

## **When Empathy Disappears: The Disconnect between African American and Asian American Muslims**

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In June, 2005, the Massachusetts chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) organized three staged readings in Boston of the play *Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*.<sup>1</sup> One of these readings took place at Freedom House, in the largely African American neighborhood of Dorchester.<sup>2</sup> Of the three readings, this one was the most sparsely attended, and, moreover, principally attended by people from outside the Dorchester neighborhood. An African American woman observed, during the discussion period, “Thank you for coming to our neighborhood today; it’s too bad that our neighborhood did not come to you.”<sup>3</sup> Even as her comment seemed to criticize her fellow Dorchester residents, she appeared as well to be faulting us for not having made a prior visit to her neighborhood. I had chosen deliberately to attend this particular reading of the play precisely because I had hoped that members of the black community would be present. I was interested in their perspectives on imprisonment, torture, and arbitrary state power, given the community’s unfortunate and daily encounters with these realities. But the woman who spoke was right: I had never before been to Freedom House, though I had certainly heard of it, and most of the actors taking part in the staged reading had never been to Freedom House. Thus, although there might have been symbolic value to the ACLU’s decision to hold one of the readings in Dorchester, the fact remained that beyond the symbolism, there was evidence of a glaring disconnect. The assault on African American communities by the prison industrial complex may be similar to the assault on Muslims by the Bush administration’s global war on terror, but there is no reason to assume, therefore, that the two communities—African American and Muslim American (with a considerable overlap between the two, given that the majority of Muslims in the United States are African American)—would feel any empathy for one another. This essay discusses the possible reasons for the weak empathetic links between African American Muslims and immigrant Muslims, specifically, Asian American and Arab American Muslims.

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Within the African American community, Islam is viewed both with deep interest and with deep suspicion. Speaking of Islam's strong hold in the black community, Robert Dannin notes that "Islam [. . .] disturbs the old assumption that African-American society is exclusively and fundamentally Christian. [. . .] Today church fathers appear stunned by what they view as a mass defection from their flock" (262). Aminah McCloud speaks of a tense relationship between the black church and Muslims: "After 9/11, white Protestants invited Muslims in to speak. African-American churches did not'" (qtd. in Lee, 9). Given the wariness within the African American community about Islam, one might imagine that African American Muslims would turn to other Muslim communities in the United States for support. But such has not been the case.

There are no accurate numbers for the size of the Muslim community in the United States. Karen Leonard cites two different surveys that place the number between 2 million and 8 million. Part of the reason for the wide range is that the "U.S. Census Bureau collects no information on religion, and there are no reliable nationwide surveys that can estimate the Muslim population comparable to those done by the National Jewish Population Survey" (Leonard, *Muslims*, 4). Most journalistic sources put the Muslim population at approximately 5 million; one breakdown of the population calculates African American Muslims at 42%; South Asian Muslims at 24.4%; Arabs at 12.4%; Africans at 6.2 %; Iranians at 3.6%; Southeast Asians at 2%; European or white Americans at 1.6%; and "other" at 5.4%. Another breakdown has the percentages at "Americans" 30%, Arabs 33%, and South Asians 29% (Leonard, "Introduction" 476).<sup>4</sup> Most scholars agree, however, that African Americans constitute one of the largest, if not the largest, group of American Muslims.

The two predominant communities of African American Muslims are those who belong to the Nation of Islam, founded by Elijah Muhammad, and those following the leadership of Warith Deen Mohammed, the son of Elijah Muhammad, who broke with his father in the 1960s to move closer to a more global and orthodox Sunni Islam than his father was comfortable with. W. D. Mohammed was, until 2003, head of the American Society of Muslims (ASM). This essay does not focus on the different interpretations and uses of Islam among the various African American and Asian American Muslim groups; instead, I discuss the factors that prevent easy alliances between these two umbrella groups. Most of the scholarship on Islam in the United States refers to the non African American Muslim populations as "immigrant" Muslims. The use of this term is significant, particularly in light of the argument I make on the impact of American nationalism in shaping African American consciousness and identity in the current geopolitical reality. While my principal landscape of inquiry is the United States, I turn for a comparative perspective to Britain, which offers a useful counterpoint to the black-Asian solidarity issue.

At the outset, let us consider the distinction between solidarity and empathy. The difference, in my opinion, is one of form: solidarity is the *strategic* and *temporary* formulation of a shared goal by two or more groups whose overall missions *could but need not* have some elements in common (for instance, at the October 2001 World Congress of Families, the solidarity around the anti-abortionist stance by certain Catholic organizations and Islamic dictatorships). Empathy, on the other hand, is a more organic identification with an other: Martin Hoffman writes that the principal attribute of an empathetic condition is “*the involvement of psychological responses that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another’s situation than with his own situation*” (30, emphasis in original). Empathy requires role-taking, the ability and willingness to imagine oneself in the situation of another, without erasing the distinctiveness of the other as an individual *separate from oneself*. Philosophers and psychologists who engage the issue of empathy and its related feelings, despite their many disagreements on the fine differences between sympathy and empathy, do agree that empathy must be grounded in acknowledging the separateness of the person with whom one empathizes. Not to do so would be akin to feeling sorry for oneself, because the other’s misfortune becomes one’s own, thereby making one guilty of falling into what Hoffman terms the “egotistical drift.”

In a related vein, Lawrence Blum insists that in a society that values pluralism, empathy is very much a function of one’s racial, gender, class, and ethnic position. Whom one is empathetic to and what kind of suffering one responds to is contextual, not absolute. In fact, Blum implies that a conscious embracing of the need both to dwell in our ethno-racial positions *and* transcend them is necessary to the development of genuine empathy leading to coalitions across many types of divides. He differentiates between the terms “ally” (a problematic formulation)<sup>5</sup> and “moral co-equal.” Speaking within the context of anti-racist education, Blum declares,

The *ally* is someone from a non-beleaguered racial group, who comes to the aid of a different and beleaguered, racial group. The ally relationship highlights the *racial* identity of the two parties. By contrast, the *moral co-equal* relationship foregrounds *moral* identity—the shared moral project, such as Abolitionism, or researching housing discrimination—and, while not denying the racial identity difference, places it in the psychic and moral background. (136)

Such a distinction is useful in that it draws attention to the issue of power, a notion that is frequently eclipsed in discussions of empathy. Thus, in the ideal situation that Blum envisions, when whites, blacks, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans come together as moral co-equals, they are joined together in pursuit of the same cause, with their racial distinctiveness never forgotten but momentarily receding into the background. When whites join with

people of color as allies, however, whites acknowledge that they operate from a position of race privilege, and it is this knowledge that enables them to see how they must interrogate and dismantle their own power even as they feel empathy for people of color. In taking up the question of whether the experiences of African American Muslims and Asian American Muslims permit mutual empathy, I view the two groups as moral co-equals. That each has a different kind of power that comes into play in different contexts is undisputable. Nonetheless, the two groups are presumably interested in the same objective: to create for Islam and people of Muslim faith safety, dignity, and respect in the American political and social landscape.

In revisiting the scene at Freedom House with a view to examining my disappointment at the paucity of African Americans attendees, I realize that I am at fault for framing the situation in terms that are precisely the reverse of what they should be. It is not that African Americans (Muslims or Christians) should demonstrate solidarity with or empathy for non African-American detainees (whether Muslim or not) of the war on terror. Rather, the understanding should flow in the opposite direction; the empathy should come *from* Asian American Muslims and be directed toward African Americans. Samina Najmi, a Pakistani American academic, says eloquently that although she had always had a theoretical understanding of the racial profiling that African Americans experienced in the U. S. social and political landscape, it wasn't until September 11 that she gained a visceral understanding of it. "The only positive outcome of September 11 for me was a new bond with African Americans, finally *feeling* what it must be like to be a targeted community."<sup>6</sup> F. Thaufeer al-Deen, an African American Muslim, writes forcefully in this regard:

For too many of their years here, the newer Muslims have lived apart from an American society that they view in conflicting ways. By faith they understand that the Islamic way of life is preferable to American hedonism—yet they need to stay within American cultural norms in order to function in America. To what example will these Muslims now turn to escape hatred, detention, imprisonment, alienation? Perhaps it will be the earlier example, an example about which they are only dimly aware—the example of African-American Muslims. (145)

Precious Rasheeda Muhammad (whose father was part of the Nation of Islam's paramilitary unit) echoes Al-Deen's view, declaring, "From fighting in the Civil War to choosing prison time over service in the Vietnam War to establishing the largest Muslim school system in America to cleaning drugs out of neighborhoods and fishing for souls in overpopulated prisons—their presence in world history and their contribution to making the universal principles of Islam heard over any culture of origin is indelible" (135).

More recently, writing of her experience in college, she recollects,

I often encountered Muslims who simply would not accept me until they put me through the third degree. *How had I become Muslim?* Explaining that I was born Muslim was not good enough. Well then, where is your grandfather from? [. . .]

How could I, an American-born Muslim, and a woman, with no traditional Islamic scholarly training, know anything about Islam or speak on its behalf? That was the question I soon became conditioned to expect. (“To Be Young”, 42-43)

Sherman Jackson polarizes the concerns of African American and “immigrant” Muslims as domestic and international, respectively. African American Islam emerged to resist white supremacy, whereas immigrant Islam resists Western supremacy. Moreover, he says, African American Muslims are focused on specifically American issues, such as “police brutality, exploitation of blacks in the media and entertainment industry, the drug-prison complex, joblessness, education, urban violence and single parentage, Affirmative Action, or the wholesale criminalization of Black American culture,” whereas immigrant Muslims are single-mindedly focused on the problems of the Muslim world—“Palestine, Kashmir, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan” (73). Jackson exaggerates the distance between the two positions, making the mistake of seeing no relationship between domestic disenfranchisement and foreign policy. At a very basic level, one could do a detailed analysis of how the \$6 billion/week expense of the war in Iraq might be better used to alleviate many of the deprivations of African American communities.

Jamillah Karim offers a more nuanced reading of the rift between African American Muslims and immigrant Muslims. She characterizes the influence of immigrant Muslims on African Americans as a “double narrative”: “one [narrative] shows immigrants using Islam to appeal to African American interests, the other shows them privileging (and imposing) Arab and Asian cultural practices associated with Islam” (497). Karim’s interviews of young African American Muslims reveals that they frequently feel their authenticity as Muslims being called into question by immigrant Muslims. Immigrants appear to display an arrogance about being better informed Muslims simply by virtue of an earlier exposure to Islam (511). There is an irony about this arrogance, given that even among immigrant Muslims, there is a hierarchy of authenticity, with Arab Muslims occupying a “higher” status because of their access to the Qur’an in its original language.

Both Jackson and Karim discuss the role of class in creating and maintaining the schism between African American and immigrant Muslims. They are joined in their view by scholar-activist Aminah McCloud: “We have in the African American community a host of imams who are men who work full-time jobs. [. . .] They don’t have the luxury of being paid to be just an imam” (qtd. in Cottle, 165). Thaufeer Al-Deen, who used to be an imam in the federal prison

system, is harsher in his criticism of the class status of immigrant Muslims: "They have the money and we don't. [ . . . ] They come over with their money and their degrees and with an insular view of Islam. [ . . . ] They hide in their jobs and their little communities" (qtd. in Cottle 165). Tim Townsend of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported in February, 2006, "[B]lack Muslims in the United States are struggling. According to the most recent national study of Muslim houses of prayer, done in 2000, African-American mosques are in more dire financial straits than their immigrant neighbors, with 71 percent saying they were having some financial problems, compared with 45 percent of South Asian (Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi) mosques and 43 percent of Arab mosques" (A1).

The racism of immigrant communities is also a factor that appears to contribute to the divide, calling into question the reality of a universal Muslim brotherhood or Ummah (Karim 511). But to say that racism plays a role without examining accompanying factors is to trivialize the circumstances of both the African American and immigrant Muslim communities. Susan Koshy, for instance, has offered a textured reading of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century complicity of Asian Americans in the valorization of whiteness and their quest to put distance between themselves and African Americans. She places their actions within legalistic frameworks that de-privileged blacks and withheld citizenship from those who were neither white nor of African descent. Laws governing citizenship did not provide a platform "to mount an antiracist protest or to foster pan-ethnic coalitions around the racist criteria for naturalization; in fact, the terms of the law worked explicitly to undermine such possibilities, prompting various litigants to prove their whiteness by [ . . . ] disavowing their Asian-ness altogether" (33). The analyses of class and race, as discussed by British sociologist Tariq Modood and which I take up below, yield insights that are more valuable than an assertion that class and race contribute to the schism between African American and immigrant Muslim communities.

That empathy sometimes does not emerge even when the situation seems ripe for it is made evident in Grace Hong's treatment of Hisaye Yamamoto's memoir piece "Fire in Fontana." Hong writes about the complex insight into race relations that Japanese American writer Hisaye Yamamoto gained during the post-internment period when she was the only Japanese American reporter at an African American newspaper in Los Angeles. Yamamoto and her family had been interned, so she knew first hand what it meant to be racially targeted. Nonetheless, despite the lived experience that ought to have made her empathetic to Mr. Short, the African American man who came to the newspaper fearing for his and his family's safety from the residents of the all-white town in which he was trying to make a home, Yamamoto fell short. She had been assigned to cover the threats being made to Mr. Short by his white neighbors; he had come to the newspaper as a means of mobilizing the support of the black community (292). Hong notes, however, that "Sadly, at the moment when, as the only Japanese American writer for an African

American newspaper, she had the opportunity to bridge the two communities, she found herself supporting the ideologies that make coalition impossible" (305). By using such words as "alleged" and "claimed" and other "callous journalese" (qtd. in Hong 304), Yamamoto was responsible for casting doubts on the extent of the danger Mr. Short and his family were facing. As a result, the black community was insufficiently mobilized to protect him. Yamamoto believes, says Hong, that she contributed to the conditions that resulted in the firebombing of his home and the death of the entire family. Hong indicts the language of journalism:

Journalistic objectivity mandates the disappearance of the subject in the writing of the text. The "I," with all of its situated histories and lived experiences, disappears and is replaced by the abstract third person. In this way, the language of journalism, approximates the language of the state, which similarly attempts to erase the particularities of subjects by maintaining the concept of the abstract citizen. (305)

One could speculate on the reasons for Yamamoto's resorting to journalistic speech, for being hesitant to enter fully into the fear that Mr. Short felt for himself and his family. Perhaps as a recent victim of the power of the state, Yamamoto wished to incorporate herself into the fabric of state institutions and so adopted the comfortable and complacent tone of "impartial" journalism. Hong suggests that in writing the autobiographical "Fire in Fontana" Yamamoto was repenting her earlier lack of duty by her African American fellow citizen. Further, Hong claims that Yamamoto saw in the attack the tragic consequences of the exclusive right to property of white people. The Alien Land Law and de facto and de jure segregation that operated in the United States in the first half of the twentieth-century withheld from people of color the right to own property, to call a home or farm theirs, and to expect that the state would support their ownership of it. By juxtaposing in her memoir her feelings on watching television images of the Watts riots of 1965 against her own inaction in Mr. Short's case, Yamamoto illuminates the link between the internment and the fire bombing of Mr. Short's home. Both injustices, argue Hong, provide evidence of the desire by whites to ensure that only they would have exclusive access to material property. The internment deprived Japanese Americans of their homes and other possessions; the fire bombing prevented Mr. Short and other African Americans from acquiring material property. Hong believes that Yamamoto wrote "Fire in Fontana" almost 40 years after her journalistic inaction, as if to remind herself and others in the Japanese American community (which, says Hong, was actively engaged in the 1980s in the redress effort) that race relations were exceedingly complex and unpredictable. In fighting for justice for those who were interned, one should not forget others' histories and still unfulfilled yearnings.<sup>7</sup>

Lest one infer that empathy is rare, one should not forget that there have been strong instances of it in recent American history.

Much has been written on the empathy of Jewish youth and rabbis for Southern blacks and their active participation in the Civil Rights movement where they worked alongside black activists as allies and moral co-equals.<sup>8</sup> Quintard Taylor writes that the *Northwest Enterprise*, an African American newspaper, was one of the few publications in Seattle to oppose the evacuation of the Japanese. An editorial printed on its front page after the bombing of Pearl Harbor cautioned:

Don't lose your head and commit crimes in the name of patriotism [. . .] As treacherous as was this unheralded attack on our country, it should bring no reprisals [on] innocent Japanese citizens on our shores. The same mob spirit which would single them out for slaughter, has trailed you through the forest to string you up at some crossroad. The Japanese are not responsible for this war. They certainly are good citizens. . . (qtd. in Taylor 425)

Similarly, Robert Shaffer details the many instances of empathy for Japanese Americans on the eve of their internment; contrary to historical analyses that attribute little or no resistance to the violation of Japanese Americans' constitutional rights, Shaffer's archival research documents that many church groups and certain left-leaning newspapers spoke out against the internment and kept up constant pressure on the government for their release even after the internees had been placed in camps. Shaffer does not minimize the general indifference of the American public to the injustice suffered by the Japanese Americans; however, he underscores the importance of recognizing the resisters, though they may have been few, to show that it is possible to counter the seemingly unstoppable machinery of state power and that it is every citizen's duty to do so. Shaffer notes that although the NAACP did not at first mount "an organizational response" to the removal of Japanese Americans in the Spring of 1942, by the summer "it had moved to an actively critical position" (104). One of the columnists for *The Crisis*, the journal of the NAACP, wrote that "the government did not move to dispel the public hysteria over the Japanese Americans precisely because it wanted to generate fear and hatred of the Japanese" (qtd. in Shaffer 104); George Schuyler, columnist for the nationally prominent black newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier*, repeatedly attacked the evacuation, "attributing it to the 'desire of lazy whites to obtain the property of industrious Japanese Americans'" (qtd. in Shaffer 104). And when Mayor LaGuardia objected to the resettlement of Japanese Americans in New York City in 1944, the NAACP joined other organizations in denouncing both the evacuation and LaGuardia's racist stand (105). Shaffer notes that the empathy was mutual. When Branch Dickey decided to hold tryouts for the Brooklyn Dodgers in the internment camps, Japanese Americans did not forget and voiced their strongest objection to the "exclusion of blacks from major league baseball, calling it a national disgrace" (105). These expressions of empathy took place despite a troubling history of tension between the two groups, with many African Americans



believing that Japanese Americans were racist. In addition, the NAACP was worried about what would happen when Japanese Americans returned from the internment camps to California's "little Tokyos" and found that African Americans had moved into their residences (Shaffer 106).

These examples from earlier moments suggest that empathy is a complicated sentiment, and its emergence cannot be easily predicted. One of the most difficult terrains to negotiate in this regard is that of the relationship between women from African American Muslim and immigrant Asian Muslim communities. Aminah McCloud makes the rather controversial claim that it is only when African American Muslim women encountered "their Muslim sisters from the Muslim world" (146) were they introduced to the attributes of "silence, submissiveness, and absence" (147). She argues that in the first half of the twentieth-century, African American Muslim women negotiated an "ambiguous gender relationship" with Black Muslim men in that these women held "quasi-leadership" positions in African American Muslim communities even as they were subject to sexist attitudes. They did not silently accept the subordinate status of Muslim women.

However, McCloud does not draw the battle lines between African American and Muslim women rigidly. She notes that Muslim women from all communities face the difficulties of the United States' "racism, religious bias, and sexism," which have "placed an overwhelming burden on Muslim women" (159). McCloud observes that the "secular nature of American society is often used to force Muslim women out of positions of high visibility" (159). She grants that

African-American Muslim women experience all the joys and struggles that their African-American and Muslim sisters experience. These women struggle in the culture of the United States, where women of all social classes struggle; in African-American culture, where women are torn between fighting racism and sexism; and finally in a budding Muslim culture that inherited the Muslim world's misrepresentation of gender relations in Islam. They push against three layers of mire, and are making dents. (156-57)

Precious Rasheeda Muhammad, like McCloud, describes a conflicted relationship with Muslim women from immigrant communities. Having grown up in the African American Muslim community led by W. D. Muhammad, she writes that "Men, women, and children [. . .] recited the opening chapter of the Qur'an in unison at the end of Friday congregational prayers [. . .] Families were not gender-segregated during Muslim events" ("To Be Young" 46). She could not, "as a Muslim [. . .] or as a descendant of slaves" accept their experience as being more authentically Muslim: "In many of these circles it was considered inappropriate for a woman to recite the Qur'an publicly at all, let alone in unison with males, or to sit with male family members during religious

celebrations, or to pray in a room that did not have a partition, or to hold positions of leadership in mixed-gender Muslim associations" (46). Yet, female Muslim scholars such as Leila Ahmed and Amina Wadud remind us that there has been a long and active tradition of Muslim women turning their attention to Islam as it was first conceived to be fundamentally mindful of the equality of claims of both sexes and unadulterated by centuries of socially imposed restrictions. Thus, the gap between immigrant Muslim and African American Muslim women, who perceive themselves to be less bound by restrictions than the former, may, in reality, be easily bridged.<sup>9</sup>

Former *Wall Street Journal* writer Asra Nomani, who emigrated with her family as a young girl from India, warns of the dangers to Muslim women of the divide-and-rule tactics of those who want to preserve the patriarchal status quo in the practice of Islam. When she challenged the mosque in her hometown of Morgantown, West Virginia and demanded to be allowed to enter through its front door and pray in the main hall (as opposed to being relegated to the balcony and visually blocked from seeing what happens in the main hall), she made national headlines in American Muslim communities and received both support and vituperative criticism. One strong letter of support came from Gwendolyn Zohara Simmons, an African American Muslim woman scholar of religious studies; her letter provides powerful evidence that there is much to be gained from Muslim women of all communities coming together:

As an African American over 50, for the first 18 years of my life, I had to go into public places via back doors, enter the bus from side doors or sit in the back of the bus, or sit in balconies at theatres, or have special days to go into Museums, Zoos, etc., if I was permitted to go at all, because I am black. [. . .] I feel just as angry when I have to go into back doors, side doors, etc., sit in balconies or in the back in silence in the Mosques that I attend today, and that is all of them that I have ever attended (except in Mecca, ironically) since being a Muslim. It is absolutely disgraceful in my opinion that we women must go through the humiliation that Asra Nomani went through. I admire her; I salute her, and I pray that I live long enough to see the men and women of Islam stand up to the forces of oppression and hatred of women and changes these practices. (qtd. in Nomani 145-46)

I have written elsewhere of the particular burden placed on women of immigrant communities to become repositories of their homeland culture. The bodies and behavior of immigrant women become the visible artifacts of that which has been lost or left behind, and as a result, women from immigrant communities often find themselves in the role of cultural preservers. Thus, it is not surprising that women from immigrant Muslim communities in the United States stress the importance of homeland practices and so become complicit in preserving the status quo and their own rigid roles. The issue of authenticity assumes predominance within

diasporic and immigrant communities, principally as a bulwark against assaults to one's dignity. When one is denied full participation in the social and political fabric of the new nation, then one takes refuge in an artificially preserved and nostalgically conceived image of the idealized cultural ethos of the departed homeland. Thus, whatever might have been the activist role of women in their home countries, in the new nation here in the United States they find themselves initially functioning to keep traditions intact.<sup>10</sup> African American women, by contrast, schooled in the activist forces of civil rights struggle, feel no such burden of cultural preservation. Last year, in March 2005, Amina Wadud, Islamic studies scholar at Virginia Commonwealth University, defied tradition (but not, as she noted, Islam) to become the first female imam in the United States to lead prayer services (Elliott B3). Elsewhere in the world, Muslim women are active on the forefront of challenging centuries of patriarchy by returning to the roots of Islam and revealing its fundamental respect for women. In Malaysia, for instance, there is vibrant activism by Muslim women. One such activist organization, Sisters in Islam, uses the Qur'an as the basis for fighting for women's rights. In 2005, Zainah Anwar, Executive Director of Sisters in Islam, declared:

Our strength comes from our conviction and faith in an Islam that is just, liberating and empowering to us as women. Groups like Sisters in Islam are reclaiming for ourselves the Islam that liberated women and uplifted our status by giving us rights considered revolutionary 1400 years ago—the right to own, inherit or dispose of our own property, the right to divorce, the right to contract agreements—all introduced by Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. (3)

In April 2006 in Morocco, the Islamic Affairs Ministry, awarded diplomas to 50 women imams. In the larger Muslim world, change is afoot that is sure to have an impact in the United States and make it easier for immigrant Muslim women to challenge their role as bearers of cultural tradition. Thus, along the axis of rights for Muslim women, it would not be unrealistic to imagine a time in the near future when empathy between women in African American and immigrant Muslim communities is likely to develop.

The early decades of the twentieth-century provide the first instance of a climate especially rich for Islam to find its footing in the United States. Certainly, Islam was present in the slave population, but the emergence of a Pan-African consciousness as articulated by Marcus Garvey, made it possible for African Americans to see in Islam a non-European, specifically African, alternative to Christianity. The segregation in Christian churches also played a part in drawing African Americans to Islam. Richard Turner's study of Islam in the African American experience spotlights a brief though remarkable confluence, in the 1920s and 1930s, of India, Islam, and black America. This was the period in which the Ahmadiyya movement found favor among African Americans. The

founder of this unorthodox Islamic movement, Ghulam Ahmad, was born in Northern India, in Punjab, sometime in the 1830s. In most respects, the Ahmadiyya movement adhered to the five basic tenets of Islam: (1) believing that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet, (2) praying five times a day while facing Mecca, (3) fasting during the month of Ramadan, (4) giving charity, and (5) performing the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca. Its heretical position was in professing that Muhammad was not *the* messenger of God, the final Prophet, but that other prophets could come after him. Turner observes that this idea of “‘continuous prophecy’ became a paradigm for Black Islamic movements as new urban prophets called on this idea to support their creative signification of Islamic identity for their black followers in the United States in the twentieth century” (112-113). The Ahmadiyya movement’s expressly stated goals included “to propagate Islam; to think out ways and means of promoting the welfare of new converts to Islam in Europe and America” (qtd. in Turner 114). The first representative of the movement in the United States was Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, who arrived in Philadelphia on February 15, 1920. On the voyage from London to Philadelphia, he is said to have converted “four Chinese men, one American, one Syrian, and one Yugoslavian to Islam” (Turner 115).

Turner writes that initially Sadiq had high hopes for a multiracial movement with increased understanding between Protestants and Muslims. But, most White Protestants were “unwilling to work toward a multiracial ecumenical goal because of their racism and their deeply entrenched fear of Islam” (123). Given the hostility of white America to his message of Islam, Sadiq began to direct his conversion efforts toward the African American population, resulting in, according to Turner, “a new vision of a global Pan-Islamic alliance in which Indian nationalism and Pan-Africanism were linked in a potent and multi-racial synthesis of anti-imperialist anti-Christian religious and political ideas” (124). Between 1921 and 1925, there were 1,025 American converts to the Ahmadiyya movement, the majority of them African Americans from Chicago and Detroit, and, to a lesser extent Gary, Indiana and St. Louis, Missouri (Turner 124).

During this period, members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the organization founded by Marcus Garvey, began to be attracted to the Ahmadiyya movement. There appears to have been an organic connection between the two groups. Turner describes their common worldview:

The Ahmadis were Indians—one of the “darker races of the world”—who were seeking their independence from the British. The Garvey movement stressed the internationalist perspective that led African Americans to think of themselves in concert with Africans and the “darker races of the world” against white Europeans and Americans. In the 1920s, this internationalist identity, which had been growing among blacks since the late nineteenth century, began to extend to their religious consciousness as well. Christianity was increasingly

criticized as a “clan religion” for whites that needed to be revised by blacks or abandoned for another religion, such as Islam. (127-28)

By 1940, the Ahmadiyya movement is believed to have had between 5,000 and 10,000 members in the United States, most of them black Americans. Although there are many reasons for the declining influence of the Ahmadiyya movement in the United States in the 1940s, the principal cause appears to have been a redirecting of energy and resources to political phenomena outside the United States (among them, the fallout of the Partition—the bloody division of the subcontinent into the two nations of India and Pakistan and the accompanying ‘slaughter’ of between 500,000 and 1 million people—the creation of Israel and the impact on Palestinians, and the post World War II courting of Muslim nations by the Soviet Union). As a result, during this period the Nation of Islam, with its message of black empowerment and racial separatism on American soil, began to gain in strength. However, this emphasis on the domestic over the global should not be taken to mean that Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam had no interest in matters beyond U. S. borders, or that Elijah Muhammad was not concerned with building connections with Muslims in other countries. Quite the contrary. Turner writes that the Nation of Islam

offered “covert support for Arab and Pakistani causes” and fostered “greater foreign Muslim understanding of the African-American human condition.” Also Elijah Muhammad insured a “high degree of global Islamic consciousness in his movement, in the future, by making the study of Arabic a focal point in the Nation of Islam’s schools for its youth. (196)

Therefore, to answer the question of why Islam appears *not* to have facilitated a link between African American and Asian American Muslims in the present moment, I turn to the centrality of the United States in both the Nation of Islam’s and the American Society of Muslims’ (the group led by W. D. Mohammed) sense of identity. America-centrism—or certainly the feeling that African American interests *must* be woven into the fabric of the United States—is an important facet in the signification of both groups. It is in this context that the issue of citizenship emerges as the principal fissure between African American and Asian American Muslims, a fissure that Islam is hard-pressed to bridge. John Fountain of the *New York Times* spoke with African American Muslims in Illinois in the weeks following September 11. He observes, “Any backlash they have faced, they say, generally has amounted to glares and harsh words rather than physical attacks that have been experienced by their Arab-American brothers and sisters” (B 9). The victims of physical attacks, some fatal, were not limited to the Arab American community. Those of South Asian descent suffered serious violence, as well.<sup>11</sup> Writing from Palo Alto for *The Korean Herald* (Singapore), Zuraidah Ibrahim notes, “While Black Muslims seem

more cohesive than before, there is now a pronounced rift between them and the Muslims here of Arab and South Asian descent" (n. pag). She quotes Imam Faheem Shuaibe, director of a predominantly African American mosque in Oakland as saying, "'African Americans prove that Islam is not antithetical to democracy or to America'" (n. pag.). In a strongly worded letter in the NAACP publication, *Crisis*, Julian Bond (Chairman of the NAACP's Board of Directors), Kweisi Mfume (President and CEO of the NAACP), and Roger Wilkins (publisher of *Crisis*) urge their readership to be patriotic and show support for the United States in its fight against terrorism. This nation is theirs, they assert, and so worth protecting. "The impulse to pull back and hurl criticism from outside rather than to participate fully as citizens within the national community cedes far too much. The massive contributions of the enslaved ancestors of so many of us have surely given us our own share of ownership of this nation. It is our shared future we should be shaping, not just their bad history we are decrying" (3). The message is clear: we have invested too much of ourselves in building this nation, and we should be staking our claim to it with confidence and pride.

The divide between African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims, which is not likely to be easily bridged by shared victimization in a time of increased surveillance and suspicion, is deep, as Akbar Muhammad notes: "Despite increased efforts, the September 11 attacks have not contributed substantially to better relations between African American Muslims and immigrant Muslims" (140). He observes that "September 11 may well have produced an historic change in the general attitude of Muslim African-Americans toward government and improved relations between them and adherents of Christianity" (140). But, he cautions, the "change may be short lived. All African-Americans have always looked favorably on the principles of the United States Constitution. The problem has been implementation of its principles of justice, equality, and equal opportunity" (140).

Writing in November, 2001 for *The New Republic*, Michelle Cottle provides powerful evidence of African American Muslims' anger at what they perceive to be expressions of hostility by some foreign-born Muslims to the United States. Imam Abdul Malik, in an address to the Masjid Muhammad in Northwest D. C., an African American mosque, demands, "Do you want me to believe that the environment that guarantees me protection to pray five times a day and that ordains itself, its credibility, under God's trust—you want me to suspect it? To feel bad about it? . . . Go to hell!" (162). Cottle observes that

The imam not only defends the United States, he suggests that it is the Middle East where something has gone badly wrong with Islam [. . .] Chiding listeners to stop deferring to foreign-born Muslims just because "they step before you and they're wearing robes and turbans and it makes you think they're back there with Mohammed the Prophet," [. . .] he argues that Old World Muslims have been mere "warm-up speakers" for African Americans. (162-63).

While immigrant Muslims like Akbar Muhammad may find distressing African American Muslims' naïve trust in the ideals of justice professed by the United States (especially at a time when it is precisely Asian and Arab men who are routinely scrutinized as potential terrorists), ironically Sherman Jackson's criticism of immigrant Muslims suggests that it is *they* (and not, African American Muslims) who unthinkingly buy into the "false universalisms" proffered by white America. Karen Leonard writes of Jackson:

Asserting that the Prophet Muhammad was sent for all peoples, at all times and in all places, and that there are not only New and Old World realities but different realities within the New World, Jackson sees Islam's pluralistic legal traditions as enabling interpretive communities to adapt Islam to their circumstances. If American Islam is to be truly pluralistic, he writes, "it will have to be bold and vigilant in its refusal to ignore or jettison any of these histories and experiences in favor of appeals to a false universal, no matter how chic, powerful, or expedient the latter may be." ("American Muslims" 21).

Jackson's criticism of immigrant Muslims is not unlike the caution that Sau-ling Wong sounded in the mid-1990s against a too ready embrace by Asian American Studies of the transnational imperative. Commitment to the goals of hard-fought battles by Asian American activists of the late 1960s for full participation on U. S. soil should not be displaced by notions of multiple citizenship and global agendas, she warned, emphasizing that Asian Americans, continually delineated as the perpetual foreigner, would only underscore their outsider status if they chose to invest emotionally in the affairs of ancestral homelands. In response, I had argued that regardless of how emphatically Asian Americans declare their claim to the United States, they will always be denied complete and unquestioned acceptance as bona fide Americans; therefore, in continuing to stay connected to ancestral homelands, one buys a certain kind of insurance of belonging.<sup>12</sup>

The outsider-insider dichotomy is very much at play in the differential perceptions by white Americans of immigrant (Asian) Muslims and African American Muslims. In fact, Asian American Muslims are, on both counts, seen as outside the fabric of American society—as Asians and as Muslims. The experience of James Yusuf Yee, Chinese American convert to Islam and former army chaplain, provides indisputable evidence of the tenuous citizenship of someone who embodies both Asian America and Muslim America. Yee, who was falsely accused (but later cleared) of abetting the detainees at Guantánamo, writes in his memoir that he was read as an immigrant despite being "terribly American" and a third-generation American, both sets of grandparents having come to the United States in the 1920s. "When people learn that I am a Muslim and then see that I am of Asian descent, they often assume that I immigrated to the United States. But in fact my background was typically American" (11). Yee was subjected to horrific

treatment as a suspected traitor, enduring 76 days in solitary confinement before the charges against him were dropped. One of the military officers acknowledged later that the allegations against Yee “were based on prejudices and petty jealousies” and that officials in the military resented him and felt “Who the hell does this Chinese Taliban think he is, telling us how to treat our prisoners?” (203). By contrast, African American Muslims are seen as African American before they are read as Muslim. And as African Americans, as I will argue later in this essay, they enjoy a certain security of citizenship and belonging that is denied the Asian American, regardless of whether s/he is Muslim or not.

But the intersections of race and ethnicity, on the one hand, and legal, experiential, or asserted citizenship,<sup>13</sup> on the other, are complex. Quintard Taylor writes of early twentieth-century Seattle, in which immigrants from Japan saw themselves initially as sojourners whose “center of gravity” (a phrase Taylor borrows from Roger Daniels) was located in Asia. Such a feeling could explain their “tempered response to anti-Asian discrimination” (407), he says. The Seattle African Americans of the same period were much more vociferous in their resistance to discrimination because they saw themselves with nowhere else to go. Longevity of stay in the United States and generational depth of presence in the nation contribute to increased sophistication in negotiating political process and asserting citizenship; this sophisticated investment in the democratic landscape of the United States is demonstrated by the successful redress campaign that Japanese Americans mounted in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

While it is likely that second- and third-generation Asian Americans are much more invested in claiming and asserting U. S. citizenship than immigrant parents and grandparents, it is also true that two phenomena in particular that have taken hold forcefully in the last twenty years—namely, the politics of ethnonational pride and globalized capitalism—are facilitating the reorienting of attention of U. S.-born Asians to ancestral homelands. Within the field of Asian American Studies, there has been active debate on the relative wisdom of asserting localized versus globalized identity and citizenship (Watanabe, 643).<sup>15</sup> Because Asian Americans are always regarded as outsiders, even American-born Asians buttress their vulnerable and tenuous citizenship in the United States with an ancestral citizenship they can deploy when their status within the United States is assaulted. The ancestral citizenship may provide them no tangible benefits of influence in the home country, but it does offer a sense of safe belonging somewhere. This sense of safety is particularly salient to constructions of identity today, when Muslim Asian Americans feel threatened on multiple fronts, but principally because of their faith. In fact, a recently released report of the Discrimination and National Security Initiative (DNSI) of Harvard University’s Pluralism Project concludes that Pakistani Americans are most vulnerable to hostility and attack by the dominant community. And yet, U. S.-born Asians of Muslim faith may, because of a greater understanding of the processes of American



democracy, be able to negotiate the many fissures within the Muslim American community to build conclaves of solidarity. How this will play out for relationships among various groups within the American Muslim community remains to be seen. For instance, Richard Wormser observes,

In the past, Muslim immigrants identified very strongly with their own ethnic communities. They isolated themselves from Muslim African-Americans. Today this division is breaking down. On any given Sunday, in most Islamic centers throughout the United States, Muslims of every ethnic background pray and socialize together. Many congregations are inviting African-Americans to join. Ibrahim Sidicki, a college student whose family is from India, notes that "as young people start to take control of their mosque, they will make it a priority to merge closer with the African-American community." (117)

In 1997, Warith Deen Mohammed said of the relationship between African American Muslims and immigrant Muslims:

We African American Muslims have to realize that it would be absolutely stupid on our part if we try to plan our life in America without recognizing the big numbers that we have in the United States now, who have come from other lands and have become citizens of the United States and are Muslims. [. . .] They are from Pakistan and India and different parts of Africa, from Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East, from Europe, and are all here [. . .] We as Muslims should not plan our future in America without at least having a way of communicating with them, so that at certain times we meet with their planners or consultative body and discuss the future of not just one of us but for all of us in America. (qtd. in Karim 509)

W.D. Mohammed, despite his disagreement with his father's separatist stance with respect to a global Sunni Islam, nevertheless, like his father, believes that African American Muslims must be committed to the empowerment of African Americans as *Americans* and that Islam is a faith that African Americans need to and could adapt to fit their needs as American citizens. His call for collaboration with immigrant Muslims, therefore, can be read as performing two functions: (1) re-articulating his Muslim community's recognition of the centrality of the United States to one's sense of identity and political activism and (2) underscoring for Muslims who have come from "other lands" and who have become citizens of the United States that it is to their future in *America* that they must attend.

Devon Carbado in his recent essay "Racial Naturalization" makes the case that African Americans, despite their disempowered status within the United States, are unmistakably marked as "American." Distinguishing between American citizenship and American identity, Carbado defines American identity as "the

capacity, as a racial subject, to be a representative body—figuratively and materially—for the nation” (638). Comparing the identity of African Americans with Japanese and other Asian Americans, Carbado argues that slaves and post-Fourteenth Amendment-passage blacks were included as possessions and subordinated subjects, though they were excluded from the privileges and benefits of full citizenship. Asian Americans, on the other hand, were first seen as un-naturalizable, unable to be accorded citizenship, and then, even when they were accorded legal citizenship status, extra-territorialized as citizen aliens. This difference centers on race—the blackness of African Americans who become marked as “American” as enslaved and racialized subjects and the non-blackness of Asian Americans who, through the logic of racism’s exclusion, are, even when granted legal citizenship, nonetheless racialized as foreigners. Carbado claims that “Slavery was a kind of forced naturalization, a process in which blacks were simultaneously denationalized from Africa and domesticated to (but never fully incorporated in) America” (642). Carbado contends that even Justice Taney of the infamous ruling in the Dred Scott case of 1856, implies that

the involuntary nature of slavery and its racial exclusivity is precisely what provided people of African ancestry their American identity—that is to say, naturalized them [. . .] [P]eople of African ancestry became American via slavery. Slavery substantially diminished, if not eliminated, the formal status of Africans as foreigners. (644)

This unequivocal reading of the black body as “American”—both in social identity and legal citizenship—is denied the Asian American. This situation presents African American Muslims with an interesting dilemma: given that their blackness marks them as solidly “American,” but their Muslim-ness taints them as foreign, how do they practice an identity that does not endanger their already vulnerable lives?

Tariq Modood explains the situation in Britain, particularly with regard to color and the political category of “black.” While in the 1970s, British Asians (principally from Pakistan and India) and blacks (from the West Indies) came together in an alliance of “blacks” against the racist and inflammatory climate created by the conservative MP Enoch Powell, in the 1980s and in the 1990s, Asians came to be increasingly disaffected with that identification. Modood observes that for British Asians, the color identification did not speak to their “mode of being.” What is salient to their sense of self was culture, not color. Moreover, “black” as a category is so clearly rooted in the historical experience of slavery and the Atlantic experience of forced displacement, that it cannot, says Modood, “be turned into a politics that is neutral between non-white groups. It cannot have the same meaning or equally give strength to those who can identify with that history and those who cannot” (44-45). British Asians feel the particularities of their experience erased under an alliance that accentuates color. Modood

relies on in-depth and nuanced sociological studies of attitudes in England to show that there is actually greater cultural racism in England than there is color racism, and that this cultural racism is most intense against those who are Muslim. White people expressed greatest hostility toward Asians, especially Pakistanis, than any other group (39-40). Much of the hostility was a result of the perception of Asians as being unwilling to “adopt English ways” (41). In a textured analysis of English racism, Modood notes that “White people who are racists toward some ethnic groups can admire other ethnic groups because of, for example, aspects of their subcultural styles” (33); he quotes a 1988 study that shows the intersection of race, class, and culture:

Most typically, of course, many White working-class boys discriminate positively in favor of Afro-Caribbean subcultures as exhibiting a macho, proletarian style, and against Asian cultures as being “effeminate” and “middle-class.” Such boys experience no sense of contradiction in wearing dreadlocks [ . . . ] and going to reggae concerts whilst continuing to assert that “Pakis Stink.” (Cohen 83, qtd. in Modood 34)

Modood offers the provocative prediction, albeit in the context of Britain:

It is by no means an impossible development for color prejudice to decline while discourses attacking the collective cultures of minority groups rise. At this point, cultural racism would have come into its own—not without color racism but as the dominant factor. It is quite possible that we shall witness in the next few decades an increasing de-racialization of, say, culturally assimilated African-Caribbeans and Asians along with, simultaneously, a racialization of other culturally different Asians, Arabs, and non-white Muslims. (38)

I would argue a similar possibility for the United States, which is increasingly moving toward cultural racism, particularly with regard to Muslims. The *Herald News* of Passaic County, NJ, echoing a number of news sources, reports that “The Council on American-Islamic Relations, a nationwide nonprofit Islamic civil liberties organization, showed a nearly 30 percent increase in anti-Muslim bias incidents between 2004 and 2005, the highest number of complaints since the group started compiling statistics more than a decade ago” (A01). Islamophobia is alive and well in the United States, underscores Scott Alexander, who documents the grossly prejudicial pronouncements by the U. S. Christian right against Islam, declarations that should have been condemned by the current administration in the White House but instead were ignored because of its intimacy with Christian groups. Alexander writes,

In June, 2002 the Rev. Jerry Vines, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and current pastor of the First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida,

addressed a pastor's conference, conducted prior to the annual meeting of the 2002 Southern Baptist Convention held in St. Louis, Missouri. In the course of this address he was quoted as saying that "Islam was founded by Muhammed, a demon-possessed pedophile who had 12 wives, the last one of which was a 9-year-old girl." (123)

Lest one dismiss such extreme sentiments as coming from groups on the fringe and therefore not worthy of our outrage, Alexander reminds us that the leaders of these groups are in close association with powerful figures in the government and enjoy their protection. "[E]ven in light of the fact that the [Southern Baptist] Convention's officials stood in firm support of Vines's statements, and that the White House was well aware of this, President Bush chose to go ahead and address the Convention as planned, without the slightest hint of chastisement in his speech" (125). One has to ask whether a racial epithet, maligning color, would have been similarly ignored. Modood would say not; he would point to such occurrences as the Convention speech as irrefutable evidence of the rise of cultural racism against Islam. At a basic level, cultural racism "treats culture in a quasi-natural or biological way, as if culture inheres in a group so that it is automatically reproduced, it does not change over time, and the relevant cultural traits are found in all members of the group" (Modood 13). Though Daniel Pipes takes serious objection to the use of the word "racism" in the context of anti-Muslim sentiment—he protests, "Racism refers only to racial issues, not to views on immigration, culture, religion, ideology, law enforcement, or military strategy" (7)—what is valuable about the "new racism," as cultural racism is sometimes called, is that it focuses attention on aspects of difference *beyond race* and uncovers other kinds of "immutable" boundaries (Modood 13) that divide peoples.

In this context African American Muslims can be disaggregated by the state into their two component parts—black and Muslim—with greater weight being placed on the former and appeals to American nationalism and patriotism being made, as well, to the former. I don't mean to minimize the continued violence of a racism based on color, but those who profess Islam do not necessarily come together because of Islam. Just as Asian Americans in the early decades of the twentieth-century made a strategic decision to embrace whiteness over blackness because of the nature of the laws of the time, so also, it is understandable that Black Muslims may choose to privilege American nationalism over universal Islamic brotherhood.

Once again, I turn to Modood for the insights the British situation may provide into the conditions here. In explaining why Pakistanis in Britain mobilize around "Muslim" with a conviction and an intensity absent from their cohering around the term "black," Modood distinguishes between a group's *mode of oppression* and *mode of being*. "Excluded groups seek respect for themselves as they are or aspire to be, not simply a solidarity on the basis of a recognition of themselves as victims; they resist being defined by their *mode of oppression* and seek space and dignity for their *mode*

*of being*" (159). I would alter Modood's formulation and say that an excluded group challenges the oppressor to acknowledge that the mode of oppression can be transmuted to provide the power of resistance. In other words, Pakistanis in Britain who feel oppressed as a result of their being Muslim often turn to their Muslim roots to find the power they need to resist oppression (in this regard, Bina Sharif's play "Democracy in Islam" is illustrative of the turn to Islam post September 11 by previously non-observant Muslim Americans, who saw themselves as culturally racialized in the administration's declared "War on Terror"). In the context of black American Muslims, while I agree with Modood's assertion that "Cassius Clay is the name of the mode of oppression; Muhammad Ali is the name of the mode of being" (107), I am not entirely in agreement with him that "in locating oneself in a hostile society one must begin with one's mode of being not one's mode of oppression, for one's strength flows from one's mode of being" (107). I acknowledge that for African American Muslims, the conversion to Islam offers a mode of being that is distinct from their mode of oppression, but unless that mode of being significantly engages the mode of oppression—in this case, blackness—and in the process transmutes the deficiency of oppression into a leverage of power (which, as Dannin argues, is precisely what Islam does for African Americans), then the mode of being will be seen as external, a mere outer covering that one can discard. For Islam to be an integral part of the African American Muslim's sense of identity, therefore, it must be inextricable from blackness; it must be alloyed with blackness.

For Asian American Muslims, cultural or religious racism trounces color racism; for African American Muslims, color not religious racism is the more salient factor. Therein lies the fundamental divide. Whether that gap can be breached will depend on the desire and ability of both groups to face the enormous complexities attending any kind of coalitional politics or empathetic connections. It is imperative for both groups to understand the role that the dominant group *de jour*—Christian and white—plays in exploiting this divide to its advantage. At the moment, black Americans, regardless of their faith, are seen by the dominant group primarily in terms of their color, an attribute that confers on them the mantle of citizenship. One cannot underestimate the powerful hold of such a privilege, particularly for a people who have endured centuries of abuse. Thus, while Asian American Muslims may wonder at the unwillingness of Black Muslims to embrace them in religious fellowship, they cannot be oblivious to the deep wounds of color racism that blacks have suffered. African American Muslims may feel no obligation to empathize with the victims of cultural and religious racism and tenuous citizenship. While that reluctance may be entirely valid, given the color bias of many Asian American Muslims, it may be unwise for Black Muslims to become too comfortable with their current acceptance within the body politic.

Not only do African American and Asian American Muslims find that they have to negotiate the fissures between themselves, they

also seem to be competing for the right to be the representational voice of Islam in the United States. Zuraidah Ibrahim writes that “Some African Americans are saying that blacks are being pushed to the background when they are in fact in the best position to educate their fellow Americans about Islam” (n. pag.). One of the African American imams she spoke with observes, “We have been here for generations. [ . . . ] We are the ones who understand the most the need to build bridges with people of other faiths because for many of us, these are people who happen to be our own relatives, our fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters.” He believes that “identifying Muslim America with recent Arab and South Asian immigrants [ . . . ] misses the opportunity to show that Islam and American values can co-exist” (n. pag.). The problem with the imam’s formulation is that it underscores the outsider-ness, the foreign-ness, of the South Asian and Arab Muslims. It is indeed true that African American Muslims can, as Dannin claims, shift the terms of the national rhetoric to include more fully a Muslim ethic in the nation’s conception of itself (thereby going beyond the Judeo-Christian characterization).<sup>16</sup> However, in doing so, they must avoid the temptation to create a hierarchy of American Muslim-ness, by positioning themselves as the insiders and Asian American Muslims as outsiders.

Leti Volpp observes that “September 11 facilitated the consolidation of a new identity category that groups together persons who appear ‘Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim.’ This consolidation reflects a racialization wherein members of this group are identified as terrorists, and are disidentified as citizens” (1575). Moreover, there is strong encouragement of the public to call attention (through profiling) to suspected terrorists and thereby to solidify one’s own citizenship through the act of disidentifying others from membership within the polity. In such a political climate, it takes a great deal of vigilance on the part of those who enjoy a sense of inclusion to interrogate just why they are so welcomed at the present moment and to recognize the fragility of their advantage. African American Muslims and Asian American Muslims must consider their historical and present disadvantages and advantages and do so with an unflinching analysis of power. Only then can there be hope of mutual empathy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Guantánamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* (2005), by Brittain and Slovo, builds its script from the text of detainees’ letters to their families, pronouncements by U. S. government officials, newspaper articles, and legal opinion.

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House characterizes itself as “a nonprofit, community-based organization with a 55-year history of service to the community [whose] mission is to promote the long-term, sustainable economic and social development of Boston’s communities of color.” It was started in the 1940s to strengthen relationships between African American and Jewish groups, and in fact its current building was at

one time a Hebrew College. Freedom House thus has always had a vision beyond the African American community.

<sup>3</sup> My recollection of the woman's words, though not exact, is largely accurate and preserves the structure of her utterance.

<sup>4</sup> See Leonard, "Introduction."

<sup>5</sup> The term "ally" can be problematic, if those who adopt this role take refuge in a "feel good" sentiment and limit their involvement to symbolic gestures of support. However, Blum's use of it suggests that he expects an ally to be fully engaged in the struggle for justice, putting him/herself in harm's way if necessary.

<sup>6</sup> See Najmi who says, "the backlash has brought home to me personally what I knew theoretically: that, as an immigrant, I need to think about how I align myself in the racially hierarchized society that is America. In particular, the backlash has given me a momentary insight into what it must be like to be black in America. And I want to be very careful here not to appropriate or conflate histories or to trivialize the centuries' long oppression of African Americans. I mean only that what I am experiencing at this moment in time—my hypervisibility; racial profiling; the suspicious looks of strangers, sizing me up as a potential threat; the uncomfortable shift in their body language, and so on—are realities that African Americans live with every day; that is, they are perpetually made to feel homeless." (n. pag.)

<sup>7</sup> Elaine Kim's powerful essay on the breakdown of relations between the African American and Korean American communities is worth reading in this regard (see also Smith and Song).

<sup>8</sup> The literature on African American-Jewish relationships is extensive. See Webb; V. P. Franklin, et. al.; Salzman and West; Bauman, et. al.; and Friedman.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Chapters 7-11 of Ahmed and also Wadud.

<sup>10</sup> See my essay "Gender and the Image of Home in the Asian American Diaspora: A Socio-Literary Reading of Some Asian American Works."

<sup>11</sup> Vijay Prashad writes, "The events of 9/11 inaugurated a new urgency in the world of Asian American Studies. First, the state and its social allies reduced the difference between South Asian and Arab American lives to nothing. The assaults on South Asians in the U. S., particularly Sikhs, and the detention of large numbers of Muslim men from South Asian countries made the ethnic divides between Arabs and South Asians less meaningful (here, the state went after certain Muslims, although non-state actors had less discrimination in their racism, being equally enraged at Muslims and those who had the indelicacy to look like them)" (173). South Asia Americans trace their ancestry to the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

<sup>12</sup> See especially Chapter 2, "Transnational Homepages" of my book *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (2004).

<sup>13</sup> By "legal" citizenship, I mean those rights of national membership that are constitutionally or theoretically guaranteed; "experiential" citizenship refers to those rights that one enjoys in actuality, or, the felt quality of one's life within a nation; "asserted" citizenship

encompasses those acts and behaviors through which individuals and groups attempt to bridge the gap between the constitutional guarantees and experienced reality of national membership.

<sup>14</sup> See Maki, et. al.

<sup>15</sup> See Watanabe 644. Paul Watanabe's overview, though weakened by his exclusion of South Asian Americans, is nonetheless useful in presenting the complexities of Asian Americans' engagement with and reaction to U. S. foreign policy particularly as it impinges on their ancestral homelands. Watanabe concludes, "American society's proclivity to marginalize Asian Americans may coincide with a desire of Asian Americans to seek "a different kind of inclusion" [quoting Rick Bonus on Filipino Americans]. Perhaps Asian Americans can navigate through the puzzle of their many selves by fully rejecting none of them and by reconceptualizing all of them. The challenge for the United States, in turn, is to rethink and reformulate its politics and practices to make room for the diverse attachments accompanying persistent local and pressing global exigencies" (644).

<sup>16</sup> See Dannin 262. I would argue that moving from the current Judeo-Christian hegemony to a Judeo-Christian-Muslim triumvirate, while definitely a step in the right direction, should not be construed as having achieved a genuine religious pluralism. American consciousness about the varieties of faith could be further enlarged to encompass Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and various animist and syncretic religions.

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