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# Ain't I a Muslim woman?: African American Muslim Women Practicing 'Multiple Critique'

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# Ain't I a Muslim Woman?

## African American Muslim Women Practicing

### 'Multiple Critique'

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**Submitted to the Department of Religious Studies of Pomona College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Senior Exercise for the Bachelor in Arts.**

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*All that is left to us*
*by tradition*
*is mere words.*
*It is up to us*
*to find out what they mean.*
ibn Arabi

*i am because we are*
African proverb


thank you God.  For everything.

thank you mama for pushing me to do my best and expecting so much from me.  And for being an example of strength, independence, and faith.

thank you papa for being my champion, confidant, editor, bank, and provider of dark chocolate.  And putting up with my moodiness.

thank you friends for supporting and encouraging me.  And thank you for listening.

thank you Professor Zayn Kassam for showing me (and modeling) a path to do the work that I am doing, culminating/beginning with the subjects of this thesis.  What more appreciation can I show except to say that your profound instruction, wisdom, affirmation, and friendship have helped (trans)form my sense of self and will always endure.

thank you Professor Erin Runions for helping me pull my socks up and crank out my thesis, for facilitating an open and critical class environment so I can try out my ideas and be moved by others, and  for all your insight and attentiveness.

thank you every wonderful professor I have had for facilitating my transformation and inspiring different pieces of my thesis.

thank you Women's Union—the space, the spirit, the people—for being a place where my voice could be heard, where ideas could be developed, where love and respect is shared, and where I spent countless hours thesising.

and thank you to all those who been acting *womanish*.

*People, We have created you all male and female and have made you races and tribes so that you would recognize each other. The most honorable among you in the sight of God is the most pious of you. God is All-knowing and All-aware. (49:13)*

I like this quote from the Quran because it speaks to the reality of difference, a difference that refers to many markers—sexual, racial, national, religious, geographic, local, global, etc, and, with the ceremony of sacred/divine mystery, discloses intention. This intention is the continuous, paradoxical, messy business of recognizing (also translated as knowing) each other, the other. Many times when performing politics we are taught to see difference as divisive, rather than as opportunities to be in suspense and be creative.

I never intended to be a religious studies major. But it proved an apt discipline to study the situations and experiences of my own life. The insights I have gained have aided in my personal project of thinking about Islam in relation to American history and structures of power. They have even nuanced my understanding in internal Muslim dialogues when thinking about inclusivity and radical subjectivity. As my professors have pointed out, the discursive relationship of religion with other disciplines, discourses, and concepts, has shown how various constructions are overdetermined, relational, and are shaped by other political, institutional, and material interests. Thus, my eyes have been open into how these relationships (re)produce and negotiate race, class, gender, etc.

Why do I choose to recognize the work of African American Muslim women?  As an American Muslim woman of mixed heritage, I have had to undergo my own negotiations when it comes to how I inhabit norms and balance various commitments. It is becoming increasingly clear to me that different aspects of my identity are constructed and the ways people view them, are to some extent, imposed upon me.  In many ways I will be relating to this thesis as a simultaneous cultural insider and cultural outsider.  The stakes of what it means to retheorize within the Islamic tradition and the negotiation of difference is of huge importance.  As an American, thinking of Islam as indigenous to the United States and not some foreign, and often demonized, identity plays a huge role in my interest in early African American Muslim communities.

In conjunction to this, I find tremendous value in the Black Radical Tradition— that old spirit that has emerged from collective African experience—which, we may find out is not necessarily "black" or "radical."  I see this influence in the creative writings of bell hooks, Amina Wadud, Sherman Jackson, Delores Williams, C. Robinson, among others.  This tradition challenges Eurocentrism and the Enlightenment paradigm, which has dominated political discourse and our ways of knowing each other.

Finally, my work as a feminist, activist, and student has pointed out there cannot be one type of dress code, one cookie-cutter liberation movement, or one way to express one's piety.  I realize being Muslim AND feminist are not a mutually exclusive concept, but am learning to continuously interrogate both of those identities.

I see this thesis as a developing paper that explores various ideas that have challenged me to think more critically, openly, and poetically.   What is significant is that

it is my own.  These ideas influence my scholarship, my spirituality, my well-being, and my sense of hope.  One could say a commonality that the subjects of my thesis have are that they are discontents.  But that very space of dissatisfaction—of racial violence, of gender oppression, of misery produced by the global economy—of hypocrisy, misunderstanding, misrecognition—is the space for genuine self-examination and exchange, where dreams are dared to be pursued, and (radical) change is demanded.

*Sara*

This thesis explores both limits and possibilities. It reflects on processes of appropriation, resignification and critique as practiced variably by African American Muslim women. I situate these processes within the concept of multiple critique, for specifically three moments—Sherman Jackson's Third Resurrection, the black feminist tradition, and Islamic feminisms.

African American Muslim women are creating a multilayered discourse that interrogates individuals, institutions, traditions, and other discourses that are insufficient, oppressive, and marginalizing. These interrogations, which unpack privilege, are balanced, and often strengthen, their Islamic loyalties. As I develop my own ethics and politics it is important for me to be suspensive and open and recognize the possibility of retheorizations and reevaluations, while still being committed to my own politics of reading Islam as a counter-hegemonic faith. Thus the conversations between black radicalism, feminist theory, and Islam provide avenues and strategies for thinking in oppositional and in solidarity. miriam cooke calls these oppositional stances *multiple critique*.

**Multiple Critique**

miriam cooke's multiple critique is the interaction between the two concepts of

*double critique* Abdelkebir Khatibi and *multiple consciousness* Deborah King.[1]  Khatibi, in

the context of French colonial presence in North Africa, uses the dual consciousness of

the postcolonial subject as a site of opposition and critique.  Dual consciousness is

processed through interrogation of the "the double negative hermeneutic" of self-

colonization and self-victimization.[2]  This articulation of oppositional discourse talks

back to both local and global antagonists.  cooke inserts gender as a third site with a

multitude of antagonist including "religious zealots and religious others, foreigners,

homophobes, and women with different histories."[3]  King's *multiple consciousness*

expands on W.E.B. Dubois's double consciousness thesis and shows how the "multiple

jeapardies" of black women being marginalized by the women's movement and black

liberation create multiple consciousness. "The importance of any one factor in

explaining black women's circumstances thus varies depending on the particular

aspects of our lives under consideration and the reference groups to whom we are

compared."[4]

Cooke uses this concept as a rhetorical stance shared by Islamic feminists.  She

distinguishes between consciousness and critique and how "Islamic feminists find ways

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[1] miriam cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 109.

[2] Mustapha Hamil "Interrogating Idenity: Abdelkebir Khatibi and the Postcolonial Prerogative" *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* (2002) http://www.jehat.com/Jehaat/en/RecentTitlesonArabicLiterature/Mustapha-Hamil.htm

[3] cooke, 110.

[4] Deborah King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist ideology," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought,* ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995) 297-298.

to move from multiple consciousness to multiple critique."[5]  These concepts are also a

move from identity politics, which focusing on the identity of the subject, can lead to

authorizing discourses and essentialism that displace others.

> Multiple critique is not a fixed authorizing mechanism but a fluid discursive
> strategy taken up from multiple speaking positions.  It allows for conversations
> with many interlocutors on many different topics.  Unlike identity politics, which
> depends on an essentialized identity, multiple critique allows for identitarian
> contradictions that respond to other's silencing moves.[6]

> This concept allows one to stay in a community while criticizing it and opens

possibilities for alliance and networking.

**Invisible Muslimah**

*"We are Muslim women too and we're not invisible." Faith*

Precious Rasheedah Muhammad articulates in her essay her strong communal

and social justice sensibility growing up within an African American Muslim community.

After interacting with other Muslims or what she calls "coreligionists" she realized that

other factors characterized her relationships with other people and with God.

Muhammad could not "just be a Muslim" or feel that she was interacting with equal

privilege.  Her experience of being an African American Muslim woman was one of a

minority, on multiple levels.[7]

In Jamillah Karim's ethnographic discussion groups, where she aims to lift the

voice of the underrepresented ("method from the margins"), she notes that the African

American female voice of struggle is marked by the overlap of oppressions and captures

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[5] cooke, 113.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Precious Rasheedah Muhammad, "To be Young, Gifted, Blak, American, Muslim, and Woman," in *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Woman Speak*, ed. Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2005), 43.

the multiple, complex, and shifting identities Muslims hold.  The words of Melanie, an

African American Muslim woman Karim talks to, voices the overlapping discriminations

she faces within and outside of the Muslim community. "I'm seen as an African

American before I'm seen as a Muslim American. I'm seen as an African American, then a

woman, then a Muslim, for whatever reasons or prejudices other people have."[8]  To

further exacerbate the marginalized feelings of Melanie, the other Muslim women in her

discussion group who do not identify as black, feel that Melanie is self segregating and

divisive, attributing her feelings as false consciousness.[9]  As Muslim women may deal

with gender erasure, African American Muslim women also deal with racial erasure, a

sentimental idea that religions traditionally hold.[10]  With the already problematic

depictions of Muslims in the media, or gender disparity when it comes to leadership

positions in religious centers, African American Muslim women are often subjected to

invisibility.

     According to Kimberle Crenshaw, "Because the intersectional experience is

greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take

intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which

Black women are subordinated."[11]  As such the needs and experiences of women who

traverse these intersections are not being met or recognized, which causes Muslim

communities to neglect, gloss over, or exacerbate internal injustices and silencing.

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[8] Jamillah Karim "To Be Black, Female, and Muslim: A Candid Conversation about Race in the American Ummah," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 2 (August 2006), 228.
[9] Ibid., 227.
[10] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 12.
[11] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," *University of Chicago Legal Forum,* 139 (1989).

People get upset with me because I defend my right to be heard, to be able to speak freely, to be able to be seen as a woman, as pretty and feminine and not slutty and just poor and black and nasty. People are afraid of me because I encapsulate everything that the world overall is unhappy and afraid of. They are afraid of femininity, the power of being a woman. People are afraid of African American people. They are afraid of people of my descent, whether it be Ethiopian, African American, South African, Nigerian, Ghanaian, or whatever. And people are afraid of Muslim people. That's why I'm treated the way I'm treated wherever I go, whatever masjid, whatever city, whatever grocery store, period.[12]

Melanie voices her experiences of marginalization because of social anxiety emanating from heightened gender and racial awareness, where communities seem to prefer to not confront the presence of empowered Muslim women of African descent. Karim locates multiple sites of oppression, not just internally but also spatially— "wherever I go, whatever masjid, whatever city, whatever grocery store." For African American Muslim women, sexism is encountered not only in Muslim immigrant communities but also in the black community and the dominant white American communities at large. In addition, racism is not only encountered in American mainstream society, with its already tense race relations, but in the Muslim community where race dynamics are not problematized due to lofty universal ideals of Muslim identity where being Muslim and spiritually equal is all that matters. These multiple sites, along with Crenshaw's statement about the intersectional experience indicate that positing struggles between male and female, blackness and whiteness, is too reductive. In addition, Melanie relates to us that not only African Americans are

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[12] Karim "To Be Black, Female, and Muslim," 230-231.

oppressed, but indicates the reality of multiple identities and the paradox of the color line, which complicate gender, race, and civil liberties struggles in America.[13]

"Most often, the matter of gender hegemony is referred to, although not integrated and certainly not resolved, as progressive Islam. Matters of class or racial hegemony receive less direct attention."[14] Amina Wadud, known for concept of *gender jihad* and female-inclusive interpretations of the Quran, points out the lack of articulation of race in global Islamic feminist, and progressive movements. Perhaps it is this dynamic that leads Melanie to identify more with racial marginalization as opposed to female-exclusivity.

This reality of triple minority status, or struggle against multiple fronts of oppression, is what makes the diverse voices of African American Muslim women significant in being critical about the multiple hegemonic power relationships in the Muslim community, and the American community at large. Aisha al-Adawiya discusses how African American Muslim women are a "rare gift," due to their historical reference and experience in addressing issues of oppression and struggle for liberation and opportunity. They are engaged and have relationships with those who oppress and those who strive for liberation. With this reference and experience with this contradiction, African American women are in the unique position to struggle for social justice for Muslims and Americans

> We knew that we could be powerful because of our spirituality – not in spite of
> it. We carry the scars of centuries of enslavement and the residual effects that

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[13] Ibid., 231.

[14] Amina Wadud, "American Muslim Identity: Race and Ethnicity in Progressive Islam," *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism,* ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 271.

persist to this day. We have lost – and continue to lose – our children and loved ones to pernicious institutional racism manifested through policies of abuse and neglect, such as economic deprivation, criminalisation of our youth, substandard health care, and inferior education. Based on these experiences, we can offer lessons learned to Muslim immigrants struggling to realise the promises America makes to new arrivals.[15]

The social location of a person is important in understanding the political nature of their work, and being a African American woman has historically and presently elucidated certain circumstances and situations. Although there is no authentic, essential African American Muslim woman's experience due, there are some similarities that can be drawn out due to certain systematical historical oppressions. As Patricia Hill Collins states, "This connection between experience and consciousness that shapes the everyday lives of all African American women pervades the works of Black women activists and scholars."[16]

Different meanings of what it means to be American, Western, Muslim, Black, Women of Color, Feminist (black, Islamic, womanist) can shape one's vision of oneself and out of which one must extract meaning that they could recognize as their own. From this process, one can simultaneously claim and challenge, disrupting the hegemony of different forms of representations and totalizations, providing new avenues of participation, commitment, recovery, and membership. Here I try to explore some of the multivalences of works by African American Muslim women and the ways that an Islamic framework can be employed as a method of social justice and change.

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[15] Aisha H.L. al-Adawiya, "African American Muslim women are a rare gift," *Common Ground News Service*, June 3 2008, http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=23271&lan=en&sid=1&sp=1&isNew=0
[16] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.

Each work presented has a place within the larger discourses in which they were written, and reflect serious forces at work.  I explore three moments and read them in conversation identifying some of these forces.  These conversations present possible sites of self-authentification and change while accounting for the discourses that describe and prescribe them.

*"Not until the condition of my people changes." Malcolm X*

*"Truly, God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves." Quran 13:11*

Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammad (c.570-632), at the age of 40, began to receive revelations from the divine. Within a century, the Islamic tradition spread through an empire. Today, it is the second largest religion in the world. Tradition functions and relates with the past, the present, and the future. It is historically evolving, characterized by its own rationality and embodied practice and its interactions with other discourses. The concept of religion as "discursive tradition" is an apt way to think about black routes to Islam in America, especially when contextualizing how this religious tradition interacts with other traditions and discourses. By thinking of Islam as not historically fixed but having a history that informs how subjects participate in the tradition, "the past [becomes] the very ground through which the subjectivity and self-understanding of a tradition's adherents are constituted."[17] I choose to think about Islam in this way, as specific definitions of Islam have different limiting or enlarging potential when thinking about pluralism within groups who call themselves Muslim. This allows me to think about Islam in terms of processes of inheritance, appropriation, and authorization.

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[17] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject,* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 115.

The purpose of this chapter is to partially situate African American Muslim

women within what scholar Sherman Jackson calls the Third Resurrection.  As such, a

brief introduction to black routes of Islam and its articulation of what it means to be

black, American, and Muslim is relevant to contextualizing the work of African American

Muslim women.  What does the Third Resurrection refer to?  Thinking about it

chronologically, the First Resurrection was the period before 1975, the year when the

Honorable Elijah Muhammad died.  The Second Resurrection is the period afterwards

during the leadership of Warithudeen (W.D.) Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan.  The First

Resurrection marks the transition of blacks into "proto-Islamic" groups, many leaving

Christian churches for organizations such as the Moorish Science Temple, Ahmadi

Muslim mosques, the Islamic Brotherhood/State Street Mosque of Brooklyn, the

Addeynu Allahe Universal Arabic Association, the Fahamme Temple of Islam and

Culture, the First Mosque of Pittsburgh, and the Nation of Islam (NOI).  The Second

Resurrection marks the leadership of W.D. Muhammad, who adopted more mainstream

Sunni teachings, and remaining leaders of particularistic "proto-Islamic" traditions such

as Louis Farrakhan (NOI).[18]  Charismatic and significant leadership characterized both of

these resurrections.  Accordingly, the Third Resurrection marks the emerging reality in

which, "whatever future Islam has in black America will be one in which the

authenticating agent is almost certain to be the structured discourse of Sunni

Tradition."[19]

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[18] Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Black American: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection,* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 6.
[19] Ibid.

The transitioning that Jackson sees occurring concerns a different approach to Islam that joins the larger world community of what he calls "Sunni orthodox" Islam, while at the same time speaking out with a distinctively Blackamerican voice. He posits the need for a Third Resurrection where Blackamerican Muslims need to both master and appropriate mainstream Muslim traditions so that they are not dominated by them. This would avoid being narrowly construed as a prototypical black "protest" religion and actually become a space where Blackamerican Muslims can emerge as "self-authenticating subjects" instead of "dependent objects." Jackson believes that Blackamerican Muslims can find the resources to reconcile being black, American, and Muslim within the Islamic tradition. This description and directive is helpful, especially in relation to Blackamerican Muslim woman's voices, as it is able to talk about race within the mainstream Sunni traditions as opposed to race-consciousness being relegated to more particular religious expressions such as the NOI and Five Percenters.

Jackson explores the encounter between Islam and the Blackamerican, noting that the presence of an indigenous Islam in America owes itself to the phenomenon of Black Religion, "a pragmatic, folk-oriented, holy protest against anti-black racism" that emerged out of the experience of American slavery.[20] Given the particularism of black religious experience in America and consequent interpretation of being Muslim, Jackson points out the evolution of and present articulations of what it means to be black and Muslim in the specific context of American whiteness, immigrant Islam, and Sunni

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[20] Ibid., 4.

orthodoxy.  Part of the anxiety that fuels his scholarship is that the Blackamerican

Muslim today has lost definition of Islam to immigrant Muslim authorities.

But Jackson points out that the Sunni tradition as imported/authorized by

Muslim immigrants was/is attached to "false universals," "the phenomenon of history

internalized, normalized, and then forgotten as history," and the judgment of others

based on universalized particular experience.[21]  Given that Black Religion manifested as

a communal tool to combat racism and compose a black identity, immigrant Muslims

found themselves at odds with not white supremacy but the "West," their struggle not

characterized by race but a religious, imperialist threat.  Confronted with this reality,

Blackamerican Muslims faced the added challenge of finding their voice within not only

a white supremacist society but in historical Islam.

**Community, Nation-building, and Group-consciousness**

*We have been captured,*
*and we labor to make our getaway, into*
*the ancient image; into a new*

*Correspondence with ourselves*
*and our Black family. We need magic*
*now we need the spells, to raise up*
*return, destroy, and create. What will be*

*the sacred word?*
Amiri Baraka From Ka'ba

Timothy Drew, or Noble Drew Ali, founded the Moorish Science Temple (MST) in

Chicago, establishing temples in different locations.  Although Drew incorporated

Islamic symbols, much of tradition borrowed elements from Freemasonry, which

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[21] Ibid., 9.

already had an Oriental streak. Drew rejected the signifier Negro and urged his following

to identify as Moorish as he believed that Blackamericans had a rich religious heritage

that was lost during slavery.[22]  The MST focused on concepts of justice, purposeful

creation, freedom of will, and people as a generator of action.  They also took political

stances like not serving in the military.  They were in part, "a nationalistic response to

America's racism and to the sense of confusion that enveloped them after the end of

slavery and the beginning of the migration of blacks from the southern states to the

north."[23]  This atmosphere created avenues for community building.  Drew constructed

Moorish Science in nationalistic/cultural terms rather than racialism, a move that would

signify a common history, belief system, and value system.  The MST had its own

practices, book, and prophet, filling in the void of having limited or no access to many

Islamic texts or hadith.  This community had a large service component in terms of

actively caring for the poor and opening rehabilitation centers.  They also believed in

self-sufficiency, encouraging economic diligence and independence.[24]

Another encounter between Islam and Blackamericans was through the

Ahmadiyya movement, which actually originated in India.  This religious community had

a large missionary and religious activism component, which, through its newspapers and

hadith literature, introduced "systematic Islamic study that had no reference to

nationalism."[25]  The Ahmadiyya movement is probably the only Muslim community that

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[22] Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: identity, liberation, and difference in African-American Islamic thought*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2002), 45.
[23] Amina Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 11-12.
[24] Ibid., 17.
[25] Ibid., 19.

committed resources to spreading Islam in the early parts of the century.[26] The community has an international character even though its membership was most Blackamerican, including many jazz musicians. However, even though the community worked for social justice and was against racism, Blackamericans were typically not appointed as missionaries and many exited. In addition, the community was culturally specific in the many ways Indian customs were emphasized.[27] The Islamic Mission of America, started by Shaykh Dauod Ahmed Faisal, attempted to reconcile being black, being American, and being Muslim. Although it emphasized black reclamation, it also supported American allegiance and had ties to the larger Muslim community. There was also an emphasis on education regarding *adab*, etiquette in which customs surrounding family and gender were solidified.[28]

The Nation of Islam, which is what most people think about when they think about historical black Islam, was founded by Wali Fard Muhammad. Elijah Muhammad, following the prophetic tradition in Black Religion became prophet to "the so-called Negro" and translated Fard's ideas, shaping the NOI. He was interested in building a nation and in the purification of the mind, body, and spirit. The community, like other Black Muslim communities, was often accused of heresy. Elijah is reported to have said in response to these claims, "My brothers in the East were never subject to conditions of slavery and systematic brainwashing by the slave masters for as long a period of time as my people here were subjected. I cannot, therefore, blame them if they differ with

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[26] Curtis, 92.
[27] McCloud, 20-21.
[28] Ibid., 22-23.

me in certain interpretations of the Message of Islam."[29]  Sherman Jackson deems this history until Elijah Muhammad died the First Resurrection, probably due to the particularistic appropriations of Islam as an expression of Black Religion.

The Second Resurrection  begins after Elijah Muhammad's death because of the transformations his son W.D. Muhammad facilitated.  W.D. Muhammad questioned the legitimacy of his father's teachings and when he became successor, reinterpreted those teachings, carrying out various Sunni reforms.  He sought closer ties with other Muslim communities and with Christian black leaders and even invited white people to join the Nation.  Though he still operated under a group identity, he asserted the primacy of Sunni teachings and norms, working to incorporate the black community within American and Islamic history while formulating an interpretation of Islam specific to the needs of the black community.[30]

**Some Particularities**

This disconnect that occurs between black Muslim communities and immigrant communities with their respective historical connections can be explained by the two Islamic concepts that Aminah McCloud, one of the African American Muslim woman voices recognized in this thesis, uses.  After McCloud draws out what she believes are some basics about Islam such as submission to divine will, revelation of the Quran, discipline through core practices, she adds two more concepts to this Islamic worldview as expressed in African American communities.  These are *asabiya* and *ummah*.  Asabiya is in reference to kinship relations that are expressed through tribal solidarities,

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[29] Ibid., 28-32
[30] Curtis, 127.

common ethics, and community identity, encompassing for McCloud broader group

affiliations centered in culture and nationalism.  Ummah describes a sense of

community, a "community of believers," that unifies Muslims across different

identifiers.[31]  These two notions are usually contemporarily posited as in conflict, asabiya

even branded as heretical. McCloud prefaces her scholarly work about African American

Islam as contingent on understanding this tension.  "African American Islamic

communities can be understood and differentiated largely by whether they grant

priority to nation-building, on the one hand, or to experience of the ummah and

participation in the world Islamic community, on the other."[32]  The first half of the

century, she argues is when African American Muslim communities focused on nation-

building and the second half when ummah is more prioritized.

     Edward E. Curtis, a recognized scholar of African American Islam, frames this

tension as the discourse characterized by both universalisms and particularisms.

Although he overviews Blackamerican Muslim history within the two concepts and

points out how Malcolm X is a figure that struggled to reconcile the two, he suggests

that the framework of Islamic universalism interacting with black particularism is too

simple and ignores historical debates.  In Islam's 1400 year history even at the time of

the Prophet, particularism was a constant characteristic in terms of tribal and then

national versions of ethnocentrism.  Thus his work helps to establish sects like the NOI

as legitimate within Islam.  Jackson states, "Many Sunni observers view proto-Islamic

communities as blasphemous.  While certainly condemnable from the standpoint of

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[31] McCloud, 3-4.
[32] Ibid., 5.

Muslim orthodoxy, these infelicities are actually no more outlandish than some of what we encounter in the early history of the Muslim world."[33] Islam has always incorporated diversity and multiculturalism. However, Jackson calls the early African American Islam proto-Islamic and refers to people like Noble Drew Ali and Fard as Islamizers. Jackson uses language of proto Islamic and irregularities to underscore his point that the starting point of the spread of Islam was Black Religion appropriation and search for alternative models/modality of blackness as opposed to spiritual transformation and community.

McCloud already contributes to Jackson's Third Resurrection discourse by mastering and appropriating Islamic concepts to bring up race. The work McCloud does is minimize the differences between black expressions of Islam like the NOI and orthodox Sunni Muslims by attributing how important asabiya and ummah is to them. McCloud wants to challenge the idea that African American Muslim communities emerged as a reaction to socioeconomic setting of America and the failure of Christian churches. She says that "most African American Muslims would consider themselves 'found' in Islam."[34] This relates to Rouse and the idea that Islam was an epiphany for many converts. As such, McCloud advocates an approach to their study through the context of an Islamic worldview and the alliance of daily struggles with Islamic beliefs and principles. The distinction is important for understanding the ambivalence of fighting local struggles and desiring international legitimacy and religious authenticity.

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[33] Jackson, 45.
[34] McCloud, 166.

These discussions put the scholar at the role of arbiter—to identify what is orthodox, heretical, or normative having implications on who can claim membership to a tradition. Can Islam encompass a bunch of particular expression of Islam? Is anyone who calls themselves a Muslim, an adherent of Islam? What qualifies as authentic Islam? To define it is to have power over the concept in public discourse, as the ways in which Muslims understand Islam in the US and the role they see for themselves as its adherents are explored. Islam offers a particular cosmological understanding of a guide to life through texts, rituals, institutions, and community. People, individuals, shape Islam through their interpretations, needs, culture, and agenda.

Many early encounters between Islam and Blackamericans emphasized social justice as the highest priority after *tawhid*, doctrine of God's oneness. The makings of these communities show nation-building or group consciousness through myths of origin, industry, spirituality, and moral boundaries.[35] "Conversion meant purification from the pollution of white supremacy and Eurocentrism and for the reclamation of an authentic social and spiritual identity. Although less significant, the identification of mainstream ideology with pollution and oppression remains a part of the Sunni community's ethic."[36]

Jackson's move of explaining black religious experience as Black Religion helps to demystify Christocentricism and displaces it as the essential religious experience of African Americans. As such, one can understand that Christianity and Islam functioned

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[35] Ibid., 34.
[36] Carolyn Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (University of California Press, 2004), 87.

more like conduits of the religious orientation of the masses and key to sociopolitical movements.  As we shall see, this master and appropriations makes faith primary and Islam the framework to work out contradiction and various socioeconomic oppressions and realities.

**Conclusion**

Sherman Jackson in *Islam and the Blackamerican* describes the historical, present, and potential articulations of what it means to be black and Muslim in the context of American whiteness, Sunni orthodoxy, and a culturally specific immigrant Islam that became the normative representation of Islam. He urges the necessity of Blackamericans to master and appropriate in order to produce knowledge and the Sunni tradition instead f just consume and be dominated by it. Jackson represents this reconciliation through his use of the term Blackamerican.  It is a reclamation of American but also points out to the history of ways that blacks were marginalized and treated as other.  The work Jackson does by using this name is to take this othering and compound the false dualisms constructed along racial lines, also talking back to the construction of the "Negro," an ahistorical and undifferentiated category that legitimated violence, dehumanization, and enslavement.  Accordingly, Islam's early encounters in America was a result of Europe's intrusion into African history.

As Jackson notes, he does not explore the difference between how Blackamerican Muslim women and men view Black Religion and the Third Resurrection so my thesis will begin to fill out certain gaps that deal with gender performance and feminist theories.  According to Jackson, Islam appealed to many black male converts

whose black manhood was threatened by American white supremacy.[37]  Islam

presented a felicitous resource for Black Religion to appropriate for the survival and

protest of Blackamericans.  Like other responses to white supremacy and struggles of

racial uplift, early black indigenous Islams were male-dominated and male-centered.

Gender roles were prescribed and discourses of protest and spirituality were often

focused on the black male experience.  For example, with regards to the Nation of

Islam, Jamillah Karim points out that scholars like Michael Gomez have described how

women were reduced through biological determinism and "seen primarily as a tool of

procreation and reproduction."[38]  Karim's article "Through Sunni Women's Eyes: Black

Feminism and the Nation of Islam" is a reevaluation of women's experience and agency,

recognizing negative sexist analyses but making room to locate Blackamerican Muslim

women in the NOI within the black feminist tradition.  In the history of Blackamericans

all the way back from slavery, women have been an important part of emancipation,

protest, liberation, and civil rights movements often struggling on multiple fronts

against racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.  If Blackamerican Muslim women

are critically engaged in articulating a nonpatriarchal and demasculinized Islam, where

do they fit in the discourses that reinterpret Islam and in Sherman's Third Resurrection?

How do they use a critical feminist consciousness in their reinterpretation of Islam?  As a

continued conversation of "mastering and appropriation" (of Sunni Islam), what kinds

of appropriations are taking place regarding feminism?

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[37] Jackson, 20.

[38] quoted in Jamillah Karim, "Through Sunni Women's Eyes: Black Feminism and the Nation of Islam." *Souls Journal* 8, no. 4 (Fall 2006), 20.

As my thesis develops it will recognize the different ways Blackamerican Muslim

women master and appropriate, not just when it comes to Sunni orthodoxy but in

relation to other legacies and traditions that are important to their becoming "self-

authenticating subjects."

## Chapter 3
### BAMF: Black American Muslim Feminists and the Black Feminist Tradition

*"I suppose I am about the only colored woman that goes about to speak for the rights of the colored woman, I want to keep the thing stirring, now that the ice is broken."*

*Sojourner Truth (1867)*

Sojourner Truth is one of the matriarchs for black feminism. She articulates how, within the abolitionist and women's suffrage movements, "the rights of the colored woman" are not struggled for. Her famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851) highlights the discontinuities with regards to womanhood at the time period noting how because of her race and bondage, she was not helped into carriages like other white women but worked hard in the field with no assistance and mothered thirteen children. This simple question troubles not only what it means to be a black woman, but of womanhood at all. It is this legacy of black feminism going back to the documented struggles of Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart[39], and Ida B. Wells in the 19th century to the 1960's with the Sexual Revolution and the Civil Rights and black liberation movements, that I hope to recognize as part of the radical subjectivity of African American Muslim women, who "keep the thing stirring." Like the Black Radical Tradition and black liberation politics, black feminism was done long before there was a term for it, when black female slaves in America were very much aware of the multiple oppressions their bodies faced for

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[39] "How long shall the fair *daughters of Africa* be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?"

being black and female.  Early African American women spoke out like Sojourner Truth, inspiring generations of black feminists and feminists of color to do their own sojourning, voicing black women's experiences and critiquing multilayered systems of power.

What are key concepts gleaned from black feminist theory that brings spirit to the work of African American Muslim women?  How do African American Muslim women situate themselves within black feminist discourses?  What have they contributed to the black feminist tradition? I hope to show how African American Muslim women are complicating black womanhood and are a resource to black feminist, or womanist, theorizing.

**Living the Intersection and Inherent Value**

*"I am a Black Feminist. I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my blackness as well as my womaness, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable." Audre Lorde*

Black feminism emerged from the starting point of differentiating and intersecting the oppression of racism and sexism.  Racism in the shape of white supremacy has dehumanized, subjugated, and oppressed Blackamericans.  Sexism has done violence to women's bodies and trapped them in roles based on biological determinism or traditional notions of gender. As early black feminists critiqued the white-dominated and white-centered first and second wave feminisms and also the patriarchy within the black community, subject/object positionality has been complicated where white feminists can be seen as classist and racist and male black liberationists can be sexist.  Appropriating the word feminist, black feminists attempt to

unpack the privilege and work towards dismantling all interlocking systems of oppression.  What can be noticed when looking at the history of feminism (first-, second-, third-wave) and the work by black, "third world," and queer women is how the concept and politics of feminism has discursively transformed, allowing more inclusively, complexity, and intersectionality leading to alternative approaches, epistemologies, and (radical) politics.

The classic essay by Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" addresses the double oppression of race and gender.  Beale talks back to what she deems as counterrevolutionary in the black power movements where black masculinity is asserted and women told to be domesticated.  She asserts how both black men (who have been lynched, emasculated, and brutalized) and black women (who have been sexually molested, abused, and scapegoated) have been exploited and oppressed and how black women have contributed to the struggle for liberation.  She also describes the necessity of the white women's movement to be anti-racist and anti-imperialist and not just simply attribute their oppression to male chauvinism.  "If the white groups do not realize that they are in fact fighting capitalism and racism, we do not have common bonds.  If they do not realize that the reasons for their condition lie in the system and not simply hat men get vicarious pleasure out of 'consuming their bodies for exploitative reasons'…then we cannot unite with them…because they're completely

irrelevant to the black struggle."[40]  Beale recognizes that black women have specific

problems that need to be talked about and that they need to be active in the struggle.

Beale's essay notes, but does not develop how race and sex are by no means the

only significant markers of difference. "Yet class structure in American society has been

shaped by the racial politic of white supremacy..."[41]  Conditions in the political

economy have also impacted the experiences of black women.   Through the American

capitalist economy, African Americans have been exploited by slavery and racial

segregations.  Today there are still shocking disparities in their economic position.  The

political economies of capitalism and imperialism have been articulated by black

feminists as sustaining racism and patriarchy.[42] However, these oppressions are not

additive and do not formulate an essential group experience.  For example, African

American women may be affected by institutional racism, but their social class

influences their experiences when it comes to housing, employment, or education.[43]

According to Kimberle Crenshaw, "Because the intersectional experience is

greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take

intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which

Black women are subordinated."[44] As such, the double jeopardy insight has been

enlarged to make reference to other forms of oppression and then to recognize that

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[40] Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought,* ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 153.
[41] Bell hooks, Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory" in *Words of Fire,* 272.
[42] Combahee River Collective "A Black Feminist Statement" and King "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Conciousness" in *Words of Fire,* 27, 311.
[43] Collins, *Black Feminist Theory,* 27.
[44] Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." *University of Chicago Legal Forum,* 139 (1989).

these oppressions interact in complex ways. Deborah King formulates "multiple

jeopardy" with the modifier multiple to recognize that different oppressions do not

function in an additive way.  Double jeopardy is a little too simplistic and is not sufficient

to think about, for example, the relationship of class structure and white supremacy, or

religious authority and race.

King's "Multiple jeopardy, Multiple consciousness" is a more sufficient model to

articulate black women concerns and helps to get out of a monistic politics, where

liberation is focused on one oppression.  King's formulation is also helpful when thinking

about the multiple ways of subject formation for black women, and not falling into the

trap of essentializing or homogenizing black womanhood. "Consequently, some black

women have sought an association with feminism as one alternative to the limitations

of monistic race politics."[45]  To push this further, this model is helpful when thinking

about why Islam may be part of the liberatory politics and social justice ethic for some

African American Muslims and provide a starting point to (re)evaluate different

modalities of inhabiting norms, specifically some of the more misunderstood "Islamic"

practices such as polygyny.

Another important part of King's thesis is "multiple consciousness."

Concentrating on the multiple jeopardies or oppressions does not allow much creativity

and agency when thinking about ways subjects like black women are not victims.

Multiple consciousnesses emerges through the complex and sometimes ambiguous

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[45] King, 303.

interactions between different forms of oppression.[46]  I see the statement by the

Combahee River Collective (CRC) as a reflection of what politics out of multiple

consciousness looks like.  They are a group of black feminists who emphasized the role

of black lesbians in the development of black feminism.  They looked to create a politics

that was not monistic and saw black feminism "as the logical political movement to

combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face." They

introduce this as, "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would

be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and

class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis

and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are

interlocking."[47]

**"you acting womanish"**

There have been debates concerning the labels of feminism and womanism and

what they mean politically and ethically. Womanism, introduced by Alice Walker,

functions as both an alternative and an expansion of feminism.  Walker writes,

"Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."[48]  It was coined to distinguish black

feminists or feminists of color from a women's movement that centered on issues that

affected middle-class white women.  The way this term has been borrowed and

appropriated reflects both possibility and hegemony or totalization. The inclusion of this

discourse is important in light of the self-identity of many African American religious

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[46] King, 312.
[47] Combahee River Collective, 232.
[48] Alice Walker's Definition of a "Womanist" from *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Continuum, 1983), xi.

scholars as womanist, the hesitancy of other black feminist to use this, and how Debra

Majeed uses this term as a reference point for her emerging paradigm Muslim

Womanist Philosophy. In addition, the "third wave" vision of Monica Coleman and the

contemporary work of others in reevaluating the term will be important to discuss

especially in regards to interacting across multiple scholarships, which I argue African

American Muslim women are doing.

In a roundtable discussion, Coleman questions whether she is a womanist as she

encountered first black feminism and finds them different in important ways. She

points out that there seems to be two camps, contingent on how black women have

self-identified---the womanists being Katie Canon, Dolores Williams, Emilie Townes, J.

Grant and the black feminists being Angela Davis, B. GuySheftal, Audre Lorde, bell

hooks, and Barbara Smith.[49] Womanism has been used in secular (i.e. literary) and

religious ways. Coleman feels that the "trajectory of womanist religious scholarship has

left me in a house without enough furniture." Her issue with womanism is mainly

concerned with three features: heteronormativity, Christocentrism, and lack of political

edginess. "Without giving detailed attention to the issue of sexual orientation,

womanists paint a picture of black women as sisters, other-mothers, girlfriends, and

church-going mothers, when there s much more to the picture."[50] This does a great

disservice to womanist politics as black lesbians have been active and vocal in black

feminism and constructing a politics that aims to dismantle all systems of domination.

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[49] Monica Coleman "Must I Be Womanist?" (Lead Roundtable article) *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22.1 (Spring 2006), 86.
[50] Ibid., 88.

Coleman also feels that womanist scholarship has been insufficient "in reflecting the religious pluralism of back women's faith associations."[51] She does acknowledge that these theologians have done monumental work when analyzing sexism within the Black church, highlighting the role and achievements of black women, introducing new metaphors and retheorizations, and struggling to make black womanhood a legitimate subject/object positionality. Finally, Coleman responds to the descriptive rather than prescriptive characteristic of womanism as she interprets it, where womanist scholars have "taken few strong political stances."[52]

> To put it in anecdotal terms, when I tell my black male friends that I'm a womanist, they think of me as a black churchwoman, which I sometimes am. When I tell them that I am a black feminist, they get a little uneasy, because they start to wonder if I'm aligned with lesbians, if I'm going to question their power, and if I'm going to call God "She"—all of which I also do. I find the word feminist, whether modified by black or not, to have the disruptive effect that I want.[53]

The work of scholars like Coleman, benefiting from an evolving and more encompassing feminist theoretical map and queer studies, work beyond just identity politics and attempt to disrupt essentializing unities of black female experience. The conversations between black feminists and womanists and the reevaluation of womanism is important for how African AM Muslim women enter this discourse. A term *for* black women with connotations of survival and community, revolutionary love and self-love is attractive, despite how some womanist scholars and theologians have conceptualized it and the contradictions and ambiguities it raises.

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[51] Ibid., 88-89.
[52] Ibid., 90.
[53] Ibid.

In February of 2010, Coleman organized a conference entitled "Ain't I a Womanist too?: Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought."  In her inaugural lecture, she articulated what "third wave" womanist religious thought looked like.  "Third wave womanist thought focuses away from the identity of the scholar to the ideology of the scholarship."  It benefits from other waves but also functions as a point of departure. She flips her original question from the 2006 roundtable from wondering if because she is black she has to be a womanist to does a womanist have to be black.  As such, third wave womanist religious thought will have convictions but not be dogmatic with a totalizing black womanhood, and be an ideological lens that recognizes multiple and diverse positions of consciousness and experience.  Coleman sees this third wave as valuing the politics of identity and of self naming that Walker and first and second wave womanists have valued, but interrogates what it means to be religious, women, and black, troubling those categories and how they have been represented.

Debra Majeed is part of Coleman's Third Wave of redefining womanist religious scholarship pointing out its shortcomings but also appropriating it.   When Majeed encountered womanism, she felt it was a term she could identify with.  She relates how she "caught hold of the term and never looked back" even though she had "endure[d] nights of intellectual and spiritual jihad" questioning the "utility of the womanist legacy for non-Christian women attempting to name themselves" and her own commitments and points of departure.  Feminism, even with a bell hooks introduction and the movement of black voices from margin to center, "held far too much political currency

that excluded black female experience."[54]  Because of the history of feminism with respect to liberation not being extended to black women,  and because racism or other forms of domination were not interrogated, feminism was, and still is for some, an insufficient label and does not accurately represent the experiences, values, and commitments of some African American women.  Majeed's appropriation of the term has been evolutionary and transformative, challenging her homophobia and "fundamentally Christian, approval-seeking, other privileging paradigm."[55]  Her commitment to study Islam with a suspensive ethic and then becoming Muslim necessitated her "to act womanish," echoing Alice Walker's definition which continues: "Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior.  Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one."[56]

Majeed's womanism hopes to maintain a threefold allegiance through the methodology or paradigm of Muslim Womanist Philosophy.  These allegiances are 1) to Islam as an essential part of identity 2) to the Quran as a source of teachings about creation, the divine, ontology, relationship and social justice, and 3) to African American women who have been invisible in larger struggles of Muslim women.[57]  Muslim Womanist Philosophy  moves beyond analyzes of black male intellectuals (race), feminist intellectuals (gender), Christian womanists (faith) as it interrogates "knowledge production, history, and human existence" that shape African American

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[54] Debra Majeed, "Womanism Encounters Islam: A Muslim Scholar Considers the Efficacy of a Method Rooted in the Academy and the Church," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 39.
[55] Majeed, "Womanism Encounters Islam," 41.
[56] Walker, xi.
[57] Majeed, "Womanism Encounters Islam," 43.

Muslim  experience, interrogating the social construction of that experience.[58]  It "fits

comfortably within a diversifying womanist discourse" while challenging it though

speaking to multiple consciousnesses arising from being Muslim, American citizens, and

of African descent.

"The method responds to the racist and patriarchal culture of the United States

and is grounded in the nuances of black struggles for survival, in questions for Islamic

legitimacy, and in the social activism of African American women."[59]  Initially Majeed,

was too intent on contextualizing womanism within radical subjectivity, but through

acting womanish, has been able to problematize the very term she at first uncritically

appropriated, and through spiritual and intellectual journey, exercised radical

subjectivity.

**Feminist (or if you prefer, Womanist) Engagement**

*"There have been multiple reasons for fighting the gender* jihad, *many of them so*
*intimately connected to the question of my own well-being that I scarcely know where to*
*start."  Amina Wadud*

The struggle for justice is often struggle over contested meanings.

One of the modes of envisioning a more liberatory Islam is through the mastering

and appropriating of Quranic exegesis. This can be seen with the use of metaphors and

symbols.  A pragmatic approach to more female-inclusive readings of texts is to focus

on the figure of Hajar.  Within the Christian tradition, Dolores Williams finds in the

biblical figure of Hajar the prototype of the struggle of African American women.  Hajar

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[58] Ibid., 46.

[59] Debra Majeed, "Roundtable Response to Monica Coleman's 'Must I be a Womanism?'" *Journal of*
*Feminist Studies in Religion* 22.1 (Spring 2006), 117

is the servant of Sarah and Abraham, mother of Ishmael[60] and is cast into the desert

where she is protected by God and is actually the first person in the Bible to name God.

She explores the themes that Hajar's story exemplifies and is relevant to the shared

experience of African American women throughout history—poverty, sexual and

economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homelessness, rape, (single)

motherhood, exile, and encounters with God.[61]

This female-centered African American tradition of biblical appropriation is named

the "*survival/quality of life tradition*" to emphasize God's response to the situation of

black people, using God's response of survival and quality of life to Hajar and

subsequently to African American women of slave descent.[62] This departs from the

liberation tradition of African American biblical appropriation as it de-emphasizes God's

relation to men in liberation struggles and male authority and instead lifts up the biblical

narrative of a female slave of African descent.

Amina Wadud uses the story of Hajar is a similar way, especially when she auto-

ethnographically problematizes the position of single motherhood within the Islamic

tradition which she claims is not commented on and, by default, not resolved.

The Hajar paradigm, Wadud hopes, challenges reformist discourse by Muslim

males whose privileging and sustenance of patriarchal traditions which still leave those

who suffer from "elitist reform discourse," such as poor mothers invisible.

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[60] Hagar is mother of Ishmael in the Judeo-Christian traditions and the mother of Isaac in the Islamic tradition.
[61] Dolores Williams, *Sisters In The Wilderness: The Challenge Of Womanist God-talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 5.
[62] Ibid., 6.

Islamic personal law is built upon a notion of family that does not include a woman thrown into the desert, forced to construct a healthy, happy life for her child and to fend for herself. Islamic law for family, as constructed and still maintained, is not only premised upon an ideal of an extended family network, it presumes that a woman will never for any reason, become responsible for providing for providing for and protecting herself and her offspring.[63]

For Wadud, the Hajar paradigm challenges Muslims to reevaluate concepts of family, motherhood, and community into more egalitarian notions. In addition, the emphasis on Hajar's positionality as contributing to these discourses alludes to the "inherent value" of the deployment of a radical black female subjectivity.

In light of this chapter, the work Wadud is doing with the Hajar paradigm can "fit comfortably" within the womanist tradition. Wadud uses her specific experience and a reclamation of the Hajar story to provide social, political, and religious commentary on the adequacy of Islamic law and constructions of tradition, family, and gender roles. She thus uses the experiences of African American female heads of households to think about reform notions of Islamic law just as "Hajar was a representation of the inadequacy of patriarchal worldviews within the context of religious law and personal status in Islam."[64] Dolores Williams, who used this Hajar appropriation more than a decade earlier, is one of the first generation of womanists who appropriated the term to inspire their theological work that was grounded in the experience of black womanhood. Thus, Wadud is part of this tradition as according to Williams, "womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's survival," and Wadud's paradigm emerges from her own experiences of survival. But she challenges it

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[63] Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006) 144.
[64] Ibid., 153.

through her non-Christian reality and through not circumscribing her new paradigm with ontological meaning of what it means to be black and female.  Wadud posits this paradigm as a resource within the broader politics of gender jihad and to a more holistic understanding of relationships among humans and with the divine.

*Behold!*
*I stand*
*a woman and my scarf.*
*Now what's so scary*
*'bout little ole me?*

*Is it my brown skin*
*phenotype for criminality*
*cordoned off in*
*Banlieus of France*
*Ghettos of America:*
*that's got lawmakers*
*taking a nine to liberty?*

*Or is my crime in the Color,*
*Faith,*
*of my scarf?*
*-Su'ad Abdul Khabeer*

Another site of engagement is through the body politic.  Judith Butler, in a recent lecture[65] talked about how the body makes demands on politics.  To be a body, she explained, is to be exposed to social crafting and shaping.  This body politic contextualizes its resisting and flourishing.

One thing that Carolyn Rouse is interested in as she studies a predominantly African American Muslim community in South Los Angeles, is the use of black bodies as "sites of resistance" by African American Muslim women.  Given that being black, being a

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[65] Plenary presenter at the Third International Conference of the Whitehead Research Project, December 3-5, 2009, in Claremont, Ca.

woman, and appearing Muslim are already unprivileged ways of existing, African

American Muslim women struggle daily with biases and stereotypes, a daily

performance of identity that challenges American notions of race, class, gender, and

community.[66] For African American women who embrace the hijab, it is a way to

challenge Eurocentric notions of female beauty and functions as a symbol of female

purity and moral character, which allows them to "undo racist assumptions about the

loose morals of African Americans."[67]

## (Radical) Black Female Subjectivity

I first approached this thesis to negotiate what it means to be black, female, and

Muslim and to posit the struggles of these women within the feminist tradition. What I

have learned and what informs my thesis is that it is counterproductive/impossible to

talk about a African American Muslim woman identity because it would result in a

particular brand of black female essentialism. My quest to locate a site of

Blackamerican Muslim female subjectivity where the black female becomes what

Jackson calls a "self-authenticating subject" was problematized and complicated by

different notions of agency, freedom, and subjectivity that avoid constraints of relativity

and feminist taxonomy.

bell hooks in "The Politics of a Black Radical Subjectivity" attempts to

conceptualize a self-determination that is not only reflexive but also creative and

productive, moving from a marginalized other to a radical black subject. She defines a

black radical subject as one who holds "an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, and

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[66] Rouse, 9.
[67] Ibid., 65.

identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-articulation."[68] This is significant as African American Muslim women can articulate black spaces as not just spaces of opposition but of actualization, construct an identity outside of hegemonic prescriptions, and recognize the centrality of blackness to resist whiteness's racialization. hooks presents a critique of the resistance narratives of obtaining the rights to and privilege of—which have been critiques of black liberation movements in the 1960's and of Western feminism.

An interesting aspect of authenticating the self is the danger of insulating ones journey within the personal or the concept of the unitary self. hooks brands this as narcissistic and subsumes radical politics.[69] Radical subjectivity involves sharing contradictions.[70] Carolyn Rouse's ethnographic study highlights the importance of sisterhood and the discussions African American Muslim women would have about various topics of religion, especially typical controversial topics that may generate ambivalence. The Southern California African American Muslim community she engages with exhibits sister programs where African American Muslim women could articulate religious teachings for themselves, negotiating their own spaces within group membership of the Muslim community.

*She has never heard a woman call her*
*To prayer   still she answers*
*Bears witness   five times a day*

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[68] bell hooks, "The politics of radical Black subjectivity," in *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 15.
[69] hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 49-51.
[70] Ibid., 56.

*She faces East*
*And washers her body   covers her human form*
*In preparation to meet the Most High*
*-Suheir Hammad*

A major implication of a radical black female subjectivity is linking subjective historic experience with the experience of the divine.  Rouse uses the concept of *engaged surrender* to illustrate feminist Islamic exegesis by portraying the underrepresented voices of African American women and their engagement with Islamic texts, scholarly challenges, and the creation of a community which understands gender equity whether it be about issues of hijab, polygyny, or husbands superiority over wives.  Ultimately conversion is a way for African American women to construct a new reality through political consciousness and spiritual epiphany, a multifaceted identity (re)formulation that involves both aspects of ambivalence and empowerment.[71]  Thus religious praxis is not only a representation of living according to God's will, but "a strategic deployment of alternative approaches" to hegemonic discourse of race, gender, class, faith, and community.[72]  Rouse actually explicates that "Muslim women recognize Islam to be the first 'feminist' monotheistic religion."  That is, they see it as the first religion to bring systematic social reform and rights to women in a patriarchal society."[73]

Amina Wadud, a "pro-faith, pro-feminist academic and an activist creating reform," explores the notion of the human being based on a relationship with the divine.  Sacred systems are not inherently patriarchal and can be redeemed.  She

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[71] Rouse, 19.
[72] Ibid., 10-11.
[73] Ibid., 150.

"wrestles" with the "hegemony of male privilege in Islamic interpretation as patriarchal interpretation, which continuously leaves a mark on Islamic praxis and thought. Too many of the world's Muslims cannot perceive a distinction between this interpretation and the divine will, leading to the truncated notion of divine intent….limited to the male stream perspective."[74]  Wadud, whose work can be defined as part of the legacy of black feminist tradition finds her source of inspiration in the Quran, where radical subjectivity that leads to social justice is a divine mandate.

Karim's article about women in the Nation of Islam offers a different lens to celebrate that historical legacy.  Her discussion with Marjorie, a self-identified African American woman illustrates how, through the Nation she learned to love her blackness (of herself and her race).[75]  bell hooks in *Black Looks* states that "In a white supremacist context 'loving blackness' is rarely a political stance that is reflected in everyday life."[76] Loving blackness is a powerful tool of resistance and opposition.  By highlighting these voices, Karim's work is important for the greater project for readers to access the black feminist tradition and oppositional stance.

**Talking Black**

Patricia Hill Collins highlights the importance of creating and recognizing alternative epistemologies. "Black feminist thought, then, specializes in formulating and

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[74]Saliba Ahmed, "Gender Equality under Article 8: Human Rights, Islam and 'Feminisms'" delivered at the 13th Malaysian Law Conference.
http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/gender_issues/gender_equality_under_article_8_human_rights_islam_and_feminisims_by_salbiah_ahmad.html
[75] Jamillah Karim "Through Sunni Women's Eyes," 19.
[76] Hooks, *Black Looks,* 10.

rearticulating the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of African American women."[77]

She uses black women's experience "as a point of contact" between the different

epistemologies of Afrocentric and feminist thought. This challenges assumptions that

black women have "a more accurate view of oppression," as if oppression is, following

King' critique, additive.  This reference point "produces a potentially clearer

standpoint."  Debra Majeed attempts to identify a more defined black female Muslim

tradition that both highlights difference yet includes Muslim women within

Womanist/Black Feminist tradition, which can incorporate the scholarship of Wadud,

Karim, Rouse, and herself.  A black feminist tradition, while not strictly delineated or

canonized, is one specific feminist practice that is attentive to the particular realities of

black women in the United States.

    I read an ethic of enlargement in theory that necessitates the induction and

inclusion of Muslim voices into the black feminist tradition.  In the next chapter,

situating African American Muslim women within a larger transnational framework

allows for connections to be drawn between the work that black feminists are doing

and the work being done by other groups, creating solidarities which is essential for

social justice.

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[77] Patricia Hill Collins "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," in *Words of Fire,* 341.

*"Islamic feminism is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning."*

This chapter engages with multiple critique by looking at how African American Muslim women enter, critique, and contribute to discourses about Islamic feminism. As illustrated within the context of black feminism and womanism, feminism is a contested term. This contestation is further exacerbated when considering how Muslims interact with the term. Even though many scholars and activists reject self-naming as a feminist, because of the ways it has been discursively constructed and appropriated, the notion of an Islamic feminism will be considered here for the purpose of seeing how Muslims, specifically African American Muslim women, configure feminism and their work for gender and social justice.

**Islamic Feminism**

For starters, lets look at the genealogy of the term Islamic feminism and the global use of it by women to claim rights within the framework of Islam and interrogate various aspects of the Islamic tradition. As works by Margot Badran and Valentine Moghadam reveal, "Islamic Feminism" was first coined by Iranian expatriate feminists in 1992 in the magazine *Zanan*. After the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, many social and cultural controls were put in place that restricted women. Out of the disappointment with the gender policies put in place, a

broad reform movement developed which included people (like Maryam Behrouzi and

Azam Taleghani) who advocated for women's rights.[78]  Moghadam, in "Islamic

Feminism and its Discontents," shows how both a secular and Islamic feminist politic

began to emerge that largely found differences in how (and if) Islam, and the

Islamization process in IRI, could be a reference point for feminist politics and women's

interests.[79]  It is important to note that Islamic feminism debates at this time also

overlapped with conversations regarding the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism

(in the context of modernity, modernization, and secularization), the evolution of and

opposition to the Islamic Republic (and possibilities of reform), and the definition of

feminism (in relation to other women's movements globally).[80]  Thus, from the outset,

Islamic feminism found itself struggling and strategizing against two kinds of

impositions 1) internal patriarchy and 2) ideologies that threatened national, cultural,

and religious identities and commitments.

In other places around the world, men and women began to use this term in

their feminist discourses and movements.  Muslims in South Africa, after a long struggle

against apartheid began to focus on gender justice, especially when it came to

negotiating mosque spaces. Imam A. Rashied Omar of Cape Town actually coined the

word "gender jihad," that has been expanded on by scholar Dr. Amina Wadud and has

come to signify for many people gender justice.  His activism in anti-apartheid peace

building and gender jihad and his engagement with the Quran raised the "ethic of

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[78] Valentine Moghadam, Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East (Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2003), 215-222.
[79] Valentine Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: Towards a Resolution of the Debate" in Gender, Politics, and Islam, eds. Therese Saliba and others (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2002), 22.
[80] Ibid., 34.

ta'aruf," which centered on embracing the other as an extension of oneself.[81]  Other

mosque-centered movements began to gain momentum demanding more female

inclusivity, leadership, and access.  Other Islamic feminists have organized in Malaysia

and Nigeria, using "the revolutionary spirit" of Islam to reclaim the tradition, advocate

for more public participation, and challenge oppressive practices and restrictions

especially with regards to Family Law.[82]

Margot Badran, as she attempts to map out the trajectory of Islamic feminism,

provides a review of feminism in the 19th and 20th centuries.  Part of her strategy is

collapsing notions of Islamic and secular feminisms operating in Islamic countries such

as Egypt and beginning a process of looking at the converges of the secular and

religious.

> Upper- and middle-class women observed how men in their families were freer
> to innovate while they were more restricted.  As women expanded their female
> circles, they discovered different ways that they as women—across lines o class,
> religion, and ethnicity—were controlled.  As they imagined new lives, women
> began to withhold complicity in their own subordination.[83]

As scholars like Badran and Amal Amireh demonstrate, Egyptian feminists are

usually considered secular with women's liberation secured through equalizing

strategies by disturbing education, employment, political representation, and private

law. During the Egyptian nationalist movement many woman organized themselves

politically and with a feminist consciousness.  In the feminist movement in the early part

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http://www.beyondintractability.org/reflections/peacebuilder_profiles/Rashied_Omar/Rashied_Omar.jsp?
nid=5300
[82] Valentine Moghadam, "What is Islamic Feminism? Promoting Cultural Change for Gender Equality"
background note for What is Feminism UNESCO Colloquium, September 18-19 2006.
[83] Margot Badran. *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gendering and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton
Univeristy Press, 1996), 4.

of the 20th century, Huda Shaarawi famously cast off her veil and organized to make the

state more responsible in dealing with its social problems.  As the century progressed,

women's political participation and representation became more prominent issues.

Amireh points out that activist Nawal El Saadawi, active since the 1970's, is often framed

within power relations between first and third worlds, and thus is not always in control

of how she is consumed by Western audiences.[84]  This evolution of claiming agency and

defining rights within the Egyptian women's movement, Badran points out, has largely

been done within an Islamic subtext.  Much of the feminist discourse throughout the

Middle East actually developed within an Islamic framework. The processes of

modernity and larger geopolitical power negotiations have led to some misreadings of

this feminist consciousness as undermining Islam, as opposed to negotiating within an

inherited, and for some resourceful, Islamic tradition.  Thus, the often furious and

imperialist opposition between feminism and Islam is debunked.  As such, it makes

sense that Badran challenges feminism as a Western creation, preferring to

conceptualize it as a politic and ethic that disrupts patriarchal order and transforms

society. This has implications in considering the compatibility between feminism and

Islam.  "Middle Eastern feminisms in the Middle East, whether secular or Islamic, it

seems important to stress here, originate in the Middle East.  Like feminisms

everywhere, they are born on and grow in home soil.  They are not borrowed, derivative

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[84] Amal Amireh "Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World," in *Gender, Politics, and Islam*, 273.

or 'secondhand.'"[85]  Thinking of feminisms as local and indigenous makes it descriptive

of many struggles around the world.

However, Badran's inclusive and accepting view of Islamic feminism is not shared

by everyone.  Moghadam sees the benefits of Islamic feminism in the work it does in

changing the gender regime in Iran and recognizing the agency of Iranian women, which

some secularists may dismiss.  However, she does have concerns with it regarding the

actual politics that motivate Islamic feminists. Perhaps this is because she attempts to

differentiate feminisms within an Islamic framework based on strategy.  Islamic

feminists reference only the Quran when negotiating gender equity, using a theological

focus for the goal of equalizing within the public and private spheres.  Other important

political, social, and economic arguments and strategies are not utilized.[86]  Thus, in her

formulation, Islamic feminism is not an umbrella term that can describe the work of

people working on women's issues in Islam.  Moghadam's concerns  seem to suggest a

further distinction of Muslim feminists as open to referencing other discourses and

resources in their pursuit of justice and Islamist feminists as working for women's rights

within political Islam and mainly within the public sphere.[87]

Moghadam's problematization of the terms Islamic feminism brings up the ways

the modifier Islamic may not be an accurate collective subject of the type of politics that

certain feminists are doing, especially since it appears that the notion of an *Islamist*

doing feminism, with all its baggage as a fundamentalist standpoint, is unsettling.

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[85] Margot Badran "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflection on the Middle East and Beyond" *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1:1 (Winter 2005), 13.
[86] Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents," 38.
[87] Ibid., 44-48.

Minoo Moallem is useful when thinking about the claims that Islamic feminism is used in inaccurate and irresponsible ways. Her discussion of how feminism and fundamentalism operate under competing global forces concerning cultural representation, makes both concepts suspect.[88] This conversation is important as feminists like Haideh Moghissi see whoever seeking authority in the Quran or in the Sunnah as fundamentalist.[89] By showing how both fundamentalism and feminism are discursive concepts, Moallem is able to complicate the perception that fundamentalism is premodern. Actually fundamentalism is a modern discourse part of the dialogue on modernity. As a phenomenon, it is not exclusive to Islamic societies or the West. Feminism also has to be thought of as not particularly Eastern or Western. Actually, such as in the case of some Islamic feminisms (or Islamist feminisms), feminism and fundamentalism work together in different ways, simultaneously and at other times also working in antagonistic relationships. We see these multiple negotiations in the example of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[90] Moallem discusses at length the converges and divergences of these two concepts and activisms. For example, she claims that they both propose two very different and opposed ideas of transnationalism. Feminism, with varying strategies, has sought global opposition to patriarchy. One problematic strategy has been to frame women, especially brown women as other to the nation. Fundamentalism invokes a sensibility of community, ummah, a "community of God" wherein women are important parts of the community in sustaining its values and

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[88] Minoo Mooallem "Transnationalism, Feminism, and Fundamentalism," in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader,* ed. Elizabeth Castelli (New York: Palgrave: 2001), 120.
[89] cooke, 58.
[90] see Moghadam "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents," for more.

survival.  Moallem points out how absolute values and a "transcendental ethic" are invoked and claimed political.[91]  This move to draw out this similar complicity with modernity is informative when thinking about Moghadam's concern with some Islamic feminisms of reviving the ethical voice as an authoritative discourse.  Both are complicit in modernity and the emergent crisis that modernizing discourses present—the negotiation of equality and difference, universal and particular, absolutes and ambiguities.  Moallem writes, "Rethinking subjectivity, difference, and political community is therefore especially important for feminism.  In this global war of representation, in order for feminism to subvert fundamentalism, it has to recognize, understand, criticize, and disrupt complicitous sites where it is itself liable to fundamentalist rigidification."[92] Using this language posits fundamentalism as an ideology as opposed to identity and reflects how it can consciously or unconsciously be used in places least expected, especially if those places define themselves in opposition to them.

This move to trouble dichotomies is Badran's agenda when advocating Islamic feminism.  Badran's claim is that Islamic feminism should not function within dichotomies such as East/West, secular/religious.  This movement is helpful when negotiating multiple identities and theorizing about gender equity both in Islamic and secular contexts.  It is also important for others when redeeming and radicalizing Islamic feminism.  Some scholars like Anouar Majid see Islamic feminism as a revolutionary

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[91] Moallem, 125-126.
[92] Ibid., 136.

paradigm that is progressive, democratic, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist.[93]  He sees

Islamic feminism as a movement to resist Islamic fundamentalism and global capitalism.

People like Majid consider Islam as a corrective to social injustices rather than an agent

that perpetuates them.

 miriam cooke also finds strategic and epistemological value within Islamic

feminism as a means of self-positioning, even if that positioning ecompasses gender

conservatism and people resisting conversativism.  "Islamic feminism is not a coherent

identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning."  It

invites consideration on what it means to have multiple commitments and "brings

together two epithets whose juxtaposition describes the emergence of  new, complex

self-positioning that celebrates multiple belongings."[94]  The title of her book, *Women

Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Though Literature,* reflects her critical engagement

with the term; by claiming, Muslim women are interrogating what it means to be Islamic

feminists themselves. For instance, using the example of Zaynab al-Ghazali's life, cooke

shows how within Islamist movements, radical reform of power relations can be

negotiated.[95] cooke's formulation encompasses the continuum presented by

Moghadam between, Islamic, Muslim, and Islamist and as Islamic feminists like Fatima

Mernissi, Assia Djebar, and others take advantage of transnational Muslim community,

this formulation provides local, national, and global critique and avenues for solidarity.

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[93] Anouar Majid, "The Politics of Feminism in Islam," in *Gender, Politics, and Islam,* 56.
[94] cooke, 59.
[95] Ibid., 99-103.

But how do people think about the works of others who do not self-position themselves as Islamic feminists? Asma Barlas has been called an Islamic feminist by many such as Badran due to her rereadings of the Quran. In 2006, Barlas[96] responded to Badran's conclusion that feminism presents a common language and that Islamic feminism "be retained, firmly claimed, and repeatedly explained." She agrees that feminism is not intrinsically Western even though many Muslims associate it with the West and use it "pejoratively to undermine the critiques of Muslim patriarchies." However, she finds it difficult to speak as a feminist because of all of its implications in the West of different levels of Othering. Her response carries through four stages. A first, she was outraged when she was called a feminist because her readings of a demasculinized and nonpatriarchal Islam issue from the Quran. She rightly asks, *"What?! Do feminists think that they have discovered equality and patriarchy?!"* In her second reaction, she found herself taking the strategy of explaining why she was not invested in the term feminist. To her, feminists find that religion is the problematic discourse where even "Islamic feminists" like Fatima Mernissi posit Islam as problematic and patriarchal and conflates those who practice it or seek authority in the Quran as fundamentalist. Barlas uses hermeneutical tools to radically assert that Islam is not only nonpatriachal but anti-patriarchal. "So even though feminists like Mernissi and I use the same analytical language of feminism about patriarchy and sexual equality, our epistemological approaches to, and understandings of, the Qur'an are radically different." Her third stage stems from some correspondence with Badran and

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[96] Talk at Ithaca College. Oct 23, 2006. "Four Stages of Denial, or, my On-again, Of-again Affair with Feminism: Response to Margot Badran.

meditation on Badran's definition of Islamic Feminism as a discourse that actually

locates its feminist mandate *within* the Quran, which is something men and women

have been doing long before the idea of "feminism." In this stage, Barlas is more

persuaded. Finally, where Barlas is at now, is again resisting feminism in any and all

forms as it is complicit in "reading oppression into Islam and reading liberation out of

the West's imperialists depredations." The continued legacy of the West defining in

opposition makes it difficult to redeem feminist theorizing. She recognizes this as a

"self-defeating strategy" as feminism and other imperialist concepts are inherited and

prevalent.

**Troubling Muslim Woman**

*"If there is one universal, it cannot be inclusive of difference." Gayatri Spivak*

When African American communities encountered Muslim immigrants, especially

after 1965, they also encountered prescribed meanings on Muslim women bodies as

oppressed or submissive victims of patriarchal domination. How do African American

women fit into the 1400 year old history of Islam and construction of Muslim women?

How do they interact with and trouble these notions as the negotiate a discourse on

Islamic Feminism?

Jasmine Zine examines politics of knowledge production and how power works

through discursive practice. She draws out how representations of Muslim women

were determined by the relationship between the Islamic world and the West where

shifts of power corresponded to "shifts within the archetypal paradigm of the 'Muslim

woman' as a literary invention and later as an object of western feminist gaze."[97] She

reveals how constructions of Muslim women, "positioned upon the geopolitical stage

not as actors in their own right, but as foils for modernity, civilization, and freedom"

became ahistorical and undifferentiated. She explicates:

Therefore, the western/Orientalist construction of Muslim women has

maintained currency .

> Despite the fact that it resents distorted and static images. On the other hand,
> the concrete social category of "Muslim woman" absorbs many meanings and
> incorporates various individual, cultural, and sectarian interpretations of Islam.
> As such, there is a disjuncture between the various discursive paradigms that
> attempt to contain Muslim women's realities (including those equally limiting
> construction from fundamentalists perspectives) and their varied ontological
> experiences.[98]

This indicates how the relationship of the Islamic world and the "West" has

imagined the Muslim woman as a means to establish or sustain authoritative and

otherizing discourses. The colonial and Orientalist models of Muslim woman have

persisted through postcolonial struggles, the Iranian revolution, events in Palestine and

the Gulf, and 9/11. The persistence of paradigms constructing Muslim women as

oppressed and in need of saving has also informed feminist scholarship which has

worked in efforts to save or liberate Muslim women. This scholarship has evolved in

some ways into a focus of locating agency or finding resistance.[99]

As such, in popular imagination and in some academic and feminist work, Muslim

women have become branded by and bound to the category "Muslim Woman," which,

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[97] Jasmine Zine, "Muslim women and the Politics of Representation" *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 19: 4 (2004), 2.
[98] Ibid., 18.
[99] Mahmood, 6-8.

in many ways, actually does not have strong Quranic grounds. Thus, with the wave of

immigrant Muslims and the geopolitical conflicts and power maneuvering of the day,

constructed Orientalist notions of the Muslim woman being silent, submissive, and

absent complicated the realities of African American Muslim women.[100] In addition

authoritative discourses that subjected the category "Muslim woman" were also

shaped by the particular cultural practices and interpretations of immigrant, primarily

Arab, Muslims on how the ideal Muslim woman should look and behave.

Aminah McCloud illustrates how "Muslim woman" is in reference to dress and

etiquette.

> The Muslim woman is one who looks Muslim, wearing a scarf that covers her
> hair, neck, and bosom. Her dress touches the ground, her sleeves close at the
> wrist, and whether she wears a blouse and pants or a dress at the her clothing
> must be loose enough so that it does not show her form. This Muslim woman is
> obedient to her husband, takes constant care of her children, and soft spoken.
> She does not want much, is content, and understands that this behavior is
> pleasing to God. Her obligations as a Muslim are marginalized. If she does not
> look like a Muslim woman she is not a Muslim woman, even if she prays five
> times daily, pays zakat, fasts during Ramada, and saves to make hajj.[101]

For some African American women, this notion is attractive and ideal. For

others, it functions as another layer of oppression. Amina Wadud does an excellent job

of using the Hajar paradigm to problematize the notion of the Muslim woman (and the

family and motherhood) and how that notion of a woman who is primarily wife and

mother renders single working mothers invisible or does not provide a space to talk

about poverty. Wadud extends critiques of constructions of Muslim womanhood (from

colonialist or fundamentalist) to reformist dialogue, which may fight for gender equity

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[100] McCloud, 147.
[101] Ibid., 147.

but overlooks the experiences of poor mothers.[102]  With this critique, Wadud is then able

to re-imagine kinship and family to make sure injustices do not go unchecked, that

issues like moral upbringing, domestic work, and child-rearing are not delegated based

on biological determinism, and that Islamic (family) law is not based on limited

constructions of gender and family.  Meditating on women like Hajar, Wadud explains

how "Islamic personal law is built upon a notion of family that does not include a

woman thrown into he desert, forced to construct a healthy, happy life for her child and

to fend for herself."[103]

Another way the notion of "Muslim woman" is troubled is in McCloud's

reflection of bell hooks' statement that the focus of women's silence may reflect what

happens in WASP communities, whereas women in black communities have not been

silent, their challenge "to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard."[104]

McCloud asserts that African American women do not see themselves as silent.  Rather

they maybe "hostage to the need to survive."[105]  As indicated, many women including

some African American women are not "powerless" in the ways that other groups are.

When particularizing Muslim Womanist Philosophy, Majeed emphasizes how African

American legacies of slavery and racial segregation ensures that they "do not share the

powerlessness reflective of the journeys of some white women and other Muslim

women."[106]

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[102] Wadud, *Gender Jihad,* 126.
[103] Ibid., 144.
[104] bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 6.
[105] McCloud, 145.
[106] Majeed, "Womanism Encounters Islam," 50.

As such, as African American Muslim women negotiate gender, there can be a place where gender roles and gendering functions may be appreciated due to greater male accountability, as some NOI women have testified.[107] In addition, thinking about specific histories and experiences of Muslim women, for example, in some African American communities, the practice of polygyny may be viable due to a negotiation of economic conditions, cultural norms, and other factors.[108] Debra Majeed looks at polgyny in the face of African American particularities, cultural patriarchy, and cultural exegesis and how it practiced by many African American women by choice due to interpretation of the Quran, desire for independence, survival, or needing a father for their children. As Majeed draws out the complex processes that may drive this inhabiting of norms, she challenges notions of Muslim women and their agency. This scholarship also makes room to address injustices in the system in a more nuanced manner that affords integrity to the subjects, and think about other possibilities of family, love, and marriage.

Majeed is clear to state that Muslim Womanist Philosophy, which both affirms and challenges womanist/feminist politics, is not Islamic feminism. Firstly, she describes its failure to adequately address the social contradictions in American society. Race and religions are "codependent" just as the gender and race cannot be paced in any categorical hierarchy as reflected in the previous chapter. Also, "non-Western and sometimes multicultural, Islamic feminism is often closely identified with the legacy of

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[107] see Karim "Through Sunni Woman's Eyes"
[108] Debra Majeed, "Muslim Marriage: A Womanist Perspective," talk given at Ain't I a Womanist Too? Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought, Claremont School of Theology, February 26, 2010.

Western (white) feminism, which is informed as much by class and white female privilege as it is by secularism." Finally, politics is personal and community is important. "The struggles of other Muslim women sometimes differ from those of American Muslim women whose practice of Islam is not driven by traditions or cultures cemented on a different shore and still imposed upon the principles of the faith." What to some is oppressive others celebrate as "authentic expression of particularity"

**Engaged Surrender**

Carolyn Rouse's important ethnographic work looks at two African American Muslim communities in Los Angeles. Rouse departs from other ethnographic works that look at African American women's experience with Islam mostly in the Nation of Islam as one that brackets women in negative discourses of patriarchy and misogyny of male black nationalism in the 1960's and 1970s. "The rhetoric of patriarchy, for example, may be deployed not to make women submissive, but to instill in men a sense of responsibility,"[109] in refutation of these generalized negative perspectives of gender performance in African American Islam. So she focuses on why these women choose to be part of the Sunni tradition, especially given the claims that conversion is reproducing their oppressions. She argues that it is the very presence of the Sunni tradition and its modes of engagement such as exegesis, or tafsir, (functioning as an "authorized discourse" between men and women) which provide avenues of participation for African American women to negotiate alternative spaces.[110]

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[109] Rouse, 16.
[110] Ibid., 6.

In Rouse's encounter with African American Muslim women who are navigating the ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiple belongings, she suggests that these converts actively choose to both submit to and claim Islam as a counter-hegemonic faith. Rouse says, "Islam is their epiphany." With this reading, Rouse claims, "Muslim women recognize Islam to be the first "feminist" monotheistic religion."[111] If they don't want to be called feminist, it is for political reasons. With this framing, Rouse uses Hudah's perspective to indicate how she uses Islam to demand the recognition of injustice against all sub groups. African American Muslim women are not reproducing their oppressions or revisiting patriarchy, as some may suggest. Many of these women, in participation in mosque activities and in active interrogation and discussion *in community* of Islamic practices, "interpret Quran as anti-racist, feminist, and as a blueprint for a redistributive capitalist system." This relates to Majid's articulation of Islam as a revolutionary paradigm as a way to transform society through challenging racism, sexism, economic exploitation, and other hegemonic discourses and systems.

**Pro-Faith, Woman-friendly**

Amina Wadud is involved in many strategies for gender justice. She is part of the mosque movement as she is the first woman to lead a mixed congregation of men and women. Traditionally only men lead prayers if men are present. She is also involved in "textual activism" like Barlas. Wadud critiques some of the early Muslim feminists arguing that many of the first Muslim feminists had to work within Islam contexts

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[111] Ibid., 150.

because they did not choose to be Muslim.  Thus the modifier Muslim is unspecific to

whether Muslim women are coincidently Muslim, pro-Islam, and how they define Islam.

> Despite how others may categorize me, my work is certainly feminist, but I still
> refuse to self-designate as feminist, even with "Muslim" put in front of it,
> because my emphasis on faith and the sacred  prioritize my motivations in
> feminist methodologies.  Besides, as an African-American, the original feminist
> paradigms were not intended to include me, as all the works on Womanism have
> soundly elucidated.  In addition, socialist feminism has focused clearly on the
> significance of class as it further problematizes the origins of feminism in the
> West.  Finally, Third World feminisms have worked tediously to sensitize women
> and men to the complexities of relative global realities to resolving universally
> existing but specifically manifested problems in areas like gender.[112]

Wadud identifies as pro-faith, pro-feminist to highlight the commonalities

between her approaches.  Ultimately the most important part of her naming is the pro-

faith.  She acknowledges contributions of secular and pro-faith approaches to doing

feminism, but that she can only do pr-faith work as the Quranic literary exegesis and

mandate for social justice is primary. Talking back to the hegemony of male privilege

and how certain interpretations get conflated with divine will and "true" Islam, Wadud

links interpretation of praxis and ideas of Allah since the core of being a Muslim,

surrendering to divine will, is compromised by "truncated" notions of that divine will,

where the divine is overwhelmingly understood as male being.  This engages with the

work of Asma Barlas who unreads patriarchy from the Quran.

**Conclusion**

These people who are engaged in the conversation about feminism and Muslim

women are obsessed about knowledge production, how various discourses have been

produced and authorized, and how lives can be improved.  What comes to the surface

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[112] Wadud, *Gender Jihad,* 79-80.

and relates to African American Muslim women is, 1) the work challenging false dichotomies 2) the idea of complex subjects with multiple belongings 3) the expansion of Islamic and global feminisms 4) the negotiation of universal/particular, individual/community. The conversation of naming is important even though it is mostly done by academics, because of the importance of self-naming, sharing, and implications for solidarity and reaching across boundaries. African American Muslim women have entered and contributed to the conversations about Islamic feminism in multiple ways. They have been able to raise new issues not adequately addressed such as single motherhood, AIDs, interracial marriage, and polygyny. African American Muslim women practicing multiple critique are helping to keep Islam relevant especially Islamic feminist discussions about reform, progressivism, and modernity as they use Islamic concepts such as *ijtihad*, critical thinking, and *jihad*, internal struggle.

African American Muslim women, through testifying, disrupt and rearrange narratives of universality and discourses of power.  As I have shown, they have generated alternative notions of womanhood in black communities, Muslim communities, black Muslim communities, and in American society.  They have complicated feminist politics whether they be Western, Islamic, or black, whatever those modifiers signify.  This thesis explores the processes of mastering, appropriating, and reclaiming, especially when it comes to Islamic concepts.

As illustrated through engagements with Islamic frameworks, a pro-faith agenda is important in claiming ownership of how one wishes to interpret and claim certain traditions instead of being controlled by others imaginations and having certain projections imposed upon them.  Law scholar Azizah al-Hibri states, "So long as Muslim women are led to believe that their oppression was divinely decreed, they will hesitate to change the status quo, as oppressive as it may be."[113] This is to say that power inscribes concepts and what may be regarded as truths or norms.  Al-Hibri's insight opens up the necessity of education and awareness of Quranic exegesis and the ways certain interpretations are legitimized and control embodied practices and relations.  Attributing oppressions to Islamic law or texts may lead one to discard tradition, which will not make patriarchy, or racism, or heteronormativety disappear.  Thus, rejecting the

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[113] Azizah al-Hibri, "Deconstructing Patriarchal Jurisprudence in Islamic Law: A Faithful Approach," in *Global Critical Race Criticism: An international Reader,* ed. Adrien Wing (New York University Press, 2000), 221.

possibilities within Islam to act as a tool against various forms of oppression is an

unjustifiable act.  Concerning Islamic law, Al-Hibri calls for a recognition of the "flexibility

of a and rich diversity within Islamic jurisprudence."[114]  As such, religion can provide

many resources when retheorizing.

**On theory**

Theory and the processes of theorizing have consequences, which shape power

and discourse and ultimately our notions of self and everyday experiences.  Theorizing is

not a neutral or objective project even if some theorists claim or wish it to be.  Theories

are constructed, broken down, and substituted.  They are subjective, strategic, and

interventionist. But we still do it, theorize I mean—because theories are communicative

whatever their agenda.  I guess I locate the utility of theory in its potentia.  Theory is

useful insofar as it reflects, directly or indirectly, the mechanisms of power and how

power inscribes realities and produces inequality.  It is potentially an opportunity to be

critical and creative through continuous and enlarging retheorizations.

As I put the processes of Third Resurrection, black feminism, and Islamic

feminism in conversation, theory becomes communicative as a tool by which people can

talk about power.  Problems and frustrations arrive when theory rests upon

universalizing particular principles, when its comparative/ comprehensive scope creates

and sustains inequalities in power, and when it creates barriers barring or

misunderstanding different voices, histories, and metaphors.  Because theory is

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[114] ibid.

communicative and interventionist, it is complicit and reflects a certain declared choice

and thus the status of theorizing discourses needs to be explicitly problematized.

What do these scholar-activists have to offer when thinking about retheorization

and religion? If we accept that power figures strongly in any theoretical framework and

analysis, how can one negotiate commitment to religious membership with other

historically totalizing worldviews?

Many binaries seem to be in operation in such theorizing discourses such as

modernity/tradition, freedom/oppression, resistance/submission, purity/impurity,

individual/community, secular/religious, public/private, and nature/culture. As any

sincere and suspensive ethic of theorizing would note, these concepts are not so cleanly

separable and are inconsistent. How do we theorize about these disruptions? I argue

that African American Muslim women are opening new epistemological and theoretical

frameworks that enlarges theory, further interrogating systems of power.

**On Practice**

*"AZIZAH, it's more than a magazine. It's a catalyst for empowerment."*

The first five issues of *Azizah* magazine (2000-2002) featured in order an African

American, an Indonesian American, a Latina American, an African American, and an Arab

American on the cover. It is images and profiles such as these that *Azizah* magazine

strives to highlight, challenging representations of Muslim women. In Jamillah Karim's

study of this cultural production, she compares these representations to the one on the

December 2001 issue of *Time,* which displayed a woman wearing hijab, passive, and

sullen. The representations in the issue formed the dichotomy of veiled women under

Islamic regimes as oppressed and secular unveiled women as liberated.  Karim asks

"Where are the images of happy and strong Muslim women in colorful hijab?"[115]  *Azizah*

confronts static images of Muslim women and emphasizes the multiple ways they think

about their lived experiences  and their multiple commitments.  These include increased

representation of different Muslim woman and different interpretations and ideas of

Muslim women.  Karim claims that it is the magazine founder's "multiple perspectives"

that contribute to its ability to connect to many different Muslim women and their

experiences.[116]  Tayyibah Taylor, founder, publisher and editor-in-chief of *Azizah*

magazine was born in Trinidad to parents from Barbados, grew up in Toronto, a resident

of Saudi Arabia, and is now a citizen of the United States.[117]

Karim utilizes the theoretical claims of cooke's "multiple critique" to situate the

work done by *Azizah*.  *Azizah* functions as a third space facilitating constant negotiation

of what it means to be Muslim in North America.  As a site that represents Islam as

polycentric and strives to depict the diversity of the global ummah, this cultural

production is a means to build networks and bring women together.

The magazine has had its share of criticisms from being too inclusive of

difference to not being inclusive enough.  Some have responded to the diverse

interpretations of Islamic modesty and the profiles and images of many women who do

not wear hijab.  Other's believe it is a liberal accommodation and too Western.  Some

have expressed the desire for content that is not so heteronormative

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[115] Jamilla Karim, "Voices of Faith, Faces of Beauty: Connecting American Muslim Women through Azizah," *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 170.
[116] Ibid., 179.
[117] http://atlanta.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A16085

miriam cooke helps to think about Islamic feminism in a US context and how persons of color, black feminists, womanists, mujeristas and indigenous and Third World feminisms interact with the concept of Islamic feminism.  Postcolonial history and the racialization of Muslims in the United States signal a transition from identity-based feminisms (such as Arab-American feminism) toward categories like women of color. This "women-of-color identity is a plural, polymorphous, racialized, and gendered way of being a U.S. citizen" and collapses recent immigrants and ethnic communities with people of color.  "To call oneself a woman of color as an Arab-American woman signifies the desire to become part of a new group, people of color, who can contest white hegemony in the United States."[118]  This positioning is referred to by Karim as common "cool."  Whether one thinks of themselves as woman of color, black feminist, Islamic feminist, womanist, or scholar-activist, new self-positionings can be assumed and new solidarity and oppositional strategies can be imagined through multiple critique.

**On That Note…**

I would like to end basically where I started.  *Ain't I a Muslim woman?*  As African American Muslim women trouble notions of blackness, womaness, and Muslimness, new frameworks, epistemologies, and commitments are raised and new appropriations, networking, and basically politics are done.  Appropriation is not surrendering, but the challenging and courageous journey to create change from within and critically scrutinize one's pieties, assumptions, and inheritance.  Finally, this thesis begins the conversation between the three moments of Sunni Islam, black feminism, and Islamic

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[118] cooke, 146.

feminism.  As my thesis attempts to fill in some gaps, there are many that still need to

be articulated and (re)theorized, and hopefully others will continue the conversation.

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