

NARRATIVES OF ISLAMIC SELF-MAKING:  
BLACK MUSLIM YOUTH IN A PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC  
SCHOOL

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*This work is dedicated to my parents, Dr. Md. Farid Uddin and Dr. Mosfika Yeasmin, without whom I would not have journeyed so far; and to the beautiful young people in this story who continue to create their own stories.*

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## ABSTRACT

### NARRATIVES OF ISLAMIC SELF-MAKING: BLACK MUSLIM YOUTH IN A PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC SCHOOL

Irteza Binte-Farid  
Kathleen D. Hall  
Deborah A. Thomas

The phenomenon I trace throughout this dissertation is how West African and African American Muslim youth navigate the complicated terrain of racial, ethnic, and religious identities within the localized context of a charter school in Southwest Philadelphia named Honors Academy. I investigate the puzzle of how, given historical contestations among African immigrants and African American Black Muslims in the US, these youth, in interacting everyday with each other at school, make sense of the differences that become salient in school in their processes of becoming Black Muslims in the US. I consider the role the school and varied spaces in the school play in this process. How can we understand what sociocultural influences become salient within different contexts in the school and how these influences shape what aspects of being Black, Muslim, and ethnic become most significant within these youth's interactions and discourses?

I argue that Black Muslim youth at Honors engage in Islamic self-making, which is the process of engaging in diverse practices of religious self-fashioning, including but not limited to religious technologies. Black Muslim youth engage in Islamic self-making through praying, fasting, and dressing modestly, through making claims to public spaces, through market strategies such as selling Islamic themed products, and through creating religious material inscriptions. Islamic space-making, a form of Islamic self-making, takes place within the context of an increasingly market-driven public education and is embedded within larger social processes such as racialization, racial formations, and ethnicization. Specifically, within US Muslim communities, ethnoreligious hegemonies, a privileging of Arab, South Asian, and immigrant Islams over Black Islamic forms, operate alongside and work within US racial formations to maintain the logic of white supremacy. I note how ethnoreligious hegemonies shape Islamic self-making practices amongst Honors students and how differences between Black Muslim youth played a prominent role despite the MSA and Honor's attempts to cultivate unity amongst their students.

Islamic self-making emphasizes that there are multiple means through which Islamic selves can be cultivated and that this process is mediated differently across spaces. My spaces of investigation are identity affirming contexts, such as the Muslim Students' Association (MSA) and African American History (AAH) class, which are grounded within a limited multicultural ideology at Honors but also occasionally creating alternative openings for religious expressions. Through each of these spaces, which include an afterschool club, classrooms, hallways, and a mosque, I consider specifically: How do religion, ethnic and family histories, and racial formations mediate forms of Islamic self-making for Black Muslim youth, within a racist, Islamophobic, and capitalist US context? This ethnographic account acknowledges the diversity of Black youth's identities and counters the essentialization of Black experiences, while also investigating the link between religious expressions and racial formations.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Well, Black people are called *African Americans*. So, when I say I’m African...when they just look at me, and they see that I’m African American. But I say, I’m African, I’m from West Africa, like West African descent. Like, you don’t know that. They just think I’m just some [what they stereotype as] “ghetto Black American,” they don’t know too much about it. They just think that all of us was born here. Well, I was born here, but my parents weren’t, at all. So, whenever they see us, the category is always Black. They just don’t see anything else, but you’re Black. Like I could have been an immigrant, I could have just escaped, came here illegally, they wouldn’t know that. They wouldn’t even ask that. They wouldn’t even think to ask that. I could have been here for years and years and years, and my English could have gotten better. They wouldn’t even know that - oh you’re Black, you’re Black. So they put you in a category.

But some Black people don’t really know where they come from. Which is the same thing as how some African Americans, African Americans that were born here, and their parents are from here. But they don’t know which, where they came from. So, yeah...it’s complicated. **Like we were never enslaved, that’s a lot of Africans too.** I’m West African, and the way they teach Islam is different because...me and Shantell see each other as *what we really are*...Like we Africans all wear our hijabs, we all go to the masjid, we all fast, stuff like that. As for **them**, like, they know, they don’t really, for us, it’s been generations. Some of them, their families were like Christians, their grandmothers are Christian. Like Shantell’s grandmother is Christian and her mom’s Muslim. So that’s the difference.”

Kabeera, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader at Honors Academy, the site of my study, readily shared her views with me on a Zoom call in June 2020. Having been disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, Kabeera and I had both missed our chats at school, and we decided to continue our chats over Zoom. During my two years of fieldwork, I came to see Kabeera as a young woman with an ability to think through complicated ideas. In this particular call, Kabeera expressed her frustration about constantly being mis-categorized as ‘Black’ instead of African by her white teachers at school. Since she identified as ‘West African,’ specifically as second-



generation Guinean American with immigrant parents, Kabeera noted how many white adults tended to overlook her immigrant background due to racialized ascriptions, such as the derogatory stereotype of “ghetto Black American.” Kabeera described how a Black immigrant’s arrival in America could differ on the basis of being Black (“I could have been an immigrant, I could have just escaped, came here illegally”), noting how overly simplistic racial categories could flatten such diverse experiences.

Kabeera also draws a distinction between her heritage as a West African Muslim from an unenslaved family to the heritage of her friend, Shantell, a young African American whose mother had more recently converted to Islam and whose family had been formerly enslaved. African Muslim families like hers, who had been Muslim for generations, possess knowledge of and enacted the ‘correct’ practice of Islam, as Kabeera defines it, through wearing hijab, attending the masjid (mosque), and “stuff like that.” But formerly Christian families like Shantell’s, Kabeera relates, “They don’t really” [know much about Islam]. Kabeera distinguishes between African immigrant and African American Muslims, based on multiple “differences” between how her family and her friend Shantell embody Muslimness, differences in their family histories, Islamic practices, and even whether or not they are “Black” or “African.” Ironically, as Kabeera recognized, none of her own distinctions would register with her white teachers, who would consider Shantell and her in the same category of “Black Muslims in Philadelphia.”

This story is just one of many shared by the Black Muslim youth that brought into relief how their sense of Muslimness and of being Black were shaped by the complicated semiotic interplay in the cultural meanings they gave to racialized identifications, their

family's ethnic heritage and histories, as well as Islamic practice. What is particularly interesting about this passage is the way that Kabeera challenges simplistic racial demarcations but replaces these demarcations with her own form of (biased or even prejudiced) characterization of her African American friend's family background.

Kabeera's comments provide insight into the ways that many second-generation West African youth self-identify through ethnic claims to their family origin, pushing back on racial identification, and more specifically pushing back on being labelled as Black by external society. second-generation refers to youth whose parents are immigrants; however, the youth are born in the US. Kabeera, as a second-generation West African youth, works actively to distinguish herself from Shantell, both racially and religiously. Racially, Kabeera hopes to distance herself from African Americans, who occupy a low status within the white supremacist racialized hierarchy within the United States. Religiously too, Kabeera hopes to elevate her family's Islamic heritage over Shantell's. Despite Shantell's claim to Islam, Kabeera questions her family's knowledge of Islam. Kabeera also proudly claims that she knows her history in contrast to Shantell's family who doesn't know "where they came from."

The phenomenon I explore in this dissertation is how West African and African American Muslim youth like Kabeera and Shantell navigate the complicated terrain of racial, ethnic, and religious identities within the localized context of their school, a charter school in Southwest Philadelphia named Honors Academy. How, given historical contestations among African immigrants and African American Black Muslims in the US, do these youth make sense of the differences that become salient in school in their

processes of becoming Black Muslims in the US? I consider the role the school, and varied spaces in the school, play in this process. How can we understand what sociocultural influences become salient within different contexts in the school and how these influences shape what aspects of being Black, Muslim, and ethnic become most significant within these youth's interactions and discourses? It is these shifts to which my study attends.

Growing up within a society in which anti-Black racism is systemic, young people like Kabeera and Shantell navigate their racialized identities differently, based on the meaning they give to their ethnicity and family history. Religiously, these youth find both grounds for common worship, yet view Islamic practices from divergent perspectives. In a nation where Islamophobia is pervasive, these youth embrace their Islamic heritage and find support from some members of the Honors Academy's administration, those who facilitate Islamic practice at school within the framework of valuing multicultural diversity. Yet, it is within the larger social context of racism and Islamophobia that these young Black Muslims are crafting their sense of identity and belonging in the US. Their school provides a unique space in which racism and Islamophobia are actively countered, providing a space where they encounter identity affirming discourses and make sense, often in contradictory ways, what it means to be Black and Muslim in America.

Throughout the dissertation, I note how Black Muslim, both West African and African American youth, engage in a process of Islamic self-making. Islamic self-making is an act of individual self-fashioning through which students express their adherence to an Islamic ethos. Their process of Islamic self-making in school, as I show, are not simply grounded in theological tenets or specific acts of Islamic worship, such as prayer or fasting.

Rather, they entail a diverse series of practices oriented towards developing their identity as Muslims in public school.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood, in her study of Egyptian Muslim women in the Islamic pietist movement at the turn of the century, develops the concept of ethical self-cultivation in relation to Islam and gender. She defines ethical self-cultivation as a “specific sets of procedures, techniques, and exercises through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come to be formed” (Mahmood, 2005, p.120). Mahmood’s draws on Foucault’s concept of technologies of the self (1988), which are the self-forming activities that transform someone into an ethical person. According to Mahmood (2005), through practicing technologies of the self, include reading the Quran, praying, fasting, and dressing modestly, these Egyptian women construct a pious Islamic self. In my study, I draw upon Mahmood’s formulation in investigating how Black Muslim youth in a similar way are engaged in Islamic self-making as a practice of ethical self-cultivation.

In some cases, pious youth processes of Islamic self-making are tied directly to religious technologies, such as praying, fasting, and dressing modestly. In other instances, these youth are less concerned with religious technologies and cultivate Islamic selves through making claims to public spaces, selling Islamic themed products, and creating religious material inscriptions. Each of these forms of Islamic self-making are interrelated and may occur simultaneously.

What the youth’s Islamic self-making practices bring to light, I argue, is the multiple and varied means through which religious selves are cultivated. In addition to considering how some of my interlocutors engage in religious technologies, I highlight

how Islamic space-making through market strategies is another means through which my interlocutors construct Islamic selves. Specifically, I demonstrate how individual Islamic self-making occurs through claims to space (Islamic space-making) which take place within the context of an increasingly market-driven public education system. The study also shows how Islamic self-making and space-making, therefore are intimately interconnected and embedded within larger social processes such as racialization, racial formation, and ethnicization. I draw from Omi and Winant's work in defining racialization as the "extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (1986, 13). Racial formation, they argue, is "the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed" (1986, 109). Ethnicization, in turn, is the sociohistorical process by which ethnic identities are assigned to a social practice, or group (1986, 21).

As they are navigating these processes of racial formations and ethnicization, I argue, Black Muslim youth use Islam as a religious resource to construct institutional power within Honors. In turn, these institutional forms of Islamic space-making bolster individual projects of Islamic self-making. In bringing into relief the interplay of religion, race, and ethnicity, my account differs from other studies of Muslim subjectivities and subject formation amongst youth that focus more narrowly on religious motivations for social and political activism. As political engagement did not play a role in the everyday lives of the students I worked with, my study also complements Khabeer's (2016) work on race and social activism among Muslim youth.

In considering the ways that Islamic self-making is racialized, my study also highlights how religious self-making is also intimately tied to racial formations on a global scale. For as Thomas and Clarke (2013) suggest, racialization is a transnational process, occurring across multiple scales and geographies. In the US, Black Muslim American youth are growing up in the face of enduring forms of anti-Black racism fueled by white supremacy and the afterlives of colonialism and transatlantic slavery. They also encounter a resurgence of Islamophobia, associated with a global war on terror primarily targeting Muslims (Rana, 2011). *Intra-Muslim* experiences and relations within the American Muslim community are deeply embedded in and shaped by these racial structures and racialized understandings.

Mutually constitutive relationships between religious and racial ideologies, as scholar Junaid Rana notes, are hardly new phenomena. Historically, concepts of race have been intimately tied to the figure of the Muslim, with the early development of the concept of race developing out of the religious exclusions in 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century Iberia. With rampant anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment under the rule of Ferdinand and Isabella, communities of Muslims and Jews were forced to hide their religious beliefs (Moriscos and Marranos) or convert to Christianity (Silverblatt, 2004; Rana 2011). For those who did convert, there was yet the test of *limpieza de sangre* (blood purification), which reinscribed notions of blood purity, despite one's religious conversion to Catholicism. Those with mixed heritage or suspect ancestry were "came to be identified racially through the logic of darkening in which Moors were associated with darker skin color despite their actual appearance" (Rana, 2011, 36). This ideology of blood purity was an important predecessor

for more modern formulations of race in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In these later centuries, the emergence of scientific racism and eugenic ideas privileged biological difference, with religious viewed as a matter of cultural divergence. As Rana (2011) argues, the modern form of racism displaced religion, and consequently Islamophobia as a form of racism. However, the historical racialized differentiation of Muslims and Jews, rooted in notions of religion difference, blood purity, and ancestry, indicates how Islam was crucial to early developments of the race concept. In more recent eras, particularly in the US American context, Islam remained a threatening presence through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For African American Muslim converts, Islam represented a path towards equality and disavowal of a Christianity that had upheld slavery; for others, Islam provided a means through which to identify with African ancestors whose Islamic faith had been stripped away from them (Khabeer, 2018). Many white Christian supremacists demonized Islam and used the specter of the Muslim to further racialize African Americans as well as immigrants (Rana, 2011). The process of Islamic self-making, therefore, is constantly racialized because of the historic connection between Islam and the race concept.

When in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Islam came to be seen as a threat to white supremacy in the US, internal conflict also emerged within the American Muslim community that existed at the time. As increasing numbers of Muslim immigrants from Arab and South Asian countries immigrated to the US, in the late 19<sup>th</sup>, the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly after the 1965 Immigration Act, an ideology of “immigrant hegemony” emerged within the Muslim community. Sherman Jackson, a scholar of Islam, in his seminal (2005) work *Islam and the Blackamerican*, notes a stark separation between

“Blackamerican” (African Americans whose ancestors had been enslaved) and “immigrant” Muslims from South Asian and Arab countries. Jackson lambasts “a régime of religion-based domination predicated upon immigrant supremacy” (Jackson, 2005, 61), highlighting the disrespect that African American Muslims faced when claiming their right to practice Islam alongside their immigrant co-religionists. The Islamic practices of immigrant Arabs was constructed as normative (by wealthier immigrant Muslims within the US Muslim community), rendering Blackamerican or “indigenous Muslim” practices as substandard (Jackson, 2005, 170). Jackson contends that “Arab/immigrant supremacy” is on par with white supremacy, casting US Muslim religious hierarchies under the existent white supremacist racial formation in the United States. Other scholars have extended Jackson’s work. Anthropologist Su’ad Abdul Khabeer terms existing ethnic hierarchies within the Muslim community as “ethnoreligious hegemony,” which manifests in questioning of Black Muslim authenticity and knowledge of Islam, a form of colorism that privileges lighter skinned Muslims in the marriage market, and white privilege experienced by white converts and Arab Muslims, especially in contrast to darker skinned Muslims within a global racial formation (especially when accounting for Black Muslims or South Asian/Southeast Asian Muslim labor migrants in the Middle East) (Khabeer, 2009; Kashani, 2018). Some Arab Muslims too, experience hate crimes and violence, particularly those of darker hue or visibly wearing hijab; others continue to be socially perceived as white (Shryock, 2008) and therefore, avoid extreme scrutiny applied to Black and South Asian Muslims. The politics of US racialization is the backdrop within which ethnoreligious hegemonies take place; ethnoreligious hegemonies are a privileging of



immigrant Islams (Arab, South Asian, and Black West African immigrants) over African American Black Islamic forms and operate alongside and work within US racial formations to maintain the logic of white supremacy (Khabeer, 2016).

Other scholars such as Sylvia Chan-Malik (2011) prefer the phrase “ethnic particularism” to describe Arab and Asian immigrants’ desires for maintaining cultural traditions and languages, often at the cost of labelling African American Muslim traditions as less authentic than their home cultures and religious interpretations. Scholars of Islam in the US note how immigrant Muslims may, in fact, justify their suspicion against African American Muslims in terms of how much religious knowledge African American Muslims possess in contrast to immigrant Muslims who were trained in Islamic knowledge in Muslim majority countries (Khabeer, 2009; Chan Malik, 2011; Grewal, 2014). However, these scholars argue that anti-Blackness, not the extent of religious knowledge, is often the crux of these immigrant prejudices against African American Muslims. Religious authority to interpret the practice of Islam in the US, while many times couched in anti-Black rhetoric, does provide immigrant Muslims a level of power that they may not otherwise experience within a xenophobic and Islamophobic United States. Therefore, both immigrant and Black Muslims (including Black Muslim immigrants) must contend with anti-blackness and Islamophobia. In the case of non-Black Muslim immigrants, such as Arabs and South Asians, they are still highly suspected as having divided loyalties to Islam or the US (Volpp, 2003; Jamal & Naber, 2008; Shryock, 2008, 2010). In the case of Black Muslims (including Black Muslim immigrants), they are double marginalized due to their

religious practices as well as their Blackness, not just within the larger US context but within the ethnoreligious hegemonies present within intra-American Muslim communities.

Jackson's work on the role of race in American Muslim racial formations remains important. However, as I've noted, more recent scholars, in particular Khabeer (2009) critique Jackson's binary categories of "immigrant" and "Blackamerican" Muslims, arguing that this binary obscures the experiences of groups such as Black Muslim immigrants and their descendants (Khabeer, 2009). In addition, Jackson's valorization of an indigenous Islam suggests that more long-standing communities of Muslims have greater claim to defining Islam than more recently arrived immigrants (Khabeer, 2009, 170). Therefore, in the US, the perceived longevity of one's practice of Islam and the level of one's knowledge mapped onto "indigenous" or "immigrant" categories play an important role in Islamic self-making. Different histories of one's encounter with Islam becomes the basis for religious hierarchies, situated within the anti-Blackness common in the US racial framework.

These ethnoreligious hegemonies within the white supremacist racial formation in the US, therefore, extend to shaping the interactions among West African and African American Muslims. Anthropologist Zain Abdullah (2010) captures, in great ethnographic detail, the complexity of Islamic practices amongst West African immigrants in Harlem with some attention to their interaction with native-born African American Muslims. Abdullah (2009) notes how West African Sufi scholars establish Islamic communities in New York City, combining cultural and religious elements in their practice of Islam. He notes how West African immigrants privilege their ethnic identification over their ascribed

racial identity, especially in a labor market which devalues Blackness. Abdullah's (2010) study notes how race remains a structuring factor in the lives of Black Muslims; despite ethnic West African migrants' desire to disavow race in favor of ethnicity, the reality of a white dominant racial hierarchy forces them to acknowledge the continuing power of race in their everyday lives. Stoller (2002) focuses on the experience of itinerant West African Muslim immigrants selling goods on the streets of New York while maintaining their Islamic faith; these peddlers tone up their ethnic identity in face of racial discrimination against Black people in America. D'Alisera (2004) too investigates the ways in which Sierra Leonian refugees and migrants reconstructed an Islamic lifestyle in DC, determined to pass on their cultural and religious values to their children to counter anti-Black racism. While Black Muslim immigrants use their cultural and ethnic backgrounds to create a separate identity from Black African American Muslims, nonetheless, they still must contend with the rampant anti-Black racism they encounter in the US.

African American Muslims experiencing anti-Blackness also draw strength from the history of Black Muslims' engagement with Islam (Fauset, 1944; Rouse, 2004; Nasir, 2004; Miyakawa 2005; Abdullah 2010; Rouse et al. 2016; Khabeer, 2009, 2016, 2017, 2018). Rouse's (2004) ethnographic study of Black Sunni Muslim women in Los Angeles highlights how Islam provides religious guidance for Black women trying to live ethical lives as wives and mothers, often amidst poverty and racial inequality. Suad Nasir (2004) describes how African American Muslim youth receive spiritual and academic instruction within an African American Islamic school in the US. African American Muslim youth in the Islamic school, even those deemed 'behaviorally challenged' thrive in a loving, Black

and Islamic centered school because of its affirmation of both racial and religious aspects of the children's identity. Khabeer (2016) theorizes Muslim Cool, which is a way of being Muslim that draws on Blackness to contest hegemonic racial norms in the US. Khabeer's (2016) focus on youth culture illuminates how American Muslim youth, not exclusive to Black Muslims, draw on Black cultural styles in order to create a mode of resistance against a specific type of racialization and in order cultivate Islamic selves in pursuit of social justice. These studies note the importance of Islam a religious resource and source of spiritual strength for African American Muslims in countering anti-Blackness.

In the US context, anthropological studies cited focus on either native-born Black Muslims (Fauset, 1944; Rouse, 2004; Suad Nasir, 2004; Miyakawa 2005; Abdullah 2010; Rouse et al. 2016; Khabeer, 2009, 2016, 2017, 2018) or West African Black Muslims (Stoller, 2002; D'Alisera, 2004; Abdullah, 2010). What remains largely underexamined is the interaction between native-born and West African immigrant Muslim groups (for exception: see Abdullah, 2010), with little insight specifically on the experiences of West African Muslim Black immigrant youth. Foregrounding this relationship between native-born and West African immigrant Muslim groups illuminates how Blackness as an ascribed, racialized identity intersects with Islam and forms of ethnic Black identity within a white supremacist society like the United States.

How are Islamic practices shaped by ethnoreligious hegemonies in the US context, particularly in Honors Academy? In the case of Black Muslim youth in my study, ethnoreligious hegemonies are evident in their practice of assessing who is and is not Islamically authentic, as well as whose cultural practices have more value. However, for

West African Muslim students, race talk is less prominent than in conversations amongst African American Muslim youth. West African Muslim youth rarely acknowledged or participated in racial discourses, often preferring to engage in conversations around ethnic histories and cultural practices. However, I argue that even in the “absence” of race talk amongst West African students, race is still a salient category of differentiation.

Scholars note that racial formations are shaped by historical, social, and local conditions (Thomas and Clarke, 2013; Pierre, 2020). Particularly in their interaction amongst each other, both West African and African American youth must contend with the particular racial formation in the US that is contingent on white supremacy, emerging out of a history of European colonialism in Africa, transatlantic slavery, and Jim Crow in the US (Pierre, 2020). However, Pierre (2020) describes how scholarship analyzing the impact of race and racialization on the African continent is sparse. Pierre argues that racialization was part of the formations of identity and communities in Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade, in addition to other modalities such as ethnicity, religion, nation, class, etc. Yet, the absence of racialization in analyses of European imperialism in Africa points to a tendency to avoid race as it applies to the African continent and its inhabitants. The intervention Pierre makes is to provide historical examples that indicate how race was, and continues, to be important in the racialization of continental Africans, and by extension, recent immigrants from the African continents in the diaspora. She argues that the concept of “ethnicity,” as well and its related terms of “tribe” and “kinship” is built on a racial foundation and that this legacy continues into the term’s usage today. (Pierre, 2020, S221). Given the inextricability of historical racialization in the emergence of modern African

people, Pierre's analysis suggests that racialization remains important in the lives of African people today, even if West Africans do not engage in conversations around race.

Adhering to Pierre's analytical point, I argue that it's important to consider anti-Blackness in/and the opposition between African American and West African Muslim youth within my study. Despite the relative absence of race talk amongst West African youth, their conditions of reception in the US as well as their engagement with their African Americans peers occur within a deeply racialized society. The varying perspectives on racialization and their comfort discussing it, marks a divergence between these two groups of youth. In their practice and interactions, the youth enact as well as counter ethnoreligious hegemonies and privilege particular forms of difference, even if not expressed explicitly through the language of racialization. Instead, some West African youth, like Kabeera, use the criteria of knowledge of Islamic practices and one's family's Islamic lineage, to indicate their alleged superiority over their African American peers. These understandings of religious and racial subjectivity that are tied to family history, racial history, and class position, as I will show, are central to processes of Islamic-self-making.

While ethnoreligious hegemonies operate alongside and work within US racial formations to maintain the logic of white supremacy (Khabeer, 2016, 15), these Black Muslim youths' ethnoreligious hegemonies become less salient in moments during which they engage in collaborative practices pursuing Black economic independence. In the chapter on community feedings, I note how discourses on Black self-determination and collaboration inspires the community feeding program. This program is rooted in the history of the Nation of Islam's economic practices and manifests in the way that Black

Muslim youth attempt to “give back” to the community. While their divergent views on race and ethnicity remain, the collaborative process of creating a self-determinative and economically successful MSA space unites both groups of young people. Other moments in which this collaboration takes place is during the MSA fundraising efforts as well as attempts to establish prayer in the school. These youths’ desire to claim a positive Islamic existence within their public school harkens back to historic efforts of Black communities to achieve self-determination and economic independence.

These efforts towards economic self-determination and Islamic self-making occur within particular spaces in the school. While I follow the same students across various school spaces, I bring to light how in each space, particular discourses take priority and distinctive categories of difference amongst the youth that become more or less salient. Within MSA, establishing institutional forms of Islamic space-making is a central project. Here, debates around ethnic family histories and religious practice emerge as significant, privileging differences between African American and West African Muslim youth. Within the history classroom and hallways, student discourses more often center on religious and ethnic histories that reaffirm or push back against existing social hierarchies. My account of everyday interactions in each of these spaces provides a window on the following: How does Islam assume a privileged and unique place within a charter school in Southwest Philadelphia, and what are the racialized, ethnic, and religious experiences of Black Muslim youth within this school called Honors Academy? How do race, religion, ethnic and family histories, and academic identities mediate forms of Islamic self-making

for Black Muslim youth, within the broader context of anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, and market fundamentalism in the US?

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Philadelphia is a city with deeply rooted historic Muslim communities that to date have been understudied (For exceptions see: Khabeer, 2016, Vitiello 2014; Aidi, 2014; Abu El-Haj 2009, 2007; Abu El-Haj and Bonet 2011; Cnaan et al. 2006; Curtis 2010). Ethnographies of Muslim Philadelphia are starting to emerge (Abell, 2021), though few studies have noted the intersection of Islam, education, ethnic histories, and race within Philadelphia public schools. A central aim of this study is to add to this literature, bringing attention in particular to how race, religion, ethnic and family histories, and academic identities mediate forms of Islamic self-making for Black Muslim youth in a charter school in Southwest Philadelphia.

To understand the institutional school context of Honors Academy, I posit that identity affirming spaces, such as the MSA afterschool club and African American History (AAH) class in Honors Academy buttress the multicultural ideology at work within the public charter school. By tapping into students' desires to feel affirmed in their identity, Honors succeeds in producing economically successful graduates ready to operate in an increasingly diverse future market. Anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli (2008) describes in her study of college students at a liberal arts college how, given the neoliberalized priorities in the school, students come to define their value in relation to their "bundles of skills," as they seek to market themselves successfully post-graduation in a competitive economy. At Honors as well, developing "skilled selves" was considered important by the



administration and teachers to equip their largely low-income students with financially viable skills post-graduation. The simultaneous work of training marketable students existed alongside the school administration's earnest desire to create a racially and religiously affirming school, in a direct challenge to the racialized and Islamophobic context of the larger United States. I elaborate on the uniqueness of Honors as a school site further in Chapter 2.

The intersection of literature from the anthropology of education, religion, race and ethnicity, and urban studies frames a study that honors the multifaceted lives of my youth interlocutors and the city in which they live. Not only do I consider the larger racialized and religious context in which Black Muslim youth like Kabeera and Shantell construct their identities – I also consider how the market-driven, multicultural context of their school shapes the practice of Islam at their school. By studying both the individual and interpersonal experiences of being a Black Muslim, as well as the way in which Islam came to be practiced at Honors Academy, I consider the question of Islamic self-making at two scales, the micro and the macro, within an Islam affirming school and an Islamophilic (or Islamic affirming) city like Philadelphia.

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### Main Arguments and Chapter Outline

Throughout the dissertation, I note how ethnoreligious hegemonies shape Islamic self-making practices amongst Honors students and how differences between Black Muslim youth played a prominent role despite the MSA and Honor's attempts to cultivate unity amongst their students. I observe Islamic self-making at two scales: the institutional,

with a focus on the MSA's claims to space (Islamic space-making) and at the interpersonal level, with a focus on Black Muslims' youth engagement with Islamic self-making in particular relation to racial and ethnic histories that perpetuated anti-Blackness through upholding ethnoreligious hegemonies in a white supremacist society.

The spatial context of Philadelphia as a "Islamophilic" city is central to how Islamic practices become established at Honors. Compared to other academic studies of Muslim students in US public schools countering Islamophobia, the nature of Islam's historic acceptance and celebration within Philadelphia is a unique context for this study. I argue that because of its situation in Southwest Philadelphia, home to large number of Muslims, Honors Academy provides an institutionally-supported Islamic affirming space for the Muslim students attending this public charter school. Under the auspices of multiculturalism, the school's administration, particularly its Muslim principal and teachers, work together to create a welcoming environment for the public practice of Islam at school. However, the limits of separation of church and state ensures the limitation of extraneous forms of religious Islam; the multicultural parameters of acceptability prompt the existence of a specific market brand of Islam that functions successfully at Honors.

Moving from an institutional level of analyzing the MSA's space-making within the larger Honors space, I next consider how students claim space for themselves on an interpersonal level. As noted earlier, Black Muslim youth at Honors stake claims to particular spaces in order to center their narrative and exclude others with whom they share similar facets along a particular (racial, religious, ethnic) that has been historically produced. As geographer Gill Valentine (2007) argues, "particular spaces are produced and

stabilized through the performing of (intersectional) identities by dominant groups as they exercise power in and through particular spaces. The ability to perform certain identities and not others relate closely to the power-laden spaces in which individual experiences are lived” (Valentine, 2007, 580). Valentine’s insight into how intersectional identities are produced in power-laden spaces highlights the importance of considering power relations within spatial configurations. I consider the ways that Black Muslim youth assert narrative claims within these power-laden space.

Claims to space-making occur at two scales: institutionally, the MSA serves as the space through which Muslim students practice Islam – their practice of Islam is both constrained by the limits of multiculturalism but also creative in incorporating new forms of Islam at Honors. At a more interpersonal scale, students claim space amongst their peers through emphasizing the importance of their own family histories, thereby creating exclusive identity categories through the lens of ethnic family history. By favoring their own backgrounds and ethnic histories, MSA students downplay the experience of their peers, thereby excluding their claims to be recognized in a particular space – ex: being a certain type of Muslim recognized at Honors or a certain kind of Black person recognized within the African American history classroom. These forms of space-making, both at the institutional and the interpersonal level, serve to reinforce ethnoreligious hegemonies, only occasionally creating room for more inclusive membership.

While the same group of MSA students are the focus of my study, the form of difference itself that is under examination does not stay uniform across the dissertation chapters. For example, the ideological stance on which form of Islam is most appropriate

to practice at school shapes MSA students' and teachers' deliberations in Chapters 3 and 4. Since the MSA is composed of Muslim and non-Muslim members, different religious views shape students' views on service within a mosque space (Chapter 5). Other forms of difference include students' family histories of Islam (Chapter 8) and ethnic family histories (Chapters 9 and 10). The dynamic quality of the students' behaviors and outlooks underscores the fluid nature of student subjectivities and the various forms which shape student forms of personhood. What specifically are these various forms of difference, which are captured in the content chapters of the dissertation?

In Chapters 3 and 4, the business and mosque model are in competition with each other. These chapters are concerned with understanding the mode and structural context in which forms of Islamic self-making are shaped within MSA. Chapters 3 and 4 are attentive to the intersection between the school's multicultural model and the development of public Islamic practices at school. They provide the overall context to understand the centrality of MSA at Honors Academy and probe two ideological forms of religious practice as the form of difference.

While Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the internal model of the MSA, in Chapter 5, the students step outside of the school grounds into West Philadelphia. Chapter 5 examines two forms of "MSA service models" that emerge based on the Islamic and non-Islamic motivations for community service amongst the religiously diverse MSA members. The varied religious backgrounds of the MSA members and their motivations for volunteering are this chapter's form of differentiation. The community feedings are rooted in a vision of

community uplift common in the histories of Black Islam, particularly the programs of the Nation of Islam.

Chapter 6 focuses on forms of Islamic space-making at Honors Academy, particularly during the exceptional month of Ramadan. The chapter emphasizes the way that Islam both fits into the parameters of multiculturalism and creates alternative spaces for spiritual expression. Through the Ramadan presentation, students emphasized self-discipline associated with fasting that aligns with the Honors mindset of grit and self-control. During the prayer in the gym, however, there is an ontological difference in the way that prayer transcends the boundaries of multicultural tolerance to highlight religious differences. The form of difference in this chapter, therefore, is ontological in nature. The students' attempts to institute public prayer at school indicates one moment during which ethnoreligious hegemonies becomes less salient in light of this joint religious purpose.

The form of difference throughout Chapter 7 is students' type of knowledge about Islam; the different kinds of knowledge circulating within a classroom - particularly textual and experiential forms of religious knowledge serve as academic resources that mediate social positionality within the classroom. This chapter highlights how Muslim students' social identities transform based on their extracurricular knowledge of Islam within the Monotheistic Religions unit during an Ancient History class. The young women's roles as Muslim students is mediated by differential levels of Arabic knowledge, with Arabic gaining cache in how Muslims and non-Muslims framed an "authentic" Muslim. This emphasis on Arabic harkens back to ethnoreligious hegemonies within the Muslim

community, in which Arabic is often perceived as the superior Islamic language over other languages spoken by Muslims (Aidi, 2014).

Chapter 8 moves back into the hallways of Honors Academy and highlights models of Islamic self-making, particularly focusing on the high status of Islam within the school and the experience of Muslim converts. Two models of local Islam at Honors emerge: one based on a communal, family-based view of Islam, and the other based on an individual self-fashioning of Islamic identity. The category of Fuslim, “fake Muslim,” become a form of difference that hinged on assumptions of Islamic authenticity based on an individual’s family history of Islamic practice (or lack thereof). While West African Muslim students were rarely questioned for their level of Islamic practice (even if non-practicing by certain peer standards), African American students, particularly female converts, often had to prove their commitment to Islam through wearing religious attire or by showing high levels of Islamic knowledge or mosque attendance. Ethnic background and one’s family history of Islam/conversion dictated social perceptions of who counted as Muslim and who counted as a Fuslim, becoming the form of difference in this particular chapter and upholding intra-Muslim ethnoreligious hegemonies.

Just as family history parlayed the degree to which religious authenticity was perceived by other Muslims and non-Muslims in Chapter 8, family history also played a key role in the debate around family origin and culinary culture within MSA. The MSA debate, i.e. “the rice debate” in Chapter 9 highlights the ways in which African American Muslims and West African Muslims drew on family history to reaffirm their own identities, and in effect, deepened ethnic fractures. The form of difference in this chapter is divergent

ethnic family histories and traditions that reaffirm discourses of anti-blackness and anti-African xenophobia to which the students are exposed within the US's white supremacist racial formation.

Like Chapter 9, this chapter's form of difference centers on divergent ethnic histories and the ways these histories reshape and deepen academic classroom discussions. Chapter 10 highlights how African American History (AAH) class served as a counterhegemonic space against white supremacist narratives of American history. However, the class's focus on a US-centric racial history sidelined the rich diasporic history of Black people, creating a hegemonic model of Blackness which Black students of recent immigrant origins found difficult to digest. Divergent family histories of slavery vs. immigration also widened students' understanding of ethnic origins, erupting in debates about the Atlantic Slave Trade.

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The aim of the study is to provide much needed insight into the interplay of racialization, ethnic identities and heritage, and Islamic beliefs and practices in the schooling experiences of, and interactions among African American and West African students. The school is a site in which African immigrant youth and African American youth encounter one another and in which their interactions shape processes of becoming Black and Muslim in the US. Yet, few studies to date have focused on these dynamics and their instantiations within school. The intersection of racialization, Islamic practice, and ethnic identification finds a particularly compelling portrait in the experience of Black

Muslim Americans, who navigate racialized and religious terrains within the broader context of anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, and market fundamentalism in the US.

Foregrounding the experiences of Black Muslim youth in the US particularly has the potential to illuminate the creative practices through which young people navigate race, ethnicity, and religion. While African American Muslim youth at Honors proudly claimed their racial identities, they rarely mentioned ethnic identity – these two categories were largely separate. African American youth also spoke about Islam as separate from their racial identity, with Blackness and Islam as two discrete topics. For the West African youth, religion and ethnic were much more closely linked; these youth mentioned being West African and Muslim in close conjunction. Racial identification as “Black,” however, was rare. The different formulations of racial, ethnic, and religious identities amongst these two groups of students suggested certain patterns, influenced by histories of slavery and imperialism, (Pierre, 2020) that produced variable family histories that, in turn, shaped student self-identities and their engagement in Islamic self-making.

In the next chapter, I turn to consider the historical context in which these young people are making sense of what it means to be Black and Muslim in America. I will first trace the history of Black migration in Philly, including the Black Muslim history of the city. Next, I will turn to the history of the school system, particularly highlighting the increasing number of and dominance of charter schools within the Philadelphia School District, including within Southwest Philadelphia, a neighborhood with a large West African Muslim community. I conclude with a discussion of the design of the study and



the methods that were used, reflecting my own positionality in relation to those with whom I worked as well as my hopes for what the dissertation might contribute to their lives.

## Chapter 2: Historical Context and Methodology

History plays a central role in this dissertation, particularly the role of family histories as a resource students draw on when constructing their narratives of space-making. These family histories are embedded within the larger history of Black Muslim Philadelphia and the history of Black migration in Philadelphia. Historical forces created the environment in which the MSA students pursue their present self-making projects. In this chapter, I explore the historical context that frames the experience of the MSA students and teachers at Honors Academy as well as the socioeconomic forces that create the market context in which the school itself operates.

### History of Black Migration

Philadelphia has long been a destination for people of African descent. As early as the 17th century, enslaved Africans arrived on the shores of Philadelphia, either directly from African or en route from the Caribbean. During the Revolutionary War era, enslaved people comprised 1/12th of Philadelphia's population with around 16,000 people. The Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 was passed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly to gradually outlaw slavery in the state. Although Pennsylvania allowed enslaved people to receive freedom from their master after 6 months of their owner's residence in Pennsylvania, often these newly freed people would be relegated to a form of indentured servitude.

In addition to enslaved people, Black refugees also constituted part of the African descended population in Philadelphia. Historian Garvey Lundy (2010) notes how the upheaval of the Haitian Revolution in 1791 led to thousands of refugees fleeing the country

for destinations in the US, including Philadelphia. Lundy estimates that “of the 3,000 refugees from Saint Domingue who arrived between 1791 and 1794 in Philadelphia, about 30 percent were of African descent, still bound by slavery (see Table 9.1). Their coming to Philadelphia, a free city in a free state, was a particularly thorny issue from a legal and social standpoint” (Lundy, 2010, 204). Although slavery was not legal in Pennsylvania, the few economic opportunities for Black people relegated these early refugees to service sector jobs, including as servants in white households. Despite the lack of opportunities as a whole, a few early Black entrepreneurs enriched the landscape of Black Philadelphia (Nash, 1988). Richard Allen founded the Free African Society, America’s first independent Black organization, while Allen and Absalom Jones gained fame for the founding of Mother Bethel Church. Some wealthy Black men, such as James Forten, businessmen and one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia, joined the cause of abolition by funding William Lloyd Garrison’s famed newspaper, *the Liberator*. Long a home to Quakers, abolition became a central mission in the lives of many, Black and white residents, in Philadelphia. William Still became well known as an African American abolitionist.

In the pre-Civil war era, African American slaves would seek freedom in Philadelphia, crossing from the slave holding states of Maryland and Delaware. Philadelphia became a central hub in the Underground Railroad movement. As the 19th century continued to attract more Black migrants as well as fleeing enslaved people, competition for jobs between African Americans and Irish immigrants led to five race riots between 1828-1849, which resulted in great destruction of Black communities. Nonetheless, Black Philadelphians continued to grow. According to statistics, “the number

of Black Philadelphians stood at 15,000 in 1830, grew to nearly 20,000 by 1850, and topped 22,000 in 1860” (Wolfinger, Encyclopedia of Philadelphia, 2020). During the Civil War, Black Philadelphians formed 11 regiments (Wolfinger, 2007).

The Black population continued to grow in the post-Civil Rights Era. Activists such as Octavius Catto worked to empower disenfranchised Black voters; he was subsequently murdered in 1871. Other events of note included Dubois’ writing of the Philadelphia Negro in 1899, a Penn commissioned study of the large Black population in Philadelphia at the time.

At the turn of the 20th century, the Great Migration was the next continuous phase in Philadelphia. Thousands of migrants made the journey from the South to the industrial North. Many of the African American students in my sample cited ancestors who had arrived from the South to Philadelphia during the early 20th century (Countryman, 2006). Rapid deindustrialization post World War II as well as disinvestment in Black neighborhoods led to the significant economic decline of Philadelphia (Takenaka and Osirim, 2010). Goode and Schneider (1994) note the increasing loss of jobs to the Philadelphia suburbs, leaving the urban core economically weakened.

Despite these economic downturns, however, even in the 21st century, Philadelphia continues to be a destination for many immigrants due to the relatively low cost of housing, compared to centers of migration such as New York City. Osirim (2010) predicts that Philadelphia ranks in the top ten metropolitan areas attracting African born immigrants. Munyikwa (2019) also notes the experiences of Black refugees in Philadelphia, who

constitute 75% of the growth in workforce numbers, according to Philadelphia mayor, Jim Kenney.

### African Migration

Immigration from Africa also constitutes a percentage of overall immigrants in Philadelphia, as noted by the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, an organization supporting new immigrants (2006). While immigration for Caribbean countries comprised the major source of Black immigrants in the US from 1980s to the early 1990s, African immigrants have substantially increased in the last two decades (Hamilton, 2020).

The U.S. Census Bureau indicate that about 20,000 African immigrants resided in Philadelphia in 2000, which constituted 6–7 percent of the foreign-born immigrants in Philadelphia (Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, 2006). Mary Johnson Osirim (2010) studied the growing economic vitality of African immigrants in West Philadelphia, with the establishment of businesses and neighborhood associations, such as AFRICOM (the Coalition of African Communities). Osirim (2010), in her research with African immigrants in Philadelphia, finds that a pan-ethnic identity develops amongst her interlocutors. Given the relatively small number of Africans residing in the US, as well as the host society's lack of recognition of specific African countries, Osirim notes that “immigrants are more likely to identify as Africans or as African Americans/Blacks rather than as, for example, Yoruba, Efik, Igbo, Ashanti, or Mande” (Osirim, 2010, 240). These interlocutors interact with African American and Afro Caribbean communities, finding strength in their pan ethnic African identity. This pan-ethnic identity allows African migrants to create ethnic solidarities and craft new communities in their adopted country.

### Location Matters

Location matters, particularly in the way that the popular elements of culture in a city permeates school culture. In addition to hosting a large variety of Black descended people, including African Americans and African migrants, Philadelphia is also well known as a hub for Black Muslims. Long known as a stronghold of Black Muslims, Philadelphia has been referred to as “Muslim Town” in an editorial in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Hauslohner, 2017). Philadelphia hosts more than 250,000 Muslims (Jones, 2016), one of the largest concentrations of Muslims in the United States (Hauslohner, 2017). While native-born Black Muslims make up only about 9% of the Muslim population in the US (Hauslohner, 2017), in Philadelphia, close to 75% are Black Muslims (Curtis, 2010; Marin, 2015). Researchers have also noted the vast number of operational mosques within Philadelphia, which ranks as the city with the fourth largest number of mosques in the United States. In addition, in various parts of the city, Islam is the predominant religion of residents in the neighborhood (Philadelphia Neighborhoods 2010; Friedman et. al, 2019).

### An Islamic Blackness Model in Philly

Scholars have posited that Philadelphia is often at the forefront of Black Muslim fashion, music, and aesthetic culture (Aidi, 2014; Khabeer, 2016) and that a unique history has produced a form of Islamic Blackness and Black Muslim community specific to Philadelphia. The Philly beard, fashionable garments such as the overgarment (long robe covering a woman’s body), shayla (women’s face covering), and men’s izar (a male skirt made of denim) are instances of innovative Black Muslim styles that emerged in Philadelphia and spread throughout the country. An Islamic Blackness model unique to

Philly arose out of a combination of faith, fashion, and history that continues to grow and innovate to this day.

Studies of Islamic culture within anthropological literature often focus on South Asian and Arab Muslim communities. Much of the literature in recent decades has focused on the increasing impact of the War on Terror on Muslims in America (Rana, 2011; Ali, 2011; Shryock, 2010, 2008; Aidi 2009b; Jamal & Naber, 2008; Cainkar, 2009, 2008; Naber, 2006; Mamdani, 2004; Howell & Shryock, 2003), Islamophobia (Meer, 2013; Shryock, 2010; Werbner, 2005), and Muslim youth (Sarroub, 2005; Ewing, 2008; Maira, 2009, 2016; Mir, 2012; Kamal, 2012; Hermansen, 2013; Grewal, 2014; Abu El-Haj, 2015, Khabeer, 2016). South Asian Muslims have also been studied in the last two decades (Maira, 2002; Puar, 2007; Ewing, 2008; Rana, 2011; Kamal, 2012) as well as the relationships between Black Muslims descended from enslaved people and South Asian American immigrants (Khabeer, 2009, 2016, 2017, 2018; Grewal, 2014).

While a bulk of scholarship exists on Muslim Arab Americans and South Asians, there is more limited literature on Black Muslims in America. The practice of Islam within Black communities has been studied by interdisciplinary scholars (McCloud, 1995; Allan, 1997; Dannin, 2002; Gomez, 2005; Berg, 2005; Miyakawa, 2005; Jackson, 2005, 2009; Karim, 2008; Curtis, 2009; Marable & Aidi, 2009; Abdullah, 2010; Howell, 2010; Ghanea-Bassiri, 2010; Chan-Malik, 2011; Diouf, 2013; Gibson & Karim, 2014; Jeffries, 2014) and a few anthropologists (Fauset, 1944; Schmidt, 2004; Rouse, 2004; Rouse & Hoskins, 2004; D'Alisera, 2004; Stoller, 2010; Khabeer, 2009, 2016, 2017, 2018). However, further anthropological scholarship is required to illuminate how both immigrant Black Muslims

as well as Black Muslims descended from enslaved people navigate Islamic practices at the intersection of race, religion, and ethnic histories.

The unique form of Black Islam is not singular; a multivocal understanding of the relationship between being Black, Muslim, and sometimes immigrant-descended people ensured a diversity of religious interpretations. Islam, though often framed as a colorblind religion by Muslim adherents (Guhin, 2018) is often race conscious and very aware of ethnic hierarchies. Ethnoreligious hegemonies (Khabeer, 2016), or a division between “immigrant” (i.e.: South Asian and Arab) and “indigenous” Islam (i.e.: African American Islam) (Jackson, 2005) highlights the ethnic divisions within the American Muslim community. However, this dual framing also ignores the experience Black Muslim immigrants, such as the West Africans in my study. The colorblind rhetoric of Islam is often a myth (Guhin, 2018). What becomes more salient in my study is how Philadelphia was an Islamophilic context in which a positive reception towards Muslims in public spaces was common. This positive context for Islam allowed for the emergence of a wide variety of Black and Islamic practices that ranged across ideological forms, and manifested differently in terms of fashion, linguistic expression, and practices of religious expression. Across each of these various forms however was the intersection of Blackness, Islam, and ethnic identity, each of which provided a foundation to resist white supremacy. By focusing on the diversity of Black Muslims in Philadelphia, this study resists the urge to flatten the stories of my youthful interlocutors and thereby essentialize everyday, lived Black experiences.



### A Brief History of Black Muslim Philadelphia

Black Muslims in Philadelphia have been a historic and powerful presence. In the 1950s, the Nation of Islam had a stronghold in Philadelphia, with a strong presence on Lancaster Avenue. The great Malcolm X had once served in Temple #12 on this Avenue when he was 29 years old, from March - June 1954. Because of this history, this area became known as Muslim Avenue, with Salam Restaurants, Muslim clothing shops, and NOI members selling the iconic NOI newspaper, *Muhammad's Call* on the streets. Additionally, a few blocks down from the Museum was the site where the great Dr. Martin Luther King had spoken in 1965 during his Great Freedom Tour.

The Nation of Islam (NOI) remained powerful in Philadelphia until the 1980s. In the early 1980s, the Muslim Mafia gained great notoriety (Griffin, 2006; Carlisle, 2017). It was said that even the Italian mobs feared the power of the Muslim Mafia (Interview with Philly's Imam Qutaiba, 4/10/20). However, with the death of the great Elijah Muhammad in 1976, and Imam Warith Deen Muhammad's transition to Sunni Islam, the power of NOI declined in Philly. While still hosting a community of NOI followers, Philly's Islamic scene changed in the 1990s and the subsequent decades. The increased migration of immigrant Muslims to Philly, particularly of Arab, South Asian, and West African origin led to a more diverse mix of Islamic viewpoints. The power of the Salafis also continued to grow, with Salafi preachers from East Orange, New Jersey, migrating to Philly and establishing Salafi networks in Philadelphia (Meijer, 2009; Elmasry, 2010; Aidi, 2014).

Since the early heyday of the NOI on Lancaster Avenue, other areas of Philly have grown in prominence with a strong Islamic presence. Famous masjids, serving majority

Black adherents, include the Philadelphia Masjid, originally affiliated with the NOI (which ran the Clara Muhammad Islamic Schools), the Quba Masjid (which still runs a full-time Islamic school and produced the first African American hafiz, Imam Mohaimin), the United Muslim Masjid (UMM, founded by the great soul musician Kenny Gamble re: Luqman Abdul Haqq), as well as Germantown Masjid (a Salafi stronghold since the 1990s). Other immigrant serving masjids include Al Aqsa Masjid in Northeast Philly (founded by Palestinian immigrants), as well as other masjids serving South Asians. Some masjids have mixed congregations.

The Muslim population in Philly continued to grow exponentially, with many converts brought into the fold through aggressive Salafi proselytization efforts (Aidi, 2014). This increase in conversion is in line with a 2017 Pew Research Center report, which found that 20% of American Muslims are Black (excluding Hispanic descent and mixed-race people), and 49% of Black Muslims are converts to Islam, a relatively high level of conversion (Mohamed and Diamant, 2020). The Salafi movement grew more popular in the mid 1990s to early 2000s and died down in the early 2010s. However, the Salafi movement continued to run strong in Newark and Philly with Germantown Masjid serving the epicenter of the Salafi movement in Philly (Mosbrucker and Fernandez 2010; Day & Conboy, 2014; Aidi, 2014; Blecher & Dubler, 2016). Many new converts turn to Islam through the Salafi movement. These new converts are often teenagers who crave a more religiously rigorous and disciplined life. The strict codes of conduct around how to dress, eat, with whom to interact, are all dictated by the Salafi guidelines, who believe that the true practice of Islam occurs with a return to the ways of the Salaf, or the companions of

the Prophet Muhammad in the late 1400s (Aidi, 2014). Salafi literally translates as “someone who follows the salaf” or forefathers of Islam, and it refers to followers of Salafi ideology globally (Meijer, 2009). The turn to religious antiquity sits in contrast with the prevalence of Salafism in 21st century Philadelphia.

In addition to the religious histories of the Nation and the Salafi movement, Black Muslims have also gained prominence in the larger landscape of Philadelphia. Electorally Muslims elected leaders gained power, with Sharif Street, Movita Johnson-Harrell, and other Muslims gaining prominence, and sometimes notoriety in local politics. The 2018 passing of a Philly local ordinance declaring Eid a school holiday, signaled the efforts of Muslims in influencing local legislation.

I posit that the larger influence and power of Muslims within the city of Philadelphia also permeates the city’s public schools. In Chapter 8, I note how Arabic words become part of the common urban vernacular within Honors Academy, as it across many urban contexts across the US (Aidi, 2014). I also note how the strength of Islamic fashion in Philadelphia emerges in the diverse sartorial styles that students adopt at school. Before turning to the specific context of Honors Academy, it is important to first understand the landscape of education in Philadelphia. Having analyzed the history of Black migration and Black Muslims in Philadelphia, the next section provides a brief overview of secular and religious education in Philadelphia.

### Islamic Education in Philadelphia

Within this larger landscape of Muslim Philadelphia, Muslim parents attempt to raising their kids as good Muslims, while also giving them the chance to succeed

professionally. Particularly for Muslim families in the low-income bracket, giving their kids a chance to succeed and climb the socioeconomic ladder to class mobility is an important goal. These families' anxieties concerning socioeconomic mobility are manifested in the drive towards ensuring their kids gain "useful skills" in terms of college and career readiness, skills assumed to be acquired in high performing schools, which in Philadelphia, are often charter schools. Alongside this drive to gain "useful" skills, families of Black Muslim youth also strive to ensure that their children receive an Islamic education, in order to become a 'good Muslim,' a moral and ethical person of faith who will live in a manner that will merit an eternal afterlife in Heaven.

I argue that growing up in low-income neighborhoods in Philadelphia and shaped by their family's desires, Black Muslim youth's aspirations are shaped by their moral and ethical commitments as Muslims, which are in turn influenced by their experiences of racialization and class inequality within their neighborhood and schools. The School District of Philadelphia has for decades been both underfunded and under scrutiny as it struggles to ensure that all their 200,000 students are getting a high-quality education. The School District's concern is reflected in its Anchor Goal #1, instituted in 2014, aims to ensure that 100% of students are graduating ready for college and career (Philadelphia School District Website, 2019). These anchor goals reflect the anxiety around future readiness that Black Muslim youth must navigate while also balancing their commitments to their faith and engaging in active social lives with their friends.

### Private Educational Options in Philadelphia

Outside of the Philadelphia School District, Quaker schools provide high quality education for Philadelphia's youth. In addition, religious and parochial schools also provide increased educational choices for Philadelphia's families. Philadelphia runs the largest network of Catholic schools, with 12 Catholic high schools (Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 2021). The parochial schools attract Christian as well as Muslim students. In fact, in their newsletter from 2006-2007, the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR)-Philadelphia shares that around "500 Muslim students in Philadelphia that attend schools operated by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia." Though no reasons are cited for parental decisions, based on research on school choice decisions by Muslim parents in other cities (New York City: Cristillo, 2004; Chicago: Reidel, 2008), I hypothesize that religious Muslim parents feel that the environment in Christian parochial schools are more conducive to greater protecting their children from the temptations of drugs, sex, and alcohol due to stricter behavioral codes at religious schools. More broadly, however, Muslim parents' decision making around which schools to choose for their children are an understudied area of research (for exceptions see Nasir, 2004; El-Amin, 2015).

In addition to parochial Catholic schools, there are private Muslim and Jewish schools in Philadelphia. The four well known full time Islamic schools are NSI, Al-Aqsa, Quba, and Villanova (which closed in the last few years). Al Aqsa and Quba are affiliated with the respective mosques in Philadelphia. Other Islamic schools (that may not be full-time) include the Islamic Day School of Philadelphia (A Montessori School in North Philadelphia), Tarbiyatul Ilm Academy (on Roosevelt Ave in Northeast Philly),

Germantown Masjid Academy, School of the Moorish Science Temple, The Islamic Education School (TIES) in West Philadelphia (which is one of 10 schools in the United States and Canada under the umbrella of the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP), (Khabir, 2020), and MAS/Al-Hidaya. Many of these Islamic schools have run into operational and funding issues and are viewed as less sustainable by Muslim parents.

In a conversation with local Islamic leader, Aliya Khabir, an African American Muslim woman, she shared her views on other Islamic options within the city of Philadelphia, particularly for African American Muslim parents. These options include the Universal Institute Charter Schools, which is not an Islamic school but provides an Islamic environment (Interview with Aliya Khabir, 2018). In addition, a series of Islamic summer camps are run by respected Muslim sisters in the Black Muslim community. Aliya Khabir also highlighted the contributions of Zenobia Shah, a legend in the Philadelphia Muslim community, in fostering Islamic educational institutes. Zenobia Shah was a teacher in the Sister Clara Muhammad Schools (SCMS) in the 1980s, which were a product of the Nation of Islam's educational arm (Grewal and Coolidge, 2011). The Sister Clara Muhammad School provided Black youth with educational services for 30 years or more before being shuttered in 2005 as a result of corruption, increased competition from newly established charter schools, and "legal battles and leadership issues" (Caparella 2007, Bailey 2019a). Zenobia Shah transitioned from SCMS and subsequently ran a day care center and was a principal there. In terms of early childhood education, Mother's Price Islamic preschool is an excellent option run by Zakiyyah Muhammad, an educator who attended Islamic schools her whole life before she studied at Temple University.

Aliya Khabir spoke about the importance of Islamic education for parents who wanted to provide an Islamic environment for their children. Similar to the parents in Nasir's (2004) study of an Islamic school, the feelings of community and spiritual support were factors parents craved for their decision to send their children to Islamic school. However, many parents couldn't afford the private school costs; others did not feel that the operational costs of the schools were sustainable. Despite the operational limitations of Islamic schooling options, however, Aliya Khabir spoke highly of the Black Muslim women who were pioneers in growing the Islamic school system in Philadelphia. Their contributions were part of the larger efforts to create a structure for Islamic education in the US (Grewal and Coolidge, 2011).

Historically speaking, Aliya Khabir also noted how Muslims used to "run Overbrook High School," in West Philadelphia in the early 1980s and 1990s. However, she notes how bullying had been a persistent problem for some Muslim kids. However, the strong reputation of Muslims over time had eased some of the issues around bullying. Another Black Muslim teacher and lifelong resident of Philadelphia, Mrs. Lyons, spoke about Muslim families whose homes were attacked in the 1980s and 1990s. Even in these times in which Islam was less prevalent, the respect that Black community members associated with the Nation of Islam had provided a level of security for Black Muslim women who covered their hair. The fear associated with the Muslim Mafia also kept attacks on Muslims at bay (Nash, 1988). Both women acknowledged the positive shift towards Muslim youth and their families over the years as Islam has become more widely and positively accepted within Philadelphia. Aliya Khabir wondered what the experience of

immigrant Black Muslim were in the current school system, a population who remained understudied in academic literature. Studies on education for African American Muslim students also remain few and far between. A handful of studies focus on African American youth (Nasir, 2004; Khalifa and Gooden, 2010), African American Muslim girls (Muhammad, 2015; McArthur and Muhammad, 2017), and Muslim youth from the Nation of Islam (Akom, 2003).

The larger landscape of private educational options in Philadelphia provided select Muslim families with the change to enroll their students in Islamic education. However, for many low-income parents without the ability to afford full time private schools, weekend Islamic schools and summer camps provided alternative means to expose their children to Islamic education. The Philadelphia Public School, particularly schools with Muslim principals (in 2020, there were three well known charter high schools with Muslim principals out 86 charters) became the next best option for Muslim parents. In such schools, their children could take advantage of a free, certified education combined with extracurricular religious activities through MSA afterschool clubs, which Muslim principals would support at these charter schools.

The ability of the Muslim principals to create an Islamic environment depended, amidst myriad factors, on the prestige and experience of the principal. For one such principal in West Philadelphia, Principal Madden, his stature as a longtime principal within Triumph Academy, a high achieving school within the Achievement School charter network, gave him the chance to experiment with bringing Islam into a public charter school. While other public schools in Philadelphia allowed Muslim students to observe



prayer during Ramadan and fast, based on my fieldwork conversations with a range of Philadelphia public school teachers, the extent to which Muslim students assumed leadership at Triumph and conducted daily prayers during the school year, was due in large part to the leadership and charisma of Principal Madden. Teachers and administrators in other schools as well were aware of how Principal Madden had shepherded Triumph Academy through tough times and emerged as a school with high test scores. Triumph Academy's improved test scores and more flexible funding options (due to its status as a charter, not a regular public school) provided the flexibility for the practice of Islam at school, despite the stricter separation of church and state in other standard public schools.

### Methodology:

#### School Site Selection and School Culture

While Triumph Academy provided an excellent site to study practices of Muslim students, particularly African American students, within a public charter school in Philadelphia, I hoped to select a school that was more diverse in terms of ethnic origin of its students. Because of my interest in understanding the overlap of Blackness, Islam, and ethnic identity in the experiences of Muslim students, I ultimately selected Honors Academy as the site of my dissertation study. This school was the second charter with a Muslim principal - her name was Principal Sawyer.

A charter school in Southwest Philly, Honors Academy (pseudonym) is the focus of my study. I selected this school within a charter school network (pseudonym Achievement Network) serving 14,000 students in Philadelphia because 1) the school's student body is predominantly Black (more than 95%), 2) students come from

neighborhoods with low family incomes (\$21-22K according to the Opportunity Atlas neighborhood database), which prompts students to gain useful skills to rise out of poverty, 3) Muslim students constitute 1/4 -1/3 of the entire student body. 4) Of the Muslim population in school, there are 2nd generation West African immigrant Muslims as well as African American Muslims (descended from formerly enslaved people). I chose this school because I surmised that these demographic distributions may impact how students engage with racial, ethnic, and religious identities in the classroom.

The Achievement Network was proud of its successes and used numerical data to market their successes amongst families in the Philadelphia School District. The network served 14,000 families in 24 schools, graduated 5,600 Alumni, employed 1,7000 people, and had been in operation for 20 years in Philly and Camden. In 2011, the Achievement Network had taken over the administration of Honors Academy, which had been run by a less successful charter network previously. In 2012, Honors Academy opened as a high school.

Achievement boasted of its well-earned successes in a section on their website entitled “Preparing Students for Success after Graduation.” The website stated that the Achievement network alumni graduate college at twice the rate of alumni from the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). In addition, Achievement had formed partnerships with local colleges in order to offer dual college courses, which would allow students to accrue enough credit to graduate with a high school degree and an associated degree at the same time. Achievement also created a robust college counseling program, taken by students during junior and senior year in high school. While college for all was initially emphasized

in the mid to late 2000s, in reality, teachers reported that not all Achievement graduates were graduating from college. During my fieldwork, Achievement began to accommodate non-college pathways for graduates as well. Even as they grappled with graduation numbers, Achievement's website presented a positive image of their graduate's successes, particularly in comparison to SDP's rates.

In terms of classroom student scores as well, Achievement performed better than SDP. In a post on February 11, 2020, just prior to the pandemic, the following information was shared: Achievement's average School Progress Report (SPR) score for the 2018-19 school year is 46%, which was two points higher than the citywide average (district and charters) of 44%. Since SPR reports began in 2015, Achievement has gained 18 points in comparison to the SDP's 11 point growth. It was unclear how SPR scores were calculated. However, the main message was the Achievement was a high-achieving charter, even compared to other charter schools in the district. Honors Academy, a member of the Achievement Network, was in fact, recognized by SDP for 3 years of consecutive academic growth.

The website explained that some of the reason's Achievement's success was because of the intentional school culture, which emphasized order and joy, co-existing simultaneously. School rules and classroom behavior systems were emphasized, but student independence and personal responsibility were also core values. Over time, the Network hoped that students would take individual account of their behaviors, develop resilient growth mindsets, come to embody socio-emotional skills explicitly taught in class, and ultimately achieve their highest potential.

Given these lofty goals, the Achievement Network worked hard to find model schools carrying out their mission. Honors Academy came to represent a very successful school within the network not just because of its improving test scores but also because of its multicultural ethos. Teachers and administrators at Honors believed that alongside their high academic scores, the culturally accepting atmosphere at school contributed to the school's success. Given that the school was located in Southwest Philly, which was a hub of African immigrants, teachers and administrators were attentive to welcoming immigrant students and families into the Honors community.

### Definitions

For definitional purposes in this study, 2nd generation West African immigrant who were born in the US self-identify under a pan-ethnic "African" moniker, rarely mentioning country of origin and generally avoiding the label "African-American." Students' families immigrated from Mali, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal. African American youth (descended from formerly enslaved people) refer to themselves as African American or Black. The Caribbean contingent of the MSA students preferred to identify themselves as "Jamaican," harkening back to their immigrant parents' roots. All students self-identified as Muslim. Muslimness, however, was mediated by African, African American, or Jamaican identities.

I refer to "Blackness" in the vein of anthropologist Su'ad Abdul Khabeer who defines it as "both the histories, traditions, and customs of Black peoples and to the circulating ideas and beliefs about people of African descent" (5). I also use her definition of "Black Islam," which is a "range of articulations of Muslim beliefs and practices among

US Black Americans [including]...the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam (NOI), the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths as well as Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies (which include Sufi traditions)." (48). I also add Black Salafism and the African students practices of Islam at Honors under the purview of Black Islam. Though viewed as heterodox by many orthodox Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, the groups listed above (Ahmadiyya, Moorish Science Temple, NOI, 5 Percenters) represent a robust intersection of ways that Blackness and Islamic practices overlap to form innovative Islamic practices.

The location and demographics at this school provide a rich site to investigate how Black Muslim youth configure the relationship between their racial, ethnic, Islamic, and historical identities.

#### African Immigrants in Southwest Philadelphia

In fact, according to the school's administrator, Mr. Selwick, these are the student data that Honors collected on its students. Of the 624 active high schoolers, considered starting from 7th-12th grade, the student racial breakdown is as follows: there are 615 Black students, 4 white students, 2 multi-racial, 1 Asian, 1 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 1 Native American student in Honors Academy for this particular academic year (Refer to Table 1 at the end of the chapters). Although Mr. Selwick and school officials do not collect ethnic data, it is clear that Black students constitute 99% of the school demographic. In some of my interlocutor's predictions, the school is highly "African." Maha, a West African Muslim junior, estimates that 85% of students at Honors are Africans

(her quote is cited in the next section), thought this skewed number may be due to her own social circle, composed primarily of other West African students.

These statistics within the school are unsurprising in light of academic research. Residing in the Greater Philadelphia area, 50,000 to 55,000 African immigrants and refugees and ranks high in terms of US cities hosting large numbers of African migrants (Vitiello and Van Tosh 2017, 157). The emigration to Philadelphia started in the 1960s with a university student presence, followed by a wave of resettling refugees in the 1980s, primarily from Liberia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea as well as a few from Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal. Refugees in Philadelphia from Sub-Saharan African increased in the 1990s with origins in Guinea, Mali, Somalia, and Sudan (ibid, 157; Krueger n.d.). Moloshok (2018) notes the initial establishment of an African hub in Southwest Philadelphia, which hosts the "nation's largest Liberian population." Even with my small sample of MSA interlocutors, there were a small contingent of 2nd generation Liberian American students. A few Caribbean students were also part of my MSA sample, which is in line with immigration patterns in Philadelphia (Vitiello and Van Tosh 2017, 157; Risemberg 2018).

By some estimates (Matza and Duchneskien 2013), from 2000-2012, "the estimated African population tripled in Southwest Philadelphia." Many Sierra Leoneans, Liberians, and Ethiopians reside in Southwest Philadelphia, a section of the city known for at least three African mosques (Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, 2004). Designated as "Little Africa," the neighborhood spans the area "from 40<sup>th</sup> Street all the way to the city limits, just beyond 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, covering about 10 square miles" (Risemberg 2018).

Woodland Avenue serves as the epicenter of Little Africa, with many shops, businesses, mosques, and churches lining the streets.

Little Africa is the world that many of my West African students inhabit. On a walk home from school, Kalila, a 2nd generation Malian American, pointed out her favorite African restaurant on Woodland Avenue, her favorite store to buy lip gloss, the mosque her dad attended, as well the homes of her school friends who lived in the area. Her spatial knowledge and historical interaction with her neighborhood highlighted the ease and comfort that Kalila felt in living in a culturally and religiously familiar neighborhood with other West African community members. The feeling of neighborhood familiarity also entered the hallways of Honors Academy, which was embedded a few blocks from the epicenter of Little Africa.

#### Honors Academy: An African and Islamic School

The location of Honors Academy in Southwest Philly strengthened the demographic strength of African Muslim/non-Muslim immigrants in the school population. Part of the reason for the uniqueness of Honors Academy is due to the demographic breakdown in Philadelphia more broadly. Ms. Jamison, a college counseling teacher for juniors and seniors, shares her observations as a life-long Philly resident:

“No one ignore or deny the fact that Honors specifically has a pretty significant population of Muslim students. I think even if you compared our campus (Honors) to another Achievement campus in the network, you might see different data. Because our school is in an area of Philadelphia, where we largely are seeing a pretty significant population of Muslim students...: I would even say that’s something specific to Philadelphia as a region too. I think Philly has a very significant Muslim population, they also have a very significant Muslim Black population. I think that’s something,

and I can only say that because I've grown up in Philly my whole life, and it's always been something that I've seen." (Interview 4/15/20).

While Black Muslims inhabit different parts of Philadelphia, including West Philly and North Philly, Southwest Philadelphia, in particular, hosts a great number of Black African Muslims. Ms. Jamison comments that being located in Southwest Philly ensures there are significant numbers of Muslim students in the school; she does not specify whether the Muslims are African American or African Muslims. However, from my own observations, and popular media articles about Southwest Philly (Matza and Duchneskien 2013; Vitiello and Van Tosh 2017; Moloshok, 2018; Risemberg 2018), the location of Honors Academy in the midst of this incredible ethnic diversity speaks to the cultural vibrancy of the student's experiences at school and the richness of my fieldwork data at Honors.

When I asked students to describe their school, they responded frankly:

Maha (11<sup>th</sup> Grader, Malian American): "I'm not even gonna lie, um, I think the school is let's say 85% percent African. Cause if you think about it, Honors got a lot of African in that school, it have a lot. People be saying African school, I'm not even gonna lie, a lot of Africans go there. 25, no! I feel like 50 I guess, it's a lot of...people."

Shantell (9<sup>th</sup> Grader, African American): Yes, this school has a huge African population. In this class too.

Kabeera: Some from Guinea. Only a few in here that speak the language as me. Yea, I see them at a lot of family events."

Shantell and Kabeera attest to the strong presence of Africans in the school, even in the African American history class in which we were chatting. Kabeera laments that there are not many other students who speak the same language, Fula, as herself. However, she does appreciate that there are other Guinean students at the school with whom she has familiarity due to their families getting together during Guinean community gatherings. Shantell, an



African American Muslim woman, too attests to the fact that she notices a “huge African population” at the school. In later interviews, Shantell admits feeling left out of conversations amongst her West African peers because she doesn’t have much knowledge about West African culture. Overall, Maha, Kabeera, and Shantell speak about the African presence at the school. Maha and Kabeera are able to draw direct links between parents in the community whose kids attend Honors Academy alongside them.

Ms. Mirree, the ESL teacher, elaborates on the students’ estimations of immigrant West African youth at Honors. She clarifies between immigrant students who are 1st generation and 2nd generation students of African descent whose parents are immigrants. She explains:

“Even if the students themselves aren’t immigrants, a lot of them come from immigrant families who came from similar countries (Guinea, Mali, Cote d’Ivoire, Liberia) to the kids that I work with. As far as the (1st generation) immigrant population, I would say that’s lower, maybe 10-15% percent, if that. I think there is a bigger number of that (children of immigrant families rather than immigrants themselves), cause we don’t always count that, cause I look more for the students themselves. There is definitely a larger number of kids where the parents are from Liberia or Guinea, but they themselves were born here and grew up here.”

Ms. Mirree estimates that there are more 2nd generation students of immigrant descent than 1st generation immigrant students themselves, which she believes is 10-15%. Many of these 1st generation immigration students end up in her ESL class. In fact, there are 6 sections of ESL taught by herself and another ESL teacher at the school.

#### Race and Ethnic Identity at Honors for African Students

Ms. Westing too notes the strong African presence at school. A US history teacher of Caribbean descent who is very popular amongst my West African interlocutors, Ms.

Westing shared that this was her first year of teaching at Honors Academy. Before Honors, she had taught in NY for 3 years - 1 year at Jewish yeshiva and 2 years in a public school in Brooklyn. Ms. Westing's observations of the uniqueness of Honors Academy in terms of the strong ethnic presence of West African students is worth quoting at length:

“I don't know, I think their school, I tell them, I've never worked with so many Black and African students in my life. Even in NY, everyone's there. My school that I worked with...I tell them all the time that their school experience is very unique. The school I worked in in NY...I told them that they have a very unique life here...you're African American or you're African immigrant, there's nobody else mixed in...They have a very unique experience where their world is a replica of their homes, kind of, where their schools is a little bit of a replica of what they see at home. So I do say this, I think these kids are a lot more confident though in their culture and in their Blackness than the immigrant students I had in New York. I will say that from experience, like immigrant students (here) are more confident in their background and immigrant status and who they are and scared to speak with an accent than the students I had in New York because they are so surrounded by people who are like them. I think that's why the community is so unique cause they don't identify as Black, they identify as African. There's a delineation from Black Americans here, in Southwest Philly, it's an African city.” (Interview, 4/6/20).

Ms. Westing echoes Maha, Kabeera, and Shantell in specifically stating that “their (school) world is a replica of their homes.” Ms. Westing notices how the demographic strength of West Africans in Honors is reflected in the demographics of Southwest Philly, which has such a strong concentration of West African immigrants. Unlike NYC, where she taught previously, Ms. Westing believes that Southwest Philly is a lot more homogenous in terms of both ethnic and religious diversity. In terms of ethnic diversity, she notes two particular groups, African Americans and African immigrants (or children of African immigrants). Ms. Westing believes there's nobody else mixed in. In fact, her

observations overlap with the school's administrator, Mr. Selwick's demographic data cited earlier (Table 1).

Ms. Westing points out that because of the strong presence of African students in the school, the immigrant students feel a sense of confidence in their ethnic identity more than their racial identities. Ms. Westing uses 'background, immigrant status, and accent' to stand in for ethnic identity, making it unclear if she included 2nd generation African descended students (who are not immigrants themselves or have accents) in her sample. Nonetheless, her larger point is that the strength of the African community is such that the students don't even have to identify as Black (African American); their African identity is recognized within the school culture. In fact, many West African youth are reluctant to identify along racial lines; they preferred a pan ethnic African designation (more on this Chapter 9). The West Africans students were proud of their immigrant status, a case very different from her students in NYC who do not have the demographic strength of the community as much as her African students in Honors Academy. Ms. Westing agrees with Maha's sentiment that Honors Academy is not only an African school, but that Southwest Philly is also an African city.

Ms. Mirree, Ms. Westing, and even administrators like Principal Sawyer demonstrate the importance they place on acknowledging and embracing the West African immigrant and 2nd generation African students in Honors Academy.

### Religious Diversity

In terms of religious diversity, Ms. Westing also offers a comparison between Honors Academy and the schools she taught in in NYC. At Honors, she explains "A lot of

them are in 2 specific religions, you're either Christian or you're Muslim, I told them that I had worked with kids who were Buddhists, Catholics, atheists, we had everybody" (Interview 4/6/20). Whereas NYC had Buddhists, Catholics, atheists, and many other faith groups, in Honors, Ms. Westing notices there are two specific religions represented in the school, Christianity and Islam. Ms. Westing's observations mirror the religious demographics of Southwest Philadelphia (and West Philly) as well (Vitiello and Van Tosh 2017). Though the school administration does not collect student's religious data, various teachers and administrators estimate that the Muslim population at the school is between 20-25%. In order to plan for Ramadan services at Honors, Mrs. Penney had done an unofficial count, which revealed that 20% of the school was Muslim. Ms. Mirree, the ESL teacher who worked with many of the African Muslim students concurred, guessing that 20% of the school is Muslim. Mrs. Areeb, a Muslim math teacher, believed the percentage was a bit higher, with 25% of the school as Muslim.

#### Gender and Islam at Honors

The Assistant Principal, Mr. McAvoy, offered a similar estimate range of Muslim students at Honors as Ms. Westing, Ms. Mirree, and Ms. Areeb. He noted that:

"You don't see 30 girls in the lunchroom (at least not by their khimars and overgarments). 10% or so of the school is visible. Girls are more visible while practicing boys have gone down (if judging by skullcap). 1/10 of the girls wear a khimar, it's safe to double that number (20%). It would be interesting to hear from practicing Muslims. In a politically heightened climate, this is a generally safe space for students" (Interview 3/10/20).

Of the 624 active high schoolers (7-12) in our building, 335 are female and 289 are male, according to Mr. Selwick, the administrator in charge of school data. Amongst this larger

gender breakdown, Assistant Principal McAvoy estimates that girls are more visibly practicing Islam than boys, if judging by Islamic garb. Overall, he estimates that 20% of the school's girls are wearing khimars and overgarments (67 girls). Mr. McAvoy believes that Honors Academy, from his perspective feels like a safe place for Muslim youth, even during a particularly xenophobic and Islamophobic political climate during the Trump administration. Kids in my sample also acknowledged feeling cared for by teachers and feeling confident in their belonging at school as both immigrant/immigrant descended and Muslim at school.

Following these larger observations about the ethnic and religious demographics at school, I too noticed that students generally felt comfortable bringing their religious identity (and oftentimes ethnic identity) to school. Particularly, I noticed how the African and African American students in Honors Academy found MSA to serve as both a religious and ethnic space within the school. While Chapters 3 and 4 traces the function, growth, and the institutional presence of the MSA, Chapter 9 will trace the MSA as an ethnic space for West African and African American students.

#### Multiculturalism at Honors: The Administrative Perspective:

Honors Academy greatly prided itself on its multiculturalism. Multiculturalism was a valued asset within the Philadelphia School District (SDP). An important goal since the 1990s, the respect for different cultures and religions is highlighted front and center in the SDP website. Under the Office of Family and Community Engagement, SDP states that it is “committed to protecting the rights of all students regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, sexual preference, or gender identity.” Three minority groups are

highlighted on the website, including the immigrant community, the Muslim community, and the transgender community. Under the section for the Muslim Community, the text reads: “The School District of Philadelphia fully embraces diversity and inclusion. We strongly promote religious freedom to ensure that students and families of all faiths feel safe and welcome.” In a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document under this section, the writers outline what Islamophobia is and how it manifests in bullying. Next, they provide resources to counter bullying and to learn more about Islam. Finally, for further resources, they provide a multicultural toolkit. It is clear from the organization of the website that the large number of Muslim students within SDP prompts the explicit inclusion of the Muslim community amongst the three main groups highlighted for support by the Office of Family and Community Engagement. Multiculturalism includes respect for religious freedom, a tenet which many educators within the SDP embraced. In fact, even within Honors, administrators and teachers would proudly explain to me that 20-25% of the school was Muslim (as described in previous section). In addition, at least 1/3 of the school was comprised of West African students, with the remaining composed of Caribbean and African American students.

The Honors’ administration was proud of its diversity and inclusiveness. As Mr. McAvoy, the Assistant Principal for 5 years, stated, “Within a politically heightened climate, Honors provides a generally safe space for kids. We have incredible diversity in terms of the location and origins of the students being different. But what unites the students is the color of their skin.” Mr. McAvoy explained that racially, 99% of the students at school were Black; the school administration did not collect ethnic origin data for students, even

though it was well-known to everyone that the school included West African and Caribbean students alongside African American students.

Mr. McAvoy expressed his hope that by “fostering pride in their identity, students can build up self-efficacy and perseverance and take ownership of the space. The battle for teachers is to have kids see the relevance of what they are learning to their life.” It was clear from my interview with Mr. McAvoy that the importance of fostering student identity was one of his central objectives. The two areas he mentioned in which student identity could be further supported were: religious and racial identity. Mr. McAvoy lauded spaces such as the MSA, and he praised Mrs. Penney for creating a space in which Muslim students could take ownership. He also shared his view that Honors focused on a “racially deliberate curriculum” in classes such as African American History (AAH) that fostered positive racial pride amongst its students. By building up a strong identity, students learn positive mindsets, such as self-efficacy and perseverance, that could create strong graduates who could apply classroom learning to life skills post-graduation.

While Mr. McAvoy did not push forward the idea of unity as a stated objective, he noted how race united students at Honors (“what unites the student is the color of their skin”). He did not believe that ethnic differences played as important a role in the school as racial identity, and the administration did not view ethnic origin as an important datapoint. Race was more salient for aggregating student data.

However, what emerged in my observations of the larger culture at Honors as well as my minute observations of student discussions during MSA revealed that ethnic origin played a much larger role in the school than administrators like Mr. McAvoy believed.

While it was his hope that positive religious and racial identity would create efficacious and persevering student mindsets, what was missing from Mr. McAvoy's analysis was how ethnic identity could actually produce fractious debates amongst students. Whether these contentious debates in MSA still cultivated efficacious and persevering mindsets was unclear; however, what these debates revealed was that an assumption of a shared racial unity amongst Honors students was an overly simplistic framework for examining the multifaceted identities of the MSA students I followed throughout my study.

#### MSA Participant Demographics

The MSA students ranged in age, ethnic identity, temperament, gender, political leanings, academic self-presentation, and many other facets of self-differentiation. I was able to interview 25 students, with 17 girls and 8 boys participating in my study. Of the 17 girls, 9 identified as having West African origin, 1 young woman was an Ethiopian immigrant, and 7 girls were African American. Of the 8 boys, 4 identified as West African, 1 as Ethiopian, and 3 as African American. Across genders (no one identified as non-gender binary), 13 students were of West African origin, 10 students were African American, and 2 were Ethiopian.

Given that my sample set was small (4% of the school's total population), I tried to understand how representative my sample was to the larger racial and ethnic demographics of the school. Comparing my data to Mr. Wick's racial demographic chart (Table 1) was not very insightful because the school did not collect data on ethnic data or student's language or religion. However, of the 624 students at Honors, 615 were Black, which



constituted 99% of the school body. Focusing on the 4% in my sample out of the 99% offered a small but illuminating cross-section of experiences around race, ethnicity, and religion within the larger student body.

### Race, Ethnic Identity, and Islam at Honors Academy

Throughout my observation of Black Muslim youth from West African and African American backgrounds, I noticed a few overall trends in their views on race, ethnicity, and Islam. The students' sense of self was comprised of an overlapping combination of racial, ethnic, religious, and gendered influences, a combination which emerged in sometimes surprising patterns. I flag moments in which these three categories overlap during the following dissertation chapters. However, not every chapter address racial, ethnic, or religious identity. The lack of uniformity in student perceptions of these categories and their overlap is reflected in the different spaces in which race, ethnicity, or religion becomes prominent in Honors Academy.

The following examples are representative of student views at Honors Academy. Although it is difficult to generalize to a larger population outside of Honors Academy, in her study of African youth in New York City schools, Agyepong (2019) discovered similar patterns of pan ethnic identification as Africans, more so than racial self-ascriptions for West African students. Race and ethnicity are, of course, more complicated constructs than many heuristic constructs suggest. Omi and Winant (1986), for example, argue that for Black and brown people, ethnicity theory was complicated by racial exclusion and social inequality. The overlap between racial and ethnic identity is difficult to parse out into

discrete categories. On occasion, I noticed a similar blurring of ideas of race and ethnicity in discussions with the MSA students.

Overall, however, ethnicity was a prominent category of self-ascription for African students and race was a more salient category for African American students. An Islamic identity rarely overlapped with race talk for both groups of students. For West African students, however, Islam and ethnic histories were regularly mentioned in reference to each other; for African American students, the absence of talk around ethnicity prevented any discussion around ethnicity and religion.

#### West African Student Views on Race and Ethnicity

For many of the West African youth, race was not a salient category in the majority of discussions. Students preferred to identify under a pan ethnic “African” category, made more legible due to their location in predominantly African Southwest Philadelphia. Few of the youth I spoke to identified as Black or African American, but instead as distinctly African. Maha, a junior at Honors had Malian ancestry, and her quote below is reflective of the majority of the responses I heard from other African students:

Irteza: ‘If I asked you, what is your race, what would you say?’

Maha: “I’m African. My boss asked me: ‘where you from?’ I said ‘I’m African’, and that girl I talked to, she was like, ‘yea, she’s African. Her parents were born in Africa. But she was born here.’ And he was like, ‘oh you was born here, so basically you’re not African, basically you’re from Philly.’ And I’m like, ‘no, but I’m still African, because my parents are African.’...When people ask, I just be saying, I’m African, but if they ask me where I’m born, I would tell them I was born here, but yea...I feel like that’s just an African thing, when people ask you where you from, you think

about where your parents are from, and you just say, I'm African. Yea (a lot of other kids do that too)."

Though Maha had been born in Philadelphia, she rarely said she was American or a Philadelphian. Her response to her boss's question was to affirm her parents' ethnic origins, rather than the land of her birth. It was also telling that for her, race was not about being Black. It was about being "African," which for Maha, stood as its own form of racial identity. Typically, however, African stands for a pan-ethnic category (Agyepong, 2019); in Maha's case, it replaced a standard racial identity as Black. Despite her disavowal of a Black racial identity, Maha was aware of the historically racialized context of US society. During discussions on Black Lives Matter, Maha acknowledged anti-blackness; however, she did avoid discussions of race because she believed there was an overemphasis on race rather than her African cultural identity.

Kania, an 8th grader with Malian immigrant parents, also stated: "Being Black to me is like having generations of your family in America and I've been here for my entire life but my parents are Africans." Kania did not identify as American or Black during my observations, an attitude which is further analyzed in Chapter 9. Maha and Kania's responses were typical of their African peers in downplaying race in favor of, or perhaps in replacement of, the normative racial category of Blackness. The one African student who offered a different perspective on racial identification was Kalila, who was an 8th grader with Malian parents. She shared:

"Like I said, I would bring up where I was born at, other than who my ancestors (are) and where I got my African from. Not that my great or my grandpa was American. I know that everybody is African on my side. So obviously I'm African, but I was born *here* in America, so I am African American. Cause like, well, cause I am tied to it. But like the community

who I am around, I would get that from them, I would be like, oh yea, I'm Black too.”

Kalila acknowledges her descent from African ancestors, but she also privileges the land of her birth. Her connection to America is based on the fact that she was born here and lived here her whole life, therefore she was “tied to it (America).” Her acknowledgement of community shapes her identification as African American. For her, the African part was her ancestry (genealogical claim), whereas the American part was her lived experience (location-based). These debates between the different definitions of American arise in Chapter 9 in depth. In brief, other than Kalila, Maha and Kania’s downplaying of race was a typical response amongst African students in the MSA. The category American too stood for both a national identity (based on being born on the land), but also seemed to stand in for a racial category at times. Surrounded by an all-Black community in Southwest Philly, American was sometimes synonymous with Black, especially when it referred to African American peers. These African students did not ignore the salience of anti-Blackness in US contexts, particularly in discussions around Black Lives Matter and police shootings; however, they preferred to distinguish themselves from racial labels in an attempt to remove themselves from the anti-Blackness they observed in society, even if they were unsuccessful in escaping society externally ascribing them the label “Black”.

Ethnic identity was a lot more salient for African students. West African students readily referred to their ethnic histories, descent, and family genealogies, the subject of Chapters 8-10. As noted in student comments above, often race was replaced by references to ethnicity. Ms. Westing too had noted, “they don’t identify as Black, they identify as African,” an observation that was substantiated by my own study. The only instance in

which race became a topic of conversation was during discussions about political upheaval, such as the protests after the murder of George Floyd in June 2020. Even the typically race-shy African students participated in conversations around Black Lives Matter and shared how they too had been negatively racialized at times.

### African American Students' View on Race and Ethnicity

In contrast to the reluctance of African students when talking about race, the African American students, on the whole, were proud of identifying Black Americans. Shantell was a representative student. She would often declare: "I'm Black and I'm proud." In contrast to her racial pride, ethnic identity was a more confusing construct for Shantell. An exchange between Shantell and Kabeera (of West African Guinean descent) is revealing:

Shantell: Wait, what's the difference between ethnicity and race?

Kabeera: Ethnicity is where you're from. Race is the color of your skin.

Shantell: You all wanna know something? I never understood something. What do you do with the people who was Black, but they weren't Black? Like your skin color was Black, but you were like Jamaican, Haitian, or something like that?"

Kabeera: Well it was just different. Some people were lighter, born in Africa, Jamaica, so it wasn't the same.

Kabeera was clear that ethnicity is about descent and family origin, while race is a biological phenotype. Shantell is less clear on the issue of ethnicity. She questions how ethnic (or national) variation could exist, when everyone's skin color is Black. Kabeera tries to explain that family origins in different countries meant different ethnic histories. However, at the end of this exchange, Shantell remained confused about what ethnicity

meant. Her confusion drove much of the contested debate in Chapter 9 around family histories and divergent identities between African American and African youth.

The question of race and ethnicity is largely viewed by the MSA students alongside Kabeera's logic presented here. Race is viewed as biological and ethnicity as based on descent, though students like Zara disagree and offer a view of descent based on location. While views on race remain largely biologically based (or as a point of racial pride in African American students' cases), ethnicity remains a more murky concept amongst some students, particularly in how it sometimes overlaps with race.

### Race and Religion

Few Black Muslim students explicitly connected race and religion together amongst the students in my sample, whether West African or African American. Race emerged in discussions such as Black Lives Matter, religion in discussions around Ramadan and fundraising in MSA. The discrete categories were a result of many students believing that Islam is colorblind (Guhin, 2018), particularly amongst African American students.

Vera: When people ask me who I am, I say Muslim. Like I know you see African-American, I know you see Black, but if, so my thing is, out of sight, out of mind. If you're not talking about it, I'm not talking about it.

Lana: But Muslim is the key, right? So any Muslim is all the same.

Kamal: I felt like because we are all Muslim, I was just Muslim. It don't matter which race you from. Everything Muslim, I feel like, should be treated the same. Like everybody is beautiful!

Vera, Lana, and Kamal are all African American students who believed that being Muslim was the basis for equality and for a certain kind of race blindness. While one is

still Black, as Vera reminded me, it is “out of sight, out of mind,” in discussions about Islam. For her, being Black and Muslim are different categories. For Kamal too, “it don’t matter which race you from. Everything Muslim,” a similar sentiment to Lana who also emphasizes the sameness of Muslims. The colorblind attitude towards Islam is reminiscent of previous studies which highlight how Muslims often aspire towards a utopic vision of Islam, in which racial and ethnic differences disappear (Guhin, 2018). I surmise that particularly for African American Muslim students, they hoped to believe in this utopic vision of Islam, given the generations of anti-Blackness their families had experienced in the larger US society. While each of these often talked about anti-Blackness in larger US society, they did not do so during the same conversations they spoke about Islam.

The only African American student who explicitly connected race and religion was Mina, a young lady who was a member of the Nation of Islam. Mina stated:

I feel like race and religion kinda tie hand in hand. The Nation of Islam is mainly about Black people and teaching us to love ourselves. Also being Muslim, I feel like it kinda just comes together. So I feel like they both affect me because my religion basically deals with my race, if that makes sense.

Grounded in a tradition of Black solidarity and racial pride, the early Nation of Islam promoted a version of Islam that was intimately tied to racial identity (Lincoln 1994 [1961]). While the transition in 1976 to more orthodox Islam under the leadership of Imam Warith Dean Muhammad (Mumiya, 1992; Rouse, 2004) had grounded the Nation’s members in more Islamic orthodoxy, Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam sect continued to emphasize the racial traditions of the original NOI (Aidi 2009b, Curtis 2009c, Turner 2009). Mina belonged to Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam in Philadelphia and continued to feel

that Islam and her Black identity were intricately connected. For her, “my religion basically deals with my race,” an articulation which was less true for her non-NOI Muslim peers at Honors Academy.

### Ethnicity and Religion

Unlike the discrete conversations around race and Islam amongst the majority of Black Muslim youth at Honors, ethnic identity and religion often overlapped for West African students; African American students rarely discussed ethnicity, as mentioned in the previous sections. Often, being African and Muslim overlapped within Honors Academy. Teachers would refer interchangeably to African and/or Muslim students. However, there was a substantial minority of African students at school who were Christian (I could not gather an exact number), as it became clear to me through the presence of Asha and other non-Muslim Africans in MSA. Overall, however, the strong connection between African and Muslim was noted by students, teachers, and administrators alike.

African American Muslims were less prone to be ascribed as Muslim, as noted in Chapter 8 (unless they were young women who consistently covered their hair for religious purposes). There was a more tenuous connection between African American ethnic identity and Islamic identity, even though some African American students in MSA had generations of family members who had been Muslim. I surmise that this tenuous connection for African American Muslims was due to prevalent perceptions of West Africans and even non-Muslim Black people of the inauthentic practice of Islam amidst African American Muslims, a pattern recorded in academic literature (Jackson, 2005; Grewal, 2014; Khabeer, 2016). Sia, a thoughtful senior at school also noticed this suspicion of African American



Muslims within the broader Muslim community: “there are other Muslim communities who look at African Americans in the Muslim community as...I wouldn’t say below them, but sometimes, they don’t identify them as equal Muslims” (Interview 6/2/20). The discrimination and exclusion felt by African American pursuing Islamic practices is the topic of Chapter 8.

African American students preferred to identify racially and nationally, by virtue of their birth in America, while African and Jamaican students preferred to harken back to their parents’ ethnic and national roots. These distinct pathways emerged out of African American students’ recognition that they did not know their ethnic roots because of their ancestors’ erasure of ethnic roots due to slavery. However, at times, African and Jamaican students identified as Black, particularly when it came to political mobilization around issues like Black Lives Matter. This study nuances West African students’ perceptions and mobilizations of Black identity from existing literature.

While race sometimes functioned as a common ground for political solidarity amongst African American and African youth at Honors, Islam was also not always a uniform source of solidarity. While students initially expressed a view of Islam in which everyone was equal, religious hierarchies emerged at Honors and reflected ethnoreligious hegemonies common in the larger Muslim American community. These hierarchies often placed African Muslim identities above convert African American identities, marking an underlying ethnic factor for determining whose Islam was more authentic. While Muslim forms of personhood were varied and innovative in the field of fashion, linguistics, and

visual culture, religion too, in combination with ethnic differences, re-inscribed forms of ethnoreligious hegemony at Honors.

This section highlighted the complicated ways in which race, ethnicity, and religion overlapped within Honors Academy. Though there was variation within each students' interpretations, certain patterns emerged which were worthy of note. The essentialization of racial identity that I noted within school discussions also points to the necessity of hosting future discussions amongst students that teaches them how race is a social construct. Without understanding the social construction of race, explanations for student underperformance can easily be attributed to racial differences, now coded as "ethnic" differences in research literature (Pierre, 2020). Without a critical understanding of race, students may continue to believe insidious discourses about racial and ethnic underperformance of Black youth.

### Focal Students

As I got to know them over the course of two years, I became close to a group of students. These students will feature in key moments throughout the course of the dissertation, illuminating the various ways they engaged in Islamic self-making at Honors Academy. More student thumbnails are available in the Student Thumbnail insert in the next portion of the dissertation.

### Middle Schoolers:

7<sup>th</sup> Grade: Fatima, Naaila, Nina (featured in Chapter 7)

8<sup>th</sup> Grade: Kania, Kalila, Abdou, Jerome (featured in Chapter 10)

High Schoolers:

9<sup>th</sup> Grade: Kabeera, Shantell, Zara (featured throughout, especially Chapter 9 and 10)

11<sup>th</sup> Grade: Ariya, Asia, Maha, Yamin (Chapter 9)

11<sup>th</sup> Grade (non-Muslim MSA members): Asha, Mary, Rania, Andrea (Chapter 9)

12<sup>th</sup> Graders: Vera, Naia, Sia (Chapter 8)

These focal students' personalities, backgrounds, and outlooks will become clear over the course of the dissertation. Deepening my relationship with these students became one of my most treasured experiences throughout my fieldwork experience.

Inhabiting the role of an adult who did not have the power to assign grades, give out demerits, or generally discipline the students helped me carve out a confidante role for myself. As I followed students around school, the streets, and the mosque, I became a trusted adult in students' life – I spent a lot of time hearing student observations about school, their peers, and social cliques at school. For the high schoolers, I became a sounding board for discussions around friendships, dating, and larger societal issues, such as racial inequality. Particularly, for the seniors, I was also an educational resource. I helped a group of seniors through their college application processes, sharing in their delight as they gained admission to colleges, and offering solace when they were rejected. Alongside all these students, I weathered the Covid-19 pandemic, keeping in touch via facetime calls and Instagram direct messages (DMs), wondering when I would see my young friends again. The deep level of engagement over the course of three years resulted in lifelong relationships.

### Timeline and Methodology

I began my ethnography in Summer 2018 and followed the students through the academic year 2019-2020, as well as Fall 2020. I spent 4 days at Honors Academy every week and attended bimonthly Saturday community feedings with the MSA members. I also attended weekly Friday MSA meetings throughout the academic year 2019-2020, some of which were virtual after the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the school year in March 2020. In the final phase of data collection, I followed students on Instagram in order to continue fieldwork “virtually” after the advent of the pandemic. I also observed their history classrooms on Zoom. I wrote extensive fieldnotes, recorded interviews, and wrote memos throughout the course of my fieldwork.

### MSA Focal Student Thumbnails

As I got to know them over the course of two years, I became close to a group of students at Honors Academy.

### Middle Schoolers:

7<sup>th</sup> Grade: Fatima, Naaila, Nina

8<sup>th</sup> Grade: Kania, Kalila, Abdou, Adeeb, Jerome

### High Schoolers:

9<sup>th</sup> Grade: Kabeera, Shantell, Zara

11<sup>th</sup> Grade: Ariya, Asia, Maha, Yamin

Non-Muslim MSA Juniors: Ariya, Asha, Mary, Rania, Andrea

12<sup>th</sup> Graders: Vera, Naia, Sia

### The 7<sup>th</sup> Graders

Fatima was of mixed ethnicity, as she proudly declared. Her dad was a Muslim immigrant from Niger, while her mother was Jamaican American. This was Fatima's first year at Honors, and she proudly wore bright hijabs to school as often as she could. A girl with a dynamic personality, Fatima's style is examined in Chapter 8 as she showcased her Islamic identity in creative fashion within the classroom. Fatima also was a creative Tiktok poster, releasing innovative content about Covid-19 from her perspective as a mixed West African Muslim hijabi woman.

Naaila becomes the feature of Chapter 7: Islam in the Classroom. Naaila is a 1<sup>st</sup> generation West African immigrant from Mali who had moved to Philadelphia a year ago. She was perceived as a "know it all" by her peers because she often took a pedantic approach when it came to Islamic practice. She would often assume the role of Islamic expert in the classroom and cafeteria, sharing her passion for Islam with her peers. Naaila was a student in Mrs. Penney's English class.

Naaila's classmate, Nina, sometimes made fun of Naaila for being a know it all. Nina was an African American Muslim woman whose mother had converted to Islam many years ago. Nina was also in Mrs. Penney's English class, and she was a talkative, popular young lady who loved gossiping in class. Nina's older sister, Shantell, had been a favorite student of Mrs. Penney and was heavily involved with the MSA club. To differentiate herself from Shantell, Nina was lukewarm towards MSA at the beginning of the school year but became actively involved in community feeding as the year progressed. While she identified as Christian at the beginning of the school year, by the end of it, she proudly declared herself to be a Muslim.

8<sup>th</sup> Graders: Kania, Kalila, Adeeb, Jerome

Kania was a leader in the MSA and known as a very good student by her teachers. A 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Malian American, Kania had been born and brought up within the Muslim West African community there. She was the eldest of 3 siblings and enjoyed thinking of ways to make money to finance her desire for new consumer items, such as shoes. Kania proudly labelled herself as “African,” even though she got pushback from her classmate, Kalila, for denying that she was American too. Kania’s pride in being African and the hurt she felt when her African American peers stereotyped Africans as “backwards,” was a point of concern during the “rice debate” discussed in Chapter 9.

Kalila also shared a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Malian American identity with Kania. However, she would often refer to herself as “American,” though in contexts with many African people in the room, she would say she was “African.” Kalila often shared negative perceptions of African Americans in personal interviews with me, though she did not share her opinions in larger group settings such as the MSA.

Abdou was a friend of Kania and Kalila. He was viewed as a “supersmart” kid who was good at math. Abdou had immigrated from Mali 3 years ago; Naaila was his cousin who immigrated more recently. Abdou was an active participant in African American history class (Chapter 10).

Adeeb was a bright student and often thought critically about the concept of race and Americanness, since these were concepts with which he was not familiar back in Ethiopia, where he had immigrated from two years ago. His views during the “rice debate” (Chapter 9) and often added a fresh perspective to discussions centering on debates between his West African and African American classmates.

Finally, a fifth MSA member of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade cohort was Jerome. Jerome was an African American youth whose mother had converted to Islam 15 years ago. Jerome was generally quiet in the classroom, though sometimes, he shared his views on race and history in the African American history classroom (Chapter 10). Jerome regularly attended community feedings with his sister, Ore (7<sup>th</sup> grader).

#### 9<sup>th</sup> Grade: Kabeera, Shantell, Zara

A core group of 9<sup>th</sup> graders had been instrumental in strengthening the MSA at Honors Academy. They had been involved since they were 7<sup>th</sup> graders in Mrs. Penney's class. This group includes Kabeera, Shantell, Zara, Mariam, Hidayah, and Djamila. During the course of the study, I got to know Kabeera, Shantell, and Zara most well.

Kabeera was one of my key interlocutors because she was social and inquisitive; she also loved being a contrarian. She delighted in taking multiple perspectives during a conversation, so it would be difficult to pin down her thoughts. Identifying as a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Guinean, Kabeera reflected on how her mother had raised her after her father was killed in a protest against Alpha Conde in the late 2010s; Kabeera had been 3 years old at the time. Kabeera took great interest in African politics as well as political movements in the US, such as BLM. Kabeera often complicated notions of what it meant to be Black, West African, African, and American, adding a great deal of depth to discussions ranging from the "rice debate", Covid-19, and MSA events.

Kabeera often got into verbal fights with Shantell, her "frenemy" (friend and enemy). Though Shantell was less of a contrarian, she also liked to have her perspective heard. If she was not being heard, sometimes, she would get into verbal fights with

Kabeera. Shantell was an African American woman whose mother and grandmother had converted to Islam a decade ago; she was Nina's older sister. Shantell took great pride in her African American identity and as a native Philly person. Shantell's views were instructive during the "rice debate" as well as in African American history class.

The third member of this 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort was Zara. Zara had converted to Islam a year ago at the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and her personal conversion story is a focus of Chapter 2. Zara thought about history a great deal, and contemplated how it is that her people, the African Americans, were created through brutal violence and rape. Zara sometimes expressed xenophobic views against her West African peers, reflecting on the historical antagonism between West Africans and African Americans. Zara struggled with how others perceived her as a Fuslim (a fake Muslim). Mrs. Penney remained her mentor in her journey to Islam.

#### 11<sup>th</sup> Graders: Ariya, Asia, Maha, Yamin

Ariya, Asia, and Maha were a trio often seen together around school. They were all of West African descent, having been born in Philly to ancestors originally from Mali. Ariya's dad was Fula, and her family had migrated from Mali to Cote d'Ivoire in her grandparents' generation. Ariya's parents had migrated to Philly in the early 1990s. Her father was an imam in a local Philly masjid, and her mother ran an ethnic clothing store, which I visited occasionally. They had been one of the first families to form a core of West African Muslim families in Southwest Philly. Ariya was soft-spoken and religious – her friends often joked with her that she had to be perfect because her father was an imam, and she couldn't make him look bad through less than perfect religious behavior. Ariya was an



only child and wished she had siblings. She had been at Honors Academy since it was taken over by the Achievement Charter Network when she was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Ariya joined Honors in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She had been self-admittedly a troublemaker before she began to “fix herself” in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She began hanging out with “good girls” like Ariya to change her friend group. Asia called Ariya “her cousin.” At first, I thought the girls were related. However, I realized that the cousin honorific was to indicate closeness. The girls had known each other since childhood. Asia was more talkative than Ariya and often the first to share her opinions on an incident. She reflected on her journey from a mischievous girl who sometimes got in trouble for talking too much in class to one who was a model student.

Maha was the third of this trio, and she had joined Honors Academy in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She had been born in Philly to Malian parents but lived with her maternal aunt in Paris from 4-11 years, since her aunt did not have a child of her own. She returned to Philly with fluent French, a cosmopolitan outlook, and a love of Islamic fashion. She was a good student who worked hard academically to be a good candidate for college. Maha was also a strong advocate of her “African” identity and struggled to understand the racial context in the US. Her views on BLM were complex and multilayered.

Yamin was the last of the juniors with whom I got close. Having immigrated from Guinea 3 years ago, Yamin was an ESL student who was recognized by all his teachers by his drive to learn and succeed. He was a well-mannered, polite young man who cared deeply about Islam. Much of his motivation to succeed derived from his religious beliefs, which presented a non-market driven vision of the purpose of education. Yamin’s younger

sister, Malika, was a bright 8<sup>th</sup> grader who had grown up in the States, and he sometimes felt self-conscious that he had to ask his younger sister for help with English. Still, he enjoyed being reunited with his mother, with whom he had not lived for most of his childhood.

### The Non-Muslim MSA Juniors

I became close to the juniors through MSA events, college visits, and helping them through the college application process. I also got to know their peer non-Muslim peers, Asha, Mary, Rania, Andrea, all of whom were in the prestigious STEM program at Honors. Asha and Mary were West African American Christians from Liberia, while Rania and Andrea were both Jamaican American. Asha's family had been admitted to the US as refugees after the Civil War in Liberia. Ariya was a STEM kid as well, while Asia did not have the grades to make it. Through Ariya, however, Asia became a core member of the STEM crowd. Even as non-Muslims, these four non-Muslims girls were active members of MSA, both as former students of Mrs. Penney as well as for the pro-social, service-oriented nature of the club. These STEM girls became prominent during the "rice debate", discussed in Chapter 9.

### A Brief Family History of The Girls

Many of these young women in MSA, with families originating from Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Guinea, spoke about the violence that their family had witnessed before they emigrated to the US. Mary spoke about how her family had fled to the US as refugees from Liberia. Asia spoke about her cousins living through the civil war in the Ivory Coast, as shared below:

“I know there was a war. It was a long time ago, I was young. It was a president, he didn’t want to leave office. He was basically going around, attacking people who wanted the new president that was coming up. It was like bad. I don’t know how long, it lasted for months, and nobody could come outside because they would kill you. My parents were here, I was like 6-7. I actually had some cousins, they told me what they went through. They were in the house. They had not enough food or water. The people who protested were killed. My cousins survived.”

Asia narrated the harrowing experience her cousins went through during the First Ivorian civil war from 2002-2007. Though they survived, they related what they had seen to their cousins, including Asia. Though Asia had been safe in Philadelphia with her parents, she did not take her cousins’ experiences lightly, some of whom emigrated to the US later. She shared this story with me as we were chatting about her family history after one of the community feedings at Masjid Jumuah.

Kabeera too spoke about her family’s experiences in the fight against President Alpha Conde of Guinea, particularly as it impacted her father.

“And the Guinea had a war because they were fighting for President Alpha Conde, they didn’t want him to be President. And my dad went, and he died. That’s how he passed away, he went to protest, there was like a protest, and it ended up being very violent, and he died. They never found his body or anything. I was probably like 3 years old. I don’t remember anything, I was too little, I was like 3.”

Kabeera spoke in a quiet voice, as she shared how her father died c. 2008, protesting President Alpha Conde around the time of the 2008 Guinea coup d’état. Alpha Conde remained in power until 2020, during which time Kabeera participated in virtual (COVID-19) rallies against this incumbent President. Much of Kabeera’s interest in African politics arose because of her father’s political involvement before his death.

Scholars such as Rosemary Lukens (2006), who studied West African youth in Philly noted that some of the newly immigrated youth had experienced violence and some trauma back in West Africa. Even after they arrived in the US, they faced a great deal of prejudice and xenophobia. Though my interlocutors were not first generation immigrants, their experiences growing up as West African and Muslim in Philly were influenced by the family histories to which they had been exposed and which had shaped their family's migration to the United States.

### The Seniors

Finally, the 12<sup>th</sup> graders provided a voice of reason and shared insights with me about their perceptions of Muslim culture at Honors. All three of these young women had been born and brought up in Philly. Vera was a senior who had converted to Salafi Islam in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and offered great insight into her faith journey and her eventual turn to a more moderate Sunni Islam. Her grandma who had raised her remained Christian. Naia was a young Muslim woman who also provided insight into the misconceptions around Islam at school, while Sia was viewed by her peers as a model Muslim because of her kindness and openness to teach others about Islam. Both Naia and Sia grew up in Muslim families; their grandparents had converted to Islam in the early days of the Nation of Islam and later transitioned to Sunni Islam. Many of their acute observations are the basis for theorizing Islamic self-making at Honors in Chapter 8.

### My Positionality

Before beginning fieldwork, however, I felt a great deal of apprehension when beginning my fieldwork at Honors Academy. I was concerned about whether being a non-

Black Muslim woman entering into a predominantly Black community might be perceived as exploitative by my interlocutors, given the long tradition of anthropology's foray into exoticizing non-white cultures, particularly in foreign, far-flung regions of the world. However, since the 1980s, scholars have been deeply attentive to the role of positionality and power (Asad, 1973; Hymes, 1974; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fox, 1991; di Leonard, 1991; Harrison, 1991). The concerns with insider status and ethnography, with conducting research within the US, as well as dealing with multiple levels of power, representation, and gender (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Rapp, 1975; Etienne, 1980) have been considered extensively in anthropological literature. Given my familiarity with this research, I wanted to ensure that I approached my work with young people, their families, and their teachers with the utmost level of respect and ethical conduct.

I soon discovered that my concerns about being an outsider or feeling judged were unwarranted. From the first day that I met Mrs. Penney, the focal teacher in my study, I felt "at home." During our first meeting in Summer 2018, wearing a full Black overgarment, Mrs. Penney gave me a wide smile of welcome before sitting down next to Principal Sawyer. I discovered that Mrs. Penney taught middle school English and had been a teacher at Honors for five years. As I chatted with these two Black Muslim women, I realized that they cared deeply about their students. As they asked me more questions about my study, I grew more comfortable, realizing that their curiosity, warmth, and enthusiasm were genuine and that their questions were an attempt to ensure that their students would be protected over the course of the study.

As a former teacher myself, I understood that it was care for the students that prompted Principal Sawyer and Mrs. Penney to ask questions about my study. Mrs. Penney, unwilling to ask about my own racial and ethnic background, asked indirectly, “what made you interested in this topic?” I answered that I myself had been a Muslim immigrant student from Bangladesh, growing up in suburban Virginia. I had struggled to find places to pray during Ramadan and fast during school hours. Knowing that Philly had such a larger Muslim student population, I wanted to study what Islamic culture looked like in a school that had larger concentrations of Muslim and had administration that actively supported these efforts. Mrs. Penney was satisfied with my answer, nodding empathically, “Oh yes, Philly is very different from the suburbs!” By the end of our hour-long chat, as if satisfied with my answers, Mrs. Penney asked me, “How many students do you need for your study?” I answered, “30?” She responded, “that’s easy! We can definitely get you 30 students!” With this positive affirmation, I began a journey at Honors Academy and its students that still continues to this day.

I related this story because it was the first time that I felt that fieldwork could eventually become a site of warmth and friendship, alongside critical inquiry. I recalled Kamala Visweswaran’s (1994) book, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, which introduces the notion of home work, which refers to “speaking from the place one is located, to specify our sites of enunciation as ‘home.’” (Visweswaran, 1994, 104). Visweswaran (1994) further notes:

“Homework’ is, I contend, the actualization of what some writers have termed ‘anthropology in reverse.’ David Scott has noted that the ethnographic project is characterized by the anthropological journey, which entails a recursive movement between departure and return. It is this ‘going

and returning that organizes the epistemological and geographical disposition of the anthropological gaze.' ...In emphasizing "dwelling," the act of staying in one place, over traveling, the act of moving from place to place, Clifford transforms Geertz's polarity (Being Here/Being There) by problematizing the relationship between "being there" and "getting there."...My own narrative has begun with the "field" and worked its way steadily homeward...My opening account of "being there" has been displaced by an emerging narrative of "getting there." Such a movement enables me to think through more clearly the act of "being here" (Visweswaran, 1994, 102).

While anthropology generally privileges going somewhere and coming back as the true test of an anthropologist ala the Malinowskian tradition, Visweswaran points out how the very idea of here and there suggest an unnecessary duality. While Scott's description of the recursive movement between departure and return emphasizes the great insights that emerge in the space between leaving for fieldwork and returning, Clifford's concept of 'dwelling,' or staying in one place, can be just as evocative. Here and there are not oppositional; neither do they require geographical displacement. Instead, the process of finding movement or insight within the act of dwelling, or being 'home,' is a methodological insight in itself. The going and returning does not have to entail entering far flung villages in another corner of the world. In fact, one's fieldwork site can be a subway ride away (Passaro, 1998).

Kisha Khan-Perry (2013) extends Visweswaran's concept further by hypothesizing "field work as home work" (Khan-Perry, 2013, xxi). Khan Perry writes: "Kamala Visweswaran's notion of homework, as opposed to fieldwork, is useful for understanding my approach to describing the mobilization of Salvador's poorest residents." In her study of Black women's activism around land in Brazil, Khan-Perry describes her deep investment and connection with her female interlocutors, a process in which fieldwork

came to resemble a kind of home space. Just as Visweswaran cites the importance of acknowledging one's positionality and relationship with interlocutors, Khan-Perry acknowledges her positionality as a female US researcher in Brazil.

Following in the methodological insights of these feminist ethnographers, I too, reflected on feelings of belonging, familiarity, and discomfort in the spaces I inhabited during my fieldwork. My fieldsite was indeed a subway ride away (Passaro, 1998). Yet, I gleaned insights from dwelling within the spaces of Honors Academy, which became a form of home to me over time. This verb of “dwelling” or “living” for me emerged out of the deep relationships I formed with the students and teachers. “Here” came to constitute both a feeling of physical and emotional proximity to my interlocutors. I continue to privilege the “here” of the process, even within the distancing act of writing up my “fieldwork” into a narrative form.

My hope for this dissertation is to explore the myriad experiences of Black Muslim youth in Honors Academy and how they fashion religious, ethnic, and racial identities within the various spaces they inhabit in school. These kids matter, and their stories matter, particularly in an era where Black Lives Matter has become the basis for contentious political debate within the United States. I hope the following chapters will shed light on the creative and dynamic processes through which young people make sense of their multifaceted educational journeys. These young people's brightness and joy illuminate the chapters ahead.



Part I: Islamic Self-Making in Market-Driven Institutions

### Chapter 3: Two Visions of MSA

“Audhu billah himina shaitan ir rajim Bismillah hi rahman hi rahim” (In the name of God, the most Merciful, the Most Benevolent).

Thus began the Muslim Student Association (MSA) meeting on an overcast day in early October. Mrs. Penney, a Muslim teacher organizing the MSA at Honors Academy, a charter school in Southwest Philly, had expressly invited me to attend the meeting. Aware that I was interested in connecting with Muslim kids at school, Mrs. Penney had told me to show up on Friday afternoon - “I’ll introduce you to a few kids,” she told me. She handed me a flyer for the MSA.

The MSA interest flyer invited the students to join and highlighted the central vision of this afterschool club. It read:

Unity, Service, Leadership: Interest Meeting for the Muslim Student Association. The Muslim Students’ Association strives to build unity through leadership and service. We aim to provide a program for students at Honors Academy for all backgrounds and levels of knowledge to learn and meet with other Muslims on and off campus in order to serve the community. Upcoming schedule of events: October: Feeding the Community 11am-1pm 10/19 and 10/26. Jumu’ah every Friday in Room 200. Contact Mrs. Penney and Mr. Hussam for more info.

I was intrigued by this flyer. The MSA flyer suggested a cohesive vision for MSA as an afterschool service and leadership club that centered on the idea of unity. It did not specify that one had to be Muslim to join, but rather welcome students of “all backgrounds and levels of knowledge to learn and meet with other Muslims.” The flyer also mentioned serving the community, both on and off campus, suggesting that the club included out of school spaces as well.

While the flyer stated shared aims for the association – to build unity through leadership and service by providing an opportunity for Muslims to meet – as I participated in the MSA meetings, it became clear that participants in the club had different visions for what purpose the MSA might serve. Different teachers and student leaders associated with MSA proposed and supported events and activities that framed the purpose of “service” and “leadership development” in relation to distinctive goals, goals that were more or less “Islamic” in religious or ethnic terms. For some, leadership development and service took on a more entrepreneurial emphasis and for others the purpose was more conventionally “religious” and Islamic in nature. Some of the goals for the MSA were accepted by a majority of students participating, while other goals were met with a more lukewarm reception.

This chapter explores how a “Muslim” space in this secular public school came to be imagined and created in everyday practice. It considers how conflicting aims for this Muslim space in the school were communicated and perceived, enacted and negotiated, and how eventually came together in a program emphasizing entrepreneurship as a way to build religious leadership among Black Muslim students.

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As I arrived at the school to attend an MSA meeting for the first time, I climbed up the steep staircase to the second floor, where the middle school classrooms were. Mrs. Penney’s room was located at the end of the hall. As I entered her room, I wondered whether I should put on a hijab or not. After all, this was the Muslim club, and perhaps I should present myself as a practicing Muslim wearing the hijab. I wasn’t sure how

“Muslimness” would be enacted, what expectations there might be. Mrs. Penney herself always covered, wearing an overgarment and Black khimar as her standard teaching outfit. Even after thinking about Mrs. Penney’s self-presentation as a Muslim teacher at school however, I decided against covering. Since I typically didn’t wear the hijab except during worship at mosques, I didn’t want to appear disingenuous by putting on a hijab at this moment. Apprehensive because of my decision but also excited to meet the MSA students, I entered Room 200.

There were about 20 students in the classroom - most were young women (15 students or so) who looked like a mix of middle and high school students. About half of the girls wore the hijab, the other half did not. All the students appeared phenotypically Black, though I knew from Mrs. Penney’s description that there was a mix of both West African and African American students in the club. There were 5 young men in the room along with another Muslim teacher in the school, Mr. Hussam, who taught high school English.

“Assalamu-alaikum,” I said to the people in the room, to which Mr. Hussam and a few students replied, “Walaikum-as-salam.” I scanned the room, but I didn’t see Mrs. Penney. Mr. Hussam explained, “She is getting the snacks for today’s meeting. Sister (an honorific for Muslim woman). Why don’t you take a seat in the meantime?” Mr. Hussam wore a *thobe* (long covering for Muslim men), a *kufi* (a skullcap for Muslim men), and round rimmed glasses. He greeted me in a soft-spoken voice. I introduced myself as the PhD student who was interested in learning more about MSA. Mr. Hussam nodded, “Mrs.

Penney told me about your project. It sounds very interesting, and I would like to help.” I thanked him for his support.

As I moved to take my seat, I noticed that most of the middle school girls were sitting on the left side of the room, closest to the door, the high school girls were on the right side of the room near the windows, and the boys were hanging out in the space behind the desks near the one bookshelf in the classroom. I decided to join the middle schoolers, since I knew some of the younger girls. I wondered what the typical gender relations were in the MSA, whether they were as gender-segregated as Marcia Hermansen (2003) had observed in her study of college MSAs in Chicago in the 1990s or more relaxed in terms of gendered interaction similar to the MSAs Fawzi (2019) studied on three college campuses in northeastern United States. As I continued observing the MSA activities throughout the year, I realized that the norms for gender relations were not as strict as they might be in a religious setting. Honors’ MSA was also a student club in a secular K-12 public school space. Most studies to date of MSAs have focused on spaces created on college campuses intentionally for religious practice.

We milled around for a few minutes. I exchanged greetings with some of the middle school girls I had met previously at a Paint Night fundraiser event they had organized last May. The girls remembered me as one of the few non-Honors adults who had shown up to support their fundraiser. Kania, a chatty 2nd generation Malian American 8th grader, recalled, “Yea, I remember you. We had iftar together last May, and I got you the *fufu* (frou frou) donuts!” I told Kania I appreciated her thoughtfulness in taking care of me during the *iftar* (dinner to break to the Ramadan fast) and introducing me to foods from her culture.

Kania quipped, “And you didn’t even get to try all the other foods because people ate all the food!” We lamented over the delicious food we missed out on because there had been 200+ people at the school-sponsored iftar, and we had been at the end of the food line. Kalila, Kania’s friend who was also a 2nd generation Malian American 8th grader, commented, “Yea and the *attieke*, you didn’t get to try that either.” I nodded.

Mrs. Penney arrived, carrying a box with packs of mini Doritos, Sun Chips, Fritos, Chips Ahoy cookies, along with Capri Sun juice packs. She had brought enough snacks for about 30 students and was disappointed that not every MSA member was in attendance. Asia, a 2nd generation Cote d’Ivoire American 11th grader, chimed in “Mrs. Penney, the other girls are at track! They couldn’t make it.” Mrs. Penney was disappointed, “They know how important the first MSA meeting of the year is. I wish they had told me ahead of time, so I wouldn’t have bought as many snacks!” Asia replied, “They told me to tell you they’re sorry.” Mrs. Penney sighed, “Well, alright, but tell them to talk to me next time if they miss the meeting.” Asia said, “Aight, I’ll tell them.”

As she set up the snack station, Mrs. Penney greeted me and thanked me for coming. Personally, I was honored that she had remembered to invite me amongst all the other responsibilities she had at the school. Not only was she a middle school English teacher with two kids herself (who went to better funded schools than Honors outside of the Philadelphia School District), she ran the MSA almost single-handedly - organizing community service events outside of the school, planning fundraisers, and mentoring the MSA students under her care. As I found out from Mrs. Penney, even though Mr. Hussam

said he would help out, it was his first year at the school, and he often didn't support Mrs. Penney as much as she would have liked.

The students sensed that the meeting was about to start as Mrs. Penney finished setting up the snack station. Mr. Hussam asked Mrs. Penney, "can we do *Asr* (later afternoon) prayer before the meeting starts?" Mrs. Penney responded, "Of course! You can pray in the open space in the back near the bookshelf. Do you have prayer rugs?" Mr. Hussam said he had brought his own and had a blanket he could lay on the ground for when the students would touch their forehead to the ground during prayer.

Mr. Hussam asked Mr. Aden, a Muslim enrichment teacher at the school to give the *adhan* (the call to prayer). Mr. Aden obliged. Before giving the *adhan*, he flipped his shirt inside out. Since his shirt had images of people on it, he didn't want to risk invalidating his prayers. Mr. Aden was operating under the general Islamic understanding that one should not be associated with any images when worshipping God. Even though he was clearly not worshipping the images on his shirt, Mr. Aden wanted to make sure he was dressed in the proper way for prayer. Without having another prayer ready outfit available, he decided to flip his shirt inside out to achieve this. However, as he was flipping his shirt, he exposed a little bit of stomach, which caused some of the middle school girls, including Kania and Kalila, to giggle. Ella, another young lady I had met last May who identified as African American and wore a full overgarment to school, made eye contact with me and rolled her eyes, indicating how silly the whole situation was. Here was a Muslim teacher, supposedly an exemplary model of Muslimness, who hadn't come to school properly dressed as a Muslim should.

Mr. Hussam did not seem to notice Mr. Aden's sartorial choices. Instead, after the adhan, Mr. Hussam launched into a short *khutbah* (prayer sermon), speaking about the virtues of the Prophet Muhammad (SWT), particularly as it came to punctuality in prayer. He spoke to the five Muslim boys and Mr. Aden, who listened intently. The topic of punctual prayer seemed intentional – Mr. Hussam seemed to emphasize that religious prayer, even in an afterschool service and leadership club in secular public school, must be conducted punctually. The opportunity to practice one's faith in Honors Academy was facilitated by the Muslim principal, Mrs. Sawyer, and by the teachers at school, who believed that Muslim students should be supported in their faith. Despite lingering concerns by administration about the separation of church and state, prayer within an afterschool club space fit within the multicultural ethos of the school and was subsequently supported by the administration and the teachers.

As he concluded the *khutbah*, Mrs. Penney asked the girls to join in prayer. Kania, Kalila, and Nina responded they couldn't pray because they had their period; Nina said she couldn't because she didn't have her scarf with her. I noticed that even in future MSA meetings, the girls, including the high schoolers, did not participate in prayer. Mrs. Penney shrugged and said "alright," and set up her prayer mat for prayer behind the men. Only one girl, Ariya, who I later found out was an imam's daughter, joined Mrs. Penney in what then became the section for women. Ariya had on a blue shirt, Black hijab, and long Black skirt, colors aligning with the school's dress code. The other girls and I watched silently as the prayer took place. The unison of the movements of prayer, the prostration and the Arabic recitation rang out through Room 200.



When the prayer concluded, the older high school boys said they had to leave. Mr. Hussam asked, “You can’t stay for the meeting?” The three boys responded, “No, Mr. H., we have track, and Abdul gotta go look after his little brother.” In later conversations with one of the boys, he noted that he felt it was his Islamic duty to come for prayer, though he appeared less concerned with the social objectives of the club. Mr. Hussam gave the boys handshakes as they left. Mrs. Penney announced that from then on, MSA meetings would be held once a month, but that every Friday, they will have *Jumuah* (Friday congregational prayers), led by Mr. Hussam. She expressed excitement that the older boys will be involved with MSA because of Mr. Hussam and Mr. Aden. Previously, the boys had been more reluctant to join because they didn’t have Muslim male role models. Mrs. Penney declared, “once track ended in winter, all the boys will return to MSA.” Mr. Hussam exclaimed, “Inshallah!” (God willing).

A few things were clear from these exchanges I observed thus far. The instance of sanctifying the start of the MSA meeting with prayer indicated to me that perhaps MSA was a space for religious practice after all and not just a secular afterschool club. After all, the teachers were freely encouraging school prayer on the grounds of a public school, and no one seemed to mind that perhaps this was blurring the lines of church and state. I wondered if the Muslim principal, Mrs. Sawyer, was aware of teacher-led prayer in the school. From my prior conversations with her, however, I doubted Mrs. Sawyer minded. After all, she and Mrs. Penney had been instrumental in starting the MSA in school in the first place. Even while prayer was important, Mrs. Penney did not ask everyone to pray -

people came to prayer out of their own volition. Therefore, students retained the freedom of choice concerning whether or not to engage in religious practice in the school.

The second issue that became apparent was the importance of self-responsibility. Mrs. Penney was frustrated that the MSA students missing the meeting did not have the personal accountability to check in with her about missing the meeting. It wasn't that she wanted MSA attendance to compete with track - Mrs. Penney understood the importance of afterschool enrichment activities. What Mrs. Penney minded more was the lack of personal responsibility the students displayed in asking a peer student to make excuses for their absence rather than being responsible and telling Mrs. Penney ahead of time. This issue of self-responsibility and accountability would emerge frequently during my participation in MSA, reflecting an ethos which I also observed to be of central importance within the larger school culture at Honors Academy.

Finally, over time it became clear that participants embraced what were sometimes very different models of Islamic self-making. This was evident even in the first meeting in how the student reacted differently to prayer, how they dressed, and how they judged others for their dress choices (ex: Ella's reaction to Mr. Aden). Islamic self-making at Honors was being defined within a contested field of debate and conflicting judgments. It was unclear that day why the students did not pray. In a comment Kalila made a few weeks later, she provided some insight into one student's reason - she said she didn't want to "pray wrong" in front of the other kids (wrong movements or not knowing the surahs). Feelings of self-worth were tied to how one's Muslimness was judged by others in the MSA club space. Yet choosing to pray could both yield praise from the Muslim teachers but also potential

negative judgment from peers for “doing it wrong.” Therefore, while having one’s period was a real reason for students not to pray, not having the proper hijab, and not knowing how to pray were reasons that were more tied to students’ own understanding of what counted as “proper” Muslim behavior appropriate for public spaces like the MSA. Ethnic identities and identifications also played a role in the social interactions among Muslim students in the club, visible, for example, in how West African girls proudly talked about their ethnic foods.

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After the prayers, Mrs. Penney took the lead on running the first MSA meeting of the year.

“Alright, team, let’s get started. Mr. Hussam is going to lead us in a recitation of Al Fatiha (the opening chapter of the Quran commonly used during prayer and at the start of events). Then we are going to go around and do intros. Then start talking about our goals of the year. Sound good?” The students called out, “Alright, yea.”

Mr. Hussam said, “I don’t know all of your names yet, but who wants to lead us in a recitation of Al Fatiha?” The room remained silent. Mr. Hussam said, “Come on, I know you all know the surah, right? Anyone?” His welcoming tone convinced Kania to participate. She said, “ok, I’ll do it.” Mr. Hussam grinned.

Kania: “Audhu billah himina shaitan ir rajim Bismillah hi rahman hi rahim” (In the name of God, the most Merciful, the Most Benevolent). Kania offered a practiced rendition

of the surah (chapter of the Quran), taking only a few pauses and reciting with confidence. It was clear that Kania had had prior practice with Arabic recitation; I recalled she had told me that she regularly attended Islamic Sunday School at a mosque in Southwest Philly during which time, she must have learned Islamic recitation. At the end, Kania didn't say Ameen (Amen) to conclude the surah. Mr. Hassan prompted her, "Say Ameen." "Ameen," Kania concluded. Kalila and Nina clapped after she finished - they were proud of their friend not only for her nearly flawless recitation, but also her courage for reciting in front of 20 other people in the room. The high schoolers nodded as their sign of approval.

Beaming, Mrs. Penney and Mr. Hussam said, "Good work, Kania!" Kania said, "It's no big deal. I like reciting." Mr. Hussam responded, "Hopefully we can continue to encourage others of you to participate in the future as well." Kalila whispered to me, "I don't know how to say Fatiha as well as Kania. I never studied it at home or school." I reassured that it was ok, and she could learn with time, if she wanted. Kania overheard and said, "Oh yea, Kalila doesn't know how to pray." I gave Kania a stern look because I could see that Kalila was uncomfortable for being called out, even though Kania was her friend. Kalila and Kania's exchange made me realize that there were varied levels of Islamic knowledge in the room, with some students having some Islamic knowledge while students like Kalila admitted, they didn't know much about Islam. Kalila also wore the hijab, but Kania did not, delinking potential associations between headcovering and one's level of Islamic knowledge.

After the opening invocation, Mrs. Penney asked students to introduce themselves, asking them to say their name, their grade, and saying how long they were involved in

MSA. Malika was the first one, and she was too shy to speak. Mrs. Penney spoke for her, introducing her as Malika, a Guinean American in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, who had been in the MSA last year and who volunteered at Masjid Jumuah during the MSA's community feedings (explored in Chapter 4). Next, Kania spoke – she said she wanted a space where she could practice her Islam, and help others through volunteering.

A non-Muslim junior, Jared, talked about showing up to MSA because he loved Mrs. Penney. He stated, “I wanna support the club even though I’m not Muslim.” Nina spoke next and introduced herself as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader who joined MSA to “volunteer to feel better about myself.” Ella also mentioned service as a way of giving back to the community. Asia, the 11<sup>th</sup> grader who had made excuses for her track friends, said she came because of the good vibes and to have fun. “This is my 2<sup>nd</sup> year in the MSA!” Ariya, the imam's daughter, says something quietly that I couldn't make out.

Mr. Hussam pauses and says, “Maybe you all can also add something interesting about yourself, something about your culture?” The students ask, “like what you mean? Like what kind of food we eat and stuff?” Mr. Hussam hesitated - “sure, that's fine. I was thinking what language you speak and home or something unique about yourself.” The students nodded.

Ella said her favorite food was mac and cheese. Kalila said rice. A 9<sup>th</sup> grader sitting next to her, Djamila, who identified as a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Guinea, commented in a loud whisper: “African!” The middle girls who overheard the comment, including Kalila, laughed. After all, it was a common stereotype that the African kids at school only ate rice. While others continued sharing their intros and their favorite foods, Mr. Hussam nodded.

While it was not the level of depth he had hoped for with his question - he had wanted students to open up about their West African and African American heritage, Mr. Hussam seemed satisfied that students were beginning to share their personalities and some elements of their culture.

### The MSA Goals: Two Visions

When it was Mr. Hussam's turn to introduce himself, he said that he had lived in Chicago for a few years and finished a teaching degree there before moving back to his hometown, Philly. He spoke about how important this space was for Muslims kids. "I want you to realize that a lot of kids don't have what you do. This space is where you can find protection and practice your identity, a place for mindful reflection." Mr. Hussam didn't specify what the students needed protection from. The assumption was that the protection was against temptations such as drinking, drugs, premarital sex, and other behaviors that plagued kids their age, common concerns within immigrant Muslim communities raising children in the United States (Ewing, 2008). However, observant Muslim parents tend to believe that the strict guidelines of Islamic behavior will protect their Muslim children from such temptations. The MSA at Honors could serve as a space for mindful reflection, a place to slow down and cultivate spirituality.

After Mr. Hussam finished, Mrs. Penney explained her vision of MSA, stating:

"The purpose of the MSA is for mindful reflection, for brainstorming activities, to pay attention to school, community, and global current events, and to have community service attendance. Remember, we want to have unity, service, and leadership to make sure that the MSA runs well."

Mrs. Penney envisioned the MSA as a place for cultivating civic knowledge, enacting service, and a place where students could cultivate good values. Mrs. Penney's emphasis was on developing good values through service and civic engagement. Though she did also mention mindful reflection, after the meeting, she admitted to me: "The mindful reflection piece was more of Mr. Hussam's idea. Honestly, I don't know if we will have time for that because we have so much to plan for and do to run the MSA." In her public presentation, however, Mrs. Penney agreed with Mr. Hussam while also emphasizing a more proactive vision for the club and its everyday activities. Therefore, Mrs. Penney's objective of the MSA was wide-ranging, but mostly tied to prosocial service and less on mindful, purely spiritual reflection. The two visions offered two visions of how students could engage in Islamic self-making as they navigated being Muslim students in a public school. Though both spirituality and business could exist side by side, institutionally, the MSA's policies were structured to favor the business model.

What was striking to me as I continued to observe the MSA over the year was how the emphasis on the values of unity, service, and leadership also mapped onto the larger values of Honors Academy. While Mrs. Penney did not articulate her vision of the values fully during the first MSA meeting, over time, it became clear that her vision of the MSA fit squarely into the values of Honors Academy, particularly self-responsibility and accountability, a point that I will return to later in the chapter.

After the prayer, recitation, and intros concluded, there seemed to be a shift in the room. The meeting became a lot more practical in tone. Mrs. Penney quickly moved through the agenda. She announced the MSA leadership positions - Money Manager,

Secretary, and 2 MSA group leaders who are official thought partners and help lead service projects. Mrs. Penney said that unlike last year, there would be no voting on who would fill these positions. The selection would be by interview with Mrs. Penney and Mr. Hussam. I learned from Mrs. Penney that this shift to a non-democratic system was because the students decided on a leader last year, Mariya, who turned out to be ineffective. Mariya would instigate drama, participate in name-calling behavior, and fail to carry through on service projects she said she would do. The combination of her inability to create unity amongst her peers and her lack of responsibility had left a negative mark on the MSA, which was supposed to coalesce around unity, service, and leadership. Mariya did not attend MSA meetings during the year, and when she did, she was often stirring up “drama,” as Mrs. Penney phrased it. Drama was not conducive to the values MSA emphasized, particularly around unity.

After Mrs. Penney described the leadership positions, she asked who was interested in these positions. She said that the Money Manager position was new and provided a unique opportunity to show leadership and grow one’s business skills. There was quite a bit of jockeying between Jared and Asia who both wanted the Money Manager position. When I asked Jared why he wanted the position, he said he was good with money. When I asked Asia the same question, she said: “I want the position cause I’m good with money and was in the MSA last year. For example, if you had \$500, you would have the option of using it all at once, or investing it in smaller chunks in different programs. I’d go with the second option because investing smartly can maximize your profits!” I was impressed with Asia’s passion. I told her it would be nice if there was a woman in the position.



The discussion about leadership animated the students. The students seemed more excited about managing the money and providing leadership than about the faith aspect (especially Jared who wasn't Muslim). Participation in this club, similar to other student clubs in the school, gave students the opportunity to become leaders and gain prestige, which also, uniquely, providing a place to practice one's Islamic faith, if they so wished, and find ways to engage in Islamic self-making. The potential to gain respect through showing leadership in managing money and model proper Islamic practices, the secular and the sacred, existed simultaneously, with leadership positions arising out of a need to manage the MSA's money faithfully and effectively for the good of the club. Watching Asia and Jared discuss their qualifications made Mrs. Penney smile because they were so passionate about being chosen for that particular leadership position.

Next, Mrs. Penney announced the MSA's community partners, including the Jumuah Masjid, a Salafi leaning mosque in West Philly, where Mrs. Penney's best friend, Mrs. Rua, served as the community liaison. Mrs. Rua was the Masjid's religious leader, Imam Nur's wife and was happy to have students serve food in their community twice a month (the MSA's community feedings). Mrs. Penney also mentioned other community partners the MSA had worked with in the past. These included the resident services and youth programs at the housing authority who helped the MSA student organize a book bag drive last year. Another potential organization to partner with in the future included a youth shelter program that teaches vocational, culinary, and auto mechanic work to the youth at the shelter.

Mrs. Penney mentioned the signup sheets for different activities, including the food drive, the community feeding program, and the academic tutoring, for both academic and religious subjects (which she broke up into two categories). Mrs. Penney called tutoring a form of service to God because you are serving people. In her view, she explained to the students, “service and sharing knowledge are both ways of worshipping God.” The kids could sign up to be tutors or to be tutored in particular subjects. One non-Muslim junior, Mary, asked “do we have to sign up for the religion tutoring?” Mrs. Penney clarified, “No, there are both academic subjects for school like math, science, and English. There are also Islamic ones like Quran and Arabic. You can definitely sign up for the academic tutoring, Mary. You’d be a great tutor!” Mrs. Penney was conscious of including non-Muslim students in the club as well, framing tutoring in itself as an act of worship; not necessarily tutoring tied to Islamic subjects. In Mrs. Penney’s viewpoint, service to God could take “secular” or “sacred” forms and still end up at the same divine end goal of worshipping God. One’s form of Islamic self-making could take diverse forms.

Having primed the students for public service, Mrs. Penney said the first community feeding was coming up at the end of October, and she expected students to sign up. The middle girls, particularly, were very eager to sign up for different service projects on the signup sheet. They did so as the meeting concluded.

The intersection of business ethics and the MSA’s religious goals were constantly in interplay during this first meeting. Mrs. Penney and Mr. Hussam envisioned the function of the MSA differently: Mrs. Penney viewed it as an activity-based service and leadership club, while Mr. Hussam viewed it as a religious sanctuary. While Mrs. Penney eagerly

participated in prayer and encouraged students to pray, even while allowing them the option not to engage, she simultaneously also advocated a business logic to running the club, including in emphasizing the importance of the Money Manager position. Mrs. Penney's vision of the MSA was more as a place to teach "unity, service, and leadership," and less so the mindful reflection that Mr. Hussam espoused.

The two visions of the club were received differently by the students. Most of the students regarded Mrs. Penney with great respect and admiration. They found Mr. Hussam to be nice but also different. "He's a little weird cause he always on about something deep, but I like him," Asia stated emphatically to me a few weeks later. Mr. Hussam worked hard to create spaces for discussions that emphasized cultural histories (West African histories, for example), discussions about events around the Muslim world (he led a discussion about the persecution of the Uyghurs in China), and around leading prayer and worship activities. He also led brainstorming activities about fundraising for MSA. However, he often forgot what notes were taken from one meeting to the next, leading the MSA girls to be frustrated with how slow things moved. Mrs. Penney was a far more effective fundraiser and taught the girls how to raise money efficiently.

Though both MSA adults engaged in both prayerful and business activities, the two leaders' approaches were nonetheless representative of two different views of running the MSA. Mrs. Penney represented a "business model" of the MSA, which emphasized entrepreneurial market skills, while Mr. Hussam emphasized a "mosque model," which emphasized spiritual prayer and reflection. Both forms co-existed simultaneously, offering students different models for practicing Islamic self-making.

Mrs. Penney stressed the organizational elements of the club, focusing on activities that would build name recognition for the MSA as well as give students a chance to be of service, while Mr. Hussam focused on primarily religious activities. On occasion, it appeared that the two leaders' objectives separated the MSA's religious practice from the market operations of MSA. However, as I will argue, the distinction was not so stark. Religious beliefs served to motivate market activities, while the market activities also bolstered support for religious practice and the institutional support for the MSA within Honors Academy. The operationalization of MSA also aligned with the larger values of teaching useful skills that was emphasized in Honors Academy, indicating that at the institutional level, the business model of Islamic self-making was a preferred method within this school context.

## Chapter 4: Aligning Values: Marketing the MSA at Honors Academy

In this chapter, I analyze how Honors Academy's values aligned with those of the MSA as well as how MSA built its institutional presence within the overall management structure of Honors Academy. I first consider how within the purpose and vision of MSA, religion came to be introduced into this secular public as mediated by markets and money. Then I draw from the work of scholars such as Bonnie Urciuoli in analyzing how religion operated within the market fundamentalism infused school culture at Honors Academy. The motivating question throughout the chapter is how religious beliefs create the impetus for market activities as well as how market practices strengthen the expression of religion at school as couched within the larger skills-based ethos that dominates the sense of educational purpose at Honors Academy and educational institutions generally. In their process of Islamic self-making, MSA students understood the importance of the business model of Islam institutionally in the Honors' context. Islamic space-making, or claiming a public recognition of Islam through strengthening the MSA, was a prominent way in which students engaged in Islamic self-making. Claims to space through market efforts bolstered Islamic identities.

The overall mission of Honors Academy was the following: "All students learn the academic and personal skills they need to succeed in higher education, compete in the global economy, and pursue their dreams." Next to the mission was the Code of Conduct: "I choose to be here, I am here to learn and achieve, I am responsible for my actions, I contribute to a safe, respectful, cooperative community, I come with a clear mind and a healthy body. This is my school...I make it shine." In the school's mission statement,

academic and personal skills were front and center. The pursuit of higher education was also tied to economic competence in the global economy. The Code of Conduct elaborated on the “personal skills” mentioned in the mission statement. These personal skills included pursuing achievement (I am here to learn and achieve), cultivating self-responsibility (I am responsible for my actions), and taking care of one’s mind and body (i.e.: self-care).

The Honors Academy administration and teachers believed that achievement, self-responsibility, and self-care (personal skills) can be achieved through cultivating five key personal qualities, including grit, self-control, a sense of responsibility, leadership ability, and interpersonal skills. The teachers worked hard to cultivate these qualities and values in their students. Their underlying assumption was that the acquisition of these skills could translate into better behavior (i.e.: fewer altercations, more compliance with classroom assignments) as well as academic achievement.

The importance of acquiring these attitudes and personal qualities at Honors Academy was clear, even when first entering the school. Posters around the school emphasized ideals associated with cultivating the five key personal qualities. One flyer posted centrally on the 2nd floor stairwell highlighted a quote by Aristotle: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit.” Another poster hanging in the 3rd floor hallway portrayed all Black students taught by white teacher working hard in class; the caption “My mindset is focused, calm, & #self-control.” The importance of repeated positive behaviors, reinforced through a school structure, was hard to miss. The nod to Aristotle was not simply decorative; the idea of practice habituated through

behavior, particularly practices of self-control, was an important perspective undergirding the behavior system at Honors Academy.

The teachers worked hard to cultivate this mindset and skills in their students during classroom time, as well as in afterschool clubs like MSA. Mrs. Penney seemed to always have the Honors values in mind as she developed programming for the students. The values that Mrs. Penney promoted in her work with the MSA, such as unity, service, and leadership, clearly aligned with the school's educational mission and provided a model of behavior for self-making as a Muslim student.

While self-responsibility was not one of the core values explicitly stated in the MSA promotional material (re: welcome flyer), it was a quality that was implicitly emphasized. Self-responsibility was valued throughout the year, but became especially prominent during the month of Ramadan, when fasting students refrained from cussing, and generally controlled their negative impulses. The tenet of self-responsibility was also a value that was enforced in all classrooms and hallway spaces, through the use of a merit and demerit system, tracked through an app called Kickboard. If students behaved well, they received a merit; if they behaved poorly, they received a demerit. Over time, teachers hoped that students would self-regulate their behavior and no longer need tracking apps like Kickboard. The logic of self-responsibility, therefore, permeated the environment of Honors Academy.

In the era of the marketization of education in an increasingly profit-driven world, Urciuoli (2008) argues that the college students in her study had begun to think of themselves as “bundles of skills,” rather than holistic human beings. Urciuoli's students

appear to be fragmented selves defined by their skill set alone. I argue that a similar dynamic operates in Honors Academy due to a similar focus in education generally on educating the workforce for enabling students to acquire skills. While schools historically have aimed to develop student's academic skills and habits, the increasing emphasis on managing behavior through tracking applications and cultivating mindset skills accentuates the salience of behavior management, for the sake of future market success. Although my focus is on middle and high school students rather than college graduates, as in Urciuoli's work, the purpose of developing "skilled selves" was just as strongly emphasized in this setting. In fact, given that 86% (Table 1 in the Appendix) of the student body at Honors qualified for free or reduced price lunch, the development of skills that would equip students for financially stable futures provided much of the impetus for the focus on cultivating "academic and personal skills," at Honors. Though Honors attempted to create these "holistic" selves through cultivation of personal skills, even these personal skills were subsumed under the larger goal of creating successful students able to compete in the global economy post-graduation.

The importance of developing personal skills amongst her students was not lost on Mrs. Penney. While she did not explicitly make a connection between all three of the MSA values and the school valued skills, Mrs. Penney did share a quote from a school administrator that was illustrative of the overlaps between MSA and Honor's Academy's desired behavior and development of useful skills for their students. Without prompting on my part, Mrs. Penney proudly shared:

I know that as kids become more confident in Islam, it changes their academic behavior too. Because the culture, the Assistant Principal of



Culture...Ms. Roberts, she was at a different school, but now she is the AP (Assistant Principal) of all the Culture stuff and Discipline stuff. She told me she loves when Ramadan comes around, as it approaches because all of the behavioral reports decline dramatically. She said kids are just different, and they became more vocal too in saying to their teachers, others, I'm not arguing with you because it's Ramadan. She [Ms. Robert]'s not even Muslim, and she recognized the change in kids. And I think also around the school, I think the positive influence that was happening around the school, other teachers and other admin would jump in and want to do it, it's a good thing, we wanna do this. Cause culturally it's a good thing, but they also saw the positivity that was happening in the school and how kids were really changing, how they were interacting with their peers and their teachers. And there was just this level of accountability that they might not have seen this whole year. And when Principal Sawyer gave her address to the kids, she would say that the behaviors that she sees in them as the iftars approaching and Ramadan, it's evident, you can see it and feel it. This is something we need to draw from all school year long. She came right out and said that to them. This is not something we just do, this is something we need to adapt all school year long. Because for some kids, this is like the best self she has ever seen. That's why we pulled that in that for our powerpoint [during last Ramadan]. What are the Honors mindset that we also see in this month of Ramadan? They are also aligned. You can't say like oh Honors makes me do xyz, no! We see these as a Muslim! You're supposed to be this way too, you need to follow the rules.

In this quote, Mrs. Penney makes several points: She explicitly connects religious practice with improved academic behavior as well as positive behavioral shifts. Administration and teachers recognized this shift in behavior and were enthusiastic about the positive impacts of Ramadan in aligning students with the overall school culture ("cause culturally, it's a good thing, but they also saw the positivity"). Ramadan by itself was a positive celebration of cultural difference (respecting Islam within the purview of multiculturalism), but it also promoted positive school behavior, which was a win-win situation from the administrators' perspectives. The Muslim Principal, Mrs. Sawyer, herself emphasizes how Islam promoted the same values of respectful behavior and self-

control that Honors valued. She argues that instead of limiting this positive behavior during Ramadan, students should embody this positive mindset throughout the year.

Mrs. Penney emphasizes that the positive behaviors that Honors promotes precede the school, i.e.: Islamic values actually accommodate the values of Honors, instead of Honors accommodate the values of Islam. “You can’t say like oh Honors makes me do xyz, no! We see these as a Muslim!” Mrs. Penney also emphasizes the importance of students following the rules, both as an obedient Muslim and as an obedient student: “You’re supposed to be this way too, you need to follow the rules.” The alignment between certain Islamic values and the values at Honors is an ongoing theme throughout my study, particularly emerging again in Chapter 7.

Mrs. Penney worked hard, alongside her staff, to ensure that she explicitly drew parallels between the values of Honors and the purported values in Islam. In her perspective, Islam promoted rule following behavior, as well as accountability and self-policing of negative behavior. Honors too promoted similar “mindset” values. Mrs. Penney, in a sense, “extracted” value of docility from her reading of Islam to suit the purpose of behavior management at Honors Academy. As Foucault theorizes, docile bodies are created through governmental oversight; in fact, over time, the MSA students policed themselves through the language of the school-favored brand of Islamic behavior, which Mrs. Penney had actively aligned with the values of Honors. MSA students understood the preferred form of Islamic self-making to be driven by values of accountability and obedience, as modelled by their teacher and approved by the administrators.

In addition to emphasizing how Islam helped regulate student behavior, Mrs. Penney also drew on Honors Academy's tenets of multiculturalism to build the MSA Club and its recognition within Honors. Drawing on teacher and administrative support for the MSA club, Mrs. Penney created a massively successful MSA infrastructure over the course of five years teaching at Honors. In addition to aligning MSA values with the larger mission of Honors, the institutionalization of the MSA speaks to the embeddedness of the MSA club within the operational functions of the school.

#### The Institutionalization of MSA:

Mrs. Penney and MSA students' efforts to strengthen the presence of Muslims at their school was aided by two main facts: 1) the demographic composition of the school (discussed in the Introduction) 2) the successful institutionalization of Muslims within the larger school space due to efforts by teachers and students in the past.

The students recognized that their purpose to "represent Islam well" was made successful because of a few factors: They had a Muslim woman principal (Mrs. Sawyer) and four caring Muslim teachers at the school (Mrs. Penney, Mr. Hussam, Ms. Areeb, and Mr. Aden). They had an MSA club that received recognition for their service activities (Chapter 5). They had consistently hosted a popular annual iftar (dinner) and lunchtime activities during Ramadan (Chapter 6). They had institutionally approved "propaganda" materials, such as sweatshirts, t-shirts, and lanyards (Chapters 3 and 4). Finally, because Islamic fashion was increasingly becoming popular at school, particularly during Ramadan (Chapter 8). These various elements contributed to Islamic space-making, or claiming a public recognition of Islam, at the school.

Each of these elements of Islamic presence were actively promoted by students and teachers in an effort to carve out an Islamic presence within a traditionally secular public school space. Instead of tapping into the fears of “creeping Sharia” common in many parts of the US (Maira, 2001), the MSA was able to demonstrate how Muslim students could serve as a positive source of leadership and service within Honors Academy. However, in order to maintain the separation of church and state, the club members were intentionally inclusive of other faiths under the tenets of multiculturalism and diversity. Mrs. Penney and MSA students stressed that public service was open to all students, Muslim and non-Muslim. The club also employed a business logic rather than focus on religious activities to drive their club’s growth.

This message of inclusivity seemed clear. Of the 30 regular club members,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the club members were non-Muslim. About  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the students were of West African origin, and one student was from Ethiopia. Occasionally, the students would refer to the club as “Muslim club” or “African” club. The presence of West African students, both Muslim and non-Muslim, gave non-Muslim African students a club they could call their own. Non-Muslim youth (both African and African American) were aware that the club was also had an Islamic component and did not mind. As Jared, the young man interested in becoming a Money Manager, stated “anything Mrs. Penney needs, I’m there for her.” Many students like Jared began attending the club due to their devotion for Mrs. Penney (though he later became busy with an afterschool job). Greatly adored and respected, Mrs. Penney was able to combine her charisma and talent for building institutional culture to create a warm and inclusive space for all students, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

However, the journey to establish the MSA as a viable club at Honors was not an easy one but spoke to the hard work required to institutionalize this club at the school. In the following section, I will highlight how Mrs. Penney's religious beliefs motivated to create Islamic friendly spaces in Honors Academy, demonstrating how religious motivations can shape local markets (i.e.: Honors Academy as a marketplace).

### MSA Markets and Religion

The MSA was officially founded two years prior to my fieldwork. It had begun after Mrs. Penney noticed the lack of pride amongst Muslim students at Honors. Her hope was that pride in religious belief would motivate students to build the MSA club, and she hoped that she could use her own organizational skills to create a space for religious practice within a largely secular school. Through empirical description, I will address how religious beliefs served to motivate market activities within the MSA. Mrs. Penney influenced the creation of a new religious "market" at Honors Academy by creating the infrastructure to support fasting, wearing the hijab, playing games during Ramadan, etc. Through her individual entrepreneurial efforts, Mrs. Penney embodied the Honors characteristics of accountability, discipline, and entrepreneurship, values which she hoped to embody for the MSA students in her charge as a positive form of Islamic self-making.

Mrs. Penney recalls that that when she started at Honors six years ago, "some of the Muslim kids would be shy about displaying that they were Muslim, and I think it was because it was seen as Other" (Interview 4/10/20). Mrs. Penney recounts how the first year she was at Honors, Ramadan started on the second to last day of school. There was a big barbeque scheduled by the school administration on the same day that Ramadan began.

Because she wanted to support Muslim students who may have decided to forego the barbecue, especially if they were fasting, Mrs. Penney opened up her room for these students. She remembers that “not one kid showed up, not a kid.” Mrs. Penney explained that she was not upset because she realized it was difficult for students to reveal themselves as Muslim when it was not recognized at school. The fact that there was a barbecue scheduled on the same day as Ramadan suggested to Mrs. Penney that the administration did not have Muslim students on their radar. Mrs. Penney decided that as one of the only Muslim teachers at the school, it was up to her to create spaces for Muslims. However, when she tried to do so by opening up her room, she realized that the larger social culture of the school amplified the Muslim students’ fears of being too openly Muslim (and showing up to Mrs. Penney’s room on the day of the school barbecue would be seen as uncool). There was no room for religious belief within the secular environment of Honors Academy when Mrs. Penney first began teaching.

Mrs. Penney vowed that she would organize an iftar at Honors, similar to the one she had seen in another of Achievement’s network schools. Mrs. Penney was indignant that Muslim students would hide their identity for so long. She reasoned that “If you were in the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, grade, if you’re choosing not to fast in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup>, what about the later grades, you’re not gonna be able to hide for so long! And why are you hiding for so long?” To Mrs. Penney, the only explanation for students not participating in MSA was individual - students were afraid to be the Other, as she described earlier. Though she herself described the lack of institutional presence of Muslims at Honors, she still attributed the locus of Muslim non-participation on *individual* students. She realized that the solution would be

individually driven as well, in that she would have to organize an iftar herself if Muslim students were to receive institutional support. It was not until Year 4 and Year 6 of her teaching that other Muslim teachers, such as Mrs. Areeb, a math teacher, Mr. Hussam, and Mr. Aden began to teach at Honors, respectively. Much of the lift for creating a space for Muslim students fell on Mrs. Penney. She embodies the spirit of self-sufficiency that Honors advocated for their students.

Mrs. Penney was successful in hosting an Honors iftar at the end of her third year of teaching. However, only 30 people or so, including staff showed, and only a handful of students talked about the importance of Ramadan to the audience. Mrs. Penney remembered this iftar fondly but commented that it was only the beginning of MSA's strong institutional presence at Honors.

In the previous school year (the year before my fieldwork year), there was an active group of seven middle school Muslim girls (African American: Shantell, Zara; West African: Kabeera, Djamila, Mariya, Mariam, and Hidayah) who became the driving force within MSA. The students effectively used their MSA meetings to plan for the 2019 iftar, and learn some religious lessons, including the 99 names of Allah. However, the focus was on the business side of planning for the iftar and fundraising, more so than religious education. Mrs. Penney guided the students in figuring out how to fundraise for the iftar (a leadership skill that a later example in the chapter will illustrate). As Mrs. Penney described the growing improvements in MSA structure and form over the years during our interview, she flagged how the perception of being Muslim shifted as MSA gained institutional power within Honors Academy.

I will say this, as the MSA started to grow as a group. We started to see kids wanting to be a part of MSA. First year, it was just a few kids, but this last year, we definitely had a lot of kids who weren't Muslim that wanted to be a part of MSA. You also saw this shift, in this sense of pride that they felt about being a Muslim. Some kids I had never seen cover before covered for the entire school year. Some kids, you could hear when Ramadan came in, holding each other accountable....Then other non-Muslim kids started to fast with them in solidarity, going into the room (designated for lunch during Ramadan. The middle schoolers are like, I'm gonna come in here with so and so. I asked them, you're not a Muslim, right? No, but I'm fasting today for solidarity. So and so is fasting, so I'm gonna fast too.

Mrs. Penney attributed the shift in MSA's institutional presence to the point where even non-Muslim students wanted to be involved in MSA. She noted how non-Muslim students joined MSA, students who had never worn religious clothing before (Muslim or non-Muslim) began covering, and how even non-Muslim students began to fast in solidarity with their Muslim friends. The idea of self-accountability and self-discipline took hold at Honors in a very concrete way through the act of fasting and was most visible in the MSA lunchrooms and afterschool club space. Another teacher in the school, Ms. Jamison, a junior seminar teacher, also noted the shift in the perception and function of MSA over time.

One thing I will say that I think contributes to Muslim and African students being heard is our MSA. The MSA really wasn't a thing, I don't believe, until a year or two ago. Mrs. Penney and when Mr. Hussam was there, they were taking it on, and they were opening up our building or community things and things like that. As I saw the MSA get stronger, I noticed that our Muslim students have been feeling more comfortable and welcomed and like they have a voice.

Ms. Jamison expressed great admiration for Mrs. Penney's hard work and self-reliance in growing the MSA over time, once again emphasizing the entrepreneurial spirit



that led to the creation of this communal space where African and Muslim students could be heard.

When I asked how the Ramadan structure got set up, Mrs. Penney described that the students had a large role to play in advocating for these student spaces during Ramadan. Since the MSA students needed “a place to pray, a place to go to during lunch,” they talked to individual teachers to find out if the teachers would be willing to host students in their classroom during lunchtime, so students could avoid the cafeteria. MSA students worked with teachers to ensure that there were host teachers for each grade between 7th-12th grade. The MSA members also raised money for games, which they purchased and distributed within the host classrooms, so all students would have lunchtime activities to take their mind off food. More on Ramadan activities and planning are described in Chapter 6.

Mrs. Penney summed up her pride in seeing the shift that occurred as the MSA grew stronger over the years and how that corresponded with the kids getting stronger in their faith over the years. Mrs. Penney was driven by her own faith to create a space for Muslim students in the school. Inspired by her faith, the students also began to grow more entrepreneurial in achieving their goals. Mrs. Penney could not be prouder of the active role that students took in advocating for a “room of their own.” She exclaimed proudly: “For right now, I’m just happy that kids are not going to the lunchroom, I’m just glad that they have a sense of pride. So, I saw them change, a lot of the kids, and I watched them become proud. The same kids who were like oh no, ‘cause this is something weird cause the other kids think it’s weird to the point where they were helping each other.” The pride grew alongside their ability to help each other, to advocate for their goals (setting up the

Ramadan teacher rooms), to exercise self-restraint (not only by fasting but also by not cussing), and to take responsibility for their actions. These were traits that Ramadan particularly solidified, but ones that Mrs. Penney hoped the students would carry with them throughout the remainder of their time at Honors Academy and post-graduation as well. After all, the MSA was just another space in which mindset skills necessary for success were being cultivated.

Mrs. Penney embodied the model of self-reliance, entrepreneurial spirit, and mindset skills like grit, that Honors Academy valued so much; she had demonstrated her Honors “badge” by building the MSA up from nothing to a flourishing afterschool program. While the students certainly did their part in growing the club, without Mrs. Penney’s advocacy, the MSA would not have grown in popularity in just five years. Mrs. Penney drew on her faith and entrepreneurial spirit to create a role for MSA within the existing social structure of Honors.

This section highlighted how religious beliefs served to motivate market activities. Mrs. Penney influenced the creation of a new “market” for all things MSA (fasting, covering, playing games during Ramadan) through her efforts. These market efforts bolstered Islamic space-making, a form of Islamic self-making at an institutional level. The next section will note how the MSA afterschool program flourished through market activities. These examples will return to the second part of the question posed earlier in the chapter: how did market activities bolster support for institutional religious practice, even while religious beliefs motivated market activities? I will share three specific examples: a discussion of business ethics and the “ethnic entrepreneur,” a portrait of how the MSA

tapped into Honors' uniform infrastructure to market their own MSA products, and how discussions about Islamic ethics and business rules highlighted elements of the audit culture within MSA's operational structure.

### Business Ethics and the Ethnic Entrepreneur

The MSA space was used in multiple ways, sometimes as an explicitly "Islamic" space, such as when Mr. Hussam asked students to recite Surahs from the Quran, and other times as an afterschool club which was concerned with fundraising and putting on school-wide events. In the following exchange between Kania and Mr. Hussam, the MSA's missions as an Islamic ethical space, highlighted by Mr. Hussam, brushed up against the view expressed by Kania and Asia, in which making money took precedence over ethical norms.

On a Friday afternoon in January, the students and Mr. Hussam were brainstorming different ways in which the MSA could sponsor events for the rest of the school.

Mr. Hussam: Oh I know a lady, she's Muslim. She puts on a skating event, and she does it in honor of her son whose son was killed.

Kania: We could profit off of it.

Mr. Hussam: She likes to designate a certain number of tickets, and if we tell her, she would give us a discount.

Kania: Exactly, most kids can't afford to go skiing (*she misheard skating as skiing*), so we could profit off of it...

Mr. Hussam: You making us into a money-making machine?

Asia.: So how can we profit off her?

Kania: Because we don't include that we are selling it (the tickets).

Kabeera: That's sketchy.

Kania: But still we could profit off of it. Most people don't need to know what we are doing. We could profit off of it. And if we have extra left...you don't have to tell the customer. She gives us the tickets, she doesn't need to know what we do. I'm not trying to go skiing (personally), I'm trying to make money off it.

Mr. Hussam begins this exchange by sharing that he knows a Muslim woman who puts on a skating event in honor of her son who was killed due to gun violence, a tragic yet common occurrence in Philadelphia. The gravity of his tone or the heaviness of the subject did not seem to reach Kania, whose mind is geared towards making money for MSA. Self-described as having a 'business brain,' Kania was one of the appointed Group Leaders for the year. Even as an 8th grader, she spoke with a confidence that matched that of the high school junior girls, like Asia, who was her Co-Group Leader.

Kania confidently states that she believes the skating event, which she mishears as skiing, could be a perfect opportunity to sell a coveted good to the school population. Since most of Honors Academy has never been skiing, MSA tickets could be lucrative and sell for a good deal of money. Ms. Hussam suggests that the MSA would already be making profit by getting the tickets at a discount - his reasoning is that since the MSA is a student group, as well as Muslim, this Muslim mother would be more willing to sell the tickets for cheaper. Kania doesn't feel that Mr. Hussam is thinking big enough. She suggests that they could profit off it more in addition to getting a discount, to which Asia asks: "so how can we profit off her?" seconding Kania's vision for making money.

Mr. Hussam pushes back on these fiscal schemes by joking with Kania: "You making us into a money-making machine?" Mr. Hussam firmly believes that the MSA is

more of a religious sanctuary, a place in which the pursuit of money is less important than supporting ethical causes like supporting a grieving Muslim mother. His comment gently chides Kania for her scheming plan. Kabeera, a 9th grader, also declares “that’s sketchy” to the fact that the MSA seems to be ripping off this mother financially. However, Kania disregards Mr. Hussam’s slight rebuke as well as her peer’s comment. She explains that it is not sketchy or unethical to resell tickets without the knowledge of the seller - in fact, it is the right of the customer to do whatever they wish with tickets they buy. Kania stands firmly by her vision of money-making over that of ethical qualms that others in the club expressed. She clarifies that she is not selling the tickets for herself (“I’m personally not trying to go skiing”) but trying to make money for the club. Therefore, her motives are pure because they are not self-serving but for the sake of her club. For Kania, Islamic self-making through pursuing market ideas was tied to institutional space-making for the MSA.

Kania’s desire to make money, supported by Asia and a few other girls in the club, is viewed disapprovingly by Mr. Hussam. Though he too understands the need for cash to be able to put on events like the Honors MSA Iftar, he seemed hesitant to turn something tragic (the death of this Muslim mother’s son) and have it associated with profit-making. However, the strength of Kania’s desire for money-making is difficult for him to manage. Ultimately, this skating idea is put on hold - Mr. Hussam said he would discuss it with Mrs. Penney.

A few minutes later, the students begin chatting about Merit Mall, an event run by their school, in which students could exchange their “fake money,” gained through good behavior, to buy items such as chocolates, stationery, writing items, and even sweatshirts.

The conversation also touches on how to organize the annual iftar for the upcoming Ramadan.

Kania: But Merit Mall is for merit, I wanna make money.

Mr. Hussam: Hahaha. Are you Fula?

Kania: No. Actually my grandpa was Fula. My great-grandma is half Fula. So like yea.

Mr. Hussam: Descended.

Kania once again talks about her desire to make money. She chides the fake nature of Merit Mall - it's playing for merit through fake money. She states that she wants to make real money. Mr. Hussam, in response, projects an ethnic stereotype onto Kania. He asks whether she is Fula, a West African tribal ethnic group he associated as being smart with money. Kania does not deny this label and admits that she does have Fula ancestors; she acknowledges that her desire to make money may be derived from her Fula heritage. Kania interprets Mr. Hussam's comment positively and perceives it as a way for her to tap into her heritage to be an entrepreneur: an "ethnic entrepreneur."

Witnessing this exchange, however, I wondered if Mr. Hussam would say the same to Kabeera who was descended from Fula ancestry as well but called out "that's sketchy" earlier in the conversation. Mr. Hussam used an ethnic stereotype to explain Kania's drive for money, easily mapping individual behavior onto ethnic characteristics he had heard of. This ethnicization of behavior was a common trait for Mr. Hussam. While he was very curious about the students with West African heritage and created "ethnic spaces" during MSA meetings for students to discuss their Fula, Bambara, or Mandingo cultures, his quick application of ethnic labels onto individual student behavior was a shorthand way of

managing cultural differences to fit his own ethnicized view of the world rather than empirically grounded. The “ethnic entrepreneur” labelled served to reify the connection between ethnicity and behavior, even while it was positively interpreted by Kania herself.

Mr. Hussam continued to hear student suggestions for MSA events, though increasingly taking a backseat as he realized the financially-driven motivations of the group. In the following conversation, Asia and Kania, for example, speak about their motive, method, and vision for making money, planning the iftar.

Asia: For Iftar, we could have the whole list. So people could donate stuff, other jawn. Instead of us doing it by ourselves. We could have other people contribute to it.

Kania: But that’s what I am saying, the more money we could make, we don’t need people help. Then we can have a field trip at the end of the year.

Asia: No, but the more money we make, we could save and get more stuff for ourselves.

Cause we doing good stuff (*a bit sheepish due to Mr. Hussam’s earlier joking comments*).

Kania: We gotta make money as much as we can, because if we can, we can also put that for next year.

Asia: And we could buy bigger things.

Kania: And go on trips for ourselves.

Mr. Hussam: Ok, we can discuss.

Both Asia and Kania are motivated to make money for MSA “cause we doing good stuff” as Asia explained. Within the purview of the MSA, the girls felt inspired to use their planning, organizing, and fundraising skills to shore up the MSA’s strength through a strong budget, a point of view Mr. Hussam did not seem to understand and tacitly

disapproved. Asia advocated involving other people to collectively contribute to donate stuff for the iftar, such as food and raffle items. That way, the MSA would have to spend less on buying food for iftar and save that money. Kania, however, has more of an individualistic approach to raising money. She views money as a form of independence that would allow MSA members to make their own decisions regarding what kind of activities they wanted to put on, including a field trip at the end of the year. Asia disagrees slightly and advocates for students to save the money for “more stuff” and “bigger things,” such as swag and school gear that could be useful over time rather than one big field trip. Despite the different visions for how the money is to be used, as well as disagreements about individualistic or collectivist approaches to raising money, both girls agree that “we gotta make money as much as we can.” For the girls, money is power and independence. Within a school setting in which the success of events made a club stand out, the girls used money as a currency for increasing MSA’s status and prestige. Mr. Hussam, on the other hand, wanted to keep MSA as a place for reflective thinking, a vision which did not seem appealing to the Group Leaders. Mr. Hussam ultimately also put a hold on this fundraising conversation, since he was taken aback by the amount of ‘money talk’ within a sacred space like MSA.

Mr. Hussam visualized MSA as a religious sanctuary, a safe haven for discussing matters of spirituality. The girls, however, used the space for everyday conversation, frequently bringing in the ‘profane’ topic of money and profit. The conversations above highlighted the competing visions of the club and blurred the distinction between the sacred and the profane. However, as Day and Conboy (2014) found in their study of religious



congregations on Germantown Avenue in Philadelphia, it was through engagement with the public rather than isolation that the power of the religious institution became more of a powerful force amidst the community in which it was embedded. Similar to Day and Conboy's (2014) example, the MSA became more well-known within Honors Academy because MSA members actively fundraised, hosted events, and invited non-Muslim members of the school to their events. The girls spread the MSA's influence by engaging in money talk, an approach which contradicted Mr. Hussam's understanding of the club's purpose. However, for the girls, the business model was successful in establishing Islamic space publicly at the school, which in turn facilitated individual acts of Islamic self-making.

#### Sweatshirts and Lanyards: Tapping into Honors' Uniform Infrastructure

Another fundraising idea that proved very profitable included selling MSA-themed lanyards, T-shirts, and sweatshirts, which proved a big draw for the general student body at Honors. Honors Academy had a strict uniform policy, with a limited range of clothing options and colors for student wear. Black, blue, and grey were accepted colors, and students were allowed to wear apparel that had Honors insignia or printed names of Honors programs and clubs, such as STEM (Math and Science Program). Within this set of sartorial restrictions, MSA Honors sweatshirts and shirts became highly coveted, once they received institutional approval. Mrs. Penney described how last year, she had ordered MSA shirts, which were popular. I noticed students wearing these MSA t-shirts proudly in the classroom and hallways. MSA members sold these shirts at Merit Mall, an event during which students could trade in their merits for coveted items. Asia explained that MSA

students sold MSA shirts and lanyards last year and that “everybody was wearing our shirts.”

This year, grey sweatshirts with the Honors MSA name printed on them in white lettering were even more lucrative. Mrs. Penney surprised the MSA students with sweatshirts, honoring those students who had been active members of the club for 2 years or more. Students just entering the club felt extremely motivated to return next year in anticipation of these free sweatshirts. The middle scholars, particularly, witnessed the ‘cool older kids’ involved actively in MSA and wanted to emulate them. One 7th grade MSA student, Nina, told me, “I just wanna have the cool sweatshirts, like those kids - there aren’t too many other options for fashion, and my mom complains that she has to do laundry too much.” Nina explicitly stated that she wanted to be cool like the high schoolers, a group which included her older sister, Shantell. She also acknowledged that the limited range of clothes allowed at Honors meant that students had to repeat outfits multiple times, and therefore, had to wash their clothes multiple times. Nina’s functional explanation for wanting the MSA sweatshirts was to expand clothing options and decrease parents’ laundry efforts. Her stylistic explanation was the desire to look cool, both to the older students in the club, as well as around the school.

In fact, the MSA sweatshirt was highly regarded in many of the classrooms in which I conducted observations. With MSA students proudly sporting these grey sweatshirts, other students would immediately ask, “How do I get one?” The MSA students said that they could buy one at Merit Mall, or that they could join MSA for two years for a free one. MSA members warned that it was not easy to join - the MSA involved a lot of meetings,

planning, and service work. I noted that only a few of the students who expressed this initial interest in getting a free sweatshirt joined the club. As Nina told me, “they realized it’s not really free after all [to get a sweatshirt in exchanged for 2 years of MSA work].” The sweatshirts became a symbol of hard work, status, and fashion within the Honors school culture. The green lanyards with MSA Honors Academy printed on them were also appreciated, but definitely not as much of a high-ticket item desired by students.

Through these increasingly visible signifiers of the MSA, being Muslim became “normalized in the school,” as Mrs. Penney saw it. She readily admitted that “this was all propaganda, and the kids were like oh, they can wear that, and I need to wear this.” Mrs. Penney had tapped into students’ desire for coolness and public recognition and developed a fashion that could be a piece of ‘propaganda’ to increase the status of MSA at Honors. Even the teachers and staff had begun to purchase the sweatshirts, as evidenced by this conversation that took place during an MSA meeting in February:

“Mrs. Penney: How about lanyards?”

Asia.: We don’t wear lanyards no more.

Kania: Nobody wears lanyards.

Mrs. Penney: They were \$2. We have some already on sale. I can order some more.

Asia.: Nobody gonna buy them. Ms. Mirree [ESL teacher] asked for a sweatshirt though.

Mrs. Penney: I forgot to ask Hussam how much they cost. And how to charge.

Kabeera: How much what cost?

Mrs. Penney: The sweater.

Asia.: People want matching sweaters, and they see it cute.

Kabeera: Marina ask me, Imi ask me, everybody be asking me.

Mariam: A lot of people asking for the price. It looks cute from the back – unity, service, leadership. Everybody tired of the Honors sweatshirts.

Asia and Kania. Even the teachers said it.

Mariam: They coming in the same thing every day. They want something new.

Kania: Mr. Murray [math teacher] has, the janitor has it.

Kalila: Did the sweatshirts come?

Asia: The janitor got the sweatshirt.”

The students expressed the high demand for sweatshirts within Honors Academy. Everyone from the janitor, the middle school math teacher, and friends had begun to inquire when the sweatshirts would arrive, so they could place an order for this article of clothing. Asia said “people want matching sweaters, and they see (that) it cute,” describing her friends’ desires to change up their look and coordinate matching outfits for particular days at school. Asia advises other MSA members to “Have your friends buy the sweatshirts. Cause mine did. People be wanting to buy it cause they like our threads. The shirts are so cute.” Mariam concurs with Asia by saying that the sweatshirt was cute from the back, especially with the MSA logo and purposes very clearly printed: “unity, service, leadership.” Mariam believes that the desire for something new and cute was an important motivation especially since folks are ‘tired’ of wearing the same sweatshirt every year. She also liked that the MSA purpose would be clear to the whole school: the more people purchased the sweatshirts, the more MSA’s positive reputation would grow.

MSA students themselves reflected on how the hoodies and lanyards had changed the MSA's perception at the school. When I asked Maha whether Muslim kids are recognized at school, she responded,

Yea! Last year, we had a shirt, we could only wear our shirt on Friday. Yea, we would get in trouble (if we wore it not on Friday). This year, they let us wear it any day. I feel like Mrs. Penney, and we did too. We were talking about how STEM people be wearing their shirt anytime. I said *we* not. Mrs. Penney complained, I feel like we all did. And the admin, they listened.

Asia, Kania, and Djamila too jumped into the conversation.

“Asia: Last year, for our shirts, we couldn't even wear it.

Kania: We could wear it because it's part of our uniform, we can wear it anytime we want.

Asia. Yea NOW.

Kania.: But last year. They said it was the Friday before feedings only.

Asia: Yea, cause last year, Dean Roberts was being hard.

Djamila: Just now, we can wear it.”

The girls described how institutional support for the MSA sweatshirts was not always universal. Though Kania initially thought the shirts were allowed at all times, after Asia's explanation, she realized that there had been limits on when they could wear the shirt in the previous year. In fact, Dean Roberts had only allowed the MSA sweatshirts once a week on Fridays as a nod to the public service the students would be doing the next day (Saturday). However, once the students complained about the disparity between the STEM students getting to wear their sweatshirts as part of the uniform any day of the week vs. the MSA members limited to wearing their shirts once a week, the administration reconsidered.

Mrs. Penney, who gained increasing recognition at the school as the successful sponsor of this club, was able to convince the administration that her afterschool club should be recognized on par with the STEM program, a select science and math program for highly talented youth. While two members of MSA were also part of STEM, the MSA reach was not as widespread as STEM; neither was MSA an academic program.

However, the popularity of MSA was such that even the rule-abiding Dean Roberts had acceded to Mrs. Penney and the MSA students' request. Even Dean Roberts appreciated the public service that MSA members conducted outside of school, as positive representatives of Honors Academy outside of the school grounds. Dean Roberts, like other teachers and admin, had also come to view the MSA sponsored iftar as one of the signature events at Honors. Due to these reasons, the MSA t-shirts and sweatshirts were now considered as part of the uniform policy, on par with STEM, as Maha described. Mrs. Penney and the MSA students had become recognized on another structural level, solidifying MSA's high status with Honors.

#### The Audit Culture: Islamic Ethics or Business Rules?

While fundraising was well under way in the spring, with students selling Mrs. Penney's banana pudding and candy from Beejay's, the students discussed how they should track sales, enforce rules, and ensure the proper handling of business transactions.

“Kania: A dollar a piece. Don't let anyone finesse you with the money. Like I'm gonna give it to you, no. People be negotiating.

Asia: Don't be capping. Ain't nobody gonna buy chocolates for \$5.

Adeeb: It's like the MSA, that's the whole point (to be truthful).

The exchange begins with Group Leader Kania enforcing the rules of sale for the MSA club members. She warns MSA salespeople not to allow consumers to fool them into selling the candy for less or to delay giving the payment (“I’m gonna give it you (later), no”). Each piece of candy is worth a dollar, no more, no less. Asia, the second Group Leader, also shares some advice: “Don’t be capping. Ain’t nobody gonna buy chocolates for \$5.” Asia understands that candy is very popular amongst Honors students; however, MSA members should not charge more than \$1 for candy, even if it’s more profitable. Plus, in her opinion, not even a foolish, unsavvy consumer would not pay \$5 for candy. Adeeb, a 1st generation Ethiopian immigrant student in 8th grade, responds to Asia’s comment: “Don’t be capping (lying).” Adeeb is confused about why MSA members would lie in the first place. Even though Asia was joking, he reiterated the ethics of Islam forbid dishonest behavior for Muslim salespeople like themselves. No one commented on Adeeb’s point, since it was viewed as obvious that MSA students would be honest in their financial dealings.

However, despite the obviousness of Islamic ethics enjoining honest business dealings, the issue of stealing comes up later in the same conversation.

“Kania: If you get caught stealing from MSA, then you will be enforced.

Asia: There’s no reason we should we doing that. We all trying to have a good time.

Mrs. Penney: This is the receipt, we don’t wanna lose it. We are buying things and selling them, but I’m not pocketing the money.

Kania: Well, we (Muslims) wouldn’t do that.

Mrs. Penney: Listen, I don’t trust everybody. There was a fashion show that did not happen.”

Kania warns the rank and file MSA students not to embezzle MSA money for their own benefit. Asia pushes back on Kania's negative imputation of her peers' motivation. Asia states: "there is no reason we should [or that] we doing that." Drawing on the idea of honesty in Islam, Asia believes that no MSA member *should* be stealing (normative), and neither would they actually steal (realistically). Asia's belief in the honesty of Muslim students is clear.

Mrs. Penney, while also believing in the honesty of MSA members, nonetheless, suggests that everyone should keep all receipts. While the MSA members selling candy had no receipts, for the Money Manager and Group Leaders handling receipts, they should be very careful with tracking all financial transactions. This time, Kania pushes back: "we wouldn't do that." Kania suggests that Muslims, particularly ones in leadership like herself and Asia (as well as Money Manager Mary, who is non-Muslim but an MSA member) would not engage in such dishonest behavior. Mrs. Penney states "Listen, I don't trust everybody. There was a fashion show that did not happen." Mrs. Penney does not believe the MSA leadership is dishonest; to the contrary, she believes in the girls' ability to run a tight ship. However, she advises the MSA leaders to cultivate the best leadership skills (a la: unity, service, leadership). Even if they are unimpeachably trustworthy, it is best practice to keep careful track of all receipts. Mrs. Penney references a fashion show that was organized at Honors two years ago. The individual student who organized the show, who was no longer at the school, had charged \$25/ticket for a fashion show that never took place. Though Mrs. Penney herself had not paid for this fashion show, the recent scam had left her suspicious of people's business motivations. Therefore, she advised the MSA



leaders to engage in an audit culture (Strathern, 2000). Even if Islamic morals certainly kept them grounded, it was wise to pair Islamic morals of honesty with sound business practices, so no one could impute dishonesty for the MSA leaders. Self-accountability was key when aiming to be a good business leader.

In addition to the discussions around Islamic ethics and best business practices, Adeeb asks another thought-provoking question during another MSA meeting in February.

Adeeb: Will you get punished if you don't sell?

Asia (joking): You will get hagged. We will kill you.

Mrs. Penney (joking): We're gonna punish you.

Asia: You don't got to sell.

Kania: If you don't, you will be removed from MSA. I'm sorry but we gotta switch you out with someone.

Mrs. Penney: Adeeb, listen, that was never a problem. The kids know, they will have their dollar ready. I have to go buy the candies.

Concerned with his own business skills, he wonders what would happen if he doesn't sell enough candy to turn a profit for MSA. Asia and Mrs. Penney jokingly tell him that he will be hagged, killed, or punished. Kania too jumps in and says in a semi-serious tone, "you will be removed from MSA...we gotta switch you out with someone." Kania suggests that if Adeeb is an ineffective salesperson, he will be replaced with someone who is more efficient. If he does not pull his weight, he may also be altogether removed from the MSA membership as well. Kania's half-joking tone suggests the importance of selling candy to being a valuable member of the MSA. Particularly in the cause to raise funds for the iftar,

an ineffective salesperson would jeopardize the success of the iftar. Once again, Kania demonstrates a market-based logic to justify one's position in the MSA.

Seeing Adeeb's serious face, Asia decides she's had her fun. She explains gently, "You don't got to sell." Mrs. Penney too reassures Adeeb that candy sales are not difficult. There is enough demand amongst the Honors students that he will have no trouble being an effective salesperson. Adeeb seems reassured. However, Kania's half-joking threat to remove him from MSA lingered in my mind. I realized how much importance Kania (and perhaps other MSA students) prescribed to the act of demonstrating their value to MSA through the amount of candy they were able to sell. Each of these students were acting as entrepreneurs *for the sake of their club*, not to fill their own personal coffers.

From these short exchanges around the art of selling, three points became clear: 1) Islamic ethics for business were in line with the sales policy of the group. Even when students joked about it, it was an underlying code of conduct for students to sell ethically. 2) Mrs. Penney recommended an audit culture even while acknowledging the importance of Islamic business ethics. She did not believe an audit culture invalidated one's own ethical or religious principles but rather reaffirmed them through a practice of accountability. 3) Altruism, loyalty, and marketing strategies combined to form the terrain on which MSA members constructed their value within the club. Though one's membership in MSA was not dependent solely on candy sales, in the context of wanting to contribute to the club, the number of sales one had increased one's popularity within the club. Islamic self-making was tied to being a good businessman for the sake of Islam.

These examples demonstrate how logics of market rationality - fair business practices, self-accountability, and audit practices, increasingly became a normal part of MSA's fundraising operation. The MSA was not just the religious sanctuary that Mr. Hussam had envisioned. It was also a place of business, where leadership was demonstrated through cultivating good business sense and implementing good business practices. Business logics, however, were embedded within an Islamic framework of honesty and accountability, combining the logics of business with the ethics of religious reform. The MSA leaders demonstrated altruistic leadership and service to one's club within the matrix of market accountability.

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I have depicted how a desire to practice Islam in the school motivated the expansion of Islamic spaces within Honors Academy, yet market activities also bolstered institutional support for the MSA. The operationalization of MSA also aligned with the larger values of teaching useful personal skills that was emphasized in Honors Academy's mission statement and code of conduct. Institutional space-making through business success was one form of Islamic self-making that allowed students to feel pride and confidence in publicly practicing their faith.

Yet, how did MSA students in Honors Academy make sense of the intersection between the market and their Islamic beliefs? And what might the connection Mrs. Penney makes between Islamic service and entrepreneurship suggest about how religious values may become neoliberalized in relation to principles of market fundamentalism? Anthropologist Daromir Rudnyckyj's (2009) theory of spiritual economies, I argue,

provides a productive formulation of the interrelationship between Islam and economics that is useful in engaging these questions broadly and those I raise specifically. I turn now to consider the insights his work provides into what he refers to as spiritual economies.

### The Spiritual Economy

Rudnyckyj (2009) defines the concept of spiritual economies as composed of three components: “1) objectifying spirituality as a site of management and intervention, 2) reconfiguring work as a form of worship and religious duty; and 3) inculcating ethics of individuality accountability that are deemed commensurable with neoliberal norms of transparency, productivity, and rationalization for purposes of profit...these three components enabled a conjunction of Islam and neoliberalism” (Rudnyckyj, 2009, 105-106). He depicts how the domains of religion and economics, in this case, at the site of a steel plant in Indonesia, come together to create an assemblage of Islam and neoliberalism. Through a series of Islamic training workshops, the factory administration hopes to inculcate Islamic values amongst workers that align with the needs of their business. The workshop trainers emphasize that Islamic teachings are the well-spring for ideas of individual accountability to God, punctuality, and hard work, values which easily translate to factory appropriate self-management skills. Through a series of training sessions, work itself comes to be defined as a site of worship, while the ethical values in Islam and new norms of the workplace (transparency, productivity, and rationalization) align perfectly. The concept of spiritual economy hinges on a brand of Islam that is amenable to management and self-accountability.

The concept of spiritual economies spans two domains, to create “a new ethical orientation toward oneself, one's work, and one's collectivity.” However, Islam is not simply instrumental in this process of enhancing worker productivity. The trainers articulate that *self-discipline, accountability, and entrepreneurship* are values that can improve one’s ethical conduct, both in the workplace and in the realm of one’s personal life. Islam was both a spiritual as well as a technical resource for improving one’s professional and personal life.

I argue that Rudnyckyj’s (2008) concept of spiritual economy reflects the kinds of values that also became clear through observations of the Honors MSA. Just as Islamic values combined with business managerial techniques within an Indonesian steel plant to motivate Muslim workers, within the Honors MSA as well, a particular brand of Islam becomes a source for managing behavior. Mrs. Penney urges obedience as a central tenet being a good Muslim and a good student within Honors. Secondly, work, in a similar way to the steel workers, becomes a source of worship for the MSA students. Tutoring itself becomes a form of worship, according to Mrs. Penney, and fundraising becomes a way to serve the MSA. Finally, ideologies of self-governance, accountability, and entrepreneurship that were common in Rudnyckyj’s study (2008) align with the values emphasized within the MSA: disciplining oneself through fasting, keeping receipts, and fundraising, respectively. The deliberate selection of particular Islamic values to promote business practices becomes a hallmark of the MSA at Honors, privileging the business model of the MSA over the spiritual “mosque” model that Mr. Hussam advocated, which I will describe in a later section.

While Rudnyckyj's concept of spiritual economy sheds light on some aspects of what I observed at Honors, significant differences between the contexts Rudnyckyj and I studied also brings into relief variations in how spiritual economies are forged and are formative. The MSA has less of a connection to the political economic effect of neoliberalism that Rudnyckyj focuses on. The scope of Rudnyckyj's study considers Indonesia's political economy, linking business practices at a national and even global scale. In contrast, my study focuses on how self-governance and cultivation of new mindsets occurs amongst students in a charter school. Rudnyckyj is also concerned with religious resurgence and economic globalization, while my scope is much more local. (Although Salafi networks are global, and Salafi culture did influence cultural behavior at the school - explored more in Chapter 8). Ganti (2014), in his review of scholarship on neoliberalism suggests that neoliberalism can denote both political contexts and socioeconomic phenomena on a large scale as well as refer to studies that focus on the production of selves and subjectivities on a more local scale (Ganti, 2014, 91). While these scales are connected, the scope of the study varies; my study is concerned with the latter scale. I argue that while the students are certainly driven by notions of profiteering and cultivating entrepreneurial selves, these behaviors do not map directly onto the larger scale political economy-oriented studies of neoliberalism, a term which is often itself overused in a great deal of scholarship without a particular defined meaning.

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This chapter provided an account of how a business model for the MSA, promoted by Mrs. Penney, prevailed over the mosque model for the MSA, advocated by Mr. Hussam.

While the MSA students engaged in acts of religious prayer and recitation of Quranic scripture, the majority of the student dedicated their time to planning and executing fundraising activities.

Throughout the chapter, I considered the interrelationships between religious beliefs and the ethos of market fundamentalism within the context of the MSA. By tapping into a rhetoric of multiculturalism and supporting study identities at Honors, Mrs. Penney was able to establish the MSA through herculean efforts. She built an institutional presence within the overall management structure of Honors Academy by aligning Islamic values with values of discipline, accountability, and entrepreneurship emphasized at Honors. By aligning MSA values with the Honors values, Mrs. Penney successfully created an environment in which MSA's version of Islam and the consumer market at Honors (candy, sweatshirts, lanyard, etc.) were interwoven seamlessly. Like Rudnyckyj's study of Islamic motivations driving workers at an Indonesia steel plant, within the MSA, religious beliefs created the impetus for market activities. These market practices, in turns, strengthened the "business model" version of Islamic space-making and self-making at school, all couched within the larger multicultural, skills-based ethos within Honors Academy.

## Chapter 5: The “Service MSA Student”

Located at the intersection of a busy street, Masjid Jumuah is visible to all street passersby. On a particular Saturday afternoon, I observed the street as the Honors MSA students set up their feeding station for their bimonthly community feeding program. There was an elderly Black Muslim man with a kufi (skullcap) who had setup a plastic table a few feet away from the mosque entrance, selling handbags and books. Another middle-aged man who sold shampoos, Tide, and other knickknacks from his car to passersby. Also visible were a group of older men, some in wheelchairs, eating together, chatting, and sometimes just looking at people walking down the street. I watched a Muslim woman in a red overgarment with her sneakers on, walking swiftly down the sidewalks. Another older woman hugged a man in a wheelchair in front of Masjid Jumuah’s food table, indicating their acquaintance with each other.

We received a lot of foot traffic because the masjid, and the MSA students’ food setup was right on the sidewalk next to the Family Dollar. Due to the convenient location, the students became used to a lot of people walking past and wanting free food. The MSA students were able to interact with members of the community as they passed out food on the sidewalks. I wondered if exposure to different kinds of people was one of the reasons that Mrs. Penney had set up this community feeding program for her MSA students.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I examined how two models of how to run an Islamic club that were being promoted within the MSA: one that envisioned the MSA as a religious sanctuary while the other viewed the MSA as a multicultural, business-skills oriented



afterschool club space that would teach students how to be productive members of the school community and successful postgraduates in the future. A commitment in the school to what I argue is a form of multiculturalism, moreover, provided an opening for bringing religion into the public school; in addition, the influential and charismatic Mrs. Penney aligned MSA with this vision of multiculturalism as a strategy of Islamic space-making.

In this chapter, I present another model of Islamic personhood: that of the “service MSA student.” Instead of taking place within the spatial bounds of Honors Academy the MSA members engaged in community feedings in a low-income neighborhood of West Philadelphia. Since one of the pillars for the MSA was “service” (unity, service, leadership), Mrs. Penney envisioned service to the community as one of the core elements of enacting a pious Muslim identity for the Muslim MSA students. Drawing on the longstanding history of community uplift programs prompted by Black Muslim groups, including but not limited to the Nation of Islam, Mrs. Penney’s community feeding program built on a historical foundation of religious and racial uplift programs (Jeffries, 2014; Curtis, 2021).

For the non-Muslim MSA students under her charge, Mrs. Penney hoped that bimonthly community feedings would instill an ethics of service. Her form of MSA service, therefore, tapped into a non-religious, inclusive ethics of service; simultaneously, however, because the feedings were taking place within a mosque, Mrs. Penney also provided an opportunity for Muslim students to enact a pious identity. Though often overlapping, there were moments when the Islamic and non-Islamic models of service came into conflict, demonstrating the limits of MSA’s “unity” in the context of an explicitly Islamic setting

like a mosque. This understanding of “disunity” was one that students learned, despite Mrs. Penney’s attempts to model “unity” at all times, demonstrating the limits of Honor’s Academy’s attempts to create a unified student body who overlooked differences in pursuit of postsecondary success.

The “service MSA student” also operated within a charter school and an increasingly market-driven city. Enacting piety through charity in the hood (Khabeer, 2016) not only fulfilled the MSA’s mission of service and allowed MSA students to gain accolades at Honors Academy. The MSA’s service provision also was a crucial element of larger market operations within the city of Philadelphia. Religious service provision was not separate from market reforms but part and parcel of the accelerated restructuring of social services within the city. What was unique about the MSA’s involvement in Masjid Jumuah was the interlocking nature of school sponsored weekend volunteering, mosque outreach, and social service provision on the streets of West Philadelphia, turning MSA students into agents of economic restructuring. Simultaneously, the students also tapped into a larger history of Black Muslim service traditions, which practiced community uplift through providing food and social services to fellow co-religionists. The community feeding program, therefore, built on both the tradition of racial uplift programs while also serving as a manifestation of economic restructuring.

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Government restructuring of public services accelerated in Philadelphia in the last two decades, operating in the field of public education and social service (Cucchiara, 2013). In her study of Philadelphia Public Schools, Cucchiara (2013) notes how

underfunded schools struggled to survive, while more successful schools engaged in rebranding to recruit and attract more wealthy students. McWilliams (2019) notes how widespread school closings affected the Philadelphia Public schools and traces how one school manages to survive due to a massive rebranding effort. Both scholars note how economic survival for struggling schools hinged on rebranding and attracting more resources and services. This logic of rebranding and partnering with entities that provided capital was crucial in sectors outside of the school system as well. Philadelphia's public service facing organizations also had to engage in this process of resource recruitment (Cucchiara, 2013; McWilliams, 2019). A larger market restructuring of Philadelphia's service sector trickled down and provided the context in which institutions such as Masjid Jumuah and individual programs such as the MSA's community feedings operated, functioned as service providers in a city starved of government social services. This process of social services, including food provision, being increasingly outsourced to non-government organizations is not unique to Philadelphia. In fact, restructuring of social services, particularly in economically strapped urban areas, is an ongoing process across the US and globally.

In Philadelphia, the network of food providers included Masjid Jumuah, the site at which the food was served and Muslims Serve, a faith-based food distribution agency which provided the meals to serve; Muslims Serve in turns partnered with other local nonprofits such as Philabundance. The City of Philadelphia's Office of Homeless Services (OHS) was also listed as a partner on the Muslims Serve website, though it was unclear whether the support was financial or strategic. My interview with a local Muslims Serve

board member revealed that the majority of funding was through individual and nonprofit networks with some support from local government: “Anyone can donate monetarily. A few grants – some from the city, one from Islamic Relief. All monetary donations from community and some in kind donations of produce and meat from connections with suppliers.”

While OHS’s involvement suggests that local government was not unattached from nonprofit service provision or monetary assistance, it was clear from the interview that the majority of donations were in kind individual donations. The structure of the food preparation and distribution also fell on non-profit labor. The board member described that “the food used to be cooked by our executive director Abdul Qawi with help from volunteers. I’m not sure who cooks now – Abdul Qawi wanted to transition to more relation-building and leadership stuff.” This explanation highlights that the labor of nonprofit leaders, such as Abdul Qawi, was essential to fulfilling the mission of social service provision in the streets of Philadelphia. While governmental support was not absent, it was outsourced to networks of nonprofit providers, which often experience staff turnover and over-reliance on volunteers to provide food for hungry people.

Instead of publicly funded services, much of the community feedings were driven by private donations. The necessity of private funding was a result of the increasingly pared down social service infrastructure in the city of Philadelphia, which is chronically underfunded and striving to support its high percentage of impoverished city residents (Cucchiara, 2013). This marketization of public services impacted many sectors, including the education sector (proliferation of charter schools, of which Honors is one), as well as

the outsourcing of public services to private funders (such as Muslims Serve). This larger restructuring of Philadelphia's service sector is the larger context in which the MSA's community feedings operated.

In analyzing the work of the "service Muslim," I draw upon Vincanne Adams' (2012) study of the role of nonprofits in New Orleans after the 2005 devastation left by Hurricane Katrina. Adams notes how charities became a primary source of labor hours to clean up New Orleans after the devastation; in fact, seven out of the ten private charities most involved were faith-based charities. Adams reviews how neoliberalism since the 1970s has shifted the burden of care for the poor and disenfranchised on private and faith-based organizations (Somers, 2008) and points out how public and private financing were deployed to make money for corporations who became involved in the relief efforts. Adams (2012) pointed out how private philanthropy and corporate finance used unpaid labor from religious organizations to profit from their own operations and how religious volunteers remained unpaid in the service of faith-based charity. The privatization of relief efforts marked the declining service provision arm of the government. Ganti (2014) notes how neoliberalism is not only concerned with the belief in markets over state intervention, as is clear in Adams' study, but is also a concerted political effort to drastically reduce the role of the state in social services.

The deliberative downsizing of state efforts results in neoliberal reforms that also shape the role of religious charity organizations and individuals globally, including in Italy, as Andrea Muehlebach (2012) studied. Muehlebach references David Harvey, who once quoted that neoliberalism dissolves "all forms of social solidarity . . . in favor of

individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values” (Harvey, 2007, 23). Muehlebach (2012) however posits that instead of the complete absence of solidarity, as Harvey posited, the state instead channels religious expressions of charity and love into replacing its social service duties; the state also used volunteerism as an important tool for capitalist production, which maximizes labor at no cost. Muehlebach traces how Italian citizens take up the role of charity providers, engaging in acts of volunteerism in the absence of state social service programs. However, she also points out how Italian citizens also find counterhegemonic spaces within this larger neoliberal program by finding real moments of ethical solidarity with their fellow man, thereby pointing out how the neoliberal project is not totalitarian.

While religious charity certainly existed before the intensification of neoliberal policies, Adams (2012) and Muehlebach (2012) are attentive to the ways in which these volunteering efforts are deployed by corporate entities for profit-making purposes and by the state for greater privatization of social services, respectively. Religious parties adapt to become superlative charity providers within a new system of partnership between corporate, private, and public efforts.

I posit that the Honors MSA’s religious volunteering efforts also operate within this larger privatization of social services within the increasing market-driven order in the city of Philadelphia, as the previous section on program funding suggested. The combination of private funding, the deployment of religious volunteering, and the privatization of social services like food provision coalesced to form a system of privatized religious charity situated within an ever increasing market-driven economy. These charitable services were

most prevalent in socioeconomically depressed areas of the city, referred to by some MSA students as the “hood,” a term which will be interrogated and complexified in later sections of the chapter.

Simultaneously, however, the community feeding program, as envisioned by Mrs. Penney, also emerged out of historical efforts of community uplift, common amongst Black Muslim organizations such as the Nation of Islam. Curtis (2021) notes how Elijah Muhammad emphasized economic self-determination for black people, himself owning several farms, a dairy, a meat processing plant, and by the 1970s, a multi-million dollar fish import business called Whiting H & G (Curtis, 2021, 664). Members of the Nation were employed in these businesses as well as opening up Salam restaurants, groceries, and bakeries. Women of the Nation as well gained great success in selling bean pies and used the proceeds to fund community programs (Jeffries, 2014). The emphasis on market efforts emphasized economic self-determination, without having to be dependent on white-dominated businesses. The emphasis of the Nation was less on charity and more on employment; however, community uplift efforts included helping the less fortunate until they could stand on their feet (Jeffries, 2014). In fact, members of the Nation had to pay an internal tax or zakat (charitable donations) in order to support community efforts at racial uplift. Mrs. Penney, as a Black Muslim woman familiar with the history of community uplift in Black communities, hoped that the community feedings would serve as a form of religious service rooted in black uplift programs, even as she operated this program within the larger market context in Philadelphia.

### The MSA as a Community Service Club

The charter school system in Philadelphia also operated within the larger charterization occurring in Philadelphia in the past two decades, as discussed earlier in the chapter (Cucchiara, 2013; McWilliams, 2019). While operating within this market-driven school system, Principal Sawyer, the female Black Muslim principal at Honors, had a vision for how she wanted to cultivate success at Honors Academy, a competitive charter school within the Philadelphia School System. Honors' mission statement stated: "Our Mission: All Students Learn the Academic and Personal Skills they Need to Succeed in Higher Education, Compete in the Global Economy, and Pursue their Dreams." Recalling that the mission statement of the school emphasized building students "personal skills" for postgraduate access, Mrs. Sawyer hoped that clubs could cultivate these skills amongst her students. According to the school website, in fact, Mrs. Sawyer's goals included creating a rich academic and extracurricular culture at Hardy as well as working with students and families to create even more opportunities both inside and outside of the school community. Additionally, the website also highlighted that the Dean of Students recommended intervention supports for students who are misbehaving. These intervention supports include, but are not limited to, community service. Community service, therefore, was viewed as both an incentive as well as a preventative measure for student behavior.

Mrs. Sawyer's hopes for the afterschool club space were reflected in academic literature. Prior studies offer insight into how the MSA afterschool program at Honors at times operated as a service learning club. Noam and colleagues (2003) outline three overall purposes for instituting afterschool clubs. One is to promote academic alignment through



clubs focused on supplemental tutoring or enhancement of skills, such as geography or robotics club. The other is to allow students to enjoy athletic or leisure activities and develop leadership skills and democratic participation. Schultz et. al (2005) cite an additional component of afterschool clubs: service learning activities that may not directly be linked to school learning.

Some clubs are intentionally run within school grounds to closely align academic priorities with afterschool enrichment activities. The purpose of these clubs is internal facing. Many scholars have advocated for these intentionally carved out school spaces for young people (Weis & Fine, 2000; Fine and Weis, 2003). Other scholars have called on educators to envision school spaces as extending beyond the physical school building itself (Schultz, 2002, 2003). Clubs may be physically based in school but draw on community connections to organize program activities (Dryfoos, 1998, 1999; Polman, 2004); these clubs are more outward facing.

Mrs. Penney framed part of the MSA's mission as a service learning club, one of the three purposes for which afterschool clubs exist. Though the MSA club fulfilled elements of the academic and leadership component mentioned in literature, I draw on Schultz et. al's (2005) insight to analyze the community service arm of the MSA club in this chapter. In addition to the MSA's tutoring component (described briefly below), it served more as a club for students to develop leadership and fundraising skills (Chapters 3 and 4) and as a service-learning club. The community feedings at Masjid Jumuah, a Salafi leaning masjid in West Philadelphia, represented an outward facing, school-based volunteering program.

The MSA flyer reflected the leadership and service component of the club most strongly, highlighting the on and off campus opportunities. “The Muslim Students’ Association strives to build unity through leadership and service. We aim to provide a program for students at Honors Academy for all backgrounds and levels of knowledge to learn and meet with other Muslims on and off campus in order to serve the community.” This flyer captured the importance Mrs. Penney placed on serving the community off campus as well, particularly the Black Muslim community, in addition to building the strength of MSA within Honors Academy (Chapters 3 and 4).

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Participating in community feedings were viewed by Mrs. Penney and the MSA students as a central part of being an active member of the MSA. In the last two weekends of every month, the students trekked all the way from Southwest Philly to an urban, Salafi-leaning storefront mosque in the middle of a busy section of Lancaster Avenue in West Philly, next to a Family Dollar, which was frequented by members of the community. Around Philadelphia, Lancaster Avenue is well-known for hosting many Muslim institutions, such as mosques, stores selling Islamic fashion items and incense, as well as halal restaurants. Masjid Jumuah was located in the middle of this bustle. A few blocks down the street was another well-known masjid in Philadelphia which was viewed by members of Masjid Jumuah as serving more of the “intellectual” Black Muslims. A few churches were also in the neighborhood radius close to Masjid Jumuah. 99% of the neighborhood residents were African American.

For students in Southwest Philadelphia to reach the masjid in West Philadelphia, some students received rides from parents, others took SEPTA (subway in Philly), while others were picked up by Mrs. Penney at their homes. Mrs. Penney herself drove all the way from the suburbs of Cheltenham. When I asked why she had chosen this particular mosque, Mrs. Penney explained that her best friend from college, also a Black Muslim woman, is the wife of the imam of this mosque, Imam Noor. Even after she had moved away from the Salafi views into more mainstream Islam, Mrs. Penney and Mrs. Rua had kept in touch. Mrs. Rua had spoken of the many poor people who frequented the streets in front of the masjid. In fact, her husband, Imam Nur, had chosen to serve at this storefront masjid because he wanted to make an impact on the community by bringing the “light of Islam” to this poor neighborhood (his words). Imam Nur explained that the community feedings were both an attempt to provide sustenance to poor community members, as well as an act of dawah (proselytization) for neighborhood residents to be drawn towards Islam. The mosque leadership hoped that the adherent’s public service and compassion, demonstrated through these feedings, would compel people to learn more about Islam. Imam Nur’s mosque joined a long tradition of storefront mosques that “constitute a specifically Muslim reusage and makeover of the quintessential urban venue, the commercial storefront” (Slymovics, 1996).

It was within this context that Mrs. Penney and Mrs. Rua co-organized the community feedings. From Mrs. Penney’s perspective, the feedings were a chance for MSA members to get exposure to the larger public - “common people” outside of school and learn more about the ethics of service that was central to her understanding of

Islam. She shared: “I want the students to give back, to know they are connected to their community, you know, and to do some good along the way, especially through the religious connection.” Mrs. Penney’s emphasis on community and religion was a key factor in the site she had chosen for the MSA’s “community feedings,” as she called these bimonthly sessions. Her idea for community feedings at the masjid was inspired by her desire to give back to the Black Muslim community, which historically engaged in community racial uplift programs.

### Charity in the “Hood”

Mrs. Penney and the students viewed the community feedings as acts of volunteering to “give back” to the community. However, the students were initially nervous about interacting with members of the community, since these were West Philly community members and street-goers they had never met. Commuting from Southwest Philadelphia via car or SEPTA, these students travelled to the ‘hood’ in order to perform acts of charity.

The term ‘hood’ has been soundly critiqued in recent academic literature (Ramos Zayas, 2007, Khabeer, 2018). In many instances, the hood came to stand in for inner city Black “delinquency,” poverty, and a place that lacked resources and services for its residents (Khabeer, 2018). The hood has a negative connotation. However, when discussing the community feedings with students, the MSA volunteers expressed their service and the ‘hood’ in the following ways:

Kania: “We are going into the community, you know, like the hood, cause it’s a poor area. They need the food, and we can do zakat (Islamic charity).”

Kamal: “It’s about giving back to those that don’t have, like charity...”

Nina: “It’s doing Islam good stuff. Like sharing what we have and showing how Islam is good. Good in the hood (laughs)”

As Khabeer’s (2018) observed in her study of spatial segregation within Muslim communities in Chicago: “In this spatial calculus there were some instances in which the ‘hood, as a place, could be tied to Muslim piety - namely as a site of charitable service and therefore a place to perform piety.” Khabeer (2018) describes how suburban Muslims, primarily South Asian and Arab, would travel to the hood, primarily Black neighborhoods, in order to perform charity, which served as a form of Islamic piety. The term hood, in Khabeer’s (2018) study is re-oriented from its previously negative association with a positive connotation of the “neighborhood.”

For MSA students like Kania and Nina, both Muslim youth, the hood was a place to perform Islamic charity. Both young women connected Islamic charity and “good” stuff through volunteering with a religious motivation to show “how Islam is good.” It was unclear whether the students’ viewed the hood ‘negatively,’ or simply as the backdrop for their enactment of Islamic piety. However, it was clear that they felt comfortable using terms like the hood.

The term charity itself also has problematic connotations in anthropological literature (Muehlebach, 2012). Underlying the critiques is the idea that charity captures an unequal relationship between the ‘givers,’ and the ‘recipients,’ of said ‘charitable’ service. What this term often obscures is the way that racial and class differences can mediate the degree to which ‘charity’ is viewed as unequal or re-inscribing differences between the volunteers and the receivers. In the MSA students’ case as volunteers, they were also

primarily Black youth, some Muslim, some non-Muslim. Those they “fed” were also Black. Therefore, it was less race than socioeconomic position that separated the MSA students from the street-goers. Ironically, however, some of these MSA members themselves came from low-income families (according to the Free and Reduced Price lunch records at Honors). The act of serving food to the ‘poor,’ consequently, was complex. Despite sharing similar racial and SES backgrounds, the MSA students still realized their privilege in having access to food, in contrast to the food insecure individuals they fed on the street.

Youniss (1997) describes a similar case of working class, Black youth in a Catholic school, serving food in the St. Francis soup kitchen as part of a service-learning project. Youniss (1997) demonstrates how the group of Black student volunteers (as well as some white peers) developed an activist sense of identity in three ways. Students learned about the depth of social problems, such as hunger and poverty and finding ways to alleviate it. Youniss (1997) notes that “being appreciated for helping another may be particularly powerful for Black adolescents who believe that they are regarded with suspicion by strangers” (Youniss, 1997, 113). Secondly, students began to believe that societal change is possible, and thirdly, students felt they had a moral imperative to confront issues of poverty and food insecurity. Each of these realizations came about through explicit discussions between the organizing teacher and the students about the conversations they had with people at the soup kitchen in connection to larger social issues like hunger or homelessness. Black students developed a consciousness that systematic change was necessary and possible.

In contrast to Youniss's (1997) study, the MSA community feeding program was not set up to systematically critique poverty or hunger. Mrs. Penney framed the feedings as "giving back," as a form of charity. In her construction of the "community feeding," program, the motive was to serve, not to change systematic structures of poverty. While Youniss's (1997) was conducted by students in a Catholic school, the secular motivations of service were more apparent in the way that service delivery was framed.

For Honors' MSA students, a religious charity model was the lens through which they engaged in the community feedings, not a goal towards social consciousness raising or racial uplift. This outlook was clear in the reflective comments of two students. One non-Muslim MSA student, Kamal, a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, admitted to me that he wasn't sure what to say to really poor people who didn't even have access to food. Despite his initial apprehension, Kamal later admitted that he had enjoyed meeting the people during his first feeding. He shared that he liked volunteering at Masjid Jumuah because: "You get to hear people's stories. You see hungry people who take extra food and say it's for something else. They are lying because they don't want to admit how poor they are. It makes sense, but it's weird since these people live in the community."

To Kamal, it was strange that people who were from the community and were known to be poor would still go to lengths to hide their poverty and manage their appearance to the world, and to these young kids. This act of image management, however "made sense," since no one likes to admit they are poor, especially to young kids like himself. Kamal tried to understand how poverty shapes one's sense of self and social presentation to the world and accepted poverty as a social fact. What struck him more was

the power that he, as a boy of 13 serving food, had over an older man who was poor. Poverty inverted the traditional generational hierarchy, making this older man deferential to him during the feeding. Kamal realized that a charitable act could help out someone in need. I did not notice a growing consciousness of social inequality, but rather a re-affirmation of charity as a pathway to alleviating social inequality. Neither did Kamal or his peers reflect on the fact that the majority of those picking up the food boxes were black individuals. Overall, there didn't seem to be much awareness that these community feedings were part of a larger tradition of racial uplift, despite the fact that the mosque itself was run by Black Muslims or that the served were primarily Black.

This focus on charity was a trend I noticed in the comments of other MSA members as well. While exposure to poor community members heightened students' awareness of poverty, they came to accept poverty as fact and believed that religious acts of charity was one way to alleviate this inequality. Kania, a Muslim West African 8<sup>th</sup> grader, shared that it was "sad that there were veterans who had to wait in line to get food." One gentleman she had met admitted that he had been a Vietnam vet and had fallen on hard times. He took two servings of food, saying it was for his family. Kania, however, suspected that the extra food was to last him for another meal after this one. Kania expressed her sadness that even a veteran who had served his country would have to depend on handouts to survive. Instead of indignation, however, Kania remained sad, believing that MSA should redouble their efforts to continue sharing free food with veterans and other poor people. She came to believe that charity was one way to make a difference in the world as well as gain blessings



from God for her pious efforts. She said “zakat (Islamic charity) is very important to me, and this is a kind of zakat.”

These MSA members realize the importance of Islamic public service as a method to serve the poor. Kamal, as a non-Muslim member, viewed the feedings as a form of charity, while Kania believed it was charity as well as an act of piety. However, in both cases, as well as other interviews I conducted with the youth, the observation of inequality was framed as a social fact that could be alleviated through individual charitable efforts, a view which Mrs. Penney endorsed. Neither Mrs. Penney or the MSA claimed to take on more systematic problems through their feeding program nor did they explicitly address how race and class, particularly in poor Black communities, were often intertwined. The program structure reflected their limited yet feasible goals. Though Mrs. Penney was inspired by the history of Black racial uplift programs, her programmatic efforts did not emphasize this point. More on Mrs. Penney and the MSA students’ motivations are explored later in the chapter.

Individual acts of charity was the preferred form for MSA members to “give back to the community” during the community feedings. In the traditional of African American religious racial uplift programs, Black volunteers drove in from outside of the Masjid Jumuah precinct to perform ‘charity’ in the ‘hood’ and fulfill Mrs. Penney’s vision of a ‘service MSA student’ leader. The MSA community feeding programs grew out of the afterschool club space with administrative support. Students subscribed to charity as both the means to address social needs, as well as to enact piety through service in a mosque. The volunteering they engaged in solidified the model of the “service MSA student.”

### Two Types of the “Service” MSA Student

MSA students who engaged in service, however, did so from two perspectives, differentiating between Islamic service and non-Islamic service, which was rooted in notions of community uplift more generally. The two major motivations for the community feeding service were grounded religious and more secular outlooks. For many of the Muslim MSA members, service was viewed from within an Islamic framework. The idea of zakat as charity was one of key words that kept coming up in interviews, which aligns with Osella and Osella’s (2017)’s research on charitable Muslims in Kerala, India. For the non-Muslim MSA students, a general ethics of service framework drove their charitable efforts. An ethics of service, especially rooted in the tradition of African American racial uplift programs and leadership, formed the basis for more secular, community oriented charitable service.

Mrs. Penney hoped that volunteering would serve two purposes: to teach students about giving back to the community while fostering leadership and to give students a chance to connect with community outside of school. While she encouraged volunteering amongst all MSA students, Muslim or non-Muslim, it was telling that Mrs. Penney had chosen a mosque as the site for volunteering. To Mrs. Penney, the ethics of service that was central to her understanding of Islam, as it was revealed when she spoke about volunteering as an act of “*dawa*” (Islamic proselytization). Therefore, community feedings were a chance for her to model an enactment of Islamic piety for Muslim youth. For non-Muslim MSA members, charitable volunteering was rooted in the ethics of community

uplift and humble leadership; community feedings could also serve a secular model of ‘doing good.’

I argue that the religious vs. secular motivations of the club were not usually in tension. In fact, Islamic models of doing *dawa* (proselytization) through volunteering and *zakat* (purification of wealth) and the secular ethics of service coalesced around the larger idea of racial uplift for the community by “giving back.” The idea of service (whether through religious or secular motivations) was supported by Honors Academy, which added an external motivator for MSA volunteers. However, at particular moments, the religious and the secular enactment of charity conflicted with each other, as will be examined through Mary’s story. Therefore, this section underscores how religious and secular visions of service overlapped and separated at times.

Many MSA students bought into Mrs. Penney’s vision, volunteering in order to “give back” to the community. 7th grader Nina states that she likes “giving back to the community, and I also love to cook and share food.” Her older sister, Shantell also mentions giving back as a motivation. 7th grader Ore states, “I want to feel better about myself by volunteering,” while 11th grader Asia says she volunteers for the “good vibes” and to “have fun.” Altruism, boosting one’s self-esteem by volunteering, and sharing good food are MSA students’ motivations for volunteering. Almost all of the students also cited the desire to “give back’ though few students directly addressed the idea of racial uplift. However, Kamal and Kania both noted how older Black men were often the recipients of the food. They wondered in passing whether “white people ever needed food” too. Their musings ended in their understanding that this neighborhood was all Black, therefore most of the

recipients were Black. Though Mrs. Penney did not specify the people's race, it was important that Mrs. Penney chose a Black neighborhood and a predominantly Black mosque for the MSA's community service efforts. Livezey (2000) traces the long history of how Black Christian churches were often the site of charitable efforts. Histories of the Black mosque, particularly during the heyday of the Nation of Islam, also cite charitable food distribution efforts as well as more recent literature on Black Muslim communities (Rouse, 2004; Lee, 2010; Pickett, 2012). The site of Masjid Jumuah was specifically chosen by Mrs. Penney to allow students to interact with the Black community, tapping indirectly into ideas of racial uplift which historically motivated religious Black organizations, such as churches and mosques in urban centers in the US.

In addition to explicitly altruistic motives, there were some students who volunteered to bolster their resumes for college applications, suggesting less altruistic motives. Asha, Mary, and Ola, non-Muslim MSA members, also came because they were "bored of being in their house," as Ola described and wanted to have some fun with friends on a Saturday morning. The girls also loved Mrs. Penney and wanted to support her efforts to do good in the community. They also conveniently received a ride from Mrs. Penney during volunteering days, since their house was far away from Masjid Jumuah, giving the more quality time with Mrs. Penney in the car. The variety of reasons cited by the students – giving back, having fun, boosting their college applications, spending time with Mrs. Penney and their friends, all coalesced in the model of the "service MSA student."

In addition to teaching about giving back, Mrs. Penney wanted to model leadership through service for the students. One of Mrs. Penney's lessons was to teach the MSA

members how being a leader sometimes meant being humble and serving others. Mrs. Penney asked the girls to actually mop and clean up, to give them more of a taste of what being a humble leader means. Mrs. Penney also helped the girls clean up, demonstrating that leadership involves doing difficult and undesirable work sometimes. The sign of a good leader is through their humility and ability to collaborate on hard tasks, which Mrs. Penney modelled for the MSA students by participating in the cleanup services.

The second way in which Mrs. Penney taught leadership was through the actual act of serving and organizing the food distribution. The students packed large trays of food deposited by members of Muslim Serve. After filling styrofoam boxes with carbs, protein, and fruits, the students carefully moved the styrofoam boxes to the plastic tables set up outside the masjid. The highly visible tables are set up across the street from a young man selling Tide laundry detergent, sponges, and other sundry items from his pickup truck to passersby, accentuating the dual activities of sacred and profane occurring on the same physical block of the street. Like Bender's (2003) study of volunteers at a soup kitchen, in which she studied how and when the prosaic and the sacred combined in ordinary people's daily lives, the MSA volunteers' simple acts of service at the mosque also encapsulate prosaic and sacred elements.

As street folks passed by the masjid, it is impossible for them to avoid the cheery volunteers passing out food. "Excuse me, would you like some free food?" The MSA volunteers engaged in this task of talking to passersby, engaging them in conversation, and asking them to sign in before receiving this food aid. Some of the students, though hesitant at first, soon began to appreciate the camaraderie of their service. They felt organized, in

charge, and full of pride for the noble task of serving others “less fortunate than them,” all the while gaining merit for being exemplary “service MSA students” and volunteers affiliated with the sacred mosque from whose metaphorical porch they conducted their service activities. They believed that being an MSA leader meant taking the lead on attending and participating in the community feedings. Non-Islamic motivations for being a “service MSA student” therefore were motivated by ideas of racial uplift and leadership.

Islamic enactments of service also occurred simultaneously, which were distinguished by Islamic explanations for engaging in service. A few students, such as 8th grader Kania, cited specifically Islamic reasons for volunteering. When I asked her why she liked volunteering while we both served food, she stated that: “I like volunteering because like I can get my zakat and it’s free food like pizza. So yea, that’s why I like volunteering charity and you get free pizza.” I recalled how Kania had stated during the first MSA meeting that she wanted MSA to be a space where she could practice her Islam and help others through volunteering. This original statement during MSA meeting and her subsequent support for volunteering suggested that Kania placed great value on community service. What her quote made clear was the Islamic connection she made with volunteering. Zakat, the third pillar of Islam designates that Muslims should share 2.5% of their wealth in charity every year as a way to purify their wealth. While serving food to the hungry is not sharing wealth, Kania views charitable service (feeding the community) as a form of zakat. She also cites receiving pizza as an extrinsic reward from Mrs. Penney who liked to reward her volunteers through food. Kania’s enactment of Islamic piety resembles the Kerala businessmen in Osella and Osella (2009)’s study. Osella and Osella (2009) show

how pious Muslim businessmen in Kerala fund schools as an act of charity, in order to fulfill their obligation to give zakat. They state:

“Muslims’ entrepreneurial ethic is tempered by a strong ‘community orientation’ – PV reminds us, ‘A Muslim cannot enjoy his wealth and life if people around him are suffering. A Muslim should help needy neighbours, that is why we give *zakat* (mandatory alms) and *sadaqah* (voluntary alms)’...well-off donors turn the individual religious obligation of zakat (almsgiving), which is one of the five core principles of Islamic practice, into a technique for the ‘spiritual and economic renewal of the Muslim community as a whole.’ Thus...the relatively well to-do demonstrate their piety and membership in the minority religious community through the act of charitable giving” (Osella and Osella, 2009, 18).

PV, a quintessential example of a charitable businessman, cites the ideology of community to give back to the needy neighbors in his society. PV reasons that zakat and sadaqah are necessary to alleviate suffering, and that it is the obligation of a prosperous Muslim to help those less fortunate. For the Kerala businessmen, zakat is not only a religious obligation, but a means to economically renew the Muslim community, while also receiving accolades from community members for their charity. Zakat has a religious and spiritual impact, both in this world and the afterlife, but also a social benefit by enhancing these businessmen’s prestige and standing in society. Osella and Osella (2009) discuss how some community members accuse the businessmen of “self-interested instrumentalism,” of strategically using charity for their own benefit. However, the researchers ultimately conclude that the presence of enhanced economic interests does not mean that other valid reasons for zakat, i.e.: zakat as a genuine act of piety does not co-exist. Multiple motivations could operate at the same time, both self-interest as well as piety. Additionally, Osella and Osella (2009)

also shows how the act of giving does not simply change the receiver but the giver as well by changing one's "moral disposition."

While Osella and Osella's (2009) example in Kerala does not translate to the MSA community feedings directly in terms of location or subject, the concept of zakat as a form of charity to help renew the community is a common thread. For MSA students like Kania, the act of giving is part of fulfilling a religious obligation as a Muslim. However, there are external incentives, the "self-interested instrumentalism" that Osella and Osella mentioned. In addition to getting free pizza, MSA students also receive positive accolades at school for their service. While community feedings do not enhance patronage, as in the case of the Kerala businessmen, service does become a way of enhancing the prestige of MSA and individual MSA students within Honors Academy.

I heard one such recognition for service in fall 2019, complementing the MSA students for participating in the community feedings. Assistant Dean McAvoy declared over the intercom, "Shoutout to MSA for taking part in the community feedings. Your service is appreciated." I didn't realize the import of this announcement until Mrs. Penney explained the value of public recognition for MSA students. She explained:

"They really like to go out and do the feedings when they were getting recognized...we would have announcements over the PA every morning. Shout outs to kids, MSA might get a shoutout for something, or individual kids might get a shoutout for doing something, so they were representing MSA. So other kids started wanting to be a part of it because of the recognition."

Within a school system which operated on a merit system, shoutouts were the ultimate recognition, not only recorded on each student's merit sheet on Kickboard, an online merit app, but audibly recognized through a central PA system. Non-Muslim students became



curious about what the MSA was, and they felt they too could receive accolades if they joined MSA. Over the course of my observations, I noticed five new members joining, of whom three were non-Muslim. Service enhanced the prestige of MSA, boosted students' support of community service, and also helped recruit new members for MSA. These external incentives, however, did not detract from the intrinsic motivations students cited, which included religious beliefs (giving zakat), as well as desires to give back and share food with others.

One crucial difference between the Kerala case and the MSA case is when reflecting on the idea of internal change. Osella and Osella (2009) mentions how "moral dispositions" of the Kerala businessmen are shaped by charitable acts. However, in the case of the community feedings, the act of feeding others, while causing some students to reflect (re: Kamal and Kania) does not necessarily transform the students themselves. For them, charity is an act of giving, not changing oneself. While internal changes may have occurred, it was less clear through empirical research whether such changes took place.

The Islamic enactment of service, represented by Kania, demonstrated that multiple motivations for community service existed. For Kania, the community feedings were both as a religious enactment of piety through service, as well as a way to get free pizza for her altruistic act. If PA announcements followed, that would not be unwelcome either. However, the existence of these external motivators did not take away from Kania's positive intentionality, nor those of her peers who had more non-Islamic reasons for performing service. As demonstrated, non-Islamic and Islamic motivations for conducting

service were aligned with each other, in terms of the overall intrinsic motivation that both provided to MSA students during the Saturday community feedings.

However, there were moments when the religious and the secular expression of charity conflicted with each other. Mary's experience during volunteering revealed that faultlines existed between secular and religious expressions of charity. Mary's experience occurred on a cold Saturday morning in December, the MSA girls and I were wrapping up our feeding for the day. Mrs. Penney and Asia had gone next door to Family Dollar to buy more boxes for the next feeding, since we had run out of boxes. Most of the volunteers for this feeding had been the junior MSA girls, one of whom was Muslim (Asia) and the other three were non-Muslim (Mary, Asha, and Ola).

An older Muslim man wearing a puffy jacket came into the mosque searching for food. The food had run out outside, and he had come in to inquire whether there were remaining Styrofoam, food-filled boxes. As he gave salam to the girls, they politely handed him the last two boxes which had been left over. As this man was receiving the food from Mary, he called her out for not wearing hijab - "how come nobody told you to cover?" Mary, slightly embarrassed but also taken aback, answered that she was not Muslim. The man advised Mary that she should not be in the masjid without her hijab or overgarment on. Mary, Asha, and Ola were confused but did not say anything since they didn't want to be rude to a recipient of the food service, particularly inside the premises of the mosque. Hearing no response, the older man left with his two packets of food.

As I approached the girls to ask what their interaction had been about, Mrs. Penney and Asia returned from Family Dollar. Upon hearing the story, they were extremely

outraged, while the three non-Muslim girls seemed mostly confused. Mrs. Penney exclaimed: “What kind of dawa is this? You [Muslim man receiving the food] show Muslims in such a bad light.” Mrs. Penney and Asia kept sharing their outrage: “Instead of commenting on others’ behaviors, why wasn’t he praying? It’s close to prayer time anyway!” Mrs. Penney and Asia, both practicing Muslims, were enraged that this Muslim man would be so rude as to insult Mary for volunteering, and additionally avoid prayer, which was his duty as a Muslim. Mrs. Penney and Asia suggested that this man was a hypocrite for telling others what to do but not exercise good behavior or even piety through prayer. In fact, his unkind comment could make the non-Muslim girls believe that all Muslims were judgmental and close-minded.

Mrs. Penney’s comment was especially enlightening: “what kind of dawa is this?” For Mrs. Penney, in addition to the stated claims of providing enriching public service opportunities for the MSA students, the outreach work to the general public through Masjid Jumuah was also an act of dawa (proselytization). The dawa was for the general public on the streets, but her comment suggested that perhaps the dawa was also intended, long-term, for these non-Muslim MSA members as well. Though she was very deliberate in never asking the girls or any of her students to convert, perhaps she hoped that through example, they would come to learn more about Islam, and perhaps one day, take the shahadah (conversion). The fact that her careful exemplary behavior as a caring Muslim adult in their lives was upended by unkind comments from other Muslims was a matter of great outrage for her.

What this story revealed was that in this particular instance, the religious and the secular expression of charity conflicted with each other. In earlier sections, while exploring MSA student motivations for volunteering, religious and secular visions of service overlapped, at least in the common desire that students had to give back in the language of community uplift. In this story, the non-Muslim and Muslim students' motivations were also aligned; however, the expression of that service was contested. Since Mary did not cover her hair, she allegedly violated a Muslim charity recipients' notion of what a mosque service-provider should look like. Since he was receiving food inside a mosque, he assumed that the charitable providers would be Muslim and be covering their hair. However, the fact that MSA was open to both Muslim and non-Muslim members meant that Mrs. Penney did not enforce the expectation of hijab. While Mrs. Penney did encourage Muslim MSA members to pray *zuhr*, the afternoon prayers, since she and the students were already inside a mosque, Mrs. Penney did not ask non-Muslim youth to cover their hair, pray, or change themselves within the mosque space. However, Mrs. Penney's inclusive vision is upended by an outsider community member's idea of what a "service Muslim" should look like - fully covered and garbed up. The rebuke Mary received did not dissuade her from returning to community feedings. However, it did make Mrs. Penney believe that the inclusive vision of MSA had been tarnished because of how the non-Muslim MSA girls had been singled out for rebuke.

While Mrs. Penney emphasized commonality between student's Islamic and non-Islamic motivations as well as how one engaged in charity within the mosque, this incident revealed that not everything was the same when it came to how MSA members were

perceived by community members. The models of “service Muslim” and the “service MSA student” were split in this incidence. Not all MSA members fit the community members’ criterion of a proper “service Muslim,” which in his perspective, was limited to Muslims, or those who covered as Muslims. Mrs. Penney and Asia, however, soundly rejected this split between the “service Muslim” and the “service MSA student,” reaffirming the idea that service could be performed by Muslim and non-Muslim MSA members alike, since the motivations underlying charity was so aligned. Different forms of service could co-exist because the end goal was the same: community uplift, even when the “community members” like this judgmental man themselves may not appreciate these acts of service by individuals like Mary.

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This chapter moves out of the school grounds and follows students to their community feedings. Mrs. Penney’s vision of the MSA centered on pro-social service events as a way to teach servant leadership (i.e.: using leadership to serve others). Ideologies of racial uplift and leadership motivated Mrs. Penney’s desire to show students how to give back to a low-income Black community in West Philadelphia. However, despite Mrs. Penney’s inspiration and her deliberative choice of a Black mosque as a site of community racial uplift, students did not engage in conversations around racial uplift; rather, their view of the service program was rooted firmly in the idea of Islamic charity.

While a shared religion allowed MSA members to volunteer at Masjid Jumuah, non-Muslim members of MSA were policed in terms of their attire, disrupting the ideology of MSA “unity,” regardless of religious background, which Mrs. Penney worked so hard

to promote on school grounds. While the two types of “service” MSA students - those serving within an Islamic framework and those operating within the general ethics of service framework - often overlapped, during Mary’s story, the inclusive nature of the service club was pushed to the limits. While zakat as charity and the ethics of service had much in common, the question of how the hijab and non-hijab wearing MSA students were perceived within the mosque led to a more exclusive vision of the ‘model’ MSA service provider. The vision of MSA inclusivity did not always come to fruition in practice. Limitations to “unity” were often glossed over by Mrs. Penney, since the limits of unity could trouble the overall objective of Honor’s attempt to produce cooperating, obedient students. This understanding of “disunity” was one that students carried with them, despite Mrs. Penney’s exhortation, demonstrating the limits of Honor’s Academy’s “unity” discourse in propagating a “uniform” student body.

The religious charity that the “service MSA student” provided operated within the larger market-driven structuring of the MSA. Mrs. Penney and the MSA students did not intend to systematically address larger social concerns regarding poverty, food insecurity, or racial uplift; their goals were limited and feasible through their bimonthly community feeding, fulfilling the service component of the MSA. What is worth of note is that the MSA and Mrs. Penney’s goal from the start had been to fulfill a mission of service that elevated MSA’s role within the school, not to solve larger societal problems. Despite this limited goal, however, the MSA students’ service provision was instrumental to the larger economic restructuring operations within the city of Philadelphia. Volunteering at a mosque turned MSA students into agents of economic restructuring, though most students

were unaware of this positioning. Both Honors Academy and the social service sector within Philadelphia situated MSA students within a deeply market-driven structure, in which money and profit existed side by side with altruistic motives, normalizing the idea of individualized charitable efforts over societal reform. Though inspired by historical efforts centered in black community uplift programs, the absence of conversation around racial themes or ideas of inequality led to an understanding of service amongst the MSA students, rooted in individual acts of charity.

## Chapter 6: Ramadan Programs: Forms of Islamic Space-Making

In this chapter, I consider the overall project of Islamic self-making and space-making in which the MSA students engaged. I situate this project of Islamic self-making within Honors Academy multicultural ethos - identity promoting clubs and classes, reinforced the larger market-based goals for producing future economically successful graduates. By connecting students to identity affirming spaces, such as the MSA, the operating logic at Honors ensured that the positive identity development efforts would lead to future market success for graduates.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I explored how the “business” model of Islam, promoted by Mrs. Penney, gained primacy over the “mosque” model of Islam, promoted by Mr. Hussam. By deliberately linking MSA’s goals with the larger goals of Honors Academy, Mrs. Penney led the MSA to great success. The institutional recognition of Islam through business efforts, or Islamic space-making, is a form of Islamic self-making that opened up various ways for students to engage with Islam in public school. In this chapter, I trace how the alignment between MSA goals and Honors Academy continued during the planning and programming for Ramadan, the holy month during which many MSA students fasted. During the Ramadan program, the students explicitly drew connections between the goals of MSA and the goals of Honors Academy, including the way the uniforms and fasting inculcated self-discipline and self-responsibility amongst MSA members.

However, even as the MSA and school’s goals remained interlinked, I argue that there were religious practices that emerged that did not fall within the purview of Honors’ multiculturalism. For example, a component of the Ramadan programming included prayer



in the gym, which Mrs. Penney and the students framed within the context of multicultural diversity valued by the school; this framing, however, elided questions of prayer on school grounds which could otherwise have been suspect in the context of the US's separation of church and state. The prayer itself, though framed in the language of diversity, became a form of Islamic space-making that transcended the limits of multicultural discourses. I draw on anthropologist Pnina Werbner's (1996) study of Islamic space-making in the streets of Birmingham by a Sufi cult to provide the theoretical framework for analyzing how the MSA students also engaged in their own form of Islamic space-making within the spatial bounds of Honors Academy. Students alluded to the creation of sacred spaces within the secular space they occupied, and they temporary re-inscribed religious activity into a previously areligious space. I argue that it was due to the temporary nature of the re-inscription that the separation of church and state could be momentarily put aside under the logic of multicultural diversity; in this case, it applied to religious diversity of practice.

This chapter focuses on two ways in which students engaged in Islamic space-making: one remained within the bounds of multiculturalism and crafted a space to practice Islam within the school approved ways of religious expression. The temporary re-inscription of secular school space for religious purposes (praying) was particularly salient during the exceptional month of Ramadan, and the *temporary* nature of religious exceptionalism fit within the hegemonic bounds of multicultural tolerance. The second form of Islamic space-making went beyond the accepted realms of the school's espoused multiculturalism. By focusing on the spiritual nature of prayer, it becomes apparent that secular motivations did not explain the practice of Islam within Honors Academy. A

alternative logic of spiritual connection explained the kinds of religious practice that multicultural tolerance could not fully accommodate. Both forms of Islamic space-making were present and simultaneously occurring at Honors, accentuating how religion entered a traditionally “secular” school space. Both forms of space-making, i.e: staying within institutional bounds and occasionally pushing the limits of multicultural tolerance, revealed different paths through which MSA students could practice Islamic self-making.

### Ramadan Programming

Chapters 3 and 4 explored how the MSA students prepared for Ramadan, including fundraising and planning prayer in the school gym, driven by the MSA ideas of unity, service, and leadership. Coached by Mrs. Penney, a group of MSA women used their entrepreneurial business savvy to raise money for the “cause of Islam;” this cause was to grow the MSA’s influence in Honors Academy by hosting a Ramadan celebration that would cement MSA’s powerful club status within the school.

One particular element of the Ramadan programming that occurred each year included the presentation in the auditorium by MSA students. In preparation for Ramadan, Mrs. Penney and the MSA students carefully mapped out a program flyer. The program of events, printed onto bright yellow paper and folded neatly in half announced the speaker lineup, which included students who all identified as Black Muslim youth:

“4th Annual Community Iftar Honors Academy - May 10th, 2019

Host/Co-host: Mariam and Omar (who I later found out were cousins.)

Quran Recitation: Kania and Asia

Student Performance: Zara: poem

Welcome - Principal Sawyer

What's Ramadan? Why is it Important?: Hidaya and Ariya

When do Muslims Fast?: Asia

Who is Required to Fast?: Djamila

Video: MSA and Honors Academy Students

Special Awards

Student Performances: Kabeera and Wasim - Reading Hadith

Fasting Builds Character: Imam Nur - Graduate from Umm Al-Quraa University in Saudi Arabia; Current Imam at Masjid Jumuah in Philadelphia, PA

Advice and Student Expectations: Shantell and Mariam

Aligning with Honors Academy's Values: Hidaya

Honors Supporting our Students: Asia

Maghrib Prayer and Iftar Dinner: Gym and Cafeteria"

The program was neat, organized, and allowed many members of the MSA to participate in the readings and explanations. The program began with Surah Al-Fatiha, the opening chapter of the Quran, signifying the religious nature of this ceremony. While there was a "student performance" right after Kania and Asia completed al Fatiha, as well as a performance by Kabeera and Wasim later in the program, the performances were non-musical. The students had earlier debated in MSA whether they could have music; the overall consensus had been that there should be no music during a sacred day of fasting during Ramadan and especially during a public representation of the MSA to the larger audience of Honors MSA. The students had not wanted to leave a 'bad' impression of

Muslims by associating themselves with music. As Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2016) noted in her discussion of music in Islamic ceremonies, often South Asian or Arab music was considered appropriate in Islamic ceremonies, but not rap or other Black forms of music. Khabeer (2016) noted that this attitude towards music was part of the ethnoreligious hegemonies common within Islamic conduct within the United States. As part of this American Islamic tradition of avoiding "Black music," therefore, the MSA students too limited their performances to a reading from the Quran and *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet), as well as a poem of a religious nature. Ethnoreligious hegemonies manifested during Ramadan planning through the exclusion of "Black music," which wasn't considered appropriate or authentic under a traditional Islamic milieu.

The students handed off the mic to Principal Sawyer, who offered a quick introduction, calling the MSA "one of the most successful clubs at the school, under the leadership of Mrs. Penney." Principal Sawyer spoke about the importance of honoring the school's multicultural diversity, including its religious diversity. She kept her remarks short before turning over the mic to the student presenters.

Principal Sawyer received a special place of recognition in the MSA program for two reasons: during our interview, Mrs. Penney cited the support of Principal Sawyer, who was not only a good administrator but someone who supported the MSA as a Muslim woman herself. While there had been two other principals before Mrs. Sawyer arrived at Honors, it was Mrs. Sawyer who was "a driving force for me. Sawyer was just helping with the logistics, whatever you wanna do Penney, just send me the logistics. She looked at it as a healthy way just for kids to do something together that was good. And it was an added

bonus that it was a Muslim organization.” Principal’s Sawyer’s support stemmed from the fact that club was primarily a ‘healthy’ outlet for kids to do something good based on camaraderie and service. The fact that it was a religious club was an ‘added bonus,’ not the primary reason for Principal Sawyer’s support of this afterschool club. The fact that Mrs. Sawyer had invited me warmly into Honors suggested that the MSA was an afterschool club that Mrs. Sawyer wholeheartedly supported for its role in strengthening Muslim student presence at the school and its public service efforts (particularly the community feedings), while remaining inclusive of non-Muslim members as well. Principal Sawyer, alongside Assistance Principal McAvoy and other administration, were in fact, some of the biggest supporters of the annual Ramadan iftar, assisting with some school funds as well as cooking food, which they shared in community during the iftar. It was clear to me, through both the interview with Mrs. Penney, Mrs. Sawyer’s recognition during the Ramadan program, as well as my overall observations that Principal Sawyer and some of the administration both materially (time, food) and logistically (funding) supported the MSA’s multicultural efforts.

After Mrs. Sawyer’s speech, she turned over the platform to the students, who introduced the purpose of Ramadan for the audience. About 2/3 of the audience were families of Muslim students; the other 1/3 were non-Muslim peers, teachers, and administrators who had come to enjoy the delicious Ramadan dinner. Hidaya and Ariya spoke about “What’s Ramadan? Why is it Important?,” Asia shared, “When do Muslims Fast?,” while Djamila addressed, “Who is Required to Fast?”. These were basic informational notes that the students had found from Google. The MSA Video, however,

was an original piece. Mrs. Penney and the students had created this video out of soundbites and clips from MSA Honors Academy Students and why they participated in MSA. Many spoken about their love of volunteering (community feedings in Ch.5), while others spoke about having the ability to practice their faith at school.

For the presentation of speeches, Mrs. Penney invited Imam Nur, the lead Imam from the Salafi-leaning Masjid Jumuah in West Philly, where the students conducted community feedings, to be the Islamic speaker for the night. She knew Imam Nur because he was her best friend, Mrs. Rua's husband. As a Muslim representative from the larger community, Imam Nur emphasized the importance of fasting to build character, in his speech entitled, "Fasting Builds Character." Imam Nur stated that fasting builds discipline and self-control, especially for middle schoolers. He shared "Even though nobody can tell if you're fasting, you're doing it for Allah's sake." Imam Nur sympathized that the fasts are longer now for kids than when he and adults like Mrs. Penney were growing up (since Ramadan is based on a lunar calendar and moves forward 10 days every calendar year). He said that it was remarkable that the MSA members had non-Muslim friends fasting with them and supporting them as well. This was a trend that was not normal 20 years ago. The prevalence of Islam in Philadelphia had made Ramadan more popular amongst Muslims and non-Muslims alike, once again affirming the ways in which the larger urban context shaped the practice of Islam at Honors Academy.

The speeches continued after Imam Nur's speech; next were speeches on the "Advice and Student Expectation" section of the program. Shantell and Mariam offered some advice to Muslims in the audience. Mariam described how MSA students "control

ourselves in classrooms and hallways, all year but especially during Ramadan. Studying Islam leads us to educated roots. Even though the negativity surrounding us is difficult, we must have grit to carry on as good students and good Muslims, even during Ramadan, when fasting made concentration harder.” Shantell added on by emphasizing the importance of grit and self-control. Even “if you want to cuss, you should not do so because it is the month of Ramadan, and you should exercise self-control. We should also limit the color of overgarments to Black, blue, or grey, which are approved colors at Honors Academy.”

Shantell and Mariam’s statements underscored the way in which their speech has been constructed with Honors Academy values in mind. Mariam spoke about having grit, one of the approved Honors mindsets, to endure throughout Ramadan, while Shantell spoke about having self-control over one’s physical self-presentation as well. Shantell noted that instead of using Ramadan as an excuse to skirt Honors-approved dress code, the students should respect the colors approved by the school. This portion of the speech emerged from an earlier MSA discussion in which the students agreed that just the fact that Honors even allowed overgarments was an act of religious freedom; therefore, Muslims should respect the limitations on which colors they should be allowed to wear. What was interesting about this was that Shantell herself was wearing a red overgarment as she presented this piece of advice. Perhaps the fact that it was a special occasion during Ramadan and that it was not during school hours encouraged her to experiment with the color of her overgarment. However, Shantell’s overall presentation honed in on the importance of self-control and public displaying Islamic garb but within the rules at Honors’ dress code. This

emphasis on self-control as the underlying theme spanned both the Islamic duty to fast and Honors' mindset to cultivate grit and determination.

This reflection on discipline and self-control was not a new theme for Honors' students. Mrs. Penney's emphasis on discipline and self-presentation are traits she constantly attempted to teach MSA members throughout the year. During our 1:1 interview, Mrs. Penney described her view of discipline and the expression of faith further:

We do have this conversation with kids about hijab. Oh you know, when Ramadan come...some of you wear hijab, but your behaviors are not in check. So how are you fussing about somebody, you wear hijab, and I hear you cussing. And the kids are oh, ok. Other kids when they saw me speaking like that, they started to pick up the same kind of language to each other. It wasn't just about eating or not eating, being covered or not covered. It was about their whole self!!

Mrs. Penney emphasized that the purpose of Ramadan was not to simply refrain from eating, drinking, or covering one's hair, but to curb one's behavior. Self-discipline was very important, particularly when it came to curbing bad language. The transformation of the whole self could occur through controlling particular negative behaviors. Just like Honors Academy valued grit, perseverance, and good behavior, Mrs. Penney too tried hard to instill the same MSA values for MSA students under her charge. Without prompting on my part, Mrs. Penney would often talk about how Islam promoted the same values of respectful behavior and self-control that Honors valued. In fact, Mrs. Penney proudly shared:

I know that as kids become more confident in Islam, it changes their academic behavior too. Because the culture, the Assistant Principal of Culture...Ms. Roberts, she was at a different school, but now she is the AP (Assistant Principal) of all the Culture stuff and Discipline stuff. She told me she loves when Ramadan comes around, as it approaches because all of the behavioral report declines dramatically. She said kids are just different,



and they became more vocal too in saying to their teachers, others, I'm not arguing with you because it's Ramadan. She's not even Muslim, and she recognized the change in kids. And I think also around the school, I think the positive influence that was happening around the school, other teachers and other admin would jump in and want to do it, it's a good thing, we wanna do this. Cause culturally it's a good thing, but they also saw the positivity that was happening in the school and how kids were really changing, how they were interacting with their peers and their teachers. And there was just this level of accountability that they might not have seen this whole year. And when Principal Sawyer gave her address to the kids, she would say that the behaviors that she sees in them as the iftars approaching and Ramadan, it's evident, you can see it and feel it. This is something we need to draw from all school year long. She came right out and said that to them. This is not something we just do, this is something we need to adapt all school year long. Because for some kids, this is like the best self she has ever seen. That's why we pulled that in that for our ppt. What are the Honors mindset that we also see in this month of Ramadan? They are also aligned. You can't say like oh Honors makes me do xyz, no! We see these as a Muslim! You're supposed to be this way too, you need to follow the rules.

Mrs. Penney worked hard, alongside her staff, to ensure that she explicitly drew parallels between the values of Honors and the purported values in Islam. In her perspective, Islam promoted rule following behavior, as well as accountability and self-policing of negative behavior. Honors too promoted similar "mindset" values. The explicit mention of the AP of Culture and Discipline indicated to me that behavior management was often equated to discipline. Discipline was not always punitive (as in detentions), but often meant conversations with the AP and Deans in charge in which they reprimanded students for poor behaviors and helped students self-correct these behaviors. The deliberate alignment of purported Islamic values of obedience with the vision of discipline at Honors linked religious values with secular school values. The ability of Mrs. Penney to work alongside Principal Sawyer, AP Roberts, and other teachers and admin in making this connection between positive Islamic habits during Ramadan and self-control in other domains of

school life was a remarkable achievement. Instead of tapping into the fears of the maligned version of Islam seeping into the realm of public education, the positive values of Islamic docility were “extracted” in a sense to suit the purposes of Honors. As Foucault theorizes, docile bodies were created through governmental oversight; in fact, over time, the students policed themselves through the parallel language of the school-favored brand of Islamic behavior. Their form of Islamic self-making aligned with the school’s principles.

Other teachers also noticed this increase in self-discipline during Ramadan, particularly. Ms. Mirree, the ESL teacher, commented: “I noticed that the fasting students have discipline! They really do have that self-discipline and they follow it. I respect that...” Like AP Roberts, Ms. Mirree too noticed how students would exercise self-discipline through fasting and not listening to music during class (as was some students’ regular behavior throughout the year). Ms. Mirree associated the self-disciplined behavior during Ramadan with fasting, and it was a behavior she admired and praised.

After Mariam and Shantell’s speech, Hidayah continued the program to discuss further alignment between Honors Academy’s values while Asia spoke about how Honors was supporting its Muslim students. Hidayah mentioned the following ways that Honors Academy and the MSA aligned: “Honors Academy promotes self-discipline, grit, and leadership. MSA too promotes unity, service, and leadership. We are taught to control ourselves during Ramadan, which is about self-discipline and to show grit to fast for 30 days. We show leadership by taking part in clubs. Some of us not just part of MSA but also Robotics and other clubs.” Hidayah’s speech elicited applause from the Honors administrators and teachers sitting in the audience. In her concise speech, Hidayah

summarized Shantell, Mariam, and Mrs. Penney’s points about the conscious intersection between Honors’ values and MSA values, both in spirit and in action.

Asia continued by sharing Honors was supporting its Muslim students as well as overviewing the chart at the back of the flyer that taught teachers how to support their fasting Muslim students. As one of the leaders in MSA and a junior, Asia was entrusted with reading out the special thanks section at the back of the flyer:

“Special Thanks: Staff, students, family and guests that contributed to food, beverages, and cutlery. From the Muslim Students Association and Mrs. Penney, on behalf of Honors Academy. We would like to extend a warm thank you to all the Honors students, families, staff, members, teachers, members of the NST and principals for joining us this evening in the observance of Ramadan. Our communities thrive when we allow love and compassion to flourish.”

Mrs. Penney made sure to acknowledge the teacher and admins support during the annual iftar and involved the students in thanking the teachers and staff. After sharing the thanks (which Mrs. Penney had insisted on having a student read out loud), Asia shared the chart about ways of assisting Muslim students during the month of Ramadan, which was also printed at the back of the yellow flyer. Asia did not go over this chart in depth, but she outlined the need for empathy and kindness for students during Ramadan, urging teachers to continue supporting students like herself during this holy month.

Issue of Concern:

Fatigue-head down on desk/sleepy

Official “policy”:

Students should have heads raised in class and engaged in lesson at all times.

Teacher Response:

Teachers should approach these issues with a heightened sense of awareness, compassion, and understanding, especially with a student who is fasting.

Issue of Concern:

Dizziness, upset stomach, and hunger pangs

Official “policy”:

Call dean to accompany student to nurse

Teacher Response:

Teachers should approach these issues with a heightened sense of awareness, compassion, and understanding, especially with a student who is fasting.

Teachers found this part of the presentation very helpful. They felt that there were the kinds of resources that an teachers needed and were grateful for the Muslim teachers and MSA for teaching them about Ramadan. Mrs. Penney herself felt proud for building these schoolwide resources over time. While the Honors’ Student Handbook had particular rules, by constructing this comparison chart, Mrs. Penney wanted to ensure that teachers knew they should treat their fasting students with more empathy and leniency. For example, in the student handbook, Level 1 Infractions included: “Failure to Carry Hall Pass, Lateness to Class, Disruptive Behavior, Insubordination, Uniform Violation, Community Infraction. Community Infractions: phones, food/drink, and other distractions are visible; the student’s posture does not convey buy-in to the lesson.” The “student’s posture does not convey buy-in to the lesson” could include having one’s head on their desk, which was a commo posture for fasting students who were exhausted. By reframing official “policy” in the context of

Ramadan, Mrs. Penney and the registered nurse (RN) who came to speak to the teachers about this policy (which I was not able to personally attend) helped educate teachers at Honors about how best to support their fasting students during Ramadan. The ability to shift school policy is another powerful element of Islamic space-making.

Ms. Jamison, the junior seminar teacher, also shared a similar view: “Most of the messaging I heard from Ramadan comes more so from teachers and school leaders. That’s one thing that I have always been impressed with Honors about. They have always been good about being thoughtful about our Muslim students during Ramadan. They always take time to make sure we have a PD, and that everyone understands what the implications are, and what are our students maybe during Ramadan. Mr. Daro, the African American history teacher, also commented: “If a student is starting to put their head down because they are fasting, you have to be very conscious of that.”

The Ramadan program emphasized the alignment between expected Ramadan behaviors and the accepted values at Honors. By drawing on tenet of multiculturalism, MSA created a space for the practice of religion within school. This Islamic space-making primarily occurred within the accepted realms of the school’s desired actions. On occasion, however, such as during school prayer, it was only the temporary nature of the prayer that prevented the prayer from being condemned by critics as a violation of the ‘separation of church and state.’

#### Maghrib Prayer: Re-Inscribing the School Gym

One particular way in which Mrs. Penney and the students tapped into existing logics of the school was in the way in which they presented the idea of Islamic prayer on

school grounds. Prayer has been studied within the Islamic subjectivity literature that has thrived in the past decades (Mahmood 2005; Haeri 2017). Prayer is theorized as an act of discipline, virtue, and connection with God and self. However, little scholarship has closely examined the connection of prayer as it occurs in public school spaces, a practice which falls under practices of Islamic space-making.

In her study of Muslim youth in Chicago, Khabeer (2018) argues that space and placemaking practices play a key role in the construction of pious Muslim identities, particularly as space becomes socially constructed as locations of contested morality, value, and power relations. Khabeer (2018) explains that in countries where Muslims are a minority, such as in the US, Muslim spatial practices include “micropractices,” such as finding places to pray within a secular campus or workplace (Jouili, 2015) or in proudly displaying Muslim identity through parades, or marches which appear to sacralized secular public space (Werbner, 1996). These acts challenge the binary of secular and sacred spaces as distinct by blurring the distinction between where the sacred act takes places, or even transforming a secular act (marching) into an act of faith. Muslims in Western countries have also begun to construct mosques and Islamic businesses and organizations which demonstrate their desire to create new sacred domains in multicultural societies (Abdullah, 2010).

Pnina Werbner’s (1996) formulation of Islamic space-making is particularly relevant here. Her study focused on followers of the Sufi cult of Pir (Saint) Hazrat Shah, who migrated to Birmingham, commemorated the saint by organizing a march through secular public space. They followed a tenet of Sufi Islam in which every step through space

is a journey to God, reminiscent of the hijra, or migration of the Prophet Muhammad to Madina in 622 AD after persecution in Mekkah. This march was possible because of the existing rhetoric of multiculturalism in the UK which allowed for temporary displays of piety by multicultural “Others.” The Sufi adherents “stamped the earth” on which they walked as an act of religious space-making.

While there are obvious differences in what Werbner was focusing on in her study, her theory is useful, I argue, for analyzing Islamic space making at Honor’s. While Werbner’s interlocutors are adults, and mine are youth, and while their form of Islamic space-making was marching, I posit that for the MSA students, one of their forms was praying. Some fundamental similarities remain - just like Werbner’s interlocutors transformed a traditionally secular road into a road for spiritual marching, the MSA students transformed a secular public school gym into a site for religious prayer. I posit that my students’ re-inscription of secular spaces for religious worship is possible because: the re-inscription is temporary, and it does not contradict the school’s values of diversity. Because school prayer is framed within the accepted discourse of multiculturalism, it becomes institutionally allowable despite the US’s separation of church and state.

What is interesting in this act of Islamic space-making through prayer is the uniqueness of the moment in which it occurs. During the regular school year (not Ramadan), the MSA students performing prayers during afterschool are generally regarded with respect by Muslim and non-Muslim members of MSA, since it aligns with the high regards for multiculturalism and diversity placed within Honors Academy. However, there is still a certain hesitancy to perform prayers during the regular MSA meetings during the

year. Other than Asiya, who is the daughter of an imam, and some of the high school students, few middle schoolers performed prayer regularly. When I asked the middle school girls why, they state it's because they have their periods (during which time they do not have to pray). Kania only stated, "I can make up the prayers at home," suggesting that for her, it was easier to pray in the comfort of her home than on school grounds. However, I wondered if the lukewarm attitude to prayer was because it was a 'non-teenager' thing to do, even if the larger rhetoric of multiculturalism made it an acceptable act. I realized it might be an issue of confidence that grows the more time the students spend in MSA. The high schoolers had been part of MSA longer, and they were also more secure in engaging prayer as a form of Islamic self-making at school. Therefore, prayer was a very normal act, not one which brought a great deal of self-conscious behavior.

During Ramadan, however, this attitude towards prayer was significantly different. Middle and high school students would vie with each other to pray during MSA meetings in Mrs. Penney's room. Students were granted prayer passes by the school administration which would allow them to pray in certain reserved classrooms, set aside for prayer during Ramadan. As Asia explained to me:

"Prayer passes are like when it's time to pray. They give the pass to each person who was participating. But people took advantage of it. It got taken away. Then the principal was like, you can pray in Mrs. Penney's school afterschool. Some parents would start (picking their kids up) at 2pm, the other 4pm. Then when they went out, they (students) didn't come back."

Irteza: "They abuse it for the rest of you."

Asia: "It's fine, we could just come up here and pray."



Asia explains that the prayer passes had been an important symbol of recognition from the school administration during Ramadan. However, the school administration had reneged on the passes once they realized that students were using this spiritual “pass” to resist school rules, such as attendance. While I expected Asia to be angry at the way in which this particular religious allowance was ruined by the acts of a select few, Asia was not angry. Instead, she emphasized that informally, students like herself, who were regular with prayer, always had Mrs. Penney’s room as an alternative space to pray. The exceptional nature of the passes meant less to a practicing Muslim like herself than to the students who began praying only during the exceptional month of Ramadan. Praying for her was less of a performance than a daily ritual act.

What was important about the prayer passes was that the Honors administration had codified prayer into a school policy through the issuance of passes, creating another institutional, public form of Islamic space-making. However, the issuance of prayer passes during Ramadan was a temporary act to mark the importance of Ramadan for the Muslim students at Honors. In reality, the prayer passes were also cancelled after the administration realized it was being used by students to skip class. This reneging on the prayer passes emphasized the power that the administration had in regulating religious expression at school for the MSA students and occasionally drawing limits on Islamic space-making.

The exceptionality of Ramadan was also of note and produced particular moments for space-making and Islamic self-making. While prayer was a common act during afterschool MSA meetings for a select few students (Ariya and Asia, both older junior girls), for most MSA members, prayer was reserved for Ramadan. Students did not

comment on this decision directly, as noted. However, feelings of discomfort marked their approach to prayer, a feeling which disappeared during the exceptional month of Ramadan. Everyday vs. exceptional religious practices overlapped with the permanent vs. temporary nature of praying at school. Exceptional and temporary Islamic acts of worship were more broadly accepted by MSA youth than the everyday and the permanent prayer on school grounds. For some, Islamic self-making practices were concentrated during Ramadan.

In addition to MSA students appreciating the exceptional acts of Islamic worship during Ramadan, the exceptional nature of Ramadan at school was clear to teachers at Honors. Mr. Daro, the African American history teacher, commented:

“Ramadan is like fully taken in by the staff. I mean, Principal Sawyer is a Muslim, and she, and Mrs. Penney is really supportive. Like our school gives students chances to pray, and we give them passes. Our school kinds of shift during Ramadan, and we become like very attuned to the needs of those families. I love it...it’s like, our staff really like hunkers down, ok Ramadan is happening, we need to make special passes, and the kids are gonna meet here here, at these times.

Ms. Jamison, the junior seminar teacher, also shared a similar view: “So every time it (Ramadan) comes around, I am constantly hearing what the expectations are, what the accommodations are, and where they can go if they don’t wanna be in the lunch room...”

Ms. Mirree, the ESL teacher, commented: “With high schoolers, the biggest thing I noticed was during Ramadan, that was a big conversation, and that was also throughout the school, not just with the immigrant population.”

Each of these teachers noticed the cultural shift in the school during Ramadan. As the earlier section described when Asia presented the health chart, teachers were given PD workshops to ensure they were supporting fasting students. In addition to the PD, Mr. Daro

mentioned how the principal herself and Mrs. Penney were supportive of students. He mentioned Ramadan prayer passes as well as specific lunch rooms where fasting students could go to in order to avoid the cafeteria. Ms. Jamison also mentioned the lunch room accommodations. Finally, Ms. Mirree noted that non-Muslim students in her class would also want to learn more about Ramadan.

During my observations, I noticed how fasting Muslim and non-Muslim students would crowd into designated teacher room during the lunch periods in Ramadan. Students played games and kept each other company throughout the long fasts of Ramadan. Overall, the school shifted during Ramadan, making room for their Muslim students, both literally and figuratively, to be able to practice their faith. However, the same accommodations were not available during the remainder of the year.

The moment when Islamic practice became most apparent in public space was during school prayers. Every Ramadan, the MSA students organized an *iftar* (Ramadan dinner) for their school community, Muslim and non-Muslim alike because their charter school in Southwest Philly prided itself on its multicultural outlook. The students had worked diligently to organize the gym space into a place for *maghreb namaz* (evening prayer). They had all brought prayers mats from home that they could lay out on the gym floor, in case people attending the iftar had forgotten to bring their mats. After all, the gym, though cleaned, was still a place where students exercised vigorously. “You wouldn’t want your face to touch the bare dirty ass floor,” Asia, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Malian 11<sup>th</sup> grader, commented. Kabeera, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Guinean 9<sup>th</sup> grader, reminded her that the floor would

obviously be cleaned before the iftar. Still, Asia insisted they must have enough prayer mats. For her, claiming Islamic space meant creating a sacred ground for prayer.

The students meticulously transformed the gym into a space worthy of prayer, an act of worship made even more special since prayer was to occur during the holy month of Ramadan. In their attempts to convert the everyday “dirty ass” gym floor into one suitable for prayer, the students used prayer mats to sanctify the floor, so worshippers could pray without any hint of uncleanness. The students used religious objects, such as prayer mats, to temporarily sacralize the gym space. They also ensured access to bathrooms for wudu (cleansing before prayer) to further emphasize the paramount importance of cleanliness in conducting this sacred act.

Another topic of discussion during MSA in preparation for the prayers was how to ensure that the gym was returned to its original conditions after the prayer had concluded.

Kabeera: Yo, small water bottles. Get the small water bottles.

Mrs. Penney: I am. I like to leave things the way they...we cannot leave it all teared up. People who leave the water bottles, so everything is back the way it was in the gym. Who is going to put the gym back the way it was?

Kabeera: I wanna help!

Asia.: You wanna help too (to Rania)?

Mrs. Penney: Because she is not Muslim, it's the perfect job to do that.

Asia.: Rania.

Someone: Ariya can do that too.

Kabeera: She gonna be busy doing other stuff.

Mrs. Penney: Cause we gonna be praying!

Kabeera: Well, we gotta make sure things are put back cause there is a game the day after.

In this excerpt, Mrs. Penney and Kabeera reinforces the temporary quality of the reinscription of the gymnasium. Mrs. Penney recognizes that having dates, water bottles, and hundreds of people praying would leave a certain amount of detritus after the prayer concluded. She insists that MSA members sign up for cleanup duty, so she could “leave things the way they (are).” The gym would have to be returned from its temporary role as sacred prayer space to a secular ordinary space for athletic events. Kabeera, a Muslim woman, volunteers to help. However, Mrs. Penney prompts Rania, a non-Muslim member, to help with the cleanup efforts. Since Rania would not be praying, she could use the prayer time to silently collect the leftover bottles. She suggested that Rania would be a better candidate than Ariya, a Muslim, who would be busy praying and doing “other stuff,” as Kabeera mentions. The role of Muslims and non-Muslims in the MSA becomes clear in this conversation - all students are consciously included, especially non-Muslim MSA members for whom the prayer experience would differ significantly than the Muslim MSA members.

Mrs. Penney and the MSA students’ consciousness of the temporary re-inscription of the gym as prayer space becomes apparent. Kabeera notes that the gym must be returned to its original condition because there was a basketball game taking place in the gym the day after. The collection of trash after the prayers was not only an act of service but an act of returning the space to the way it was supposed to be – not a prayer space, but a playing space. As geographer and educational scholar, Sandra Schmidt, theorizes in her (2011) study of school spaces: “It is insufficient to suggest that the gymnasium, even with a

dominant meaning, held only one meaning....The gym held the conflicting messages of competition and peace” (29). In Schmidt’s study, one of her interlocutors, Kristen, insisted that the primary purpose of the gym was still as a competitive athletic space, despite philanthropic plays and food drive occurring in the same space. In the case of the MSA students praying in the gym, students perceived the gym as “dirty ass,” or a place where students exercise and sweat; it was not typically associated with cleanliness or a space of spiritual exertion. During Ramadan, however, the students re-inscribed the gym as a place of prayer, like Werbner’s interlocutors who transformed the secular streets of Birmingham into a site of Sufi devotional practice. Students had transformed the gym into a sanctified space through laying out prayer mats, making wudu available, and by re-envisioning the space as one of quiet connection to God.

Yet, the students knew that even though they had recast the gym as a spiritual place, the dominant perception of what the gym as athletic space remained; i.e.: the recasting was temporary. The space itself had not been transformed fundamentally; it remained a gym used for prayer, rather than a sacred place in and of itself. Praying in the gym was not a direct challenge to the separation of church and state, a common logic in K-12 schooling, but rather a temporary realignment, which drew on school-sponsored logics of multiculturalism to allow religious prayer to occur on school grounds. Nonetheless, as Werbner stated, perhaps the “ontological divide” had been crossed, even if the space was not fundamentally transformed. The students had demonstrated to their non-Muslim peers that they were willing to perform Islamic prayer in public instead of being ashamed to be viewed as religious. Their public demonstration through prayer as a form of Islamic self-

making had the effect of signaling their piety to the larger public, as well as solidifying their affiliation with the increasingly visible power of the MSA within school culture.

Excluding Werbner's (1996) analysis of space and prayer, there has also been little attention to the religious and spiritual element of the prayer itself within studies of space (Lefebvre, 1991). The spiritual importance of this act of prayer should not be underestimated, particularly in the way it taps into deeper religious modes within the student's self-understandings as practicing Muslims, connected to an ummah (Islamic community) around the world. Jeannerat (2009) explains that "prayer itself has the power to purify and protect the spiritual energy of the worshipper. Prayer literally generates a sacred energy that the believer can harness to purify, discipline, convert and protect the self."

As the students began to pray, there was silence among the worshippers that would ensure that their prayers would be delivered to God. There was also a feeling of connectedness, as all the worshippers prayed in the direction of the sacred Kaaba, the central node of the Islamic universe. Standing in a linked chain, with each foot brushing up against the next worshipper's foot, there was a feeling of solidarity. I suggest that the MSA students, families, and other adherents were linked in a chain of prayers that connected them to Muslims praying all around the world. Particularly at a sacred time like Ramadan, worshippers around the world were standing in linked formations, offering their prayers towards the Kaaba. In this case, Islamic space-making through claiming prayer space in the gym occurred in connection with space-making efforts offered globally, indicating the importance of claiming religious space as a form of Islamic self-making.

As Werbner describes in her work, her interlocutors believe that their movement in Birmingham is part of a chain of linked Sufi saints around the world, also marching through space. The Sufi saints established new sites of worship around the world, extending the chain of Sufi adherents globally and extending the influence of Pir Hazrat Shah. For these Sufi adherents in Birmingham, this very movement in space was an act of spiritual significance and worship. While the MSA students in my study were not part of specific spiritual order, they were nonetheless, linked to the millions of Muslims around the world who were also earnestly offering prayers during Ramadan. While these global spaces were separated, it was through a central node, that of the Kaaba, that the MSA students and families were spatially interlinked to the ummah. The prayer offered up in a charter school gym in Southwest Philly, therefore, joined the prayers of worshippers in West African countries, from which many of these students' families originated, as well as joining the prayers of worshippers at the Kaaba in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. The prayers also served a function of standing testimony to the piousness of the worshipper. As Werbner (1996) describes in the language of her interlocutors:

“According to the Hadith, when you walk along saying the zikr (chant), then everything, including people and objects and things of nature, will be your witness on the Day of Judgement when you have performed the zikr, yes, even the stones and buildings.” I asked, “even the earth?” and he responded. “Yes, it is said in the Hadith that once you have said zikr stamping on the earth, the earth will wait for you to come back again” (323).

Werbner's interlocutor emphasizes how even inanimate objects embedded into the land, can stand testament to one's faith. This saying corroborates a hadith (sayings of the Prophet) in Islam that basically advises worshippers to pray in as many places as you can around the world. That is because each of these spaces will be witness for a believer on the



Day of Judgment. Islamic wisdom sacralized spaces themselves by imbuing the spaces themselves with the power of witnessing. Every step you take towards a masjid moves you closer to God, the traditional wisdom says. Drawing on this saying, the MSA students too offered prayers on this new location of the Honors Academy gymnasium in the hopes that their prayers would stand testimony for their good deeds on the Day of Judgement, regardless of the fact that it was originally a “dirty ass gym” in which this sacred offering was put forward.

While operating within the logic of multicultural diversity, prayer on school grounds crossed the “ontological divide,” of secular and sacred spaces within the spatial bounds of Honors Academy. While the Ramadan program and the inclusivity of the prayer subscribed to the ethos of multiculturalism, the spiritual sanctity of the prayer and the transnational connection of the prayer created an alternative model of religious actions within school grounds. While fasting was an individual act that was contained to individual student bodies (although it did achieve a certain leniency in the school’s rules), the act of collective, transnational prayer signaled an alternative use of the secular school space. Though it was a temporary re-inscription, *salat* nonetheless had the potential to violate the division of church and space. By publicly endorsing school prayer, the school administrators (perhaps inadvertently) extended beyond the realm of multicultural tolerance to support the MSA students’ attempts to be religious individuals at school, without fear of Islamophobia or school sanctions. Even within a hegemonic logic of multiculturalism, religious prayer sanctified the space, creating an alternative possibility.

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This account brings to light how religious motivations found purchase within a market-driven framework. The Ramadan presentation and the prayer itself, though framed in the language of diversity, became a form of Islamic space-making that transcended market discourses. Both forms of Islamic space-making occurred through claims to space within a secular public school, indicating the importance of finding institutional belonging in a space (ex: school, state, nation) as one form of Islamic self-making.

One form of Islamic space-making remained within the bounds of multiculturalism. The Ramadan program constantly emphasized the alignment between the accepted values at Honors and how Muslim students embodied those very values. Mrs. Penney's "extraction" of the values of self-discipline and grit from Islamic teachings was deliberately in line with the values the school espoused. This first form of Islamic space-making created a space for the practice of Islam within school grounds under the purview of multiculturalism.

The second form of Islamic space-making went beyond the accepted realms of the school's espoused multiculturalism. The religious nature of the *salat* prayer in the gym crossed "ontological divides", and it was only the temporary nature of the prayer that prevented the prayer from being condemned by critics as a violation of the 'separation of church and state.' This transnationally oriented, collective form of prayer signaled an alternative possibility of using secular school space, arrived at even within (and despite) a hegemonic logic of multiculturalism.

## Chapter 7: Islam in the Classroom

A few weeks into observation in a 7th grade classroom, I noticed a group of women wearing khimars and overgarments sitting together in the front row of the classroom. During a classroom break, I went up to introduce myself since we had not met before. As I walked up to the girls, I was unsure about whether to ask if they were Muslim - after all, I couldn't assume that wearing an overgarment and khimar meant they were definitively Muslim. Zara, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade Muslim woman who had converted to Islam had in fact, told me about her friend who was a "practice Muslim," who wore *khimar* (Islamic headcovering) and overgarment, dated girls, but had not taken the shahadah (the Islamic declaration of faith). I did not want to place labels on students just based on how they dressed, a sentiment that other teachers had also mentioned when they talked about students they assumed were Muslim.

My deliberations were unnecessary as I soon found out. As I approached the four girls, they glanced at me curiously. I introduced myself as someone who was a researcher at their school who was interested in learning more about Islamic culture. One of the girls in a Black khimar and overgarment asked me "are you Muslim?" I admitted yes, and the young lady said "salamu alaikum" (peace be upon you). I responded "walaikum-as-salaam" (may people be upon you also). What she said next surprised me. This young lady asked me "say the full salam." Confused, I said, "what do you mean?" She said, "you know, the full salam." I could tell from her grin and the mischievous looks on the other girls' faces that this was clearly a test designed for me to prove my level of Islamic knowledge, and therefore authenticity to them. Especially since I was not wearing a khimar and

overgarment, I did not appear characteristically Muslim according to the standards of Islamic fashion at the school. I thought for a second, wondering what this young lady meant by the full salam. I realized that the girls wanted to me to say: “assalamu alaikum wa rahmah tulla hi wa barakatuhu” (Peace be upon you and God’s mercy and blessings), the “full salam.” The girls said “cool, you know it” - I had passed muster.

My interaction with the girls suggested that gauging one’s Islamic authenticity was not just a casual part of the culture in Honors Academy - it was a marker of identity and difference that emerged in everyday interactions among youth and some of their Muslim teachers in the hallways, the cafeteria, and classrooms. Moreover, my interaction with the girls illustrated their strong sense of self as Black Muslims, a sense that is nurtured through growing up in a city like Philadelphia with a relatively large and historically vibrant Black Muslim community. Black Muslims have achieved a status among Muslims in Philadelphia, and so, young Black Muslim women do not have to prove to non-Black Muslims that they are legitimately and “authentically” Muslim, as is common in many other South Asian and Arab dominated Muslim settings (Khabeer, 2016). Ethnoreligious hegemonies privileging South Asian and Arab interpretations of Islam were temporarily inverted in this interaction.

The history of Black Muslims in Philadelphia also, most likely, contributed to the ability of Muslim students to create spaces for practicing Islam at Honors. While prior research, particularly in the post 9/11 paradigm, has noted the virulence of Islamophobia in many US classrooms (Maira, 2001; Abu El Haj, 2015), the uniquely positive status of Islam within Honors Academy stands out in contrast. Instead of hiding

their social identities as Muslims, students were eager to associate with Islam, due to the prevalence of Islam within the social scene in Philadelphia. In this chapter, I note how Muslim students within an Ancient History classroom reshaped dominant religious discourses within the classroom through their extracurricular knowledge of Islam, thereby creating alternative classroom discourses and unique visual forms.

The Monotheistic Religions unit was an important element in fostering Honors students' multicultural knowledge of the world's major religions. Particularly in a religiously diverse city such as Philadelphia, Honors administrators and teachers felt it was imperative for Honors students to learn about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in order to become the educated and multicultural citizens that Honors envisioned for their graduates. However, the curricularly accepted version of multicultural Islam did not pass muster with some Black Muslim youth within the Ancient History classroom, prompting students to engage in diverse, public expressions of Islam, even when it wasn't accepted by their teacher. This form of curricular reinterpretation was another form of Islamic self-making.

In the Ancient History classroom, student discourses concerning Islam tended to take two forms. First, Muslim students utilized spoken and visual forms to publicly declare their adherence to Islam, to emphasize their Muslimness, and to position themselves in a classroom interaction primarily in terms of this sense of self. In doing so, the Muslim students indexed their sense of Islamic selfhood in relation to a range of semiotic signs and symbols: through the use of spoken Arabic invocations, inscribing visual representations of faith inscribed on material objects such as binders, and critiquing the curriculum itself. Through these various semiotic practices of Islamic self-making, students expressed their

engagement with Islam within classroom spaces. And frequently, in so doing, these students gained prestige through their positive association with Islam, a positive association between Blackness and Islam that many have historically struggled to establish within the Philadelphia Black Muslim communities to which these students belong.

Second, in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade Ancient History Monotheistic Religious Unit, the explicit focus on Islam enabled Muslim students to draw from their funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006) concerning the religion to co-produce knowledge and contribute to their learning process. When the topic of Islam was introduced in Mrs. Longwood's class, Muslim students, instead of accepting the limited understanding of Islam presented in the curriculum, were able to draw from their own understandings of and experiences with Islamic practice in an effort to enrich their non-Muslim classmates' learning about their religion. Some Muslim students attempted to "Islamify" the unit lesson by introducing their own interpretations of Islam while others engaged in theological debates with non-Muslim students in an effort to present the "true" interpretation of Islam. Overall, students were able to shift the curricular dominance within the classroom through their knowledge and to cast themselves as knowledge experts, creating alternative interpretations of Islam to that of the existing curriculum.

In my analysis of these classroom interactions, I draw on Wortham (2005) and his theory of how social identity and academic learning are inextricably intertwined. In the account Wortham provides of classroom interactions in a joint high school English and history class, he depicts how social identity shapes students' academic identities and what they learn. In his close analysis of interactional patterns in the classroom over time, he

brings to light how, occasionally, the students' academic identity also reshaped their social standing within the classroom space. Wortham (2005) emphasizes that academic learning and social identities work simultaneously to produce content learning and social exclusion. He also notes how local categories of identity emerge in the classroom, based on the unique identities of students and teachers in class, who build a recognizable classroom culture over time. Local categories refer to mutually created interactional patterns and shared ideas that emerge over time within the specific, localized classroom space. Similar to Wortham's (2005) classroom study, I also note how the Black Muslim youth in the classroom use Islam as a resource to navigate their social and academic identities within the Ancient History classroom. I depict how Islam serves as a resource for enacting forms of Islamic self-making within classroom spaces. The Islam unit gives academic value in class to the subject of Islam in a way that scholars have referred to as culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) or more recently, culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012), allowing Muslim students to re-orient the existing curriculum for their peers and remake their social identities within the classroom.

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As noted above, when Islam was not the official curricular focus in the classroom, students would find other ways to express their Muslim sense of self and bring Islam into classroom interactions. One way they enacted this was through the recitation of Arabic invocations. These invocations, which included the salam test described at the beginning of the chapter, indicated Islamic self-making at work in classroom settings. The importance of Arabic as denoting Islamic identity became even more clear to me one day when I was

chatting with Mrs. Penney's students before class started. The students asked me what I was doing in their classroom, and I explained that I was studying the practice of Islam within Honors Academy. In response, one young woman declared proudly amidst a group of five of her friends, "I took my shahadah." Another friend called out "That's fraudery. She ain't no Muslim, she just trying to be in your study." Another girl called out, "say the salam!" The young lady responded, "I know how to say as-salamu-alaikum, see?" The dissenting friend looked skeptical, but let the matter go, since the young lady had been able to pass the 'salam test'. In this particular example, the ability to recite the Arabic words for the Islamic greeting qualified a young lady as "Muslim," even amidst her doubting peers. The invocations of Arabic solidified an Islamic identity within the classroom, revealing the students' association of Arabic with Islamic authenticity.

Students also used Arabic to demonstrate piety within the classroom. I noticed that Sami, a young man in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and occasionally attending MSA meetings, would often declare 'la ilaha illa la' (there's no God but God) when he forgot to write something on his worksheet or when he wanted to show disapproval of someone's action. Once, he noticed classmates fighting in the seat next to him; he called out 'la ilaha illa la' with a disapproving nod. Sami judged his peers for their childish behavior and set himself apart as a God-fearing Muslim who did not engage in such horseplay, especially within an academic place like the classroom. Another time, Sami calls "I can't hate cause I'm Muslim, but I am annoyed by Ms. Mo's composition essay." Even while complaining, Sami reminded his peers that he will not let his frustration about the essay overtake the need to respect teachers within



Islam. In Sami's case, Arabic invocations served to demonstrate his piety and adherence to Islamic rules of 'proper' behavior.

The salam test as well as invocations of piety in the classroom were contingent on the use of Arabic. The high regard associated with Arabic is a common trend amongst some Black Muslim communities. Anthropologist Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2009) notes how "legitimate religious authority is tied to the cultural capital of the Arabic language in the global Muslim community" (Khabeer, 2009, 171). Khabeer critiques the immediate association of Arabic with Islamic authenticity or piety, particularly due to the ethnoreligious hegemonic hierarchies within the US Muslim community. Because of the elevated position of the language due to the revelation of the Quran in classical Arabic, amongst Muslim communities, Islamic authenticity becomes mapped onto mastery of Arabic, which in turn maps onto an ethnic hierarchy. Ethnic Arabs speaking the language are given great deference and authority. In fact, though there is a great diversity of global Islamic scholarship in many languages, Arabic still remains a marker of superiority within Muslim communities. The privileging of Arabic perpetuates ethnoreligious hegemonies, casting Black Islam as inauthentic, and thereby reaffirming anti-Black ideologies. My young interlocutors tapped into this elevated view of Arabic to craft practices, such as the salam test within the classroom at Honors Academy, in order to test Islamic authenticity of Muslims, though by doing so, they too reaffirmed ethnoreligious hegemonies.

In addition to spoken invocations of Arabic, visual representations of Arabic also worked to fortify students' Muslim identity and their public declaration of faith amongst their peers. Inscriptions on binders like Zara and Fatima (described below) and one's arm

(described in Nina's case in the next section) were ways in which young Muslims in my study shared their faith with their friends, classmates, and teachers. How these young people incorporated material and corporeal surfaces as a canvass for their faith was not coincidental. Studies of tattooing amongst Muslim youth (Nasir, 2016; Rokib and Sodiq, 2017) indicate how corporeal forms become a means for the expression of faith, despite the transgressiveness associated with tattoos in Islam (due to the belief that one is altering God's given body). These works emphasize how material surfaces carried the mark of faith permanently and visibly; for MSA students as well, visual markings as a form of Islamic self-making strengthened their public expression of religiosity, even within "secular" public school classrooms.

Arabic script solidified students' Islamic identities by creating a visual signal of piety. Particularly for young converts like Zara, this signaling mechanism to demonstrate her piety was an important function of Arabic writing. During class one day, I noticed that Zara had a binder with a clear cover, through which one could see Arabic script written out in bright yellow and green marker. When I asked her what it said, she explained: "It's my name. I wrote it, Shantell helped me. I don't know how to write Arabic, Shantell does. She's very educated, I'm still a beginner." When I tried to make out her name, I realized that the Arabic script didn't exactly spell out her name. It looked like started with b u u n (pronunciation) and got harder to read. Though it's possible that Shantell had had Arabic training, the written-out script itself had not captured Zara's name; it's possible that Shantell had less Arabic training that Zara gave her credit for. Zara, however, as a non-Arabic speaker, nonetheless trusted in Shantell's training and was proud to have a piece of

Arabic writing to sanctify her academic notes and papers. As a newly converted Muslim, it was important for Zara to signal her emerging Muslim identity within the classroom, which she did by displaying the Arabic writing on her binder and by seeking out her Muslim friend's help in writing the Arabic script. As Khabeer (2016) noted, the exaltation of Arabic to mark one's piety is a common feature within Muslim communities, though it often serves to perpetuate anti-Blackness within the Muslim community. Nonetheless, Zara used Arabic, as imperfect as her knowledge of it was, for her own form of Islamic self-making, both finding strength in the script while also engaging in larger ethnoreligious linguistic hegemonies.

For Fatima, a young woman of mixed ancestry from Niger and Jamaica, the Arabic script served a different purpose than Zara. As a hijabi, Fatima did not need an additional "reminder" to indicate to others she was Muslim; her hijab already served this Islamic signaling purpose. Fatima, however, used Arabic to craft her own fashionable form of Islamic representation for her peers. She wanted to demonstrate that being religious did not have to be dour, but could also accommodate fun aspects of her personality, such as her favorite music. For Fatima, therefore, Arabic invocation served as a piece of her self-crafted fashionable Muslim self within the classroom.

Fatima carried a Black binder to every one of her classes. Inside the front clear plastic cover of her binder, Fatima had inserted her class schedule and made it 'cute' by inserting a sheet of paper, which signaled her personality. On a half sheet of looseleaf lined paper, she had written in bright purple and pink marker, "Fatima <3 <3 "Keep it Cute Sis - Cardi B." She had taped a fortune cookie saying "A journal must begin with a single

step.” On the back plastic inside cover of the binder, Fatima had inserted a lined piece of looseleaf paper, written in Black marker. “Thanks allah (Arabic) - Stop. Breathe. Remind yourself: Allah is with you. He’s watching over you. He’s testing you because he loves you. He hasn’t forgotten you. He’s making you Stronger. Now Smile :) Say Alhamdulillah +.” She had drawn some hearts in Black and purple on the white space next to Stop. Breathe. Remind yourself (these letters were in bigger letters than the rest of the message below).

Fatima’s unique personality was clear in the presentation of her binder. An avid fan of Cardi B as well as Allah (SWT), Fatima had found a way to share her passions with her friends, classmates, and observes such as myself. I found it interesting that she placed her note of faith on the back of the binder and Cardi B on the front. The note of faith was visible to all as she walked with her binder, while the note with Cardi B faced her. Occasionally, Fatima would carry her binder flipped, so that the Cardi B note would face her classmates. What the intentional placement of the messages in her binder indicated to me was that Fatima wanted the world to know that she was actively Muslim, that she was constantly thinking about Allah. This message also served to remind her to be patient through her struggles. Allah is always with her, watching over her, testing her because He loves her. The underlined “you’s indicates Fatima’s personal relationship with God - he is taking care of her as a unique individual and Muslim. Fatima struggles to hold her tongue, as her Muslim teachers advise her at Islamic school - she often talks back when she shouldn’t. She believes that controlling her words and behavior is the test Allah (SWT) is placing her through - she must overcome her struggles to smile (not have a resting b\* face

as others accuse her of) and always remain grateful by saying Alhamdulillah. Fatima believes that exercising self-control will make her “Stronger,” a word which she capitalizes intentionally (in contrast to lower case letters for other significant words in the message.” At the top of the message, she also does not capitalize Allah - “allah.” Perhaps it is her way of showing her personal connection with Allah - that she feels that using lowercase letters makes Him less imposing as a God.

Just as significantly, Fatima’s reminder to herself about God, which she intentionally showcases to the world, is also placed back to back with her love of Cardi B. Fatima often would hum and break into Cardi B lyrics in class. Cardi’s advice to keep it cute resonated with her. Even with the gravitas of faith, her love of Cardi helped her stay up to date with pop culture and signaled her coolness. Fatima was not just a God-fearing Muslim in a ‘bland,’ overly pious manner. She was cute like Cardi B, aware of pop culture at the same time that she was also authentically Muslim. Fatima saw no disjunction between the sexually explicit lyrics she listened to in Cardi B’s songs and demonstrating her faith through her message in the binder. Her enactment of the cool Muslim as her form of Islamic self-making seemed to be positively accepted by her non-Muslim peers, who often commented on how “cute” her binder was.

The aesthetic reworking of the material form of the binders to indicate faith is one way in which objects are used to signify piety. Anthropologist Carla Jones (2010) posits that women bear unusual semiotic burdens at the borders of materiality and piety. In her study of Indonesian women’s consumption of fashion, Jones demonstrates how her young interlocutors had to navigate the boundaries between consumption and piety, taking care

not to appear immodest or overly invested in materialism. Jones (2010) suggests that young Muslim women define their pious expressions through material forms. In the case of Zara and Fatima, they used the simple item of the binder and made them fashionable to express their religiosity. Fatima's particular draw to Cardi B indicates her consumption of this popular music. Usually associated with explicitly sexual lyrics, Fatima, nonetheless, does not fear being labelled as immodest (unlike her Indonesian counterparts), since her khimar and her lifelong practice of Islam guarantees her authentic Muslimness.

As Jones (2010) writes: "neither sober and ascetic nor sacred and inalienable (Weiner, 1992) pious commodities and the people who use them defy discrete conceptions of materiality and piety by constructing virtue through, rather than outside of, consumption." (Jones, 2010, 618). Though less a flashy item of consumption, as in the case of fashionable khimars and overgarments, the binders still represent a material form that is reworked to combine faith and aesthetic fashion. In addition, Fatima's devotion to Cardi B songs is another unusual way in which she combines religiosity with consumption practices. Material consumption, therefore, is not separate from faith practices, but rather a means of Islamic self-making that allow MSA students to express pious devotion within public spaces at Honors Academy.

Through the previous examples, I have argued that Muslim students' public declaration of Islam served as a resource to elevate MSA students' social roles in the classroom. Arabic invocations served an important role in delineating who was "Muslim" and who was not, similar to the students' use of the term *Fuslim* (fake Muslim) in the upcoming Chapter 8. The strategic use of Arabic in the form of the salam test and Islamic

invocations like “li ila ha illa” marked a form of Islamic self-making based on ethnoreligious hegemonies privileging Arabic. The strategic use of Arabic also extended to visual forms. Her Arabic binder served to solidify Zara’s new convert status, while Fatima’s binder exhibited a cool Muslim look. Each of these young people – Zara, Fatima, and Sami eagerly deployed spoken and visual forms to socially carve out their roles as Muslims within the classroom. Material consumption becomes a means to express piety. However, even as MSA students used Arabic strategically as a form of Islamic self-making, they also perpetuated the larger ethnoreligious hegemony of Arabic dominance within Muslim communities, which casts forms of Black Islam as indeterminately inauthentic.

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Muslim students in Ancient History elevated their academic standing in the classroom through their social identification as Muslim students through Arabic invocations and material consumption; in turn, their academic expertise about Islam reinforced their social standing in the classroom. To understand these students’ behaviors, I draw on Stanton Wortham’s (2005) study, in which he traces how social identity and academic learning were inextricably intertwined and accentuates the relationships between academic and non-academic activities.

I focus on two 7<sup>th</sup> graders in the Islamic Monotheism unit. Naaila, a recent West African immigrant from Mali, had a strong desire to advocate for Islam. Her father warned her that learning about Christianity was an attempt to get her to convert. Naaila, therefore, professed a strong adherence to Islam, often engaging in debate with her Christian

classmates and serving as an “advocate” for Islam. Nina, on the other hand, initially did not acknowledge that she was Muslim, inhabiting the role of the “reluctant Muslim”. As the class progressed, however and Islam received positive attention, Nina avidly declared her public expression of Islam. The contrasting experiences of the two girls suggested that academic and social identities were intertwined and that their Islamic self-making processes took different forms. Social identification as Muslims shaped how these two girls interpreted and re-interpreted the existing curriculum.

The relationship between Nina and Naaila was also worthy of note. While the two of them would chat occasionally during MSA, within the Ancient History classroom, Nina was a lot more popular than Naaila. As the year began in Ancient History class, Naaila expressed to me that she felt that Nina ignored her; Nina, on the other hand, felt that Naaila was a know it all whom she preferred to avoid. However, during my observations of the girls during the Monotheistic Religions unit, it became apparent that Nina came to view Naaila as a valuable resource from whom she could learn about Islam. The Islamic unit prompted social transformation amongst both girls that I will trace later in the chapter, occasionally even at the cost of academic ‘correctness’.

The Islam unit, I argue, had alternative implications within the classroom space. Instead of simply serving curricular purposes of learning about the faith, the Islam unit elevated the prestige of Islam within the class, allowing Muslim students to re-orient the existing curriculum for their peers. Students like Naaila and Nina tried to “Islamify the curriculum.” They used existing Islamic schemas to reinterpret the lesson, drawing on Islam as a resource to remake their social identities within the classroom, engaging in a



form of Islamic self-making through curricular reinterpretation. Here, I will focus on three instances in which Naaila and Nina used existing Islamic schemas to reinterpret the lesson.

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The 7th graders began their Monotheistic Religions unit in late February in their Ancient History class, which was taught by Mrs. Longwood, a young African American woman who had been teaching for 3 years. On the first day of my observations, the class began to talk about martyrdom in early Christianity, on which they spent a few days, then transitioned to Islam. I followed Nina and Naaila into their classroom. Nina and Naaila were both talkative and very eager to please me. Having gotten to know me in MSA meetings, they were delighted that I would observe them in their classroom, amongst their friends, peers, and teacher.

Similar to Wortham's (2005) study, I attended the Ancient History class for a semester, observing how localized forms of identity and classroom culture emerged over time. Through longitudinal observation, it became clear to me how the lesson on Islam was perceived with great excitement by the students; the Islam unit elicited the most enthusiastic response out of Christianity and Judaism. It was during the Islam unit that Naaila really came alive. Naaila sat, eyes focused, body leaned forward as Mrs. Longwood wrote the unit lesson was about Islam. Someone asked 'We learn about Islam?' Another student exclaims: Can't wait to hear about it! Some girls in the front row assigned seats start clapping. There seemed to be general jubilation around the classroom that Mrs. Longwood would finally talk about Islam. I asked Nina 'why are people so excited?' Nina flashed her characteristic grin and said 'cause Islam is cool.' Students generally had a

positive perception of Islam due to the prevalence of Islam, especially Black Islam, and even non-Muslim students were eager to learn more about this religion.

At Honors, public classrooms became a site of religious expression, with Black Muslim students often highlighting their faith in relation to curriculum to which they were exposed to in class. Teachers did not discuss religious topics, Islam in this case, intentionally in the classroom. Many teachers were wary of crossing the boundary between the separation of church and state. However, there were one content area in which Islam became a topic of prominence, which was during the Monotheistic Religions unit in 7th grade Ancient History. Administrators and teachers at Honors felt it was important for their students to have multicultural exposure to the world's major religions.

Throughout the Christianity unit, Nina drew on her faith to interpret comprehension questions in class. During one class period when Mrs. Longwood showed a video of Jesus dying on the cross, she asked the students why Jesus was being punished by the Romans. Drawing from her religious schema, Nina answers "they (the Romans) want people to worship their gods." Mrs. Longwood corrects her: "Actually, they want people to worship the rulers as God." A confused Nina whispered to me, sitting in the chair in the row behind her, "but people can't worship anybody other than Allah!" Nina drew on her existing Islamic schema to answer Mrs. Longwood's query about why Jesus was being crucified - it made sense to her that Jesus would oppose worshipping Roman gods because they were false idols. The only true God was God or Allah. However, Mrs. Longwood explained that the Roman rulers believed themselves to be Gods who should be worshipped by the people. Nina found this explanation of humans as God puzzling based on her Islamic knowledge

in which people cannot be a deity, and there cannot be a God besides Allah. I was uncertain about whether Mrs. Longwood's correction rectified Nina's understanding of Roman religion, since Nina drew on existing Islamic schemas when trying to interpret the unit on Christianity. Her religious identity as a Muslim shaped Nina's interpretation of the lesson more than the academic content she was supposed to be learning.

Mrs. Longwood briefly touched on Judaism. She stated that "at that time, people believed that Christianity and Judaism were the only religions then. Who were some Jewish prophets?" The students referred to their worksheet and called out names. Nina stated that Ibrahim was a Jewish prophet, but did not mention Moses. On her paper, Nina corrected Abraham to Ibrahim by crossing out the A and replacing it with an I. She told me that's the name she had heard from Mrs. Penney, not Abraham. Nina's adoption of Ibrahim, not Abraham, was her way of "Islamifying" the text. She wanted to refer to the names of the Prophets from an Islamic perspective. However, Mrs. Longwood corrected Nina when she said, "Prophet Ibrahim." Mrs. Longwood said, "on the sheet, it says Abraham, so say that." Nina didn't respond, but continued to write out her worksheet responses in the "Islamified" version of the Prophet's names. Despite her desire to get a good grade in class, she wanted to remain true to her Islam and write the Prophet's name in the way that she wanted. In this case, religious identity trumped academic success (re: getting full points for correct spelling on her worksheet), and Nina "Islamified" the worksheet response as a means of asserting her Islamic identity as part of a practice of Islamic self-making.

In addition to Islamifying non-Islamic texts, Nina and Naaila continued to draw on their Islamic knowledge to offer a more faith-based explanation of the curriculum. By

doing so, the students demonstrate how their effort towards Islamic self-making reshapes their response to the question, even if it means they got the question “wrong.” Mrs. Longwood, in contrast, often adhered strictly to the facts laid out in the Islam worksheet. While she was aware that Muslim students in her class had more knowledge of Islam, she was reluctant to privilege non-textual understandings of Islam over that of the “official” curriculum (via the worksheet) she used in class. I offer a comparison of my empirical example with anthropologist Patricia Baquedano Lopez’s (2000) study of doctrina (catechism) classes for Mexican American students. Baquedano Lopez shows how an emphasis on facts also shapes doctrina lessons within the catechism class.

Naaila shared her view of Islam through her classroom responses. In response to a worksheet question: “Why do you think that this statement (the shahadah) is a significant part of being a Muslim?” Naaila writes: “So you can worship Allah.” Another young Muslim lady in the lady, Kiki, who had recently decided she was Muslim during the course of the Islam unit, answers “So you can ask for God’s forgiveness.” Mrs. Longwood revealed that the answer to the shahadah question in the text was: “The meaning of the shahadah is that people not only believe in God, but pledge their submission to him. For Muslims, God is the center of life. The shahadah follows Muslims through everyday life, not just prayers.” While the text focuses on shahadah as an everyday act of submission to God, Naaila thinks about the shahadah literally, as the declaration of faith people make during conversion so they can worship Allah. While her answer is correct from an Islamic perspective, it does not mention the words that Mrs. Longwood was looking for, which were “submission” and “making God the center of life.” Naaila also responds literally by

thinking of shahadah as a one time act, since that is the ordinary view of shahadah for practicing Muslims. The text, however, emphasizes shahadah as an ongoing act. Naaila's re-interpretation of the text is marked wrong by Mrs. Longwood, who tells Naaila she should "refer to the text more when answering your question."

Despite getting answers wrong, Nina continued draw on existing schemas to answer questions rather than refer to classroom content. When Mrs. Longwood asked students to provide a written response to "What is the importance of the Five Pillars in Islam?" Nina responded by drawing on a scriptural view of Islam, rather than referring to the worksheet provided in class. She writes that it's important because "it shows you are loyal to God/Allah Subhanu ta-Allah and because you have to follow the rules to be a Muslim." Nina confidently tells me she is ready to take the assessment on the Five Pillars because she already knew about it before she started class. In contrast to Nina's response, the answer that the text provided to the Five Pillars question was "The most basic acts of worship for Muslims are called the Five Pillars of Faith. The Qu'ran provides general commands to perform these five duties. The Sunnah explains how to perform them using Muhammad's example." The response that Mrs. Longwood was looking for "they are basic acts of worship for Muslims." Nina does capture the idea that these Five Pillars are general rules to be Muslim. However, she adds the section about being loyal to God/Allah Subhanu ta-Allah, making sure to mention both the anglicized as well as the Arabic version of God's name. Nina expresses how she views the Five Pillars as an act of loyalty to God; implicit in her answer is that loyalty comes about through acts of worship; however, she does not

mention worship directly in her answer. She also emphasizes the importance of rules, which the Five Pillars represents to her.

Though the girls' responses do not deviate significantly from the text answers, they offer a more lived interpretation of Islamic practice in response to classroom questions about the meaning of Islam. Occasionally, these non-textual answers are marked wrong by the teacher. However, the girls continue to use Islamic viewpoints to answer the questions during the Islam unit as an act of Islamic self-making. Their lack of "alignment" with the formal curricular answer does not deter their social identification as Muslims, even if it comes at the cost of receiving lower marks on their paper or redirection from Mrs. Longwood to follow the worksheet, rather than come up with their own answers.

Nina and Naaila's experience in emphasizing religious belief over fact finding reflects the experience of Mexican American students in a doctrina (catechism class) in California. Baquedano Lopez (2000) explains how the children's education program at the St. Paul church teaches students the story of the humble peasant, Juan Diego and how he saw the apparition of the Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe. The teacher narrates a religious story that shows the religious connection between the past and the present for Mexican descended youth. Even within the religious story narration, however, the teacher emphasizes factual learning: "At doctrina, events are presented as facts that need to be learned" (Baquedano Lopez, 2000, 443). Students were supposed to become religiously knowledgeable, but the knowledge that was assessed was fact-based, not narration based. The teacher engaged in I-R-E (initiation-response-evaluation) (Cazden, 1988; Mehan,

1979); therefore, the religious knowledge through which students were supposed to “become knowers and legitimizers of knowledge” were based on memorization of facts.

While the Catholic Mexican students in the doctrina class were learning about their religion within a church-based class, Naaila, Nina, and other Muslim students in the class were learning about Islam within a Monotheistic religions’ unit within a secular public school classroom. However, like the teacher at church, Mrs. Longwood too emphasized facts as the legitimate basis for knowledge construction. Naaila and Nina’s prioritization of their experiential Islamic knowledge upheld a different form of legitimate knowledge than Mrs. Longwood. The different emphasis on experiential narration versus fact based, IRE responses led to the tension between Mrs. Longwood and the Muslim girls. Legitimate knowledge about Islam was bifurcated between curricular facts and experiential knowledge, with curricular facts privileged in the Ancient History classroom.

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In addition to illustrating tensions around legitimate forms of knowledge about Islam between the teacher and the students, I will also highlight the ways in which religious knowledge was debated between student peers as a form of Islamic self-making, rooted in publicly representing one’s interpretation of the “correct” version of Islam within a classroom. The incident I highlight is centered on Naaila, a young immigrant woman from Mali with extensive Islamic knowledge (based on years of Islamic education at home). Naaila had been unusually quiet during the unit on Christianity in comparison to her regular vocal participation in class. When I asked Mrs. Longwood what was going on, she explained that Naaila’s dad had told her not to respond to anything related to Christianity;

her dad was afraid that the school was trying to convert Naaila to Christianity. Despite Mrs. Longwood's explanation that this was not an act of proselytization but rather of learning more about world traditions, she could not communicate her message of reassurance to Naaila's dad who had limited English skills. Naaila forged on in class, doing her best to maintain her good student identity but unwilling to engage in verbal discussions about Christianity.

In her introduction to Islam, Mrs. Longwood asked the students: "What similarities do Christianity, Judaism, and Islam share?" The 7th graders were trying to do a fill-in-the-blank do now (with word bank provided). The students mixed up the do now words, confusing the holy books of the Torah/Quran in their response. However, they were excited when Mrs. Longwood discussed the right answers. The completed paragraph was as follows:

"Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the three monotheistic religions, meaning that all three believe in one God. One similarity is that all three religions believe that Abraham is a prophet or messenger of God. A shared similarity is that all three holy books are the Judaism's Torah, Christianity's Gospels, and Islam's Quran contain teachings about the value of loving God and persecuted people. First, Moses led the Israelites and Egypt where they were slaves. Similarly, Jesus taught his disciples that it was important to love God and to love their neighbors. Christians reached out to the poor and powerless who led very hard lives. Finally, the Prophet Muhammad preached that all people were equal and that the rich should share their goods."

Mrs. Longwood did not spend too much time talking about the message of the paragraph, which was suggested by the curriculum planners. Instead, she wanted to make sure that the students knew which word fit into which blank. The message of social uplift and care for the poor was less important in that moment making sure that the students could distinguish



between the Prophets and holy books of the three religions. This formulaic approach to learning monotheistic religion, however, was not enough for Naaila and her classmates. Soon, they began to have side conversations about what the content they were learning.

Vivian, a self-defined proud Christian, asked Naaila: “Do Christians, Jews, and Muslim have one God? Naaila adamantly explained that Allah is different from the Christian or Jewish God. Vivian and her seat partner Susu pushed back on Naaila by stating “that that’s not true - the sheet says that it’s the same God!” The exact language on the sheet stated: “They (Muslims) believed that the truth of one God was revealed to mankind through many prophets.” As I heard this debate taking place, I overheard Nina explaining to her seat partner that it’s all the same God. I turned my attention back to Naaila to find out how the debate was ensuing. Maya, another classmate, was shocked when Naaila states that Jesus is not the son of God. As Naaila continues to explain that what she was saying was the truth, Maya exclaimed: “y’all have too much stuff in Islam!” Naaila’s face darkened, and she was very offended, believing the girls to be making fun of Islam. Maya stated: “I’m not going back and forth with you.” At this point, Naaila reached a tipping point. She raised her hand and asked Mrs. Longwood if she could step out of the classroom. Mrs. Longwood granted her permission, and Naaila stepped out into the hallway. I also went out to make sure she was alright in the hallway.

In Naaila’s viewpoint, her resistance to believing that Allah was the same God stemmed from the fact that she did not want to dilute any of the uniqueness of Islam. Neither did she want to become proselytized in any way by the school curriculum. Her healthy suspicion of school lessons on religion, meant that she had to do more work in

upholding her view of Islam and in her process of Islamic self-making within the classroom, even if that meant engaging in debates with classmates. Instead of trying to understand her viewpoint, Mrs. Longwood essentially ignored Naaila's reaction. She too was of the opinion that "Naaila took everything too personally, plus the sheet did say it is the same God." Mrs. Longwood viewed Naaila from the lens of a "social outcast," as well, noticing how her trouble with her classmates stemmed from the fact that she took things too personally. Although she could have taken a little time to sit with Naaila and discuss her viewpoints, Mrs. Longwood relied on the worksheet explaining Islam rather than take Naaila's view into account. Mrs. Longwood negated Naaila's perspective and by casting her as a social outcast, Mrs. Longwood essentially ignored Naaila's view on the theological debate, revealing an instance of subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1998). While it would have been proactive to use this debate as a way to productively compare Christianity and Islam by drawing on the lived experiences of students in her class, Mrs. Longwood privileged one perspective over another. Her overreliance on the curriculum worksheet overlapped with her perception of Naaila as a social outcast, preventing further dialogic engagement in favor of social and curricular exclusion of Naaila's viewpoint.

What is interesting is that Mrs. Longwood's subtractive schooling later gives way to a tolerance of Naaila's knowledge. During the story of the Dajjal (narrated later in this chapter), Mrs. Longwood surprisingly accommodates Naaila's extracurricular knowledge, indicating that she too was influenced by the shifting social dynamics in class during the Islam unit. The transition from social outcast to valued classroom member highlights the shifting social classroom dynamics that Wortham (2005) noted in his study.

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Unlike Naaila's experience as a social outcast, Nina's social experience was very different. Nina had many friends in class, and she was known for being a talkative student. In the first few months of Ancient History, Nina identified as Christian. However, as she listened intently to Mrs. Longwood's explanation of Islam during the course of the Islam unit, Nina wanted to express pride in her own faith as a form of Islamic self-making. During one particular lesson on Islam, I noticed that Nina was writing something on her arm in Black sharpie. As the bell rang for the end of the school day, Nina proudly showed me her right arm. On the underside of her right arm, she had written "AllaH the Most GloRy". When I asked her what had motivated her to write it, she shrugged her shoulder. She offered, "I was just thinking about Allah."

This inscription on her arm was her signal that she was willing to be associated with Muslims. Given the strength of Muslim presence at school, her classmates' positive reception of Muslims, having a Muslim teacher like Mrs. Penney, as well as the fun she had in MSA, Nina decided to publicly declare her awe of Allah (SWT) during a discussion on Islam. Just like Zara and Fatima had inscribed their faith on their binders, Nina too used her own body as a surface for her Arabic inscription. Her declaration of Islam came from a deep wellspring of faith, and she realized her religion was not something to be ashamed of, particularly as it was being validated through the curricular lesson on Islam.

Having known Nina for a few months, I understood how deeply the unit on Islam had touched her and how writing this inscription was a breakthrough in terms of a public declaration of her faith in her process of Islamic self-making. Nina's older sister, Shantell,

was well known in the MSA. Nina, however, had been wary about her involvement with Muslims. Mrs. Penney, one of Nina's 7th grade teachers as well as the MSA teacher sponsor, shared how Nina had changed over the school year in terms of her religious orientation.

“And I think Nina too (was really prideful of the fact that she does have a Muslim teacher). Cause Nina for a while, her mom told me during back to school night, before I really got to know Nina well, her mother had said to me like, oh, I know you love Shantell, but Nina is a different kind of child. In a bad way? Oh, she something else. She said to me, she doesn't identify as a Muslim. She goes to church with her grandmother. I don't know, Mrs. P. I know how much Shantell looks up to you. Maybe some of that will rub off on Nina. This is my initial intro to her.” (Interview 4/10/20).

Mrs. Penney narrated how Nina had initially identified as Christian to her peers and proudly talked about the fact that she went to church with her Christian grandmother. Her mother and sister, Shantell, identified as Muslim, but Nina did not want to be like her older sister, since Shantell had built her own identity as Muslim at school. Nina alluded to this feeling when she would talk about how Shantell irritated her, and she wished she weren't number 6 out of a family of 8. Nina expressed her desire to be different from her sister.

Nonetheless, as the year progressed, Nina began to attend MSA meetings more. She brought her 7th grade friends with her, she made comments during group discussions, and she attended the community feedings regularly. In the classroom too, Nina began to realize that faith was a matter of discussion and recognition. When she realized that Mrs. Longwood, a non-Muslim teacher, was positive towards Muslims, Nina felt that it was alright to express her affiliation with Islam in public spaces, even within the classroom of a non-Muslim teacher, indicating her increasing willingness to engage in processes of Islamic self-making in public.

Nina also began to change her attitude towards Naaila. Nina expressed to me privately that Naaila: “she too much. Always trying to tell us she know more.” While Nina had often ignored Naaila at the beginning of the semester in Ancient History, during the Islam unit, Nina’s perception of Naaila began to change. Nina came to view Naaila as a valuable resource from whom she could learn more about Islam instead of finding her to be a “social outcast.” Like Wortham’s (2005) study of Tyisha and Maurice, two students typified as outcasts within the classroom he observed (described more below), I too observed the two girls over the course of the semester in Ancient History. Their growing friendship began to blossom during and after the Islam unit because both girls felt connected by their faith. They felt the responsibility to share more about Islam with their non-Muslim peers as a form of public declaration of Islam in their engagement with Islamic self-making. Nina, an already popular student, deferred to Naaila for her deeper knowledge of scriptural Islam and Arabic, thereby increasing Naaila’s social standing within the class.

In subsequent classes, Nina asked Naaila, who knew Arabic, to write out some Arabic phrases for her. Nina kept practicing how to write Allah in Arabic all over her lined notebook paper, copying from Naaila’s Arabic example that she had written out for her. Nina excitedly told me to take a picture of her completed page, full of copied Arabic script saying ‘Allah’ and ‘Bismillahir Rahman ir Rahim!’ She drew one giant heart, colored in with Black pen. On another page labelled “Arabic Study,” Nina had written in Arabic and English translation: “Prophet Muhammad Sahlullahu Wallhi Wasalam”; “Ma hu aismak: what is your name?”; “As-Salamu Alaikum (Peace be unto you)”; “Wa Alikum as salam wa-Rattullah”; and Shakur (thank you).” The writing was deliberate and careful. Even as a

non-Arabic speaker, Nina worked hard to copy Naaila's words down exactly on her notebook pages. Nina requested that I include her efforts in my 'paper,' so others could see how hard she was trying to be a good Muslim as part of her Islamic self-making efforts.

Nina's transition from reluctant to proud Muslim as well as her friendship with Naaila occurred at the confluence of social accolades for Muslims at Honors, public recognition of Islam as a legitimate faith worthy of respect in class, and the example of Muslim teachers like Mrs. Penney at school. Nina used her own body as a surface for her declaration of faith, and she Islamified the Prophet's names in the texts. In Nina's case, individual faith developed within the context of larger sociocultural influences at Honors Academy, itself situated within the larger landscape of Black Muslim Philadelphia. Her embracing of Islam did not change her popularity – rather, Nina remained popular throughout the course of my observations.

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Unlike Nina's popularity within the classroom, Naaila inhabited a tenuous social position within the classroom. Similar to Wortham's (2005) classroom study, I note how the 'social outcast' label is initially applied to Naaila by her peers within Mrs. Longwood's classroom. By taking up Wortham's method of a longitudinal study of a classroom, however, I notice how Naaila's social and academic role shifts over the course of the Monotheistic Religions Unit, particularly when Naaila began to teach her peers about the Dajjal, an eschatological figure in Islam.

The inextricability of her social and academic identities and the social shift over time is most reminiscent of linguistic anthropologist, Stanton Wortham's 2005 study, *The*

*Joint Emergence of Social Identification and Academic Learning.* In Wortham's (2005) study, social identity and academic learning were inextricably intertwined. Wortham (2005) described how social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles co-constituted relationships between academic and non-academic activities. For example, Wortham (2005) provides an example of two students, Tyisha and Maurice, who are identified by their teacher as "beasts" in an example exploring Aristotle's distinction between humans and beasts (Wortham, 2005, Pg. 5-6). Due to the fact that Tyisha and Maurice are already viewed as social outcasts within the classroom, the teacher's example allows students to solidify their understanding of Aristotle's point while also reinforcing the two students' social roles. Academic learning and social identities overlap to produce learning and exclusion simultaneously. By studying how local categories of identity emerge in the classroom, Wortham notes the importance of classroom specific dynamics that emerge over time within a localized space and amongst a discrete set of operating students and teacher identities.

Instead of remaining outcasts like Tyisha and Maurice, Naaila's knowledge of Islam is an asset that leads to a shift in her social standing within the classroom. Whether this shift was temporary was difficult to note, since in person classes ended due to the advent of Covid-19 soon after the Monotheistic Religions Unit. However, what was apparent in my classroom observations was the extent to which Naaila's social identity shifted almost overnight and enhanced her academic standing as well. Alongside the students, even Mrs. Longwood became more tolerant of Naaila's spoken contributions in class because her knowledge of scriptural and apocryphal Islam was considered valuable

within the Islam unit. The local category of “Islamic chic” emerged within the classroom based on a collective classroom shift in students’ and teacher’s perception of Naaila.

While the Monotheistic Religions unit in the Ancient History class focused on Islam as a scriptural tradition, Naaila brought in outside knowledge of the Dajjal, an evil figure in Islamic eschatology, to add a non-scriptural version of Islam. Religious knowledge shifted Naaila’s social identity and foregrounded the importance of Islam as a resource through which students individually self-fashioned social belonging at Honors Academy. This case study also highlights how the larger context of Islam’s popularity in Philadelphia created a conducive classroom space in which Islamic ideas gained popularity amongst students. Naaila did not try to become popular; however, the 7<sup>th</sup> graders accommodated a cool new idea: the Dajjal, thereby increasing Naaila’s standing within the classroom’s social dynamic. Inadvertently, Naaila’s religious knowledge became a means through which she converted her faith into a “Islamic chic” status within the existing middle school social scene. Through sharing her extracurricular knowledge about Islam with her peers, Naaila engaged with Islamic self-making in public.

Nina and Naaila worked together to ensure that their peers would learn as much about Islam as they could teach them. I noticed that Nina had told Camar that women had to take the shahadah (declaration of faith) before getting married; now, she turns to the question of zamzam water (the water from a divine spring in Mekkah) as students talk about the second pillar of Islam: salat (prayer). In order to purify oneself before prayer, Nina advises Camar, another fellow Muslim: “you know, you can wash your hair in zamzam water and make wudu with it.” Nina looks over at Naaila to confirm this



information. Naaila nods - she has assumed the role of resident Islam expert within the classroom, given her knowledge of Arabic, Islamic customs, and rituals. Nina adds a titbit of information on her own: "Because of the coronavirus, they had to clean the Kaaba." Her peers are curious about what zamzam water is and what the Kaaba is.

A few minutes later, there was a tangent about the Dajjal, an evil figure in Islamic cosmology, who is similar to the anti-Christ in Christianity. The Dajjal has one eye and is supposed to arrive before the end of the world to mislead people into sin. Naaila shared this information about the Dajjal, which the students listened to with awe. Brian assumed the role of the Dajjal, assuming the stance of a zombie of sorts, walking through the classroom with his arms outstretched. When I asked Nina what was going on, she said that Brian was re-enacting the Dajjal, who wore no shirt, before the Day of Judgement. As the students and even Mrs. Longwood laughed at Brian's re-enactment, Maya mentions how her Christian grandma often acted like Brian; her grandma claims she can hear voices. Brian switched from his Dajjal re-enactment to Maya's grandma catching the spirit. The class ended in hilarity.

Instead of shutting down the extracurricular discussion about the Dajjal, Mrs. Longwood tolerates Naaila's knowledge. While earlier Mrs. Longwood had failed to intervene during the theological debate when Naaila felt forced to leave the classroom, during the Dajjal episode, she surprisingly accommodates Naaila's extracurricular knowledge. What I surmised was that Mrs. Longwood "read the room." She noticed the shifting social dynamics in class during the Islam unit and realized that Naaila had more to

offer, in terms of academic learning; thereby, Mrs. Longwood created space for her knowledge instead of ignoring it as in the earlier instance.

As the students headed to lunch, Nina revealed to me that she was scared of the Dajjal. When I googled Dajjal to find out more information about it, a picture of a one-eyed Dajjal popped up. Nina quickly shifted her eyes away from my phone. She told me that Naaila had told the class about it more during Mrs. Penney's classroom. What she had learned was that the Dajjal is "like that dude with the eyes, and basically the idea is that like the devil (but) is not the devil, but he's like, he's like being driven by the devil. And I mean to deceive. Somebody who tricks you, and then like, oh, he's gonna pretend to be like Jesus, but he's not gonna be the real. Camar and Brian, they were trying to act out." Nina's fear was palpable. She was terrified that the Dajjal would try to trick others by pretending to be good but actually having evil goals. Nina asked me tremulously: "how would you know who he is?" I responded that I did not know much about the Dajjal, but that a focus on doing good works, like volunteering, as she had been doing, rather than focusing on being misled. I myself had not grown up learning much about the Dajjal except that he was a harbinger of the Day of Judgment. I did my best to assuage Nina's fears, but Naaila's story of the Dajjal had left an impression on her.

I found this Dajjal episode humorous, and I related this Dajjal incident to Mrs. Penney. Mrs. Penney responded with much more context for me:

"I think that with Naaila, it's interesting. Naaila is really prideful of the fact that she does have a Muslim teacher (laughs). That alone and the fact that I'm a Muslim makes her happy, that I'm her teacher. ...Just before we went out of school, they were learning about Islam in her history class. So when they came back to my class at the end of the day, they were having this conversation about this...well, Naaila is clearly more knowledgeable than

a lot of some of the other kids in that class who are Muslim. Maybe it comes from family, maybe her family having her in an outside program, but you can tell she was educated them a little bit more, on whatever it is they were talking. They were talking about the Dajjal, and she was giving ayats from the Quran and Hadith and giving them descriptions. Nina turns to me with her mouth wide open, is this true, Mrs. P? I was affirming what she was saying from an Islamic perspective was correct. And Nina was just like, well this stuff is not gonna happen to me because I'm a Muslim. And I was just like, you are!? That's interesting cause your mom was telling me you were always saying that, 'I'm a Christian.' It's just because my grandma tries to make me go to church, but I'm not. And then out of nowhere, Kiki comes out and says, 'I'm a Muslim too.' 'You are?' 'You know I don't always do everything, but my dad is a Muslim, and I'm a Muslim too.' I think they were impressed though with Naaila, with the things Naaila was sharing with them about all these different things, about the end time. Naaila was able to not only share it in English, but some of the things she knew in Arabic, but she didn't necessarily, she was like help me, what is this thing? Like the Arabic thing, she didn't know how to translate it into English, like what it...and they were just fascinated, and they gravitated to her in a way I had never seen them do before. If anything, (before) they were arguing with Naaila or 'oh, Naaila, you're a know it all,' but now that it's Islam, they were like 'Naaila, tell us more!!' (Laughs). 'Tell us more, what about this and what about that?' They were like asking her. (Interview, 4/10/20).

I too had noticed this shift in Naaila's status since the Dajjal re-enactment. Before this unit, Naaila had expressed to me that the other girls, including Nina, didn't like her. When I asked her why, she said "because of my color." Naaila was a lighter shade of Black, but not significantly different phenotypically from the peers around her. Since Naaila was learning English as a Second Language, it may be that she was attempting to express her feeling of exclusion through the rhetoric of colorism. Nina expressed to me that Naaila: "she too much. Always trying to tell us she know more." Nina expressed her tension with Nina as Mrs. Penney described it, as dislike of a know it all.

Comparing Naaila's social status before and after, as observed by Mrs. Penney, I too, noticed the shift after the Dajjal conversation. Naaila had been designated the resident

Islam expert because of her knowledge of Arabic and Islamic customs, once again reaffirming a form of ethnoreligious hegemony within Muslim communities that privileged knowledge of Arabic. Fascinated by extracurricular messianism in Islam, the students had gravitated to her knowledge of the doom and destruction that may ensue on Earth when the Dajjal arrived. Nina had not wanted to believe Naaila at first, but when Mrs. Penney confirmed what Naaila was saying, Naaila's status as 'Islam expert,' was solidified. Her know-it-all perception was replaced with one in which her knowledge of the apocalyptic was valued. After all, who else could tell them so much detail, both in English and Arabic, about non-curriculum approved material? Though not a rebel in any way, Naaila's knowledge of things outside of school approved things, elevated her status among her peers. Her ability to speak and recite Arabic phrases was a second point of favor. Even though Camar, Kiki, and Nina were also Muslim the class, their level of Arabic was not high; therefore in the context of ethnoreligious hegemony, Naaila was viewed as more authentically Muslim. These Muslim students trusted Naaila to be their "Islam guide." Naaila's unplanned rise in status emerged due to the already high status of Islam in the school. By tapping into this social hierarchy and adding the element of non-curricular Islamic expert to this mix meant that Naaila gained a level of acceptance amongst her peers that she had lacked previously. I noticed how Nina and the "other girls" who had laughed at Nina, were now sitting next to her at lunch and sharing chicken nuggets with her. Naaila's public form of Islamic self-making drew on extracurricular Islamic knowledge and Arabic literacy as religious resources that shifted her classroom social status.

Kiki's admission of being Muslim was also another revelation through this Dajjal episode alongside the strengthening of Nina's identification as Muslim over Christian. Though Kiki had not been known as Muslim by long-standing teachers such as Mrs. Penney or Mrs. Longwood, it was during the Islam unit that she declared that she was Muslim. She explained to me that her dad had found Islam in prison, and now her family was Muslim too. Like Nina, perhaps it was the acknowledgment of Islam in the class that convinced her to express her religious affiliation in public.

The Islam unit, therefore, seemed to serve two functions. One was to create a space in which students felt empowered to publicly express their religious faith as a form of Islamic self-making. The second was to create a degree of coolness for students who could offer information outside of the curriculum, such as Naaila. Nina and more so, Naaila's social transformation affected her peers as well as Mrs. Longwood who moved from a subtractive schooling perspective to toleration an accommodating learning environment. Though learning about Islam from an authority figure like Mrs. Longwood and Mrs. Penney at times, solidified the institutional status of Islam, having peers who could step outside of the 'teacher space' but still offer fresh information was an important addition to the social scene. The Islam curriculum served dual roles of institutional empowerment as well as creating space for extracurricular authorities like Naaila.

The presence of multiple Muslim students in classrooms ensured a diversity of viewpoints; however, it was up to the students, rather than the teacher or their reliance on the curriculum, to ensure that Islam was discussed in the classroom. The presence of Muslim students also ensured that the curricular version of Islam was not the only source

of information about Islam for students; the addition of apocryphal stories of the Dajjal during the Monotheistic Religions unit was just one instantiation of how student lived experiences shaped students' understanding of Islam as both a textual and lived tradition. The public sharing of Islamic knowledge as a classroom resource was an important way in which Nina and Naaila engaged in Islamic self-making.

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As I have argued, classroom spaces were also important settings for Black Muslim students to present their Islamic self, through word choice, fashion, social behavior, and public explanations in class. Islam in the classroom assumed many forms: linguistic presentations of faith (the 'salam test' and Sami's Arabic invocations), visual representations of faith inscribed on material forms (Fatima, Zari, Nina), and critiques of the curriculum itself (Nina, Naaila). Zara represented the new convert who used Arabic invocations on her binder to solidify her Islamic identity, while Fatima assumed the role of Cool Muslim through her integration of Cardi B and Allah in her binder decorations.

Extracurricular knowledge of Islam also served as an additive resource to bolster MSA students' popularity in the classroom. The Islam unit elevated the prestige of Islam within the classroom and empowered Muslim students to become experts in the eyes of their peers. Naaila, the "know it all" proselytizer assumed an "Islamic chic" identity, while Nina too transitioned from being a "reluctant Muslim" to a publicly enthusiastic Muslim. The relationship between the two girls also improved when Nina began to defer to Naaila to learn more about Islam. Instead of treating her like a social outcast, Nina's attitude signaled a larger classroom attitudinal shift towards Naaila, who was viewed more

positively because of her knowledge of Islam. Even Mrs. Longwood shifted from subtractive schooling to allowing space within the classroom for Naaila to share her knowledge. Sharing Islamic knowledge in a secular classroom demonstrated another form of Islamic self-making for these two MSA students.

Wortham (2005) notes how social identities and academic learning occur concurrently within a localized classroom space. Certain localized forms of identity emerged, such as “the social outcast” that grows out of a shared culture within the classroom. Wortham (2005) notes that dynamicity is always involved within this creation of a classroom space, particularly in the ways that social and academic identity shift over time. In his example, Tyisha and Marcus remain outcasts; however, in Naaila’s case, her outcast identity shifted, due to her knowledge of Islam, which represented a positive resource within the classroom. I have argued that Islam serves as an empowering resource for Black Muslim youth in the Ancient History classroom at Honors, which stands in stark contrast to prior academic literature about Islamophobia in US public classrooms.

I also argue that the Islam unit had alternative implications within the classroom space. Instead of simply serving curricular purposes of learning about the faith, the Islam unit elevated the prestige of Islam within the classroom (as it is in the hallways of Honors, explored in Chapter 8) and served as a form of Islamic self-making for MSA students in the academic classroom. It allowed Muslim students to re-orient the existing curriculum for their peers and open up a broader field of learning that accounted for lived experiences in addition to information they learned in textual resources.

Part II: Islamic Self-Making: Debating Family Histories



## Chapter 8: Faith, Muslims, and Fashion

During the course of my fieldwork, I was asked by two non-Muslim students whether I could give them shahadah (the Islamic declaration of faith). I refused in both cases because I did not feel comfortable taking on this serious responsibility of guiding someone through a new faith. In contrast to my unease, during MSA, Kamal, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader African American Muslim, proudly shared that he had given three people shahadah that year alone.

Shahadah was a common practice within the city of Philadelphia. Mrs. Lyons, one of the Muslim teachers at school, had been born and brought up as a Muslim. During our interview, I asked her about whether she had observed the phenomenon of conversion in Philadelphia. Mrs. Lyons responded:

“Philly is like a Black city. But again, no one could have predicted, it [shahadah] would have taken off in this way, but it certainly has....Yea, but we are like none other, they call us the Mecca because of that....You know like in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, that was the case, we were minorities, we were ostracized. Even when we were younger, even targeted by Black people, people who broke into our house and vandalized it. They might not be Muslim, but they definitely have someone who love and care about who is. Cue the overzealous who tells everybody about Islam, and their grandma goes to church. By osmosis, you’re gonna get this information....And I know from being in this city that people get really excited about it, you know? How many times have I talked to someone who is dating some guy, and they are Muslim, and they are like, how do I become Muslim? Once you see the ebb and flow, you give them lots of space.” (Interview, 4/3/20).

Mrs. Lyons spoke about how growing up in the 1980s, her Muslim family was ostracized, even to the point of having had their house vandalized. That is why Mrs. Lyons expresses surprise at the rate at which shahadah has accelerated in the city of Philadelphia, to view the rapid shift in unpopularity from the 1980s to the 2010s. With increasing numbers of

Black Muslims gaining popularity in hiphop circles as well as the increasing number of African Americans converting to Islam within the carceral system (Felber, 2020), the spread of Islam in the past few decades has been widespread, particularly in urban areas, such as Los Angeles, Atlanta, Detroit, and Philadelphia. Because it is common for Christian families to have family members convert to Islam in Philadelphia, through a process of “osmosis,” information about Islam, including certain Arab terminology, is shared with family members, including the Christian grandma she mentioned. Mrs. Lyons also notes how one common reason for conversion is dating someone who is Muslim and then becoming inspired to explore the new religion. There is an “ebb and flow,” Mrs. Lyons explains, which suggests that conversion is not necessarily a lifelong commitment, but a way for individuals to explore a new religion that has become increasingly popular in Black Mecca, Philadelphia. This initial background suggests that the increasingly positive presence of Islam in the city of Philadelphia provided avenues for non-Muslims to convert to Islam, a trend which I also observed within the school grounds of Honors Academy.

In Philadelphia, conversion to Islam occurred through many pathways, which I found out more about through interviews with respected Black Muslim adults in the community. Mrs. Lyons, a Muslim teacher at school suggested that conversion is a prison phenomenon (Interview 4/3/20), a point with which Imam Qutaiba, a religious scholar (Interview 4/10/20), agreed. Felber (2020) argues that while prison ministry has been widespread since at least the 1940s, the growth of Muslim chaplaincies in the late 1970s and the increase in number of prison inmates in the late 1980s and 1990s as a result of the war on drugs, has led to a dissemination of Islam within the carceral system. Imam Qutaiba

also added that hip hop and Nation of Islam are also means through which people find out about Islam. Imam Suhaib, another well-regarded imam, states that the Salafis are also attracting young converts at a rapid pace (Interview 5/27/20), a phenomenon that Vera, a Muslim senior who converted three years ago, agreed with since she had found her calling through Salafi preachers.

It was a common occurrence in Honors for Muslim students to give interested individuals their shahadahs. The shahadah consisted of declaring: “I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad (SAW) is the Messenger of Allah (SWT).” With this simple declaration of faith, one could become Muslim, though the work of learning about the faith and practicing is much more difficult than the declaration itself. Kabeera, a Muslim 9<sup>th</sup> grader of West African origin, reflects on the process of conversion for some of her peers: “Cause some people, before they convert, they learn about Islam, they learn about everything they need to know before they convert. Or some people just convert right away, and then they start to learn about it. And then they stop, and they don’t care about it as much anymore.” Conversion was a long journey, with multiple approaches and pathways, reminding me of Mrs. Lyon’s earlier description of “ebb and flow” of people’s faith journey.

Islam served a popular role within Philadelphia culture. Arabic terminology, Islamic fashion, and the popularity of shahadah became common features of Philadelphia culture that could be seen as shaping the culture at Honors Academy. Yet, the variation among “types” of Islamic practice among Muslim students attending Honors Academy, also reflects the religious diversity within the larger Islamic landscape in Philadelphia. In

addition, different “types” of Islamic practice mapped onto two versions of Islam practiced at Honors. One version upheld community-and-mosque based, family-oriented approaches to Islam that also valued ancestral faith lineages. The other version of Islam was less institutionalized, more open to individual practice, as well as less concerned with family histories of Islam. This less institutionalized version was more open to shahadah or conversion stories and valued this individual self-fashioning. In Honors Academy, shahadah was the method through which African American students became part of the Muslim community, while for the West African Muslim youth, Islam had been a part of their family lineage for generations.

Family histories of Islam suggest that there are multiple pathways through which the students at Honors Academy inherited Islam. West African and African American students reflected long histories of Islam within their families. While it is commonly assumed in Arab, South Asian Muslim, and even African communities that African Americans practice what they claim is an inauthentic version of Islam (Grewal, 2014; Khabeer, 2016), the experiences of African American Muslims with generations of Muslim family members at Honors Academy suggests otherwise. Part of the ethnoreligious hegemony in Muslim communities relies on the assumption that African Americans and Black Muslims are less authentic in their adherence and knowledge of Islam than Arab or South Asian Muslims. Yet, the long family lineages of Islam or strength of one’s desire to learn about Islam and adhere to its principles amongst African American Muslims students at Honors counters this assumption.

I highlight two sets of beliefs about Islamic practice that informed Muslim student understandings of Muslimness at Honors: an individualized and a communal version of Islam. The first version of Islamic practice allowed individuals to selectively use Arabic terminology, employ Islamic fashion (“garbing up”), and take the shahadah (declaration of faith that signifies conversion to Islam) to construct a unique Islamic identity for themselves. This individually crafted identity represented the kind of Muslim one wanted to become within the school setting. Individual self-fashioning, however, sometimes brushed up against the second version of Islamic practice, which was more communal. This communal version viewed Islam as an inherited tradition that provided legitimacy and authenticity to its adherents based on how closely everyday actions measured up with traditionally accepted tenets of the faith. Those who did not live up to this longstanding tradition were sometimes labelled “Fuslim” (fake Muslim) by their peers, reinforcing existing ethnoreligious hegemonies privileging “immigrant” forms of Islamic belief over that of African American forms’ of Islamic practice (Khabeer, 2016).

Student debates around various kinds of Islamic self-making practices revealed fractures around who was perceived as a persistent Muslim and who was viewed as a Fuslim. These instances of disagreement also highlight the limits of an individually constructed, self-fashioned identity, particularly for Muslim converts. Most converts in school were African American Muslims while West African Muslims had inherited Islam from their families, whether or not they practiced it or not. Family lineages of Islam, therefore, shaped how one’s individual self-fashioning as a Muslim was perceived by

others in the school context. Ethnic family histories were not separable from ethnoreligious hegemonies and hierarchies at Honors Academy.

I begin this analysis of ethnoreligious hegemonies at Honors by contextualizing the popularity of Islam within Philadelphia and how it manifested itself through linguistic terms, Islamic fashion, and the popularity of conversion at the level of Honors Academy. Next, I will outline the “types” of Muslims prevalent in Honors Academy to provide context for the two modes through which Islam is practiced at school. Types of Muslims references different sects of Islam and is separate from Islamic self-making which is the process of engaging in diverse practices of religious self-fashioning, including but not limited to religious technologies. These various types of Muslims engaged in Islamic self-making practices alongside two modes of Islam. These two modes coexisted and were in tension within the school. They include individual practices of Islam in contrast to communally constructed notions of ‘authentic’ Islam which focus on students’ Islamic family histories. The individualized form of Islam was associated with the designation of the ‘Fuslim.’ Through examining three types of Fuslim typologies, I posit that African American Muslim women were policed a lot more around Islamic practices than their West African counterparts. Through the experiences of these young women and the deployment of the term Fuslim, I illustrate how gendered and racialized hierarchies are made manifest through religious practice, reaffirming larger ethnoreligious hegemonies in Muslim communities in the US.

This chapter reveals that ethnoreligious hegemonies, based on family histories of Islam, were a key element in shaping forms of Islamic self-making at Honors Academy. A

central aspect of family lineages is how family history became part of the community-based version of Islam operating at the school. A critique of family-based histories opens up space for a more individualized understanding of Islamic practice.

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“I wanna take the shahadah!” (declaration of faith to Islam)

“Yo, he a kafir!” (disbeliever)

“It’s my anni!” (birthday)

“Wallahi, that ain’t right.” [swear to Allah (subhana tu allah)]

These are phrases that I heard regularly during my time at Honors. What was surprising to me was that those uttering these phrases were not Muslim youth, but rather Christian-identifying and other non-Muslim kids. Arabic words, usually associated with Islamic culture, were a common part of parlance in everyday conversations at Honors.

Ms. Jamison, a Philly-born and based teacher, explained this linguistic phenomenon to me during my semi-structured interview with her in Spring 2020:

I would even say that’s something specific to Philadelphia as a region too. I think Philly has a very significant Muslim population, they also have a very significant Muslim Black population. I think that’s something, and I can only say that because I’ve grown up in Philly my whole life, and it’s always been something that I’ve seen. It’s like non-Muslims mentioning Muslim words or Muslim references, things like that, just because it’s like, it’s like a normal cultural thing here. I don’t think you would see the same thing in other parts of Pennsylvania for sure or even other states. But I do think this particular region is somewhere you see strong, a strong Muslim presence. So it’s normal for people to say things like taking the shahadah or mentioning the Quran or those sorts of things and not be Muslim. (Interview 4/15/20).

Speaking with Ms. Jamison helped me realize the strong presence of Islam in Philadelphia, which was apparent even in the language that students used at school. For Muslim and non-

Muslim students growing up in Philly, it's a "normal cultural thing" to know the meanings of words such as shahadah because of the presence of Muslims within the Islamophilic city as well as within their schools. Mrs. Lyons, a lifelong Muslim and teacher at the school, also shared during an interview with me: "Arabic words are part of the culture, of non-Muslim Black culture in our city now because so many people, if they're not Muslim, they are related to someone who is Muslim." (Interview, 4/4/20). The prevalence of Muslims in the city of Philadelphia led to linguistic sharing. Another reason that Imam Qutaiba, a local imam working with Black Muslim youth, cited was the influence of hip hop language (Personal Interview, 4/10/20), which often used Arabic and Islamic terminology as a way to popularize Islamic words within the hip hop street culture (Aidi, 2014). Particularly in Southwest Philly, the imprint of Islam was apparent in everyday language. While competence over Arabic remained one way in which ethnoreligious hegemonies were reaffirmed, often at the expense of Black Muslims (even excluding Arabic speaking Sudanese Muslims to some extent), the shared invocation of Arabic also allowed Muslims to claim Islamic space in city of Philadelphia.

Alongside linguistic patterns influenced by Arabic terminology, the uniqueness of Muslim fashion at school was also a reflection of the Muslim fashion scene in Philadelphia. During our interview together, Ms. Jamison and I chatted about Islamic fashion in Philadelphia:

Oh yea, absolutely. Like I said, that's 100% a Philly thing. Like you know the Philly beard, the khimars, like I've seen so many beautiful khimars in fashion, being incorporated with like khimars and things like that. I've seen wonderful things here. It's a very strong cultural presence, it's normal. Again, there's people who are Muslim, I'm not Muslim, and I'm very very familiar with it just because I grew up here all my life. (Interview 4/15/20).



Even as a non-Muslim woman, Ms. Jamison reflected a knowledge of Islamic fashion in Philly, citing the beautiful khimars as part of a strong cultural presence in Philadelphia. She emphasizes that Islamic culture in Philly is “normal,” unlike other places where these fashions may be less widespread; in fact, the fashion is often innovative, being incorporated into other existing styles. Ms. Jamison’s use of the term “normal” suggests that Islamic fashion is “abnormal” in places outside of Philadelphia. However, instead of categorizing Islamic fashion in these normative terms, it is more useful to consider how fashion can often be a material means of exchanging cultural ideas about beauty and style. Through such exchange, familiarity with certain styles may emerge over time in particular locales.

Ms. Jamison’s comments reflect anthropologist Su’ad Abdul Khabeer’s observations of fashion in Philadelphia. Khabeer (2016) notes that Philly is known as a center of Black Muslim fashion, particularly within hiphop styles. Khabeer (2016) describes “the pairing of hip hop staples, a white T-shirt and sneakers, with an izar, a male skirt, made of denim. Within US Black American Muslim communities, Philly Muslims were noted for their construction of such creative and hybrid styles” (Khabeer, 2016, 166). The Philly beard was also a popular style within the city (Khabeer, 2016; Aidi, 2014). Participating and innovating Islamic fashions was literally a form of Islamic self-fashioning and self-making amongst Philly Muslims.

Mrs. Harris, a 9th grade non-Muslim teacher who had lived in Philly for about a decade, talked about her observations on Muslim fashion in Philly. “It’s Islamic fashion. There’s a Muslim fashion store across the street from me where I see kids go in. It’s really popular in Philly. Kids and families, sometimes I saw Sara (Muslim student) a few times,

I don't know if you know her. I always thought she has the coolest Muslim fashion" (Interview, 4/9/20). Mrs. Harris's comment highlighted the role of Muslim owned fashion stores in popularizing Muslim fashion as well as the 'cool' status that students gained by donning such fashionable items. Even teachers would notice the confidence with which their fashionable Muslim students would carry themselves.

The visibility of Islam on the streets of Philadelphia, both through people's dress as well as the number of Islamic fashion stores in busy intersections such as 52nd Street and Lancaster Avenue, was a trend that was apparent to non-Muslim observers as well researchers like myself. Like Khabeer (2016), I also noticed unique Islamic fashion as I rode SEPTA public transportation around the city. It was common to see men in izar as well as the rolled-up pant leg style; the Philly beard was a common sight. I also noticed the deference with which Black men, Muslim and non-Muslim, would greet Muslim woman on the trolley. A deep assalamu-alaikum would be directed towards the sister in full overgarment and khimar (Islamic women's garb described further below), who would respond 'walaikum-as-salam' to brothers offering the Islamic greeting.

Given the strong presence of Islamic fashion in Philadelphia, it was not a surprise that Islamic fashion also aesthetically shaped the culture at Honors Academy, where a visual Muslim culture, based on fashion items, was pervasive amongst the student body. At school, students wore Black and blue khimars (in line with the school dress code) and overgarments (long garment covering a woman's body). A handful of girls wore shaylas (face coverings) which were common to Black Muslim communities in Philadelphia. While other terms such as hijab (associated more with Middle Eastern Muslim fashion)

were also used in everyday parlance, khimars, overgarments, and shaylas were popular terms for women's garb within Black Muslim communities, while kufis and thobes (words derived from Middle Eastern origin) were common terms for male Islamic clothing. There was no one type of Islamic fashion, but spanned sartorial styles to emphasize the diversity of Islamic fashion, as scholars have noted (Moors and Tarlo, 2007; Bucar, 2017).

The popularity of Islamic clothing in Philadelphia suggests a strong link between consumption and performances of piety. Anthropologist Carla Jones (2010) studies practices of fashion and consumption amongst young Muslim Indonesian women. She suggests that the popularity of Islamic consumer cultures denotes a dynamic relationship between consumption and piety. Instead of viewing piety as separate from consumption practices, Jones (2010) notes the overlapping of the two fields, i.e.: between religion and markets. Similarly, the increasing popularity of Islamic fashion suggests a comparable practice of Islamic self-making through consumption in Black Muslim Philadelphia.

One point of difference between Jones and the Philadelphia context is that Islamic fashion is popular even amongst non-Muslim women in Philadelphia, prying apart the direct relationship between consumption of Islamic products and Islamic piety. On occasion, the khimar was nothing more than a headcover for a "bad hair day" at Honors Academy, a practice soundly critiqued by Muslim interlocutors (analyzed in a section below). What is similar between these two contexts, however, that of predominantly Muslim Indonesia (Jones, 2010) and Islamophilic Philadelphia, is the increasing visibility and vibrancy of Islamic religious fashion, as well as the central role of women in mediating the relationship between consumption and piety. What these fashion trends in Philadelphia

also reveal is the large extent to which broader ideas about what's fashionable and trendy is driven by African American style and aesthetics.

### “Types” of Muslims

As noted in the introduction, Philadelphia, known as Black Mecca or “Muslim town”, hosts more than 250,000 Muslims (Jones, 2016), one of the largest concentrations of Muslims in the United States (Hauslohner, 2017). While native-born Black Muslims make up only about 9% of the Muslim population in the US (Hauslohner, 2017), in Philadelphia, close to 75% of the Muslim population are African-Americans (Curtis, 2010; Marin, 2015). The diversity within the Black Muslim community has been noted by scholars (Rouse, 2004, Karim, 2009, Aidi, 2014; Khabeer, 2016). Some Muslim communities represented within Black Islam in Philadelphia are Sunnis, Salafis, the Nation of Islam (NOI), and some Sufis and Shias. The West African Muslim community in my sample primarily identify as Sunnis; in other studies, the Sufi order of Cheikh Amadou Bamba is also popular amongst some West African communities (Abdullah, 2010). The African American students in my sample often toggle between Salafi and Sunni influences on how they practice religiously.

While the Nation of Islam had a huge presence in Philadelphia during the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, the Salafi movement grew more popular from the mid 1990s to the early 2000s and again in the last decade or so. Sunni Imams in Philadelphia with whom I conducted interviews find the stringent practice of Islam under Salafi ideology problematic. However, these imams also notice that former Salafi preachers have transitioned to mainstream Sunni Islam (Interview, Imam Qutaiba, 4/10/20). As I noted in

Chapter 5, Masjid Jumuah is viewed by Muslims in the city as a Salafi masjid that is less stringent in its practice of Islam than the Germantown Masjid. Within the Germantown masjid, it was common to advise new converts to avoid interactions with non-Muslim family and friends, advise young women to avoid wearing any colors other than Black, and to condemn non-Salafi forms of Islamic practice (Armstrong, 2011). Longer established Sunni Black mosque leaders found the Germantown version of Salafi Islam to be “hardcore” and overly restrictive.

Given this overall overview of the “types” of Black Muslims, I will note how Black Muslim youth at Honors identified in relation to these existing typologies. Overall, there was a tension between the Sunnis and the Salafis. Additionally, Islam was often mentioned in separate conversations than race, except in the case of Mina, who explicitly linked race and religion together. When discussing racial encounters, racial history, or simply discussing what it was to be a Black kid in Philadelphia, African American interlocutors did not talk about being Muslim. Vice versa, when African American interlocutors talked about Islam, they rarely mentioned being Black. West African youth rarely talked about race at all, preferring pan-ethnic descriptions (“African”); they did more often than not, speak about being African and Muslim simultaneously. Blackness and Islam, therefore, remained largely discrete categories in student descriptions while ethnic descriptions and Islam more commonly overlapped. However, as Rana (2011) observes, Islam shaped understanding of race historically while race and Islam are also interlinked in the ways that Muslims are characterized in post 9/11 US society. Discrete conversations amongst MSA

students about Blackness and Islam did not mean that these categories are not intimately intertwined in the development of Muslim communities in the US (GhaneaBassiri, 2010).

### Sunnis

#### *West African Muslim Sunnis*

The majority of the West Africans identified as Sunni because their parents and grandparents were Sunni. It was not much of a topic of discussion, since the assumed religious sect within MSA and Honors was Sunni. Some African American Sunni Muslims like Naia, however, did assume a very strong position against Salafis.

#### *Sunni Critiques of Salafis:*

Naia, a senior, was an astute observer of social dynamics at Honors Academy. Having been raised as a Sunni Muslim in a Black middle class African American household, Naia was descended from three generations of Muslims. Her grandparents had converted to Islam through the Nation of Islam in the 1960s and mainstreamed to Sunni Islam with Warith Deen Muhammad in 1976. Naia's critiques of Islamic culture at Honors was based on 4 years of observation. During an interview, Naia noted that there were a lot of Muslim kids at school with Muslim dads and non-Muslim moms. She said that for many kids, being Muslim was a connection to their dad in prison. She also noticed the big Salafi influence at the school. Girls often start wearing full khimar and overgarments, particularly if they convert to Islam via the Salafi proselytization efforts spearheaded by the Germantown Masjid in Philadelphia. However, Naia notes that these young converts have little knowledge of actual Islam. Naia mentioned that "she was stunned by the Muslim kids at the school because of their misconceptions around Islam. Girls said they couldn't wear

hijab when they had their period. Also, that they had to take their hijab off for picture day! When I went to the school nurse on picture day for a cut, even she asked me if I would take my hijab off for picture day!” Naia offered insight into two prevailing notions that were common in Honors: a) that having one’s period made one unclean, and therefore unable to don the sacred hijab and b) one shouldn’t mix school pictures - a profane, fun tradition with something as grave as Islam. School picture day was the time one showed off their beauty, not hide it under their hijab. Regular hijab wearing could be resumed after picture day. These prevailing notions were promulgated by these young women, who in turn had likely picked up these misconceptions from lay Philadelphians, non-Muslim and newly converted Muslims, who had received a piecemeal understanding of Islam from social media and personal interpretations of Islam from others.

Naia’s critiques emerged from her understanding of Islam, in which one carried a sense of religiosity and spirituality throughout the year, not watering down one’s belief for a particular day i.e.: picture day. Naia reasoned that having a period was also a part of being a woman in the form that God had created humans. Therefore, one was no less pure for having their period and could certainly continue to wear hijab.

Having had years of Islamic education, Naia was appalled at the low level of Islamic knowledge amidst her peers. When I asked her why such notions existed at Honors, she explained “it’s the Salafis - it’s all about how you dress, the overgarments, the colors, not why or how.” Naia believed that Islamic belief through a Salafi lens overemphasized dress and visual representation, over Islamic content, which led to misconceptions around Islam, as demonstrated above. Naia’s explanations, though very critical and sometimes

dismissive of her peers, reflected a mainstream Sunni orientation that critiqued Islamic culture that was not shaped by scriptural tradition (Aidi, 2014; Elmasry, 2010), but by a local understanding derived from the heavy Salafi influence in Philly.

### Salafis

Many converts were brought into the fold through aggressive Salafi proselytization efforts. This increase in conversion is in line with a 2017 Pew Research Center report, which found that 20% of American Muslims are Black (excluding Hispanic descent and mixed-race people), and 49% of Black Muslims are converts to Islam, a relatively high level of conversion (Mohamed and Diamant, 2020). Despite the popularity of Salafi in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Salafi movement leaders died down in the early 2010s (Elmasry, 2010). Nonetheless, they continued to run strong in Newark and Philadelphia. Germantown Masjid remains a center of the Salafi movement in Philly (Day & Conboy, 2014; Aidi, 2014; Blecher & Dubler, 2016).

Vera, a senior, was representative of an African American Muslim who converted to Islam through the Salafi movement, in fact, through her exposure to the Germantown Masjid. She had searched for a faith that would give her discipline (more about her conversion story in the Conversion section of this chapter). Vera, however, had been dissatisfied by how strict the Salafis were in regards to wearing different colors as well as how narrow their scriptural interpretation was, thus leading her to seek out Sunni masjids in Philly, which she still attended. Yahya, another sophomore MSA student who attended MSA meetings infrequently, also shared that he had a dad who identified as Salafi, though



he himself did not. However, during MSA discussions, he would offer Salafi critiques of activities such as painting or listening to music that he learned from his dad.

Anis, a junior, also identified as a Salafi. She wore the full overgarment as well as shayla (face covering) to school. The only part of her face that was visible were her intelligent, sparkling eyes. Anis did not attend MSA meetings. However, her younger sister, Maya, did. In contrast to Anis, Maya did not wear the shayla but a regular hijab covering her hair, and an overgarment. Therefore, even within this Salafi family, there was variation in how the girls interpreted Islamic covering. Though I did not speak to Anis much, except during break times in history class, she revealed that her father had joined the Salafi movement in the 1990s and remained an active member in the group. Anis's family, was therefore, part of the original Salafi converts in the 1990s, in contrast to the current Salafi proselytization movement in the 21st century (Elmasry, 2010).

### The Nation of Islam

Scholarship on the Nation of Islam (Lincoln, 1994) refers to NOI adherents as Black Muslims, coined by C. Eric Lincoln. The term Black Muslim, however, now applies to any who identify as Black and Muslim (Lincoln 1994; Felber 2020). Since 1976, Elijah Muhammad's Nation was split into two parts: one long run by his son, Warith D. Muhammad which followed more orthodox tenets of Islam, and the second run by Louis Farrakhan, reminiscent of the early Nation.

Mina, a 10th grade MSA student who is a member of Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, shares her own experiences with race and religion during a personal interview with me: "I feel like race and religion kinda tie hand in hand. The Nation of Islam is mainly about

Black people and teaching us to love ourselves. Also being Muslim, I feel like it kinda just comes together. So I feel like they both affect me because my religion basically deals with my race, if that makes sense.” Mina explains how the origins of the Nation of Islam was rooted in radical self-love for Black people. Mina defined noted how for generations, “white people told you to hate yourself, your nose, your big lips, hate everything, hate your dark skin...I guess being Black is embracing all the things that people hate about you, knowing that we are still kings and queens. I would probably just say loving yourself cause I feel that’s a really big thing!” Mina believes that loving yourself, especially the physical characteristics that was historically denigrated by whites, is one way in which self-love could be practiced. Instead of hating these physical aspects of oneself, for adherents like Mina, the leaders of the Nation of Islam taught her to love herself despite living within a white supremacist framework in the United States. Though widely regarded as a heterodox belief that lies outside the purview of orthodox Islam, even to this day, the Nation continues to preach a love of Black people, which resonates with Mina.

Mina’s overlapping views of racial pride and Islam was one of the few explicit models that showed the interconnection between racial identity and religious practice. The narratives of other African American Muslim students highlighted racial pride and religion as separate issues. Lana, an African American 10<sup>th</sup> grader, spoke about how she didn’t really think of Islam as related to being Black. Jerome too, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader African American young man whose mother had converted to Islam a few years ago, also expressed that he thought of Islam as unrelated to being Black. For the West African students, as mentioned earlier, race was not an oft-discussed topic, though being African and Muslim were often

interlinked during conversations. In contrast to these students, Mina's position on the inextricability of race and religion was unique.

In addition to speaking about radical self-love, Mina also described the clothing common in her congregation: headpiece was the term for hijab. She explained her perspective on clothing and modesty to me: "Yea, we believe that women should be like full, not full garb, but at least covered up. Modest. Oh, headpieces, tams, we call it headpieces, regular scarves, regular headwraps...But here's a scarf (showing me a picture on Google), you can just put it on, just however you want. It can look like a hijab, it cannot. More so modest and civilized." Mina emphasized that the NOI apparel was different from that of other Black Muslims in Philadelphia, but that it emphasized modesty nonetheless. Her use of the term "civilized" is of note. I believe that, given the vilification of the Nation of Islam, both by dominant media as well as the suspicion with which the Nation is regarded within normative Muslim communities, Mina's use of the term "civilized," was an attempt to counter the denigration of the Nation as a religion. Mina was proud of her unique religious heritage and wanted to make sure that my research also captured the experiences of Nation of Islam members.

This short overview of the main Muslim "types" within school reveals the diversity that exists within the school as well as tensions between the Sunnis and Salafis. The types are heuristic models for understanding the diversity of Black Islam at Honors Academy. They are not intended to reify particular Islamic practices as normative. However, the tensions I noticed between the Sunnis and Salafis are religious-based distinctions that are debated within the larger Islamic discourses as well (Aidi, 2014). While this tension is part

of a trend within the larger Muslim community in the US, the next section will explore the two modes of Islam emerged at the local school site and that framed the larger context within which the MSA students engaged in Islamic self-making practices.

#### Family Histories of Islam: Communal Versions

Family histories of Islam suggest that there are multiple pathways through which the students at Honors Academy inherited Islam. West African and African American students reflected long histories of Islam within their families. While it is commonly assumed in Arab, South Asian Muslim, and even African communities that African Americans practice an inauthentic version of Islam through the lens of ethnoreligious hegemonies, (Grewal, 2014; Khabeer, 2016), the experiences of African American Muslims at Honors with long lineages of Islam suggests otherwise.

For many of the West African students, Islam had been in their family for generations. Maha, a junior whose family immigrated from Mali, stated during our 1:1 interview, “I know that my grandparents were Muslim, all my family way back was Muslim.” Ariya too spoke about how her father was imam and how there were many generations of her family who were Muslim. Ariya explained how; “The only other imam that I know is from my mom’s side. My grandmom brother, he’s like kind of a big imam over there.” These stories revealed family’s Islamic lineages going back many generations; this kind of a historically situated Islamic background was common for many West African Muslim youth.

Fatima, a 7th grader whose father was a Muslim from Niger, and her mother a Jamaican Christian, reflected on her experience as a hijab-wearing Muslim woman at

school: “I don’t really get judged a lot as Muslim because a lot of people, I guess, are starting to take their *shahadah*, or something. They are like trying to become Muslim and stuff. But since I been Muslim for my whole life, it really don’t affect me because I already know it’s gonna come, like what’s gonna happen.” Fatima contrasts her experience as a lifelong, hijab-wearing Muslim to the experiences of newly converted Muslims, implying that there is greater judgment for new Muslims than there are for those born into the religion who have more certainty in how to practice the faith going forward.

For the African American students, their parents or grandparents had converted to Islam and passed on the faith to them. African American Muslim students had “mixed” religious families, with many family members practicing as Christians. Sia, an African American senior who I had met during an appearance she made at MSA at the beginning of the school year (described briefly above), described how her grandparents had converted to Islam in mid 20th century during her interview with me.

Well, basically my grandpop and my grandmom, they weren’t Muslim, they took their shahadah together. My grandpop is actually an Imam now. And ever since then, my family’s been raised Muslim, since my grandpop and my grandmom. Before then, on my grandpop’s side of the family is Christians, my grandmom’s side is Christian, and it’s us that’s Muslim, so we are mixed. Everybody else, the offspring of my grandmom and grandpop are raised Muslim. And always in Philly... we got our Islamic knowledge from our family.

Sia describes how her grandparents had converted through the Nation of Islam originally but transitioned to Sunni Islam when Imam Warith Deen Muhammad took over the leadership in 1976 (Rouse, 2004). However, as Sia notes, mixed religious families like hers were common in much of Philadelphia.

For other African American students, their parents had converted more recently. Yahya describes: “Oh, I was born into it. My mom wasn’t born a Muslim, but then when she turned 13 or something, she turned Muslim...So I was born into Islam, so I always knew everything. My mom would study with us...” Although he did not know details about how or why she converted, Yahya thanked his mother for enrolling him in Islamic education classes that fosters his ability to recite some Quranic surahs. Yahya’s father followed more of a Salafi version of Islam (as mentioned earlier). Sia and Yahya’s stories demonstrate that family was a source of Islamic education for African American Muslim youth and that they had been born into Muslim families. Unlike the assumption amongst many South Asian, Arab, and African Muslim families that African Americans were all recent converts (Karim, 2008), the generational experience of Islam amongst these African American students indicated otherwise. Finally, for some African American students without a family history of Islam, they were the first from their primarily Christian families to convert to Islam. These students’ conversion stories will be explored later in the chapter.

It is important to understand how family history becomes a point of debate when it comes to establishing Islamic legitimacy for Muslim students at Honors. Through altercations between Kabeera and Shantell, two illustrative modes emerge: Kabeera argues for a communal version of Islam (while still emphasizing personal belief), while Shantell advocates for a more individualistic form of Islam. Kabeera claims this communal version of Islam for West Africans, alleging that African Americans were less familiar with Islamic practice, due to the recency of their conversions, and therefore had less family upon whom to draw on for communal religious support. Vera’s statement later in this section also

laments the growing atomization of Islamic communal practice, despite the greater popularity of individually fashioned Islamic practices. Vera, an African American Muslim convert, also prefers a communal version of Islam, in which Islam is practiced within a community; her view contrast with Shantell who prefers a more individualistic form. Despite Vera and Kabeera's preference for communal practice, Vera does not claim family history as a nexus upon which this communal Islamic practice ought to be constructed, as Kabeera claims. Vera's view suggests that preferences around communal and individualistic practice of Islam at Honors was not tied to whether one was West African or African American. However, during my overall observations, more West Africans preferred the family-based communal practice of Islam, while more African American students preferred a more individualistic form, a dynamic captured in the debate between Kabeera and Shantell.

While examining these two views of Islamic practice, another point that emerged within is the efforts that African American Muslims had to put forth in order to prove that they were legitimately practicing Muslims, in contrast to assumptions propagated through ethnoreligious hegemonies. While Vera regularly attended the mosque, Shantell did not. Shantell was more suspect in her Islamic identity because she did not regularly attend mosque or cover her hair, even though Kabeera, a West African Muslim, also did not cover her hair regularly. The burden of proof for African American Muslims to prove their religiosity was higher, suggesting ethnoreligious hegemonies based on ethnic histories.

While Mrs. Penney constantly emphasized the theme of unity during MSA meetings, students like Kabeera disrupt this notion of unity by pointing out differences

between West African and African American Muslims. Kabeera, a 9th grade Guinean American, stated the following during her interview with me:

Kabeera: “Shantell is about that African Muslim and the African American Muslim. I’m West African, and the way they teach Islam is different because Shantell, that’s what we were always arguing about, our differences. And that’s the thing about us. She would be like ‘well, your parents, Africans are more known for being strict, so your parents probably made you know about Islam.’ I’m like what? And then we will argue...about our differences and stuff like that...She feels different. Because a lot of Africans are Muslims or Christians, the kids are really religious. Not really religious, but they care about it much. Like you see Mariam, Mariya, we all wear our hijabs, we all go to the masjid, we all fast, stuff like that. As for **them**, like, they know, they don’t really, for us, it’s been generations. Some of them, their families were like Christians, their grandmothers are Christian. Like Shantell grandmother is Christian and her mom’s Muslim. So that’s the difference. That’s what it really is. Because her mom was learning about it, and she didn’t know too much about it. And Shantell was born into it. And if her mom don’t know too much about it, Shantell won’t know too much about it.”

Kabeera makes multiple points in this statement above. She distinguishes between the Islamic practice of West African and African American Muslims. She states that West African Muslims are more knowledgeable about Islam because Islam has been in the family for generations. In contrast, African American Muslim peers like Shantell “they don’t really [know]”. Kabeera attributes this lack of knowledge to fewer generations knowing Islam and Muslim converts having less time to learn Islamic knowledge. However, as earlier noted, Sia and Yahya had both gained their Islamic knowledge from their families. Kabeera’s claim, in contrast, is based on her own presuppositions about the Islamic superiority (in terms of knowledge) between West African Muslim families like hers versus African American Muslim families like Shantell’s. Kabeera created a hierarchy of Islamic knowledge based on how far back in history one’s family had been Muslim. For more



recent converts like Shantell and her mother, their Islamic knowledge was incomplete, or suspect. A similar devaluating of African American Islam by Arab and South Asian Muslims is noted in literature through ethnoreligious hegemonies (Jackson, 2005; Kabeer, 2016).

Though I did not share my conversation with Kabeera with Shantell, during our 1:1 interview, Shantell too brought up her relationship with Kabeera. Shantell complained, “she [Kabeera] prejudiced against us cause she thinks she knows more about Islam. But my mom has been Muslim her whole life. I mean, I don’t always wear hijab or go to the masjid, but I know some Islam.” Shantell does not know of the interview I had with Kabeera. However, her response suggests that she and Kabeera had discussed this topic together before, as Kabeera described in her interview passage. In her response to me, Shantell does not claim to know a great deal about Islam herself, but she refutes Kabeera’s claim that she or her mom do not know as much about Islam. From her perspective, Shantell also feels that West African Muslims are too strict, and that West African kids follow Islam because their parents are strict, not necessarily out of free will. Kabeera, as noted above, says “I’m like what. And then we will argue.” Kabeera does not like Shantell’s charge that West African kids only follow a communal, parentally driven Islam, not a personal form of faith. However, Shantell believes that Kabeera’s form of faith is not personal, but rather derived from parental authority.

I once overheard one such argument between the two when the girls lingered after an MSA meeting, where Shantell called Kabeera “so extra Muslim,” and Kabeera responding, “not extra, just wearing hijab and going to the masjid. You don’t do that!” In

protest, Shantell says, “So? Going to the masjid doesn’t make you Muslim!” Kabeera smiled wryly before class started. Of note is the fact that Kabeera did not always wear the hijab, but did put it on when praying at the masjid, as I noted during a community feeding at Masjid Jumuah. Despite the fact that Kabeera did not always wear hijab, she still believed that wearing hijab and going to the masjid were signs of the greater religious belief of West African Muslims like herself and her peers like Mariam and Mariya. In contrast, African American Muslims (“them”), lacked the same level of Islamic behavior. Shantell tried to delink going to the masjid with one’s level of faith, suggesting that individual faith did not have to be institutionally linked for a person to be religious.

The debate between these two girls is illustrative. Kabeera claimed that Islamic belief derives from generations of Islamic family history and institutional behaviors like going to the mosque or wearing hijab. Shantell, on the other hand, shared how belief should be more personal and less driven by family history or obedience to “strict” parents; going to the mosque too is not indicative of one’s Islamic belief. Kabeera advocated for a more community-based version of Islam, - she believed that one’s Islamic beliefs could be influenced by generations of family history, but also distinguished between pushed into the faith by parents versus voluntarily practicing it. Her nuanced views of West African Muslims contrasts with her reductionist view of the type of Islam that African Americans follow. Shantell counters Kabeera’s stereotypes (as do Sia and Yahya in earlier examples) and asserts that recency of conversion does not make one less knowledgeable or authentic as a Muslim. It is not the generations of Muslims in your family that determine one’s Islamic chops, but one’s personal will to practice it, with or without institutional influence

(i.e.: mosque going). Shantell's view pushed back against ethnoreligious hegemonies and biases against Black Muslims, particularly recent converts. Kabeera represented a more "communal" version of Islam while Shantell highlighted an "individual" form of Islam.

The girls' debate was only one instance of this overall pattern. A view of "communal" (community-based) vs. "individual" Islam also emerged throughout the spaces of Honors Academy.

#### A Core (Communal) vs. Individualized Islam

Vera, a senior who had converted to Islam three years prior to my fieldwork, did not often attend MSA meetings because she had an afterschool job. However, during our conversations during history class where I met her, she was very perceptive about the cultural dynamics at school. Vera first clued me in to the Islamic culture within Honors.

She noted that:

"Honors has changed a lot. There are more Muslims there than there was (four years ago when she started but also when her older cousins had gone to school). Although being Muslim was a thing, it's more of a thing now too. It's just cute, it really is cute. I think the looks and just like being different. You say, everybody like Christian, ok; if you're Muslim, it's like 'OHH YEAAA'. And even like the names, a lot of the...when I was growing up, a lot of my Muslim friends didn't have Muslim names. You had Keke, you had Leniqua, Kalil, yes, but now you got Abdul Rahman, you got Jihad, like you know, and when I was growing up, Islam was something you did with your family, when I was young, that's how I was at, like at Kia's house, we were all going to the masjid. Even when I talk to Mrs. Lyons (Muslim teacher at school), it was a family thing. Families built masjids. *Now it's like everybody for themselves (my emphasis)*, like their parents can still be Muslim, but it's just like some people are only Muslim by name now. Even if some my peers, I didn't know Jah was Muslim, I didn't know Lana was Muslim, I didn't know Keshawn was Muslim, I don't think Amira's Muslim, but she's thinking about it. I knew Yahya was Muslim, but...it's just different....Nowadays it's just different, people

believe different things, they feel like they wanna practice in different ways. And that's the beauty of it, but now, there's no...core."

As a lifelong Philly resident, Vera notes how the larger cultural shift in Philadelphia's Muslim community also reshaped culture at Honors Academy. Vera talked about how "families built masjids," which was a communal effort and that "Islam was something you did with your family." Islamic belief was not a standalone, individualistic idea but one that was practiced both alongside family members as well as through institutional means, such as building a masjid. This "core" was defined by dense relationships and communal bonds, rather than the "everybody for themselves" form of individualized Islam. This communal bond was also not contingent on a long history of Islam within one's family, as Kabeera argued; it was based on Islamic practice within mosque and other congregational settings. In fact, as an African American female convert to Islam, the communal relationships were one of the main reasons Vera had been attracted to Islam. Vera had converted via the Salafi Germantown Masjid and slowly transitioned to Sunni Islam, and she worked very hard to show she had become fully Muslim. She only wore Black overgarments to school, and I often saw her reading the Quran during lunchtime.

Vera's long-term exposure to Islamic culture at Honors gave her a historical perspective of cultural shifts within the school. Having often visited the school with older cousins and still often discussing her experience at Honors with her cousins, Vera notes some unique characteristics of present-day Islam in Honors. While Christianity was regarded as 'ok,' Islam was much more enthusiastically received ('OHH YEAAA') by the student body. Islam was "just cute;" it was fashionable, it was trendy, and it was newer than Christianity. Vera explained that the changes that she and her cousins noticed were in

two categories: a) one was the shift in how people's names had become more strongly Muslim, and b) secondly, that Islamic belief and practice assumed a more individualistic path that lacked a core. Islam seemed less something that people participated in due to family influences, but "now it's like everybody for themselves." Though Vera thinks that it's beautiful that people have unique approaches to their practice of Islam, she also laments the fact that Islam is less community-based, particularly because it was the community aspect that drew her to the faith in the first place.

Vera's analysis is complicated because she notes countervailing trends: while more people assume strong Muslim names and while Islam has high social prestige on the premises of Honors, people simultaneously also do not view Islam as a community effort as in the past. The individualized nature of Islamic belief as well as its proliferation meant that one could not assume who was Muslim anymore. Though trying hard not to critique this lack of a "core" or coherent tradition of Islam, Vera believes that the *everybody for themselves* philosophy of Islam (a sort of do it yourself model of Islam) did not mesh well with the collective Islam she had experienced growing up. Though there was a strong MSA at school, many students did not join; therefore, there were some students who bought into the collective experience of Islam while others chose to follow it as a trendy, 'cute,' and personal form of identity making experience. Vera's statement revealed her sense of unease at the growing atomization of young Muslims though she still finds "beauty" in the fact that Islam has become more popular within the school culture.

By understanding the debate between Kabeera and Shantell as well as by hearing Vera's observations about cultural shifts within Honors, it is clear that there were two

modes of Islam that emerged at the school through which Muslim students engaged in practices of Islamic self-making. One version upheld communal, familial, and institutional approaches to Islam that valued ancestral faith lineages. The other version of Islam was open to individual practice, as well as less concerned with family histories of Islam. Vera, who was an African American convert to Islam, preferred the community-and-mosque based version of Islam, similar to Kabeera, a West African Muslim. However, Shantell, whose mother had converted to Islam, preferred the individual version of Islam. The variation within these African American's women's understanding of Islam suggests that there is no one way to be Black and Muslim. However, Shantell especially had to work harder to "prove" her Muslimness, at least to Kabeera, because her individual version of Islam was seen by Kabeera as less legitimate than the communal version she espoused. For both Shantell and Vera, African American Muslims, their family's or their more recent conversion to Islam, respectively, meant that they had to work harder to prove their Islam legitimacy to the long-standing West African Muslims, like Kabeera, in Honors Academy.

This religious dynamic of having to demonstrate one's Islamic legitimacy applied primarily to African American Muslim converts. While many of these African American Muslims did not have the long chain of Muslim ancestors as did their West African Muslim peers, they could subscribe to the communal version of Islam by becoming deeply involved in mosque activities and by wearing overgarments and Islamic clothing (Sia, Vera). However, if converts subscribed to a more individual version by not valuing mosque-going and not wearing hijab (Shantell), their claim to Islam was more tenuous. Ethnoreligious hegemonies were keenly experienced by young African American Muslims at Honors. As

depicted, family history played an important role in shaping ideas of Islamic legitimacy. But other forms of signification, particularly the semiotic of Islamic clothing, also played an important role in establishing one's religious legitimacy and distinctions the students made between being persistent Muslims in contrast to Fuslims.

### Persistent Muslims vs. Fuslims

While the previous section examined the two local modes of Islam at Honors: the individualized and communal forms, this section explores how the category of Fuslim is one that instantiated students' belief that Islam was individualized at school through fashion and conversion. Persistent Muslim and Fuslim were oppositional terms that captured the debate around authentic and inauthentic Islamic practice at school. Within the culture at Honors, a persistent Muslim was viewed as a Muslim who was consistently faithful and having a core belief in Islam that permeated how they dressed and acted. The Fuslim ("fake Muslim") identity, in contrast, suggested inauthenticity and fakeness. Two ways that students acted as "Fuslims" was through: a) adopting/appropriating Islamic fashion, as well as b) through converting to Islam by taking the shahadah but not following all the supposed traditions of Islam. Both persistent Muslims and Fuslims were engaging in strategies towards Islamic self-making, whether communally accepted or not.

The Fuslim identity most often was directed towards African American women who had taken the shahadah but did not wear the khimar consistently. While there were other applications of the term as well (directed towards cultural appropriators and utilitarian users, types described below), there was sometimes a clear distinction between long-term Muslims and more recently converted Muslims, who were more suspect and had

to prove that they were “legitimate” believers of a communal version of Islam. There were also greater critiques of Muslim women than Muslim men, particularly around their sartorial practices.

I heard the term “persistent Muslim” again from Sia, a senior and one of the academic stars at the school. Sia occasionally attended MSA meetings, although she too had an afterschool job that prevented from regularly attending. Sia’s family, as discussed earlier, had been Muslim for three generations, with her grandparents converting to Islam in the 1960s. As a respected African American Muslim family in Philly, Sia was embedded within the Muslim community in Philly.

When speaking about her role at school during her interview with me, Sia shared, “they [non-Muslim classmates] see me since Day 1 always, like there hasn’t been a day when I went to school uncovered, so I feel like they think that I’m a persistent Muslim.” When I asked her what she meant by persistent Muslim, Sia explained, “like garbing up consistently, being humble and honest to the faith.” Sia believed that others viewed her as a persistent Muslim, one whose outward appearance consistently matched their inward faith, as well as one who demonstrated the humility and honesty she believed to be central traits of being a good Muslim. Particularly because of her family’s history, Sia was viewed as a legitimate representative of Islam, both because of her own consistent garbing, as well as her family’s three generations of Islamic practice.

I heard a few other MSA students talk about “persistent Muslims” as well - they referred to Muslim girls at school who consistently covered their hair throughout the year instead of just during Ramadan, when covering one’s hair became more prevalent. Many



of these “persistent Muslims” were the “covered girls,” a group of West African Muslim juniors who had worn hijab ever since they had turned 13. Ms. Westing, a non-Muslim history teacher who taught the girls, had first referred to the girls as “covered girls” during our interview together. The “covered girls” label aligned with the “persistent Muslim” definition that Sia provided, underscoring the importance of the hijab/khimar in how young women were viewed as legitimate Muslims within the local culture of Honors Academy.

In contrast to persistent Muslims, students like Kamal critiqued inconsistent Muslims. Kamal, a quiet 9th grade African American MSA member, assumed a critical stance of girls’ covering their hair only during Ramadan. During our interview, he stated: “It happens more during Ramadan. Like people right now, right now, if we were in school, people would be wearing their hair out and all that, and then when Ramadan come, they all try to garb up.” I asked Kamal why there is more garbing up during Ramadan, and he shared his view:

You just dress up to be Muslim just to be Muslim. And you don’t know the meaning behind Muslim and don’t know nothing about Muslims, basically. And for the last two years, y’all just be wearing your hair out, and now all of a sudden, you wanna wear your garb and all cause Ramadan coming. It’s just a lot of just, fake, they don’t wanna garb up when it’s not Ramadan, but when Ramadan comes, people wanna garb up and stuff. They not persistent, they Fuslim. I mean, yea, (it bothers me) a little bit.

Kamal revealed that the manner in which his classmates’ “garbing up” behavior changes during Ramadan is hypocritical. Kamal accused his female classmates of ‘wearing your hair out,’ for the last two years but suddenly deciding to take on the appearance of piety during the holy month of Ramadan. To Kamal, this was being a ‘fake,’ or not being a persistent Muslim. It is noteworthy that Kamal only directly addressed his female

classmates, not male classmates who I noticed also donned more kufis (skullcaps) and thobes (long robes) during the lead up to and during Ramadan as well. Therefore, the “fake” Muslim, or Fuslim, stood in direct construct to the persistent Muslim identity that students like Sia represented. Fuslim was also a term that directly implicated Muslim women more often than men, as indicated in Kamal’s statement above.

The term Fuslim was common enough that not only non-Muslim students but also non-Muslim administration were aware of the term. During a meeting with Mr. McAvoy, the Assistant School Principal, he mentioned to me that since I was interested in studying Muslim youth at school, I should ask them about the term “Fuslim.” When I asked him what it meant, he said, it meant “fake Muslims,” and the kids used it to critique each other’s practice. I was surprised that the term was so common, but also curious about how it was used within Honors Academy.

There is great richness in the ways that students at Honors used the term Fuslims. What became clear in my understanding of the term was the way that the Fuslim designation was more critically applied to African Americans, who were assumed to be newer Muslims following the individualized version of Islam. For African Muslims with a long tradition of Islam in their families, the designation Fuslim was rarely applied, even if they did not pray or recite the Quran. Islamic self-making practices of Fuslims were particularly under scrutiny due to ethnoreligious hegemonies at Honors.

Students tended to differentiate among three types of Fuslims. The Fuslim identities were enacted through fashion and conversion and provide a window on how Islamic authenticity or inauthenticity was being framed at Honors. The Fuslim was constructed

along a continuum of distinctions and valuations among views of Islamic practice at school. In this way, attributions of Fuslim served as a form of difference which students used to distinguish between an individualized and communal version of Islam.

### The Three Types of Fuslims

Fuslims consisted of three large groups: Lapsed Muslims, Fuslims by fashion, and Fuslims by conversion. Lapsed Muslims referred to Muslims who had been a part of the communal, family and mosque based version of Islam, but stopped practicing. For these Muslims, there was some leeway because it was expected that they could return to Islam. The second category: Fuslims by fashion focused on the way that khimars or kufis were used to signal a Muslim identity. There were two types of Fuslims by fashion: the utilitarian fashionists and the cultural appropriators. However, utilitarian fashionists were not necessarily Muslim but used the khimar strategically. Cultural appropriators also were not Muslim, but used the khimar as a form of fashion. The third category: Fuslims by conversion, were Muslims who had recently converted but did not consistently wear their khimar or pray, thereby receiving judgment from others.

During our interview, Kabeera express her views on Fuslims and sum up the various definitions most astutely: “Fake Muslim. They’re the people that say they are Muslim cause their hair’s not done inside of the khimar, or the one that actually convert or say they took the shahadah, not wearing their khimar or wearing it but not praying...or the Muslim who doesn’t do worship things...” Kabeera identifies the first category (Muslim who doesn’t do worship things - “lapsed Muslims”), and the second category (“their hair’s not done inside” - the utilitarians), and the third category (“on that actually convert, not

wearing their khimar or... praying” - experimental converts). Kabeera does not refer to the cultural appropriators, which is another type of Fuslim under the second category. Kabeera’s overall summation of the various manifestations of Fuslim attests to the complexity and multiple uses of the term. The application of the categories of Fuslims often depended on the speaker and context of the one accused, which often revolved around whether the accused was a ‘long-term Muslim’ (West African lapsed Muslim) or short-term Muslim (African American converts or experimenters).

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During a series of individual interviews with them, the West African youth shared their view of Fuslims. Maha, a 2nd generation Malian American, placed Fuslims within the first category of lapsed Muslims: “I feel like some people say to themselves that they are Muslim cause their parents are Muslim, but they don’t practice at all.” Malika, a 2nd generation Guinean American, explains: “Fuslims, yea. It’s basically like people who claim they are Muslim, but they don’t fast, they don’t pray, yea, I think that’s mainly yea...It doesn’t really bother me, I don’t really interfere with them...” Yamin, Malika’s older brother, offers a sympathetic view of Fuslims: “Maybe, some of those people, they also need, like when they was young, they also need their parents to be behind (them).” Yamin reasons that without parents’ guidance, it was easy for Muslim youth to forget how to be Muslim in practice.

In these examples, a Fuslim was someone who was born internally into the religion, through a Muslim family, but who did not maintain Islamic practices of worship. This first category of Fuslim was glossed by these Maha, Malika, and Yamin as “lapsed Muslim,”

who forgot how to be Muslim. At least to Yamin, it seemed possible that these Fuslims could return to the fold by fixing their behaviors.

In fact, during my observations at Honors, it was clear that there were some “long-term Muslims” who were not called Fuslim, even though some of their behavior matched the actions described as pertaining to a “lapsed Muslim,” or generally un-Islamic behavior. This was another example of the ethnic distinctions that my interlocutors made between African American and West African Muslims. These long-term Muslims tended to be West African and were generally perceived by teachers and the general non-Muslim student body as model Muslims because of their consistent covering via khimar, despite occasional un-Islamic behavior.

*The Mischievous Covered Girl: Asia*

A group of three West African Muslim juniors who had worn hijab ever since they had turned 13 were known as the “covered girls”. The students were Ariya, the imam’s daughter from Chapters 3 and 4, Asia, the co-leader of the MSA, and Maha, a 2nd generation Malian American. Ms. Westing, a non-Muslim history teacher who taught the girls, had first referred to the girls as “covered girls” during our interview together, and she labelled them as excellent students.

While observing a history classroom which included some of my interlocutors, one non-Muslim African American young man in the classroom, Rendell, called out to Asia, one of the covered girls: “Just cause you’re garbed up, don’t be thinking you’re all innocent.” Rendell often teased Asia because he enjoyed getting a rise out of his hot-tempered friend. As a fully “garbed” woman, Rendell knew how important being a

practicing Muslim woman was to Asia; however, he called out Asia's assumed innocence by teachers, just for being a Muslim. While the students discussed the topic of detention, he noted that Asia too had been on the verge of getting detention like the rest of the loud-mouthed, talking back juniors. He called Asia out for trying to get off punishment free just for being "garbed up." Asia laughed off Rendell's comment. However, Rendell's use of "garbed up" to stand in for innocence and good behavior alerted me to the ways in which Islamic covering was associated with academic identity by the teachers, in the case of the covered girls. Students, however, were more critical of the link between covering up and being good, obedient students.

In fact, Asia too, revealed more about her evolution into the "covered girl" she had become. During a bus ride back from a school field trip, Asia chatted freely with Ariya, Maha, and Aissata, a Salafi Muslim discussed below. Asia commented:

I did everything when I was little. Half of the stuff you wouldn't believe I did. I just got bad friends. I had a friend in khimar who smokes right in front of me. A friend that got drunk, hijacked a car. Aww dang, I still got hellfire to get to. I wanna spend the night in Heaven, that's the only thing that stopped me. That's not for me, I would never drink. I mean, I'm a good person now. I'm a better person, and I don't wanna be bad in my khimar like my friend.

While Asia herself admitted to having bad friends who involved her in destructive behavior, she also acknowledges that she doesn't drink. Part of her motivation is not going to hell, but also because she didn't want to be bad in the khimar, which represented a good Muslim. Despite Ms. Westing's assumption of "innocence," Asia agrees with Rendell that just because she is "garbed up" doesn't mean she was always good. However, part of her motivation to be a better person is because she doesn't want to misrepresent the religious

meaning behind the khimar. Though she is somewhat of a formerly lapsed Muslim, like Yamin said, Asia found a way back to Islam, all the while maintaining the reputation of a good student at school, at least in front of Ms. Westing. Her “covered girl” image protected her reputation from accusations of Fuslim.

*The Non-Practicing Muslim Hijabi: Kalila*

In the logic of Honors Academy, Islamic dress was often the way one could easily identify Fuslims. As I observed Kalila, a 2nd generation Malian American 8th grader, in her English class, she whispered to me, “see that girl over there? She supposed to be Muslim, but look at how she is wearing those boots and no hijab.” I whispered back to Kalila: “why is it bad that she is wearing boots?” Kalila explained, “it’s not bad, it’s just that she doesn’t even care about Muslims.” How wearing boots equated to not caring about Muslims was unclear to me. However, Kalila, as someone who wore khimar, clearly felt that by dressing the part, she was upholding the Muslim identity within the logic at Honors, while her classmate was not. Boots did not suggest Muslim identity, but the khimar did.

I contrasted this observation during English class with an MSA meeting Kalila and I had attended. During the meeting, Kania, a 2nd generation Malian American friend of Kalila, had commented that Kalila didn’t know how to pray or say the Fatiha. Kalila had not protested, simply smiled at Kania’s comment. Later, Kalila too had admitted to me that she didn’t know how to say Arabic words or ‘pray really’ since she had left Islamic School. She described how she “stopped. And then I keep on saying that I am going to learn, and then I stop. And I keep on doing it over and over again. I’m 100% sure it’s beneficial for me to actually read the Quran, but then again, I don’t. Also I don’t really know how.”

Despite her own admission of her lack of knowledge about Islam (even though it would be ‘beneficial’), in her view and in how others perceived her, Kalila did the right Muslim things. In a passing comment with me during an MSA meeting, Mrs. Olney, another 8th grade teacher who taught Kalila, stated, “Kalila is a good kid, she always shows up to MSA and feedings, even though she gets in trouble with her English teacher for clapping back.” Kalila’s tense relationship with her English teacher was something she had shared with her Mrs. Olney, who perceived Kalila as a good kid and a good MSA member (if not a good Muslim in exact terms).

This designation of a “good” MSA identity emerged out of the fact that Kalila followed the expected dress code for Muslims at school and volunteered through MSA, even if she didn’t know the Islamic rituals of recitation or prayer, a fact that the non-Muslim Mrs. Olney didn’t know. This vignette suggested that it was Islamic garb, which was visible and calculable, that carried a greater weight on the balance sheet of Islamic legitimacy than Islamic knowledge, at least on this occasion. Being an African Muslim, Kalila did not have to know the prayers to be respectably Muslim because she wore the hijab, volunteered, and was an African Muslims. Kalila was not labelled Fuslim, even by Kania who critiqued her lack of scriptural knowledge, because she had inherited her family’s Islamic heritage. The assumption was that even if she faltered temporarily in her Islamic practice, she had a way back to Islam through her family.

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While Type 1 focused on West African lapsed Muslims, Type 2 focused primarily on African American Muslims. Type 2 Fuslims by fashion consisted of the utilitarians and



the cultural appropriators. Both used the hijab for fashion reasons, not for the religious reasons associated with the hijab, namely: as an act of piety towards God (Jones, 2011). MSA members explained the importance of hair covering and Islamic authenticity to me. Maha stated, “Yea, I feel like some people only do it because, some people believe their hair is ugly, I don’t know, they don’t wanna get their hair done, so they just put on a khimar.” In Maha’s statement, she referred to the khimar as a covering that girls used to cover bad hair (the Arabic flavored term for khimar is hijab).

The predominant style of khimar in Honors Academy was the khimar style associated with Middle Eastern hijabs, a cloth scarf that was elastic enough to pop over one’s hair and fit various head sizes. The elastic khimar could come in many styles and colors. Girls typically wore Black or blue to fit within the uniform code at Honors. Maha had covered her hair since 8th grade. Sometimes she wore an elastic khimar, but more often, she donned a pinned-up style Black khimar. Maha disapprovingly noted that putting on the khimar often served a utilitarian purpose for some women. These girls didn’t want to show off their ‘ugly’ hair, or hair that was not done. In this explanation, Maha distastefully explained the khimar did not serve its expressed purpose as an article of faith for these Muslims. Though she didn’t directly call them Muslims, the fact that she provided an example of these ‘convenient bad hair day khimars’ when asked about Muslims was telling. To Maha, the khimar was a sign of religious faith, not simply a neutral fashion choice to cover unstyled hair.

Similar to Maha’s assessment of the utilitarian reasons that some young women wear khimar, Kalila herself admits that “First, this is actually very, this is not very, not the

purpose of the hijab. But I wanted to wear the hijab to avoid getting my hair done.” Kalila drew on a practical reason to cover without praying or reading the Quran, as she herself admitted to me during her interview with me. Unlike Maha, she did not believe that the khimar was imply for religious reasons, but could serve as a fashion choice. However, once again, Kalila was not critiqued for her utilitarian reason; I wondered if an African American Muslim woman would receive more flak for the same action. The stringent standards applied towards African American Muslim women suggested that ethnoreligious hegemonies within the Muslim community often placed these individuals on a lower strata. Scholars such as Khabeer (2016), Jackson (2005), Chan-Malik (2011), and others have illustrated how anti-Blackness informs prejudices that South Asian, Arab, and even West African immigrant Muslim communities hold against African American Muslims, who are viewed as less legitimate practitioners of the religion, due to recency of conversion, continued association with more heterodox Muslim groups such as the Nation of Islam, as well as anti-Blackness that permeates a white supremacist society such as the United States.

The second kind of fashionable hijabis included the cultural appropriators. Cultural appropriators of Islamic fashion had become more common in Philadelphia in the past few decades. Mrs. Penney provided greater context on how Islamic fashion became trendy in Philadelphia during our interview together.

I feel like some part of it became trendy, to be honest with you. I think kids gravitate to things that they think are stylish, so they wanna adopt that part of it, not realizing it's a cultural thing too. Oh, they like the way Muslim people wear their pants about their ankles, they like the beard, like the way it looks, and then they start to pull in other things, and they don't realize that this is a religion. Cause religion's purpose is spiritual...but they are not looking at it like that, they are looking at it in a trendy way, fashion way....Kids started coming in with hijabs and kufis, and this was outside of

Ramadan. So they started to celebrate the fact that they were Muslim. I think a part or stimulus of it was the MSA. That they felt a sense of pride that there was nothing wrong with being Muslim...So I think that became normalized in the school...and with the kids who they see as cool kids too.

Mrs. Penney explained that Islamic fashion became trendy at school because many kids started wearing hijabs and kufis, even outside of Ramadan. As the popularity of MSA grew, Muslim students felt more confident wearing Islamic clothes at school, which inspired non-Muslim youth to start adopting Islamic fashion as well. Just as wearing pants above one's ankles, or the Sunni beard (popularized by Philly rapper Freeway) were adopted as fashion trends by non-Muslim Philadelphians, so too did hijabs and kufis become trendy at Honors Academy. Mrs. Penney explained that kids don't see it as "a religion," or a "cultural thing," but they see it "in a trendy, way, fashion way." Mrs. Penney didn't appear upset about Islamic fashion being adopted by non-Muslims even though she does affirm that "religion's purpose is spiritual."

MSA students, however, found this fashion trend to be a form of cultural appropriation that sometimes did not respect the religious reasons for covering one's hair. Tooma, a 2nd generation Liberian Muslim woman, stated confidently during an MSA discussion on culture:

Tooma: "I was talking about how some of the African clothes, the beads and everything, nobody wanted, but now everybody wants it. Well, certain things like waistbeads and those scarfs and things, most people wear it for fashion, while other people wear it for cultural reasons. Kinda like khimars, hijabs, whatever you wanna call it. People wear it for fashion reasons (Mrs. Penney: Some); some people wear it for fashion or just because they can't get their hair done, while others wear it for cultural reasons or even for religion. So how do you know if it's cultural appropriation?"

Mrs. Penney: "Right, so the reason might be different, but nonetheless, they are still pulling something from somewhere else that they saw it. They might

be like, I like the way she is wearing a scarf, no I'm not a Muslim, I'm gonna wrap my hair like that. You understand. But that's my point. My point is that different reasons and the ways that we get to the same common thing is still happening, regardless, right? I think the difference between cultural appropriation is whether you respect the original culture or not."

Tooma made a parallel between the ways that African clothes and waistbeads had suddenly become popular as fashion trends, whereas in the past, they were shunned because of their association with negative African stereotypes. She next made a parallel with how religious items too, like khimars or hijabs, are used for fashion reasons, for utilitarian purposes (not getting hair done), or sometimes even for religious purposes. Tooma was puzzled as to how the same item of clothing can serve so many functions, and if so, how could one distinguish between cultural appropriation and religious use?

Mrs. Penney echoed her earlier remark by acknowledging that wrapping one's hair for a religious reason or for fashion reasons are different. However, "the ways that we get to the same common thing is still happening, regardless, right?" Mrs. Penney, ever the advocate of unity, played down the difference between cultural appropriation and religious usage. She advised that cultural appropriation must respect the original culture, but she does not expand further about what such respect may look like. Did that mean that those who are non-Muslims should not cover their hair?

Tooma's question remained largely unanswered during the MSA meeting. However, Tooma's question itself suggested that the different reasons for wearing the hijab were not quite the same, and that some fashion reasons might even fall under cultural appropriation, even though Mrs. Penney steered the conversation away from that observation for the sake of unity within MSA.

Mr. Daro, the African American history teacher, also shared his view during our interview together on young Muslim men at Honors Academy using religious attire as fashion.

“Yea, sometimes it does seem like fashionable thing sometimes the boys, there are boys who I’m like, you act really bad in school. Are you wearing this... and then four of them will wear this thobe, and I’m like, wow, they are like really bad. They are like really bad, is it just like they wanna look cool. It’s not my place to say, what they...but like you seriously got into a fight the other day. It’s more a cult, it looks cool, so I don’t know, it’s hard for me to draw the line between what’s teenage behavior and what’s Islamically influenced.”

Mr. Daro called the boys “bad”. While bad can sometimes means cool in the social context, bad here refers to troubling behavior, like fighting. The thobe and kufi wearing young men got into serious fights, which made Mr. Daro label them a ‘cult.’ As a non-Muslim teacher, he acknowledged his limitation in parsing out fashion trends versus Islamic influences and underscores how Islamic fashion and religious practice through wearing Islamic attire was difficult to distinguish at school. Yet, Mr. Daro picked up on the idea that Islamic fashion signaled a certain type of style, which was not necessarily associated with a well-behaved student, often associated with MSA members at Honors.

Finally, Zara shared an example of cultural appropriation by pointing out how her friend, Khalia, wore the hijab as a “practice Muslim.” Khalia practiced appropriation because she purposefully delinked the practice of Islam from the headcovering she wore for fashion.

“A Fuslim is who’s like not really into the religion but still like garbs up and says that they worship Allah. Like, for example, I know someone who like just says stuff, ignorant things and stuff, says f the religion and all that but still garbs up and stuff like that...It offends me. I have a friend, she is not Muslim, she didn’t take her shahadah. But it’s like she also garbs and

stuff like that. But if she also doesn't also follow the rules of the religion. First off, she dates females and stuff like that and like, it's nothing wrong with that, but it's just forbidden in the religion. And if you wanna consider yourself to be like a Muslim and stuff, although you didn't convert, that's still considered to be disrespectful because you garb, but then you don't follow the interests of Allah, so... We had the conversation, but it didn't seem like she really cared about it. So, I'm gonna leave where she is, if she is gonna go about her life." (Interview 4/12/20).

Zara squarely critiqued her friend, Khalia, for wearing Islamic attire but condemning the religion, dating females, as well as not caring about the rules of Islam. Though her friend garbed up, she did not control her cussing, saying 'f the religion.' While finding the condemnation of Islam offensive, especially while wearing the hijab, the second reason Zara was offended was because Khalia did not follow the rules. Even as a "practice Muslim," which is how she describes her friend (one who is practicing to be Muslim but not has not taken the shahadah), Khalia refused to follow the "rules" of Islam. The rules included not having same-sex relationships, which Khalia broke by dating females. Zara believes that Khalia's actions are not only 'forbidden' under Islam but also 'disrespectful.' In addition to not following the 'interests of Allah,' Khalia is also making a mockery of Islam by taking parts of the religion she thinks are fashionable (the khimar) but not following the attendant rules of Islam. Zara believed that Khalia's behavior perfectly encapsulates a Fuslim: one who garbs but does not practice the rules (cussing) or taboos (dating same-sex people) within Islam. Aidi (2014) describes how the colloquial term for individuals like Khalia, people who are not Muslim but adopt Muslim fashion trends is "asalama-faykers" (Aidi 2014, 51).

What is interesting in Zara's definition is that the person was not even officially Muslim, since they had not taken the shahadah. Khalia's actions represented an instance

where fashion stood in for itself, within a larger matrix of Islamic logic at Honors, but stripped of its substantive meaning as a sign of submission to Allah. Even if Khalia was simply practicing to be Muslim and not a Muslim convert yet, in Zara's view, her behaviors are disrespectful towards Islamic tenets. At best, Khalia is a flawed "practice Muslim," at worst she is a cultural appropriator, disrespecting Islamic norms of behavior by associating lesbianism with the khimar.

Zara's condemnation of Khalia's cultural appropriation was supplemented by her critique of Khalia for linking Islam (through her headcover) with same sex relationships. In this particular instance, Khalia did not only culturally appropriate the khimar; she also associated Islam with same-sex behavior. Cultural appropriation of Islamic garb took varying forms, and both Muslim women and men engaged in appropriating religious Islamic clothing. They delinked the practice of religion through the materiality of the hijab with simply using the hijab for their own fashion purposes.

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### *The Fuslim by Conversion*

Having described two types of Fuslims - the lapsed Muslims and the fashion Fuslims: utilitarians and cultural appropriators, I will turn to the third type of Fuslims: Fuslim by conversion. The term Fuslim was most often directed at converts who were viewed as suspect by many West African Muslims and even non-Muslim students at Honors, who were influenced by the judgment directed towards converts that they witnessed amongst their West African peers. Since converts tended to be African Americans, ethnoreligious hegemonies shaped their reception into Islam. I will highlight

the reasons that a few students like Zara converted. Then, I will share the pushback she received for being a converted “Fuslim,” and how she dealt with this judgment. Zara’s story illustrates how the term Fuslim was unevenly applied to African American Muslim women, a function of ethnoreligious hegemonies that were contingent upon the values placed on ethnic distinctions and family histories by West African Muslims.

*Why do Muslims Convert?*

Conversion to Islam was common in the experiences of women in Rouse’s (2004) study of Black Muslim women in the Los Angeles area. Rouse (2004) described how “important elements of conversion stories include new concepts of body, purity, and health; redefinitions of gender and family; positive acceptance of race; and belief in the doctrines of Islam.” (Rouse, 2004, 138). These narratives of transformation described what drew Black Muslim women to Islam. In some historical narratives of conversion focusing on Black Muslims, there was an underlying belief that people convert because of Black nationalist impulses or the rejection of Christianity. While these are valid reasons, what they do not always address is the spiritual drive as well as an individualistic desire to fashion a new self in people’s decision to convert. Sia, the persistent Muslim, shared:

“I feel like most people, especially at Honors, there’s a lot of people that took their shahadahs, from 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. So I feel like, like a lot of them did come to me to ask questions, especially during Ramadan. So I feel the thing that attracts them most is the humbleness, I just feel like it’s the way that Muslims carry themselves and their beliefs and prayers. Plus they see me since Day 1 always, like there hasn’t been a day when I went to school uncovered, so I feel like they think that I’m a persistent Muslim. So I feel like they felt comfortable coming to me and asking me questions. There’s actually a group of girls I hung out with, and they took their shahadah, and I asked them, do you really want to take the shahadah, or are you just doing this because your other friends are doing it? They was like, no I really wanna take it. So I was like ok, know the responsibility that



comes along with it, you really gotta stick to it. Like you can't just do it as a turn."

In this passage, Sia explained that there is a high rate of conversion amongst Honors students and that students are attracted to the faith because of the humbleness, piety, and persistence of Muslims like herself. Sia gave shahadah to the group of girls she mentioned. However, before she did so, she asked them whether they are converting because it is trendy or because it is a spiritual desire, casting these as conflicting motivations. She reminds the girls that there is responsibility with converting and a need for persistence ("you really gotta stick to it.") But as Kabeera and Mrs. Lyons alluded to, there is an inevitable "ebb and flow" in the path of faith, which means that conversion was more fluid and multi-faceted than Sia portrayed it to be. It was possible that taking the shahadah was both trendy and also a search for spiritual community. Whatever the motivations, taking the shahadah was a quintessential form of Islamic self-making.

#### *Zara's Conversion*

In Zara's case, she converted to Islam because of her admiration of Mrs. Penney and a feeling of community she desired. Zara was a mixed Puerto Rican and Italian American teenager from a Christian family.

"When I became a part of MSA, I wasn't a Muslim. I said, I don't know how you all can fast all day. I would just get hungry. And other Muslim would be like, Zara, it's not just about the food. And I said, well, I can't understand. But then over the summer, I thought about it. It wasn't just about food, but being proud of a tradition. I actually wanted to convert to Buddhism for a bit. I did my research and stuff, like they believe in Nirvana and stuff like that. And I did (want to convert to Buddhism), but then I eventually ended up converting to Islam cause I felt like I had more support and I felt like I could maintain that better. I was like scared, I was like this is a big risk. How I want my life to be. And I came in one day with my khimar on. I told Mrs. Penney, wait till tomorrow, I'm taking my shahadah

tomorrow, and I did. In my watching Muslim people pray, it's so satisfying. And just witnessing how devout Mrs. Penney was. It's like, when like when she educated me a little about it, it made impact with my Muslim friends and all. After that, it urged me to do my research on the religion, and like be like 'oh I could really do this, and I feel like I have a lot of support if I was to do this. "

For Zara, her individual desire to convert was tied to a sense of community. She was inspired by her teacher's devotion as well as the core group of Muslim friends she made through her involvement with MSA. However, the decision to become Muslim was not immediate. She wanted to become Buddhist at first. She also didn't understand the meaning of not eating during Ramadan. However, with time, she realized it was about "being proud of a tradition," about seeing how satisfying prayer is, studying the faith, and mainly seeking support she had from friends and her teacher. While her consideration of Buddhism suggested an experimental phase, where she was searching for meaning in a spiritual tradition, whether it was Islam or not, ultimately, it was the community aspect that helped Zara make the decision to take shahadah. Her individual conversion, to fashion herself into a new spiritual self, was not separate from a community, even as taking the shahadah was trendy and fashionable. There can be multiple reasons for conversion - individual self-fashioning alongside seeking spiritual community. Zara's journey into Islam was her initial engagement with Islamic self-making.

Given the journey she had undertaken to convert to Islam, Zara lamented that she has been called a Fuslim by others. During her interview with me, she shared:

"The only thing people say about me is that I claim to be Muslim, but I don't garb. And I feel like, garbing up shouldn't define my commitment to the religion. So it's like, I could know more than you, but just not garb up and everyday. I feel like, but then there's people who do garb up everyday but still aren't really educated on the religion."

Zara described how she does garb up during Ramadan as a sign of respect, but that garbing up the rest of the year was something she was working up to, especially as a recent convert. She pointed out the inconsistency in someone garbing up but not being ‘educated on the religion’ in contrast to someone like her who doesn't garb up consistently but is educating herself through taking Islamic lessons from Mrs. Penney. She described how she has a 1:1 class on Tuesday with Ms. Penney, during which she took a lot of notes in her book about the tenets of faith, such as the Five Pillars of Islam. By sharing her perspective, Zara stated emphatically that a Muslim was not determined by someone who didn't garb, but someone who didn't learn more about Islam. Despite her attempts to learn more about Islam and scripture, Zara was hurt that others would accuse her of being a fake Muslim, harkening back to ethnoreligious hegemonies in the Muslim community that often devalues the spiritual journey that brought African Americans into the fold of Islam.

Zara acknowledged her shortcomings when it comes to being a persistent Muslim:

“I understand with the dressing part and all that. Cause you see, I don't really garb up all the time, but I understand the point that's being made with like saying that you have to garb. It's just that I just don't really do it often. Mrs. Penney told me garbing is a small thing. I struggle with fasting and stuff like that, memorizing Surahs, stuff like that. Cause it's like, how long was I Muslim for? Like a year or two? I've been Muslim for 1 or 2 years. (I: You took the shahadah in 7<sup>th</sup> grade?) Yes. And it's like, I'm the only Muslim in my house. So in my house, it's like everybody eats pork in this house, except me. So I'm the only person in the house who eats turkey. Nobody respects that I don't eat pork. Just cause you don't eat pork don't mean I can't eat it, don't mean I won't make it in the house. So it's like...and it's like, they don't pray the way I do, so what more help can they contribute to me because they don't do as I do. But I mean, I garb during Ramadan. It was burgundy, the overgarment I wore last year.”

Zara shared how difficult it to practice Islam at home. She was the only one who eats turkey at home, and her family didn't respect her decision. She also did not always garb because

covering was new for her. Mrs. Penney was very welcoming to Zara, advising her to ease into the religion. While Zara does garb during Ramadan because that's an important month; however, the rest of the time she does not. Zara also struggled with fasting and scripture (memorizing Surahs). Zara's excerpt above offers a real life view into how difficult it is for new converts to Islam to find the support they need to fulfill different elements of Islamic practice and to engage in practices of Islamic self-making.

Through these empirical examples, I explored how the category of Fuslim served to flesh out the individualized version of Islam at school through understanding the practices of fashion and conversion. By outlining the three ways in which Fuslims were typologized, I underscored how Islamic authenticity was unevenly applied at Honors: African students were less critiqued than African American students for similar behaviors pertaining to religious practice. Fuslim was the form of difference which students used to distinguish between an individualized and communal version of Islam, with African American Fuslims automatically associated with the individualized and more suspect version of Islam. Fuslim ultimately reaffirmed ethnoreligious hegemonies and lambasted individual forms of Islamic self-making, particularly amongst African American converts whose practices were not viewed as adhering to communally accepted Islamic practices.

### Sympathetic Views of Fuslims

Despite the critical view of Fuslims outlined throughout these examples, there were more sympathetic views of Fuslims circulating at Honors. Sia, the persistent Muslim, offered a sympathetic view of Fuslims. Sia captured some of the difficulties that Zara spoke about in maintaining an Islamic lifestyle at home:

“I try to avoid that, even though I do notice people going back and forth...because I don’t know what they going through at home. I don’t know if they praying or not, so I really don’t know what they are doing, but I try to uplift and remind them. But I never try to judge people, and I try to tell my friends at school, I’m like don’t. Cause some people at school, they be like ‘oh, she wanna cover up now,’ and I’m like you don’t have to cover up to practice Islam. Even though it’s a blessing, you don’t have to cover up. You shouldn’t be judging cause you don’t know if she is going home and praying or not. She might be praying more than you, you never know. So I’m like, I try to avoid the Fuslim term cause you never know what somebody going through in the *path of faith*. You never know what they are going through that could bring them closer to Allah or not. So they might be going through something, and they might look back at it and think, I need to get my stuff together, and it might bring them closer to Islam.”

Sia made an important point that “you don’t have to cover up to practice Islam.” Even though she, as a covered hijabi herself, found great blessings in covering up, Sia did not believe that covering up was the only way to be Muslim. Sia reasoned that faith was often hidden, and that everyone’s path of faith was different - it was difficult to judge from external appearances who was becoming closer to Allah and who was not. Therefore, by creating spaces of compassion for those people who go “back and forth,” it allowed them to return to Islam, even if they had temporarily lost their way. Sia reasoned that perhaps individuals who did not cover up offer prayers at home, more so than the person who was serving up the Fuslim critique. Sia was attentive to the difficulties new Muslims face at home, as in the case of Zara.

Sia’s view on Fuslims was one based on the idea of faith as an enduring path, one in which progress cannot be measured by external appearances alone. As someone who describes herself as a “persistent Muslim,” Sia had herself worn hijab for all four years of high school. She shared that many Muslims who wished to take shahadah would approach her because they viewed her as a kind and “consistent Muslim.”

Sia's explanation aligned with my observations of her in the classroom and hallways spaces. In my presence (and even while eavesdropping), I did not hear her utter an unkind word to others on the matter of faith. It was heartening to see a so-called "persistent Muslim" being supportive of potential "Fuslims," because ultimately, the path of faith was a difficult one for all people, particularly new converts like Zara who did not have generations of Muslim family members to support her, like Sia did or many of the West African Muslims discussed above.

In addition to being more sympathetic towards so called "Fuslims," some students also contextualized how it was that Fuslim became a popular term at school. Kabeera suggested that the majority of those accusing others of being Fuslim were primarily not Muslim practitioners themselves. Kabeera lambasted the accusers:

"I think Christians and whatever else, they should not be judging anybody. The people that say Fuslims, the people that call people Fuslims, most of them are non-Muslim. You don't hear a lot of Muslim people say, calling other people Fuslim cause I think they know that you're not supposed to judge anybody in Islam....It's always the non-Muslim kids who are always judge. I think it's like because they're curious. They are curious about...I don't know. I just think that it's different, they see that oh, Muslims wear these thobes and these khimars during this time of Ramadan, I think they wanna know why, they are curious about it. But then it just comes off ignorant. Like they try to be funny about it. Make jokes, instead of just like asking us. Like I don't judge when you only go to church on Easter."

Kabeera strongly castigated Christians and non-Muslims who attempt to police Muslims on their choice to wear a hijab or thobe. Particularly during Ramadan time, when many Muslims attempted to show respect to Allah by donning religious garb, these non-Muslims accused Muslims of being fake. Kabeera understood that the underlying motivation for calling out 'Fuslim' emerged from a sense of curiosity about the different clothes that

Muslims wear. However, she wished that this curiosity would take the form of sincere questions rather than jokes or unkind labels like Fuslims. Kabeera compared the ramped up religiosity during Ramadan with the religiosity Christians show during Easter. Many Christians only attended church on one day of the year; just so, some Muslims increased their spiritual efforts during Ramadan. Given this reasoning, Kabeera argued that Fuslim should be a term that was retired. Instead of policing people of other faiths, conscious dialogue would be a better way forward to promoting understanding of multiple faith practices at Honors Academy.

What is important about Kabeera's conclusion is that the term Fuslim was used readily by non-Muslim people, which I observed in conversations as well. Because of the prevalence of Islamic cultural elements - linguistic terminology, Islamic fashion, and the popularity of shahadah (described in the first part of the chapter), even non-Muslim students at Honors felt able to engage in policing bounds of Muslim religiosity. However, the idea of proper Muslims overly focused on an overly visual understanding of Islam. Instead of focusing on practice, garbing was the main standard for judging religious practice amongst non-Muslims. Unlike Kabeera's assertion, I noticed that the term Fuslim was also used by Muslims, even though "Muslims are not supposed to judge each other" as many of the Black Muslim youth reminded me. In reality, however, youth described in the passages above, also liberally used the term Fuslim.

Fuslim, therefore, was a way to police religious boundaries and determine the bounds of Islamic legitimacy at Honors Academy, both by non-Muslim and Muslim students alike. The Fuslim label was primarily applied towards African American converts

or those experimenting with elements of Islamic culture. For African American Muslim to be called “persistent Muslims,” they had to wear the hijab, know Islamic scripture, and attend the mosque. West African Muslim students, on the other hand, even if they weren’t following Islamic practices, were given the benefit of the doubt because it was assumed that they had legitimate, communal claim to Islam through long-term family histories. Muslim was not just a standalone concept, but one that accounted for Islamic family histories and bolstered an overly visual form of Islamic piety at Honors Academy. The term worked to reinscribe ethnoreligious hegemonies by overly scrutinizing the Islamic self-making practices of African American Muslims.

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This chapter examined the debates over legitimate models of practicing Islam in Honors Academy. There were two ways in which legitimacy was determined within the local culture of Honors: through family histories of Islam as well as through the concept of persistent vs. fake Muslims, where fakeness was defined along multiple forms, but emphasized a visual concept of practice. These two forms of legitimacy were couched within two versions of Islam: communal, familial, and institutional approaches to Islam that valued ancestral faith lineages and another version that was open to individual practice. MSA students, particularly West African students like Kabeera, emphasized Islamic family history as a means of claiming centrality to a “legitimate” form of Islamic identity. All those with more recent family conversions to Islam were hard-pressed to claim an identity as “Muslim,” illustrating how Islamic family history could serve as one form of space making that could be exclusive of those with more recent claims.



The two version of Islam, communal and individual forms existed simultaneously, though boundaries of the individual form were policed more strongly through labels such as Fuslims. The Fuslim identity policed African American converts and women more strictly than West African Muslims or young men at school. Muslim women were policed more re: head covering, while African American Muslims had a higher stake to prove themselves as true Muslims. Family and ethnic histories and recency of conversion were salient elements that operated as two factors on which to determine legitimacy, suggesting that ethnoreligious hegemonies were indelibly present within the context of Honors Academy.

These ethnoreligious hegemonies were not unique to Honors Academy but reflected larger trends within the US Muslim community in which African American Muslims are viewed as suspect by many South Asian, Arab, and African immigrant communities (Jackson, 2005; Khabeer 2016). Unable to overturn these existing hierarchies, African American Muslim women like Shantell, Zara, Vera, and Sia took up different means to gain acceptance as Muslim converts, some emphasizing communal worship in mosques (Vera, Sia), while others emphasized individual spirituality (Shantell, Zara). These women refused to be excluded from laying claim to a Muslim identity, despite historical hierarchies, religious biases, and anti-Blackness within the larger Muslim community, as represented by individuals such as Kabeera. These women's struggle for acceptance illustrated that claims to Islamic self-making are constantly contested and sometimes overcome to create new social realities.

## Chapter 9: Debating Family Histories: The “Rice Debate”

In Chapter 8, I examined different types of Muslims and two modes of practicing Islam in Honors Academy as students engaged in Islamic self-making. While Islam appeared to be a uniform shared identity amongst MSA members, the deployment of the term *Fuslim* suggested that the depth of one’s Islamic family history mediated peers’ perception of religious authenticity amongst MSA members. In this way, students’ shared Muslim identity within MSA becomes less salient in the face of different family histories that perpetuated ethnoreligious hegemonies.

MSA students’ family histories were markedly different - for African American and Caribbean descended MSA members, histories of enslaved ancestors stood in stark contrast to the voluntary migration in more recent decades of family members of West African MSA members. While, as depicted in Chapter 8 in certain contexts, students primarily distinguished among one another on the basis of divergent family histories of religious identification and practice; in other contexts, it was ethnic differences that were most salient. Perceptions of cultural differences among Black Muslim students were rooted for some, in their family’s dark and painful past, harkening back to legacies of slavery.

Islamic self-making, therefore, were shaped by various self-formations, including religious, ethnic, and racial family histories, which is the focus on Part II of this dissertation. Through words and behaviors, MSA students accentuate that their identity-based differences themselves are not static but weave together and come apart variably between distinct spaces. By following students in their differences across spaces, these changing forms of difference themselves (religious, ethnic, racial) are illuminated.

In the school, the MSA space serves an ethnic function, providing a space where students could talk about their family histories and cultural customs. While Mrs. Penney attempted to create a ‘unified’ MSA, the family history debate began with a playful discussion of phenotypes and how skin color surfaced different ancestral origins. The family history debate continued to refer to different ancestral experiences, which fractured any pre-existing ideas of an undivided Islamic identity amongst MSA students. Mrs. Penney often glossed over different Islamic experiences, reminding students that they are all Muslim and shouldn’t argue with each other about it. Given this perspective, it was important that students nonetheless used the MSA space as one in which they could discuss and debate differences – religious, ethnic, or racial. The students conceived of American identity differently as well throughout the family history debate, illustrating how they were more prone to discuss differences than Mrs. Penney.

African American and West African students used the MSA space to air grievances against each other and mark their differences. There are two ways in which the differences students identified during the family history debate emerged in action. One was through the “rice debate”, during which West African and Jamaican students made fun of African American peers for allegedly having “no culture” through comparing different ways of preparing and cooking rice. The second was through the ethnic slurs that African American students directed at West African peers. African American students ridiculed West African students for being from a poor, ‘savage’ continent. The two instances shared below foregrounded students’ differences and demonstrated students’ efforts at ethnic boundary marking as well as the extent to which youth internalize circulating stereotypes about

various groups. Throughout the debates, the majority of students' self-ascribed identity as "Africans" and "African American" emphasized historical differences and ethnic boundary making rather than racial solidarity. Though these particular debates are not religious in nature, the idea of ethnoreligious hegemony still persists in the way that these Black Muslim youth devalue each other's cultures, based on a hegemonic understanding of the superiority of their own histories. In this debate context, anti-Blackness was an underlying thread, with students' Islamic self-making deeply influenced by a white supremacist framework that deepened historically produced ethnic fractures between West African and African American Muslim youth. The process of Islamic self-making is constantly racialized because of the historic connection between Islam and the race concept, even if the particular conversation does not specifically address religious matters.

Within the MSA space, debates often emerged among the students that invoked not religious distinctions, but others that symbolized racialized, ethnic, or cultural differences that the students perceived. These debates ranged across a field of topics, including a discussion of race and phenotype, a debate on ethnic origins and American identity, ethnicity and its impact on different cultural customs, as well as ethnic boundary marking through the "rice debate" and sharing ethnic slurs against the other ethnic groups in MSA.

#### The MSA as a Religious and Ethnic Space

Mrs. Penney constantly reminded the MSA students of the core MSA ideologies: "unity, service, and leadership." The MSA members included 2/3 Muslim and 1/3 non-Muslim students. Of the 1/3 non-Muslim members, the majority were West African Christians. A few non-Muslim members were also Jamaican, a nationality which

constituted the only Caribbean MSA members. The students recognized the diversity within the club but hewed to the ideology of unity. They were excited to fundraise and contribute to the financial and programmatic success of the MSA (Chapters 3 and 4).

In addition to the function of MSA to serve as a space in which participation could produce forms of social solidarity as Muslims and allies, the West African students, both Muslim and Christian, felt that the club could serve as an “African club,” as Asha (a West African Christian) cleverly named the club. West African Liberian American Christians, such as Asha and Lina attended the club, rooted in their ethnic solidarity with their West African Muslim peers. West African students discussed particular African foods they would eat at home and debated the best African restaurants in Southwest Philly. Ethnic identity, therefore, as rooted in shared food cultures, provided 2nd generation West African students, Muslim and Christian, a way to feel validated in their African heritage. Particularly given the low status of Africans within Honors Academy, the MSA served as a safe affirmative ethnic haven for these students.

While ethnicity in this case served to unite Muslim and Christian West African students within MSA, there were also moments when discussions about ethnicity became the cause of great disunity within MSA. While Mrs. Penney worked hard to unify the students around the common discourse of a shared religion and shared humanity, MSA students honed in on ethnic difference rather than a shared religious identity to make sense of their differences. I will share the ways in which family histories surfaced ethnic differences within MSA. I will reflect on how a contentious debate around family ancestry nonetheless allowed students to take ownership of this identity affirming space. Even

though the fractious debate did not fit the model of unity that Mrs. Penney posed, it did nonetheless provide an alternative space during which MSA students could discuss “taboo” topics of slavery, ethnic divisions, and criteria for cultural value.

The continuing reference to ethnic identity throughout this chapter necessitates a discussion of how I am conceptualizing ethnicity throughout the chapter. Stuart Hall’s (1996) reminder remains relevant: “We are all ... ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are” (Hall, 1996, 447). For many of the Black Muslim youth, ethnic identity seemed to be defined by descent and bounded geographic origins; race is defined by distinct physical characteristics. On occasion, some students defined being Black as synonymous with American in the context of an all-Black school (re: Shantell). However, I conceptualize and trace ethnic and racial identity as fluid, contested, and changing throughout the chapter. Ethnic labels were a preferred mode of identification by West African students, and these designations were rarely contested by peers. However, for African American students, their roots were often debated, leading to questions about what their ethnic family history was; these students avoided ethnic labels and preferred to identify racially as Black. In different spaces, the salience of ethnic identity gave way to religious or racial identities, illustrating the constant interplay of ethnic, racial, and religious identities.

I also consider the fluid concept of ethnicity in the context of these students’ family histories; in debates around family history, ethnic identity becomes the crux around which students define their social belonging. The anthropological problematic of continuity and rupture concerned earlier generations of scholars and as it turns out, the youth in my study

as well. Earlier scholars debated whether the common connectivity of Black people was centered on the idea of shared origin in Africa (often labelled as the essentialist viewpoint) or the idea of creolization, hybridity, and syncretism that highlights how Black cultures are uniquely formed and reshaped by the soils on which they develop? Was the focus on continuity with a past African heritage (roots) or the different ways in which Black people have been inadvertently joined through shared struggle and racial terror (routes)? The MSA students too, on a rare Friday afternoon in February 2020, debated the idea of Black origin, solidarity, as well as ethnic differences amongst each other. The West African and African American Muslim youth disagreed about how centrally Africa and/or America should feature within their self-identities. African American Muslims, such as Shantell and Zara insisted that their West African peers should try to be more “American,” while the West African Muslim youth insisted on the centrality of Africa to their self-identity. Both sets of students discussed family histories in trying to define how they should self-identify racially and ethnically. This debate around self-identity rooted in family history highlighted two viewpoints: a) remembering African roots and b) recreating new homelands and hybrid identities.

Like the MSA students, scholars too have engaged in trying to understand roots and routes of Black communities across the Atlantic. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy (1990) coined the term the Black Atlantic to refer to the decentering of Africa in diaspora studies. Instead, the journey across the Black Atlantic, the creation of a transatlantic network of Black communities across Africa, North America, the Caribbean, and England shifts the center of power and considers other sites of origin for Black people. Stuart Hall (1990)

writes about syncretic and hybrid cultures of Black people, writing about new ethnicities that emerge out of admixture and migration while David Scott (1991) writes about the idea of “tradition: “between that event (Africa or slavery) and this memory there spreads a complex discursive field we may usefully call "tradition" (Scott, 1991, 25). Scott speaks to the utility of the concept of tradition in thinking about local networks of power, knowledge, and the kinds of identity they serve to fashion. Stuart’s view of syncretic identities and Scott’s concept of “tradition,” refer to ways in which new networks of power are created for Black communities, harkening back to how some of the MSA students preferred the “new” American identity over the centrality of African origins in constructing their sense of historic belonging.

More recent scholars have moved beyond the Black Atlantic, arguing that multiple nodes characterize the interconnectivity and power of the Black peoples despite the existence of global anti-Blackness. Thomas and Clarke’s (2006) collection features scholars writing about Black communities in Europe and the Americas, paying particular attention to how racial formations can be an effective conceptual tool through which to analyze race at its particular historical, social, and specific juncture. Thomas and Clarke (2006) hope to “demonstrate the ongoing power of Blackness while still debunking racial essentialisms” (Thomas & Clarke, 2006, p.5). The continuation of anti-Blackness speaks to the relevance of Blackness as a form of global racial solidarity, even while recognizing the multiple forms of Blackness that exist within a social construction of race. Jacqueline Nassy Brown (2005) furthers the notion of shared diasporic resources, such as music, culture and commerce, that function within Black communities. Though both African



American and West African students spiritedly debate their different ethnic origins, they nonetheless recognize, during limited times, such as during the Black Lives Matter protests, that they are all prone to racial discrimination in society due to their shared race. While West African students typically avoided identifying racially, they too realized that white people viewed them as “just Black,” as Kabeera stated in the introduction of this dissertation. Occasionally, some of these MSA students also shared in their enjoyment of hiphop and rap, which served as shared diasporic resources a la Nassy Brown (2005).

John Jackson (199) in his classic book, *Harlemworld*, alluded to a new geographical node for Black origins by capturing the words of one of his interlocutors, Ms. Joseph, who views “Harlem as African Americans’ Africa” (Jackson, 2001, 198). For African Americans, Black America, with deep historical roots in Harlem, is a central locus of identity formation. African Americans do not need to look geographically elsewhere for a strong sense of rootedness. Like Ms. Joseph, Shantell and Zara, who identify as African American, also elevate America as the site of origin, a perspective that is hotly contested during the debates ensuing in MSA.

While the anthropological debates consider the range of ways in which Black communities locate their complex subjectivities, the MSA students too engage in debates about where they come and how, despite the fact that the majority of the afterschool sessions were devoted to practical topics, such as fundraising strategies and discussing how to strengthen MSA. Nationality and notions of ethnic difference operated in situ within this diasporic community represented in the MSA. The differences they note amongst themselves also reflects the current literature around Black youth that largely highlights

divisions between immigrant youth (Caribbean and West African youth) and their African American peers. Sociologist Mary Waters (2009) traces how 1st and 2nd generation Caribbean youth avoided racial typologies and preferred an ethnic label in order to remain distinct from African Americans while Butterfield (2004) examines how 2nd generation Caribbean youth continue to maintain boundaries with their African American counterparts. Anthropologist Oneka LaBennett (2011) demonstrates how West Indian adolescent girls were encouraged by their parents to retain their Caribbean accents, so they would be viewed as ethnic rather than 'just Black' in society. These young women turn to educational opportunities and material cultural forms (re: TV shows) to define their gendered and ethnic identities. The deliberate ways in which Caribbean immigrant youth distinguish between themselves and their Black peers is reminiscent of how West African youth in MSA delineated their own ethnic boundaries in my study. Other scholars such as Ana Ramos Zayas (2007) in her study of how Luso Brazilian and Puerto Rican youth navigate race, nationality, and ethnic identities in Newark, New Jersey depicts how US-born Latinos and Latin American migrants valorized Blackness and equated it with "Americanness." This was motivated, she argues, by their effort to create alternative forms of citizenship and belongingness that challenge white supremacy. In each of these studies, Black and Latinx youth draw on ethnic categories within a racialized society such as the United States to elevate their own social positions within their local context. While Ramos Zayas's (2007) interlocutors elevated Black cultural features as authentic American practices, within my study, Blackness was often disavowed by West African Muslim youth.

An understanding of society in which Anti-Blackness operated prompted West African youth to distance themselves from their African American peers.

Given the increasing migration of people from West African countries to the US, there is emerging interdisciplinary literature on the interaction between West African immigrants and African Americans (Sigelman, Tuch, and Martin, 2005; Clark, 2008; Balogun, 2011; Halters and Showers Johnson, 2014; Imoagene, 2015). Some recent research focuses on the experience of 2nd generation West African youth and their experiences in education (Allen, Jackson, and Knight, 2012; Awad, 2014; Shani, 2018; Agyepong, 2019; Watson and Knight Manuel, 2020; Smith, 2020). Particularly in the context of Philadelphia, Traore and Lukens (2006) highlight the tensions between West African immigrant and African American high schoolers; both groups of students held derogatory stereotypes about each other. While 1st generation West African immigrant youth were accused of coming from poverty-stricken countries, West African youth in turn critiqued African American peers for forgetting their African heritage (Traore and Lukens, 2006). Traore and Lukens (2006) particularly examine student relations within a high school in Philadelphia and highlight the tensions between West African immigrant and US-born Black youth high schoolers. I noticed a similar dynamic in my observations of the MSA students as well.

In the next section, I consider various debates that emerged among the diverse MSA students on topics such as ethnic origin, ancestry, nationality, and social belonging. The analysis focuses in particular on debates concerning definitions of race, how they conceive

of ethnic differences and varying definitions of American identity, as well as different cultural customs.

### The Family History Debate

As part of the MSA's marketing strategy, the students had decided to shoot a video highlighting some of the student organized activities. This video was an outward facing project, one that would showcase the MSA within the larger school. Producing it was a kind of collective process of Islamic self-making involving public representation. Through their multimedia presentation, MSA students could define how Islam was perceived institutionally at Honors. The students had different ideas about which MSA activities should be highlighted in the video as well as which students would make the best spokespersons for MSA. Some students wanted light-skinned actors over dark-skinned actors because light-skinned actors were common in media productions they viewed on TV. This colorism too was a feature of anti-Blackness as well as ethnoreligious hegemonies privileging light skin within the Muslim and Black community, a colorist ideology that the students carried within themselves. While discussing who should be featured in the video, the students began debating the degree of "Africanness," based on dark skin color of two MSA students, Andrea and Zara.

Among the students participating in the exchange, Ariya, Kabeera, and Kania identified as West African, Shantell and Zara as African American, Andrea and Rania as Jamaican, and Adeeb as Ethiopian.

Ariya: Who wants to sign up for the video testimony?

Zara: It's the light skins.

Kabeera: Y'all are light skinned. Light skins should not be in the video.

Irteza: How do you label yourself?

Kabeera: I'm brown-skinned.

Irteza: So why don't you raise your hand?

Kabeera: I don't wanna be in the video. Cause light skins are always in the video (even though they should not be all the time).

Zara: Y'all are haters! She (Andrea) African...

Kabeera: She not!

Kania: She don't look like it though.

Rania: Don't make assumptions.

This is a complicated exchange, based on phenotypical perceptions and racial assumptions. In it, students use different words to index race and associated skin color; the overall assumption, however, is that race is biologically fixed. Kabeera begins by stating that only light skinned people usually appear in videos; however, she who self-identifies as "brown skinned," does not volunteer for the video. The students debate whether Andrea should be in the video. Zara, an African American with Puerto Rican heritage, assumes that Andrea is African because she is dark. Two West African students, Kabeera and Kania, as well as Andrea's fellow Jamaican classmate, Rania, rejects Zara's attempt to label Andrea as African, simply based on skin color.

Adeeb: How do you know what looks African, what does that mean?

Kabeera: Of course, I knew he gonna ask that!

Zara: Cause she (Kabeera) stereotypical!

Kabeera: She doesn't look African.

Adeeb: What does that mean? I genuinely don't understand.

Zara: She's (Kabeera) racist!!!

Adeeb: Are her features different from other Black people?

Kabeera: She (Kania) look African, y'all look American or whatever.

Adeeb, a recent immigrant from Ethiopia, is flummoxed by these racial labels. He asks how one can even label someone else African, simply based on skin color. As an African immigrant himself, Adeeb is aware that there are multiple skin tones amongst people on the African continent, including white. He asks whether it is skin color or certain features that could determine one's "Africanness." Kabeera exclaims that she knew Adeeb would ask – as a recent immigrant to America, he knew little about how racial categories operated within the US. Two West African students respond, including Kabeera answer Adeeb's question indirectly by pointing out how Kania (a West African) looks "different," than the Americans (Zara and Shantell), implicitly referencing skin color. Kania too states, "you can tell." Kabeera and Kania are convinced that West Africans, Caribbean, and Americans (i.e.: African Americans) look phenotypically different, based on both skin color (Africans are darker) and features. In other interviews, Kabeera calls her ability to distinguish Africans from African Americans as "Afrodar."

Andrea: I'm Jamaican.

Adeeb: I'm not American.

Zara: Where you from?

Adeeb: Ethiopia.

Kabeera: You're Puerto Rican (to Zara).

Zara: I'm light but still Black...y'all so racist!

Shantell: You're not African (to Zara).

Kabeera: Zara, you white.

Zara: I would totally jump on your case. Yea, how you all gonna call me not African!

Kania: You can tell.

Zara: Y'all some heavy.

Andrea is displeased with being labelled as African, and she asserts that she is Jamaican. Adeb too clarifies that he is not American, but Ethiopian. Both of these students claim a particular ethnic origin, based on their or their family's specific country of origin. In response to her peers' critiques of her act of labelling Andrea based on skin color, Zara retorts that everyone is racist. It is unclear how she comes to the conclusion that her peers are racist when she herself is assigning labels based on skin color. Just as Zara tries to label Andrea, Zara too is labelled by others: Kabeera labels Zara as "Puerto Rican" and "white" and Shantell labels her as "not African." In response, Zara states: "I'm light but still Black...y'all so racist! Yea, how you all gonna call me not African!" Zara is frustrated that her peers deny her African origin based on her light skin. In her own self-identity, light skin does not obviate her African (read: dark-skinned) origin. The work that students engage in to create distinctions based on skin color is complex in that students individually deny simplistic ascriptions but easily label their peers in overt categories. In a later interview, I asked Zara more about this exchange, and she explained her stance on her racial self-identity further:

“People just think like, just like, ‘oh you’re not Black because you look like this.’ You’re more, you don’t have as much pressure on you as a Black person because you’re like this or your skin color looks like this, so you’re not really Black or you can’t be considered to be Black and stuff like that.’ There’s not one way to be a Black person, how do you know what a Black person is. One thing, two things for certain: you don’t look Black, and stuff like that. But it’s not all, the way, the world is just built off of stereotypes. Like who says all Puerto Ricans had long, silky, long curly hair? Who said Black people have kinky, ‘nappy’...like that’s not how people hair, that’s not how all African American hair is.”

Zara denies that there is not a particular way to be Black. Based on the constant flak she receives from her African American peers: “‘oh you’re not Black because you look like this,’” Zara asserts that “there’s not one way to be a Black person.” Zara herself has African, Puerto Rican, and Italian heritage. She could be light skinned and have “long silky hair,” but her skin color or hair texture do not obviate her claim to Blackness. For Zara, Blackness is not just a biologically determined phenotype.

In this discussion, features and skin color become solidified into an understanding of who one is. Unless students push on this identity category, skin color becomes pre-determinative of African or African American biological origin. The students’ underlying assumption is that African Americans are lighter because of “intermixing” with Europeans. West Africans, in comparison, are more pure and darker in skintone because they do not have any European intermixing in their histories. In reality, African people too have color gradings across the continent which has their own complicated history of intermixing and migration (Pierre, 2020). Despite the complexity of racial and ethnic histories, the students oversimplify and create this dualistic identity: African American or West African. The Jamaican student, Andrea, refuses to be labelled as African, and instead identifies according to her national origin. In most of these students’ performances of identity, they



internalize tenets of white supremacy which denigrate Blackness. Hewing to nationality appears to be one way in which they avoid racial labels, an act which Zara suggests is “racist.”

The MSA students’ discussion of Blackness and Africanness is an example of racial performance that Ramos Zayas (2007) analyzes in her study “Becoming America, Becoming Black? Urban Competency, Racialized Spaces, and the Politics of Citizenship Among Brazilian and Puerto Rican Youth in Newark.” In her analysis, Ramos Zayas notes how US-born Latinos and Latin American migrants valorized Blackness and equated it with “Americanness,” as an effort to create alternative forms of citizenship and belongingness. However, Ramos Zayas questions the extent to which Blackness as urban competency becomes detached from actual Black bodies, who some of the Latino students associated with criminality. Valorized Blackness, therefore, is used strategically by students, particularly immigrants who claim “Americanness” by proximity to Black styles (not necessarily Black bodies). Ramos Zayas suggests that these claims to Black and Americanness are heavily policed in BHS, the school in which American born and immigrant students have greater socioeconomic disparity, and therefore, a greater impetus for well off students to maintain their social position (elevated by wealth) through intergroup distinctions. Ramos Zayas (2007) poses an evocative question: “To what degree are racial performances a “strategy” youth adopt, and to what degree are these performances imposed on young people by normative views of “race” and citizenship that are systematically endorsed?” (Ramos Zayas, 2007, 100). Ramos Zayas questions the

extent to which youth have control over the racial performances in which they engage, or the degree to which such “racial” terms are pre-determined by normative societal views.

In the case of the MSA students’ discussion of skin color above, Zara insists that she is Black despite having fair skin and smooth hair. Her comment is situated within the US context in which the “one drop” rule – i.e.: even having one Black ancestor automatically rendered one legally Black during segregation. However, while the “one drop” rule denigrated Blackness, in this case, Zara actively wants to claim her Black identity within a school like Honors in which Blackness reigns dominant due to the 99% Black student body. However, her peers playfully deny Zara’s claim to Blackness, based on normative phenotypic constructions of what a Black person looks like. Features and skin color become pre-determinative in racial performances, and any alternative claims to Blackness are heavily policed. The students solidify two separate identities: African American or West African, which become associated with physical features. Anyone who does not fit within the normative views of phenotypical ‘race’ categories are teased or excluded, as it occurred in the case of Zara. Race remains a largely biologically determinative concept for the MSA students. Additionally, West African and Jamaican students favor national categories over racial categories, a trend which Jemima Pierre (2020) notes in her study of African interlocutors. Students argue how the different physical appearances amongst MSA students hint at different national (overlapping with ethnic) origins, harkening to the question of Americanness with which students in Ramos Zayas’s study also grappled.

Kania: “So like, back to the original topic.”

Kira: “MSA.”

Kania: “It’s no hate towards you Americans, but…”

Rania: “You Americans, huh.”

Andrea: “They weird.”

Mrs. Penney: “Wait a minute, you Americans? Wait, you’re American too, aren’t you?”

Zara: “What’s that supposed to mean? You live in America.”

Kania: “I know, but…”

Kania began the exchange by stating: “It’s no hate towards you Americans but…”

Kania positioned herself against an American identity. Even though she didn’t get to finish the rest of her thought at this point, later on in the transcript, Kania argues for the distinctiveness of African Americans vs. African youth based on the length of time one’s families had been in the US (“So the difference is, you guys come from a heritage where you were brought from Africa to America, and you guys stayed in America for a while. But if we say we’re African, we’re probably first-generation Africans.”) Though Kania is actually a 2nd generation African, having been born in Philly, she thinks of herself as 1st generation and her immigrant parents from Mali as 0 generation (Portes and Rumbaut, 1990). Kania’s point is that she still thinks of herself as ethnically ‘African’ rather than an American, an identity which she believes applies to the African American and even the Jamaican kids. Kania draws more on pan-ethnic African identity than a national identity as a Malian.

Kania’s opposition to the American identity is immediately critiqued by Rania, Andrea, Mrs. Penney, and Zara. Rania comments: “You Americans, huh. Why you so hard

on it? I'm Jamaican." Rania interrogates Kania for being 'so hard on it' (the American identity), implying that Kania too was American by virtue of being born in the US, no matter how much she denied it. In the same line of breath, however, she also reminds everyone "I'm Jamaican," pushing back on Kania's blanket characterization of any non-African kids as American. Rania claims an ethnic identity (overlapping with her immigrant parents' nationality), even when Kania denies it to her, while simultaneously critiquing Kania's rejection of an American identity. Andrea too, as a Jamaican descended American, simply states, "they (the Africans) are weird."

Mrs. Penney too adds a critique in the form of a question: "Wait a minute, you Americans? Wait, you're American too, aren't you?" She reminds Kania that she was born in America, therefore by birth she was American too. Therefore, denying her American nationality was disingenuous. Zara agrees with Mrs. Penney: "What's that supposed to mean? You live in America." Her argument is less that she was born in America as much as the fact that she had lived her whole life in the US, which made her denial of Americanness faulty. In response to these various critiques, Kania said: "I know, but..." Though she never got to finish this thought, she later explained that Africans had a distinct ethnicity because they had been in America for far fewer generations than African Americans. To Kania, being an American was less about the country of legal birth and citizenship than generations of family ancestry.

Shantell: "I don't like how you always racial profiling. First of all, we are all Americans. Y'all not African, your parents are. Y'all just have African descent, don't get it twisted."

Kabeera: "So I'm African, I'm African, I'm African!!!"

Rania: “But that’s my ethnicity. I’m Jamaican.”

Andrea: “Thank you.”

Shantell: “No, y’all American!!”

Kabeera: “Y’all West Indian or something.”

Andrea: “Yea.”

Hearing Kania’s denial of her Americanness, Shantell responds: “I don’t like how you always racial profiling. First of all, we are all Americans.” Shantell views the term “you Americans” as a kind of racial profiling because she felt that the African students often stereotyped against the American (African American) students like herself. Vehemently, Shantell explains “we are all Americans. Y’all not African, your parents are. Y’all just have African descent, don’t get it twisted.” To Shantell, the West African youth became American (and were Black by virtue of their skin color) the moment they were born in America. In contrast to Kania, Shantell measures American identity by legal birth rather than ancestry. She reminds Kania that though she may have African descent, she cannot deny her Black American identity. For Shantell, a racial and national identity trumps ethnic claims. In Shantell’s definition, there is little room for 2<sup>nd</sup> generation ethnic identities; either one is a Black American or one is an immigrant like the parental generation.

In response to Shantell’s reductionist approach to ethnicity, Rania, Andrea, and Kabeera have some angry exclamations. Kabeera passionately claims: “So I’m African, I’m African, I’m African!!!” She is angry that Shantell would have the audacity to place labels on her, when Kabeera herself identifies as African. Rania, less vehemently, but just

as forcefully, explains: “But that’s my ethnicity, I’m Jamaican” to which Andrea responds: “Thank you,” to Rania for accentuating the ethnic element of identification, which Shantell had erased. Uncowed, Shantell doubles down: “No, y’all American!!” However, Kabeera ignores her and speaks directly to Andrea: “Y’all West Indian or something.” Andrea nods assent to Kabeera’s recognition of her ethnic background. Once again, the West African and Jamaican youth vehemently deny Shantell’s denial of ethnic identity. Their vision of identity is based more on ancestral origin and than it is on American national identity, which can sometimes flatten these ethnic differences amongst immigrant families.

Zara: “Ok, we American (by virtue of intermixing with slavery), but y’all Americans live in America.”

Andrea: “What that mean, what that mean? I’m moving to Jamaica!”

Kabeera: “But Puerto Rico is a territory of the US (*implication to Zara: you are not even from here here, and you’re arguing their ‘the American’ side!*)”

Rania: “Yea, if we gonna talk about...”

Kabeera: “But your country is under US territory.”

Shantell: “No, don’t say that!”

Kabeera: “It’s US territory!”

Rania: “So we are gonna take our pride and all that stuff we brought here, and take it with us. Let’s go, y’all.”

Andrea: “Y’all will starve to death.”

Kania: “So the difference is...you guys come from a heritage where you were brought from Africa to America, and you guys stayed in America for a while. But if we say we’re African, we’re probably first-generation Africans.”

Kabeera: “In America.”

Kania: “The whole reason is that our parents wanted to come to America...so Africa is as it was. In America, we really wouldn’t be...(American?)”

Noticing that Shantell is losing ground in the argument, Zara, as a self-defined American and Puerto Rican, backs up Shantell though adding her own modification to Shantell’s argument based on the critiques she just heard from the Africans and the Jamaicans. “Ok, we American, but y’all Americans live in America,” Zara responds, trying to distinguish between Americans, such as herself and Shantell, who had generations of ancestors in America (ancestry based) vs. newer Americans such as Kabeera, Rania, and Andrea whose families had more recently migrated to the US. These newer families could claim Americanness because they now resided in America (i.e.: location based). Despite the fact that Zara’s argument was more inclusive to different kinds of relationships to America, Andrea misunderstands her. Andrea responds angrily: “What that mean, what that mean? I’m moving to Jamaica!” Andrea interprets Zara’s argument as being xenophobic, only claiming that African Americans could count as Americans. Andrea threatens to move back to Jamaica.

Kabeera too takes up Andrea’s critical view of Zara’s supposedly xenophobic comments. Kabeera reminds Zara that Puerto Rico (PR) is not even part of the continental US but rather a commonwealth: “But Puerto Rico is a territory of the US.” Therefore, how dare Zara be xenophobic when the people of PR themselves have a tenuous hold on the American identity? Kabeera critiques Zara for arguing Shantell’s ‘American’ side when she herself was a suspect PR American. Shantell defends Zara: “No, don’t say that!” by

asking the girls to stop excluding PR, and by extension, Zara, as being American and therefore, discredit her perspectives.

These discussions bring into relief two key aspects of how these youth make sense of the interrelationship between race and ethnicity: the distinctiveness of ethnic identities (overlapping with national origin at times) as well as varying definitions of American identity. The Jamaicans and the Africans argued for the distinctiveness of their ethnic identity in opposition to Shantell and Zara's denial of their ethnic identities. The Jamaicans joined the West Africans in a coalition, in order to push back against the 'Americans' (African Americans) argument that renders ethnic identity as insignificant. The Jamaicans and the African students eventually imply that they have culture, while their African American peers do not. The second point that this segment highlights is the varying definitions of American identity. For some, being American is about living in America (location based), while for others being American (or not being American) is based on the length of how long one's family has been in the United States (ancestry based). These debates harken back to some of the anthropological literature on how one considers diasporic Black identity, given the generations of migration, cultural exchanges, and admixture that construct identities within the Black Atlantic.

Exasperated by the trajectory of the argument so far, which focused on Shantell's denial of ethnicity as well as perceived xenophobia from Zara, Rania finally throws out a half-serious, half-joking statement: "So we are gonna take our pride and all that stuff we brought here, and take it with us. Let's go, y'all." Andrea adds "Y'all will starve to death," and Kabeera adds the African perspective: "Yea, we got our rice too!" Rania and Andrea



are very proud of their Jamaican heritage as well as the jambalaya rice and other delicious Caribbean food that their people had contributed to the US culinary culture. Tired of being denied recognition of her proud ethnic heritage, Rania threatens to take the delicious cuisine of Jamaica away from America; if America didn't want her people, she would take Jamaican food away from xenophobic Americans. Andrea too states "y'all will starve to death," implying that Americans themselves had no distinctive, delicious culinary cuisine. If the Jamaicans left with their food, Americans (including white people and African Americans) would be left culturally bereft. Kabeera too jumped on the Jamaicans' bandwagon and threatened to take away African rice, a pan-ethnic culinary dish label she used to gloss specific West African foods that her people had brought to America.

The overall impetus of these threats was to make Shantell and Zara (and even Kania) recognize that ethnic identity was a distinct identity factor that could not be swept under the essentializing term "American." The ethnic forms of rice represented the rich cultural heritage of various ethnic groups, and these ethnic flavors added to the cultural richness of America. However, if Shantell and Zara did not recognize their ethnic contributions, then girls would 'jokingly' take their culture back with them, leaving America 'cultureless.' In their rendition of America, only immigrant cuisines added to the culture of America. Americans themselves, in this case, referring to African Americans like Shantell and Zara, had no 'culture' of their own. This comment was suggestive of ethnoreligious hegemonies, in which African American Black culture is denigrated when compared to other immigrant cultures, including Black immigrant cultures.

This “rice debate” will be examined more thoroughly in a later part of this chapter. However, what is significant to note here is how these MSA debates connect to important literature that examines discourse regarding culture and ancestry. Viranjini Munasinghe (1991) analyzes how discourses of difference operate in Trinidad between Afro and Indo-Trinidadians. She illustrates how the terms ethnicity and race are often conflated in the Trinidadian national context, which leads to important political ramifications. Those groups labelled racially do not share the “same fate” as those labelled ethnically, highlighting the ways in which discourses of difference can have larger sociopolitical implications on one’s status in society (Munasinghe, 1991, 72). Ethnic labels shield individuals from the worst deleterious effects of anti-Blackness. While the MSA students discussed ethnicity and race, sometimes conflating the two as well, their debate had less direct impact on political economy, though it had an important effect on their view of themselves as raced individuals, whether or not they identified as Black.

The students returned to trying to understand what it is that made someone “American” versus “African” or “Jamaican,” within this local context, discussing how cultural customs differ based on where one is born. Shantell begins by stating her understanding that the African Americans, Africans, and Jamaicans come from different countries, i.e.: “different places.” Mrs. Penney corrects her by saying, “no, not different places.” Shantell corrects herself and acknowledges that everyone comes from the same place, i.e.: Africa (though at different times) but “everybody here was born in America, right?” Mrs. Penney, however, finds out that Adeeb was not born in this country and chastises Shantell for assuming that “everybody was born here.” Mrs. Penney explains that

Adeeb's and other students like him have an "understanding of what America and what it means...[that] is different." Mrs. Penney makes a point that the length of a family's exposure to American shapes their relationship to America. Adeeb agrees with Mrs. Penney's point and shares an example of how his 1<sup>st</sup> generation Ethiopian does not participate in a typically American tradition barbeques, even though they are technically "African American" (by virtue of being from Africa but now living in America). He acknowledges that his Ethiopian family has different cultural experiences than African Americans. Though providing further clarity on how multiple immigrant cultural practices can exist even migrating to the US, Adeeb and Mrs. Penney do not understand Shantell's point.

Shantell: "No, but I'm not...I'm talking about the people that actually was born here, not the people that wasn't. They just like...ok, let's just say I do something, my parents, they say you do it this way, I do it this way..."

Zara: "Like American stuff..."

Adeeb: "I have experience first-hand. So my parents, we haven't been here for a long time. 2 years or 3 years or something. So we...I'm technically African American, but I don't usually hang out with...my mom is not friends with his friends. She is friends with first generation Ethiopians. So we don't do barbeques, we don't do most of the stuff African Americans I know do...so we have like a different culture, different cultural experiences, so I agree with what Mrs. Penney said."

Andrea: "How Shantell was saying that people who were born here do stuff a certain way and how people who weren't born here do stuff a certain way. Well, what I have to say is that I was born here, but I was brought up in a Jamaican home, so I do stuff different."

Shantell is curious about whether differences exist between people who were all born in America, particularly differences around how people took up "American stuff," as Zara said. For Shantell, the idea of origins and cultural practices map on. If one is from

Africa, one does a certain thing. However, once someone is in America, the practice shifts to American customs and traditions. Andrea understood Shantell's question and answered "I was born here, but I was brought up in a Jamaican home, so I do stuff different." Andrea acknowledged that while she is American by birth (location based), her traditions at home did not match typical "American stuff," (i.e.: barbeques) because her family had different cultural customs as Jamaicans. Mrs. Penney concluded by saying "they have a different set of values," explaining that just being in born in America as a Black person (African American and Jamaican) does not mean that cultural customs conform to "American stuff." Shantell appeared to understand this point at the end ("alright"), though it was unclear to what extent her comprehension of ethnic difference amongst American born youth grew. For Shantell, cultural practices still largely mapped onto where one was born.

Mrs. Penney too assumed that the non-Americans had a 'different set of values' than Americans around cultural customs. However, even while trying to add nuance to the argument, Mrs. Penney, like Shantell, solidified the idea that values between different cultures were incommensurable. Mrs. Penney states: "that is the point, that is the point, that is the point because the culture is different. So it does seem weird to them. It does! Because they don't have the American, they have a different set of values, they have a different. It does seem weird to them, it does!" Unclear as to whether or not Sarai understood or agreed with Mrs. Penney's point, she acknowledges, "Alright, like..." While Mrs. Penney did not assume that different cultural traditions disappeared just by virtue of immigration, she did hold on to the idea that there were different values between immigrant cultures and American cultures, instead of acknowledging that values themselves could change as well.

Like the students in Ramos Zayas' (2007) study, MSA students and even Mrs. Penney's attempt to understand what the label "American" meant. Did it represent one set of values or customs or different cultural traditions that were incommensurable? The debate did not reach a conclusion about the multidimensional term "American," and how it functioned as a legal, social, and cultural construct, often simultaneously.

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The next part of the debate moved on from attempting to understand American identity to focused on topics, such as ethnic origins, which for the African Americans, was a result of the horrific Atlantic Slave Trade. The students bring in a deeper historical perspective in order to understand how the group of Black students within MSA differed in terms of family experience and ancestral history. The students tied divergent ethnic origins to histories of descent. Though all the students were African-descended, the horror of slavery ruptured the original continental connection.

Shantell: "Alright, I know personally I've always been racially profiled by the Jamaicans and all that..."

Mrs. Penney: "Can I just jump in real quick? I know you have a comment, but can someone agree, disagree, or add on to what Kania said before we go into a different direction with it, right? So Kania was making a point that African Americans have been in America for a longer time than Africans, who are probably 1<sup>st</sup> or even 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Americans. Is that what you're saying (yea). So wait a minute, so what's the point you're trying to make with that?"

Kania: "So the point is like, also that we don't mean to racially stereotype people, it's just that..."

Zara: "But you all do it."

Kania: "It's that we have different backgrounds. African Americans have been in America longer than Africans have."

Shantell begins by stating how she has felt “racially profiled by the Jamaicans.” Kania responds to Shantell’s perception by implicitly acknowledging that Africans do racially stereotype people (i.e.: African Americans like Shantell) even though they “don’t mean to. Kania states: “Africans don’t mean to racially stereotype people... It’s that we have different backgrounds. African Americans have been in America longer than Africans have.” Kania suggests that the ‘racial stereotyping’ of African Americans occurs because Africans and African Americans are just extremely different, based on the different lengths of time they have resided in America. The generational differences make it more likely that Africans stereotype (i.e.: hold negative opinions of) of African Americans.

Zara: “It’s like, how you think African Americans, how you think that we exist? Slaves were taken from Africa, they were brought to America, most of them were raped, creating African Americans. So we are made of African and European descent...”

Someone: “But it was European white people (*not American white people, so why African American, not African European?*) who raped them.”

Someone: “Ooohhh.”

Zara: “Europeans considered themselves to be Americans (white?)”

Sahih: “Only the Native Americans were actual Americans.”

Zara: “Ok, but the Europeans took over their territory...Europeans came to America. “How you think America was founded and created?”

Kabeera: “What?”

Zara: “Europeans came and took, they colonized this country.”

Sahih: “But before that there were first Native Americans right?”

Zara: “I understand that.”

Zara responds to Kania's explanation of generational differences by bringing in history. It is unclear what the connection is between Kania's previous statement about generational difference and Zara's historical explanation. However, what I believe is that Zara wants to highlight two points: a) how the cultural divisions between Africans and African Americans emerged because of the ruptures of slavery, i.e.: African Americans did not choose to come to America but were forced to come here; and b) that African and African Americans have actually become ethnically different people due to rape and the admixture of European genes. Zara does not shy away from pointing out that the generational differences that Kania pointed to as a source of "racial stereotypes" were not within the control of African Americans, who had to endure the horrors of slavery.

Zara asks: "How you think African Americans, how you think that we exist? Slaves were taken from Africa, they were brought to America, most of them were raped, creating African Americans. So we are made of African and European descent..." Zara emphasizes how rape created a hybrid population of African American descendants who carried both African and European genes. An MSA member points out that it was Europeans, not Americans who raped African women; therefore, why are African Americans called African Americans and not European Americans? Zara clarified that the Europeans thought of themselves as American (which is not historically true until after the Revolutionary War). Regardless, Zara follows the same logic as her earlier location-based claims to American identity - that by virtue of the Europeans residing in and colonizing America, they became American over time. Other students like Sahih, a West African student, critique Zara's definition of American based on residency on site. Sahih states that only

the original residents of America, i.e.: Native Americans, should be counted as Americans. Zara acknowledges Sahih's "I understand that," but holds on to her definition of Americanness as based on residency on the soil (location-based).

Two divergent perspectives emerge around definitions of Americanness in the previous definition that ultimately refer back to family histories as referents. Shantell and Zara insist on America as the new land, as the basis for a new ethnic identity, based on their family's enslaved past and history of admixture. Zara's reference to hybridity is clear when she rhetorically asks: "How you think African Americans, how you think that we exist? Slaves were taken from Africa, they were brought to America, most of most of them were raped, creating African Americans. So we are made of African and European descent." Zara's statement was a powerful rejoinder to Mrs. Penney who wanted to brush over the differences existing between African American and West African youth. West African youth too recognized this difference between the two groups of students, though as Kania explained, it was more due to the length of time that passed since their African origins, rather than the admixture point that Zara raised.

West African students, therefore, emphasized the natal connections to Africa, prioritizing an unbroken history and lineage. These students emphasize continuity with their ancestors and distance to the US. Students like Kania emphasized the difference in time and generation between West Africans and African Americans, which led to "stereotyping." Kabeera accentuated the difference between an enslaved past and a free past, taking care to affirm that her ancestors had always been free as a marker of difference (if not superiority in one's unblemished past). The West African students resist being



labelled as just “American.” Given how much pressure they receive from the parental generation who try to mediate their Americanization process (Bledsoe and Sow, 2011; Roubeni et. al, 2015; Coe and Shani, 2015), it is unsurprising how vehemently the West African and Jamaican students push back on Shantell and Zara’s claims they are “American.” In the necessity for cultural preservation, students like Kania and Kabeera call themselves “African” rather than “American” because they refuse to have their ethnic histories erased by their African American peers and because they disavow the racial connection that labels them as Black in an anti-Black white supremacist nation.

In the case of Zara and Shantell, they reflect on how natal connections from the African motherland were severed during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Both emphasize the importance of their American identity and on a place-based understanding of identity. Shantell struggles to understand ethnic identity, particularly if a child of immigrants was born in America. She states: “first of all, we are all Americans. Y’all not African, your parents are. Y’all just have African descent, don’t get it twisted.” Even after much discussion, it is unclear whether Shantell understands how 2<sup>nd</sup> generation children of immigrants may still hold on to the culture of their parents’ original country. Zara too emphasizes a place-based identity, constantly pointing out how being born in American makes one American. Zara does not give credence to her West African peers’ claim that they are “African.” While Zara is very nuanced in terms of her own complex ethnic heritage as Black, Puerto Rican, and Italian, she does not apply the same nuance to her West African and Jamaican peers, who claim ethnic identities. Zara’s point is unclear to many within the MSA, prompting Mrs. Penney to intervene.

Mrs. Penney: “Ohhh, I think that Zara’s point is, regardless of if you’re African American or if you’re African, at some point you came from Africa. I feel like that’s her point. But I feel like what Kania is actually agreeing with you. Her point is that the experience is different because we, Black African Americans who have been in this country longer, they been here longer, and their experiences are different, from a person who’s been here, or a family who’s been here only 1<sup>st</sup> generation or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation. The experience is different. You’re like agreeing with each other, but you’re not realizing you’re agreeing. We’ve been here longer, what Kania is saying. Our experience and our culture is different because we’ve been in America longer. When you’re first or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, just getting here, you have a different kind of culture, you have a different value system. Sometimes your morals and stuff is different because you’ve only been here in America...your culture is really African, if you’ve been here for only 1, you know, just your parents. So that the way they look at things are a little different from maybe how we look at things. A good one is like with hiphop, for example, right? When people think about hiphop, when you think about hiphop and rap and stuff like that, if your family has been here since the 60s and the 70s, and you went through, Woodstock, and all of this stuff like that, your experience of America is just different. And learning about all the stuff that was happening in the hood and all that is totally different. African Americans have a totally different experience in America. And they’ve only been here for maybe 10 years, 15 years. So they come to America, and the way that they think about America is different cause they haven’t been affected by America the way that we have been in America. Does that make sense?”

Adeeb and all: “Yea.”

Irteza: “So it’s time and generation.”

Mrs. Penney: “Yea.”

Zara’s point is unclear to many, including Mrs. Penney. While I interpret Zara’s comments as distinguishing the ethnic and generational differences of African and African American people, Mrs. Penney argues the opposite point. Mrs. Penney hopes to show that all Black people, including African and African Americans, originate in Africa. Mrs. Penney is less keen to focus on the horrors of slavery and rupture and attempts to highlight the unity of Black people by emphasizing a common root in Africa. Zara and Mrs. Penney’s

two views, highlight two nodes of interpretation of the relationship of African Americans to Africa. While Zara emphasizes the division and the rupture that created a new ethnic group of mixed African Americans (of African and European descent), Mrs. Penney continues to uphold the original unity of Black people's origin in Africa, regardless of generation, slavery, or genetic admixture.

Mrs. Penney: "Yea, I think we will still have differences. We probably have to pick this up later, cause some of the kiddos have to leave. I think we will always have differences, but you do have to think about, when you think on a grander scale, when you like zoom out, are we kinda like one culture on Earth, you know what I'm saying? I'm just saying. If you have, and I don't mean to make an analogy with animals. I'm just saying puppies. I don't know. The puppy from the litter, they all look different, even twins don't look, even identical twins have differences, right? Something about them is different, but they are still puppies! He got spots on his eyes, he all Black, he all white, the puppies look different, but they are all puppies! You understand what I'm saying? What you like on a grander scale...we're all humans. Our cultures and our differences might be different, our cultures and our heritage. But we all wanna share something, that makes us like human beings. Go ahead..."

Adeeb: "Yes."

Kabeera: "We're all people. We share the same..."

Mrs. Penney zooms out and reemphasizes how all people are united by a common humanity, despite this contentious history. In an ahistorical interpretation, Mrs. Penney explains, "we kinda like one culture on Earth... What you like on a grander scale...we're all humans. Our cultures and our differences might be different, our cultures and our heritage. But we all wanna share something, that makes us like human beings." At the expense of acknowledging difference, Mrs. Penney makes an analogy of shared humanity to puppies who share the fact that "they are all puppies," even if they look different. Mrs. Penney changes the scale of student discussion to focus on ahistorical, zoomed out focus

on a common humanity. However, the students never denied a common humanity; they simply wanted to surface how ethnic differences emerged, as a factor of historical rupture, generational differences, and varied cultural customs. The acknowledgment of differences between African and African American students, though contentious and though downplaying ancestral connections to Africa, nonetheless, surfaced very in-depth analyses of how ethnic differences emerge. By urging students to take a zoomed out view of a common humanity, Mrs. Penney hopes to quash conflicts; however, at the same time, she imposes an ahistorical analysis on importance student discussion on the origins of their differences.

While Mrs. Penney rather wished that these different ethnic histories would not lead to raucous arguments, she allowed students to talk about these ethnic histories explicitly within the space of the MSA. This ethnic origins debate brought into relief how the MSA dialogic space served an important function in negotiating the larger ethnic and religious tensions within MSA students. Ethnoreligious hegemonies perpetuated an anti-Black discourse running throughout the debate, with African American students defending their racial histories while also attempting to convince their West African peers that they too were racialized as “Black,” despite their peers’ attempts at holding on to their ethnic distinctiveness.

### The “Rice Debate”

The “rice debate” emerged from a discussion among students about ethnic differences via stereotypes. Put simply, it was a moment for these groups of students to air these grievances against each other. The students emphasized cultural differences based in

divergent ethnic histories. The “rice debate” reveals ethnic identities, particularly as marked through cultural traditions, cuisines, and migration patterns, are less fixed than the students emphasize. Yet, the premise of the debate was based on ethnoreligious hegemonies, in which African American Black culture was denigrated.

The “rice debate” distilled three separate ethnic groups in the MSA space - West Africans, African American, and Jamaicans. The conversations were combative yet light-hearted at the same time. Students formed coalitions with different ethnic groups when it served their purpose; when a different point needed to be emphasized, students changed coalitions. Overall, the rice in question represented ethnic identity, cultural heritage, as well as status, determined by the broader social valuation of the rice dish in question.

Historically, rice played a key role in shaping African American identity in early America. Michael Gomez (2005) writes about how West African slaves were brought from Africa to the South Carolina and Georgia Lowcountry exactly because they knew how to cultivate rice from their experience in Africa. Historical records show that plantations such as on Sapelo Island and St. George’s Island included Black Muslims within their midst, who often assumed leadership roles. While rice is central to the Lowcountry, it was less important to the Mississippi Delta group of African Americans, where sweet potatoes and Johnny cakes were a more central part of the diet. These differences point to how African American populations indexed different cultural customs and preferences through food. In Caribbean cuisine as well, rice played a big role (Carney, 2001; Montero, 2014).

Debates about rice are not new - the jollof wars, for example, are another instance of a “rice debate” that occurs between African youth (Quist-Arcton, 2016). Light-heartedly

jockeying one another, Ghanaians and Nigerians claim jollof rice as an invention of their people over the claims of their peers. The re-emergence of rice as a point of debate in MSA echoed the culinary history of the MSA students' ancestors. The discussion on rice served many purposes: assigning cultural value in society, claiming culture, as well as marking ethnic boundaries; many of these purposes upheld anti-Black prejudices against African American students, emerging as a result of the white supremacist context.

Anthropologist Lee Baker traces how the same debates around who “had” culture and who did not raged during the 1893 World Fair in his (1998) work *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954*. During the fair, world’s fair organizers, politicians, and media magnates worked hand in hand with anthropologists to visually present US racial categories in hierarchical form to the general public. The accomplishments – art, architecture, and technology of the civilized Western societies were placed in stark contrast to the backwardness of the uncivilized African and Eastern societies, attendant with dirt, smells, ignorance, and brown and Black bodies. The visual display of these various civilizations was deliberately organized to show evolutionary racial hierarchies, in which white people had accrued “culture,” while non-white people had remained debased in “savagery.” More than a million visitors came to understand how racial categories were embodied in presence or lack of “culture” amongst superior or inferior people, respectively, marking anthropology as the discipline that determined cultural value.

While the MSA students’ “rice debate” did not distinguish between white “civilization” and Black/brown “savagery,” it nonetheless engaged in a similar pattern of

using “culture” as a means of laying claim to civilizational value. West African and Jamaican students claimed that their rice dishes had value and asserted that their African American peers had made no such cultural contribution to rice cuisine. Some of the MSA students assigned civilizational value through “accomplishments,” such as the quality of one’s rice cuisine, and engaged in a similar logic as the 1893 fair organizers. The particular salience of rice in historically Black communities made this discussion about rice and cultural value/absence even more charged during the MSA debate.

### Rice as Culture

In the first exchange about rice, rice is visualized as a cultural form with added value. As the students discussed what the label ‘American’ meant the students once again highlighted rice as a form of distinct cultural identity that distinguished them from an essential non-ethnic ‘American’ identity. Rania, a Jamaican student, states: “So we are gonna take our pride and all that stuff we brought here, and take it with us. Let’s go, y’all.” Her friend Andrea agrees with her: “Y’all will starve to death.” Kabeera offers her view as a West African student: “Yea, we got our rice too!”

To MSA students, rice served as an indicator of ethnic cultural value in larger society. In their rendition of America, the Jamaican and the African students stated that only immigrant cuisines added to the culture of America. Americans themselves, in this case, referring to African Americans like Shantell and Zara, had no ‘culture’ of their own. This attitude of rejecting ‘American’ contributions to culinary culture by claiming Americans had no culinary culture was a response from Kabeera, Rania, and Andrea; these girls repudiated Shantell’s denial of their unique ethnic identities. In Shantell’s viewpoint,

being born in America meant that no other culture existed besides ‘American’ culture, which flatly denied the African and Jamaican students’ proud ethnic upbringing at home. The value that students associated with ‘ethnic’ rice served as a way to resist flattening ethnic particularity in the face of American mainstream culture; by re-emphasizing the added value of immigrant cuisines, they reaffirmed their existing heritage as African and Jamaican youth.

The second rice excerpt focused on Shantell’s attempts at reclaiming a place in the “rice debate” by bringing in the idea of African American’s minute rice. Shantell mentioned the idea of minute rice to show that this rice had already been pre-washed, thereby not fitting the insult of ‘dirty’ rice that Kabeera had targeted at her. Shantell’s accentuation of minute rice was also her way of stating that African American people’s culture was not bereft, no matter what the other girls had said. Shantell’s reclamation of pride in her African American culture through minute rice was not appreciated by her MSA peers, an attitude which Mrs. Penney noticed.

Shantell: “I wanna go back to the rice situation.”

Rania: “Oh my god,”

*[Others laugh.]*

Shantell: “No, because I’m trying to get my point across. She was like... we do have white rice. Ours is minute rice.”

Someone: “What is minute rice?”

Mary: “What is minute rice? You never heard of that?”

Andrea: “Who cooks rice in the microwave?”

Shantell: “Minute rice is where you put it in a pot, and it’s white rice.”



*[Lots of kids laughing...]*

Andrea: “You can’t speak to everybody.”

Shantell wanted to counter Rania and Andrea’s point from Part 1 where they had threatened to take away their jambalaya from America. Andrea had said “y’all will starve to death,” implying that Americans, including African Americans, had no rice-based cultural cuisine of their own. Kabeera too had threatened to take away African rice. Shantell declared: “we do have white rice. Ours is minute rice,” making a counterclaim to Rania and Andrea. Someone asks in a curious tone: “what is minute rice,” to which Mary, another African American student responds in exasperation: “what is minute rice? You never heard of that?” Mary felt slightly offended that no one outside of herself and Shantell (and perhaps other African Americans in MSA) knew what minute rice was. Andrea, assuming that minute rice was rice cooked in the microwave for a minute, asks sneeringly, “Who cooks rice in the microwave?” Her tone suggested that such rice was very low on the value scale for ‘good’ and tasty rice, like jambalaya. Shantell clarifies what minute rice is: “Minute rice is where you put it in a pot, and it’s white rice.” However, Shantell’s explanation is met with derisive laughter. Most students find it hard to accept minute rice as equal to jambalaya or West African fish and rice.

Zara: “It’s her experience...just cause y’all not used to it doesn’t mean y’ll shame people because it’s something that y’all do.”

Adeeb: “I agree. What are you laughing about?”

Rania: “It’s just funny because she brought it up again.”

Shantell: “I wasn’t done. You all stereotype Americans.”

Zara comes to Shantell's defense. Zara states: "It's her experience...just cause y'all not used to it doesn't mean y'll shame people because it's something that y'all do." Zara is angry at her peers for shaming Shantell for her defense of minute rice. She argues that not being familiar with a cultural custom does not mean it gives folks the right to ridicule the custom. Adeeb states: "I agree. What are you laughing about?" to his fellow MSA peers. Adeeb does not understand everyone is laughing at minute rice. Rania explains: "It's just funny because she brought it up again." Rania does not acknowledge that her laughter is meant to 'shame' Shantell or be derisive towards minute rice as a cultural form. Instead of admitting that she is engaging in 'rude' behavior, she explains that she was just amused that Shantell found the rice discussion so important as to dredge it back up after it had concluded. Shantell does not buy Rania's explanation: "I wasn't done. You all stereotype Americans." Once again, Shantell feels as though the Jamaicans (and the Africans too) had assumed that African Americans had nothing to offer culturally when it came to rice. Shantell felt that she and her African American people had been stereotyped as being culturally bereft. In fact, within the logic of ethnoreligious hegemonies which upheld anti-Black discourses, African American culture was allegedly culturally impoverished.

Nina: "Let me see, let me see (googling picture of minute rice)."

Someone: "That rice be good!"

Someone: "Just to see the rice!"

Shantell: "The rice be washed already."

Kania: "I don't wanna eat your rice."

African American students tried to revive the reputation of minute rice. Shantell's younger sister, Nina, had googled a picture of minute rice. Seeing the picture, someone commented: "That rice be good!" Shantell clarified: "The rice be washed already." The minute rice did not require washing before eating because it had been pre-washed. Therefore, Kabeera and Rania's critiques that African Americans did not wash their rice, was not true in this case. Despite Shantell's defense of minute rice, Kania flatly stated: "I don't wanna eat your rice," solidifying her views that that minute rice could not compete with the high status of West African rice or the Jamaican students' jambalaya. Like Baker's (1998) description of the 1893 world fair, culture became embodied in certain products (such as art, architecture, or technology). In this case, the MSA students used rice as a way to determine whose cultures were worthy of value.

### Washing Rice

The students continued the debate about ethnic particularity in the face of 'mainstreaming' American culture by focusing on the preparation and cooking of rice. Students who were offended by Shantell's denial of ethnic differences insulted Shantell by stating that Americans did not clean their rice. The derision around 'dirty' rice and the high emotions that students brought into this discussion exacerbated the differences between the Americans (Shantell and Zara) and coalition of Africans (Kabeera, Kania, Asia, etc.) and Jamaicans (Rania, Andrea). Though sometimes humorous, stereotypes around washing your rice nonetheless created binary judgments around; 'healthy' or 'unhealthy;' 'clean' or 'unclean' rice. While Mrs. Penney attempted to take away the sting of judgment associated with methods of cleaning rice, the African students particularly felt strongly that not

washing rice was a negative cultural attribute of their African American peers. Washed rice became a symbol of moral and cultural superiority, with Kabeera stating: “if you don’t wash your rice, it’s like how you are as a person.” While Mrs. Penney attempts to break down Kabeera’s moral superiority, she does not succeed. Rice remains a symbol of cultural value arrived at through judgments of superiority and inferiority.

Rania: “Mrs. Penney, that’s what she (Shantell) talking about. So one time, we had this argument. Because we cook rice different from how they...”

Kabeera: “They don’t clean it.”

Rania: “They don’t clean it so it’s like.”

Kania: “Wash it.”

Rania: “Exactly, it’s weird.”

Rania begins this section by noting how rice preparation between African American and Jamaicans differ. Kabeera adds that rice preparation is different between African American and West Africans too (“they don’t clean it.) Kabeera delivers an insult about ‘dirty rice,’ a critique of how Americans like Shantell do not clean their rice. Deliberate in Kabeera’s insult was a counterargument to Shantell’s earlier denial of ethnic differences by putting down Shantell’s ‘American’ traditions. In a strident tone, Kabeera says: “They don’t clean it,” to which Rania adds second fiddle. Kania joins into the critique by issuing an order in a matter of fact tone: “wash it,” implying that it was common sense to wash the rice, so why wouldn’t ‘Americans’ do it? Rania supports Kania “exactly, it’s weird” that ‘Americans’ like Shantell and Zara don’t wash the rice.

Zara: “See, see! Yea, but do you see how they just stereotype that?”

Mrs. Penney: “So...”

Kabeera: “It’s true!! You don’t like that I’m African. You mad cause she American.”

Shantell: “I’m not playing. I make my rice how I want.”

Zara understands the insult and points it out to Mrs. Penney: “See, see! Yea, but do you see how they just stereotype that?” Zara refers to the idea that both the Africans (Kabeera and Kania) as well as the Jamaicans (Rania) banded together to insult Americans for not having “clean” rice. Zara interpreted her peers’ statement as the insult they were meant to be. Kabeera denies Zara’s allegations that not washing rice was a stereotype. She doubles down and states “It’s true!!” that Americans don’t wash rice. If it’s a fact that Americans don’t wash their rice, then it cannot be a stereotype. Kabeera also alleges that Zara is twisting her words because “You don’t like that I’m African. You mad cause she American.” What Kabeera means is that Zara falsely accused her of stereotyping because Zara was mad at her for being African. Zara was also mad at Kabeera on behalf of Shantell, who shared Zara’s own American identity that was under attack by West African students like Kabeera. Shantell appreciates Zara’s defense and adds: “I’m not playing. I make my rice how I want.” Despite being accused of having ‘dirty,’ unwashed rice, Shantell defends her ‘American’ habit of not washing rice, regardless of how the African students portrayed it as an insult.

Kira: “So I feel like that whole rice thing, there isn’t a whole different, I mean like it’s rice.”

Kabeera: “There’s a strong difference.”

Andrea: “There’s a difference, there’s a difference.”

Kabeera: “When I be washing my rice, it came out pink.”

Ali: “Um, most of the time, the reason why we wash off the rice is because...when you wash off rice, you actually removing most of the starch on there. And the starch causes more fat. So it’s free, it’s healthier...”

Mrs. Penney: “No, it makes it not stick. That’s the point, there shouldn’t be judgment.”

Kira, a generally quiet 7th grader who self-identified as African-American, was frustrated by the whole discussion about rice. She thought it was making a mountain of a molehill because “like it’s rice.” Kabeera and Andrea strongly disagree with Kira, stating there are strong differences in the different preparation and washing techniques for rice, which highlight unique cultural differences. Kabeera describes in detail how the washing techniques produced different kinds of rice: “When I be washing my rice, it came out pink.” Ali, another West African youth, adds on: “Um, most of the time, the reason why we wash off the rice is because...when you wash off rice, you actually removing most of the starch on there. And the starch causes more fat. So it’s free, it’s healthier...” Ali offers a functional explanation for washing rice based on health. He believes that washing rice removes the starch, which causes more fat; therefore, by removing the starch, the rice is fat free and healthier. Mrs. Penney counters Ali’s health-based explanation: “No, it makes it not stick. That’s the point, there shouldn’t be judgment.” Ali had inadvertently made a value judgment by stating that washed rice was more healthy and fat free; by extension, unwashed rice was unhealthy. Though washing rice does remove the starch and make it less sticky, it has less connection to judgments about health. Mrs. Penney rejects Ali’s supposedly scientific explanation and offers a counterpoint. Washing the rice does not have to do with health as it does with the texture of the grains of rice. Some people prefer sticky rice (unwashed rice) while others prefer unsticky rice (washed rice). The difference in

starch should not be value-based and open to judgment; rather rice preparation techniques should simply acknowledge people's different preferences for the kind of rice texture they prefer.

Kabeera: "But you should wash your rice though."

Mrs. Penney: "No, but there shouldn't be judgment on whether or not you wash your rice. It's a choice, it's a cultural thing."

Someone: "That's a stereotype..."

Kabeera: "*If you don't wash your rice, it's like how you are as a person*" (my emphasis)

Mrs. Penney: "I don't wash my rice."

Kabeera: "Yea, and I realize, every person doesn't...that doesn't mean I don't like you, I'm not gonna talk to you because you don't wash your rice."

Kabeera does not pick up on the distinction that Mrs. Penney is making about acknowledgement of differences vs. judgment tied to differences. She reiterates: "But you should wash your rice though." Mrs. Penney explains to Kabeera once more: "No, but there shouldn't be judgment on whether or not you wash your rice. It's a choice, it's a cultural thing." Kabeera does not immediately respond to Mrs. Penney's advocacy for non-judgement. Someone else, whose voice I could not identify, remarked "that's a stereotype," referring to washing rice as a form of stereotyping that labelled ethnic group members as 'healthy' or 'unhealthy;' 'clean' or 'unclean'.

Kabeera remains unconvinced of Mrs. Penney's explanation, seemingly unmoved by her logic. She reaffirms her original view: "If you don't wash your rice, it's like how you are as a person." For Kabeera, the washing of rice is not judgment free; there is a cultural and ethnic basis for this which did imply how healthy or clean a person was.

Noticing that her words were not getting through to Kabeera, Mrs. Penney revealed a personal detail: “I don’t wash my rice.” Kabeera realizes that she cannot continue with her line of reasoning and avoid insulting her teacher. She changes track a bit and restates: “Yea, and I realize, every person doesn’t...that doesn’t mean I don’t like you, I’m not gonna talk to you because you don’t wash your rice.” Kabeera explains that while she still held on to her strong belief around the importance of washing rice, it did not mean that it changed her personal relationships with teachers like Mrs. Penney; neither did it mean that she was going to stop advocating for rice-washing techniques. She responds:

Mrs. Penney: “Because my mom does wash her rice.”

Kabeera: “Exactly.”

Mrs. Penney: “So I was raised with differences.”

Kabeera: “Your mom does wash your rice, but you don’t wash your rice.”

Mrs. Penney: “So go ahead, I would love for you to...”

Kabeera: “I do have a point.”

Mrs. Penney: “That’s just the way your family does it.”

Kabeera: “You were talking about it (the difference), that’s weird.”

Mrs. Penney: “No, it’s not. But my mom does. Literally wash it.”

Adeeb: “Like with soap?”

*Everyone laughs.*

Mrs. Penney offered another line of thought: “Because my mom does wash her rice. So I was raised with differences. So go ahead, I would love for you to...That’s just the way your family does it.” By offering her story about her mom, Mrs. Penney wanted to push



Kabeera to move away from her perspective that a) all African Americans did not wash their rice b) washing one's rice was the 'right' way to prepare rice. Mrs. Penney gave the example of differences in rice washing techniques within her own family to indicate that making claims about washing/not washing rice was a stereotype that did not apply to everyone within a single ethnic group. Secondly, she wanted Kabeera to stop claiming superiority that washing the rice was the only way to eat rice.

Kabeera's response was still not in full agreement with Mrs. Penney: "Exactly, your mom does wash your rice, but you don't wash your rice. I do have a point. You were talking about it (the difference), that's weird." Kabeera recalled Mrs. Penney's earlier point in which she had empathized with why it was strange for African and Jamaican students to reckon with unwashed rice. However, instead of understanding Mrs. Penney's larger point that the difference in rice-washing may exist but that it did not mean superiority/inferiority of cultural traditions, Kabeera focused on the point that it was "weird" not to wash one's rice. Mrs. Penney makes one last effort at correction: "No, it's not (weird). But my mom does. Literally wash it." She tries to show Kabeera that there are variations within ethnic groups in their cultural traditions; therefore, she should not stereotype African Americans. It's unclear whether Kabeera understood Mrs. Penney's point because this conversation ended in laughter when Adeeb asked: "(Wash rice) like with soap?" The students had had enough of the conversation about rice washing and its connection to stereotypes and making value judgments of different ethnic groups.

Rice represented various ideas: whether some groups had culture that was worthy of recognition or whose cuisine was more valuable within society. Despite Shantell's

attempts at articulating forms of African American rice cultures through one example of the minute, anti-Black ethnoreligious hegemonies undermined Shantell's contribution. Eager to create ethnic distinctions, the MSA students discussed rice for 45 minutes because it represented a concrete cultural artefact that was representative of their differences. Despite Mrs. Penney's exhortations to be united, particularly as a core MSA value, the students felt it was important to carve out distinctions amongst each other, particularly through divergent ethnic histories and varied cultural customs. Differences became mapped onto cultural judgments, creating an environment of disunity within the MSA, but more importantly, in perpetuating anti-Blackness.

Significantly, however, Mrs. Penney did allow the MSA to be a place of open-ended discussion about important issues relating to one's identity, fulfilling Honors' vision of itself as a multicultural community. However, the extent to which students took this 'freedom' to be different sometimes fell outside the purview of acceptability within MSA, for example when students became to hurl insults at each other based on their ethnic identities.

### Ethnic Slurs

While the "rice debate" surfaced West African students' stereotypes about African Americans, the following part highlights African Americans' stereotypes about West Africans, seemingly in response to the "rice debate". Similar to Traore and Lukens' (2006) observations (discussed further below), I noticed how African students faced many negative ethnic stereotypes, highlighting the underlying assumptions and oversimplified caricatures which African American students levied at their West African peers. The

xenophobic comments that West African students faced was also part of anti-Black and ethnoreligious hegemonic discourses, which denigrated these youths' Black immigrant experiences, just as African American cultural contributions had been devalued earlier.

This tension between Shantell, Andrea, Rania, Kabeera, and other students carried over from the "rice debate". What this initial conversation did was highlight the simmering tensions below the surface that these students were harboring about each other and their ethnic group. It was clear that this was not the first argument that the students had engaged in, based on students referring to prior insults thrown at each other. However, this was one of the few times that teachers like Mrs. Penney attempted to help them talk about these ethnic stereotypes explicitly. This conversational opening occurred within the space of the MSA, opening it up as an ethnic space.

Kabeera began her litany of complaints by accusing Shantell, an African American, of "making fun of us (the Africans), making fun of our culture, how we do stuff differently, so y'all be coming at us – African bootyscratcher, do you sleep with lions? So y'all think Africa. Y'all be thinking we live in a hut." African bootyscratcher was an insult that many of the other West African students had also lamented about to me during their interviews. In fact, Imoagene (2017) argued that this was a common insult applied to African immigrants.

The West African students listed a variety of other insults and stereotypes they had experienced - living in a hut, sleeping with lions, not having access to water, not wearing shoes. Yah adds a few more ethnic jokes by saying Africans don't have access to clean water and then asking Kania if she knows T'Challa from *Black Panther*, since Wakanda is

supposedly in Africa. Amidst these complaints and ongoing jokes, Shantell tried to defend herself (and by extension, African Americans) by protesting: “not everyday [issues insults].” Kabeera, however, charges at her: “How do you know they are African? (when you insult them). Shantell responds, “cause they are *African!*” following up on her earlier conversations that Africans looked different from Americans (i.e. African Americans). Though protesting Kabeera’s attack, Shantell admits to spreading these stereotypes: “Well sometimes maybe.” Rania, a self-proclaimed Jamaican, tried to back up her claim that Africans were “dirty” by sharing her experiences at the hair salon. Kabeera pushes back on her by saying “that’s messed up;” i.e.: Rania should not generalize to an entire group of people from one experience.

Maya explained how her father had been greeted by a fellow Muslim and then asked whether he lived in a tree. Kabeera and Andrea issued a collective gasp, with Kabeera calling this statement “offensive.” Mrs. Penney jumped in at this point to direct the conversation: “What is the assumption? That Africa is backwards, they don’t have good houses, people live in a jungle.” Taking up Mrs. Penney’s critical stance, Andrea, a Jamaican woman, offers a potential explanation for these backwards assumption: “cause of the commercials that.” Zara adds “also we are told...when you see that stereotype (you begin to believe);” Zara though she does not mention who told her these assumptions.

Mrs. Penney tries to mediate between the students: “We’re from the same place...” Mrs. Penney hopes to remind them that West African students and African Americans students ultimately came from the same continent, though with very different histories of

migration vs. enslavement; nonetheless they had all come from West Africa. She refers back to the “rice debate” and the family history debate.

Mrs. Penney: “You got here, regardless of whether you are washing your rice or not washing your rice. We all eat rice, no matter how you fix it. Regardless of how you got into America, we are all here. Everybody has different experiences, right? How you got here, your experiences are gonna be different. But at the end of the day, you are all *here together*. So that’s like the takeaway. You can be different, that’s fine. But at the end of the day, we share something bigger, all in common, cause we are all here.”

Mrs. Penney once again downplays differences, both in terms of how one prepares and eats rice, as well as the experience of how “you got into America.” While she emphasizes the commonality of being America (“you are all here together”), she does not actually emphasize racial unity. Her basis for unity is the fact that everyone lives in America, an interpretation of location-based identity she shares with Zara (though she does not deny her West African or Jamaican’s students’ ethnic heritage). For Mrs. Penney, difference is inevitable (and perhaps an unwelcome intrusion especially when it leads to contentious debates). However, in her perspective, a unified American identity and a unified MSA identity (in the Honors context) should trump these differences.

By zooming out once again, Mrs. Penney ignores different family histories that resulted in ethnic differences. She also does not use a shared Blackness or a shared Islamic identity as the means to bring students together. Instead, she draws on simply common existence in America as her basis for advocating unity. Mrs. Penney’s ahistorical framing of the students’ difference does not address the nuances of the students’ discussion. However, to her credit, she does not shut down the discussions. Mrs. Penney’s constant attempts to bring unity back to MSA was her effort to return to the MSA’s vision of “unity,

service, and leadership.” While it is clear that she prefers to focus on unifying factors, Mrs. Penney nonetheless does not prevent students from claiming MSA as an ethnic space.

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Overall, the students conceived of race as a fixed biological entity, despite Zara’s alternative interpretation. Though all the students were African-descended, the horrors of slavery ruptured the original continental connection. Ethnic identity was conceived as rooted in descent, overlapping with students’ families’ national origins (African, American [African American Black], or Jamaican). Despite the fact that most MSA students had been born in America, the non-African American students were less prone to claim American nationality by birth than the ethnic and national identities of their immigrant parents. The students conceived of American identity differently throughout the family history debate.

The family history debate surface fractured any pre-existing ideas of an undivided Islamic identity amongst MSA students. Often based on inaccurate assumptions and alleged stereotypes, the “rice debate” and the ethnic slurs sharpened ethnic divides and perpetuated anti-Blackness through a denigration of African American culture and perpetuated xenophobia, through a devaluation of West African immigrant experiences. West African students’ efforts at ethnic boundary marking stemmed from a desire to disavow Blackness in a white supremacist society. These divisions highlight how student differences emerged at different times in different contexts, marking the dynamicity and complexity of how these same students moved through space in Honors Academy.

## Chapter 10: The History Classroom

The history classroom is another academic setting in which MSA students drew on racial, ethnic, and religious identities to make sense of curricular content, highlighting the ways in which social identities mediate academic understandings. African American History (AAH) class drew less on ideas of market competition and self-interest prevalent in many charter schools and more on an ideology of family, history, and community. The African American history curriculum, in fact, emerged out of student and community activism in the latter half of the 20th century, which wanted to counteract capitalist framings of Black failure by emphasizing the rich Black history students had inherited. Given the white supremacist racial formation within which Black Muslim in the AAH class experienced their youth, and given the localized forms of ethnoreligious hegemonies they encountered at Honors, AAH class served as a positively affirming counterhegemonic identity space that did not disavow but rather embraced Blackness. Part of the AAH class curriculum highlighted the rich histories of West African Islamic empires, providing another means through which students' could engage in Islamic self-making in class.

However, despite providing a Black affirming space and despite having been borne out of a history of activism, I argue that the AAH classroom sometimes serves as a hegemonic space, even as the AAH curriculum serves to counter dominant historical narratives. Through the examples I highlight in the chapter, it becomes clear that even counterhegemonic spaces have dominant discourses that emphasize simplistic racial ideologies and center a narrow framing of US-centric Black identity to the exclusion of more diasporic understandings of Blackness. While Blackness is affirmed and celebrated

in AAH class, often it remained limited to US racial formations of Blackness. Yet, many West African students draw on their own family histories to counter these dominant discourses, suggesting that students have the power to reshape dominant historical discourses. Both African American and West African students' personal family histories serve as a source of historical interpretation, particularly complexifying discussions around the Atlantic Slave Trade. Through discussions rooted in history, MSA students began to understand that classroom histories were intimately connected to family histories and social belonging within a larger Black community, even though family histories changed the ways in which one entered into the US specific racial formation of Blackness.

### Neighborhood Context

As the previous chapters demonstrated, Honors Academy's goals and values were geared towards helping students attain future socioeconomic success and teach them valuable skills for the workplace. Honors Academy particularly marketed itself to prospective students through two programs: the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) as well as the schools' focus on Black pride, including the African American history (AAH) class. During a conversation at the beginning of the school year, Principal Seward assured me of her commitment to Black Lives Matter (BLM). She described how "our school teaches positive racial literacy, so students can come away knowing who they are." Principal Seward and her staff marketed Honors Academy in promotional literature as a community school in Southwest Philly that offered a competitive STEM program as well as positive racial literacy for all students. Though all schools in the Philadelphia Public School system offered AAH classes, the unique combination of a STEM program alongside



an emphasis on positive racial pride within a predominantly West African neighborhood cultivated a unique school environment. School success was based on producing student graduates with marketable skills through programs like STEM, while also promoting positive identity development through classes like AAH. Market forces were not separate from racial pride or multiculturalism within the school. In fact, as I argued in Chapter 3 and 4, multiculturalism found greater hold within the school because it operated within a larger market-based system. Just as MSA thrived within this market-based school context, so too did AAH thrive within this environment because the class produced students “who knew where they came from, so they could go where they needed to in the future” (Quote from Mr. Vincent, the AAH teacher). Future socioeconomic achievement was bolstered by helping students know their own histories because it would make them more motivated students. I posit that the market-based context of the school accommodated AAH class, and in fact, bolstered the school’s instrumental goals through embracing racial positivity and pride. Simultaneously, AAH also created a space in which students could discuss ideas of collectivism, solidarity, and family history that countered the atomism sometimes associated with market-based logics.

Within Honors Academy, market values, therefore were not encompassing, given that ideologies of community and social solidarity were promoted within spaces like AAH. Instead of rejecting ideologies counter to the individual spirit of market success, Honors Academy incorporated these alternative spaces within the larger market system to buttress its effectiveness. Multicultural, identity positive spaces, such as the MSA or AAH, became co-opted, to serve the larger instrumental goals of the school, i.e.: to produce economically

successful, marketable students. Positive Black identity efforts in AAH class at Honors, therefore, while offering a firm critique of anti-Blackness, nonetheless, thrived within a market-based system that often devalued the labor of Black people themselves.

### The African American History Classroom

The movement for implementing African American history courses in the Philadelphia Public Schools emerged from the 1967 protests by Black students and community members who were advocating for, among other demands, Black history courses taught by Black teachers (Sanders, 2009; Bredell, 2013). While a concession by white-controlled city leaders led to a limited adoption of an African American history course, it was only in 2005 that this course became a graduation requirement for all Philadelphia high schoolers (Countryman, 2006). In 2020, some critics note that the course still fails to connect Black history to issues of race and racism today and advocate for a more critical teaching of African American history (Toliver, 2014).

The African American History (AAH) classroom in 9th grade Honors Academy was intentionally designed to promote Black pride. The AAH class serves as a counterhegemonic space countering the dominance of “white history” prevalent in many high school history classes across the US (Sanders, 2009; Chikkatur, 2013; Bredell, 2013). In a white supremacist society that was built on the foundation on anti-Blackness, AAH served to refute denigration of Black culture by empowering Black youth with knowledge of their histories. However, I noted that even within this counterhegemonic space, teachers sometimes promoted dominant discourses around race. The teachers emphasized simplistic racial ideologies and excluded more diasporic understandings of Black identity. The

following two case studies will demonstrate how a) dominant racial discourses were perpetuated by teachers as well as b) how students countered these dominant discourses by drawing on their own family histories and applying critical analysis.

Over the course of my fieldwork observations, I observed two history classrooms, one taught by Mr. Daro, a white teacher, and one by Mr. Vincent, an African American teacher. Mr. Daro left at the end of the academic school year and was replaced by Mr. Vincent. Therefore, I had a chance to observe two classrooms, taught by two teachers over the course of my field research.

#### Abdou's Perspectives on Slavery and Race

Mr. Vincent was a young African American teacher who was excited to teach his students to love being Black. Promoting racial pride was one of the reasons he cited as deciding to become an African American history teacher. Though Mr. Vincent lamented not knowing his own family history due to the ruptures of slavery, he hoped that teaching African American history would instill pride in young Black kids who may also struggle to know where they came from. Mr. Vincent's guiding principles for the class were: family, history, community. He often emphasized the importance of social solidarity, particularly amongst Black and brown people, as a way to counter the histories of white domination. During the introductory lecture to the unit on the Atlantic Slave Trade in Fall 2020, Mr. Vincent offered his own view as an African American man teaching this unit:

“All other groups had history, they could trace back their lineages. African Americans do not. If I asked you what tribe your people was from, if it wasn't from ancestry.com, you couldn't identify where you came from. Some people can trace their history back generations. I don't know who my great-great-great grandfather was. I can't tell if I'm Malian, Guyanese, Fula.

My culture was stripped away, it was seen as unimportant. Slavery had multiple effects, not just the servitude or beatings, but the mental impact you see in society today.”

Mr. Vincent spoke about the horrors of slavery over the course of the unit, including physical and emotional torture. In his opening salvo, Mr. Vincent focused on the crushing impact slavery had in severing family histories and connections to the enslaved people’s natal families. Generations of history and lineages were wiped away for enslaved people, in stark contrast to “other groups” who were able to retain their historical connections. Mr. Vincent emphasized that because of this forced rupture, it was all the more important for “Black kids to come together. We have to help each other realize we are brothers and sisters.”

The spirit of communalism and racial pride Mr. Vincent spoke about, however, occasionally obscured his own critical analysis of African American history. The following exchange between Abdou, a young 1<sup>st</sup> generation West African immigrant student in the class, and Mr. Vincent, highlights how this teacher’s preconceived ideas of racial solidarity obscured more critical analysis of the role of money and power in driving the Atlantic Slave Trade. By bringing in his own critical analysis, Abdou is able to push back on Mr. Vincent’s simplistic view on race, resulting in a more complicated discussion of race and power.

As a young West African immigrant from Mali, Abdou approached the study of the Atlantic Slave Trade with a critical lens as an African immigrant and a student who loved history. During class, it was clear that he was a bright student upon whom Mr. Vincent often relied for intelligent comments during class discussions. Abdou would occasionally

disagree with Mr. Vincent as well, especially when it came to matters of race. During an exchange in class, Abdou and Mr. Vincent discussed the reasons for enslavement.

Mr. Vincent: “Did slavery exist in Africa?”

Abdou: “Yes, at a certain point slavery existed.”

Mr. Vincent: “Slavery goes way back, but it’s not the same kind. Slavery in America was far different than any other slavery because it was based on race. Slavery in other places was based on servitude you could gain your freedom. Here, your skin was darker, your skin was inferior. You had to be a slave for your whole life.”

Abdou: “That was because the slaves from African were dark-skinned, so the dark-skinned became known from slavery. West African slavery wasn’t about race, but *over time*, American slavery was. I would blame the kings more than the Portuguese.”

Kania: “So kings technically who had slaves would sell the slaves to make a profit and increase their wealth.”

Mr. Vincent: “I agree with you guys to a certain extent, but we are not gonna get deep into it.”

Mr. Vincent and Abdou agreed that slavery had existed in African as well as in America. However, Mr. Vincent explains that slavery in America (i.e. chattel slavery) differed from slavery in Africa. In Africa, the slavery was similar to servitude, and it was not a permanent state. In the US, slavery was based on skin color, in which Black skin was viewed as inferior; American slavery was also permanent and intergenerational.

After hearing Mr. Vincent’s response, Abdou disagrees: “That was because the slaves from African were dark-skinned, so the dark-skinned became known from slavery.” Abdou does not agree that American slavery was based on skin color initially; it was over time that slavery became associated with color, i.e.: race. Mr. Vincent and Abdou’s interpretation differed on the relationship between race and slavery. While Mr. Vincent

argued that slavery originated in racial hierarchies, Abdou pushed back and argued that skin color and race became associated over time; however, race was not the cause. “West African slavery wasn’t about race, but over time, American slavery was,” Abdou explained, making it clear that it was not initially race that explained the cause of slavery. In his interpretation, it was the business motives of people like the King of Congo, that had driven American slavery. Kania too agrees with Abdou’s explanation of business over race as the cause of slavery. As both students point out, “race” is a modernist phenomenon that emerged as a category of hierarchy over time (Silverblatt, 2004).

Hearing the pushback from Abdou and Kania, both West African students, Mr. Vincent does not directly address the students’ critiques and glosses over this point: “we are not gonna get deep into it.” It is unclear why Mr. Vincent does not want to engage the students in discussion this point. It is possible that Mr. Vincent was unprepared to address the students’ questions about the centrality of race, or rather lack thereof, in motivating the Atlantic Slave Trade. In his comments he suggests being racially Black *is* the reason for enslavement. The next class period, however, Mr. Vincent decides to explain the issue of African culpability further. He has taken time to incorporate Abdou and Kania’s views into his explanation for slavery, acknowledging the impact of money and power in driving the slave trade, not just Black skin:

“I like to see the root and cause. People like to say all Black people are the same, we are one family. But civil war is one of the primary reasons West Africans empire failed. Slavery, a lot of us sold our own people to Europeans. But the harsh reality is that people don’t wanna hear the truth, a fantasy. The truth is sometimes we did things for business, it wasn’t for the benefit of the culture. Meaning, if I was part of a Swahili tribe, and I was part of the Fulani tribe, I am gonna sell you. It’s not malicious, it’s a

business thing. If they knew the ultimate slavery was painful, if they had seen it ahead of time...they would have stopped it.”

Mr. Vincent makes two main points in his explanation. One is to acknowledge Abdou and Kania’s point in the class before about business motives being a major driver for the Atlantic Slave Trade. In fact, it was the development of plantation-based agricultural production for export that necessitated a broad and differentiated labor force, a need which enslaved people filled. The second point is that African people sold each other into slavery. Though Mr. Vincent makes a distinction between the Swahili and the Fulani tribe, he still implies that they are the same people, i.e.: Black people. What is missing in Mr. Vincent’s explanation is that at the time of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the West African tribes didn’t think of themselves as the same people; therefore, they weren’t selling their people into slavery. This flattening of ethnicity into race was a common step for Mr. Vincent throughout his explanations for slavery, a point which Abdou had earlier pushed back on.

What this exchange between Abdou and Mr. Vincent highlights is how a teacher’s limited perspective on race does not pass muster amongst his student audience. Abdou questions the centrality of race in perpetuating the slave trade, based on his own reluctance to identify as a Black male. Abdou identified as an “African;” and generally did not identify as “Black,” or acknowledge himself as a racial being. Because of the anti-Blackness he hoped to escape in society through a more ethnic self-label, Abdou often cited non-racial explanations for events. Perhaps it was his skeptical outlook on race as an identity category that prompted his critical questioning of race as the sole explanation for the Atlantic Slave Trade. Abdou’s critique of Mr. Vincent’s explanation changed the way that Mr. Vincent taught about slavery the next day. This suggests that while teachers can set the dominant

discourse in the classroom, students too have a space to push back on the power figure in the classroom and allow their own voices to be heard, and to shape the hegemonic narrative in the classroom. Like Stanton Wortham's (2006) study of learning identity, this exchange between Abdou and Mr. Vincent highlight how learning identity is shaped by social identity. Abdou's learning identity role as a "smart guy" in the classroom allowed him to use his position to push back on the teacher's proffered dominant explanation. His social identity, in turn as an African immigrant, meant that he questioned the salience of race as an explanatory category in the first place. His social identity impacted his learning identity as a "smart guy," and therefore, influenced the teacher to change his dominant position by acknowledging Abdou's alternate historical interpretation.

Mr. Vincent also remained convinced that had the African tribal people known about the horrors of chattel slavery, they may have stopped it; he is less willing to lay blame on African tribes. However, in Abdou's perspective, it was the Portuguese and the African kings who were squarely to blame; his interpretation leaves less room for condoning African participation. Abdou, however, lays the majority of the blame on the rulers [Europeans] and African kings like King Aphonso of the Congo:

"I know it was the Portuguese who sold slaves. I would mainly blame the kings and rulers of West Africa. If they had controlled how the trade was happening, slavery would have been a lot less. The king, Aphonso, he allowed Africans to be taken to the Portuguese, he allowed them to take the slaves. It would have been less if he hadn't. I don't think the major slave trades were directly the leaders fault. I think their decisions to allow slaves to be sold eventually led to slaves being mass ambushed. I've heard stories where they [the kings] take injured and captured enemies from wars and use them as slaves instead of executing them. So from what I think, I don't think when the kings let their slaves be taken with the Portuguese, I think it was primarily it was slaves from wars from other tribes. I don't think they were trading their own slaves. It doesn't have to directly be the action, but that



eventually led to those big slaves where they were ambushed and taken. I don't think it was direct, but it was the king's decision to be taken that was that."

Abdou acknowledges that while slavery might have still continued without the participation of African kings, perhaps "it would have been less if he [Aphonso] hadn't" cooperated with the Portuguese. Even so, Abdou believed that the "major slave trades" were not directly a cause of the King's orders but a consequence of his partnership with the Portuguese. While previously, kings had taken slaves from other tribes during ambushes and wars, eventually this cycle of warfare and the kings' allowance of the Portuguese led to even the king's people being taken as slaves. Abdou's statement is primarily accurate in that kings like Aphonso often sold other tribes' slaves before turning to his own (Snethen, 2019).

While it is true that African kings, the Europeans, and even some African individuals were all to blame, in part, for the slave trade, what occurs as a result of this complexity is that Europeans are condoned for their part in this historical evil. Apologists will respond to the blame assigned to Europeans with: "But Africans had slavery too, so you can't just blame the Europeans." In fact, as Diouf (2003) explains, the 'Black betrayal model' portrayed Africans as slave raiders, all engaged in acts of warfare, raiding, and kidnapping. This model advanced an idea of African savagery, to the detriment of academic analysis of the ways in which Africans engaged in strategies to oppose the slave trade. Even as many Africans were engaged in opposition to the slave trade, it serves the purpose of traditional Western historiography to focus on African savagery, in order to justify, or at best, contextualize European culpability in driving the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Additionally, while it is true that African leaders like King Aphonso were involved in the Slave trade, what it occludes is how different slavery in Africa was to the American chattel slavery. Therefore, to use a false equivalency to condone European culpability is not historically accurate, even while acknowledging that the blame for the Atlantic Slave Trade lay spread out amidst many parties.

While the Atlantic Slave Trade was a difficult and complex topic of discussion, in this particular example, Abdou provided critical insight into the lesson that Mr. Vincent incorporated over the course of the lesson. While a form of racial understanding certainly shaped early colonial actors who participated in the Atlantic Slave Trade, it was more a concept of inferiority rather than modern notions of race that shaped these early encounters. Though initially presenting a dominant narrative of race as the central factor for perpetuating African slavery, Abdou's perspective prompted Mr. Vincent to consider and teach an alternative basis for African slavery, highlighting the power of students in reshaping hegemonic classroom narratives.

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Just as Abdou's critical thinking transform the Atlantic Slave Trade lesson in Mr. Vincent's class, so too did Kabeera transform the class discussion about Black Lives Matter in Mr. Daro's AAH class. In Mr. Daro's case, he promoted a US centric focus on Black history and Black politics that excluded more diasporic and international understandings of Blackness. Kabeera, however, pushed Mr. Daro to reconsider the limits of who should be included under the purview of Black Lives Matter.

The discussion began on October 27, 2020, a day after the murder of Walter Wallace, a mentally ill young Black man in Philadelphia, who had been killed by the police. The police killing was captured on video and prompted great outrage amongst many Philadelphia residents. While acknowledging the tragedy, Kabeera brought up her dissatisfaction with the fact that no one talks about the persecution of Black lives outside of the US, at least in her observations. While she remains an ardent supporter of BLM, Kabeera was hurt and disappointed that none of the fellow classmates or even her teacher would find the time or space to talk about the major events going on in West African countries.

Kabeera had been following the protests in Guinea, her parents' home country with growing alarm. A week before this class, on 10/22, she sent me a text: "I'm not really paying attention in class because their protesting in the new right now for guinea. And I might go it depends on my mother. No in New York, real life." Kabeera sent me a picture of a large group of protestors from NYC flying the Guinean flag and holding up a sign that says 'No third term for Alpha Conde.' Kabeera explains that the protest is "right now. Well two days ago. Alpha conde wants to go into his 3<sup>rd</sup> term and he is not a good president." Kabeera felt angry at the many Black lives that Alpha Conde had killed through state-sanctioned violence, many of them young kids. Given that the Black Lives Movement was also a protest against state-sanctioned violence, she was upset that her peers in school didn't think that Black lives in Guinea mattered as much as in the USA.

Kabeera launches the critique against her classmates initially by stating: "None y'all had that same energy when we was talking about what is going on in Africa." She

feels the students are hypocrites for investing so much in the issue of Walter Wallace while not caring at all about the protests in Africa. Reem, a young African American man in the class, responds that he didn't know what was going on, to which Kabeera responds that she was reposting it and Reem must have seen it on her Instagram post. Gigi, a young African American woman, suggests that she did know what was going on and disapproved of it (though it's unclear if she reposted the news about West Africa on her own story).

Aniya, another African American young woman, does address lack of knowledge as the main issue but explicitly states that it's too depressing to hear about people dying everyday. She focused on the fact that "mental health matters," and that students cannot pay attention to people dying all day "here and there." Kabeera calls out Aniya for not caring about the violence in West Africa even when the Walter Wallace shooting had not happened the week before when the protests in Africa were going on. Kabeera's point is that the two events did not happen simultaneously; therefore, both should have been given full focus and attention in their due time to reaffirm that all Black lives matter. Aniya, however, clarifies that the events in West Africa did not affect her: "you talk about it if it's effecting you & it is. Mental health matters." Aniya implies that only issues occurring directly in one's proximate life matter, i.e.: the shooting of Walter Wallace, blocks away from where the students live and attend school. The situation in West Africa is over "there" and does not affect her (and the other American kids Kabeera is critiquing). Gigi tries to diffuse the situation between Kabeera and Aniya by saying that "Black unfairness is everywhere" and that Black people should not fight amongst each other. Each cause of injustice to all Black people should be lifted up and heard.

Gigi's attempt at peacekeeping does not stop the argument between Kabeera and her classmates. Reem reminds Kabeera that as teenagers, they are limited in their activist efforts; "we can't fly over there but if something happens where we are of course we are gonna make it more affective towards us." Reem reiterates Aniya's comment that proximity to events shapes one's ability to respond to and address the problem. Kabeera reminds Aniya: "I been reposting," assuming the moral ground for taking virtual action. Aniya shoots back "as you should," indicating that it makes sense for Kabeera to post about West Africa because she herself is West African; reposting doesn't give her any extra moral legitimacy, since it was almost a matter of duty for her based on her unique identity. Kabeera understands the critique directed at her and shoots back "who saying anything about flying over there? You could have been reposting and educating people around you. Y'all just proving my point." Kabeera doesn't believe that it is only her duty to post and accuses her classmates for not caring about West Africa. Reem is hurt by Kabeera's accusation: "you making it seem like we not doing nothing tho." Kabeera reaffirms her accusation: "y'all are not."

At this point, Kabeera's classmates are frustrated at being blamed for being uncaring individuals. They respond to Kabeera that they have indeed been reposting, signing petitions, and praying. Reem asks evocatively: "what else can we do but to repost," and Caiah, a young African American woman, agrees: "I feel like at this point it's nothing we can do." These comments highlight the teenagers' beliefs that they have limited power to affect world change. Aniya takes a more combative tone and counters Kabeera's accusations and declares: "you don't even know what you talking about, you blaming us

for smt we can't control. we are 15-16, what more could you possibly want us to do? I'm curious. repost? We did it. Like cmon now. Y'all always try to flip it and make our people hate each other." Aniya is fed up being told that she does not care about Black lives. Instead, she asks Kabeera why she is blaming mere teenagers for larger geopolitical issues and anti-Black violence over which they have no control. Aniya counters Kabeera's accusation by sharing that she too has shared about the violence in West Africa on Instagram, which was the only way concrete way forward Kabeera had suggested in the first place; Aniya was tired of being portrayed as an uncaring person about Black issues.

Aniya hurls a counter accusation directed at Kabeera "Y'all always try to flip it and make our people hate each other." Aniya, who identified as African American in prior conversations with me pre-COVID, clearly viewed herself as a separate 'people' than West Africans, a group which Kabeera represented. Aniya accuses all West Africans "Y'all" of trying to flip it, i.e.: turn the blame for negative events back on other Black people and cultivating hate, rather than find a common basis for collective action against anti-Black violence. Aniya's comment expresses her belief that there are divisions between African Americans and West African migrants which are exacerbated when West Africans blame African Americans for the cause of violence against Black people in society. Aniya ends up calling Kabeera a bigot, and Kabeera restates that she is right and has nothing to apologize for. In the midst of this tense conversation, which portrays inter-Black community relations in a dire state, Caijah takes on the role of bridgebuilder: "it's sad what's going on in America and Africa we just got to be strong and stand tall." Instead of using pronouns such as "y'all" to hurt accusations, Caijah believes that American and

African people are both hurt by anti-Black violence. The real solution was to be strong and stand tall, instead of allowing internal division and strife to take over.

Kabeera is not finished after Aniya's counter accusations. She makes one last attempt to clarify her point: "I do know what I'm talking about....I'm talking about we had conversation in class about what's going on here or whatever-and not about what's going on in Africa....so what...you stopped class to talk about this but did not last week to talk about what's going on in Africa. But go off." Kabeera is actually addressing Mr. Daro, the teacher, directly in this explanation. She is ultimately not as upset about her classmates allegedly not posting on social media about the conflict in Africa, as she is about the fact that even her teacher, who is supposed to be unbiased, clearly felt that the death of Walter Wallace was more important than the countless men and women dying in Africa in violence during the election season. Reem responds, "We talking about it cause it happened here lol and it affected us in our own ways," reiterating an earlier point about the importance of proximity in determining which events are important to consider deeply.

Mr. Daro, realizing that he has been directly implicated, attempts to explain his choice to have a deep dive in class for Walter Wallace but not about the events in Africa:

"With so much going on in the world, it depends how you use your energy. If it happens in your backyard, it hits different. That's not our country, it comes down later to us. It doesn't hit as hard, it's not literally in our backyard, even though it's still the same thing. I haven't talked about it because I am talking about imperialism in Africa tomorrow."

Mr. Daro justifies his choice by sharing that "that's not our country [Guinea, Mali, Cote'Ivoire], it [the news] comes down later to us." Mr. Daro's explanation suggests that news outlets did not report the events in West Africa as thoroughly or in time with events

in Africa. His latter explanation “It doesn’t hit as hard, it’s not literally in our backyard, even though it’s still the same thing” is a more substantive statement. Mr. Daro draws on the mental health argument cited earlier in the conversation by noting that events that happen closer are more important than events far away, *even though it’s still the same thing*. Mr. Daro recognizes that state-driven anti-Black violence in the US is parallel to state-driven violence in countries of West Africa. Still, he does not acknowledge that Kabeera’s anger was justified in the unequal representation of US vs. non-US Black lives. Mr. Daro attempts to assuage Kabeera by explaining that the class would, in fact, talk about “imperialism in Africa tomorrow.”

While the class did discuss imperialism in Africa the day after, the discussion was not about recent events at all. Mr. Daro’s explanation left much to be desired, and Kabeera just texted me “he [Mr. D] doesn’t even care.” Her disappointment in how the classroom chat went was palpable: why was it so difficult for students, and even the teacher, to understand that Black lives everywhere matter? Kabeera’s question reflects Strong (2013)’s question: do Black lives matter until African lives also matter? As Strong (2013) explains, working for Black causes is not bound to a nation-state but diasporic. However, in the way that BLM has operated, Black lives in the US have remained central to the conception of BLM as a movement. Kabeera’s anger, though perhaps not expressed in the most sympathetic way, but rather in the languages of insults and accusations at her classmates, still capture the central dilemma: how can Black lives matter more in one nation-state than another, when the core of BLM is to value the most persecuted, racialized people in society and is built on a foundation of internationalism?



The central motivating factor in this argument is a question of which Black lives are worth spending mental energy on discussing, lamenting, and processing? The underlying pedagogical question is the extent to which it is the responsibility of history teachers like Mr. Daro to consider non-US perspectives within an AAH history classroom, particularly when a student calls on the teacher to engage in such discussions. While it is true that Mr. Daro might have had other plans to use the class time to cover class content, given the fact that he created time to discuss the Walter Wallace situation, it was clear that having frank discussions with students was priority for how Mr. Daro used class time. The difference was that he wanted the discussion to focus on US centric topics without making the effort to incorporate international struggles into the class discussion.

Mr. Daro categorically denies the importance of Kabeera's point, i.e.: that it is worth discussing the political situation in Guinea. He argues that what happens "in our backyards," takes precedence over events impacting Black lives internationally. Though Kabeera directly implicates Mr. Daro for not caring about her concerns, Mr. Daro does not even take a moment to acknowledge her valid concerns. Neither does he respond to student prompts in the chat that explicitly connect Black lives in the US to Black lives abroad. Gigi states: "moral of the story is Black unfairness is everywhere," while Caiah connects the struggles in both countries: "it's sad what's going on in America and Africa we just got to be strong and stand tall." Both of these students' comments could easily have been a jumping off point for Mr. Daro to address the diasporic nature of Black struggles against racism and violence, particularly in an AAH class whose focus is on the importance of Black lives.

Another point of intervention could have been from Aniya's comment: "Y'all always try to flip it and make our people hate each other." Aniya highlights the tensions between West African and African Americans in Honors Academy. Given that Mr. Daro was well aware of ethnic tensions in the school (see Chapter 9: The "rice debate"), and given that he watched the argument between Aniya and Kabeera unfold, he could have used Aniya's comment as a learning moment to dispel stereotypes that the two groups had of each other (similar to Mrs. Penney's attempts in Chapter 9).

While it is easy to offer pedagogical interventions as an outside observer, teaching is not an easy task, particularly in moments of heightened emotion. Mr. Daro did an excellent job creating space for students to process their emotion after a difficult event like Walter Wallace's death at the hand of the Philly Police. However, even while creating space, Mr. Daro clearly prioritized American concerns over international concerns, thereby denying Kabeera's multiple identities as 2<sup>nd</sup> generation African as well as American by birth. Angela Valenzuela (1999) describes this process of not taking up student identities and even explicitly denying them as part of subtractive schooling.

Unlike Mr. Vincent who incorporated Abdou's perspective into his historical lesson on the Atlantic Slave Trade, Mr. Daro did not take up Kabeera's concerns. In this example, Mr. Daro reaffirmed his dominant analysis of Black Lives Matter by ignoring alternate student perspectives. The hegemonic narrative of US Black Lives Matter continued in the classroom, at the cost of connecting the diasporic struggles of Black lives everywhere, a central tenet of the BLM movement. AAH served not as a space for counterhegemonic interpretations (as it was in Mr. Vincent's classroom) but one in which the actions of the

teacher led to the solidification of a hegemonic and ethnocentric curriculum (in Mr. Daro's classroom).

These two examples highlight how the AAH classroom served multiple functions – both as a space for counterhegemonic perspectives, as well as a location for the dominance of hegemonic narratives. Students were able to share their agentive narratives, to the extent that the teacher allow for such alternative narratives to emerge. Even a potentially subservice space like the AAH classroom, well poised to counter white hegemony, remained a court of power that privileged US centric narratives over diasporic interpretations. This particular form of hegemony privileged US centered Blackness over that of non-US Black lives, without showing how Black lives are interconnected through struggles to counter anti-Blackness the world over.

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The interplay of student identity, and the curriculum, as exercised through a teacher's pedagogical power, continued to be an important element throughout my observation of AAH class. Part I traced the ways in which AAH teachers a) emphasize simplistic racial ideologies and b) center a narrow framing of US-centric Black identity to the exclusion of more diasporic understandings of Blackness. Some students, like Abdou, are able to counter these dominant discourses, suggesting that students have the power to reshape dominant historical discourses. Others, like Kabeera, fail to do, highlighting the limits of student agency in the classroom.

In Part I focused on the interplay between students and teachers in controlling classroom narratives around history and current events like BLM. In Part II, I focus

primarily on the interplay between student identity and their interpretation of history lessons, particularly in the ways that students deploy history to serve their own identity narratives. I argue that students' personal family histories serve as a source of historical interpretation, particularly complexifying discussions around a) The Atlantic Slave Trade and b) Ancient West African History. MSA students realized that their own historical identities impacted how they interpreted classroom lessons (identity -> history). In lessons on the Atlantic Slave trade, culpability was a major point of contention, and West African students adopted a strategy of silence in order to avoid contentious negative debates with their African American peers. In lessons about West African history, combatting anti-African stereotypes emerged as a key effect of these lessons.

Some scholars have studied the ways in which the Atlantic Slave Trade has been taught within the history classroom. In many of these studies, the history of slavery is marginalized or silenced within the curriculum as well as in class contexts. Even when slavery is talked about, it is viewed as a point in history that should be forgotten in light of more positive national achievements (such as independence in the context of postcolonial nations). The reason this history of slavery is shameful differs based on the national context in which it is presented – in Holsey's (2008) Ghanaian high school classroom, African collusion portrays ancestors in a negative light, while in Godreau's (2008) Puerto Rican elementary school classroom, the construction of *mestizaje* (the ideology of race mixture) prefers *blanqueamiento*, the whitening of the population rather than dwell on the African blood in Puerto Rican ancestry. In the Dutch context, white history students believe that slavery should be studied by Black descendants of enslaved ancestors; they did not see the

need to study slavery, given that they did not have a direct link to enslaved ancestors. In each of these classrooms, slavery was marginalized or muted, another way in which anti-Black sentiments took root within white supremacist national racial frameworks.

In contrast, what emerges from my study is the willingness with which teachers and African American students grapple with the horrors of the Atlantic Slave Trade within the African American History (AAH) classroom as a means to counter marginalization of Black history. West African students in AAH class, however, express the same reluctance to discuss the slave trade as students in these previous studies. West African students distance themselves from the history of slavery in the US because they do not believe that it is “their” history, but rather the history of their African American peers; this distancing is manifested in relative silence and less participation in AAH classroom discussions and is perhaps an internalization of anti-Blackness within a white supremacist US nation.

In Holsey’s study of a Ghanaian history classroom at a private girls’ school, she notes how the teacher, Mrs. Mensah, emphasizes African collusion in the slave trade while also stating that the slave trade had both negative and positive effects on African society. At one point, “Miss Mensah emphasized the benefits of the European presence and argued that they mitigate the damage done by the slave trade” (Holsey, 2008 145). The “positive” benefits include the arrival of European style education in Ghana. Most young women in the class accept this story and conclude that the slave trade is a shameful part of African history and should therefore, be forgotten. Although Mrs. Mensah herself mentions having a slave owning ancestor, she shares this story to acknowledge the shame she feels and the

reminder to students that such shame should be forgotten over time in the quest to keep rebuild Ghana as an independent and thriving nation.

In the Puerto Rican context, Godreau (2008) argues that subduing and narrowing the history of slavery in the Puerto Rican classroom is important in the construction of mestizaje in the Puerto Rican context. Since Puerto Rican people are often viewed as having emerged from a racial mixture of Taino Native, Spaniards, and Africans, the tendency is to favor narratives in which Puerto Ricans have whitened over time (*blanqueamiento*). This racial preference is reflected within the classroom in the ways that teachers rarely covered materials from the unit on African heritage. Godreau (2008) cites how slavery is not even discussed in a unit titled “We Are Caribbean People,” an ironic turn in that the impact of slavery has been a key factor used in academic analysis of the Caribbean as a region (Mintz 1971). In terms of the student interactions in the class, students who were *Prieto* (Spanish for “Black”), often did not speak up in class because they didn’t want to explicitly highlight their Blackness in a class that favored mestizaje and *blanqueamiento* narratives of race. Davila (1997) and Godreau (2015) also speak to the specificity of racial hierarchies in Puerto Rican racial ideology, delineating the various ways that skin color and racial ascriptions shape individual social experiences in Puerto Rican society.

Finally, in Savenije et. al (2014) study of 55 Dutch junior high school students, the authors noted that students failed to develop an understanding of the impact of slavery on Dutch society more broadly. Even after visiting slavery museum and the National Slavery Monument, students believed that these historical sites are important primarily for direct

descendants of enslaved people. This history was less relevant to their own understanding of race relations in Dutch society. Discussions of slavery were relegated to a limited realm.

These studies served as a contrast, in part, to the openness in which the Atlantic Slave Trade and the impacts of slavery were discussed by African American students in AAH class in my study. However, the reluctance that students in these previous studies expressed reflected the silent demeanor that the West Africans MSA students inhabited in AAH class. The findings suggest that discussions of slavery remained central to the identity constructions of African American descendants of formerly enslaved people; for West African students, discussions of slavery were couched in histories of shame and prompted a desire to absolve their own families from this historical atrocity. Their reluctance to engage in this historical discussion may also have emerge from a sense of anti-Blackness and ethnoreligious hegemonies, frameworks within which they regarded their African American peers.

In AAH class, students discussed the culpability of West Africans in perpetuating the enslavement of Africans who later became African Americans. Discussions about culpability highlighted less about who is actually to blame for the Atlantic Slave Trade and more about African American and West African students' own relationships vis a vis each other within this space of the AAH classroom. While students debated many historical claims, the point is less about actual historical veracity as it is about the fact that the MSA students deployed history to fit their own personal interpretations of history, that to them is closely connected to their family history.

Students attempt to understand the extent to which they are a part of a single race (“Black race”) or diverse groups (ethnically West African or African American). While the AAH history teachers, Mr. Vincent and Mr. Daro, had hoped to demonstrate that critical AAH lessons allowed students to find solidarity between Black people in the diaspora, the actual discussions surface how deep-rooted divisions between African American and West African kids remained. Through debating the culpability for the slave trade, students used blame to solidify their different ethnic histories that continued to shape intergroup tensions between the two groups in the present as well.

I began observing this unit wondering whether student reactions to the Atlantic Slave Trade would be shaped by the different family and ethnic histories the students brought to class. I assumed that like students in Bayo Holsey’s (2008) observations within an history classroom in Ghana, West African students would deny or downplay the culpability of West Africans in the slave trade. In fact, I found my findings similar to Holsey’s (2008). Kania, Kalila, Kabeera, and even Maha from MSA, while proud of being 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Americans of West African origin (“African” as they called themselves), acknowledged the culpability of Africans in driving the Atlantic Slave Trade; simultaneously, they removed their own ancestral family from blame, as most actors do in disavowing the centrality of slavery to the generation of wealth in the “New World” and for the “Old World.”

The African American MSA students, Zara and Shantell, on the other hand, honed in on the ways that Africans themselves were to blame for selling their “own brothers” into slavery. While the AAH teacher shared a history of the Atlantic Slave Trade that focused



on the nefarious actions of the European powers as well as select African Kings, the African American students cast blame on ancestral Africans for their horrific participation in the slave trade. Zara even went as far as extending this blame of ancestral Africans to her African peers within the classroom.

In the following examples, I demonstrate that despite the attempts of the AAH teacher to share a balanced perspective of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the MSA students interpreted the history, based on their own individual understandings of family histories. Students exercised agency in deploying history to serve their identity purposes, even if that history was not the curricular version that the teacher emphasized, nor always avoiding presentism. While student agency is important, in these following cases, it obscured historical veracity and fueled ethnic tensions within the AAH classroom (and beyond as I explored in Chapter 9: the “rice debate”).

The following student perspectives emerged from Mr. Daro’s AAH classroom. In this classroom, Kabeera, Zara, Shantell, Sami, Mariam, and Yamin were met with posters of inspiration; Black historical figures, such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Shirley Chisholm, and more. A quote by Marcus Garvey stood out: “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.” Mr. Daro, an experienced teacher of five years, worked hard to create a classroom that was affirming of his students’ Black roots, even if he himself was not Black.

Zara, who identified as Puerto Rican and Black, had strong emotions tied to the issue of enslavement and the origin of African Americans. These emotions were shaped by her anger that her family suffered enslavement in the not so distant past. During a lesson

on learning about the past, Zara commented, ““I don’t like learning about African American history because I hate how traumatized I feel from watching what my ancestors went through. And still till this day it’s still racism going on. I do think about their resilience, but they were tortured. Over a skin color. I just don’t understand.” Zara expressed her pain in class, even as she was one of the most avid and interested students in Mr. Daro’s AAH class.

An interaction between Mr. Daro and Zara demonstrates how Zara used history to serve her point, instead of allowing Mr. Daro’s lesson to dictate her view. During the lesson on the Kingdom of Congo and Portugal, Zara read primary source documents from the King of Congo, which detailed how he was selling his people. Zara’s reaction in class had been one of outrage: “he was greedy!” Mr. Daro clarified, “That’s not the point I’m trying to make, oh look, Africans are selling people. I think it’s like these European colonists were manipulating African countries into doing this.” Mr. Daro’s clarification was that the Europeans were greatly to blame for creating the conditions for the Atlantic Slave Trade. Instead of picking up Mr. Daro’s point, however, Zara instead blamed the Africans for slavery. She was angry at the Africans for the part they played in the slave trade, and in fact, stated, “it wouldn’t have started if Africans were more appreciative of themselves and like their people...people just, it’s like they make Africa seem so like so top priority.” Zara laid blame on ancestral Africans for not valuing their own people. Zara also extended her anger to her African classmates who always seemed “top priority,” (i.e.: receiving positive attention from teachers), when her African classmates had never been absolved for their ancestral family’s crimes of selling their brothers into slavery.

Based on these comments I observed in class, during our interview in April 2020,

I asked Zara to discuss her view on race and ancestry further:

“When you compare African Americans to Africans, well...when people talk bad about Africans and all that...and now they feel like Africans got all the good graces and kudos and all that type stuff now. But it was like even though it was originally *Africans* who were like taking advantage of slaves...they also took advantage of each other. In Africa is where was the start of slavery.”

Zara was angry that “Africans got all the good graces and kudos and all that type stuff now. But it was like even though it was originally *Africans* who were like taking advantage of slaves.” Zara felt that African students so often got attention and credit when it was their ancestors who had sold her ancestors, i.e. the African Americans, into slavery. Zara is quick to note that the English, Spaniards, and Portuguese were just as much to blame for the Atlantic Slave Trade and the “raping [of] Africans, creating mixed biracial children.” She discusses the advanced technology, the stealing and domination, as well as other ways in which Europeans took advantage of the African kings. Despite describing the involvement of European powers in propagating the slave trade, however, she placed more of the blame on Africans for selling “each other to people in power”.

“But what happened was Spaniard and English and those type people just came over and took advantage. And then it was to a point where like, first Africans began to sell each other to people in power, like African kings and stuff. Then after like Americans and English and Spanish and stuff, Portuguese, after all those people came over, Africans were doing a trade. And then European and all these type of people had more advanced technology, so it was easier for them to just steal and take over, and then that’s where slavery like eventually came into being and got more worse. And the worst thing being, although it started with Africans American, African American people were eventually created because these Spanish and European and American people were just raping Africans, creating mixed biracial children.”

Though there were many others to blame, Zara believed that the Atlantic Slave Trade, “wouldn’t have started if Africans were more appreciative of themselves and like their people.” Zara squarely placed the blame on Africans for the pain and suffering of African Americans, her ancestors. Zara does qualify that “it wasn’t all of the people,” but some Africans who were to blame. In addition, she recognizes that in Africa, the system of slavery was different than chattel slavery, a lesson she had learned in Mr. Daro’s class. Therefore, the Africans who were engaging in the Atlantic slave trade, used to the more ‘benign’ form of slavery where you “could still buy your freedom,” may have had no idea of the horrors of chattel slavery that they were selling other Africans into. Regardless, Zara is still angry at the part that Africans did play in the slave trade, especially now that that they were “so top priority” compared to African Americans, in her opinion. Though it was the Africans who were sold into slavery, it was these Africans and the newly created Americans who had to suffer generations of slavery.

“So like, I mean, yea, it started in Africa, but *it wouldn’t have started if Africans were more appreciative of themselves and like their people* (my emphasis). Although it wasn’t *all* of the people, it was still some, and it was still the thought that counts. When they captured people in war, they would make them slaves. In Africa, you could still buy your freedom. But people, it’s like African people feel like they got it worse, but it was like, *it wouldn’t be that way if y’all didn’t sell yourselves* (my emphasis). But even though it did happen, it was also Americans who also went through this, African Americans being now. It wasn’t against Africans. So like when people, people just, it’s like they make Africa seem so like so top priority, I guess, you could say.”

It is of note that Zara selectively takes lessons from Mr. Daro’s class that serve her pre-existing ideas about African culpability. While Mr. Daro notes how European machinations created the conditions for the slave trade, Zara takes note and blames the

English, Spaniards, and Portuguese. However, she does not change her opinion that Africans sold their own people into slavery. Historically speaking, at the time, various tribes made up different ethnic groups in mainland Africa. Therefore, most African traders did not sell their “own people,” but rather rival ethnic tribes who had been captured in internecine warfare (Snethen, 2019). Instead of trying to understand this complexity, which Mr. Daro explained in class, Zara held on to the idea that Africans were to blame for their betrayal of their brothers.

Zara’s narrative was grounded in her anger about the atrocities of the past, where her ancestors had been enslaved, raped, and forced to endure horrific suffering. She found it difficult to forgive Africans for their part in the Atlantic Slave Trade. Though she logically understood that her African classmates were not the same people who had been part of this atrocity, she nonetheless projected her anger of history into her current dismissal of African students. Zara stated:

“Cause it’s like honestly, if you [Africans] have so much to say about American people, then don’t live in their country. If they really curse you so much and if Americans do so much bad to you, then I feel like you should, and this sounds offensive sometimes, but I feel like you should go back to where you came from.”

Zara’s xenophobic comment did not emerge without cause, at least in her perspective. She felt that the sins of the past could not be so easily erased in the present. In addition, if Black Americans, who had been borne out of so much to pain to create something great, i.e.: African American culture, was not good enough for the African students, then they were free to leave the country. My extended interview with Zara revealed many of her underlying reasons for her sometimes xenophobic comments during the “rice debate”,

which was explored in Chapter 9. Zara keenly felt the anti-Black sentiments and ethnoreligious hegemonies that prompted her West African peers to disavow their racial identity and to denigrate African American cultural traditions, at times (“rice debate”).

Shantell, another African American MSA student and Zara’s friend in AAH class, elicited strong reactions while watching the first episode from the new *Roots* in Mr. Daro’s class. While watching, Shantell realized that Africans captured other Africans and sold them to the slave traders. Next, the class had watched a portion of another documentary that talked about how some Africans were indeed fueled by greed and money to capture each other and the trading of guns made it worse and worse. As Shantell watched this, she was angry. She commented in surprise: “so everyone was in on it – the Europeans, Africans, everyone” revealing her understanding that multiple parties were involved in fueling the slave trade and it was more complex than she had previously imagined. Shantell also had a reaction when Mr. Daro mentioned that it was August of 1619 when the first Africans were brought to America. Shantell declared, “that’s crazy there is an actual date!” While always having learned about slavery in the past, understanding the actual origin and how the Atlantic Slave Trade, though painful, was a lesson which reaffirmed for Shantell that the slave trade was a manmade atrocity that could be directly traced back to Europeans and Africans.

As a young African American woman who was descended from formerly enslaved people, Shantell’s relationship with AAH content was one which she perceived through the lens of her ancestors’ sufferings. Shantell felt hurt when learning about the horrific acts that her ancestors underwent. However, was less explicit than Zara in her vocalization of

African culpability for her ancestors' suffering. While Zara directly connected her historical understanding of culpability to her xenophobic comments against African peers, Shantell's motivations for name-calling were less clear. Whether Shantell's views of historical culpability of Africans led to specific negative actions in the present was difficult to determine from just observing her in AAH class. However, in observing Shantell in the MSA space as well as AAH, it appeared that her anger at Africans did stem partly from her negative perception of the African Americans' and Africans' fraught history.

Shantell's negative reactions to her African peers came to a head during a name-calling incident I observed in AAH class. One particular day in class, I noticed Shantell shouting "Stop speaking African" to Kabeera, a West African peer. Kabeera protested by telling her to "stop, African is not even a language", but Shantell keeps saying "shut up" to her repeatedly. Mr. Daro gave Shantell detention for her comment, to which Shantell shot back: "I said it – and I mean it!" To Shantell, the term African itself was an insult and a slur. To Kabeera, her comment was nonsensical because African is not even a language.

What I found interesting about this incident was that just the week prior, Kabeera and Shantell had worked on a group project in AAH class together collaboratively. Reflecting on the timing, I wondered if the "rice debate" in MSA the week before had exacerbated tensions between African American and West African MSA students, and whether this tension was now erupting in AAH class. Shantell did not want to reflect further on this name-calling incident when I asked her about it. Kabeera, however, stated that "Shantell always be calling me names about being African." I also observed over time that name-calling was a particular strategy that Shantell engaged in, especially when she was

angry at Kabeera. “You’re African” became her way of hurling negative emotions onto Kabeera; anger and ethnic insults proved a potent mix that became attached to the ostensibly neutral word “African.” Similar to Imoagene’s (2015) study, ethnic tensions often became concentrated within a slur. In this case, Shantell’s perception of the vast differences between the two ethnic groups seemed to be rooted in the painful history of the African Slave Trade and Africans’ culpability in it.

In contrast to Zara and Shantell, who struggled with the pain of their ancestors’ enslavement and shared their views explicitly, Kabeera made very few remarks about the African Slave Trade in class. Once, while watching the *Roots* episode, she expressed horror at the atrocities of the past, commenting: “It was the Europeans that divided the African people.” Kabeera laid the blame squarely on the Europeans. During our interview in May 2020, Kabeera reflected on slavery more openly. She proudly declared knowledge of her own ancestry, explaining:

“My tribe and my ancestors, my mom said that we were never enslaved. We were always in West Africa, we were always there. I’m from Guinea. We were never slaves. Of course, they had slaves in Africa, but it wasn’t like the same thing as in America. I feel like Daro talked about how slavery was a little different cause you could be free or sometimes a slave because you were poor. Slaves in West Africa had more opportunities, they weren’t like how it was in America. But then there, it was like, you were born, you had a job. It was basically kinda like a maid, like if you did something wrong, you were a slave...I don’t say much in class cause I don’t think we need to get that deep there, and I don’t wanna piss people off.”

Kabeera made two points in her statement. One was distinguishing between West African slavery and chattel slavery. The second one was absolving her own family from any slave ownership and involvement, as well as reflecting on her family’s unbroken chain of freedom. First, Kabeera explained “Of course, *they* had slaves in Africa, but it wasn’t



like the same thing as in America,” describing how slaves within the West African system were basically like a “maid” who had “more opportunities” than slaves in America. Though Kabeera’s description, “like a maid” is overly simplistic and ignores how being enslaved is not the same as having a job, she did recall the differences that Mr. Daro had presented in class about chattel slavery in the US and slavery in West Africa. Kabeera distinguished between this ‘benign’ type of slavery, in which slaves could gain freedom over time versus the intergenerational slavery under chattel slavery. She also incorrectly stated that Africans became slaves within the African system of slavery by doing something “wrong,” – more accurately, African slavery was a result of conquest of one ethnic tribe by another, not by an individual doing something “wrong” or simply by being poor.

Second, as a means of absolving her family from associations with slavery, Kabeera also used the pronoun “they,” tellingly in a shift from her earlier use of “we,” when referring to her family. *They* referred to the culpable Africans who sold other Africans into slavery. However, Kabeera was proud of the fact that “we were never slaves,” (and also never participated in slavery) and that her family could trace an unbroken tribal lineage in Guinea, reinforcing ethnoreligious hegemonies against her African American Muslim peers. Kabeera connected this pride in her ancestry to a second point in which her family also were not culpable for slavery (although in reality there is no way of knowing the degree of culpability or participation of one’s ancestral family members in the slave trade in a history that goes so far back).

Kabeera’s nearly silent bearing in class, when it came to the Atlantic Slave Trade, did not mean she did not have opinions on it in private. Her own family history shaped her

belief that not all Africans were culpable for the slave trade; though some were. When I asked Kabeera why she didn't share more of her views in class, she stated, "I don't say much in class cause I don't think we need to get that deep there." Kabeera implied that by remaining silent in class and not going that deep into history, she wanted to avoid further anger from African American peers like Zara and Shantell. She was afraid of "pissing people off," by dwelling too much on her own family history. As one of the few West African students in class, it's possible that Kabeera felt blamed by her peers as being the representative of ancient "African evils," and therefore chose to remain silent as a strategy of protection.

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In Mr. Daro's class, Kabeera's perspective as a West African student was illuminating. In Mr. Vincent's AAH classroom, there were more vocal West African students who willingly expressed their view on the question of culpability for the African Slave Trade. In Mr. Vincent's class, the students were learning what "seasoning" slaves meant. Kania shared her feelings of sympathy for the enslaved people in class as well when she shared the following: "Seasoning was a disciplinary process to change your behavior and attitude. I would be sad and angry because I'm forced to go and to do something I don't want to do and I'm not going to get paid to help my family back home." As the class discussed seasoning, Kania offered a definition and then launched into an explanation of how the enslaved people might have felt at the time. She expressed sadness and anger for the slaves' lack of freedom and their lack of remuneration for work done. Kabeera's

exercise of historical empathy (Endacott and Brooks, 2018) was based in her sorrow at the sufferings and her horror at the lack of free will that enslaved people had to endure.

While sympathetic for the slave, Kania also directly rejected any potential involvement her family may have had in the Atlantic Slave Trade. While discussing the topic of slavery after Mr. Vincent's class, Kania explained to me: "I don't blame the Africans for slavery because either way they were going to be taken, and I don't think my family was involved or had people sold. But the Africans in Africa, some of them betrayed their people because when people came to take more slaves, they betrayed them." Similar to Kabeera, Kania both absolved her family of any potential dealings in the slave trade, but also condemned some Africans in Africa for betraying their people by selling them into slavery. Kania had previously stated "either way they [the enslaved Africans] were going to be taken" because she believed that the Europeans would have found a way to enslave them (whether Africans slave traders colluded or not). Despite this view of inevitability, Kania condemned Africans selling slaves as an act of betrayal. Kania's family was simply not involved in this betrayal, and therefore, she herself was not culpable for the sins of the past. Other West African students like Maha as well expressed anger and blame towards West Africans for their part in the slave trade. Maha stated:

"Well, hearing that West Africans, even Malians, had sold their brothers into slavery, I was mad that they did that. Nope, I wasn't surprised at all cause Africans are very selfish and don't care about each other, not all of them but some. I know that my grandparents were Muslim, all my family way back was Muslim though. They don't do that."

Similar to Kania, Maha too condemned the West Africans who had sold their "brothers into slavery." Maha was angry but also unsurprised because "Africans are very selfish and

don't care about each other." Though Maha is careful to say that not every African was this way, she based her understanding of past wrongs on her current negative understanding of stereotypically African behavior. Personally, she felt as though selfishness had been at the root of brothers selling brothers. However, Maha is careful to say that her family was Muslim, "they don't do that." In Maha's view, Muslims don't sell other Muslims into slavery; therefore, since her family was Muslim "way back," they could not have participated in the slave trade either, even if other Africans had.

These West African students' personal narratives indicate that the class discussions on slavery were not something they perceived casually. Though they eliminated their own families from the calculus of culpability for the selling of slaves, these students condemned other Africans for their treachery. These students found a way to remain proud of their own lineages while laying the blame on other Africans, similar to the reaction of some families in Holsey's study of Ghanaian families and histories of slavery.

An observation to note is that most of these comments that students shared occurred in private conversations with me. Kania and Maha (and earlier Kabeera) did not share their views on African slavery and their family's absolved role within the classroom context. Fear of being blamed or furthering angering or upsetting their African American peers may have been a motivation for this strategy of classroom silence.

### Curricular Reflections

Two points emerged out of this section. First, individual family histories shaped students' understanding of historical content, more than the curricular material that the teachers presented. Instead of history reshaping student beliefs, history lessons instead

reaffirmed students' existing stereotypes of one another (particularly the stereotypes the African American students held of African peers).

Sometimes, students ignored teachers' lessons (ex: Mr. Daro's explanation of ethnic differences of West African tribes) in order to serve their own interpretations. For example, MSA students' complex interpretations of the Atlantic Slave Trade were historically inaccurate insofar as the Africans who sold other Africans into slavery were often not from the same tribes. Internecine warfare between tribes exacerbated ethnic differences; in addition, West African slavery was not the same as chattel slavery; neither was the modern race concept parallel to early forms of difference (Rana, 2011) in the interactions between various tribes and colonial agents. Therefore, the assumption that Africans betrayed their "own people" was historically inaccurate. Mr. Vincent did not clarify this point (recall Section 1 and his argument with Abdou about whether Africans were the same people.) Therefore, Kania and Maha believed in the idea of African betrayal. While Mr. Daro did distinguish this point in class. Kabeera, Shantell, and Zara also believed that Africans sold their own people into slavery.

Therefore, both West African and African American students based their interpretation of history on a flawed account of history. Even though Mr. Daro offered historically accurate material, the students deployed history for their own purposes. For African American students like Zara and Shantell, their ancestors' pain gave them fuel for their negative and xenophobic comments against African peers. For African students, the history gave them a chance to condemn "other" Africans, as long as their own families remained blameless for the past.

Secondly, West African students like Kabeera, Kania, and Maha used silence in order to navigate the classroom histories. Fear of upsetting or angering their African American peers prompted them to remain silent in class. The “chilling effect” is pedagogically unhelpful in allowing West African students (in this particular unit on the Slave Trade) to actively engage in classroom discussions. Signithia Fordham (1988) traced how African American students used silence as a strategy of empowerment in Capital High, a predominantly Black high school in DC. She noted how:

“The most salient characteristic of the academically successful females at Capital High is a deliberate silence, a controlled response to their evolving, ambiguous status as academically successful students...Developing and using this strategy at the high school level enables high achieving African American females to deflect the latest and not too latest hostility and anger that might be directed at them were they to be both highly visible and academically successful (Fordham, 1998, 17).

Fordham (1988) notes how silence and invisibility are the strategies academically successful African American female students adopt in order to deflect anger and hostility they may experience from teacher and peers for being too ‘academic’. In a context in which the majority of African American females were viewed as too loud and as academic underperformers, these young woman had to carve out spaces for their existence through the strategy of silence. In terms of gender pattern, Fordham (1988) notes how being a good student was often associated with masculine behaviors of speaking out and taking up space within the classroom. African American females in her study adopted a different approach to maintain their academic status, by both pushing back on existing racial and gendered patterns of academic behavior. However, in adopting silence, these young women became isolated from non-academically performing African American women. These high

performing African American women had to forge a new path towards maintaining their Black, female, and academic identities, which was not without cost.

In the context of my study, silence is also used as a strategy by West African students, but less in the context of disrupting racial and gender stereotypes than in managing their association with a maligned family history. West African students silenced themselves in order to quell potential negative emotions or reprisals in class from their African American peers (as described by Kabeera). Silence in this case was disempowering, in that it silenced different historical perspectives from emerging in the class. While it was incumbent on the teachers to create more collaborative classrooms, the students' silence was often overlooked. The weight of historical atrocities, pinned onto the bodies of individual West African students, reinforced the "chilling effect" within the classroom, pointing to pedagogical limitations on the part of the teachers to allow for different student perspectives to emerge during discussions of the implications of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Students deployed history for identity serving purposes. These history lessons re-affirmed students existing stereotypes of one another (particular the stereotypes the African American students held of African peers) and in fact, perpetuated anti-Blackness against their peers. This negative repercussions of this ethnic stereotyping led to the teasing and scapegoating of West African students. However, West African students did not remain passive in the fact of stereotyping; they too deployed history to empower themselves against ethnic stereotyping and at times, to uphold ethnoreligious hegemonies, marking their ancestral "superiority" to that of their African American peers. At other times, they

used silence for self-protection from historical blame. AAH class, while providing a space for a celebration of Blackness, nonetheless, harbored moments in which anti-Blackness and ethnoreligious hegemonies reaffirmed the racial framework of white supremacy that continues to divide diasporic communities of Black descent.

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In this chapter, I examined how AAH classroom can sometimes serves as a hegemonic space, even as the AAH curriculum serves to counter hegemonic white-centered historical narratives. Even counterhegemonic spaces have dominant discourses that: a) emphasize simplistic racial ideologies and b) center a narrow framing of US-centric Black identity to the exclusion of more diasporic understandings of Blackness. Yet, on occasion, students have the power to reshape dominant historical discourses, particularly if the teacher is receptive to incorporative alternative narratives within the classroom curriculum.

In Part I of the chapter, I focused on the interplay between students and teachers in controlling classroom narratives around history and current events like BLM. In Part II, I focused primarily on the ways that students deployed history to serve their own identity narratives. Students' personal family histories serve as a source of historical interpretation around topics such as the Atlantic Slave Trade. Discussions around the Atlantic Slave Trade did little to quell existing ethnic tensions between African American and West African students.

Instead of deepening discussions on fraught topics, teachers failed to create a positive learning environment during some units. Silence became a strategy that students



used to protect themselves from negative emotions. Pedagogically, this served a chilling effect in the classroom, which reinforced existing negative stereotypes between the two groups of students with divergent family histories. Particular fraught moments between the students, especially around discussions of the Atlantic Slave Trade, also reaffirmed ethnoreligious hegemonies rather than create the positive affirming Black space for which that AAH class was created.

## Conclusion

The young people in this account acted in often contradictory ways: argumentative and reconciliatory, judgmental, and understanding, concerned and carefree. Their everyday choices shaped the course of afterschool activities, classroom discussions, and impersonal relationships. Through the course of their actions, they engaged in multiple forms of Islamic self-making at Honors Academy. They brought their religion into this public charter school in ways that were multilayered and multivocal, reflecting complex forces shaping their everyday choices and actions.

Throughout the dissertation, I have argued that Islamic self-making among Black Muslim youth at Honors was also a form of Islamic space-making. The account depicts, moreover, how these practices of Islamic self-making were enacted within an increasingly market-driven public education system and were also embedded within larger social processes of racialization, racial formations, ethnicization, and the reproduction of ethnoreligious hegemonies. On two levels of scale: the institutional, and the interpersonal level, Islamic self-making among these youth often perpetuated anti-Blackness through upholding ethnoreligious hegemonies in a white supremacist society (Khabeer, 2016). By denigrating Black Islamic forms, West African students' practice of ethnoreligious hegemonies re-inscribed anti-Black racism within US Muslim communities and upheld white supremacy on a societal level.

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This ethnographic account brings to light the diversity of Black Muslim youth's identities. While race sometimes functioned as a common ground for political solidarity

amongst African American and African youth at Honors, Islam was also not always a uniform source of solidarity either. While students often expressed a view of the Islamic community in which everyone was equal, African youth would sometimes make statements that implied an ethnoreligious hierarchy in which African Muslimness was allegedly more authentic and therefore of higher status than that of African Americans. Their assessments were informed by their ethnic perspectives concerning what made certain practices of Islam more authentic. Hence, while Islamic self-making was varied and innovative in relation to orientations to fashion, language use, and visual culture, ethnic differences introduced an Islamic social hierarchy among Black Muslim youth attending Honors. This study provides one of the first analysis of the nuanced ways that race, ethnic history, and Islam overlap amongst African American and African students within a public school in the United States. With the increasing number of West African youth in coming decades, such nuanced intraracial engagement needs to be further studied. Yet, race, ethnicity, and Islamic identity are complex social constructs, and they are difficult to separate into discrete categories. In fact, Rana (2011) notes the deep mutually constitutive relationship between Islam and race. Despite the inextricability of these constructs, the students in their processes of self-making deployed discrete categories in marking differences among Black Muslims. While they didn't use this term, ethnicity was a prominent category of self-identification for West African students and race was the preferred category for African American students. African American Muslim youth rarely addressed the topic of ethnicity when discussing Islam and Muslimness. West African students' sense of Muslimness tended to be grounded in their ethnic histories and their family's Islamic lineages. Yet, race

talk seldom overlapped with conversations around Islam within and among both groups of students.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research:

This study was limited in its geographic scope, focusing on the everyday activities of Black Muslim youth in a charter school in Southwest Philadelphia. Future studies conducted with other Black communities in other places will determine if insights from this study provide more general insights. Growing up in the uniquely Islamophilic context of a predominantly Black area of Philadelphia meant that these Black Muslim students experienced less virulent Islamophobia and anti-Blackness compared to youth in other parts of Philadelphia, the East Coast, or different regions of the United States with smaller concentrations of and historical legacies among Black Muslims.

Another limitation of the study was due to its limited number of interlocutors. At most, 35 students participated in my study. Yet there was substantial religious and ethnic diversity within my sample. Of course, the experience of individual students is not wholly generalizable to other students who share their religious or even, ethnic, backgrounds. The power of anthropological research lies in its attention to the unique conditions of each interlocutors - the aim is not to simplify or produce generalized findings. Nonetheless, other studies of West African youth in public schools (Traore and Lukens, 2006; Agyepong, 2019) have yielded similar insights into the ethnic and religious attitudes of this subset of youth. Fewer studies have analyzed the interaction between West African and African American Muslim youth, particularly at the intersection of race, religion, and ethnic

histories. It will be up to future studies of relations between youth from these backgrounds to explore possible similarities.

Future studies might also attend to issues that were outside the parameters of this study, such as how Black Muslim youth contend with historical and political inheritances and the ways these shape their educational aspirations as well as political outlook. Further research is needed to disentangle complex interactions around ideas of nationality and Americanness among these groups of youth. This study also included but a few Black Caribbean youth (specifically Jamaican American youth), and their experiences also merit further research consideration.

#### Where are the Students Now?

Each of the young people I interacted with changed during the course of my observation. It has been 1 year since my fieldwork has concluded. The focal students have grown and have developed different concerns than three years ago. The snapshot in time that this dissertation provides does not capture the dynamic nature of their growth or the constant changes affecting their lives.

#### Middle Schoolers:

7<sup>th</sup> Grade: Fatima, Naaila, Nina (featured in Chapter 6)

8<sup>th</sup> Grade: Kania, Kalila, Abdou, Adeeb, Jerome (featured in Chapter 5)

#### High Schoolers:

9<sup>th</sup> Grade: Kabeera, Shantell, Zara

11<sup>th</sup> Grade: Ariya, Asia, Maha, Yamin

11<sup>th</sup> Grade (non-Muslim MSA members): Asha, Mary, Rania, Andrea

12<sup>th</sup> Graders: Vera, Naia, Sia

### The MSA

The MSA meetings shifted to a virtual format during COVID-19. The meetings occurred every Friday during Ramadan. Mrs. Penney organized a program called Chat n Chew, during which students could break fast in virtual company with their MSA peers. Mrs. Penney organized quiz games to test Islamic knowledge during these Friday sessions. The students ended up receiving swag from the leftover money from their fundraising efforts, as Mrs. Penney had promised.

### 7th -> 9th Grade

Fatima is now a 9th grader, and she continues to make Tiktok videos. During a trip to Niger, Fatima posted more photos of her trip and seemed to be less critical of her African identity that she was previously.

Naaila moved to Seattle with her family. Her father moved the family there for IT training. She and I still keep in touch via email. Naaila wrote that she was enjoying 9th grade but staying very occupied: "I don't even have a time to text a friend 9 grade freshman make you sooo busy with different kind of tasks at one time."

Nina remains at Honors and shared that she was really enjoying 9th grade African American history. She was currently learning "about Egypt and how African Americans impacted the world. They are nice topics." The Honors students are back in school after a year of virtual school, and Nina was excited to have her own locker at school.

8<sup>th</sup> -> 10th Grade

Kania ended up transferring to Central High School, one of the highest achieving schools in Philadelphia. Her “African father was so proud” (her words) that they went out for a rare dinner to celebrate.

Kalila remains at Honors. She hopes to become a Physician’s Assistant and last sought out my help to transfer to Biology class. She was not sure how to contact the school counselor. Kalila also reflected on how her friendship with Kania had deteriorated after she moved to Central. She found solace in online video games with her African cousins and friends from around the US.

Abdou shared that he initially didn’t feel challenged at school. However, his love of history continues to motivate him in World History class. He texted: “The boring part was mostly for the first week, now it has picked up pace, and i’m learning a lot more. I’m recently enjoying world history, we’re learning about theories of early migration to the americas and I surprisingly find archaeology fun. I like the collecting evidence aspect of it. Comparing the theories based on the evidence and stuff.” Abdou continued to be a passionate learner, as I observed during AAH class.

Adeeb moved to a new part of Philadelphia. He spoke about how he was starting to forget Geez, his language, and that he didn’t want to forget his roots in Ethiopia. He also shared that his parents bought spectacles for him, since he had spent too much time on the computer during the pandemic and was starting to have weakened eyesight.

Jerome and I lost touch unfortunately. The last I had heard from him was during my observations during AAH class.

### 9<sup>th</sup> -> 11th Grade

Kabeera struggled to transition back to in person school. She texted me “it’s weird, I feel like a freshman. It’s weird being upper class-men. It went by so fast. Imma make best out of it.” Kabeera shared her passion for history further: “I love history so the class (US History) is never boring for me. Right now we’re doing this project about the 13 colonies. We have to make a brochure, but I’m not reactive so it will most likely look dry.” In her characteristic way, Kabeera did her best to transition from virtual to in person schooling.

Shantell is enjoying 10th grade. She, however, is afraid of getting the Covid vaccine because she doesn’t trust it and because there are too many risks. She told me that she missed me and appreciated the gift card I had sent (which I had sent to every student, teacher, and administrator who had made my project possible).

Zara began to wear an overgarment daily to school. Her conversion to Islam led to her involvement in the Germantown Salafi Masjid. The last time we chatted, Zara was considering whether she should wear a shayla, the face covering that only reveals the eyes. Her conversion had only led to a deepening sense of religiosity, which she hoped to express through her sartorial style.

### The College Students

11<sup>th</sup> Grade: Ariya, Asia, Maha, Yamin

11<sup>th</sup> Grade (non-Muslim MSA members): Asha, Mary, Rania, Andrea

12<sup>th</sup> Graders: Vera, Naia, Sia

The 11th graders were highly successive in their bid for college acceptances, despite the uncertainty of applying during the pandemic. Ariya, Maha, Asha, and Mary



gained acceptance to Temple University. Asia really wanted to go to Penn State to leave some distance between her family and college, but she also ended up attending Temple because it was closer to home. Rania received a track scholarship to a state college in Connecticut. Yamin also received a track scholarship to Lehigh University.

In the case of the Muslim girls, they commuted to college from home because it was cheaper and because of their family's preferences. Temple had a strong Muslim Students Association, as well as a strong group of West African women, factors which the girls' parents shared approval. Asha and Mary got their own apartments with the scholarship money they had received from Temple. Vera and Sia also became successful students at Temple University, with Vera studying to be a teacher and Sia hoping to become a future dentist. Naia received a full ride to the University of Pennsylvania.

As graduation presents, I made sure to send giftcards to all of these students. Their hard work and persistence resulted in excellent outcomes. Yamin called me to thank me, and he told me that he prayed that I would graduate soon from my program as well. He continues to find time to pray at Lehigh University, despite his busy track schedule and academic commitments. He summarized his views on college during our last conversation: "Masha-Allah. May Allah make it easy. College is not too and, and for the most, yes, it is everything I dreamed of." Yamin's positive outlook on college remains integrally tied to his strong Islamic faith.

#### Honors Academy High School Graduation

What better way to celebrate these young Black graduates than during high school graduation? Despite the difficulties of planning a graduation during a pandemic, Honors

decided to host an outdoors graduation ceremony in an amphitheater in Philadelphia. I sat with Yamin's family to celebrate his graduation. Near us were Asia and Ariya's family as well. The West African family and friends had shown up wearing bright colors and traditional clothes.

Principal Sawyer began the ceremony by reciting a verse from the Quran, "Read, in the name of your Lord who Created You!" (Quran Surah Al Alaq, Verse 96:1). Mrs. Sawyer gave a brief speech about how knowledge was highly valued within her faith and how this view towards knowledge drove her to become a Principal. The Quran verse was solemnly received by families in the audience, particularly the West African Muslim families.

Yamin's family and I expressed loud cheers every time Yamin received an award (multiple times). We cheered loudly for each MSA graduate. It was especially memorable when Asha walked across the stage, wrapped in the flag of Liberia. She was eager to remember her roots. The palpable excitement and joy as these students graduated marked the end of a long journey for them.

After the graduation, the girls reminded me of a graduation party at their home. The three Muslim girls - Asia, Ariya, and Maha coordinated outfits - bright yellow and purple. They spent the entire evening taking selfies and group photos with their loved ones (including me). They served food to all their guests - rice, chicken, lamb, fufu, vegetables, as well as an array of desserts.

As I prepared to leave after an evening of delicious food and celebrations, Ariya's mom turned to me and Mrs. Penney. She asked us to "pray for the girls because they are

our future. Any duas will help them become successful and stay on the right path in the future.” Ariya’s mother believed in the power of prayer, particularly in keeping her daughter and her friends on the path of faith. She hoped that the girls would grow up under the guidance of their teachers and within the context of a practicing Islamic lifestyle. The deeply rooted faith which guided Ariya and many of her Muslim peers was apparent on this special day of celebration. In their public and private lives, on occasions banal and grand, Islam continued to be a force of influence shaping their present and future aspirations.

#### My Positionality (Coda)

Just as my interlocutors changed during the course of my research, I noticed changes within myself as well, particularly in my research identity. As anthropologist Stanton Wortham stated in his (2005) book, *Learning Identity: The Joint Emergence of Social Identification*: “We are constantly and inevitably changing, even if in small ways, becoming different types of people as we learn new things” (25). Through my own fieldwork experiences, I moved from apprehensive to comfortable critical inquiry. I began to view myself as both an outsider, due to my status as a non-Black person, but also as an occasional insider in terms of my deep relationships with my interlocutors and our shared faith backgrounds.

I remember a particular exchange that I shared with Mrs. Penney in the midst of my fieldwork days on 2/21/20.

Irteza: “They said, ‘you’re not Black, so why are you working in this community?’ I also taught before, and I have comfort around children.”

Mrs. Penney: “I don’t know why, that’s interesting why they assume you won’t mesh well with the kids. They are assuming there might be some tension. I see you as someone who’s known us for years!”

Irteza: “Historically, researchers are white – sometimes they are nice, sometimes they exploit the community. That’s where a lot of research comes from. I try to think about, what is it like for you? How am I giving back?”

Mrs. Penney: “Well, the kids love you and I love having you around.”

Mrs. Penney assuaged my worries about my powerful position as a researcher. She reminded me that love was a key element in the relationships I forged. While the relations of power that I held - the ability to tell the story that I want, the power to select the facts that I desire, the chance to portray the students in the way that I wanted - were never far from the surface. Yet, these acts of power, my concerns and my trepidations, existed simultaneously alongside the deep respect and love I felt for the students and teacher with whom I engaged daily. I was reminded once again of anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran reflections on fieldwork as home work.

“My own narrative has begun with the "field" and worked its way steadily homeward...My opening account of "being there" has been displaced by an emerging narrative of "getting there." Such a movement enables me to think through more clearly the act of ‘being here’” (Visweswaran, 1994, 102).

I felt that my journey homeward had been a process made easy by the people I got to know over two years. Just a subway ride away (Passaro, 1998), Honors Academy became a form of “home.” My act of dwelling in space and time within the halls of Honors Academy led to the clear emergence of a “here,” a feeling of belonging and embeddedness that I had not expected when I began my fieldwork. Critical inquiry and every living existed side by side for me, with my interlocutors serving as my teachers along the process.

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I began my study with a group of focal students. Two and a half years later, I find it interesting to note where the students are now. Their educational progress is the reminder of the passage of time over the course of a dissertation research project. These students' growth is the most provocative reminder that a dissertation is simply a snapshot in time. Like them, I too am a product of the moment in which I reside.

My hope for this dissertation was to explore how young Black Muslim youth in one school in Philadelphia made sense of religion, ethnic identity, race, and future aspirations. In an era where Black lives are still at peril and still turned into a single, flattening, essentialized story, I wanted to write a story that would illuminate the myriad possibilities and sites of existence for Black Muslim youth.

The light that guided me throughout this process was that of the young people to whom I dedicate this work. I treasure the joy that they brought me. I hope that the light they shine illuminates the chapters of their life ahead.

## Appendix

### Data from Mr. Selwick

We started the year budgeted to have 635 students in grades 7-12. Partway through the year, due to enrollment trends, we adjusted that target down to 620. As of today, we have 624 active students, and 533 students in the grades you are observing (7-11). In the entire building (K-12) there are 1182 enrolled as of today.

Of the 624 active high schoolers (7-12) in our building, 335 are female and 289 are male.

American Indian/Alaskan Native	1
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1
Black	615
White	4
Multi-Racial/Two or more races	2
Asian	1

We provide free breakfast and lunch to all of our students, but here is the breakdown on who would qualify

Directly certified for free meals (receive government assistance)	450
Qualify based on income	86
Do not qualify based on income	41
Data missing	47

Our school was not operated by the Achievement Network at the time current 11<sup>th</sup> graders were in Kindergarten, so I do not have data that far back. The furthest I could go back is the 2011-2012 school year, when they were in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Entered in grade 3	56
Entered in grade 4	6
Entered in grade 5	2
Entered in grade 6	6
Entered in grade 7	2

List of Teachers and Religious Leaders:

Honors Academy Teachers:
Mrs. Penney – 7 <sup>th</sup> grade English
Mr. Hussam – 11 <sup>th</sup> grade English
Mr. Aden – Enrichment Teacher; Muslim
Mrs. Sawyer – Principal; Muslim
Mr. McAvoy – Assistant Principal
Ms. Roberts – Dean of Cultures and Discipline
Mrs. Areeb – High School Math; Muslim
Ms. Westing – 11 <sup>th</sup> grade history
Mr. Daro – 10 <sup>th</sup> grade history
Mr. Vincent – 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade AAH
Mrs. Longwood – 7 <sup>th</sup> Grade Ancient History
Ms. Mirree – ESL
Ms. Jamison – Junior Seminar
Mrs. Lyons – Freshman Seminar; Muslim
Mrs. Harris – History Teacher
Ms. Olney – 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math



Mr. Selwick – Data Administrator
Principal Madden – Principal of Triumph Academy within the Achievement Charter Network. Well known and respected.

<u>Muslim Leaders:</u>
Masjid Jumuah – Mosque in West Philly
Muslims Inc. – Nonprofit for Food Provision
Mrs. Rua – Leading the Feeding Program; Imam Nur’s Wife
Imam Nur – Religious Leader of Masjid Jumuah
Mrs. Fatima - Community Volunteer at Masjid Jumuah
Imam Qutaiba – Local Religious Leader
Imam Suhaib - Local Religious Leader
Imam Ware - Local Religious Leader

Honors Academy Students:

<u>Middle Schoolers:</u>
7th Grade: Fatima, Naaila, Nina (featured in Chapter 7)

8th Grade: Kania, Kalila, Abdou, Adeeb, Jerome (featured in Chapter 10)
<u>High Schoolers:</u>
9th Grade: Kabeera, Shantell, Zara
11th Grade: Ariya, Asia, Maha, Yamin
11th Grade (non-Muslim MSA members): Asha, Mary, Rania, Andrea
12th Grade: Vera, Naia, Sia
<u>Other Students:</u>
Mariya, Saraiya, Omar, Hawa, Djamila, Ore
Amber, Anis, Maya, Tooma, Mariam, Sami, Mina

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