborated on and gave examples of the aforementioned ideas. Overall, in
discussing the blurry boundaries between spiritual notions of equality between people and equity
in gender roles, the women further contributed to pro-woman Islamic discourse that speaks
against Islamophobia. Ibtisam explained:

Islam says that both men and women are equal; both have been given rights and duties.
And it is in performing those [rights and duties] that there is a harmonious relationship
and everybody has a designated thing…. Respect, justice between the relationships—that
is a prerequisite of Islam. And it is not one or the other, but both have to be respectful of
each other, be fair, be loving, be equal, be kind to each other.

Amal referenced the Qur’anic designation of gender roles as well: “you have your own role, he
has his own role.” Liyana was able to further explain the reasoning behind this:

There’s some things that are different right? And it’s kind of revolved around the woman
is really the nurturer for the family, for the kids…. I feel like inherently there’s something
inside of us that’s a little bit different for the most part; there’s differences. I don’t want
to generalize them 100%. So there’s some talk around that [in the Qur’an]. But the male role is to be the provider predominantly and the woman is to be the nurturer. So the Qur’an does reference that.

It’s important to note here that the women qualified that the role of the nurturer that is given to/assumed by the woman is not seen as secondary to the man’s provider role in Islam. In fact, as previously stated and as Amal supported, “your mother has her own role” which is highly revered in the religion.

Finally, Sam qualified these articulated roles based on collectively understood inherent gender/sex differences:

She [the woman/wife] is not there to cook and clean and breed…. It is my duty [as a woman/mother] to take care of my children. Okay, that is my first priority. But once I have taken care of my children, once I have done my duty towards my children, my time is my free time.

Here we have a complex set of messages that must be understood in the context of a much longer dialogue of speaking about women’s rights and agentic mobility in everyday life as the women understood to be provided to them through the Qur’an. What is primary in these excerpts is the acknowledgment that women embrace Islam as mandating that all people are equal, regardless of gender/sex. Within this understanding comes an acceptance of gender roles that broadly designate the man/husband/father as the financial provider for the family and the woman/mother/wife as the primary rear-er/nurturer of the family. This does not mean, however, that the woman is condemned only to the home; rather that if she has children, her share of the family work is to ensure that the children are taken care of while the husband’s share of the family work is to provide financial income (and thus shelter, food, etc.). All of this is to say, that
while the women garner so many rights and meaning to their lives from Islam, perhaps it’s a stretch to say that Islam is entirely pro-woman. Islam wasn’t made for women; it came to being at a time for all humanity. From what I’ve gathered from these women’s interpretations of their faith, identities, and interactions within their relationships and marriages, it would be more accurate to say that Islam is pro-family before it is pro-woman. However, I still maintain that the women project a pro-woman Islamic discourse because they affirm that, as women, they are empowered agents in their world through their identification with Islam. So the distinction I’m making here is that Islam itself is perhaps not inherently pro-woman because that could be read and assumed to mean that if it is pro-woman, it is not pro-anything else (and let’s face it: we often think in binaries). So the argument I’m making of Islam is that it is inherently pro-family; meaning that the faith works to manage and maintain harmonious family units rather than primarily endowing women with rights (because Islam also gives men and children, whether female or male, rights). But this dissertation is not about Islam as a religion; it is about these women and their understandings of, identifications with, and performances within the faith in the context of rampant Islamophobia. So what matters more in this project is that these women find the Qur’an and the faith as a source through which they gain empowerment as women. And it is through their use of the faith, reclaiming and using verses in the Qur’an that have been used against them, that they are able to (re)construct a pro-woman Islamic discourse that challenges Islamophobic, xenophobic, and sexist discourses.

The ways by which the women attend to their children’s needs vary widely, indicating the agency they have in fulfilling their duties to their children/families as designated by their faith while also attending to their own personal needs and desires once those duties have been met. For instance, Angel is a college student while raising two toddlers. One of her children, who
is preschool aged, attends a Catholic preschool. The reason for this is that the Catholic school in the area offers the best education available in the vicinity; because Islam stresses the need for education for all followers, Angel and her husband agreed that this was the best decision for their child. Family members watch the other child while Angel attends classes. When Angel is not in classes or doing schoolwork, most of her time is spent raising her children. Her husband, who also attends classes at the university, balances his time between school, work, and spending time with his family. In these ways, Angel and her husband perform the duties the Qur’an provides for them while also negotiating their roles to meet their individual needs and partake in an equitable relationship.

Sara described a similar sentiment in her relationship with her husband and within her family. Sara works part time by teaching piano lessons and volunteers at her children’s schools. She primarily stays at home to take care of her children. Before she had kids she taught music full time at a Catholic high school. She shared:

I live in a household where I’m constantly told that my job is harder than his job…. I’m fortunate that he tells me those things and a lot of families, I think the women just kind of assume the role of cooking and cleaning and taking care of everyone whereas I’m fortunate enough to get that time alone to go ride my bike, go do what I need to do. You know I teach piano lessons part time. So having that independence to myself is important too and I have someone who is supportive of that.

She further described the way of life that she and her husband have negotiated as “very free and I don’t think that as a Muslim and a woman that I’m denied any of that [freedoms and rights as a woman].” It is through her family, her negotiations with her family, and her contributions to her family, that she gains a sense of affirmation of whom she continually becomes which is aligned
with an Islamic perspective. Sara attributed her ability to have agency and feel strong in her performances of Islam in personal ways to the fact that “I have a very strong family and a very supportive family.”

Overall, these women felt that Islam provides them with rights that they embrace as empowering and provided them spaces in which to enact their agency. The women also saw their Qur’anic rights as assuredly conducive to an American way of life, if not expanding beyond the rights and freedoms that the United States’ constitution offers them. While the Qur’an does set out gender expectations within the family context, those roles are ones that the women in this study have supported and have negotiated willingly with their partners. For those not married, they expressed an enjoyment of the freedoms that any woman in the United States may have, which include pursuing higher education, advancing in a career, and traveling extensively. The resistance that single women do face from their Muslim families comes from the cultural prescriptions of the roles of women rather than those of Islam. While these women can extensively list their rights as Muslim women, they do not deny that there are Muslim women who are oppressed, even within the United States and in Northwest Ohio. However, this group of women was critical of those, at least within the United States, who profess that they have limited or no rights under Islam. These women beg other Muslims to read the Qur’an for themselves and urge them to educate their children. Sam argued:

My point has always been to the Muslim women: learn your rights. Learn your rights and teach your son what are the rights of women. Forget your generation; you’re done with it. I cannot go explain to my mother-in-law that these are my rights. But I can teach my son that these are my rights. These are the rights of his sisters, these are the rights of your
wife, these are the rights of your daughters. So maybe I will not be able to influence the past generation. But I will be able to influence the future generations.

Notable in Sam’s argument is the notion that boys/men/sons need to be taught women’s rights in Islam. Not only did Sam call upon her Muslim sisters to take stock in their own rights within the faith and suggest female Muslim children be taught their rights, but boys are implicated in this process too. It is not merely the responsibility of women to know their own rights, although that is definitely required. It is also the responsibility of boys who will become men to know the rights of their sisters, women friends, acquaintances, and future wives should they choose to marry. Sam was indicating then, that this pro-woman Islamic discourse demands that all Muslims be aware of everyone’s rights—including those of women which have unfortunately been neglected in many areas, including the United States—if we are to not only combat Islamophobia, but if we are to truly grow as good neighbors, friends, and community members.

Anne was also critical of Muslim women who do not approach their faith proactively and partake in a life of perceived submission to a husband and/or male family member. She asked, “Oh honey, have you ever opened the Book? Have you ever explored this religion besides what your husband’s told you?”

Sam elucidated about Muslim men who protest that women are subservient to men and belong in the home:

If you understand what is Islam, you will know that the rights given to me are much more than what the US constitution gives to a woman, than what anybody gives to a woman.

Men don’t accept it because they don’t know the Qur’an.

This alludes back to the previous statement that Sam made which suggests that all Muslims need to proactively (re)approach their faith if they are to understand each other’s rights in the Qur’an.
It is through ignorance, Sam argued, that inequality is allowed and performed among Muslims. And unfortunately, there are many who do not know their faith. Ibtisam urged that knowing the faith, reading the Qur’an, and knowing the rights that the faith provides demands “Introspection…. Islam encourages people, not women only, it’s An Nas; not all women, not all you women or men but mankind.”

Despite an Islamophobic discourse that the women are very conscious of and do respond to via their discussions of women’s rights, these women asserted that Islam provides them, as women, with numerous rights that allow them to grow as people in an ever-changing world. Islam is a foundation that provides them with agency to grow into the women they want to be while being conscious of their impact in the world. Islam motivates these women to be better people with the knowledge that they are human and that they will inevitably make mistakes. These women are very aware that ultimately, their rights and agency come from a proactive approach to and conscious investment in their faith. With knowledge, they argued, comes awareness, which results in empowerment. This is why, Sam argued, so many women are converting to Islam despite a strong and loud Islamophobic discourse: “Why then are women becoming Muslims? Because they know the rights given to them by the Qur’an! No human law can even come close to that.” Through their continuing interactions with Islam, these women have come to embrace the idea that Muslim women “must change, grow, strive to make women strong by always asking questions.” A critical approach to discourse, faith, and everyday living is supported by Islam. It is through this freedom to critically think about and apply the Qur’anic teaching in their lives that these women find a sense of empowerment and extend a pro-woman Islamic discourse.
Religion and Culture

We divide ourselves into groups and religions and all of these things. I still think about that verse in the Qur’an [Surah al-Hujurat, 49:13] that says, “All mankind, we have made you from a single pair, male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may KNOW each other, the most honored amongst you is the one who is most pious.” So acceptability of differences is there and it recognizes that we HAVE made you that way although the beginning of ours, the commonality of that is there. (Ibtisam)

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One of the pervasive misunderstandings about Islam is that it is a monolithic institution. The women in this study described this misconception often and were quick to counter it with discussions of the vast diversity within Islam and among Muslims. The overall distinction the women made between Islam as a religion and cultural practices of Islam is that the religion in and of itself is divine and perfect. The religion, free of human misinterpretation and malpractice, can exist within any culture and ideally would be implemented in any culture and enacted in the same way, much like a standardization process. Culture, the women argue, is not based on religion so much as it is based on ethnicity, geography, nationality, community, etc. and that is where the varying practices come into play. The cultural influences that Muslims embody permeate their practices of the faith and over time, become so intertwined with religion that what is distinctly cultural and what is religious is difficult to decipher. On a cursory level and in simple contexts, this explanation makes sense. But there certainly is an inconsistency in this line of thinking if we are to view Islam as something that, as a whole, should be able to be placed into several social groups and be enacted and understood the same, if interpreted “correctly.” This is inconsistent with the women’s articulations of what Islam means to them when they talk about
the flexibility that Islam offers them to make the religion their own and make their own choices in how to practice the faith for themselves. Their argument about a perfect, standardized Islam could make sense if, and I’m assuming they would agree with this, Islam did permit a degree of flexibility. However, that’s where the interpretation gets tricky. And that is where culture comes into play along with the countless other mitigating factors, discourses, and struggles for power. So perhaps the women making these distinctions about Islam as a religion versus the cultural practices of Islam aren’t made so much to demonstrate the “correct” version of Islam because intrinsically, no person is without culture thus Islam never exists free of cultural influence.

Rather, the women present this distinction to further implore a non-Muslim audience to engage in the critical examination of factors outside of religious ones. Because the religious designation of “Islam” has been misappropriated to signify terrorism, violence, and abuse of over 1.5 billion people in the world of innumerable cultures, women are crafting an argument to say that perhaps certain cultural influences, defined broadly and not limited to nationality or ethnicity, are qualities to examine in the complex phenomena of conflict. Put another way, there is far too much variance among Muslims to pinpoint a single character/cultural trait that is common among them all.

All this is to say is that the women described enormous variety in the ways in which Islam is understood and practiced even within Northwest Ohio. This means that if we are to understand Muslim women within our communities, we have to understand the cultures from which they come and the cultures with which they identify and interact. Similarly, we cannot understand Islam today as people perform it without taking into consideration context and culture.
One way that these women described the diversity among Muslims was by likening it to the variance seen within other faiths. Angel made the connection to Christianity:

There are so many different versions of Christianity out there and people portray it in their own ways. Some people are really religious; some people celebrate Easter like it’s the most special holiday out there and some people take it like it’s fun. I mean they go, ‘Oh we’re going to go Easter egg hunting, we’re going to do this.” And for us, it’s pretty much the same thing: You have the strict Muslims who will try to make it seem like such a strict religion.

Similarly, Crystal stated:

Muslims are different and we’re not like this homogenous group. People think that Muslims all think the same way, that we’re all supposed to do the same things. And it’s really hard to explain that Muslims have differences of opinion just like those exist in Christianity and Judaism. But for some reason, people think that Islam, everyone has to think the same way, that all Muslims, to have to be a Muslim we all think the same way; and that’s not true. And it’s VERY hard to get people to see that there’s differences of opinion.

Rashida stressed that, “Muslims are as diverse as every other people on earth.” In these statements, not only are Angel, Crystal, and Rashida emphasizing the breadth of the followers of Islam, they are equating their diversity to that of those who identify as Jewish and Christian in a Christian-majority society. This assumed state of Christianity being the norm or the majority reference of identification is then rhetorically positioned next to Islam to draw a connection between the two in an otherwise differentiated space. Through this repositioning of the followers of faith versus the doctrine of the belief system, these women are able to open up a
conversational space for Muslims and non-Muslims to identify with each other on the bases of spiritual inclinations and human expressions of religion.

Angel enacted that same rhetorical strategy when identifying Muslims within the conceptualization of an American identity. She explained:

To me, whether you’re Christian or American, I think we’re all natives here because we were never here to begin with. We migrated here, so I’m native to this country just like anybody else is. Even everybody who was born here, who supposedly originated here, which they didn’t—they were pilgrims…. So to me this country is a bunch of natives who are happily combined with common causes, common beliefs. Yes, they might not ALL be common, but if you look into it each religion, there is one thing, there is one miniscule thing that ties each religion to each other.

Angel took an additional step of connecting Muslims to Americans in this statement, stating that despite religious differences (Christian or Muslim), they are all Americans by virtue of them all being immigrants. Though she did not talk about other faiths or lack of faith in this statement, other women expounded upon such ideas to include other areas of spiritual identification or lack thereof. The overall idea here is that the discussion is meant to be inclusive of all citizens of the United States. It is crucial to note too that in the heat of conversation, it is easy to forget to account for all of one’s history. So while Angel referred to those who originated from/founded the U.S. as pilgrims, I find the sentiment of the thought being projected more important than the verbatim diction. In connecting us all through similar immigrant narratives, she further established a national identification that encompasses everyone despite religious affiliation, and drawing a connection between us all on religious levels, however small those connections may be.
One reason for the diverse understandings of Islam is due to the numerous interpretations of religious sources. Crystal explained:

Different people can look at the same source, whether it’s the Qur’an or the hadith or other sources, and they can come away with like REALLY different interpretations and that doesn’t mean that someone’s a weaker Muslim or someone’s a better Muslim; it just means that we think differently about the same things.

Her statement is important in countering the notion that there is a monolithic Islam. Furthermore, she offered an appreciation for the multiple ways to enact faith from within the same religion—something that is difficult for many across religious lines. Crystal shared:

Speaking about groups that have these very rigid ideas about Islam, I don’t agree with those rigid ideas. But at the same time, I don’t think I have, I don’t think I should completely dismiss it either…. I don’t dismiss their point of view even if they may think that someone like me is like highly misguided. I think if I want people like that to respect me, then I have to respect their point of view as well.

Finally, she insinuated flexibility within the religion for people to discover and embrace the religion in terms that make sense to them which can allow for personal growth in those understandings and within the religion. Crystal described her own growth given the flexibility of Islam: “I’m more accepting of other people having different views about Islam whereas before I used to think that there is just this one correct Islam.”

Lindsay explained that this flexibility may be due to Islam being newer to the United States than other countries. She said:

I think maybe Islam, what’s happening in the west is a little bit more traditional in that it hasn’t been centuries and centuries of Islam and culture interweaving. So they really had
to just pull Islam away from all the other cultures and place it on top of their own culture.
Whereas if you go overseas or if you observe like Middle Eastern Muslims, they do practice Islam a little bit differently because it’s also been culturalized. So I suppose in the west, because it’s a newer religion, people are kind of having to pave their own path through and create their own culture around Islam.

How Lindsay conceptualized the multiple perspectives and performances of Islam that exist in the U.S. may be due to her relatively new experience with Islam, having reverted to the faith a few years prior to our meeting. Her statement needs to be read in the spirit of how she experiences Islam. The long history of Muslims in America does not play into Lindsay’s immediate experience in this discussion, though it is not to be dismissed entirely. What Lindsay is talking about is her American identity as a revert to Islam. As a revert who has grown up in a Christian-dominated society then, perhaps what she sees of Islam in the United States is what she sees of herself in her own experience with becoming further acquainted with and growing in Islam. As she is growing into her own awareness of the faith, so too is she becoming aware of the religion’s existence and growth in the United States as a whole, which can make it seem that its history is shorter than it truly is. In this statement, Lindsay presented that in an American context where Islam is not as popular or as easily seen as other faiths or lack of faith, she experiences an agency in the ability to democratize her religion. For her, the newness of the faith in a democratic society where choice is available for her, especially as a woman, allows her the ability “pave (her) own path” and aid in the creation of an American culture around or American approach to Islam.
Ibtisam also spoke of Islam as being a faith experienced differently in an American context. From Pakistan originally, which is a Muslim country, she discussed the differences in how she has experienced her religion in relation to her family:

When you are in a diverse culture and religion (Islam), I think if you want to teach your children your culture, your religion, your ways, then you do have to first of all be very sure as to who you are and be. You can’t be one way and start teaching your children something [that is different]. So I really had to do, I had to rethink everything and think do I really accept this? Do I really believe this? Because my children are asking these questions. So they forced me to reevaluate my own faith and that’s why I’m saying I became a better Muslim, I think, when I came to this country. But when you’re in the same environment (Muslim country), there isn’t that much pressure on you. Everybody’s doing the same thing.

Here, Ibtisam shared the taken for granted assumptions she had about her faith and culture when living in a country where the majority shared those beliefs and customs. In the United States where her ethnic culture and religion are of minority status, she became more aware of her own interpretations and performances of these identities because of her children’s need to learn more exclusively from her due to the lack of resources that they would have otherwise had access to in a Muslim country. In a space where she is forced to reflect more on her religion and thus become “a better Muslim,” she has created space to share and teach an understanding of Islam that may have resulted because of her moving to the United States. In other words, immigrating to a new country with different cultural and religious resources may have enabled her and provided her new ways of spreading her faith that otherwise would not have been possible because the opportunity to reflect in the ways that she has would not have presented itself.
This flexibility within Islam and the acceptance of differing perspectives of the faith, though, are not always easy for Muslims, much less non-Muslims, to embrace. For example, Anne discussed how when she first converted to Islam, she had a lot of “bad role models.” In one of her Muslim communities, she found herself persuaded by many of the other women’s statements that their early-teenaged daughters should have limited freedoms: they shouldn’t be able to wear certain clothes, they wouldn’t go to college or study abroad, weren’t to be trusted, and other similar sentiments. When she was able to step back and think critically about that line of thought, she realized/remembered that she disagreed with those ideas and was validated once she moved (due to a change in her husband’s job) to a new, more “liberal” Muslim community. Anne attributed these differences in Islamic thought to culture, which will be discussed momentarily. What is important in this discussion is the difficulty that these women face in trying to embrace differences of opinion within the faith in circumstances where they may not feel as free to have a different opinion (otherwise be ostracized by the community) or where there is a fundamental objection to what Islam preaches.

The women do have the ability to choose places of worship in the Northwest Ohio/Southeast Michigan area though, based on Islamic philosophy and varying levels of identification on the conservative/liberal Muslim spectrum. This may be something available to them in the United States or at least in this geographic part of the United States that differentiates this community from others. For instance, Anne talked about her dissatisfaction with a previous mosque in Michigan. She described the Michigan mosque as one whose community is less diverse than her new, current one in Northwest Ohio. Whereas her former mosque was mainly comprised of those of Arab backgrounds and who were more conservative, she understands her new mosque to offer a wider variety of national and ethnic backgrounds and ranging political
affiliations. Through this diversity, she also sees more acceptance of multiple perspectives of practicing Islam that she did not see in her former community; she labels this Ohio mosque as more “liberal.” In deciphering these different community approaches to the faith, she described how it impacted her personally:

I tried so hard to please and to do it [the faith] the right way, even though it wasn’t the right way. It was what was expected of me. But it was based maybe on the culture or based on somebody else’s misconception of how to do things, you know? And I had a hard, hard time, struggling from anything from “why aren’t you wearing the hijab” or “why aren’t you doing this….” And as you learn and then you become very confident….

At her former mosque, which happens to be the one where she first converted, she struggled with living up to the community’s expectations of what it meant to be a good Muslim woman, or how to do it “the right way.” She attributed her struggle to her lack of confidence and also to her difficulty in making sense of what she understood Islam to say and what others who had been raised in the faith were saying that Islam was saying. In other words, she did not yet have the confidence nor felt she had the space to experiment with different interpretations of Islam. She felt a sense of relief coming to a different mosque upon her move to Northwest Ohio where she felt more freedom to discover and move about the spectrum of Islamic understanding. Also, as time passed, she inevitably became more confident in herself and her understanding of the faith, which served as a contributing factor as to why she felt more able to embody her own sense of Islam when she moved to Ohio.

Anne also felt discomfort in some of the teaching of her former mosque. She describes:

There were so many things that we didn’t approve of. The way they [community in Michigan mosque] would teach these kids, you know the word “haram”? “Haram.
Everything’s *haram*. *Haram*. You’re going to hell and God’s going to punish you, you’re gonna do this.” [Other community members saying this to Muslim children that attending the mosque]. You CAN’T do that to children! It’s so wrong!”

Feeling a responsibility to voice these dissatisfactions, Anne and her husband tried to teach different lessons in their Sunday school class to the Muslim children. This was an action that they felt they could take. However, they did face resistance from the community at the mosque. Anne said that rather than focusing on the questions of “why” in the religion, the mosque’s philosophy was to focus on rules and rituals without explaining the logic or reasoning behind them and reinforcing those ideas through threats of punishment by God. Anne went on to articulate that:

> They mix the culture up so many times with the religion…. I want my kids to be more faith-centered rather than practice-centered even though practice in religion is part of it.

> But you’re not doing your religion for somebody else. You’re doing it for you and God.

Anne critiqued her Michigan community for allowing religious instruction to be overtaken by cultural interpretations of what was and was not *haram*, or forbidden. So an emphasis on correct and incorrect practices took precedence over an actual engagement with religion. Anne was frustrated that the emphasis on one being accountable for her actions through her relationship with God was undermined by the community’s intrusion in the theological structure of the religion. This lack of openness in engaging in critical conversations about and inquiry into faith were issues that Anne found incommensurate with her understanding of the breadth that Islam allows and stifling in terms of the egalitarian approach that she understands Islam to provide.

Anne also described how in her former Muslim community in Michigan, the majority of women and families that she knew talked about their daughters as having limited freedoms. The
daughters’ missions, for the most part, were to be married and become housewives and mothers. This, Anne argued, is a cultural infusion into Islam that really has nothing to do with the faith.

Anne is critical of herself, though, in that she found herself becoming absorbed into these thought processes unconsciously.

However, when they had to relocate to Northwest Ohio because of Anne’s husband’s new job, Anne described her new community in Toledo as quite different. Anne explained that at her mosque in Northwest Ohio “the women pray on the side instead of behind [men]. That’s more liberal. Some people don’t like that and they have left and gone to another mosque.” With this, Anne described more options available in Northwest Ohio in terms of an availability of perspectives of Islam and communities that accommodate such views. She also spoke about how her new mosque had a philosophy that matched more of her egalitarian view of Islam than her former mosque did.

When you come HERE, the majority of the Muslims at the mosque are…they are very, VERY educated; these are doctors, surgeons, and people…who travel and interact with smart people and THEIR daughters are away at college. THEIR daughters are working overseas. THEIR daughters are working on a master’s program…. I’m like “WA!” [surprised/happy/relieved sound]… It was the confidence, the confidence and the knowledge and getting away from the feeling that people are judging me.

In this statement, Anne described a much more positive experience for her in this new mosque than her previous one. She felt more confident at this mosque and more knowledgeable and free to speak about her understandings of Islam. It seems to, that perhaps by omission in previous statements made of the old mosque though, that class may have something to do with her different experience as well. By saying that this mosque has “VERY educated” people who
“interact with smart people” and give their daughters much more freedoms than her former community did, she is insinuating a population that has more access to education and high paying jobs (doctors, surgeons) than others. Along with a wider variety of ethnic backgrounds then, this Northwest Ohio community was described as being composed of a higher status/socio-economic and educated background than her former community. This could make Northwest Ohio or at least this particular mosque in Northwest Ohio specifically different because of its affluence and access.

Crystal critiqued these issues of class and race in the Muslim communities of Northwest Ohio. Crystal regularly attends a different mosque than Anne. Crystal’s mosque is smaller, in a more urban area, and is known to be predominantly composed of African American Muslims. Crystal discussed that even within a faith that she understands to project equality among all, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, or socioeconomic status:

Muslims I guess in reality, they don’t always live up to that ideal. And you know, we still have to deal with things. We still have to deal with the fact that people DO think of each other differently because of class and a lot of times we can still have stereotypes about other people. And there’s also, a lot of times class can get mixed up into it. Just here in Toledo, a lot of the immigrants who come here, they have, they come from very well-off backgrounds you know? A lot of times, they may be professionals, maybe doctors, lawyers, already own their own businesses. And so a lot of times they may come from a different class from a lot of the African American Muslims here who may come from a working class background. And it can affect how they view, deal with African Americans and it’s not always overt. Sometimes it can be very covert. Sometimes I feel like in our masjid, our dealings with the other masjids that have predominantly immigrant
congregations, that there’s a sense that we can’t always do things ourselves, that they kind of have to tell us what we have to do. And I do feel like part of it is because “Oh, they’re the black mosque and you know, they don’t have as many resources so you know they probably need our help.” And, it’s patronizing but I don’t think they realize that it’s always patronizing.

While having options of mosques to attend to in Northwest Ohio (given the luxury of a car) and the overall social acknowledgement of a larger Toledo Muslim community overarching the separate masjid/mosque communities, there are still conflicts regarding assumptions made and stereotyping of those of particular races, ethnicities, and class within the larger Muslim community. Again, while embracing the fact that there are diverse ways of approaching Islam, Crystal brought attention to how spaces of autonomy and collectivism are often contested spaces with unclear boundaries. While simultaneously acknowledging and embracing the fact that she is part of a larger Muslim community in Northwest Ohio, she also differentiated herself from others in the community by identifying as someone who attends a particular mosque that is identified by particular characteristics that also shares much in common with the larger Muslim community but still yearns to carve out its own autonomous space.

All the women attributed many essentialized misunderstandings and misperceptions about Islam and Muslims to cultural enactments and/or interpretations of the faith. In essence, these women make a distinction between Islam (religion) and culture. For these women, Islam is conceptualized as “divine” and “perfect,” but it is in the human interpretation and performance of the faith or in name of the faith where error and imperfection exists. In talking about perceptions of women’s freedom and oppression, Ibtisam urged:
Try and understand it in its context, in its cultural context. Then separate religion and culture. Religion is one thing. Culture is another thing. And yes, there is the fine line sometimes that they overlap, but that’s what you need to do. And that’s what I tell people wherever I meet, I said ‘separate the two. I’ll tell you about my faith. But culture? You’ll find Muslim culture in ALL the world and that may differ. The religion doesn’t differ.’ So try and understand those two things independently. Don’t blame the religion for culture and politics.

Sam expressed similar sentiments when she said, “Muslims are humans. We can be, we can make mistakes. But Islam is divine. It’s not going to make mistakes.” Lindsay continued this line of thought by expressing how she finds herself defending the religion of Islam in everyday situations, even within her own non-Muslim family, from the cultural (mis)interpretations and (mis)representations of it:

My sister is constantly saying things like “Oh that’s just Muslim culture.” I’m like “No, it’s not Muslim *culture* because Islam is a *religion*; it’s not a culture.” So it can be taken out of any culture in the world and placed inside another culture and you know, a lot of times people think all Muslims are the same and they all adhere to the same to the exact same things and they all do the exact same things and they all believe the exact same things. And I guess that’s where that’s just not true. You know and so maybe before I converted, maybe I thought being Muslim was a little more like being Arab or something like that and I know that’s what my sister thinks and my family thinks, but it’s not. So I guess that’s the biggest difference—making people understand that Islam is a religion that is independent of culture.
Here too, Lindsay spoke of her own growth in understanding about the cultural and theological differences of performances of Islam. Lindsay struggles in combating cultural misappropriations that are vastly misunderstood by non-Muslims around her, like her sister. In combating such misunderstandings or monolithic ways of thinking, she described Islam as a religion that is independent of culture; this is the ideal of Islam. However, in these statements she neglected to say that interpretations of Islam are always read through cultural lenses, hence the diversity in approaches to the faith. This is an important element to point out in her story because it is in the sharing of such moments of personal growth and reflection that an opportunity exists for others to identify with, connect to, and inquire into that can generate conversation and lead to transformative potential. What we see in these women’s stories is a devotion to God through their religion, Islam. However, how they culturally experience Islam in the United States (and via other cultural influences throughout their multiple identifications with other communities and [co]cultures within their lives) is differentiated and separated from other enactments and interpretations of the faith that they view as oppressive, misguided, or merely not a perspective that fully encapsulates their understandings.

One area where the women talked extensively about cultural misappropriations of Islam is in the discussion of gender and sex. This discussion is complicated by notions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and politics and is undeniably influenced by 1) an ability to question these notions in this geographic space and time and 2) the narratives that construct American discourses of equality, freedom, and opportunity. The women problematized these complex processes of demanding God-given rights with cultural expectations and constraining national/geopolitical discourses. It is important to foreground this discussion in an understanding that all these women share that Liyana expressed most coherently:
Women were given rights during the time of the Prophet, which again was 1500 years ago compared to us in the United States in the 1920s. So anywhere that you see that the males are dominating the females, it’s completely a society thing, it’s a male hierarchy, it’s driven by the men, it’s not driven by the faith.

The women argued that where misogyny exists among Muslims, it is a human activity and practice, not a product of Islam.

Lindsay discussed the common misperception that all Muslim women are oppressed. In talking about an article about the Middle East that she posted on the social networking site Facebook, she said:

It talks about how much misogyny there is over there and that it has nothing to do with the religion; it has everything to do with the emasculation of the male population through colonization and how they’re taking it out on women by subjugating them and that it has nothing to do with their religion whatsoever. And so I post things like that because I feel like people DO have that idea that Islam is a submissive religion and women are slaves to men and I don’t accept that at all. And so I’ll post things like that. Like “See! It’s not the religion! It’s the MEN! They are the problem with almost everything!”

In posting articles to educate others about her faith, Lindsay exercises her agency in speaking up and out for herself and others within her faith that she believes are unjustly represented. In this statement, she also invoked historical events of colonization as a causal factor in the mistreatment of women, therefore implicating colonizing forces (in many instances the United States, i.e., many of her readers) in a chain of events that has many guilty parties. She ended with her conclusion that men are the ultimate cause of the problem; however it is important to note that that was not done without first implicating imperialist forces.
Another example of the difficulty these women face in embracing the differences within their faith and making the distinction between culture and religion is when Crystal described local issues between men and women. Crystal said that one of the most difficult challenges that she faces is trying to get Muslim men to see Muslim women as fellow Muslims. She explained:

A lot of Muslim men…they don’t quite see Muslim women as fellow worshipers. There’s these different ideas that are going in their heads about Muslim women and sometimes those ideas are kinda misogynistic and it’s hard to combat those ideas, especially if people feel those ideas are kinda supported by Islam or that there’s nothing really wrong with those ideas.

Crystal talked about the difficulty in speaking out about this issue within her community because:

I know that Muslim men have their issues that they deal with and the stereotypes that they deal with. But at the same time, I feel like we can’t be silent about these types of issues either and act like they don’t exist just to make Muslim men feel better. So you know, I think as a Muslim woman, personally, my relationship with God, I feel like it’s fine. But I have to be honest, being in the community sometimes it CAN be challenging.

Here, Crystal illustrated a dilemma in which some Muslim women find themselves. They are followers of a faith that they love, embrace, and understand as divine. This does not mean though, that it is free from human error. However, the women know that given the current geopolitical climate that positions Muslim men in particular as oppressors and casts them in a negative light, the risks involved in being outwardly critical of them may cause more damage to Muslims as a whole. While being critical and demanding change of a minority group of Muslim men, the women understand that the men, too, are victims of discourses of colonization, Islamophobia,
and xenophobia. Muslim women are aware of these factors and are therefore careful and purposeful in how they participate and/or initiate these discussions and with whom they do so. This is because while they demand acknowledgement and change on the basis of sex and gender within Muslim communities, they also do not want the negative publicity that could come with such demands to become more fodder for blown up, misconstrued, and out of context arguments for Islamophobia. Crystal gave one more example of the different cultural interpretations of the Qur’an in reference to sex/gender that she has a difficult time ameliorating while still being mindful that Muslim men, at large, are constantly targets of an Islamophobic discourse:

I’m like completely against child marriage. I don’t think girls should be getting married at 12. But there are Muslims who you know, maybe not necessarily have an issue with it. They may think, “Well, it’s not that big of a deal and we need to stop making it look so bad.” But it’s hard to reconcile sometimes, especially when you’re dealing with Muslims who look at the Prophet’s life and who look at the story of Aisha and even though there’s conflicting views, I mean there are stories where she got married to him as young as I think six and then it was consummated when she was 9 and then there’s all these other different ages too. So you know, obviously I don’t condemn the Prophet, you know I look at that time period and I think “Well, that was that time period.” But then there are Muslims who see that time period as SO normative that it should guide everything we do, even now in the 21st century and it’s like if you reject some of those values then it’s like are you rejecting what the Prophet did? Are you saying what the Prophet did was wrong? So you know I guess, you know it’s, it’s hard sometimes because I don’t want Muslim men to seem bad and I don’t like it when I feel like Muslim men are kind of attacked in the media but at the same time, you see some things that are done against Muslim women
and it’s reported in the western media and honestly, you know, some of it, I DO think it’s wrong. So I kind of feel, I guess I feel torn sometimes between like my values and a lot of them have been influenced by feminism and this sense of wanting to protect Muslim men because you feel they are constantly under attack.

Here, Crystal grappled with several conflicting ideas about faith, humanity, emotion, and allegiance. She articulated that child marriage is fundamentally wrong in this day and age though there are some people who identify as Muslim who believe that the Qur’an justifies such activities because of its occurrence over 1500 years ago. However, she emphasized the importance of context, which is a recurring theme among all the women, that the Qur’anic teachings have in today’s world. She and the women of this study do not adhere to a literal translation of the Qur’an and hadith; rather, they believe in understanding the lessons of the holy books in context. This demonstrates how culture influences practice while maintaining the ideal that Islam is pure. Crystal argued that implementing those lessons in a way that is conducive to modern understandings of minor/adult relationships is Islamic and that perpetuating old practices such as child marriage no longer benefit society or achieve what they were initially created to do. In essence, they are outdated practices that violate human rights that are not supported by the Qur’an because their existence in the Qur’an came from a need to offer protection to women and grant them rights, whereas it has become a practice of ownership and oppression over women today.

Finally, despite some mistreatment of women, Crystal is still cognizant of the fact that not all Muslim men mistreat women. So, she is hesitant in speaking outwardly against Muslim men to a non-Muslim public for the fear that her words will be misconstrued to further essentialize them as oppressors and thus reify Islamophobic rhetoric. Simultaneously, she still
fosters ambivalence because she does experience inequality from some men on a frequent basis. Crystal is caught in the webs of numerous discourses, including that of feminism, which aims to advocate for women but in participating in a discourse of women’s advocacy, she faces the problem of inadvertently preserving Islamophobia. However, she also firmly believes that feminism and Islam are not incommensurate; rather, they can and do walk hand in hand in so many ways when it comes to women’s rights, agency, and creating a better, more equitable world for all. But in these statements, Crystal showed the limitations of all of these discourses—where they often, on a base level, project similar goals, but where there are points of conflict and contention that women such as Crystal and the others in this study have to negotiate or create new ways of knowing in order to move forward.

Rashida spoke similarly when she said that both men and women are implicated in these webs of oppression. She demanded:

The women need treatment and the men need treatment. And we can’t just say it’s just “you guys” because it’s not the reality. And I think we need to look at the reality. A lot of the things that happen culturally in countries that are “Muslim” are often made to seem like that is the norm of Islam, like that’s what Islam is and it’s not!…. And so I think we have to get beyond this blame game and attributing everything to Islam and thinking that all Muslims are the same.

Rashida echoed the arguments that the women have previously engaged in: that there is not a monolithic Islam and that cultural enactments in the name of the faith are often confused for representations of the actual faith. She furthered the idea by stating that women participate in the cultural misrepresentation of Islam as well. She continued to describe her past participation in such activity:
And here’s how deep it goes, that ideology, or that feeling or that…the prejudice against Muslims. I had it with ME, as a Muslim girl growing up and I didn’t even know I had it until I got older. When I would see a Muslim woman in hijab, I remember the first woman I met who wore hijab, brilliant woman, gorgeous, smart, they were very educated and I’m sitting down with her and my eyes were crossing because I couldn’t understand it. I’m like, what’s going on? Why does she have her hair covered like that? And I had these prejudices within me and where they came from, I could never tell you because it wasn’t, I wasn’t brought up in a household where hijab was even an issue. I didn’t even know what it was called. So I found that later in life, even talking to imams and stuff, I would have this fear of them, thinking “Oh they’re going to come back with something harsh.” And whenever I talked to imams, it’s always the softest response. So over the years, being within Islam, I had to break down those prejudices. It’s not an easy task to expect the non-Muslim community around us to break down those stereotypes. But it’s fundamentally important because if we don’t stop seeing it as a simplistic, monolithic type entity, we’re not going to be able to get beyond those surface problems.

Rashida, who was raised in a Muslim family her whole life, honestly admits that even she found herself complicit in the same fears and thoughts that some, if not many mis-educated non-Muslims today find themselves too. In sharing this, Rashida is able to create a space of connection with others who harbor some of these same fears and sentiments that often go unchecked, as was her case. By expressing such empathy, Rashida also shares a possibility of overcoming those misguided sentiments in demonstrating the ability to critically reflect on those ideas through thought and direct experience with other Muslims. It is in sharing this compassion with one’s self and others that Rashida is able to both identify a problem that exists inside and
outside the Muslim communities of the United States and is able to offer a potential solution through exposing her own vulnerabilities.

So on one hand, Muslim women are saying that there are diverse perspectives of Islam that need to be respected. And on the other, they too, are trying to navigate the lines of respecting difference and giving others the opportunity and grace of an open-minded audience while being acutely aware that perspectives do exist that they adamantly believe Islam does not uphold, such as terrorism done in the name of the faith. Anne explained:

And those who ARE that, those terrorists or those, you know bad people, they’re not Muslim. They’re not! They can sit there and preach till kingdom come but they’re not. Anybody who’s a Muslim knows that that’s not Islam. That is NOT Islam!

Or, for instance, when Ibtisam asked how does one respect cultural differences when fundamental human rights are violated? Ibtisam illustrated that these countries exude a:

Lack of total understanding in context. Lack of total understanding in context ‘cause it’s just like, you know, you portray the women of Afghanistan as “this is what Islam is.” No! That’s NOT what Islam says. Or people being portrayed in Saudi Arabia, women being portrayed in Saudi Arabia with the entire, whole garb and everything. No! That is something political in nature.

But if we are talking about religious clothing, how does this perception of Islam and culture change if we change the context of the donning of the “whole garb” to a woman in the United States who chooses to wear it? Though considered uncommon, there are some Muslim women who do wear niqab and abaya (the full face and body covering) and do so by choice as an expression of their faith and in establishing a personal connection with God. Despite this respect for personal choice that many of the women speak of when it comes to discussions of hijab, the
women said that if a woman walks into a mosque or public setting in full garb in the U.S., even Muslim heads turn. Definitely, as the women were quick to clarify, all of these actions and discussions must be contextually positioned, but it is difficult to account for all the exceptions to everyday occurrences, making it a continual process for these women to negotiate and understand themselves and their own situatedness within their faith while also working to dismantle pervasive misguided notions of what it means to be Muslim.

The women in this study took great strides to distinguish between Islam as a religion and cultural influences within/on/to Islam. The women all agreed that Islam is not monolithic nor are its followers. These women argued that Muslims need to be understood to be at least as diverse as their fellow sisters and brothers in Abrahamic faiths, Christians and Jews. Islam as a religion is viewed as perfect, but it is through human interpretation and interaction that differences arise; but the women argue that is a divine calculation. As seen in the opening surah, it is through difference that God asks that people of different groups come to know each other. However in this coming to know each other, or struggle to know each other, notions of power take hold in the processes of interpretation, transmission, and practice of the faith.

At this point in our history, Islamophobia works to discursively position all things Muslim/Islamic as oppositional to all things American. How these women negotiate this discursive terrain is through a counter-discourse, a pro-woman Islamic discourse, that rhetorically positions the variance of them as Muslims with the variance experienced by a Christian-majority American nation, thus equalizing the playing field on religious grounds such that an American identity is more theoretically tenable. The women also do this by contextualizing the Islam that is practiced in the United States today as notably distinct from practices of the faith elsewhere because of the allowances that this country provides for such
varying performances of the faith and the choice made available to all Muslims, especially women, in being able to practice their faith more freely (though still within an anti-Islamic geopolitical context). American-born and raised reverts to the faith are able to approach Islam with their own cultural backgrounds and experiences within a Muslim-minority context rather than acquiring the faith in a context where they view it more difficult to distinguish other cultural factors from the actual religion. For women like Lindsay, this provides a more “objective” or purely religious view of the faith rather than one filtered through cultural interpretations. For Muslims who have immigrated to the United States from Muslim-majority countries, they often find themselves more invested in their faith and more reflective about their actual beliefs and practices because they don’t live in a society in which they can rely on to fill in the educational gaps for their children when it comes to lessons in religion/culture, such as Ibtisam shared. Also, as Anne described, in the United States, Muslims can find options as to what sect of the faith to follow. While not all areas of the country offer the breadth of mosques like Northwest Ohio does, the United States as a whole does allow a certain diversity of Islamic practice to function, existing on a spectrum of conservatism to liberalism.

This is not to say that the above statements are not problematic in and of themselves. Of course we can argue that interpretation is always a practice of subjectivity and bias, therefore making the claim that an objective, purely religious view of the faith is never achievable—but that’s not Lindsay’s experience. We can also argue that although there is a spectrum of accepted Islamic practice in the United States, it is watched closely and is policed by certain governmental entities and an Islamophobic/xenophobic discourse (i.e., anything that is deemed or resembles “radical” or “extremist” is instantly shut down, investigated, discredited, and more) therefore indicated that that freedom isn’t exactly free. And these critiques wouldn’t be entirely wrong or
misled; but it’s important to keep in mind that the truths experienced by these women are valid and demand attention. Furthermore, while the United States as an entity is not by any means innocent of social/racial/religious/ethnic profiling and policing and there are definitely improvements that can be made, when the women talk about their religious opportunities and capabilities here in the United States in Northwest Ohio, they are grateful and make a clear distinction that the luxuries they have here in the practicing of their faith are much greater than those they may have in other areas of the world.

The women articulate that not only is it a challenge to convey the differences between religion and culture to non-Muslims, it is also a challenge to navigate and negotiate the two even among Muslims. Furthermore, it is difficult to embrace the diversity of different interpretations/cultural enactments of the faith while simultaneously witnessing cultural misappropriations of the faith that are enacted by self-proclaimed Muslims that are also used to amplify an Islamophobic discourse. Overall, the women’s message is that Muslims are diverse and deserve respect and compassion; it is only a very small minority that based on other cultural factors—not Islam—the Islamophobic discourse represents.

**Misconceptions of Muslim Women**

Noor shared this story with me:

It was a day when I was bored and had nothing to do, so I decided to just kinda poke around at the local shoe store. It was early in the day, so not many people were there, just me and perhaps a handful of others. The aisles at that particular store are super narrow, so you have to literally move yourself out of the way to let another person pass. I was in an aisle, standing around looking, when the cutest little girl came into that same aisle from the opposite end. She
continued to walk towards me and when she needed to pass, she said, “Excuse me.” So I moved back to let her through.

She grabbed a pair of shoes and took them back to her mother at the other end of the aisle. I continued to look at the selection. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw this girl’s mother whisper something to her and the girl yet again walked all the way down the aisle and nicely said, “Excuse me.” So of course I made room for her to pass. She grabbed another pair of shoes and walked right back.

This happened again, but this time it was the mother. I saw her approaching, so I tried to make room for her to pass me. As she passed, she elbowed me in the middle of my back. She didn’t say anything. Just shoved passed me and continued walking. I didn’t think anything of it at all because the aisles are narrow; I thought she just unintentionally walked into me as she was trying to pass. A few minutes later out of the corner of my eye, I saw the same girl and her mother walk into the aisle and approach me. Her daughter was a few steps ahead of her and as they came closer to me, the girl so sweetly said, “Excuse me.”

I smiled and just as I was about to let them pass, the mother grabbed her daughter by the shoulders, pushed her back, hugged her close, and—while staring at me—said, “Honey, you don’t tell people like her, ‘Excuse me.’ You tell them to ‘MOVE!’”

* 

The women in this study articulated innumerable misconceptions about Muslims both in the United States and as a whole. These misconceptions were attributed to lack of information, misinformation, and ignorance. This means that for the most part, these women don’t blame non-Muslims for holding these misperceptions; rather, the women provide them the benefit of the doubt because of multiple mediated channels that do not accurately speak to the breadth of
everyday Muslims. Knowing that these media tend to foster an Islamophobic-leaning perspective, the women were able to identify why non-Muslims lack a more educated perspective of what Islam means and how it functions in the lives of its followers.

This is not to say that the women were not frustrated with others’ ignorance and lack of motivation to rectify these misperceptions. The women were very critical in saying that people (both Muslim and non) need to develop an awareness of diversity, learn to critically think for themselves and critique media/gain media literacy, and be motivated to seek out information to educate themselves. Furthermore, the women spoke of the power of transnational discourses of Islamophobia in infiltrating the (mis)understandings of Muslims in the United States, where the ability to filter out and evaluate such mediated messages is lacking on the behalf of a general American public, and the ability to take context into consideration is often nonexistent. This passivity in knowledge accumulation perpetuates Islamophobia in that messages are often being accepted as fact, even if more or less unconsciously, allowing for the normalization of an othering of Muslims in the United States to continue to happen.

Where the discussion of an excusable misinformed/ignorant audience and media’s power becomes contentious is on the topic of what then, is done with the mediated information. As will be discussed later in this section, it is one thing to hold an opinion, a misconception, and prejudice against a person or a group and to keep it quietly to one’s self. But when a person becomes not only entitled to that belief and thus the byproduct of personal superiority but feels morally responsible to proactively teach their children how and whom to fear and hate, that goes beyond the pure responsibility of the media. As the stories in this section will demonstrate, the particular words in this statement are not from the women, but are my analyses of their experiences and of the actions others directed towards the women. This extends the conversation
of this topic beyond “this happens to every immigrant group; eventually their time will pass” since inherent in this dismissal is the assumption that it is okay to promote practices and beliefs in hate. Furthermore, it highlights the urgency with which we must approach this topic since these lessons are being taught on a daily basis to children in our own neighborhoods, both actively and perhaps implicitly by ourselves.

One misconception the women addressed is the idea that Islam is a violent religion. This theme generates images of brutality, terrorism, and torture—images rampant in national and international media in discussions of wars involved in the Middle East (also identified in the U.S. commonly as Muslim countries) and in discussion of “Muslim” practices (versus being identified by other cultural designations). These areas are contentious and difficult to navigate in discussion because they require time, involvement, and a true interest in hearing in order for them to be dismantled. Since so many of these topics are dependent on context, an understanding of cultures, and the acknowledgement that people are people and ultimately prone to mistake, it is not an easy nor an expeditious conversation where quick generalizations can be made, which is often how these topics are handled in the media and in politics. Angel articulated that even within Muslim communities, “it [Islam] might not be portrayed properly from different Muslims, from different people, but that’s just the way people are.” So a prerequisite to even having any sort of conversation about the inhumanity of humanity is wholly accepting the fact that among any identified group, there will be at least some people who do not represent the tenants that the rest of the group embrace.

I invoke Angel to start this conversation: “Islam isn’t really something that’s brutal. It’s really a peaceful religion.” Angel talks about the (mis)representation of the word *jihad* in
creating a pervasive misunderstanding that Islam is inherently imbued with war and violence. She explained and corrected this notion:

It’s just right now, that automatically terrorism is affiliated with Islam and Muslims. They [public, media, Islamophobic discourse] don’t differentiate between the two. And why? All because *jihad* means “to go commit murder or to commit suicide,” which it does not. There is *jihad an-nafs* which means you sacrifice; it’s self-sacrifice. Not self as in go and kill yourself but you go and you have—you see this purse that’s like $150 and you just want it so bad but you’re sacrificing it because you have to get clothes for your daughter. You have to get supplies for school. That’s self-sacrifice. There’s *jihad* in education—you go and learn, that’s *jihad* as well. There’s so many different types of *jihad* and the *jihad* that we believe in as far as war comes, that’s when all-out war is affiliated. There’s war between two countries, there’s war between two different peoples, two different tribes, that’s when a war breaks out. When a war breaks out and you’re fighting, it’s because you’re fighting for your country; you’re fighting for your loved ones, you want your loved ones to remain free. That’s *jihad*: when you go and fight for a cause. You’re not fighting for the sake of “oh yeah, I’m strapping a bomb to myself and I’m going to kill someone just because they’re coming and they’re saying they’re going to take over but they haven’t.” That’s just wrong. I mean, if a person does that, it’s because they’re either brainwashed or they’re LED to believe that’s the proper thing to do.

In this explanation, Angel stated that there is more than one meaning to the word *jihad*. In other words, *jihad* is not a singular concept; rather, it is an overarching idea within Islam that instructs Muslims that they will all encounter some form of struggle within their lives, and that they must
inherently do so in order to constantly grow and become better people which is in line with what Islam asks them to do.

Lindsay added the clarification that people often mistake *jihad* to mean “holy war,” to which she responds, “No, it’s a struggle within yourself.” Lindsay also added that those Muslims who wrongly invoke *jihad* in terrorist/extremist activity are just as likely to target other different Muslims as they are to target non-Muslims. She explains, “Just because I’m a Muslim, I am not safe from extremists. They would shoot me in the head just like they would shoot anyone else because I’m an American.” In this statement, Lindsay positioned herself opposite of extremist Muslims who misappropriate *jihad*. In doing so and subsequently rearticulating her American identity, she aligned herself with the broader American public who are, generally speaking, anti-terrorism. In explaining *jihad* and the misappropriation of the term in this way, she carves out a space where she can identify her Muslim and American identities in complementary ways where those beliefs and experiences in the context of terrorism locate her in ways with which everyday Americans should be able to identify.

Anne also contributed to this conversation. She, too, identified a common misconception that Muslims are all understood to be terrorists or extremists. She explained:

I think that between the terrorists and…the extremists being the norm. People think the extremists are the norm. They’re not. Anybody with half a brain knows that. But sometimes I think, I’ve asked this to people too, people who are against Islam: “What is it? Seriously? Stop and think about it.” You’ll never get an answer. “What is it about what I’m doing in my practice of my faith, that’s so offensive to you? I mean I believe in the same god you believe in. I worship Him and Him alone. I stop several times during the day to actually stop and like commune with Him. I live my life trying to be a good
person. And all these positive things, I don’t drink alcohol, I don’t eat pork, I don’t gamble—all these positive things and yet you’re offended by me? Can you tell me why?”

You never will get an answer. NEVER get an answer from anybody. “Just tell me what offends you!”

Not only does Anne identify the misconception, she expressed incredible frustration in not being rendered an answer nor real conversation that would explain why another would feel ill will towards or threatened by her due to her Islamic faith.

Sara also elaborated on the idea of *jihad* when it is misappropriated and performed in ways not conducive to Islam. She uses the Qur’an to support her argument when she shared:

It [killing/terrorism] makes you a godless person. You should not be able to assimilate [align] yourself with any religion if you kill a human being out of hatred. And I mean there is a verse in the Qur’an that says if you murder an innocent person, it’s as if you’ve killed all humankind [Surah al-Ma’idah 5:32].

Married to the discursive message that Islam is a violent religion is the idea that Muslims are violent themselves, most often painted within the language of terror. These women describe that Muslims have continually been essentialized in negative ways and that opportunities for dialogue and sharing of stories are incredibly limited, especially after 9/11. When asked what are the main misconceptions that the general public holds of Muslim women, Noor echoed the voices of all the women in the study which overrides the gender divide: “Muslims in general: we’re terrorists. That’s a BIG misunderstanding and probably the most obvious.” Angel further described:

After 9/11, plane crashes were associated with Muslims. So whether you were on that plane or not, you were the terrorist who did it…. Muslims are terrorists whether they’ve
done something wrong or not, that’s who they are…. I mean if you’re a Muslim woman or man, you’re a terrorist.

On that same note, Anne stated, “You NEVER hear the word terrorist attached with anybody except a Muslim/Arab.” Inherent in Anne’s statement too is something that many of the women mentioned, and that is if she is perceived to be Arab, then she is automatically Muslim as well, thereby casting her into the role of terrorist.

Liyana also talked about this casting of Muslims in the role of terrorist post-9/11. She likened the political actions and (re)creation of essentialized enemies to that of the Cold War and World War II. She explained:

We [Muslims] are now OFFICIALY on the record; we are now the enemy. It’s no longer the Russians. It’s no longer the Nazis. It’s the Muslims. We are now the enemy. And it just makes me so angry and disappointed that that happened and that he [men who carried out 9/11 attacks] was allowed to do that. And then the third leg of that is sitting there listening to people talking about “bombing those bastards.” “We need to go bomb the pyramids, we need to go bomb this.” You know they were thinking about all the landmarks that are in the Middle East that we should go get and get revenge on and “Damn Muslims” and “Damn Arabs.”

So in the discursive (re)creation of a post-9/11 enemy, Muslims, Arabs, and all peoples and indicators of the Middle East were equated to the Russian enemies of the Cold War and Nazis of WWII. All these peoples and entities were one and same, overlooking the immense diversity that exists within those classifications. In this expeditious grouping, Liyana indicated the ease with which a discourse was enabled to target the American Muslim population and discursively work to contain them through a fear regulated/policed by everyday community members, including
themselves—which is how hegemony works. Sam agreed when she said, “It’s very easy to accept that Muslims are terrorists, Muslims are dumb headed, they’re towel heads, real towel heads, but we are not towel heads.” Sam added:

They don’t understand anything about us. And they don’t want to understand anything about us. It is easier to accept what the media talks about you [sic.] than taking the trouble of getting to know you and understanding that what you have been told is wrong.

Heather, too, shared a story of how everyday actions of others would work to regulate her activities or keep her in a state of check/fear through chastisement based on her sometimes outwardly noticeable Muslim appearance. Heather worked at an Islamic school and when she was going to or at the school, she would wear the headscarf. This is how she described some of her experiences:

When I was in Boston I used to cover my head when I worked in the schools. You know, people would yell stuff at me while I was driving the car but I remember this one time, my boss and I, my boss was the principal. She was a female. We were standing in the building and the UPS guy came in and we were talking very softly and we must have been talking about one of the kids or something and we were talking very softly. And he came over to us and he said [in a sardonic voice], “Would you mind speaking English?” ‘cause we were talking so softly and you know he just assumed because we had our heads covered that we didn’t know how to speak English. And I looked at him and I said, “English is the only language I speak.”

In the creation of an enemy, then, based on religion, comes a host of other characteristics that are xenophobic in nature. As a result, Islamophobia is not remiss of xenophobia and the two seem to work powerfully hand in hand. Heather and her principal were not only read as Muslim, but as
foreign and likely to speak in another language besides English, which leads to suspicion as is indicated by the UPS man’s rude request/demand that they speak in English, when they already were. On top of that, Heather is actually Caucasian but the headscarf acted as a deterrent apparently from this man actually looking at her, much less listening to her, to acknowledge that perhaps she was something other than Arab (not that that should matter) much less that she was speaking his language (not that she should have to speak his language if she wasn’t talking to him in the first place). All of this is to say, is that a climate of suspicion exists as a result of an Islamophobic discourse and this interaction would seem that this climate permits those who are privileged (non-Muslim, white man) to have extra rights or feel entitled to forcefully request certain actions to appease his discomfort.

Amani talked about how this automatic stereotyping has impacted her life well after the events of 9/11. Though she is in a new position at work now where she is able to more freely speak about the diversity of her identifications, when she was in a position of interacting more directly with customers, she was consistently stereotyped by customers in negative ways and faced more direct Islamophobia. She recalled:

“You are a terrorist. I don’t want you to help me.” I’ve had people tell me, “You wearing the scarf is offensive to Americans because it symbolizes oppression.” I’ve had people that have told other co-workers of mine “What gives her the right to wear her religion so freely?” I’ve had customers who have told my management, “You should have given jobs to Americans and not foreigners.” So I’ve dealt with A LOT of it. And you know, to me it’s like those are the comments that sting because they’re so blatant and very hurtful.

Being cast as a stereotype with no agency has robbed Amani of her voice in these situations. While her employer has a zero-tolerance policy against discrimination, for which she is grateful
and is the reason she is still with the company, ultimately there is still no control over what
costumers can and do say. The company does refuse, in these moments, to provide help to
costumers to demonstrate support to the employee. However, the discursive and personal damage
is done. And in moments like these, Amani accepts that it is better to not speak back so that the
situation does not escalate, so that she does not give the customer the attention that s/he may be
craving, and because the chances of that person actually wanting to listen and learn are beyond
minimal. What that silencing disallows though, is for Amani to be able to say, “I am not a
terrorist. I advocate peace on all levels as does my faith;” “To me, the scarf provides me a sense
of empowerment that is beyond words;” and “I am an American born in Ohio so this job was
given to an American.” So while her safety is ensured and the company acknowledges a full
support of their employee, a counter discourse isn’t verbally affirmed. This isn’t to say that
discourse must absolutely be verbalized to be powerful or existent; the performance of support in
this case is definitely a striking back at the costumers’ Islamophobia. But Amani’s voice is still
minimized if silenced in this process.

The struggle that these women face then, is actually being afforded the time and attention
from others to hear their voices and articulations of Islam. While all the women spoke of the
inability or lack of opportunities to have these conversations because, as Anne mentioned, Islam
is not a proselytizing religion, I use Angel’s words to surmise their sentiments at this point.
Angel shared of those who say Islamophobic things or make judgments about her:

And it didn’t really bother me because I knew that those people were just misinformed
and it was just a matter of trying to make them understand. If they were looking for some
answers and were willing to listen to what I have to say, I’ll answer their questions. But if
they’re just gonna come and bark at me, I’ll just let them be. Say what you want. As long
as there’s nothing else going on [e.g., physical harm], [my] words can’t help. Words are harmful but as long as you’re not doing anything to anybody else, I’m okay. Say whatever you want to me; just leave everybody else out of it.

Here, Angel acknowledged, as did the other women in this study, that there are situations where they know that no matter what they say, their words will have no effect due to the instigator’s unwillingness to participate in an actual dialogue. From numerous experiences and altercations, women have learned how to decipher in which situations they should outwardly speak up or engage and which would serve better to ignore and/or disengage. In situations where the women perceive a hostile environment uninviting for conversation or the chance that a heated situation could easily escalate, they make the decision to not partake due to 1) safety concerns for themselves and those around them, 2) because they know that it is a fruitless venture anyway as the person will not listen, and 3) because usually these situations occur in public spaces.

When these provocations occur in public spaces, there is almost inevitably the potential for them to become spectacles for growing audiences. As Muslim women already acknowledge that they are constantly being watched, the lens magnifies exponentially when voices are raised and attention is directly drawn to them via an altercation. So in these instances where an instigator’s actions can often be read as a mode through which to attract (negative) attention, the women understand that they have limited options in reacting without coming off as combative, having started the problem, or as the instigator herself since discursively she is already located in a disadvantaged position. The women have described that reacting by avoidance in these circumstances of being the target of angry, Islamophobic remarks in public with an audience has often ended with witnesses paying condolences or expressing sympathy for and to them.
This is a complicated space to maneuver on multiple levels because for one, these situations are undeniably heart-wrenching for these women. Though Angel’s excerpt above describes a noble, brave approach and willingness to bear the brunt of people’s bad behavior, an approach that many women also embody, it is not to say that they aren’t still hurt when those events happen. Though altercations may not happen on a daily basis for every woman, they unfortunately happen often enough that all the women were able to describe similar situations in which something like that had happened to them and what is worse and foreboding is that the normalization of those instances within Muslim women’s narratives, to the point where they are losing their evocative effect, seems to be continually concretizing.

Another reason why these situations are difficult is because they are so often unexpected. As the women’s narratives articulate, they occur in truly everyday activities that so many of us traverse where the idea of a religious altercation happening would be the furthest thing from our minds. These (recurring) moments, then, strip women of a feeling of safety and freedom that they once felt and should feel in partaking in everyday activities such as going to school, attending the library, and shopping for groceries.

Also, these situations are further complicated in that these women know that Islamophobia exists. These women in particular are very open to talking with and educating people to rectify images of Islam and its followers. However, while a situation is presented where Islamophobia is definitely a pertinent topic, the space that is created is not one that allows them to actually educate. So here, we’re already talking about a situation where women are caught off-guard, are startled, in shock, most likely afraid if they are not still in utter shock, and then incredibly frustrated because they want to take the opportunity to educate but know that whatever they say will fall upon deaf dears. Not only do the women perceive the provocateur(s)
as not being willing to listen, but they know that if they are to talk back, they run the risk of being viewed through the lens of a hegemonic discourse that positions Muslims as combative, terrorists, trouble-makers, foreigners, and the list goes on, all imbued in negative connotation.

So, there is something that happens in the space between acknowledging that someone is not going to hear you and knowing that whatever you say has the potential to be read as incriminating yourself. When the women frame their actions as avoiding the situation/walking away in terms of not engaging because they know the person will ultimately not hear them, there is a sense of admiration and a wisdom that comes from experience and the Qur’an that says that true change has to come from within. At the same time, it is understandable that disengaging out of fear for your own safety/the safety of children that may be with you and the fear of being misread as “a belligerent Muslim woman” who then becomes representative of all Muslim women is a viable option. But when I listen to these strong, contemplative Muslim women, I hear in their voices a difficulty in permitting themselves to feel or at least verbalize this fear. And it could very well be that it is difficult because I am not their family, that they know that though I am a friend to so many of them that I am still a researcher, or for other various reasons, that they are not comfortable expressing to me that they are afraid of the pressures of misrepresenting all Muslim women in one moment at a grocery store in an unrehearsed scene. So it may be a negotiated and rhetorical choice in the retelling of such moments that the explanation wholly becomes “I disengaged because s/he wasn’t going to listen” to save face and dignity.

But what I truly believe from hearing these women’s recollections of these stories and their retelling of them on numerous occasions is that the stories are still in the sense-making process for these women. And there is a space between these two areas—that of acknowledging a moment where education is not going to happen and acknowledging a moment where you are
afraid for the safety of you, your family, and the image of Muslim women as a whole—that
women continually find themselves navigating and making sense of for themselves. I am not
sure that, at least at the times that I interviewed these women, the women are able to answer with
certainty where they fall in the spectrum of how they would identify their navigation of those
areas. My impression is that it is a dynamic movement and that even with continued thought,
there is not yet this moment of “this is what happened, this is the choice I made, and this is why.”
This is to say, that as these events unfortunately continue to happen, the women find themselves
in such interactions renegotiating those spaces individually based on their particular contexts.

Another prominent misconception about Muslim women in particular is that they are
subservient to men and oppressed. Every woman in this study expressed frustration with this
sentiment being directed towards them. Zaina began this conversation with, “People think we’re
oppressed…. We’re forced to wear a scarf on our head and we’re forced to stay at home and take
care of our husbands and children in our homes.” Noor agreed when she said, “It’s a huge
misunderstanding that women are like these modern day slaves,” and that “We get mistreated a
lot because they think that Islam is kind of like degrading women.” While I address the women’s
responses to such stereotypes and accusations at length in the section on Muslim women’s rights,
I bring up these articulated misconceptions here as well to stress the notion that these women are
very well aware of the perceptions others have of them. The women attribute these
misconceptions, like the rest, to ignorance and lack of seeking out information that supplements
the passive information non-Muslims receive from different media sources that contribute to an
already existing Islamophobic discourse.

Rashida discussed the many ways in which this stereotype of Muslim women lacking
agency functions in her world. She said:
“We don’t have a mind of our own.” And I don’t know if that’s just my perception of what I perceive they’re [non-Muslims] perceiving but it almost seems like when you are approached, they aren’t expecting someone to talk with intelligence or without an accent or I think that they think that…we’re beneath men and that we even view ourselves that way. And it’s totally false. I oftentimes look at some of my non-Muslim friends and I see the dynamics in their families and I actually feel sorry for the dynamics that they live with. Because to me, it’s more oppressing than what they perceive I’m supposed to be. And like for me, I’m perfectly fine. There’s a beautiful balance in our marriage between me and my husband and there’s mutual respect; it’s truly like a match made in heaven. It just wonderful and I wish people would see that again. Yes, there are Muslim women who are oppressed, abused, in bad marriages, but you can see that across the board in all peoples and so don’t get isolated in thinking that this is just a Muslim problem. The goal of Islam is for harmonious home, harmonious marriage, or harmonious community, harmonious country, and harmonious earth. Like that’s the whole thing and I think that looking at Muslim women as oppressed or you know, uneducated, backwards, subservient, all those things, it’s demeaning and it’s counterproductive because there are real issues that we could all work together towards to making society better for everyone.

Rashida further discussed how she notices that a watchful eye is not only directed at her in these matters, but towards her husband. Because she is stereotyped as being oppressed, he is automatically cast as the oppressor:

The big thing is, too, with my husband, is wishing that people didn’t look at me and then think that he was an oppressor. Like it really bothers me. And my husband’s a big joker. So he’s always doing these jokes and…before I wore hijab it was no big deal and we
would just go along with anything; we’d just have fun. But after wearing it, I’m just like “you can’t do that.” ‘Cause he would do silly things like…when I would want to buy something and he would like joke at the register, “All right, I’M paying for it.” And he’d be like just joking around and in that, I felt like well what are they thinking? Like I don’t have my own money and I can’t go and buy my own things and you know, I started thinking all of these things and I don’t want, I just wish people would just take the time to get to know individual people before judging them you know?

In this excerpt, Rashida described a hyper-awareness of the stereotypes that others can make of her because she can be easily identified as a Muslim by wearing hijab. Whereas when she did not wear the scarf, she and her husband could more easily traverse public spaces without necessarily being marked as Muslim, she experienced her identity differently after making the personal decision to don hijab. She is aware of an Islamophobic discourse that promotes the idea that women are subservient to men in Islam, and though it is her personal choice to wear hijab, she has found that that choice not only marks her as a target of anti-Islamic sentiment, but her husband too when they are together. When they were not marked as Muslim, they were able to enjoy a freer expression of their personal qualities, her husband being a joker for instance, because that joking was not perceived as being attributed to a faith. Now that Rashida understands that they are marked, she is wary of what assumptions others can mistakenly make when her husband exercises his personal quality of being a joker. This act of self-censure works in the favor of Islamophobia as those who are victims of the discourse become self-regulators of the confines that the discourse works to solidify.

Along these lines is the misconception that so many hold about the headscarf, or hijab. I have chosen not to emphasize or belabor the discussion hijab in this dissertation because there
are numerous other works that specifically speak about the vast interpretations of and politics behind women wearing hijab. I have made this decision not to downplay the personal significance that hijab has for women who choose to wear it; rather, I have noticed, as have other scholars (e.g., Croucher, 2006, 2008), that so often the focus of debates about Islam and women become almost exclusively centered around hijab that little else is afforded attention. To add breadth to the debate and vast complexities of Muslim women’s lives, I purposefully focus my attentions elsewhere. However, I do bring in some discussions of hijab as they inevitably do make their way into the conversations I have with these women. But, I discuss them and frame them within the communicative contexts that the women deem important to them at these particular moments.

The nine women who wear hijab in this study agreed that wearing hijab is an individual woman’s choice. Some women, such as Sam and Lindsay, argue that wearing hijab is not a choice for them in that they understand that God asks them to wear hijab through the Qur’an, but say that it is still a choice for other Muslim women. This means that they embrace or at least acknowledge that Islam can be interpreted differently from the way that they interpret and enact their faith, but that when it comes down to their personal relationships with God, they understand and embrace for themselves that they must wear hijab. The women who choose at this point to not wear hijab also indicate that choosing to wear it is a choice. They commend women who choose to wear hijab and affirm those who choose that it is not necessarily something that needs to happen for them to feel a close connection to God. Anne, however, did mention that that choice to wear hijab is sometimes more or something other than a religious choice for Muslim women; it can be a political choice. And whether it is a political choice or not, the choice in
wearing a hijab is wrought with communal responsibility despite it being an individual choice. Anne stated:

I think that’s why a lot of women wear the hijab, because they want to represent it and be identified that “I am a Muslim.” My problem with that is, that’s fine, be identified as a Muslim. But you damn well better be a pretty good Muslim. You’re putting that on your head and you’re representing all of us. Don’t misrepresent it.

Amani presented that “A lot of people see it [hijab] as a symbol of oppression. And honestly it is the exact opposite.” She described the process she went through when she started wearing it:

I started wearing the scarf when I was 14, so this was 16 years ago. And while it was a little difficult in high school, it wasn’t that bad. You’d get the usual taunts but that’s you know, they make fun of anybody in high school. It doesn’t matter, if you wear glasses, they make fun of you. But after 9/11 is when I started to realize that I was easily picked out of a crowd, you know? And I was always singled out. You know, working a lot of times you’d have those people that would come in that would not want you to help them because of some sort of pre-conceived image of what they have about you and your religion. And it was a little more difficult to deal with. So the first thing you go through is that anger—anger at everybody else who doesn’t understand, anger at yourself because you don’t know how to deal with it. There was a lot of doubt at certain points: should I take off the scarf? Is it going to be easier on me? And even my parents supported me. They said, “Look, if you feel like you can’t, if you’re never going to get a job or you’re never going to be viewed as yourself, go ahead, take off the scarf.” But after a lot of soul-searching, I realized that if I take it off, I’ll be losing a part of who I am.
In this excerpt, Amani shared, on a very surface level, the difficulties she encountered and continues to encounter because she wears hijab. The sharing of this story serves the purpose to demonstrate a true commitment to what the hijab symbolizes to her as a Muslim woman. She wears the headscarf because it is something that she understands to bring her closer to God. In the process of coming closer to God through the symbolic act of wearing a headscarf, she has become a stronger, more empowered woman and that has intrinsically taken hold into how she views herself as a person. Despite the mistreatment from others she received/receives due to ignorance of hijab, she still chooses to wear it, even with permission from others to take it off, because it represents and has become something that is such a valuable component of her identity.

Noor also shared stories that revolve around others’ treatment of her based on her wearing hijab. I want to highlight here that I do not share these stories to evoke sympathy or pity from readers. As Lila Abu-Lughod (2001) argues and as I argue of these highly intelligent and empowered women, Muslim women do not need saving. I share these stories because they are monumental moments that have occurred in these women’s lives and grievously, they continue to happen. What is worse is that many of these stories happened to these women when they were still youth in school. It almost seems paradoxical that in a national climate where a discourse of Islamophobia is undeniable, very contentious, and often supported by otherwise open-minded individuals, there is also a discourse of anti-bullying, where millions of dollars are poured into campaigns directed at preventing schoolyard bullying (Shepherd, 2011). Noor shared this story:

One time in particular, I forgot what grade I was in, but I think it was in junior high. I was just walking down the hall and out of nowhere this guy comes up from behind me and he just like takes his hand and he like, you know, shoves my hijab down and so like
my hair showed and I was just like so shocked! Nobody’s ever done that. And I was just like, I just stood there. And I cried and I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know why he did that. I mean, he wasn’t otherwise physically abusive. He just like came up, put his hand over my head and put the hijab down. And I was just like, “Oh my God!” We had a police officer; he’s kind of like a security guard or something for our school. He didn’t do anything. I mean, it’s like he gave him a warning and I mean, this was after school. I was at my locker on my way out and he was like, “Oh, you shouldn’t have done that. Don’t do that again.” And he just walked out. And I’m like, “No!” and I just stood there. And I cried for 10 minutes. I couldn’t even move or, I felt so numb. And I was like, “Why did that just happen?” I felt so embarrassed too because you know, I haven’t shown my hair and now everybody is like looking around and looking at me. I was so vulnerable and I felt so embarrassed.

I asked if anyone had come up to console her. She said that no one had and “I felt very isolated and that’s why I was crying ‘cause I felt so embarrassed and I felt alone and I just really couldn’t understand why anyone would do that.” There are several factors at play in this narrative that demand attention. For one, religion aside for one very brief moment, this is undeniably a case of bullying where a student’s body and space were violated and the enforcer of safety, the police officer, dismissed the violation thus contributing to a culture (of bullying) that accepts that kind of behavior. Second, Noor’s initial emotions in this incident besides shock were embarrassment, vulnerability, and isolation, though she did not instigate nor invite the violation. This speaks to an internalization of such events that are sonorously unfair and misplaced.

It is interesting when we start to think about internalizing such events, how we experience them as Noor described, and how that interacts with discussions of terrorism and fear.
When people experience such events, they do encounter fear. And especially when similar events happen more than once, fear becomes a nagging force constantly in the back of their minds.

Bullying is often talked about in terms of kids terrorizing other kids through intimidation and fear. When Noor talks about her fear-invoking experience of bullying, can it not be said that one kid is terrorizing her in this moment? Or does that language not take effect in this instance because she is a Muslim and we have to be careful when we use the word “terror” if there is a Muslim, especially if it’s meant to describe the non-Muslim in the story? Sure, most conversations in news media regarding terror is about mass killings and governmental entities being targets, etc.; but we cannot deny that in many instances, these same words are used in different contexts but are excusable if they are “kids being kids” or have nothing to do with Muslim kids. Furthermore, it is even more rare that we talk about the bullying that truly does exist within adult populations that takes place beyond the schoolyard.

What makes Noor’s incident particularly problematic too, though, is that this was indeed a gendered experience. So it becomes elevated not only to an instance of bullying, where a head covering of one student was removed forcefully by another, but to an instance of sexual harassment, where a male student forcefully removed the religious head covering of a female student in a public space. When a woman decides to wear hijab, only her husband and men in her family are allowed to see her without it (her hair). The action made by this boy was unsolicited and meant to humiliate. Because the hijab is a religious symbol of modesty, a woman’s relationship between herself and God, she was violated; her rights as a woman, as an American citizen were violated. The fact that the police officer did almost nothing in this situation demonstrates a systemic ignorance to Islamic culture and/or support of sexually discriminating/hostile educational environments for women, particularly those of certain
religious affiliations. This type of (in)action greatly contributes to maintaining and validating an Islamophobic discourse by literally policing the (lack of) rights for (Muslim) women.

Noor shared another story, this time not centered around the *hijab*, except that she is identified as Muslim because she does wear it. This event happens after the aforementioned story, speaking to Noor’s strength and conviction in her faith in that even though she was humiliated when a boy pulled off her scarf in the hall at school, she still chose to continue wearing her symbol of faith. She illustrated:

> Again in school, I was just walking down the hallway, minding my own business and there were a couple of girls just standing in front of the stairs. And I couldn’t get to the stairs, I couldn’t pass them. So I said, “Please excuse me” and then one girl said, “Ah move over; she’s trying to pass.” The other [girl], she’s like, she looked at me and gave me the dirtiest look ever and she’s like “I’m not gonna move for no Muslim!”

Even the youth are not exempt from Islamophobia.

> At this point I want to recall the misconception that was just discussed, and that is that Muslim women are oppressed and subservient to Muslim men. I invoke Faith to remind us of this conversation. She shared:

> I guess for Muslim men you know, I feel like the common stereotype is they’re bad; they’re bad and they don’t really care. For Muslim women, I feel like there’s this narrative that we’re still kind of victims and we still need this constant protection from these “bad Muslim men.” And that’s, that’s also something that’s very hard to fight because again, there are issues that we’re still dealing with. And there are injustices that we’re dealing with as Muslim women.
I use her quote to reemphasize that the misconception exists that Muslim women are viewed as victims without agency and need constant protection from “bad Muslim men” while also introducing the new idea that there are some very real issues within the Muslim communities that Muslim women face based on perceived gender differences. What is important to mention in terms of Noor’s stories of mistreatment as a Muslim-identified woman in public contexts within the discussion of Muslim women as a whole being viewed as in need of protection from “bad Muslim men,” is that Muslim women are in fact NOT being protected by a non-Muslim public. As Noor’s stories demonstrate, they are often targets of mistreatment from non-Muslims, perhaps in some ways more so than men because they are easily identifiable as Muslim if they are wearing hijab. While the discourse itself is problematic is essentializing all Muslim women as without agency or rights, it further contradicts itself when in the same breath, it encourages or enables participants within the discourse to think it is okay/their right to bully/terrorize/subject Muslim women to discrimination.

Furthermore, Islamophobia disallows any outward conversation to happen about actual gender discrimination within Muslim communities due to cultural interpretations. This idea is discussed in more length in the culture and Islam section, but it is reemphasized here in that it is directly connected to misconceptions of Muslims and Muslim women that disable constructive conversation to happen in more effective and efficient ways. Similarly, any critique of happenings within the Muslim community then become hushed topics outside of the Muslim community because they become more fodder for outside criticism and for those problems to be taken out of context. For example, while Noor encounters bullying from non-Muslim peers, Heather talked about the bullying she and her kids have experienced because of their non-Arab identities within a certain Muslim community. She shared:
My son was bullied to the point of, he was sick. Like you know really bad, to this day, I think he still suffers the after-effects of it. Really bad. And they used to call ‘em [her kids] like “white girl” and you know make fun of ‘em. They used to call me the “white lady.”

In sharing this, she expressed that all groups are prone to cruelty and making mistakes—it is a human problem that needs to be addressed on a human level. However, it becomes very difficult to mention this kind of example in larger conversations because such stories are easily taken control of and transformed into stories of Muslims being anti-American or evil/bad people by nature versus exuding unfortunate though common human qualities.

Noor included critiques of different cultural practices that take place based on gender in Muslim countries. She stated, “I’ve actually heard and seen people say that, you know, Islam is really unfair to women, especially like in the Middle East. There, I mean, it’s crazy over there!” Here, Noor actually agreed with many non-Muslims who say that the ways in which Islam is practiced in the Middle East is degrading to women. While this statement is broad and others, including Noor, would qualify that not everyone in the whole Middle East practices an oppressive Islam towards women, she made a cultural distinction of how Islam is performed in some countries versus how it can be performed in the United States. So here, Noor said that Islam is not unfair to women theologically speaking; rather, it is a cultural misappropriation of the faith that warrants criticism. However, this point is not often heard by Islamophobic publics.

Liyana brought the conversation of Muslim women’s perceived lack of rights and their perceived oppression back to their choice to wear the headscarf. To the misperceptions about hijab in general, Liyana laughed as she urged, “Just because she covers her hair that means she’s “subservient” and you’d be surprised! You go into an Arab home and you SEE who the real boss
is!” Here, because of her own Arab and Muslim identities, she conflated the two because they do complement each other in this performance of power within her Muslim/Arab household. This performance, nonetheless, is contrary to what a misconceived discourse projects about women in such contexts. These women presented these statements as misconceptions because for them, they do not feel oppressed as Muslim women, they do not believe that Islam is degrading towards women, they do not feel forced to wear *hijab*, and they do have agency.

There are numerous other misconceptions or overgeneralizations about Islam and Muslim women that the women identified. Amani presented the idea of arranged marriages and that non-Muslims often think that she has no say in her choice of partner or of not getting married at all. Amani was quick to demystify this as resonating with cultural practice versus Islamic practice. Rashida talked about the perception of heightened abuse in Muslim partnerships. To this, she explained that non-Muslims often stereotype:

> Muslim women being abused by their husbands. And I just, I said “Take a look at statistics. Muslim women are not alone. This is a plight for ALL women and we ALL have to work together to stop it.” Muslim, Christian, Jew, atheist, non-denominational, I don’t care where it comes from; it has to be stopped! And it’s not Muslim women alone who are suffering although yes, it does exist and it’s horrific. It’s horrific wherever it exists…. Psychologically, it’s a problem. The women need treatment and the men need treatment.

Rashida spoke back to such overgeneralizations by redirecting the arguments back into their larger contexts. She did not deny that domestic abuse exists in some Muslim marriages, but she made the case also that these instances also exist across religious lines and that domestic abuse does not discriminate by religious creed. She presented this problem as a human problem, not
only a problem experienced by women, but also by men, alluding to a systemic problem of violence within our society. This repositioning of the issue of domestic violence is strategic in that it erases perceived barriers based on religion to bring attention to a problem that is experienced by too many women and men in our society, in the world as a whole. Rashida’s communicative act works to reposition an “us versus them” argument to an “all of us who can agree that this horrible issue that impacts us all” location, thus making it very difficult for one to not acknowledge that her thinking doesn’t make at least some sense. This is a strategic rhetorical move in once again, breaking down an “us versus them” paradigm and encouraging others to see similarities within and through diversity.

Another common misconception that the women identified was that Muslims are assumed to all be from the Middle East. Lindsay explained:

When people think of a Muslim, they’re thinking of like an Arab who lives like in Iraq or something like that. It’s like no, no the majority of them are not Arab…a Muslim doesn’t have to be from the Middle East.

Similarly, Sara said, “When most people hear the term Muslim, they think automatically Middle Eastern.” The combination of Muslim/Middle Eastern then conjures up the idea “that they hate Americans…. That they hate anyone who has democracy as a government; that they hate anyone who supports…policies that are aggressive or not compassionate to people who are in need.” Yet again, we see an essentialized image of what a Muslim looks like which includes character traits that limit an understanding of the diversity that exists among Muslims across the world and in the United States.

Working towards the same ends but from a different angle, Zaina described how those identified as from the Middle East first (thus Muslim second or not primarily Muslim) are targets
of similar marginalizing sentiments that group them in the same categories as Muslims. Zaina was certain to make clear that “just because you’re from the Middle East doesn’t automatically mean you are Muslim.” The assumption in this statement is that if one is perceived to be Middle Eastern, then they are automatically assumed to be Muslim. This disallows any acknowledgement of the millions of Jews, Christians, non-religious, and other spiritually identified who live in the Middle East and claim those ethnicities. So not only are these stereotypes and Islamophobic discourse limiting the freedoms of Muslims, they are limiting those of others from the Middle East from being acknowledged and initially accepted by an American public from even having a voice.

Zaina also presented that a common taunt directed at Muslims is “go back to where you came from.” She described how this statement is above all, hurtful. Besides that, it is problematic in that it assumes a foreign otherness about the person at whom it is directed. When this insult is directed at her, it is particularly confusing because she was born in the United States, in Toledo, where she still lives. So to say, “go back to where you came from” makes no sense unless the person means to actually crawl back into her mother’s uterus. Perhaps this last statement can be read as unprofessional and unbecoming of a scholar, but I’m disinclined to remove it because though it is abrupt and acerbic, so too is the statement “go back to where you came from.” My point isn’t to be disrespectful for the pure reason that such a person should lack my respect; indeed, as hard as it would be to constrain myself, that goes against my feminist ethic. But my reason for making such a caustic statement is to demonstrate the absurdity of such jeers that lack any form of creativity as they are reproductions of a discourse that discourages any critical thinking. A minute of critical thinking before projecting such a statement may lead to a person thinking that perhaps the chosen target of said insult may in fact be from this country and/or city,
thus rendering the statement null and void, thus ineffective in the situation, in which case, its actual verbalizing would indicate incredible ineptitude on behalf of the injurer.

Indeed, there are numerous misconceptions about Muslims, Muslim women, and Islam that are instilled by an Islamophobic discourse. The women are acutely aware of these misconceptions and experience them often, to the point where some are sadly referred to as “the usual stuff” which indicates a normalization of such insults, accusations, and statements made towards Muslims and Muslim women. Such indicators, products, and regulating features of an Islamophobic discourse instill a feeling of otherness, inability to be heard, and oftentimes fear in Muslim women. For non-Muslims, these features work to discourage critical thinking and perpetuate a climate of suspicion and fear of (an entirely misunderstood) enemy. What can result is a continued practice of stereotyping and misperception on all sides, which creates more distance between neighbors, community members, and cultures. By increasing the distance between supposed groups of difference and continually buttressing walls to prevent intercultural understanding, then, we prime ourselves for further conflict and misunderstanding. Rashida explained how this is happening among Muslims today, using herself as an example:

I think the misconceptions, too, go back and forth because I have misconceptions about people when they look at me. And the classic example is when I met my friend who ended up converting [to Islam]. The first time I walked into the school [both their kids’ attended] wearing hijab…I walked into the classroom and she was just staring at me from across the room. And I thought, “If looks could kill, I would be six feet under right now.” I thought, “Oh my god, for sure she hated me just because I wore the scarf.” She came over to me later that afternoon and she’s just like [in a soft voice], “Hi;” introduced herself and she’s like, “Can we exchange numbers? I’d love for our kids to play together.
I want my kids to be raised with morals and your kids have such good manners.” And I was like whoa! It was the complete opposite of what I had perceived. So I think it’s a back and forth thing: Muslim women need to, we need to, especially me, get over the “what are they thinking?” and just be. And on the other side of it is don’t look at a Muslim woman and think you know her when you haven’t talked to her. Like don’t do that. And then don’t judge all Muslim women by a couple. [If] You see someone who lost her temper once or whatever, I mean it’s a human being losing her temper! It’s not [a Muslim thing]. So we all have to be more open-minded about each other, I think is important, and to accept that we are all humans. Like I’m not a super hero because I have a scarf! I can’t fly! I’m going to be impatient at times and I’m going to break down at times and I’ll be strong at other times but that’s human nature and we all have that in us and we have to accept it from each other that we have those human weaknesses and strife and it’s okay.

In this sharing, Rashida garnered a warning to everyone implicated within an Islamophobic discourse that these more or less illusions of control and superiority are just that—illusory—and that in whole, they work to diminish the quality of life and opportunities for connection for all of us. Ultimately, we are all human and are all susceptible to weakness and strife, but so too are we all human in our desire to raise healthy, happy, well-adjusted kids. At least, that is the assumption being made in such statements that attempt to override the negative, fear-based messages inherent in hegemonic discourses such as Islamophobia. Overall, Rashida said that as critics of Islamophobia, it is not enough nor is it fair to point the finger only primarily at non-Muslims or at Muslims who give Islam a bad name, but that it’s important that everyday Muslims themselves be aware of how they too are complicit in similar discursive practices that
Islamophobia uses, only directed in a converse manner. To break free of this revolving system of oppression, Rashida alluded to the need to be able to identify when the same practices are being pursued but with different aims in mind. In enacting her agency to make such goals for herself and challenge her Muslim sisters and larger non-Muslim community as a whole to more critically engage in their own interactions, Rashida contributed yet again to a pro-woman Islamic discourse that empowers women to contest and break free of the systems of oppression that work to stifle and limit their ability to connect with each other.

**Misrepresentations in the Media**

Today is YOUR day. You wake up on your own to the sound of birds chirping and the soft brush of the warm sun upon your cheek. You stretch your limbs as far as they go, reaching to opposite sides of the bed in perfect, exhilarating release. You bounce up to a sitting position on the side of the bed, get in one more calf stretch as your arch your back toward the mattress to greet the morning air. You stand to the side of your bed, close your eyes, and breathe in deeply as you meditate in morning prayer. You feel the wholeness of your body—how every muscle in intricately connected to another that enables graceful movements—as you methodically move in rhythm with your prayer. You open your eyes once again to greet the luminosity of the day feeling rejuvenated and blessed.

You slip on your comfy, fluffed up brown house shoes that have been through the dryer perhaps one too many times, but you dare not part with these longtime friends that hug your heel, your toes in warm embrace. You promenade to the beat of life around you as you make your way to the kitchen. You breathe in heavily…mmm! The aroma of freshly brewed Arabica engulfs your senses. You can already taste the tang of the beans, the neutralizing cream of that newly purchased vanilla dream coffee mate upon your tongue, and feel the caffeine gently climb and
cloak your veins. You feel absolutely refreshed and affirmed in your choice of preparing the coffee pot and setting the timer to go off automatically the night before. What a pleasant surprise to this already luxurious morning!

The sun casts a warm glow on the side wall of the kitchen, tracing the shadows of springing finches and buzzing hummingbirds around the flowers just outside the window that frame the miraculous view of a lone buckeye tree in the front yard, large and strong with its thick waves of leaves dancing in the morning breeze. The sky is a brilliant blue, dotted with soft puffs of white cloud accenting its tapestry. You lean back comfortably on the edge of the counter, cradling your warm coffee mug in both hands up to your amused grin. You close your eyes as you inhale the fragrance of the coffee. You feel the warm liquid make its way down your throat and warm your soul slowly till it hits your stomach. You open your eyes refreshed and with an enhanced sense of awareness. You think to yourself, “Today is the perfect day for a walk.”

You carry your coffee mug with you as if it is attached to your hand as you make your way to the bedroom to put on your walking clothes. ::sip:: You reach out your hand to put the mug down—oh wait! ::Sip!:: Ah! Much better. You place the mug down on the worn oak dresser, a hand-me-down from sister-brother-mother-aunt-grandfather…. Its stains and blemishes bear the memories of family and trace the genealogy of a recent and distant past. You open the drawer near the top right corner, the one with the mismatched handle from when Brother took up the hobby of carpentry at the age of eight and decided his first project would be, at the time, his dresser drawer. You pull the circular metal handle that reads “Made in America” to open your trove of workout regalia. Where’s the coffee? Oh! ::sip:: You reach down and are too excited to get on with your journey to care what item you fetch. Good—a pair of pants, Adidas with its distinct white stripe down the sides of the legs, will be perfect for this late spring morning.
You open the drawer to the left as you close the pants’ drawer, this time pulling out a semi-worn t-shirt that reads “Midwest Women’s Soccer Invitational 2001” from your days on the community women’s soccer team. You smile at the memory of that tournament. You and your team were losing horribly and while it had never been the team’s intention to be competitive, you had all somehow made it to the Invitational. Morale was down and the laughter and smiles that usually permeated the game were somewhere lost in a hole in the dirt on the field, perhaps even on the field next to the one on which you all found yourselves. Then, it happened. You saw the other team’s players charging toward you, ball in the lead and they looked like bulls, bulls with their horns pointing right at you, their nostrils expelling clouds of air and snot and their squinting eyes raging red, rushing in for the kill—you. You saw this and had the milisi-mili-milisecond thought that you should take this seriously, but you couldn’t help but see how ridiculous these bull-snot-women-with-a-5lb-ball looked! You started busting out laughing as their faces contorted from anger and tenacity to confusion while their feet didn’t quite get the message on time and they all crashed right into you. It was as if these four women and you had staged a long-awaited group hug for a movie where none of you had seen each other in years which required the running of numerous yards at high rates of speed with arms wide open and the camera panning out into slow motion as finally you all collided after the agony of the long awaited embrace. In this moment, there were five of you girls, covered in mud, hair starting on one girl’s head and somehow mixing and ending on another’s, legs entangled in knee-high dirty socks and shin guards and polyester uniforms, all laughing in those hard-to-breathe, no-sound-really-coming-out, air-filled, snorting laughs that make you laugh even more because of their obscenity in all things lady-like. You sigh, “Those were the days.”
Finally, you grab the piece of cloth that is wrapped around the bedpost among others similar to it yet varying in color, ornamentation, and graphic design. You choose a plain one, sky blue to match the beautiful day and your black and grey outfit. You wrap it around your hair as you’ve done hundreds of times before, quickly check yourself out in the mirror, grab your coffee ::sip:: and you’re ready to go!

You make your way out the front door, through the tulip-lined garden that greets visitors from the driveway, and onto the neighborhood sidewalk. You march to the cadence of Lady Gaga’s “Born this Way” as it strums through your head. Having left your Ipod at home, you find the beat of your head-song matching the world around you. “My mama told me when I was young, we were all born superstars…”

You feel on top of the world. You are struttin’ down the street. You feel your hips move to the lyrics in your head, you feel your lips mouth the words “She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on, in the glass of her boudoir…” Skip, hop, step, Yeah!

About two houses down in front of you, you see a mother standing with a toddler hooked to her leg and a stroller carrying a younger child. The mother is talking to another woman; you assume the resident of the home of which they stand in front. You smile as you push forward, thinking about how nice it is to live in a neighborhood where families know their neighbors, talk to each other, and take walks in the middle of the day with their kids. The young toddler swings from her mother’s hand on one foot as she gazes around her. She spots you and turns to face you. You approach the women and children as they are centered on the sidewalk and you slow down to respectfully acknowledge them and move over. The child looks up at you and you smile at her. You slightly bend down so that the child can more easily see your face and say, “Good morning!
How are you today?” The child squirms with delight and smiles the contagious smile that only children can do as she stomp-jumps with giddiness.

You proceed to straighten yourself to continue forward and smile in acknowledgement at the women talking, as you notice that the child’s mother briskly pulls her child by her shoulders across her body, causing the child to stumble over her mother’s feet before recollecting her balance on the other side of her mother, furthest away from you. You see the indent marks on the girl’s shirt from where her mother’s fingers gripped. Now, her mother’s hand is turning the stroller away from you as if your gaze into it would contaminate the soul lying asleep. The look on the woman’s face is contorted in a way that you can’t understand. Is it anger? Suspicion? Fear? You don’t know what it is but it has trapped your breath, paralyzed your legs, forced your heart to stop beating, and you’re choking on silence. The mother glares laser-burning beams into you as she directs her flock into the house. You stand there unable to move and in utter disbelief. As the garage door reaches the halfway point in its descent, you see the little girl peek from behind her mother’s leg…

and wave.

“There’s nothing’ wrong with lovin’ who you are, she said, ‘cause he made you perfect, babe…”

The tune starts to pick up in your head as if the track had been running all the while. Sounds around you start to filter back into your consciousness and you feel the blood start to regain its flow. You stare down at your shoes with tear-filled eyes, unsure of where these warm puddles that accumulate at your feet are coming from. You become aware of your surroundings
and cautiously look up and around to see if there were any witnesses to the event. You are humiliated, embarrassed for thinking today was a beautiful day. You’re ashamed for trying to greet the child; “Why didn’t I just keep walking?” you admonish yourself. Deflated, you retreat back the way you came, noticing the sounds of life quiet as you trudge past, as if the earth knows what you have done.

You quietly creep back into your house, this time using the side door instead of the front so that no one can see you return so soon from your walk. You maintain your composure until the door is shut tightly behind you. You push on it once more just to make sure the lock sealed, then slide to the floor, dropping your head between your legs and your arms over your head.

Breathe in ::sniff sniff::  Breathe out:: sniff sniff::
Breathe ::sniff:: in ::sniff sniff::  Breath out ::sniff::
Breathe in…

“So hold your head up girl and you, you’ll go far…”

“So hold your head up girl and you’ll go far…hold your head up girl…hold your head up…” You hold your head up and wipe the burning remnants of tears as traces still accumulate in the corners of your eyes. It hurts. You try to give the woman the benefit of the doubt. You try to think to yourself “maybe she’s just having a bad day.” “Maybe it was something else entirely.” But you’ve had enough experiences like this and enough checking in with yourself and others like you who wear hijab to know or at the very least feel that it isn’t out of the ballpark that perhaps it was because the woman saw you and thought something bad or was afraid.
You get angry at this thought but remember that “our days are happier when we give people a bit of our heart rather than a piece of our mind.”

You want to scream “I’m a person,
woman,
daughter,
sister,
mother,
aunt,
neighbor,
teacher,
community member,
Buckeye,
American,
Harry Potter-loving,
Midwestern knitting,
open-minded,
tax paying,
Liberal, conservative, moderate,
fourth-generation Anglo-Saxon, first-generation German, third-generation Palestinian, second generation Lebanese, first generation Desi,
HUMAN BEING

who wants the best for this world, for you, for me, for OUR children!”
But you remember what Sam and so many of your mentors have said, and that is that unless they have an open mind, they’re never going to hear you. So you remind yourself of their words: “You do much better by your actions than by your talk.” You sit yourself up and sigh away your defeatist affect. You remember that this event didn’t just happen today. This event has happened many times before. And many times before, you’ve been able to hold your head up. You straighten your *hijab* and push away some flailing hairs, remembering the smile of the child.

And that memory leaves you with a smile.

*THE WOMEN IN THIS STUDY IDENTIFIED MANY (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS OF THEMSELVES AND OF MUSLIMS IN GENERAL STEMMING FROM DIFFERENT FORMS OF MEDIA, PARTICULARLY FROM TELEVISED NEWS. THE COMPOSITE NARRATIVE ABOVE ENCOMPASSES THE SENTIMENTS THAT MANY OF THE WOMEN HAVE EXPERIENCED DUE TO THESE MISREPRESENTATIONS. SEVERAL WOMEN EXPRESSED A PARTICULAR SHIFT IN THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH NON-MUSLIMS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING 9/11 AND ALL OF THEM SHARED THE GROWTH OR RESURGES IN NEGATIVE SENTIMENT WITH SUBSEQUENT INCIDENCES SUCH AS MAJOR NIDAL HASAN’S SHOOTING ON FORT HOOD IN 2009 AND UMAR FAROUK ABDULMUTALLAB’S (OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE “UNDERWEAR BOMBER”) UNSUCCESSFUL BOMBING ATTEMPT ON A FLIGHT FROM AMSTERDAM TO DETROIT, MICHIGAN IN 2009. WHEREAS MUSLIM WOMEN PERCEIVED THEMSELVES AS BEING ABLE TO MOVE ABOUT MORE FREELY IN PUBLIC SPACES BEFORE THE ATTACKS ON THE WORLD TRADE CENTER, THEY SOON FOUND THEMSELVES FACING THE INABILITY TO TRaverse THOSE SAME SPACES WITHOUT BEING NOTICED, AT LEAST IF THEY WORE *Hijab*.
and/or were racially/ethnically perceived as being from the Middle East (which often mistakenly includes those from the Indian subcontinent and parts of Europe). It is vital to understand that these excerpts and examples are not shared to evoke sympathy from an audience. To do that would encourage a sense of pity, which is entirely counterproductive to these types of conversations and more importantly, leads to a re-colonizing and further subjugation of these women.

I share these stories because they are vital parts of these women’s narratives in understanding who they are and are constantly becoming. The important message to gain from these sections is that these women have learned how to use these experiences as fuel to further do good in the world. They use such instances to further promote patience and compassion within themselves and to guide the ways that they teach their own children. This is not to say that it is always easy and that they do not have moments of doubt, anger, and exhaustion. Additionally, as will be seen in their accounts, these women have adopted a way of speaking and a way of thinking that almost always either provides the offender(s) 1) the benefit of the doubt or 2) excuses their behavior as due to lack of information or mis-education, thus further attesting to women’s commitment to compassion and patience. Furthermore, these accounts are given their own section within the larger conversation of the women’s experiences with mistreatment, ignorance, and hate/fear because of the association these women make between the particular stories and media.

Crystal starts the conversation by stating that it is “definitely, definitely” harder to think of positive images of Muslim women in the media, something that the other women articulated as well. She said that Muslim women are often portrayed as “sad, tragic figures” in the moments when they are afforded media attention and not subsumed by the general image of Muslims as a
whole being anti-American extremists. This sad, tragic image is often wrapped in a black-clad, faceless package, which is meant to symbolize oppression and lack of human dignity from a mediated perspective. Angel described, “Most common media…usually portray a woman wearing all black and sometimes eyes showing, sometimes eyes not. Which is…a lot of times culture-based and not really religion based. Similarly, Crystal stated:

There’s so many images of Muslim women who are wearing these dark veils and the face veil and you know, it’s fine because there’s obviously Muslim women who dress that way. But the problem is that it becomes the overarching image and it affects just how we see Muslim women in general.

Here, Angel nor Crystal denied that black is a color worn by some Muslim women and some Muslim women do indeed wear clothing that shows only their eyes or even conceals their eyes. But what they pointed out as a problem is the overrepresentation of this image being used to construct a monolithic image of what a Muslim woman does/can look like. The particular “look” and thus embodied performance of a Muslim woman then becomes essentialized in the way that she dresses down to the very color that she wears. Furthermore, any discussion of cultural influence and choice is denied access to the discussion through these media representations, thus making it more difficult for everyday Muslims in the United States and elsewhere to 1) identify with mediated representations of themselves and 2) combat others’ misperceptions of them when the majority of others’ (non-Muslims) most consistent exposure to Muslims comes through media. The everyday women then become the exception to the rule rather than the common experience, permitting the misperception to still achieve a powerful hold in the minds of mis-educated others.
Additionally, there is a general misunderstanding about what liberation and modesty mean between Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly in the United States. While I will not go deeply into this discussion as there are numerous great works that focus specifically on this issue (e.g., Ahmed, 1992; Mahmood, 2005; Wadud, 1999; Wadud, 2006), I will mention it within the contexts in which the women alluded and/or described it. In talking about media representations of Muslim women through internet memes (see Appendix), Lindsay presented:

I just posted a couple weeks ago a little meme to my Facebook where you have a Muslim woman and an American [non-Muslim] woman passing each other on the street. And the Muslim woman is in all black; she’s got a *niqab* on. And no sunglasses. The white woman is walking by and she’s got blonde hair and she’s got her sunglasses and she’s got a little bikini and there are little thought bubbles above them. And the Muslim woman goes, “That poor thing, not an inch of clothing on her. Only her eyes are covered. She is in such a male-oppressed society.” And then the white woman wearing the bikini has a little bubble going, “Oh that poor thing. Every inch of her covered except her eyes. She lives in such a male-dominated society.” And so it just makes me laugh because I think there is that dialogue going on, to say it’s not about Muslim women being oppressed, it’s about all women and that we need to work together because if we start fighting amongst ourselves, we’re going to be in trouble.

Here, Lindsay exercised her agency to partake in and extend a conversation and confrontation of the stereotypical images associated with not only Muslim women and their perceived oppression through dress, but with concepts of female objectification and liberation as a whole in American society. She made the point that this is a women’s issue before it’s a Muslim issue, and that
perhaps through uniting on a gender front, they can be more powerful in dismantling oppressive patriarchal structures on a social level than fighting against each other on religious levels.

If women are not being portrayed as oppressed, sad, or tragic, they are often subsumed into the general discourse that illustrates all Muslims as extremists/terrorists. With this representation comes images of an angry/raging, anti-western/anti-American/anti-democratic/anti-modern, violent woman. Rashida described in detail how this image and representation of her impacts her life:

The first image was like a Muslim woman in hijab with an Allahu Allah on her headband, in a rage. And I think that the idea that a Muslim woman is somehow seen as a political figure of anti-West or anti-modernity or anti-democracy so it affects me because when I walk down the street then, I’m not seen as part of this democratic society or as somebody who looks positively on it. But I feel like that message makes me the outsider. I’m so desperately trying to not be [outside]. I wish the images of the women I know was in the media: the nurturer, the one who is out at the food shelters, who’s helping the homeless, who’s nursing their elderly parents, the one who is just returning a smile from somebody who was mean. I mean ‘cause that’s the reality to me of a Muslim woman. That is exactly who we are: the woman who helps build communities and helps brings society together. But instead since you see media and Muslim women, that’s what I see. Or I see the other extreme which is the faceless voiceless Taliban girl who has nothing to live for. Who’s just in isolation. And I shouldn’t say she is, I don’t know what her life is, but what seemingly to us seems as confined human being. So I wish that the images would be more real to who we are as human beings, more in tune with the everyday lives of the people and not the extremes on either side of it. Those extremes need to be addressed, but
they don’t represent what we are, you know? Just as in any other peoples who have extremes. It’s not the norm; they’re the fringes.

Here, Rashida described two options through which the media provides an understanding of Muslim women: that of the political extremist who is to be feared and silenced and that of the helpless, oppressed, child-like figure who is to be pitied. Rashida demonstrated how neither image applies to her life and that they work to further ostracize her from a community of which she truly is a part yet already feels separated from even without the help of media. The media works to further reinforce her otherness and while it can be argued that the media functions to help others (non-Muslims) target and regulate those who are in need of it (such as Muslims), the media also works to further isolate Muslims themselves and imbue them with self-doubt and uncertainty, as is evidenced by Rashida’s reaction to these images. Rashida did offer suggestions to the media and described what she would like to see, indicating the reality of her experience as a Muslim woman in the United States that includes a diversity of Muslim bodily performances other than those demonstrated through the media. The question remains: what can she, the others in the project, and we as researchers and readers do the make this happen?

Along with these images of Muslim women come an overall attention to violence that the media pays when talking about Islam, the Muslim world, Islamists, and therefore by association, Muslims. Sara explained:

In the media…violence gets a lot of attention. In the media, really it’s all violence.
Whether it’s saying something mean, it’s violent, because it hurts someone. In the media, stories about… a death coming out of fighting, like the wars. The wars get a lot of coverage. And not everyone understands what’s on both sides of the wars. Really for me,
the violence, the violence in the media and they equate that violence in the media with a
certain mentality and a certain faith, and that’s really the minority of the people.

Sara explained that while media do not always directly or overtly proclaim, “This act was done
by ‘A Muslim,’” the terms associated with these stories, the contexts in which they are presented,
and the lack of clarity in saying to the effect of, “This is an isolated group that most Muslim
communities condemn,” insinuate or allow a more or less passive or uncritical audience to make
incorrect or overblown associations between such violence and everyday Muslims. This is
problematic for Muslim women in demystifying their identities in everyday circumstances
because a host of negative associations are already attributed to them before they even have an
opportunity to speak in many cases.

For instance, Sara gave an example of a group of Muslim women trying to do some good
in their community when they were faced with incredible discrimination from a group of non-
Muslims whom they did not know. Sara told the story:

There is a battered women’s shelter that is either run and operated by an Islamic
community or is funded [by the community]. The Islamic community was donating to
this battered women’s shelter. And when the community had decided that they were
going to gather and bring their stuff to the shelter. There were people protesting outside
the shelter trying to PROHIBIT the Muslim women from taking in food, clothing, dishes,
household items for the women who were leaving the shelter and getting their own space.

Something that is heavily disregarded in media accounts of Islam as a faith is the requirement,
one of the five pillars of Islam, of zakat, or charitable giving. For those who can afford it, this
means paying a portion of their earnings to charities, community organizations, etc. Another part
of it is volunteering your time and service to others. Aside from zakat, part of being a good
Muslim and a good human being in general is doing good for others and one’s community. For example, the women in this study partake in near-endless amounts of volunteering and charity, including partaking in their children’s school events, donating to shelters, serving at soup kitchens, raising money for Multiple Sclerosis, raising awareness for Down Syndrome, tutoring children in lower-income neighborhoods, and collecting and boxing supplies to send to those in need following Hurricane Sandy. These stories aren’t heard amid the constant barrage of war updates and Muslim-bashing that happens, and among the questions of “What happens to our national security if…” or “Should we more closely monitor foreign students’ [i.e., specifically those who come from Muslim countries] visas?” When the stories of the contributions these women make to the community are not heard to offset or at least supplement the discussions of war and adverse activity that happens in the world due to some, a large population of people become wrongly cast by the actions of a few, which has most certainly happened in the case of Muslim women.

The women also shared everyday interpersonal instances of discrimination that they attribute to the messages the media portray about Muslims and Muslim women. With her young daughter on her lap, squealing and pining for our attention and Dora the Explorer playing in the background, Angel shared her experiences following 9/11, when at the time, she was in middle/high school:

[Pre-9/11] I’d smile at a child and they’d smile back at me and the parents would be like “Hi, how are you?” And I’m like, “Good” and, “You have such a nice kid and such and such.” And then after 9/11, if I were to just glance and just smile, not even say anything, they’d grab their child and hide them behind them as if I was going to eat them.
This dramatic shift in others’ reaction towards Angel over such a short period of time indicates a powerful discourse at play that had to be constructed or amplified very quickly and transmitted highly efficiently. Given those requisites, it isn’t a far stretch to consider her assertion that media is a primary channel through which those messages were delivered. What is interesting is to note the power of those messages given that at the time that 9/11, she, for all intents and purposes, was a young teenager. So, even Muslim youth were/are not spared from Islamophobic discourse. She continued to talk about immediate actions that occurred in her school following the attacks:

I was in school when the massacre [9/11] happened actually and people started coming and police officers started coming to make sure nothing was happening, but you could get the feeling that the police officers weren’t comfortable doing it either. You’d get that “We’re doing our job but there’s something wrong with you guys [Muslim students].” And we’re like, “C’mon we’re students. What’s wrong with us, you know?” I mean, I was actually proud to be a Muslim then because to me, I know who I am and I know Islam and Muslims aren’t as they were being told by the media.

Along with the actual media discourse, the institutional actions of the school were (perhaps inadvertently) concretizing those sentiments by enhancing security without providing a reason or articulating a perceived threat (at least not one that was remembered by Angel). This type of action further marginalized Muslim students because the lack of discussion about the increased police presence was filled by students’, faculty’s, administrators’, and perhaps even the law enforcement’s understandings from the media that if the Muslim students/perceived Arab students were not there, there would be no threat.

Also, an opportunity for connection exists for Angel today: her children. Mothers (and fathers) often find opportunities for interaction, even in situations where only a salutation is
exchanged, a knowing look is exchanged when a child is crying in the grocery store, everyday occurrences where parents nonverbally or verbally commiserate with other parents based on having kids. However, that opportunity is taken away in some circumstances, even though Angel has her children in tote, because she is perceived negatively due to her outward Muslim appearance. This limits her ability for contact with others and therefore relegates her to the margins.

Most of the women in this study have experienced overt discrimination in-person due to them being marked (Nagel & Staeheli, 2005), read, and understood as being Muslim. The few women who said that they had never experienced mistreatment, would say this, though it would be followed up later in conversation with, “if there was an occasion, it was quickly dealt with…” or “this one time….” So it is interesting to note that in the telling of these experiences, what constitutes an act of discrimination or mistreatment is qualified by some other criteria, which was not brought up, or it was discounted as not being an incident. That aside, most of the women did admit to facing these circumstances, some having only experienced it a few times, and others saying that these incidences have happened “many, many, many” times. However, what the women say occur more are instances of hate and discrimination that occur online, either through social media outlets such as Facebook or through the comments sections of news articles. Crystal suggested a reason for the expressions of hate and intolerance existing more freely online than being enacted in real life:

Doing overt acts of hate or hate acts—it’ so frowned upon now [by everyone]. It’s bad person [sic.], don’t do that. Which is good but at the same time I think it can drive a lot of people’s prejudice underground or they might use it online where no one knows who they are and they can say whatever they want. I definitely think the Islamophobia’s there and I
think reading the media, reading just overt stuff you might see on Fox News by someone like Robert Spencer, it’s…it’s definitely there but it’s just, I think that it’s [hate] very hard for most people to express that overtly.

Crystal’s argument here is that Islamophobia and its perceived growth or decline cannot be measured then by overt, in-person acts of discrimination. Because it is less socially acceptable for anyone, regardless of race, creed, religion, sex, orientation, etc., to personally attack someone in person, these acts of hate move to less conspicuous spaces, such as the internet with its supposed shroud of anonymity.

Noor shared her experience of others’ comments on articles on the internet pertaining to Islam and Muslims. Noor said the articles she finds via Yahoo and Facebook, “especially if it pertains to anything about Islam, I like to read it. Then of course I scroll down to the comments and it’s just crazy…absolutely crazy.” She described this “craziness” in this way:

I just feel like people are so brave behind the computer but if they were to see a Muslim in public, they would never say anything, you know? They would just act normal. And I would NEVER guess the people who I see in public who are so warm and seem welcoming and are so nice, you know, they can go home and they can write all this stuff. I mean a lot of it for sure has to do with you know, the anonymity of…saying stuff online and not being brave enough to say it in front of their face, which is interesting because a lot of those people are supposedly religious and it’s like, you know that’s just being two-faced.

Anne contributed to this conversation by saying that not only do these prejudices become exposed online, but that the messages are presented and spread by a particular age demographic.

Anne stated:
You’ll see things on Facebook which tell you, you KNOW they’re prejudiced, you
KNOW they’re against Islam, they make these little comments, they KNOW I can see it,
you know?... The younger ones, like in their 30s, 20s and 30s, are more tolerant and
accepting and it doesn’t seem to be an issue for them. But the ones, like close to 40 and
up into the 60s, are the ones that seem to have a problem.

Anne shared that in her experience, it is not the younger generation that transmits Islamophobic
messages, at least via Facebook; rather, it is those of her generation and older that are the culprits
in the use of this platform to extend their negative views. This is interesting to note as research
moves forward in this area. While no other women make reference to this specifically in terms of
media usage, it could be beneficial to pursue such analysis, as there is a growing area of research
that indicates that a quickly growing number of social media users are middle-aged (Royal
Pingdom, 2010). This could be particularly insightful if by virtue of the social media market
being dominated by this age group, they have the largest circulation/contribution of information
that exists in social media. If this age group is more likely to foster and express such sentiments
about Muslims, then perhaps there is some relationship between that usage and the strength of
the Islamophobic discourse.

Crystal, Noor, and Anne shared that news and social media sites are not only, then,
sources of edited information from acclaimed news sources. Rather, because of the lay
contributory features of comments and discussion boards that supplement news stories, there are
opportunities for the public to engage with the material with other media users. Furthermore,
while most sites are somewhat regulated, that regulation works to not suppress the freedom of
speech of individuals—a paradox in itself which many researchers (e.g., Scott, 2004) also
critically analyze but will not be done in this work. I do, however, nod to it because despite the
regulation, messages of hate, fear, and Islamophobia get through and painstakingly often dominate that discourse of those comment areas, to which the women allude. While there are Muslims, Muslim women, and some of these women who do and have participated in such discussion boards to contribute their voices to such (non)dialogues (the lack of civility on the comment boards are often astounding), many women after a certain point choose to disengage all together and stop reading them because it becomes too painful and/or a fruitless endeavor to even try to slip a word in otherwise. Completely aware of the complicatedness and paradox in their decision to limit their global awareness via news outlets, several of these women do find themselves tired and emotionally drained from constantly engaging in such battles where ultimately no one on the opposing side even wants to try to listen; Anne expressed with exhaustion and sadness that, “I really stay away from the media.” Most of the women, however, are very involved in current events and politics, especially as it pertains to representations of their identities and of Muslim-American relations.

Angel discussed the disparity in representation of whole peoples in news media regarding terrorist actions even today:

I mean, just recently on the news they said about that massacre that guy did in the cinemas [James Holmes’ 2012 shooting at a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado]. They didn’t say that that was a terrorist act. They said that that guy was sick. So it’s just a matter of how people portray it. I mean, there’s just so many different ways people can portray crimes, and...just the fact that they said they found a Qur’an in one of the plane crashes [9/11] and the black box was destroyed, it’s a little you know hard to believe. I mean the black box was MADE so that it would be disintegrated in a fire. So how would
a Qur’an that’s made out of paper survive such a drastic thing? But it’s just the way…the message is sent out and the way people receive it.

Here, Angel described a frustration that so many other women in this project feel in terms of the representation of a person acting violently or carrying out acts of violence. If the person is found to be Muslim (and most likely non-white), s/he is automatically pegged as a terrorist, thus reifying the notion that Muslims are or are more likely to be terrorists. If the person who carries out such acts is a non-Muslim (most likely white), the person is presented as “sick” or “in need of help.” This disparity is unfair, according to these women, for several reasons. One, if the person is carrying out these actions in the name of Islam, s/he is either “not truly a Muslim” or has been “misguided.” Two, whether the person carried out the act in the name of Islam or not, the person is obviously, like her/his (white) non-Muslim counterpart, “sick” and “in need of help.” And third, all these statements still holding true, this person is still not representative, nor even near the majority, of all the people of the faith. These labels then that are associated with the person serve as extraneous information that is not included in the reporting of other stories of similar acts when those involved are not non-white/Muslim. This begs the question, then, why the extraneous information? What this information does is present a norm of someone who is white/non-Muslim but when that person commits such atrocious crimes, it does not become indicative of that population as a whole. Since the non-white/Muslim is identified by those extra adjectives, s/he becomes something extra/other than the norm, thus the other becomes representative of the whole of that particular other—Muslims. White, non-Muslim privilege then offers that group as a whole the ability to have a sick person among them who has committed a heinous act. When a non-white, Muslim person commits such a crime though, the whole group that is identified similarly (rather than identifies a similar) is accused of being evil/sick.
While the women in this study do attribute much power to the media in terms of bias and proliferation of the (Islamophobic) messages, the women admitted that it’s not the media alone that is responsible for the perpetuation of such misunderstandings and discourse. People themselves have agency in this area to educate themselves, ask questions, and be active in their media participation. However, as many of the women articulated, not everyone is equipped with such tools or knowledge of a proactive approach to their media consumption or critical thinking. For instance, Angel credited many non-Muslims’ discriminatory behavior to:

Ignorance and lack of knowledge people have…I honestly didn’t mind; it’s their perspective. It’s what they’re seeing in the media and honestly, media has a VERY big role in this. If media were to portray it more properly, they’d probably get a better reaction.

Similarly, Sara said, “So the media, whether it’s in print, on the computer, on the regular news, they have a stronghold on what the mentality is towards Muslims.” The women, in other contexts not related to media per se, do encourage non-Muslims to take a proactive stance toward messages they hear, particularly when they are indicative and/or part of an Islamophobic discourse, to combat their own mis-education and ignorance. When framing non-Muslims’ reactions in terms of mis-education and ignorance, the women are offering non-Muslims the benefit of the doubt or the grace of knowing that they are embedded in a system, a discourse, that urges them to demonize a perceived other in their own communities. The Muslim women understand that we are all implicated in such discourses and that it is not always obvious to us when it is happening, even to the Muslim women themselves. However, there is a problem when too much emphasis is placed on the media as a controlling factor. While I hear what Angel and Sara said when they described that the media does have a stronghold on a public’s perception
about certain events and people, we have to keep in mind that there is a fine line between the full excusing of hateful, marginalizing behavior towards Muslims and true ignorance and lack of knowledge. I’m not saying that Sara and Angel were wholly excusing misbehavior at all; what I’m urging is that readers do not dismiss this section as “okay, okay, we get it. Media controls this.” That is not what I’m saying. I’m asking at what point do we hold people accountable for their own agency in deciphering what the media is portraying as true and fabrication or sensationalism. I understand that there is much talk about media literacy and the class (e.g., Ranieri, 2009), race (e.g., Owusu, 2010), gender (e.g., Bullen, 2009), geographic (e.g., Park, 20012) issues involved with the education of it—but perhaps in case that camp of scholars and activists need any more help in advocating for reasons and/or funds for such initiatives to be enacted, here’s another one.

Furthermore, there is a point at which I get lost and cannot understand the blaming of media entirely and excusing people for ignorance and lack of tools when they demonstrate that they are beyond passive receivers of mediated messages. For instance, Anne gave the example that members of her non-Muslim family, who were and are still angry at her conversion to Islam, tell her what her faith is based on the information they receive from the news: “They tell ME, my brother’s family tells ME what we believe. ‘You guys believe this, you guys do this, you guys do…’ ‘Ugh, no that’s Fox News; that’s not our life!’” Passive, misconception is one thing, when a person has this feeling, this thought in his/her head where s/he thinks another person doesn’t quite have something right; perhaps s/he even “hates” them. But the passivity in that thought (which I personally argue is never passive to begin with, but alas, that’s a philosophical conversation for another time) becomes undeniably active when s/he is compelled and feels it is his/her personal responsibility to preach to another person how wrong and evil (“you’re on the
wrong path, you’re going to hell”—both directed at Anne by her family) s/he is, or worse, actually acts violently towards another, as was demonstrated in Noor’s stories of the boy in junior high and the woman in the shoe store. So there is something more active happening in this discourse than merely presenting a perspective. Islamophobia is bestowing non-Muslims with a sense of entitlement that not only is Islam not the proper way to conduct one’s life, but it is the responsibility of non-Muslims to educate others (including their children) that Muslims are to be feared and/or hated and/or cause emotional and/or physical harm upon them.

However, much like I problematize the notion of dialogue, those who take part in it, or those who may read this, are more likely to already be empathic to the messages that I’m presenting. Those who engage in interfaith dialogue are already there—they want to have interfaith discussion, they want mutual respect, they want the world to be more inclusive, they want to dispel myths of our neighbors and the diversity within our communities—perhaps much like you who picked up this work. So there’s little convincing to be done there. But as has and will be expressed by the stories these women share, there are enough accounts of people who do not think this way to indicate that we have a long way to go. And perhaps the majority of people in the United States do not foster hate for Muslims—that’s what I’m inclined to believe. But what we do seem to have as a problem is an overall sentiment of insularity and/or apathy. Being hyper-involved in our own communities where we don’t think Muslims exist or the discussion of multiple faiths doesn’t apply to us is an issue because we are limiting the knowledge of those within our communities and are perpetuating the sense that Muslims are vastly different from ourselves. When we are apathetic and say that “their” problems don’t influence me and there’s nothing I can do, we are complicit in the proliferation of Islamophobia.
Knowing that these misrepresentations do exist and the inequality that is practiced in the economy of what type of information is reported, the Muslim women in this study discussed both what has and is being done to counteract these messages, and the challenges they have and still face in doing so. The women do say that Muslims have spoken up and out against violent acts performed in the name of Islam and misrepresentations of Muslims. Rashida described:

The tragedy of 9/11 happened, everybody was saying, “Where are the Muslims to condemn this?” and they were condemning it all over the world! All the imams and sheikhs and scholars wrote out and I still hear people saying, “They never, they never condemned it; they never said it was wrong.” I mean, I don’t know what we have to do beyond. Sometimes you just want to pull your hair out and scream, “It’s awful, it’s horrific!” but no one hears what we’re saying and then that’s very problematic.

Rashida presented an inability to be heard even when Muslims do speak out, insinuating that these events happen, but media attention is not paid. Sara agreed with this when she stated:

Any time that someone from a very moderate Islamic perspective wants to get information out there, it’s shut down. They’re not given permission to broadcast. They’re not given permission to assemble. They’re not given permission to publicize. And handing out a little mom and pop newspaper that is printed independently when you don’t have the resources available to you or the PERMISSION to broadcast and get that out there, RESTRICTS the way of reaching out to people.

Here, Sara elaborated on Rashida’s example by saying not only is there an inability to be heard, but that Muslim voices are purposefully silenced by those in power in media to ensure that everyday Muslim voices, or as Sara deemed it, a more “moderate Muslim” voice, is not heard.
Sam gave a specific example of this censorship happening when Tony Blair’s (former prime minister of the UK) sister-in-law, Lauren Booth, converted to Islam in 2010. Sam shared:

Tony Blair’s sister in law, his wife’s sister, she accepted Islam. And the news was up on the internet for a few hours, they shut it down. They shut. It. Down. They didn’t want the world to know that Tony Blair’s wife’s sister accepted Islam.

These excerpts are important because they describe an awareness that these women have about their (in)ability to have access to and/or a trust in partnering with media. While, as Angel described, “Yes there’s media, but we can go out on the media too and speak against it,” and indeed there have been Muslims who have condemned terrorist activity on national and international news, “it wasn’t enough.” And along with it not being enough or not having enough/any airtime, or being shut down prematurely, Angel articulated too that:

If you do it [speak out] through the media, they [media] have the power to take some things out of context and put it just the way they want just to spruce up the news. So I’d probably say the media is the worst way to go about it.

In the past and still in moments today, Muslims have and do attempt to speak out against media misrepresentations via media, but with little to no success. Besides that, as will be discussed in an upcoming section, the idea of speaking out while bringing outward attention to one’s self in ways that can be read as bragging, showing off, or boastful is ontologically against how these women understand Islam. Therefore, knowing the limited success of media as a means by which to counteract negative messages and the heartfelt sentiment that media exposure to themselves in self-amplifying ways are problematic, they are left to figure out and enact other practices by which to engage the public in critical thinking and discussion about these mediated representations of themselves.
The women identify that the best way to counteract these misrepresentations is by engaging in interpersonal relationships with family, neighbors, and community members. Sara shared that although anti-Islamic sentiment is pervasive, “I think that that’s changing. The more that American Muslims get out and, just within their extended family—because I’ve got a lot of non-Muslim family who now reserve their opinions.” What Sara said is that change starts on a very local, interpersonal level, even within our own families. Sara continued with:

And just on our street, our neighbors had those same misconceptions and now we are best of friends and their whole mentality has altered towards [Muslims]. And they’re the first to defend, you know like on the social media, the Facebook, the Myspace, the GooglePlus or whatever they’re on, they’ll say, “That’s not true.” And they will stand up and they will say, “That information is wrong.” So we are making an impression, we are making a difference.

**Democratic Struggle**

I consider me and my family American because we’ve lived here our whole lives. Me and my siblings were born here and being American is just living in America, being American citizens. I’m American because I was born and raised here, I grew up here, I know this is what, I know America, you know? I’m comfortable here. This is my country.

(Zaina)

Every woman interviewed in this study is a legal American citizen, most of them being born and raised, or at the very least spending the majority of their lives in the United States. Despite this legal fact and the appreciation they have in understanding that they live in the U.S. versus other countries, they are still acutely aware of the limitations of the democracy, liberty, and freedoms projected by this nation. Angel articulated:
And that’s the beauty of this country, is that, the freedom of religion, the freedom of speech, the freedom of, to do everything. But at the same time, you feel like there’s a limitation to your freedom. It’s not REALLY freedom of religion when you’re being judged, you’re being criticized, you’re constantly being ridiculed by different people just because of their ill-education and arrogance of not wanting to understand or ask about what’s really going on. So yes, it’s a blessing living here because you have such opportunities, but at the same time, it’s also not because you have to constantly prove yourself, prove to others that you’re not what you’re being portrayed as. (emphasis mine)

The women acknowledged that there are subtle yet profound regulatory and disciplinary mechanisms at play that limit their full access to the freedoms that Americans are supposed to enjoy. For instance, Anne, a white, American-born revert to Islam, expressed that it is common for her non-Muslim family to tell her what she believes as a Muslim, as articulated by media sources: “They tell ME! My brother’s family tells ME what we believe: ‘You guys do this, you guys do…’ Ugh! No! That’s Fox News! That’s not our life!” Here, Anne illustrated that one mechanism that challenges her everyday being as a Muslim is outside sources, both media and non-Muslim family, dictating back to her what she believes as a Muslim. Because her family receives their information from Fox News, a news source that they view as credible, their understanding of Islam comes from this outside source and therefore informs their construction of what Islam and being a Muslim is, rather than the enactments of Anne. Anne is then put in the position of defending not only herself, but Islam as a whole to her family in response to the media which almost becomes a fruitless fight because the media has more credibility in this discussion to her family than she does.
Anne articulated some hope though, while describing the negative influence such discussions and messages have on her nuclear family:

Hopefully, at least in my children’s time, they don’t have to be ashamed. Because I think that’s what’s pushing young people away too [from Islam]—when they look at the media, when they look at how they have to apologize for this and they’re embarrassed and they’re ashamed, ‘cause that’s my faith that you’re attacking.

This process is one of frustration and sadness, among other feelings, for Anne, which demonstrates the power of discourse to wear at the heart. So while these blemishes may be small per incident, the constant exposure to these types of conversations inevitably have the power to shape others’ perceptions of and reactions towards Muslims, therefore creating a hostile atmosphere for these members of our communities.

Zaina furthered Anne’s notion of the impact Islamophobic messages have on her and her family. She presents:

It does instill a little bit of fear in you…. It does stink because you don’t want to feel that way. I never grew up feeling that way. Just in recent years did I start thinking “what if?” or “you never know.” You start to question certain upcoming events or anniversaries and things like that and you start to wonder “are we safe?” “Are my kids safe?” I don’t even worry about myself anymore; I worry about her [daughter].”

Here, Zaina spoke to the power of national narratives, such as 9/11 or the subsequent shooting at a mosque in Toledo. She spoke to a climactic change, of an Islamophobic discourse arising, or if not just arising then definitely undeniably amplifying at a certain point in her lifetime (post-9/11). So while the increased visibility of the discourse may not have been experienced in blatant physical terms from the beginning, it has been effective in permeating into the consciousness of
these women’s thinking processes, if not in terms of their own safety, then certainly in those of their children’s.

Lindsay expressed similar notions in terms of access in public areas: “Every Muslim is paranoid when they get on an airplane because they know everyone’s staring at them even though it’s never been like a female bomber.” This quote harkens back the national memory of September 11, 2001, an event wrought with cultural memory, political charge, and cultural criticism. Though Lindsay’s race, gender presentation, and way of speaking would not outwardly identify her as non-American, because she wears hijab, she understands herself to be automatically marked as othered, a Muslim other, a foreign other, an other to fear. Because of an event that played out on 9/11 and the continued narrative of Muslim terrorists, bombers, and airplane hijackers, she occupies and traverses these otherwise public spaces knowing she is being watched, monitored, and viewed with suspicion. Similarly, Crystal expressed:

For the most part, I would say I can go about and do things and I can go along fine and no one really comments on it [her Muslim identity]. It’s just sometimes you feel like, you know, maybe someone’s staring at you because of it but you know you can’t actually, you can’t actually prove it because it’s just more of an instinct or a hunch or maybe you’re being looked at differently.

Though Lindsay and Crystal are American citizens in a democratic country where they are entitled to freedom of expression and religion, they are not able to enter into “free” spaces without psychological constraints.

Lindsay alluded to the hijab as marking her identity as Muslim that can and does result in her being negatively watched. Sam and Rashida also discussed the negotiations that come with wearing hijab in a society that grants them freedom of religion while an Islamophobic discourse
works against that freedom. Sam articulated, “In the United States of America, I HAVE the right to choose what I want to be. And I choose to be a scientist and I CHOOSE to be a scientist who wears on the hijab.” In this statement, Sam confronted the notion of choice that she understands the United States to grant its citizens with the insinuated accusation that many (particularly non-Muslims) or an Islamophobic discourse hold, which is that Muslim women are forced to wear hijab. With this statement, Sam argued that it is indeed, her choice (i.e., she is not forced to wear hijab) and not only is what she wears to indicate her faith or relationship with God her choice, but her occupation and level of education is her choice. To her, she does not have to choose one identity (that of being a Muslim) over the other (scientist); rather, both can complement each other and that her being Muslim does indeed influence her ability to be a scientist in a positive way. Furthermore, she can do this as a woman and it is a right given to her in this country and by Islam, despite Islamophobic messages to the contrary.

Rashida shared the ambivalence she has in embracing the idea of what a democratic, free America means when it comes to notions of hijab. As one who did not start wearing hijab until she was in her late 20s, she is deeply aware of her experiences before and after the piece of cloth, with so much personal meaning yet so much societal apprehension, came into her life:

One of the most beautiful things about this country is that we ARE a diverse country and all of these, you know, we’re not supposed to be a mold of one another. That doesn’t make us strong. What makes us strong is that we are diverse and we have different perspectives. So I just wish that we could kind of get past the scarf. And a lot of times it’s really hard when you go out and you know that if you just took it off, you’d blend right back into society and people wouldn’t give you a second glance.
In this statement, Rashida spoke to her marked identity as Muslim because of her scarf. She noticed an unmistakable increase in negative incidences with those outside of her home after she started donning the scarf, ranging from suspicious glances, feeling like she was being watched, to actual altercations from another woman in a grocery store. So in this statement, Rashida negotiated the mixed feelings and experiences with living in a “beautiful,” “diverse” country where she has in moments felt the desire to “blend right back into society” when her freedom to be different and diverse has been threatened. Rashida expanded on this when talking about the impact Islamophobia has had on her own identity and how she is negotiating what has to be done to overcome those negative messages:

I’m trying to get to a point where I can fully identify myself. Not that I don’t internally, but externally I still feel like that outsider. I don’t want to be there. I want to be an insider where I feel “this is home.” THIS is home to me. And so I want to get there, in a place where… I’m just able to be a citizen and not feel like that foreigner, you know? I want my kids to feel that and I’m trying to nurture that in them. But it’s a struggle sometimes….

I’ve felt like an outsider for so long, it’s hard for me to put myself in and say, “No, I can work within this society and BE a full, you know, citizen that goes and makes improvements for everyone and does things.” But I feel like my voice shouldn’t be heard still in a way. And that’s, that’s gotta come from within me where I get to the point where I can be vocal about what I feel.

I have to remind readers here that Rashida is an American citizen. She was born in the United States. She has lived in the Midwest and East Coast her whole life. She comes from a Lebanese family and while the family gatherings often have hommous and pita as side dishes, we also had tacos for Eid and grilled on the barbeque for family night on other occasions. How
powerful does a discourse have to be to make an American-born citizen feel like she is “foreign?”

This is not a new story…unfortunately.

So many women referenced an immigrant sociological narrative that has infested the history of the United States since before its legal inception. This narrative has been used to describe the experience of minority groups such as Irish, Asian, African immigrants who now almost automatically come with a hyphenated “American” tail/tale. The narrative is typified by systematic exclusion, marginalization, a history of civil rights activity that differentiates this group’s experience from other unmarked groups’ to achieve acceptance, and ultimately acceptance through assimilation (Nagel & Staeheli, 2005). The message of this narrative is that if a group goes through these steps and eventually holds out long enough, the group will achieve acceptance/more easily granted citizenship or socially accepted citizenship at all even when they are lawfully citizens of the country already.

Anne, Crystal, Ibtisam, and Lindsay, shared how they participate and have hope in this narrative. Anne, a revert to Islam who is white and was born in the United States, says:

If you talk to people before us…whether it was the Polish or Italians …all the different ethnic groups that came through and they weren’t assimilating yet and they were judged or persecuted or prejudiced [against]. And now, they’re all in here [“assimilated” into U.S. culture], they’re all okay. So I just think that with time, I think that’s a normal social thing that happens, or societal thing that happens, because it’s [Islam/Muslim immigration] still so new…I have to think here it can only get better.

Here, Anne presented not only an engagement with the narrative, but a true hope in it working for the immigrant/religious minority group with which she identifies even though she herself is not an immigrant. What is notable about her comparison is the particular choices of Polish and
Italians, both of which have gained white status in American society today. By making this choice of immigrant exemplars, Anne, who is also white, may be unintentionally exercising her white privilege that is assumed under and inherently is an ultimate goal of assimilation narratives that assume the norm to be white. Researchers have found similarly, that invoking the experience of the Irish in the United States has been and continues to be used to make an argument for Arab immigration/citizenship through a strategic rhetorical positioning of the groups as similar in their assimilability (Nagel & Staeheli, 2005). This projection of assimilability attempts to “normalize Arabs, who are otherwise marked by ethic, cultural, and sometimes religious [Muslim] difference from the American mainstream” and makes the argument, that like the Irish, they too, “would become ‘white’ (Ignatiev, 1995; Salins, 1997)” (Nagel & Staeheli, 2005, p. 486). Anne invokes that same rhetorical argument by calling upon the narratives of the Polish and Italian.

Lindsay, also white, American-born, and a revert to Islam, called upon an immigrant narrative to explain what is currently happening with/to Muslims in the United States at this particular moment. She alluded to a Jewish immigrant narrative:

I think it’s going to be the same struggle that it was for Jewish population. They were despised and hated for a really long time in America. It just took a really long time for people to acclimate to them and I think that’s going to be the way that it is with Muslims—people are just gonna really hate, despise them for a really long time then eventually they’ll get used to the fact that we’re here and we’re not gonna leave and we’re harmless; we’re Americans too. And I think they’ll, I mean I think America will come around. It’s just gonna take a really long time, especially with all the horrible things that have happened.
Here, Lindsay referred to a history of anti-Semitism in the United States that has, like Islamophobia, been a discursive challenge to a group of people being fully identified as American citizens. Like Anne who rhetorically positioned race/ethnicity to liken Arab (Muslims) to Polish-/Italian-/Irish-(Catholic/Christian) American immigrants, Lindsay rhetorically positioned Muslim Americans as similar to Jewish American in their immigrant sociological narratives that pursues the storyline that if the groups work hard enough long enough, they will not only eventually assimilate into American society, but, as Lindsay suggested, mainstream American society will “acclimate to” their presence. This shift in perspective or choice of words does qualitatively change the meaning of the story, however. Lindsay insinuated here that perhaps there is the chance that a mainstream American society can acclimate to differences from mainstream (non-Muslim) Americans that Muslims embody which speaks beyond an assimilation narrative, thus partially freeing Muslims and immigrants from an imperialistic, xenophobic sociological discourse that demands newcomers to unrealistically abandon preexisting ties and identifications.

Crystal, an African American woman who was born and raised in the U.S. also alluded to an immigrant narrative when discussing Muslims’ and Islam’s minority status in the United States. Crystal shared:

I think that Islam’s place in the United States [pause] I think it’ll primarily be as, eventually, it’ll be as another, another faith that adds to the diversity of the U.S. I think eventually we’ll become accepted and I think Muslims will come to be seen as another minority that adds to what the U.S. is, that adds to the melting pot.

The allusion to the sociological narrative was made when Crystal conjured up the image of the melting pot, one that is a now generations-old trope that assumes an assimilationist view of
immigrant cultures working in the United States. The incoming immigrant cultures are expected to melt in, thus assimilate, to the host (American) culture and while that fusion initially is thought to add diversity, the melting together of such ingredients is done to homogenize the whole, thus ultimately result in a forced sameness among a public. Within Crystal’s statement, then, we see ideas of 1) adding diversity of another faith and becoming “accepted” by a host-culture (thus speaking to host-culture receptivity and acculturation on behalf of the immigrant culture rather than assimilation) competing with 2) a traditional discourse/sociological narrative of the immigrant experience into full(er) citizenship.

Finally, Ibtisam, a born-Muslim woman who immigrated to the U.S. from Pakistan 38 years prior to the interview, contributed to the conversation by affirming that Muslims are going through what many minority groups before have gone through, particularly African Americans. This is different from the aforementioned women’s descriptions because here Ibtisam does not assume white privilege or an effacement of racial/ethnic identity. Ibtisam shared:

It’s a slow process but it’ll change. It’ll change. All immigrants have gone through this process. And so it is not just us. I never feel victimized…. No this is a process. And this IS the greatness of this country that even if you may have discriminated against somebody, sooner or later you figure things out and you do change the course of things be it, you know, African American relationships, whatever relationships they made, they were slaves at one time. Today we have a president who is an African American. It took a long way, a lot of suffering, full of hardships. But that gives me hope, that I think it is THIS ability in the American people that I, I so cherish that they are able to change course and say “no, that was wrong.”
Like the other women, Ibtisam alluded to the immigrant narrative by articulating that African Americans as a minority group, have faced isolation and marginalization through discrimination, that their narrative is fraught with hardship as was/is demonstrated by slavery, and in the space between this and her marking Obama as the first African American president is an unmentioned history of Black civil rights movements, integration, affirmative action, and numerous other strides towards assimilation/acceptance of African Americans into mainstream America. In retracing this narrative that seemingly ends on the positive note of a marginalized African American man being able to become President of the United States, Ibtisam drew a trajectory for Muslims in the country that assumes roles for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For Muslims, this means that if they follow the narrative—experience isolation, marginalization, go through hardship but partake in civil rights movements while at the same time strive in many ways to assimilate—in time, they will assimilate and/or be accepted into mainstream America. For non-Muslim Americans who already enjoy the pleasures of full citizenship, the narrative that Ibtisam provided acknowledges that they initially mistreat those of difference but that mistreatment eventually leads to an apologetic and changed non-Muslim public who accept those they once viewed as different as full citizens. Thus, the process for immigrants (even in the case of African Americans who were historically forced to relocate to the United States as slaves versus more or less voluntarily relocating that the term immigration suggests) or those even associated with immigrant groups, as is the case with Muslims, is equated to if not absolutely said to be one and same as the immigrant sociological narrative that has pervaded the United States since before its declared inception 237 years ago.

This sociological narrative, while told to make sense of mistreatment, bring comfort, and hope to these Muslim women, is problematic in many ways. First, this narrative projects a
discourse of white elitism, nationalism masked as patriotism, and assimilationism. Second, by virtue of this narrative existing across racial, ethnic, and generational lines of immigrants and born-citizens, as common knowledge upon which we can all rely, we know there is a discourse that exists that is ultimately anti-difference and multiculturalism. This difference and multiculturalism, then, needs to be policed and disciplined to a level of acceptability that can be subsumed under a more or less homogenous umbrella. This doesn’t mean that difference doesn’t exist at all, but that difference is definitely tamed. Along with disciplining, the narrative itself too becomes a ritual, almost a rite of passage, then, that all immigrant groups or groups of difference must go through to obtain full citizenship and to a more or less extent, acceptance into mainstream American society. When the women, Muslims as a whole, and even non-Muslims of the general population give into the narrative and say, “we/they’ve all been through this sociological narrative; it will eventually pass,” they have given up their agency to the narrative and have therefore become complicit in their own oppression as Muslims and as oppressors if they are non-Muslim. We are all implicated in this narrative that is masked as a story with a happy ending but is truly a story of repeatedly accepting our own complicity in horrifically bad behavior and abuse of others.

Third and most important in terms of this sociological narrative: it is an utterly true cop-out and scapegoat tactic to rely on the trite excuse that history is bound to repeat itself. If this is our centuries-old immigrant narrative of the United States—one full of isolation, marginalization, abuse, violence, forcing a group to question their identities and give up their national/ethnic heritage, disavow their affiliations, and more—of a country born out of escaping persecution of difference if we are to go with the more honorably-shared, white patriarchal version of the story, then how is it that this is the narrative that we are very actively keeping alive? By continuing to
say that this is something that all groups have gone through and future groups will continue to go through, we are sentencing ourselves to our own inability to transform into better people, our own incapability to become more humane, our own ineptness for compassion. We give those discourses of xenophobia, white patriarchal hegemony, Islamophobia, power by giving up our agency through apathy. When we say, “this is just what happens” to avoid the painful and critical thinking, discussing, and then the actual action that needs to happen to instigate change, we give up our power. And unfortunately that apathy is easy to dismiss when we think we are not directly associated with immigrant narrative of the day.

**Exceptionalism**

Talking about Muslims’ current situatedness within an ongoing immigrant sociological narrative inevitably leads to conversations about performing appropriate immigrant identities and in exceptional ways as Muslim women. Here, I refer to Ehrkamp’s (2010) depiction of the supercitizen immigrant to describe what the women articulate as a performance they embody to outwardly demonstrate their conductivity to an American way of life. I also call upon Badran’s (2008) rhetorical construction of the moderate Muslim woman to problematize the position of exceptionalism that many Muslim women are forced to occupy and thousands, if not millions more, are forced to strive to be because of an Islamophobic discourse that demands women to be something beyond their Muslim identities or something in spite of their Muslim identities. This “something” to be ultimately has nothing to do with Islam and that is the point; exceptionalism is a tool of assimilation that serves as an exemplary example for a group that says despite this particular character flaw, in this case religion, this person was able to achieve X, where X is always something highly valued in mainstream society. That X in mainstream society is the superficial focus, but not the point in and of itself. The X can be anything from being painted a
heroine for saving lives, finding a cure to an illness, solving the national debt crisis—anything so long as it’s extraordinary even for everyday citizens; the underlying message in that is that the act of achieving X becomes an achievement of an American citizen rather than a Muslim; an identity of an individual, or the choice of the individual to identify which identities may claim responsibility for that accomplishment are co-opted by a national/hegemonic discourse, and thus it is because of this person’s assimilation/American identity that X was achieved.

We have already seen some examples of this throughout the narratives thus far, but they warrant re-mentioning along with the introduction of a few more. For one, exceptionalism is apparent in the women’s narratives in the performances of their Muslim identities when they decide to wear hijab. Though the women in this study specifically articulate that their chosen reason for wearing the scarf is primarily because of their relationship to God rather than political in nature, because they live in a discursive landscape that automatically politicizes the act, they are imbued with the responsibility of performing in superhuman ways because they are marked to the public as Muslim. Because they know they are more likely to be watched and monitored due to being marked by the hijab, they understand that their behavior becomes representative of all Muslim women rather than just of themselves; therefore, they must behave in exceptionally positive ways as to not further tarnish the misrepresentations already existent of Muslim women. This process of exceptionalism is complex in that it is regulated through the watch of non-Muslim citizens who do not have to act on their best behavior or in exceptional ways because they already have the privilege of having full citizenship discursively and have overcome the supercitizen immigrant narrative generations ago. The process is also regulated by other Muslims, particularly women, who uphold the supercitizen immigrant narrative as to further work to overcome it (and thus gain discursive citizenship for all Muslims) when they police other
Muslim women’s behavior, especially those who wear hijab, because they know they being watched.

Amani discussed the difficulty in knowing that she is being watched. As mentioned earlier in the analysis, Muslims are diverse in their identities and most certainly in their understandings and practices of Islam. This makes the process of performing a “correct” Islam for an American public that is watching even more difficult because there is no one correct way to enact Islam. Amani shared:

I do my best to represent my religion in the best way possible because I do know that I am spotlighted in society when I walk out the door everyday. So I feel like you know, that’s probably on some level I’ve had the struggle that every Muslim woman goes through, is which version am I and which one is the right one? Really, there’s no right answer. You know? And it’s really about your intention and then what you want for yourself and your relationship with God is always private; it’s not something that ALWAYS has to be on display for everybody to see. You don’t have to be in the mosque five times a day so everyone can see you praying. You know? I feel like the people that do that a lot of the times, it’s more like as a showoff you know? And a lot of them might have the intention that yes, I want to pray in the mosque everyday, but I feel like a lot of times people put on the show.

Here, Amani described the challenge in performing a correct Muslim identity not only for society but, as seen in the latter half of the quote, for the Muslim community as well. Both of these performances entail different requirements or expectations, yet both of them attempt to structure Amani’s performances and thus limit her agency in the expression of her faith. Both performances miss the religious mark of intentionality that is solely within the realm of an
individual and her relationship with God, which does not require a public display. However, in a tangible discursive world the display becomes the criteria upon which social and cultural capital is gained/lost and group membership is decided.

Amani provided more concrete examples of how she acts in public knowing that when she engages in such acts, she is often read as a Muslim woman. She said:

I’m conscious every single day of every single thing I do, whether it’s opening a door, holding an elevator open for someone, letting someone cut in front of my on the highway. I mean, I realize that if I maybe make someone mad just because me, personally, I don’t want to let you in or you know you’re too far away for me to continue to hold open this door, sometimes I feel like I HAVE to do that stuff so that people see Muslims as kind people. So I’m always conscious of every action I do because I always want to portray the best image that I can.

While none of these actions seem incredibly difficult or specifically inconvenient to do, what Amani said here is that she understands herself to not really have the option to not do these things. If she were to not hold the door open for perhaps an uncomfortably long time because a person is a bit too far away to assuredly hold the door open, but she’s already made eye contact so it could be read as rude to not hold the door open, she faces the threat of being read as a rude Muslim woman. She’s not just a rude woman; rather a rude Muslim woman that then is carried into a discourse that reads that all Muslim women are rude which turns into Muslims are rude, Muslims are bad, and the snowball effect continues to carry the message further along out of context and to more people. Amani and Muslim women then do not have the luxury to have absent-minded, self-focused, or bad days where they act rudely or neglectful of those around them. If they do have those days, they run the risk of representing other Muslim women as
negative. Therefore, Muslim women must be exceptional; they must behave exceptionally well on a daily basis to ensure that they do not further tarnish the image of Muslim women everywhere.

Rashida articulated this sentiment best when she described that Muslim women are not allowed to have bad days. Rashida shared:

I had lost my uncles and my father in law and a dear niece and they’ve all died and when I go out my door, I can’t take the morning with me. I have to smile and pretend everything’s fine….

Part of performing a good, supercitizen Muslim identity means that women must fight the Islamophobic message that Muslim women are bad, angry, oppressed, or hysterical. So even when life events happen, such as family loss, Muslim women are unable to be human by having a bad day in the public eye. Muslim women do not receive a pass or forgiveness for not smiling or forgetting to hold the door open for someone when they are dealing with real psychological distress. They still understand themselves to be monitored at the same level, through the same lenses as they would be any other day. So in these instances, they still must act exceptionally despite the life conditions that would permit other already accepted citizen groups to have days where they are not entirely conscientious of others around them. Though it is not uncommon for most of us to make internal attributions more than to receive external attributions on a daily basis, the women have ample evidence from encounters with others (such as those altercations already and to be discussed) to validate their feelings of being marked and/or monitored.

Finally, the supercitizen immigrant, sociological narrative, and Islamophobic discourses are all complicated by the idea of the exceptional Muslim woman when a Muslim woman is identified as exceptional or thought of as the norm (read: non-Muslim) despite being Muslim.
For example, in talking about the support from non-Muslim friends and community members soon after 9/11, Rashida shared:

There was a lot of support…but at the same time, some of the same people would say things like, “We need to bomb Mecca” or you know, “They live with you; they live in your neighborhoods and then they turn around, they do this [bad activity]” and this was from neighbors who were very close to me, and I would look at them. So they weren’t seeing me as one of them, the Muslims.

In this statement, Rashida presented that her neighbors affirmed Rashida’s existence, her membership in the community, which is a positive thing. Those neighbors had disassociated her with negative activity; also a good thing. But in doing so, they also disassociated her from being a Muslim altogether. Or, if she is Muslim, then she is exceptional in that she isn’t one of them. She isn’t like the rest of the Muslims, who are the enemy. She is exceptional because she is not the norm. The norm for Muslims in this line of thinking is that Muslims are bad. This is the discourse of Islamophobia. And she is exempt from this discourse because the community knows her as something besides or in spite of her Muslim identity.

Similarly, Sam shared this of her hope when people come to know her: “I think when they [non-Muslim co-workers] hear the news they’ll say, “No, we have this female in our lab. We have this female in Dr. Boss’s lab. She is different. She is not like the rest [extremists/terrorists] of them.” While this sentiment came from a good place in Sam’s heart and the intention of making this statement is to support the idea that interpersonal relationships can help overcome Islamophobia on local levels, what we as Muslims, activists, non-Muslim empathizers, community members, and so on need to beware of is this notion being co-opted by a discourse of exceptionalism that finds a home within Islamophobia. When Sam projected her
co-workers saying, “She’s not like the rest of them,” the assumption is that the rest of them are terrorists/extremists. Again, the notion then is that the Muslim norm is negative and that Sam’s version of Muslim/Islam is exceptional and rare. Sam and the other women entirely disagree that their understandings and performances of Islam are rare—so we have to be careful in the contradictory phrasing or the ability of such phrasing to be appropriated by an Islamophobic discourse.

Summary

The point here is that these women, these American Muslim women, are having to negotiate and make sense of their existence and (in)ability to freely move in a supposedly free country because their religious choice marks them as lesser citizens or citizens in need of surveillance. Furthermore, the non-Muslim social world is implicated in this policing, as they become victim to and then perpetuators of Islamophobic discourse. So, not only are legal entities constraining these freedoms or accesses for Muslims, but everyday citizens who are otherwise uneducated are finding themselves in a climate of suspicion, misunderstanding, and fear.

The process of reconciling the generations-old narrative that “the U.S. is supposed to be the melting pot: everybody free, freedom of religion…” (Anne) with contradicting experiences of otherness, lack of access, shame, and fear has become a pervasive, conscious thought process that is undeniably confusing and frustrating for these women. The women are astutely conscious of the contradictions they continually face living in and with the narrative of a free, democratic United States and the actual ability to perform and maneuver as free Americans in a nation that permits and perpetuates an Islamophobic discourse.
Resistance to Islamophobia: Muslim Women Speak Out

The Muslim women in this community have created and adopted several strategies of speaking out against Islamophobia and/or condemning activity done in the name of Islam that they consider un-Islamic. These are some of the many answers to so many of the questions that I hear non-Muslims ask: “Where are the everyday Muslims condemning terror attacks?” “Where are the Gloria Steinems of the Muslim community?” The answer: they are everywhere if we listen. And not just merely listen, but if we learn to understand a language beyond western notions of argumentation. The act of “speaking out” for these women is an act of patience and profound subtlety, of everyday acts of kindness and civic responsibility, of educating and allowing one to learn versus telling and forcing one to adhere.

These acts require an ontological shift in our thinking. We cannot only look for the marching down the street, the angry voices shouting on news stations—even if that was a tactic, and indeed, there are some examples of that that do exist—the airtime afforded to those instances is very limited if existent at all, perhaps due to its lack of being “newsworthy” or interrupting a discourse that keeps an American public fearful of assumed others. Instead, we need to learn to understand that these women understand Islam to teach them patience, and that it is through patience with themselves and the patience and compassion that they afford other people that they can truly enact and share what Islam requires of them. To these women, Islam teaches them that ultimately a person must come to overcome and understand ignorance for themselves. Through interaction with others, the women have learned that the most effective and safest way to do this is by demonstrating what being a good person is, as stated by the Qur’an, yes, but beyond that, what connects to others is that we can all identify with being kind and compassionate. It is through opportunities to educate others and invite questions that the women create space or look
for opportunities for open discussion and demonstrations of kindness that illustrate what being a true Muslim is.

Sara explained why traditional methods of speaking out such as airtime on television stations, public service announcements, and advertisements indicating the good that the Muslim communities are doing are not predominantly used. This is what demonstrates that ontological shift in thinking about community activism and speaking out against misconceptions. Not only are these processes more aligned with Qur’anic teachings, but they are also embraced by these women to have a more sustainable impact within communities because of the personal connection these activities establish across religious lines. Sara said:

A Muslim would rather give $50k to a food pantry that’s going to feed a community food that is desperately needed or buy books for a school that is desperately needed rather than spend that $50k to try to have ten minutes on a TV station. Their money is best spent helping, at the community level, helping replacing an air conditioner for a retirement center or they would rather do things with their money like that and set an example that way rather than worry about publications, magazines, newspapers, TV shows. I think their priorities are a little bit more community-centered rather than “look what I have, look what I can do” type of a mentality. I would like to think that. I mean most of the people that I know, that’s the way they’d rather have their resources utilized, in example rather than just spewing information, trying to, you can correct more, someone’s misconception by being an example rather than just giving them something to read or a picture to see.

Similarly, Rashida explained that going to food shelters, donating food, and cooking for the homeless are examples of being a good Muslim, a good person, and are more effective ways
to speak out against misconceptions about Muslims. She was quick to stress that “Wherever we go, though…we’re not supposed to do it to say anything (like “look at me and what good I’m doing”), but you just try to be that example.” She shared a story too, of how at times that sentiment can be lost even among Muslims:

We were at a soup kitchen one time and we were serving food and halfway through it one of the members of our group said, “Where’s the banner?” And I was like, “What are you talking about?” And he said, “We have a banner that says you know ‘Islamic Society’” and he wanted it hung. And I was HORRIFIED. I don’t know this gentleman; it’s not like somebody I know very well but I was horrified at that thought. I’m like “No. That’s, ugh!”

The Qur’an tells us that when you give, your left hand shouldn’t know what you gave. And you’re not supposed to toot your own horn. You’re intention is that you’re doing this because it’s pleasing to God and so when you do give, it should be between you and God, whether nobody else in the world knows it or not is irrelevant because it has already been written down with the One that matters. And to me, the advantage of that is that I think a lot of people get distracted with honoring people who serve and not that it’s a bad thing, but when that becomes more important than the serving, and when it becomes “I want to get this award, I want to get that award” and then you have this huge banquets [sic.] and you have people raise wonderful amounts of money for you know, homeless, hungry, whatever. And then the money, so much of it is used, I mean even for me $50 to buy a trophy would be too much because with that $50 you can feed another family. And I find that it’s difficult to balance it too because of course, especially today, people need to know Muslims are doing things. We ARE out there but we’re just not, we’re not
celebrating it because it’s not, it’s an act of worship, not an act of boasting or whatever you want to call it.

Amani, who works at the corporate level of a large national organization, uses her position of creating understanding and appreciating diversity among employees as a way to educate others about herself and her faith:

In my job, one of the days, we teach people how to ask questions to get to know someone. And I let the students go around the room and everyone gets to ask me a personal question and we get into some pretty deep topics. But they are so curious and I love the fact that they can ask me those questions. And I just really wish that everyone, you know, had that initiative to be just like, “hey, can you explain to me why do you wear the scarf? Can you explain to me why this is how they portray you in the media, is that true?” But some people are just so afraid…. It’s unfortunate.

In this non-confrontational setting, Amani is able to open up spaces for conversation about her marked identity of being Muslim by inviting her students to inquire about her based on their curiosity versus other traditional methods of speaking out and/or preaching what being Muslim means in more heavily valenced settings. Amani furthers this practice when she talked about her actions following 9/11:

I actually spoke a lot on [local University’s] campus after 9/11. I had a professor of mine that had me speak to our class and then his other honors English classes. And then word got around that I was doing it so other professors started asking me to talk to THEIR classes. So I would do like 2 or 3 classes a week and I would just go in and basically give a little background on my religion and then open it up to ask me questions. Yeah it was amazing. You know it’s one of the best things you can do to combat the ignorance, is
actually to educate. And I’m a huge, HUGE person on education because I feel like a lot of times people make those judgments because they just don’t know…they’re too afraid to ask. So if I open my door and say, “hey ask me anything” and I will do my best to answer it, then I’m initiating, you know? And that’s really the only way that things can get better.

While Amani is able to use her position as a diversity leader in a multi-national company to initiate a conversation about her many identities, other women find difficulty in actually starting discussion. Anne, who does not work outside of the home, shared her difficulties:

I would love to have the conversation. If somebody would just have the conversation! I mean the only time I can think are things like with strangers. I had a garage sale and somebody was, and I do this too, people, as soon as they start to bash Islam or the Arabs, I stop them because I can hear it coming and then I’m going to get all upset about it. So, “Let me stop you now and tell you I am a Muslim, my children are Arab” you know? And this kinda stops them and they don’t go any further. But other times, like when at the garage sale and the guy is blasting the Arabs, blasting Islam and stuff, and then I just had to tell him, “How can you take an intelligent, educated woman at my age, raising children, obviously my brain works…leading five children into adulthood, you’ve had this conversation with me now for 20, 25 minutes before you knew I was a Muslim. What scares you? Why are you so afraid of me?” And [the man in an apologetic voice] “Oh no I’m not afraid of you” and by the end of our conversation, I had enlightened him enough that he said it actually affected a change in him.

In this excerpt, Anne presented a lack of opportunities in sitting down with others to dispel myths about Islam. In the few times she is able to have that conversation, it is predicated on
Islamophobic introductions where she interrupts a (mis)/(un)informed person from pursuing a line of thought that may make the situation more uncomfortable once it is realized that she is Muslim and/or her children (therefore, her husband is assumed to be) are Arab. Despite the difficulty she expressed in having a less confrontational/uncomfortable conversation though, she did mention a tactic that several other women enact as well: stopping a conversation midstream when it appears to be going into a divisive direction regarding Muslim and/or Arabs.

Liyana shared how she has navigated difficult situations when others have not identified her as a Muslim/Arab woman and how she has learned to share knowledge and open up spaces for conversation and critical thinking in those moments:

I’ve tried to be patient. I try to kind of educate by example. Like, you know, those people have no idea where I’m from. They think I’m Greek; they think I’m Italian, something like that. My name isn’t like Khadija Abdullateef or something that would give it away real quick…. There’s no “kh” sound in there, hard letters to pronounce. And people have been caught in awkward moments where they have been saying things and then I raise my hand and go “by the way, I’m a Muslim.” [laugh] or, “by the way, I’m a Palestinian; I’m an Arab.

Often, like Anne, Liyana “outs” herself as Muslim and/or Arab in these types of conversations. This speaks to a passing (Ginsberg, 1996) that happens among Muslim women who do not have the “look” of being Muslim (e.g., wearing hijab). This permits Muslim women who pass for non-Muslim the ability to maneuver undetected in certain spaces where these types of conversation may be more likely to arise since the fear of being politically correct is lessened. Not only do Muslim women in these situations pass for non-Muslim, they are simultaneously able to benefit from white privilege because they are not othered as Arab women, thus granting them access to
spaces and conversations that are not generally meant to include them. This complex yet instantaneous process of religious/racial/ethnic marking/perception/avowal/ascription (in)access is then further complicated by historical and modern American census practices of racial identification that still requests that Arabs identify as white (NPR, 2010). This is certainly not a strategic intention of these women to not wear hijab; rather, this choice of embodied performance of being a Muslim woman equips these women differently and gives them access to different spaces than their hijabi counterparts. This means then that they are able to partake in conversations differently and in entirely different contexts than those who do wear the headscarf.

Liyana continued to discuss how her performances of identity that pass for non-Muslim/non-Arab in the workplace impacted her interactions immediately following the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001:

“We need to go bomb the pyramids, we need to go bomb this.” You know they [co-workers] were thinking about all the landmarks that are in the Middle East, that we should go get and get revenge on and “Damn Muslims” and “Damn Arabs” and it’s like, “You guys, I’ve been working with you for 15 years. When have I ever done like, all of a sudden you hate all of us?”... And then something happened at [workplace] ‘cause they were just getting to know me after six months, and they were talking about 9/11 for some reason, something came up, maybe it was ON 9/11, maybe it was the actual day of, they were like “Could you imagine if you were a Muslim in this country, how you must have felt?” So we had conversations around where were we, “did you hear it, what were you doing, how did you react,” you know what I mean? And then one of the guys was like “Can you imagine being a Muslim in this country that day?” and I was like “Okay, where is he going with this? I’m going to intercept it before it gets into language I don’t want to
hear.” And I said, “By the way, I’m a Muslim. I can tell you how I felt that day.” And they were all just like, like they were busted. You know what I mean? You could see them stopping and thinking “Okay, what did I say? Did I say anything that could have offended her?” ‘Cause they’re really sweet people. I love working at [workplace]; they’re awesome, awesome people. And I was like, “It was hard.” And it ended that conversation. But I just feel like I need to bring it up sooner rather than later, let people know who I am, what I believe in, where I’m from.

What is interesting in both Anne’s and Liyana’s attempts to address Islamophobia/xenophobia is that they simultaneously acted to not embarrass those caught starting the conversation. Though most likely there are moments of discomfort and embarrassment, as is particularly seen in Liyana’s story with her co-workers, the women took great strides to stop the negative conversations before they escalated and introduced their voices/experiences while keeping the others’ feelings in mind. There is an honesty imbued in these women’s stories that they are very aware of the difficult situations in which they find themselves, having to navigate their multiple identities and the communal allegiances that come with those identifications, including those of being American and Muslim (which are not to be read as opposing in any sense). The women try to lead out socially acceptable and understood as “normal” American lives—working in diverse contexts, partaking in garage sales—while not constantly or even bringing up their faith when the context is not deemed suitable or appropriate. So while some may interpret these last few stories as women assuming closeted identities (Faulkner & Hecht, 2006), it would be a gross misreading of how these women perform their identities and exercise their agency as Muslims in the United States. These women demonstrate a respect for their fellow citizens and the diversity those neighbors bring to situations, their ability to choose what and what not to disclose about
their personal lives. Just the same, the women expect the same respect from those to whom they afford it.

Anne further spoke to the goal of such interpersonal interactions, including those that do not commence with negative stereotypes:

For example, if I go into a bookstore and I’m talking to the girl who’s helping me with a book and we start talking about religion, I hope that by the time I walk away, she’s learned something. So the next time somebody’s saying to her the negatives, she’s armored with enough, not a lot, but something that she would say, “No, that’s not how I see Islam because I met somebody.” You know what I mean? So I think it’s just kinda that ripple effect of, you know, that paying it forward? So if I do a good deed for you and then you go, don’t pay me back; pay somebody else back. I think that’s really ultimately the only way it’s going to work—is your knowledge will now enlighten somebody else’s. (emphasis hers)

Finally, Noor talked back to me as a researcher, saying that participating in this project is a form of activism for her. She shared:

I’ve never been a part of anything like this nor have I heard of anything, like to me it means a lot of be a part of it. I feel like I’m doing my part, no matter how small it is, you know? I’m doing my part and kind of bringing the word out there and educating people.

This was a particularly affirming moment for me as a researcher because it informed me that I can be a part of this activism, which I have struggled with understanding how to do without being a member of the Muslim community. At the same time, I saw Noor using me as a vehicle through which to get her voice heard, which is strategic in that she has identified a mode which
has the potential to be viewed by many in socially higher places of power and by a wider audience outside of our local communities.

The women described such performances as demonstrations of what it means to be a kind, compassionate human being and a good Muslim. These performances also serve as moments of grassroots, interpersonal activism that can have a more profound, sustainable effect in changing an ignorant public’s misperceptions of Muslims. All of these descriptions of these moments take precedence over this following idea, but nonetheless, this idea is present in the women’s minds. In paraphrasing another Muslim sister, Rashida best articulated Muslim women’s (in)ability to speak out:

And one of the Muslim sisters just said it as it is: “because when we speak, they (non-Muslims) say, ‘Of course they’re going to think like that because they’re one of them.’” You know? We don’t get the respect…our people don’t matter because we have an “agenda” or something. It’s not a “sincere” feeling within us or a “sincere” need or “sincere” observation on the situation. It’s completely written off because you’re just one of “them.” So it makes it difficult.

In this statement, Rashida referenced a communal conversation taking place about the inability that Muslim women have to be heard in public. This speaks to an awareness that Muslim women have about the challenges they face in actively speaking out against Islamophobia in traditionally accepted American methods. Perhaps this indicates too why so many women, as is demonstrated by all the women in this study, have found the most success in practicing interpersonal gestures of activism. It may be that the women have found limited options available to them in terms of speaking out. Where the Qur’an already mandates that the participate in good deeds with and for the communities of which they are a part, perhaps this is
an area where they have found space through which they can enact their agency to actually speak out against a hegemonic discourse of Islamophobia. In searching for alternative avenues available to them to speak back to accusations made against or for them that deprive them of agency, the women have rhetorically repositioned themselves to be read, first and foremost, as good people/citizens to non-Muslims. In doing so, they carve a space of potentiality, open for conversation and learning together as neighbor and neighbor to become more interpersonally invested. Of course, this process works differently when a woman can be read automatically as Muslim because of outward appearance (e.g., wearing hijab). Yet, at least from the conversations that all of these women share, both those who wear hijab and those who do not, this is the ideal interaction they try to instigate with others when the opportunity is made available.

Through interpersonal interactions of kindness and compassion, a message can be passed along eventually, that this is what Islam is really about. Perhaps though, that direct message is never shared. Perhaps those with which these women come in contact never find out that they are Muslim—but that is not the responsibility of these women. In the Qur’an, it is not Islamic to bring attention to one’s self (i.e., hijab), or “toot our own horn.” It is up to God and an individual to decide one’s trajectory. However, the idea is that compassion and kindness resonate within others or have a ripple effect and that affect (Massumi, 2002) is a form of speaking out, activism, making a change in the world.

This is not to say that it is easy for these women. Anne shared:

I am frustrated because you can’t do anything about it [ignorance about Islam]. So it’s hard for me when you say, “Oh is there something that sticks out;” EVERYTHING sticks out to me. Everything that’s anti-Islam makes me want to scream! It makes me want to grab people. I want to grab those idiots over there and I want to grab the idiots here. It’s
just, I, [sigh] I don’t know. So I just kinda like go to my happy place [laugh] and say I can only, I can’t EVEN affect what’s going on in my house because there’s so much external stimuli you know that affects my children and their thought process and their journey. And that’s their journey. I can only live my own personal life, you know what I mean? That’s all I can do.”

The Complexities of Relational Identities

As is apparent in all the women’s narratives, their numerous identities are constantly called upon and challenged, willingly and unwillingly, by themselves and by others. A relational communication theory of identity can be used to explain or illustrate some of these processes and incidences in which Muslim women act, negotiate, and find themselves reacting to when they invoke certain identities. Since Communication Theory of Identity asserts that identity is intrinsically relational, I argue that the model should be examined initially and primarily from the relational lens (hence, Relational Communication Theory of Identity) by identifying relational partners before conducting further analyses of identity processes. I will do that here.

First, I must clarify an important assumption about the spiritual/religious component of the self layer of identity. Whereas Communication Theory of Identity positions spirituality/religion as located within the self layer of identity, I argue that the women demonstrate that it is located in the relational layer of identity, thus making RCTI more applicable in the discussion than tradition CTI. It seems common in American discourse that religion is positioned as a personal issue, therefore it makes sense that theoretically it is situated as such when the locus of identity is pursued through the self. However, the women in this study continually present that their religion is not just something that matters to them, but it is ultimately their relationship with God. This inherently undermines the idea that spirituality is
solely about the self because in order for this aspect of identity to take place, there needs to be the believe in the relationship between the self and another relational partner, God. Though this entity does not take on a human form and does not meet traditional conceptualizations of a relational partner that one can visibly, measurably, physically interact with over a prolonged period of time, it is undeniable that this relationship does indeed have real material influences and effects in the lives of those who engage in this type of relationship. So, we can no longer say, “here is a woman who, within her self layer of identity, is Muslim.” Instead, we are required to look at her multiple layers of identity with Islam located primarily in the relational layer as it is her relationship with God that then intermingles with the other layers of her identities. This is not to say that this is how every Muslim-identified woman experiences her identity; on the contrary, some women may actually identify as culturally Muslim (despite the conversation prior to this on the differences between cultural and religious Islam) where the relationship with God is not primary to perhaps their Muslim performances of holidays or something to that effect. But for these Muslim women in particular who emphasize their relationship with God, it is that relationship that must be emphasized when understanding their faith and how that influences the other aspects of their identities and their lives.

Second, the interpenetration of the relational, self, enactment, and communal layers are indeed strong, especially when linking all of those areas of identity to the common thread of Islam. The women describe that Islam is not just a religion, but a way of life, which extends the location of this identification from the relational layer directly to the enactment layer while also touching and/or reaching to the self/communal layers (thus every layer of identity). This happens nonlinearly, but for the sake of brevity and ease, I will present it in this way: the women understand God to ask them (through God’s being and/or the Qur’an) to live life through good
deeds, peace, patience, and compassion (relational layer of identity). So, enacting a Muslim way of life means to go out and do good deeds in the name of Islam and also as part of being a good person in general (enactment and self-layers of identity). As mentioned in the analysis though, women are very aware of the Islamophobic/xenophobic discourses that exist that challenge their ability to be seen doing good deeds, their ability to do them at all, or in their doing them, they know they are being watched, so they do them knowing they are representatives of Muslim women as a whole (communal layer of identity).

This is a limited example, but this serves as a base for understanding the RCTI model as it becomes vastly more complicated as we add the infinite factors that come into play as we continue to understand the ever-dynamic processes of identification in a field of competing discourses. The compiling factors are unlimited. I will mention some here (this is by all means not an exhaustive list) to provide an understanding of the complexity that ensues when more identifications, discourses, and relationships are factored into the model.

- Relational identifications: Islam/God; role as: mother, daughter, sister, cousin, aunt, grandmother, matriarch, friend, neighbor, community member.
- Self identifications: Profession, education level, personal desires, class
- Enactment identifications: Presentational/dress style, way of speaking
- Communal identifications: Nationality, Ethnicity, race, co-cultural groups, profession, class
- Discursive: Islamophobia, Xenophobia, Nationalist/Patriotic Discourses in U.S.

Taking these limited factors into consideration, we can see how identities become complex fields of interaction and negotiation given the dynamic and often contradicting and competing demands
of groups and relationships with which we identify and of which discourses constantly (re)assess and attempt to (re)structure.

I will now present an analysis that privileges the relationship through RCTI that takes discursive influences into consideration in the processes of identification processes. I present a story that Sara has shared of an incident that happened to her and her family in Toledo as they were cleaning a rental property that they own. I have kept the story in interview form to emphasize that the actual context of and telling of this story too is not exempt from examination under RCTI. Indeed, the very telling of this story may not happen given another relationship or context and inevitably, the telling of this story would be different given a different relational partner. So, within the relational context of Sara and me, of initial researcher/researched turned friend/chosen family member/researcher-friend/chosen family member/researched, I listen to her story. In her initially telling and me rewriting it on the page, we co-construct this story for readers which implicates others into the relationship and thus the narrative.

I punctuate Sara’s and my conversation with RCTI analysis to directly indicate the theoretical factors at play. I do this by italicizing our interview and leaving the analysis generic font. The point in such analyses is to have a fuller understanding of how identities are (re)created, sustained, and transformed through communicative processes and how discourses outside of the relationship influence relational processes. Since what is observable as a researcher is communication, and communication is ultimately a performance, where performance is “behavior situated in context” (Alexander, 2006, p. 7), it is imperative to note that these identification processes can only be understood within these contexts and within these historical moments. This means that what we gain is a past-tense understanding of what has already happened; we are mapping a cartography of identities that existed in the past as inevitably the
context has already changed, new relationships have occurred, new nuances to discourses and entirely new discourses have come into play. But what we do learn from this is where we have been and where we have opportunity to grow. And where the analysis on the page is past tense and the relationship between Sara and I on the page is past tense, the meanings and relationship the reader develops with the narrative and in their own analyses are very present and vibrant and thus mark the continued life of the narrative rather than marking the end once the reading is done.

Sara: As you know, any city has leaf collection. You rake your leaves to the street and they go around and suck ‘em up and my husband and his brother and the two boys [her young sons] were at the apartment building. They were raking the leaves and putting them out to the curb for the city to come and collect.

Here, Sara immediately established her relational identity within the context of the story. She is a family member: the wife, sister-in-law, and mother of the two young boys in the story. The relational identity is the primary identity marker in the story as it is the reference point to which all other identity factors harken back. Also, she established herself, via her family, as an owner/co-owner/landlord of an apartment building. In maintaining this role or identity, one of the enactment layers of identity include maintaining the property by raking leaves. This is important because while this acknowledgement seems like a mundane aspect, it serves as the superficial impetus for the conflict in the narrative. In enacting the proper/good performance of a landlord, Sara’s family was raking the leaves. However, in enacting that identity, as will be seen, other aspects of their identity were (mis)read and unintentionally threatened a neighbor.

The neighbor across the street came over and said, “Don’t put the leaves there. We don’t want to look at it. It’s an eye sore. It’s right in front of our window.” And my husband said, “We’ve been putting the leaves here at this curb for the last ten years.” “Well really, we just don’t want
to see your kind out, you’re...” called them sandniggers and told them that they were, you know, raising children who were unclean and not fit to walk in the neighborhoods.

Here, we see a different relationship form. Sara’s husband, Mo, and the neighbor are implicated in a relationship, thus assume their own RCTI model. On Mo’s side of the model, one of his interpenetrating layers of identity, that of a landlord, has been particularly exhibited in the enactment layer through his activity of raking leaves on to the curb. The neighbor, with whom he shares a relational identity with now, was upset superficially at the act but then unveiled that it is really his reading of Mo as a non-white Middle Eastern man (via the grotesque term “sandnigger”) that he was upset about. This is a reading of Mo’s perceived communal identity, whether Mo identified as Middle Eastern or not. By identifying Mo negatively as Middle Eastern, the neighbor identified himself as most certainly not that, and by the term used which reappropriated an incredibly racist depiction of African and African American peoples, it is assumed that this man identified as white American. So, part of this man’s communal/personal identity is that of a white American. Furthermore, surrounding and enacted through the communication this man used, discourses of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and racism were implied thus speaking to the infiltration of discourse in aspects of identity construction.

[Neighbor] pushing them [husband and brother] on the chest, at one point had a knife out, threatening him [husband] with a knife. All kinds of anti-you know racist comments toward Muslims and actually called the cops on them.

Again here, we explicitly see discourses of racism and Islamophobia at play and being enacted through communication (enactment layer of identity) through comments the neighbor made towards Mo, his brother, and the young boys. Furthermore, we see an entitlement and responsibility that the neighbor felt to act violently towards Sara’s family that was supported by
these discourses that he was invoking as he pushed the men and pulled out a knife. This speaks to the aforementioned otherness that comes with being ascribed an othered Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim identity by others that embody white privilege because of a hegemonic Islamophobic and sociological immigrant narrative that works to minimize the likelihood of minorities gaining full access to their rights of citizenship. This means that aspects of the neighbor’s identity included his being an American citizen, white, male, and believing in a narrative that assumes white privilege. These identity markers then were supported by discourses that enabled him to enact these identities in ways that he did. So much so, in fact, that he felt he was in the right to call the police, to call upon the state, the nation, the country, to help fight these others (who are still, unbeknownst to or without it mattering to him, American-born, American citizens).

**Marne:** *Wait, the neighbors called the cops on…?*

**Sara:** *Yeah, my husband and his brother [pause—looks off] because they were disgusted by their appearance and their…*

**Marne:** *What did the cops do?*

**Sara:** *The cops did nothing. Didn’t see any threat. Didn’t write any file. They came and said, “Just go home; leave each other alone.”*

**Marne:** *Even though there was a knife involved?*

**Sara:** *Yes. They took no action to protect my husband.*

Now more relational circles are added to the model; those of the police officers. The fog of discourses open to surround the new relational entities added to the model. It is interesting that in a situation where horrific racial/ethnic/religious slurs were flung, uninvited physical force was executed, and a weapon was present, that no file was taken nor any threat was perceived. It is
especially disconcerting when there were two minors present and the impetus of the call was racial/ethnic/religious in nature; however, we do not know what was actually said over the 9-11 call. But what this can indicate is a systemic issue in the legal system of dismissing instances of racial, ethnic, and religious violence and altercations, especially when the threat is directed at Muslims. Unfortunately, there is research that supports that a blind eye is turned to such instances and that the number of unreported acts of discrimination are staggering. What such dismissals by law enforcement do, however, is validate the actions and thoughts of people such as this neighbor, therefore reifying the discourses of Islamophobia, Xenophobia, and white American nationalism.

Although on the other hand, despite the threats and the comments about the children and the comments made to them personally, they [husband and brother] didn’t press charges. They chose to just keep their hands in their pockets.

Some could interpret these as trait characteristics of being shy or not wanting to cause a stir/make trouble (personal layer of identity). This could be the case and/or be a reaction to/working with the sociological immigrant narrative. Though both men have American citizenship and have lived in Toledo their whole lives, their parents are immigrants from Lebanon so the immigrant narrative is something they are acutely aware of, not only in their own family but of it existing for Arabs and Muslims as a whole. Knowing that they too contribute to how Muslims are represented, especially since they are men and that if they are aggressive in these situations they will very easily and quickly be targeted as violent Arab/Muslim men, they may have chosen to disengage because of the high stakes involved for their family and community as a whole. So between the awful choice of having to put up with direct personal abuse or risk contributing to the misrepresentation of violent Arab/Muslim men, which may
result in altercations with the law and heartache for their families and children, they chose to take personal abuse. These are highly conscious decisions that the men made based on their relational/communal aspects of identity that directly impact the performances (enactment) of those identities that were being challenged.

_They didn’t, they weren’t aggressive in the situation, they weren’t yelling. They were trying to remain calm, trying to put a good example forward—_

Again, being aware of the context and the relational factors at play, the men knew the children were present therefore acted in such a way that a good example (in line with what the women articulate Islam asked them to do) was set forth for the boys. By doing so, Mo and his brother were enacting their relational identities as father/uncle as well as their Muslim identities of setting a good example even in the face of adversity. This means that they were embracing multiple relational identities within a single moment and that they not only called upon those identities themselves, but that those identities were purposefully and selectively challenged by the neighbor when he chose to publicly hail them by derogatory ethnic/racial/religious terms. 

--and that actually led to many incidents the, the gentleman actually started to harass the people [tenants] that live in the building.

This is interesting about the neighbor’s expectations of the relational identity with Mo and his brother. In engaging in the manner in which he did with Mo, the neighbor obviously expected a different reaction than what was received because most relationships predicated on negative interactions do not foster the assumption that they will continue. However, the neighbor encouraged the relationship to continue through subsequent altercations with tenants of the rental property that would undoubtedly require the attention of Mo and Sara. Unless this truly was an example of a personal vendetta otherwise unknown to Sara and Mo, the fact that the argument
commenced on the basis of racial/ethnic/religious grounds sends the message that this neighbor’s sense of identity is deeply imbued with the belief that something by which he identifies that is not Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim is innately superior to those identifications. Those personal, communal, and relational aspects of identity are selectively supported by and/or were unconsciously aided in development by hegemonic discourses of Islamophobia, Xenophobia, and (White) American Elitism.

And at that point we went downtown and we filed a harassment charge against them stating this would be the third tenant they were driving away from our building; we wouldn’t be able to rent it anymore. And this is part of our income. And the tenants had enough documentation that they actually went downtown and positioned for a restraining order. And the judge did not award the restraining order; however, the people that it was being filed against, they had to get an attorney and show up in court so the court costs and the attorney costs have deferred [sic.] them. They don’t drive past the apartment anymore, they’re not outside, they’re not—I mean they were throwing garbage at the children when they were playing outside. And they’re not even Arab or Muslim or anything. But the fact that they rented from someone drove them to act so foolishly and it’s, but you know thankfully nothing more has come of it.

When the neighbor started harassing Mo and Sara’s non-Arab, non-Muslim tenants, they took legal action. While there was a conscious negotiation process or at the very least, ambivalence, about including legal authorities in the issue when it was over religious/racial/ethnic and personal altercations and issues, it became a much easier decision to make when the actions of the neighbor were against non-Muslim/Arab, non-family member tenants. So, when the situation is not religiously/racially charged then, it seems that Mo and his brother, at least from Sara’s telling, were freer to engage with authorities. However, when they
themselves were in the situation, perhaps they knew and assumed that they were already at a
disadvantage based on their cultural and religious heritage. So while they do identify as
Lebanese-American and as Muslim and they do not understand those identities to conflict with
their being full American citizens, they are very conscious of the portrayals and stereotypes of
their communal groups and that as men who do represent those groups they are forced into the
responsibility of not misrepresenting those communities. And in proudly representing those
groups, they are in a catch-22, where in doing so, they are living to the name of the values of
those groups, but they are also allowing themselves to be self-regulating in a hegemonic
discourse that works to disempower them.

*And as happy as I am that they maintained their level of calmness through that situation, I wish
that they would have charged, would have filed a racism charge or a hate crime or something.*

*Because I don’t think that the police are aware of how often that does happen.*

If the men were to file a racism charge or a the crime, they could be read as causing
trouble within the sociological immigrant narrative that while calling for civil rights movements,
also demands a supercitizen immigrant. When the supercitizen immigrant files a hate crime or
racism charge, especially if authorities did address the situation and said there was not an issue,
the person is saying that there was something wrong with the authorities. The authorities are
representative of the system. The system is of the state. The state is of the nation. The nation is
what the supercitizen immigrant is trying to gain admittance into. So to whom is the supercitizen
immigrant to file the complaint about whom?

**Marne:** *So why is it that your husband and his brother stayed silent on it? I know you refer to
that quite often but what is that?*
**Sara:** They tried their best to avoid an argument. And actually in the Qur’an it tells you that if you are aggressed upon, defend yourself. But the moment that they stop aggressing, you don’t go after them. So they’re doing...you know what’s expected of them. How they did it and remained calm took an immense amount of patience on their part. I don’t know that I would have been able to not yell at them or you know, defend myself with a loud voice rather than just trying to be calm and hands in the pockets and. But you’re allowed to defend yourself but you’re not permitted to aggress upon someone else.

So another huge relational factor is at play: the relationship Mo and his brother have with God. Not only are their actions with the neighbor filtered through the relationship they have with him, each other, and the nephews/sons that are present, but by their relationship with their faith. So based on Qur’anic teachings, they perform their identities in calm ways that strive to alleviate/avoid the argument (defend) rather than engage and encourage the situation to escalate (aggress). This is a distinctly different approach/enactment from the neighbor who approached the situation from an aggressive position (enactment) and encouraged an escalation of the situation by baring a knife and threatening with slurs.

**Marne:** What kind of impact did it have on your husband afterward?

**Sara:** He wouldn’t allow me to go work at the apartment by myself. And I would go and pull weeds and tend to the flowers. And after he would mow, I would go and sweep the walkways, you know, help him clear any debris that’s out of the way. If I know he’s gonna go mow that I day, I would go early and move the toys off and lawn chairs and things. He wouldn’t let me go alone for fear that the guy would come and be aggressive towards me or towards the kids if they were with me. But now that that situation has kind of resolved itself, we go over as a family, we’ll mow the lawn together, take care of things together.
Here we see a change in activity after the incident, which is to be expected. While Sara doesn’t talk to me specifically about any conversation she and Mo may have had about the emotional impact the incident had and continues to have following the incident, which surely was the true intention of my question, it is undeniable that this situation has affected the lives of the family and has caused at least momentary distress. As a reaction though, we see a change in the perception of safety and the enactment of identifications with safety by requiring all future visits to the property to be as a family rather than solo excursions.

**Marne:** What impact did it have on the boys?

**Sara:** Alby [older son] was actually very upset. To the point that I had called the school and told the guidance counselor what had happened so that if Alby did come to him and talk to him. And the guidance counselor was kind of, handled it on a child-level. He says, “You need to think of this man as a very little dog trying to have a very big bark.” And Alby kind of visualized him as a little dog and he kind of laughed about the situation. And we’ve told him that sometimes the people that have a lot of hatred in their heart, people that have a lot of misunderstandings coming off of their tongue usually just don’t understand something. It’s a lack of understanding; it’s a lack of education. And once they try to step forward and learn something, you know when you learn something new about something that you didn’t understand before, your perception changes. You know your feelings about it, the way that you react to it—they still may not like it but they understand it a little better so that it won’t warrant such an aggressive behavior based on the situation that they’re in. So they understand the education is important and they understand that portraying a good example at all times is important. You know even between playing with his brother, not losing his patience if he takes an extra piece to build something with or you know not yelling at him. Even in those moments, those are critical moments of trying
to portray what Islam and what being a Muslim should be. But you know, I’m sure that the whole situation broke my husband’s heart, that there are still at this time in age in the world that there’s that much hatred towards another human being when we have the resources to educate ourselves SO readily available now and so many resources, not just TV you know, newspaper. There are so many other places to find information. And I think what bothers him more is he’s afraid that that is the same environment that’s going to be available for our kids when they grow into adulthood. I think that’s the thing he worries about the most.

In a relatively short moment, not even an hour long, four members of Sara’s family directly experienced a situation where their outward identities were called upon and threatened by someone with which they did not have a relationship until that moment. In the retracing of those minutes as told by Sara, we attend to only some of the identity factors and discursive influences at play that permitted that experience to happen. Numerous relational identities are implicated in the (re)telling of the story and what is important about that in the context of RCTI is that sense we all live narrative lives and identities are inherently relational, it only makes sense that we predicate our understanding our identities on relationally-constructed narratives or narratives of relationships. What is particularly important about the (re)telling of Mo et al.’s story via Sara via me is that this story hits all the narrative elements of the women’s stories in the preceding analyses. This continually retold story encompasses elements of relational identifications with religion, relational others, trait characteristics, culture, nationality, concepts of citizenship, discourses, education, ignorance, media, and agency. While theory is never complete, what RCTI offers in this discussion is a new step towards (re)conceptualizing identities in the field of communication that disavows an existence other than “we” and thus holds us all accountable to constantly require ourselves to become something better than what we
are and requires us to include the examination of discursive influences in our lives that cannot be remiss in the consideration of how our identification processes work.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have engaged in a journey with 15 Muslim women from Northwest Ohio to demystify uncertainties about Muslims and Islam, rectify misrepresentations of Muslim women, problematize discourses that work to disempower and marginalize members of our communities, and bring attention to how we are all complicit in structures of power and oppression and what we can do to transform our complicity and positions within them. This dissertation works to 1) articulate how Muslim women can and do enact agency through their multiple (and thus, nomadic) identities in an Islamophobic geopolitical climate, 2) problematize narratives of democracy, citizenship, women’s rights, and freedom within the context of a post-9/11 United States, and 3) interrogate how hegemonic discourses of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and American identity (via citizenship, immigration narratives, and nationalism/patriotism) advanced through myriad channels are negotiated and resisted by/and or are transformed through these women’s communicative performances. I sought to answer four research questions. What I got was a lot more.

From this group of women who live in Northwest Ohio, we learn that Muslim identities can be performed in various ways. These myriad performances are based on a similar ontological orientation to Islam where the women understand the Qur’an as serving as a source of women’s empowerment and granting them particular inalienable rights. This similar orientation is what constantly (re)creates a communal Muslim identity. This communal identity is flexible in that women have many choices in how to practice their faith, how to perform their faith in terms of outward appearance, and how to give back to the community. What makes this communal identity interesting in the context of Northwest Ohio is that there is such a large Muslim population in the area and there are several options of where to communally practice the faith
and associate with co-cultural groups within the faith. While these women do not all associate with each other frequently or at all, this ontological assumption and way of being exists, indicating a pro-woman Islamic discourse that permeates the walls of distinct groups within the larger Muslim community. This discourse functions in reaction to Islamophobia as a means of reclaiming their identities that have been subjugated under the hegemonic discourse that works to disempower them through images of oppression and silence. It also works within the larger Muslim community to speak against antiquated cultural notions of Islam that work to suppress women’s agency and power.

The women are acutely aware of an Islamophobic discourse and anti-Islamic rhetoric that functions to spread and concretize it. The women articulate that most obvious forms of anti-Islamic rhetoric emerge from media through conservative news channels’ discussions of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, other Muslim majority countries, and commentary on Muslims/Arabs in the United States. They are also quick to point out that Muslims are quickly and often conflated with Arabs and that this is a strategic move within Islamophobic discourse. Along with depictions of Muslim women as oppressed or helpless within the media or Muslims in general as terrorists, the women shared their stories of first-hand encounters with Islamophobia in places such as the grocery store, in school, and in their neighborhoods. These outward acts of discrimination and violence powerfully work to marginalize Muslims within our communities. Furthermore, media depictions and these types of acts function to rhetorically position Muslims as subhuman and most certainly non-citizens, further reifying and instilling unfounded fear (Bouma, 2011) and hatred towards them, amplifying the power of Islamophobic, xenophobic, and nationalist discourses.
To make sense of the Islamophobia that is rampant in American society (and transglobally), the women often invoked a sociological immigrant narrative. The narrative indicated that most minority immigrant groups had gone through similar processes of gaining social acknowledgement of citizenship that was and is typified by marginalization and exclusion, a civil rights type of movement, and ultimately acceptance. While I have problematized the whole narrative and process, I am particularly critical of the stage of acceptance because it appears that acceptance ultimately privileges assimilation. Though the women provide cultural, ethnic, and religious examples of minority groups who have undergone this process, it is apparent that the narrative values assimilation through a melting pot metaphor (through acquisition of citizenship). While many of the women already have legal American citizenship by virtue of being born in this country or by living in this country for several decades, they still have to perform in ways, as supercitizen immigrants (Ehrkamp, 2010) or Moderate Muslim women (Badran, 2008), to demonstrate exceptionally how American they are despite their being Muslim. This disallows Muslim women to make mistakes or have a bad day because they are constantly being monitored to prove their citizenship on social levels. They become demonstrative of Muslim women as a whole through their individual public actions. This narrative then poses a problem and contradiction to the Islamic values that the women discuss in valuing difference and embracing diversity. While they articulated that the United States is a place that allows for diversity, the sociological immigrant narrative paints a picture of policing and disciplining difference into a very narrow scope of what that difference can look like. So while a pro-woman Islamic discourse empowers the women to embrace difference and enact their agency as Muslim women, they are caught and participating in their own oppression within the hegemony of a nationalist discourse through a sociological immigrant narrative.
Discourses of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and nationalism (through sociological immigrant narratives) all have true cultural, social, political, and material consequences when it comes to notions of democracy, dialogue, and tolerance. Though a pro-woman Islamic discourse exists alongside (and is also often influenced by) feminist discourses to compete against and react to such negative discourses, the hegemony of the latter are strong. For example, even though the United States is a democratic nation, when Muslims in particular do not hold enough social capital to be viewed as whole citizens (thus having to perform as supercitizen immigrants or in exceptional ways), there is no way that their voices are heard equally or given as much volume as those who have full access/are deemed socially as full citizens. When secularism permits certain religious demonstrations but not those with ties to Islam, democracy is not taking place. In terms of dialogue, a democratic dialogue cannot be achieved if Muslims are not viewed equally in the first place. Dialogue inherently assumes an equal value of all members through mutual respect and openness from the start of discussion (Council of Europe, 2008). This is problematized by notions of neoliberal democracy that is predicated on a capitalist United States because it privileges a discourse of individualism (Scharff, 2011), leaving little room for cooperative dialogue. So, while dialogue is admired, the actual practice of it becomes difficult because of unchecked philosophical tendencies towards individualistic goals of reward and competition, ultimately leading to failure. Or, when interfaith dialogue happens, for instance, a conversation happens but little is achieved in terms of movement because most if not all of those who attend interfaith dialogues are already convinced of the same positioning. In other words, those who need to understand the other or need to be persuaded that interfaith dialogue is a good thing are not present due to lack of interest in the topic. Finally, tolerance, as stated by the women, is hardly an appropriate aim for advancement. Tolerance still marginalizes groups as
deviant and undesirable, which is disempowering. What we should be aiming for is understanding and embracing/acceptance. The hegemonic discourses barely, if at all, entertain tolerance; but what I’m calling for is a dismissal of tolerance and an aspiration for acceptance/affirmation.

The first research question addressed how Muslim women (re)construct and negotiate their identities in relation to the discourses that surround them in the United States. In hand with the Relational Communication Theory of Identity, it is a given that these women experience their identities primarily through their relationships. Their relationship with God (and Islam) influences their lives in that their faith is not only an aspect of their identities; rather, they articulate it as their way of life. This demonstrates a primacy of the relationship they have with God/their faith/Islam in their lives. As this relationship amounts to their way of life, it influences their other relationships (their roles in the family, how they treat their neighbors, friends, extended family, etc.), how they perform those identities (doing good deeds, charity work, following through on contracts with employers), and how they represent and engage with their communities (cultural, national, faith-based, neighborhood, hobby, etc.). The women negotiate their relationships in ways that they understand to ultimately be supported by God. This means that in situations where they are conflicted about how to act, they consciously think and act in ways that they understand God to approve of. This was demonstrated, for instance, in the multiple stories of the women not engaging in further conversation with others who were speaking negatively about Muslims because the women assessed that the situation would only escalate with the person(s) not being willing to listen and thus, causing harm/a disturbance to others, their children, and/or themselves. Though the temptation and inclination is there to speak back, as several women indicated, they negotiated the situation via their Muslim identities and
relationship with God to live out and act in ways that were more conducive to an Islamic way of life than the self-satisfaction of talking back at Islamophobia.

The second research question sought to explore how Muslim women participate in, influence, and work to transform discourses impacting Muslim identification. These Muslim women are very active in local, interpersonal instances of speaking out and against Islamophobia through subtle yet profound everyday acts of kindness, patience, and compassion. Whether it is smiling at the neighbor, volunteering at their children’s schools, saying hello in the grocery store, or offering help across the street, the women find instances to reach out to neighbors and community members in areligious contexts to establish a human connection. In the end, the action is not entirely not even primarily about speaking out against Islamophobia; rather, the act goes back to the relational primacy between each woman and God. God would ask that they act in these ways whether Islamophobia existed or not. Knowing that the discourse does exist though and perhaps knowing/feeling compelled to reclaim the misrepresentations of Muslim women, these women continue to act accordingly which, while also meeting the mandate of God, works to speak against an Islamophobic discourse. The women also speak at length about women’s rights within Islam as a way of correcting the misconceptions that an Islamophobic discourse carries about women’s location within Islam. It is important to note that in this discussion though, women’s rights are said to be embodied and performed in myriad ways that cannot be afforded only a surface level reading; they require an understanding of the faith, culture, context, and women’s choice. In the framing of such rights and agency within Islam and against a discourse of Islamophobia, the women participate and (re)create a pro-woman Islamic discourse that is situated in the United States as one that not only speaks against but also competes with discourses of Islamophobia, religious intolerance, gender inequality, and xenophobia.
The first component of the third research question overlaps with the second research question in addressing how women describe their agency and empowerment through their multiple identities. The women state that the Qur’an imbued them with equitable (equal in their terms) rights to men long before the U.S. constitution granted “equal” (yet inequitable) rights to women. The women argue that issues such as inheritance, divorce, right to education, and equitable family/house responsibilities were granted to women through Islam over 1500 years ago and that it has been cultural impositions upon the faith that have disempowered women from achieving their righteous equality/equity. The women say that particularly as Muslims in the United States who are free from the cultural constraints that Muslim countries have imposed on Islam, they have every right that Muslim men have which includes rights to education, choice in whom to marry or whether or not to marry, profession, travel, and the list goes on. The women have the choice to wear hijab or not. The women have the choice to wear it because they understand it to be demonstrative of and/or make their faith stronger with God or wear it as a political act against Islamophobia and a discourse of regulated freedom of religion. The women understand their American and Muslim identities to not have to be conflicting identities and often that it is through their being Muslim and American that they are able to embody the agency that they do.

The second component of the third research question inquires about the potential that lies in processes of identification that the women embody to overcome polemic discourses about Muslims in the United States. In essence, what this question is asking is “so what?” So what can we do to overcome this notion of Islamophobia? What is the solution? To be trite, there is no one solution nor do I have one sure plan of action. I do, however, have the suggestion of pursuing friendship as a method of overcoming Islamophobia and other hegemonic discourses, which is
discussed in further detail shortly. I feel like what we have to offer from this project is an opening into a trailhead that resulted from us already hiking down another trail. At this trailhead, we have several paths in front of us that we can take, but none of them have trail markers or trail names, none of them include the mileage or indicate whether they are out and backs, roundtrips, or go on into infinity. However since I’ve argued that everything we record is already in the past tense, so too then must be our journey behind us once we make the first step. So perhaps it can be comforting to know, then, that there are several trailheads, but none of them can be out and back nor roundtrip, because once we leave, we can’t come back except through memory or knowing that if we do “come back,” everything, at least in some way, has changed. What this leaves us then, is with only potential. Which is exciting and, though scary, if we take these lessons about our interconnected selves and direct this potential is a way that is mindful of others, includes our others (thus requires a “we” versus an “I”), and demands an accountability of nomadic ethics, we can continue to move in such a way that continues to build upon the connections versus consciously trying to sever them. So often, it seems, the discourses that are present in our lives work to amplify difference in such a way that we become disconnected and fearful of our neighbors, friends, and community members. As is interrogated in this work, discourses of Islamophobia, xenophobia, immigration all negatively other people in a nation supposedly born of immigrants and religious freedom from persecution. Even when we talk about discourse of bullying, which is mentioned in this project in reference to kids terrorizing other kids in school in the form of bullying: a bully is so often positioned as an enemy, and the target of bullying, the victim. So the story falls yet again into a trope of division where an audience, of children nonetheless, is inherently encouraged to side with the victim and against (thus ostracize which is also a form of bullying) the bully. Not that I advocate for bullies, but all
of this is to say is that these discursive practices seem to systemically paint over the real issues at heart which finding ways for people to connect with people as people with real feelings, the need to belong, feel acknowledged, affirmed, and loved with and because of their differences. Islamophobia, xenophobia, and immigration then become the grown-up versions of the discourse of bullying but amplified because of the real political, militaristic, and economic power invested in sustaining such discourses.

So, where is the potential in everyday Muslim women’s identification processes? The women do speak out and against these negative discourses via their pro-woman Islamic discourse in everyday acts of kindness, patience, and compassion. They are small, subtle, yet profound, but still seem to pale in comparison to the political, governmental, military industrial complex of global economics. There is saying in hadith that Rashida shared with me. She said:

That’s what being a Muslim woman is: is to take every moment of your life and use it for a positive growth within you and around you. And the Prophet, peace be upon him, once said that if the end of the world were to, if you were to witness that it was starting [to end], and you had a sapling in your hand to plant, he said, “finish planting it.” And to me, that’s a call to never, EVER give up.

I know that within my life through this, I have come to know these women and I have been changed, something that I expected and wanted to happen. I honestly had no idea though how much I would be changed and in what ways I would be changed. I never foresaw, for instance, that I myself would become acutely aware of my white privilege and my discomfort with and guilt in being relieved when Sara, my first Muslim woman research participant-turned friend/family member, was white four years ago. I did not foresee myself learning about what it means to be a citizen of the United States through the narratives of women who truly understand
and value what that means because on a daily basis, they either can’t fully exercise those rights or are so closely being monitored that they can be taken away without a moment’s notice. I continue to learn what white, non-Muslim privilege means.

I thought I was going into this project to learn about Muslim women, Islamophobia, and hang out with some brilliant women, and hear some amazing stories. While I did indeed do all those things, the most important lessons I got out of this were about friendship. It was through this lesson that I also received an education and clarification in methodology: while I had adamantly identified as an ethnographer who sometimes played with autoethnography, I have now learned to embrace and will argue that any true ethnography is inherently, if we are to be honest, autoethnographic. In chapter three, I discuss my methodological approaches to maintain a feminist ethic and not appropriate or recolonize the participants in the study through misrepresentation. While that is never to be forgotten nor downplayed, one way to account for my role in the recreation, representation, and reconstitution of others’ stories is by taking myself to task and critiquing my choices and decisions in the whole research process, including the analysis and writing. This means I cannot and I believe I have not just merely stated my positionality; rather, throughout the narrative of this dissertation, I have weaved in my voice and have demonstrated to readers areas where I have found myself particularly vulnerable, unfair, and hypocritical in my thinking. While ultimately the power is in my hands to choose what and what not to write, my honest plea is that readers understand that I have tried to point out my own contradictions and my own biases and reflect on them openly to illustrate not only how those thoughts have influenced my participation in this project, but to also provide an example of how transformative thinking can take place. It truly is unfortunate that the Academy dismisses such discussions often as “not research,” “feminine,” or the dreaded “too subjective” (Tillmann-Healy,
2003). I can envision some reading this and thinking, “This is the touchy-feely part that does not meet the standards of academic writing.” But to me, that assumes that academics are inhuman. And if anything, what I’ve learned in this project is that we are all human, no matter how ultra, super, mega, whatever human we try to be. We are all human and humans deserve compassion, patience, kindness, forgiveness, the ability to make mistakes, the ability to say “sorry,” the ability to learn, the ability to become.

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It starts with a mask. Or maybe the idea of a mask, the metaphor of a mask. Ethnography is a process, experience, activity, performance, way of understanding the world that is ripe with potential—one that requires us to unhinge the masks we wear if we are to do what we set out to do, which is to critically use ourselves as the tapestries upon which we examine, critique, and understand cultures in movement. It is through such examination and critique that we learn “who we are in relation to others in culture” (Spry, 2011, p. 64). This story isn’t a new story; it is a given that often in the quest of understanding perceived others that whom we really learn about is ourselves. Not that our selves and others and distinctly separate entities; we are all relationally (re)constructed and ethnography assumes at its foundation that our being in the world is inherently relational. But in my perhaps pre-mature frustration of already knowing that there will come a day upon which I reflect back on my previous works and think “What was I thinking? How could I have done that? Where were my ethics? How did I misread that? How did I not know?,” I write this piece mapping my very recent (auto)ethnographic adventures. This story starts with the idea of a mask. And I learned that once I shed it, I felt freer to be authentic and connected to others in the research process. What I later learned though, is that there are more masks under the mask that I initially cast away, masks that are very lifelike and indeed have
found ways to embed themselves into my skin so much so that it has felt almost impossible to peel them off, or I never even thought to shed them in the first place because I thought they were true parts of me.

In the recent past and present, I found and find myself confronting many of the skills and practices that I was taught with my desire/need/ethical duty/moral obligation to connect with the women from whom I seek knowledge. In other words, I can read all I am assigned and want about ethics in ethnography (e.g., Bochner, 2007; Conquergood, 1982; Ellis, 2003; Madison, 2001; Tillmann, 2003; Goodall, 2000), (re)presentation of minorities, the act of speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991), and I can read about how to maintain ethical distance, or that I can become really intertwined with great people in my research—all things which I do and have read and many, especially the latter, that I fully embrace. But call me naïve and unable to really think critically about what it means to apply discussions to my own life in hypothetical circumstances, but I am unsure that anyone can truly understand these discussions unless they have lived and continue to live through them.

At the risk of sounding narcissistic, which is truly not my intent, I want to share my story of growth, my experience of what it means to be invested in a community, of what it means to truly become friends and family with those from whom I seek knowledge (unflatteringly called “participants” though that is much better than “subjects”), and some real unanticipated stakes that have become blaringly aware to me as I have progressed through the research-turned-friendship-but-still-research-and-back-again process. Graduate seminar discussions of deceit that seem textbook simple (Don’t deceive your participants, duh!) become complicated territories of what personal information is shared or not just through everyday conversation. Trust extends beyond maintaining confidentiality and doing no physical harm—what psychological harm can
be caused, for instance, through a white lie or omission in a friendship? And how does that play out when that friendship is predicated on a research project?

So here is my story—our story—told through my eyes of my interactions with a particular woman, Sara, who helped me through my dissertation. I make myself vulnerable here and take myself to task early, knowing that inevitably I will miss certain critiques and that despite my attempt to nip it in the bud, I will have numerous moments where I yearn for the opportunities that Carolyn Ellis (2007) and Lisa Tillman (1996) have already had to “revisit” their previous works. In performing this assessment though, I hope to share my vulnerabilities with others, offer some empathy with others who perhaps share in palm-to-head “Doh!” moments like I do, and show a process of growth that can motivate and inspire others, assuring them that it is okay that we are ultimately all human and can learn from our mistakes.

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Much of my time with Sara during my second year of knowing her was spent riding bikes along the paved rails-to-trails routes of Northwest Ohio. In the unfolding of our relationship, Sara had been reunited with her long-lost love for bicycling and had decided that as running was my thing, cycling was going to be hers. I am not particularly proud to report that I thought, “Cycling? Sure! I can do that. I run 26.2 miles with some frequency; hopping on a bike for a few hours here and there should be nothing.” Though I knew pedaling versus hitting the ground with my actual feet was not my personal preference, I viewed it as a great opportunity to spend more time with Sara and show support by taking part in something that she enjoys. So, I strapped my $59.99 (with a $19.99 mail-in rebate) shameful-corporation bought bike to my car and drove to her house for our first of several bikin—I’m sorry—cycling adventures:
I pull up to Sara’s driveway and there she is, already decked out in her gear and ready to go with a huge braces-filled smile on her face which, combined with her sharp, dark sports sunglasses and sleek bicycle helmet, make her look like a mischievous fox, sly and ready to roll. The red hair may be adding to that picture too. I smile at her and turn my back to her to unload my bike as my face quickly, briefly drops as I think “Oh, Shit! She’s serious!” I hop on my bike, start to turn my head over my shoulder and never finish the question, “ready to head o—?” and she zips past me. Here we go!

We maneuver the neighborhood streets for a couple of blocks, dodging potholes and parked cars as we gather speed in the initial rush felt at the start of a ride. The warm morning air sweeps our hair back and both of us are smiling like gleeful children…except I’m also panting, hoping that Sara doesn’t notice. “Heh!” I almost choke out, trying to emulate laughter to show her just how much fun this bike ride is. It’s times like these where I remind myself, “Be thankful you don’t smoke. It could be much harder.” I turn to look at Sara and forget my first-world problem pity party and find myself still in such disbelief of how she glows—truly, despite how long I have known her and have come to know the many obstacles she has and continues to encounter in her life, she can still glow. Though not perfect, there truly are beautiful people in this world.

We get on the trail and ride for a few minutes in silence, breathing in the air and taking in the sublime nature around us. Squirrels and chipmunks dart across the trail ahead of us and cardinals bounce from branch to branch of the trees arching the trail. Sara turns to me and says, “So I’ve kind of reconnected with someone from high school.”

“Oh?” I respond. Spoiler alert: this is a completely platonic reconnection. Sara is happily married and when she says, “reconnect” she only means it as friends. Back to the story. She tells
me that they found each other via Facebook. She enthusiastically shares with me details of his life, what he has been up to since high school, what he was like in high school—a seemingly fun moment of reminiscing and taking joy in another’s growth and accomplishments. Then, the tone changes a bit. She hesitates a moment, then cautiously deals out her words, “but…he posts some…things….”

My mind instantly goes THERE. Anti-Islamic. Islamophobic. Hateful. I give her a knowing look as our eyes lock in momentary acknowledgment, our legs still pedaling, and god knows how we are actually still riding in a straight line on the trail. “So how do you feel about that? Do you think you’re going to say something?” I ask.

Sara looks down at her handlebars with a contemplative, distant look, one that I see her oldest son get often—no doubt of relation there. Her eyebrows furrow and her lips tighten. “I—hmm.” She opens her mouth again but only a forced breath of air escapes before any actual sound can make it out. Then she contemplates again. “I don’t know. I don’t know how.” We pedal forward.

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Reflection:

I feel helpless in this moment. I don’t know what to say or how to help. I don’t know my role. In these moments I honestly I forget that I am a researcher. I shed that mask long ago and it’s not that I shed that identity or the practice/co-creation/participation-in research altogether; rather, I’ve shed the mask of hiding behind an identity that distances me from a truer human connection with her through a supposed distal safety that comes with the power of being “the researcher.” But in these moments where I am out, riding bikes with my friend Sara who is telling me about a friend with whom she has reconnected from her childhood who is excitedly
telling her how glad he is to talk to her while at the same time posting hateful messages about Muslims on his Facebook wall, I am her friend. absolutely. and. first. And as a friend, I do not know what to offer her. I am always here to listen, which I’m hoping to god right now is exactly what she needs because that’s the only thing I know with any confidence how to do. I hear the struggle in her silence of the hurt that comes with learning that someone you loved and respected in your youth has grown to have views that you do not agree with, especially when those views position you and your family as an enemy or target. I hear the distraught in her silence of having to negotiate the very difficult task of deciding if, when, and how to come out as a Muslim when a relationship with this person is at stake. I hear the fear in her silence of knowing that it isn’t just this relationship that is at stake; this person is still connected to so many others from “back home” that this coming out and/or the way in which she does come out could have very material social consequences for her and her family. I hear the frustration in her silence of wondering why the world has to be this way and so full of ignorance and hate. I hear the volume of her silence because this is not a silence that she wants.

Days after such moments, then, my researcher identity reemerges, and I think, “Is that who Sara needed in that moment? Could I have offered her something from my supposed mounds of research to have made that process easier for her?” My heart tells me that’s not what she was looking for. Honestly, I go to her to seek those answers. But perhaps that’s not how she sees it. I doubt it. Wait, I don’t know. She does know more than I do—she lives it. I couldn’t have offered her anything. She has to know that. Right? She had to be telling me this story because she knew that I was someone who could listen and who could empathize. And also she knows that I’m doing this research. She reminds me more than I often find myself remembering that I’m doing this research. So perhaps in that moment she told me her story because she knew I
could use it in my research when I wasn’t even thinking of it as something from a research perspective. So would she have even shared this story with me had it not been for my research? Ultimately, no, because we most likely would have never met. But besides that, have I become an outlet for her for these kinds of issues because I’m more willing to listen? In forgetting that I was a researcher in the moment, perhaps it was the researcher hat that I should have been wearing. But could I have empathized as I did while wearing that hat? The boundaries are indeed messy and now I find myself unable to talk about one without implicating the other. So now when I think of the books and manuals that talk about researcher identity and friend identity, I find them incomplete. In upholding so many ethics of friendship, I break so many supposed ethics of a researcher. But as a friend, I most certainly cannot and will not break my ethics and morals of being a true friend. And to me, for Sara, that is more important than my textbook-given ethics as a researcher. But Sara sees me as both a friend and researcher, apparently—and that those identities are not incompatible. I can’t help but to think that many, many others have experienced this—perhaps it’s time that we, as friends/researchers/community members/feelers come clean about this.

Carolyn Ellis (2003) articulates a relational dimension of ethics that “recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work” (p. 4). Ellis urges me as a researcher, that as I have developed a friendship with Sara, that in moments like the ones I have described, I should act from my heart and mind and ask “What should I do now?” instead of the conventional approach of “This is what you should do now.” Okay then, what should I do now? Or what should I have done? I feel that Ellis’ relational ethics is well-articulated, appropriate, and allows for the growth of relationships to develop between researcher and researched that
permits a closeness “to them while they are responding to what life does to them” (Goffman, 1989, p. 125), which is something taught as an idealized situation in conventional ethnography classes. But this all assumes that ultimately, the researcher identity is primary and friendships are either artificial or fortunate byproducts of the research process. This perspective still privileges research above the participant-turned-friend thus subtly yet profoundly locates this person still as a subject with utilitarian function before she is a human being of equal standing in an equitable friendship. This is where research ethics and ethics of friendship, in my mind, collide, mix, and have an opportunity to grow together.

William Rawlins (2011) outlines seven ethical practices of friendship (pp. 176-184). For one, friendship is an active process of choice where becoming and remaining friends is achieved voluntarily by both parties. This means that a friendship is purposeful and conscious; friendship does not just happen. Two, friends are mutually concerned for each other’s well being; an intrinsic value in friendship is care for the other and often the lines between self- and other-interest do not exist. Third, equality forms the foundation of friendship, though equality does not have to take on the guise of similarity; “our equality as friends is demonstrated by our respect for each other and in relation to our common concerns and activities—not by direct comparison of our individual abilities or attributes” (p. 180). Fourth, ethical friendships requires a continual learning about each other. Fifth, in line with establishing mutual equality, learning, and knowledge, friends trust and are trustworthy of each other. Sixth, friendships are performed through respectful honesty in discourse with one another. This also implies though, that a friend’s privacy and areas of sensitivity must be respected as well. Finally, friendships are conscientiously interested relationships. Blum describes conscientious interest as, “the concern, care, sympathy, and the willingness to give of oneself to the friend which goes beyond what is
characteristic and expected of people generally” (p. 67). He continues, “These relationships involve a deeper identification with the other’s good than is customary in their absence; and it is entirely proper that they do so” (p. 81). Overall, these ethical practices of friendship outline properties of equality, compassion, respect, honesty, voluntariness, and care that define this kind of relationship. Inherently, there are qualities within this that are spoken about within research ethics, all of which are addressed in feminist research ethics. Yet, these guidelines seem incomplete to me when I find myself unsure of whether my friend/research participant is calling on me and/or expressing a need for me to listen as a friend/researcher/both or asking me for advice as a friend/researcher/both or is informing me as a researcher/friend/both. Furthermore, these guidelines are still incomplete when the relationship changes from I (being the researcher) need you (as the researched) for my research to I NEED you, as a friend who needs a friend.

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My friendship with Sara was indeed an unexpected surprise emanating from a research project. I cannot argue that I did not see the potential of our relationship becoming deeper the moment she invited me to her home. So maybe it was there that a conventional research taboo was enacted. But had I to do it over, I most certainly and without a doubt would make the decision to violate the script given to me of the performance of “the researcher” again.

In the development of our friendship, I genuinely feel that my relationship with Sara has changed from one of “Oh, Marne, the one who does research on Muslim women” to “Our friend, Marne, you know, the one who runs for charity and bought our newborn niece the baby swing, bought Dad the dozens of soda pop for his birthday, showed up with oodles of chocolate for Sara when she was craving it, she studies Muslim women, brought rocks from Arizona for big brother to add to his geology collection, the one with the karate brother, she likes….” And Sara has
grown from “(Participant 1), Muslim woman convert from Ohio in her 30s, Caucasian who has tons to offer and share about her experiences as a Muslim” to “my close friend and Ohio family, Sara, whom I can’t imagine life without.” Our relationship changed from my needing her as a participant in my research to be able to do my research, have voices from whom to gain knowledge, have enough voices and time with participants to meet field standards of “quality” and “richness” of “data” to one of my needing her as a friend in moments of vulnerability, shame, sadness, and fear. The ethics I enacted towards and with her evolved from our first meeting of having her sign a consent form indicating that I would not share transcripts with anyone else, that I would have a specific code system only decipherable by myself, the researcher, and keep files in a locked, security box to which only I have a code, to an ethics of offering to babysit when her family was in need, sending uplifting text messages when she posted deflating feelings on the Facebook, coming out to her as gay because omitting that information and/or concealing that would be lying and thus betraying our friendship.

This isn’t to undermine the immensely difficult processes that I, and all researchers, endure when it comes to ethics of representation in the writing processes when it actually does come down to research analyses. But what I’m trying to convey here is that there is no guidebook for the day-to-day interactions of being a good friend who also happens to be a researcher—but it isn’t just happenstance that those two identities exist; they are intertwined and both exist simultaneously, and conventional tradition of ethics no longer work. And I’m not sure that a guidebook is what I’m calling for— I’m not sure that general guidelines can be articulated except to say that they exist in the spaces between and beyond research ethics and an ethic of friendship. Perhaps what I am calling for instead is permission to admit to these events happening and these relationships existing. I’m asking that we don’t have to apologize for or
hide that these friendships develop. In line with Tillmann-Healy’s (2003) argument for friendship as method, I am advocating that we admit that these friendships inevitably impact our research, but that impact doesn’t have to be read as a negative development or something that devalues the analyses/sharings/findings. Rather, friendships can add breadth and depth to our work, even shift the focus of our work, which it has surely done in mine, and for which I am entirely grateful. I am advocating that we encourage these discussions in research pedagogy early on rather than send out upcoming scholars to deal with these issues on their own, not knowing how to deal with them or attempting to become inhuman, socially awkward robots. We’re in the academy; god knows we’re already good at social awkwardness.

I set out on this journey to understand what it means to be a Muslim woman in the United States today. While I have listened to numerous stories, partaken in many activities, attempted to learn Arabic, attended religious services, spent uncountable hours with Muslim women—all things of which are accounted for in my dissertation work—I think the most important lesson I’ve gained from this continuing journey is how to be a good friend. And I’ve learned this from Sara, both in her interactions with me and in the interactions I’ve seen her have with countless others in her life, those she knows personally and those she has never met. And though I initially sought to learn about Muslims, what I have learned is that the real question I was seeking to answer was how can we learn to respect, embrace, and value the diversity within each of us? And I found a trail to the answers through Sara and what does through friendship…what she and I do in our friendship. If this is the most honest, respectful, equal relationship that we can be in as two human beings, then isn’t this what we should strive for as critical, feminist, (auto)ethnographic researchers?
As We Continue to Become

There is no doubt that this project demands more questions to be asked and research to be conducted than it provides answers and explanations. This is the case of all truly inquisitive research and an ethic that we, as qualitative scholars and as pursuers of knowledge both from within and outside the academy, must maintain. For myself, I look forward to pursuing these future areas ethnographically though I do encourage a multitude of methodologies and methods to be employed from others interested in similar topics.

First, it is vital that pursuits in the understanding of women’s interpretations and experiences with(in) Islam and in relation to Islamophobic discourse continue in different geographic areas. Gaining insight into different communities’ interactions with and participation in or against hegemonic discourses while simultaneously attending to performances and negotiations of identity offers us new ways to conceptualize transformational possibilities and ways to overcome oppression and marginalization.

Second, the women repeatedly invoked the Qur’an as a source of female empowerment. The explanations they shared were often predicated on the designated role of heightened status of women as mothers within the family. The way several women presented these explanations assumed a heterosexual orientation to the family unit, thus reifying patriarchal discourses (not exclusive to portrayals of Islam) that deem the husband as the primary breadwinner. What these explanations do not account for are circumstances where the woman in a heterosexual coupling is indeed the breadwinner or cases of same-sex relationships. This offers two future directions of research that would add breadth and depth to the discussion of Islam and politics of the day. Furthermore, these discussions may elucidate further (re)negotiations of women’s rights within
Islam and against hegemonic sexist discourses within our society that are happening imperceptibly.

Along these same lines, because of the heightened status of motherhood within Islam, it would be interesting to pursue questions of motherhood itself. While the women in this study discuss motherhood as a gift and a reason for elevated/equitable status to men, the absence of discussion about those who choose not to be mothers or cannot be mothers, especially within a heterosexual marriage, lends me to question if within this rhetorical construction of empowerment is also an association with pro-natalist discourse. In other words, what happens if a Muslim woman chooses to or cannot have children or does not wish to marry? While one woman in this study did talk about her decision to focus on her career at this time in her life versus getting married/having children, she did say that her case was culturally unusual and that it took and still takes negotiation among her family members to accept her decision. This line of inquiry lends to a study in and of itself.

There are also numerous other studies that can be sparked or continued from this project. I encourage readers and scholars to use this work as one of many resources to inform future lines of research inquiring about identity, culture, community, discourse, and transformation. My hope is that from this, past, and future works, we can learn and continue to become more culturally literate, sensitive, invitational, and understanding of ourselves and our neighbors. Ultimately, we are all in this together (Braidotti, 2006) and indeed, it is up to us whether we allow ourselves to become our ever-growing potential.
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Figure 1. Model of relational communication theory of identity. This figure illustrates the proposed lens from which to examine a relational identity between two people through communication.
Figure 2. Example of internet meme.
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: Nomadic Subjectivity and Muslim Women: A Critical Ethnography of Identities, Cultures, and Discourses

**INTRODUCTION**
You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Marne Leigh Austin, from the School of Media and Communication at Bowling Green State University. Your participation in this research will contribute to a dissertation seeking to understand what it means to be Muslim, how you describe the function of Islam in your everyday life as a woman, and how you respond to anti-Islamic sentiments in our society. You were identified as a possible volunteer in the study because you are a Muslim woman who responded and volunteered your perspective and time to the project.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**: The purpose of this study is to contribute to the current understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman and how it impacts your everyday life. Furthermore, the study aims to demystify and challenge misunderstandings of and stigma directed towards Muslim women.

**PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES**
1. With your voluntary participation, you will be briefed on the purpose of the study and how your participation will contribute to it. You will be given a verbal explanation of all procedures and activities along with this written consent before any interviews or observations are made.
2. I will conduct a one-on-one interview with you that will take about one-hour. During this interview, I will be asking you what it means to be Muslim and how it impacts your everyday life and actions. This interview is open in that whatever you feel important to reveal about your perspective, I encourage you to share. We will conduct the interview in a semi-public location that you request that meets your level of comfort and access (e.g., coffee shop, book store, mosque meeting rooms, etc.). I will record the interviews with two audio-recording devices that will only be listened to by me and will remain locked in my residence to maintain your confidentiality. After I transcribe the recordings and complete the analysis, they will be erased to further ensure confidentiality.
3. You will also be asked for permission to participate with you while observing you in a context in which you feel comfortable with my being there. The point of this is to gain a fuller understanding of your life and your story by seeing you in action. The context is up to you—this may be in your home, at work, at an event or day at the Islamic center/masjid/mosque, etc. Observations will last for as long as you deem comfortable—from an hour, to several hours, or multiple days and times of activities. I will start and stop observations at your request. All notes of observations that I make will be sent to you before analysis so that you are aware and can add or correct any of my observations. If you are not comfortable with this component of the study, you are free to only participate in the interview.
4. After I have gathered my data and have made my analysis of the study, I will share the transcript of our interview, fieldnotes, and summary with you so that you can correct, clarify,
or delete parts of it as you see fit. This will be done before the work is turned in or goes into publication. I want your story and I want to understand it correctly.

5. There are no monetary incentives associated with this study. However, you will be contributing to a greater understanding of what it means to be a Muslim and how Islam functions in your life.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

1. Risk of participation is not greater than that experienced in daily life. I am asking you for your opinions and insights, so anything that you are uncomfortable sharing is completely at your discretion.

• POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

1. You will benefit from this study by being able to voice your opinion of what it means to be Muslim and practice Islam. Often, you may not be openly invited to share this opinion, but here I am openly asking for it. This study will be a great way to get your voice out there and understood.

2. You will also be contributing to a greater body of research in understanding what it means to be a Muslim within the US. With this more comprehensive, real, and updated understanding, Islam may be better understood by those who do not participate in it or we may be able to construct more effective and accurate messages of what being Muslim means.

• CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Your name will be changed so that you may remain anonymous throughout the research report. All audio-recordings, transcriptions of those recordings, fieldnotes, and transcriptions of the fieldnotes will be locked at my personal residence and will remain on a computer only accessible to me. The tapes will be erased at the completion of the study. The transcripts will be kept with the researcher in a safe after the study under a coding scheme which will not reveal your identity. You can feel comfortable deleting or changing anything that you have said if you feel it may identify you or violate your confidentiality.

• PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to participate in this study or not. Your decision to participate or not participate in the study will not impact your relationship with Bowling Green State University in any way. Furthermore, your decision to participate or not participate will not have any impact with the Muslim community—your identity will remain confidential. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. If you volunteer to participate, you may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. Your decision to participate or to not participate in this study will in no way impact any relationship you may have with Bowling Green State University.
IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS AND REVIEW BOARD
If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact: Marne Austin at maustin@bgsu.edu, 505-220-6956 or Sandra Faulkner (faculty sponsor) at sandraf@bgsu.edu, 419-372-8349. If you have other concerns or questions regarding participant rights, contact the chair of the human subjects review board at Bowling Green State University at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT
I have been informed of the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

________________________________________________________
Name of Participant  (please print)

____________________________________  ________
Signature of Participant  Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR
In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly providing informed consent and to participate in this research study

________________________________________________________
Name of Investigator or Designee

____________________________________  ________
Signature of Investigator or Designee  Date

HSRB APPROVAL STAMP