LOS MUSULMANES BORICUAS:
PUERTO RICAN MUSLIMS AND THE IDEA OF COSMOPOLITANISM

By
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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2019
The purpose of scholarship is not to gain knowledge, but to learn to contemplate the world in light of our incurable ignorance.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this dissertation would never have been possible without the many people who contributed and offered helpful critique to my work and supported and encouraged me along the way. My deepest thanks go out to each and every one of them.

To my dissertation committee, Dr. Anna Peterson, Dr. Benjamin Soares, and Dr. Efraín Barradas, for providing valuable insight from their own research background and experience — on Latin American religion, ethics, and the building blocks of academic writing, the anthropological study of global Islam, and Puerto Rican culture and history respectively. Special thanks are due to Dr. Terje Østebø, my dissertation committee chair. From the very first time I talked with him over the phone about attending the University of Florida I enjoyed both his scholarly acumen and his lighthearted humor. Over the last five years he always acknowledged the strengths of my work while constantly challenging me to go deeper and push further. I am forever indebted to him and his mentorship.

There were other faculty and staff at the University of Florida who greatly influenced my research and supported my work with resources along the way. Associated with the Department of Religion, I benefitted from studying under and collaborating with Dr. David Hackett, Dr. Robin Wright, Dr. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, Dr. Whitney A. Sanford, Dr. Abdoulaye Kane, and Dr. Manuel Vásquez. Thank you to my fellow graduate students and doctoral candidates who sharpened me with their own fascinating research and questions, companionship, and critique during our times together. The University of Florida libraries’ resources and staff are an immense treasure all around. In particular I would like to thank Dr. Megan Daly, librarian
for Classics, Philosophy, and Religion for pointing me in the direction of valuable resources. Thanks are also due to Paul Losch, the Head Librarian for the Latin American and Caribbean Collection. I am also grateful for the support of the University of Florida’s Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere, its Director Dr. Barbara Mennel, and Associate Director Dr. Sophia Krzys Acord. Not only did they support me with a graduate assistantship in my final year of writing, but they broadened my appreciation for humanities research, writing, and collaboration. Dr. Joseph Spillane and Dr. Mark Hoyer also provided valuable perspective, feedback, and mentoring throughout the dissertation process. Finally, Anne Newman made the logistics of my graduate student experience a breeze. If ever I had a question, Anne had a solution as the Department of Religion’s Senior Secretary.

My sincere gratitude also goes to Dr. Jeffrey Kripal, Dr. Stephen Prothero, and Dr. Thomas Tweed for offering advice, giving counsel, and pointing me in the direction of faculty, universities, and libraries that would help me pursue this course of study. In particular, I am thankful to Dr. Tweed for putting University of Florida on my radar in the first place.

Thank you also to Rev. Dr. Steven P. Mueller, Rev. Dr. James Bachman, Dr. Jack Schultz, Dr. Christine Lawton and the many other faculty I learned from and studied under as an undergraduate and graduate student at Concordia University Irvine, California. My research with Latinx Muslims began with a master’s thesis back in 2012. The faculty at Concordia not only supported my interests, but taught me valuable lessons about research and writing along the way.
Thanks also to those who offered me guidance, hospitality, and friendship during my fieldwork in Puerto Rico. Dr. Raymond Laureano and family, for being a research collaborator and superb host in Carolina and Juana Díaz. Omar Ramadan Santiago, for your research insights, friendship, and for introducing me to people I needed to know to make this research a success. To each of the imams, members, and leaders of the mosques and Muslim communities I visited throughout Puerto Rico, thank you for opening your homes, lives, and places of prayer to me. Specifically, I would like to thank Sheikh Yunus, Soraya, Adrián, Sumayah and family, and Imam Ahmad Salman and family for generosity at every turn. Thank you also to my other hosts in Puerto Rico: George and Lambda, Livia, Cristina, Laura del Olmas, and Cesar Piñeiro. Finally, I appreciated the staff at the library of the Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y El Caribe in Viejo San Juan for assistance in researching the history of the Puerto Rican Muslim community.

My appreciation goes to those who offered me guidance, hospitality, and friendship during my fieldwork in New York and New Jersey as well. Uta Kriefall, Matt Popovits, Johnson Rethinasamy, Kelly Sullivan, and Kevin Sharp for housing assistance in Harlem and Queens. All the staff, volunteers, and individuals who welcomed me for interviews or participant observation at MAS Queens, the North Hudson Islamic Education Center, the Islamic Cultural Center NYC, and at other institutions and events throughout the city. Finally, I am thankful for the assistance of Felix and Anibal and other staff at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (CENTRO) at Hunter College as they helped me in my archival research on Puerto Rican Muslims in the city. I would also like to thank José Yusuf Vilmenay for many discussions over food and in parking lots in
Gainesville and San Juan. You were a constant companion from the start to the finish of this project and it was a pleasure to have you present at my dissertation defense.

To the students who studied with me in the courses I had the opportunity to teach and lead at the University of Florida, including Religion and the News, Introduction to Islam, Islam in the Americas, and Religion in North America, thank you for providing valuable feedback and insight to me as an emerging scholar.

Thank you to colleagues, co-presenters, and panel presiders and respondents who gave me valuable feedback along the way at conferences and meetings such as the American Academy of Religion Annual Meetings (2015-2017); the Latin American Studies Association Conference (2016); the Caribbean Studies Association Conference (2017); the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center and the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs at Florida International University for their invitation to speak in Fall 2017; and the American Academy of Religion Western Region Meeting (2019). Presenting on portions of my dissertation — or ideas still being developed — and receiving questions, comments, and critique helped me refine my argumentation and take my research in new directions.

To the University of Florida’s Center for Global Islamic Studies for funding my follow-up fieldwork in Summer 2018, thank you for providing resources and opportunities such as this throughout my studies. Also, to the Spalding Trust U.K. for a dissertation writing grant for the 2018-2019 academic year. Thank you for your support of a scholar working across religious and cultural boundaries and studying a tradition that is not their own. Your support of inter-religious research and dialogue is immensely appreciated.
To First Lutheran Church Gainesville, specifically Rev. John Glover and the leadership of the congregation, thank you for financial, emotional, and spiritual support over the last five years. Thank you for allowing me to focus on my doctoral program while also serving alongside First Lutheran amidst the shifting circumstances of life.

To my mother and father, who are always proud of me no matter what. While you may never have guessed that my academic journey would lead to a dissertation on Puerto Rican Muslims you never questioned my motivations and always stood behind me. Your never-ending support made all of this possible. Thank you for putting up with me all these years.

Finally, to Paula, you are the most intelligent, compassionate, and thorough individual I know. Your person and work inspire me daily and your constant companionship, challenging questions, and robust conversations contributed directly to this work. You are the greatest joy of my life, my most precious blessing, and that which I am most proud of beyond any academic accomplishment or distinction.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF KEY TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalization, Religion, and Cosmopolitanism</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Idea of Cosmopolitanism</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Idea(l) of Muslim Cosmopolitanism</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Considerations</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Multi-local Ethnography</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techniques and Data Interpretation</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Observation?</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope and Sequence</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 THE CONTINGENT LINEAGES OF PUERTO RICAN MUSLIM COSMOPOLITANISM</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims in Puerto Rico from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabs, Palestinians, and Other Muslim Immigrants to Puerto Rico</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “Original Gangstas”: Puerto Rican Muslim Converts in the U.S.</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreams of al-Andalus</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 PUERTO RICAN MUSLIMS AND THE SEARCH FOR “AUTHENTIC” PUERTO RICAN PEOPLEHOOD</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Authentic Puerto Rican Culture?</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Losing Family, Gaining Family</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of Pork, Peoplehood, and Halal Puerto Rican Food</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Cultura Borracha</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boricua Halal</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Fiesta de Santiago Apostól and Muslim Presence in Puerto Rican Culture</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,000 Words and the Significance of an Arabic Linguistic Heritage</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing, Sweat, and Puerto Rican Muslim Womens’ Fashion</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 PUERTO RICAN MUSLIMS AND THE “MUSLIM WORLD”</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Critical Cosmopolitanism from the Margins</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinians and Puerto Ricans Between <em>Ummah</em> and <em>asaBoricua</em></td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibn Khaldûn and <em>asaBoricua</em></td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories from the Perceived Margins</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the Perspective of Palestinians in Puerto Rico</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicality and Principles in Vega Alta</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Solidarities Between Puerto Rican Muslims and Palestinians</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 AMÉRICAN MUSLIMS</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration and movement among Puerto Ricans in the U.S.</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Puerto Rican Muslim Ninja in Staten Island</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican Muslims and Hurricane Maria</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the Intersections of the So-Called Immigrant/Indigenous Binary</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Alianza Islámica and Puerto Rican Political Citizenship in New York City</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music, Food, and the Signification of Puerto Rican Muslim Identity</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Chapters</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications to the Study of Global Islam, Religion in the Americas, and Other Fields</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Areas for Further Consideration</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF REFERENCES</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-1</td>
<td>Giraldo — “Jerry” — in the small prayer room in Jayuya, Puerto Rico.</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-2</td>
<td>The original locations of Alianza Islámica on Lexington Avenue (left) and in the Bronx (right)</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>Puerto Rican Muslims refer to motifs and architectural designs like those in the lobby of the Ateneo Puertorriqueño (left) and the courtyard of the House of Spain (right).</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>Puerto Rican “Muslim” Pride image popular on Facebook and other social media online.</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-2</td>
<td>Neighbors, friends, and family gather to celebrate Eid al-Fitr in Bayamón (2017). Individuals hailed from Iran, Morocco, Egypt, the U.S., and Puerto Rico and the food featured a mix of these different traditions.</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-3</td>
<td>A group of vejigantes and caballeros pose for a photo with festival attendees in Loíza Aldea, Puerto Rico.</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>Samuel Lind with one of his commissioned posters featuring vejigantes and Santiago Apostól in his Loíza Aldea workshop.</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>One of the Santiago Apostól figures paraded through the streets of Loíza Aldea, Puerto Rico during the festival, featuring Santiago Matamoros (St. James the Moorslayer).</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6</td>
<td>Centro Islamico de Puerto Rico in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico.</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-1</td>
<td>Local mosques organize a large gathering for Eid al-Fitr for Puerto Rican Muslims across the island each year at the San Juan Convention Center.</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-2</td>
<td>Ahmed’s “souk in a trunk” outside the mosque in Vega Alta, Puerto Rico.</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-3</td>
<td>Leaders at the Vega Alta mosque meeting to discuss dawah and tensions in the community.</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-4</td>
<td>Adrián Robles showcases one of his murals on the UPRRP campus.</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-1</td>
<td>Youssef Ali-Abdullah in his Staten Island dojo and local mosque.</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-2</td>
<td>La Alianza Islámica during the Puerto Rican Day Parade in Harlem. Ca. early 1990s.</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jorge Fabel Pabon (also known as “Popmaster Fabel”) wearing one of the original Alianza Islámica sweatshirts featuring the trigueño symbols of identity — Taíno, Spanish, and African. ................................................................. 231
# LIST OF KEY TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abaya</td>
<td>A robe-like loose overgarment or dress, worn by some Muslim women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adhan</td>
<td>Ritual call to prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmadis</td>
<td>Messianic movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in the Punjab (formerly British-controlled part of India) in 1889. Their status as &quot;Muslims&quot; is controversial, and Ahmadis claim persecution and marginalization. Known for peaceful propagation of their beliefs through literature, missionary activity, and community service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Alayhi s-Salaam</td>
<td>Literally, “peace be upon him.” A conventional complimentary phrase attached to the names of the prophets of Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alhamdulillah</td>
<td>Literally, “praise be to God.” A conventional phrase to give thanks to Allah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alianza Islámica</td>
<td>The Alianza Islámica was a Latinx Muslim organization founded by Puerto Rican Muslims in 1987 and was the U.S.’s first Latinx specific Muslim organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALMA</td>
<td>Atlanta Latino Muslim Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asabiyah</td>
<td>Social solidarity or “group spirit” with an emphasis on the cohesiveness, camaraderie, and unity of the group. The term became popularized with the publication of Ibn Khaldūn’s Muqaddimah. In the modern period the term has been used to refer to solidarity positively or “tribalism” with a more negative connotation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bani Saqr</td>
<td>A community of Puerto Rican Muslims in Newark, New Jersey that was active in the 1970s and early 80s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boricua</td>
<td>A term for “Puerto Rican” derived from the Taíno word Boriken, to illustrate their recognition of the island's Taíno heritage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bozales</td>
<td>A black slave in the Americas during the period of Spanish colonial rule, brought directly from Africa as opposed to ladinos who had familiarity with Iberian culture and language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CAIR</strong></td>
<td>Council on American-Islamic Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C.E.</strong></td>
<td>Common Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CENTRO</strong></td>
<td>Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, City University of New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dabke</strong></td>
<td>A Levantine Arab folk dance that combines circle and line dancing. Widely performed at weddings and other celebrations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Da’i</strong></td>
<td>One who invites others to faith, to prayer, or to Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dawah</strong></td>
<td>Literally, “call.” The term has been used widely to refer to calls to prayer, to pious Islamic practice, or to conversion. It has been conceived of as the work of governments, organizations, transnational institutions, and individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eid al-Fitr</strong></td>
<td>Feast of the breaking of the Ramadan fast. Lasts for three days after the sighting of the crescent-moon on the last day of Ramadan. It is a canonical feast on the Muslim calendar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>El Barrio</strong></td>
<td>Literally, “the neighborhood” this is a term used to refer to Spanish Harlem in Manhattan, where a large number of Puerto Ricans and other Latinx immigrants came to reside throughout the twentieth-century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fitra</strong></td>
<td>The original state of humanity as Muslims as created by Allah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FPN</strong></td>
<td>Five Percent Nation, a break-off group from the Nation of Islam. Founded by Clarence 13X its members emphasize the use of “divine mathematics” for self-realization and empowerment as “gods.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hadith</strong></td>
<td>Report of the words, deeds, or traditions of the prophet Muhammad and his Companions. Considered an authoritative source of revelation, second only to the Qur’an.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hejaz</strong></td>
<td>The western coastal area of what is today known as Saudi Arabia, home to the early Muslim community and the cities of Mecca and Medina (also spelled Hijaz).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ICNA</strong></td>
<td>Islamic Circle of North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iftar</td>
<td>Literally, “breakfast.” Used here in relation to the daily breaking of the fast during Ramadan. Usually a time for familial or community gatherings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPNA</td>
<td>Islamic Party of North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISNA</td>
<td>Islamic Society of North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jahiliyyah</td>
<td>The time before Islam. Considered a time of “ignorance” prior to monotheism and the recitation of divine law to Muhammad. Also used in modern times to refer to the beliefs and practices of secular modernity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jihad</td>
<td>While the specific meaning depends on context it refers to striving, struggling, or exerting one’s self on behalf of Islam and the Muslim community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumaah</td>
<td>Congregational prayer, held at midday every Friday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khutbah</td>
<td>Sermon or speech given by an imam during the Friday midday prayer services at the mosque or on the occasion of special feasts and festivals such as Eid al-Fitr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladinios</td>
<td>Blacks, enslaved or otherwise, familiar with the religion, cultures, and languages of the Iberian Peninsula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LADO</td>
<td>Latino America Dawah Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LALMA</td>
<td>Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin Kings</td>
<td>Also known as the “Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation” (ALKQN, ALKN, LKN) it is the oldest and largest Latinx street gang worldwide with roots stretching back to its foundation in Chicago, Illinois in 1954.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMASFV</td>
<td>Latino Muslim Association of the San Fernando Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masjид</td>
<td>Arabic term for the English word “mosque.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mestizaje  Spanish term for the process of cultural and historical miscegenation.

Mezquita  Spanish term for “mosque.” Not derived from the Spanish word for “mosquito” as popularly suggested.

Minbar  An ascended space or pulpit from which the imam delivers the khutbah.

Morisco  Former Muslim pressured by the Catholic Church in the Iberian Peninsula to convert to Christianity under the threat of death after the Spanish crown outlawed the open practice of Islam in its territories during the sixteenth-century.


NHIEC  North Hudson Islamic Education Center

Niqab  A veil that covers all of the face apart from the eyes.

NJ  New Jersey

NOI  Nation of Islam. African-American Muslim organization, which emerged alongside black nationalist movements in the U.S. and abroad. Considered “heterodox” by some, the Nation of Islam was founded in 1930 by Wallace D. Fard and later led by Elijah Muhammad. Later broke apart into branches led by Warith Deen Mohammad and Louis Farrakhan.

PBUH  Peace be upon him,

PIEDAD  Propagación Islámica para la Educación y la Devoción a Aláh el Divino (Islamic dawah to educate and worship Allah the Most High). Also means “piety.”

PLO  Palestinian Liberation Organization
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rakah</td>
<td>The act of prostration accompanying ritual prayers. There are two to four <em>rakahs</em> performed during each prayer, depending on the time of day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramadan</td>
<td>The ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, during which obligatory fasting from eating, drinking, and sexual activity is required during daylight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconquista</td>
<td>Term used to describe the Christian re-conquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the eight-century C.E. until the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada in 1491 C.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salafi</td>
<td>Name (derived from <em>salaf</em>, “pious predecessors”) for a reform movement that developed from the late nineteenth-century through to the twenty-first with a focus on purity and piety and the rejection of traditional <em>madhabs</em> in favor of ethical and modernist interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunnah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shahadah</td>
<td>Recitation of the witness to the Islamic faith. It is seen as a declaration of acceptance of Islam by a convert. It is said twice, once in Arabic and once in the convert’s native language, in the presence of at least one other Muslim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheikh</td>
<td>A pre-Islamic honorific title, meaning “leader” or “notable.” Used in relation to religion for someone who possesses learning in religious sciences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Souk</td>
<td>Market or marketplace, bazaar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunnah</td>
<td>The established custom, habits, conduct, precedents, and oral tradition of Muhammad and his Companions. Believed to be a “living Qur’an” that helps establish the norms of practicing Islam and living out the precepts contained in the Qur’an. Considered a primary source of Islamic law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWT</td>
<td>Subhanahu wa ta’ala,”May He be glorified and exalted,” conventional Muslim honorific said after referencing Allah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabiah</td>
<td>Universal or Quranic nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablighi Jamaat</td>
<td>Reform movement founded in 1921 by Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas in Delhi, India. Emphasis on propagation of the faith, reform of personal religious practices, and defense of Islam and Muslim minority populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takbir</td>
<td>The phrase “Allahu akbar,” which implies that God is greater than anything else that can be named. Part of the call to prayer, it is also used as a chant for religious purposes and as a slogan at political rallies and demonstrations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tariqah</td>
<td>Literally, “path” or “way.” Refers to Sufi orders or spiritual system of a specific master teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tawhid</td>
<td>The foundational doctrine of Islam, declaring the absolute oneness, unity, and uniqueness of Allah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thobe</td>
<td>Also referred to as a thawb, kandoora, or dishdasha it is an ankle-length garment, usually with long sleeves, similar to a robe, kaftan or tunic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tres Raíces</td>
<td>Term used to refer to the three “roots” of Puerto Rican culture — Taíno, African, and Iberian/Spanish. Also referred to in regard to individual persons that bear trigueño or trigueña heritage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPRRP</td>
<td>Universidad de Puerto Rico Rio Piedras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>The United States of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Zulu Nation</td>
<td>An international hip-hop awareness and identity movement founded by artist Africa Bambaataa, which aims to revitalize ghetto culture and marginalized ethnic groups through hip-hop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wudu</td>
<td>Obligatory cleansing rituals performed in order to make an adherent pure for ritual purposes. Required for men and women before prayer. Consists of washing the hands, mouth, face, arms, and feet with water. In the absence of water, clay or sand can be substituted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vejigante</td>
<td>A character in Puerto Rican festivals down for their brighty colored, ornate masks corresponding to the colors of costumes (traditionally green, yellow, red, and black).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

LOS MUSULMANES BORICUAS: PUERTO RICAN MUSLIMS AND THE IDEA OF COSMOPOLITANISM

By
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August 2019

Chair: Terje Østebø
Major: Religion

This dissertation focuses on the everyday lives of Puerto Rican Muslims and addresses questions of identity, ethnicity, and religion to provide a picture of how Islam takes shape in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims, specifically in and through their relationships with others as “quadruple minorities.” It will illustrate how Puerto Rican Muslims become *Puerto Rican Muslims* through their relationships with various histories, alongside other Puerto Ricans and their conception and construction of “authentic” Puerto Rican culture, with other Muslims on the perceived margins of the so-called “Muslim world,” and as both Puerto Rican *and* Muslim in the U.S. This multi-local ethnographic study based in Puerto Rico, New York, Florida, New Jersey, and online helps enrich our understanding of Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas. Furthermore, it allows scholars to elaborate on the idea of cosmopolitanism in general and the idea(l) of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” in particular. It provides a nuanced picture of cosmopolitanism as a quotidian and commonplace process of beliefs, narratives, and social strategies deployed to navigate the diversity of relationships that confront various actors in the late modern world. Its research and conclusions are relevant for multiple fields including global Islamic studies, religion in
the Americas, Puerto Rican studies, religious studies, and ethnographic studies in a
global and digital age.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Most people would not know there is a mosque in Aguadilla — a large town on the west coast of Puerto Rico. Even people who have lived there their entire lives are unaware of the prayer room located above the Casa de Empeño pawn shop and next to the Arroba Café along Puerto Rico Highway Two in and out of town. Even I drove past it the first time I visited and had to double-back before I saw the Arabic script on the windows and the small sign that indicated this was a place of prayer. Following a couple of young men up the stairs, I entered into the small space that would end up being packed with 22 men, one woman, and five children for prayer. As they started their prayers you could still hear the hum of the highway outside, the purr of the air conditioning units keeping the crowded room cool and the distant sound of the waves on Crashboat Beach over the prayers.

The majority of the people there were Palestinian. Before the prayers they talked about news out of Jerusalem, got updates on family members and friends “back home” in Palestine, and one man fiddled with his Handala keychain, a creation of the Palestinian artist Naji al-Ali, which stands as a symbol for the Palestinian refugees expelled or forced to flee in the twentieth-century. After the prayers a few congregants gathered around me to welcome me. Among the Palestinians there are three local Puerto Rican converts — Marcel, Benjamin, and Sammet Caban. Later, at the café next door, Sammet told me about his life and his conversion to Islam. A computer programmer, he was born and raised in Aguadilla. Born into a “very involved Messianic Jewish family”\(^1\) he encountered a young Muslim woman during college who began to

confront what he called the “misconceptions” he had about Islam, the Qur’an, and Muslims. After fixing the young woman’s computer she gave him a green, embroidered, Qur’an as a thank you. He began reading it. Around the same time, he reached out to his uncle Wilfredo Amr Ruiz, a Puerto Rican Muslim living in Miami who was director of the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) en Español. Ruiz taught him about the “Islamic roots of Puerto Rican culture.” In 2012, Sammet declared his witness to the Islamic faith (shahadah) in the tiny room above the pawn shop. While he sometimes feels misunderstood and maligned as a Muslim in Puerto Rico, he is proud to be a Puerto Rican Muslim. “You have to be patient with other Puerto Ricans, teach them the basics. It’s a battle for us — a jihad of the soul and mind — but it’s worth it.”

Sammet’s story is but one of thousands of Puerto Rican Muslim narratives of conversion and community, identity, and Islam. His speaks not only to the ostracism that many Puerto Ricans feel as quadruple minorities — Puerto Rican in the Muslim community, Muslim in the Puerto Rican community, and Puerto Rican and Muslim in the U.S. — but also the transnational, interconnected, and cosmopolitan nature of their identities. Spanning multiple locations across the U.S. and Puerto Rico and in connection with other locales throughout the so-called “Muslim world,” the Puerto Rican Muslim community is a cosmopolitan one, built through the active choices of Puerto Rican Muslims dealing with the diversity of the late-modern world and its attendant challenges and opportunities. Theirs is not only a testimony to the difficulties of this diversity, but also the openings that such cosmopolitan circumstances provide for notions of identity and community, religion and ethnicity.
I dig into these questions of identity, ethnicity, and religion to provide a picture of how Islam takes shape in the context of Puerto Rican Muslims’ everyday lives and their relationships to others as quadruple minorities. It will illustrate how Puerto Rican Muslims become *Puerto Rican Muslims* through their relationships with various histories, alongside other Puerto Ricans and their conception and construction of “authentic” Puerto Rican culture, with others on the perceived margins of the so-called Muslim world, and as both Puerto Rican and Muslim in the U.S. This empirically rich study is important because it helps us enrich our understanding of Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas. Furthermore, the case of Puerto Rican Muslims’ everyday experiences allows me to elaborate on the idea of cosmopolitanism in general and the idea(1) of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” in particular. In this way, I go beyond describing a Muslim community in the Americas and further develops theoretical concepts such as “cosmopolitanism” and “Muslim cosmopolitanism.” Through careful ethnographic research it provides a nuanced picture of cosmopolitanism as a commonplace process of beliefs, narratives, and social strategies deployed to navigate the diversity of relationships that confront actors in the late modern world.

These concerns emerged out of my research and reading in the areas of global Islamic studies and American religion. What I continued to notice in my reading and research was that 1) there were no long-term and in-depth studies of Puerto Rican Muslims, a significant constituency within the broader Latinx\(^2\) Muslim community; 2)

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\(^2\) This term is a gender-neutral and non-binary alternative to Latino, Latina, or Latina/o to refer to people of Latin American origin or descent. While there is debate about the term, I use it in this case because I find it best fits the diverse voices that I encountered in the course of my fieldwork. Puerto Rican Muslims — and the broader Latinx Muslim community — do not conform to codified categories of gender or sexuality and consist of a broad range of identities and perspectives. Furthermore, the letter “x” points to
there remains a need to broaden and deepen the understanding of Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States (U.S.) in order to better appreciate its place in the “Muslim world” and American religion, hemispherically conceived and 3) that the concept of cosmopolitanism in general and “Muslim cosmopolitanism” in particular needed further nuance through the ethnographic exploration of a community experiencing cosmopolitanism in their everyday lives and amidst their relationships with several perceived “others.”

Thus, the central questions in this study are: how do Puerto Rican Muslims craft their identity and create, maintain, and sustain a community on the margins of all the communities and identities that they claim membership in; how does this fit into the broader narrative of Islam in the Americas and Muslim communities throughout the hemisphere; in what sense are Puerto Rican Muslims’ lives “cosmopolitan,” and what can this tell us about the idea(l) of cosmopolitanism as it is both utilized in academic research and lived out between various communities dealing with the frictions of globalization in the encounters and dilemmas of their everyday lives?

By considering the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims, I argue that cosmopolitanism should not be framed only as a moral ideal or political philosophy but also as a wholly commonplace, if also simultaneously chaotic and complex, process of cosmopolitanization in the lives of individuals and communities on the move and encountering others in transition at the same time. The question at hand is not whether

*the ambiguity of location and quantity in the lives of Latinx peoples. Finally, it is in line with the history of the use of the “X” marker in the lives of many Muslim Americans (and others) who used the letter in order to push back against a system of slavery and oppression that named and labeled them. While many Latinx Muslims prefer to use gendered labels such as “Latino” or “Latina” I simply could not settle for such designations given my encounter with such a broad range of identities, positions, and perspectives within the community.*
Puerto Rican Muslims are cosmopolitan or not, but how they are cosmopolitan and what that means for their relationships with others around them. I also make the case that employing the principles and attendant methodologies of cosmopolitan social theory help scholars better understand what is happening in global Islam and American religion. I argue that cosmopolitanism is a relational process of becoming and is not a single status, product, or outcome. Instead, as a process consisting of a set of postures, narratives, and social strategies cosmopolitanism is a way of navigating the diversity of this world and cooperating and competing with others along the way. As a result of these interactions and orientations there is innovation and adaptation and community change (some more gradually, some more rapidly). As tradition continues to weigh on individuals’ and communities’ choices and behaviors, Puerto Rican Muslims make changes in order to influence the function and form of new contexts and relationships. I argue from the Puerto Rican Muslim case that cosmopolitanism offers people membership in multiple groups. Emphasizing agency over structure, I contend that cosmopolitan actors choose to activate certain ties and ignore others, to trace their lineage through certain histories and narratives and not others, and to claim membership in several communities via various connections, but never to comfortably belong to any single one of them. To support these claims and discuss how this dissertation will develop these ideas further, this introductory chapter will include a discussion of my theoretical framework and an outline of the parts of this dissertation and how they support my main aims, answer my central questions, and reinforce my thesis.
Globalization, Religion, and Cosmopolitanism

In this current era of globalization — in all its forms — encountering the diversity of the world and its attendant predicaments and provocations lie at the center of contemporary life. Individuals, communities, and societies across the world are coming to terms with diversity and its presence in their lives in one way or another. With the opportunity for mutually enriching exchange also comes tension, often induced by the challenges and strains presented and produced by this diversity and the structural power dynamics at play in individual and communal relationships. Amidst this there are those that wonder if religion is a principal part of the problem or can be part of the solution to overcoming the tensions, ruptures, and conflicts that plague the new global order. Specifically, some have pondered whether Islam and Muslim communities stand in the way of multicultural progress or open up pathways for transcending differences and working together toward a more verdant world.

Scholars continue to address these issues through discussions of modernity, globalization, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. These ideas and arguments overlap in many ways and coincide when it comes to theory, research projects, and operational methodologies. Amidst the discussion, the tension between globalization and individual and local customs, beliefs, and material cultures continues to defy exact analysis. Rather than trying to argue for one explanation, I posit that the multiplicity of theories — and the sometimes-overlapping nature of their arguments — is a good thing. With that said, while ideas like “multiculturalism” point to the co-existence of diverse cultures, the concept of cosmopolitanism focuses in on the collisions and collaborations between cultures and peoples sharing physical, ideological, or even digital spaces. It looks at the generative frictions between various cultures in order to understand what
lives lived in multi-cultural context look like on the ground. Multiculturalism — as both concept and philosophy — puts forward the idea of the individual dependent upon their cultural background and their sense of a bounded and demarcated identity (for example, “Puerto Rican” or “Muslim,” “Palestinian,” or “American”) shut off from outside influences and steeled against incursions from the “other.” Multiculturalism then places this individual (and by extension their bounded community) in the context of other individuals/communities with delimited identities/communities (for example, Palestinians in Puerto Rico or Puerto Ricans in the U.S.). Multiculturalism calls for understanding these “little nations in one nation”\(^3\) and working out how they can coexist in the context of diversity. The idea of multiculturalism is to be lauded for trying to understand difference and diversity against the tendency of humanity to seemingly seek the security of a circumscribed sense of self and community identity. However, multiculturalism fails in that it still remains under the sway of methodological nationalism. While it accounts for difference, movement, and questions of minority and majority populations, it still imagines the world as defined by demarcated identities and the borders and differences that exist between them. Furthermore, it often casts peoples of the diaspora, migrants, refugees, and other minorities as victims, leaving little room for authentic expressions of agency.

The framework of cosmopolitanism on the other hand, opens scholars’ eyes to the dynamics of mobility, the transgression of boundaries, and the ever-present reality

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of instability in a globalized age. Furthermore, cosmopolitanism avoids the slippery
slope of ideas like “hybridity” that can sometimes focus too much on the mixed
character of late-modern identities and do not fully account for the ways in which
individuals and communities resist that mixing. While hybridity assumes the existence
and/or mixing of cultures as something fixed and demarcated, cosmopolitanism
assumes that there are no such things as “pure” cultures to begin with. Hybridity is the
norm. It is not the exception in our world. The theoretical framework of cosmopolitanism
helps us account not only for hybridity, but the choices that lie behind the particular
characteristics of that “mixing.”

Lastly, cosmopolitanism helps scholars move beyond the global/local dichotomy
that still finds its way into much thinking about “global Islam.” With cosmopolitanism’s
emphasis on connection and overlap, the encounter of identities and practices beyond
the local and the incursion and adaptation of the global in local settings, it speaks to the
reality that contemporary dynamics for Muslims across the world and in the farthest
reaches of the globe are far too interconnected and mutually entangled for any
singularly idiosyncratic forms of Islam to develop. Since communities “are always
multiple and layered, not singular and exclusive,” cosmopolitanism can help scholars
observe and examine the real dynamics of self-perception and practice among Muslims
(and non-Muslims) in the current world order in the ways in which local actors and
communities are engaging with global dynamics and local situations simultaneously.
The late-modern age facilitates these kinds of entanglements and crossings in ways
that were perhaps impossible a few decades ago. By looking at Islam and Muslim
communities through the lens of cosmopolitanism we might better be able to understand
the interwoven nature of global Islam as it is today. This is not to say that there are no idiosyncrasies to point out on the one hand or that there is a homogenous “Muslim world” to speak of on the other, but that the challenge is not to tease out what is “global” and “local,” but to identify the dynamics at play betwixt and between. This is the “leading edge of a new form of Muslim cosmopolitanism” that Bruce Lawrence spoke of. The Puerto Rican Muslim case, I believe, clearly illustrates these dynamics at work.

Thus, I take up the concept of cosmopolitanism and the social theory behind it as a particularly helpful way to understand the collision of local systems, religious values, and global movements in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims. While I do not argue that such a concept can fully account for the totality of the possibilities and realities of the globalized world, I do believe it is a helpful concept to think with and a worthwhile framework to apply to the study of global Islam and American religion. Specifically, in the case of Puerto Rican Muslims, cosmopolitanism helps account for the different conflicts and collaborations that help them process the effects of globalization — migration and movement, the encounter of new ideas, people, and cultures, etc. — in the negotiation and maintenance of identity. Puerto Rican Muslims do not annex, subvert, or reject the global and cosmopolitan aspects of their lives, but instead modify them as they deal with new actors, new operations, and new forms of being through their journeys. In essence, Puerto Rican Muslims construct new ways of moving through the world — new forms of cosmopolitanism — in order to be both local and global. In

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the midst of a “pluralization of cosmopolitan forms,” Puerto Rican Muslims position themselves at the heart of the late-modern world with an identity formed in the process of cosmopolitanization.

The Idea of Cosmopolitanism

The idea of cosmopolitanism has been imagined in various ways over the centuries and cultivated for multiple purposes — philosophical, ethical, political, and religious. The kernel of the idea of cosmopolitanism — in the academic literature and popular parlance — is that a person, place, or thing is not defined by any single locality, nation, or culture, but is constituted by, or is comfortable with, the world as a whole. Other words associated with the concept of the “cosmopolitan” include urbane, sophisticated, worldly, cultured, or multi-cultural. Some posit that cosmopolitanism is primarily an ethical or political outlook and that cosmopolitanization necessarily leads to a moral way of being in the world that is deemed acceptable by many at the assumed center of the neo-liberal world order. While there certainly are ethics or political perspectives with the name “cosmopolitan,” they are not the be all and end all of “cosmopolitanism.” Cosmopolitanism is far from the refined principle of “universalplus difference.”

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For the purposes of my argument, I take “cosmopolitan” to refer to a way of being in the world that includes daily, even banal, encounters with the world in all its diversity. To be “cosmopolitan” is not simply to adopt, abandon, or reject an ethical stance, but an everyday and ubiquitous experience of life in the twenty-first century. With that said, I refer to “cosmopolitanism” as the possibility of a moral outlook and ethical posture toward this difference, informed by both conflict and collaboration with the supposed “other” in the late-modern age. Finally, I define “cosmopolitanization” as the ongoing process of negotiating the hyperdiversity of our late-modern age. Cosmopolitanization is a way of becoming, a set of conscious and subconscious imagined outcomes, constantly under construction and never fully realized. It opens up the possibility of membership in multiple groups, but prevents individuals from fully participating, or claiming membership, in any single community. This process does not lead to a necessary end, but takes on flesh as an everyday, lived, reality in the lives of individuals and communities ripe for social-scientific and ethnographic exploration.

This perspective is informed by the work of previous scholars that pushed against normative definitions of cosmopolitanism and explored alternative geographies and genealogies of cosmopolitanism. Others have expanded the anthropological

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toolset when investigating cosmopolitan contexts and lifestyles. For example, Vertovec and Cohen made the observation that cosmopolitanism is not only an “attitude or disposition,” but also a “practice or competence” embedded in specific contexts and formed through particular relationships. Especially helpful in this area is Ulrich Beck and his notion of normal, “banal,” or “common cosmopolitanism.” Building off the ideas of “risk society” and “second modernity” Beck argued that the old debates between the cosmopolitan and the parochial are not as relevant as they once were because the human condition has itself become “cosmopolitan.” Beck contrasts a “cosmopolitan vision” of the world with a “national outlook” that misses the fact that even nationalism in late modernity is shaped by the very same global forces it is opposing. Holding up Europe as an example of the best tradition of “cosmopolitanism,” Beck can be critiqued for a mono-cultural outlook of what cosmopolitanism is and can be. In particular, he singles out “Muslim societies” (and the U.S. for that matter) and Muslim thinkers such as Ibn Khaldûn as somehow inherently counter-cosmopolitan. In this, he is far from alone. Nonetheless, his exhortation to openness and tolerance is commendable on the whole if still smacking of a certain air of ethnocentrism.

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10 Like Nina Glick Schiller on remittances sent from the US to Haiti), and alternative urbanisms (like Ato Quayson on street life in Ghana).

11 Vertovec and Cohen, 13.


14 This will be further explored in the following section on the idea(l) of Muslim cosmopolitanism.
However, what is perhaps more relevant is the subtle point that in this radically insecure world where everyone is different, but also in contact with one another, “boundarylessness” has become an everyday reflexive reality. Beck wrote, “the important fact now is that the human condition itself has become cosmopolitan.”

Cosmopolitanism is no longer just the precinct of a privileged elite, but an opportunity and challenge for all people who wrestle who are confronted with the challenge to live life and build “social relations under conditions of cultural mixture.” This, it would seem, is both blessing and curse to many. All people, Beck contended, are given the chance to construct “a model of one’s own identity by dipping freely into the Lego set of globally available identities and building a progressively inclusive self-image. The result is a patchwork, cosmopolitan, but simultaneously provincial, identity whose central characteristic is its rejection of traditional relations of responsibility.” These cosmopolitan lives, by hook or by crook, no longer exhibit the “either/or” of nationalism, but exhibit the “both/and” of a world where cosmopolitanism is the common experience of all. From this perspective, without us realizing it — or even wanting it — our very existence has become intertwined with other cultures, worlds, and religions.

Related to the notion that “[c]osmopolitanism is no longer a dream but has become a social reality, however distorted, which has to be explored,” I seek to investigate the ways in which Puerto Rican Muslims develop their own form of “rooted cosmopolitanism” or “cosmopolitan nationalism” in the midst of multiple layers of social

15 Beck, 3.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 5.
18 Ibid., 44.
relationships with “others.” Agreeing with Beck that, “cosmopolitanism acquires its realism and its historical specificity, its ability to persuade and seduce, from the way in which the different social strategies for dealing with difference interpenetrate and become so fused that their cosmopolitan impulses are reinforced and their anti-cosmopolitan impulses are weakened and held in check”, I seek to understand Puerto Rican Muslims’ cosmopolitan outlooks in an empirical and ethnographic sense in order to reveal their particular tensions, contradictions, and concrete manifestations in everyday life.

As will be shown in the subsequent chapters, Puerto Rican Muslims experience the delimitation of pre-existing boundaries and the increasing interdependence of multiple networks and communities in their everyday lives. The line between “us and them” is constantly negotiated in the concrete and everyday relationships that they develop in the context of home and mosque, work and school, online and in the flesh. Puerto Rican Muslims do not live in a “modest, familiar, local, circumscribed and stable,” shell, but exist in a world that is a “playground of universal experiences…of encounters and interminglings or, alternatively, of anonymous coexistence and the overlapping of possible worlds and global dangers.”

Both willingly and unwillingly, Puerto Rican Muslims have had to rethink their place in, and relation between, their home and the rest of the world. Markers of cosmopolitan existence – traditionally understood – such as extensive mobility, the capacity to consume many places en route, a curiosity about places, peoples, and cultures, an ability to map one’s own society onto the history and geography of the world, semiotic skill to interpret the images of various others, and an

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openness to other peoples and cultures and a willingness/ability to appreciate some elements of the language/culture of the “other” are all characteristic of the Puerto Rican Muslim lives that will be exhibited in this dissertation. Yet, my aim is not to decide whether Puerto Rican Muslims are cosmopolitan or not, but instead to examine how their “cross-border moral conceptions and practices” are embedded “within [their] specific lifeworld contexts.”

Indeed, it is vitally important to look at the process of cosmopolitanization within particular contexts and historically and geographically specific communities. This makes visible more vernacular forms of cosmopolitan being. As other anthropological studies of Islam have paid more attention to the translocal and “global” aspects of Islam, this research seeks to show that the steady interaction of Muslims from across the globe in places where Puerto Ricans live, work, and pray has helped to create new identities and inflections of who makes up the “Muslim world” and what the “Muslim world” consists of. This process is not necessarily to everyone’s benefit or liking. That is because it has also produced more exclusive forms of identity among Muslims in Puerto Rico and the U.S. However, these exclusive identities — Puerto Rican Muslim or Arab Muslim, etc. — are not necessarily anti-cosmopolitan. Instead, they are injected through-and-through

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with cosmopolitan experience and sensibilities. In fact, they cannot come to be defined or created without the cosmopolitan experience of the actors and communities involved. That is because rather than something that is forced upon Puerto Rican Muslims and their community of connections from the outside, cosmopolitanism is also informed by local subjectivities, contextually specific histories, and more parochial discourses and identities.

What makes this process fascinating are the complex cultural, practical, and religious transactions that take place between various cosmopolitan actors on the ground. By using the tools of ethnography to explore the everyday coexistence of different ethnic Muslims from various places and yet sharing the same community spaces, Muslim communities are not only de-exoticized, but shown to be an essential part of the process of cosmopolitanization taking place across the globe. They are not exceptional in this, but understanding their experience becomes an important part of piecing together the puzzle of what it means to be cosmopolitan in the late-modern, neo-liberal world. By turning away from more formal, institutional, and state forms of cosmopolitanism I want to focus on everyday cosmopolitanism, an arena where ethnography proves especially adept. In this way, scholars can better observe how Muslims “forge intricate, intimate, and dynamic relations with other Muslims, not only from different places, ethnolinguistic groups, or confessional backgrounds, but also very

24 See Benjamin Soares and Filippo Ossella, “Islam, politics, anthropology” Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.), S1-s23 2009 — “Studies of ethical self-fashioning illustrate the utility of focusing on individual experiences and the importance of fine-tuned ethnography, which helps considerably to de-exoticize the Muslim Other (see also Isik 2008). Arguably, this is anthropology at its best.” (510) Ways of being Muslim in the modern, neo-liberal, world — “islam mondain.” (511-512)
different life histories and personal experiences of transregional space.”²⁵ What we will find is that Muslims are not smoothing differences over with a de-culturalized or “deterritorialized” version of “global Islam.”²⁶ Instead, there are intertwined forms of complicity, critical engagement, conflict, and collaboration with people and communities of various values, traditions, and cultures informed by various influences, interactions, and exchanges. Furthermore, this cosmopolitan reality does not automatically conform to notions of “Western” universalism or models of multi-culturalism, but confronts difference in everyday and practical ways, which includes re-territorialized and re-entrenched exclusive identities and an exchange of ideas, practices, and material culture at the same time.

Puerto Rican Muslims serve as a particularly apropos community for such a study. Caribbean countries in general — and Puerto Rico in particular — are pioneers in producing plastic and post-national identities.²⁷ Imperial incursions beginning in the sixteenth-century forced a transnational existence upon Puerto Rico and its people and created a new, albeit historically situated, peripheral and colonized culture in the world order. Their colonial existence and anti-colonial struggle have only persisted under U.S. control.²⁸ In the midst of borderland conflicts over identity and nationality, Puerto Ricans

²⁵ Marsden, 204.


²⁸ See Jose Trias Monge, Puerto Rico: Las Penas De La Colonia Mas Antigua Del Mundo, (San Juan: La Editorial, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1999).
have been actively manipulating a series of identities, class positions, and diverse ethnic contexts. Indeed, Puerto Ricans offer a prime example of the power of immigration and peripheralization as forces of displacement and the reconversion of space and culture, identity and social standing.29 Thus, Puerto Ricans show how in the current era of globalization, “each national, regional, tribal, local and individual identity is invaded, intervened, transformed or crushed.”30 Furthermore, they show us how “we participate in our own transformation” as we wrestle with new identities, symbols, practices, ideas, and materials.

As will be shown, Puerto Rican Muslim lives are characteristic of these conditions as well. Their existence is both territorialized and de-territorialized. Their identities transcend ethnic boundaries even as they reinscribe them in particular ways. They also negotiate principles and practices of both exclusivism and inclusion through experimentation, collaboration, and conflict in relation to “others” as quadruple minorities. Thus, they serve well as a community to consider in an attempt to better understand the making, and unmaking, of Muslim cosmopolitanism in historically specific, culturally situated, and materially informed contexts. Harold D. Morales wrote that Latinx Muslims “continue to de-naturalize or de-essentialize, to broaden and to push our varied and unfixed understandings of and relations to Latinos, Muslims, and Latino Muslims, to ourselves and also to the complex ways in which race or ethnicity


30 Translated from the original, “Cada identidad nacional, regional, tribal, local e individual está invadida, intervenida, transformada o aplastada…participamos en nuestra propia transformación.” Ibid., 35.
and religion are entangled in our daily lives and mediated experiences.” Indeed, in trying to understand cosmopolitanism, scholars will need to move toward what Morales called a more “practical understanding of identity as dynamic becoming that is reliant upon reciprocal relationships of recognition…” Considering the relational aspects of Puerto Rican Muslims’ cosmopolitan existence might help scholars move beyond static representations of individuals or communities as “cosmopolitan” or not, and, even better, avoid reinscribing the relations of power and domination that are inherent within these fixed categories.

The Idea(l) of Muslim Cosmopolitanism

The idea of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” is too often only superficially engaged as a utopian vision rather than a flesh-and-blood reality in the lives of Muslim individuals and communities. While the political and ethical dimensions of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” have been hinted at and a vision for a cosmopolitan future cast the concept remains under-explored. It has also remained fairly geographically locked in the Arab and Southeast Asian on texts. There is still a need to expand the focus on “Muslim cosmopolitanism” beyond such a narrow geography and include locales such as the Americas in our scope of study. Moreover, Aaron W. Hughes noted, “cosmopolitanism” as a concept of harmonious pluralism and tolerance is “largely a moralistic claim” for “ethical coexistence” and falls short of providing a sufficient critical method or


32 Ibid.

33 There are some notable exceptions in other areas such as sub-Saharan Africa, which will be discussed later.
hermeneutic for the study of Islam. He wrote in his review of the edited volume *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, “I assume that to study religious forms using a ‘cosmopolitan’ hermeneutic would mean that we would have to take these forms seriously and at face value. We would have to accept them as they are; to describe them using terms to which those of the religion in question would assent; and not attempt to undermine them by using hermeneutics of suspicion, reductionism, or the like.”

I concur that the definition of “cosmopolitanism” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies* remains ambiguous and poorly defined, but I disagree with Hughes that cosmopolitanism is not a helpful idea when studying global Islam. While it may not prove a paradigmatic frame, it is not necessarily a “softer” methodology. What is needed is a coherent definition of what we mean by Muslim cosmopolitanism and a critical and contextualized approach to the study of cosmopolitanism in Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. Such a critical approach will help mitigate the tendency in the study of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” to make essentialist and paternalistic moralizing claims about who is, and who is not, a “Muslim cosmopolitan” or the over-stated assertion that all Muslims are inherently cosmopolitan actors. Moreover, I will seek to ground the too often abstract idea of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” in the lived contexts of Muslim individuals and communities in Puerto Rico, New York, New Jersey, and Florida.

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In his afterword to the edited title *Rethinking Islamic Studies* Bruce Lawrence addresses the possibilities of what he calls “competing genealogies of Muslim cosmopolitanism.”

Emphasizing that studying Islam can help scholars not only understand Muslims, but culture, history, and society as a whole, Lawrence imagines an emphasis on the concept of cosmopolitanism that could allow for studies to accent Islam/Muslims as a way to study citizens of the world in general. Lawrence imagines cosmopolitans, no matter their religion or location, as fellow citizens of the world. Lawrence also highlights how an emphasis on “Muslim cosmopolitanism” can provide new pathways for charting the ways Muslims craft their identities between the global and the local.

While Lawrence may be correct in emphasizing the simultaneity of the local and the global in the cosmopolitan life and in pointing to the virtual world as a critical geography in this experience, his framing of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” falls short in a couple of dimensions. First, the “contingent” nature of locality that Lawrence imagines overlooks the conditional connections to multiple spaces that many Muslim actors maintain in their transnational and networked lives. These conditional connections are critical to our understanding of life in these changing times. The pace and scale of globalization impacts lives across the globe and cosmopolitanism is an apt framework within which to understand how we might interact with one another given such contingent realities. Secondly, when he refers to “Muslim cosmopolitans” as “like-

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36 Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin (eds.), *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

37 Bruce Lawrence, “Afterword,” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, 302-324.
minded utopians, contingently related to one space, but virtually connected to multiple spaces” and adopts a more political/ethical framework for the idea of “Muslim cosmopolitanism,” Lawrence over-emphasizes the similarity of global actors (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) without paying attention to the context specific, and religiously accented ways and means that Muslims engage with broader cultures and cosmopolitan identities. As scholars engage Muslim cosmopolitanism and its ability to shed light on how Muslim actors engage global flows of media, technology, finance, politics, and the like, it is necessary to recognize that there is not just one cosmopolitanism that global actors tap into, but multiple, alternative, cosmopolitanisms through which Muslims and others promote multiple identities, form new cultural combinations, and interact with a wide variety of dynamic and changing communal and individual identities.

There have been several other titles in recent years that address historical and contemporary Muslim cosmopolitanism, especially in-and-around the Indian Ocean. Particularly popular is Khairudin Aljunied’s *Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam in Comparative Perspective*. In this work Aljunied argued that Islam as it is in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia is “radically defined by what can be termed as ‘Muslim cosmopolitanism.’” He envisions this as a vulnerability and openness that allows Muslims and non-Muslims in this area (Southeast Asia) to come together rather

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38 Ibid., 303.


than become increasingly divided in the age of globalization. He wrote that this acts as a “counterpoint to the growing perception of Islam and other religions as divisive forces and powerful engines of dissension in society, while shattering the preponderant thesis that Muslims are prone to violence to achieve what are supposedly their essentialist absolutist, divisive, and insufficiently rational aims.” While he admitted that there is no clear definition of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” he defines it as “a style of thought, a habit of seeing the world and a way of living that is rooted in the central tenet of Islam, which is that everyone is part of a common humanity accountable to God and that we are morally responsible towards one another.”41 To be a cosmopolitan Muslim in this sense is to respect universal values both within and outside one’s tradition and promote these in the public square in interaction with others — Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

To this point, Aljunied does well to posit that Muslim cosmopolitanism involves relationships and interactions both within the Muslim community — between Muslims of different ideological persuasions and frames of mind — and ties between Muslims and non-Muslims. Muslim cosmopolitanism is not solely a “Muslim-driven enterprise. It can only be made real through the active participation of non-Muslims in the creation of a tolerant society.”42 However, this work falls short when he makes too much of the ethical aspects of cosmopolitanism and ignores the more banal, social, and everyday reality of cosmopolitan existence, which is often much messier than the definition of Muslim cosmopolitanism offered by him above. Seema Alvi makes note of this in his study of print cultures and merchant networks of the past. Not only does Alvi state that the term

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.
“cosmopolitanism is ill-defined and under-theorized,” but that scholars need to look at the nastier side of cosmopolitanism rather than just the positive and liberal notions that surround it. In part, this is what I try to do by not only highlighting the collaborative aspects of cosmopolitanism among Puerto Rican Muslims, but also the very common, and even conflictual, features of their relations with others.

There has also been a recent shift toward more cosmopolitan understandings of various Muslim populations in places in West and East Africa and elsewhere that bear some promise as precursors to my focus on a population even further afield from the traditionally recognized “Muslim world.” For example, Mara A. Leichtman’s ethnography illustrates the “diverse forms of cosmopolitanism as envisaged and practiced by two Shi’i Muslim minorities — one diasporic, the other indigenous — in a Sunni Muslim majority country.” By tracing the contours of the Twelver Shi’i Lebanese migrant community, Senegalese converts, and interactions between them Leichtman’s discussion “explores the interrelationship among theories of cosmopolitanism, migration, and religious transformation, while paying attention to intricacies of these theories in colonial, as well as post-colonial and neoliberal Africa.” She argues that “Muslim cosmopolitanism as articulated through engagement with history, colonialism, the state, political economy, global Islamic movements, and the imagination of nations.” Thus, this conception of Muslim cosmopolitanism is simultaneously

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45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 5.
universalist and set within the frame of the *ummah* while also “rooted in particular local histories.”

Leichtman adroitly highlights non- “Western-centric political understandings of cosmopolitanism” and point out how “Islam has always been cosmopolitan and that the concept is limited to Western enlightenment ideals.” And yet, her argument at times seemed to succumb to the very assumption that underlies these postulations. She wrote that Muslims are naturally “counter-cosmopolitans,” but in the modern world they have been forced to develop strategies to accept, and lean into, cosmopolitanism as defined by Appiah: “universality plus difference.” Furthermore, while there is much talk of cosmopolitanism in the beginning of the book, its theoretical force seems to wane throughout the rest of the book to the point where it becomes a trope for a local ethnography of Lebanese and Senegalese Shi’i Muslims. Although Leichtman’s work certainly helps to document more cases of cosmopolitanism as a social fact in the lives of Muslims and in the midst of their own self-understanding and subjectivities, the study could go even further.

What of the limits of this type of cosmopolitanism? Can Muslim cosmopolitans extend their ethics beyond the *ummah*? The lives of Puerto Rican Muslims — such as they are betwixt and between multiple communities both Muslim and non-Muslim — will help us address these questions.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 12.

Carool Kersten also outlines how cosmopolitanism has been imagined as a useful heuristic tool “for analyzing the ways in which contemporary Muslim intellectuals are coming to terms with globalization.” Kersten accounts for how new, non-Western, ways of thinking about “cosmopolitanism” have emerged from intellectuals in Indonesia, Iran, and Turkey. Opting for a conscious cosmopolitan hybridity (as opposed to an unconscious transnational hybridity) these intellectuals are leaning into cultural hybridity as a way to “speak for Islam” and challenge the discourses of other more parochial and traditionalist voices in the ummah. In one sense Kersten’s treatment of these intellectuals points to the “realistic cosmopolitanism” of second modernity, according to Ulrich Beck, wherein actors try to “synthesize universalism, relativism, nationalism and ethnicism, as well as — I would add — religious diversity.” Furthermore, this type of cosmopolitanism is different than the universalizing ethic of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism (a la Kant) and is instead “good to think with” when it comes to studying contemporary Muslim discourses. It is also important to note, as Kersten makes clear, that Muslims have started using as a self-descriptor as well as a way of “doing” cultural hybridity and managing and producing meaning in a cosmopolitan world. Lastly, Kersten’s study is another example of bridging beyond the Middle East and North Africa to include other geographies of the “Muslim world.” Still,

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51 This distinction was first posited by Ulf Hannerz in “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture,” Theory, Culture, and Society 7 (1990): 237-251.

even as she lists places like Europe and North America, she leaves out Latin America and the Caribbean (not to mention sub-Saharan Africa or Oceania).\textsuperscript{53}

All of this is fine and good, but there remains a need to move beyond the “idea” and the “discourse” to also pay attention to the material, physical, and lived contexts of Muslim cosmopolitans. Also, the practice of cosmopolitanism is not as elite as Kersten makes it out to be. She writes, “On the individual level, however, I argue that also elsewhere in the Muslim world, intellectuals are trying to confront the challenges of globalization by developing alternative discourses which can accommodate endogenous modes of intellectual creativity.”\textsuperscript{54} This study of Puerto Rican Muslims will turn away from purely intellectual or discursive treatments of Muslim cosmopolitanism (although these will be kept in view) and focus on the creation and curation of critical cosmopolitanisms from below. It will be a study of the lived contexts where these intellectual currents are made manifest and where the “endogenous modes” of creativity are forged.

Finally, Kersten falls for the same trap as many of the other commentators on Muslim cosmopolitanism — principally that there are good/cosmopolitan Muslims and bad/tribal Muslims and that the job of social scientists is to prove to the naysayers that the former exist and that they are more numerous and/or convincing than the latter. Hughes’ critique from before is also highly relevant here when he surveys the literature on Muslim cosmopolitanism and finds that the idea is less often utilized for its social scientific value, but more as a moralistic claim on who is, and who is not, cosmopolitan.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 131.
in the “Muslim world.” This speaks to a deeper and more troubling aspect of the
discourse about the idea(l) of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” — that “Muslim
cosmopolitanism” is not something that simply exists, but that it is something that “good
Muslims” must strive toward or struggle to cultivate amidst a generally tribal milieu. This
aspect of the discourse around “Muslim cosmopolitanism” no doubt emerges from the
racial diacritics surrounding the idea of cosmopolitanism itself.

What I mean to say here is that Europeans and the West are imagined to be in
some way more inherently cosmopolitan, or at least more naturally predisposed to it in
many formulations of cosmopolitan ethics. At the very least they are framed as the
progenitors of the idea(l). Juxtaposed to this natural European cosmopolitanism is a
supposed Muslim tribalism. Thus, scholars feel they have to make the case that
Muslims are capable of cosmopolitan attitudes and ethics over and against their more
inherent tribal tendencies. Even well-meaning scholars trying to counter Islamophobic
structures that posit the European/cosmopolitan against the Muslim/tribal end up
succumbing to this dichotomy while trying to argue against it. In trying to repudiate such
a standard too many scholars end up recapitulating the good/bad Muslim dichotomy as
a divide between the cosmopolitan Muslim on the one hand and the tribal Muslim on the
other.55 Framed this way, the idea(l) of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” runs the danger of
setting an unfair standard, as if Muslims are distinct from the rest of humanity and
anymore inherently anti-cosmopolitan than everyone else.56

55 Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*,
(Harmony, 2005).

56 In the vein of Bruno Latour and his censure of the social sciences in *We Have Never Been Modern* we
might also wonder if “we” have never been cosmopolitan either. Just as the idea that we “moderns” made
While I think the idea of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” remains useful as a concept, in order to pursue it as a rubric for the study of global Islam, scholars will need to be more nuanced in our definition of what it is and avoid the temptation to make Islam and Muslims an exceptional case. In particular, scholars need to treat cosmopolitanism as a banal experience of contemporary life and pay attention to how it is worked out in relationships of difference and not prognosticate on who is cosmopolitan or not. While there are certainly ethical dimensions to the concept of cosmopolitanism, scholars cannot act as arbitrators of who is morally superior or inferior according to a moving target of what is, or what is not, cosmopolitan. Instead, scholars should focus on the everyday mechanics of cosmopolitanism as it is worked out on the ground between overlapping communities and individuals who are dealing with their common cosmopolitan circumstances. As Kai Kresse pointed out in his research on cosmopolitanism among Muslims in and around the Swahili Coast, the issue often becomes one of dealing with the multiple forms of “cosmopolitanism” at play. Is there one type of, “Muslim cosmopolitanism?” In general, Kresse is critical of the recent inflationary uses of the term cosmopolitan or cosmopolitanism. Instead, he finds it useful to speak of cosmopolitanism as a way of, “engaging oneself locally that draws

a radical break with our pre-modern past is not as sure as we have assumed perhaps we are too quick to conclude that we have moved on from a more tribal or nationalistic past and into a cosmopolitan present.


from the available resources of worldly knowledge and knowledge about the world — with the wider world in mind, so to speak — even if partly as a result of (possibly adverse) historical circumstance and social pressures." Kresse argues that cosmopolitanism (*Weltgewandtheit*) is developed with both openness to the world (*Weltoffenheit*) and a pool of experience with it (*Welterfahrung*). Siding with Schielke who believes that the anthropology of Islam has too much “Islam” in it, Kresse contends that cosmopolitanism does not grow directly out of Islam per se, but out of the social conditions and connections that exist for people who are Muslim and draw on Islamic thought and practice to give voice and verb to their cosmopolitan sensibilities.

Particularly tantalizing for this dissertation is the way in which he highlights how the tensions and pressures that Swahili Muslims encounter help them develop a cosmopolitan posture toward the world. From this perspective ethnographic approaches to the study of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” must not only pay attention to the religious principles and practices of Muslims, but capture the specific, complex, and diverse worldly contexts within which people whom we study live, work, play, and interact with others. What we will find there is that competing forms of cosmopolitanism, parochialism, and tribalism can exist side-by-side in the daily lives and interactions of Muslims and non-Muslims and even within the same community or individual. As will be shown, it is common for individuals and communities to contend with global issues and pressures in the daily tasks of a local life. This is the source of a common search for

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smaller and often reactionary entities that helps maintain the world’s order, develop actionable values, and build community and identity. Thus, this study will also highlight how cosmopolitanism is not apart from the practice of Islam in the daily lives of Puerto Rican Muslims, but an integral part of it. Therefore, cosmopolitanism as a social process will be shown to be a helpful way to think about global Islam and the ways in which Muslims navigate the diversity of this present age. What we will discover is that there are multiple inputs that inform their cosmopolitan postures and practices and that the relational aspects of their experience are perhaps just as important as ideological or religious concepts and practices. While religious ideas and traditions are of great significance, I emphasize the relational contexts of Puerto Rican Muslims in order to highlight the profound effect of the ensemble of human relationships that grounds and defines their identities, communities, and daily activities. Far from wanting to essentialize cosmopolitanism, I take a non-reductive approach to these relational contexts. Subjective meaning, ideological leanings, and aesthetic choices still matter, and cosmopolitanism cannot be reduced to these relationships, but I believe the social life of Puerto Rican Muslims and their interactions with others as “quadruple minorities” is critical in understanding what cosmopolitanism is, and is not, in the world today.

Methodological Considerations

This section contextualizes my methodological approach, describes the actions I took to investigate my research questions thoroughly, and provides discussion of the rationale and issues related to my methods and my position as a researcher. It not only answers how my data was collected, but also how it was analyzed. The aim of this section is to illustrate the thoroughness of my research and to make the case for the reliability of my findings and analyses of such qualitative research. This will include an
overview of the basis for, and approach to, my multi-local ethnographic research, the
sources of my data, access to the field, and ethical considerations.

A Multi-local Ethnography

My ethnographic research was multi-local. While there are concerns that multi-local ethnographies are plagued by purely aesthetic sensibilities and stretched-thin fields of analysis, I favored the approach because it highlights the transcending of boundaries and the rejection of essential dichotomies that are characteristic of the late-modern age and the Puerto Rican Muslim community. Given the transnational nature of Puerto Ricans, whom Jorge Duany referred to as a “nation on the move” — it became necessary to develop a transnational, multi-local ethnographic research approach as well. Drawing on the example of other ethnographies that adopted a multi-local practice I interviewed and observed Puerto Rican Muslims in New York, New Jersey, Florida, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere.

I conducted fieldwork in places where Puerto Rican Muslims are in their highest concentrations or where I sought to understand their relational dynamics with other communities of interest. The three main physical locations of my fieldwork were Puerto Rico, the New York metropolitan area, and Florida, while also including previous research conducted in Texas and California. I spent Summer 2015 and Summer 2017 in

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Puerto Rico with follow-up research in August 2018. I spent Summer 2016 and Fall 2017 in the New York metropolitan area as well. Furthermore, I conducted interviews and participant observation on-and-off over 2015-2017 in Florida (Gainesville, Tampa, Orlando, and Miami) where I met with, interviewed, and observed Puerto Rican Muslims who lived in closer vicinity to my home-base at the University of Florida. My research also extended to online communities (specifically on Facebook) where Puerto Rican Muslims are able to connect with one another despite their geographic dispersion. This social-media based ethnography lasted from 2015-2018. Finally, I also pulled from previous research I conducted from 2012-2014 to satisfy the requirements of my M.A. program at Concordia University Irvine, which involved participant observation and interviews in the Houston, Texas and Los Angeles, California metropolitan areas.

In Puerto Rico I was mostly based in the San Juan area. As the largest metropolitan area in Puerto Rico, it allowed me an opportunity to not only observe and make connections with a large number of Muslims in Puerto Rico, but also to learn about the Puerto Rican context within which they live, work, and have access to a wider range of resources for research, travel, and communication. I also spent time in the Vega Alta area west of San Juan, on the West Coast near Aguadilla, and then a period of time in the South near Ponce, the second largest metropolitan area on the island. Since Puerto Rico is a relatively small island, I was able to travel elsewhere during my research to places like Jayuya, Hatillo, Mayagüez, and Fajardo. The Puerto Rican Muslim community gathers, prays, and relies on several mosques on the island of Puerto Rico, principally in the municipalities surrounding San Juan (Río Piedras and Montehiedra), but also elsewhere including Vega Alta, Hatillo, Jayuya, Ponce,
Aguadilla, Guaynabo, and Fajardo. All of these were founded by Muslim immigrants and their families. Of these, the mosque in Montehiedra is one of the more prominent and was founded by Imam Abîdelrahim — a Palestinian of Jordanian nationality who came to Puerto Rico in 1989 and delivered *khutbahs* (sermon or speech delivered by an imam) in both Spanish and Arabic. The newest place of prayer on the island is the Islamic center founded in Guaynabo by an Ahmadi missionary, Imam Ahmad Salman. I spent time at this location during my follow-up fieldwork in summer 2018.

In New York, I spent two different periods of time in the area and lived in three different communities. In Summer 2016 I was based in Elizabeth, New Jersey. This gave me access to the significant number of Puerto Rican Muslims in New Jersey, which meant that when I lived in New York City (in Harlem and then in Queens) during Fall 2017 I was able to focus on research on the other side of the Hudson River. To be sure, one of the most challenging aspects of conducting research in New York is the size of the place. Not only is the city large and extremely difficult to get a handle on (if that is even possible, each borough and neighborhood has its own sense and scene), but Puerto Rican Muslims were spread out across all five boroughs and in New Jersey and Connecticut as well. During my time in the New York area I conducted interviews and participated in observation at mosques, cafés, restaurants, and homes in all five boroughs, in several communities in New Jersey, and in Connecticut as well. There is no one place that Puerto Rican Muslims gather for prayer or community. Thus, I relied on informal data and information — and contacts via phone and online — to locate and observe Puerto Rican Muslims. This took me to the North Hudson Islamic Education Center in New Jersey, the Islamic Center of New York in Manhattan, MAS Queens, and
several other prayer rooms throughout the metropolitan area. I also spent a lot of time walking the streets of Spanish Harlem and traveling by train, bus, and car to visit people as far away as Staten Island, Long Island, Yonkers, and Newark, New Jersey. In contrast to the centrality of mosques in Puerto Rico, the vast majority of my research in New York was conducted outside of mosques and involved visiting people in their neighborhoods and in their homes or places of work.

In Florida, I had an entirely different experience. Rather than visiting their homes or places of work I had the opposite occur in Florida. During my time as a Ph.D. student and candidate I came to encounter two Puerto Rican Muslims in Gainesville, and then get connected to others in Tampa, Orlando, and Miami. The number of Puerto Ricans coming to Florida has increased sharply in recent years.\(^{64}\) Some of these were Puerto Rican Muslims coming to Florida. This made it relatively easy to conduct interviews nearby my home base throughout the course of my research. However, it also brought up some issues about boundaries between the field and home. One story in particular can illustrate this point. I first met José (Yusuf) Vilmenay in San Juan, Puerto Rico, at an Eid celebration at the convention center. I interviewed him twice on the island and as part of the conversation he asked about the economy in Gainesville. I shared a bit with him, and he mentioned that he was looking for work anywhere he could find it. I let him know that he should reach out to me if he ran into any issues or had any questions. We

left it there and continued with the rest of our interview. Two weeks after returning to Gainesville in August 2015, I received a text message from José saying that he arrived in Gainesville and was looking for work and a place to stay. While I could not host him at my condo, I helped him locate an apartment nearby and connected him with the local Muslim community through the Islamic Community Center of Gainesville. He not only found a job but was able to bring his family to the city as well. We met up regularly at restaurants, on campus, and at each other’s homes over the next two years. Not only does this anecdote illustrate how the field “came to me” as it were, but also the highly mobile, decentralized, and interconnected nature of Puerto Rican Muslim life. Rather than standing outside that network or basing myself in any one field, I became part of that network and used it wherever, and whenever, to conduct research and connect with Puerto Rican Muslims.

This aspect of my research became even more acute with my online ethnographic activity. Beyond physical fieldwork, my ethnography of Puerto Rican Muslim community was partially based in the “hypertext” and sodalities of cyberspace where Puerto Ricans not only converse with another (for example, on the Puerto Rican Muslim Facebook page), but also with other Latinx Muslims, Muslims across the globe, other interlocutors, and researchers such as myself. From Spring 2015-Summer 2018, I regularly engaged with Puerto Rican Muslims online, paying

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66 Indeed, Harold P. Morales contends that while regionally diverse, Latina/o Muslims create a pan-Latina/o Muslim “brand” that is fostered via online communities, is frequently picked up by mass media and that further marginalizes those who do not empathize with these narrow narratives of what it is to be Latina/o Muslim Cf. Harold Morales, *Religion and American Cultures: An Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity, and Popular Expression*, Gary Laderman and Luis D. León, vol. 4 (ABC-CLIO, forthcoming), 11.
attention to their interactions with one another, recording conversations at critical moments (for example, the ongoing Puerto Rican fiscal crisis, Hurricane Maria, the 2016 election, the establishment of Centro Islámico in Houston, Texas, etc.), and interacting with them via direct messages, comments, and other forms of social media engagement (such as “likes”). Adding an online component to my ethnographic research allowed me to remain “in the field” for longer and to observe Puerto Rican Muslims as they interacted with one another — and a wider community of online interlocutors — on a regular basis.

Virtual ethnography, or social media-based ethnography, is not a method in and of itself, but is a way to expand the field of research by applying the various tools of ethnography in a new digital context. Expanding ethnographic practice to bridge between online and offline worlds is an important step in the right direction for those wanting to make sense of “Muslim cosmopolitanism.” Such a “social media-based ethnography” can prove a fruitful field because it involves both face-to-face interactions, interviews, and initiation into a community, but also the convenience and ubiquity of cyberspace interactions that are available anytime, anywhere, given that you have a connection to the internet and a device through which to connect. It not only enlarges the field, but increases the amount of available data, heightens an ethnographer’s awareness of cosmopolitan practices in spaces hitherto under-explored, and deepens our understanding of what it means to be a “Muslim cosmopolitan” in practice both offline and online.

Techniques and Data Interpretation

Over the course of my sometimes untidy, but always informative, research, I conducted 82 separate interviews with a wide range of Puerto Rican Muslims of various
ages, ideologies, and socio-economic classes. These interviews were conducted in New Jersey, New York, Florida, Texas, and Puerto Rico. Most of my interviews occurred in the context of participant observation, but I also arranged formal interviews with multiple interlocutors. The vast majority were in person, with just a few being conducted online or over the phone. My conversations and interviews were semi-structured, and I had a bank of questions I would draw on from time-to-time if the conversation lulled, but typically the discussion moved forward without much prompting on my part. I asked about my informants' background, life histories, conversion/reversion stories, friendship and family networks, religious identity, and relationships with various communities they interacted with at home, at work, online, in their neighborhood, and in their mosque (or lack thereof).

The interviews ranged in length of time. Some lasted only thirty minutes and others lasted the entire day as I spent my time with them in their lived context. My interviews were conducted in mosques, at restaurants, in cafés, in parking lots, apartments, homes, at the beach, in parks, in my own home, in their homes, or out and about running errands with the family. It was important for me to conduct these interviews on my informants' turf as I wanted to avoid a sterile interview environment and get the opportunity to learn about their lives in both public and private spaces where they were comfortable and which they called "home" in one way or another.

I used other techniques to supplement my interviews and observations in the field in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims. All the while, I kept copious notes. Through participant observation, in-field thick description, individual cases, incidents, recorded interviews, non-recorded
interviews, experiences, archival research, museum visits and analysis, conversations with other scholars, and reading I collected over 694 pages of field notes. I conducted some soft analysis throughout my fieldwork, but I remained committed to grounding myself in my Puerto Rican Muslim respondents’ views as much as possible. I continued to adjust my methods, theory, and techniques through my interviews, experiences, and ever-growing network of contacts. When I completed my formal fieldwork in December 2017 I returned to Gainesville, where I finished transcribing a few interviews left over from the previous months and started the process of line-by-line and sectional coding. I became more convinced of the relevance of cosmopolitan theory to my research and endeavored to read more about the topic and its history during those months of coding. This helped me refine my theoretical categories by sampling them through a careful reading back, and analysis, of my field notes. I began drafting my dissertation in Summer 2018 and finished the manuscript in December 2018 and have been in the course of revision and reworking since.

**Participant Observation?**

There are always challenges, limits, and potential pitfalls and boundaries of “participant” observation. As an outsider, I do not attempt to provide an ordered, neat, narrative account from a singularly authoritative voice. Instead, my work relies on anecdotes and reflections, narratives and theoretical reflections, demography and historical background, works of art and poetry, performance and ritual, material culture, digital worlds, and intimate interactions. I believe that such an approach has value, especially when discussing an idea like cosmopolitanism. Just as we should not attempt to flatten out or overly demystify something as ambiguous and multifaceted as cosmopolitanism, so too an ethnographic account of cosmopolitan lives will not be one-
dimensional, overwrought in its claims to authenticity and authority, nor entirely straightforward.

While I never had any difficulty gaining access to mosques, Muslim communities, or individuals in general, there were two things that came up because of who I am and what vocations I fulfill as a non-Muslim, non-Puerto Rican researcher, journalist, and Lutheran minister. First, while I was often warmly welcomed at mosques during the course of my research, there was always that awkward moment when during the course of my visit that the gathered members would stand shoulder-to-shoulder near the front of the room for prayer. Many did not notice my presence up until this point in time and it often raised eyebrows and invited questions. On the one hand, it always felt a bit disingenuous on my part. On the other hand, it often meant that individuals would come up and talk to me after prayers. This proved an excellent opportunity to share about my research and invite individuals for further conversations and interviews. Other times, my identity and purpose were known before I arrived at a mosque or event. Frequently, people would “Google” me before meeting me or inviting me to their mosque or institution. For example, over a coffee in Newark, New Jersey after a multi-hour interview Khadijah Bint Elliot stopped me mid-sentence to tell me this:

What you are doing, I think it’s amazing, because no one has taken the time to question who is the Puerto Rican Muslim…people like you and like me and like many others are bringing our culture, our people, religions together in order to understand each other and bring our lives, you know, I guess together into a better place. Um, if you don’t do something like this

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67 Given my previous research with Latinx Muslims in Texas and California, I had made contact with several stakeholders and gatekeepers. This gave me access to a wide network. I did not want my research to be overly-influenced by any hierarchical arrangement within the community and made a concerted effort to rely on gatekeepers and stakeholders to connect me with a wide variety of informants and respondents. I also relied on those I met during participant observation in each location as well. This led to further contacts, more names, and other opportunities for interviews and conversations with individuals who were on the margins, newly converted, or had only a tangential connection to the community.
who else is going to do it? Or in what light are they going to do it? …I’m grateful that you came about, because like I said I need this. I need this to be out there so that people will know. That people will understand that we are not different. That we are just like anybody else. It just happens to be that we speak Spanish and we Muslim. You know, that’s it. We Puerto Ricans. When I was listening to you, this is what you study, but you’re coming from a viewpoint of experiencing some of these things, not coming from a viewpoint of a book and that’s what I appreciated about you. It’s not a book experience alone…So, for me it was like, “Ok, I can do this. I can sit with you and give you a little bit of me.”

As I reflected on what Khadijah had to say I realized two things: first, that in my investigation of the relational dynamics of Puerto Rican Muslims’ cosmopolitanism I not only had to interrogate their relationships with African-American Muslims in New York or

![Figure 1-1. Geraldo — “Jerry” — in the small prayer room in Jayuya, Puerto Rico. Photo: Ken Chitwood.](image)

Palestinian Muslims in Puerto Rico, but also their relationship with non-Muslim, white, and American individuals like myself; and second, over the last few years of ethnographic research I came to appreciate — more and more — that the Puerto Rican
Muslims I interviewed are not "research subjects," but teachers.68 My conversations with these individuals taught me more about the world and the process of cosmopolitanization, opened my eyes to things I would otherwise have overlooked, and challenged me personally, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. I learned much along the way. While I certainly tried to bring the critical theory of social science to bear on my data, I treat Puerto Rican Muslims as the principle authorities on the subject matter of their lives and experience. My research is at once critical and compassionate. I do not fall into the false dichotomy that it has to be one or the other, that a researcher must choose between being an absolute critic or an overly sympathetic caretaker.69 Such an approach acknowledges and privileges the complex, imprecise, and messy nature of the social world of ethnographic research.

On one occasion, however, there was a challenge made based on my outsider status. While in Jayuya I was invited to visit the small prayer room on the main market street located down the road from Salim’s electronic appliances store, a local hub of the Muslim community. Giraldo, who often goes by “Jerry,” is a Puerto Rican convert and local agricultural worker. When I met him, he was between jobs and had time to show me the mosque, which is located in a rear apartment above a bakery named, Panaderia Rodriguez. A small space, Jerry opened up the curtains and set out three rugs for prayer as I acquainted myself with the room. After obligatory ablutions (wudu) I came out of the bathroom and Jerry was waiting, kneeling on one of the three rugs with a

68 I was first challenged to think of Puerto Rican Muslims as my teachers and not my subjects or informants after reading Su’ad Abdul Khabeer’s, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*, (New York University Press, 2016).

Qibla compass orienting prayer toward the holy sanctuary in Mecca. “Would you lead the prayers?” he asked. A little surprised, I politely declined and reminded him that I am not a Muslim and would not feel comfortable doing so. He looked down for a moment and then said, “but I do not remember the motions. I know the words, the recitations, but not the movements. You know them, don’t you? You study Islam, right?”

In all my time during fieldwork I was never quite as unsure as I was in this moment. Was Jerry testing me? Had he honestly not become accustomed enough to the motions in the five years since he converted that he needed someone else to lead him? Was I crossing a boundary if I led the prayers? Would I lose access or offend him if I refused? What were the ethical boundaries? Instead of relying on my own expertise, which in the moment I was seriously questioning, I let him know my thoughts, my questions, and my conundrum. I asked him if he was testing me. I let him know how uncomfortable I felt and how unsure I was on how to proceed. He told me he was not trying to test me per se, but wanted to be able to pray and also wanted to know if I was the “real deal.” After some discussion we made an agreement: before he prayed, I would show him the motions. Then, he could conduct his prayers on his own. Whether from the humidity or the humiliation of the interaction, I sweated profusely as I made the prostrations and bent at the knees and hips, going through the motions of each rakah (prostration). When I finished, I sat back and observed as Jerry proceeded to pray. I was sick to my stomach, but he was seemingly content. After his prayers were complete, we proceeded to talk for another hour and a half about the literature on the shelves, Ramadan in Jayuya, the difficulty of finding good work since the beginning of the fiscal crisis, and how the local Muslim community — predominated by Palestinians
— provided a socio-economic safety net for him and other converts. I am still unsure I made the “right” call in that moment. However, I made the only choice I could make as a non-Muslim, etic ethnographer, groping my way through fieldwork high up in the interior mountains of Puerto Rico. In the end, I am glad I had the opportunity to get to know Jerry, Salim the shop owner, Raduan, and others connected to either the Muslim community in Jayuya or through Salim’s electronics shop in the town.

My position as an outsider also influenced my access to women during my fieldwork. I had to tread carefully when approaching women for conversation or interviews. Not only could I not participate and observe women on a regular basis, but I was rebuffed from potential interviews on several occasions. For example, after interacting with a Puerto Rican Muslim woman on Facebook, I sent her a direct message asking if we could perhaps set up an interview via e-mail or over the phone. Two days later, she responded and rebuked me for contacting her through direct message. She said, “as a researcher of Islam you should know better.” While the intensity of this interaction is an exception, I did not have the opportunity to interact with or interview as many women as men during the course of my research. Of my interviews only 13 were with women.

**Scope and Sequence**

With the aim of describing the everyday cosmopolitan lives of Puerto Rican Muslims in the context of their relationships with others as “quadruple minorities,” the majority of the chapters focus on different relational aspects of Puerto Rican Muslims’ cosmopolitan experience. Chapter 2, “The Contingent Lineages of Puerto Rican Muslim Cosmopolitanism” describes the development of the Puerto Rican Muslim community as they draw on various histories to flesh out their narrative of identity over time and across
vast geographical distances. This chapter provides an overview of the conditions under which Puerto Rican Muslim cosmopolitanism arose and continues to develop. It also shows the “contingent lineages” that make up Puerto Rican Muslims’ historical narrative and how it helps them claim membership in multiple groups at any one time. Chapter 3, “Puerto Rican Muslims and the Search for ‘Authentic’ Puerto Rican Peoplehood” hones in on the ways in which Puerto Rican Muslims wrestle with global identities, relationships, material context, and experiences alongside their local “Puerto Rican” identities, relationships, material context, and experiences. This chapter will show dynamics of both tension and creativity as Puerto Rican Muslims choose how to create a supposedly “authentic” Puerto Rican identity as Muslims to reveal the process of cosmopolitanization in greater nuanced detail. Chapter 4, “Puerto Rican Muslims and the ‘Muslim World’” explores the tensions between Puerto Rican Muslim’s localized identity and the ideal of unity within the worldwide ummah. This chapter not only shows how Puerto Rican Muslims navigate these tensions, but considers their position on the perceived margins of the so-called “Muslim world” through the lens of border theory in order to better shine light on dynamics within the study of global Islam. Chapter 5, “AmeRícan Muslims” tells the story of Puerto Rican Muslims on the margins of the “American experience.” Doing so in transnational perspective, this chapter challenges some of the accepted categories and boundaries currently inscribed in the study of Islam and Muslim communities in “America” and provides a more complete picture of American Muslims by relating the experiences of Puerto Rican Muslim individuals in and around New York City and online. Chapter 6, “Conclusions and Areas for Further Consideration” will tie the various threads of this narrative together and suggest some
ways that this research could be extended and further applied. In the conclusion I will restate the main purposes of this dissertation and relate it back to the discussion in the previous chapters. Specifically, I will reiterate how providing a picture of, and insight into, how Islam takes shape in the context of Puerto Rican Muslims’ everyday lives and their relationships to others as quadruple minorities helps scholars better understand Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas and consider the concept of cosmopolitanism as a helpful theoretical framework for studying global Islam and American religion.
CHAPTER 2
THE CONTINGENT LINEAGES OF PUERTO RICAN MUSLIM COSMOPOLITANISM

It was a muggy morning in late May in Union City, New Jersey when I met up with Abu Sumayah Abdur Razzaq Lebron at Noches de Colombia, a chain restaurant serving Latin American fare. Similar to shops in the deep South, the restaurant’s windows dripped with humidity. The café is located just off Bergenline Ave. — a hub of the local Latinx community with 90% of the neighborhood being made up of Colombians, Peruvians, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Salvadorans, and Mexicans. Here, just west of the Lincoln Tunnel and with a view to Hell’s Kitchen and Midtown Manhattan, the Americas come together with remnants left from previous migrations of Dutch, English, German, Irish, Polish, Armenians, Syrians, European Jews, Italians, Belgians, Greeks, Chinese, and Russians. Just up Bergenline Ave. lies the North Hudson Islamic Education Center (NHIEC) where there is a high concentration of Latinx Muslims. So much so that there is an annual “National Latino Muslim Day” held at the Islamic center. This is the neighborhood where Daniel Abdullah Hernandez, a Puerto Rican imam serving in Pearland, Texas, grew up and took his shahadah — a recitation of the witness to Islam and the signifier of conversion. It is also where Abu Sumayah was originally schooled in the ways of Islam. Over a traditional Colombian breakfast (carne asada con calentado) we talk about his story. We started by discussing his recent comments on “The Deen Show” — a popular YouTube show hosted by Eddie Redzovic, a Bosnian convert from Chicago with a significant online presence.
Responding to disparaging comments toward Muslims made by then Miss Puerto Rico Destiny Velez on Twitter, ¹ Abu Sumayah appeared on the show saying that Ms. Velez would be welcomed by the Muslim community, ² needed to show more “Boricua pride,”³ and was in need of a “history lesson.” Pushing back on those who frame Puerto Rico as a “Christian nation,” Abu Sumayah talked about Muslim contributions to mathematics, science, education, technology, and navigation. He harkened back to Andalusian Spain and Caribbean history claimed his family had African, Taíno, and Andalusian roots. “My great-grandfather used to speak in a language that my family couldn’t understand,” he said. His grandmother mimicked the words to Abu Sumayah and he believes they are Arabic. He talks about the thousands of words that Spanish shares with Arabic and the entanglement of Puerto Rican culture with the Middle East. Tapping on the popular music culture of Puerto Rico Abu Sumayah claimed that “‘La Bamba even has Muslim roots.” Looking at the camera he challenged Miss Puerto Rico to “see how our people are connected to Islam, especially in our Boricua culture.”

As we finished our breakfast and continued our conversation, Abu Sumayah also told me about his personal journey to Islam in the 1990s. He meandered his way through drugs and gang life before finding his way to a meeting of the Universal Zulu Nation, an international hip-hop awareness group formed and formerly headed by artist and speaker Afrika Bambaata. As part of their mission to inspire solidarity and “ghetto


³ Pride in Puerto Rican culture. Boricua is a term derived from what is believed to be an original Taíno name for the island of Puerto Rico: Borinquen.
transformation”, many members of the Nation of Islam and the Five Percenters, a break off group from the Nation, joined the meetings in the 1980s and 90s. Through contacts in the Zulu Nation, Abu Sumayah talked with Five Percenters and members of an all Latinx, and specifically Puerto Rican, community in El Barrio called Alianza Islámica. He took the shahadah in 1998 and was by 2001 studying Arabic and religion in Medina, Saudi Arabia. Reflecting on the intersections of street life, ghetto revitalization, and exiting gangs, Abu Sumayah told me, “yeah, I guess you could call Puerto Rican Muslims the ‘original gangstas’ of Latino Islam. We started in gangs and then we started the Latinx Muslim community. But we didn’t do it alone.”

Abu Sumayah’s story not only illustrates the various valences of a Puerto Rican Muslims’ personal networks and narratives, but also the importance of the connective tissue that comes together in the ways they speak of their historical development as a community. Spanning from the eighth century to the twenty-first, the way that Puerto Rican Muslims frame their history — and how that history has played out — come to serve as major markers of identity and claims to authenticity as they encounter marginalization as quadruple minorities. To understand the process of cosmopolitanism, we must situate it within such a matrix of historical and cultural memory.

Thus, this chapter will provide an overview of the history of the Puerto Rican Muslim community in order to appreciate the conditions under which Puerto Rican Muslim cosmopolitanism arose and is still in the process of becoming. In looking back over time at the many ways in which history has flowed into the contemporary community’s notion of identity, the chapter will also pay attention to how Puerto Rican Muslims view and interpret their history. Therefore, this chapter not only provides a
snapshot of the Puerto Rican Muslim community’s cosmopolitan genealogy, but also shows how they construct this genealogy as a means to attain authenticity in the communities they claim membership in. In other words, it will present what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing called the “contingent lineages” of Puerto Rican Muslim identity.

Puerto Rican Muslim history is not just about facts and figures, but the confluence of multiple, shifting, stories that span multiple geographies. There is not a single Puerto Rican Muslim “history” as such, but various fragments that have been pieced together by Puerto Rican Muslims in the present. By analyzing these “contingent lineages,” the “world-embracing” network of Puerto Rican Muslims will be brought to light alongside the “cosmopolitan specificities” of their local contexts and crossings. While each of these histories — and their meaning in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims — will come up again in subsequent chapters, it is good to first get an overview of the story itself.

**Muslims in Puerto Rico from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century**

Muslims first came to Puerto Rico as part of the transatlantic colonial project, from both the Iberian Peninsula and West Africa. In the past decade, scholars have started to analyze trends in the European encounter with the Americas in trade and exchange across the Atlantic World and how this came to shape communities and individuals among colonizers, slaves, shipmates, and indigenous peoples. There is reliable evidence that Muslims most likely came to Puerto Rico as part of the initial

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4 Tsing, *Friction*, 127.

5 Ibid.

Spanish foray into the Americas. Some Moriscos — Spanish Muslims who became
baptized Christians in the context of the Reconquista — came on the ships that
Columbus and Cabeza de Vaca, Cortés, Pizzaro, and others sailed with across the
Atlantic.⁷ Specifically in regards to Puerto Rico, “Moriscos or Iberian Muslims” bypassed
Spanish laws that prohibited them from crossing the Atlantic to the Spanish Americas
and were later brought before inquisitorial courts to face charges of “practicing Islam or
of being descendants of Muslims.”⁸ An official inquisition did not exist in Puerto Rico, as
there was no religious court maintained on the island. Nonetheless, suspected heretics
were charged and, at times, remanded to regional tribunals elsewhere in the Americas
or sometimes sent back to the regional governors in Spain.⁹ Since Moriscos were not
permitted to worship and express their identities publicly in the context of boundary
making state-craft in the Americas, the full impact of their presence in New World
politics, economy, and religion is difficult to discern.

Beyond their embodied presence, the specter of the “Morisco” was brought over
in the minds of Iberian colonizers as well. As will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3
on Puerto Rican culture and Muslim identity, the imagined menace of the “Moor” also
came with the soldiers and conquistadors who came over to the Americas. Their
visages infused elements of the encounter between Europeans and indigenous

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⁷ Karoline P. Cook, Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America,

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ The cases in Puerto Rico are few and underwhelming in detail, but there could be more to discover in
the archives. It is possible, given further research, that Moriscos, like “crypto-Jews,” could have practiced
their faith on the periphery of the concentrated centers of power in San Juan. See Ezratty, Harry, “Crypto
Jews in Puerto Rico Welcomed by Reform Community,” Society For Crypto Judaic Studies, accessed
Americans — including Puerto Rican cultural festivals such as La Fiesta de Santiago Apostól in Loíza Aldea, to be explored later. Indeed, it could be said that the mental universe of the conquerors was shaped by the ethnic, racial, and religious tensions of Spanish peninsular culture and history. That is because the Spaniards who came to Latin America and the Caribbean in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were still working out their particular ethnic, racial, and religious identity after emerging from a series of wars to claim Spain and the entire Iberian Peninsula for Christianity alone. Not only did the explorers and colonizers carry in their imaginations the contest between Christianity and Islam and the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula and map that onto their new social worlds — where indigenous peoples became representative of the expelled Moors\(^\text{10}\) — but they would come to work out these tensions in the Americas and against the backdrop of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim co-existence.\(^\text{11}\)

Muslims also arrived in Puerto Rico as part of the transatlantic trade in enslaved persons. Two texts help shed light on this period of history in the Americas in general and in Puerto Rico in particular: Michael A. Gomez’s *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*\(^\text{12}\) Sylviane A. Diouf’s *Servants of Allah:*

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African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas. In his work, Gomez outlined the social history of the experiences of African Muslims and their descendants throughout the Americas, including the Caribbean, beginning in the fifteenth century. For her part, Diouf offered an account of the background of African-Muslim slaves in Africa, the ways in which Muslims sought to maintain their beliefs and practices in the New World, and the legacy of this nearly-forgotten history.

Both Gomez and Diouf interrogated slave ship manifests, plantation records, and other slave-trade documents to show the long history of interaction, exchange, and even circulatory relationships between Muslims and Muslim communities in West Africa and the Americas. Though it did not thrive, or even survive, Islam established itself in significant ways as the Americas’ “second monotheistic religion” through the religious imagination and inventive ritualistic adaptation of Muslim slaves, freedmen, and maroons. Further, it left traces and “has contributed to the culture and history of the continents.” As Gomez wrote, “the Old World context and set of circumstances molding and impacting Muslim life in Africa and Europe continued to inform conditions in the New World and clearly influenced the ways in which the colonial project unfolded. In what became Latin America, the conflicts and enmities and politics [of the Old

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14 A caveat must be made here about the indentured Indian Muslim community of Trinidad and Tobago. A significant and long-lasting wave of indentured Indian immigration occurred there from 1845-1917. These numbers included Hindus, Christians, and Muslims (both Sunni and Shi’a). Merging with African populations and later influenced by African American Islamic groups, this community continues to be a robust part of the Trinidadian religious landscape. See also Aisha Khan, ed. *Islam and the Americas*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), 216-326.

15 Diouf, 251.
World…were not quickly or easily forgotten in…Hispaniola, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Panama, Venezuela or elsewhere…”

Muslim slaves were not only present in the Caribbean, they were also numerous. It is not a stretch to imagine that they were also present in Puerto Rico and part of the Spanish encomienda system there, especially as the Taíno population rapidly declined and African slaves were brought in droves to the island to support a struggling sugar plantation economy. Indeed, because of the aforementioned rapid decline of the indigenous Taíno population and the island’s robust, but faltering, sugar plantations, Puerto Rico was a key destination of West African slaves. This is evidenced by the fact that Wolof Muslims rebelled in San Juan in the middle of the sixteenth-century and that Muslim maroons sought refuge throughout Puerto Rico, often in the hinterlands and inner mountains where the colonial powers in-and-around San Juan could not always extend their reach. The aforementioned Omar Ramadan-Santiago has accomplished some of this work in his exploration of African/Moorish connections and identity construction among Puerto Rican Muslims. He identified that Puerto Rico’s population of enslaved persons included “undercover Muslims” or ladinos from Iberia and West African and non-Spanish-speaking slaves, or bozales, from the Wolof, Mandigo/a, and

16 Gomez, 371.


18 Diouf, 38, 211.

19 Ibid., 50, 241.

20 Gomez, 12.
Fula/ni tribes. Enslaved Africans were originally brought to Puerto Rico to work on the sugarcane plantations that could no longer be supported by Taínos who provided the original labor for the emerging Caribbean sugar economy.

Decimated by both harsh labor conditions and lack of resistance to European diseases, the indigenous population was eradicated by smallpox, malaria, the plague, influenza, the measles. This loss in labor led colonists to request royal permission to bring Africans “to supplement the diminishing labor force since they had already built up a natural immunity to the same diseases that plagued the indigenous.” Many of these enslaved Africans were Muslim. Even so, as Ramadan-Santiago noted, “[t]he prohibition of Islam coupled with African Muslims’ severance from their home countries and communities resulted in a steady decline in the number of Muslims in the New World” let alone Puerto Rico. Spanish rule proved “a hostile environment where Christianity was not only favored, but forced.” Muslims in Puerto Rico not only struggled to maintain the faith, but also fought to pass it down to the following generations. In addition to Spanish antagonism toward Islam, African Muslim enslaved persons were double minorities—in both race and religion—in the colonial society as well as among the enslaved, hence foreshadowing the experience of Puerto Rican Muslims in the


twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Eventually, Islam died out in Puerto Rico and there is little evidence that any Muslims were able to pass on their religion to their children and so forth. Thus, what researchers and the Puerto Rican Muslim community in search of historical rootedness and identity are left with are vestiges and hints, historical imagination, and the construction of meaning rather than direct links.

**Arabs, Palestinians, and Other Muslim Immigrants to Puerto Rico**

However, before getting to that part of the Puerto Rican Muslim story we must first address the Arab Muslims who came to have an outsized influence on the Puerto Rican Muslim community, specifically on the island of Puerto Rico itself. While there were Muslims present in Puerto Rico before Arab immigrants began to arrive in the twentieth-century, it was this latter flow of people and religion that brought the practice of Islam back to the Caribbean island after a hiatus of some a hundred years. Their presence also marked a new stage in the cosmopolitan experience of Puerto Ricans in general and Puerto Rican Muslims in particular.

Not only did immigrant Arab communities help establish many of the mosques in Puerto Rico, they proved a critical node of influence in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims in the U.S. as well. Furthermore, leaders such as Abu Sumayah, Imam Daniel Abdullah Hernandez, Imam Danny Khalil al-Sagrado, and others, received their training in places like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. To be sure, while Arab Muslims are far from the only influence in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims their role cannot be overlooked. Without them, the community as it exists today would look drastically different.

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25 See Diouf.
Particularly in Puerto Rico, Palestinians — and to a certain extent other immigrants from Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey — have acted as a “middle-man” minority group linking various geographies, identities, and religious communities together on the island. While they have provided economic and social benefit to Puerto Ricans in general, they have remained somewhat sequestered off from the general population, accused of clannishness, and have been the object of resentment by some Puerto Ricans — both non-Muslim and Muslim.

Arabs came to Puerto Rico beginning in the late nineteenth-century and subsequently throughout the twentieth. Initially, it was predominately Christian Arabs who came, but more Muslims arrived from Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan beginning in the 1950s. Their arrival helped spur the growth of the contemporary Muslim community on the island. Their story is predicated upon, and runs parallel to, Palestinian history in the twentieth century. It has been surmised among Muslims on the island that the advent of the Muslim community in Puerto Rico came with the first-wave of Arab immigrants in the mid-twentieth century. While narratives of Arab Muslims coming to Latin America and the Caribbean have been somewhat neglected in scholarly discourse, their migration to the region has proved an important component of its


demographic landscape, adding to its complexity over the centuries. Although immigration from Europe and the importation of slaves from Africa were the principal sources of population growth up until the mid-twentieth century, intra-regional migration flows and migration from Asia and the Middle East are now emerging as important processes in the formation of the region.\textsuperscript{28}

According to the Arab America Institute Foundation, the population in Puerto Rico who self-identify as having Arabic-speaking ancestry is estimated as close to 7,284.\textsuperscript{29} The largest number of new Arab immigrants to Puerto Rico came from Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. Census data on “Arabs” include the responses Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Palestinian, Moroccan, Arab or Arabic, and the following countries collapsed as “Other Arab”: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. In Puerto Rico, according to the 2010 Census, roughly 47% of Arab Americans have Lebanese or Palestinian roots. Since 1990, significant increases appear in the number of Puerto


\textsuperscript{29} Arab America Institute Foundation, “Puerto Rico,” accessed November 1, 2015: https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/aai/pages/7706/attachments/original/1431630809/PuertoRico.pdf?1431630809.
Ricans who are of Jordanian and Iraqi descent. Roughly 39% of ancestry respondents chose the generic identity of “Arab/Arabic.”

Palestinian immigration occurred in four successive waves. The first wave of immigration came in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the rule of the Ottoman Empire (1860-1916). The second wave occurred under the British Mandate in Palestine between 1918 and 1948. Finally, the last two waves were a direct result of two events: the 1948 Palestinian exodus, when more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were expelled from their homes following the creation of Israel, and the Six-Day War of 1967. Although the numbers of Arabs and Palestinians arriving before 1948 was negligible, their population rose to 2,000 between 1940 to 1970 (0.07 percent). Due to continued immigration and internal demographic growth, that number rose to an estimated 3,000 (0.09 percent) in 1980; 4,500 (0.13 percent) in 1990; and 5,000 (0.13 percent) in 2010. As of today, the population seems to be stagnating, and possibly declining, as subsequent generations either move to the U.S. or back to the Middle East.

While many believed that the first Arab Muslims came to Puerto Rico in the 1950s and 60s there is evidence that Arab Muslims arrived even earlier, during the second wave of Palestinian immigration. Although the vast majority of early Arab immigrants to Puerto Rico were Catholic, there was a mix of Orthodox, Malakite, Druze,

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
and Muslims as there were elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin America.\textsuperscript{32} This was certainly the case in the 1950s and going forward.

Finding a quality of life that they enjoyed and establishing a successful economic foothold in Puerto Rico, Arabs became part of a larger integration process of various immigrant groups in Puerto Rico between 1910-1940 and came to leave their mark on the construction of Puerto Rican identity.\textsuperscript{33} Beyond their economic proclivity, Arabs would leave their cultural footprints in language, architecture, music, food, and philanthropy. They did the same in the realm of religion by establishing mosques in several cities and municipalities throughout Puerto Rico. The Arab community is most well-known on the island for their commercial presence. Multiple families own petrol stations, restaurants, and even a butterfly shop in Viejo San Juan, which is popular among tourists and locals alike. The longevity of the Arab community in Puerto Rico is crucially linked to the vitality of this economic activity. For the most part, Arabs and Palestinians seemed to quickly adapt, assimilate, and carve out spheres of economic success in Latin America and the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{34} However, it must be noted that while some found success, not all prospered and not all chose to integrate into the local society. Likewise, while some Arab and Palestinian immigrants and refugees in Puerto Rico are economically incorporated and fairly comfortable, if not coalescent, with the

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\textsuperscript{32} “La Presencia Árabe en San Juan, Puerto Rico (1910-1940).” May 2016, Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y El Caribe under the direction of Dra. Amalia Alsina Orozco, 139.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{34} See Roberto Marín-Guzmán and Zidane Zéraoui, \textit{Arab Immigration in Mexico in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Assimilation and Arab Heritage}, (Monterey, Mexico and Austin, TX: Instituto Tecnológico de Monterey and Augustine Press, 2003) & Roberto Marín-Guzmán, \textit{A Century of Palestinian Immigration into Central America: A Study of their Economic and Cultural Contributions}, (San José: University of Costa Rica, 2000).
\end{flushleft}
indigenous Puerto Rican community, there is a sense of distance — particularly between Palestinian Muslims and Puerto Rican converts.

In the course of my research in Puerto Rico I only found internal demographic estimates for the contemporary Muslim population in Puerto Rico. Those estimates state that there are between 3,500 to 5,000 Muslims on the island. From my observation and conversations with imams, members of the community, and other scholars the vast majority — perhaps 80-90% — are Palestinian by descent. The majority of the remainder are a mix of Jordanians, Egyptians, Turks, Dominicans, Jamaicans, Trinidadians, and Puerto Ricans. Participant observation at mosques between 2015-2018 reveals that the active population of Muslims on the island (those who gather regularly at mosques or in private homes, businesses, etc. for Friday prayers or other events) is around 800-1,000 at most on any given Friday. Furthermore, I observed that between 2015-2018 there were 500-600 people who attended the annual Eid al-Fitr gathering in San Juan. This leads me to believe that the Muslim population of Puerto Rico is lower than the estimates provided by leaders within the population. Furthermore, of those Muslims in Puerto Rico only a slim minority identify as “Puerto Rican.” While I have no verifiable survey data, from my observations at mosques (specifically during jumaah prayers) I would deduce that Muslims who identify as “Puerto Rican” would only constitute about 10-15% of the total Muslim population on the island. The population could be higher as it was difficult to find all of the Muslims who identify as “Puerto Rican” on the island due to claims that many Puerto Rican Muslims preferred to pray at home, at work, or with family and friends. While I observed some of this, it was
impossible for me to find everyone through the networks I worked with. To provide a clearer picture of Puerto Rican Muslim life on the island, I will return to the matter in Chapters 3 and 4.

The “Original Gangstas”: Puerto Rican Muslim Converts in the U.S.

For the Puerto Rican Muslim population in the U.S. I found more reliable data. Gaston Espinosa, Juan Galvan, and Harold Morales conducted the Latino Muslim Survey (LMS) and combined it with other data from fifteen years of their own qualitative research within the community and based on other surveys of the U.S.’s Muslim population. In the end, their conclusion was that there are “likely between 50,000 to 70,000” Latinx Muslims in the U.S. Of those, 22% are Puerto Rican. This would make for some 11,000-15,400 Puerto Rican Muslims in the U.S.

Thus, to understand the Puerto Rican Muslim community today it is necessary to not only understand dynamics between Palestinians and Puerto Ricans on the lush island of Puerto Rico, but also explore places like the asphalt jungle of El Barrio — Spanish Harlem. There, the community stretches back over 50 years and has had an impact on dawah to the Latinx community in other U.S. urban centers such as Chicago, Orlando, Houston, Philadelphia, and in Puerto Rico. This is also the area where most research has been done, not only tracing the historical contours of the community, but also critically contributing to an understanding of some of the characteristics thereof and their significance in understanding Islam and Muslim communities in the U.S. As will

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become clear in Chapter 5 on Puerto Rican Muslims and Islam in the U.S., the presence of Puerto Rican Muslims is not only significant for how we understand the global *ummah*, but also to understanding religion in the U.S. as well.

It was there that the initial spark for today’s Puerto Rican Muslim community fanned into flame. There are numerous means by which Latinx Muslims in general, and Puerto Rican Muslims in particular, come to convert to Islam — including various theological, social, and societal factors ranging from difficulties with the concept of the Trinity in Christianity, to conversion in prison, to marriage, and contact with immigrant communities in U.S. urban centers. Despite the great diversity in means and methods of conversion, multiple researchers link the contemporary growth of the Latinx Muslim community in the U.S. to contact between the African-American Muslim community in the U.S. and Puerto Ricans as part of the civil rights efforts of the 1960s and 70s. Hisham Aidi wrote, “on an ideological level [Latinx Muslims in the U.S.] have been profoundly influenced by their African-American counterparts, adopting similar ideas of spiritual self-discovery and emancipation in their approach to Islamic theology.”

Indeed, contact between African Americans and Puerto Ricans was significant during the civil rights struggle, specifically in the New York area where Puerto Ricans involved in anti-war and nationalist movements were often sidelined with their black counterparts and attracted to the powerful anti-racist ideologies circulating in their mutual

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communities at the time. While the impact of the such communities on the contemporary Latinx Muslim community, and on Puerto Ricans specifically, is less intense, it was a significant factor in this early period.

Indeed, it was against this backdrop that a distinctly Latinx, and predominately Puerto Rican, organization called Alianza Islámica — the first Latinx Muslim specific organization in the U.S. — emerged out of African American Sunni Muslim groups in Harlem in the 1980s and groups such as the Puerto Rican led Bani Saqr in New Jersey. Alianza Islámica is a critical node in the Latinx Muslim narrative as a whole. It is also, as an organization founded by Puerto Ricans in El Barrio, a touchpoint for many Puerto Rican Muslims in particular. It is a symbol of pride and a hinge point in their history. It is at once a contested and celebrated organization. Situated within, and emerging out of, a dual New York and Puerto Rican background, the founders of Alianza — Yahya Figueroa, Rahim Ocasio, and Ibrahim González — “grew up in a revolutionary center of political activism and the struggle for civil rights.” They founded Alianza in 1987 at 1717 Lexington Avenue in the heart of El Barrio. Its founders wanted to not only reach out with the message of Islam, but “improve [their] community and its way of life.” Speaking at an event to raise funds for those in Puerto Rico impacted by

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41 Morales, Latino and Muslim in America, 36.
Hurricane Maria, Rahim “Ramon” Ocasio said that the impetus for Alianza came both from their ostracism in local mosques and their desire for social justice. He said:

African Americans back in the 70s would convert and they would go to an African American mosque and wouldn't feel alien. They had a support group. They weren't left out to dry. In contrast with the Latinos...they [took] shahadah and blend into what — the greater Muslim mass...they start dressing differently and people don’t know who they are. How could anybody count Latino Muslims? Go to a mosque in New Jersey, New York City, how could you tell? And after a while...some people blend in, survivors, they can take it...there are those who aren’t surviving. They are leaving.42

Ocasio and his fellow founders decided to “create something ourselves. Create a safe space where [Latino Muslims] don’t feel alienated, that their culture matters, yet it has an Islamic expression. Alianza created that safe space.” They also wanted to speak out against racism, struggle in the cause of social justice, and liberate people from their moral decrepitude in El Barrio. Ocasio said, “We felt that Islam was the salvation for our family. For our community. For our people. And then for humanity at large.” Sharing a language, sharing an ethnic identity, sharing a history, sharing a call for social justice, sharing a cosmopolitan outlook that was simultaneously focused on their community, and sharing a religion made Alianza Islámica a hub for Puerto Rican and Latinx Muslims

in the city. It also created a catalyst for more conversions and more organizations in their wake.⁴³

Figure 2-2. The original locations of Alianza Islámica on Lexington Avenue (left) and in the Bronx (right). Today, the evidence of their existence is gone, but the memory of the organization remains a critical node in the Latinx — and Puerto Rican — Muslim narrative. Photo: Ken Chitwood

As Muslim communities underwent a general Sunnification and Arabization in the U.S. in the 1990s, multiple organizations grew out of Alianza Islámica, albeit with slightly different emphases. Alongside the “Dot-Com Boom” of the 1990s, there was a burgeoning of online communities, which eventually gave birth to the Latino American Dawah Organization (LADO) in September 1997⁴⁴ and a slew of other organizations in the years to follow. This was the “second wave” of Latinx Muslim conversion and community development.⁴⁵ Through the leadership of the likes of Juan Galvan from Texas, and later Puerto Rican Juan Shafiq Alvarado of New York, LADO produced the

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⁴³ The story of Alianza Islámica will be explored in further detail as part of the discussion around Puerto Rican Muslims and their experience in the U.S. in Chapter 5.


⁴⁵ Morales, Latino and Muslim in America, 44ff.
periodical “The Latino Muslim Voice” starting in 2002. Since then, The Voice helped create a Latinx Muslim culture and identity with its own narrative, history, and identity. The Voice provided “discourses and strategies”\textsuperscript{46} to help new converts deal with the primary crises and issues of their recent reversion (specifically, the dual ostracism faced from the Latinx culture on the one hand, and their newly found Muslim community on the other). The Voice developed “a transcript concerning a ‘Latina/o Muslim’ identity that includes images, practices, and ideas of a cultural memory of a unified ‘Latina/o’ world as well as a Muslim Spanish heritage.”\textsuperscript{47} In effect, LADO and its publications online and in print created a clearinghouse for Latinx Muslim conversion narratives and became integral in shaping “a transcript of an imagined community” of Latinx Muslims.\textsuperscript{48} Overall, the unifying voice of the forerunners’ conversion narratives and the culturally creative power of community character is evident in these early Latinx Muslim publications. In fact, this characteristic of LADO’s printing culture later gave birth to the Latinx specific outreach strategies of the organization Islam in Spanish, which reaches out to Latinx people across the Americas on the internet, through print and digital distribution, and “street dawah” in places like Houston, New York, and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Initially, these organizations came together in order to provide community for isolated Latinx Muslims spread throughout the U.S. They also endeavored to educate Latinx Muslims in the basics of Islamic doctrine. However, as their knowledge grew,

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48} Bowen, 8-13.
camaraderie intensified, and “Muslim immigration increased and more and more Latina/os embraced the religion, a handful of Muslim immigrants began to take seriously the possibility of converting Latina/os through organized proselytization efforts.” Latinx Muslim specific organizations began to emerge to not only meet the needs of the community, but also reach others. Since Alianza Islámica and LADO — both organizations with strong Puerto Rican roots and presence — paved the way, a myriad of other organizations came forth including, but not limited to: IslamInSpanish (a multimedia organization aiming to translate outreach materials and information into Spanish); Why Islam? (a hotline set up by Muslim volunteers to offer Islamic advice and information to people of Latina/o background, including many in Mexico); La Asociación Latino Musulmana de América, popularly referred to as “LALMA” (supporting outreach activities, transitional support, Spanish-language materials, and introduction courses to Islam); the NHIEC (although not specifically Latinx in nature, it has the largest concentration of Latinx Muslims compared to any other Islamic Center or masjid in its region, and thus engages in Latinx specific dawah including Hispanic Muslim Day, which has been running since 2002); Propagación Islamica para la Educación e la Devoción a Allah el Divino, (PIEDAD, a network of women who engage in activities to support Latinx Muslim spiritual development, community building, sisterhood, and educational outreach); and local organizations such as Latino Muslims of Chicago, the


50 Such as providing relationship and hijab advice for young Latina converts.

51 Alianza Islámica no longer exists and LADO is not nearly as active as it once was since many of its leaders have gone on to be part of other organizations, work on independent projects (i.e. Juan Galvan’s book Hispanic Muslims) or retire from active participation in dawah efforts.
Latino Muslim Association of the San Fernando Valley (LMASFV), Alameda Islamica: Latino Muslims of the Bay Area, and the Atlanta Latino Muslim Association (ALMA). These paramosque organizations have led the way when it comes to Latinx specific dawah and owe much of their inspiration to the initial catalysts for Latinx specific dawah from among the Puerto Rican Muslim community in and around New York.

Having achieved a certain level of understanding, and acceptance, among the Muslim community in the U.S., these Latinx Muslim organizations are now re-focusing their efforts on reaching people throughout the Americas, with targeted outreach efforts in major U.S. urban centers, Latin America, and the Caribbean. This is part of a general trend in which “in a postcolonial world [...] Muslim missionary efforts are being recast in a global, multicultural, and multilingual context.”52 Not only are da’is — one who invites others to faith, to prayer, or to Islam — finding it necessary to engage in more “soft-sell” forms of dawah in North America, but they are seeing the need to tailor Islam to particular cultural realities and languages. Da’is reaching out to Latina/os in the U.S. and in Latin American countries have realized that Islamic doctrine and practice need to be translated into the Spanish language and culture in order for them to come into “authentic” contact with Islam. They follow in the footsteps of reformer Rashid Rida who, while accepting “Arabic should remain the authoritative language of the Qur’an,” advocated “multilingual da’wa that would enable Muslims to match the skills of Christian missionaries, ‘who learn the languages of the peoples.’”53 These Latinx Muslim da’is are

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engaging in this not only in the metro-areas of the U.S. where there are large Latinx populations (Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, San Antonio, Chicago, New York), but also in Latin American nations such as Puerto Rico. To reach them they are engaging in targeted outreach efforts that are tailor made for their culture and shaped by their history stretching all the way back to the mid-1970s and the foundation of Alianza Islámica by Puerto Rican Muslims in New York City. Hence, in this way, these organizations have come full circle and have now created a cyclical exchange, or network of multiple nodes, between leaders and interlocutors in multiple locations.

Dreams of al-Andalus

In part because of the activities of Alianza Islámica and other Latinx Muslim organizations, media outlets started to take note of Latinx American Muslim communities in the 1990s. As news began to appear about this emerging population, articles chronicled the stories of Latinx Muslims and their “reversion” to Islam — how they believed they were not only born Muslim and fell away, but also how Latinx Muslims framed their conversion to Islam as a return to their roots and connection to al-Andalus. Some 130 publications were written by non-Latinx Muslims via public media outlets (newspapers, online blogs, magazines, radio shows, TV programs, et cetera) between 2001 - 2011. Many of them referenced this connection between al-Andalus and the Latinx Muslim community in the U.S. and across the Americas.

54 Daniel Abdullah Hernandez and Mujahid Fletcher shared with me the fact that they regularly engage in outreach to Latina/os in foreign countries. Each imam spends two-four weeks a year on short-term mission trips to support masjids in these countries, to train da'is there, or to preach in “revival-style” meetings that call Latina/os to Islam. Hernandez also raises funds and support for an Islamic Learning Center he helped launch in Moca, Puerto Rico.

Lacking verifiable historical connections to the broader *ummah*, Puerto Rican Muslims do more than refer to the facts of their history in discussing who they are. The frequent reference to, and re-imagining of, al-Andalus in the publicized testimonies of Latinx Muslims is part of this process and allows them to shore up their identity as a reference-point for authenticity and to resist their marginalization as quadruple minorities. As part of their “reversion stories,” Latinx Muslims recall al-Andalus as a means of authenticating their identity as both Latinx and Muslim at the same time. For many Muslims the idea of “reversion” recalls the notion of *fitra*. *Fitra* is believed to be the original state in which humans were created by Allah. In essence, every child is born a Muslim only later to be corrupted by other religious sensibilities and traditions. Thus, in one sense a convert does not change their religion as revert back to their original state. For Latinx Muslims the term “reversion” has an additional connotation. Harold Morales wrote,

> Latinos who consume racialized mediations of Muslims as Arab often accuse Latino Muslims of rejecting their Latino ethnicity. Muslims who consume essentialized mediations of Latinos as beer drinking, pork eating, and licentious have conversely accused Latinos of being incapable of being good Muslims. Perhaps the ‘convert’ can never shed the suspicion of not being a real Muslim and a real Latino at the same time.⁵⁶

In this way, the memory of al-Andalus becomes “integral to the emerging story of Latino Muslims” according to what Morales called, “a logic of return” wherein they claim a historic-cultural connection to Islamic Spain as a means to meaningfully connect competing aspects of their identity and history. Thus, this historical memory must be considered alongside the facts of Puerto Rican Muslim history shared before.

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⁵⁶ Morales, *Latino and Muslim in America*, 100.
Figure 2-1. Puerto Rican Muslims refer to motifs and architectural designs like those in the lobby of the Ateneo Puertorriqueño (left) and the courtyard of the House of Spain (right) — both in Viejo San Juan, Puerto Rico — as evidence of the enduring Andalusian heritage in Puerto Rico. Photos: Ken Chitwood

While the memory of al-Andalus plays a significant role in the identity of Muslims across the globe\(^57\) for Puerto Rican Muslims in particular, the memory of al-Andalus “is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater.” It is a means of looking to the past to strengthen their identities in the present.\(^58\) Thus, al-Andalus functions as a key node in a mapped network of historical connections that constitute the Puerto Rican Muslim identity as authentically Muslim and authentically Latin at the same time. Yet, this identity remains elusive and not wholly validated. In looking to al-Andalus, Puerto Rican Muslims present their community as a justified mixture of old and new, pre-colonial and post-colonial, traditional and avant-garde, and thoroughly Muslim yet authentically “Hispanic.” Effectively, the dream of al-Andalus centers Puerto Rican

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57 “…it is difficult to exaggerate the nostalgia that individuals throughout the entire Islamic world still feel for the real or imagined pleasures of Andalusia.” Stephen Frederic Dale, *The Orange Trees of Marrakesh: Ibn Khaldun and the Science of Man*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 42.

identity as an integral, and historic, part of the global ummah while also refashioning Islam as an ingrained aspect of Latinx culture and the American continent via a mythic-historical relationship with a idolized Muslim culture that existed within a diverse ethnic and religious milieu, which mirrors that of Puerto Rican Muslim in the U.S. Maryam Noor Beig, a Latina Muslim, wrote, “By its outstanding example, Muslim Spain proves to the world that as a melting pot of religious faiths and races, we can, in reality, live and prosper with one another.” Thus, this identification with al-Andalus not only offers a possible pathway beyond their marginalization as quadruple minorities, but strengthens their own sense of self in a religiously plural context.

Puerto Rican Muslims cite “a heritage that dates back to Spain’s classical Islamic period,” to represent their conversion as “a return to their true cultural traditions” rather than a departure. This inclination is akin to the call “Seamos moros!” or “Let us be Moors!” that rallied Berbers during the uprising against Spanish rule in Morocco in the late nineteenth-century. Just as Islam and similar “dreams of al-Andalus” galvanized racial authenticity for African-American Muslims in the 1960s to the 70s and beyond, so too with Puerto Rican Muslims who graft these dreams into their own experience and search for authentic identity. This process was compressed as African-Americans and


Puerto Ricans came into close contact with one another in places such as Bronx and Harlem.  

With only tangential historical connections between the present-day Puerto Rican Muslim community and Andalusian Spain Puerto Rican Muslims — and other Latinx Muslims — must turn to the imagination of history to back-fill significance and make claims to authenticity within the global ummah. Puerto Rican Muslims craft and legitimate their identity, its institutions, and its assertions of authenticity through the invention of a tradition that appears and/or claims to be old and yet is quite recent in origin. Lacking the consistent historical connections of Arab Muslims, for example, to the narrative of Islam, Puerto Rican Muslims imbue their historical and cultural narrative with symbolic references to Muslim histories in order to imply their own kind of continuity with their preferred past. Thus, through the construction and maintenance of an “imagined Andalusian diaspora” Puerto Rican Muslims attempt to establish an identity founded in the past that makes a home for them in their religious sodality (Muslim), their cultural community (Puerto Rican), and their broader socio-political and geographic context (the United States and the Americas). This type of multi-directional authenticity serves as an unchanging truth that provides a powerful identity marker in a world of 

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62 In some ways, you might be able to say African-American Muslims acted as a “proximal host group” for Latinx Muslims, but this bears much more study for the terminology to be applied appropriately and authoritatively. Cf. Patrick D. Bowen, “The Latino American Da’wah Organization and the ‘Latina/o Muslim’ Identity in the United States.” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Religion*, 1, no. 11 (September 2010), 1-23.

constant change and challenge. It also acts as a kind of “ethnogenesis,”" or “ethnicity-as-practice,” wherein Puerto Rican Muslims are in the process of creating a distinct, but hybridized, ethnic identity that is not subsumed into any of the constituencies or communities it is part of, but stands on its own.

This process is not ephemeral, but practical, malleable, and situated. For example, while giving me a historic-cultural tour of his hometown Yonkers, New York Danny Khalil Salgado-Miralla (also known as Danny Khalil al-Portorikani) frequently referenced the ethnic and religious diversity of the city. The city has a strong history of immigrant communities leaving their mark on the fourth largest metro area in New York state. Italians, Irish, Dominicans, Levantine Arabs, Slavic, Polish, Portuguese, and many more ethnic communities shaped Yonkers into what it is today and the vestiges of their presence and impact are still felt. Reflecting on this, Salgado-Miralla pointed out the aptly named Islamic school in the city — Andalusia. Not only does it speak to the large Muslim population in the area, he said, but also their desire to be part of an ethnically diverse and religiously tolerant community here in the U.S. “Yonkers is my home,” he said, “but Andalus is my heritage in many ways.” The name of the school, and Danny’s affinity to it as he drove me around town, pointed to the meaning of Andalusia in his life and in the imagination of many Muslims. For them, the memory of Andalusia recalls a cosmopolitan golden age, “a great civilization that the whole world


65 Juan Flores, Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity, (San Juan: Arte Publico Pr, 1993), Kindle loc. 4246ff.

experienced and benefitted from.” Underscoring their cosmopolitan vision, the school’s website states that its mission is to nurture “Muslim youth that will contribute to humanity’s civilization in the twenty-first century as the youth of Andalusia did.”67 The school, and Puerto Rican Muslims too, recall Andalusia as a cosmopolitan Muslim empire even it is historically difficult to verify.

At the same time, this ethnicization of Muslim identities subtly maintains pre-existing boundaries. While Puerto Rican Muslims are able to inscribe themselves into the narrative of Islamic history through dreams of al-Andalus, there are elements of the Andalusian heritage that are subsumed under the Iberian emphasis featured in Puerto Rican Muslim narratives. Indeed, one member of the community warned that their fellow Latinx Muslims, “want to look for religious heritage in all the wrong places.”68 Citing genocidal persecution and lack of historical evidence, this blogger claimed that if Latinx Muslim heritage comes from anywhere it is not Spain, but West Africa, where there were Muslims being transported via slave ships to the Americas in both British and Spanish colonies. Historically verified or not, Latinx Muslims who no longer recognize themselves as part of the “official” or “accepted” history of the Latinx individual as Catholic, “reclaim that Islamic myth, and create a space of contested identities.”69 Attention paid to language and historical narratives coming from Moorish Spain are all


69 Martínez-Vásquez, 101.
part of world building and the construction of a plausible Latinx Muslim identity structure in the U.S.

In regards to Puerto Rican Muslims in particular, I spoke with Omar Ramadan Santiago at a seafood restaurant near Viejo San Juan. Over dinner, he opined about the negligence toward Africanness in Puerto Rican imaginations and in re-configurations of Andalusian heritage. He said, “we have to remember that Moors were part of African Islam and also part of the transatlantic trade that first brought Muslims to the Caribbean.”70 Referencing the work of Sylvian Diouf and Michael A. Gomez,71 Omar emphasized the Africanness of Puerto Rican Islam and the debt that Latina/o Muslims have to their African American forebears. He said, “we cannot miss it, but we do so because we tend to play down our African roots in the first place, even before we become Muslim.” In point of fact, there has been a long-standing debate about the African roots of Puerto Rican identity and wider Latinx characterizations of culture.72 Looking down at the mofongo — a dish made from mashed fried green plantains — he was eating at the time and considering the African influences on the dish,73 Ramadan-Santiago commented that it seems that in re-imagining themselves as a diaspora people via Iberian conceptions of Andalusian heritage, Puerto Rican Muslims may also be re-inscribing ethnic marks of difference by ignoring — whether implicitly or explicitly


71 See below.

72 As evinced in Juan Flores' work on ethnicity in Divided Borders or also in presentations such as “The Politics of Race in Contemporary Latin America,” by Ginetta Candelario, Michael Hanchard, Edward Telles, and Juan Flores at The City University of New York, November 14, 2013.

73 The roots of mofongo can be traced back to a West African yam dish called fufu.
— African connections. At the same time, there is also a strong sense among Puerto Rican Muslims that African Muslim history is also a part of their narrative in the “New World.”

With that said, some Puerto Rican Muslims do look to their West African heritage for historical identity. Abu Sumayah spoke proudly of his African roots and regularly references how the African-ness of Puerto Rico cannot be forgotten. This is part of a broader Puerto Rican insistence on not sidelining African heritage on the island and in the diaspora in favor of more European lineages and identities, and is something picked up by in the Muslim community as well. For example, in his response to Miss Puerto Rico, Abu Sumayah commented on how all three show the evidence of Islamic influence: his Taíno roots as an indigenous Puerto Rican were perhaps touched by pre-European contact between Muslim explorers and indigenous Taíno; his African roots through the transatlantic trade in enslaved persons; and his Spanish roots through al-Andalus. He emphasized that in each situation the original Islamic influence was lost because Christianity was forced on Puerto Ricans. Thus, in multiple conversations the memory of enslaved African Muslims in the Americas came up as one of the ways that Puerto Rican Muslims often draw on the notion of their culture’s tres raíces (three roots) — Taíno, African, and Spanish — to inform their present identity and look for Islam’s inflection in each. This process will be explored in further detail in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

It is paramount for any study of the Puerto Rican Muslim community to take into consideration the above historical antecedents and angles. These narratives are not random bits of historical fodder, but illustrate the interconnected nature of the
contemporary Puerto Rican Muslim community’s “contingent lineages.” As can be seen from this historical survey, the Puerto Rican Muslim community is grounded in multiple streams that often crisscross and intersect one another at multiple times and in multiple locations. Today, Puerto Rican Muslims are interwoven in a translational social network that is mediated by back-and-forth movement, rapid internet and phone communication, and migration from the island to urban centers in the U.S. and occasionally vice-versa (including New York/Newark, Chicago, Philadelphia, Miami, Orlando, Houston, Tampa, etc.). Puerto Rican Muslims leverage these networks (especially via social media) and this livelihood of simultaneity to their advantage as they create linkages between Muslim communities on the island, in the urban diaspora of the U.S., and with other Muslims across the globe through travel and technology. Thus, their history is vital for an understanding of Islam in the Americas in general.

Furthermore, as this chapter asserted, Puerto Rican Muslims claim an authentic place at the Muslim/Puerto Rican/American table in part by pulling on the various strands of these historical narratives and networks. The stories and chronicles covered above not only show the multiple networks and narratives that Puerto Rican Muslims are a part of, but also show the various inputs and impressions that came to shape their contemporary identity as they encountered marginalization and struggle as quadruple minorities. This chapter looked back over this history and shared how some Puerto Rican Muslims make meaning of it and see themselves as part of it. By introducing the relational networks and geographic nodes that make up the Puerto Rican Muslim world

74 See Tsing.

this historical overview of Puerto Rican Muslims points to the cosmopolitan origins of the community betwixt and between multiple religious, ethnic, and social identities. It also shows how that story cannot be confined to either a “global” or “local” register.

As an interpretative exploration of Puerto Rican Muslim history, this chapter showed a community founded in multiple narratives, geographies, situations, and communities at local, trans-local, and global levels. It highlighted the importance of the networks, flows of ideas, nodes of memory, and the relationships that came to define them and in which they took shape. And yet, it could only point to how these networks and nodes came to shape the contemporary Puerto Rican Muslim community and their ideas about, and practice of, cosmopolitanism. To get an even clearer understanding of how their cosmopolitan lives take shape requires moving beyond history and entering into their daily lives in the contemporary scene, starting with their relationship with their own Puerto Rican identity and culture.
CHAPTER 3
PUERTO RICAN MUSLIMS AND THE SEARCH FOR “AUTHENTIC” PUERTO RICAN PEOPLEHOOD

Puerto Rican Muslims are proud of their Puerto Ricanness. Look no further than the ubiquitous symbol found on the Facebook pages of Puerto Rican Muslims online. It features a fist raised in defiance of colonial incursions and social marginalization, emblazoned with the Puerto Rican flag in resplendent blue, white, and red. Above and below are the traditional words associated with this symbol — “Puerto Rican Pride.” This image is used by non-Muslim Puerto Ricans, but Puerto Rican Muslims add their own twist. Inserted, somewhat awkwardly, in between the top of the fist and the words “Puerto Rican” is “Muslim” in a false-Arabic font. When a Puerto Rican imam is hired by a mosque in the Bronx, a commenter will post this picture. When Muslims gather for Eid in San Juan, someone will share this image. When Abu Sumayah and others protested the perceived mistreatment of Puerto Ricans in the wake of Hurricane Maria, this image was displayed prominently on profiles and in discussions about the issue. Indeed, whether in New York or Puerto Rico, Philadelphia or Florida Puerto Rican Muslims find ways to ground themselves in their Puerto Ricanness. While this identity is certainly defined by mobility and divided experiences across borders and boundaries it is also defined by their interactions with local culture — both their inherited Puerto Rican culture and their local environments.
This chapter will focus more on the latter in order to highlight that being cosmopolitan does not only mean movement and adopting new practices, identities, and cultural cues, but also reengaging, redefining, and making choices about what to carry over from inherited cultures that individuals and communities were already part of before conversion. It will explore how Puerto Rican Muslims navigate, contest, and reconstitute Puerto Rican peoplehood in various ways: with family, friends, and community; in terms of religion; with food, with festivals and popular culture, and with the lived environment of Puerto Rico or Puerto Rican geographies in the United States, in the nexus of immigration, colonialism, and contested ethnic heritage. By doing this, the chapter will show how there is not a strict dichotomy between the cosmopolitan and the local, the mobile life of a Puerto Rican and the rootedness of their everyday
contexts. Instead, local people’s engagement with their immediate context can not only be cosmopolitan, but also re-energize their local ethnic identification in the process. It will further show that cosmopolitanism is not mutually exclusive from other forms of identification (ethnic, regional, religious), but that these may actually reinforce one another. Furthermore, it will show how cosmopolitanism involves a sometimes lonely contestation of existing norms that leads to a simultaneous experience of exile and the finding of a new community of fellow cosmopolitans.

**An Authentic Puerto Rican Culture?**

At the end of the Paseo de la Princesa¹ in Old San Juan is the well-known Raíces Fountain. The statue in the center of the fountain is eye-catching and eclectic. Completed in 1992 by architect and artist Miguel Carlo to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the encounter between Spanish colonial power and the Amerindian populations of the Caribbean and the Americas, the bronze statue is designed to honor the “three roots” of Puerto Rican culture: African, Spanish, and Taíno. On the one hand, the statue looks as if it is a ship being steered out to the sea lying just beyond the edge of the colonial city’s walls. On the other hand, the figures also seem to be positioned in a vibrant challenge of their colonial past, flaunting their ethnic heritage in open defiance of the forces that tried to silence Taíno and African bodies and culture.

In recent years there has been renewed interest for many Puerto Ricans searching for their roots. In particular, the Neo-Taíno movement features Puerto Ricans who identify as descendants of the Taíno forming groups and calling on the government

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¹ Walkway of the Princess.
to recognize their tribe. Along with African and Spanish heritage, Taíno roots have been reproduced in statues such as the Raíces Fountain, in art, in tourism posters, and public street art. Together, these three roots have been seen as part of José Luis Gonzaléz’s four-story building theory of Puerto Rican culture (Spanish colonial period, Afro-Caribbean popular base, South American and European immigration, and U.S. colonialism) or as part of other contemporary theories about hybridity and mixing on the island.

Regardless of the formulation, and despite academic challenges to these ideas, the three roots of Puerto Rican culture have become a popular litmus test of authenticity and a point of pride among Puerto Ricans. According to Arlene M. Davila, this “romanticized and harmonious integration” of the three roots of Puerto Rican culture have become part of an objectified national imaginary as part of an effort to contrast “authentic Puerto Rican culture” against the commercial and colonizing culture of the United States. Even if Puerto Ricans challenge these representations of official Puerto Rican culture — or seek to generate new expressions of Puerto Ricanness — they still have to draw on authorized versions and their representations to make their case. The

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2 As part of their evidence they cite a 2002 Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) study of 800 Puerto Ricans that found that 61% of the Puerto Rican population has Taíno mtDNA. The study also confirmed that the genetic pool of Puerto Ricans is a mix of European/Spanish, Amerindian/Taíno, and African lineage. See Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Race, Identity and Indigenous Politics: Puerto Rican Neo-Tainos in the Diaspora and the Island, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).


same is true for Puerto Rican Muslims. In their search for authenticity they are forced to draw on these three roots to illustrate their Puerto Rican bona fides. In trying to show their connection to broader Puerto Rican society, these three roots are Islamicized in the narratives of Puerto Rican Muslims. Thus, even as they draw on the roots to make their claims they also generate new, and arguably more cosmopolitan, versions of Puerto Rican identity.\(^6\) While the “official” Puerto Rican culture serves as a tool to stoke a national identity contra American colonialism it also demarcates boundaries of what constitutes being Puerto Rican. In this process, “[s]ome people and certain elements of the culture are valued as part of the community; others are shunned, excluded, and categorized as ‘ethnic’ or foreign.”\(^7\) Arab and Muslim identities or cultural elements are often marginalized, not recognized, or excluded from official representations of Puerto Rican peoplehood.

Against this backdrop, Puerto Rican Muslims struggle to represent themselves as authentically Puerto Rican. Whether Palestinian or Puerto Rican, Muslims in Puerto Rico occupy a tenuous space in the Puerto Rican public imaginary — if they even appear at all — and have as of late made a more concerted effort to represent themselves as the fourth root of Puerto Rican culture. Grafting themselves on to the existing Puerto Rican national imaginary involves a process of synthesis, political struggle, and cultural conflict, all against a broader context of domination, entanglement with local communities, and webs of national and global power, immigration, and exchange. Commenting on the cosmopolitan and the Middle East, Sami Zubaida noted


\(^7\) Davila, 14.
that in the process of creating a cultural identity, demarcation lines can be more and more narrowly defined for cosmopolitans in certain regions and cultures. The same could said about Puerto Rican Muslims in their own families. By stepping into a more multi-cultural way of living and thinking, Puerto Rican Muslims do — in some sense — differentiate themselves from their “cultures of origin, from conventional living, from family and home-centeredness, into a culturally promiscuous life, drawing on diverse ideas, traditions, and innovations.”

Certainly, Puerto Rican Muslims display a certain “cultural promiscuity” in their conversion, but not at the expense of their communities and cultures of origin. Instead, there is a process of transformation, what Naeem Mohaiemen’s might call the “flaw in the algorithm of cosmopolitanism” wherein Puerto Ricans strengthen their Puerto Ricanness through their openness to the world and in reaction against other — perhaps less desirable — aspects of doing so.

It is important to recognize that this pragmatic cosmopolitanism has its limits. It does not negate nationalism. It does not do away with the rootedness of one’s identity. It does not metaphorically transform a local grub into a cosmopolitan butterfly. Instead, the transformation is much more complex. Cosmopolitanism necessitates that the nation – and by proxy “nationalism” – be reconfigured, re-imagined, and re-formed into a


9 Naeem Mohaiemen, “Volume Eleven (Flaw in the Algorithm of Cosmopolitanism)” from its display at MOMA PS1, New York, NY: November 22, 2017. His is a reflection on his uncle’s positive writings concerning Nazi Germany. On the one hand, his uncle was fighting against colonial domination (India v. UK), but on the other he bought into the discourse of national socialism and the far-right in Germany. In part, this was because he saw the need for a strong national spirit on behalf of Indians. To define an “Indian-ness” to combat foreign incursion and colonial domination. This is problematic because the work his uncle did was “cosmopolitan” on many registers, but also anti-cosmopolitan and nationalistic. This is the flaw in the algorithm and design of cosmopolitanism. But is it really a “flaw?” Perhaps it is part of it. To hold this anti-cosmopolitan view (support of Nazi Germany) required the very notion of a wider world itself and contact with it through media, movement, etc.
“cosmopolitan nationalism,” or “imagined cosmopolitanism,” of sorts. To get a better understanding of how Puerto Rican Muslims do so, this chapter now turns to the stories of Puerto Rican Muslims to see how they understand, live with, and develop their distinct cosmopolitan selves amidst the cultural ideals, material context, ideas of belonging and citizenship, language, mobility, flows of communication, and the lived environment of Puerto Rico itself.

**Losing Family, Gaining Family**

The film “New Muslim Cool” tells the story of Puerto Rican rapper Hamza Pérez and his conversion to Islam against the backdrop of the post-9/11 world, government surveillance, prison, drugs, and street life in the urban centers of Pennsylvania. It also shows Pérez’s family and depicts their reactions and continued wrestling with his new religious identity. His aunt reflected that it was a “shock” when Pérez converted because “we’re Catholic ya know? It was a little…we would get into our little confrontations, arguments.” His mother talked about raising Pérez in a Catholic school, his name being Jason and not Hamza, and the process of his conversion being confusing for her. At the same time, she is happy that he no longer drinks, smokes, or is involved with gang life. But in the end, she admitted, “my family don’t understand what Muslims is.”

Pérez’s story is far from the only one that involves misunderstanding, confrontation, and struggle within the family. Indeed, the place where the process of simultaneous ostracism and re-constituted identity takes place most frequently and with the most intensity is within the intimate networks of family and friends. The family is the

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10 Zubaida, 49.

primary quotidian context wherein Puerto Rican Muslims must reconfigure themselves as both local and cosmopolitan, as rooted and yet mobile and supple toward other cultures, religions, and places in the world. Almost every Puerto Rican Muslim I talked to had a struggle within their families when they converted. Furthermore, even after conversion they faced a steady barrage of pressure from their friends, neighbors, co-workers, and family members for being “too Arab” or of abandoning their culture. Puerto Rican Muslims face marginalization from those closest to them — their family and friends — in part because through conversion they are stepping away from what is perceived as traditional (and acceptable) Puerto Rican culture. However, this is not only a story of loss, but a story of gaining new perspectives and relational networks.

When Adrián Robles converted to Islam, his wife could not follow suit. I first met Adrián when he was cleaning the steps leading up to the prayer room at the Vega Alta mosque. He was vigorously mopping the white tiles to get them pearly clean before the community gathered for prayer. A fairly recent convert who had grown up Christian, he became roused by the Palestinian political cause and through contact with Palestinian activists and other anti-colonial agitators he finally decided to convert. His conversion cost him. Right now he is living at his mother’s house after going through a divorce.12 When he converted to Islam, his wife told him that while she liked Muslims and did not mind Islam, she would not convert. At Adrián’s mother’s house a couple of days later his ex-wife Diana arrives with Shamil, their 20-month old son. Over café con leche I got to

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12 Adrián Robles, Interview with Ken Chitwood, Personal Interview, Vega Alta, Puerto Rico, June 23, 2017.
know Diana a bit more and she told me her side of the story. It turns out that she speaks some Arabic because she works for an Arab man in Vega Alta and travels to the Middle East on business. It was partially through these business contacts that Adrián came to convert. She emphasizes again that while she respects Muslims and Islam she would not convert to Islam nor remain married to Adrián after he converted. Adrián related that he kept his conversion a secret at first until Diana “caught him praying” and “freaked out.” He said, “while she respects Muslims she couldn’t convert and we realized our interests, feelings, and outlook were heading in different directions so we divorced.” Whether or not Shamil will be raised Muslim is a contested question.

Adrián’s family struggles were not limited to his former marriage. His parents were divorced as well, in part because of religion. His mother was a Pentecostal and his father a strict atheist. When Adrián converted, his father made fun of him for his religion. “As an old-school Marxist who still thinks religion is the opium of the masses…my father doesn’t take me seriously,” Adrián said. His mother had even stronger words. Reflecting on how Puerto Ricans respond in general to his being Muslim, Adrián said that it could all be summed up in the reaction of his mother on the news of his conversion — “you betray Christ she said.” She is concerned for his eternal soul and life. While there is rarely any overt tension between Adrián and his parents, he knows that his family and friends do not know what to do with his newfound faith.

The same could be said of Miguel Caliz. Caliz — one of the first Ahmadi Muslims in Puerto Rico — faced questions from family and friends when he converted. They

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13 Diana, Interview with Ken Chitwood, Personal Interview, Carmelita, Puerto Rico, July 9, 2017.

asked, “so you’re not going to celebrate Christmas no more? Or the fiestas?” They also openly wondered if he had become a “terrorist” or was abandoning his Puerto Rican culture to become an “Arab.” To this day, some of his friends believe that he has betrayed his culture or his religion. He said facing the onslaught from his family and friends was “like being a one-man army going against everything. But the thing is, this is my culture, this is what I grew up in. So the challenge is to not go back to my old ways, but also not be so singled out as a complete stranger.” This is what Miguel liked about the Ahmadi community. “Puerto Ricans are proud of their culture,” he said, “so it’s important that the Ahmadis want you to be at home in your culture.”

In fact, the Ahmadi missionary to Puerto Rico — Imam Ahmad Salman — was explicit with me when he wanted to make it clear to Puerto Ricans “burned by the Arab-oriented mosques in Puerto Rico that Islam is not about getting rid of your cultural identity, but reforming it and ridding it of jahiliyyah — alcohol, consuming pork, and things like that.” When he talks with people interested in Islam he always tells them to not give up their cultural identity. “It is not only part of who you are, but it is who you are. Allah doesn’t ask you to change that. He doesn’t ask you get rid of your identity. He calls us to follow him and his prophet and that requires change, but it doesn’t require

15 Miguel Caliz, Interview with Ken Chitwood, Personal Interview, Hato Rey, July 26, 2017.

16 The Ahmadis are a global missionary and messianic movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in the Punjab (British-controlled India) in the late nineteenth-century. A sometimes controversial community, their status as “Muslim” is contested. They are known for their worldwide propagation of Islam, mass literature production and distribution, and the establishment of missionary centers, mosques, hospitals, and other social service organizations worldwide. In recent years, their activities in Latin America and the Caribbean (for example, in Guatemala, Mexico, and in Puerto Rico) have experienced a notable uptick largely supported from established centers in the U.S. and Canada. They have also been linked to the concept of “cosmopolitanism” before in the work of John Hanson, who situated their emergence on the Gold Coast of West Africa with the changes brought by modernity, global religious and economic engagement, and cultural transformation in the transition between the British Gold Coast and independent Ghana. See The Ahmadiyya in the Gold Coast: Muslim Cosmopolitans in the British Empire, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).
deleting your identity or exchanging it for a new one.” He admits that he understands the reason that many Arabs, Palestinians, and others cling to their culture in a diaspora setting, but rejects the merging of Arab culture with Islamic culture. “Allah brought his revelation into an Arab context, but he did not mean to bless it as the perfect culture. Quite the opposite. He wanted to reform it and perfect it. He wanted to get rid of their arrogant ways, the polytheism, the inequality, the drinking, and make it whole. He spoke in Arabic, he uses Arabic, but God is not Arab.” Pointing to a poster that quotes the Prophet’s final khutbah he underlined how “Muhammad said that the Arab is not superior to the non-Arab in Islam and that the ummah should be a cosmopolitan ummah made up of the many nations, tribes, and peoples of the world.” Salman lauds what he sees as the cosmopolitan mosques of many Muslims throughout the world and believes there needs to be more of that. “I am trying to build one such community here in Puerto Rico. I want it to be a particularly Puerto Rican Muslim community.” To that end, his Islamic center and all of his advertisements and branding bear both a Puerto Rican and an American flag and are written in Spanish. His khutbahs are in Spanish and he meets with local politicians, professors, and community leaders in order to “become part of the Puerto Rican fabric.” Certain Puerto Ricans are responding to such an approach, including Caliz.

Adrián’s and Miguel’s stories show how cosmopolitanism can be a lonely business. It is, as Diogenes said, a kind of exile — from the comfort of local truths, from the warm, nestling feeling of patriotism, form the absorbing drama of pride in one’s self
and one’s own.\textsuperscript{17} In this sense, conversion, which makes possible alternative ways of being cosmopolitan, does not offer refuge for Puerto Rican Muslims. While it opens them up to new relationships with their co-religionists these new communities may not be as comforting as their previous sources of belonging. Yet, while cosmopolitanism can be a lonely affair at times, it does not translate into a life that is, “boring, flat, or lacking in love.”\textsuperscript{18} Instead, it can open up new avenues for belonging, new understandings of national identity and symbols of ethnic heritage, and new opportunities to re-imagine and re-constitute the idea of family itself. Such is the case for individuals like Margarita Abuawadeh, Faruq “Frankie” Menendez, and Sumayah Soler.

For some Puerto Rican Muslims the family can become a central locus where their identities can merge and head in new directions. That is in part because the family is central for Puerto Rican identity and is often cited as an important element of Puerto Rican culture. For example, in an article in \textit{Al Día}, Abuawadeh shared how she believes that Islam and Latinx culture share an emphasis on family and tradition. “The Latino community is very family oriented, where Islam is based on family. We are home people. And hospitality too — Latinos are very hospitable. Islam is very hospitable and about treating people with respect, having your heart and your home open,” she told a reporter for \textit{Al Día}.\textsuperscript{19} A self-described “first generation Puerto Rican Muslim American” Abuawadeh is happy to integrate her Puerto Rican heritage and Muslim faith in her daily


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 162.

life. The reporter shared how Abuawadeh proudly held “an embroidered pillow her
daughter made depicting a combination of the Puerto Rican flag and the pattern of a
Palestinian traditional scarf known as a keffiyeh.” As both a mother and an immigrant-
rights activist in Philadelphia, Abuawadeh wants to integrate her advocacy with her
home life, that tells her children that they cannot sit back and do nothing. The pillow is a
material expression of not only her dual identity, but of how her home is being recast
according to that identity and what that means politically and socially for her children.

For other Puerto Rican Muslims, what may drive them away from their families
may compel them into an ever-widening cosmopolitan social circle that gives their
identity new inflections and the idea of family new meanings. That is the case with
Faruq “Frankie” Mendez, who lives in Harlem. While there may be family difficulties in
his life he is proud of his cosmopolitan connections and extended network of relations
that his conversion brought him. Faruq grew up Catholic in Harlem, but said that both
sides of his family were not “too religious,” but that they went to Mass every Sunday. He
never felt at home in Catholicism and abandoned the faith of his family when he was
spending time in Riker’s Island prison as a young man. When he emerged from prison
he felt “spiritually dead.” At first, he looked back on his roots. His grandparents practiced
Santería and said that as a child he was “freaked out” by the statues and images at his
abuela’s house. In his search for a spiritual foundation after leaving prison he
reconnected with these familiar roots and went to a local botanica — a store selling
alternative medicinal and herbal products, religious candles and statuary, amulets, and
other products for use in Afro-Caribbean religious ceremonies and rituals. He started

20 Faruq “Frankie” Mendez, Interview with Ken Chitwood, Personal interview, Harlem, New York, October 17, 2017.
setting up a shrine in his home with a statue of a Native American and one of St. George slaying a dragon and even adopted his own Santeria saint. The experience was disappointing in the end. He admitted, “I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Faruq converted to Islam in 1995 after a series of “visions or visualizations” of the Prophet Muhammad in the desert calling out to him. He converted as a Sunni, and soon got connected with a few Sufi orders in the city. His family did not approve and felt they were losing their son to something even worse than the tough drug life he was involved with before. But Faruq continued to pursue his relationships with Muslims from around the world in New York — he learned from Pakistani Muslims, hung out with an Albanian imam, and joined the Naqshbandi order under the tutelage of a Cypriot sheikh. He married a Latina from Texas, and later divorced and was remarried to a British woman of African descent, and eventually found himself connected to the Nimatullahi order that originated in Iran.

Through it all he said he found a family in his new Muslim sisters and brothers. This was a comfort to him as his former family relationships fell apart. When his brother Omar converted and became a part of the Five Percent Nation they had a serious falling out and they have not talked for years. While Faruq is happy with his newfound family, he also hopes that he can bring more Puerto Ricans into the fold. He said that a community center or masjid (mosque) for Puerto Ricans would be a welcome addition to the landscape in and around New York City. Part of his motivation for such an institution emerged out of his own experience. He told me that when he converted his parents asked him if he was “becoming Indian or something.” It hurt to be ostracized from his own kin and he desired a place where Puerto Ricans can become Muslim and not give
up on their own culture. “They don’t have to give up on their ethnicity to be Muslim,” he said, “instead they can merge them together with Muslims across the world and with different languages, places, and cultures.” For Faruq, becoming a Muslim was a story of both loss and gain in terms of family and friends. His vision is that the latter, and more cosmopolitan aspect of his relationships will become common for future converts.

Figure 3-2. Neighbors, friends, and family gather to celebrate Eid al-Fitr in Bayamón (2017). Individuals hailed from Iran, Morocco, Egypt, the U.S., and Puerto Rico and the food featured a mix of these different traditions. Photo: Ken Chitwood

Cosmopolitan connections and networks can not only co-exist with Puerto Rican Muslim family life, but also be constituted by it. While some Puerto Rican Muslims feel cut-off from their families and listless in their new communities, other Puerto Rican Muslims channel that marginalization into actively creating a new, and decidedly more cosmopolitan, family dynamic. For Eid al-Fitr in 2017, Sumayah Soler invited me to her home in Bayamón, just southwest of San Juan.\textsuperscript{21} There were 14 people in attendance to

\textsuperscript{21} Interview with Ken Chitwood, Personal Interview, Bayamón, Puerto Rico, June 24, 2017.
celebrate the end of the Ramadan fast. There was an eclectic mix of people around the table. There were some non-Muslim co-workers, neighbors, and friends, me, a Ph.D. candidate from Florida, Sumayah’s Puerto Rican mother, her Egyptian husband Muhammad and their two kids, a Puerto Rican convert and her Moroccan husband, Sumayah’s best friend and fellow convert Rochelle, and Muhammad’s good friend and colleague Jonathan from Iran. In between laughter, prayers, and multi-lingual chatter each reflected on how glad they were to find one another.

In their own ways, each of the people at the table felt ostracized in some way from their family and friends. Whether because of moving away as migrants, marrying someone outside of their religion, converting, or spending time in interfaith activities, they felt on the margins of communities they still strongly identified with – whether they be Puerto Rican or Moroccan, Catholic or Muslim, Egyptian or Iranian. There were push and pull factors that brought them together this Eid. While they acknowledged a shared affinity, each of the participants shared that they gathered together at this Bayamón home instead of at the nearest masjid because they felt unwanted or judged by the larger Muslim community in Puerto Rico. Unwanted because they refused to conform to certain cultural markers embedded within the local Muslim community. Judged because they sought to fuse their Puerto Rican sense of self with their newfound religious sensibilities and practice. Furthermore, their non-Muslim families were not open to celebrating Eid with them. Still, when asked if they would change a thing they all heartily replied that this table — this table of people exchanging stories in French, Spanish, English, Arabic, Farsi, and German — constituted a life of connections with people from across the world.
Of Pork, Peoplehood, and Halal Puerto Rican Food

They also might not have enjoyed such a broad-based buffet that evening. Just as the group was an eclectic mix of people, the food was a plentiful and diverse combination of Middle Eastern morsels and Puerto Rican plates. There was ancho chile beef ribs, lamb and chicken kebab, laban, rice with almonds, pita, maduros, falafel, and tres leches cake. This blend of foods is something Sumayah and Rochelle are particularly proud of. In fact, it is their hope that they can open a halal Puerto Rican food truck in the future. Already, they invite women over to their homes to show them how to cook “Boricua halal.”

Food, it turns out, is like family an important element in the process of cosmopolitan becoming for Puerto Rican Muslims. Paralleling their experience with family, Puerto Rican Muslims’ relationships with food involve both loss and contestation as well as new opportunities and combinations. All the while, as they wrestle with a new diet they simultaneously grapple with what it means to be Puerto Rican Muslims in the foods they eat.

Cruz Miguel Ortíz Cuadra explored questions related to why Puerto Ricans eat what they eat and why there are certain changes and continuities with these traditions that can be traced through Puerto Rican kitchens across vast geographical distances. Rice, beans, corn, cassava, tannier, sweet potatoes, plantains and bananas, yams, pork, beef, and salted codfish all became part of Puerto Rican culinary culture over time — introduced and refashioned by immigrants and others who adapted former traditions


to a new environment all against a backdrop of slave and colonial societies. In concluding how “Puerto Rican cuisine and food-ways” came to be, Ortíz Cuadra makes references to the *tres raíces* theory of Puerto Rican culture. He cites the “knowledge and experience of the island’s indigenous population,” and the desire of “Spanish settlers to duplicate a familiar gastronomy in an unfamiliar land,” and the “thousands of African slaves and large contingents of soldiers” who came to add their own flavors to the mix. Quite poignantly, Ortíz Cuadra calls attention to how Puerto Ricans are inclined to identify themselves as Puerto Rican “through the agency of food” and the practices that surround it as a means of claiming “authenticity” as a Puerto Rican. Ironically, this is done even though the archetype of what “Puerto Rican cuisine” is has lost much of its meaning in the era of American colonialism when Krispy Kreme and Burger King are just as likely to feature in a Puerto Rican diet as is arroz con pollo.

It is against this backdrop that Puerto Rican Muslims’ relationship with food and food-ways must be set. Puerto Rican Muslims — as with most other aspects of Puerto Rican culture — have an ambivalent relationship with the reality and archetype of Puerto Rican food and the practices and traditions that surround it. Arjun Appadurai made the point that “authentic” cuisines and their attendant cultures (cookbooks, menus, etc.) are marks of nostalgia, feelings of exile, and a sense of loss. So too with

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24 Ibid., 7-9.
26 Ortíz Cuadra, 258.
27 Popular rice and chicken dish.
28 Appadurai, 5-10.
Puerto Rican Muslim food choices. While they try to adjust their food intake and reform their menus to both *halal* standards and markers of “authentic” Puerto Rican cuisine, there is also a potent sense of loss that accompanies their conversations about food and negotiations concerning their new diets. Puerto Rican Muslims not only eschew (or secretly do not) certain aspects of Puerto Rican eating and drinking culture that they see as not in line with Islam, but they also use food as a means of bridging the two aspects of their identity — Puerto Rican and Muslim. Furthermore, they also steer their mouths, stomachs, and food choices through a real-world setting that only offers a certain amount of options.

This reveals a critical difference between Puerto Ricans in metropolitan areas such as New York and Philadelphia and those living in San Juan. While *halal* options may be much more plentiful in places like New York, they are few and far between in Puerto Rico. Each of these aspects of the Puerto Rican Muslim’s relationship with food reveals again that their local context matters for their cosmopolitan lives. Their food and food choices, and their very parochial contours, are a critical aspect of their cosmopolitan identity. While they are bridging beyond the traditions and archetypes of “authentic Puerto Rican” food, they are simultaneously bridging backward to ground themselves and their food choices in the food-ways of their families and their perceived upbringing in a Puerto Rican culinary tradition. They do all of this while going out to eat, shopping, and living life in a particular context where certain choices are available (or not) or with certain practices and foods almost overwhelming in their ubiquity.

For Ilyass Figueroa in Florida, the fact that pork makes its way into just about every Puerto Rican dish makes it hard for Muslims to feel like they “belong” in Puerto
Rican culture. “Pork is so important to Puerto Rican culture,” he said, “with Muslims not being able to eat it, it contributes to a non-Muslim Puerto Rican narrative that says, ‘Muslims don’t belong, they don’t fit into the overall Boricua identity.” But, he contested, “I can be Puerto Rican and not eat pork” as he points down at his pasteles with chicken and vegetables. “You don’t have to use pork lard or bacon in every dish. Really, you don’t.”

Ilyass is correct in identifying the ubiquity of pork in popular Puerto Rican dishes. Mixed in with mofongo, beans, and rice, pork finds its way into many common Puerto Rican offerings. And its role in Puerto Rican food-ways has a long history.

First brought by the Spanish in the early period of colonization, pork soon took on a character of its own in Puerto Rico. The meat became particularly popular with the proliferation of the orejano, a feral pig found in the highlands that became prized for its lean meat. The meat was readily available and there was a robust trade in both wild pig and cattle in the early days of the Puerto Rican colonial era. This, in part, led to a general carnivorismo — love of meat — on an island where every Saturday on roads through the country side you can smell the sweet smoke of a lechonera on your way to the beach with family. However, another aspect of the love of pork in particular has to do with Spanish identity and society. Ortiz Cuadra commented that the Spanish deliberately populated Puerto Rico with meat so as to recreate the Peninsular associations of meat consumption with “distinction” in Spanish society and “a confirmation of one’s religious faith and heritage.”


Ortiz Cuadra, 162.
to reinforce and consolidate “an individual’s power and his social and religious associations.” Why? While meat in general was a luxury in Spain, pork came to be a symbol of distinction among Christians over and against their Moorish enemies. This practice was recreated in Puerto Rico and left its stamp on the culinary culture of the island and its people. Today, some vestiges of this heritage remain.

Several respondents reiterated both the prominence of pork and the difficulty of avoiding it in pursuit of a *halal* diet. Pork is more than food for Puerto Ricans, they shared, it is a way of life. Sitting in a café in Guaynabo and catching up after not seen each other for a year I was talking with Imam Ahmad Salman who is a transplant to the island as an Ahmadi missionary. Because Imam Ahmad is a regular at this brunch restaurant, I asked for his recommendation as I looked at the menu. As he pointed out some sandwiches he made a comment about how tough it can be to avoid pork. He has to ask for it *not* to be included and be very clear about it. “They sneak pork into everything,” he said. This theme of pork and Puerto Rican identity came up again twice more that day talking with other members of the Ahmadi community.

While Imam Ahmad makes his requests for no pork quite explicit, others have developed alternative strategies. While I was having lunch with fellow researcher Omar Ramadan Santiago in Loíza Aldea, he told the waiter that he was allergic to pork as he ordered *mofongo*. When I asked about this allergy he said that there are many times that he has told servers in Puerto Rican restaurants that he does not want pork and the

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31 Ibid.

meal still comes out with bacon mixed in or pork in some shape or form. “So,” he said, “it’s easier for me to say I am allergic to pork rather than talk about religion.”33 For others, navigating the plate-politics of Puerto Rican identity are more personal. Earlier, I mentioned Miguel Caliz and how some friends thought he was betraying Puerto Rican culture by converting to Islam. In part, this was because he stopped eating pork. “Puerto Ricans are proud of that culture and part of that culture is pork,” he said, “sometimes I thought my friends were just joking about it, but it’s not that funny.”34 Imam Ahmad, Omar, and Miguel each have had to make peace with pork and Puerto Rican cultural identity. While they reject the meat, they understand the meaning and importance of pork in Puerto Rican cuisine. Thus, they place the onus on themselves and accommodate occasional discomfort, misunderstandings, or jokes knowing that their choice is an unfamiliar one in their local context.

La Cultura Borracha

While many Puerto Rican Muslims struggle with the meaning of pork in Puerto Rican culture, a fairly strict line is often drawn when it comes to what several of my respondents referred to as “la cultura borracha.”35 The topic of “borracha culture” first came up with Pedro Grillo in our conversation after jumaah (Friday) prayers at the Centro Islamico de Puerto Rico in Montehiedra. As he told me his story of conversion to Islam — involving time spent in “Buddhism light,” Judaism, and Christian communities — he related how he was trying to escape “la cultura borracha.” Being more familiar

35 “Drunk culture.”
with Mexican *borracho* beans in the southwest (beans with beer mixed in) I asked what he meant by “*la cultura borracha.*” He replied:

> the ills of our society, the haram nature of most of Boricua culture — women, sex, dirty language, *reggaetón*, all of it. But most of all, the drinking. The beer mixed in with everything we do here; the beach, the home. after work, on the weekends. Everywhere. All the time. ³⁶

Grillo made a point that he wanted to break out of this routine and that he found his escape hatch in Islam. “I love my culture, my heritage,” he said, “but I must leave the haram aspects of it behind.” For him, that means no drinking, no women, no dancing. For others, the struggle can mean there are gray zones in their pursuit of piety.

Francisco “Hakim” Perez says that the problem with “*borracha* culture” is not so much the drinking, it is the drunkenness. “Being a Muslim is about being a real human being. I try to live like a real human being. If everyone in my family or friend group is toasting and they offer me a glass of wine I will have it because I am not going to get drunk.”³⁷ But, there are tensions in these choices for Perez. He said:

> Then I’ll hear the ‘But Muslims don’t drink!’ Well, that’s a different story. When I am in front of Allah we will straighten that out, but right now I am going to enjoy a bit of wine with my neighbor or maybe a beer. There is a difference between a bit of wine and a full *borracha* lifestyle and that’s what a lot of people don’t understand.

Not only does Perez face accusations from Puerto Rican friends who hold Perez to their image of what Islam is and what Muslims are supposed to do, or not, but he also faces pressure from his fellow Muslims. He said:

> I’ve been seen in public with a beer in my hands and challenged by my brothers, but I’d rather be comfortable in the hot sun with a cold beer than drink the junk that’s in a Coke can. For them, it’s cut and dry: ‘Arabs don’t

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drink.’ But for Puerto Ricans it is so much of who we are and what we do, beer is mixed in with everything. I’d be denying my culture without enjoying a beer with friends. It’s not that simple.

For Perez and others, the struggle is very real. Both Grillo and Perez feel that “borracha culture” is haram, but they each have different ways of balancing their Puerto Rican environment and cultural pressures with being Muslim and the community of piety that surrounds them there. Each has adapted in their own way and illustrated again how cosmopolitanism is not a steady state, but an ongoing process of negotiations and becoming, of different adaptations, accommodations, and contradictions.

**Boricua Halal**

Accommodation, adaptation, and artistic resourcefulness are the name of the game for some Puerto Rican Muslims trying to merge their Muslim identity and food-ways with their Puerto Rican cultural heritage. While Sumayah Soler and her friend Rochelle Quiñones reject pork in their diet, they are also seeking to create a new culinary community around the merging of Egyptian and Puerto Rican cuisine. They regularly gather with friends to make halal Puerto Rican food. While celebrating Eid al-Fitr on the beach just outside of San Juan, the table we were at was filled with Puerto Rican finger-food delicacies like empanadas filled with chapín, mofongo bits with shrimp, coconut arepas, and piña coladas “sin alcohol” (without alcohol). As everyone excitedly chomped down on the food in front of us, Rochelle casually turned to me and shouted over the reggaetón in the background to say, “This is why we want to open our own halal Puerto Rican food truck. The food is delicious and so many Muslims avoid it

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38 Forbidden in Islamic law or referring to an actual infringement thereof.
because they are afraid that it is not *halal.*” Rochelle shared that they also want to try their hand at *halal* beer to serve with the food.

Their dream would resonate with many Puerto Rican Muslims. Individuals regularly post pictures of creative *halal* versions of Puerto Rican culinary classics like *bistec cebollada* or *mofongo* on Facebook pages such as “Latino Muslims” or “Boricuas Embraced by Islam.” Others chime in asking for helpful hints on how to make their favorite dishes *halal.* Some struggle with the availability of reliably *halal* food in areas where sensitivity to Muslim dietary needs are few and far between. “Puerto Rico, it is like a *halal* food desert” said Soler. This is why she gathers an interfaith group of women together every few weeks to make dishes that are an eclectic mix of Middle Eastern and Caribbean foods. She regularly posts pictures to Facebook and people seemingly salivate through the screen leaving comments of their craving and appetite for such foods. Their desire for the food is more than hunger and appetite for the food itself, but for the merging of cultures it represents. It is also because the options can be hard to come by.

As noted, this is less so the case for Puerto Rican Muslims, or Latinx Muslims, in the U.S. During Ramadan there is the “Taco Truck at Every Mosque” project in California that delivers Mexican-style tacos for *iftars.* Then, there are creative restaurants like Fruit Punch off North Bergenline Ave. in West New York, New Jersey. I decided to eat lunch there before meeting a contact from the nearby North Hudson Islamic Education Center — an epicenter of Latinx Muslim culture that hosts the annual National Latino Muslim Day each year. As I enjoyed my *lomo saltado* — a savory Peruvian stir-fry with marinated steak, onions, tomatoes, and french fries inspired by
fast-food culture, Peruvian dishes, and Chinese influence in the Latin American nation — I looked up and noticed a framed work of calligraphy over the front door. I inquired with the waiter and was told that the owner is a Honduran Muslim. When I mentioned this to the individual I was meeting up with he said, “Yeah! I love that place. Good Latin food with excellent halal quality.” The Yelp! reviews echo his sentiments. A user named Yahya S. From Bergenfield, New Jersey wrote, “I was just looking forward to the food. What a delight when I found out the restaurant abides by halal standards as well. I went buckwild.” As I talked with the owner briefly on my way out he said that many people came in for the mix. “We are in a unique place. Lots of Muslims here. Lots of Latinos. I bring them together at my restaurant.”

While such locales may not be ubiquitous across the vast and various landscapes that Puerto Rican Muslims inhabit, all of the above experiences, negotiations, and adaptations speak to how Puerto Rican Muslims are wrestling with traditional Puerto Rican foods and familiar gastronomic practices as a means of establishing their identity as both Puerto Rican and Muslim. Each of these food-ways is an “invented tradition”\(^{39}\) — a myth that Puerto Ricans may or may not know they are still in the process of making. Ortíz Cuadra hints at this and argues that “authentic Puerto Rican food” (or other cuisines for that matter) is not what it claims to be. Instead, it is a “multinational assemblage”\(^{40}\) that reflects the impact of globalization and a gallery of

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40 García Canclini, *Consumidores y ciudadanos: Conflictos multiculturales de la globalización*, (Miguel Hidalgo, Mexico: Grijalbo, 1995), 16.
various, specialized, and regional cuisines.\textsuperscript{41} Hence, the ways in which Puerto Rican Muslims are negotiating their dietary practices as Muslim minorities in Puerto Rican culture are not exceptional. Instead, they are part of a broader process of variation, individualization, and “the fragmentation of culinary norms” and “traditions” against a backdrop of culinary globalization.\textsuperscript{42} The globalization of food means that many people are confronted with a buffet of options when it comes to what meals to cook, consume, and share with a community of friends or family. Where once the options may have been more limited, there is a literal smorgasbord of choice now available.

On the one hand, this is an opportunity for expanding one’s plate and palate. On the other, it confronts and challenges what are held as more “traditional” food-ways even if those traditions are themselves hybrid amalgamations of various cultural influences from the past (for example, with Puerto Rican food and its Taíno, Spanish, African, and other heritages). This is all part of the “banal cosmopolitanism” and the “detrationalization” of individuals’ sense of heritage, which in turn leads to the “invention of hybrid traditions.”\textsuperscript{43} There is no choice in the matter for most people today. The world is constantly confronted with the reality of a cosmopolitan scene, often despite its efforts at building boundaries and re-enforcing borders. When we go to the supermarket, head to the restaurant, or get together with family and friends we will have “different” foods


\textsuperscript{42} Appadurai, 18.

and drinks to choose from that we may or may not be used to or want to have. For Puerto Rican Muslims, choosing certain types of food, rejecting others, and adapting still more is a way of charting these cosmopolitan waters. In this process, Puerto Rican Muslims are pushing back the “invented tradition”\textsuperscript{44} of authentic Puerto Rican cuisine with their own re-invented food-ways — \textit{Boricua halal}.

**La Fiesta de Santiago Apostól and Muslim Presence in Puerto Rican Culture**

This process also features a certain balancing act between historical erasures and the re-insertion of identities into popularized traditions. For evidence of this, look no further than the streets of Loíza Aldea — a northeastern coastal town of Puerto Rico that is a center for black Puerto Rican culture, music, and dance – in early July every year. There, the rhythmic blast of the latest \textit{reggaetón} hit will reverberate in your chest cavity as the tunes pump from the trunk-mounted speakers of a tricked-out Jeep Wrangler cruising down the town’s main drag. The cacophonic intermingling of the deep beats of the \textit{reggaetón} mixes with the music-making of a truck full of \textit{bomba y plena} instrumentalists that appear from around the corner. In response to this combination of sounds, a woman who seems to be at least in her sixties shoots up from her wicker chair to dance like a teenager at the local \textit{discoteca}.

\textsuperscript{44} See Hobsbawm.
Figure 3-3. A group of *vejigantes* and *caballeros* pose for a photo with festival attendees in Loiza Aldea, Puerto Rico. Photo: Ken Chitwood

The oppressive humid heat of the tropical Caribbean summer day seems not to deter the throngs of people lining the streets for a procession of SUVs, cars, golf carts, pedestrians, and parade floats that stretches on for miles through the coastal communities that make up the Loiza Aldea municipality. At the head of this lively procession is a group of garishly dressed *vejigantes* — folkloric characters donned in bright colors and carnivalsque costumes often featured in local festivals in places such as Loiza Aldea and Ponce, Puerto Rico. They also wear masks, adorned with horns, hand-made from coconuts, and painted in bright and bold orange, yellow, pink, black, and the colors of the Puerto Rican flag — blue, white, and red.

This particular group leading the procession in Loiza Aldea are known as *los diablitos* — the little devils. They take pride of place at this multi-day festival, the Fiesta
of St. James the Apostle (*La Fiesta de Santiago Apostól*) in Loíza Aldea.\textsuperscript{45} For locals, and according to the cultural politics of Puerto Rico,\textsuperscript{46} the fiesta is a celebration of Afro-Puerto Rican culture. The *vejigantes* are symbols of the strength of African traditions in a place where they have often been marginalized or neglected in cultural politics. They are also a celebration of *mestizaje*, the mix of American cultural antecedents from Spanish, African, and indigenous roots. Thus, in many ways, Puerto Rican national symbolism is expressed in the faces of the *vejigantes*, or *diablitos*, which are emblazoned with the Puerto Rican flag and held up as embodiments of the diversity of Puerto Rican national culture. Afro-Caribbean culture is a point of pride in Puerto Rico, a vital element of the three roots (*tres raíces*) that make up the sanctioned and celebrated national Puerto Rican cultural identity. To many, the *vejigantes* may represent the embodiment of evil, the forces of darkness, the dead, or simply a robust mixture of multiple cultures — most notably those of African descent. In fact, the *vejigantes* used to represent a particular, and poignant, people group for the Spaniards that brought the festival to Latin America and the Caribbean. When the festival first arrived, *los vejigantes* were the race of the enemy of Catholic Spain — the Andalusian Muslim, *los Moros*, “the Moor.”

Beyond representing Afro-Puerto Rican culture and invoking images of good versus evil, the history of the Fiesta of St. James the Apostle in Loíza Aldea reveals a deeper resonant meaning behind the *vejigantes*, their masks, and the processions that


\textsuperscript{46} See Dávila, *Sponsored Identities*. 

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serve as an easy excuse to dance, sing, gather with friends, and drink sangria from sunrise to sunset. This festival also hints at the role that Muslims — in memory and in body — played in the colonization, establishment, and cultural development of the Americas. Nonetheless, Loíza Aldea based artist Samuel Lind — known for producing posters for the annual event and a local legend in Afro-Puerto Rican art — told me that, “if you asked any man in the street, or even someone dressed as a vejigante, they would think they are heroes — not enemies, not Moors.”

Lind is the father of Loíza Aldea-inspired paintings and his oeuvre covers the range of Afro-Puerto Rican themes: nature spirits, orishas, bomba music, and symbols and elements of Taíno heritage in painting and sculpture. He also designed the official posters for La Fiesta de Santiago Apostól for many years. During our hour long meeting, he showed me every piece of his art and shared his deep knowledge and expert opinion about the festival, its roots, and how the contemporary celebration functions as a focal point of Afro-Puerto Rican pride. Pointing to, and proudly displaying, his representations of vejigantes in the many eye-catching placards he had hanging around his bold but bucolic gallery in Medinía Alta he said, “The Muslim presence in the festival has been forgotten. Now they represent African pride.” In this, the festival is perhaps prototypical of a general amnesia when it comes to the ways in which Muslims came to, and shaped, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the American hemisphere as a whole.

Today, the annual Festival of St. James in Loíza Aldea and its processions, rites, and festivities feature a focus on los diablitos and their merged imagery of Taíno, African, and Spanish influences. Every aspect of the festival bears the marks of multiple cultures — from the local bomba y plena and reggaetón music, to the folklore behind the festival, or the masks once created from bladders now carved from coconuts. When it comes to the masks, Spanish representations of Moors as demons and Christians as caballeros, or knights, merged and gave way to African traditions and imagery. Slowly, but surely, the meaning of the mask morphed so that today very few festival goers know that these vejigantes once represented the Muslim “other” at all.

Omar Ramadan-Santiago told me, “no one knows they’re Muslims anymore.”

On the one hand, he said it was good that nobody recognized the vanquished foes as Muslims or Moors. On the other hand, he reflected, “it’s sad to see, I mean, [Santiago] is

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crushing a Muslim. I wish it wasn’t such a big part of Puerto Rican culture and identity…but it is what it is. At least they aren’t actually celebrating killing Muslims.”

Interestingly enough, Omar spent part of his research time in Puerto Rico learning how to carve vejigante masks from coconuts in Viejo San Juan to sell to tourists. It is perhaps a bit ironic that hundreds of years after Muslims were brought to Latin America and the Caribbean on the ships and in the imaginations of European colonizers and conquistadors, there is a Puerto Rican-Egyptian Muslim man making masks that once represented the evil “Moor” to sell to tourists. This is just one way in which Muslims have been, and continue to be, erased from the history and narrative of the region. In fact, in Puerto Rico, Muslims do not figure into the sponsored and promoted cultural identity of the island whatsoever, even though they were part of the development of the island’s patria — or heritage.

On the one hand, this reality reflects the huge imprint that African culture has in Puerto Rico — a place that long denied its African heritage. Furthermore, as Omar suggested, perhaps it should be celebrated that Muslims are not depicted and remembered as villains in this annual festival. Too often, Muslims are represented in popular culture — books, film, radio, television, news, etc. — as enemies, foes, others, and terrorists. You could say that while Muslims are not related to los diablitos in Loíza they are most certainly demonized in many other popular culture representations across the globe. Yet, for Puerto Rican Muslims the memory of their Muslim forebears and their impact on Puerto Rican culture is not forgotten. Indeed, it is an important aspect of their own search for identity. Furthermore, the fact that the vejigantes no longer are
remembered as Muslims represents a broader sidelining and erasure of the connections between Puerto Rican culture and Islam.

![Figure 3-5. One of the Santiago Apostól figures paraded through the streets of Loíza Aldea, Puerto Rico during the festival, featuring Santiago Matamoros (St. James the Moorslayer) striking down Moors with his sword and white steed. Photo: Ken Chitwood](image)

Obviously, the religion that is most recognized as contributing to the makeup of Puerto Rican culture is overwhelmingly that of Catholicism. However, in most studies of Puerto Rican culture the topic of religion is often sidelined. Or, it is assumed that Puerto Ricans are Catholic, grew up in a Catholic milieu, or practice “lived religion” of some sort or the other.⁴⁹ This assumption is not far off. The majority of Puerto Ricans are Catholic and most respondents I talked to share some history with Catholicism. Some were brought up with marginal experiences with Catholicism in the family, others were trained to be altar boys or to become nuns. All of them mentioned a Catholic culture predominating among their family, friends, and wider community.

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At the same time, those I interviewed also mentioned three things that deserve attention. First, most families knew little about Islam, but came to either convert alongside their family members or come to understand that while they were no longer Catholic they were at least “still religious.” This was, for a community that values religiosity perhaps more than the form religion takes, a comfort when a son or daughter left the faith of their upbringing. Second, while Catholicism predominated there were other religious practices, options, and identities that Puerto Rican Muslims encountered or experimented with. Everything from Santeria to Scientology, Hindu traditions to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, atheism to Pentecostalism was mentioned by my Puerto Rican Muslim informants. Finally, many Puerto Rican Muslims also pointed to traditions like the *vejigantes* above or to the popularity of Our Lady of Montserrat that are prominent in popular Puerto Rican culture. As one Puerto Rican Muslim told me, “that tradition comes from a shepherd in Spain who hid in a cave from Moorish — Muslim — soldiers. The shepherds found a statue of *La Virgen* and Jesus there. That was brought to Puerto Rico by a farmer in Hormigueros in the southwest and later became a big part of the island’s national identity. Again, Muslims played a role in that.”50 Religion is another important linchpin in Puerto Rican national identity. And yet, it is like other elements of their cultural heritage, an invented tradition largely made up of Catholic inheritance, but peppered with influences and practices from various sources. Puerto Rican Muslims are stepping into that assemblage of beliefs and practices and adding their own perspective to the mix.

Indeed, conversion to Islam among Puerto Ricans and other individuals in Latin America and the Caribbean should be understood as part of a wider trend toward greater “diversity and fluidity of religious expressions”\(^{51}\) in Latin America and the Caribbean.\(^{52}\) Furthermore, rather than undergirding “rational choice” models of religious conversion in a diversified religious marketplace as is evident above, the conversion of many Puerto Ricans leads to ostracism, increased difficulty with family and friends, and struggles with their identity. There are little to no supply-side benefits for Puerto Rican Muslims who convert. Their stated reasons tend to focus on issues of theology, practice, and community,\(^{53}\) but rarely fit with economic models of religious conversion. Their conversion narratives speak to more of a process of becoming than a rational decision to change.\(^{54}\) Additionally, they challenge theories about “dual memberships” or “multiple memberships” in Latin American and Caribbean religious contexts.\(^{55}\)

Puerto Rican Muslims strongly claim to be explicitly Muslim and I found no evidence that they shirk this commitment. While their process of conversion involved experimentation with various religious traditions, when they finally converted their religious identity was singular and demarcated quite strongly from other religious traditions. With that said, while they forcefully maintained membership in only one

\(^{51}\) Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, 3.


\(^{53}\) Chitwood, “Islam en español”: 35-54.

\(^{54}\) See Steigenga and Cleary.

religious community, they still tried to retain membership in their cultural community at
the same time, which is largely seen as Catholic. And so, they had to find ways to point
out how Islam has been part of the Puerto Rican story over time.  

3,000 Words and the Significance of an Arabic Linguistic Heritage

Another means of pointing to the past to justify choices today is found in their
appeal to the influence of Arabic on the Spanish language. Puerto Ricans are proud of
the Spanish language. While not all Puerto Rican Muslims, nor all Puerto Ricans for that
matter, speak Spanish, it is an important point of tension in their understanding of what
it means to be Puerto Rican. As it turns out, it is also an important node in their self-
understanding as Muslims as well. The questions of who speaks what languages, how
many, and where, are all relevant for considering the idea and reality of
cosmopolitanism. For Puerto Rican Muslims it means being proud of their Spanish
language and communicating that pride in both English and Spanish. It also means
pointing out how Arabic has influenced Spanish and thus, by extension, Puerto Rican
culture and identity. There are also practical dimensions when it comes to what
languages they speak, which languages are spoken at the mosque, how theologies,
ideas, and materials are translated into new languages, or the ways that individuals
navigate the diversity of languages in the context of local communities. Each of these
provides a further opportunity to consider the contours of cosmopolitanism in the lives of
Puerto Rican Muslims.

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56 This speaks to a more general need for studying religious change and pluralism in the Americas in local
contexts along the lines of such issues as identity construction, cultural participation, and transnationalism
and cosmopolitanism. See also Anna Peterson, Manuel Vásquez, and Phillip Williams, Christianity, Social
Change, and Globalization in the Americas, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press,
2001).

57 Beck identifies language as a quantitative indicator of cosmopolitanization, Cosmopolitan Vision, 93.
The majority of Puerto Rican Muslims I interacted with do not speak Arabic beyond what recitations, phrases, prayers, or words they memorized from the Qur’an or the discourses of Islamic tradition. The primary languages spoken among Puerto Rican Muslims are Spanish and English. Most are bi-lingual. Only relatively few could speak only one or the other. Regardless, every single Puerto Rican Muslim I spoke to showed a pride in the Spanish language and viewed it as a primary marker of Puerto Rican identity. Even those who cannot speak Spanish — all of whom were second or third generation Puerto Ricans in the U.S. — believe it is an important aspect of Puerto Rican identity and often express remorse over not learning Spanish in their households or in schools in the U.S.

As this chapter has intimated, and as Duany argued, geopolitical identity tends to be a secondary consideration for Puerto Ricans after cultural identity.58 Issues such as history, traditions, food, space, material context, and other markers of communal cultural life become paramount in the minds of Puerto Ricans as they navigate how to identify. Language is a crucial piece of this puzzle. Spanish is the primary functionary language in Puerto Rico and English has not penetrated too deeply into the nation’s daily life. With that said, Spanish and English co-exist on the island and there are strong feelings about language and the core of Puerto Rican cultural identity. Zentella argued that “the survival of Spanish has become inextricably linked for many with the survival of Puerto Rican identity and that of the Puerto Rican nation itself.”59 In part this is because of the


Spanish language’s critical role as a symbol of Puerto Rican nationalism and pride vis-à-vis the island’s colonial associations with the United States.

Part of the process of Americanizing their new colonial holding in the Caribbean was the Official Languages Act, which mandated that English and Spanish be used indiscriminately. In practice, English was the sole language used by the military government from 1898-1900 and education in government schools was overwhelmingly conducted in English. The use of Spanish was ubiquitous across the island at the time and the maintenance of the language became a form of resistance to what were perceived as foreign powers by nationalists and other Puerto Ricans who did not want to abandon their language and culture. Over time, loyalty to the Spanish language has in some respects become a litmus test — albeit a contested one — for loyalty to Puerto Rican identity and culture. Yet, sectors of the Puerto Rican population, and within the diaspora community, disagree about the importance of the Spanish language for politics, education, and cultural identity. As studies have shown, Spanish language use does not necessarily “correlate with the feeling of group membership and the development of a clear cultural identity” among all Puerto Ricans. This is especially true for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora. While Spanish is adopted as a symbol of Puerto Ricanness, it is not always maintained in practice. As Edwin Lamboy wrote, “Puerto Ricans in the United States, like most other Latino groups, do not perceive being

60 For an overview of the Foraker Act and life under it see José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico: Las penas de la colonia mis antigua del mundo*, (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2005), 40-79.


62 Ibid.
proficient in Spanish as a co-requisite for identifying with the Puerto Rican culture and way of life.” In my research, Puerto Rican Muslims could often speak both English and Spanish, but maintained a definitive pride in the Spanish language. This was particularly true in the diaspora, where Puerto Rican Muslims are proud of the Spanish language. In fact, this pride becomes a critical point for them as they negotiate their dual Puerto Rican and Muslim identities.

Many Puerto Rican Muslims like to point out how much the Arabic and Spanish languages are connected. Not only does this help Puerto Rican Muslims underline how being Muslim is not in opposition to their Puerto Rican identity, they go one step further in claiming that it in some way makes them even more Puerto Rican by having a connection to one of the antecedents of the Spanish language through their religion. Abu Sumayah, in his aforementioned rebuke of Miss Puerto Rico (see Chapter 2), referenced the debt that the Spanish language owed to Arabic. Referencing the many contributions that he believes Muslims have made to modern society, Abu Sumayah underscored how there are some “2,000-3,000 Hispanic words derived from the Arabic language.” He even went so far as to posit that his grandfather, who was a Spaniard, spoke “words that sometimes that [his family] could not understand.” He said that when his grandmother tries to say them, “they sound as if they are Arabic words.” Abu Sumayah is not alone in making these assertions or pointing this out as evidence as a means of connecting Islam and Puerto Rican culture.

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Moreover, historian Soraya Asad Sánchez pointed to language as one of the “footprints” left by Arabs on Puerto Rican culture. She wrote that 20% of Spanish words bear the imprint of Arabic, up to 4,000 in all. She included an appendix of words in her work that ranged from the agricultural to the architectural, astronomy to topography and mathematics. Based on this Sánchez asserted, “we can point out that the Arab was the fourth ethnic group to integrate into our culture. That is to say, Arabic is a fundamental part of it.” Many Puerto Rican Muslims would share in this sentiment and remained roused by the possibility of including Arab and Muslim identity in the cultural DNA of Puerto Ricanness.

At the same time, while this point may function as an instrument of defending and grounding their dual Puerto Rican and Muslim identities in both cultural histories and practices, how does the use of Arabic and Spanish get worked out on the ground and in their local communities? For example, what are the linguistic contexts at the mosques like where Puerto Rican Muslims pray, learn, and connect with other Muslims? While the lingua franca on the streets in Puerto Rico is overwhelmingly Spanish, it is hard to come by Spanish in the island’s mosques. One gets a sense of this in the environs around the mosque in Río Piedras. It is the oldest mosque in Puerto Rico and is highly respected

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64 Sánchez, “La Presencia Árabe en San Juan, Puerto Rico (1910-1940).”

65 See also Pedro López Pagán, “La Huella Islámica” Primera Hora, a tu manera cooltura, May 11, 2006, 81.

66 Sánchez, 239-253. For example, agricultural (aceite, arroz, azúcar, naranja, zanahoria), architectural (alcaldé, mezquita [not from mosquito as some people assert as a racist epithet], barrio), astronomy (acrab, nadir), chemistry (alcohol, or al-chemy), topography (place names), mathematics (algebra, cifra, algoritmo).

67 Sánchez, 199. “Con la información obtenida en esta investigación podemos señalar que el árabe fue el cuarto grupo étnico en integrarse a nuestra cultura. Es decir, el árabe es parte fundamental del mismo.”
for its history. It is also situated in a lively and multi-cultural part of the city just south of the University of Puerto Ricos’ largest and perhaps most well-known campus. The neighborhood also has a long and proud commercial history still evident by the bustling market down the road from the mosque. Arab immigrants came into the area in the twentieth-century and set up their own shops in and around the market.

Walking into the home-goods store across the street from the mosque, I was greeted in Spanish by a Palestinian man who also spoke a bit of English. He seemed to be running the show and explained that he imports Palestinian and Jordanian goods that he sells to local Arabs and makes sure that they are well-stocked on Fridays as many people will come and buy things after prayer. The man thanked me for coming into the store and then I followed him across to the mosque as the adhan sounded out along the street. When I entered the mosque there was a young man who had a litter of literature spread out before him in Spanish and English, the basic pamphlets explaining Islam to the curious seeker. He was reading them enthusiastically. Later, I joined him and a small group of Puerto Ricans (and other visitors) where a man named Yusuf translated the khutbah from Arabic into Spanish for us. While the majority were able to follow the Arabic khutbah, a small minority huddled in the back to have it summarized and translated into their vernacular. There were two men there who had converted and were still learning Arabic. There was also Alejandro whom I met at Montehiedra the year before and who was translating the Spanish into English for a visitor from Pakistan. There was also a man from Bangladesh I had seen the previous week at prayers in the mosque in Vega Alta. All told, we were a group of eight huddled in the back to exchange
in Spanish. The about 70-80 men there to pray were predominately Palestinian. There were others as well — an African man, a few from Indonesia.

Figure 3-6. Centro Islamico de Puerto Rico in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico. Photo: Ken Chitwood

This scene is an oft-repeated one at various mosques across Puerto Rico. In fact, there is always a lively discussion among Puerto Rican Muslims about which mosques are offering Spanish translation, Spanish summaries, or that have the *khutbah* delivered in Spanish. At various times I was told that this mosque or that mosque had a Spanish *khutbah* or a summary read from the front. Often, these places were lauded and their leaders widely respected among Puerto Rican Muslims. This is how a man like Imam Zaid Abdelrahim who served as the imam in Montehiedra came to be so respected during his tenure there. He gave the *khutbah* in both Arabic and Spanish. Those places that either did not offer a translation at all or expected individuals to gather in the back as we did in Río Piedras were disparaged — or mosques I was discouraged from attending. Various Puerto Rican Muslims told me that they felt that
they were not treated like “real Muslims,” but were “ghetto-ized” into the back of the mosque because they could not speak Arabic.68

Others critiqued the mosque leaders for, “not being here to preach to Puerto Ricans, just to other Arabs.”69 Miguel Caliz shared that it is tough for Puerto Rican Muslims, “because, like I said, they’re not interested in spreading the message. So you can go to the mosque and they won’t kick you out, but they are not going to preach to you either. So you’re Puerto Rican and you go into Islam, but you have to do everything on your own.” He compared Imam Zaid with other imams and leaders who “don’t even speak Spanish” and said that is why he preferred Imam Ahmad Salman because he was making the effort to learn Spanish and deliver his messages in Spanish. Similar sentiments were expressed outside of Puerto Rico, albeit less so. While most mosques that Puerto Rican Muslims attend in the U.S. have the khutbah in English alone or in both Arabic and English, those that offered Spanish language messages were lauded (for example, the North Hudson Islamic Education Center in New Jersey or Islam in Spanish’ Centro Islamico in Houston, Texas). The overall concern was that Puerto Rican Muslims would not feel “welcomed or that they belong” said Sumayah Soler. Without Spanish in the mosque, Puerto Rican Muslims were staying home or seeking out others who gathered in their homes because “they don’t feel like [the mosque is] their community, but an Arab social club they can’t join. So they are on their own.”70


Some Puerto Rican Muslims dealt with this tension by endeavoring to learn Arabic. Some even became fluent in classical and modern Arabic. Taking courses in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, enrolling in ASL (Arabic as Second Language) courses at mosques in North Hudson, Guaynabo, or Montehiedra, or online, they learned Arabic as a means of access to respect and authority. While not fluent, Jesus de Nieves shared with me that in New York a lot of Latinx Muslims find it difficult that “there is a clear lack of services for Latinos and a discrimination factor even among and within the Arabs.” He said, “there’s a little bit of tribalism there too.”\textsuperscript{71} Jesus said that he would see “a clear change in demeanor” when he started speaking Arabic. People would automatically start paying attention to him, he said. “They gave me respect that maybe I don’t deserve because I don’t know it all. But I’ll take it.” Imam Ahmad Salman, despite his desire to communicate his message in Spanish, offers ASL courses at his home as a means for dawah. Benny, a recent convert at the mosque in Ponce in the south of Puerto Rico, said that he was learning Arabic as a means of accessing not only the Muslim community in his area, but as a means of access to a wider world. He said that he was taking Arabic courses in Montehiedra in order to “learn part of a new culture” and come to understand the messages at the mosques where everyone else is Palestinian. “I am the only Puerto Rican here,” he said, “so I have to change. I have to learn a new culture even if I am not giving up my own.”\textsuperscript{72}

This is an issue that Puerto Rican Muslims share with many other non-Arab Muslims, where speaking Arabic is linked to knowledge of Islam. What makes the

\textsuperscript{71} Jesus de Nieves, Interview with Ken Chitwood, Personal Interview, Manhattan, New York. October 4, 2017.
Puerto Rican case interesting is their particular pride in Spanish and emphasis on Spanish as a means of resisting colonization by foreign powers and outside forces. They learn Arabic, but they also fight to maintain their Spanish and underscore its relations to Arabic, its connections to a global Islamic narrative, and its continual use in the Muslim community in Puerto Rican contexts. This process of negotiation and exchange, translation and transculturation mixed with a bit of resistance and critical tension is pivotal to the cosmopolitan lives of Puerto Rican Muslims. They show an openness to the world, but bring their experience as Puerto Ricans to that openness. The generative friction between these two aspects of their lives leads to new cultural expressions and a re-reading of previous experiences and markers of identity, but not wholesale abandonment or a form of globalized homogeneity. Puerto Rican Muslims’ translation of Islam into their own idiom reflects their desire to simultaneously be open to the world while also maintaining a firm commitment to their native language (or, at least, the language associated with their ethnic identity). This vernacularization is a tactical reversal of domination and its idioms.\footnote{Sheldon Pollock, “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History,” in Cosmopolitanism ed. by Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 15-53.} It is a means of resistance through appropriation.\footnote{Ibid., 47.}

While on the one hand they are localizing and vernacularizing the global language of Islam into their own idiom of Spanish, they are also globalizing their vernacular and augmenting its meaning and modes of transmission through the translation of Islamic materials. Spanish gains new inflections and significance through
this process. Whether in re-highlighting its Arabic roots or elevating it to the language of a *khutbah*, Spanish becomes something more than it was before in the eyes of Puerto Rican Muslims. Not only is it a sign of their Puerto Ricanness, but it is also a sign of their inclusion and/or exclusion in the Muslim community.

With that said, others such as Danny Abdullah Hernandez, Abu Sumayah Wesley Lebron Razzaq, and Danny Khalil al-Portirikani have learned Arabic in Egypt and Saudi Arabia and come to be respected as *sheikhs*. They saw Arabic as a necessary portal to authority in their communities and now they are using that authority to reach out to other Latinx people to bring them to Islam. Others feel a bit differently about Arabic. Ramon Ocasio, one of the founders of Alianza Islamica, told me that when he went to mosques “back in the day” all he would see “were Arab men sitting around talking Arabic…there was no place for a young Nuyorican like me.” He sought a more diverse mosque community to enjoy, “to enjoy the diversity that Islam has to offer.”

Seeing Latinx Muslims as an “underserved minority” in American Islam, he and others endeavored to translate outreach materials, messages, and other Islamic literature into Spanish. This was sometimes supported by official publishing houses or outreach organizations and sometimes not. Sumayah told me that while the materials are being translated into Spanish, YouTube videos are being made, and podcasts produced, it is not enough. She lamented that when you walk into mosques Spanish-language materials “are often hard to find or located on a disheveled and dusty bookshelf not touched in a long

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75 Ramon Ocasio, Conversation with Author, Queens, New York. October 14, 2017.
The desire for Sumayah, Ocasio, and others is to see more materials translated into Spanish, hence the popularity of organizations like Islam in Spanish or other outreach organizations working on producing Spanish-language messages and materials for Latinx and Puerto Rican Muslim minorities.

Although their efforts at translation are still stunted in many respects, the process of vernacularization is an active mode of resistance and appropriation, inclusion and exclusion, the global and the local in dynamic tension. It is a simultaneous process of “carving out space” for Spanish in Islam and among Muslims as well carving space out for Islam and Muslims in the Spanish idiom.

Clothing, Sweat, and Puerto Rican Muslim Womens’ Fashion

Another aspect of Puerto Rican culture that Puerto Rican Muslims must contend with is the island itself. Puerto Ricans display what María Acosta Cruz called “a deep and abiding love for…the scenic beauties of the land,” which is in turn tied to “nationalist emotions, to patriotism” and what she argued is a “dream nation.” Frequently, Puerto Rican Muslims reference “la bella Isla” or “la Isla del encanto” and appeal to its lush beauty, profound fecundity, and beautiful white sand beaches. For Puerto Rican Muslims living in New York and other locales in the Northeast U.S. this is contrasted

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79 The “island of enchantment,” proudly printed on each state-issued license plate.
with their asphalt laden, bitterly cold, and rusty metal surroundings. Many long for the island. While there are exceptions — and a new category of literature and art that deals with the traffic jams, roads, overcrowding, vehicular lifestyles, technology, and commercial enterprises of twenty-first century Puerto Rican life — there is a long history of literature and artistic representations that present an “Edenic vision of Puerto Rico.”

For example, Santiago Vindarte wrote in his poem “Insomnia”:

   And see you there beneath its shady foot,
   a wondrous garden where blooms so lushly grow,
   where April lives, my Siren, in each root?  
   Well, that garden’s name is Puerto Rico.

Juan Rodríguez Calderón called Puerto Rico the island of “happy fame” and his “blithe sanctuary.” Following suit, Puerto Rican Muslims on the island — and living in the diaspora — both appealed to Puerto Rico’s natural beauty. Those who living on the island with proud pleasure. Those who lived elsewhere with longing. Even the appeal of one of the mosques in Puerto Rico was partly found in how it was tucked into the lush gardens of a hillside outside Vega Alta. Adrián Robles remarked to me as we drove on Highway Two west of San Juan how the mosque in Vega Alta was prominent with its white walls and coral minaret, but that its true beauty lie “in how it is surrounding by the essence of Puerto Rico — the beautiful trees, colors, and sounds of coqui frog.”

80 Acosta Cruz, 111.

81 See Roberto Márquez, Puerto Rican Poetry: An Anthology from Aboriginal to Contemporary Times, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

82 Ibid.

made this mosque distinctly “Puerto Rican” to Adrián is that it was enveloped by the island’s natural splendor.

Beyond the rainforest and its flora and fauna, the beach is a particular place of beauty, family gathering, and another significant aspect of Puerto Rican cultural memory. José Gautier, drawing on the idyllic and Edenic vision of Puerto Rico equated the very pleasantness of the name of Borinquen to the “pounding of its pleasant waves” upon the shore.  

It was at the beach that I first got a sense of how some Muslims struggle with the lived environment in some way as well. While drawing henna tattoos as a fundraiser for Syrian refugees, Sumayah was dressed in a black abaya — a loose full-length outer garment covering her body legs, and arms. It was a hot day in mid-July and even in the shade the temperature and humidity were oppressive. As Sumayah worked she was sweating profusely. She commented on how people would often look at her because of what she wore. Eating lunch with her one day a fellow patron came up to our table and asked about her clothes. She asked why she wore them, if she was forced to wear them, and whether or not she was hot all the time. Sumayah politely responded and explained her choices as a Muslim woman and how it was an act of piety to wear conservative clothing.

Back on the beach, she elaborated on the heat. She said that she loved Puerto Rico and its environment. She loves the beach. She loves the mountains. She loves being outside. It is part of who she is she said. But, she laughed, “it’s hot…there is no doubt about that!” Reflecting on her physical condition and the sweat trickling down her forehead as she worked she said, “the clothing makes it hotter, yes. But with every bead

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84 Márquez, Puerto Rican Poetry, 47.
of sweat I can feel my piety and my submission to Allah. I will not move. I will not change. This is who I am.” For Sumayah, there is tension between her lived environment in Puerto Rico and her choice to wear what she wears as a Muslim woman. And yet, like the women profiled in Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* or Elizabeth Bucar’s *Pious Fashion* she finds a way through “creative conformity” to tactically engage with her social context. That social context not only includes the religion that she adheres to, but the physical environment in which she lives, works, and goes out with family and friends in.

Angelica Molina makes a parallel tactical engagement with her social context, religious practice, and lived environment. And yet, she makes different choices than Sumayah. When we met for brunch in San Juan she referenced her black and gray outfit as an “Old Navy hijabi special.” She said, “I wear a gray long sleeve maxi dress with black leggings and somewhat-stylish black rimmed glasses because that is what I can find at normal stores. It’s not like I go to Muslims r’ Us!” Sometimes, she said, she goes out with her hair uncovered. When she goes to the beach with her family and friends, she often goes with a turban wrapping her hair and nothing on her neck. Her husband might sigh or some Muslim friends give her pushback, but she often reminds them that there is great diversity in the clothing choices of Muslim women across the world and throughout history. She said that for more “traditionalist and conservative” Muslims she has to defend her decisions at times. “They have different opinions and

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perspectives from me, but we figure it out,” she said. “What I am realizing is that a lot of
the choices they made are because of their culture, their history, their background. They
are Egyptian. Palestinian. Pakistani. I am Puerto Rican. We are different. So we
disagree. We argue. It’s a struggle, but it’s worth the relationship.”

Angelica’s choices are a complex mix of relational negotiations, individual agency, social and cultural
context, and living in a particular environment where going to the beach is part of being
“Puerto Rican” and the heat and humidity might influence her to make decisions that
differentiate her from her co-religionists at the same time that her religious ethics
influence her to make decisions distinct from her fellow Puerto Ricans.

**Conclusion**

Puerto Rican Muslims are in an awkward position when it comes to identifying as
Puerto Rican. They are proudly Puerto Rican. Yet, because official and popular
understandings and perceptions of Puerto Rican culture seem not to include the “fourth
root” of Arab Puerto Rican culture they must re-engage their ethnic heritage and find
ways to authenticate their identity and situate their Muslimness within “Puerto Rican
culture.” Thus, in the process of cosmopolitan becoming they re-draw the boundaries of
the three roots of Puerto Rican culture in their search of simultaneous authenticity.
Furthermore, they weave together a new identity from the various threads of their
culture — food, customs, and literal threads of clothing. Through a creative re-tooling of
their context, religion, and cultural symbols Puerto Rican Muslims actively ground their
identity in the idea and realities of Puerto Rican culture. At the same time, their identity
remains betwixt and between, centered and still on the margins, here and there, mobile

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but rooted, active and passive. All the while, it is cosmopolitan. It reveals to those of us learning from Puerto Rican Muslims what it means to be cosmopolitan in the world today and how cultural goods, ideas of belonging, language, mobility, communication, relationships, and transnational but rooted forms of life constitute “the cosmopolitanization of reality.”

The same could be said of “ethnicity.” Puerto Rican Muslims do not dissolve their Puerto Ricanness into a grand multi-cultural mélange. Instead, they reconstitute and recast their ethnic identity in a cosmopolitan frame. Their cosmopolitanism is not a static state, but rather a dynamic mode of being and becoming, of translating and vernacularizing, of — as Benny in Ponce said — learning a new culture but not giving up one’s own. To be cosmopolitan is not necessarily to learn Arabic, but it is to engage in the process of negotiation and exchange with other cultures, people, and languages. It is to wrestle with the tensions, to translate, and to resist. Puerto Rican Muslims are engaging with cultures typically held to be beyond their own. As they engage with them, they are not abandoning their ethnic heritage, but re-engaging it, re-imagining it, and opening it up to new interpretations and meanings. As Pollock wrote, “Cosmopolitanism, in its wide and wavering nets, catches something of our need to ground our sense of mutuality in conditions of mutability, and to learn to live tenaciously in terrains of historic and cultural transition.”

Puerto Rican Muslims live in the tension and transition and are actively carving out their own “situated universalism.” This is happening not only with

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90 Pollock, 4.

91 Ibid., 9.
their language, but their food, family, and friends. It is also happening with their lived environment as well.

This is what makes Puerto Rican Muslims’ cosmopolitanism compelling. The concept takes on flesh, as it were, and historical specificity as Puerto Rican Muslims wrestle with the differences that their mobile yet rooted lives reveal to them. There are tensions and conflicts between their multiple identities. While the cosmopolitanization of their lives has caused some of them to question the givenness of their ethnic and national heritage, they are able to deal with their situations’ complexity and ambiguity by reconfiguring what their ethnic/national identity means in light of their cosmopolitan reality. This situation is not necessarily new in history, but reflecting on their situation helps us realize how complex that process is and what it might mean for the rest of us making sense of the diversity of the late-modern world we live in.
CHAPTER 4
PUERTO RICAN MUSLIMS AND THE “MUSLIM WORLD”

If cosmopolitanism is the experience of others and cosmopolitanization is the process of coming to terms with that experience, what does that process look like for Muslims in this context? This chapter is about Puerto Rican Muslims’ experience with others as part of the broader so-called “Muslim World.” By examining that relationship and experience I scrutinize how the idea of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” exists as a social reality in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims. As quadruple minorities who live lives that are defined by both crossing and dwelling, by encounter and entrenched identities, Puerto Rican Muslims enable us to understand cosmopolitanism and the process of cosmopolitanization. Their experiences point to how cosmopolitanism becomes a way of life, the connectedness that exists between different people and spaces, both in real time and virtually. One of the more interesting things about Puerto Rican Muslims is that their Muslim identity is shaped through this interconnectedness, that they are interacting while moving, and that their cosmopolitanism transcends the reality of the local, yet constantly crossing boundaries and transcending the limits of their geographic settings.

Furthermore, this chapter will explore the tensions between competing visions of the ummah, accusations of tribalism in multiple directions, and the contestations of culture from Puerto Rican Muslims’ critical position on the margins of the so-called “Muslim world.” There they craft a “critical cosmopolitanism” that I am refer to as asaBoricua.¹ This conceptualization of their particular navigation of cosmopolitan

¹ This term compounds the two words asabiyah and Boricua (Puerto Rican) to speak to the power of Puerto Rican Muslim identity and the role it plays in speaking from the margins of the so-called “Muslim world” to the putative center.
experience within the “Muslim world” draws on the idea of *asabiyah* first introduced by Ibn Khâldûn.\(^2\) The aspects of how this works out in relation to their Puerto Ricanness were addressed in Chapter 3. This chapter, however, deals specifically with *asaBoricua* as it relates to Puerto Rican Muslims’ relationship with others in the broadly conceived, “Muslim world.” Dealing with their place on the perceived margins of this “Muslim world” geographically, religiously, and culturally Puerto Rican Muslims turn to their shared sense of *asaBoricua* in order to re-assert their power and identity. Indeed, this has often been theorized as a central aspect of *asabiyah* — its ability to translate a will to power into reality.\(^3\) As they do so, they not only draw on their Puerto Rican cultural pride, but also engage with broader debates over ideology, identity, and Islamic institutions. Joining a chorus of contemporary voices, this chapter will also challenge the still predominate notion that the so-called “Muslim world” is constituted by a narrow geography that includes just North Africa, the Middle East, and some other nations and territories peripheral to this theoretical core.

This chapter highlights the relationships that Puerto Rican Muslim converts have with other Muslims in Puerto Rico (predominately Palestinians, who make up the majority of the Muslim population on the island). While I discuss the experience of some Palestinian Muslims and there is some crossover between these two communities, my focus is on Puerto Rican Muslims’ experiences in particular. It is my hope that by focusing on Puerto Rican Muslim, this chapter will show that cosmopolitanism is


\(^3\) For example, see E.I.J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*, (Cambridge University Press, 1962), 87-91.
anchored in local identities and loyalties, but augments them with new global networks of knowledge and experience through contact, and even conflict, with others. As an experience and a process of broadening horizons and new encounters and entanglements with a more extensive lattice of ideas, customs, materials, and people, cosmopolitanization is not just about mobility, going to other places, peoples, and cultures, and an openness to other peoples and cultures, but it is also about negotiating with other people and ideas, challenging pre-conceived notions of history and geography between “our” world and “theirs,” and the conflicts and tensions that come with this process. Applying some insights from the framework of “border theory” to this process helps us better see these dynamics at work in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims.

Specifically, it will be shown that the global and the local aspects of cosmopolitan experience edge up against each other in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims. Paying attention to these strains and struggles at the borderlands between being Puerto Rican and Muslim at the same time, both global and local, transnational and still patriotic, helps us see what it means to be Muslim in the late modern world. Respecting the heterogeneity within Islamic tradition, the social reality of Puerto Rican Muslims allows researchers to better understand the sometimes messy, overlapping, and contradictory

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nature of exchange between constituencies all claiming membership in one global ummah. It also illustrates the choices that cosmopolitan actors make between membership in, and marginalization from, multiple communities they identify with.

**A Critical Cosmopolitanism from the Margins**

As students protested rising rent prices in the wake of the Puerto Rican fiscal crisis, José Vilmenay and I talked about colonialism and Puerto Rican identity. He told me that “colonialism defines Puerto Rico” especially vis-à-vis its relationship with the U.S.⁶ Telling a story of uprisings and secret police, sedition and the malevolence of the C.I.A. in the Caribbean,⁷ Vilmenay made the case that U.S. hegemony had shaped Puerto Rico and its people psychologically. He said, “controlling us politically and militarily has meant controlling our culture and our psyche. We don’t know who we really are.” This colonized mindset, he continued, has impacted the felt divisions between Palestinian and Arab Muslims in Puerto Rico and local converts. “There are definitely divisions here, which is disheartening,” he said, “it is tribalism and colonialism.” He lambasted those Palestinian Muslims who isolate themselves and who he accused of lording their Middle Eastern roots over Puerto Rican converts as if it makes them superior Muslims. He critiqued certain Palestinian Muslims — and other “Arabs” — for their tribalism, their desire to further colonize the minds of Puerto Ricans, and for a need to seek unity in the ummah.

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⁷ He drew on the narrative of Nelson A. Denis’ *Guerra Contra Todos los Puertorriqueños: Revolución y Terror en la Colonia Americana*, (Public Affairs: 2015). (See also Jose Trias Monge, *Puerto Rico: Las Penas de la Colonia mas Antigua en el Mundo*, [La Editorial, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1999]).
“Being Arab doesn’t make you a better Muslim,” he said, “if anything, Puerto Rican Muslims are a purer picture of the unified ummah talked about in the Qur’an.” I inquired how so. He responded with a smirk, “we are pure hybrids, man. Pure hybrid creations of our own making. Nobody bred us, nobody planned to make Puerto Rican Muslims. We just happened. And we are not easily categorized. We are the next step in the ummah’s evolution.” “But,” he admitted, “it’s still difficult to get a grasp of who we are.” Indeed, the question of who “we” are remains a prevalent one for Puerto Ricans who have converted to Islam. Along with many others in the modern world whose identity has been brought into question by the commonplace nature of cosmopolitan encounter, Puerto Rican Muslims must navigate the in between of simultaneously being part of the “Muslim world” and yet feeling as if they are marginalized to its metaphysical edges.

While Puerto Rican Muslims are very much a part of the global “Muslim world” their voice within that broader community is one of critical cosmopolitan inclusion. While they may be deconstructing certain preconceived notions and accepted realisms of what constitutes the identity “Muslim” or where the “Muslim world” is located, they are at the same time drawing on the received corpus of opinion and perspective on what those terms mean. It is a process of framing these terms, ideas, and debates within their own matrix of experience and perspective as Puerto Ricans. This implies a certain reformative project that “takes the form of border thinking or border epistemology — that is the alternative to separatism.”

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away from the umma. Instead, as will be shown in the stories below, they seek to
critique and challenge the “center” of the “Muslim world” because it hides and obscures
the repression of the marginal in the Puerto Rican Muslim experience. Thus, they
recognize, frame, and transform the hegemonic imaginary of globalizing Muslim forces
from their own subaltern position⁹ and push back against these forces simultaneously.¹⁰
In this way, they problematize the troubling binary between “Arabs” and “other Muslims”
so often prevalent in perceptions of Muslim communities, especially in the Americas.
Furthermore, in underscoring the ethical imperative of Islam – in their minds
dichotomized with the “cultural Islam” of the Palestinians — Puerto Rican Muslims
indirectly frame Islam as de-contextualized and de-territorialized. This is a common
trend among new converts in the late-modern age and speaks to the question of
constructing a pious subject – versus “Islam” as a collective ethnic category.

The way Puerto Rican Muslims navigate the tensions and the transitions in their
conversion and experience within the Muslim community instead showcases the
dynamic, borderlands, processes going on in multiple Muslim communities. If there is
something to “Muslim cosmopolitanism” it is as this kind of social reality — one where
different conceptions of the what the ummah is or how it should act are worked out in

⁹ Ibid., 174.

¹⁰ This move is reminiscent of the demands of the “politics of recognition” – those efforts by subaltern
groups in multicultural societies or communities to demand recognition as part of the whole as a means of
contesting nonrecognition or misrecognition and the damage and distortion that they cause. See also
Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition, ed. Amy Gutmann, (Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1994): 149-163; Nancy Fraser, Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on “Postsocialist”
Condition, (New York: Routledge, 1997) and “Rethinking Recognition,” New Left Review. 3 (2000): 107-
120; Terje Østebø, “The Question of Becoming: Islamic Reform Movements in Contemporary Ethiopia,”
Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition: 25-73.
complex interactions between Muslims of multiple identities and ideologies. This social reality complicates common understandings of the center and/or the peripheries — and by extension the supposed borders and boundaries — of the so-called “Muslim world” and shows them to be not so neatly delimited. As Zareena Grewal notes in her work on Muslims in the U.S., “scholars often over-territorialize Muslim American communities,” and argued that scholars rely “far too heavily on demographic variables when dividing Muslim Americans into separate communities, perhaps as a practical concession to their incredible diversity…” Puerto Rican Muslim identity is not so easily delimited, but instead illustrates “overlapping qualities” with multiple Muslim identities and communities and “shared investments” in concepts such as the ummah.\(^\text{11}\)

**Palestinians and Puerto Ricans Between Ummah and asaBoricua**

Speaking to his fellow Puerto Ricans in his “Rompe las Cadenas”\(^\text{12}\) videos on Facebook Live and proudly sporting a Puerto Rico baseball cap, Wesley Abu Sumayyah Abdur Razzaq Lebron exhorted his fellow Muslims toward unity. He appealed to Qur’an 49:13 to say, “Allah [SWT] said he created us from nations and tribes so we can get to know on another.”\(^\text{13}\) The same week he made this appeal, near the anniversary of 9/11 in 2016, a Mr. Schreiber set fire to the mosque in Ft. Pierce, Florida where the alleged shooter in the Orlando Pulse Night Club shooting had attended jumah several times. Wilfredo Amr Ruiz, a Puerto Rican Muslim and lawyer who leads CAIR in South Florida and CAIR en Español spoke from in front of the burn-out shell of the Ft. Pierce

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\(^\text{12}\) “Break the Chains.”

\(^\text{13}\) Facebook live video, September 16, 2016
mosque. He said of Schreiber, “he obviously doesn’t know about the efforts of our community to be engaged with our cousins, the Jews, not only in Florida but throughout the nation.” He made reference to the one part of the mosque that was not burned, a wall inscribed with a verse relevant to Ruiz’s call for unity in the face of tragedy. Despite being scorched, the wall was still emblazoned with the words from Qur’an 49.13:

> O mankind! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another. Surely the most noble of you before God are the most reverent of you. Truly God is Knowing, Aware.

Over and against the seeming fragmentation of Muslim societies, ideologies, and communities, Muslims will often still cling to the ideal of the ummah. Indeed, the unity of the ummah seems to be the desired social embodiment of the doctrine of tawhid — the oneness of Allah. In this framework, fragmentation and disunity — fitna — become signs of Islam at war with itself and Allah. It is, in a way, a loss of Islam’s central organizing principle. And yet, with the rise of Islamic reformism there has been a tense debate about the relationship between local loyalty and identity and the supposed essential unity of the ummah worldwide. The term ummah itself took on more symbolic power than it had before, especially among minority Muslim communities trying to assert their Muslim identity over, against, or alongside the majority populations of their respective nation-states. In the thought of some Islamic reformists, nationalism became linked with jahiliyyah — the times of ignorance before Muhammad and Islam — and Muslims everywhere were called to leave behind nationalist formulations of identity in favor of the unified ummah, which would be made great again in its unity.

In the Qur’an, the term signifies in multiple, if interconnected, directions. Even so, the different meanings all share a similar basis: it expresses the ideal of the essential
unity and theoretical equality of Muslims across cultural, geographical, and ideological boundaries. The idea of the ummah provides Muslims with a sense of belonging to something more, a familiarity and a fraternity in a world often fragmented by various fealties. In the Qur'an, the term refers to those whom Allah sent a prophet or the people who are objects of a divine plan of salvation or a religiously defined community (for example, Muslims and Jews). The ideal of the ummah remains a multivalent concept today. There are multiple and competing conceptualizations of what the ummah is or should be. There are various visions of what unites the ummah and what divides it. Each of these visions is historically situated, culturally constructed, and has often been used as means of coercing others to conform to a particular ideation of what the Muslim ummah should be.

The process of cosmopolitanization is a negotiation of difference, tension, and living together in both collaboration and conflict that is similar to the negotiation between the ideal and social reality of Muslims' desire to see the ummah realized among them. This came home to me on one blazingly humid and hot afternoon in June 2016 when Ilyass Figueroa, a Puerto Rican Muslim from Tampa Bay, Florida, gave the khutbah at the Islamic Cultural Center of Gainesville, Florida. Just two days before the beginning of Ramadan, Ilyass made an appeal for the Muslims in Gainesville to seek to follow Allah's words on Islam being the "middle nation." (2.143) He used this as a platform to critique the creep of custom and culture into the belief and practices of a community of Muslims. He warned against allowing old ways to become the ways in Muslim communities, especially in the "West." He advised that instead, Muslim communities in the U.S. would be like "water through rock" — that they might shape the culture and context around
them even as they pick up bits and pieces of their new cultural context and add it to the mix of their practice of Islam. His khutbah was not received well. After the prayers were over, complaints were heard from senior members of the community, saying that “he doesn’t know what he is doing!” or “he is too young!” or “give him time, he just has to learn.” The fallout would last for weeks and in the end, Ilyass was removed from the minbar rotation. Meeting up with him a couple months later, he complained to me that he had been removed from the rotation because of “tribalism.”

He continued, “I am not treated fairly because I am Puerto Rican. I am held to a different standard than others that do not know as much as me,” he said. Because of this tribalism he had lost his regular job at the mosque and had to find work at a local hotel. He lamented that “most mosques I’ve been to are divided along ethnic and linguistic lines.” He complained that the Gainesville community was no different and that the congregation had completely missed the point of his sermon on the essential cultural call for Muslims to unite around their diversity and differences, and not divide over the false ideal of unity based on conformity. Sadly, he reflected, he did not see much hope for the future. “We don’t know what it is to be an ummah. Even non-Muslims do it better than us man. There is less tribalism and division at my job at the hotel or where I go to school than at my mosque. That ain’t right!”

The tension that is felt in Ilyass’ story is one that resonates with other Puerto Rican Muslims as well. Some even believe they have the solution. Catching up with José Vilmenay just a few days after Ilyass’ khutbah, he reflected on the young preacher’s predicament and said that if there is to be a renaissance among Muslims

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today it is not going to come from those coming from the Middle East or North Africa. “Just look at where Muslim immigrants are fleeing from and where they are coming to. They are coming to the West. They are coming to us. To the Americas.” He said, “The Islamic Renaissance will start here. It will start with us.” He posited that Puerto Rican Muslims — or Latinx Muslims in general — could play a leading role. “We bring the worlds together,” he said, “Muslim, American, North American, South American, Caribbean, African, European… it all comes together in our story.”

This belief that Puerto Rican Muslims are especially positioned as hybrids to provide a new way forward for Muslims across the world is one that I encountered frequently in my conversations with Puerto Rican Muslims struggling with the tensions and fragmentations in the ummah. Not seeing a way to be united with their other Muslim brethren — particularly those from the Middle East, North Africa, or South Asia — they instead turned to their own homegrown identity, a product of the sharp edges of their experience on the margins of the so-called “Muslim world.” While certainly a perspective with its own contradictions, for some like José, the Puerto Rican Muslim condition could not only provide a different perspective on the problem, they could provide a solution and perhaps — if given the opportunity or willing to take it — lead other Muslims into a new “Islamic renaissance” with a renewed cosmopolitan vision for the ummah.

Ibn Khaldûn and asaBoricua

One Muslim scholar who took up the theme of unity in the context of historical processes and social reality was the renowned administrator, scholar, and judge Ibn Khaldûn (1332-1406 C.E.). Khaldûn sought to develop a theory concerning what he saw

as the cyclical nature of dynasties and political power in Iberia, North Africa, and the Arab Middle East in his time and in history. In the course of his studies he identified two antithetical societal groupings: rural tribes and the populations of cities. Although he believed that all people were born the same, he thought that growing up in a city versus growing up in the rural areas produced different social sensibilities. Thus, he posited that rural societies were — by nature (or tabiah) more, “morally pure, socially cohesive, and militarily tested” and that city peoples were, “morally corrupt, socially atomized, and militarily inexperienced.”\(^\text{16}\) He placed these juxtaposed populations in a “framework of a cyclical, dialectical model that explained, he said, the chronic political instability and persistently anemic culture…”\(^\text{17}\) Arguing that in order to survive and thrive, human societies had to create forms of community and organization (\(\text{\textit{i}j\text{\textit{t}i\text{\textit{m}ah}}\)) and launched the concept of \(\text{asabiyah}\). Asabiyah has been variously defined as “social solidarity” or “communal identity” with an emphasis on group consciousness, cohesiveness, and unity. Familiar in the pre-Islamic era, the term became popularized with the publication of Ibn Khaldûn’s \(\text{\textit{Muqaddinah}}\), or “Introduction” to history. Most likely drawing on an earlier sense of clannishness or tribalism within Arab society, Ibn Khaldûn elevated asabiyah to the level of “fundamental principle of social solidarity”\(^\text{18}\) and viewed it as a natural power generated through a combination of common descent, kinship ties (either physical or fictive), and common everyday experiences. Ibn Khaldûn wrote that “\(\text{asabiyah}\) produces the ability to defend oneself, to offer opposition, to protect oneself


\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Dale, 26.
and to press one’s claims.” Ibn Khaldûn believed that societies, tribes, or communities with strong *asabiyah* possessed a certain tenacity, bravery, and toughness that gave them a certain will to power. Over time and in the context of cosmopolitan cities, he believed, *asabiyah* weakened until dynasties collapsed, typically victim to the power of another tribe or nation with stronger *asabiyah*.

Although this is an oversimplification of Ibn Khaldûn’s theories and there is much more to glean from his writings on history, social reality, and politics, I bring up Ibn Khaldûn’s discussion of *asabiyah* in order to speak to the dynamics at work between Puerto Rican Muslims and the broader “Muslim world” that they interact with and see themselves as part of, but marginalized from. While I heed Robert Irwin’s caution to not make Ibn Khaldûn say things for our time that he could not, or would not, have said in his own, I believe that the concept of *asabiyah* is relevant to the conversation around Puerto Rican Muslims and the idea(l) of cosmopolitanism.

Indeed, Puerto Rican Muslims feel themselves caught between the ideal of the *ummah* and their own robust *asaBoricua*. More than social solidarity, *asaBoricua* is the group consciousness and cohesiveness that Puerto Rican Muslims feel, despite being dispersed across various geographies. Not based on blood or traditional kinship networks it is a chosen unity, a selected solidarity. While they yearn for a broader, and

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19 Khâldun, 111.


more unified, ummah Puerto Rican Muslims are faced with the sense that their Puerto Ricanness does not often fit within pre-conceived notions of what that ummah looks like or how it acts for others. The feeling that many Puerto Rican Muslims shared is that Arab Muslims evince in their words and deeds that there is no way to be a “good Muslim” and be non-Arab (Puerto Rican, British, German, or otherwise). Additionally, facing pressure and ostracism from family, friends, and Puerto Rican popular culture, Puerto Rican Muslims retreat into the strength of their own asaBoricua in order to simultaneously assert their Muslim identity and in some way to challenge the prevailing power that they feel forces them to be something they are not — Arab or Christian, a particular kind of Muslim, Puerto Rican, or American.

Puerto Rican Muslims seek to craft their own asaBoricua as a means to — in the words of Ibn Khaldûn — “defend themselves, offer opposition, and press their claims.”

To do so, Puerto Rican Muslims draw from a diverse repertoire of identities and resources in order to construct their asaBoricua identity. In doing so, Puerto Ricans inhabit a third-space between the margins and the center and challenge simplistic, but tempting, binaries in scholarly analysis of global Islam (for example, between Arabs and “other Muslims.”) In these imaginings of the ummah, Puerto Rican Muslims — for all their group identity and efforts at unity in the face of marginalization — remain sidelined in many discussions pertaining to Islamic life in the Americas and broader notions of who makes up the “Muslim world.”

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22 Khâldun, 111.
Stories from the Perceived Margins

When Puerto Rican Muslims convert, they often, as noted, face challenges and accusations from family and friends accusing them of being “Arab.” Moreover, multiple Puerto Rican Muslims I spoke to also shared that they felt pressure from their co-religionists to conform their speech, customs, and clothing to Arab norms. Wesley Abu Sumayyah Abdur Razzaq Lebron shared that when he entered his first mosque near his home near Passaic, New Jersey his first impression was, “What did I get myself into?’ All I saw were Arab men sitting around talking Arabic. Their leader stood in front of them and began delivering a speech in Arabic.”

23 Turned off by the overwhelming “Arab” feel of the mosque, he found comfort in another mosque that was more diverse where there “African Americans, Hispanics, Whites, Arabs, etc.” and even some “brothers” from Puerto Rico and Guatemala. Reflecting on these experiences later in his life, he told me:

Way too often sometimes we hear that people, especially when it comes to converts like myself, people say, ‘Well, you have to wear thobe all the time, you have to look like an Arab, behave like an Arab, take on the characteristics of an Arab; but the reality is...that Allah [Subhanahu wa ta’ala, SWT]...did not create me to be a Saudi Arabian, Pakistani, Indian, Syrian, Egyptian. He created me [pointing to his Puerto Rican baseball hat] to be from Puerto Rico. Allah [SWT] created me to be a Puerto Rican Muslim...Alhamdulillah I can combine the two and it makes something exquisite and beautiful, to accept and speak Islam in the Spanish language. Allah [SWT] didn’t tell the Arabs to change their food, their customs. As long as something didn’t go against the Qur’an or the Sunnah...then there is no problem. Even the shari’a is founded according to the customs of the people...you don’t have to become some other than who you are to become Muslim.24


For Lebron — and other Puerto Rican Muslim converts like him — the tension experienced in their conversion and the collision of culture, traditions, and customs that comes with it produces new mixtures and identities. This process is not an easy one, but through the confluence of the streams of different cultural heritages and the pressures they feel in joining a new community a new identity emerges that they take to be both decidedly Muslim and stubbornly Puerto Rican. Puerto Rican Muslims do not feel they have to make a choice between the two identities. Instead, they decide to merge the two. They do so in very strategic ways. Not only do they try to conform their Puerto Rican cultural heritage to their new Muslim identity, but they also couch their Puerto Ricanness in Muslim tradition, customs, and teachings. Their cosmopolitanism is optative, in that it allows them to choose between various identities. At the same time, each of these identities becomes contested, imagined, and somewhat ambiguous. For Lebron, that means looking to the foundation of the early Muslim community in the seventh century Hejaz, in the revelation of the Qur’an, and in the practice of the Prophet Muhammad to express his asaBoricua identity in ways that resonate with his fellow, non-Puerto Rican, Muslims and his fellow Puerto Rican Muslims.

Similarly, Ilyass felt the pressure to conform to different cultural standards when he converted to Islam. He also worked out his new identity by appealing to Islamic tradition and the opinion of respected scholars. Perhaps a bit ironically dressed in an Afghani turban and long thobe, Ilyass shared with me over a vegetarian Jamaican meal served by local Rastas that “Muslims do not have to discard their culture to become Muslim. It is a process of give-and-take.”25 Quoting Muhammad and the hadith that

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says, “No Arab is better than a non-Arab” he asked incredulously, “what happened?

“While Islam used to shape, and become shaped by, the culture it came in contact with this is no longer true,” he said, “Islam is now enforced and imagined as some monolithic culture of universal rules and regulations.” Affirming that when he does dawah he makes sure that people know they do not have to abandon their culture to become Muslim, he said, “Islam is like a river. Wherever the river flows it reflects its bedrock. There are uniquely Chinese, Indian, African, or Mediterranean flavors of Islam in their contexts. Wherever Islam has flowed, it has taken on some of the character of the culture and its people in that context.”

Sadly, he reflected, this seemed to no longer be the case. Appealing to his reading of Islamic history and its encounter with other cultures, Ilyass hoped Puerto Rican Muslims like himself would continue to lead the way in allowing for Islam to confront and change their culture even as their culture adds to the vitality of Islam as it continues to flow around the globe.

Like Lebron, Ilyass looked to alternate Muslim communities for a home. Figueroa received training from the Ta’leef Collective in Fremont, California and Chicago, Illinois. Self-described as a “third space” besides the home and the mosque where people can experience “Islam as it is,” scholars have also referred to the group as a Sufi “counterpublic” in the broader Muslim American context. While it is true that such

26 Ibid.


groups as the Ta’leef Collective help discipline and motivate the self toward supposedly “purer” and more ethical forms of Islam\textsuperscript{29} and contest the retreat of Islam from the public sphere into the private realm, they also challenge what they see as limited, ethnicized, visions of Muslim community. Ilyass takes Umr Faruq Abd-Allah’s words very seriously. “When he wrote, ‘Islam must reflect the good in the world’s diverse races and ethnicities’ he tapped into the core of Muhammad’s message,” Ilyass said, “the Prophet [PBUH] and his message were sent to perfect the character of the people, not to destroy their culture.”\textsuperscript{30} For Ilyass this is as much as personal imperative as it is an obligation for all the faithful. Ilyass said, “Like a crystal-clear river, Islam and sacred law are pure but colorless, until they reflect the Chinese, African, and other bedrock over which they flow.” For Ilyass and other Puerto Rican Muslims this means that as Islam flows over the bedrock of their culture and context that it will reflect and take on some of the character of their identity as well.

This desire is rooted in Puerto Rican Muslims’ desire for authenticity. Paralleling the experience of Black American Muslims in the U.S.,\textsuperscript{31} they seek ways to authenticate their decidedly ethnic expressions of Islam over and against the supposed and inherited authenticity and superiority of the “Arab Muslim” experience. Su’ad Abdul Khabeer


\textsuperscript{30} This perspective, Ilyass told me, was inspired by the idea of “Islam and the cultural imperative” as outlined by the leader of the now defunct Nawawi Foundation Uma Faruq Abd-Allah’ and evinced by others such as Usama Canon and the Sufi leanings of Abdallah Bin Bayyah in Europe.

\textsuperscript{31} Explored in further detail in Chapter 5.
wrote of this in regards to U.S. Black Americans who faced pressures as well. Because they “cannot claim immediate descent from the ‘Muslim world,’” they are “presumed to be new to the Islamic tradition, and [their] religious practices and perspectives have to be authenticated.”32 Meanwhile, Muslims of Arab descent are “presumed to have proximity to the Islamic Tradition” and their “religious practices and perspectives are endowed with authenticity simply because she is Arab.”33 Likewise, Puerto Rican Muslims look for ways to authenticate their “Islam-ness” without necessarily becoming “Arab.” Similar to other modern converts, they emphasize the ethical imperatives of Islam in order to de-contextualized and de-territorialize Islam over-and-against the seeming “cultural Islam” of Arab Muslims. They seek to construct themselves as a pious subject, but cannot help but re-territorialize and re-contextualize that piety in the midst of their everyday cosmopolitan lives.

The tensions that exist between Puerto Rican Muslims and their co-religionists because of this cannot simply be summed up as a contest over tradition or a battle over ethnicity and authenticity. Instead, this relationship is part-and-parcel to the late-modern experience of cosmopolitanism. Confronted with the world and its diversity — and certainly at home in multiple places, identities, and communities — Puerto Rican Muslims and those they are in relationship with are working out these tensions in multivalent ways. They are at odds with one another, but at the same time arguing over shared concepts (for example, the ummah) and wrestling with shared experiences. Even as they argue and contest one another’s respective identities and loyalties they

32 Khabeer, Muslim Cool, 13.
33 Ibid.
also stand in solidarity with one another on various issues. They quarrel, but they do so together as Muslims.

This is the social reality of cosmopolitanism at work in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims and their co-religionists. While Arab Muslims may view themselves as possessing a certain power over Puerto Rican Muslims in terms of the “Muslim world” and Puerto Rican Muslims sense a certain “colonization” as they join and contest established Muslim communities, there is a simultaneous process where the divides and hyphens between these two imagined communities begin to become fuzzy and disappear as Puerto Rican and Arab Muslims interact with one another. Whether in conflict or collaboration the two are taking on each other’s attributes and become mutually implicated in the supposed others’ lives. To really understand what this means, it is best to pay attention to how this plays out in the communities within which Puerto Rican Muslims and others regularly interact. The following section provides a snapshot of how this borderlands dynamic at work in the cosmopolitan experiences of Puerto Rican Muslims played out in Puerto Rico around Eid celebrations on the island and in the community in Vega Alta.

From the Perspective of Palestinians in Puerto Rico

When I first arrived in Puerto Rico to start doing fieldwork Imam Danny Abdullah Hernandez from Houston said I had to meet Imam Zaid Abdelrahim and attend the Eid al-Fitr celebrations he hosted at the San Juan Convention Center. With those instructions in hand I made my way to the Convention Center on July 17, 2015. Upon my arrival, the massive convention center seemed empty and I wondered if I had made a mistake or gone to the wrong part of the center. Before too long I saw a man dressed in a *thobe* and I walked up and introduced myself. He introduced himself as José
Vilmenay and had his daughter with him. He asked what I was doing there and I told him that I had studied “Latino Muslims” before, and was looking to get to know “Puerto Rican Muslims” here and in the U.S. José quickly corrected me. “That’s not right. You can’t study ‘Puerto Rican’ Muslims. There is no such thing. There are only Muslims. There is one ummah. Sure, if you go to this mosque or that community one speaks Spanish and the other speaks Arabic, but otherwise it is a universal faith. What is true about it is global. You mis-speak by saying, ‘Puerto Rican Muslims,’ as if there is such a thing! There are Puerto Ricans who are Muslims, but the ummah is one.” Indeed, gathered for Eid celebrations from all over Puerto Rico, there were Muslims who claimed heritage or came from such diverse locales as Egypt and Ethiopia, India and Indonesia, Haiti and Hato Rey. The khutbah and the announcements were made in a mix of Arabic, English, and Spanish. It seems that everyone there was united in their pronouncement of takbir, their collection of the Eid donations, and their excitement over breaking the fast of Ramadan.

As we left the convention center rooms where the prayers were held, we all shuffled into the main hall where over 500 Muslims were gathered from all over Puerto Rico. There were bounce houses for the kids to play in, tables full of dates and snacks, a stage set-up with a full sound system and disc jockey, and tickets were handed for the fried chicken lunch. Desserts were a mixture of basbousa, kanafeh, and baklava. I grabbed some kanafeh and Turkish coffee, and was approached by Abdul. A local gas station owner, Abdul introduced himself as Palestinian. He was born in Caguas — a city to the south of San Juan — and grew up in Puerto Rico. However, he lived in Amman, Jordan and Tampa, Florida, before returning to San Juan. He asked what I was here for
and I shared the same thing I said to José — to learn more about “Puerto Rican Muslims.” Instead of lecturing me about the unity of the ummah he widened his eyes and said, “that’s good, that’s good. People don’t know much about Puerto Rican Muslims, just us Palestinians maybe. But not much. It is a vibrant, living community. Imam Zaid, he bridges the world between Palestinians and Puerto Ricans. He is respected here. Treasured even.”

Figure 4-1. Local mosques organize a large gathering for Eid al-Fitr for Puerto Rican Muslims across the island each year at the San Juan Convention Center. The 2017 celebration had about 500 people in attendance. Photo: Ken Chitwood.

Abdul introduced me to all of his friends at his table — Muhammad and Abdullah, Shaquille and Ahmed. We ate and shared stories. Every single one of them was born in Puerto Rico to parents who immigrated there from Palestine in the 1950s and 60s. Each had spent time back in Jordan or Palestine or both. Each considered themselves Palestinian. At the end, as we were finishing our desserts and they were about to head to the main stage for dabke — a popular Levantine dance — Abdul turned to me and said, “it was great talking to you. Really. But if you want to learn more about the Puerto Rican Muslims you should head over there.” He pointed to a couple of tables in the
corner where there were several couples sitting back and looking over in our direction. Before he walked away I asked, “Abdul, you were born in Puerto Rico, raised here, have family here, and live here. You don’t consider yourself a Puerto Rican Muslim at all?” Abdul replied, “No, not at all. I am Palestinian.”

These sentiments are in keeping with what Juliane Hammer found in her exploration of Palestinian memory and identity in the diaspora. She found that “Palestinians all over the world have, to different degrees, managed to pass on a sense of Palestinian identity to their children since 1948.” Such is the case with Palestinians in Puerto Rico from my time there. In their search for a homeland, they also found one another. They established connections with one another across in the island in business, through marriage, friendships, and religious communities as well. Fridays at the mosque not only presented an opportunity for prayer, but also for connecting with other Palestinians and expressing that Palestinian identity in explicit ways. They spoke the Southern Levantine dialect with one another, talked about news from home, discussed potential engagements between daughters and sons, and in Vega Alta, Río Piedras, and Montehiedra they had the opportunity to buy their preferred Palestinian groceries— both fresh and shipped from “home” — such as olive oil from Nablus, fresh kibbeh and sfiha, Nakhla brand tobacco for their water pipes and peach-flavored Laziza malt beverages, falafel and maffoul mix, cucumbers and kanafeh in various containers. Even so, Hammer pointed out how Palestinians in the diaspora live transnational lives and have a “floating sense of ‘home’” and may struggle as they rethink ethnicity and

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identity in the light of global forces and interests. Often, Palestinians are forced to live between two worlds.\textsuperscript{35} This is also the case with most Palestinians in Puerto Rico. However, it is important when analyzing their situation not to lose sight of the people they do this in relation with. Palestinians do not figure out their transnational lives and their sense of “home” in isolation or with a ghetto-ized Palestinian vacuum.

I got a glimpse of this in a very intimate way when I stuck around with Ahmed who was selling goods from Palestine and elsewhere from the back of his van outside the mosque in Vega Alta. Showing me the back of his Aerostar he said, “it’s like a \textit{souk} in a trunk.” He told me, “people like having a taste of home in Puerto Rico and I like to deliver it to them.” We talked a bit about my travels to Palestine and Jordan and the fact that my wife was soon moving to Amman. He told me his nephew worked for the United Nations and married a Chinese girl. He also said of their work, that it is important because they go and see the people they seek to serve. “That’s different than watching it on TV,” he said, “you don’t feel for the people in the same way if you don’t see them face-to-face. It’s the same with the problems here in Puerto Rico. People don’t see us. Or in Palestine. People don’t see us. People don’t want to see us.” As our conversation faded off, several other men from the mosque joined us — from Palestine and Trinidad, Bangladesh and Puerto Rico. People shook hands, caught up, met one another’s grandkids, shared a meal together, introduced one another to each other, all after having prayed side-by-side. They were not overly intimate, but they were not stand offish or cliquish either. Arabic, Spanish, and English floated in-and-out of each and everyone seemed to acquiesce to the language of one’s choice (people spoke to me in

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 1, 2, and 222.
English, Arabic, and Spanish, making sure I understood and code-switching if I did not).

Yet, noticeably, there was a lack of Puerto Rican dishes, customs, and topics of conversation. There was some, but the gist of the impromptu post-jumah gathering was focused on the Middle East. The Palestinians hosting this impromptu groups aim to be hospitable by inviting others into their beloved traditions and giving them a taste of their home. For that they are proud. For some Puerto Ricans, however, it can come off as something else entirely.

Figure 4-2. Ahmed’s “souk in a trunk” outside the mosque in Vega Alta, Puerto Rico. Photo: Ken Chitwood.

After meeting José at the Eid celebrations, I met up with him a few days later in Rio Piedras. We talked about the celebration — the prayers, the food, the dancing, and Abdul’s comment. He balked. Stressing again the unity of the ummah across the globe he laid the divisions in Puerto Rico at the Palestinian’s feet. Referencing the dabke and some of the food he said that it is all:
...pure tribalism. We can eat the food, we could participate in the dances, but that wouldn’t be us. That isn’t our identity and it isn’t Islam. They can get together for their celebrations, to remember they are Palestinian — that’s fine! We have our festivals, our celebrations as Puerto Ricans. But we don’t mix that with Islam. We don’t try to make it one and the same.36

When I returned to Puerto Rico in 2017 after doing fieldwork in Florida I found the fissures were still felt and still fresh. Sumayah Soler — married to an Egyptian and a convener of a multi-cultural group at her home for Friday prayers and special events — joined me at the Eid al-Fitr celebration at the Convention Center in June 2017. She had had a falling out with the Muslim community in Puerto Rico. Whereas she used to be seen as a leader for her efforts alongside Imam Zaid in doing dawah with Puerto Ricans, she was now widely suspect for her outspoken positions on LGBTQI issues and participation in mass wedding ceremonies. She came to the celebrations, but was wary of her co-religionists at the same time. Pulling me aside just outside the main prayer room she commented:

We get together every year for this ritual, this celebration, and people gather from all over Puerto Rico. But the thing is — this isn’t real community. It’s ‘community’ without community. I’d rather be on my own, or with my own, than interact with them [the wider Arab Muslim community in Puerto Rico].37

As Palestinian music began to play in the background and several men begin to dance their way to the stage, Sumayah pointed out to me that there are not many Puerto Ricans here. She looked around the room of 500 and counts out 20 or so. I asked if that is just a reflection of the small number of converts and she retorted, “No, it’s a reflection


of how they do not feel part of this community.” Mohammed, her Egyptian husband, broke in to provide evidence, “for example, the Spanish summary of the *khutbah* they provide isn’t an actual summary. It’s not the *khutbah*. It’s probably some print-out from the internet they downloaded a few minutes before showing up. Maybe it’s based on the same text, maybe not. They don’t care.” There were a few others around the table with us who nodded their heads and added their own perspectives. Khaled, from Morocco, went on an extended rant about “the Arabs” and echoed Sumayah’s comments about wanting to go off on their own. He said, “I’d rather invite a new convert to become part of our family. Have dinner with us. Pray with us. We don’t need them [pointing to the Palestinians dancing]. We can get together on our own, our kids can play, and we can make a new community.” Jonathan, born to a Puerto Rican mother and an Iranian father and who identifies as “proudly Puerto Rican” said he finds it hard to fit in. “I am not considered *Boricua* by my neighbors because I am Muslim. I am not considered part of the Muslim community here because I am Iranian and Puerto Rican. Two strikes. So I find this community and it is now home.”

**Practicality and Principles in Vega Alta**

While Sumayah’s community of self-described “outcasts” could be aptly described as a counter-public to the predominately Palestinian core community in Puerto Rico and a prime example of the assertion of *asaBoricua* identity politics, they are not the only ones wrestling with the ethnic tensions, debates over tradition, and

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38 Ibid.


other stresses placed on the supposed unity of the *umma* in Puerto Rico. Indeed, Muslims in Puerto Rico do not only form new communities to wrestle with these issues, but continue to tussle with them in mosque communities themselves. At each mosque I visited in Puerto Rico I ran into Puerto Ricans, Palestinians, and other Muslims from various places and claiming multiple heritages. They each shared a bit about wrestling with the desire to be one *umma*, but also navigating the practicalities of language, custom, and tradition. While I could focus on any one of these communities for my analysis I am going to zero-in on the experience of the Vega Alta community west of San Juan. There, Sheikh Yunus — an imam from Nigeria — deals with these tensions daily. One of the largest communities in Puerto Rico and with renewed energy after the arrival of their new imam, Vega Alta is a prime example of how Muslims in Puerto Rico are navigating the tensions between *umma* and *asabiyah* — whether of the Palestinian or the *asaBoricua* variety.

I sat down with Sheikh Yunus on the patio overlooking the valley cut through by Puerto Rico’s Highway Two, the main East-West thoroughfare where thousands of Puerto Ricans drive every day. The Vega Alta mosque is the most well-known of the mosques in Puerto Rico given its prominent architecture on the hillside along this popular highway. We talked about Sheikh Yunus’ most recent *khutbah*, entitled, “Islam Forbids Intolerance and Prejudice on the Basis of Family Names, Origin, or Ethnicity.” He began his message with the words

Brothers and sisters in I-salaam, the noble religion of I-salaam invites [us] to solidarity among the Muslims worldwide, regardless of differences in color, language, or gender!...Are you the type that gets easily offended on the basis of differences in country, party, or other identities? Even Prophet Muhammad (*alayhi s-salaam*) rejected being projected as superior over other prophets if such projection arose from intolerance and boastfulness!
He continued by quoting from two hadith reports that supported his claim concerning the prophet and concluded with the words of Muhammad who said, “he who summons others to party-spirit [asabiyah] does not belong to us; and he who fights based on party-spirit [asabiyah] does not belong to us; and he who dies upholding party-spirit [asabiyah] does not belong to us.” As an imam, Sheikh Yunus shared how he is concerned about his community and the divisions he sees between Palestinians and Puerto Ricans. “That has no place in Islam! There is to be solidarity among Muslims worldwide and we have to root out the party-spirit, this asabiyah.” I asked whether it came from one group in particular and the imam reflected, “No, not one in particular. I understand both, however. I understand. Palestinians have lost their home and so they look to one another to remember where they come from. Puerto Ricans lose their families and friends, they are foreigners in their own home. And so they look to one another as well. But we cannot fight. In the end, our home is Islam.”

As discussed earlier, there is a tension between the ideal and the practical realities of the ummah. Each group respects the idea, but finds it difficult to put it into practice in a local community, often find the other at fault for “tribalism.” Palestinians possess power in numbers, in leadership, in finances, and many other forms of capital within the Muslim communities in Puerto Rico. However, by asserting their dual Puerto Rican and Muslim identities through their own asaBoricua, Puerto Rican Muslims carve out their own form of power from which they also accept the presence of Palestinian Muslims and their numerical superiority in the island’s Muslim scene. At the same time, there is more going on here than mere tolerance. Through a rivalry to best represent,

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build, or unite the *ummah*, both Puerto Rican and Palestinian Muslims continue to contest the diversity they are forced to deal with on a daily basis. Through generative frictions they continue to share with one another certain ideas and identities, practices and positions. While each may imagine themselves in some way as decidedly Puerto Rican or proudly Palestinian, each has rubbed off on the other and the result is a diverse, and fluid, mosaic of cosmopolitan identities. While they are not quite ready to see in one another an equal claim to authenticity and authority, they can no longer claim the purity from which they might position themselves as superior to one another. And they recognize this. In the conversations at Vega Alta, I came to see an awareness among both Palestinians and Puerto Ricans there that they cannot claim to be either pure Palestinians or Puerto Ricans in any sense. In the midst of their contestations over the *ummah*, and their mutual “tribal” claims, they had mixed and mingled in ways that made it impossible to exist as either one or the other. Instead, many started to come to see that diversity — and even the disagreements this sometimes brought on — might be a central expression community within the *ummah*.

One night, Sheikh Yunus brought together a group of Puerto Rican Muslim community members who regularly prayed and participated at his mosque to discuss the issue of *dawah* — how to reach out the local Vega Alta and Vega Baja communities. Having just received a delegation from the mayor’s office of Vega Alta, Sheikh Yunus saw this as a prime opportunity to build bridges between the mosque and the community in which it is situated. Gathered around the table was Yusuf, who was born in New York City but had moved back to Puerto Rico with his family as a child. He had spent time in Miami and Orlando as well and converted to Islam in 2003. Also present
were Francisco, an older man who lived next to the mosque for eight years and had family in Florida; Saber, a Palestinian and president of the mosque council; Adrián, a recent convert to Islam and young activist engaged in a range of political causes on the island; and Elba, an outspoken woman who, with a bit of a wink, insists I speak English with her so that she can “learn the language of my enemy.”

Figure 4-3. Leaders at the Vega Alta mosque meeting to discuss *dawah* and tensions in the community. Photo: Ken Chitwood.

Before the meeting could even broach the topic of outreach in Vega Alta, Francisco began with a salvo, “The problem with the current state of *dawah* on this island is that the Arabs are too concerned with their businesses and not taking the message to the Puerto Ricans. They [the Arabs] are in the streets, but they are not *of* the streets, the *barrios*. They may own the gas station I work at, but they don’t know the people like I do, because I work there and I am from here.” Saber, the sole Palestinian at the table, responded that he understood Francisco’s frustrations, but reminded him

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42 Event and conversations, Vega Alta, July 6, 2017.
that it was difficult for Palestinians in Puerto Rico. “For one, we can never truly feel at ‘home,’” he said, “my heart is never fully whole.” He’d been in Puerto Rico for over 20 years, spoke fluent Spanish, and sent his children to Puerto Rican schools and married them off to Puerto Ricans. “But I still feel split in two,” said Saber, “desirous of being back in Jerusalem, but dedicated to living here.” Yusuf said that as a Puerto Rican who lived between New York, Florida, and the island, he might be able to understand this a little bit more. Yusuf nodded and agreed with Sheikh Yunus who reminded everyone that “we must forget nationality, class, and politics because we are together, Muslims.”

Referencing Francisco’s comments about the business efforts of many Palestinians in Vega Alta, Sheikh Yunus said, “No matter what businesses we own or work for, we are in the business of Islam together.” Having stayed uncharacteristically silent up until this point, Elba chimed in and shared that she feels part of the ummah, but “here, right now, in the Vega Alta mosque, I don’t see a lot of amor, unidad, or abrazo!” Her comments about the lack of love, unity, and embrace inspired another round of discussion about diversity and disunity with multiple accusations and anecdotes.

Sensing that the meeting was headed in a direction he did not want it to go, Sheikh Yunus tried to rein things back in. He reiterated, “It is important that we acknowledge our differences — culture, gender, age, income — but then dissolve them in the melting pot of Islam. In the end we must all speak the common language of ourdeen [religion], ‘Allah said…’ or ‘the Prophet said…’” Returning to the business trope, he shared the stories of how traders arrived in Indonesia and spread the religion through their different fields of business and their interactions in the marketplaces. He reflected

43 Love, unity, and embracing (the term abrazo can be used to refer to fellowship, fraternity, or solidarity within a given community).
that both Adrián and Francisco had come to Islam in part because of employment in local Palestinian-owned companies. “Religion is a business, the business of salvation,” Sheikh Yunus concluded, “and we must first educate ourselves on the principles of our business and then sell that in the streets like any other good or service.”

When I interviewed Sheikh Yunus after the meeting and asked him about the meeting, he shared his concern about the divisions and called it his greatest task as an imam — uniting the *ummah* in Vega Alta. “We are supposed to treat everyone with respect before Allah. That is the ideal. But that is not always the reality. Here in Vega Alta, or in Hatillo and Montehiedra, they struggle with this. We forget that Allah created all nations so that we may learn from each other and instead we turn against each other. Teaching this is my primary business here.” He shared that he is concerned that Puerto Rican Muslims are too caught up with the issue of their nationality and that if they only “learned Islam” and “performed their religion” their concerns about clothes and politics, language and culture would “melt away.” He said, “*Asabiyah* is associated with *jahiliyyah*. People going back to their different groups is not Islam…Solidarity within a group is not a problem, but not at the expense of other Muslims. This basis of stressing difference or intolerance is something that doesn’t build peace and Islam is peace. It is I-salaam.” I asked him if he saw this “tribal” solidarity among both Palestinians and Puerto Ricans and he said, “No, I don’t see them forming a clique or leaving the mosque or doing their own thing against their Puerto Rican brothers.” Pushing him on this issue, I asked if this might do with the fact that they are the leaders of the mosques and the primary stakeholders in the community. Sternly, he said:
One-third of Islam is about praying, charity, etc. and the other two-thirds is about interacting with others and they know this. Maybe, sometimes, they will not speak in Spanish or speak in Arabic only and this hurts people’s feelings, but they are trying to perform their religion. That is all.  

Political Solidarities Between Puerto Rican Muslims and Palestinians

“Perhaps,” shared Adrián Robles as we left the mosque that night, “all this division is a sign of the end times. I don’t know.” As we walked away, Adrián invited me over for dinner. I obliged and over a meal of *chicharrones de pollo* 45 we talked about his involvement with the Palestinian community and his solidarity with them over political causes. Surrounded by a pile of books ranging from Marx to Foucault and Nelson A. Denis’ *Guerra contra todos los puertorriqueños* 46 laying on top of the nearest pile to his desk we discussed his increasing political engagement over the years and how that led to his eventual conversion to Islam. Raised in what he called a “leftist, activist” household, he was drawn to the plight of Palestinians for a long time. This is what initially drew him to Islam: “I saw this country of 1 million people taking on the second largest army in the world and winning and I wondered what gave them this power. What inspired them.” He connected this back to his efforts in the cause of Puerto Rican independence. He dove deep into the stories of anti-colonial movements in Muslim majority countries like Afghanistan and Iran, Palestine and Egypt.

While walking around the campus of the University of Puerto Rico Río Piedras (UPRRP) where Adrián had taken part in a protest action in the Spring of 2017 protesting an austerity budget in the University of Puerto Rico system due to the island’s

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45 Fried morsels of chicken.

fiscal crisis and the recommendations of the U.S. backed “junta” — the Financial
Oversight and Management Board — he showed me some of his “public art
interventions.” On walls and hallways across the campus, Adrián had put into material,
graffitied form, the intersectionality of his political sentiments and sense of solidarity. He
took time to describe one in particular. Featuring a Chechnyan in niqab on one side and
a Palestinian woman also in niqab both holding Kalashnikovs and a rifle sight focused
on Carlos M. García, a prominent member of la junta, the piece also displayed signs of
peace — purple and pink flowers encircling and overlapping with the women’s stern
looks and aggressive poses. He said that he felt this image of strong Muslim women in
places far away was not separate from the struggle of those Puerto Ricans who were
fighting against the injustice of their colonial situation. Instead, he said, “we can draw
strength from each other and perhaps be inspired that through our struggle we might
make a better tomorrow.”

Figure 4-4. Adrián Robles showcases one of his murals on the UPRRP campus. Photo:
Ken Chitwood.

Adrián is far from alone in his solidarity with Palestinian political causes and other movements across the “Muslim world.” Not only has scholar Sara Awartani noted the connected political solidarities between Palestinians and Puerto Ricans in Chicago and elsewhere in the U.S., but multiple Puerto Rican Muslims I spoke with saw echoes and shared sentiments between their political situation and that of other Muslims around the globe — particularly Palestinians. For example, Ibrahim shared a similar story to that of Adrián. “My family was a reading family,” he said, “my parents were both communists and they had us reading A Communist Manifesto and learning about popular revolutions around the world — the Zapatistas, the PLO, Iran, even Puerto Rican skinheads.” One of the books his mother passed on to him was the Qur’an. “Pretty soon it went beyond literature. I stopped drinking. I stopped smoking. I stopped eating pork. I realized this is where their strength to fight against the powers came from — it channels their political energy.” A skateboarder and self-proclaimed “hipster,” Ibrahim was covered in tattoos. One of his arms showed off his solidarity with popular political causes among Muslims in other parts of the world. “This one is of Leila Khaled, the PLO leader,” he said, “she is here on my arm to remind me of the strength of resistance and how we must be showing our solidarity with one another.”

Ibrahim and Adrián’s comments reflect the frequently employed vision for a united and pan-Islamic ummah among nineteenth and twentieth century Muslim activists. For some, the notion of the ummah as a super-collective offered a means for solidarity and fortitude for colonized populations. The ummah could transcend the

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divisions often put up between them by colonial powers. In such a context, the ummah can serve as a politicized vision of a “unified community that would transcend geographical, historical, sectarian, and political difference and unite Muslims of the worked into a network of mutual association.”50 On the one hand, this vision is alive and well among Puerto Ricans and Palestinians. Both politically and historically, Palestine and Puerto Rico share commonalities in terms of conceptualizing their political situations as being colonized by foreign powers — Israel and the U.S., respectively. The perceived occupation of the two nations significantly shaped, and continues to mold, the national identities of those still living within the borders of their nations and those who fled, immigrated, or who have never known the feel of the soil of their home country under their feet but still identify as Palestinian or Puerto Rican. The Palestinian diaspora that fled their native land and made Puerto Rico their home recognizes the intricacies of the two nations’ cultures and situations and share in a sense of being derided by devastating injustices.51 On the other hand, there are tensions that challenge the ideal. As Ibrahim shared as we closed our conversation, “in the end to be a Muslim in Puerto Rico is lonely. Palestinians and Puerto Ricans — for as much as we share — run in different circles and gather at different masjids. Language plays a role, sure, but that provides cover for underlying problems,” he said.

For their part, Palestinians also feel this tension and share a desire to work in tandem with their Puerto Rican brothers and sisters toward greater unity and dawah.

50 Grewal, 107.
Still, they face their own struggles to transcend these divides. Back at the mosque in Vega Alta, I sat down with Saber Odeh, the president of the community there. Born in Amman, Jordan in 1951 after his parents left Jerusalem “because of the Zionist occupation in 1948” he came to Puerto Rico in 1974 after spending time in Kuwait following the fallout from the Six Day War. He said his experience was not unlike many other Palestinians in Puerto Rico. “We had to find some place to live because our homeland was taken away.”

Like other Palestinians in Puerto Rico he invested himself into businesses that might help him get established in the community — gas stations and pharmacies, restaurants and shops. “Many people do not know this,” he shared somewhat conspiratorially, “but we Palestinians brought IHOP to Puerto Rico!”

Cleaning out a back room at his gas station in 1980 for prayer, a community began to gather there, and over the next 20 years they collected the funds, bought the land, and eventually constructed Puerto Rico’s first purpose-built mosque in 2000. Looking out over the beautiful and expansive property on the hill Saber shared, “we wanted to build a park for the community here as well, but were denied the permits. We wanted to let the community know they are welcome here, which they still are. We are part of this place.” Unfortunately, he shared, Palestinians did face some ostracism as they sought to integrate into Puerto Rico:

Some ignorant people don’t understand. They call us ‘Osama bin Laden’ or ‘Taliban.’ Other times they shout ‘terrorismo’ or things like that because they are brainwashed by the media. One time a young man came into my gas station and said something about ‘you Arabs.’ I looked at him and asked how old he was. He was 30. I told him, ‘I’ve been here since 1974. That’s 43 years. I speak Spanish. I have had five kids here. I own this business and have been part of this community for four decades. I am more Boricua than a lot of Boricuas!

As he finished, he reflected while looking out the window at some place in the distance, “Puerto Rico is my home, sure…but Palestine is in my heart.” Others, he said, had moved to Chicago, gone back to Palestine, but he said “no matter where we [Palestinians] go we are in between.”

Saber’s story sits in a strange tension between the various perspectives heard in this chapter. From the above, we can see that there is no easy declension between Palestinian and Puerto Rican, Arab or other ethnicities within the Muslim community of Puerto Rico. While each may claim a home or an identity there is no easy place for any of them to fit, no one identity that fully encompasses their transnational experiences brought on by migration and colonialism, conversion and community-building. As other scholars have noted, Palestinians occupy an “in-between” space in Puerto Rico. Certainly integrated into the society in many ways, Palestinians and other Muslims have left their mark on Puerto Rican culture. Soraya Asad Sánchez went so far as to claim that Arabs in Puerto Rico are a “fourth root” of Puerto Rican culture alongside the island’s Taíno, European, and African cultural antecedents. Tracing the historical, demographic, and socioeconomic details of Arab immigrants in the early twentieth-century and their cultural “footsteps” in language, architecture, music, business, food, philanthropy, and art/literature she wrote, “the Arab presence in San Juan, Puerto Rico from 1910 to 1940 was part of the process of integration of multiple ethnicities that contributed to the construction of our identity.”

While perhaps overstated — there are multiple ethnic groups that have contributed to Puerto Rico’s current culture over the years that could claim to be part of an extended “fourth root” (for example, Chinese, Dominican) — Sanchez’s point is well made: Arabs have played a significant role in Puerto Rican culture for the last century. Given their significant and prolonged presence in Puerto Rico they have certainly left their mark in multiple ways. They have also been marked by their new context as they have taken on the characteristics of Puerto Rican culture even though they may not explicitly view it as home. They are, as Caraballo-Resto argued, a “middleman” minority.54

Conclusion

In this way, stories like Saber’s also show how migration, movement, interactions in “in-between” spaces and places, and the experience of the “other” cause all parties to take on a bit of the supposed “other” in the process. Their stories also illustrate how this struggle is worked out in the flesh, in religious communities, and in the lives of Puerto Ricans seeking to juggle the global and local identities and cultures that simultaneously exist within them. Their stories are not just about conflict, but collaborations as well. There are connections across ethnic, linguistic, and other boundaries. While not fully explored in this chapter, but frequently implied, there are also multiple networks and

54 The concept of the “middleman minority” was coined by Hubert Blalock (1967) and refers to a minority community that mediates between multiple groups, usually a dominant group and a subordinate one. While Palestinian Muslims have played this role economically in Puerto Rico, they have also done so in the realm of religion. Middleman minorities are usually sojourners who intend to go back “home,” but rarely do. They also have strong in-group ties and in general become fairly well integrated into their host society even as there remain tensions between them and the dominant ethnic group. Palestinian Muslims fit this bill well. Except, that in the realm of religion they could be seen as the dominant group. Even so, their middleman status means that Palestinians — along with their Puerto Rican contacts and co-religionists — occupy a place in the tension in-between multiple identities where who “we” are overlaps with other markers of identity and culture. See Hubert M. Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations*, (New York: Wiley, 1967).
nodes that exist in this community with Palestinians and their connections in the Middle East and the U.S. and Puerto Ricans’ transnational links across the U.S. and Caribbean. Given the above, their stories illustrate typify the processes of cosmopolitanization at work in the world today for Muslims and others. Somewhere between the ideal of the *ummah* and the realities of *asabiyah* — of the Boricua kind or otherwise — new cosmopolitan identities are being ground out in the generative frictions that exist when different communities come into contact with one another via migration, economics, politics, or conversion to a new religion.

This chapter focused on Puerto Rican Muslims and the “others” they regularly encounter. Despite their visions for an ideal global community, globalist appeals, or seemingly “tribal” stances and expressions individuals and communities encountering others cannot help but be shaped by the experience. There are slippages in identity, exchanges of cultural cues and customs, and shared solidarities across multiple identities. Viewed as a social reality, the process of cosmopolitanization can be appreciated as anything but clean and clear. Instead, it is messy, conflicted, and multivalent. In the experience of the other through movement, conversion, or some other forms of connection, cosmopolitanism opens wounds and picks at scabs. At the same time, it involves growth and positive connections, such as new solidarities that allow different communities that have been marginalized in various ways to build community around their anti-hegemonic causes. In the end, cosmopolitanism is very much about smaller and reactionary events and entities of daily life, which help common people keep the world together, maintain sensible values and identities, and make their everyday lives more rewarding and meaningful.
Between Palestinians and Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico, on the perceived margins of the “Muslim world” there is a dynamic process of exchange, encounter, and engagement going on. What it reveals is that the limits of the so-called “Muslim world” are just as dynamic as others that receive much more focus. This also shows greater diversity and more complex processes of identity formation within, and between members of, the ummah — even on its perceived margins. There, we have to pay attention to the power dynamics at play and can then witness the energy of identity formation in the face of marginalization, which in the case of Puerto Rican Muslims I call asaBoricua. In the end, this process makes it harder to classify and clarify the “other.” While we can fall on simplistic, and troubling, binaries like “Arab/other Muslims”, there is a dynamic exchange across these categories that such groupings do not do justice to. In the experience of cosmopolitan co-mingling and the attendant contestations going on between perceived periphery and supposed center and across pre-conceived and scholarly borders and boundaries the lines can no longer be drawn so neatly. Even though Puerto Ricans and Palestinians continue to place themselves in these categories, scholarship has long noted the “imaginary” notion of these communities.

In coming together through migration and conversation and contesting religious custom and discursive tradition together these imagined communities take on the character of what Gloria Anzaldúa described as “nos-otras.”55 While she couched this firmly within a colonizer/colonized relationship, we can apply it here to the power dynamic between Palestinians and Puerto Ricans (or other Arab/non-Arab Muslims) as well. As Anzaldúa noted, there is a dash between nos and otras. The nos is the notion

55 Anzaldúa, 281.
of “we” the people group within which we feel a sense of in-group identity and power (what also might be called asabiyah). The otras is the “other.” Then there is the dash, the divide — or connection — between these two groups. However, as Anzaldúa noted, what happens is that the divides begin to disappear because each respective nos and otras takes on the attributes of the other — the others stuff “leaks into our stuff.”56 She wrote, “So we are neither one nor the other, we are really both. There is not a pure other, there is not a pure subject and not a pure object. We are implicated in each other’s lives.”57 Puerto Ricans are in some sense used to this “double life” at the borders. Discussing both their transnational lives and their colonial situation as “legally domestic, but culturally foreign” or “foreign in a domestic sense” Duany commented that Puerto Ricans are used to the ambiguity.58 At the same time, they do not all sit idly by. Some push back from the colonial margins and try to carve out their own distinct place “in-between” global identities and local loyalties. This becomes even more evident when considering Puerto Rican Muslim lives in transnational perspective in the American context.

56 Ibid., 282.
57 Ibid.
CHAPTER 5
AMERICAN MUSLIMS

Whereas the previous chapter discussed Puerto Rican Muslim cosmopolitanism in light of their minority status within the so-called “Muslim world,” this chapter turns its focus toward their place in the U.S. In the U.S., Puerto Rican Muslims are often marginalized because of their identity as Puerto Ricans, frequently labeled a “problem minority” over the course of the twentieth-century. This is as true for Puerto Rican Muslims as it is for other Puerto Ricans who have migrated, settled, or grown up in the U.S. and who still maintain connections with Puerto Rico and its national identity. Furthermore, as Muslims, Puerto Ricans struggle with being Muslim in America, a minority religion often caught in the crosshairs of the trumped up “global war on terror” and its attendant, and influential, Islamophobic and anti-Muslim discourse and rhetoric. Lastly, Puerto Rican Muslims are frequently left to the sideline in the narrative of Islam in America. This “triple-bind” is another example of their being “quadruple minorities.”

This chapter seeks to illustrate how this marginalization in the U.S. has impacted the contours of Puerto Rican Muslim experience. Specifically, the following stories will relate how this to Puerto Rican Muslims’ relations to the broader Muslim American community. More broadly, however, these stories also shine light on issues related to migration and transnationalism, the importance of place in Puerto Rican Muslim lives, and the intersectionality and relevance of multiple identities in the contemporary American scene. To do so, this chapter highlights three distinct, but interconnected narratives. While disparate in many ways, these stories shine light on different aspects

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of the prism of Puerto Rican Muslim experience in the U.S. First, that of Youssef Ali Abdullah in Staten Island. Second, the impact of Hurricane Maria on the Puerto Rican Muslim community. And fourth, the significance of Alianza Islámica in the history of Islam in America and for the contemporary Puerto Rican and Latinx Muslim community.

Each of these stories helps further illustrate Puerto Rican Muslims' “entanglement in the American experiment”2 and their “presence in the broader fabric of American civic life”3 to explain how their cosmopolitan AmeRícan4 experience has come to shape key aspects of their identity and vice versa. Moreover, these stories show how Puerto Rican Muslims have been a part of this process over time and in particular places and spaces hitherto underexplored. By looking into the rich and varied histories, institutions, identities, and realities of Puerto Rican Muslims in America and the trends, debates, and discourses that shaped them, this chapter provides further texture, depth, and breadth to the study of Islam in America as a whole. It is another example of how focusing on the everyday lives, histories, and experiences of religious minorities such as Latinx Muslims helps to “de-naturalize and de-essentialize, to broaden and to push our varied and unfixed understandings”5 of various categories of religion, identity, ethnicity, and issues such as immigration, religious freedom, and Islam in and of the West.6


3 Ibid., loc. 390.

4 In his poem “AmeRícan,” Tato Laviera redefined Puerto Rican nationality to include both Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico and those living in the United States. The blend creates a new AmeRícan identity, that is a blend between the U.S. and island traditions and histories.


Migration and movement among Puerto Ricans in the U.S.

Ever since the U.S. first invaded and took over Puerto Rico in 1898, Puerto Ricans have been making their way to various ports of call throughout the U.S. From Puerto Ricans migrating to Hawaii to work the sugar farms in the early twentieth-century, to the making of the “Nuyorican” community in and around New York City from around the time of World War I, to the post-World War II boom and increased numbers in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, the Chicago-area, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and recently to Florida — now home to the largest Puerto Rican population in the U.S. Puerto Ricans became a people on the move. Indeed, the metaphors and sayings referring to the mobility of Puerto Ricans are plentiful — la guagua aérea, la carreta

7 They also made their way to Hawaii, Ohio, Massachusetts, and more recently places such as Texas, California, Georgia, California. For an overview of these migrations and background on the experience of Puerto Rican Muslims in each of these places, see Carmen Teresa Whalen and Víctor Vásquez-Hernández eds., The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

8 See, Jennifer Hinojosa, Nashia Román, and Edwin Meléndez, “Puerto Rican Post-Maria Relocation by States,” CENTRO - Center for Puerto Rican Studies, March 2018. In some sense this brings the Florida-Puerto Rico connection full circle over the last 500 years, starting with Juan Ponce de Leon’s initial foray into La Florida from the western ports of Puerto Rico in 1513.


10 The “air bus” or “flying bus” representing the ease of movement between New York and Puerto Rico as if it were like taking a city bus. See Gabriel Ignacio Barreneche, Jane Lombardi, and Héctor Ramos-Flores, “A New Destination for ‘The Flying Bus’? The Implications of Orlando-Rican Migration for Luis Rafael Sánchez’s ‘La guagua aérea,’” Hispania, vol. 95, no. 1 (2012): 14-23.
and its u-turn,\textsuperscript{11} the “divided nation,”\textsuperscript{12} and other aphorisms such as a “commuter nation,”\textsuperscript{13} “a nation on the move,”\textsuperscript{14} or passengers taking flights and “jumping the pond (\textit{brincando el charco}).”\textsuperscript{15} All of these indicate that to be a Puerto Rican is — at least in part — to be transnational, crossing boundaries and borders, and existing in multiple places at once. The discussions around ideas about diasporas, colonialism in the twenty-first century, and transnationalism are highly relevant to the Puerto Rican case. The experience of living between multiple homelands and geographies — and the attendant movements and migrations that come with this duality — is part and parcel to the Puerto Rican experience. Geographic displacement — and its attendant incursion, inversion, and transformation of national, regional, tribal, local and individual identities — and which we might say is both a cause and feature of common cosmopolitanism, plays an outsized role in shaping Puerto Rican identity. Likewise, it is a critical point when considering the Puerto Rican Muslim community.

\textsuperscript{11} In the 1950s René Marqués wrote a play — \textit{La Carreta} — often considered a classic that depicted the movement of a family from a Puerto Rican village to La Perla in San Juan and then to New York and -- after the tragic death of a young man — came back to Puerto Rico. The play and its central metaphor — \textit{la carreta} — came to be seen as an artistic expression of the collective Puerto Rican experience and the desire to maintain identity and integrity in the midst of movement and migration. Tato Laviera’s poetry collection \textit{La Carreta Made a U-turn} spoke to this metaphor and sought to ground the contemporary Puerto Rican identity firmly in New York as well as Puerto Rico. It is often considered a classic collection of Nuyorican poetry and culture and cited in the debate over the authenticity of “Puerto Rican” identity among Puerto Ricans in New York and elsewhere in the U.S.


\textsuperscript{13} Carlos Antonio Torre, \textit{The Commuter Nation: Perspectives on Puerto Rican Migration}, (San Juan: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1994).

\textsuperscript{14} See Duany, \textit{The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move}.

Since the Jones Act of 1917 Puerto Ricans have been considered citizens of the U.S. Even so, they do not possess the full rights of U.S. citizens who live within the 50 states (for example, they do not have direct representation in Congress nor the right to vote for President if they still reside in Puerto Rico, among other things). However, as citizens Puerto Ricans can come to the U.S. freely and legally. They have done so since before the Spanish-American War in 1898 and in particularly large numbers over the last six decades. Driven by both push (for example, poverty, turmoil, disaster) and pull (for example, migration programs and population control initiatives led by the U.S. government) factors, Puerto Ricans came to the U.S. in larger numbers beginning in the mid twentieth-century. In part because of this distinct, and at times ambiguous, status vis-à-vis the U.S., the nature of Puerto Rican migration is a hotly debated topic. Largely depending on how one views the nature of Puerto Rico’s relationship to the U.S. (colony, self-governing, “freely associated,” as a “postcolonial state”), Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. may be considered a case of internal or international immigration or as a transnational, or diasporic, distribution of people claiming a common identity.\(^\text{16}\)

No matter how one views Puerto Rican migration — and that is not the primary subject of this chapter — the statistics tell us that Puerto Rico is the leading source of migration from the overseas possessions of the U.S. and represents one of the largest flows of migrants from anywhere in the world.

Indeed, over the last ten years, and even more so since the financial crisis of summer 2015 and the subsequent devastation by Hurricane Maria in 2017, Puerto Ricans have left their island for the U.S. in their largest numbers since the Great

\[\text{16 See Jorge Duany, “The Puerto Rican Diaspora to the United States: A Postcolonial Migration?”}\]
Migration and after World War II. As the island population has decreased and the U.S. population been on a sharp incline, the number of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. (4.9 million in 2012) surpassed the number on the island (3.5 million in the same year). Recent Puerto Rican migrants are more likely to settle in the U.S. South: especially in Florida cities such as Orlando and Miami. In fact, in 2017 the number of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. reached 5.5 million and Florida became the state with the most Puerto Rican residents, surpassing New York by 15,000. This is compared to the first great waves of Puerto Rican immigration to the U.S., which occurred after World War II and when the majority settled in the Northeast — specifically in the greater New York City area.

All the while, they have maintained strong connections — materially and ideally — to their Puerto Rican identity, culture, and sense of place. In moving to the U.S., Puerto Ricans feel a sense of rupture as they leave a culturally distinct “homeland.” Thus, I agree with Duany who views Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. as a form of transnational, or diasporic, movement highlighting how the lives of Puerto Ricans exist in dynamic tension between la banda acá (the shore here) or la banda allá (the shore there). What I mean by this is that Puerto Ricans both make crossings and dwellings in

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their movement across borders and boundaries. On the one hand, they are products of migration and movement. They have either migrated or moved themselves, are the product of migrant families, or have an extended kin network that is spread out over a vast geography because of migration. Many have gone back and forth between Puerto Rico and the U.S. and maintain a dispersed network of contacts and connections in multiple places. On the other hand, the Puerto Rican Muslims I spent time with, got to know, and interviewed each had a distinct understanding of their “home” that was multi-sited.

This is why such terms as Nuyoricans, or we might say FloRicans, given recent demographic shifts to the Sunshine State, have won so much purpose. They make plain the dual nature of Puerto Rican identities as “mobile subjects” as they exist between places such as New York and Florida and Puerto Rico. They are not impure “hybrids” or undeserving of academic attention when considering the “Puerto Rican” experience. Director Ricardo Olivero Lora, reflecting on his film Nuyorican Básquet, said that through chronicling the experience of New York-based Puerto Rican basketball players competing under the national flag helped him “to understand is how complex identity issues are. The traditional coordinates of what it means to be Puerto Rican do not conform to what has been our historical development as a people, of which the Puerto Rican diaspora is an integral part.” Indeed, Puerto Ricans defy stationary models of

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21 Duany, The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move, 74.

22 Suset Laboy, “Nuyorican Basketball in Puerto Rico: A Game-Changing Documentary,” Center for Puerto Rican Studies (CENTRO), accessed December 10, 2018,
physical and cultural space as they blur borders and boundaries with their multidirectional movement in body, mind, and soul. They represent a heterogeneous, fluid, contradictory, and performative rupture in the understanding of nation, place, and identity in the late-modern world.23 The lines between Puerto Rico and the U.S. — while very much present because of colonial pressure and prolonged marginalization — are perhaps at the same time, “more permeable than elsewhere because of the island’s nebulous definition as an unincorporated territory.”24

As Puerto Rican Muslims make these moves, they pick up as much as they leave behind and the movement itself marks their identities, being a product of cosmopolitan encounter. Just as much as their movement defines who they are, so too do the places, people, and perspectives through which they flow, with whom they interact, and which they engage and adapt to their situation. It is messy, complex, and can defy scholarly attempts to categorize and codify. The work of Francisco Donoso on display at El Museo del Barrio in New York in October 2017 illustrates this point nicely. His work on display at one of the most well-known cultural institutions in Spanish Harlem — a significant node in the Puerto Rican Muslim experience — explored “the immigrant experience through patterns and forms that evoke networks of movement” across, through, and in various landscapes both urban and rural. As an immigrant from Ecuador


24 Duany, 228.
he found it “impossible to stabilizing [himself] within one cultural identity. The question of what it means to belong to a particular society emerges from the formation of the ambivalent space created when cultural identities overlap. That ambivalence intensifies in an age of transient borders.”

His art and comments evoke much of what is true about identity in a cosmopolitan age. His images are metaphors for the experience of cosmopolitans such as Puerto Rican Muslims whose identities are made up of multiple flows, various places, and entangled networks of community and connection.

As a “divided nation” Puerto Ricans’ migration and movement must also be seen through the lens of colonialism and contested citizenship. Puerto Rican communities are shaped according to their dual status as both colonial subjects and citizens and often imagined as a culture on the margin or periphery of the globalized world.

Their identity as “mobile subjects” is the “result of historically specific processes conditioned by Puerto Rico’s colonial status, as well as a longer history of exploration, conquest, and empire characterizing the entire Caribbean.” In many cases this has led to them being treated as second-class citizens in the U.S. Associated with this second-class status came horrendous labor conditions, poverty, ghettoization, and other issues associated with their marginalized minority status in the U.S. Puerto Rican Muslims marginal minority status is in many ways compounded because of their religious affiliation. With that said, they have not taken these disenfranchisements sitting down. Instead, they have organized politically, socially, and religiously to contest their outsider status in the


places they call home. Indeed, the last point to be emphasized is that Puerto Ricans in general, and Puerto Rican Muslims in particular, have created transnational solidarities through which they seek to contest this outsider status. Puerto Rican Muslims, who span multiple communities even as they are marginalized within them, are in some ways naturally able to act as conduits for these relationships and there are multiple examples to point to this, as will be illustrated below. In the end, it is imperative to emphasize that wherever “they settled, Puerto Ricans sought to adjust to and mold their new surroundings to meet their needs, as well as to improve conditions for themselves and others. They relied on social networks, the celebration of cultural traditions, involvement in existing community institutions, the building of their own community organizations, and political activism.”

The same is true for Puerto Rican Muslims like Youssef Ali Abdullah.

**A Puerto Rican Muslim Ninja in Staten Island**

Often considered a “step child” to the other boroughs, Staten Island is a far removed bedroom community of New York City. I came to Staten Island one crisp November morning to meet Youssef Ali Abdullah. I first met Abdullah at an event for Latinx Muslims in Queens where he introduced himself as a “Puerto Rican Muslim ninja.” Intrigued, I promised to follow-up with a visit to his karate dojo in Staten Island. And so, there I was. It took me nearly three hours to arrive at his front door from Queens. It is a testament to how far flung Staten Island can feel. It also testifies to the dispersed nature of the Puerto Rican Muslim community in New York and New Jersey, if

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29 A dojo is a dedicated space for martial arts or meditative training and learning.
you can call it a “community” in any real sense – as Puerto Rican Muslims are
distributed across a vast area including northern New Jersey and all five boroughs of
New York City. Abdullah is a sixth-level black belt and weapons master and runs a dojo
— the Staten Island Ninja Society (SINS). The colors of the sign and interior of the dojo
are decidedly black and yellow — the colors of the Latin Kings from which, Abdullah
would tell me, he emerged and from which he draws clients to this day.

I walked up the dimly lit stairs to his apartment above the dojo and the smell of
dojo — the Staten Island Ninja Society (SINS). The colors of the sign and interior of the dojo
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I walked up the dimly lit stairs to his apartment above the dojo and the smell of
kitty litter was pungent. Before I could knock he shouted for me to come in. He saw me
coming with the security cameras positioned outside his front door and in the stair well.
As I entered, Abdullah was being seen by a visiting nurse, getting his blood pressure
checked. He had a couple of strokes recently, struggles with diabetes, and has been
wrestling with water retention issues. “I am getting old,” he said, “and I am only 64!” His
apartment is an intense mix of calligraphy, images of the Kaaba, other Islamic décor,
Japanese art, and karate weapons. It is not a fancy apartment, but it has a living room,
two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom for him and his roommate. His renter is
Muslim as are his neighbors from Bangladesh and Pakistan. Apparently, Ahmed Sattar
— the “Post Man” — who was convicted of terror related charges and connections to
the “Blind Sheikh” Abdel Rahman and al-Jama’at al-Islamiyya used to live next door. I
am not sure if Abdullah told me this as a point of pride or just in terms of general
interest.

Abdullah is straightforward and speaks his mind. As our conversation covered
religion, politics, business, relationships, and life over the course of four-and-a-half
hours I heard him share his honest perspectives — and tall tales — on all of it. His was
probably one of the most wide-ranging and intense interviews of my fieldwork experience. It underlined how Puerto Rican Muslims are entangled in multiple histories within the Muslim American narrative, influencing and being influenced by African-American Muslim individuals and organizations, Arab Muslim communities, and street gangs, cultural clubs, and identity movements in and around New York City in the late twentieth-century.

Abdullah converted to Islam in 1970 when he was twenty years old. He told me, with a wry smile, “I converted for the ladies. As a Puerto Rican I was just a Puerto Rican. As a Puerto Rican Muslim? Damn, now that’s interesting. A wider field of play you know?” He had been married three times and has 13 children ranging in age. His wives were Puerto Rican, African-American, and British. He maintains good relationships with his ex-wives and pays child support and provides other financial assistance as needed. He is currently in the market for wife number four. He said, “A woman recently came by who sought me out because she heard I am a ‘Salafi.’ You see, she is so keen to marry a Salafi because her current husband, a Puerto Rican brother, is dedicated to the *deen*[^30] apparently. But I am not Salafi. I just follow the Sunnah and the Salaf. There shouldn’t be any ‘Salafi’ label. All Muslims should follow the way of the Salaf, no exceptions.”[^31] This perspective, he shared, came from his

[^30]: Variously translated as "judgment," "custom," or "religion" this term is often used in daily Muslim parlance to refer to the practice of one’s religion, submission to the law and customs of Islam, and to following the “Way” or *shariah*.

[^31]: Salafi is a name derived from the term *salaf* (meaning “pious ancestors”), which refers to a reform movement that first emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. While the Salafi movement is broad and the identity contested, Salafis tend to emphasize the restoration of what they deem “pure” Islamic jurisprudence, sole adherence to the Qur’an and Sunna, the rejection of *madhabs*, and the restoration of the unity of the *ummah*. 
brother-in-law from a previous marriage — Muhammad Syed Adly, a popular Egyptian cleric with YouTube videos and a spectral presence in myriad online chatrooms.

Growing up, Abdullah was connected to the Latin Kings — the largest and most well-known of the Latinx street gangs in the U.S. Eventually, he would convert through the Nation of Islam. But, he said:

I never bought into their teaching fully. They had a lot of ignorance back then — and some still do — but they didn’t have a lot of knowledge like we do now. The good thing is, they had intention and the put Islam into practice as best they could. That’s the opposite of a lot of kids today. They are nice kids, they’re trying, they’re serious, but although they have knowledge they don’t always go out into the streets and put it to work.

Reflecting on the early days of his Muslim experience in the 1970s, he remarked that it was hard to learn and grow in Islam and everyone was suspicious of everyone else.

While one aspect of that has changed, the other has not. He said:

back then a Qur’an cost $35. It was hard to gain knowledge. Now they give the books away. There are Qur’ans everywhere in every language and color: green and red, black and blue, Spanish and Arabic, English and everything else. So kids have access to the knowledge, but they just don’t use it.

The suspicion he said, is still there:

I got into corrections at Ryker’s, on the legal side of things as a corrections officer, but I didn’t tell anybody at the mosque. Everyone thought we were being watched by the C.I.A., FBI, the White House. And they were right, we were. Today, it’s the same feeling. 9/11 didn’t change anything, it just reminded us that we are always outsiders in America.

He also brought up the topic of boundaries and identities:

There are Jews, Poles, and all types of people here in Staten Island. Their identity isn’t religious. It’s ethnic. For Muslims it’s not supposed to be about ethnicity, but religion. I am Puerto Rican, sure, but with other Muslims that doesn’t matter. My identity is based on my religion first…then comes everything else.

With this in mind, he leveled a critique at Alianza Islámica:
Those guys didn’t really do anything for the community. They only served their friends and their families. They were just nationalists, Young Lords who dressed themselves up with Islam and marched in the streets. They didn’t try to dress Sunnah, they just rolled up like Puerto Rican gangsters. You can be a nationalist, you can be a Young Lord, you can parade in the streets and that’s fine. But don’t claim that’s Islam.

Abdullah shared a story about the Egyptian Sheikh Adly to underline this point. He said, “back in the day, Adly came to a meeting at a brother’s home where everyone was packing heat. Death threats had been made. But Adly didn’t carry anything in. I did, but he didn’t know that. He just came to teach Islam, to correct innovations. He didn't care who you were, where you came from, or what label you chose – he just came to correct the innovations and errors. He came with Islam as his weapon.” Referencing an interview of Adly that Abdullah did for his local access television program, “Muslim Topics USA,” we started watching some of his videos. He shared one program called “Islam Is.” It opens up with Abdullah silhouetted against a green background. A gun shot rings out and then Abdullah opens up with a spoken word poem:

Islam is not communism, socialism, Marxism, or Zionism. Islam is not nationalism, Africanism, Arabism, or Nazism. Islam is not bigotry, hatred, Five Percenters, or Dr. York…. Islam is not Marcus Garvey, Drew Ali, or the Nation of Farrakhanism. Islam is not Shiism, Ahmaddiyism, Wahabism, Sufism, or terrorism… Islam is against all forms of slavery, pimping, and/or prostitution. Islam is not a compromising religion and yet we are the solution.

He told me that this video was a response to all the innovations that Adly and others like him were preaching against. “All of this is here in the Muslim community in New York and among Puerto Ricans. People are confused and someone has to set them straight. Who better than a Puerto Rican Muslim ninja?”

After the video screening was over, we headed out for a tour of Staten Island. Along the way, he shared points of local interest — that mosque and this, Latin King
owned grocery store, the Arab restaurant, and the Polish sandwich place. We arrived at
the Masjid Al Noor Islamic Society where Abdullah often prays. Tucked into a docking
and shipping business area, the masjid has faced suspicion and complaints that the
man who owns the property uses the dock, mosque, and adjacent apartments to
smuggle in refugees, immigrants, and terrorists. Abdullah said:

we had spies, we had informants, we had people wondering if we were
connected to ‘The Postman,’ but it’s actually just the opposite. We work
with the government, we’ve done safety training here, and the FBI had
some training operations here in the docks. We are against violence of
any kind — Black Panthers, Latin Kings, Young Lords, or Islamic
extremists.

He gave me a tour of inside the mosque where there are a few people hanging around
— Adam, a local Staten Island convert with a strong accent and an Irish background;
Muhammad, a local African-American convert currently looking for work, and then a
man and his wife who prayed together and shared that they came from West Africa.
Abdullah posed for a few photos in the mosque, and then, as we got ready to leave, he
handed me a few books from Darussalam Publishers and International Islamic
Publishing House. Both are based in Riyadh and have been accused of Salafi/Wahabi
stances on various issues. “Still,” Abdullah said, “they might help you. Allah’s peace be
with you and hear what I have to say, do not die unless you’re a Muslim today.”

Abdullah’s story illustrates the complex intermingling of multiple narratives in the
story of Puerto Rican Muslims. Predominately African-American Muslim organizations
such as the Nation of Islam (NOI) or the Five Percent Nation (FPN), transnational Salafi
scholars from the Arab world, other Muslim dawah organizations and paramosque
communities, street gangs, government surveillance, and Islamophobia all came to
shape how the Puerto Rican Muslim community emerged in the 1970s and 80s. Much
of Abdullah’s story emphasizes the locality of these institutions, individuals, and trends in and around New York City. Indeed, the influence of the NYC area is hard to overstate in the formation of the Puerto Rican Muslim community in the U.S. However, as important as such a place is to Puerto Rican Muslim identity, this territorialization of their experience must be held in tension with their connections with other geographies as well.

Figure 5-1. Youssef Ali-Abdullah in his Staten Island dojo and local mosque. Photo: Ken Chitwood.

**Puerto Rican Muslims and Hurricane Maria**

After conducting 46 interviews in Puerto Rico, I expected to do just as many, if not more, in New York and New Jersey where there was a higher concentration — and a deep history — of Puerto Rican Muslim presence. However, on September 20, 2017 all those plans went to ruin as Hurricane Maria made landfall near Yabucoa in Puerto Rico. On September 18, I sent messages to several contacts in Puerto Rico asking how they were preparing for the storm. They seemed at peace and hoped that the storm would pass by or weaken before it hit the island. Sheikh Yunus, Francisco Hakim Perez, Adrián Robles, and Sumayah Soler all felt as prepared as possible and we looked forward to reuniting when I returned to Puerto Rico in 2018 for some follow-up fieldwork.
On September 19, I spent some time with the librarians and archivists at CENTRO — the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, City University of New York. I was looking for archival data on La Alianza Islámica and we were discussing a possible oral history project when the conversation drifted to the hurricane re-gathering strength on its way to Puerto Rico. The concern was palpable. On September twentieth I touched base with several contacts I was meant to interview in the coming days, trying to confirm details of time and place. Whereas I was used to receiving rapid-fire text messages from contacts eager to share their story, I was not receiving responses on September 20-22. Meanwhile, the news reports out of Puerto Rico became more and more devastating. The hurricane hit the island hard. Mobile phone reception and internet was down and no one knew what was happening to their families and friends “back home.” Although communication was down from the island, correspondence concerning the island and its people was on overdrive in the U.S. In particular, Puerto Rican Muslims were hyper-active on Facebook trying to find information, rally support, and quickly collect donations to come to the aid of their brothers and sisters, family, and friends in Puerto Rico. As Wendy Díaz reported, “the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States an all over the world watched in horror as their homeland was devastated beyond recognition…perhaps the most frustrating ordeal was not being able to communicate with family members to find out if they were safe.”

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At first, there was a rush of international assistance that came flooding into Puerto Rico to help with recovery. The storm devastated the island nation’s already beleaguered infrastructure and killed at least 2,975 people. Homes were destroyed, forests felled, and roads were impassable. As part of that response, Danny Abdullah Hernandez of Houston, Texas, Yusuf Rios of Cleveland, Ohio, and Wesley Abu Sumayyah Lebron of Passaic, New Jersey formed the “Three Puerto Rican Imams” project to collect funds and distribute aid to the areas worst affected by the hurricane.

Partnering with organizations such as United Muslim Relief, Islam in Spanish, the Islamic Circle of North America’s (ICNA), the community kitchen El Comedor Pedro Albizu Campos, and El Centro Islamico del Caribe in Montehiedra they sought to fill containers of donations in the U.S. and then ship and deliver the aid on-site in Puerto Rico. Delivering basic goods, the three imams traveled across the island delivering goods and meeting with the people — Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Throughout the U.S., benefit dinners and donation rallies were held and GoFundMe campaigns started online. It was a united effort to help the hurting in the wake of the hurricane. That Friday, September 22, I was at the North Hudson Islamic Education Center (NHIEC) in Union City, New Jersey, a hub of the Latinx Muslim community in the northeast — and nationwide. The end of jumāah at NHIEC one of the community’s leaders, Ameer,

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spoke of the need to collect donations for the natural disasters in “Central America and the Caribbean.” He said, “we know how our brothers and teachers — Lebron and Danny — are raising support to fill containers to take to Puerto Rico. Their work will not only bless the Muslims in Puerto Rico, but non-Muslims as well because Islam is not only for Muslims, Islam is for mankind.”

Amidst the rallying of support in the days that followed the hurricane, none of my contacts got back to me about interviews and in effect, my “fieldwork” went on hiatus. Instead, I became a participant observer in the efforts to raise support with the Three Puerto Rican Imams Project. I attended events, shared donation links on social media, and shared messages from and between various Puerto Rican Muslims on the island and elsewhere. While Hurricane Maria was on the radar of other Muslims, Latinx Muslims included, it was all any Puerto Rican Muslims (or Puerto Rican for that matter) could think about in the fall of 2017. In fact, Hurricane Maria would come to change the demographics, politics, and other elements of Puerto Rican identity and culture in the months and years to come. Increased news coverage, debates between Puerto Rican governmental leaders and the U.S. Federal government, and the massive influx of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. — specifically Florida — in the wake of the storm brought attention to broader issues concerning Puerto Rico and its status, population, and persistent issues as a colony of the U.S.35

34 Participant observation, Union City, NJ September 22, 2017.

Hurricane Maria also rekindled questions of citizenship, identity, integration, and pride for Puerto Ricans in general and for Puerto Rican Muslims in particular. Parallel to the ways in which Spanish Harlem specific issues inspired the leaders of La Alianza Islámica to found a Muslim organization “of their own,” so too did Hurricane Maria bring into focus for many Puerto Rican Muslims the need to establish their own Puerto Rican-specific institutions and communities. The storm stoked an already smoldering desire among Puerto Rican Muslims to mark off their own space within the Muslim American landscape. Feeling ostracized and discriminated against within other institutions, mosques, and organizations several Puerto Rican Muslims expressed to me the need to have “a place of our own.”

“A Place of Our Own”: Jesus de Nieves made this point clear when he opened up about how he was generally disappointed with other Latinx Muslims and their futile attempts at “making themselves more ‘Arab-sounding’ and seeking some ‘authenticity’ through a name with all types of Arabizations. That’s some typical Latino Muslim nonsense, man.” 36 De Nieves came to Islam through the Nation of Islam and his journey had put him into contact with La Alianza Islámica early on. He said, “gentrification of the ummah and the neighborhood pushed out La Alianza. They were doing good things for our people on the streets, and then they got pushed out by a desire to become middle-class Muslims. Now, we have people at work, at home, in the streets of New York looking for something like La Alianza, but it doesn’t exist. There is segregation between Muslims and other Muslims, Muslims and non-Muslims. Latino Muslims are dispersed

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36 Personal Interview, Manhattan, October 4, 2017.
across all five boroughs [of New York] and there is a clear lack of services for our people.” He continued, “there is this discrimination factor for us. Even among Arabs, within the Arabs. There’s a little bit of tribalism too. I see a clear change in demeanor when I am talking to Arabics [sic] and they hear my accent. They want to keep a distance from this Boricua brother, if they even know what that means. That impacts the masjids all over New York.” While he said he likes the multi-cultural mix of many mosques in New York, he said that Puerto Rican Muslims might need to make an effort to reach out to their own. “We have support networks in places like New Jersey because of Lebron, in Houston because of Centro Islamico, but we need to band together as Puerto Ricans, Latinos. The community is so spread out that I only meet Puerto Rican Muslims online. There needs to be a predominately Puerto Rican masjid here in the New York area. I mean, there’s enough of us. But it doesn’t exist. So I’m still trying to find home.”

His desire was not one formed in isolation. Just days before there was a voracious discussion about racism within the ummah and the ostracism of Puerto Rican Muslims following a post by Al Hajj Farooq Jimenez on the “Puerto Rican Muslim Facebook” page. When he raised the possibility of a Spanish-speaking masjid focused on the needs of Puerto Rican and Latinx Muslims, many Puerto Rican Muslims — from around the U.S. and in Puerto Rico — responded. While some said that they are thankful to their “Arab brothers” for introducing them to Islam, they now felt that they were on the periphery of their communities. Silvia Puchie La Árabe opined that she had been denied requests for zakat support for her family in light of a domestic abuse issue

37 Facebook post, September 11, 2017.
at home and posted, “the fact that Puerto Rican Muslims have to belittle themselves to any other community of race is what pisses me off…” She also lamented that, “[in Puerto Rico] the brothers told me that they are afraid to give dawah…” and so she had to do it with her fellow Puerto Ricans. “I am no teacher,” she said, “I want a teacher or at least discussions about Islam [among my people].” Fellow Puerto Ricans reached out with names such as Angelica Molina — a Puerto Rican muslimah who ran for office in the east of the island — or Sumayah Soler. Everyone seemed to understand her difficult position and felt sympathy for her isolation and desire to have a Puerto Rican imam for Puerto Rican Muslim community.

That type of sentiment only increased after the events surrounding the hurricane in September. It seemed to bring home to Puerto Rican Muslims that they had their own issues, their own identity, and their own community to care for and if no one else would come to their aid then they would have to do so on their own. Aldo Rafael Perez, who I had tried to set-up several interviews with in and around September 2017, was never able to meet with me as we planned. I saw him at a couple of community organization events and we talked online. Amidst our brief encounters, he shared with me that his aunt had died in the aftermath of the storm. He wrote, “she is now one of the statistics. She is one of those the U.S. government will not count. She was sick before and did not receive the treatment she needed because of the hurricane. She died because of Maria, but they will not say so.” He regularly posted online that “UNITY IS THE ONLY

38 Original, “Pero aquí los hermanos me decían que tienen miedo dar dawah…”
39 Original, “Yo quiero una maestra o por lo menos discusiones sobre Islam…”
40 Facebook conversation, October 13, 2017.
SOLUTION FOR OUR VOICES TO BE HEARD” and always in all caps, but he bemoaned that in the response to the storm it seemed Puerto Rican Muslims’ particular needs were not being met. On the Puerto Rican side of things, he was upset that Puerto Rican Muslims were not being served by the authorities. “Supplies of food that they are given out in Puerto Rico 100% Pork Products…Now ask yourself is this right?”41

Then, on December 29, 2017, Facebook posts from several prominent Puerto Rican Muslims called for a boycott of ICNA and Islamic Relief USA, “until they rectify the donations for our brothers and sisters suffering the tyranny of Hurricane Maria.”42 Citing the Qur’an and its call to stand for justice even against members of your own family (4.135), one of the imams complained that Islamic relief organizations in the U.S. “relieve nothing but their bills on payday.”43 The issue was that 100 days after the hurricane and after raising thousands of dollars, the societies had not released those dollars nor had they reported on how that money had been used to bring assistance to Puerto Rico. The complaints continued to echo on social media and at gatherings in New Jersey and New York. For example, quoting Surah Nisa Iyat 135, Perez opined about “standing firm in justice” and lambasted those leaders he saw were being unjust. “Don’t abuse my people, Muslim Puerto Ricans against abuse. Unity is the only solution for our voices to be heard.”44 Wesley Abu Sumayyah Lebron chimed in and said, “That’s right! 100% transparency is needed! We told them not to play with our people during this tragedy. We stand behind you Aldo regarding these points. If they collected money,

41 Facebook post, October 3, 2017.
42 Aldo Rafael Perez, Facebook post, 3:17am, December 29, 2017.
43 Wesley Abu Sumayyah Lebron, Facebook post, 8:57am, January 13, 2018.
44 Facebook post, December 28, 2017.
they need to go in and serve the people.” Recalling how the members of La Alianza Islámica felt ostracized in their efforts to work with umbrella Muslim organizations in the U.S. back in the 1970s and 80s, Perez and others sensed that they needed to do their own thing. “They are playing with our Brothers and Sisters in Puerto Rico. That’s not going to happen no longer.”

Perez was not alone in his anger, frustration, and wholehearted desire to come to the support of his fellow Puerto Ricans. Mixed in with the calls for financial donations were protests against the abuse of Puerto Ricans by the U.S. federal government, state and local authorities, and umbrella Muslim organizations. Amidst these outcries were images that recalled the anti-colonial fervor of some Puerto Ricans. Images of Pedro Albizu Campos — a widely revered Puerto Rican independence leader — or flags associated with Puerto Rican independence flashed across screens as people made posts calling for organizations, government authorities, and institutions to come to the aid of “our people.” At the center of this social media storm was the Three Puerto Rican Imams Project who not only joined in with the nationalistic demonstrations, but appealed to their brothers and sisters that if no one else would come to their aid, then Puerto Ricans were going to have to rise up and do it for themselves. The drama of Hurricane Maria brings into sharp relief the particular contours of the Puerto Rican Muslim experience and how it stands out for its own peculiarities in the context of broader American Muslim, and Latinx Muslim, experiences.

At the Intersections of the So-Called Immigrant/Indigenous Binary

Similar to the ways in which the Puerto Rican diaspora has “contributed to eroding the conventional dichotomy between black and white people that has prevailed
throughout U.S. History so too Puerto Rican Muslims (and Latinx Muslims in general) have challenged the prevailing split between so-called “indigenous” and “immigrant” Muslims in the U.S. Their story further complicates the already intricate, interwoven, and intimate currents of contemporary Muslim American identity in the context of a global *ummah*. They challenge forced binaries that draw strict lines between identity constructs, illustrating that the formation of identity is a complex process involving imaginative agency that is shot through with multivalent discourse and practice at local and global levels.

Indeed, much of “the celebrated diversity, cosmopolitanism and international flavor” that is acknowledged and celebrated in NYC today “were sadly lacking when Puerto Ricans came in large numbers.” Puerto Ricans helped contribute to that multicultural milieu alongside multiple communities, including African Americans, Arabs, and other immigrant and minority communities from Latin America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. This paralleled how they helped develop “local cultures” in “daily contact and consequent alliances” with other ethnic communities they lived and worked alongside of in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, or Hawaii. In the context of questions of citizenship, migration, identity, and assimilation, Puerto Ricans have formed alliances with other marginalized minority groups in cities like New York and have, at the same

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46 Haslip-Viera, Falcón, and Rodríguez, *Boricuas in Gotham*, 204.


48 Whalen and Vásquez-Hernández, 49.
time, formed their own distinct sub-community alliances and organizations, maintaining “that something Puerto Rican” (lo que es puertorriqueño⁴⁹). The same is true for Puerto Rican Muslims.

Although they came to Islam in many and various ways, the African American Muslim community in the U.S. played a significant role early on. In fact, Puerto Rican Muslims — and Latinx Muslims in general — should be considered a vital aspect of the development of such groups as the Nation of Islam, the Five Percent Nation, and other Muslim organizations that were created throughout the twentieth-century in urban America. At the same time, as much as Puerto Rican Muslims were part of this “African American Muslim” experience in the U.S. they were also marginalized from it and chose to maintain a certain distance. As minorities struggling together — on the streets of American cities and on the margins of the Muslim community — African American Muslims and Puerto Rican Muslims often worked with one another to establish themselves in Islam. It could be said that together, African American and Puerto Rican Muslims are still incrementally filtering Islamic cultural and historical precedents into mainstream Western culture and history through minority societal infusion and discourses.⁵⁰ Tapping into general anti-imperial sensitivities across Latin America, Islam is providing a new opportunity for Puerto Ricans in the U.S. to counter predominant culture and binary racial categories alongside their African American Muslim counterparts.

⁴⁹ Jorge Duany, Puerto Rican Nation, 16.

Tracing the history of Latinx Muslim conversions back to the beginning of the twentieth-century Puerto Ricans and other Latinx Muslims came to know of Islam largely through contact with African American Muslims. Via the Ahmadis, the Nation of Islam, the Five Percenters, Sunnis, Sufi *turuq*, Shi’a, or the Moorish Science Temple of America Puerto Rican and other Latinx Muslims converted to Islam as a means of augmenting and undergirding their broader civil rights struggle. As part of a cosmopolitan community of various constituencies Puerto Ricans came in contact with Muslims from various backgrounds, but without the connections, collaborations, and conflicts they shared with African American Muslims, Puerto Rican -- and other Latinx Muslims -- would not be who they are today. It was at this time that a certain Nuyorican and post-colonial Puerto Rican consciousness was beginning to emerge in

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New York City and its metro area. Together, these would flower in the work of Alianza Islamica. Founded in 1987 by Yahya Figueroa, Rahim Ocasio, and Ibrahim González this group materialized out of “a revolutionary center of political activism and the struggle for civil rights”\(^5\) in the New York City area.

At “The Call” event in Queens in October 2017 Yayha Figueroa told me how he grew up in New York’s barrios and encountered various gangs, social activist groups, and religious communities all “vying for your attention and allegiance.” He became a Muslim in 1973 after being a part of the Young Lords Party, a political organization that represented “the concerns of Puerto Rican urban youth and their commitment to make a difference in dealing with the everyday problems of the inner city barrios.”\(^6\) Originally founded in Chicago, the New York chapter would prove “the most visible and active.”\(^7\) Along the way to his conversion, he was attracted to the Ahmadies and said that they were “influential” in the early formation of the African American and Puerto Rican Muslim community.\(^8\) “We wouldn’t be what we are without them,” he said. He also used to “go around with the Tablighi Jamaat to lapsed Pakistanis and started thinking, ‘why am I not doing this with my own people?’” He said he was a “Five Percenter because I was at 112 and Lennox, you had to be. There was no choice.” He saw Malcolm X speak

\(^5\) Ibid., 36.
\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) “So important was Malcolm X to the New York Young Lords — a group of, primarily, Nuyorican, radical youth fighting for freedom and justice in their community — that in the first issue of Palante published in New York City (in late 1969), their initial biographical feature was not on a great Puerto Rican leader. It was on Malcolm X and the relevance of his legacy.” http://darrel.wanzerserrano.com/2015/05/19/the-young-lords-and-malcolm-x/?fbclid=IwAR3xPm32wzNtgaL-GL9N3iX7yKCaNshbHftVgjvBH3eN9GEu0HsYYL_FJE
in Harlem, he listened to Clarence 13X — the founder of the Five Percenters — “teach mathematics lessons to the gods.” He even heard of Armando X (a.k.a. P.R.) a Puerto Rican in the Five Percenters who came to some prominence. For his part, Ocasio had connected with the Islamic Party of North America (IPNA) where they felt that being Muslim meant abandoning their Puerto Rican and Latinx identity. These, “young Muslim Nuyoricans now faced a new form of possible assimilation and loss of Latino language and culture. This time, they worried their Spanish would be displaced by Arabic and their culture by one from a Muslim majority society.”58 Figueroa said:

They try to tell us that we shouldn’t be tribal or have our own culture. All of them do! They are proud of being Saudi, Turkish, Pakistani, whatever. And we’ve been behind them. We were out there marching for Palestine before anyone else. We fought (the Jews) to march and protest. We know how to be global, we choose to remain proudly Puerto Rican.59

After meeting with, and being inspired by the largely Puerto Rican group Bani Sakr — a community in Newark created in the 1970s with “Hajj Hisham Jaber, who led Malcolm X’s funeral prayer, as their spiritual guide” — Ocasio, Figueroa, and Gonzaléz founded La Alianza Islámica with the expressed aim of propagating Islam and offering social service programs to and for “their people.” This Nuyorican core sought to draw other Latinx members of their community into the fold and to struggle for peace and justice in a shared and “similar cosmopolitan space in the United States.”60 In this way, as part of their cosmopolitan make-up, they situated and redefined other struggles from their own experience and the global ummah in the simultaneity between the global and local, here

58 Morales, 38.
59 Interview with Ken Chitwood, Personal Interview, October 14, 2017. Queens.
60 Morales, 39.
and there, and beyond categorizations such as “immigrant” or “indigenous.” The experience of those involved with Alianza Islámica was both/and – and not so easily delimited.

**La Alianza Islámica and Puerto Rican Political Citizenship in New York City**

This point becomes clearer when La Alianza Islámica is situated within a wider nexus of politically and socially active young organizations that represented the more radical politics of the Puerto Rican diaspora in U.S. cities in the 1970s and 80s which sought to overcome the challenges of migration in a colonial context while also creating new alternatives for social connection and collaboration. Tired of “second-class citizenship, racism, and poverty, as well as with the United States’ continuing colonial domination of Puerto Rico”61 Puerto Rican radicalism — including Alianza — resisted various forms of marginalization through their activism. They are an example of the communities that “sought to adjust to and mold their new surroundings to meet their needs, as well as to improve conditions for themselves and others” that “relied on social networks, the celebration of cultural traditions, involvement in existing community institutions, the building of their own community organizations, and political activism” to get their work done.62

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61 Whalen and Vásquez-Hernández, 237.

62 Ibid., 41-42
As part of these “other groups” that sought to “take the mantle of the community struggle for empowerment” to the grassroots of New York community politics, their struggle also transcended their own particular concerns. They saw their marginalization as an “under class” in American cities as part of a broader struggle against neo-colonialism and racism. They shared their struggle with other civil rights groups in the U.S. and with other groups in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. They saw the connections between “Occupied Palestine” and “Occupied Vieques” (a Puerto Rican island used for U.S. military testing and bombing practice) and their joint struggle against the military might and racist superstructures of the “Western powers.” Influenced by pan-Islamic organizations and groups such as Bani Saqr and the FPN,

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63 Ibid., 102.
64 Ibid., 69ff.
65 Morales, 16.
but wanting to do something singular for “their people,” Figueroa, Ocasio, and González founded La Alianza Islámica to improve their community and its way of life.

Ocasio said, they “began the difficult journey of being a Puerto Rican Muslim in a world that had trouble accepting that; both inside the mosques…and outside.” He felt that Puerto Rican Muslims should be as proud of their cultural background as they were their religion. Ocasio elaborated:

So, we started efforts to add a Puerto Rican accent to dawah efforts in the ISNA and ICNA, but to little effect. They were predominately South Asian organizations and they didn’t want anything to do with Spanish. We started independently to put our own identities and idioms first said Ocasio. They not only wanted to meet pressing human needs, but also foster Puerto Rican identity and pride. To that end, they offered various social programs as part of their efforts: GED prep, drug rehabilitation, gang negotiations, and job programs. They held cultural events and marched in the city’s famous Puerto Rican Day Parade proudly modeling a mix of Muslim and Puerto Rican symbols and dress. Thus, Alianza Islámica is another example of how Nuyoricans — those who immigrated from Puerto Rico or were the sons and daughters of those who did — adjusted and molded their new surroundings for the needs, sought to improve conditions in the city for themselves and others, created new overlapping social networks and solidarities, celebrated their own cultural traditions, drew on existing community institutions such as the Young Lords and Islamic organizations, and build their own new ones based on a desire to be simultaneously politically, socially, and spiritually active.

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67 Participant observation, Queens, NY, October 14, 2017.
While individuals like Abdullah above contest the impact of these efforts, their legacy is long. Even today, almost three decades since they first inhabited the building at 1717 Lexington Ave., the neighborhood still knows their name. Slowly becoming gentrified with a new brewpub and barber shop catering to the area’s increased “hipster” population of young adults, the women in the shop next door to 1717 told me that they remember La Alianza. “They haven’t been here for years,” said one of the women chatting and playing cards in a boutique shop with a Puerto Rican flag in the window, “but I remember them from the 90s. They were a big deal in their time and people still know who they are.”68 While you would not know it today, their heritage and history remain in a part of the city still known for its eclecticism and deep Puerto Rican roots.

Music, Food, and the Signification of Puerto Rican Muslim Identity

Without a doubt, beyond their broader Latinx identity, La Alianza Islámica was proudly Puerto Rican from the start. Beyond solely being a “Muslim” organization, they were a “Puerto Rican and Latinx Muslim” organization influenced by various flows of ideologies, concerns at the global and local levels, and various material cultures. In fact, material expressions of this identity are particularly telling. The dancer, artist, and hip-hop historian Jorge Fabel Pabon (also known as “Popmaster Fabel”) wears his identity on his clothes all the time. From sporting Universal Zulu Nation hats and sweaters to a Rock Steady Crew jean fest emblazoned with Puerto Rican flag patches and “El Barrio NYC” stitching, his clothing repertoire reads as a testament to the context out of which groups like Alianza Islámica emerged in the 1970s and 80s. He helped design one of the early sweaters that members of the Alianza wore as they marched in the Puerto

68 Conversation with Ken Chitwood, Harlem, September 13, 2017.
Rican Day parade or took part in “street dawah” in Spanish Harlem. The sweater features a quote from the Qur’an in Spanish, with a Puerto Rican flag draped underneath,

![Image](image_url)

Figure 5-3. Jorge Fabel Pabon (also known as “Popmaster Fabel”) wearing one of the original Alianza Islámica sweatshirts featuring the *trigueño* symbols of identity — Taino, Spanish, and African. Photo: Ken Chitwood.

and the words “reclaiming our Islamic heritage, El Barrio - NYC” below. On the Puerto Rican flag are three silhouettes — one of an indigenous Taino, a Spaniard, and an indigenous African. “This is us,” he said, “we are three nations, mulatto, *trigueño*:

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69 This can be seen as part of the broader Puerto Rican activist sentiment to “take it to the streets” in various ways. While there has been focus on various social and religious aspects of these efforts by Puerto Rican activists the vast majority of literature on the topic within Puerto Rican studies ignores the Islamic inflections of this work as evinced by the endeavors of La Alianza Islámica. Whalen and Vásquez-Hernández, 103.

70 “Reclamado nuestra herencia Islámica, El Barrio – NYC.”
Spanish, negro, and Taíno. We are Alianza.” This sweatshirt represents the fusion that Alianza Islámica was seeking to create, drawing on the popularized and commoditized “three roots” of Puerto Rican culture while also inflecting this identity with Islamic heritage and notions of selfhood — a triple heritage they were attempting to reclaim.

La Alianza Islámica also appealed to their fellow Nuyoricans in El Barrio through food and music. Figueroa told me, “it was a mix of all types of food — pasteles, corn with queso fresco, hot chiki powder, plus good shawarma and pita before The Halal Guys were even a thing. We brought it all together. Food is a way for Puerto Ricans to connect, to celebrate, to be Puerto Rican. We made Puerto Rican food and through in a mix of other influences from all of the Muslims who were coming together there.” More than food, Figueroa underlined who music played an important role. He said, “people wanted to hear their music when they came. So we had bomba. We had hip-hop, we would play drums with the adhan. We were creating something new, something people hadn’t heard before, but it was also something familiar. Something distinctly Puerto Rican.” When it comes to culture, “music has been an extremely powerful way for Puerto Ricans to express both a sense of continuity with their heritage and their capacity to create and innovate by adapting elements from their new environment.”

No doubt, there is much to be said about the Puerto Rican music styles such as la bomba and la plena and their influence on the emergence of hip-hop in South Bronx and Harlem and how they are “woven into the very fabric of this supposedly ‘American’

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71 Interview with Ken Chitwood, Personal Interview, Queens, NY, October 14, 2017.
72 Whalen and Vásquez-Hernández, 220.
or strictly ‘African American’ genre in all its subsequent manifestations,“73 but it is also interesting to note the convergence of an Islamic influence on this category of music as well. Various scholars have noted the significant impact of Islamic motifs, identities, and language on hip-hop via the NOI, FPN, and other individuals and communities in the 1970s. However, this musical genre is also an important linchpin in the creation of a distinct Puerto Rican Muslim identity. Hip-hop art and culture helped Puerto Rican Muslims “rewrite their histories and create for themselves new identities that challenged existing stereotypes they refuse to fit.”74 Between popular imaginings of what it means to be Puerto Rican or Muslim (including the so-called “immigrant/indigenous” binary) Puerto Rican Muslims utilized hip-hop as a way to identify and signify, to do dawah, and expand their notion of what being “Boricua” or “Muslim” means.

Not only does music such as hip-hop permit Puerto Rican Muslims to “challenge narrow definitions of what it means to be Boricua,”75 but it also continues to erode the idea that the study of Muslim Americans can fit into neatly defined categories such as “immigrant” or “indigenous.” The confluence and transference of multiple strands of identity and influences that are woven into the Nuyorican and Puerto Rican Muslim experience through history, music, religion, and other aspects of culture defy such restrictive categorizations. La Alianza Islámica illustrates this in spades. Members of La Alianza contested the narrowness of the ways in which Latinx or Puerto Rican — and


74 Omar Ramadan-Santiago, “Insha’Allah/Ojalá, Yes Yes Y’all: Puerto Ricans (Re)examining and (Re)imagining Their Identities through Islam and Hip Hop,” in Khan, Islam in the Americas, 115.

75 Ibid., 134.
specifically Nuyorican — identities were defined. They also resisted claims that they were inauthentic Muslims. Even their name “Alianza was a form of resistance against these critiques and against the pressure to assimilate.”76 First in Harlem and later in the Bronx, Alianza Islámica resisted multiple categorizations and built a cosmopolitan community informed by multiple flows and Puerto Rican Muslims’ position on the margins of the American and Muslim American experience.

Part of this resistance involved new — and not before seen, heard, or consumed — fusions of identity, music, clothing, or food. They brought together various strands of indigenous, immigrant, and Islamic identity and material culture and made it distinctly their own. Their sources included Arab-predominant organizations like the IPNA or ICNA, African American groups such as the NOI and FPN, the Ahmadis and Tabligh Jamaat dawah efforts, the history and legend of Islamic Spain, and the inspiration of other “alliances” and Puerto Rican social organizations in and around New York City. More than “a space for celebrating Latino ways of being Muslim and Islamic ways of being Latino”77 it was also a way of being proudly Nuyorican, distinctly Puerto Rican, and decidedly Muslim all at the same time. Therefore, its history and influence stand out as a prime example of the interconnected and complex histories that make up the Muslim American experience and cannot be categorized according to divisive and somewhat arbitrary binaries between “immigrant” and “indigenous” Muslim

76 Morales, Latino and Muslim in America, 41.

77 Ibid., 42.
communities. Indeed, in some ways, Puerto Rican Muslims stand completely outside of this binary as both/and or neither/nor. Either way, Puerto Rican Muslims like those that started, joined, and carried on the legacy of La Alianza Islámica unmistakably bring such categories into dispute.

Conclusion

Turning its focus toward Puerto Rican Muslims’ place on the margins of the American experience, this chapter showed how their dual marginalization in the U.S. has impacted the contours of Puerto Rican Muslim cosmopolitanism. Youssef’s life, the wider community’s experience in the wake of Hurricane Maria, and the formation and relevance of Alianza Islámica further fleshed out the depth and breadth of the Muslim American experience. Emphasizing AmeRícan Muslims and their stories help de-essentialize certain categories in the study of Muslim Americans such as delimiting the study to North American alone or relying on fixed binaries such as the supposed divide between “immigrant” and “indigenous” Muslims.

The AmeRícan Muslim experiences shared before also remind us of the importance of a cosmopolitan framework to study both historical and contemporary Muslim communities. With a view toward everyday cosmopolitanism, this chapter provided a street-level view of the flesh-and-blood realities of Puerto Rican Muslims’ overlapping identities, discourses, and experiences. Similar to the ways in which Mara

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78 Robin Wright discussed further issues with the term “indigenous” with me in light of the fact that this term should be reserved for indigenous peoples in the Americas. His point is well taken as there are communities of Maya Muslims in Mexico that could be termed “indigenous Muslims” in this sense. While the term “indigenous” means multiple things to multiple people, this chapter argues that it is problematic on multiple registers. At the very least, it is important to consider how the term “indigenous” is understood is a fundamentally political question with material consequences in the lives of those labeled (or not labeled) as such.
Leichtman’s exploration of the cosmopolitan lives of Lebanese Muslims in Senegal complicated categories like “African Islam” and “Islam in Africa”\textsuperscript{79} so too this chapter helps expand the geographic limits of, and complicate ideas about, Islam in America, interrogates the explicit and implicit immigrant/indigenous binary in the study of Muslim Americans, and highlights sub-stories of the American Muslim narrative by using a cosmopolitan theoretical and methodological lens for its analysis. By exploring the everyday context of Puerto Rican Muslims in places like Spanish Harlem or Staten Island this chapter provided further complexity and breadth to the Muslim American narrative, showing how Islam and Muslims are most certainly “part of and not foreign to”\textsuperscript{80} the fabric of American life.


CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

When I first arrived in Puerto Rico for fieldwork in the summer of 2015, I went to an organic café located along Calle Loíza and in a part of town where hipsters like to hang. Taking in the sounds and sensations around me like water from a fire hose I took a moment to write down what I was experiencing and encountering. Sitting there and drinking my Medalla Light, a local beer, I listened to the radio cut back and forth between English pop songs and Spanish *reggaetón*. I noted how the café itself seemed to lack clear definition as a whole wall was removed in favor of an open plan where the patio seamlessly fused with the Caribbean-themed interior. The menu offered an eclectic mix of curries and pizzas, organic tropical fruit smoothies and European lattes, *tostones* and tater tots. Over the doorway where I was sitting was a small shrine of sorts with various materials combined together on the lintel and on shelves to the side including small wooden *santos* of *La Virgen de Montserrat* and *San Rafael*, a flowery cross, a few *nazars* to ward off the “evil eye,” an indigenous American dreamcatcher, a golden statue of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara, a copy of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* illustrated by Rockwell Kent, a statuette of Ganesha, and an orange Buddha in meditation flanked by two Moroccan style *fanous*, or lanterns.

At the time, taking notes on this scene seemed a way to help ground myself in a situation where I felt slightly overwhelmed. It was a way of parsing through the assault on my senses brought on by my first hours “in the field.” However, in retrospect this vignette helps illustrate the common cosmopolitan scene within which we all live in the late-modern world. It testifies to the transitions, asymmetries, synchronicities, openings, and amalgamations brought on by migration, new media, and market technologies in
recent years. While no Puerto Rican Muslims were present at this moment, this evocative description of a café in the Santurce neighborhood of San Juan, Puerto Rico speaks to the banality of cosmopolitanism that we all encounter in our everyday lives — Puerto Rican Muslims most certainly included.

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the everyday lives of Puerto Rican Muslims in such a cosmopolitan context. It addressed questions of identity, ethnicity, and religion as Puerto Rican Muslims interacted with others in the context of Puerto Rican culture, the so-called “Muslim world,” and in the U.S. Taking cosmopolitanism as a banal experience in a world defined by superdiversity\(^1\) it focused on how Islam takes shape in the everyday lives of Puerto Rican Muslims in and through their relationships with others as “quadruple minorities.” This conclusion will reiterate how I approached this study, reviewing the scope and sequence of the dissertation and recalling critical units of analysis and issues related to research design and methods. This conclusion will also include a brief review of theoretical perspectives that helped guide the discussion before drawing conclusions from the analysis about the study of global Islam, religion in the Americas, and the concept of cosmopolitanism as a rubric for study. Furthermore, recognizing that this dissertation could not cover all the angles, this conclusion will tentatively suggest some areas for further research.

In particular, I would like to suggest that this study of the everyday, cosmopolitan, lives of Puerto Rican Muslims not only reveals new aspects of the global Muslim experience and new intersections in the study of religion in the Americas, but also undergirds the idea of using “cosmopolitanism” or “cosmopolitanization” as concepts

\(^1\) Vertovec, 86.
helpful to think with when addressing communities in these different fields of study. Over and against multiculturalism and methodological nationalism, Ulrich Beck suggested that cosmopolitanism — shorn of its more normative philosophical applications — or rather what he called the process of "cosmopolitanization," is best suited to understand the hyper-diversity of our day brought on by the magnification of time and space compression\(^2\) via global movement, technology, and communications. Whereas methodological nationalism focuses on national identities to the detriment of considering multilateral and global engagements and mutual implications, a cosmopolitan perspective on identities such as those of Puerto Rican Muslims helps draw our attention to the dynamics of difference between communities that seem bounded, but in actuality are quite porous and in a constant state of negotiation.

While cosmopolitanism does not deny the human desire for boundaries and borders, it allows scholars to look deeper into how the dynamics at play at, around, over, and through those boundaries and borders shapes identities on all sides. Cosmopolitanism offers scholars the chance to work out how individuals and communities work out the tensions between belonging to one’s nation or tribe with constant contact with “humanity” writ large and in other national and/or tribal expressions. What it reveals, following Rapport, is that while there is a need for creating, sustaining, and defending “bounded communities”\(^3\) and identities, the boundaries that close these entities off are constantly under negotiation, they are flexible and porous. Here, difference does not define “us” and the “other,” it defines the


generative frictions and mutually committed collaborations that go on between different identities and communities to create new senses of the self through contact and negotiation.

This study attempted to bring “cosmopolitanism down to earth” through an ethnographic exploration of the everyday lives of Puerto Rican Muslims and thus turn cosmopolitanism “from its philosophical head unto its social scientific feet.” What was shown is that in their interactions with various communities of difference as “quadruple minorities” Puerto Rican Muslims’ understanding of global and local becomes blurred and they construct an identity, not necessarily “progressive” or normative in any philosophical sense, but built of the various pieces of “globally available identities” that results in “a patchwork, quasi-cosmopolitan, but simultaneously provincial, identity whose central characteristic is its rejection of traditional relations of responsibility.”

Thus, this study of Puerto Rican Muslims provides a prime example of the “both/and” that can, and in my estimation should, replace the “either/or” of methodological nationalism and multiculturalism. In that way, lessons from this study can be applied to other studies and disciplines beyond investigations into the lives of Muslims in the Americas.

It is one thing to claim that the concept of cosmopolitanism can help scholars make sense of the radical diversity — or “diversification of diversity” that has occurred and is still in the process of happening in various cultural, political, social, and

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5 Ibid., 5.

6 Ibid., 55.
religious landscapes the world over. Yet, to challenge more essentialist understandings of different identities and communities — through nationalistic, multicultural, or even normative cosmopolitan frames — it is not enough to assert heterogeneity and hybridity, but to investigate its texture of reifying discourses and practices. This required, in my estimation, an ethnographic approach to the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims. Even in the process of ethnographic fieldwork there is fertile opportunity to experiment with the “us/them” divides that often punctuate our psyche and politics in the late-modern world. While the divides between “us” (the researchers) and “them” (the interlocutors, teachers, and subjects of study) are not dismantled by ethnography, the process at least renders the divide problematic. As I said in Chapter 1, through the course of my ethnographic research, my categories, theories, and concepts were constantly called into question. Principally, I became aware that the question I was seeking to ask and answer was not whether Puerto Rican Muslims are cosmopolitan or not, but how they are cosmopolitan and what that means for their relationships with others around them.

Through exploring the everyday lives of Puerto Rican Muslims as “quadruple minorities” I attempted to make case that employing the principles and attendant methodologies of cosmopolitan social theory helps scholars better understand what is happening in global Islam and American religion. I showed that cosmopolitanism is a relational process of becoming and is not a single status, product, or outcome. Instead, as a set of postures, narratives, and social strategies cosmopolitanism is a way of navigating the diversity of this world and cooperating and competing with others along the way. As a result of these interactions and orientations in the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims, I illustrated the innovation and adaptation that takes place as communities
change. I demonstrated how tradition and the sense of bounded community identities continue to weigh on individuals’ and communities’ choices and behaviors and how Puerto Rican Muslims continue to make changes in order to influence the function and form of new contexts and relationships. I extrapolated from the Puerto Rican Muslim case to show that cosmopolitanism offers people membership in multiple groups. Emphasizing agency over structure, I made the argument that cosmopolitan actors choose to activate certain ties and ignore others, to trace their lineage through certain histories and narratives and not others, and to claim membership in several communities via various connections, but never to fully belong to any one of them.

**Review of Chapters**

With the aim of describing the everyday cosmopolitan lives of Puerto Rican Muslims in the context of their relationships with others as “quadruple minorities” the majority of the chapters focused on different relational aspects of Puerto Rican Muslims’ cosmopolitan experience. To begin, Chapter 2, “The Contingent Lineages of Puerto Rican Muslim Cosmopolitanism” described the development of the Puerto Rican Muslim community as they draw on various histories to flesh out their narrative of identity over time and across vast geographical distances. This chapter provided an overview of the conditions under which Puerto Rican Muslim cosmopolitanism arose and continues to develop. It also showed the “contingent lineages” that make up Puerto Rican Muslims’ historical narrative and how it helps them claim membership in multiple groups at any one time. In particular, it showed how Puerto Rican Muslims “dream” of al-Andalus as an imagined diaspora, illustrating how conceptions of history are just as critical as the histories themselves in understanding the dynamics of contemporary cosmopolitanism. It also demonstrated how Puerto Rican Muslims draw on the history of the transatlantic
trade in enslaved peoples and are influenced in multiple, transnational, directions by Arab immigration and movements that started in U.S. metro centers (such as New York City) and spread to other locations via multidirectional migration and communications technology. Looking at how Puerto Rican Muslims cite Andalusian and African influences in their contemporary culture and are shaped by multiple streams of movement from the Arab world or by immigration and communication between and across the U.S. and Puerto Rico this chapter illustrated the interconnected nature of the contemporary Puerto Rican Muslim community’s “contingent lineages.” This survey showed that the Puerto Rican Muslim community is historically grounded in multiple streams that often crisscross and intersect one another at multiple times and in multiple locations. It helped reveal how Puerto Rican Muslims claim an authentic place at the Muslim/Puerto Rican/American table in part by pulling on the various strands of this historical narrative.

In Chapter 3, “Puerto Rican Muslims and the Search for ‘Authentic’ Puerto Rican Peoplehood” I honed in on the ways in which Puerto Rican Muslims wrestle with global identities, relationships, material context, and experiences alongside their local “Puerto Rican” identities, relationships, material context, and experiences. By analyzing their relationship with “authentic” Puerto Rican culture, their family and friends, foodways, cultural celebrations, language, and the lived environment this chapter showed dynamics of both tension and creativity as Puerto Rican Muslims choose how to create a supposedly “authentic” Puerto Rican identity as Muslims to reveal the process of cosmopolitanization in greater, nuanced, detail. It demonstrated how Puerto Rican Muslims have an ambivalent relationship with “Puerto Rican culture.” On the one hand,
they are moving beyond the bounds of expected cultural norms by converting from, and away, certain aspects of their cultural heritage. They are proud of this move and see themselves as stepping into a global, and more cosmopolitan, community of belief and action. On the other hand, they are still very proud to be Puerto Rican and work in concrete ways to maintain and re-tool aspects of their cultural identity to not only fit, but also augment both their Puerto Rican and Muslim identities. The disruption that their conversion caused — both for good and ill — motivates them to not only reach out to new people, cultural touchstones, and heritage, but to reformulate the old as well.

Largely staying in Puerto Rico, Chapter 4, “Puerto Rican Muslims and the ‘Muslim World’” explored the tensions between Puerto Rican Muslim’s localized identity and the ideal of unity within the worldwide ummah. This chapter not only looked into how Puerto Rican Muslims navigate these tensions, but considered their position on the perceived margins of the “Muslim world” through the lens of border theory in order to better shine light on dynamics within the study of global Islam. Specifically, I looked at how Palestinians and Puerto Ricans navigate the tensions and differences that they feel between each other and extrapolated on Ibn Khaldûn’s idea of asabiyah to speak of a certain asaBoricua that helps Puerto Rican Muslims craft a quasi-cosmopolitan, but concurrently cantonal and critical identity in the broader ummah, whose central characteristic is its resistance to traditional notions of who, or what, constitutes that community. This chapter sought to bring attention to both sides of the tensions, listening to both Puerto Rican Muslims such as José Vilmenay and Ilyass Figueroa, but also Palestinian Muslims in Puerto Rico like Saber and Abdul.
Moving northward in my study, I focused on the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims in the context of the “Americas” in Chapter 5, “AmeRican Muslims” This chapter told the story of Puerto Rican Muslims on the margins of the “American experience.” Relating the experiences of Puerto Rican Muslim individuals in New York and the U.S. in the context of mid-century migrations, the emergence of the African-American Muslim communities in the 1970s and 80s, and solidarities and tensions between Puerto Ricans and others in regards to political, religious, and social citizenship this chapter helped provide a more complete picture of the American Muslim community and how movement and the navigation of multiple identities has shaped the contours of the Puerto Rican Muslim experience as a whole. Its focus on the lives of particular Puerto Rican Muslims such as Youssef Ali Abdullah and those associated with Alianza Islámica further reiterated the importance of paying attention to the lived experiences of individuals on the ground in order to understand the Puerto Rican Muslim community as a whole or concepts such as cosmopolitanism, which have the tendency to remain abstract and over-theorized.

It is my hope that each of these chapters and their respective methods, units of analysis, theoretical approaches, and results can contribute to wider fields of study such as global Islamic studies, the study of religion in the Americas, Puerto Rican studies, the study of religion, and ethnographic studies in a global and digital age. It is to these deductions I will now turn.

**Applications to the Study of Global Islam, Religion in the Americas, and Other Fields**

This study contributed to the literature in various fields, including global Islamic studies, the study of religion in the Americas, Puerto Rican studies, religious studies,
and ethnographic studies in a global and digital age. In the first place, researchers and
the interested public can use the findings of this study to broaden and enhance their
understanding of what constitutes the so-called “Muslim world” by appreciating the
importance of communities in Latin America and the Caribbean (and the Americas as a
whole) that are often perceived to be on the periphery of this supposed geography.
Second, this study cast light on one aspect of the Americas’ continuing religious
diversity and change. While Latin America and the Caribbean have long exhibited a
stunning diversity in religious traditions and practices, contemporary conversions and
immigration flows have further altered the religious landscape in the hemisphere. Puerto
Rican Muslims are a prime example of this contemporary change and present an
instructive case study through which to examine these more general trends. The same
is true for understanding Puerto Rico and its own religious landscape. Although a
smaller community, Puerto Rican Muslims present an informative case study of the
tensions and opportunities forced upon, or presented to, minority religious groups in the
context of globalization. Their experiences also further complicate explanations of
“authentic” Puerto Rican culture that might do well to emphasize certain identities long
ignored (Taíno, African, etc.), but simultaneously marginalize others. In both cases, the
stories of Puerto Rican Muslims help underscore the point that Islam and Muslim
communities have not only long been a part of the American and Puerto Rican story
(see Chapter 2), but that they continue to impact, and be impacted by, contemporary
discussions and debates over issues such as religious diversity, identity, race, and
immigration. Finally, it is my hope that this study can be used by present and
prospective religious studies scholars to better pursue ethnographic research in a global
and digital age by providing another example of a multi-local, analogue and digital, ethnographic project in the field of religion.

Beyond these more general contributions to academic study, I would like to suggest that Puerto Rican Muslims can help broader publics consider what cosmopolitanism is, and what it means, for our day and age. The everyday lives of Puerto Rican Muslims help bring the process of cosmopolitanization down to earth and shift our view from more normative, ethical, or philosophical understandings of cosmopolitanism, to a more realistic and social-scientific appreciation of the concept. In other words, Puerto Rican Muslims move us away from the ideal of cosmopolitanism and toward the idea of cosmopolitanism as a way of being and becoming in a world of hyper-diversity. Indeed, the Puerto Rican Muslim case does not only speaks to the idea of “Muslim cosmopolitanism.” Instead, I believe it can help us better absorb what cosmopolitanism looks like and what it means for various communities and individual actors the world over. With such a frame, I believe that scholars can better apperceive that the human prerequisite of belonging does not preclude that the boundaries of that belonging are constantly in a state of negotiation and alteration.

Thus, using the idea of cosmopolitanism and the process of cosmopolitanization as frameworks within which to analyze communities such as Puerto Rican Muslims helps us more adroitly tease out the multidimensional means by which such communities are dealing with the dizzying diversity of the contemporary scene in their everyday contexts and social worlds. What we see with such a framework is that actors are recognizing the interconnectivity of identities given the movement of people, ideas, rituals, materials, religions, and resources and addressing it through both conflict and
collaboration, resistance and solidarity. Cosmopolitan actors such as Puerto Rican Muslims understand that their identities can no longer be bounded as they once were — they will face increasing hybridity and exchange between, and across, local and global cultures and traditions — but as they wrestle with this interpenetration they exhibit agency as they take in the world and adapt it so that it becomes part of their previous identities even as those identities undergo radical change. This is the process of cosmopolitanization at work and each chapter in this dissertation further illustrated what that looks like in the context of Puerto Rican Muslims’ lives.

At the same time, paying attention to the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims, we might learn lessons about how we all navigate globalization’s challenges to group identity. The desire to become a global citizen has coursed through the annals of history from Diogenes to Goethe, Immanuel Kant to Kwame Appiah. In many ways, the neoliberal political order has sought to make this possibility a reality through increasing multilateralism and global cooperation on issues such as climate change, terrorism, and human rights. And yet, it does not take a social scientist to note that underdevelopment, the disappearance of traditional forms of employment, and a loss of autonomy — and the nationalistic reactions and resistance against these shifts — have betrayed that fact that we may not be ready for such a “cosmopolitan civilization.” Unsure of how we interact with “the other,” the temptation exists to retreat into identities and communities that we assume are more under our control. This kind of “silo mentality” reflects the fact that many feel overwhelmed by the complexities of their daily reality so that they cannot see the bigger picture of global diversity and change or are unaware of the value of others around them.
However, the proverbial cosmopolitan cat is out of the bag. Interaction and entanglement with “the other” cannot be avoided no matter what exits, walls, or other forms of resistance we construct. As was often repeated throughout this dissertation, encounters with “the other” are an unavoidable, banal, fact of twenty-first-century life. Furthermore, I demonstrated that when we come in contact with the other we simultaneously experience feelings of loss (of wholeness and unity) and conflict (over identity and what constitutes our community) and a sense of opportunity (new relationships and networks of exchange) and openness (to new ideas and identities seen as not previously available to us). Some feel the sense of loss more keenly and feel like exiles in their own lands. This sense of loss and exile “at home” seems to be one of the motivations for nationalistic rage and resistance to globalization and multilateralism. Against such re-entrenched nationalism, others lean into the openness and opportunity and eagerly consume what the world offers them. The latter have more traditionally been viewed as “cosmopolitan” and the exhortation from more normative and philosophical treatments of this idea has been that actors should evince this “world openness” in their teachings and traditions. Such is the case with Muslims, who have often only been treated as “cosmopolitan” or not based on such conceptualizations. I believe we make a mistake when we think this way. Cosmopolitanism is not necessarily only about world openness, it is about the very encounters with the world that evoke a whole range of reactions — from loss to opportunity, conflict to collaboration. The very experience of difference changes us, adds to our lives, and makes our world larger — even if we fail to notice it or seek to reject it. In this, ironically, we all share in the same experience. While we may reject unity or oneness with other ethnic groups, belief
systems, or nation-states, there is a congruity in our shared cosmopolitan experiences and encounters with one another.

Thus, we deceive ourselves thinking that there is a “non-cosmopolitan” entity out there. We must rework our thinking to conceive of communities not as bound by common values and attitudes, but a shared experience of continually overlapping, complex, and inherently messy systems of “generative frictions” wherein contestations for power, boundary maintenance and transcendence, cooperation within and across borders, and occasionally collaboration across social categories and constructed identities are possible. As people, things, geographies, histories, beliefs, practices, materials, and concepts continue to come into contact with one another in the decades to come, we need to move beyond the idea of conformity and assimilation to a non-existent cosmopolitan ideal. First, if there is no telos, or ultimate aim, to cosmopolitanism then demanding it or expecting it of any demographic (Muslim or otherwise) is confusing at best, nonsensical at worst. Second, if we are to seek peace and cooperation across the divides, we must acknowledge that authentic relationships between actors of different thoughts, words, and deeds must recognize and deal with the limits of unity rather than pretend they do not exist.

Before we can get there, cosmopolitanism must first be appreciated as an everyday social reality in the lives of actors worldwide — whether in Puerto Rico or Pakistan, Paris, France or Perth, Australia — Muslim or not. In this dissertation, the

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7 One might refer to the debates over the cosmopolitanism of Immanuel Kant in comparison with that of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. For an overview, see Wallace Brown and David Held Garrett, eds. The Cosmopolitan Reader, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

everyday lives of Puerto Rican Muslims were put to the fore as an example of the process of cosmopolitan becoming through strangers and friends, things “foreign” and “domestic,” through productive tensions and generative frictions. It was shown that Puerto Rican Muslims make choices as they navigate tension and difference and they are able to better make sense of themselves through their interactions with others. Thus, we might learn from them how we can better navigate our interactions with “the others” now living next door. In one sense, a cosmopolitan future is guaranteed for us all. The superdiversity of our world is not going away, our lives are implicated with those of others across the globe and vice versa. What that future looks like, however, is up to us. We are all in the process of creating it, whether we like it or not. Puerto Rican Muslims offer a glimpse of how some of us are doing so and it is my hope we might listen to them and learn from them, whether we perceive their lives as “quadruple minorities” as consequential or not.

Areas for Further Consideration

Even though I am confident of my research design, framework, and selection of sites and participants for study and data collection I admit there are limitations to my work. As an outsider, I am constantly humbled by how to, or if to, represent the insider’s point of view on these issues. While I have formed deep relationships with Puerto Rican Muslims I cannot overcome the gaps that exist between our contexts, cultures, and religious outlooks. There is a danger that I could re-inscribe Orientalist, and colonial, discourses in my work without explicit malice or intent. It will be important for me to remain aware, and humble, throughout this process and listen to my interlocutors in order to do my best to not misrepresent them or lord my theory, or research, over them. Given this ethical consideration it is my hope that in the final published edition of this

251
work there will be space for particular Puerto Rican Muslims to speak back to my work. I will ask several individuals to write responses to my dissertation chapters, offering their own insights, contestations, and critiques of these perspectives. I will not respond to them, but instead let them stand as the critiques, or contributions, that they are. First, these responses will perhaps counteract any misrepresentations on my part. Furthermore, they will act as further evidence of the generative tensions that exist between outsiders and insiders and the privilege of researchers who seek to write about them and their experience.

It is also my hope that research into the lives of Muslims in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Latinx U.S. will only continue to grow in the coming years. Throughout this dissertation, I provide not only useful and insightful comments on the lives of Puerto Rican Muslims that might be relevant to research beyond this subfield, but also could prompt further research on the topic. In particular, I hope to expand on how the case of Puerto Rican Muslims can help scholars better understand what we mean when we discuss Islam as a “discursive tradition.” The most recent era of globalization has allowed for a greater, and more constant movement of people in local and regional networks and allowed for more distinctive Muslim communities to share, debate, and integrate their visions of what it means to be Muslim. New technologies, especially in media, have changed the nature of these networks and conversations, expanding or even creating new discursive spaces in which practitioners can enact being Muslim. On this point, Talal Asad, in his seminal work *The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam* proposed that Islam be appreciated as a “discursive tradition” that connects variously with the attempts that Muslims make throughout the world to form
their moral selves. His work also speaks to the forced binary between a “high” orthodox, scholarly, and scriptural Islamic tradition and a “low” popular, parochial, and more mystical tradition. Asad argued that researchers too often overlook, or underemphasize, the intertwined nature of these supposed traditions and miss the ways in which popular traditions draw on textual sources and authoritative mores and how so-called orthodoxy is shot through with popular practices and a development of doctrinal conventions over many years. In view of this, Asad argues that anthropologists should come to the study of Islam by taking it as a discourse of power constantly made and remade in tension with relations of power and its relations with the Qur’an and the Hadith. I agree.

Hence, my further research into this community will need to not only flesh out the ways in which Islam is lived out locally in the various contexts that Puerto Rican Muslims inhabit, but pay attention to the ways in which they engage with the flow of Islamic tradition, supposed Islamic orthodoxy, and the textual tradition as it comes to them via the shared vocabulary of various schools of thought, universities, online sources, etc. Exploring a community on the perceived margins of the “Muslim world” seems a particularly pertinent place to do such research. Since Islam has expanded beyond the Arab world, its practitioners continually find themselves inhabiting and domesticating new physical and philosophical environments, including the Americas. These same individuals, and the institutions they form or found, similarly encounter and inhabit ever-more diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural communities, which allow Islam and Muslims to be habituate in new settings. Through appropriation and domestication Muslims innovate on how to balance against an expression of Islam as something that transcends the purely local, while also linking back to its historical, and inspirational,
sources. No matter the local variation, it could be argued that these discourses and practices still convey a recognizable sense of what it means to be a Muslim. This is true of Puerto Rican Muslims as they appeal to broader currents in the “Muslim world” (for example, the memory of al-Andalus, Salafi discourses, and Sufism to name a few), but at the same time fluidly adapt them to their local context and quotidian cosmopolitan experiences and encounters. Throughout my research I was fascinated with the sheer diversity of Puerto Rican Muslims’ ideological affinities and inputs. There is no way to pigeonhole Puerto Rican Muslims according to any single discourse within global Islam. Indeed, I found on multiple occasions that Puerto Rican Muslims had crafted a mélange of various perspectives and traditions that they claimed fealty to and applied to their practice of Islam in their local context. On other occasions, I listened as Puerto Rican Muslims told me of their journey through the various terrains of Islamic tradition, from the Nation of Islam to a broader Sunni identity to Sufi orders and post-Salafi discourses and communities. It is my hope that in the future I will return to this theme and pay more attention to these aspects of Puerto Rican Muslim lives and identities.

There were other aspects of Puerto Rican Muslim experience that I did not adequately explore and I believe they deserve more attention in the future. In particular, there needs to be more attention given to aspects of gender and sexuality. I encountered various perspectives on sexuality and gender identity among Puerto Rican Muslims. For example, along the way I picked up on some threads of discussion concerning such things as the “Islamization of machismo” among interlocutors, but more research would need to be done before coming to any firm conclusions. Sumayah Soler spoke frankly with me about this and told me, “[many converts] come in with their
machismo and they find in Islam an excuse for their running the household and keeping their women under them. This is not Islamic or Quranic, it’s just machismo dressed up like its Islamic. It’s not.”

There were others who felt that many Palestinian Muslims used Puerto Rico as a place to find a “good wife” and some complained that Arabs came to Puerto Rico simply to “find beautiful Puerto Rican women, convert them, and take them back to Palestine.” I found some evidence for this in a conversation I overheard in front of the masjid in Rió Piedras. While perusing inside a sundry store across the street from the masjid I overheard a young man and an older man discussing a woman that the younger man knew who had just converted to Islam. The older man asked, “but how do I know she is a virgin?” This is caught my ear. Not knowing the men, I did not approach them, but I listened as the young man tried to assure the older man. They talked about cultural customs, her good family, that she was trustworthy, etc. Conversations like these left tantalizing clues for me to follow-up on, but I did not explore them fully during my fieldwork or subsequent interviews. Unfortunately, my research into how men frame their masculinity, how “machismo” expresses itself among Puerto Rican converts, and how the discourse around marriage, family, women, and purity is worked out among Palestinian and Puerto Rican Muslims on the island is far too shallow for any substantive analysis as of right now, but this is something I plan to explore more in the future.

It would also be worthwhile for more research to be done on the history and presence of Arab Muslims in Puerto Rico in general. I spent the majority of my time with

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10 Ibid.
Puerto Rican converts, but a future scholar might look into the Arab Muslim experience on the island and bring to light other aspects of the Puerto Rican Muslim community that this study was not able to fully investigate. I also did not delve deep enough into the experience of Puerto Rican Muslims in relation to prison life, crime, street gangs, and racial politics. I might also dig deeper into the everyday religious piety of Puerto Rican Muslims. While I touched on this in my discussion of food consumption, clothing or prayer at the mosques, there is more to be explored in terms of Puerto Rican Muslims’ desire to be, or be considered, pious Muslims. What does that look like? How do they put this into practice? I would imagine that the negotiation of being quadruple minorities has an impact on their pursuit of piety, but it would need further focus in fieldwork and analysis in order for me to come to any firm conclusions. Indeed, there is much left to be researched here and plenty of material to be analyzed, but this study only touched on these themes briefly.

Also, it is my hope to expand on the political accents of Puerto Rican Muslim identity. As referenced several times in this dissertation, Puerto Rican Muslims address issues surrounding continued American colonialism, solidarity with other “nations without a nation-state” (e.g., Palestinians), and discourses around liberation and resistance. Returning to these themes seems a particularly fruitful way to contribute to conversations about religion and politics in Latin America and the Caribbean and it is my plan to pursue this line of inquiry in article form.

Despite these areas of further consideration — and others beyond my purview — I believe this dissertation stands as a suitable introduction to the topics presented and it is my hope that it will spur further research as a worthy entrant into the academic
conversation around Puerto Rican Muslims, global Islam, Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas, and the idea of cosmopolitanism. This study is not meant to be the end of a conversation, but the beginning of one. Umberto Eco wrote, “ideas are similar to jokes that become better as each person tells them.”11 It is my hope that this dissertation provokes others to research such topics as Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean, religion in a global and digital age, or the very idea of cosmopolitanism itself. Not only do I hope others take up these topics, but that they come up with better ways to understand them than even this study can offer. That is, after all, the goal of scholarship — for ideas to travel, inspire, move, and motivate a better understanding of the world around us.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ken Chitwood studied education, theology, and anthropology at Concordia University Irvine, California graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in 2007 and a Master of Arts in 2014. His master's thesis focused on the conversion pathways of Latinx Muslims in the U.S. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Florida in 2019 with the Department of Religion and Center for Global Islamic Studies. His work focused on the study of Puerto Rican Muslims, Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas, Latinx Muslims, translocal religion, intersections of religion & culture, religion in the Americas, Christian-Muslim relations, global Christianity, Muslim minorities, & ethnographic methods and manifestations of religion-beyond-religion in a global and digital age.

Additionally, he has published work on Judaism in Latin America and the Caribbean, religion and popular culture, Christian-Muslim relations in Africa, Islam in Africa, American Christianity, global justice movements, Islamophobia, and religion and media.