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*Resisting the Veil of Universalism: Muslim Womanist Philosophy as a Lens for Authentic Representations of African American Muslim Women*¹

From the moment I took my *shahāda*—the Islamic declaration of faith—in 1998, and formalized my journey to Islam from Christianity, I realized that whatever theoretical paths I would traverse, I might first have to clear a course myself or revise one developed by others. From conversations with African American Muslim women who guided my matriculation in Islam to explorations of the history on African American Muslim life, I became convinced that identity formation, cultural tradition, and religious representation can be as contextually-determined as they are intertwined. As Sherman Jackson has observed, “self-definition is always and fundamentally a social cum political act; it is never a purely intellectual one.”²

This essay builds upon my religious and intellectual journey as the impetus for a framework that would “reclaim, enhance, and produce thoughtful explorations of African American Muslim life,” with-

1 I appreciate the assistance of my writing partners, Beatrice McKenzie and Linda Sturtz, who reviewed and commented on drafts of this essay.

2 Sherman A. Jackson, “Muslims, Islamic Law, and the Sociopolitical Reality in the United States,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 17, no. 2 (2000): 2.

out disguising the particularity of African American approaches to Islam as the universality routinely accorded to black Christianity.³ It introduces a new framework—Muslim womanist philosophy—as an apt approach for the study of African American Muslims, particularly the lived realities of Muslim women and the multiple identities they strive to balance. While underscoring the complex and multilayered nature of black religiosity, I also draw attention to some of the strategies Muslim women use to negotiate the categories of woman, African American, and Muslim in America.⁴ In the process, I argue that the sites of struggle of African American Muslim women and their conscious integration of religion in their daily lives offer insight into the three worlds they traverse: the mosque, the black community, and American society.⁵ The absence of sustained scholarly attention on the lives of African American Muslims suggests that a number of important religious and cultural issues related to black spirituality remain unaddressed. Moreover, for researchers to present a comprehensive view of African American Muslim life, they must look beyond the veil of Christianity. Indeed, African American Muslim women serve as a point of resistance to monolithic views of black women and religion.

A Scholarly Journey to Islam

My academic work began in the field of religious and theological studies at Northwestern University and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in 1995. Prior to the completion of my qualifying exams and dissertation proposal, my theorizing about theology and the experiences of African American women was driven by “Protestant-derived templates of religion.”⁶ My “teachers” were, for the most part,

3 Elsewhere I have explored Muslim Womanist Philosophy as “an interpretation of reclamation.” See Debra Mubashshir Majeed, “Womanism Encounters Islam: A Muslim Scholar Considers the Efficacy of a Method Rooted in the Academy and the Church,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, 38–53 (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

4 No Arabic equivalent exists for the English term “conversion,” yet some Muslims do use the term to describe their journey to Islam. Also common for new Muslims is speaking of their religious conversion as “becoming Muslim” or “reverting.”

5 Tabassum Ruby introduced me to this concept in her thoughtful exploration of identity formation among immigrant Muslim women in Canada. See “Who Am I and Where Do I Belong? Sites of Struggle in Crafting and Negotiating Female Muslim Identities in Canada,” in *HOME/BODIES: Geographies of Self, Place, and Space*, ed. Wendy Schissel, 27–45 (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2006).

first- and second-generation womanist scholars and Christian women—most engaged in pastoral ministry in their local congregations. In monographs, essays, and public presentations, Katie G. Cannon, Renita Weems, Emilie Townes, Cheryl Kirk Duggan, Delores Williams, Cheryl Saunders, and others appropriated Alice Walker's definition of womanist, and brought into the academy this interpretative framework that expresses African American female consciousness beyond the boundaries of white or black feminism.⁷ While mining Walker's theoretical approach as a new Muslim, I began to wrestle with the possibility of recognizing representations of black women beyond the Christian context. That is, I began to understand a womanist to be an African American woman who resembled the African American Muslim women I had encountered while conducting research among more than a dozen Muslim communities. That is, they confirmed for me that a womanist exhibits "outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior"; wants "to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one"; and is "responsible, in charge, serious"; "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people male and female"; and is "not a separatist, except periodically for health."⁸

My journey towards depingularizing black religiosity consciously began with a self-focused desire: I wanted to meet and marry a religious African American male. For the first forty years of my earthly existence, I limited myself to spiritual and intellectual discourses grounded in Christianity—for the most part, in its evangelical forms. That is, my socialization conditioned me to believe that non-Christians were relevant only as prayer subjects, and any religious tradition other than Christianity lacked legitimacy. Yet, decades of Protestant church involvement and exposure to non-denominational, Baptist, United Methodist, and Pentecostal congregations that were predominately or entirely African American confirmed for me that I was unlikely to meet my future husband in a church setting. At the same time, I be-

6 Rosemary Hicks, "The Question of Authority: Deracinating Race, Repositioning Religion, and Regenerating Gender in the History of African American Islam: A review essay of Sherman A. Jackson's *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 4, nos. 1–2 (2008): 219.

7 See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

8 *Ibid.*, xi–xii. Some may argue that my selectivity in regards to the parts of Walker's definition I chose to incorporate denies the presence of queer Muslims. While the issue of homosexuality among Muslims continues to be a highly charged one, my choices more accurately reflect the realities of the African American Muslim women whom I have studied.

gan to read about local arrangements for the visit of a Nation of Islam (NOI) leader. Such media reports accompanied photographs of NOI temple activities and depicted the presence of a significant number of men. Kelly Brown Douglas, a womanist scholar, contends that “sometimes a person chooses a subject, and other times a subject chooses a person.”⁹ While still a Christian, I quickly discerned that my doctoral topic, African American formulations of Islam, had selected me.

As stated above, I did not consider Islam to be a viable religious path for any African American when I began my doctoral work. Even before the horrific events that occurred on September 11, 2001, I held negative views of Islam and Muslims. I knew no Muslims personally, nor was I aware of the lack of homogeneity among movements in the United States or across the globe. In particular, my “knowledge” of African American Muslims was restricted to news coverage of speeches by Louis Farrakhan and activities of his followers. I did not realize that W. D. Mohammed was Elijah Muhammad’s successor as leader of the *original* Nation of Islam, and that he led scores of individuals and communities onto the path of mainstream Islam.¹⁰ When Tabassum Ruby claimed that “knowing about oneself very much depends on the culture in which one lives,” I translated her theorizing into “I knew myself to be one striving for what was good, and that was nothing related to Islam.”¹¹ That is, I could not and did not engage in the act of “stripping away of all particularity”; I understood that anything short of what I considered to be normatively religious for African Americans—Christianity—to be an expression of deviancy.¹²

But, as my unrequited desire for marriage lingered, I began to question the future of the Black Church, an institution whose “backbone” is overwhelming female. Simultaneously, the upcoming visit to the area by a leader of the *contemporary* Nation of Islam fueled curiosity about what black people—especially black males—found attractive

9 Kelly Brown Douglas, “Introduction,” *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 1.

10 I distinguish between the *original* Nation of Islam, or the movement that began in the 1930s and whose architect was Elijah Muhammad, and the *contemporary* Nation of Islam, which Louis Farrakhan began in the late 1970s after he could no longer support the leadership of Muhammad’s son and successor, W. D. Mohammed.

11 Tabassum Ruby, “Who Am I and Where Do I Belong? Sites of Struggle in Crafting and Negotiating Female Muslim Identities in Canada,” in *HOME/BODIES: Geographies of Self, Place, and Space*, ed. Wendy Schissel (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2006), 27.

12 Paula M. Coeey, “Women’s Religious Conversions on Death Row: Theorizing Religion and State,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no. 4 (2002): 703.

about a movement that began as a sociocultural organization and is situated on the margins of both black America and the larger society. I contextualized the dilemma as “all the sisters are in the church, and all the brothers are in the nation. If the church is to survive, someone must move.”

Studying Muslims beyond the Veil of Christianity

As my research shifted to gender considerations from communal organization, I began to question the limits of legitimacy that I had placed around black spirituality. I soon discovered that the ethnographic research I was conducting among African American mosques in metropolitan Chicago was not common among scholarly approaches of black religion or Islam. That is, prior to 1997, African American Muslims rarely appeared as subjects in explorations of Muslim self-definition, and representations of religiosity in black America scarcely extended to Islam.¹³ Through personal experience and secondary research, I also came to recognize that depictions of womanist spirituality in the lived realities of African American women routinely positioned Christian perspectives as the norm for non-Christian experiences, leaving Muslim women without the opportunity to “language” themselves.¹⁴

What was needed, I surmised, was a framework that could challenge “the forms in which consciousness incarnates itself” about African American Muslim women, perhaps in some way returning to them the power of “naming” their reality.¹⁵ Methodologically, “naming” functions as the “product of dialogue” into which African Amer-

13 Prior to 1997, exceptions of published monographs included Aminah McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Toronto: S. J. Reginald Saunders and Co. Ltd., 1961); Martha F. Lee, *The Nation of Islam: An American Millenarian Movement* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Steven Barboza, *American Jihad: Islam After Malcolm X* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1994); Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, eds., *Muslim Communities in North America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

14 Irene Monroe, “Response’ to Monica Coleman’s ‘Must I be Womanist?’” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 108.

15 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 7, 8.

ican Muslim women enter on their own terms, bringing with them material realities born within the temporal, spatial, cultural, and religious context that is most authentic to them.¹⁶ They become subjects with agency, not objects upon whom realities and truths are imposed. In this dialogue, their changing status changes the nature of the discourse. Their experiences—their theological sensibilities as well as their daily living and marginalized status—serve as the source of meaning that helps observers formulate better understanding of black religiosity and African American Muslim life. As one scholar of Islamic intellectual history and philosophy has noted, “knowledge is the door to actualization and realization.”¹⁷ One such door for the production of knowledge about African American Muslims is Muslim womanist philosophy.

*Muslim Womanist Philosophy:
Mirroring Identity, Meeting a Need*

I created this approach as an alternative to viewing Muslim women and Islam through the veil of Christianity. After I became Muslim and began to examine Islam from the perspective of a former Christian, I realized how easily I could use Christian terminology or my Black Church experience as a starting point. For example, rather than consider the various ways in which female religious leadership exists in Muslim communities, I initially contrasted the absence of women as imams, or those who lead congregational prayers, with the pastoral opportunities open to women in many Protestant associations. After all, I had been a pastor, and now, as a Muslim, I considered my gender a barrier to religious leadership. I did not realize at the time that though racism and sexism exist in Muslim communities, many African American Muslim women have and are developing strategies to replicate the visibility of women in many black congregations. For them—and, now for me—religious leadership is not one dimensional, or exclusive to a specifically defined role. I also began to appreciate the motivations that compelled African American Muslim women to dress in a

16 Ibid., 8.

17 William C. Chittick, “Worship,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter, 218–235 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), here 234.

manner that appeared to be more modest than some of their Christian counterparts. Rather than view my new Muslim sisters as lacking agency or choice, I began to realize that attire should not be confused with liberation. You see, I was no longer an outside researcher observing a community I once characterized as “other.” Since I refused to accept the label of “other” for myself, I needed to develop another way to authentically view myself and other Muslim women. Thus, Muslim womanist philosophy responds to the gap between a *rhetoric* of experience imposed upon African American Muslim women and the *reality* of experience that denotes the lived realities of African American Muslim women.¹⁸

This framework can be labeled “*Muslim*” in that it begins with the experiential triad of Muslim life. How female practitioners of Islam live along with individual and communal exegesis may sometimes be oppositional but nevertheless, it routinely directs their daily living. It recognizes a “counterculture” that Paula Coeey describes as “a community with a distinctive system of values and practices aimed toward producing a specific identity among its members.”¹⁹ Some of the roots of this method can be described as “*womanist*” because they represent the sociopolitical conditions of African American women whose material reality is confounded by tri-dimensional oppression. In our case, oppression that results from race, gender, class, and religious biases. Muslim womanist philosophy furthers consideration of the diversity of African American religiosity by promoting a “new process of identification, the emergence into visibility of a new subject. A subject [African American Muslims] that was always there, but emerging, historically.”²⁰ *Philosophy*, the disciplinary home of rational investigations that considers questions about existence, knowledge, and ethics, as well as the meaning of fundamental religious assertions of truth, is my starting point.

In addition to the issues cited above, the foundational rationale for consideration of a new approach in the study of African Ameri-

18 Riffat Hassan speaks of the rhetoric and reality in reference to gender equality. See “Members, One of Another: Gender Equality and Justice in Islam,” <http://www.religiousconsultation.org/hassan.htm> (accessed May 10, 2011).

19 Paula M. Coeey, “Women’s Religious Conversions on Death Row: Theorizing Religion and State,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no. 4 (2002): 718.

20 Stuart Hall, “Old and New identities,” in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King, 31–68 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/wash/www/102/stuarthall.htm> (accessed April 28, 2011).

can Muslim women responds to Mary Daly's promotion of methods that are "determined by the problem."²¹ In this case, the "problem" can be viewed in situational and contextual terms. This framework functions as an alternative to the methodological presence of at least two constructions of gendered power through which African American Muslim women usually enter the "imagination" of scholars of black religion and/or Islam.²² As will become obvious, African American Muslim women confront both patriarchy and invisibility differently from Christian and other Muslim women in terms of both perceived and actual reality.²³ *Religious patriarchy* manifests itself as control of the representation of one religious community based upon the perceived religious authority of another. The Protestant Church is perceived as the norm for African American religiosity. This control, one could say domination of space and discourse, can and has, although perhaps to a limited extent, influenced the practice of Islam as well as the ideological constructions of what is believed to be and what is regarded as "purely Islamic."²⁴

Another gender construct, *religious invisibility or marginalization*, can assume a peculiar correlate within Muslim communities as it speaks to the lengths to which the external bodies of African American Christians—and to some extent the embodied living of other Muslim women—are employed to speak for, in place of, or to shape the "materiality of existence" for African American Muslim women.²⁵ As a concomitant of religious patriarchy, this construct distinguishes African American Muslim women from other female Muslims born in the United States or elsewhere.²⁶ The lived realities of female Americans of African ancestry who become Muslim cannot be equated with the Western experiences of other Muslim women who do not share the experience of subjugation and humiliation in the United States because of their race. To claim otherwise seriously underestimates the effects of

21 Mary Daly, quoted in Gloria L. Schaab, "Feminist Theological Methodology: Towards a Kaleidoscopic," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 341.

22 I adapt the concept of "imagination" from the work of Schaab. *Ibid.*, 341–365.

23 I recognize the challenges embedded in the use of the term patriarchy.

24 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy: Comparative Perspective," in *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, eds. Christina Gilmartin, Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Robin Lydenberg, 219–235 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), here 219.

25 Pamela Moss, book review of *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, Representation*, *Economic Geography* 75, no. 2 (1999): 204.

26 The feminine form of the word Muslim.

Western social structures of oppression. These structures continue to question the authenticity of the faith claims of African American Muslims. In other words, the socialization of African American and other Muslim women in the United States can be as different as the everyday living of black and white women. Yvonne Haddad is a helpful resource for a better understanding of this dilemma. She notes:

Muslim women arriving from abroad have brought with them a variety of cultural expectations, shaped and influenced by the many different societies from which they have come ... In addition to carrying this complicated baggage, immigrant Muslim women have also needed to adjust to the realities of the American environment itself.²⁷

Moreover, the different contextual spaces in which African American Muslim women traverse at the level of belief and embodied reality are linked to a predominantly ahistorical consideration of the main tenets of Islam, their implications for women, and the response of the larger society to what its members regard as the manner in which women are regarded in Islam. The end result often becomes misrepresentations at best and, at worst, marginalization. This issue coupled with the more visible presence of ethnocentricity among some immigrant communities suggest that the realms African American Muslim women traverse can be viewed as “place-based politics” that are both situational and contextual, especially in regards to the covering of the female body and the seclusion of the female person. As intertwining constructs, both religious patriarchy and religious invisibility or marginalization come together as problems in need of theoretical attention. Muslim womanist philosophy critically responds to these gender constructs.

27 Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “Islam, Women, and the Struggle for Identity in North America,” in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether, 601–607 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), here 602.

*Womanist Religious Roots
in the Context of the Mosque
and the Church*

Muslim womanist discourse taps into the multifaceted, African American women's intellectual and religious tradition in four distinct spheres of influence. First, the works of Pulitzer Prize winning author Alice Walker, whose collection of essays first published in 1983, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, concretized a term with which generations of black women have been identified, "womanist." Conducting ethnographic research in the metropolitan Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC areas, I encountered African American Muslim women—in body and spirit—who upheld the legacy bequeathed to them by Clara Evans Muhammad, wife of Elijah Muhammad and the only female to serve in the capacity of "Supreme Secretary" of the *original* Nation of Islam.²⁸ As I was invited into their public and private spaces and historical memories, I was introduced to women who were activists, homemakers, educators, religious leaders, entrepreneurs, photographers, real estate agents, therapists, administrators, fashion designers, and liaisons between their mosque, other religious institutions and the larger society. I encountered women who edited periodicals, established international organizations and created forums and support systems for new Muslim women as well as their immigrant sisters. Some of these sisters held academic achievements, including the highest degrees in their field. I discovered that as early as the 1930s, African American Muslim women waged battles to achieve gender equity in mosque functions and leadership positions. They protested against racism and other social injustices in their neighborhoods and, alongside the men in their lives, they were jailed. They supported each other against the tyrannical hands of deranged husbands and ignorant male leaders. In essence, they "talked back," picking up the language of bell hooks.²⁹ In short, these African American Muslim women behaved in *womanish* ways, even if they did not identify themselves as womanists.

28 As a historian, I view the self-representation of these women as a means of constituting themselves in the present "on the basis of the past that they remember, recall, and reenact." See Rita M. Gross, "Women and Religion: Methods of Study and Reflection," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether, 3–10 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), here 6.

29 bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989).

The second—and closely connected to the first—influence for Muslim womanist philosophy was the intellectual activity of a number of African American female religious scholars who, in response to Walker, began to consider womanism as a site of critical inquiry and multi-dimensional analyses about black people, and, specifically, African American women. They launched a movement in the twentieth century whose branches continue to reach far and wide in the twenty-first century. Unlike the term feminism, these academicians—the majority of whom were self-identified Christians—recognized that womanism “is an African American concept” that “speaks to African American concepts of embodiment.”³⁰ It is a term that does not require the “preface” of black.³¹ In other words, womanism is a natural site for intellectual and activist discourse about the world of African American women. Contrary to anthropologist Carolyn Moxley Rouse, who questions whether womanism can “methodologically mediate the contradictions between universalism and particularism,” these first-generation womanists acknowledge the presence of creative tension, but their pioneering scholarship suggests that they see the particular and the universal in dialectical relation—each informing the other, each in possession of part of the truth.³² Thus, with regard to the interconnectedness of gender and Islam, Walker’s definition functions as a tool that helps African American Muslim women wrestle epistemologically, institutionally, and ritually with what it means to be who and what they are. In this way, Muslim womanist philosophy provides a framework for researchers to more fully articulate African American Muslim women’s “sense of uniqueness.”³³

30 Arisika Razak, “Roundtable Response to Monica Coleman’s ‘Must I Be Womanist?’” *Journal of Feminist Studies In Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 107.

31 Rufus Burrow, Jr., “Enter Womanist Theology and Ethics,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 22 (1998): 19–29.

32 To Carolyn Moxley Rouse, Muslim women can (and do) more easily identify with feminism. See *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004). See also the following book-length works: Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Katie G. Cannon, *Katie’s Cannon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Renita Weems, *Just A Sister Away* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988); Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993); Emilie M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1993); Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: the Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1993); Marcia Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994); Cheryl Sanders, *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995).

Clearly, the chief concern of this paradigm is to accomplish for Muslim women what Cannon and other womanists have endeavored to achieve for their Christian subjects: the documentation of the agency and moral formulas African American Muslim women construct and pass on to succeeding generations from within the social conditions of membership in both a racial class and religious group that are marginalized in the United States. The particularity of this double marginalization challenged me to search beyond the narrow theological and cultural boundaries of *Western Womanism*, a concept some may label “essentialist Womanism.”³⁴ The African heritage of my subjects led me to consider the resources of woman-centered ways of knowing and womanist hermeneutics drawn from the intellectual wells of Africana scholars, and to become acquainted with *Africana* womanism as formulated by Clenora Hudson Weems.

Like Cannon, Grant, and other first-generation womanists, Weems recognizes the potential of a womanist framework in the study of the religious experience. Although Weems’ womanism is socially constructed from the realities of Africana women, her method, she writes, deals with the “Diasporic African,” and is thus “an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent.” Indeed, I discovered that among her “descriptors” that speak to the lived experience of Africana women, at least five resonate with the realities of their Muslim sisters in the United States: “family centered,” “in concert with the Africana man in struggle,” “strong,” “spiritual,” and “adaptable.”³⁵ Although Weems is adamant that her approach is not “Walker’s womanism,” it is sufficiently flexible to serve as a critical resource for Muslim womanist philosophy. Together these methods translate into a *global* womanism for the construction of a womanist methodological approach and theoretical paradigm that serves as a “distinct trunk” dedicated to the study of Muslim women of African ancestry.³⁶

33 Herbert W. Harris, “Introduction: A Conceptual Overview of Race, Ethnicity, and Identity,” in *Racial and Ethnic Identity: Psychological Development and Critical Expression*, eds. H. W. Harris, H. C. Blue, and E. E. H. Griffith, 1–15 (London: Routledge, 1995), here 1.

34 Omaira Abou-Bakr, “Gender Perspectives in Islamic Tradition,” <http://www.minaret.org/gender.htm> (accessed December 4, 2011).

35 Clenora Hudson Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Troy, MI: Bedford Publishers, 1995), 154–155.

36 Debra Mubashshir Majeed, “Roundtable Response to Monica Coleman’s ‘Must I Be Womanist?’” *Journal of Feminist Studies In Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 118.

The cultural and moral contexts of the local mosque and the larger *ummah*, or body of believers, represent the third sphere of influence. The Islamic house of worship is called the masjid or mosque and is situated as the core of communal life and ritual practice for the world's 1.2 billion-plus Muslims—at least half whom are estimated to be women. Most African American Muslims “seized upon Islam as a moral, psychological, and spiritual jacket in the stormy sea of American racism.”³⁷ That is, the fight for social justice and equality that their moral sensitivities discharged in the societal arena, came with African American Muslim women into the mosque, and into their homes. Muslim womanist philosophy recognizes that the mosque experience of African American and other women is routinely viewed in monolithic terms, though in reality the difference can be substantial. Descriptive narratives of their mosque experiences and family lives and critical analytical accounts of what the religion and Muslim leaders say about women have much to teach us. They suggest that the historical lives and historical memory of African American Muslim women deserve a framework that enables a more authentic understanding of the physical connections that African American Muslim women share with their house of worship and the ritualized activities that they experience. Unlike many of their immigrant sisters, most African American Muslim women choose their religion for themselves in a secular Western environment, rather than adopt the traditions of their parents who were raised in a society of Muslims. American Muslim women also differ in how they choose or are permitted to participate publicly in the practice of their faith.

In African American Muslim communities, women traditionally attend the Friday congregational prayers, or *Jum'a*, and generally experience their mosques as accessible spaces in which they comfortably and visibly exercise religious leadership, albeit not usually as prayer leaders. Indeed, for African American Muslims, the mosque can resemble the “invisible institution”—the communal structure that later evolved into the Black Church—as space in which they educate themselves, strategize about politics and survival, consider scriptural interpretations, feed each other emotionally and spiritually, develop and exercise marketable skills, and meet potential life partners. This real-

37 Sulayman S. Nyang, “The Muslim Community in the United States: Some Issues,” *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 2 (1999), <http://www.as.yzu.edu/~islamst/sample2.htm> (accessed May 11, 2011).

ity, however, is rarely visible in popular and scholarly reports about the widespread marginalization of female Muslims in mosques in the United States.

Furthermore, many African American Muslim women argue that their mosques would not be communal centers of prayer and social interaction in their absence. Indeed, they say, if their presence was restricted, so too would be the quality and the number of necessary mosque functions that could be addressed. Their experiences clearly demonstrate that just as the identities of Muslim women reflect contextual and relational positionings on a global scale, so does the interchange between religious spatiality and gendered mobility speak to the gendered politics that African American Muslim women continue to shape, conform to, and resist. So to be Muslim for African American women is to battle multidimensional forms of oppression, especially in terms of their race, gender and religion. That is, to paraphrase Deborah K. King, there is a difference in being African American and a female adherent of a particular faith, and in being Muslim and a female with a particular cultural experience.³⁸ Neither the generic African American woman nor the generic Muslim woman exists in real time.

Indeed, the *body* of African American Muslim women displays meaning and value, through the ways these female Muslims dress, embody the Islamic mandate of modesty, interact in mixed gendered settings, and situate themselves in particular spaces in the mosque. As Rouse discovered, the mosque is the space in which African American Muslim women subvert hegemony.³⁹ And, as Jane I. Smith notes, “women [in the United States] have the chance to participate in the public observance of Islam in ways never available to them in a number of other countries.”⁴⁰ Understandings of the embodied realities of African American Muslim women are limited when the center of discourse is a religious perspective other than Islam, or is one that universalizes Muslim female reality. Muslim womanist philosophy is a non-universal alternative that offers prospects for not only the re-

38 Deborah K. King, quoted in Janice D. Hamlet, “Assessing Womanist Thought: The Rhetoric of Susan L. Taylor,” *Communication Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2002): 420.

39 Carolyn Moxley Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 164.

40 Jane I. Smith, “Women’s Issues in American Islam,” <http://macdonald.hartsem.edu/smithart1.htm> (accessed March 15, 2006?).

examination of Islam in the world of African Americans, but the opportunity to hear anew the moral voices of African American Muslim women as well.

Finally, the social activist scholarship and other public forms of expression of Amina Wadud, Aminah McCloud, Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, Riffat Hassan, and Azizah Y. al-Hibri represents a significant base of influence.⁴¹ Though none of these female Muslim scholars identifies herself as womanist, each brings a womanist-sensitive approach to the study of Islam, drawing attention to the “divergences between theoretical statements about the rights and status of women in Islam and the actual implementation or application of these rights.”⁴² The primary mechanism of these scholars of Islam is Islamic exegesis, and with it, they place the beliefs, moral reasoning, and lived realities of Muslim women in a larger context. Through their publications, lectures, and other activist engagements, these scholars consistently demonstrate “the centrality of an antipatriarchal Qur’anic hermeneutics” as a multidialogical activity.⁴³ They also draw attention to and diligently strive to address the reality that, in the words of Hassan, “the vast majority of Muslim men and the vast majority of Muslim women actually believe that men are superior to women and women are inferior to men.”⁴⁴

Through their efforts, these Muslim scholars raise global consciousness regarding issues that are central to the well-being of Muslim women. In the process, they oblige Muslims to rethink their relationship to the Qur’an by challenging them to approach what they accept as divine speech as that which “itself enables a continually evolving

41 See Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Asma Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam: *Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, rev. ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987). One of Riffat Hassan’s more noteworthy essays is “Religious Human Rights in the Qur’an,” which appeared in *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Religious Perspectives*, eds. John Witte, Jr. and Johan D. van der Vyver (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996). Hassan also co-edited *Women’s and Men’s Liberation: Testimonies of Spirit* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991). Al-Hibri writes extensively dealing with issues of women’s and human rights in Islam. She co-edited the section on Islam in *Sex, Marriage and Family in World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

42 Omaina Abou-Bakr, “Gender Perspectives in Islamic Tradition,” http://www.crescentlife.com/thisthat/feminist%20muslims/gender_p (accessed May 10, 2011).

43 Asma Barlas, “Hold[ing] fast by the best in the precepts: the Qur’an and method,” paper read at the Conference on The Changeable and Unchangeable in Islamic Thought and Practice, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, May 7–9, 2005, http://www.asmaabaras.com/PAPERS/Holding_Fast.pdf (accessed May 11, 2010).

44 Riffat Hassan, quoted in “The Role of Women in Islam,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, January 25, 2002.

thought and practice as long as they read it in contextually appropriate ways.⁴⁵ Beyond revelatory considerations of the Qur'anic vision of gender-justice and equity, their work also challenges non-Muslims to think differently about Muslim women by considering the ways in which popular perceptions of Islam in relation to the dominance of Christianity in the West, foreign policy decisions of the United States government, and media portrayals of Muslim life further serve to objectify Muslim women as Other in need of a masculinist and/or Western liberator.

With intentional particularity, Muslim womanist philosophy integrates and appropriates the reflections and critical theorizing of Wadud, McCloud, al-Hibri, and others as a means of assigning authoritative status to the wisdom and experience of African American Muslim women. Until 1999, Wadud and McCloud, both African American, were most likely the only scholars of their gender, religion, and race to give voice in the academy to the experiences of African American Muslim women.⁴⁶ The significance of al-Hibri, a Lebanese-American lawyer and scholar of Islamic law, derives from the moment in one of her numerous speeches that she first voiced a potential connection between womanist thought and Muslim women.⁴⁷ As the leading Muslim scholars who draw attention to the inadequacies of research on Muslim women that ignore the African American experience, the contributions of this trio join, in my view, the more recent work of Jane I. Smith and Carolyn Moxley Rouse to offer a Muslim contextualization of, what womanist Delores Williams labels the "survival, quality-of-life tradition."⁴⁸ Although Williams's focus is the biblical appropriation of Hagar, her language is instructive for my work and the contributions of these scholars because they extend conversations about the ways in which African American Muslim women do and should exhibit survival strategies as they seek to live healthier lives.

45 Barlas, "Hold[ing] fast by the best in the precepts."

46 As an ABD student at Northwestern University and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and a first-year faculty member at Beloit College, I presented "Sitting at the Feet of the Long Distance Runners: Black Women, Black Church, Black Islam, and Embodied Black Agency," at the 1999 Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

47 Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, "The Quranic Worldview: A Womanist Perspective," Rice Webcast Archive 2003, 1 May 2003, <http://www.rice.edu/webcast/speeches/20030421alhibri.html> (accessed May 11, 2011).

48 See Delores S. Williams, "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, 171–184 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 171.

Even more specifically, Wadud and McCloud bring to the forefront the under-examined world of African American women from the rare perspective of an insider who also possesses outsider sensibilities. Their contributions enable Muslim womanist philosophy to function as a paradigm that moves beyond the race analyses of black male intellectuals, the gender analyses of many feminist (predominantly white female) intellectuals, and the faith analyses of Christian womanists in its attention to questions of knowledge, history, and human existence that form African American Muslim family life. They unashamedly travel to mosques and other gatherings to raise the issue of gender bias that some African American Muslim women experience particularly from their male leaders and/or husbands. Their global visibility has drawn added attention to the place of women in Islam, even, at times, to the accompaniment of cries against the dangers of “modernism.”⁴⁹

Conclusions

Let me now summarize my motivation for the consideration of a new method. I am an African American Muslim scholar trained as a gender and religion historian whose interpretative skills use the conventional tools of the Western Academy.⁵⁰ My intellectual and religious journey to Islam has convinced me that these tools were inadequate for any meaningful description of what I observe in Muslim communities. Muslim womanist philosophy creates space for Muslim women to situate themselves and, through their own lived realities, articulate who they are, what they value, and where they belong. It demonstrates the diversity and complexity of the *African* and the *female* and the *American* experience of Islam, and situates the lived realities of African American Muslim women as central resources for analyzing Mus-

49 Amina Wadud (Muhsin) delivered the “presermon” lecture from the main floor of the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa, on August 12, 1994. Both women and men were seated in the same area. Some Muslims characterized the event as evidence that “the West had achieved another victory, this time not on the battlefield but in the innermost sanctuary of Islam.” See Abdulkader Tayob, *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams, and Sermons* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999). Six years later, on International Women’s Day, I delivered the presermon at Claremont, but this time from the balcony where women gathered. 50 Aware of arguments such as one posited by Jualynne E. Dobson against “an ethnocentric reference” to Muslims of African ancestry living in the United States, I intentionally employ this label because it is the one with which my subjects most identify. See Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African-American Religious Experience*, reviewed by Jualynne E. Dodson, *The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History* 4, no. 2 (2001), <http://www.princeton.edu/~jweisenf/northstar/volume4/pinn.html> (accessed May 11, 2011).

lim life in the United States and for explorations of African American Muslim communities. I position this framework within an emerging field of religious, cultural, theological, and ethical reflection in which “the historic and present-day insights of African-American women are brought into critical conversation” with Muslim traditions and the teachings of Islam.⁵¹ Even at this early juncture, the positionality of Muslim womanist philosophy is comparable to that held in 1985 by womanist thought, when Cannon and other African American seminarians first raised the possibility of such discourse as they began to construct the “womanist house of wisdom.”

Finally, Muslim womanist philosophy adds a Muslim voice to proclamations that the multiple identities of African American women may include a plurality of faith experiences. Acting as if “Christian” or “Church” equates authentically with “woman,” observers of African American female spirituality have done a disservice—even if only from the chair of naivete. Such practices cannot sustain and enable inter-faith, multi-dialogical conversations among the intellectually and religiously diverse cadre of womanists. But they can challenge us to remember that a non-Christian crafted the term, and in spite of the Christology that pervades its use, *womanism* was never meant to “remain a fixed identity to whose bones [only Christianity and Christian scholars] could give flesh.”⁵² I acknowledged at the outset that Muslim womanist philosophy is a *developing* category, whose time for unveiling is now. While critical responses are invited, I contend that this method deserves time to be further defined and clarified by both those who employ it and those whom they represent with it. To declare that “time” is warranted is appropriate in light of the magnitude of the mission. In this regard, I echo the sentiments of one reviewer of womanist theology when he writes:

When a group’s voice has been effectively silenced, or at best muted for several years, it is reasonable to allow time and space for them both to find their own voice, and to express all that has been pent up for so many years, without being menaced by external criticism.⁵³

Muslim womanist philosophy can awaken a new awareness of the role of African American Muslim women in the production of knowledge about them. By resisting the veil of universalism, scholars who chronicle the lives of African American Muslim women can shift the

discourse on African American religiosity to the domestic struggle of black Americans striving to frame for themselves a legitimate sphere of faith outside of Christianity. As Gloria Bashir, Dorothy Rahman, Minnie Shabazz, Latifah Wangara, and others reached out to me when I first became Muslim, they modeled for me a type of Muslim womanhood that challenges the authenticity of conventional portrayals of their communities and their realities. Not only did they defend the prophetic voices of Sister Clara Muhammad and her generation, they freed me decades later to establish a religious and intellectual identity with which I could claim a place in Sister Clara's legacy of activism. Thus, mine is an identity that illustrates the creative possibilities when an academic journey and spiritual odyssey merge. Finally, as a lens for authentic representations of African American Muslim women, Muslim womanist philosophy offers a doorway to the understudied contours of African American Muslim life.

51 Katie G. Cannon, "Roundtable Response to Monica Coleman's 'Must I Be Womanist?'" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 96–98; see description of the pioneering womanist scholarship of Emilie Townes, "Scholar of womanist theology and expert on preaching to join Divinity faculty," *Yale Bulletin & Calendar* 33, no. 28 (May 6, 2005), 1.

52 Ariska Razak, "Roundtable Response to Monica Coleman's 'Must I Be Womanist?'" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 99–107; Debra Mubashshir Majeed, "Roundtable Response to Monica Coleman's 'Must I Be Womanist?'" *Journal of Feminist Studies In Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 113–118.

53 Rufus Burrow, Jr., "Enter Womanist Theology and Ethics," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 22, no. 1 (1998): 27.

