Displaced Islamic Identities: Language, Time, and Space in a Post 9/11 America

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DISPLACED ISLAMIC IDENTITIES: LANGUAGE, TIME AND SPACE IN POST 9/11 AMERICA

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Linguistics
2012
This thesis entitled:
Displaced Islamic Identities: Language, Time, and Space in a Post 9/11 America
written by Susanne Stadlbauer
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May 2, 2012

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

IRB protocol # 0207.47
Stadlbauer, Susanne (Ph.D., Linguistics)

Displaced Islamic Identities: Language, Time, and Space in a Post 9/11 America
Thesis directed by Associate Professors Kira Hall and J. Andrew Cowell

This dissertation examines how women in the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at the University of Colorado at Boulder respond to the negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims that have proliferated since 9/11. The media’s positioning of Muslim women as “backwards” and “un-American” compels MSA women to construct an extensive discourse of da’wah (outreach to non-Muslims) that repositions Islamic doctrine within the terms of American modernity. While this discourse shows respect for Islamic ritual practices, such as praying five times daily and wearing the hijab, the women construct their use of these practices as an agentive choice informed by study, self-discipline, and conscious reflection. The seven chapters that constitute this dissertation examine the discursive strategies that facilitate this construction of a contemporary Islamic self across multiple discourse domains, including interviews, personal narratives, rehearsed performance, and everyday conversational interaction.

The dissertation is centrally concerned with uncovering the spatial and temporal dimensions that underlie the discursive production of identity. As a sociocultural linguist, I incorporate a range of theoretical perspectives to illuminate the interplay of time, space, and identity, engaging directly with Bakhtin’s (1981) understanding of chronotopes, Benjamin’s (1986) distinction between historical time and messianic time, and Keane’s (2007) exposition of the moral narrative of modernity. I similarly incorporate a range of methods in my analysis of the discourse data that I collected over the course of two and a half years of
ethnographic fieldwork. Chapter 2 employs Membership Categorization Analysis to examine how MSA women negotiate a mediatized Muslim-American binary. Chapter 3 focuses on the women’s use of spatial and temporal deixis to illuminate how they situate themselves in response to a media that portrays them as both foreign and anti-modern. Chapter 4 incorporates narrative analysis to shed light on the women’s faith development narratives, which articulate their journey with Islam as evolving from ritualistic obligation to intellectual choice. This methodology is also the basis of Chapter 5, which analyzes the narratives of American women who converted to Islam after 9/11. In contrast to other kinds of religious conversion narratives discussed in the literature, these narratives, which I identify as “reversion” narratives, do not demonstrate a clear break with the past but rather rewrite the past as Muslim, thus aligning with other faith development narratives in emphasizing learning as instrumental to self-progression. Finally, Chapter 6 incorporates linguistic anthropological work on the subject of language ideology to illuminate the social meaning behind the women’s alternating uses of Qur’anic Arabic, contemporary heritage languages, and English. Taken together, these chapters provide on-the-ground examples of how sociocultural linguistics, with its emphasis on interdisciplinary theories and methods, contributes to the larger endeavor of analyzing the place of Islam in contemporary U.S. society.
To Karl Stadlbauer and George Figgs,

for their support
Acknowledgments

This dissertation is the product of four years of thought, work, and discussions with many scholars and supporters, whose generous contributions made it possible. Foremost, I owe a great debt of gratitude to the members of the Muslim Student Association at the University of Colorado between the years of 2007 to 2010 for their extended welcome and willingness to participate in this academic endeavor. I am especially thankful for their trust in working with me on this project during a time of political difficulty for Muslims in the United States.

I also wish to express gratitude to Dr. Kira Hall and Dr. James Andrew Cowell, who served as my co-advisors throughout my course of study at the University of Colorado. Their academic knowledge and dedication provided the all-important inspiration for this project, which would not have been possible without their efforts. Dr. Barbara Fox has similarly advised me throughout my academic endeavors and provided much appreciated intellectual support. Dr. Ruth Mas has always been generous in personal and intellectual assistance and inspiration. Likewise, I like to thank Dr. Carla Jones for her support and dedication. Both scholars have been an instrumental help in the beginning stages of this dissertation. I like to sincerely thank all members of my advisory committee.

Since 2005, my colleagues at the University of Colorado at Boulder, especially my fellow graduate students in the Culture, Language, and Social Practice (CLASP) program, have inspired me to pursue these studies and provided invaluable feedback. In particular, I would like to thank Aous Mansouri for his insights throughout the years. I also feel indebted to numerous scholars at conferences and colloquia for their input.
I also received abundant support from the University of Colorado, including the staff of the Department of Linguistics, the Office of Contracts and Grants, the Human Research Committee, and the Graduate School, among many others.

For financial support, I gratefully acknowledge that work between 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 was supported by the Foreign Language Area Studies (FLAS) Scholarship from the University of Colorado at Boulder. I thank the FLAS reviewers and staff. Work in 2011 was supported by a Doctoral Dissertation Writing Grant by the Department of Linguistics at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Finally, I am grateful for my family – my mother Karin Sirtl, my father Karl Stadlbauer, my stepdad Heinz Sirtl and my stepmom Maria Albrecht – for their encouragement and support. I owe special gratitude to George Figgs, whose love and support has been invaluable.
Transcription Conventions, inspired by Bucholtz (2011) and Ochs & Capps (2001)

The names of interviewees in the dissertation are changed to ensure their privacy. In the data excerpts, the following symbols are included to make the excerpts more readable, to illustrate content and context, and to point to relevant text for the analysis:

Intonation and stress:
↓ The down arrow indicates a falling intonation at the end of an intonation contour
↑ The up arrow indicates rising intonation at the end of an intonation contour
word Underlining indicates stress or emphasis on a word or parts of a word

Length:
::: Colons indicate stretching of the preceding sound, proportional to the number of colons

Flow of speech:
> < The talk between the “greater than” and “less than” symbol is faster
< > This stretch of talk is slower
(1.0) Number in parentheses indicate silence in estimated seconds

 Loudness:
WOOrd Upper case letters indicate loudness
~ ~ Speech between these signs indicate quiet or soft segments of talk

Extralinguistic information:
(( ))) conversational information
(word) a transcribed word in parenthesis indicates uncertainty on the transcriber’s part
bold linguistic form of analytic interest
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1 INTRODUCTION: MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF ISLAM AFTER 9/11

Out of Place: Contested Islamic Space in United States Media Discourse.

Every Friday at 4:30 pm, members of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at the University of Colorado filter into the classroom reserved for the weekly general group meetings. The members are Muslims of various backgrounds - Saudi Arabian, Kuwaiti, Jordanian, Egyptian, Nigerian, Sudanese, Iranian, Indian, Pakistani, and American – and are generally undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25. In the meetings, the members receive updates on events the group is holding on campus, discuss issues concerning Islam and Muslims in the United States, and socialize with other Muslims. Each member entering is welcomed loudly with the customary Islamic greeting assalamu alaikum “peace be upon you,” followed by the newcomer’s reply wa aleikum salam “and peace be upon you too.” The president or vice president often has to quiet down the chatty crowd with stern words, trying to hold a structured meeting with introductions, segments on current events or pressing issues, news concerning members, or discussion topics regarding Islam that are often misrepresented in the media, such as the hijab (head scarf worn by Muslim women covering the hair and neck) or jihad (defined as a “holy war” by the media and simply as “struggle” by the group). Sometimes, the chatter is suspended by the salat (mandatory Islamic prayer), where the men line up in the direction of Mecca in the front of the room and the women stand behind them.¹

¹ I attended these meetings for more than two years and usually sat in the back of the room as a silent observer. The group was always welcoming to any visitors interested in Islam and accepted my presence as a non-Muslim researcher on women in Islam. In fact, after visiting the meetings for about a year, I was declared an honorary member who understood their struggles as Muslims on campus and who sided with them when it came to defending Islam against negative media stereotypes. I was also invited to off-campus social events, such as Eid dinners (the
These meetings are not just locales where Islam is taken for granted as a requirement for membership; they also serve as the prime locality where Islamic practice is negotiated. In the process, members acquire the necessary and appropriate vocabulary to talk about Islam and learn how to identify and position themselves as Muslims. The most recurrent topic discussed in the meetings is how members as a group can contest the negative image of Islam projected by the media. The group is fully aware that Islam has become increasingly contested and publicized after 9/11, and that U.S. mainstream media discourse has projected “Islam” as a violent religion and “Muslim” as a homogenous and universal category. These ideologies are also discussed in recent research on Islam (see Karim, 2006; Hirschkind, 2001; among others), which demonstrates that the U.S. media, and in particular political discourse, often produces or reinforces incriminating concepts such as *jihad, Islamic fundamentalism, radical Islam, militant Islam, or political Islam*. Islam has become an umbrella term standing for these concepts and is contrasted with Western concepts that emerged since the Enlightenment, such as *rationality, reason, and freedom*. Islam has been repeatedly placed in binary temporal, spatial, and more generalized identity oppositions that contrast with the West, such as traditional versus modern, past versus present, East versus West, foreign versus indigenous, religious versus secular, or us versus them. In short, Islam is constructed as the Other (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999).

The media blitz in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks is unique in terms of its impact on how Islam and Muslims are categorized in the United States. The projection of violent images and apparently oppressed veiled Muslim women has not subsided even at the event’s tenth anniversary, which also affects those members in the MSA who are too young to remember the day of 9/11. Robert Holland (2006), who analyzes the representation of Islam from the celebration of the end of a day of fasting during the Muslim holy month of *Ramadan* or end-of-the-semester barbecues.
perspective of critical discourse analysis, represents this media blitz as an extraordinary historical event in terms of how shifts in public opinion of Muslims penetrated audiences’ homes and minds. He claims that 9/11 triggered “an ideological turn in certain kinds of Islamic discourse, and a cultural turn in the discourse of liberal democracy” (p. 37). This ideological turn builds on a long history of Western projection of Muslims collectively as a threat to the “civilized” world (see Said 1979, 1981). Edward W. Said’s (1981) *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, for instance, is a critical account of Western mass-mediated views on Islam and the Middle East.² Said surveys media coverage of the seizure of hostages at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979-1980, the October War, the oil embargo of 1973, and the OPEC price hike in 1974 to point out that media and expert coverage of these events reveals a predisposition to broad abstractions and racism. The problem Said identified lies in these abstractions being presented as objective and factual. Journalists searched for a “real” Islam, which, according to Said, led to generalizing Islam as either violent, backwards, medieval, or stagnant.

Also written before the events 9/11, Karim H. Karim’s (2000) book *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence* criticizes the mass media’s misrepresentation of Islamic cultures, histories, societies, and conflicts in the Caucasus, the Balkans, the Middle East, and the West. The author discusses the emergence of a distinct set of visual signifiers over the last few decades in the media’s projection of Islam. Ideological Islamic “landmarks” have been transformed and tied to the discourse of terrorism. Karim describes these landmarks as the *hijab* worn by Muslim women and girls, the cloak and turban worn by Muslim *ulama*, the Arab head-dress and cloak, the figure and the face of Ayatollah Khomeini, people prostrating in Islamic prayer, a mass of people performing the hajj (pilgrimage) at Mecca, children at a Koranic school, domes of mosques, minarets, a crescent with a five-pointed

² Said bases this book on earlier arguments published in *Orientalism* (1979), which predominantly analyzes how U.S. scholars charted the legacy of European Orientalism to the needs of U.S. imperialism.
Illustrations of these iconographic Islamic images in the print media and television, Karim argues, index ideologies without verbalizing them, specifically a pervasively perceived threat of “Islamic fundamentalism” (p. 68). Even photographs of individuals carry large ideological meaning that has “the potential to activate cognitive models of latent information” (p. 68). To illustrate this point, Karim provides the example of “a stern, bearded ‘middle-Eastern-looking’ man wearing a black cloak and turban and carrying a rosary” (p. 68). This man can trigger images “of a fanatical religious movement, of airplane hijackings, of Western hostages held helpless in dungeons, of truck bombing killing innocent people, cruel punishment sanctioned by ‘Islamic law,’ of the suppression of women, and of people flagellating themselves in public – in sum, of intellectual and moral regression” (p. 68).

These generalizations have intensified after 9/11 (see Karim, 2006; Mas, 2006; Poole & Richardson, 2006; among many) and provided the incentive for contesting physical and metaphorical space in the U.S. geopolitical and moral landscape, leading to behavioral regulations of how much Islam is acceptable in the United States, as was evident, for instance, in the 2010 controversy surrounding the opening of an Islamic community center in a two-block proximity of New York’s Ground Zero site at the former location of the World Trade Center. Erroneously termed the Ground-Zero-Mosque or Mosque at Ground Zero, it caused strong reactions in street protests among proponents and opponents of the center.

The opponents of the Islamic center advocated moving the center out of the proximity of Ground Zero or eliminating its construction completely, citing sensitivities to 9/11 victims and their relatives. They projected Ground Zero as sacred space, casting the physical ground of the former World Trade Center as a site of blessing, worship, or holinessness. Furthermore, they
personified the “Mosque” as an enemy in the messages of some picket signs that read “Mosque Stomps on Graves of 9/11 Victims,” “No Temple for the God of Terrorism at Ground Zero,” “Separate Mosque from Sacred Ground,” or “Preserve the Dignity of our Loved Ones Killed Here on 9/11.” In terms of the spatiality of Islam in the United States, the opponents expelled Islam to the remote Middle East in signs like “Muslims Go Home” or “This Is Not Your Country,” which imply that Muslims cannot be U.S. citizens. The following cartoon by Matt Wuerrrer recaptures this controversy regarding Islamic space in the United States and the definition of “sacred.” It satirizes the hypocrisy of the opponents by illustrating the presence of many clearly non-sacred establishments between the Islamic center and Ground Zero.

In contrast, proponents of the Islamic center grant Islam space in the political and religious landscape of the United States, citing the 1st Amendment to argue against restrictions

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3 Retrieved from online news coverage of the protests.
4 According to The Pew Forum’s (2009) executive summary of their project “Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Muslim Population,” only 20% of the world’s estimated 1.8 billion Muslims live in the Middle East-North Africa region, while more than 60% live in Asia and the rest in predominantly non Muslim-majority countries (http://pewforum.org/Mapping-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx).
on religious practice. On protest signs such as “America Supports All Faiths,” “Love Thy Neighbor,” or “Unite and Fight to Smash Racism,” they argue for peace and tolerance, criticizing the opposition for propelling fear, hate, racism, scapegoating, bigotry, and siding with the enemy. Responding to the opposition’s argument that the Ground Zero site is sacred and can be defiled by an Islamic center, proponents claim, “Islamophobia Defiles Ground Zero” and ask, “Isn’t the Constitution Hallowed?”

The proponents of the Islamic center also took issue with the language usage of its opponents. In the *New York Times Online* article “In Islamic Center Fight, Lessons in Prepositions and Fear-Mongering,” Clyde Haberman (2010) finds fault with the proposition *at* in *Mosque at Ground Zero* that is often used by the opponents of the center:

> There’s that “at.” For a two-letter word, it packs quite a wallop. It has been tossed around in a manner both cavalier and disingenuous, with an intention by some to inflame passions. Nobody, regardless of political leanings, would tolerate a mosque at ground zero. “Near” is not the same, as anyone who paid attention back in the fourth grade should know.

Similarly, Matt Sledge’s (2010) *Huffington Post* online article “Just How Far Is the ‘Ground Zero Mosque’ From Ground Zero?” points out that the center is not *at* Ground Zero but two blocks away and around a corner, “so you would need to go out of your way to have it offend you.”

**Behind the Times: Islam and the Discourse of Anachronism**

This heated political climate of contested Islamic space in the United States gives rise to a powerful and pervasive master narrative that views the social, religious, and linguistic practices of Muslims not only as out of place and antagonistic, but also as anachronistic: Islam has no

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5 The beliefs that Muslims are hostile to the United States contradict the findings by *The Pew Forum* (2007) that “most Muslim Americans have a generally positive view of the larger society;” “a large majority of Muslim
potential for progressing into the future without “reform,” as advocated by some Muslims and many non-Muslims. Islam and Muslims are projected as behind the times, stuck in the past, or against the times, instead of with the times. In other words, the temporal logic constructs Islam and Muslims as outside of modern time, that is, as unable to undergo historical change.

These temporal metaphors suggest that the “modern” and “secular” West, in contrast to Islam, is conceptualized as a chronologically organized, continuous passage from a finite past through the present to a desirable and prosperous future. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) describes this type of temporal progression as historicism in his book Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. Chakrabarty argues that Europe has been depicted as a powerful imaginary that brings modernity to non-Western countries. The modern narrative designates as anachronistic those elements that do not fit into the dominant narrative, characterizing other peoples, cultures, and societies as having a past but no future (see also Fabian, 1983). Instead, in this modern narrative there emerges the “true present,” which “always looks to, and is in turn determined by, the blueprint for a desirable future” (p. 248).

Understanding the ideological meanings of competing ‘histories’ requires understanding the ideological structures that operate within or behind them. Certain aspects of “tradition” cannot be used to construct a desirable future, and Islam signifies such a tradition that supposedly disrupts the historicized linear narrative of modernity (see Keane, 2007).

Kathryn Woolard’s (2004) analysis of a 16th-century controversy over the origin of the Spanish language is helpful for understanding how modernity is often characterized in contrast to the premodern, nonmodern, or anachronistic. In her article, Woolard exposes how an early Americans believe that hard work pays off in this society:” “although many Muslims are relative newcomers to the U.S., they are highly assimilated into American society:” and that “Muslim Americans reject Islamic extremism by larger margins than do Muslim minorities in Western European countries.”

This type of temporality can be explained by the conceptual metaphor that time is agency, as can be seen in the popular idioms time heals, time passes, or times have changed (see also Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).
controversy over the Spanish language involved two contrasting conceptions of time: a historicized “homogenous, empty time” and an atemporal “messianic time,” which are terms first introduced by Walter Benjamin (1968) in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* and then adopted by Benedict Anderson (1991) in his research on *Imagined Communities* and nation building. Homogenous, empty time implies temporal simultaneity and homogeneity across a nation. Time moves in a linear progression in measurable, yet disconnected, units or steps that cause a national community to collectively progress forward through history and towards a state of improved humanity (Anderson, 1991). In the case discussed by Woolard, the 16th century debate concerned the view of Castilian Spanish as having developed from Latin in empty, homogenous time over the centuries versus having always been the language of God and monarchies, aligning to messianic time. Woolard agrees with other researchers that the concept of homogenous, empty time is often associated with the West and therefore is powerful, but she points out that it is not always linked “with epochal social changes, in particular the emergence of the nation” (p. 57), as proposed by Anderson (1991). Instead, she shows that these two conceptions of time can also be used to explain the social implications of the pre-nation language ideologies of Spanish and Latin in Early Modern Spain, and suggests that they are therefore more widely applicable for scholarship.

Several scholars have argued that Islamic practice is associated with “messianic time” (Benjamin, 1968) – a sacred simultaneity across past, present, and future. Instead of subjects moving in synchronized progression through homogeneous, empty time, messianic time implies the presence of virtuous ancestors, festivals, religious holidays, or days of remembrance (Benjamin, 1968, p. 263), which all appear to hinder subjects from progressing towards modernity. Webb Keane (2007) made similar observations in *Christian Moderns: Freedom and*
*Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, in which he analyzes the encounter of Dutch Calvinist missionaries and ancestral ritualists on the Indonesian island of Sumba. The Calvinists, Keane argues, view these ritualists as being behind the times because they preserve “dangerously misguided practices from the past” (p. 2) by worshiping stones, gold, or ancestors. This is constructed as an affront to God and “threatens to undermine the agency proper to humans” (p. 2). Islam is often associated with these types of rituals and with a threat to the flow of “progress.”

**Chronotopicity**

In order to understand these spatial and temporal influences on the construction of a Muslim identity in discourse, I analyze the data in light of the notion of *chronotopicity* (literally “time space”), as introduced for the analysis of literature by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) in his book *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, and recently brought into linguistic anthropology by Asif Agha (2004), Deanna Davidson (2007), Miyako Inoue (2004), and Richard Parmentier (2007), among others. Bakhtin defines a chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (p. 84) in the meaning of every word, sentence, genre, etc., thereby shaping historical consciousness. In his words, time is concretized in the text, as it “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible” (p. 84). Likewise, space “becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history” (p. 84). The author argues that one has to ask when and where a word appears and how it is tied to the whens and wheres of discourses in which it is represented. These whens and wheres are always part of broader cultural logics, which in this dissertation is seen to materialize in media discourse, local religious practice, global Islamic conventions, and a “secular” ideology on the university campus.
Structurally speaking, chronotopes are units of analysis underlying narratives, genres, registers, or other linguistic patterns in text (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 271). Deanna Davidson (2007), for instance, studies the linguistic manifestations of chronotopes underlying the pre-unified East and West Germany in terms of the simple deictic oppositions here/now and there/then. The author states that former Easterners, now part of pan-Germany after the 1989–1990 period of socialism’s fall, segregate space into East and West territories, defined by past state borders. The pre-unified East is nostalgically associated with belonging to a community where everybody knew everybody, so much so that it was not even necessary to have a name on the mailbox (p. 213). Easterners contrast this former sense of belonging with their present social struggles with consumption, poverty, and alienation, all associated with the West. These two chronotopes, East and West Germany, then, are the spatio-temporal foundation that determines the organization of speech events in this community.

It is important to note that spatiality and temporality, as constructed in discourse, are never objective since they interact with a number of social categories, such as religion, gender, or ethnicity, which are always colored with emotions or ideologies. Richard J. Parmentier (2007), who explores multiple planes of temporality from a semiotic perspective, argues that chronotopes are often “indexically ‘charged’ with the aura, patina, sedimented value of the distanced past” (p. 210). This past is often colored with sentiments of nostalgia, loss, or the moral superiority of the good old times, for instance. In the data for this dissertation, moral projections are central to the experience of spatiality and temporality and to being Muslim at the University of Colorado: Islam, for my informants, is not just an imported value system from the Middle East, as the media claims, but a set of moral discourses and practices that emerge within
the discursive field (Hanks, 2005) of the University of Colorado and that culminate in Islam being “a complete way of life.”

In his article “Recombinant Selves in Mass Mediated Spacetime,” Asif Agha (2007) elaborates on Bakhtin’s chronotopes and highlights that one cannot forget the subject in the analysis of time/space relations. Although already implicit in Bakhtin’s novelistic chronotopes, entextualized projections of time and space cannot be isolated from those of personhood (p. 320). Agha renders the temporal framework of Anderson’s (1991) argument regarding the emergence of nationhood as too general and imprecise: For Anderson, the advent of the printing press and mass communication ideologically situated the nation state – and therefore all of its citizens – as moving separately yet united towards the future. As a point of contrast, Agha develops an account of cultural chronotopes, which he defines as “depictions of place-time-and-personhood to which social interactants orient when they engage each other through discursive signs of any kind” (p. 320). Neither time, nor space, nor personhood are semiotic isolates in Agha’s account; rather, all three parameters give meaning to each other in a specific context and its power relations.

This trend of viewing meaning as emergent from discursive and interactive contexts is not new in the social sciences, as can be seen in the literature of linguistic anthropology (see Bauman, 1977, 1986; Duranti, 2009; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992, Hymes, 1962) or sociocultural linguistics more broadly (see Bucholtz & Hall, 2003, 2005; Bucholtz, 2011). Alessandro Duranti (2009) in Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader, for instance, argues that the basic assumption of linguistic anthropology is that “to understand the meaning of linguistic messages one must study them within the contexts in which they are produced and interpreted” (p. 31). This obligation towards contextualized language, he writes, is supported by “a number of units of analysis that

7 Bakthin (1981) mentions that the “image of a man” is “always intrinsically chronotopic” (p. 85).
go beyond the word, the sentence, and the notion of language as an ideal system” (p. 31). These units of analysis could include communities, speech events, or activities, which in turn shape identity, ideologies, religious beliefs, and gender. Bakhtin (1981) provides the analogy that words function like biological organisms that cannot survive outside of their nurturing environment. In interaction, “each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (p. 293), a process he calls *dialogism* (p. 259).

The sociocultural linguists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall argue for combining theoretical frameworks that analyze language in social life, such as linguistic anthropology, the sociology of language, and discursive psychology (Bucholtz, 2011; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, 2005). In their article “Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach,” Bucholtz & Hall (2005) focus on the discursive achievement of identity, or more specifically, on how interactional environments impact speakers’ usages of particular linguistic features and on how speakers intersubjectively position themselves with respect to their environments. In a comprehensive review of how identity has been viewed in the last two decades of sociocultural linguistics, the authors maintain that identity is “the product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore is a social and cultural rather than primarily internal psychological phenomenon” (p. 585). The authors also maintain that the analysis of identity in discourse involves “macro-level demographic categories, temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles, and local, ethnographically emergent cultural positions” (p. 585).

My analysis aligns with these views on the intersubjective and interactional construction of identity, but differs in making *spatiality*, such as the “ethnographically emergent cultural positions” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 585) and *temporality*, such as “temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles” (p. 585), analytic categories in themselves.
that interact with, and crucially inform, the discursive emergency of identity. In sum, the data analysis in this dissertation is based on (1) the chronotope as an intimate link between temporality, spatiality, and identity; and (2) the expression of these interrelated features in a specific participation framework, which itself has a chronotopic organization of time, place, and identity (Agha, 2007, p. 321). This participation framework could encompass a mass mediated audience of millions of people, as Agha (2007) points out, which is geographically dispersed but semiotically unified by a common message. Widely known chronotopes emerge in the form of “large-scale cultural ideologies and sociopolitical formations” or “widely acknowledged sociohistorical trends” (p. 322), examples of these being colonialism in the Middle East or Protestantism in the United States. In the aforementioned contestations of time, space, and identity in media stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, a sociohistorical trend is the message that Islam is threatening to a Western way of life because of its perceived reliance on a temporality and spatiality that is out of sync with American narratives of linear progress. A chronotope is most vividly visible and powerful when it is voiced in a frame of contrast with another chronotope (Agha, 2007, p. 322).\(^8\) As an example, Agha cites the competing chronotopes that frame the dispute between Darwinians and Creationists: “evolutionary history” and “biblical time” (p. 322). Each of these chronotopes informs “an official picture of the world (linked to canonical texts and institutions) in one circle, and is an object of derision (and sometimes rage) in the other” (p. 322). Similarly, the chronotopic models of both Islam and the West are widely known, accessible to all members, and are legitimated by their uptakes in the MSA. The negotiation of these chronotopes is a social process executed “through modes and moments of participatory access to the model itself (i.e., through semiotic activities that unfold within

\(^8\) Bakhtin (1981) is primarily interested in the contrast of chronotopes that figure in competing literary genres in the novel.
participation frameworks) and through forms of alignment to that model (or variant) to which participants orient in some modality of response (registering uptake, maintaining its presuppositions, countering its features, proposing alternatives, etc.) through their own semiotic activities” (p. 322). According to linguist Debra Spitulnik (1997), who investigates mass media’s extensive power in circulating radio discourse in Zambia, “top down” mass communication builds communities that “are preceded and succeeded by numerous other dialogues and pieces of language that both implicate them and render them interpretable” (p. 161).

**Reclaiming Space and Time: Constructing a Female Muslim Identity in the U.S.**

I started my research in the fall of 2007. Initially, I was interested in gender relations between Muslim women and Muslim men as an ethnographic and analytical focus because of the projected inequalities between purportedly oppressive Muslim men and submissive Muslim women. However, after a few months of observing the group, I had come to notice a lack of concern for gender issues in interviews with Muslim women and in the weekly meetings. Instead, the women voiced a genuine concern with having their Muslim identity or piety questioned by, in their own words, “America” or “the West.” I realized that the primary positioning of women in the group revolves around their aim to defend Islam and to construct a personalized Islam against a “secular” society, not against Muslim men. This observation changed my focus towards how media images shape their interpretation of Islam and therefore their Islamic practice. One of the primary questions that frames this dissertation is the following: How have these media images compelled members of the group to renegotiate their identity across both the “secular” university environment and the “sacred” realms of Islamic practice?
The women mainly took issue with being constructed as behind the times, backwards, or foreign, as well as with being reduced to mere objects positioned as “powerless” and “submissive” to their husbands and their religion. They conceive of themselves as being viewed as lacking the emancipation of their “modern” Western counterparts and as constantly being put “on the spot.” Their private lives have become public affairs – a phenomenon also noted by Garbi Schmidt (2004) in her research on the identity formation of young Muslims in Denmark, Sweden, and the United States. Schmidt writes that Muslim women’s lives have been publicly scrutinized and criticized and that “their life-styles, their clothing, and their piety metonymically stand for the stigmatized Islamic space in the West since they are unfamiliar to the majority population” (p. 31). The women in the MSA also critique the public judgment of Muslim women wearing the hijab – a headscarf worn by Muslim women covering the hair and neck. The hijab is viewed as a powerful visual marker that metonymically stands for an insurmountable spatial and temporal boundary between the “modern” West and the “anti-modern” (Middle) East. Although the practice of wearing the hijab is generally viewed as insignificant by the women, they are nevertheless incited to address this practice frequently on the university campus and during their events.

The MSA women argue that the media favor a “progressive” Muslim subject who sheds any old-fashioned practices of an apparently violent religion and embraces “modernity.” One local example comes from a story covered in the online Boulder newspaper Daily Camera, entitled “Muslim Woman Fights Boulder Jail to Keep Hijab for Mug Shot” (2010). Journalist Erica Meltzer reports on a 19-year-old female undergraduate student, convert to Islam and member of the Muslim Student Association at the University of Colorado, who reported to the jail for a two-day sentence. Meltzer describes the woman as “fighting the Boulder County Jail’s
insistence that she remove her headscarf for a booking photo, saying that to do so would violate her religious beliefs.” The student apparently refused the mugshot on 1st Amendment grounds, which grants religious freedom, as well as on the grounds that the Qur’an requires Muslim women to wear the hijab in public. After three hours spent at the jail, she was released without having her picture taken.

What is interesting, however, is how Meltzer spends a significant portion of the article criticizing the reason the woman was in jail in the first place, portraying the arrest as demonstrating the undergraduate student’s hypocrisy. Referencing that the student was drinking while driving, with a blood-alcohol content of 0.19, Meltzer writes that the women’s offense is “an awkward one for an observant Muslim, whose faith prohibits alcohol consumption, to explain.” This singling out is highly marked, given that many religions discourage alcohol consumption and surely all of them disapprove of drinking while driving. Muslims are thus held up to a different standard of morality, while simultaneously being disparaged for that morality. In a reply to this article, entitled “Student Voice: ‘I Am a Muslim and I Love This Country’” (2010), the woman in question, Maria Hardman, apologizes for her actions of drinking and driving, addressing the public with an all-encompassing “To My Fellow Americans.” But her focus is on the religious humiliation that she experienced at the hands of the police and an unsupportive media: “As a Muslim-American woman, I feel let down by my country.” She elaborates that she should be granted religious freedom as an American citizen, and that this freedom should include the right to adorn her hijab in the photograph. Finally, a later article titled “Boulder Sheriff Will Allow Muslim Woman to Wear Hijab in Jail Photo” (Meltzer & Aguilar, 2010) reported that the issue was resolved by a compromise to push the scarf back one inch, enough to expose her hairline and ears.
The newsworthiness of the Boulder booking photo conflict and the *Ground-Zero-Mosque* controversy mirrors the women’s concern with contested Islamic space: despite their ethnic backgrounds as Arabs, Africans, Persians, Afghans, or white Americans, all women in the MSA face similar accusations of foreignness and backwardness, of being spatially and temporally removed from, as well as racialized within, the America mainstream. Furthermore, they are viewed as threatening to various liberal feminist causes (see Mahmood, 2005) since they are collectively linked to conservative and Islamically defined conceptions of womanhood and family. Traditional Islamic values are seen as inimical to individual performance, emancipation, and personal development.

Various scholars on Muslims in the West argue that Muslim women especially are caught in this discursive field of oppositions (Schmidt, 2004; Badran, 2006; Nieuwkerk, 2006; among others), and many Muslim women from various backgrounds have been voicing their disagreement on these issues. Articles on and by Muslim women on this topic are manifold. A Google spot search on “Muslim women” retrieved numerous popular articles and blogs authored by American and European Muslim women that discuss the difficulty in finding balance between Islamic tradition and secular society; all of these articles take for granted the binary polarity of these concepts. This binary sentiment is exemplified by Na’ima B. Robert, who describes herself as a Muslim author, wife, and mother living in Britain. In “Behind the Veil: The Online Diary of a British Muslim Woman”9 (*Times Online*, July 26, 2008), she writes about the problems she encounters “living in the embrace of a vibrantly secular, liberal democratic society.” She states “on the one hand, there is your faith, Islam, a religion and way of life revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) over 1400 years ago, a religion that affects the way you think, the way you act, the way you speak, dress and eat.” On the other hand “there is the dunya, the

9 [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article4400089.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article4400089.ece).
‘worldly life,’ where you live, work, study, shop, entertain and unwind. It is a world of trends and societal pressures, deadlines and promotions, summer sales and summer holidays.”

These tensions are also addressed in numerous edited volumes on defending Islam by and about Muslim women and scholars on Islam in the United States. The titles of these volumes themselves reveal the aim to dispel negative stereotypes: *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* (2005), edited by Fawzia Afzal-Khan; *Voices of Resistance: Muslim Women on War, Faith and Sexuality* (2006), edited by Sarah Husain; *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak* (2005), edited by Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur; and *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America* (2000), edited by Gisele Webb. Some contributors to *Shattering the Stereotypes*, for instance, acknowledge the dichotomy between the East and the West and at the same time reject it. This dichotomy, in their opinion, lies only in analytical categories imposed by the twin lenses of Western education and modes of communication, such as satellite television and the Internet. Contributor Azizah al-Hibri writes that “Islam is not merely an ‘Oriental’ religion but a world religion which is capable of meeting the needs of Muslims in all historical eras and all geographical locations” (p. 159). In *Voices of Resistance* Azza Basarudin, Maddy Mohammed, and Khanum Shaikh argue that the negative media image of a Muslim woman causes her to be “a self-hating Muslim” exposed to “a recycled modern ‘Orientalism’ in the United States, Canada, and Europe” (p. 141).

**Da’wah**

Consequently, the most frequently discussed topic in the interviews, meetings, and event planning that I witnessed in my ethnographic research is how to correctly conduct *da’wah*, which is an Islamic precept roughly translated to and conceptualized as an invitation or calling to Islam. In Islamic literature or Islamic public forums, the correct way to conduct da’wah is contested.
Although most agree that Islamic practices and values should permeate the spatial and ideological boundary with the non-Muslim community, some see da’wah as an obligation for every Muslim to inform non-Muslims about Islam, while others deem it to be a reserved right of Islamic scholars to disperse and popularize the message of Islam. In my data, the women formulate their religious obligation of da’wah as duty for every Muslim, and this duty is highly colored by their need to defend Islam against harmful stereotypes. They conduct da’wah through three channels: (1) embodiment of Islam in everyday interaction; (2) acquisition of Qur’anic knowledge in order to answer non-Muslims’ questions about Islam; and (3) outreach events.

**Da’wah through embodiment.** Many women in the MSA mark their identity as Muslim women by using their appearance as *muhajjaba* (Muslim women who wear the hijab). Catherine and Tamara, for instance, are both native Coloradans, recent converts to Islam, and *muhajjaba*. They both claim that the non-Muslim community needs to be constantly reminded and educated about Islam. Tamara claims “I’m white and a Muslim and it shows people that there are Muslims of all races, that I’m American and Muslim.” In a similar way, Catherine states that “people are really interested in me because, you know, I have white skin and blue eyes and I am American.” She believes that just living an Islamic way of life would educate and attract non-Muslims more effectively than holding events showcasing Islam on campus community. She noticed that some people are angry towards Muslims and pleads that Muslims should always remain calm and answer any questions with a smile. A Muslim identity, for them, is bound up with the bodily behavior of dressing modestly and responding gently.

Amita, like Catherine and Tamara, is a convert to Islam and a native Coloradan, but she previously practiced Hinduism and her parents are first generation immigrants from India. She
aspires to wearing the hijab so non-Muslims can see her as a Muslim and not just “a brown person,” in her words. She claims that wearing the hijab “is a way of marking yourself as a Muslim woman and being proud and showing it to everybody.” But she acknowledges that, along with it being a privilege, wearing the hijab is also a huge responsibility, which she will only take on once she can be “a perfect Muslim at all times.” Amina, her best friend, shares this view of conducting this type of embodied da’wah. She grew up in a Pakistani family in California and intends to wear the hijab when she is “strong enough” to never take it off again. Maria, a young woman from Iran, feels that the hijab demands respect from the campus, although she admits that she does not wear the hijab perfectly - her mother points out that she shows too much hair. Nevertheless, Maria maintains that the hijab is empowering for a Muslim woman when she wants to represent Islam. Zibaa, her sister-in-law, even goes a step further, claiming that she strives to become a better and more harmonious person through wearing the hijab, which helps her remember that “our creator is God.” Like Maria, she enjoys people seeing her as a Muslim and asking questions about Islam.

Accordingly, the women resignify the image of the muhajjaba as being deviant from the U.S. norm of an American woman showing hair and skin: due to the way the media portray the wearing of the hijab, any muhajjaba will automatically be seen as in an oppositional position to the norms for women in American society. Although they are assigned the ideology of oppressed or threatening Muslim women, they use this image to project a version of Islam they deem appropriate and presentable. A similar process is discussed by Zimman & Hall (2009), who investigate how language is implicated in creating the categories of “male” and “female” bodies in online communities of transsexual men, as well as how the use of gesture, specifically a distinctive hand clap, is implicated in constructing hijras in India as “neither man nor woman.”
The authors propose the following: “the relationship between language and the body is a recursive one, with language shaping conceptualizations of the body, and embodied action functioning as an integral part of language” (p. 3). The meaning ascribed to Muslim women wearing the hijab and the embodiment of Muslimhood are themselves the product of linguistic practice.

**Da’wah through studying the Qur’an.** In addition to embodying Muslimhood through wearing the hijab, all of the women I interviewed propose representing Islam by studying the Qur’an and therefore equipping themselves to answer all questions about Islam posed by non-Muslims. Indeed, Fahida views a solid knowledge of the Qur’an as the most important tool of da’wah. She grew up in Saudi Arabia and is often mistaken for an American, as she claims, because of her light-skinned Turkish heritage and her dark-blonde hair. Her reason for joining the MSA was her desire for activism on behalf of Muslim women to “speak up” and “let the Muslim women’s voice be heard,” as well as for showing society that Muslim women are not oppressed. She does not wear the hijab and, in contrast to Catherine and Tamara, does not use her appearance as activism. Nevertheless, she urges Muslims to “make sure that if you’re speaking regarding an Islamic issue, that you have verses from the Qur’an or sayings of the Prophet, peace be upon him, to back it up with.” She believes that Islam cannot and should not be forced on non-Muslims. Since Islam is “a very beautiful, logical, and peaceful religion,” it is enough for Muslims to lead by example and “portray his [the Prophet Muhammad’s] good deeds as an example to other people.” She is convinced that it would not take long for an ignorant person “to realize the true essence of Islam.” Faiza, her sister, agrees and adds that she has been
studying the Qur’an “all her life,” which helped her to grow into a “mature” and “logical” person.

Zahleh argues along similar lines. She is an Afghani Muslim who was born in Pakistan as a refugee of the Soviet-Afghani war and moved to the United States when she was six years old. She is concerned about “Afghan issues” during the present U.S. occupation of her home country and finds it difficult to be “the official enemy of the United States.” She perceives herself as being “in between those two communities, these two worlds” and, in order to bridge this gap, she studies the Qur’an and takes philosophy undergraduate courses. These courses, she explains, help her interpret her religion more “open-mindedly” and educate people about Islam.

In sum, the women agree that in order to become a da’ee (a Muslim who invites unbelievers to Islam), a Muslim has to practice discipline and perseverance in her/his work, which requires studying the Qur’an and training in Islamic ways to conduct arguments. The members believe that the process of conducting da’wah is an interactive learning field, as each question that the da’ees are not able to answer forces them to look up the answers and increases their knowledge of Islam. The women often claim that questions non-Muslims ask about Islam make them stronger Muslims since they have to work harder in knowing their faith. They acknowledge that in their home countries of Afghanistan, Iran, or Pakistan they never had to acquire a detailed knowledge of their faith because they were never challenged.

**Da’wah through outreach and community work.** The task of conducting da’wah also requires a deep understanding of the society in which Muslims live, and the da’ees of the MSA want to overcome spatial and temporal boundaries in the U.S. ideological landscape by getting involved in the campus community. All public events held by the group, such as the annual
Sights and Sounds of the Islamic World festival or the Islam Awareness Week, are geared towards showing the non-Muslim student audience their interpretation of Islam. Furthermore, Project Downtown, a recurring event that requires the members to buy pizza for homeless people in the central part of the city, provides the members with an opportunity to tell the general public about “the real Islam.” During the academic year, some members conduct guest lectures on the university campus to inform other undergraduate students about Islam from their perspective. Other opportunities to reach out to the non-Muslim community are participation in various interfaith events held by student groups of other religions, such as the Baha’i Student Group, or by local churches, such as the Episcopal church, which invite an open interfaith discussion on religious differences and similarities.

Analyzing verbal and behavioral strategies of da’wah is a complex task, as Hirschkind (1997) observes. Da’wah activities, which in addition to preaching or almsgiving could also comprise providing medical care, building a mosque, publishing, or “generally promoting what is considered in the society to be public virtue through community action” (p. 13), are always political: they are subject to control or restrictions by the state and “must often compete with state or state-supported institutions (pedagogic, confessional, medical) promoting Western models of family, worship, leisure, social responsibility, etc.” (p. 13). Hirschkind concludes that the success of da’wah, like the success of any project to preserve a traditional form of personal piety, “will depend on its ability to engage with the legal, bureaucratic, disciplinary and technological resources of modern power that shape contemporary societies” (Hirschkind, 1997, p. 13; see also Foucault’s later work on sexuality and governmentality, such as Foucault, 1992). These resources of modern power include education, worship, social welfare, and family (p. 13), or in this dissertation, the university-sanctioned parameters of being a registered student group;
the media stereotypes of Islam and Muslims and an often mass mediated ideological bond to a national and international *ummah* (community of Muslims).

The Muslim women in the MSA, in particular, see the process of da’wah as necessarily involving not just a representation or promotion of Islam, but more specifically a requirement to react to American media discourse and to directly or indirectly engage with it in creative and oppositional ways. Thus the general Islamic practice of da’wah takes on very special inflections for young Muslim women in this MSA.

**Chapter Outline**

The present introductory chapter has pointed to the immense influence of negative media stereotypes on the linguistic and social behavior of Muslims in the MSA. It also presented some of the linguistic and social contexts in which the study was conducted. Each of the five data analysis chapters in this dissertation present different approaches to how temporal, spatial, and identity relations – chronotopes – reveal the positioning of local Muslim women in the context of defending Islam against the mass mediated representations of Muslims and Islam and of being required by their religion to conduct da’wah. The questions to be investigated are as follows: how do specific temporalities, spatialities, or identities, along with their ideological and moral implications, build a dialectic between the individual Muslim, U.S. society, and the scriptures of Islam? How do media-driven stereotypes change da’wah, and how do the women’s Islamic moral, scriptural, social, or ritual codes influence the defense of Islam?

As a sociocultural linguist, I approach the analysis of chronotopes in my chapters similarly to how Bucholtz and Hall (2005) approach a sociocultural linguistic perspective on identity: through a broad interdisciplinary field that centers on explaining linguistic features
within sociocultural processes, making use of “the comprehensive toolkit already available” (p. 585). Specifically, in order to extract time/space/identity from the data, I apply the linguistic frameworks of language ideology, indexicality, and narrative analysis, which demonstrate that the construction of chronotopes occurs on multiple levels simultaneously. As Agha (2007) claims, chronotopes “are formulated by a vast variety of text-patterns and genres in discursive interaction” (p. 323), which lead to a deconstruction of time/space/personhood relations, as elaborated in the chapters.

Chapter 2 specifically looks at the ideological binary of “Muslim” versus “the West,” which is one of the most prominent oppositions constructed in the media and also reiterated by the women and the group. Applying the framework of Membership Categorization Devices (MCD) to my data allows for uncovering how the women use the membership categories “Muslim,” “Muslim woman,” “Muslim man,” “sister,” and “brother,” as polar opposites to “the West” or “America” with the aim to reverse the directionality of the discursively created moral superiority of the West towards Muslims. The women describe “the West” or “America” as geographic and ideological categories attributed with ignorance, oppression, superficiality, present and past global domination, and a general lack of values or religion. In contrast, they describe person categories such as “Muslim” and “Muslim woman” without any chronotopic values: community members are global, not restricted to any space and time, and hence morally superior. Interestingly, my analysis of these membership categories demonstrates that even thought the women use various adverse membership attributes for “the West,” they nevertheless maintain the categorization of “Muslim” as Other, distinguishing themselves with the use of negative polarity and alternative descriptions such as “we are not that way.” These discursive tactics echo the mutual exclusivity of “Islam” versus “the West” that is perpetuated in the media
and similarly position Islamic space as elsewhere, as not belonging to the United States. The women’s discursive strategies thus work to reify the dominant “us” versus “them” opposition.

Chapter 3 investigates how the women define their identity within ideological bifurcations of individual agency versus Islamic ritual practice. In dominant American media discourse, agency is often portrayed as an essential attribute of being “modern” or a “Westerner” and denied to the female Muslim subject. Islamic practice is depicted as anachronistic to Western freedom of action and liberal feminist thought (see Mahmood, 2005; Mas, 2005; among others). In contrast, my data illustrates how these women claim ownership over both individual agency and Islamic practice. In terms of agency, they reconcile these purportedly opposite modes of being by aligning to general social types that are acceptable in the campus community, which I call “the independent thinker,” “the scholar,” and “the victor.” Agha (2007) discusses cross-chronotopic alignment as restructuring social relations and participant frameworks in everyday interaction “through the link made between a citation of an event in another time/space and the current interaction” (332). The women of my study achieve alignment through a strategic deployment of impersonal you statements, which literature on pragmatics categorizes as expressing structural knowledge and idealized, general truth that is not anchored in time and space (Berry, 2009; Fludernik, 1991; Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990). They also apply these language practices to subvert what they deem to be the most controversial of Islamic practices - the hijab and jihad - and use them as self-disciplining techniques to construct themselves as modest, pious and, most of all, agentive Muslim women.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyze autobiographical faith testimonies in the narratives of both born-and-raised Muslims, which I call born Muslims (Chapter 4), and converts to Islam, which I call new Muslims (Chapter 5). These narratives reveal how constructions of the past, specifically
Islamic rituals conducted in what is portrayed as the “ignorant state” of pre-adolescence, get re-indexed and highlighted to construct a suitable Islamic practice in the present.

Chapter 4 analyzes born Muslims’ discursive strategies when narrating how their faith developed over the years. Reacting to being seen as behind the times and stagnant in the past, the women construct a version of the modern narrative of modernity, as proposed by the anthropologist Webb Keane (2007) in his book Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetishism in the Mission Encounter. Keane argues that modern subjects have to progress towards becoming free and emancipated human beings, capable of acquiring the staples of modernity: self-transformation, self-realization, agency, and de-objectification of religion, which is “a story of human liberation from a host of false beliefs and fetishisms that undermine freedom” (p. 5). This chapter shows that the women do all of the above in their faith development narratives, which depict progress in their development as Muslims and de-objectify religion through the resignification of Islamic ritual. Whether it is praying five times a day (salat), fasting during Ramadan (sawn), or wearing the Islamic head scarf (hijab), Islamic rituals are not eliminated in their narratives but rather highlighted and delinked from their material, ritualistic, and pure-repetitious nature. They are thus reassigned a new meaning compatible with the construction of a “modern subject.” The narratives are rhetorical practices of identity construction, movement, and self-realization.

Since the media organizes Islamic practices along ideologically anachronistic regimes, I analyze the rhetorical practices used in faith development narratives that renegotiate these regimes by using Bakhtin’s (1981) influential chronotopic prototypes: the chronotope of the road and the chronotope of the life-course towards authentic knowing in which the narrative plot is broken down into well-marked epochs. These epochs reflect the narrators’ ignorance of the
accurate interpretation of Islam, self-critical skepticism, and meaninglessness of their religious lives, all leading to self-knowledge and authentic understanding of the truth through the type of Islam practiced in the MSA. The majority of the narratives depict movement or progress in the women’s development as Muslim and human beings, echoing sentiments displayed in Keane’s moral narrative of modernity.

These findings echo Western ideological oppositions not only between the “religious” and the “secular,” but also between the “religious” and the “spiritual.” Keane (2011) suggests that “spirituality is the product of that purification characteristic of what I have called the ‘moral narrative of modernity’” (para. 1). Of crucial importance for my data analysis is Keane’s argument that religious purification has changed in the contemporary West. Historically, it has stood for eliminating religious ritual, codes, and hierarchies in the quest to eliminate barriers between humans and divinity (para. 1). The rituals, codes, and hierarchies as ends in themselves were seen as barriers between the subject and his or her true self. In my data, Islamic rituals function in this way in that they are not ends but a way of discipline to become a better Muslim since praying, fasting, and wearing the hijab are interpreted by the women and other Muslims in the MSA as a means to submit to God and to be closer to God. The endpoint of their narratives is not secularism or anti-religion, but rather a “pure” form of Islam that is not tainted by organized religion.

Chapter 5 investigates conversion narratives of three female American converts to Islam who are faced with the media’s disbelief and criticism of American women converting to Islam and wearing the hijab. This criticism, which is also voiced in Western liberal feminism (see Mahmood, 2005), questions how “emancipated” American women can cross ethnic and religious boundaries – ideological constructs – into a religion that is seen as oppressive and violent.
towards them. The converts thus experience a “foreignization” that is exacerbated by the way the university environment treats religion in general as irrational and as a suspension of “normal” thinking and reality (Harding, 1987).

An important point of departure is to investigate the tensions between the socioreligious frame the converts leave behind (associated with the non-Islamic U.S.) and the new Islamic frame that predetermines the contour of the whole (Bakhtin, 1981) and “functions as a means of individual problem-solving” (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999, p. 361). My data show that the women use narrative patterns that partially reflect conventional local rhetorical patterns of storytelling for communicability and persuasion. Interestingly, the narratives predominantly align in content and structure to a genre of personal transformation stories referenced in academic literature on narrative as the Pauline conversion narrative. Originally linked to the apostle Paul’s radical conversion from a persecutor of Christians to a Christian missionary, this genre of narrative depicts a lost or sinful soul transforming his or her life into one with higher morals and value. This type of narrative had become “the most unmistakable religious shibboleth in existence” (Bailey, 2008, p. 222) and also underlies non-religious, life-changing transformations. Bailey (2008) describes the structure of events of this narrative with the pattern of transgression-transformation-commissioning, famously adopted by George W. Bush when enacting his personal transformation from a led-astray alcoholic to a born-again Christian and U.S. president. In other words, such narratives portray a subject that moves from a life with no direction (transgression) through events that trigger a changed identity (transformation) to a life with a sense of purpose and outreach (commissioning).

Another influential structural pattern in these narratives is the concept of reversion to a “real,” “true,” or “pure” Islam, in the women’s own words, by which they mean a return to the
natural, pre-socialized, and unpolluted state of Islam into which every human being is born and which crystalizes in their transformation and commission phases. As with the spatio-temporal deanchoring discussed in Chapter 4, the women’s use of this concept again projects an Islam that is devoid of any time, space, and identity. The women describe Islam as pure or perfect after divorcing it from any social, behavioral, or sectarian divisions, “imperfect people,” distant pasts, or remote places. In short, Islam has to be de-chronotopicalized in order to be applied to the lives of these women. The women want “a genuine American Islam, rooted in the classical faith, which dates back before the theological, political and legal schisms fractured the Ummah, the Muslim world, centuries ago” (Grossman, 2007, para. 10). This rhetoric of genuineness, authenticity, and purity is a general trend in contemporary storytelling and can also be found, for instance, in coming out narratives – a rhetoric created by another group forced into activism in the United States, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community.

Chapter 6 investigates language ideology, specifically the ideology of Arabic – a cover term for conversational varieties, such as Egyptian Arabic and Sudanese Arabic, as well as for Qur’anic Arabic. Qur’anic Arabic is ideologically anchored in the Qur’an as the literal word of God, spoken through the angel Gabriel and recorded by the prophet Muhammad. As such, Arabic is subject to linguistic purity and is non-translatable. The chapter provides two case studies of how Qur’anic Arabic is used in interaction with conversational American English: (1) the use of the conversational religious and discursive markers insha’alla, masha’allah, and alhamdulallah; and (2) the use of the Surat al-Fitiha (1st Surah of the Qur’an) in the five daily prayers. I discuss how these ideologies relate to previous findings regarding the purity of Islam and religious ritual to a different participation framework: the Sights and Sounds of the Islamic World festival, which is an annual public celebration of Islam. Detailed consideration is given to
the power of the chronotopic organizational framework of multiculturalism under which student
groups like the MSA hold cultural and religious festivals. Under this label, the university has
institutionalized the concepts of equality, dignity, respect, individual expression, and exchange
of diverse thought amongst international students. In these festivals, events or epochs of the past,
such as the Golden Age of Islam, fit into present performances under the modern heading of
celebrating cultures and cultural relativity. Islam is tied to places, times, and people – or
chronotopically anchored – and seems to reverse the claims to purity and reconstructing the
meaning of Islamic ritual made by the women in the interviews. This new participation
framework relies on producing nostalgia, which is a form of remembering and dwelling in an
imagined past. Hirschkind (2001) writes that nostalgia is one “by which secular forms of
memory secure their privilege: in recoding nonsecular forms of memory as romantic
sentimentality, the terms secure the transparency and authority of secular historical practice” (p.
25). The discourse of nostalgia, then, is “an affective expression of the modern logic of linear
and forward-looking temporality, in which the idealized quality of the past is perceived to be
permanently lost and irrecoverable” (Inoue, 2004a, p.3). In these festivals, nostalgia backgrounds
the media stereotypes.

The conclusion in Chapter 7 summarizes the key themes of the study and suggests the
implications of this work for the study of language and religion.

The seven chapters that constitute this dissertation do not seek to determine a truth about
either modernity or Islam, nor do they seek to illustrate how media images sensationalize Islam,
or even how members of the Muslim Student Association define Islam. Instead, they offer an
analysis of ever-changing discursive effects on the construction of stigmatized religious
identities in a local community. My hope is that the linguistic anthropological method employed
here can be applied to studies of other religious communities in the United States and be used to expose and highlight the spatio-temporal framings involved in the making of social meaning. As such, this dissertation seeks to “[move] us beyond ideas about the local and the global and [shift] our focus from media systems, texts and audiences to more subtle processes of modernity in which the media are enmeshed” (Saranovitz, 2007, pp. 1-2). Although the chapters presented here will not provide a comprehensive picture of Muslims in general, they will nevertheless suggest a framework for how to study some Muslims comprehensively, at a specific time, and at a specific place.
This chapter investigates the Muslim Student Association (MSA) women’s identity claims to being “Muslims” and “Muslim women” against the background of negative media images of Muslims after 9/11 in the United States, focusing on how morality emerges in discursive identity construction. As my discussion of the Ground Zero Mosque controversy in the previous chapter demonstrated, media images have been changing the perceived spatial, temporal, and moral foundations of Islam in the United States among Muslims and non-Muslims: Islam has been increasingly spatialized as outside the United States (or the Western world) and temporalized as behind “modern” times, especially by the general public in response to universalizing media stereotypes of Muslims. This chapter shows the women’s responses to these de-territorializing and de-temporalizing processes. I analyze their competing discourses on identity positioning in which spaces gain new meaning and moralities.

The women’s claims to identity are framed within the powerful and pervasive binary opposition of “Islam” versus the morally superior “West.” As I pointed out in the previous chapter, scholars of Islam have long shown that Islam is set against the ideologically rich concept of “the West,” a dichotomy that also entails the oppositions of tradition versus modernity, religion versus secularism, religious bigotry versus Western enlightenment/rationality, past versus present, far versus near, East versus West, and so forth. The “secular” West is constructed as modern and superior and anything Islamic as either incompatible or not quite there yet. This
also implies a hierarchy, where the West (or in my data the United States) is more powerful and influential in defining, transforming, and essentializing the Other, and specifically Islam (see Al-Azmeh, 1996; Ghannoushi, 2011; Hirschkind, 2001; Karim, 2006; Said, 1979, 1981; Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999; among many). In the process of “othering,” the person, group, society, or nation that carries out the othering constructs itself as original and authentic, as well as ethically and morally superior. Interestingly, as I demonstrate in the excerpts below, the women in the MSA conduct similar type of othering, but they reverse to moral geography.

All of the women at the time these interviews were conducted were active members of the MSA. Despite their cultural and ethnic diversity, they repeatedly asserted that they felt united by an Islam they viewed as non-sectarian, non-racialized, and non-nationalistic. While the three converts grew up in Colorado, most of the women arrived in Colorado from other parts of the United States or travelled internationally from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Sudan, or Egypt. This physical relocation is often central to research on migration and globalization (see Appadurai, 1996; Blommaert, 2010; among many). According to Blommaert (2010), globalization commonly stands for increasingly intensified and complex global flows of people, capital, goods, images, and discourses, which are “driven by technological innovations mainly in the field of media and information and communication technology, and resulting in new patterns of global activity, community organization and culture” (p. 13).

Criticizing the widespread metaphor of the world as a village, Blommaert claims that the world instead has become “a tremendously complex web of villages, towns, neighbourhoods, settlements connected by material and symbolic ties in often unpredictable ways” (p. 1). In terms of linguistic resources, Blommaert (2010) elaborates that people’s translocal mobility leads to a situation where “‘sedentary’ or ‘territorialized’ patterns of language use are complemented by
‘translocal’ or ‘deterritorialized’ forms of language use, and that the combination of both often accounts for unexpected sociolinguistic effects” (p. 4-5). While these claims of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity in light of globalization and migration are evident in the MSA, this chapter shows that the combination of local and translocal forms of language use are subject to local reevaluations in the dynamics of the group where a potential diversity of linguistic expressions is often suppressed and normalized. Multilingual, multiethnic, and multisectarian identities aside, the Muslims in the MSA utilize a specific discourse on da’wah when identifying as “Muslims” or “Muslim women,” as I show below.

This discourse on da’wah is the product of two main processes: First, the MSA as a dynamic yet situated official student group establishes implicitly and explicitly the normative and proper manner of speaking about Islam in a way that challenges negative media images. Second, the interview data reveal that da’wah is a central discourse drawn on as part of this counter-discourse: in order to oppose the negative images of Muslims in the media, the women’s Muslim identity is foregrounded over other possible identities, such as undergraduate student, immigrant, American, Iranian, Egyptian, Saudi Arabian, Indian, etc.

Furthermore, the interviews are treated as an outlet for sharing an alternative interpretation of Islam. Assumptions regarding what the interviewer knows are highly relevant to the discursive shape of these interviews, and there is reciprocal sharing of contexts and semiotic resources between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviews, then, have to be viewed as talk-in-interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, 2005; Widdicomb & Wooffitt, 1995; among many), and it is crucial to analyze linguistic features’ indexical value within the scope of this particular space and time.
In short, the MSA is a controlled and protected space where members from various backgrounds repeatedly (re)negotiate how “Islam” is to be interpreted among themselves and how it should be communicated to the campus community, and the interviews function as another example of this discourse. I investigate the usage of the categories “Muslim” and “Muslim woman” by applying the method of Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), founded by conversation analysts Harvey Sacks (1972) and Emanuel A. Schegloff (1972; 2007a; 2007b). This method is useful for uncovering identity categories since it elaborates on the emergence of category attributes as an interactive accomplishment. In my data, these attributes and predicates of membership categories in the here-and-now are highly dependent for their meaning on their prior usage-based history in the political environment of the post 9/11 United States; these earlier meanings are being recycled for a different discursive goal within the MSA.

The remainder of this chapter initially provides accounts of the characteristics of the MSA and the interview situation - two quite different interactional environments. Subsequently, in the data analysis sections, I demonstrate that the women, like the media, construct their identity and locality as foreign to the physical and ideological space of the United States. However, they reverse the moral geography and construct their “Muslim” identities as morally superior to their “Western” counterparts, reifying the media’s projection that being both Muslim and Western/American is not possible. As Blommaert (2010) claims, “[e]ach society’s ‘moral order’ is reflected in its particular spatial order and in the language and imagery by which that spatial order is represented” (pp. 5-6). The women rhetorically contradict the implied moral superiority of the United States media discourse.
The MSA

The MSA at the University of Colorado was established in 1980 and is a chapter of the MSA National (U.S. and Canada), which materialized in 1963 on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As stated by the MSA National (2011), the mission of all MSA chapters is to unite and serve Muslim students from diverse backgrounds during their university careers by facilitating their efforts to establish, maintain, and develop local MSA chapters throughout North America and influence the type of Islam practiced in each chapter. The goals and duties of the MSA officer team – the president, vice-president, secretary, sisters’ and brothers’ coordinators, secretary, and treasurer – are to allocate responsibilities to each member and officer “all for the sake of Allah.” The MSA can be successful and prosperous only if Allah permits it and if the members stay on the straight path (MSA National, 2011).

The goals of the MSA at the University of Colorado align in general with these aims of unifying and serving Muslims on campus and of encouraging members to cultivate an intimate connection to God, but its specific characteristics are in constant flux since members stay for an average of only four years during their undergraduate and graduate degrees. During the 2-½ years of my ethnographic research, the members were not actively engaged with the MSA National or other MSAs in Colorado. Nevertheless, their mission of defending Islam mirrors those projected by the MSA National as they strive to bring Muslims on campus together and to educate both Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam in order to rectify any misunderstandings about Islam resulting from “the sometimes negative media image of Islam” (MSA, 2007).

The group frequently denounces the recycling of negative media images of Islam in various contexts on the campus of the University of Colorado. Most prevalent and offensive are events like the Islamofascism Awareness Week, a national event organized by David Horowitz.
and held on numerous U.S. campuses. Islamofascism is a newly coined term that aligns Muslims as a general category with fascist movements, such as the Nazi, neo-Nazi, or other totalitarian movements of the past and present. In a general meeting, the members discussed in detail how to represent Islam during this event but eventually opted not to attend so they would not implicitly support the event by their presence. Another event highly criticized by the MSA members was the screening of the controversial documentary *Obsession: Radical Islam’s War against the West* (2005). This documentary projects the threat of a global jihad on Western civilization, interspersed with violent imagery of “radical Islamic terror.” For the members of the MSA the message of the documentary consists of “false claims” that indiscriminately associate Muslims with waging a “holy war” against anything non-Islamic. These events de-territorialize as well as de-moralize group participants as being non-Western and foreign and re-territorialize and re-moralize Islam in specific ways.

Even those events on campus that are meant to dispel stereotypes of Muslims, or of Muslim women specifically, often implicitly recycle those stereotypes. An event organized by the University of Colorado Cultural Events Board, for instance, screened the Alba Sotorra documentary *Unveiled Views: Muslim Women Artists Speak Out* (2009), which focuses on the creativity of five Muslim women in handling unfavorable political and economic conditions in their respective countries. The film was described as follows by the organization *Women Make Movies*:

Bosnian Alma Suljevic risks her life daily clearing the landmines near Sarajevo that are the war’s deadly legacy, then sells minefield earth in European art galleries so that she can continue her work. Eren Keskin, a longtime human rights activist and lawyer with music conservatory training, fights to change Turkey’s legal practices that perpetuate violence against women. Veteran filmmaker Rakshan Bani-Ehmad, true to her credo that art must “look, observe, and discover”, frequently pushes Iran’s censorship rules to the limit. Surrounded by conflict since childhood, young Afghani writer Moshagan Saadat creates brave, profoundly moving and memorable poems. And renowned Pakistani
dancer Nahid Siddiqui, once forced to live outside her homeland when her work was banned, continues to perfect, renew, and teach her art form. (http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c781.shtml)

Although the event’s advertisement declared that “these self-portraits of hope, heroism, and pride challenge conventional Western stereotypes about women in the Islamic world,” the subsequent one-hour question and answer session ignored the documentary altogether. The audience, consisting of approximately 40 women and men from various ethnic and national backgrounds between the ages of 18 and 60, was interested only in speaking about the implication of “the veil” on the freedom of Muslim women. This interest might have been triggered by the term “unveiled” in the title Unveiled Views: Muslim Women Artists Speak Out, which captured the attention of this Western audience, or by the appearance of the moderator, a young Syrian-American Muslim woman who has been wearing the hijab since she was eleven years old. For one hour, the moderator had to defend this choice, despite the fact that Muslim women’s head coverings were not mentioned by the women in the documentary. These head coverings function as a physical as well as metaphorical barrier to the West.

Prompted by these pervasive ideologies on Islam, the MSA constructs Islam as spatially and temporally compatible with any other religion, but Muslims as morally superior. In regard to space, the group projects Islam as a global religion that believes in the unity of all mankind and knows no spatial limits – it is not restricted to the Middle East. In fact, the members state that for about one-fifth of the world’s population, Islam is “a complete way of life,” in their words. As a scriptural support of Islam’s global identity, the members often cite Surah al-Hujurat (49:13), a verse in the Qur’an, that reads, “O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other)” (MSA, 2007).
On temporal grounds, the group legitimizes Islam’s longevity, claiming, “Islam is not a new religion, but the same truth that God revealed through all His prophets to every people” (MSA, 2007). Consider the following faith statement:

Muslims believe in One, Unique, Incomparable God; in the Angels created by Him; in the prophets through whom His revelations were brought to mankind; in the Day of Judgment and individual accountability for actions; in God’s complete authority over human destiny and in life after death. Muslims believe in a chain of prophets starting with Adam and including Noah, Abraham,…, Moses,…, and Jesus, peace be upon them (MSA, 2007).

The members align Islam with the two other Abrahamic religions – Christianity and Judaism – that are socially established religions in the contemporary United States. They affirm that God’s final message was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel as a reconfirmation of an eternal message and as “a summing-up of all that has gone before” (MSA, 2007).

Ideologically and morally speaking, the group claims that Muslims practice a religion of peace, mercy, and forgiveness. The members repeatedly highlight that the term Islam simply means “submission” to God, deriving from the Arabic root *s-l-m* meaning “peace.” For them, the majority of Muslims “have nothing to do with the extremely grave events which have come to be associated with their faith” (MSA, 2007). In contrast to discourses on “secular” belief systems, they claim, “Muslims have religion always uppermost in their minds, and make no division between secular and sacred” (MSA, 2007). They acknowledge that Islam may seem “exotic or even extreme in the modern world” (MSA, 2007), since, as they claim, religion does not dominate everyday life in the West today, thereby recognizing the notion of secularism but rejecting it. In contrast, religious and moral codes for Muslims are eternalized in the Qur’an, which is “the prime source of every Muslim’s faith and practice.” Additional moral support is the
Divine Law, the *Shari`a*, which should be seen as dealing with all everyday matters: it provides wisdom, doctrine, worship, and law in order to uphold the relationship between God and His creatures (MSA, 2007). At the same time, it provides guidelines for “a just society, proper human conduct and an equitable economic system” (MSA, 2007).

The women in the MSA and the group itself consider da‘wah a communal project and an integral part of their identity as Muslims on the campus of the University of Colorado, Boulder. Although some members insist that da‘wah focuses only on improving the relations among Muslims on campus, the political significance of post-9/11 media coverage compelled the MSA to make it a primary goal to defend Islam to the non-Muslim campus community and to project it as a religious and intellectual value system morally superior to the apparent secularism and lack of values in the United States. All events held by the group, such as the yearly Islam Awareness Week and the Sights and Sounds of the Islamic World festivals, are geared towards eradicating negative projections of Islam. The following questions, delivered to an MSA student panel at the Islam Awareness Week in 2008, are illustrative of discourses on dispelling stereotypes that are most bothersome to the MSA. In this weeklong event held every spring semester, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of Islam are invited to talk about the “real Islam,” as one member frames it. The questions for this student panel indicate that the group collectively perceives media messages as unfavorable to Muslims and Islam, especially in the framework of a post-9/11 United States. Moreover, the questions presuppose that the participants on the panel know how to dispel the negative ideologies forged through the media.

**Questions for a MSA member panel at the IAW 2008**

1. *In your opinion, how accurate is the portrayal of Muslims in the media?*
2. *For the brothers, how would you respond to the general misconception that Muslim men are aggressive and abusive towards women?*
3. For the sisters, how does wearing or not wearing the hijab effect how people react around you?

4. In common terms, jihad is defined by holy war. How does Islam define it and what are its parameters?

5. Is there a personal experience that you could share with us in which you were stereotyped against because of your religion?

With the first question, for instance, members asked the panelists to rate the accuracy of the portrayal of Muslims in the media and thus invited the audience to doubt the media’s representations. Not surprisingly, most panelists considered the media’s portrayal of Muslims highly inaccurate.¹⁰

The second and third questions, which were addressed to the male and female members of the MSA separately, presuppose and try to dispel two of the stereotypes most frequently discussed in the group: (1) Muslim men oppress Muslim women (both treated here as monolithic categories), and (2) Muslim women, as wearers of the hijab, are antimodern, backwards, and oppressed. The third question, with its use of the interrogative “how,” presupposes that the hijab does indeed have an effect on how U.S. society treats Muslim women. In response to this question, those women on the panel who wear the hijab claim that they felt discriminated against because they are seen as foreign and anti-American.

Questions four and five both are designed to expose discrimination by non-Muslims towards Muslims. Question four asks for a definition of the term “jihad,” which the group deems problematic in the way the media constructs it as a “holy war against unbelievers.” Specifically, the question opposes the “common” definition to an Islamic definition of jihad, implying that the former is inaccurate and vague. In their response to this question, the panelists point out that the Islamic definition is derived from the Arabic root (j-h-d), which means “struggle.” For them, the

¹⁰ Ironically, the women treat the category “Muslim” as monolithic similar to the projected unfavorable master narrative in the media.
most important jihad is the inner struggle for self-discipline and for becoming a better person.

Finally, question five assumes that students have either experienced or heard of prejudice against Muslims.

The Interview

The interviews with the women have to be viewed as a distinctive in terms of discursive interaction from the general meetings of the MSA, although the fashion of talking about Islam is based on the discourse of da’wah, established in the interaction of all members. Since the interviewer had been participating in these meetings, the women had an understanding of how much the interviewer knows about their goals and hence how much they were able to omit and render as background knowledge. Furthermore, the women have a tacit understanding of the interview procedure, which, according to Widdiecombe & Wooffitt (1995), can be said to be due to “culturally available, taken-for-granted tacit knowledge upon which we draw as interpretative resources to make sense of the actions of others, and which inform our own actions and behaviors” (pp. 77-78). Baker (1997) agrees, arguing that, during an interview, members “draw on their cultural knowledge including their knowledge about how members of categories routinely speak” (p. 131). As Widdiecombe & Wooffitt (1995) point out in their analysis of personal identity, group affiliation, and membership in youth subcultures, speakers draw upon their tacit understanding of the interview procedures and take advantage of the right to speak, which in this dissertation is based on their membership in the MSA. For instance, a question/answer cultural script determines the roles of the interviewer and the interviewee depending on the questions, which cannot be seen as neutral invitations to speak (p. 131). Furthermore, the women are also aware of the fact that their interview can be classified as a
research interview and therefore that they provide knowledge about the research topic of the interviewer.

Despite the fact that the dimensions and the establishment of these participant roles has been determined by the social science research paradigm, the relationship between interviewer/interviewee is not solely one of question/answer or informer/knowledge seeker, even though talk-in-interaction is frequently structured in pairs of exchanges, such as question/answer sequences (Widdicome & Wooffitt, 1995, p. 77). According to Tedlock and Mannheim (1995), participant roles are created in speech events since each speech event requires “a particular type of participant structure to succeed as a certain kind of social event” (p. 13).

Participants are social and linguistic actors positioned during the speech event through power relations, authority, and the individuals’ specific histories and social roles. The interview data support an alternative organization of the interaction, which is the pair of conductor of da’wah/receiver of da’wah.11 According to Widdicome & Wooffitt (1995), “both participants in the interview organize their talk to mobilize the relevancy of the respondents’ identities as members of specific subcultural group” (p. 76). The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is implicitly established in the data discussed here: the interviewer is a female, white, non-Muslim academic, who is researching women in Islam. The interviewees are members of a stigmatized group intending to rectify stereotypes on Islam. These attributes of conversational interaction and of the categories inform the data and call for an alternative organization. Sacks (1992a) and Schegloff (2007) also note the presence of alternative organizations when discussing a group therapy session watched by Sacks behind a one-way mirror and “categorizable by

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11 One of the clearest examples of this relationship was Fahida’s email to the MSA email list recruiting interviewees for this study and telling the women in the MSA: “get your voices heard.”
reference to it as ‘patients’ vis-à-vis his being an ‘observer’” (Schegloff, 2007, pp. 468-469).

Schegloff writes,

several of these ‘patients’ lean toward the microphone and say “Turn on the microphone;” “Testing;” “We’re about to start.” They thereby appear to invoke an alternative categorization device – [performer/audience] – with partitioning constancy relative to [patient/observer]; that is to say, all the persons who are patients by reference to the one MCD are performers under the other; but the two MCDs refract the scene in a rather different way (pp. 468-469).

In similar vein, I regard the interviews as platforms for the women to reclaim Islamic space through the employment of various overlapping participant roles and membership categories. These participant roles and membership categories are determined by the precepts of the wider discourse of da’wah used by the group.

**Muslim versus Non-Muslim**

Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) (Collet, 2009; Sacks, 1972; Schegloff, 2007a, b; Silverman, 1998; among many) makes explicit people’s practically and ideologically oriented rationale for categorizing their social lives, which can be resources for social action and interaction. The membership categories “Muslim” and “Muslim woman” in this chapter are essentialized broad social categories whose attributes and predicates have been established through media images. Tanja Collet (2009) conducts an MCA analysis of the categories civilized and civilization in a corpus of U.S. presidential speeches from 2001-2003 and shows that “the New World Order discourse contains a ‘clash of civilizations’ frame, at least since the terrorist attacks of 2001” (p. 455). As Collett argues, Membership Categorization Analysis takes the position that all knowledge and understanding in verbal interaction about people or collectives is stored in membership categories (p. 459). Following Carolyn Baker’s (1997) social science
approach of analyzing interactional interview data through MCA, I initially locate the central categories of people, places, or things that emerge in the data. I then look at “the activities associated with each of the categories in order to fill out the attributions that are made to each of the categories” (p. 142). The categories, along with the attributions and activities of their members, reveal perspectives regarding how the members could, should, or do behave (p. 143).

In *Harvey Sacks: Social Science and Conversation Analysis*, David Silverman (1998) provides a survey and introduction to Sacks’ work and its value for sociology or linguistic anthropology, as well as other fields. In his account, MCA directs attention to the locally used, invoked and organized “presumed common-sense knowledge of social structures which members are oriented to in the conduct of their everyday affairs” (p. 3). In that sense, “all categorizations are indexical expressions and their sense is therefore locally and temporally contingent” (p. 18). Collet (2009) extends this sentiment, arguing that the organization of everyday knowledge about persons is situated and is usually not done for its own sake but aims to accomplish a conversational goal (p. 459). In politics, for instance, categorization can be used “to accomplish among other things the rejection of an opponent or the recruitment of allies, and it can moreover prepare the ground for future political actions and interventions” (pp. 459-460).

MCA is an established research area, but it is important for this study to depart slightly from the traditional MCA account and underscore the historical embeddedness of membership categories. Every linguistic act is grounded in time and space and connected with prior ones, which are always related to various social orders and therefore not random. As Collett (2009) claims, any linguistic act represents “an image of a world in which power and authority are shared by various concrete actors – centres – from whom normative guidelines can be expected and are being adopted” (p. 138). In this sense, membership categories are chronotopes. The
different centers represent different orders, “some of which have long histories and are attached to relatively stable institutions, while others are momentary, flexible and ephemeral” (p. 138). However, as Collett goes on to explain, “there are connections between the present and the past, and people infer from past experiences and from their existing batteries of resources and skills what is useful for the present task” (p. 138). All the linguistic concepts I use have an intrinsic historical dimension that emerges in the present framework, but which points to prior actors, spaces, and times with their prior resources and social systems.

As a result of the conditions of the interview situation, the women foreground their identities as Muslims: they know that they are being interviewed because they identify as Muslims and as members of the MSA. Maheen, Fatima, Nisreen, Zibaa, Tamara, and Zahleh all label themselves as Muslim with a first person, single, and present tense statement: “I am a Muslim” or “I am Muslim.” This is a canonical identity statement and a declaration of their religious identity, which is also exemplified in Maheen’s statements reproduced in Excerpt 1. I had asked Maheen what she would say if she had free airtime on national TV. Her response is a clear example of how a Muslim identity can be foregrounded against the backdrop of Islam being a contested category in the U.S. (Person-references important to this discussion are bolded for emphasis)

(1) Maheen

1 If we’re such a (1.0) instrumental thing in globalization
2 that this country is such so globalized
3 how come the people don’t know anything
4 about other countries other people↓ ((serious tone))

12 There are also slight variations to this statement, such as “I mean a Muslim is who I am” (Amita) or “I was always Muslim” (Amina, Catherine). In these situations of defending their Muslim identity and Islam, the women also position themselves as Muslims in an indirect way, such as “being a Muslim” (Catherine), “as a Muslim” (Tamara, Farida, Aditi, Amita, Maheen, Zahleh), or “ever since they found out I was Muslim they keep telling me” (Maheen).
because (1.5) by learning about them you understand them more
when, when I, I, when I started to do
to hang out with the MSA more
>I do project myself<
when people ask me what my religion is,
<I do say Muslim I am Muslim>
even though before I was like I'm agnostic
I say it more often↑
because I want people to know
that they know a person who's Muslim

This excerpt highlights the ideological conflict between this country (line 2), the United States, as an instrumental thing in globalization (line 1) and its people (line 3) as ignorant about other countries and other people (line 4). In other parts of the interview, Maheen criticizes the political and military influence of the United States in predominantly Muslim countries in the Middle East, but also points out the irony of the United States having global reach yet not having the necessary insight to treat people of other cultures appropriately or recognizing them as Americans. She claims that learning about Muslims in the United States would further intercultural and interfaith understanding (lines 5-8).

Maheen initially identifies with this country by using the pronoun we (line 1), giving prominence to her status as a U.S. citizen. But after having assigned to this category the attributes of ignorance and lack of education, she dissociates herself from the United States among college students. She acknowledges that although Muslims have historically occupied the person category the Other (line 7), learning about them erases not only the negative associations, but also the category as a whole and as applied to them. At this point, she introduces a new locality – the MSA – where she spends time (lines 8-9) and where she had learned to utilize Muslim as an identity statement to counter the fear and hypocrisy of people (line 3). Moreover, before the media backlash, she used to identify as agnostic (line 13) – a

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13 By using the construction “the Other,” Maheen is making use of an academic term of othering processes.
popular and socially accepted identity on the campus community due to the various atheist, agnostic, and secular student activisms and official student groups. But this association drastically changed in the MSA, where she realized that these *people* (line 3) – i.e. non-Muslim U.S. Americans – claim to use moral standards that they themselves do not have. She thus uses *people* as a general person category with different indexical values to shift through different spaces, including both non-Muslims (lines 3, 11, and 15) and Muslims (line 4).

All membership categories, Schegloff (2007b) writes, “are constituted by category-bound activities, i.e. activities that are thought to be characteristic of the category” (p. 459). Each category also has category-bound predicates, such as aims, beliefs, or values, rights, entitlements, obligations, knowledge, attributions, competencies, or motives (Silverman, 1998). In Excerpt 1, Maheen discusses the activity of the category *this country* as globalizing and the attributes of the people of *this country* as ignorant towards Islam and possibly religion in general, although she does not describe the category *Muslim* or assign it any attributes. Maheen uses a negative definition since *Muslim* is defined by *where* it is not (the United States), *who* it is not (ignorant and uneducated people) and *how* it is not (immoral). In contrast to her use of the category *people*, then, this linguistic strategy clearly indicates opposing categories that do not have any overlapping attributes or predicates.

Zahleh (Excerpt 2) and Nisreen (Excerpt 3) apply similar discursive strategies when identifying as *Muslim*, highlighting the negative characteristics of the Other. In Excerpt 2, Zahleh answers the question about her experience as a *hijabi* (a Muslim woman wearing the hijab) on campus. She states that being Afghani and wearing the hijab makes people curious and she uses this curiosity to educate them about Islam.
(2) Zahleh
1 I feel like there are much bigger issues in the world to care about
2 than just you know your appearance
3 and that's something that matters a lot in the West
4 but (1.0) I mean I HAVE noticed that people treat me different
5 and and I mean I realize it's about me, you know†
6 if I feel comfortable
7 it doesn't matter how people look at me
8 and there are times when I (1.0) I mean
9 when the topic of Islam or Muslims come up in the classroom;
10 it's like I have to defend you know I have to say something
11 but ahm and people I think look at me to say something about it;
12 and so it is it's kind of um (2.0)
13 you take your religion with you everywhere you go
14 and honestly I I believe women are blessed to (2.0)
15 to have that um (1.0)
16 to have this opportunity to educate people about Islam
17 and that we're constantly looked at as Muslims and so
18 therefore even if Muslims are being attacked
19 in certain parts of the world
20 I am still a Muslim
21 I'm I'm still proud of that identity
22 and maybe I can do something to help change the ahm
23 these negative ahm perceptions of Muslims

Zahleh, like Maheen, sets up a strong and seemingly unbridgeable contrast, namely between the West (line 3) and Muslims. In her opinion, the West does not concern itself with bigger issues in the world (line 1), but is instead focused very narrowly on the individual and his/her appearance (line 2-3). A focus on appearance generally implies superficiality and objectification of women, which the women in the group frequently denounce and see as a culprit for a corrupt society.

Zahleh also constructs the attributes of the Other before stating that she is Muslim, omitting any attributions for the latter category throughout her discussion. She mentions various locational categories - the West (line 3), in the classroom (line 9) and everywhere you go (line 13) – which are inhabited by people (lines 4, 7, 11, and 16) who have the attribute of being ignorant about Muslim women. She constructs herself outside of these categories and claims that despite the fact that Muslims are being attacked (line 18) in certain parts of the world (line 19), she is still a Muslim (line 20) and still proud of that identity (line 21), suggestion that this category is a dispreferred identity in the eyes of some.
In Excerpt 3, Nisreen foregrounds her *Muslim* identity against *America* (line 2). She opposes temptations that result from valuing appearance and a college lifestyle of partying (line 9).

(3) Nisreen

1 and there's times you know like where you
2 just being in America
3 you just feel like
4 when you see girls and like you know†
5 they're dressed all cute ((smiles))
6 and they have their hair all nicely done ((laughs))
7 and you kinda like "Oh, I wish I could have my hair done†"
8 it's like KIND of those little things
9 that when you see people partying
10 all your friends
11 and you kinda like wanna go out and party with them
12 like get involved in like things like drugs and alcohol
13 but you know like, you would have to refrain
14 and you know the reasons are like very you know legit
15 for why you have to refrain
16 but like you just you feel left out kind of in a way
17 so it's kind of you have those moments†
18 but never have I ever had doubts in my religion
19 and thought “this is unfair”
20 and I don't like my religion cause of this
21 I think instead it makes me stronger
22 and like “I'm proud to be a Muslim and like, yeah”((laughs loudly))

Despite growing up in the United States, Nisreen constructs the Other in the form of girls (line 4) or *all your friends* (line 10), with the attributions of partying and conducting un-Islamic activities, such as *drugs and alcohol* (line 12), which are not *legit* (line 14). These girls care about appearance, which Nisreen, like Zahleh, sees as superficial and oppressive to womanhood in general. She emphasizes her Muslim identity (lines 18-22) by using a less informal tone, as can be seen in the reversal of the canonical American-English sentence structure of *never have I ever had doubts in my religion* (line 18), which inverts the subject (“I”) and verb (“have”) for emphasis. Like Maheen and Zahleh in the previous excerpts, Nailah defines *Muslim* in terms of what it is not and also sets up clear territorial boundaries when claiming that she physically and
ideologically has to refrain (line 13) from the college lifestyle and feels left out (line 16). These statements suggest that Islamic practices are incompatible to Western ones and difficult to uphold, but the merit outweighs the sacrifices.

These identity statements reveal an incompatibility and tension between the category Muslim and the categories this country, the West, and America, among others. Each category is inference-rich (Sacks, 1972; Schegloff, 2007a); that is, these categories are the “store house and the filing system for the common-sense knowledge that ordinary people – that means ALL people in their capacity as ordinary people – have about what people are like, how they behave, etc.” (Schegloff, 2007a, p. 469). Furthermore, person categories “are not a simple, single aggregate of categories, but are organized into collections of categories” (Schegloff, 2007a, p. 467), otherwise called Membership Categorization Devices (MCDs) (Sacks, 1972; Schegloff, 2007a; Collet, 2009). The categories in the excerpts discussed so far build MCDs of the form [Muslim] and [this country, the West, America] to which further categories can be added. Critical to this discussion is the observation that these categories are established in talk-in-interaction.

Interestingly, the MCD [this country, the West, America] is constructed without any religious or spiritual attributes, despite the fact that there is a pervasive and influential discourse on Christian values and politics in the U.S. media. Irvine & Gal (2000), in their work on linguistic ideologies and linguistic differentiation, would call this omission erasure, an ideological process through which social actors, activities, or behaviors are rendered invisible (p. 36). The authors argue that through this process, facts “that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away” (p. 36). In the case of these women, any religious features, such as Christian values, do not fit into the group’s categorization of America as secular. More specifically, the erasure of American Christianity works to tie Muslim to
morality and *America* to immorality. Amina, for instance, states that it is difficult to be a “good Muslim” in “today’s day and age.” She explains further, “living in America in today’s times, and stuff, it’s very hard cause there’s so many like temptations.” Again, overcoming difficulties is important for the women in their pursuit of moral superiority. Consequently, the MCD [*this country, the West, America*] can be called the MCD “Non-Religion”\(^\text{14}\) since it lacks religious or spiritual, as well as positive moral, attributes. The MCD [*Muslim*], in contrast, can be called the MCD “Islam.” It is notable that this construction reverses the MCDs of dominant media discourse in the United States, where Islam is represented as immoral and the United States as moral.

All categories in the MCD “Non-Religion” are place names that stand in opposition to a religious identity. Schegloff (1972) argues that membership categorization analysis can also be extended to the analysis and formation of locations (see also Silverman, 1998). In contrast to geographical locations, such as street names or latitudes, these location formulations relate to members (Schegloff, 1972; Silverman, 1998). Categories “range from ‘concretely located,’ named institutions usually linked to architectural structures (X bank), through more abstract designations such as ‘the legal system,’ ‘state bureaucracy,’ ‘the health-care system,’ etc., to holistic constructs such as ‘the middle class,’ feudal society’ and ‘free enterprise system’” (Silverman, 1998, p. 3). Silverman (1998) draws on a study of British public hearings on *Violence and Civil Disorder in Northern Ireland* (Drew, 1978) and shows how the witnesses’ descriptions of locations mapped along a normalized religious geography of Belfast (p. 86). The author further writes, “when witnesses refer to Shankill Road, they will be heard to use a

\(^{14}\) I avoid using the term “secularism” since the term has been assumed to have no spiritual or religious attributes, although this has been disputed by many researchers on Islam (see Asad, 2003; Mas, 2005).
category drawn from the MCD ‘Protestant areas’ and associated with various category-bound activities (Orange Order, marching, wearing bowler hats, etc.)” (p. 86).  

In the following section, I analyze the contested category *Muslim woman*, the most common collocation with *Muslim*, and the media’s favorite nemesis of *Muslim woman: Muslim man*. This category — *Muslim man* — has been assigned the attributes of seeing Muslim women as physically and mentally inferior and of depriving them of their individuality. With the help of their religion, so the argument goes, Muslim men impose religious, legal, and customary constraints on women that hinder them from choosing their own actions. Although media discourses accuse Muslim men of these atrocities, they similarly deny women a possibility of choice: this perspective does not consider that Muslim women may choose to be pious and to show their Muslimhood through wearing the hijab (see also Mahmood, 2005). In the following data, however, the women of my study overtly align themselves with *Muslim men*, while still opposing the *West* in their discourse of da’wah. They actively embrace these essentialized categories and use them discursively as a means of resisting the ideologies imposed on them.

**Muslim woman and Muslim man versus the West**

The categories *Muslim woman* and *Muslim man* used by the women in the interviews index political actors with the cause of conducting da’wah. As seen in Excerpt 4, these categories presuppose oppositional media images that attack them ideologically. Fahida elaborates this perception in Excerpt 4, when continuing her answer regarding what she would say on national TV if she had free airtime.

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15 In a similar way, the chronotopic (time/space/personhood) (Bakhtin, 1981, Agha, 2007) relation between the present time, the West as a dominant, albeit oppressive society, and the people in the West, who are described as ignorant, form an ideology of immorality and highlights the righteousness of Islam and Muslims.

16 Other less frequent categories are *Muslim kid(s)*, *Muslim community*, *Muslim people*, and *Muslim friend(s)*.
(4) Fahida
1 I think↑ the biggest issue
2 has to do with women specifically is
3 that they are seen as the weaker gender
4 and that they are oppressed by men.
5 And they, you know, they can’t do anything on their own
6 you know they don’t have any rights.
7 I think that’s the biggest issue
8 with the way Muslim women are seen, so:↑

Fahida characterizes the view that Muslim women are weaker than Muslim men (line 2 and 3), are oppressed by and dependent on them (lines 4 and 5), and don’t have any rights (line 6). She uses agentless passives (lines 3 and 8), omitting the culprits that are the source of “the biggest issue” (line 1), and thus distancing herself from these culprits. Fahida lists the attributes that are assigned to Muslim women and Muslim women by the media to illustrate what these two categories are NOT.

Tamara was asked the same question in Excerpt 5 of what she would say on national TV. She also brings forward the topic of Muslim women’s apparent oppression by Muslim men and subsequently dispels it.

(5) Tamara
1 I mean I can’t think of anything specific
2 but I think it’s it’s like
3 it’s like a nuance it’s like this overall
4 just kind of like um
5 it’s like part of the American worldview
6 you know, it’s just like its collective view
7 on (1.0) on women in Islam
8 and on hijab in particular
9 ahm I think I think the main (1.5) problem is that ah (1.5)
10 people in America think that (1.5) ahm
11 Muslim women are subordinate to Muslim men
12 or like they have to obey men
13 or the men force them to wear the hijab
14 which is not true
15 I mean everyone’s only we are only obeying God
Tamara implicates America in general and deems its worldview problematic, implying that all people in America (line 10) share the same opinion. The Other to Muslim woman is not Muslim man, but the collective view on women in Islam (lines 6 and 7) and on the hijab in particular. With this statement, she constructs herself outside the category people in America, despite the fact that she was born and raised in the United States and is currently a resident. In that sense, the women are deterritorializing themselves for the purpose of constructing an extra-national, extra-territorial, but universal Islamic identity, which becomes the basis for the claim of moral superiority.

(Excerpt 6) similarly cites perceptions of the veil as being responsible for the image of Muslim women. The discourse she references deems Muslim women foreign, powerless, and backward. The veil becomes a powerful visual marker that metonymically stands for a boundary between the West and the East. Viewed as a symbol of oppression, the veil delineates Muslim women from their seemingly more modern and emancipated counterparts in the West.

(6) Catherine
1 And I think the biggest misunderstanding is
2 that a lot of women who you know don’t cover their hair
3 think that, that Muslim women do it
4 because they are ashamed or
5 because they are forced to by their husband or
6 because they are subservient to men or
7 because men can’t control themselves ((laughs))
8 or things like this

Fahida, Catherine, and Tamara all articulate Muslim identity through the binary opposition already forged in the media. However, in contrast to the excerpts discussed earlier, in which they used the person category Muslim to identify themselves (remember the usage of “I” in I am Muslim), here they use the pronoun “they” to index the person category Muslim woman, as Catherine does in the above excerpt. When depicting a category of Muslim woman that has been
forged through the media, they do not identify with or take ownership over this gendered category, but only describe it.

Furthermore, all the women align the category of Muslim woman with Muslim man as a strategy to oppose the media stereotypes and construct themselves outside the category to defend it. They do this through what Bucholtz & Hall (2004, 2005) call the process of adequation. Adequation accounts for the fact that “in order for groups or individuals to be positioned as alike, they need not – and in any case cannot – be identical, but must merely be understood as sufficiently similar for current interactional purposes” (2005, p. 599). The differences drawn between Muslim men and women by the U.S. media are damaging to ongoing efforts of da’wah to fight for all Muslims. Any differences that may be perceived to exist between men and women are thus downplayed and “similarities viewed as salient to and supportive of the immediate project of identity work [are] foregrounded” (2005, p. 599).

At the same time, the women are using distinction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, 2005) to distance themselves from the West. In Bucholtz and Hall’s framework, distinction is “the ideological construction of social difference through the erasure of likeness and the highlighting of unlikeness” (2004, p. 496). It is simply the construction of social differentiation17, as can be seen in the differentiation of Muslim woman/Muslim man from the West. Although the categories Muslim man and Muslim woman differ along gender lines, “differences are largely downplayed in the interaction in favor of an emphasis on this identity” (2004, p. 496). Bucholtz & Hall review research on gay and lesbian discourse to show that “adequation with others as fellow queers is accomplished through a variety of strategies for presenting information (about history, stereotypes, practices) as shared knowledge” (p. 496), which highlights similarities “based on

17 According to Bucholtz & Hall (2005), “[t]he overwhelming majority of sociocultural linguistic research on identity has emphasized this relation, both because social differentiation is a highly visible process and because language is an especially potent resource for producing it in a variety of ways” (p. 600).
sexual identity that span the differences that might in other situations divide the participants” (p. 496). In sum, the excerpts show that the women align the category Muslim woman collectively with Muslim man while still opposing the American worldview and Western woman.

Bucholtz and Hall’s framework also explains why these membership categories do not overlap or contradict each other. They are used in the service of strategic essentialism or essentialized identity positions (Spivak, 1995; see also McElhinny, 1996; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004), temporary overgeneralizations that are often necessary “in the establishment of sociopolitical institutions such as research fields and political movements” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 476-477). The motivation for this discursive strategy “lies in the need to remedy the historical underrepresentation of social groups” (p. 477), or in this case, to rectify what is perceived as a misrepresentation. Oraib Mango (2010) discusses similar findings in research of the category Arab woman, which parallels the category of Muslim woman in mainstream U.S. discourse. The author interviewed both Christian and Muslim Arab women who oriented to this stigmatized label by (1) explicitly using this label “to refer to themselves and others in the group” (p. 652); (2) constructing relational identities with other Arab women; and (3) “going back and forth between positions to try to take a definite stance (between condemning racial remarks and understanding their cause), between validating her own feelings (of being offended as Arab American) and validating those of others (mainstream American discourse)” (p. 660).

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18 In other parts of the interviews with Tamara and Catherine, who are both European-American converts and born and raised in the United States, the categories overlap. Tamara claims, for instance, that “I’m like white and a Muslim” and “I am American and Muslim.” Catherine explains that people are really interested in her “because, you know, I have white skin and blue eyes and I am American.” Both converts to Islam stress both their ethnic and Muslim identities in rectifying Islam to the non-Muslim society.

19 Bucholtz and Hall (2005) cite “queer identity” as an example of underrepresentation of social groups.
Sister and Brother

Adequation between the categories Muslim woman and Muslim man and distinction to the West are also evident in the community-based usage of the common terms sister and brother. These categories are used frequently for every member of the group in the weekly general meetings, and each member is categorized as one or the other. On one occasion, for instance, the group discussed starting a prayer chain, which calls for the first participant to begin with the pre-sunrise fajr prayer, to call the next person to continue the prayer, and so on. Waving a sign-up sheet, the president of the MSA asked who of the “brothers” or “sisters” would sign up. In an informal prayer during the meeting, Maheen stated with closed eyes and bowed head, “And we hope we can all stay brothers and sisters, insha’allah.” At the end of the meeting, a member announced, “one of our brothers was in a skiing accident and broke his collar bone, but alhamdulallah, everything went well.”

These categories and terms of reference extend from the local MSA community to the national and international ummah (Muslim community). On the national level, the categories sister and brother are used as official categories in all MSAs in North America, more so since they are incorporated into officer positions: the brothers’ coordinators and the sisters’ coordinators. The women discuss the duties of a sisters’ coordinator in the interviews and in the meetings. Consider Zahleh’s explanation (Excerpt 7) of the duty of a sisters’ coordinator, which is representative of other women’s opinions. Zahleh was asked about whether men and women have different goals in the MSA. She negates this question:

(7) Zahleh
1 no I don't think so
2 cause we've had a female president and a male president.

20 Other positions are president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary.
Tamara agrees and explains that the sisters’ coordinator job “is to organize things, like events and fun things for the sisters.” She elaborates that they had parties in the past, which were “pretty fun.” Fahida also points to the importance of having “sister parties,” since the sisters want to dance and not worry about the brothers. Male members often announced events in the local mosque, and brother is often used in religious or theological discussion when men address each other, as when praying in the local mosque.

The categories sister and brother are also used on a global level in the interviews and in the meetings. One member, for instance, called on other members to keep the Palestinian brothers and sisters in their prayers. In the interviews, Maheen also discussed “standing up for Muslim brothers and sisters” and described the prophet Muhammad’s peers and descendants as brothers. An Afghani-American calls Iranians in Afghanistan “Iranian brothers.” The global nature of these terms for the ummah is also stated in the Qur’an (49:10), which prescribes that all believers are brothers: “All believers are but brethren. Hence, [whenever they are at odds,] make peace between your two brethren, and remain conscious of God, so that you might be graced with His mercy” (islamiciti.com, July 8, 2011).

From a perspective of Membership Categorization Analysis, the categories sisters and brothers are invoked interactionally as categories of the MCD “Family” (Sacks, 1972; Schegloff, 2007; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005). Schegloff (2007) argues that this MCD and its categories of husband, wife, father, mother, daughter, sister, brother, etc., are “team-type” MCDs, similarly to the MCD “Soccer Team,” which has the membership categories goalie,
striker, forward, etc. Pomerantz and Mandelbaum (2005), in their article on conversational analytic approaches to the relevance and usage of relationship categories ask the important question of “How does explicitly evoking a relationship category operate with respect to accomplishing a locally relevant conversational action?” (p. 150).

A mother and child or friend and friend do not generally declare to each other their relationship category [...] When persons make reference to a relationship category, they are responding to specific circumstances and are relying on shared assumptions about incumbents of the relationship category to accomplish a conversational action [...] participants explicitly refer to relationship categories in various contexts and for a variety of purposes, where in each case their use relies on inferences they make, and assume others make, about the activities, rights, obligations, motives and competencies that are viewed as proper for incumbents of specific relationship categories (p. 150).

As with other categories in the MCD “family,” the categories brother and sister in the MCD “Islam” have the attributes of having stronger ties than friendship and leave out the possibility of sexual relations. Muslim women and Muslim men are equal when it comes to da’wah, even though they may be viewed as different when it comes to the conduct between them.

In conclusion, applying the approach of Membership Categorization Analysis to the previous excerpts has revealed that the women view themselves as members of the category Muslim and the MCD “Religion,” and strongly distance themselves from the U.S., which they categorize as entirely secular and ignorant. They draw a clear alliance between themselves and Muslim men by characterizing female-male relationships as sister-brother relationships, thus challenging Western stereotypes of a patriarchal and oppressive Islam. They foreground a Muslim identity that is difficult to achieve in face of the adversity they encounter by elements of the category “Non-Religion,” which involves a Western superficial reverence for appearance or un-Islamic “temptations,” such as parties or drugs. As a result, the women’s discourse echoes

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21 When group discussed the proper conduct between men and women in the MSA, one of the women told a man: “think of her like a real sister.”
that of the media in terms of placing Muslim identities and their localities as foreign to the physical and ideological space of the United States: that is, they reify the media’s projection that being both Muslim and Western/American is not possible. Yet their discourse also reverses the moral geography established by the U.S. media—which frames the West as morally superior to the Islamic East—by projecting the United States as problematically secular and erasing the pervasive discourse of Christianity, for instance.

The analysis of the previous interview excerpts demonstrates that morality, as an emergent property of the discourse of da’wah, is spatially constituted and articulated through the interactional norms of the interview situation with an interviewer who is believed to be empathetic to the cause of da’wah. This supports Blommaert’s (2010) claim that “[e]ach society’s ‘moral order’ is reflected in its particular spatial order and in the language and imagery by which that spatial order is represented” (pp. 5-6).
This chapter investigates how women in the Muslim Student Association (MSA) discursively construct a personal Islam. This Islam is framed by the ideological bifurcations between individual agency and Islamic practice that secular-liberal media discourses deem incompatible in the Muslim subject. Specifically, the women align their conceptual interpretations of Islam to broader discourses of (1) piety movements, as described in Saba Mahmood’s (2005) ethnographic account of a women’s mosque movement as part of the larger Islamic Revival in Cairo, Egypt; (2) secular-liberal political discourses that underpin media stereotypes of Islam; and finally, (3) da’wah. They thus utilize the space of the interview to highlight aspects of Islam that are acceptable to a Western audience. As a result, the women redefine their agency in Islamic and Western terms. Contrary to a Western secular-liberal framework, they seek agency not by resisting an external oppressive authority (such as an oppressive religion or patriarchy), but by objecting to anything that hinders them from practicing their own version of Islam (see Mahmood, 2005). In short, the women highlight commonalities between Islam and the West, such as the activities of studying, thinking independently, and seeking self-discipline, to legitimize Islamic practice and reclaim their agency.

**Islamic Piety in Secular-Liberal Discourses**

The ideological and political conflict between public manifestations of Islamic practice or piety over and against “the West” or “the secular” is the product of not only a long history of
contentious relationships that Islamic societies have had with “the West,” but also of the apparent threat that contemporary Islamic piety movements pose to secular-liberal politics and the feminist perspectives adopted therein (see Mahmood, 2005). In Politics of Piety, Mahmood (2005) argues that Muslim women have been criticized for their social conservatism and rejection of liberal values, such as women’s emancipation and freedom, and seen as “submissive instruments of a threatening irrationality” (p. 1). Mahmood views this projected irrationality as part of the secular-liberal assumption that “there is something intrinsic to women that should predispose them to oppose the practices, values, and injunctions that the Islamist movement embodies” (p. 2).

The participants in the mosque movement in Cairo, as discussed by Mahmood (2005), claim that their campaign for Islamic piety was created in response to their marginalization under modern structures of secular governance, a process echoed by the participants in this dissertation. The most prevalent secular-liberal criticism pointed out by the women in the mosque movement and the women in the MSA alike is their acquisition of Islamic knowledge as a means of organizing daily conduct and public da’wah. The mosque movement participants, and in a similar way the women in the MSA, work against a trend the former call “‘secularization (‘alman or ‘almaniyya) or ‘westernization’ (tagharrub), a historical process they argue has reduced Islamic knowledge (both as a mode of conduct and a set of principles) to an abstract system of beliefs that has no direct bearing on the practicalities of daily living” (p. 4). This type of Islamic piety cannot easily be compared to Western piety movements, such as English Puritanism, which tend to highlight inner spiritual states (p. 4). Instead, the mosque participants’ use of the Arabic term taqwa (piety) suggests “both an inward orientation or disposition and a manner of practical conduct” (p. 4).
In a similar way, the MSA, as pointed out in the previous chapter, claim Islam to be “a complete way of life,” which is an identity foregrounded to that of being students, citizens, athletes, etc. There should be no division between “the secular and the sacred” (MSA, 2007). The participants in both groups teach each other the norms of being Muslim, echoing Mahmood’s claim that the women instruct themselves and other Muslims “not only in the proper performance of religious duties and acts of worship but, more importantly, in how to organize their daily conduct in accord with principles of Islamic piety and virtuous behavior” (p. 4). The realization of this movement as part of Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya) has swept the Muslim world (p. 3); the vast amount of female members holding public meetings in mosques to teach each other Islamic doctrine has never before occurred in Egyptian history and has changed the historically male-centered environment of mosques as well as Islamic pedagogy (p. 2). The MSA at the University of Colorado provides such a space where women discuss Islamic doctrine, play Jeopardy games with facts on Islamic scripture, and conduct other social practices that cultivate the ideal Muslim woman. The sisters’ coordinator, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is responsible for forming a quasi-formal women’s group that encourages the women to realize their identity apart from men.

Although the women in my study never mention being part of larger Islamist movements, they nevertheless construct Islamic practice similarly to the Egyptian piety movement. For them, Islam is, always has been, and forever will be “perfect,” while people (including Muslims) and cultures are not. Tamara, for instance, addressed the term “Islamic Reform” that is advocated in the United States by some Muslim and non-Muslims and denied that it is necessary or even possible to reform a perfect religion. Consequently, I apply the concept of an Islamic piety movement only as “a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary
Manifestations of this religious ethos are activities “organized under the umbrella term da’wa” (p. 3), which involve a marked display of religious sociability, such as the adoption of the veil; a strong increase in religious activities; individual interpretation of the Qur’an and the hadith (the authoritative record of the Prophet’s exemplary speech and actions); the vast proliferation of neighborhood mosques and other institutions of Islamic learning and social welfare; a brisk consumption and production of religious media and literature; and “a growing circle of intellectuals who write and comment upon contemporary affairs in the popular press from a self-described Islamic point of view” (p. 3). The MSA, as I established in the previous chapter, is an organizing center for such activities, which have a palpable public presence on the campus of the University of Colorado at Boulder.

In short, the West’s favorite Islamic binaries of oppression and resistance have to be analyzed with reference to the linguistic, ethical, social, and political forces that establish their meaning, since “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressive point of view may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the condition of its enactment” (p. 15). Islamic piety should not be explained in binaries of oppression and resistance to male domination and Islamic traditions, which ignores “other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse” (p. 153). Instead, the women’s discursive construction of Islam is framed through elements of this religious ethos in order to align to Western ideas of agency and secularism, to convince the interviewer of the merits of Islam, and to work against the stereotype that Muslim women are not independent thinkers and do not have “agency.”
In this chapter, I specifically look at the women’s discursive chronotopic alignments (Agha, 2007) to generic social types through which they show that a Western-type of individuality, Islamic practice, self-discipline, and da’wah are compatible. I explain how these frameworks expose the communicative implications of shifting to the not-I, not-here, and not-now realms in order to align themselves to the common social types of what I call “the independent thinker,” “the scholar,” and “the victor.” I also argue that the women construct Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab and believing in jihad, as self-disciplining and self-transforming processes to become modest and pious Muslim women and to overcome both spiritual and mundane difficulties in everyday life.

The women’s alignments with these social types are established by semantic-pragmatic shifts in four ways: (1) from the deictic pronouns I, he, she, or they to the non-deictic, impersonal you;22 (2) from discourse tied to a concrete place to discourse tied to an idealized, often psychological space; (3) from grammatical past and future tense to present tense; and (4) from deictic spatial or temporal adverbs, such as the proximal here/now and the distal there/then (Fludernik, 1991; Silverstein 1976; among others) towards indefinite ones. These linguistic features are called shifters and are often used as a means of achieving a switch from an egocentric to a general truth-centered worldview. The strategic deployment of impersonal you statements is categorized in literature on pragmatics as expressing structural knowledge and idealized, general truth (Berry, 2009; Fludernik, 1991; Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990).

From a chronotopic point of view, I analyze the shifts from spatial, temporal, and personal markers anchored in space, time, and personhood, to linguistic markers indexing a not-here, not-now, and a not-I realm. These shifts have interactional and social implications, which

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22 Various definitions of these types of pronouns are used in the literature, such as “universal non-specific, generic, generalized human, generalized indefinite, referentially arbitrary and impersonal” (Siewierska, 2004, p. 210).
must be analyzed in terms of dimensions of power, status, solidarity, or even intimacy (Siewierska, 2004, p. 214). To recapture Bakhtin’s (1981) words, I ask when and where a shifter appears, how it is tied to the whens and wheres of spaces, times, and persons that it indexes, and what the broader cultural, religious, and political forces are. As pointed out in the introduction to this dissertation, a chronotope is always experienced within a certain participation framework, which has itself a chronotopic organization in terms of time, place, and personhood. In this dissertation, the participation framework is the interview - located in a room at the University of Colorado at Boulder, conducted in the time period of 2007-2009, and explained to the participants as inquiries into Muslim women’s experiences on the university campus. The participants are myself – a Caucasian, female, non-Muslim academic – and female Muslim undergraduate students of various background and ethnicities. I thus analyze a sketch of personhood – or specifically Muslimhood – with its spatial and temporal coordinates within the participation framework of the ethnographic interview.

**Shifters**

The concept of shifters was famously introduced by the linguist Otto Jesperson (1924) and further developed by the linguist Roman Jakobson (1956[1984]) in his classic paper *Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb*. Both authors state that the general meaning of a shifter or linguistic code cannot be defined without reference to a message that is established in the context of a speech situation. Michael Silverstein (1976), in *Shifters, Verbal Categories, and Cultural Description*, adds that the referential value of a shifter depends on the presupposition of
its pragmatic value\textsuperscript{23} (p. 24), which in turn is constituted by the speech event itself that provides indexical reference. Silverstein further claims that these rules of use are grounded in the American English grammatical and cultural norms of spoken language (p. 34). For instance, in the sentence \textit{I am a Muslim now}, it is understood that the personal pronoun \textit{I} indexes and refers to the speaker, while the deictic, temporal adverb \textit{now} indicates that the proposition of the sentence is fulfilled at the time of speaking.

The shift from deictic and referential pronouns to the impersonal \textit{you} also indicates the egocentric shift from proximity to distance (Berry, 2009; Fludernik, 1991; Kamio, 2001; Levinson, 1983; Siewierska, 2004) or from a deictic center, which Levinson (1983) describes as:

(i) the central person is the speaker, (ii) the central time is time at which the speaker produces the utterance, (iii) the central place is the speaker’s location at the utterance time, or C[oding] T[ime], (iv) the discourse center is the point which the speaker is currently at in the production of his utterance, and (v) the social centre is the speaker’s social status and rank, to which the status or rank of addressees or referents is relative (p. 64).

For Levinson, proximity then is “close to the speaker” (p. 62) and distance is “non-proximal, sometimes close to the addressee” (p. 62). To illustrate shifts from the deictic center, consider Excerpt 1 that shows parts of a faith-development narrative, which are elaborations of how the faith of Muslim women who were born into Islamic families developed over the years (discussed in detail in the following chapter). Maheen describes her journey from Iran to the United States and contrasts her experiences with practicing Islam in those countries to those she acquired in the United States. She represents Iran as a place where everyone accepts Islam as normative and

\textsuperscript{23} Traditional scholarship on pragmatics typically categorizes personal pronouns as deictic and referential, especially in the first and second person (Berry, 2009; Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990; Silverstein 1976; among many); first person forms, such as \textit{I} and \textit{we}, refer to the speaker/writer, while the second person forms, such as singular and plural \textit{you}, refer to at least one addressee but not the speaker/writer (Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990, p. 740). Jakobson writes that personal pronouns “categorize the participants of the narrated event with reference to the participants” (p. 45) and tense categorizes “the narrated event with reference to the speech event” (p. 46).
predetermined. The United States, in contrast, is the place where she realized that faith is your own interpretation (line 7) based on your own views on how you live (line 8).

(1) Maheen

1. >But then when I came to the United States
2. there was a time that I just didn't wanna even believe in God<
3. because I thought that a lot of the negative things that had happen to my life↑
4. was because of Islam
5. but then I've kind of grown to (1.0) realize that
6. for me religion isn't like just the whole package
7. religion is your own interpretation
8. and your own views on (3.0) how you live
9. so you can use that you can use the good things
10. that you learn about the religion
11. and just apply them to your daily life
12. So >it was kind of like that for me<

The central person in this excerpt is I (lines 1-6, 12) as she narrates her journey to the United States. The central time is the past tense24 as seen in the verbs came (line 1), was (line 2), thought (line 3) or had (line 4). This narrative is also locally anchored in the United States as her destination (line 1). These aspects of person, time, and location make up the deictic center of the excerpt. However, in lines 7-11, Maheen shifts out of this center to communicate to the interviewer her view on how Islam should be interpreted, calling on her social role as a Muslim and the addressee’s role as an interested witness. Harvey Sacks (1992a), in his work on Conversation Analysis (CA), claims that “one of the nice things about the non-differentiation and the plural character of ‘you’ is that there is no limitation of the size of the population it can be referring to” (pp. 165-166). The you’s can be translated as the singular indefinite pronoun, such as one or someone (Sacks 1992a, p. 165). In this conversation, all participants are included in the action described in the conversation.

24 In general, narratives are deictically anchored in the past
The shift from past tense to non-past tense is likewise a powerful linguistic tactic, which leads to an idealization of time. Silverstein (1976) deems the constructions with this type of present tense “predications of timeless truths” and “‘tenseless’; that is, they do not refer to the present but to all time (p. 22). Impersonal you statements almost always appear in the present tense (Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990, p. 748) and often occur within narrative plots, as Excerpt 2 shows. Amita discusses how her conversion from Hindu to Muslim came about. She explains that she studied Islam (lines 10-11), following the example of her Muslim ex-boyfriend. But when she describes interpreting Islam for herself (lines 18-24), she shifts from a narrative anchored in the past tense to present tense.

(2) Amita
1 ahh I I dated a guy um
2 and >we were engaged for a while<
3 and ah he was Muslim
4 and >he never forced me to convert<
5 but he LEARNED about it a lot
6 and he taught me about it
7 and a lot of time I'd see him reading the Qur'an
8 and I'd pick it up
9 and I'd um (1.0) learn about it
10 and it just really attracted me to <becoming Muslim>
11 because I really love the culture
12 and the um the aspects behind it so:
13 um yah and you just kind of think about it for a while
14 and you study it
15 and you learn about it
16 and um you see how much you like
17 and how much you don't like
18 and what you agree with
19 and what you don't agree with

Fludernik (1991) claims that these types of impersonal 2nd person constructions have no particular temporal or spatial co-ordinates, which allows for bringing the past into the time of speaking. There is an absence of deictic spatial adverbs, such as here or there, which would place the event at a specific location. These deictic adverbs are often converted into non-deictic
markers of time and place (Fludernik, 1991, p. 193): Amita uses the indefinite temporal marker *for a while* (Excerpt 2, line 13) and Maheen describes applying Islam to her *daily life* (Excerpt 1, line 11).

**Social Types**

There is a general agreement in literature that the use of the impersonal *you* expresses structural knowledge, general truths, generalization, a truism, or morality (Goldsmith and Woisetschlaeger, 1982; Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990). In his analysis of *Deixis and Shifters after Jakobson*, Herman Parret (1991) argues that these statements come with universality and are “intrinsic to truth that it is not subject bound” (p. 338). Along similar lines, Siewierska’s (2004) analysis of person pronouns reveals that the use of impersonal *you* is an appropriate impersonalizing strategy and offers “neutral or inoffensive situations or events which the addressee can imagine himself being involved in” (p. 212). According to Kitagawa & Lehrer (1990), this use of *you* conveys “the theme of generality – particularly a generally admitted truth or a personal opinion that the speaker hopes is shared” (p. 742). In that sense, “studying” (Excerpt 2, line 14) and “learning” about a certain idea (line 20) can be seen as acceptable general truths or shared opinions in the university environment. In sum, literature on pragmatics discusses the shift to the not-*I*, not-*here*, and not-*now* realms in two ways: (1) as distancing, impersonal, removed from time and space, and often disengaging (Parret, 1991); and (2) as inviting the addressee “to imagine himself in the situation or event expressed by the speaker and thus share in the world-view being presented or entertained” (Siewierska, 2004, p. 212).

However, a chronotopic focus on the data shows that this type of idealization and generality allows for the alignment to generic social types, which simply are “consensual
characterizations of people or groups” (Almog, 1998, p. 3). Oz Almog (1998) views social types as prototypical of a social category and reminds us “of other individuals with similar values, behavior, style, and habits” (p. 3). Frequently used examples in the contemporary United States and England are the “New York yuppie” or the “London cockney” (p. 4), respectively, which as social types “have not been fully codified and rationalized” but have “specific connotations in terms of the interests, concerns, and dispositions of the group” (p. 4). The women’s alignment to the social type of “the scholar,” for instance, allows them to show that they studied Islam before deciding to conduct da’wah, validating it as an informed decision. Social types are presented as homogenized “facts,” which are established by a dominant culture, subculture, or institution at a specific time and in a specific space. The generic social types in my data, which I call “the independent thinker,” “the scholar,” and “the victor,” are familiar on the university campus and solidified over time. Since these social types are socially accepted on the university campus, while the social type of “the Muslim woman” is not, the women cross boundaries to the dominant norm of the local majority.

This alignment to socially accepted social types is a tactic to conduct da’wah because by using the impersonal you, the speaker includes herself within a much wider or more dominant class of people, downgrading her own person and shifting the authority to what could be anybody’s (Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990, p. 748). Instead of analyzing this shift into the distance, I view it as a shift of authority, or authorization (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), away from the individual to a general authority – in this case, the various social types discussed below. The women in this study use this idealization strategy in order to share their worldview and their ideal social type with the interviewer.
Furthermore, the women exploit the pervasive acceptance of these social types to show how their state of mind has changed towards a more mature and autonomous self. In the words of Agha (2007), they create “chronotopic displacements and cross-chronotope alignments between persons here-and-now and persons altogether elsewhere, transposing selves across discrete zones of cultural spacetime” (p. 324). As the following sections show, there is a common trend in the women’s use of these impersonal you statements to indicate evolution from the initial I that deictically points to an ignorant and immature version of self. After the impersonal you statements have appeared in the narrative, I refers to a more matured person who exists beyond any stereotypical classification. In other words, this later I has changed through the message conveyed in the impersonal you statements – a generalized process of experience or universal perspective – towards a more mature I. The sections below illustrate how these women forge chronotopic alignments to the social types of “the independent thinker,” “the scholar,” and “the victor” to indicate an acceptable self-transformation and change of state of mind.

“The independent thinker.” The messages in the impersonal you statements aligning to the social type “the independent thinker” involve finding meaning and value in Islam, as can be seen in the statements you have to find the true meaning yourself (Zibaa, Excerpt 3, line 8), you have to reach a conclusion yourself (Zibaa, Excerpt 4, line 2), you gotta think about things, you know, not just follow things blindly (Faiza, Excerpt 5, lines 8-9), you gotta make a selective choice (Faiza, Excerpt 5, line 16), and you need to be open-minded (Nisreen, Excerpt 6, line 4). These meaning-searching statements mainly occur in the context of interpreting the Qur’an independently, of finding the right practices and doctrines from various Islamic sects, and of learning from other religions. Furthermore, these arguments also speak to secular-liberal political
discourses in the United States that regard Muslim women to blindly follow a violent Islam, to be caught in competitive sects whose members cannot be reconciled, and to be enemies of other religions or non-believers (*kafir*).

But these arguments also speak to the Islamic concept of *ijtihad*, which is a concept often discussed by the women and the MSA. The Oxford Dictionary of Islam defines *ijtihad* as “‘independent reasoning,’ as opposed to *taqlid* (imitation)” (p. 134). This term originated in Islamic law requiring “thorough knowledge of theology, revealed texts, and legal theory” (p. 134) which is not covered in the Qur’an or the hadith and was historically reserved for male qualified Islamic scholars or Muslim religious leaders. The women and the group use the term more generally, stating that Islam requires all Muslims to achieve knowledge to make decisions independently as a way to oppose ignorance and to conduct da‘wah. They assign ignorance to both the secular Western media and to Muslims that do not think for themselves. Maria, for instance, describes her encounter with “close-minded” Muslims in Denver, who she describes as “very high and mighty and self-righteous” and as incapable of continuously learning about Islam. When she asked them about how they reach certain conclusions, she mockingly quotes them as saying “it’s just that way and don’t talk about it.” She depicts independent thinking as the most important way to understand Islam’s message.

To emphasize the importance of this precept, the speakers use modal verbs, such as *have to*, in the impersonal *you* statements, which generally speaking reveal a speaker’s evaluation of the likelihood of a linguistically-expressed state of affairs (Cornillie, 2009; Nuyts, 2001; Quirk et. al, 1985, Vold, 2006). Quirk et al. (1985) in their account on *The Comprehensive Grammar of English* describe modality as “the manner in which the meaning of a clause is qualified so as to reflect the speakers’ judgment of the likelihood of the proposition it expresses being true” (p.
219). The modals I am looking at are those that express an “obligation” or “compulsion” (p. 225) for the addressee to accept the statement as valid and important. According to the authors, the speaker is advocating a certain form of behavior, which “typically suggests that the speaker is exercising his authority” (p. 225). This includes self-admonishment as the speaker exercises authority over herself, appealing to her own sense of duty or expediency (p. 225). My data mainly contains the modals could and have to (Excerpts 3 and 4), gotta (Excerpt 5) and need to (Excerpt 6).

In the following excerpts, these modals express the requirement to think before taking action, implying ethical considerations and moral prescriptivism: they communicate an obligation or duty as ethical human beings and at the same time certainty that the message is correct and has to be understood by everyone, which can be seen in Excerpt 3. Zibaa discusses the talk of an invited speaker at the Islamic Awareness Week whose argument impressed her. She echoes his argument of interpreting Islam and the Qur’an in various ways, depending on reader and environment. She initially uses the modal could, which implies that interpreting Islam is an option that is nice (lines 2-6). However, she then strongly emphasizes that you have to find the true meaning yourself (8), using the much more forceful modal have to (7-8).

(3) Zibaa
1 the the things that he was saying
2 that he was interpreting the Qur’an differently um
3 it was nice because you could ___ that
4 as I said in the beginning
5 you could interpret it
6 as the way you want (1.0)
7 but you have to find, you have to find it
8 you have to find the true meaning yourself
9 so: you could be misguided or guided by Qur’an as
10 as as God himself he says in the Qur’an
11 you could be misguided by this book or you could be guided
In a later part of the interview, Zibaa sustains this certainty when projecting God as the ultimate authority over her life (Excerpt 4). Pious Muslim women’s appeal to God is also discussed in Mahmood’s (2005) findings, who claims that “women’s religious participation within such public arenas of Islamic pedagogy is crucially structured by, and serves to uphold, a discursive tradition that regards subordination to a transcendent will (and thus, in many instances, to male authority) as its coveted goal” (p. 2-3). Consider also Excerpt 4:

(4) Zibaa:
1 you have to think about the things that God told us
2 and you have to reach a conclusion yourself

In Excerpt 5, Faiza rejects the notion of identifying with a specific type of Islam. She claims that she always believed that there should not be divisions in Islam (lines 1-4); instead, selective Islamic practices originating in different sects can be applied to one’s life (lines 5 and 6). She contrasts herself with people out there (line 10), which is an indefinite spatial marker. Faiza uses this marker, along with the pronoun they, to distance herself from people who do not think for themselves, but follow things blindly (lines 9-13).

(5) Faiza
1 no no I’ve I’ve always
2 I’ve always believed that um there is
3 there really shouldn’t be a certain type of Islam
4 um they should actually just
5 I mean you could take from like the different sects
6 like from what makes sense to you
7 because generally it’s all Islam
8 ah (1.0) and you just gotta think about things you know
9 not just follow things blindly
10 cause there’s a lot of people out there
11 who just follow a certain sect
12 because they either you know
13 their parents told them to ((laughs))
14 or because that’s what everyone’s doing
15 but um (1.0) I think
16 you gotta you gotta make like a selective choice
think about things before you actually believe in them

Note that the modal gotta lends force to think about things (line 8) and to make a selective choice (line 16). Faiza proceeds to say that Islam allows her to make personal choices about her religious practices. Islam advocates balance, lenience, and harmony. It is not black or white but “makes you think.” She repeats her notion that “you need to think before you decide to believe in something.”

Nisreen (Excerpt 6) uses the modal need to in the sense of have to. She discusses the notion of interfaith with the interviewer and states that it is necessary to acquire knowledge about other religions because this knowledge can help you to grow in your own religion (line 2) and if anything it will make you stronger (6). She also states that you need to be open-minded (4).

(6) Nisreen
1    I am just all for it
2    I think in order to grow in your own religion
3    you need to learn about other religions
4    and basically like you need to be open-minded
5    and you need to be like
6    if anything it will make you stronger
7    because like if you learn about another religion
8    and you feel like "oh well we think this"
9    and you kind of like make that reasoning in your head
10   of why you do different things differently
11   and I feel like it's just it's important to have that
12   like educate yourself on other religions
13   to make you stronger

In sum, Faiza, Zibaa, and Nisreen all align themselves with the social type I call “the independent thinker” with the imperative to be open-minded, to search for true meaning, and to think about things before acting, through which they transform themselves discursively into more mature human beings. This social type is accepted by default in university environment as well as in Islam.
Furthermore, this social type also aligns with a process of what Keane (2007) describes as purification of religion – a trait of the moral narrative of modernity (p. 7). Keane follows Latour’s (1993) definition of purification as “the drive to draw a clear line between humans and non-humans, between the world of agency and that of natural determinism” (p. 7). Drawing on Karl Marx, Keane further alludes to “an abstraction of that which is concrete” (p. 10) and an “alienation of persons from the results of their activity” (p. 10). In my data, these concepts translate into the overarching process of making separations between corrupt human or cultural practices and the truth of a timeless, “pure,” and “perfect” Islam, which is tainted and distorted by these practices. In Excerpt 1, for instance, Maheen filters out “the whole package” of Islam, which could be responsible for negative things that had happen to my life (lines 3), although she does not go into detail as to what these things entail. Similarly, Amita explains that, when practicing Islam, one has to see what you agree with and what you don’t agree with (Excerpt 2, lines 16-19).

Another trend in the data is to eradicate any other human, and hence possibly erroneous, interpretation of the Qur’an, but to “find the true meaning yourself” (Zibaa, Excerpt 3, line 8). These arguments are underpinned by the pervasive belief that the Qur’an is the literal word of God and therefore the ultimate authority, which also becomes evident in the women’s rejection of following any Islamic sect, such as Sunni or Shia Islam, since these are viewed to be human creations. Nevertheless, it is allowed to filter out appropriate aspects of these sects: Farida, for instance, states that “you could take from like the different sects like from what makes sense to you because generally it’s all Islam” (Excerpt 5, lines 5-7). She calls this process a “selective choice” (line 16).
Lastly, the women conduct a de-territorializing of Islam from countries in which it is practiced. A prime example is Excerpt 7 below, in which Tamara, a Caucasian American from Colorado who converted to Islam in 2006, discusses a talk by an Imam at the Islamic Awareness Week. She agrees with the speaker that Islam has to be approached objectively (line 2). She defines objectively as de-contextualizing Islam, which involves removing Islam from the cultural settings in which it has been embedded, such as Saudi Arabia or America (line 7), since these settings could corrupt the message of Islam. In other words, she constructs a trans-cultural and transnational Islam and proposes taking charge of interpreting Islam individually so it can be applied to all times and places (line 15).

(7) Tamara
1 and um but I really liked what he said
2 that he was saying how you have to look at Islam objectively
3 or you have to at least try to
4 because everyone whether they are Muslim or not
5 comes at it from the wrong like lens
6 their own cultural lens
7 you know even if they are in Saudi Arabia or America anywhere
8 and you're gonna see it through your cultural lens
9 you have to take yourself out of that context
10 and look at it objectively to see what does it say
11 and how is that applicable
12 because once you take yourself out of your context
13 or time and place
14 then you can see how Islam is applicable to all times and places

In this excerpt, I am particularly interested in the way Tamara chronotopically places herself in the location of the talk on Islam in the United States, using past tense and the deictic first person pronoun I, liking what he, namely the speaker, said (line 1). Subsequently, however, she shifts from the deictic pronoun I to the impersonal pronoun you, as seen in lines 2-3 and 8-15, and from the past tense to present tense and to the indefinite not-here realm to all times and places (line 15).
In their survey of *Impersonal Uses of Personal Pronouns* and their typological differences among languages, Kitagawa & Lehrer (1990) claim that person shifts towards the impersonal occur frequently in spontaneous conversation and often “in discourse situations involving structural knowledge and general truths” (p. 739). These shifts towards impersonal pronouns, present tense, and the not-*here* realm create universality and idealization. Interestingly, there is a paradox between the structural and functional interpretations of these linguistic features since, on the one hand, Tamara uses impersonal *you* statements to separate Islam from culture and, on the other hand, these impersonalizing statements work to position her as agentive. The strategy in this excerpt is to de-individualize and de-contextualize Islam by generalizing it, so it then can be reapplied to the individual person without any cultural baggage.

In sum, these purification techniques and alignments to social types allow the women to apply Islam to their daily lives. As described in previous chapters, for the women, Islam *is* a complete way of life and *not* inimical to the contemporary normative concept of secular-liberal politics in the United States with its emphasis on individuality and freedom of action. Instead, Islam itself *is* freedom of thought, as Maria clarifies in Excerpt 8:

(8) Maria
20 because in Islam it's very important to think
21 and when *you* don't
22 when *you* do not use *your* minds
23 and *you* just follow blindly
24 that's >I think that is the worst type of a Muslim actually<

The women take charge of how to interpret Islamic practices, such as praying or adopting the veil, and construe their own version of Islam, which they often call “real” or “pure” Islam. Real and pure Islam is based on their own, independent interpretations of the Qur’an and the hadith.
“The scholar” and personal experience. The social type of “the independent thinker” relates conceptually to that of “the scholar,” which implies that getting educated is to become a stronger person or Muslim. In Excerpts 9-11, the women position themselves as educated and align themselves with the common social type of “the scholar,” for which growing up and learning is necessary to make educated and informed decisions and having moral discipline. They use personal experiences and verbs expressing emotions to argue for individuality in Islam, which leads to a more egocentric interpretation of impersonal you statements.

Kathleen Wales (1996), who provides a comprehensive analysis of grammatical behaviors of personal pronouns in English, states that when expressing personal experience in impersonal you statements “[t]he subjectivity of the generalisation makes you strongly egocentric in its orientation” (p. 79). The author claims that “[a] speaker’s observation on life will invariably be coloured by their own subjective attitudes and experiences; conversely they may feel that their own experiences are of interest or significance to the community at large” (p. 79). Furthermore, in the egocentric use of the impersonal you the generalizations are simply a reiteration of personal experiences or of personal habitual behavior (p. 79).

In my data, the social type of “the scholar” is frequently opposed to the ignorance of young age, as exemplified in Excerpt 9. Maria narrates her childhood in Iran and then shifts out of her narrative frame by using the impersonal you, present tense, and no spatial marker (lines 2-6). She has overcome ignorance at the age of ten (lines 5 and 6).

(9) Maria
1 well I guess I guess
2 when you're a kid
3 you are you, you follow easy
4 because you don't have too many ideas in your head ((smiles))
5 but when I reached ten
6 then that's when I just refused to do many things
In Excerpt 10, Nisreen expresses this idea when discussing why she considers herself as a progressive Muslim. She discusses a journey to the point that you want to be (lines 4-5). The destination of the journey is to be progressive (line 13) and being a better Muslim (line 15).

(10) Nisreen
1  I think being progressive involves like (1.0)
2  you're not at the point that you wanna be
3  but you're just kind of (1.0)
4  well like you're not at the point
5  that you wanna be
6  but at the same time you're not being like
7 > you're following the religion<
8  and you're growing
9  and you're learning
10  and you want to learn
11  and want to grow
12  so you become a better person
13  so in order to be progressive
14  you're like educating yourself
15  and kind of work at being a better Muslim so: ya

Nisreen (Excerpt 10), Alia (Excerpt 11), and Zibaa (Excerpt 12) all use positive emotion verbs, such as wanna, feel, or cognition verbs, such as become aware. Quirk et al. (1985) state that these verbs are “expressing ‘private’ states, which can only be subjectively verified” (p. 202). They are often associated with states of emotion or attitudes, which are egocentric and add more empathetic power because they put the addressee in the experiencer position. The present progressive in lines 7-9 (Excerpt 10) indicates the duration of time and effort put in to becoming a better Muslim (line 15).

Similar strategies are used by Alia (Excerpt 11), who stresses the inside (line 2), drawing on feelings (line 3), intentions (lines 4 and 5), going through hardships (line 6) or experiences (line 12), becoming aware (line 9), noticing (line 10), knowing (line 11), and growing (line 13).
Aditi projects personal experience into the impersonal you statements in order to elicit the empathy of the listener to understand and share the same sentiments.

(11) Aditi
1 so I think yes it's with your actions
2 but it's also inside
3 “how do you feel”?
4 and your intentions
5 cause Islam is a religion that has a lot to do with intentions
6 so: I think when you go through hardships or you
7 or I think the older you get
8 and the more you you know
9 you become aware I guess of other or of many things
10 you haven't really noticed before
11 or you've known them
12 but now you go through experiences
13 and you just grow and you and you
14 I think you begin to look
15 I don't know, I think you can think objectively
16 and look at things on a deeper level

These excerpts show that not only do the women want to interpret the Qur’an and Islam for themselves, they also feel the need to work on themselves and apply self-discipline to transform themselves.

“The victor” and agency as self-transformation. This last section focuses on the controversial Islamic concepts of jihad, which the media often portrays as an unjustified holy war, and hijab, which is the head scarf worn by of Muslim women and is constructed as a symbol of oppression. The following excerpts illustrate the general social type of “the victor,” which involves a self-disciplined person who has found self-realization in the process of self-transformation and in the mastery of personal struggles or roadblocks. The women claim self-discipline through applying those Islamic concepts to their body and minds: their discourse of

25 This is also a narrative pattern that underlies the faith-development narrative I analyze in Chapter 4.
The use of "jihad and the hijab" shows that overcoming struggles helps them in reaching a higher psychological and religious state that is informed only by God’s words and precepts, which represent the only truth and perfection. They implicitly align with Mahmood’s (2005) argument that the quest for agency is tacitly informed “by the humanist assumption that self-transformation is not only a central fact of history but also a good that exceeds local systems of value” (pp. 3-4), which she renders part of the “European intellectual, moral, and even theological history” (pp. 3-4).

In the following excerpts, the women use a more specialized version of the impersonal *you*, which Kitagawa & Lehrer (1990) call the “vague” use of *you*. This vague use includes the speaker as a referent, but not the addressee. Instead, it refers to specific individuals or subgroups, which are not identified by the speaker but can be retrieved from context. In my data, this subgroup includes Muslims in the MSA or Muslims in general. Nevertheless, the speaker is still chronotopically removed from time and space and is therefore open to align with socially accredited generic social types in the *here-and-now*. Sacks (1992a) discusses the usage of this type of *you* in his analysis of an interview between the former American vice-president Humphrey and a Japanese newspaperman on control over atomic weapons. Humphrey is asked about whether Japan would have more say in having atomic weapons. Regarding Humphrey’s answer, Sacks writes,

> although he’s talking about what ‘we’ will do, he formulates his remarks in terms of ‘you,’ e.g. “You want to give other people a chance,” etc. This involves the Japanese who read it in the position of assessing his problems as though it were anybody’s problem in such a situation (p. 166).

The strategy that emerges in my data is a similar sort of idealization strategy in that it addresses Muslims but pretends to be anybody’s struggle.
The following excerpts still project Islam as removed from time and space, as well as having to be applied for individual purposes. The hijab and jihad are detached from their indexical meanings of oppression or violence, as assigned by the media. Instead, these Islamic precepts are purifying means to self-discipline for the speaker and demand work on the body and mind over a period of time. Being a constant presence in the women’s lives, these self-disciplining means form certain patterned behaviors, such as modesty and righteousness, which lead the women to their goal of becoming better Muslims (see Mahmood, 2005). Furthermore, the women foreground their motivation to please and achieve closeness to God, which counters the stereotype of them being impelled to please Muslim men or Islamic societies. The best course of action is determined by becoming more pious, modest, virtuous, and moral human beings. Linguistically and chronologically speaking, the women create idealized space to align to “the victor” and they divert the discourse inwards – towards an inner space.

**Jihad.** While the media refers to jihad mainly as an unjustified “holy” war, the women stress that the English translation of the Arabic word *jihad* is “struggle.” They collectively talk about two types of struggle: (1) the “lesser,” “physical,” or “outer” jihad, and (2) the “inner” or “greater” jihad. They explain that the lesser jihad could refer to physical warfare but emphasize that only self-defense or the defense of family, nation, or Islam counts as an acceptable motive for warfare and is licensed by Islamic law. The women jointly stress the importance of the greater jihad, which is also frequently discussed in scholarship on Muslims in the West (Schmidt, 2004; among others). And while the physical jihad is located in a specific country at a specific time and in specific circumstances, the inner, greater one leads to both physical and mental discipline, which is ceaseless and prolonged.
In Excerpt 12, Tamara discusses this difference between the lesser and greater jihad (line 1), which cannot be separated from each other. The presupposition is that you have to be a disciplined, moral human being (greater jihad) before you can change the world (line 7) (lesser jihad), which is an aim of da’wah.

(12) Tamara
1 and also um you know there is like the lesser and greater jihad
2 with the lesser being physical
3 the greater being internal
4 you know, struggling within yourself so:
5 and you can’t really separate the two
6 I mean you have to change yourself
7 before you can change the world

Tamara, along with others, embraces these Islamic symbols, such as the hijab, and Islamic concepts, such as jihad, which are both media buzzwords associated with social fundamentalism and the subjugation of women. In her rendering, however, these norms become “practices, techniques, and discourses through which a subject transforms herself in order to achieve a particular state of being, happiness, or truth” (p. 32).

In Excerpt 13, Zibaa agrees with Tamara (Excerpt 13) that the most important jihad is the jihad within you (lines 1 and 2), which leads to a purification of the self (line 3) and to becoming a better person (line 4).

(13) Zibaa
1 well jihad is not (1.0) it's the most important jihad
2 is the jihad within you
3 so: you have to pure yourself
4 you have to be a better person
5 that's the biggest jihad you could do
In Excerpt 14, Zeina also mentions the inner versus the outer struggles (lines 1 and 2), as well as the self-discipline and self-transformation after going *through a difficult time* (line 6), which demands patience (line 5) and affects a person’s *character* (line 4).

(14) Zeina

1 and jihad is there are two forms of jihad
2 like inner struggle and outer struggle
3 um inner struggle is about (1.0)
4 it's more about your character you know
5 and being patient
6 um when you go through a difficult time
7 and just to have faith and hope

These excerpts on the jihad, and the following ones on the hijab, indicate the social type of “the victor,” which overcomes difficulties or roadblocks, although these are not specified in the data. This vagueness is an effective discourse strategy because it allows the listeners to fill in the omitted details and be part of the women’s worldview. This social type also implies ceaselessness or prolonged duration without an endpoint, which is expressed with “durative” verbs that result in a change of state (Quirk 1985, p. 207). The lexical properties of these verbs are also part of the way in which they are structured in relation to time. Purifying (yourself), struggling (with yourself), changing (yourself), going through (something), and behaving (with others) are continuous activities that have duration and no terminal points - they indicate unfinished action or activities at the time of speaking. They also communicate linearity and progressing through infinitive time (see Anderson, 1991; Benjamin, 1986).

**Hijab.** The analysis of the discursive use of *hijab* speaks to the apparent increasing popularity of the veil in urban Egypt since the 1970s, and also in non-Muslim majority countries like the United States (Mahmood, 2005). Mahmood (2005) mentions that scholars “often explain
the motivations of veiled women in terms of standard models of sociological causality (such as social protest, economic necessity, anomie, or utilitarian strategy), while terms like morality, divinity, and virtue are accorded the status of the phantom imaginings of the hegemonized” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 16). While the women in this study often cite resistance to the commodification of Western women’s bodies or the hegemony of Western female behavioral norms, it is important to pay attention to “Islamic virtues of female modesty or piety, especially given that many of the women who have taken up the veil frame their decision precisely in those terms” (p. 16).

In Excerpt 15, for instance, Tamara describes the women’s happiness of being Muslims. The pronoun we she uses in lines 1-3, 13-15, and 18 most likely refers to Muslim women in the MSA, but possibly includes Muslim women globally. She designates America to be one of the best places that you can be a Muslim (lines 4 and 5) and you can wear the hijab (6) because you do it for the right reasons (7). It is interesting to note that she does not specify the reasons, but explains what they are not, namely force of tradition and family (9-11). Instead, doing Islam and veiling is important because you do it for yourself (12). This vagueness is communicatively powerful, particularly when she talks about wearing the hijab in the United States for the right reasons (7).

(15) Tamara
1 I would say “we are happy
2 we are so happy ((smiles))
3 we are doing what we want to do”
4 I think America is one of the best places
5 that you can be a Muslim
6 and you can wear the hijab
7 because you do it for the right reasons
8 you are not doing it
9 because you’re like forced to
10 or because you know it’s like the tradition
11 or family or something
12 you do it for yourself ((...))
Wearing the hijab is an indication for modesty and good conduct. Rather than letting *the sun shine in my hair* (line 16), Tamara uses the hijab to discipline the body and oppose Western models of the feminine. Here, again, Tamara uses the three-step process to build the chronotope of the evolved Muslim women, as she speaks for Muslim women in general (lines 13-18). That is, her narrative moves from an uninvolved persona through a generalizing process and finally a temporal evolution to a more reflective persona.

Zeina feels that “there are much bigger issues in the world to care about than just, you know, your appearance, and that’s something that matters a lot in the West.” Fatima continues to explain that veiling in the general Muslim population is due to the women’s aim to be modest: “they do it for modesty.” Consider the following Excerpt 16, where she describes how *your conduct* (line 2) leads to *thinking before you act or say something* (8).

(16) Fatima
1 hijab has also to do with not just covering up
2 but also to do with your conduct
3 how you how you behave with others so:
4 I’d say that wearing it has made me
5 MADE me more conscious of (1.0)
6 thinking before I say something (1.0)
7 So that’s (…)]
8 thinking before you act or say anything

This type of modesty is also about disciplining others, which is part of *da’wah*.

(17) Zibaa
1 Um yeah I think that ah I think that point of my life
I needed to ahm prove something to myself that I that it doesn't matter how you look or how your body looks like or how your physical aspect doesn't matter a lot if you're a good person if you if you have worked on yourself a lot on your inner whatever you become a better person people respect you as who you are and not as what you wear So, that's another thing that I like I like to wear hijab.

Maria agrees with that aspect when she states, “when you wear the hijab, you demand respect from people cause they, they have no other option.”

These excerpt show an intimate relationship between the outward self-disciplining hijab and the inner state of modesty, which Mahmood calls the Islamic virtue of female modesty (*al-ihtisham, al-haya*) (p. 23). She claims that there is considerable debate about how this virtue should be lived, and particularly about whether its realization requires the donning of the veil. A majority of the participants in the mosque movement (and the larger piety movement of which the mosque movement is an integral part) argue that the veil is a necessary component of the virtue of modesty because the veil both expresses ‘true modesty’ and is the means through which modesty is acquired. They draw, therefore, an ineluctable relationship between the norm (modesty) and the bodily form it takes (the veil) such that the veiled body becomes the necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created and expressed” (p. 23).

In keeping with Mahmood’s claim, da’wah is reflected in Amita and Amina’s narratives because both women do not wear the hijab, but want to wear it in the future when they are self-disciplined enough to bear the responsibility.

(18) Amita

1 if you’re waling down the street and you see a hijabi who’s
2 ah (1.0) I don't know
3 not that I do things like this ((laughs))
4 but like um being mean to somebody
5 or putting somebody DOWN
6 or any kind of imperfect human act
that sometimes slips out of us
you, you don't see that
because hijabies (1.0)
when you wear a hijab you represent Islam
and <you are you> show the world what Islam is
and so if you can't show the world properly what Islam is
you can't be as close to that perfect ideal as possible
then I feel like you shouldn't wear hijab
until you're ready to be that ideal

(19) Amina
no I mean definitely I think that cause
>insha'allah< I wanna wear the hijab
and I think that once you wear the hijab
you can't separate your faith from anything that you do
because it's there it's on your head that you know;
"I'm a Muslim I'm" you know;
so: you can't separate it and
insha'allah I mean I wanna be a doctor and
but I don't want my goals for a career to like
interfere with my goals for like my faith

Amina proceeds by saying that she wants to have a family and in both of her goals – being a
doctor and having a family – “Islam plays a big part.” She states, “one day I want to wear the
hijab,” but she is not yet ready to bear the responsibility of being a perfect Muslim. Note also
that the tense shifts from future to present tense and back to the future tense. Zibaa agrees in that
the hijab is a symbol of Muslim women because “if you wear hijab, everyone knows that you’re
a Muslim.” This will attract people to talk about Islam, which is an opportunity to discuss their
interpretation of Islam.

In addition to the hijab being tied to responsibility, self-discipline, and right conduct, it is
also seen as an advantage that Muslim women have over Western women and therefore wearing
it is a privilege. This departs greatly from the notion that the hijab as a chronotope is often seen
as a divider of space between the Muslim women and the world around them\textsuperscript{26}. In a lot of cases, the women say that they feel more freedom to move around through wearing the hijab. Amita (Excerpt 20) even calls it a *privilege* (lines 2) that is *bestowed upon the women* (line 3), which has the connotation of honor or gift.

(20) Amita
\begin{quote}
\begin{tabular}{l}
1 like it's, some people see it as a form of oppression \\
2 But the beauty of the hijab is that it's a privilege \\
3 that is >bestowed upon the women< \\
4 It is, it is a way of marking yourself as a Muslim woman
\end{tabular}
\end{quote}

Nisreen (Excerpt 21) even compares Muslim women to a jewel, which is a metaphor indicating that something timeless, precious, and rare has to be protected from the outside world and is *kept for those who deserve it* (line 6).

(21) Nisreen
\begin{quote}
\begin{tabular}{l}
1 it's the fact that women are so valued in Islam \\
2 and that's why we have to cover because it's a \\
3 form of protection a form of modesty \\
4 if you have a jewel you're not gonna sit there \\
5 and show it to the world you're gonna cover it up \\
6 and try to keep it for those that deserve it you know! \\
7 and so women are viewed as that jewel \\
8 so: it's I like how I have that opportunity to be able \\
9 to explain it to people
\end{tabular}
\end{quote}

A jewel can also be defined as a means to draw other people close, which Nisreen sees as an opportunity to praise Islam and conduct da’wah.

This chapter has shown how shifts to the impersonal pronoun *you*, to the present tense, and away from concrete temporal and spatial markers achieves an alignment to different social types. Through these alignments, the women of the MSA construct the contemporary Muslim

\textsuperscript{26} It is also not an extension of the division between women who lived in the women’s quarters and the outside world.
woman as independently choosing Islam as a way of life, as a way to self-discipline and self-transformation, and as a way to subverting common media stereotypes. The women construct their agency not in a simple opposition to established symbols of oppression, such as jihad and the hijab; instead they draw on common social types in the West and in Islam to show that they think for themselves, educate themselves, and overcome struggles themselves. Similar to Mahmood’s (2005) subjects in the mosque movement in Cairo, or to pious subjects in general, the women have “an uncomfortable place in feminist scholarship because they pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status” (p. 5). The agency of the women lies in the fact that they draw from, as Mahmood (2005) explains, historically contingent discursive forces in which they are located (p. 32). In that sense, independent thinking, modesty, and self-discipline are constructed as intimately intertwined and used to educate the non-Muslim campus environment on the women’s way of life and identity.
In the previous chapter, I explored how the women of the MSA claim agency by aligning with generally accepted social types and asserting their freedom to interpret scripture without clerics, which are both components of Keane’s (2007) *moral narrative of modernity*. I also touched on how the women turn religious symbols, such as the hijab and the jihad, into self-disciplining, self-transforming, and self-realizing mechanisms that project them as independent thinkers, which is yet another integral component of Keane’s narrative. These discursive strategies counter the popular American stereotype that Muslim women have no agency. This chapter builds on the previous discussion by analyzing narrators’ strategies for countering stereotypes in their accounts of faith development narratives. These narratives emerge from interviews that I conducted with women in the MSA who were born and raised in Islam and who strive to dispel claims made by the media that Muslims, and Muslim women in particular, are anti-modern or anti-secular. As explained in previous chapters, such media representations, while often vague and abstract, construe Muslim women as behind the times, stagnant in the past, or at best, not appropriately Western or American.

Faith development narratives, like narratives in general, are rhetorical practices of identity construction, personal movement, and self-realization (Bacon, 1998; Lindquist, 2002). They are a discursive means by which women in the MSA can negotiate and manage individual and collective aspects of identity so as to get their voices heard, to gain credibility in the university community, and to conduct da’wah. In narrating how they have progressed from an unknowing child to a knowledgeable adult, MSA women integrate the Islamic rituals they associate with their childhood into a narrative of modernity and progress.
Modernity’s Precept of Movement and Purification

Attributes of modernity “underlie everything from venerable depictions of religion as an opiate, to liberal ideas about self-fulfillment, to Western denunciations of Islam,” as Webb Keane (2007, p. 5) argues in Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetishism in the Mission Encounter (2007). Keane links the role of Christianity, specifically the influence of Dutch Calvinist missionaries on ancient ritualists on the colonial and postcolonial Indonesian island of Sumba, to the inseparability of the concepts of modernity and human emancipation. His coined term moral narrative of modernity entails expectations, or norms, of how modern subjects should behave in a specific society and how they should move through time. Keane argues that the imagined progress toward becoming “modern” implies a free, emancipated human subject who is capable of acquiring the staples of modernity: specifically, self-transformation, self-realization, and finally, the de-objectification of religion. The latter is crucially relevant for the analysis of data in this chapter.

In a recent contribution to the Social Science Research Council blog The Immanent Frame, which publishes interdisciplinary perspectives on secularism, religion, and the public sphere, Keane (2009) notes that there are many contradictory definitions of modernity. He describes modernity as a feature of people’s historical consciousness, not as an objective historical period. Nevertheless, the idea of modernity looms large in the contemporary imagination, and its narrators perceive it as involving movement or progression forward towards a brighter future:

People around the world think there is such a thing as modernity. They are asking things like: Are we there yet? How do we get there? What will it cost us? How can we get out of it? Why are others not as modern as we are? Are they going to drag us back? And when
people ask these questions, they are usually not taking modernity as a neutral description of the world, surveyed from afar and with indifference. (para. 3)

The idea of progress, Keane further writes, is important not only for the disciplines of technology, economics, science, or government, but also for the practice of self-mastery and emancipation.

Kean’s moral narrative of modernity, envisioned through movement towards progress, associates the modern subject with the West, emancipation, ability to achieve self-transformation, and agency. When the media formulates this narrative, it often associates the “anti-modern” Muslim subject with the lack of these same qualities, positioning Muslims as backwards due to their perceived oppression by Islamic societies, and more specifically Muslim men. These representations have now become powerful contrastive tropes in many spheres of American society, so much so that the women in my interviews frequently remark that the media denies them the agency and freedom that it grants to the “emancipated” and “modern” Western woman. As Muslims, they are judged to have impeded movement towards self-realization or self-transformation, and thus towards emancipation and agency. Indeed, Tamara, a Caucasian American convert to Islam, states that these judgments exert great pressure on Muslim women in that the media will be happy only if she and her friends turn into “castrating career bitches.” Not surprisingly, as I illustrated in the previous two chapters, the women, in a somewhat reactionary manner, stress their individuality and defend Islam by constructing themselves as agentive Muslim women who challenge harmful images in the media. Their faith development narratives are oriented towards three levels: media stereotypes, the interviewer, and the CU campus community. Notably, the narratives that I collected exhibit a striking absence of any reference to

27 The valorization of self-transformation originates in the ideas about humanity that circulated in the intellectual, moral, and theological history of Europe and the Euro-American West (Keane, 2007, p. 3-4).
divine intervention, perhaps since they are framed for the interviewer, whom they perceive as not being faith-based and thus a likely candidate for da’wah.

Keane (2007) describes the moral narrative of modernity ultimately to be “a story of human liberation from a host of false beliefs and fetishisms that undermine freedom” (p. 5). This includes religious ritual, which according to Keane, “is supposed to have no efficacy in and of itself” (p. 61). The women do not eliminate discussion of Islamic ritual from their faith based narratives—such as praying five times a day (salat), fasting during Ramadan (sawn), and wearing the hijab (head scarf)—but they resignify ritual by delinking it from the material, ritualistic, and pure-repetitious nature that is characteristic of religious rituals more generally. Instead, they assign ritual a new meaning and logic that is in accordance with accepted “secular” values. For instance, Maria, an Irani-American, recalls the popular stereotype of Islam as a set of rituals when narrating how she found her religious identity through her interactions with people who questioned these rituals. For her, the external critique of these rituals became a means for self-realization regarding how she could become a “better Muslim.” Similarly, Maheen, who grew up in Iran and in the United States, also produces an external critique when she jokingly refers to the “typical Muslim woman” of the American media: wearing the burqa (an enveloping garment covering a woman’s body and face) and walking two feet behind her husband while her husband is married to multiple women at the same time. As she mocks the American tendency to view typical Muslim men as “women-beating suppressors,” she sighs over the media’s one-sided portrayal of Islam as “a sort of backwards religion” and frames her use of ritual not as a requirement, but as a choice. As Keane (2007) claims, “[T]he concept of agency can therefore enter into the work of purification, guiding people as they try to sort out which kinds of being do or do not have agency” (p. 23).
It is easy to see why women of the MSA are compelled to carve out a different interpretation of their engagement with Islamic ritual, given the stereotypes of Muslim women that they view in the mainstream media on an almost daily basis. Maheen sees the presentation of Muslim women as dehumanized: “like they’re a different type of species, they’re not even human.” Amina counters this same rendering when she describes MSA members as “just normal kids who are from a different religion, but that doesn’t mean that we’re monsters out there.” Both women see themselves objectified by the American discourse on modernity and resent the way they are positioned as lacking autonomy and self-determination. In addition, since Muslim women are constructed as not having achieved this purported “modern” state, they are also positioned as being un-American. Nadia, for instance, an American-born Muslim of Egyptian heritage, told the interviewer that when she walked through the gate at the Philadelphia airport on her last trip home, a middle-aged, European-American woman—a complete stranger—put an arm around her shoulder and said in a supportive, motherly tone “It’s okay, honey, you can take your scarf off now. You’re in a free country!” Although Nadia laughed it off as ignorance, this “advice” nevertheless stripped Nadia of her agency, her freedom, and her U.S. citizenship. Her darker skin and headscarf, popularly associated with foreignness and captivity, was perceived by this stranger to be incompatible with an American identity. Minoo Moallem (2005) notes similar tendencies in her book Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran, in which she confronts those stereotypical representations that position Islam and Muslims as fanatical and backwards. Indeed, she describes the effects of 9/11 as triggering “the paradoxical nostalgia of colonial discourse for the ‘barbaric other’ in need of civilization”28 (p. 55).

28 This sentiment is not restricted to Muslims in the West. Gayatri Spivak (1995), for instance, in her research on the elimination of the Hindu rite of suttee by the British colonizers in India, coined the prominent phrase “White men
In the two-and-a-half years that I have been participating in meetings and events of the MSA, I have heard Nadia and other women on numerous occasions discuss what it means to be both “Muslim” and “American,” terms that come to stand metonymically for being religious and secular, respectively (see Chapter 2). Their narratives presume that these are two discrete identities and categories, echoing the way that these categories are constructed in mainstream American media. When the women claim “we are Muslim, but we are also American,” as they do in many of my interviews, their usage of the conjunction *but* implies that these categories are somehow incompatible. In order to see how MSA members reconcile the Muslim and the American, or the religious and the secular, I asked them how their faith developed as they moved from the place of their Islamic socialization to a secular university in Colorado, where they studied and developed their version of Islam further and towards a point of maturation in an Islamic student group. The remainder of this chapter analyzes three faith development narratives as told by Amina, Maheen, and Maria, which are consistent with the other narratives I collected from group members in both content and form.

Since the media organizes Islamic practices along ideologically anachronistic regimes, I focus on the rhetorical practices used in faith development narratives that renegotiate these regimes.

**Movement through the Faith Development Narratives**

Jens Brockmeier (2000), who focuses on autobiographical time from a psycholinguistic angle, defines autobiographical story telling as “a continuous synthesis of various times and time orders” (p. 56). Faith development narratives are autobiographical testimonies, which are an
important genre for uncovering identity changes in time and space (Ayometzi, 2007; Brockmeier, 2000; De Fina, 2003; Gross, 2009; Schiffrin, 2009, among many). Similar to other autobiographical narratives, the faith development narratives that I analyze here are organized along a seemingly linear passage of time, starting with phrases such as “when I grew up” (Manush), “growing up” (Amina), “when I was young” (Maria), when speakers describe the acquisition phase of their faith. What follows are events crucial to how their Islamic faith developed over the years, which end in the present with a resolution of how Islam should be practiced. Thus, as Brockmeier (2000) claims, “episodes of fundamentally different temporal dimensions appear to be fused in one order” (p. 56). This type of chronological organizing principle operates as an ideology in autobiographies; it is assumed and conforms to common sense (Richardson, 2006).

In order to shed light on different temporal and spatial dimensions within the narrative plot of the faith development narratives I analyze here, I again make use of the framework of chronotopes (Agha, 2007; Bakhtin, 1981; Schriffrin, 2009). Deborah Schiffrin (2009), who analyzes a woman’s oral history in an African American enclave in the mid-1960s United States, states that narrative is “a blend of genres evoking place as well as personal identity linked to complex coordinates of time and space” (p. 421). Narratives shape and evoke chronotopes since they shape and evoke the narrator’s experience and identity in time and space. In addition, the narrative plot depends on how social norms regarding time and space organize personal experience in a specific context (Schiffrin, 2009) and through the canonical narrative repertoire of a culture (Brockmeier, 2000). When women in the MSA deliver their faith development narratives, they exhibit an interplay of possible pasts and possible beginnings in the light of moral and ideological goals in the interview situation.
Chronotope of the open road. The narrative plots that frame these faith development narratives are similar to each other in the way that they reflect one of Bakhtin’s (1981) influential chronotopic prototypes in ancient Greek narratives: the chronotope of the open road. According to Bakhtin, this chronotope maps the temporal course of life onto the metaphor of a road:

Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road); this is the source of the rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course: ‘the course of a life,’ ‘to set out on a new course,’ ‘the course of history,’ and so on; varied and multi-leveled are the ways in which the road is turned into a metaphor, but its fundamental pivot is the flow of time. (p. 244)

Bakhtin further claims that in the chronotope of the road, “time is chopped into separate segments, each encompassing a single episode” (p. 128), each of which is separate, rounded-off, complete, and self-sufficient. The episodes are ordered in a temporal sequence that makes up an irreversible whole and cannot be reversed or transposed.

Furthermore, temporal and spatial movement in the faith development narratives through which narrators display, perform, and construct self/other identity happens on two levels (Bakhtin, 1981; Schiffrin, 2009). The first level is the story world (Schiffrin, 2009), which is framed through what Bakhtin identifies as an interior chronotope. In this narrative realm, the time/space/personhood combination is reflected in each represented event or epoch in the narrative plot. These represented events make up the second level, which is the storytelling performance (Schiffrin, 2009), a realm in which we find Bakhtin’s exterior chronotope. In contrast to the interior chronotope, the exterior chronotope is interactional and dependent on context. In the case of the women I interview here, this chronotope importantly encompasses the women’s desire to conduct da’wah.
An example of how these two levels work can be seen in Amina’s narrative, reproduced below in Excerpt 1. Amina grew up in California and her parents were first generation immigrants from Pakistan. She moved to Boulder to get her undergraduate degree in Integrated Physiology. The course of life described in her narrative revolves around her physical journey from California to Colorado, intertwined with her emotional journey of maturing as a Muslim. The narrative is sectioned into three epochs, which are marked by significant events or changes in Amina’s course of life, introduced by growing up (line 1), but after coming here (line 4), and but now (lines 8 and 14).

(1) Amina

(1) Growing up in California
11 I mean growing up like
12 I always prayed five times a day↑
13 and fasted during Ramadān↑

(2) Moving to Boulder, blending back
14 but after coming here
15 I have learned like the meaning of what that is,
16 of what I have been doing my whole life
17 which I just did

(3a) Finding meaning in Islam, blending back
18 but now I understand why I'm doing it
19 and why it is important
20 and what its meanings are, you know?
21 which I am so thankful for
22 because before I just did it
23 because like like I said I was always Muslim

(3b) Resolution, thanking God
24 but now I'm like I know what being Muslim is
25 alhamdulillah yeah so

Amina discursively telescopes her childhood into two events in the first epoch—i.e., praying and fasting—that together represent how she practiced Islamic rituals growing up in California. These rituals constitute two of the five pillars of Islam, which are obligatory undertakings for all Muslims. In line 2, Amina mentions prayer, or salat, which consists of the five mandatory daily
prayers in Islam: *fajr, dhuhr, asr, maghrib, and isha’a*. In line 3, she refers to the ritual fasting, or *sawm*, that takes place from dusk to dawn during the month of Ramadan.

The second epoch encompasses the time period *after coming here* (lines 4-7), in which *here* deictically stands for the University of Colorado at Boulder and the MSA. It is *here* where the Islamic rituals she has been doing her *whole life* (line 6) became meaningful through common usage among her friends in the MSA, as she points out in a later part of the interview. With repeated use of the conjunction *but* (line 4, see also lines 8 and 14), Amina signals a change of mental state with respect to her early performance of ritual. By reframing her earlier practices of ritual as mechanistic instead of conscious, she represents her past self as ignorant about what Islam actually entails.

When describing the third epoch (3a and 3b), Amina brings her physical and mental journey into the present tense with *but now* (line 8 and 13), overtly distinguishing her present self from her past self. This is an emphatic period in her narrative plot. She enhances statements she made earlier in the narrative regarding how Islam has now become more meaningful by rephrasing them in rhythmic parallel structure (lines 8-10): “But now I understand why I’m doing it, and why it is important, and what it’s meanings are.” She stresses the importance of her message by drawing in the interviewer as an accomplice with the tag question *you know?* (line 10). She emphasizes the greatness of her achievement by stating how thankful she is to have been lifted out of her state of ignorance (line 11). She critiques her earlier practice of just “doing” ritual without the requisite understanding of what it means to be Muslim (lines 12-13). And in what I have identified as the resolution of her narrative (3b), she confidently presents her arrival at a new understanding of identity—or in her terms, a new understanding of “being Muslim”—that goes far beyond the practice of ritual that she began in childhood. The Arabic
phrase *alhamdullah* signals the conclusion of her narrative, as she praises and thanks God for this cognitive achievement (line 16).

**Chronotope of the life course of one seeking true knowledge.** Amina’s faith development narrative, as well as the ones discussed below, is organized along a special case of Bakhtin’s chronotope of the road: “the life course of one seeking true knowledge” (p. 130). The narrative plot is broken down into well-marked epochs through which the narrator “passes from self-confident ignorance, through self-critical skepticism, to self-knowledge and ultimately to authentic knowing” (p. 130). Although Bakhtin is interested in how this knowledge-acquiring chronotope found its earliest representation in the works of Plato (p. 130), it is also a staple of the moral narrative of modernity. Importantly, the women of the MSA see the acquisition of knowledge as an integral part of Islamic doctrine. By structuring their narratives around this chronotope, they are able to counter mediated stereotypes of Muslims as anti-modern, instead positioning the journey to their present-day interpretation of Islam as one of self-knowledge.

For instance, in the narrative analyzed above, Amina represents her past self as ignorant and her current self as knowledgeable. She stresses this distinction in other parts of her interview by jokingly stating that she did not even know that words like *insha’allah* and *masha’allah*—which are used daily in casual speech by most members in the MSA and can be translated to “God willing” or “praise God” (see Chapter 6 for a full discussion)—are not Urdu terms, but rather Arabic terms that originate in the Qur’an. Tellingly, in yet another part of the interview, Amina reveals that once 9/11 occurred, she was inspired to learn more about Islam in order to defend it against “what’s being portrayed on the media.”
In sum, Amina’s identity as an authentic Muslim speaking for Islam rests on a new understanding of ritual as meaningful instead of obligatory and empty, as suggested by the U.S. media. She thus incorporates the ideas of mobility and self-realization into her narrative, two concepts fundamental to Western understandings of the self. Although the initial epochs of the narrative focus on her movement through linear time and physical space, namely from the California of her childhood to the Colorado of her religious maturation, the bulk of the narrative focuses on her movement as a Muslim or human being, echoing sentiments associated with Keane’s (2007) moral narrative of modernity. For Amina, the attainment of a conscientious and knowledgeable Muslim identity is a fulfillment of her destiny, moral character, and potential. This perception is echoed by Nisreen, an Egyptian American raised in the United States, as she narrates her quest to become a “better person,” a “better Muslim,” and even more pointedly, a “progressive Muslim.” After describing her path to Muslim awareness as a “roller coaster” with its share of ups and downs, she acknowledges that even though “you’re not at the point that you wanna be, … you’re following the religion and you’re growing and you’re learning and you want to learn and want to grow.”

For the women of the MSA, then, “true” Islam is discovered only in the encounter with here (Colorado and U.S.). If Amina and Nisreen had not experienced this encounter with university peers in their life journey, they would have remained ignorant about the meaning of ritual and thus how to be appropriately Muslim. This type of progression can also be seen in Maria’s narrative in Excerpt 2. Maria lived the first six years of her life in Boulder and then moved to Iran. When she was 17, she moved to Toronto, Canada, with her family and back to Boulder, Colorado, two years later. She speaks English and Farsi fluently and studied Arabic in Iran. Of special interest is the content of Maria’s evaluations (Labov, 1985), the excerpts that
exist outside of the linear plot of the narrative. In these evaluations, Maria interrupts the flow of the narratives and provides the interviewer with comments on what she sees as essential to her development as an authentic and independent Muslim. (These evaluations are indented below for clarity.)

(2) Maria

(1) Iran, grandmother, masjid, praying
1 when I was very young
2 I remember my grandmother used to
3 she was very religious
4 and we would live with her†
5 so she used to take me to the masjid
6 and then we were just
7 I was I was very into
8 I'm still into praying no ((laughs))
9 I guess I guess when you're a kid;
10 you are (1.5) you you follow easy
11 because you don't have too many ideas in your head

(2) At the age of ten
12 but when I reached TEN
13 then that's when I just refused to do many things
14 because I it didn't seem logical to me
15 but not all people are like that
16 I was just a very stubborn child
17 and I still am;

(3a) Canada, Iran, now, hijab
18 and I think in at one point
19 when I moved to Canada
20 because (2.0) when I first went there I never
21 I never really wear worn a scarf outside of Iran†
22 and in Iran I never wore it properly
23 the way that people wear it here sometimes
24 and I still don't wear it properly
25 because I don't I don't see a need to;
26 um in CANada when I when I had to cover
27 and go to public high school
28 and I didn't know
29 I knew English
30 but I never studied in English
31 and I was new
32 and it was my last year in in high school
33 and there's so many issues in high school usually
34 I WAS I was a little shy
35 but it didn't really make me more religious
36 I was just more aware of who I am†
Maria’s faith development narrative contains three distinctive epochs, introduced by *when I was very young* (line 1), *when I reached ten* (line 12), and *when I moved to Canada* (line 19). In Epoch 1 (lines 1-11), Maria describes her childhood in Iran when she was *very young* (line 1). She mentions her grandmother (line 2) as influencing her in being religious (line 3) and praying (lines 7-8). In this epoch, she associates Islam with Islamic ritual practice: she uses spatial indicators, such as *the masjid* (mosque), as sites for her enactment of this practice. But when she brings the narrative into the present in the first evaluation (lines 8-11), she reframes her early relationship to Islamic ritual as ignorant. She explains that she is still praying, but not because she follows blindly as would a child who does not have *too many ideas* (lines 9-11). She thus distinguishes her current self as an agentive and independent thinker. This self-representation continues through Epoch 2, where she narrates her journey to figuring out a more authentic faith. During this period, she refused to do things that she did not find *logical* (line 14), as she was and still is a very *stubborn child* (line 16). She distanced herself from people who are not *like that* (line 15), stressing her self-determination.
In Epoch 3, Maria narrates her life in Canada in three parts, which are introduced by

*when I moved to Canada* (3a, line 19), *when I moved to Canada* (3c, line 37), and *in Canada* (3d, line 51). In each part of the epoch, she stresses her agency and her freedom to choose the Islam she believes to be appropriate for her.

In (3a), Maria introduces the hijab, in relation to which she developed her identity as a Muslim. She describes the feeling of foreignness that she encountered in Canada, which is due to her wearing the hijab for the first time outside of Iran (line 21); not being used to having English as the language of instruction in education (line 30); being exposed to *so many issues in high school* (line 32); and being *a little shy* (line 34). Nevertheless, she underscores, *I was just more aware of who I am* (line 36), which she elaborates on in the subsequent epochs (3b) and (3c). In the evaluation interlude (lines 22-25), she stresses her independent interpretation of Islam by stating that she does not see the need to wear the hijab properly (line 24).

Similar to Amina in the previous excerpt, Maria highlights the powerful impact of an encounter with non-Muslims who are chronotopically anchored in the West. In epochs (3b) and (3c), she incorporates the quoted speech of a hypothetical conversation with Canadian *people* (line 39) unfamiliar with Islam who challenge her practice of wearing the hijab and praying: “Because people ask me, ‘so, why do you wear a hijab?’ or ‘why do you pray?’” (lines 39-40). Ironically, the encounter with these questioning voices becomes the basis of her self-identity. That is, Maria’s sense of the meaning of ritual arises in response to people questioning these rituals (repeated in 3c). It is when she is compelled by others to articulate the “why” of her religion that she comes to a new understanding of her Muslim identity, something that Muslims in Muslim countries, such as her home country of Iran, are never are asked to do. The idea of encounter is important to Bakhtin’s (1981) chronotope of the road as well, as speakers narrate
their journey to a new self in large part by aligning or distinguishing themselves from the selves they encounter along the way. In Maria’s narrative, the encounter with questioning Canadians inspires her to distinguish her own views as different from the mainstream and pursue a new path. On the road, Bakhtin writes, “the spatial and temporal series defining human fates and lives combine with one another in distinctive ways” and for a specific purpose (p. 243).

Consider the focal encounter of Maheen’s faith development narrative, reproduced as Excerpt 3. Maheen lived in Iran until she was eleven years old, after which she moved to the United States. She considers both countries her home. But in this narrative, the encounter that compels her to rethink Islam involves her own stepfather, who urged her and her mother to abandon the Islamic ritual of wearing the hijab when they moved to the United States:

(3) Maheen

(1) Growing up in Iran
1   ahm WELL for ME:: kinda
2   >Islam was kinda forced on me<
3 not in a way that (2.0) not in a bad way forced
4 but I was just kinda lived grew up with it;
5 so: it was part of my life without

(2) United States and embedded narrative about her step dad
6   ahm when I came to the United States
7   my step dad lived here for about twenty years
8   and he went back
9   and met my mom
10   and they got married;
11   so my stepdad had lived here for some twenty years
12   and he (1.0) ahm although he is very Persian
13   and he has the Irani background†
14   he doesn't really believe in uh (1.5)
15   some of the principles of Islam
16   so when I came here
17   he was very strict
18   and he didn't like
19   the hijab our head coverings
20   so he told my mom and I
21   when we went to Turkey to get our green cards
22   that >it wasn't really cool anymore< ((has regret in her voice))
23   so it was really hard for my MOM;
24   because she'd grown up with it
I'd just you know I was eleven
so I didn't really care that much

(3) Iran, times of faith, grandfather, teacher
but ahm I guess there were times of faith
because when I was younger
there were people that influenced me,
<like my grandfather was really spiritual>
my, I remember my teacher in ah elementary school
my fifth grade teacher was very spiritual
so I ended up taking up a lot from her

(4) United States, self-doubt
>but then when I came to the United States
there was a time that I just didn't wanna even believe in God
because I thought that a lot of the negative things
that had happen to my life
was because of Islam

(5) Resolution
but then I've kind of grown to (1.0) realize that
for me religion isn't like just the whole package
religion is your own interpretation
and your own views on (3.0) HOW you live
so you can use that you can use the good things
that you learn about the religion
and just apply them to your daily life
So >it was kind of like that for me<

Ironically, in Maheen’s narrative, as in Amina’s and Maria’s narrative, it is another’s questioning of belief that sets off the narrator’s belief and makes it evolve. Here, the questioner is the stepfather, who “doesn’t really believe in, uh, some of the principles of Islam” (lines 14-15). And while Maheen “didn’t really care that much” at the age of eleven about no longer wearing the hijab (line 26), in contrast to her mother who cared deeply, she has now come to re-appropriate this ritual as an agentive choice (lines 39-47). Maheen’s faith development narrative thus has two central parts, one past and one present. She begins with a narrative of how the Islam in her life is ritualistic, communal, and forced upon her (lines 1-25), but then abandons this view to construct Islam as conceptual, applicable to her everyday life (lines 26-46), and most importantly, a life path that she has selectively and independently chosen (lines 38-46).
In the resolution of the narrative (Epoch 5, lines 38-46), Maheen distances herself from the term *religion* (line 39), using the ontological metaphor of the *whole package* (line 39). By use of this metaphor, as with Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) *container metaphor*, Maheen suggests that religion has an in-out orientation capable of holding many items, such as unwanted and unwarranted hindrances, but also *good things* (line 43). The metaphor allows her to present Islam as a grab-bag of sorts, and to position herself as an agent who can select from among its contents when applying Islam to her own life. Note that this last part of the narrative has no spatial, temporal, or person markers and is told in the present tense, indicating infinite duration. Like other women in the MSA, Maheen stresses that it is important to acquire knowledge of Islam. The act of acquiring knowledge in order to make an informed decision is highly valued in the secular university environment and the MSA community. It is this acquisition that sets the women of the MSA apart from the stereotyped Islam projected through the American media, enabling them to embrace ritual as an educated choice and reframe Islam as a progressive identity.

**Idealization of Islam and the U.S.**

My chronotopic analysis of these faith development narratives suggests that what governs the narrative plot from the outset is the communal interpretation of Islam as practiced in the MSA. When describing the chronotope of the road, Bakhtin (1981) notes that “from the very first strokes (the first manifestations of character) the firm contours of the whole are already predetermined, and everything that comes later distributes itself within these already existing contours – in the temporal order” (p. 142). A similar argument is offered by Ganser, Pühringer and Rheindorf (2006) when they analyze the chronotope of the road in “road movies” since the
1970s—a film genre they identify as post-*Easy Rider* movies. They argue that this chronotope “offers audiences an opportunity to invest the causal chain (or lack thereof) with their own values” (pp. 2-3). Citing the example of the chronotope of the Promised Land, which “if articulated as the road to California, may suggest to the audience a particular American myth along with its ideological implications” (pp. 2-3), the authors claim that audiences learn to see their own life in the plot as it unfolds. As I listened to these women and recorded their stories, I too experienced their narratives of faith development as a journey with significant ideological implications. The women demonstrate that connecting Islam to a specific cultural setting would diminish its authority in the university environment and hence the possibility of conducting da’wah with other university students and myself, the interviewer. They decontextualize, and therefore idealize, Islam to stress their individuality in face of contemporary political representations, despite the fact that individuality is very much contradictory to the communal aims of the group and also the global *ummah*.

These narratives also suggest that there are multiple ways not to be Muslim. The women describe not only the Islam of their childhood as unfavorable, but also similar forms of Islam practiced by other Muslims. Maria, for instance, describes “Muslims in Denver” as discriminating against her because they saw her as too liberal. In her opinion, these Muslims were close-minded and unwilling to educate themselves about Islam. She voices a similar perception of Muslims in Iran in the narrative cited above, who in her opinion are never compelled to think through the meaning of Islam for themselves because their practices are never challenged. These encounters with others, whether real or imagined, instigate self-awareness in the women’s faith development narratives, as they incorporate them into their development of a contrastive understanding of self and of Islam. Ganser, Pühringer, and Rheindorf (2006) call this

29 Except it is inversely connected to a very specific cultural setting – the ‘secular/non-Muslim west’
process “the background glances on the lookout for whatever they are escaping from” (p. 8). Other forms of Islam are thus positioned in contrast to the Islam that structures their current lives. The endpoint of their narratives is a more desirable form of Islam: a “pure” Islam that is not tainted by organized religion and thus enables the emergence of a pure, agentive self.

Nevertheless, when constructing their own version of Islam, the women inadvertently appropriate narrative “templates” that are part of the rhetorical repertoire of dominant U.S. American culture. As discussed in the previous chapter, the women’s rhetorical interpretation of U.S. society is as broad and oversimplified as the U.S. media’s interpretation of Muslims. For instance, their narratives set out a binary in which “Muslim” equals “religion” while “America” equals “ignorance” and “lack of values.” The women conceive of themselves as resisting the American “secularism” they criticize; yet the language they use is in fact a product of this same American secularism. In short, the women reduce Americans to a caricature for the purpose of emerging morally superior to their audience. This moral high ground is hard for an American audience to argue against, given that they too subscribe to a moral narrative of modernity that prefers meaningful and independent spirituality over ignorance.

It is interesting to note that the road to self-realization through Islam, as articulated by these women, occurs entirely without God’s interference, even though all Islamic rituals, as defined by the group, require submission to God. This may be the case because the women are attempting to convince the interviewer, whom they perceive as a white, female, non-Muslim academic, that the Muslim woman subject is modern and not backwards. But it is also possible that they imagine their audience—the larger university community—to be a secular community, and that they therefore construct their identity in a way that might appeal to non-religious listeners.
Also notable is the fact that these narratives never mention the pervasive American discourse on Christianity. This is in stark contrast to the liberal academic community, who claim that there is too much religion in politics and governmental decisions. It also contrasts with some members of the MSA taking issue with former president George W. Bush leading wars against Muslim nations because “God told him to.” The women’s omission of any reference to American Christianity in these narratives is all the more striking given the media’s frequent projection that America is a Christian nation and Islam is a heresy. An unanswered question thus remains: Why do the women sidestep the media’s ongoing depiction of conflict between Islam and Christianity? Why is there no discussion in their narratives of anything even vaguely related to Christianity?

Yet the most puzzling aspect of these faith development narratives is the way they are based on an internal contradiction. That is, the women criticize the American value system while simultaneously constructing an Islam that is in accordance with American ideals of individuality, freedom, and self-transformation. This understanding of Islam is quite different from the way many Islamic scholars outside the United States define Islam, who project it as an alternative to the perils of Western modernity. Yet elsewhere in their interviews the women assert that modernity is indeed about egocentric narcissism and superficiality, and they resist the common call by the media, politicians, or religious organizations to modernize Islam.

I suggest that the women of the MSA are intimately engaged with the oppositional stereotypes of “Americans” and “Muslims” that are perpetuated on a daily basis through the mass media. Feeling victimized by these representations, they set up their own binaries in the encounters they describe in their narratives, distinguishing good forms of Islam from bad forms of Islam through the concepts of self-awareness and self-knowledge. It is in this reframing that
they are able to position themselves as agentive subjects. Yet this reframing also complies with
U.S. ideas of secular individualism: their conduct of da’wah and defense of Islam not only
accepts, but also furthers, the dictates of modernity. Ironically, in narrating an alternative to
media stereotypes, the women of the MSA come to embrace many of the qualities that they
criticize elsewhere.
5 TIME AND SPACE IN MUSLIM CONVERSION NARRATIVES

Converts may identify the temporality of individual transformation with that of whole societies, or sharply distinguish between them (Keane, 2007, p. 113).

This chapter looks in detail at the conversion narratives of three new Muslims who are members of the Muslim Student Association (MSA). Amita comes from a Gujarati Indian background while Tamara and Catherine are Caucasian American, yet all three women grew up in Colorado and are immersed in the linguistic, ideological, and institutional university environment. As I suggested in the previous two chapters, the student environment at the University of Colorado is home to two types of opposing ideological forces, both of which injure the status of Muslims. First, many students view religion as ideologically incompatible with university life because of its perceived irrationality and suspension of “normal” thinking and reason (Harding, 1987, p. 168). Secular ideologies and the curriculum on campus deal with religion mainly as an analytical category to be studied. Second, religion is ideologically tied to powerful conservative Christian organizations, such as Focus on the Family in the neighboring city of Colorado Springs, and these are often perceived as intolerant of Muslims.

This concern over how much religion is acceptable on campus also affects relations between new and born Muslims within the MSA, sometimes triggering strong reactions. New Muslims are sometimes seen by born Muslims as a nuisance. For example, when they first embrace Islam, new Muslims are notorious for adopting radical and vocal ways of telling other Muslims how to be appropriately Muslim, such as how to wear the hijab. They interpret the Qur’an without having experienced Islamic culture; they lecture born Muslims on how Islam should be presented to the non-Muslim community. Nonetheless, new Muslims also are admired
by born Muslims for these very same reasons and for their dedication to the cause of Islam in the
West. For instance, Catherine, Tamara, and Amita are in strong agreement that Islam should be
divorced from culture. In other words, they are invested in creating a version of Islam that
focuses only on God and not on cultural expressions that can be distorted; they seek a diversity
in Islam that counters any generalization or stereotyping; and they embrace “a genuine American
Islam, rooted in the classical faith, which dates back before the theological, political and legal
schisms fractured the Ummah, the Muslim world, centuries ago” (Grossman, 2007, para. 10).

The following analysis views the conversion narratives of these three women as what
Keane (2007) calls “rival narratives of schemes for how individuals and communities should
project themselves in time” (p. 114). In his discussion on conversion to Christianity in Indonesia
from Dutch colonization to the country’s post-independence, Keane argues that “radical
conversion can foster a heightened sense of history” (p. 113) and looks at some problems “that
arise concerning the strong sense of historical agency that is common to many projects of
proselytization” (p. 113). Keane holds that missionaries’ views about the process of conversion
ultimately amounted to a theory of social change. The “sense of history” that they embraced and
shared with their converts emerged from perceived transitions between the past, present, and
future. Furthermore,

It involves questions about the kinds of agent that produce or hinder transition, about the
continuities or ruptures that result from their actions, and about the projected future. The
sense of history, however, is not a matter of imagination or memory in the abstract. It is
produced through concrete practices, texts, and material things whose historical
implications – the conclusions people draw from them and actions they encourage or
inhibit – depend on specific semiotic ideologies. (p. 114)

Though the women of the MSA are clearly situated in a very different time and place from the
Christian converts of Keane’s study, they too ascribe to a theory of social change. Indeed, their

30 This is similar to Protestant Christianity’s divorce from Catholicism.
entire reason for being dawees is to change societal perceptions of Islam that are commonly held in the United States, and more specifically on the university campus. The following analysis seeks to uncover the semiotic ideologies that inform these women’s sense of history, with an emphasis on how conceptions of continuity and rupture are negotiated in their conversion narratives.

Conversion to Islam in the West

The increase in the numbers of North American converts to Islam in the aftermath of 9/11 is often described as puzzling, even more so because European-American women constitute the highest number of converts (Bowen, 2009; Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999; among others). Although the numbers of converts vary greatly depending on the source of statistics, sources deem 9/11 a turning point after which conversion to Islam increased dramatically. This increase seems to correlate with the heightened coverage of Islam in the aftermath of 9/11 and a subsequent increased interest to learn about the religion.

The muddling of social constructs such as religion, ethnicity, gender, and nationalism plays an enormous role in how the popular media has questioned the motives of female European-American converts to Islam. Why, the discussion goes, would women cross ethnic and religious boundaries into a religion that is oppressive and violent towards them? This becomes evident in the “fame” some of these Muslim converts have achieved, as can be seen in the media coverage of Ingrid Mattson, a European-American Canadian who left Catholicism for Islam 23 years ago. Called “the face of Islam in America” in an article on USA Today (Grossman, 2007), Mattson is singled out as the first woman and first European-American convert to head the

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31 Bowen (2009) cites reports by CAIR (Council of American Islamic Relations) and NBC News with estimates from 34,000 Americans who converted since 9/11, to 200,000 American converts to Islam per year (p. 2).
Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), North America’s largest Muslim group. Now a celebrated author and professor at Hartford Seminary, where she teaches Islamic law and Islamic history, Mattson claims, “It’s time now to move the focus back off me and back on the issues” (Grossman, 2007).

Social science research has been treating the conversion to Islam in the West from a variety of perspectives and has asked important analytical questions, such as how gender and Islamic feminism are translated into practice (Badran, 2006); what motives Westerners have to convert to Islam (Köse & Loewenthal, 2000); what social forms the Islamic practices of converts take on (Luckmann, 1999); how theorists define religious change (Rambo, 1999); what kind of social types the converts turn into (Snow & Machalek, 1983); what phases converts go through during and after the conversion (Sultán, 1999); and whether conversion to Islam can be explained by analyzing its emotional reasons, such as social or psychological stress, loss of jobs, problems in dating, Western women’s promiscuity, etc. (Sultán, 1999). Köse & Loewenthal (2000) identify six motives of British converts to Islam, which they describe as intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. Luckmann (1999) analyzes conversion to Islam in Europe through the lens of privatization, marginalization of traditional Christianity, and pluralism. In a similar vein, Rambo (1999) explains conversion to Islam through reference to globalization theory, post-colonial theory, feminist theory, and cross-cultural theory.

As many researchers have pointed out, these explanations are not altogether satisfying since many of these categories and theoretical perspectives are found in the narratives of non-Muslims who are critical of Western societies and do not occur consistently in Muslim converts’ stories. As an alternative, Monica Wohlrab-Sahr (1999) calls for a deeper understanding of “how
life experience is expressed through religious symbols” (p. 353). In her research on conversion to Islam in Germany and the United States, Wohlrab-Sahr defines conversion in general as “the radical change of world views and identities, linked with a conflicting, exclusive relationship towards the past and former commitments” (p. 353). Researchers investigating Muslim converts in the West have to pay attention to Muslim converts’ adopting of the “Other,” since Islam is constructed as a foreign and non-Western religion. An important point of departure, then, would be to examine the tensions between the religious and social frame that converts leave behind and the new frame converts merge into. These tensions are framed through the lens of the new religion, which “functions as a means of individual problem-solving, because it re-evaluates the former weak points in the biography, and replaces the old relations by a new, absolute commitment” (p. 361).

Yet this body of literature on conversion to Islam, to my knowledge, has still not addressed what I see as the most prevalent identity claim among the new Muslims of my study: namely, that they are not “converts,” but rather “reverts” towards a natural state of Muslimhood into which every human being is born. That is, the women of my study explained their journey to Islam as a return to a de-materialized state that existed before they were socialized and polluted by people and culture. In my data, both new Muslims and born Muslims adhere to this view. In Excerpt 1, for instance, Fatima, who grew up in an Islamic family in India, claims that everyone who converts to Islam later in life was in fact born as a Muslim and thus “revert[s]” to an “original faith.” Muslimhood, then, is an eternal state:

(1) Fatima:

1 and Islam believes in one God
2 it believes in a natural state
3 that a child or anyone would have when he is born
4 so it takes it further that idea
so I’d say that my faith has been the same since I was born and we say that if someone converts to Islam it’s not converting it’s reverting because that was your original faith and then you came back to it

Catherine, an American who adopted Islam in 2006, similarly states that she has always been a Muslim because she had always lived “in the best way for God,” even as a Catholic. In her opinion, it is the natural state of fitrah (nature or disposition) that allows Muslims to accept Islam as the religion of truth. She links this natural inclination to a belief in one God (tawhid) and to obtaining excellence through knowledge (ihsan). Consequently, embracing Islam implies a return to a perceived pure disposition and is cyclical: a return to the past. Catherine, along with other women in the group, also depicts Prophet Muhammad and his wives as ideal Muslims and role models who have demonstrated how this natural disposition has been lived.

Linguistic anthropological background on the structure of conversion narratives

What is often referred to in the literature as the genre of conversion narratives involves autobiographical testimonies of faith changes. Autobiographical narratives are an important site for uncovering the construction of identity change in time and space (e.g., Ayometzi, 2007; Brockmeier, 2000; De Fina, 2003; Gross, 2009; Schiffrin, 2009). The linguist Deborah Schiffrin (2009), as mentioned earlier, analyzes an oral history of a young woman’s experience in an African American enclave in a middle-class white suburb in the mid-1960s and shows that narrative evokes and shapes nexuses of time, space, and identity. Jens Brockmeier (2000) focuses on autobiographical time from a psycholinguistic angle. He defines autobiographical story telling as “a continuous synthesis of various times and time orders” (p. 56). This implies
interplay of possible pasts and possible beginnings in the light of moral and ideological goals. Time and space organize personal experience, and “episodes of fundamentally different temporal dimensions appear to be fused in one order, the order of autobiographical time” (p. 56).

In addition to these temporal dimensions, conversion narratives can be understood by being organized around moments of self-transformation or metamorphosis (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 114), which is “a vehicle for conceptualizing and portraying personal, individual fate” (p. 114). In other words, the story line is organized around a pivot of how the narrator or protagonist goes through changing her identity. All events in the story have meaning only in relationship to this pivot. In that sense, the idea of metamorphosis translated into the narrative plot organizes the life story of the protagonist “at all its critical turning points” (p. 114). Metamorphosis depicts only the exceptional, utterly unusual moments of a man’s life, moments that are very short compared to the whole length of a human life. But these moments shape the definitive image of the man, his essence, as well as the nature of his entire subsequent life... It is not a time that leaves no traces. On the contrary, it leaves a deep and irradiable mark on the man himself as well as on his entire life. (p. 116)

Much research on the rhetoric of metamorphosis or identity transformation establishes a connection with the rhetoric of Christian conversion. Bakhtin (1981), for instance, associates metamorphosis in story telling with Christian crisis hagiographies, in which there are “two images of an individual, images that are separated and reunited through crisis and rebirth; the image of the sinner (before rebirth) and the image of the holy man or saint (after crisis and rebirth)” (pp. 115-116). Similarly, Bailey (2008) argues that although conversion was prevalent in the pre-Christian world, “its most prolific influence in Western civilization occurred after it was recast in the Pauline form by subsequent generations of Christian rhetors” (p. 217). This Pauline form of Christian conversion narrative, often called the born-again narrative (Gross...
2009; Harding, 1987; among others), originally draws on texts in the Bible for its authority. Of specific interest are the following New Testament verses:

“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3, New International Version).

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17, New International Version).

In such narratives, the concept of being born-again, or the new replacing the old, implies a transformation into a newly created and enlightened person.

The archetype of the born-again narrative is the apostle Paul. Bailey (2008) and Clements (1982) point to Paul’s conversion to Christianity in the New Testament book of Acts, which “correspond[s] in its structural pattern to many New Testament miracle stories” (Clements, 1982, p. 108). The story revolves around Saul of Tarsus, after conversion called Paul, who was a devout Jew. He initially persecuted first century Christians, whom he saw as belonging to a dangerous sect. However, while journeying to Damascus, he heard the voice of Jesus asking him why he persecuted him. After this encounter, Saul realized his shortcomings, repented, and was born again as a Christian. He changed his name to Paul and became the first Christian missionary.

Researchers have associated this type of conversion rhetoric with many Christian traditions, such as Lutheran orthodoxy (Bailey, 2008; Gross 2009); German Lutheran and Reformist traditions (Gross, 2009; Harding, 1987); American Puritan traditions (Gross 2009); and, most famously, contemporary American evangelical traditions (e.g., Bailey, 2008, Gross, 2009; Harding, 1987).32 Paul’s conversion story was retold throughout centuries, and according to Bailey (2008), “it was also reconfigured to meet the rhetorical needs of the Christian converts who used it to frame their own conversion stories and often those of their audiences” (p. 218). As

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32 According to Bailey (2008), 46% of US Americans claim to have been born again (p. 222).
a result, contemporary tellers of this type of narrative need not rely on the New Testament to determine the appropriate structure of the narrative (Clements, 1982, p. 108). The Pauline form has thus become “the most unmistakable religious shibboleth in existence” (Bailey, 2008, p. 222), depicting a sinful or lost soul confronted by divine influence transforming his or her life into one with higher morals and values.

Furthermore, the Pauline narrative form has become a nonreligious and global form “used by contemporary and historical rhetors to enact life-changing transformations” (Bailey, 2008, p. 216). It is now “a commonly recurring pattern of religious discourse that has permeated everything from the autobiography and novels of Western literature, to American frontier literature and mythology, to the rhetoric of racial reconciliation in the American South” (p. 217). In his thesis on the evolution of the model of Christian conversion in French autobiographical traditions, Riley (1996) traces the way in which conversion ultimately becomes “a secular trope referencing subjective upheaval” (p. 2). The conversion story simply morphs into a pattern for autobiographical production. This process mirrors Keane’s (2007) claim that Protestantism is a “thoroughly familiar part of the moral, political and conceptual world in much of the Euro-American West, even for the most unreligious – or non-Christian – individuals” (p. 37).

Rhetorical building blocks of Protestantism can be found in habits, practices, and ways of thinking that are not usually viewed as religious (p. 38). Tamara’s narrative (Excerpt 2) provides evidence for this point despite the fact that she was brought up by an outspoken atheist: her father.

Linguistically and structurally speaking, the elements of the narratives presented in this chapter are both similar to and different from the template of conversion narratives in significant
ways. What are the features of this Pauline narrative template and how do they relate to the conversion stories in this chapter?

**Transformation, Transgression, and Commission Phases**

Bailey (2008) describes the features of the conversion narrative with the pattern of transgression-transformation-commissioning,\(^{33}\) along with recollection of the specific time and place at which the transformation occurred and an existential crisis of the soul. In this section, I illuminate these three stages, as Bailey depicts them, with reference to former President George W. Bush’s now infamous born-again narrative. I aim to show that although the narratives of the MSA women have much in common with the Christian conversion narratives described by Bailey, particularly when it comes to the “transformation phase” of the narrative, they also depart from the template in quite significant ways. Ultimately, I suggest that these departures are explained by the women’s understanding of their journey to Islam as not as an instance of “conversion,” but rather of “reversion.”

In his article “Enacting Transformation: George W. Bush and the Pauline Conversion Narrative in *A Charge to Keep,*” David C. Bailey (2008) argues that George W. Bush adopts Pauline conversion rhetoric when enacting his personal transformation into a born-again Christian before the 2000 presidential campaign. This rhetoric allowed Bush to do three important things: (1) declare his previous transgression – that is, alcohol or drug related DUIs – off limits for his critics; (2) claim a respected public figure, the Reverend Billy Graham, as his mentor; and (3) create a political and ideological alliance with important voters for his

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\(^{33}\) Although it is not identical in every respect, as analyses of the conversion narratives of St. Augustine of Hippo and Protestant reformer Martin Luther illustrate (Bailey, 2008, p. 218). See also further conversion narratives by Augustine, Luther, Wesley, C. S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, or Charles Colson.
presidential election: conservative evangelical Christians (p. 215). Consider the following excerpt from Bush’s campaign autobiography *A Charge to Keep*, written by ghostwriter Karen Hughes in 1999:

> Actually, the seeds of my decision had been planted by the Reverend Billy Graham. He visited my family for a summer weekend in Maine. I saw him preach at the small summer church, St. Ann’s by the Sea. We all had lunch on the patio overlooking the ocean. One evening my dad asked Billy to answer questions from a big group of family gathered for the weekend. He sat by the fire and talked. And what he said sparked a change in my heart. I don’t remember the exact words. It was more the power of his example. The Lord was so clearly reflected in his gentle and loving demeanor. The next day we walked and talked at Walker’s Point, and I knew I was in the presence of a great man. He was like a magnet; I felt drawn to seek something different. He didn’t lecture or admonish, he shared warmth and concern. Billy Graham didn’t make you feel guilty; he made you feel loved.

> Over the course of that weekend, Reverend Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year. He led me to the path, and I began walking. It was the beginning of a change in my life. I had always been a “religious” person, had regularly attended church, even taught Sunday School and served as an altar boy but that weekend my faith took on a new meaning. It was the beginning of a new walk where I would commit my heart to Jesus Christ.

In Bailey’s framework, the *transformation phase* is at the center of the Pauline conversion narrative, depicting the events that lead to a changed identity. Common to the transformation phase is the emphasis on meeting a person who inspired the conversion, although this person need not be divine, as in the case of Jesus appearing to Paul in the Pauline conversion narratives. In Bush’s case, it was Reverend Billy Graham, a well-respected and influential Christian evangelical. Bush was inspired by Graham’s gentle and loving demeanor (bolded), his being a great man, and the fact that He didn’t lecture or admonish, he shared warmth and concern. Another recurring theme in the transformation phase is the metaphor of change of heart or metamorphosis. In Bush’s testimony, Reverend Billy Graham sparked a change in his heart, and this sentiment is repeated during other political speeches, such as the Iowa Republican
caucus debate (Bailey, 2008, p. 215). This change of heart always happens suddenly in Christian conversion narratives. According to Harding (1987), “[I]t is the Word of God, the gospel, and, believers would add, the Holy Spirit, God himself, that converts, that ‘changes the heart’” (Harding, 1987, p. 168). In Christian born-again narratives, agency lies in God, and it was rejected on doctrinal terms “that humankind cooperates in its own salvation” (Gross, 2009, p. 198). It is God and his grace alone that transforms hearts. The Holy Spirit, as Harding (1987) argues, remolds the believers’ inner speech. Furthermore,

‘The heart’ is contrasted with ‘the head,’ and seems to mark the difference between unconscious and conscious knowledge and belief. The Holy Spirit, the Word, ‘works on’ the unconscious mind to bring the conscious mind ‘under conviction.’ As listeners appropriate the gospel, the Holy Spirit penetrates the conscious mind and becomes ‘another voice,’ ‘a real person,’ who begins to recast their inner speech. After salvation, the voice of the Holy Spirit ‘guides’ converts, gives them ‘discernment,’ and seems to alter the very chemistry of desire. (Harding, 1987, p. 175)

This narrative strategy is effective because it makes concrete and familiar the abstractions of religion, and in the end the convert comes across as an honest person that everyone can relate to.

In Bailey’s template, the transgression phase (p. 219) that occurs before the transformation is often described as a life with no direction or as a life in sin. Harding (1987), who analyzes conversion stories of fundamentalist Baptists, finds in this transgression phase “the lost soul, the sinner, the person who needs salvation, or simply someone who is missing something in his or her life” (p. 173). She analyzes the conversion story of Reverend Cantrell from the Abundant Harvest Baptist Church and argues that “[H]is life was empty and lacked meaning and purpose; it was not maturing or growing into something real” (p. 173). After the conversion, life is described as full of wisdom and morality through a relationship with God.

Finally, in the commission phase of this narrative template, the narrator “details the benefits of conversion and discusses his or her new sense of purpose” (Bailey, 2008, p. 228). For
instance, Bush explained that he was “humbled to learn that God sent His Son to die for a sinner like me” (p. 228). He pointed to the life-changing powers of his new faith, which led his renouncing of alcohol and steered him towards a presidential campaign (p. 228).

In the “reversion narratives” that I analyze in the remainder of this chapter, the rhetoric of identity transformation is also highly developed and depicts a life divided into two: before and after the conversion. These findings contradict Gross’s (2009) claim that “for good doctrinal reasons Jews, Muslims, and even Roman Catholics can’t be born-again in the conventional sense” (p. 212). In their appropriation of the before and after themes of Christian conversion, the Muslim women in my study are, in some important sense, “born again.” Similar to Bush’s narrative, an outside influence is named as critical to this transformation. Amita, Catherine, and Tamara, for instance, all tie their initial encounter with Islam to meeting Muslims: Amita cites her fiancée, who was educated, but never forced her to convert; Catherine met three Egyptian girls, who were “great, nice, and kind”; and Tamara met a Saudi Arabian boy who tutored her in Arabic and who “just had this light.” Yet the similarities between Christian conversion narratives and these new Muslim narratives for the most part end here. For one, while the transformation phase of the narratives I recorded largely complies with that of the Christian conversion narrative, with some situational variations, the transgression and commission phases are reduced and sometimes omitted altogether.

**From Paganism to Islam.** Tamara converted to Islam in the summer of 2006 from her former identity as “pagan” (Excerpt 2, line 2). Like Amita and Catherine, Tamara joined the MSA for networking, opportunity, and meeting people. She initially did not want anybody to know that she was Muslim and “was really in the closet about it.” Becoming a member of the
MSA helped her embrace her new identity. Like Catherine in Excerpt 3, she made “a lot of great friends” who taught her about the Muslim faith and helped her understand her transformation. One of her stated goals upon joining the group was to “show non-Muslims the role that women have in Islam because people have skewed ideas of it.”

In order to capture the moments of identity transformation that surfaced in the narratives of Catherine, Amita, and Tamara, I conduct a classical Labovian narrative analysis of their stories. In his landmark book *Language in the Inner City: Studies in Black English Vernacular*, sociolinguist William Labov (1981) examines linguistic techniques used to evaluate temporally ordered clauses in narratives that he collected from speakers in south-central Harlem. Although aspects of Labov’s narrative theory have been criticized from a number of perspectives, I find his breakdown of narrative structure into different parts useful for uncovering the structure and function of the narratives I collected, particularly what he identifies as the *orientation*, *complicating action*, and *evaluation*, explained below.

(2) Tamara

1. okay it’s kind of a long story ((laughs))
2. so um before I converted I was pagan ((smiles))
3. >or I considered myself to be pagan< (1.5)
4. and but I wasn’t like really raised with any religion Evaluation 1
5. it’s like my parents never told me what to believe except my dad who is like atheistic
6. and he always said that there is no such thing as God ((laughs))
7. “don’t believe it it’s all BS”
8. but um (1.0) when I came here to CU Complicating Action 1
9. I met ai: Muslim boy from Saudi Arabia ((smiles))
10. and he was so:: nice Evaluation 2
11. and we we then became great friends Complicating Action 2
12. and, like >he never tried to force his beliefs on me< Evaluation 3
13. he never tried to prove <that he was right>
14. he never um (1.0)
15. he wasn’t pushy↑
but he was so:
 he just had like this light
 and he was so: good
 he had like ah (1.0)
 he just had like these rules that he followed
 >whereas I didn’t have like anything
 I was just like free floating ((laughs))
 So (1.0) we then became good friends

and then I went back to Steamboat for a little while Complicating Action 3
 and I was just kind of cut off from the world there Evaluation 4
 cause it’s like Steamboat
 it’s like a psychological bubble↓
 there is nothing around↓
 terrible↓

but ((laughs)) I spent some time alone Complicating Action 4
>and hiking and stuff<
<and soul searching reading>
like, >I did a lot of research on the internet< about Islam
about all these different issues and (1.0)

I↑ thought there was like you know↑
> it always spoke to my heart<
and like a lot of moral things↑
and like the logical things↑
or like more physical things of Islam I guess↑
<they made sense> you know↑
like (1.0) ahm
I can’t think of an example but (1.0)
just like why ahm (1.5)
why Islam says
“you must do this and must not do this”
it’s like it’s obvious.
“why don’t you drink↑”
“because like it’s bad for you” you know↑
Because God says so ((laughs loudly))

and it spoke to my heart so Complicating Action 5
and I decided I’m gonna do it ((speaks softly))

<but is was really slow> ((speaks loudly)) Evaluation 6
it wasn’t like (1.0)
one day I like decided to be a Muslim
I just kind of like slo:wly started doing this
I started praying

and like, and then you know↑
just like a few weeks ago a month ago maybe
I started wearing the hijab
 so::↓
Labov (1981) argues that the orientation and complicating action set up the narrative as a temporal structure, while the evaluation sections (indented in the above excerpt for clarity) often build a secondary structure. The orientation is often an initial chronotopic description of the who’s, where’s, and when’s of the narrative and the participants’ activity or situation, “sketching the kind of thing that was going on before the first event of the narrative occurred” (p. 364).

The orientation and complicating actions 1 through 5 establish the plot of the narrative and outline Tamara’s story:

TRANSGRESSION PHASE
• Before her conversion, Tamara considered herself to be pagan (line 3).

TRANSFORMATION PHASE
• At CU, she met a Muslim boy from Saudi Arabia (lines 10-11), with whom she became good friends (line 13, repeated in line 25).
• She returned to Steamboat Springs (line 26) to do soul searching, reading, and a lot of research on the Internet about Islam (lines 32-36).
• As a result, Islam spoke to her heart (lines 52-53).

COMMISSION PHASE
• She started wearing the hijab (lines 59-61).

Labov (1981) explains that evaluations are the most revealing elements of narratives because they indicate “the point of the narrative, its raison d’être: why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at” (p. 366). In more contemporary sociolinguistic terms, evaluations are where narrators take a stance toward the elements of the story they are depicting, “taking up a position with respect to the form or the content of one’s utterance” (Jaffe, 2009, p. 1). Composed of descriptions, examples, reflections, or explanations, evaluations reveal why a narrator picks one narrative plot over countless other ways to tell the same story (Schiffrin, 2009, p. 425).
the evaluations provide details important to the speaker with respect to the listener of the story. Tamara’s evaluations can be summarized as follows:

EVALUATIONS

• Evaluation 1 depicts Tamara’s perception of her childhood with an atheistic dad. This type of evaluation can be described with Labov’s (1981) term external evaluation (p. 373), since she brings in the voice of her dad in reported speech as telling her that there is no such a thing as God (line 9).

• Evaluations 2 and 3 are discursive strategies to convince the interviewer about the Saudi Arabian boy’s effectiveness in transforming Tamara’s beliefs. Tamara concentrates on his gentle, non-imposing attributes, such as he never tried to force his beliefs on her (line 14). She also uses intensifiers, such as so, great, or even temporal superlatives, such as never or always, to convince her interlocutor of her position. Furthermore, with expressive phonology, such as rising intonation in her appeals to the interviewer (they made sense, you know?, line 42), she asks the interviewer to share her stance regarding the “logical” and “physical” appeals of Islam.

• Evaluation 4 indicates her withdrawal from the world (line 27), referring to Steamboat Springs as a remote area of the Rocky Mountains where she is physically and ideologically removed from university life. She offers a mixed evaluation of this locality as a psychological bubble (lines 29 and 31) that is terrible (line 31) yet suitable for soul-searching (line 34).

• Evaluation 5 again uses reported speech, when Tamara has a theoretical discussion with a non-Muslim who cannot believe that she will not drink alcohol (lines 51-53). She
evaluates this Islamic precept as both logical and moral (lines 39-40). Perhaps inadvertently, Tamara alludes to the popular illness analogy of sin (Ayometzi 2007), which occurs often in the Pauline narrative type. Ayometzi (2007), for instance, finds this illness analogy of sin in the born-again narratives of both Mexican immigrants at a Baptist church and participants in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). He argues that these speakers forge a connection in their narratives between the sickness of the body and “the otherwise unobservable sickness of the spirit” (p. 52).

The commission phase is coded in lines 59-62, which starts with Tamara’s wearing of the hijab. As is evident in other parts of the interview, Tamara sees the hijab as a means to conduct da’wah and to show the non-Muslim campus community that Islam is part of the American landscape and not the remote religion of the Middle East. She points out the diversity of Muslim women, with Arabs making up only 18% of all Muslims. For her, “America is one of the best places that you can be a Muslim and you can wear the hijab” because women do it for themselves. She criticizes the collective American worldview that Muslim women are forced to wear the hijab. For her, wearing the hijab is “a direction from God and not from men”; it makes her more pious and “more conscious of God.” Tamara watches carefully how she interacts with non-Muslims and how they interact with her. In her opinion, a Muslim should “just be” and interact with the world, which is her outreach. She states, “I want people to see me that I’m … white and a Muslim, it shows people something that there are Muslims of all races, that … I’m American and Muslim.”

When Tamara expresses that Islam is also a complete way of life, she extends the commissioning phase indefinitely. In short, Islam is part of everything that she does and
determines how she interacts “with the world.” She now fasts during Ramadan and “avoids any
un-Islamic activities and situations, like parties and drinking.” She wants “pure Islam” and does
not follow any particular sects, believing that any division within Islam is political. She sees the
Muslim women in the MSA as happy because they are doing what they want to do. When asked
about future goals, Tamara recalls her past goals before she converted. She had her whole life
planned out and had even developed a business plan to start a nightclub. But now, as a Muslim,
she feels much more “open to the possibilities” and comfortable with it as “part of [her] life,
completely.”

On first glance, Tamara’s narrative complies with the general outline of the Pauline
narrative, particularly in terms of the transformation she undergoes from a past to present self.
Yet there is an important exception: instead of the sudden metamorphosis and divine intervention
that structures the Pauline narrative, Tamara narrates a slow and deliberate process of study and
contemplation. Instead of a thunderbolt metamorphosis, she spent some time alone to hike (lines
32-33), did soul-searching, reading (line 34) and conducted a lot of research on the Internet
about Islam (lines 35-36). Tamara replaces the sudden moment of conversion by using
syncretism, a term discussed in detail by Wohlrab-Sahr (1999). Wohlrab-Sahr identifies a
continuum between syncretism and symbolic battle, which she describes as “two different modes
of adopting Islam and of relating to one’s original frame of reference” (p. 351). Syncretism is an
attempt to reconcile or combine opposing frameworks, practices, or ideologies – the old and the
new - through religious symbolism (p. 351).34 This strategy surfaces in Tamara’s fusion of
different religions and ideologies in her linguistic representation. On the other end of the
spectrum is symbolic battle, which reveals conflict and radical difference in social and religious
behavior (p. 353). In Wohlrab-Sahr’s words, to conceptualize conversion as a symbolic battle

34 Wohlrab-Sahr (1999) provides the history of Christian mission or ecumenicity as examples (p. 351).
involves “more than just situational adjustments that can easily be revised; they are permanent forms of transformation that imply the rejection of former commitments” (p. 355).

Most conversion stories incorporate elements of both, but lean towards one or the other. Conversion to Islam, then, is not only about the new faith, but also about the circumstances under which this conversion happens, which determine how “old” and “new” convictions are related. For Tamara, as well as for Amita (Excerpt 3) and Catherine (Excerpt 4), Islam has to be studied and learned, which are legitimate precepts for the acquisition of knowledge in both the university community and Islamic doctrine. For Tamara, the transformation to a Muslim required learning about morality and logic in Islam; for Amita, it required learning the culture and practice of Islam; and for Catherine, it required reading books, which she has been doing since childhood. In that sense, the women do not construct the old and the new by the way of a complete break.

This, however, is not syncretism in the conventional sense of intentionally blending elements of previous religions, such as Paganism, Hinduism, or Catholicism, with Islamic practices. Rather, the women see continuities in the way they relate to religion, drawing from past and current subjectivities in the construction of a Muslim self.

**From Hinduism to Islam.** Amita’s conversion narrative (Excerpt 2) provides a strong example of this kind of syncretism, as she unites the old and the new without conflict. Amita was raised in Denver, Colorado, by first-generation immigrants from India. She converted from Hinduism to Islam in 2005 and came to the University of Colorado at Boulder two years later to study psychology with the goal of becoming a medical doctor in the United States. Shortly after her arrival, she joined the MSA to meet Muslims and to learn more about Islam. In the interview,
Amita self-identifies as an interfaith person and still holds her previous cultural identity as a Hindu close to her heart. She states, “a Muslim is who I am, and my Hindu culture is also who I am, and my Indian culture is who I am.” Wohrab-Sahr writes that in syncretistic conversion stories, “[O]ne mode of adopting a new religion does not necessarily preclude the other mode” (p. 354). Although Amita’s new religion determines her present circumstances and value system, her conversion did not cause a radical reorientation. Instead, Amita’s narrative reveals that “[T]he symbolic space becomes enlarged, the old is integrated into the new, and a third situation is created” (p. 354). Consider Amita’s conversion narrative in Excerpt 1, which captures her response to my question of how she converted to Islam.

(2) Amita

1 ahm, I, I dated a guy um (1.0) 
2 and we were engaged for a while 
3 and ah he was Muslim 
4 >and he never forced me to convert<
5 <but he learned about it a lot>
6 and he taught me about it 
7 and a lot of time I'd see him reading the Qur’an 
8 >and I’d pick it up<
9 and I'd um ah (1.0) <learn about it>
10 and ah it just really attracted me to becoming Muslim↓
11 because I really love the culture 
12 and the ahm the aspects behind it↓
13 so↓

Amita’s orientation (lines 1-3) is brief and impersonal; she mentions a guy (line 1) with no name, who was Muslim (line 3) and who she dated (line 1) and was engaged to (line 2). Indication of temporality is vague and captured in the past tense of the verbs and the indefinite temporal marker for a while (line 3). The complicating action section (lines 7-10) reports subsequent events in the narrative plot in time sequence, answering a potential question of “then what
happened?” (Labov, 1981, p. 370). In this and subsequent versions of the narrative, however, Amita omits both the transgression phase and the commission phase.

**TRANSGRESSION PHASE**

(none)

**TRANSFORMATION PHASE**

1. Amita was engaged to a Muslim (lines 1-3).
2. She repeatedly saw her fiancée reading the Qur’an (line 7).
3. She followed his example of reading the Qur’an (lines 8-9).
4. As a result, she became attracted to becoming a Muslim (line 10).

**COMMISSION PHASE**

(none)

**EVALUATIONS**

- In Evaluation 1 (lines 4-5), Amita establishes the attributes of a guy she was engaged to but is no longer in contact with now. In projecting him as a credible inspiration for her conversion, she portrays him as positive and appealing to the audience; or in this case, as an educated person who did not force her to convert. His knowledge of the Qur’an qualifies him as her teacher of Islam.³⁵ Like Tamara in the previous excerpt, she thus expresses her agency in the process of the conversion by marking the process as an informed decision that was made after thorough studying.

- In Evaluation 2 (lines 11-12), she constructs Islam as a culture she loves. This is a common sentiment in the multiculturalism of the university environment, which tolerates and encourages cultural diversity.

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³⁵ The two other conversion narratives by Tamara and Catherine include similar descriptions of the source of their conversions in the beginning of the narratives.
Amita’s commission phase is set for the future and her transformation phase has not yet finished, as she explains in other parts of the interview. She states that she wants to wear the hijab, but is not ready to bear the responsibility. Wearing the hijab, for her, is “marking yourself as a Muslim woman” and “being proud and showing it to everybody.” She sees the hijab as a privilege that comes with a lot of responsibilities in terms of social behavior and claims, “at this point, I’m not up to the fact that I don’t believe that I can walk down the street and be a perfect Muslim at all times and represent the beauty of our religion. I hope, insha’allah, I aspire to it that one day I will be, that in that mindset where people can look at me and see Islam.” Her sentiment that Islam is perfect and that she strives to be that ideal shows that she is working on a change of religious behavior. She admits that she clashed with her family after they found out that she had converted and had to defend Islam to her family “since they see Islam through misconceptions in the media.” She explains, “when I converted I had to fight those misconceptions and even, you know, five, six years after 9/11 had happened.”

The transgression phase is omitted altogether in Amita’s narrative, here and elsewhere in the interview. Her reason for becoming Muslim, as she narrates it, is not to overcome or leave behind a problematic past, but to pursue an intellectually superior religion.

**From Catholicism to Islam.** Catherine’s conversion narrative exhibits similar elements of syncretism between past and present. She grew up Catholic in Colorado and converted to Islam shortly after 9/11. As an International Affairs major, she focused on the Middle East and studied Arabic and the Qur’an. Like Amita, she joined the MSA in her sophomore year to be part of the Muslim community on campus. In her interview, she repeatedly emphasizes that she integrated seamlessly into the “CU ummah,” whose members are her friends and help her out.
She possibly stresses this point to speak against the stereotype that Muslims’ are not friendly to Westerners, or lacking a Western value system. Like Tamara and Amita, Catherine also sees herself as part of a global ummah and believes that Muslims should not be divided by sects or politics. The MSA is an ideal, she states, because a lot of people in the MSA “don’t know a lot about those sects, we just know that we are Muslim.” In her opinion, the purpose of the MSA is “to tell people about Islam so they don’t have a wrong idea about it.”

When I asked Catherine if she would talk about her conversion to Islam, she responded as follows (Excerpt 3):

(3) Catherine

1  sure well when I was in high school Orientation 1
2  um when I was a freshman in high school
3  I was thirteen years old
4  and I had um (1.5) I had a couple of friends↑
5  in my high school that were Muslim
6  and (1.0) there was a a family of Egyptian girls
7  that went to my high school
8  there was three girls Evaluation 1
9  and they, you know, they all covered their hair↓
10  and they were the most popular girls in our school
11  everyone loved them↑
12  they were so: nice↑
13  they were just the most (1.5)
14  well-behaved kindest people ever>
15  and um you know↑ I had read some books about Islam Complicating Action 1
16  because I, I just always read books Evaluation 2
17  >when I was a little kid<
18  I just I would read books about everything ((smiles))
19  and so I was just always very interested in it Complicating Action 2
20  and I just had this (1.0)
21  this calling from God↑ you know↑ ((soft voice))
22  I really, I met these girls
23  and I said I wanna be like them you know↑ ((smiles))
24  cause they were just so kind to me Evaluation 3
25  um and then so I had started learning about Islam then↑ Complicating Action 3
26  and um (1.0) this summer actually in Boulder
27  I (1.0) I met a couple of Muslim people
and I just started ahm
thinking about ah thinking about who I am again
>and thinking about God<
>and things like that<
and I just um realized
that Islam is (1.0) the right religion for me↑
so:

The skeleton of her narrative includes orientation 1, as well as complicating actions 1-3, which depict the events that lead to her conversion, all arranged in a linear temporal and causal order,

Like Amita, she too omits both the transgression and commission phases:

TRANSGRESSION PHASE:
(None)

TRANSFORMATION PHASE
1. Catherine met three Egyptian Muslim girls in high school (lines 4-8).
2. She read some books about Islam (15), which made her interested in Islam (line 19).
3. She got a calling from God (lines 20-21).
4. She refers back to meeting these girls and states that she wanted to be like them (lines 22-23).
5. She refers back to learning about Islam (line 25).
6. She met Muslims in Boulder (lines 26-28).
7. She thought about her identity and God (lines 28-31).
8. She realized that Islam is right for her (lines 32-33).

COMMISION PHASE
(None)

Interestingly, Catherine briefly mentions a sudden moment of getting a calling from God (lines 20-21), but quickly moves her focus to the events of meeting the Egyptian Muslim girls in high school (lines 22-23) and learning about Islam from them (25). It is possible that she diverts attention away from this divine “calling” because she anticipated that it might not appeal to the interviewer, whom she perceives as a secular academic. But her repeated references to the three high school Muslim girls offer an exceedingly positive evaluation of not just these three individuals, but the practice of Islam more generally. Indeed, it was their “nice” and “kind” behavior that ultimately instigated her interest in Islam, as captured in evaluations 1 and 3.
EVALUATIONS

• Evaluations 1 and 3 depict an extensive description of the Egyptian girls’ manners. In evaluation 1, Catherine uses a range of superlatives to describe them (bold face), such as the most popular girls in our school (line 10), everyone loved them (line 11) and they were just the most well-behaved, kindest people ever (lines 13-14). She again returns to this type of explanation in evaluation 3, emphasizing that they were just so kind to her (24). The repetitions of evaluative segments, Labov argues, “say to us: this was terrifying, dangerous, weird, wild, crazy; or amusing, hilarious, wonderful; more generally, that it was strange, uncommon, or unusual – that is, worth reporting” (p. 371). These intensifiers are used strategically to convince the interviewer of the legitimacy of her motive for conversion and the Muslim girls who inspired it, while suspending the action of the narrative plot. In Labov’s terms, they have a “marked evaluative force” (Labov, 1981), since they depart from the basic narrative syntax.

• Evaluation 2 is an elaboration of how reading books about everything (line 18) has always been in her life (line 16), an indication of syncretism.

In terms of commissioning, later in the interview Catherine aligns with Tamara in highlighting her physical attributes and states that “it is an advantage to have white skin and blue eyes and being American” while also wearing the hijab. She hopes that this combination of physical attributes helps her make non-Muslims understand that Muslim women are not ashamed or subservient to Muslim men or societies. She also emphasizes that, as Muslims, the members of the MSA have to make sure that “you are doing things that are correct.” Knowledge about
correct behavior, such as whether men and women should pray separated by a barrier, has to be acquired from credible sources, such as the Boulder mosque or the Islamic Society of North America online, “since these societies are formed by … people with PhDs, really scholarly people.”

Like Tamara and Amita, Catherine sees her Muslim identity as a complete way of life that permeates all aspects of her being every day. Her plans for the future are to have a family\(^\text{36}\) and a career in education, which she describes as goals compatible with Islam. She argues, “Islam is very practical because your spiritual goals are all built into your other goals. So, raising children, pursuing education, working, they’re all spiritual things.” She further explains that “the whole point of Islam, … the reason why we do any of these things, is God. The only reason we want knowledge is to know God or to worship God, which is the whole point of religion.”

The Chronotope of Conversion to Islam

Contrary to my expectations, the difference between the then and now in the women’s conversion narratives is not as prevalent as in the faith development narratives discussed in the previous chapter. The conversion narratives show more continuity in how the women relate to Islam and their past. Although the da’wah that the women and the MSA advocate sometimes constitutes the commissioning phase of these women’s narratives, the transgression phase is largely absent. Tamara is the only one of these three narrators who mentions a “transgressed” past: misguided by her atheist dad, she found herself free-floating with no direction. But Amita and Catherine do not reflect on their past at all, nor do they express the guilt of a sinner, as can be seen in George W. Bush’s narrative. This finding might be a function of many circumstantial factors.

\(^{36}\) Catherine got married to another member of the MSA and had a son one year ago.
factors: the small sample size of converts in the MSA during my fieldwork; the absence of any discussion of sin and guilt in the MSA (in the sense normatively found in Pauline conversion narratives); the doctrinal differences between Islam and Christianity; the university environment’s emphasis on studying and learning, which comprises the women’s transformation phase (even Zahleh, an Afghani born Muslim, positions her philosophy classes as helping her interpret Islam); a popular rhetoric among MSA members that positively evaluates U.S. educated Muslims. However, the omission of the transgression phase might also correlate to the women’s conceptualization of their journey to Islam as reversion: the return to a natural state of Muslimhood and a return to a past that was pure and original. When learning about Islam, the women realized that they were always Muslims and then “transformed” their selves back to that state. This is contrary to the Christian concepts of being born in sin and being born again, which both require the believer to leave their past behind.

Instead of a split between past and present, or even a sudden reversion to a natural, pre-socialized self as part of a cyclical journey, the narratives exhibit a linear progression, similar to the faith development narratives discussed in the previous chapter. Most notably, the women narrate a gradual movement towards an evolved and enlightened person brought about by intellectual discipline. There is no sudden metamorphosis, but rather a continuous and deliberate phase of studying and learning about Islam. Tamara speaks of a “slow” conversion that required an extended period of “time alone.” Catherine describes a point where she “started learning” about Islam, linking it with the fact that she “always” read books. Amita spent “a lot of time” learning about Islam. This is of course very different from the Pauline narrative, which relies on a temporal break between the past and the present. The women’s emphasis on studying and learning in the transformation phase indicates continuity and syncretism, not a clash of past and
present semiotic ideologies. For these women, the present breaks with the past only in terms of ignorance, a da’wah-inspired argument used by the larger group of MSA members to counter negative stereotypes.

The most significant difference between the women’s narratives and the template identified for Pauline conversion narratives has to do with individual agency. Female converts to Islam in the MSA claim much more agency over their religious conversion than do narrators in the Pauline tradition, since in the latter divine agency overwrites human agency. In contrast to Paul, who did not actively choose his conversion but was called by God, the authors of the narratives discussed in this chapter actively work on their conversion to Islam. Although they share the goal of learning about God, this knowledge is achieved by their own intellectual effort, not by divine agency. They characterize their transformation as a slow and arduous process so as to connect to a non-Muslim interviewer and project themselves as mature, thoughtful, and moral human beings.

Certainly the women’s self-positioning supports Keane’s (2007) argument that the modern individual convert is defined by “the capacity to deliberately step outside custom, tradition, and given social roles, rights, and obligations, scrutinize them, formulate a moral critique, and … envisage a new social order governed by new moralities” (Keane, 2007, p. 52). Yet their narratives do not so easily sync with Keane’s idea of modernity, which in his opinion “commonly seems to include two distinctive features: rupture from a traditional past and progress into a better future” (p. 49). The women of this study mitigate this rupture in favor of blending together their past, present, and future so as to project a socially acceptable religious self.
This chapter investigates how women in the Muslim Student Association use colloquial Arabic, Qur’anic Arabic, and English in the domains of everyday conversation and religious ritual. I argue that language choice reworks an ideological apparatus that has traditionally situated colloquial Arabic and Qur’anic Arabic in two different spatiotemporal regimes. I thus revisit some of the themes brought up in previous chapters, where I argued that the women of the MSA frame their use of Islamic rituals not as misguided practices of the past, but as agentive choices that point to a progressive future. My analysis is inspired by recent work in linguistic anthropology that has examined the spatial and temporal underpinnings of language ideology, a body of work that relies heavily on Benjamin’s (1986) and Anderson’s (1991) conceptualization of time as a sociocultural, national, and discursive construction. Ultimately, I seek to illustrate how the temporalities identified by Benjamin as homogenous empty time and messianic time—which signal “modernity” and “tradition,” respectively—emerge in the English-based discourse and performance of da’wah in a manner suggestive of a new kind of temporal hybridity. The chapter also introduces a new participation framework, the Sights and Sounds of the Islamic World (SSoIW henceforth) festivals.

This discussion brings me to further revisit an aspect of Keane’s (2007) concept of the moral narrative of modernity, namely modernity as practiced through the rejection of the “fixed discursive forms” and “rigid traditions and unreal fetishes” associated with religious practitioners (p. 2), which are seen to undermine human agency. In Keane’s own words, modernity is “a story
of human liberation from a host of false beliefs and fetishisms that undermine freedom” (p. 2). Religious practitioners, who rely on those traditions that seem to be out of step with the times, are often viewed as having conceded their agency and are therefore seen as irrational. In United States media discourses, this type of irrationality is often assigned not only to Muslims but also to present-day Catholics, pagans, and adherents of the New Age Movement, who are perceived as relying excessively on material entities such as prayer books, statues of saints, prayer beads, prayer carpets, head veils, incense, rocks, crystal balls, tarot, among many. Ritualistic discourse, in its fixedness, is similarly perceived as a kind of excessive materiality, generating accusations of idolatry, polytheism, mythology, and magic, all incompatible with the modern narrative of modernity (Keane, 2007).

The Islamic ritual prayer called salat is often criticized by the media precisely because of its embodied and ritualistic attributes, which are put on display in public. The prayer is conducted at dawn (al-fajr), noon (al-zuhr), afternoon (al ‘asr), sunset (al-maghrib), and in the evening (al-’isha). The exact times are posted on selected Islamic websites. Salat requires a prayer carpet (sajjada), which has to be oriented towards the Ka’ba shrine in Mecca. Muslims are encouraged to join other Muslims because group prayer is perceived to gain special merit from God. Furthermore, salat has to be preceded by ablutions (wudu’), the ritual washing of the face, hands, and feet. These five daily prayers always begin with the first verse (surah) in the Qur’an. The surah has to be recited in its original form in Qur’anic Arabic.

The usage of Arabic in Islamic prayer, as well as in the everyday life of Muslims in the United States, has been subject to criticism as well. The convert Tamara, for instance, explained that at a recent family reunion she offered to recite Arabic poetry after dinner. Her father’s response, “why don’t you say it in a really angry voice, it will make it more believable,” was
very upsetting to her and she viewed it as highly “inappropriate.” The father’s comment echoes a general trend of vilifying Arabs in popular American culture, the most infamous of which is the portrayal of Arabic and Arabs in Disney movies. Rosina Lippi-Green (1997) analyzes how both recent and classic Disney movies link Arabic-sounding accents to bad characters. Arabs, then, suffer a kind of ethnolinguistic discrimination, as their language is stereotypically associated with ethnicity, violence, and villains. The Disney movie G.I. Jane, for instance, features Demi Moore and the Navy Seals killing numerous faceless Arabic-speaking villains who are represented as interfering with benevolent, timeless, and classic American virtues. A similar set of stereotypical images emerge in the opening song “Arabian Nights” in the movie Aladdin, as also discussed by Lippi-Green (1997):

1. “Oh, I come from a land
2. From a faraway place
3. Where the caravan camels roam.
4. Where they cut off your ear
5. If they don’t like your face
6. It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.”

After a heavy and lengthy protest by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), Disney changed lines four and five, which now read:

4. “Where it’s flat and immense
5. And the heat is intense.”

Yet protests like these, although successful to some degree in raising awareness of the issue, can do little to stop the tide of negative representations of Arabic-speaking peoples across all facets of the US media.

In MSA meetings and my interviews with MSA members, “Arabic” is a multifunctional umbrella term standing for colloquial Arabic (amiya), such as Egyptian Arabic, Sudanese

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37 These language ideologies are in stark contrast with Arabic being increasingly popular after 9/11 and the university’s increase in Arabic courses
Arabic, or Lebanese Arabic, as well as for Qur’anic Arabic. This stands in sharp contrast to the singular and unified representation of the Arabic language in the U.S. media. The women make use of the symbolic prestige given to Arabic within the Arab world, linking *amiya* to their home countries, to the CUmmah, or even to a Pan-Arabic identity. For instance, Qur’anic Arabic is linked to a global *ummah* (Muslim community) and to the Qur’an: It is God’s spoken word, as communicated through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad.

**Language Ideologies and Chronotopes of Community**

The media’s association of Arabic with evil villains and the women’s countering association of Qur’anic Arabic with religious purity are both informed by what linguistic anthropologists call *language ideologies*. Language ideologies have been investigated pervasively in sociocultural and linguistic scholarship (Woolard, 1998; Irvine & Gal, 2000; among many) and are broadly defined as shared or commonsense conceptions about spoken or written languages. Woolard (1998) summarizes some approaches to language ideologies:

Silverstein defines linguistic ideology as ‘sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization of justification of perceived language structure and use’ (1979: 193). On the other hand, with a greater emphasis on the social facet, language ideology has been defined as ‘self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group’ (Heath 1989: 53) and as ‘the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests’ (Irvine 1989: 255). (p. 11)

This definition treats the interpretation of language ideologies as dependent on social norms, group behavior, morality, and politics. Arguing in a Foucaudian line of thought, Woolard further deems language ideologies to be “derived from, rooted in, reflective of, or responsive to the experience or interest of a particular social position” (p. 6). Importantly, language ideologies
frequently express universalizing truths, a claim that resonates in Foucault’s position on truth as ideological and constituted within discourses of power.

Of specific importance for this study is the examination of how languages ideologies also reflect temporal framings. Because of these framings, different language varieties come to be divergently associated with past and present. This syncs with Keane’s (2007) idea that words, as well as things, have an “incorrigibly historical dimension” and are “in constant motion” (p. 5). Linguistic anthropologist Patrick Eisenlohr (2004), in his study of the language practices of the Indian diaspora in Mauritius, similarly views language ideologies as inescapably tied to the temporality of social life. He illustrates how Hindi functions as a ritualistic language that unites the island diaspora with its Hindu homeland of India, over and against the more commonly spoken island varieties of Bhojpuri and Creole. Thus, on the one hand, languages are the product of their historical contexts; on the other hand, “they themselves contribute to the temporal structuring of social worlds by establishing relationships between linguistic forms, communicative practices, and sociocultural valuations” (p. 81).

**Dimensions of Time**

Before offering discursive examples of the temporal indexicalities associated with colloquial Arabic, ritual Arabic, and English, I want to spend some time delineating how temporality is linked to narratives of tradition and modernity. Walter Benjamin’s (1968) work is central in this respect. He explains how our perception of mankind’s historical progress relies on a conceptualization of *homogenous empty time*. He calls this dimension of time “empty” because it relies on a causal sequence of events as one bead of time leads to another in a linear progress through history. In this scenario, no moment of time is qualitatively different from another. In
Benjamin’s view, homogenous empty time emerged in reaction to developments such as the Enlightenment, natural law, and the French Revolution. In contrast, what Benjamin calls messianic time exhibits timeless simultaneity: All historical events coexist eternally.

Linguistic anthropologists have recently applied Benjamin’s dimensions of time to the study of language, nationalism, and identity. As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, Katherine Woolard (2004) ties these two contrastive dimensions of time to a 16th century controversy regarding the origins of Castilian Spanish. In Woolard’s account, homogenous empty time emerges in Bernardo Aldrete’s argument that Castilian evolved as a vernacular of Latin, while an atemporal, messianic view of time emerges in Gregorio López Madera’s argument that Castilian had always been the language of the ancestors, the monarchs, and the elite.

One side argued that Castilian was derived from Latin; the other vehemently rejected such origins, claiming that Castilian had been created by God at Babel and brought to the Iberian Peninsula by Noah’s offspring after the Flood, long before the Romans arrived. No mere matter of succession and mutation of forms, the attribution of historicity to the Spanish language, with its implications of inconstancy, corruption, and human invention, was treated by the opposition as the highest insult to the Spanish nation. (p. 60)

Woolard discusses Benjamin’s (1968) homogenous empty time as the backbone of a narrative of modernity. It is a time experienced through structurally identical but distinct units – such as hours, days, months, and years – that provides the illusion of people moving linearly from a past into the future, aided by modern products, technologies, and commodities that can be replaced, renewed, and exchanged. This dimension of time is laden with the concepts of change and progress, framing items associated with the past, such as previous instantiations of a language, as different and foreign. In this historicist conception of time, as Woolard explains it, “the past is a foreign country, where things were done very differently from the present” (p. 59).
Benedict Anderson (1981), building on Benjamin, emphasizes the communal nature of homogenous empty time. For him, the power of this form of time is that it enables the imagining of a horizontal community marching together through time in comradeship. This undifferentiated temporally coincidental mass becomes “the people” of the modern nation-state (Woolard, 2004, p. 61). The synchronic “all of us in the here and now” is then “projected diachronically, backward and forward” (p. 62). Eisenlohr (2004) explains the nationalizing force of this conceptualization of time in the following way: subjects exist “in a synchronized manner together with other subjects in temporally and spatially bounded yet homogenous units of ‘nations’” (p. 84). Benjamin was highly critical of how the modern nation state thrived through its connection with empty, homogenous empty time, since he saw firsthand how this connection was used to justify exploitation on a large scale, as exemplified in Nazism.

In stark contrast, messianic time implies that any events in the here and now have existed and occurred from the beginning and keep on recurring since “the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future” (Anderson, 1991, p. 24). In Woolard’s (2004) words, “the ancient past is not a foreign country; it is an uncannily familiar one where they did things in exactly the same way as ‘we’ do” (p. 68). In contrast to the argument that the Castilian language developed over time from Latin along homogenous empty time, the counterargument in alignment with messianic time claims that

the past of the Spanish language is not actually past. It is charged with the time of the now, and this language in this time of the now is shot through with chips of the glorious past, eternally anchored in messianic time…what was important to the theory of primordial Castilian was not history in the way we now think about it, which is about change. Rather, it was antiquity, which is about constancy (p. 68).
This conceptualization of time relies on constancy, higher morals, and truth claims, rendering counterarguments as corrupted and derivative. Spanish is the timeless language of monarchy, antiquity, continuity, and constancy; as such, it defies any accusations of corruption resulting from change, development, or evolution (Woolard, 2007, p. 68). Origin and essence are key in the argument that primordial and contemporary Spanish were the same and superimposed, which “flattens history into a unified chronotope (Bakhtin 1981) (or we might say it gives dimension to the present, creating a four-dimensional space)” (p. 68). The women of the MSA utilize this conceptualization of time when they position Qur’anic Arabic as “pure” over and against contemporary, and thus corrupted, spoken varieties of Arabic, and even more significantly, American English.

Yet messianic time also redeems the past by reinscribing it in the present, although in a new form. We will see how this works in the last section of this chapter, when I examine the incorporation of Qur’anic Arabic as a ritual language into staged performances at the SSoIW festival. Benjamin argues that messianic time does not recognize the past as “the way it really was,” but rather, seizes hold of memories as they emerge. For example, the circumstances of past revolutions, failed or successful, become relevant in a present-day revolution. According to Woolard, this redemption leads to an experience of “Truth,” as past moments inform current emotional and social configurations. Benjamin recounts how messianic time invites hope in the past, or rather, hope for the future in past potentials that did not materialize. These potentials are “reconstructed as something already present in objects, awaiting release – hence the idea of the objects being ‘redeemed’ by their alternative uses” (Woolard. 2007).

Both of these dimensions of time are at the heart of the MSA women’s ideological constructions of contemporary Arabic varieties as opposed to Qur’anic Arabic. When they talk
about their use of spoken varieties of Arabic, such as Egyptian Arabic, Sudanese Arabic, as well other colloquials, such as Farsi, or Dari, they position themselves as a community progressing together through time, united by a shared form of communication that enables them to demonstrate ethnolinguistic belonging. When they talk about their use of Qur’anic Arabic, they imbue the present with Muslim ancestors who lived in the time of Prophet Muhammad, and with God’s message to prophet Muhammad, eternalized in the Qur’an. Moreover, their use of Qur’anic Arabic calls for the sacred geography of *salat*: the women signal a claim of religious authenticity by postulating a direct link to prominent centers of worship in Saudi Arabia. Yet when they perform at the SSoIW festival, these two dimensions of time emerge in somewhat contradictory ways, especially in the 2010 festival entitled “The Golden Age of Islam.” It is important to note that this festival is held in an environment of institutional multiculturalism and thus celebrates the use of Arabic as an “ethnic” language. Language practice, along with ritual prayer and cultural artifacts, is thus on display and “commodified” (Heller, 2010) as integral to Muslim identity.

**Ethnolinguistic Belonging Through Spoken Varieties**

The spoken varieties of Arabic are used as a daily means of communication among diverse members of the MSA, including Egyptians, Sudanese, Lebanese, and Saudi Arabians in the MSA, as well as among these Arabic speakers and their friends or family members outside the university community. The women of the MSA accordingly view everyday varieties of spoken Arabic as constituting a shared temporal and spatial dimension in an experience of simultaneity and horizontal comradeship. In this sense, colloquial Arabic is ideologically positioned within the bounds of Benjamin’s homogenous empty time. Echoing Anderson’s
“all of us in the here and now” of a nation, these women embrace Arabic as a means of building ethnolinguistic ties to other speakers of colloquial Arabic or even to Arabs more generally. Colloquial Arabic, together with spoken Farsi or Dari, not only establishes synchronic community ties to peers and family members, it also communicates linguistic and national authenticity as an Arab.

Almost all of the women in the MSA that I interviewed have spoken English since childhood, and the majority of them speak English without an L2 (second language) accent. Yet it is their heritage language—that is, the language of their parents—that they perceive as their “mother tongue.” Maheen states this overtly in Excerpt 1 below, when she explains how Farsi is preferable to English for “expressing cultural perspectives”:

(1) Maheen
1 Farsi is just my mother tongue
2 I feel a lot more comfortable sometimes
3 expressing cultural perspectives in Farsi†
4 If I want to explain something (1.0)
5 that's from Iran to an American friend
6 I have a hard time translating that into English
7 cause I just feel like I can't express it well enough†

Aditi, who grew up in Khartoum, Sudan, and thus orients to Arabic as her “native tongue,” echoes this perspective in Excerpt 2 when she asserts that Arabic is better suited to the expression of an Islamic identity, even though she has been speaking English since the age of 3.

(2) Aditi
1 it's just you know it's your it's your language
2 it's your it's your native tongue
3 and that's what you and
4 and that's and sometimes you are more comfortable speaking in that
5 some ideas are better expressed in your native tongue
6 and um (1.0) and so yeah so it's just
7 it's a part of I think language and a part of your identity as well so:
Nora, who is Egyptian and grew up speaking both Arabic and English, has recently begun speaking Arabic with her friends, a practice she had previously reserved exclusively for family interaction. Indeed, she explains in Excerpt 3 that speaking Arabic with her *Arab friends* (line 1) and *Egyptian friends* (line 4) gives her a sense of being *back home* (line 3), even though she grew up in the United States:

(3) Nisreen
1 but now it's kinda like I feel like more that I have Arab friends
2 we just kinda like speak more in Arabic depending on like (1.0)
3 give us the sense of we were like back home and kind of ((laughs))
4 like I don't know it's kinda like with most of my Egyptian friends

Finally, in Excerpt 4, Zahleh similarly associates the Dari language with her *original home* (line 2), which is Afghanistan, claiming it as the language of both her past (here represented by her parents) and her future (here represented by her children).

(4) Zahleh
1 um with I mean, with my language with Dari you know
2 it's just kind of the language of I guess my original home
3 and it's also the language of ah
4 the language that I speak with my parents
5 and the language that I would want my kids to learn

In all of these examples, speakers conceptualize their respective heritage languages as a source of ethnolinguistic belonging: it links them to a wider Arabic world associated with a distant homeland; it situates them within their own family lineage; and it provides a shared symbolic resource for use by like-minded peers in the MSA.
Arabic as a Sacred Language

The women’s projection of Qur’anic Arabic as a sacred language stands in stark contrast to these conceptualizations. In its idealized form, in the opinion of MSA women, Qur’anic Arabic neither changes its essential, ineffable, and untranslatable external form, nor evolves into other languages in the way natural languages change in form, function, and meaning. Like Gregorio López Madera’s 16th century argument that Castilian had been created by God at Babel and therefore had never changed its form and value (Woolard, 2004), MSA women equate Qur’anic Arabic with purity: that is, they consider it to be the literal word of God and the sacred code of the Qur’an recorded verbatim by the Prophet Muhammad. This claim to original prophecy has great weight since the prophet’s words carry divine authority, which renders Qur’anic Arabic a non man-made language. Qur’anic Arabic is the purest form of Arabic, and any deviation from this originary perfection would mean decay and heresy (see Suleiman, 2003; Haeri, 2003; among others). In my data, the purity of Qur’anic Arabic becomes evident in how the women condemn translations of the Qur’an into other languages, even though most of them read the Qur’an in English. They study Arabic for the purpose of interpreting the original sacred language.

For the women of the MSA, the performance of Islamic prayer has to be done correctly. Catherine, for instance, went so far as to ask “people with Ph.D.s” in the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) whether or not women should be physically present in the men’s prayer areas for salat or be shielded by a physical barrier. Amita, an Indian convert, who is fluent in Gujarati, English, and Hindi, also emphasizes procedural correctness. In Excerpt 5, she discusses her application of Qur’anic Arabic in prayer. For her, Arabic is a means to becoming a good Muslim and fulfilling all religious duties, such as the mandatory Islamic precept of the salat.
(prayer), which involves reciting surahs (chapters) of the Qur’an verbatim, slowly, and rhythmically (Qur’an 73:4), especially the first surah, Surat al-Fitiha (“The Opening”) in prayer. She claims that you memorize it in Arabic, and that’s how you communicate with God (lines 5 and 6).

(5) Amita
1 >I can pray in Arabic<
2 which is I mean you m you memorize ahm (1.0) like surahs
3 and ah hadi:ths and things like that
4 (goma) and stuff like that.
5 and you memorize it in Arabic
6 and that's just how you communicate with God.
7 So I get I PRAY when I PRAY >that all happens in Arabic<

When asked to elaborate on why she would use Arabic for prayer, Amita continues:

(6) Amita
1 Um well the official prayer of Islam um the actual
2 I don't know if you ever seen us pray before
3 but the actual yah ah the actual movements
4 and the verses that you will cite
5 should be recited in the ah original text
6 because things get lost in translation
7 so: you as a Muslim that's what you do
8 you memorize like the first surah
9 >as a part of it and other surahs<
10 BUT ah when I'm actually praying↑
11 when you know when we it's just communication between me and God↑
12 when I'm just talking ahm
13 90 percent of the time it probably happens in Hindi or Gujrati
14 my two first languages↑
15 ahm, sometimes in English↑
16 and I can't <pray in Arabic>
17 I can't like actually communicate with
18 cause I can't formulate sentences
19 I can memorize Arabic but I can't converse in it

Salat comprises the second of five pillars of Islam and, among others, consists of the Surat al-Fitiha, which praises God (takbir). The times of the five daily prayers – daybreak (salat al-fajr), noon (salat al-duhr), midafternoon (salat al-asr), sunset (salat al-maghreb), and evening (salat al-isha)” (“Salat,” n.d.) – are determined by the sun’s position and are, in Islamic majority
countries, performed by the muezzin (prayer announcer) from the tower of a mosque. Salat requires ritual purification (wudu) and a declaration of proper intention (niyyah) (“Salat,” n.d.). Preferably, it should be conducted communally, but this communal practice is only required of men for the Friday noon prayer (jumah) in mosques (“Salat,” n.d.). Furthermore, Muslims must face the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca (qiblah), which is discussed at length in the Qur’an. Salat has two to four cycles (rakah), each containing a series of postures, most characteristic of which is prostration (“Salat,” n.d.). The prayer consists of the following steps.

1. intention (niyāh)
2. the opening “God is the Greatest” (“Allahu akbar”)
3. standing (wuquf);
4. reciting the opening surah (“al-Fatihah”)
5. bowing (ruku‘)
6. remaining motionless a moment therein (tuma‘nīnā)
7. straightening back up after bowing (iʿītīdāl)
8. remaining motionless a moment therein (tuma‘nīnā)
9. prostration (sujūd)
10. remaining motionless a moment therein (iʿītīdāl)
11. sitting back between the two prostrations (al-julūs bayna al-sajdatayn)
12. remaining motionless a moment therein (iʿītīdāl)
13. the final testimony of faith (al-tashahhūd al-akhīr)
14. sitting therein (julūs)
15. the blessings on the Prophet (al-ṣalāt ‘alā al-nabī)
16. saying “Peace be upon you” (“al-salāmu ‘alaykum”)
17. the proper sequence of the above integrals (Abu-Rabi’, para. 11).

The Qur’an, Abu-Rabi’ states, reminds the believer to elevate the self to the level of obedience to the divine majesty (4:103), thereby complying with divine agency. In the Surat al-Fitiha (Table 1), this obedience is expressed in a number of ways: by glorifying Allah through superlatives, such as “most,” paired with two of Allah’s names, the Beneficent or the Merciful, which are
repeated; by depicting Allah as the lord of “all that exists”; by exclusively specifying Allah as the “only” and “you alone”; and by relying on him for “everything.”

| In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Dispenser of Grace: | ِبِسْمِ الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَرْضَ بِالَّذِي خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ ِبِلَاءٍ وَلَبَاءٍ وَنَجْنُوٍّ |
| All praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds, | ِالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَٰمِينَ |
| The Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace, | ِالرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ |
| Lord of the Day of Judgment! | ِمَلِكٌ يَمِينَ الْدِّينِ |
| Thee alone do we worship; and unto Thee alone do we turn for aid. | ِإِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَتَّسَيَعُنَّ |
| Guide us the straight way. | ِأَهْدِنَا الصُّرْاطَ الْصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ |
| The way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings, not of those who have been condemned [by Thee], nor of those who go astray! | ِصَرَاطُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ المَخْصُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَأَلْصَالِّينَ |

Muhammad Asad translation taken from [http://www.islamicity.com/quransearch](http://www.islamicity.com/quransearch)

Table 1. *Surat al-Fatiha:*

Abu-Rabiʿ further writes that “the intention of the Quran is not merely to prescribe prayer as a ritual or an institution, but as an immense personal and communal commitment to order, punctuality, change, and coherence.” (para. 3). Salat is “the meeting point between the sacred and the secular in Muslim life. It is a reflection of a divine desire to change the world in the direction prescribed by God in the Qurʾān” (Abu-Rabiʿ, para. 3). It is situated at the intersection

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38 Nevertheless, this prayer also elevates Muslims above Christians and Jews.
between messianic and historic time, but it is not part of the narrative of modernity because it attributes agency to a deity, not to the individual.

The salat has many attributes of messianic time, such as the cyclical nature of returning to a ritual or tradition. Muslims move together through time by diachronically aligning with the prayer ritual Muslims have been conducting ever since the 6th century. The women connect temporally (five specified times a day), spatially (global group prayer oriented towards Mecca), and personally (relating to God together). This allows Muslims to replicate how Muslims have been praying throughout Islamic history and to connect to other Muslims on the local and global levels. There is timelessness and cyclical time all at once, as in messianic time. Qur’anic Arabic is the language that unites all Muslims.

The textual features and performative characteristics of the prayer comply with the understanding of ritual speech as discussed by linguistic anthropologists. In the words of Keane (1997:52-53), the prayer consists of “gestalt knowledge (speakers often learn texts as a whole and cannot recite them in parts), personal volition disclaimer (crediting a traditional source for one’s words), avoidance of first and second person pronouns, and mediation through several speakers” (Keane, 1997, pp. 52-53). Amina and other Muslim’s memorizing of the first surah as a whole in a language they do not speak is a clear example of gestalt knowledge. Although the Surat al-Fitiha contains no first person pronouns, it does contain second person pronouns that address Allah directly. Consequently, the women of the MSA credit Allah as the source of their words as well as address him as a transcendent participant. Since they perform the words as direct quotations from Allah, the words bear divine authority and agency, which is reinforced by constructing his presence during the prayer. Quoted words that carry divine authority (as opposed to mere prophetic speech) “sharpen[s] the boundary between author and animator, and
thus between reported text and reporting context, thereby keeping the original prophecy at a
greater, potentially more authoritative, remove from subsequent events” (Keane, 1997, p. 61). In
other words, directly quoting Allah separates animator (the person doing the quoting) from
author (the person being quoted) (see Keane, 1997; Goffman, 1981).

This type of direct quotation indexes an interpretative frame radically different from the
frame of the speech event. The resultant discourse is transported back in time (to the 6th century),
removed in space (to Saudi Arabia), and projected to the person of Prophet Muhammad who
recorded Allah’s words conveyed through the angel Gabriel. The animator, because she is
chronotopically removed and hence a mere vessel of God’s words, seemingly lacks agency. The
text shifts from a person praying in the here and now to a participant that is spatially, temporally,
and ontologically distant (see Keane, 1997).

Semanticists and pragmatists have argued that formal or ritual speech is often repetitive
and redundant, and therefore lacks propositional meaning, which in turn mitigates individual
agency (Keane, 1997, p. 54). However, formal ritual speech can also index divine authority and
is therefore not devoid of semantic meaning. Moreover, the women tap into powerful,
supernatural sources of authority that are not in the here and now, and this alignment allows the
women to make truth claims. These authentication strategies have moral consequences for the
speaker, since those who customarily use religious language “may themselves be credited with
essential qualities of refinement or sacredness” (Keane, 1997, p. 53). Irvine and Gal’s (2000)
notion of *iconization* exposes the ideological ties between form and social meaning, which are
seen as a reflection of the essential characteristics of their users. Iconization is “a process by
which linguistic features that normally index stances, genres, or dialect become so strongly

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39 In contrast to direct quotation, indirect quotation merges the two roles since the original words are rephrased and
the animator takes ownership over the original message to some extent.
associated with a social group that they are thought to be inherent or essential characteristics of that group” (431).

Most of the women I interviewed – both born Muslims and converts – affirm that speaking and reading Arabic for the sake of reading the Qur’an and for praying should be one of the highest goals of every Muslim. The three Iranian women in this study all learned Qur’anic Arabic explicitly for the sake of reading the Qur’an. For instance, Maria points out how odd it is that she knows “the ancient Arabic,” but not “the modern Arabic.” Zibaa, who is Maria’s sister-in-law, agrees. She also grew up in Iran and studied Arabic in high school. Like Maheen and Maria, she uses Arabic only for reading the Qur’an. When I asked her about why she is using Arabic for that, she replied as follows:

(7) Zibaa
1 well the actual Qur’an is in Arabic
2 so: when you translate it to English or Farsi
3 it doesn’t have the
4 they can’t translate it as well as Arabic.
5 so a lot of meanings and a lot of understanding is ah
6 is not as well said
7 so: it’s more understandable in Arabic

Fatima, a 19-year-old woman from India, argues that Qur’anic Arabic cannot be translated, or only carefully so, because its essential meaning would get lost in “mistranslation.” One Arabic word, she explains, has many meanings, and only an educated scholar on Islam, who has knowledge of both the Qur’an and the hadiths, can decipher the original meaning. Her ideas are echoed by Amita, who claims: “the verses that you will cite should be recited in the original text because things get lost in translation.”

In Excerpt 8, Tamara answers the question of what Arabic means for her. She explains that only through Qur’anic Arabic that she can get the true meaning of God’s words.
(8) Tamara
1 you know, ahm, being able to speak it
2 it's opening up the Qur’an more for me
3 to be able to interpret it for myself
4 and read it for myself (1.0)
5 the more I do that the more I realize
6 how flawed all the translations are
7 cause I look back at the translation
8 and like it totally doesn't say that ((angry voice))
9 Like why do they put that in there you know↑

She elaborates that there are a lot of words she does not understand, but she has “a pretty strong grasp on the grammar and syntax.” The women demonstrate that Qur’anic Arabic and the Qur’an are not only tightly intertwined, but also set apart as pure and untranslatable, aligning with Benjamin’s understanding of messianic time. Nevertheless, purification is also a modern precept, according to Keane (2007), which is necessarily forged through hybridity. That is, the past can only be viewed as pure from the perspective of an impure present.

Hybridized English

In the MSA, English functions similarly to contemporary varieties of Arabic and heritage languages by serving as a lingua franca: a means of communication shared by speakers of diverse heritage languages. Although English does not carry the religious prestige of Qur’anic Arabic or the social prestige of contemporary Arabic varieties, it is crucially the language of da’wah, since da’wah relies on communicating with the non-Muslim campus community. Most of the women I interviewed had little to say about their usage of English or what kind of ideologies they associate with it, perhaps because they see it as an unmarked means of everyday communication. Yet there is some evidence that MSA members share the dominant American view that English is a progressive language that encapsulates forward thinking, a perspective that
again aligns with Benjamin’s idea of homogenous empty time. Maria, for instance, who grew up in Iran using both Farsi and English, associates speaking English with being “very forward” and with having a professional and official tone. Indeed, in her opinion, English has taught her “to be forward,” a characterization that mirrors the predominantly Western “modern” rhetoric. In contrast, she sees Farsi as having “a lot of polite poetic tone to it,” a sentiment also shared by her sister-in-law, who associates Farsi with poetry or poets. When speaking Farsi, she explains, “you’re not very forward.”

In the remainder of this chapter, I demonstrate how women in the MSA, although they orient to English as a language of modernity, practice it in such a way that it simultaneously becomes a marker of Islamic identity. Specifically, I argue that MSA members produce a “hybridized English” by incorporating Qur’anic Arabic into both everyday talk and stylized performance. The questions I seek to answer are thus the following: How is the association of English with the West, and therefore with anti-Arabic sentiments, altered to reflect an Islamic worldview? How do these hybridized forms of English work to establish Muslim identity by challenging temporal readings of Qur’anic Arabic as an anti-modern language? I present two case studies in order to explore this question. First, I look at how messianic time, encapsulated in the ritualized expressions of insha’allah, masha’allah, and alhamdulallah, is distributed over the homogenous empty time of colloquial English. Second, I investigate the use of Qur’anic Arabic in the salat, the ritual Islamic prayer. Although salat in and of itself reflects messianic time due to its verbatim quotations and recitations of God’s original words in the Qur’an, when it is placed in the environment of an onstage performance at the SSoIW festival, its character is changed in unexpected ways.
Case Study One: *Insha’allah, Masha’allah, and Alhamdulillah in Spoken English*

Both Asad (1983) and Keane (2007) point out that religious language has no meaning in isolation, but derives its significance in everyday interactions that are embedded in and constitute discourses of power. Furthermore, each religious group has a paradigm for an ideal communicative relationship among participants and God in ritual performance, which finds its meaning in repetition (Csordas, 1997). Everyday manners of conversing are interrupted and religious forms “signal a special frame of interpretation” (Keane, 1997, pp. 52-53) by using “ritual register (different lexical items for the same words in colloquial and ritual speech), archaistic elements (including words and grammatical forms that speakers believe to be archaic), elements borrowed from other languages, euphemism and metaphor, opaqueness of meaning, and semantic-grammatical parallelism.” (pp. 52-53).

In their everyday conversations, the women of the MSA produce a ritualized register of English through the incorporation of archaistic elements from Qur’anic Arabic. These elements include the terms *insha’Allah*, “if God wills,” *masha’Allah*, “as God has willed,” and *alhamdulillah*, “all praise be to God.” The interpretations of these terms, according to the women I interviewed, are rooted in the following passages of the Qur’an:

1) *Insha’allah*’s principle is described in the Surat Al Kahf 18:23-24: “And never say of anything, ‘Indeed, I will do that tomorrow,’ Except [when adding], ‘If Allah wills.’ And remember your Lord when you forget [it] and say, ‘Perhaps my Lord will guide me to what is nearer than this to right conduct’” (http://quran.com/18/23-24)

2) *Masha’allah*’s principle is described in the Surat Al Kahf 18:39: “And why did you, when you entered your garden, not say, ‘What Allah willed [has occurred]; there is no power except in Allah’?” (http://quran.com/18/39)

3) *Alhamdulillah*’s principle is described in the Surat-Al-Fitiha 1:2: “[All] praise is [due] to Allah, Lord of the worlds” (http://quran.com/18/39).
When these terms are brought into the English language, they constitute an abrupt shift from a conversational American-English register to an Arabic-inflected religious register that has its origins in the Qur’an.

The excerpts below provide examples of the women’s use of this discursive strategy. In Excerpt 6, Kathryn offers a positive assessment of the MSA Westzone conference in Utah that she attended with her friends. In lines 1 and 5, she incorporates the phrase *alhamdullah* to indicate that her attendance at the conference was God’s will. In similar vein, her use of *masha’allah* in line 8 indicates the truth and validity of her message. Finally, her use of the term *insha’allah* in line 11 places the outcome of future actions in God’s hands: Kathryn hopes that the MSA in Colorado will someday hold a conference like the one held in Utah (10-12).

*(9) Catherine*

1. me: and Tamara and Ayman *alhamdulillah*
2. we had the opportunity to go to the: Westzone conference
3. over spring break
4. and I really wish the whole MSA was there and been blessed
5. cause it was a really like a really nice time *alhamdulillah*
6. and the Muslim community there is a really like inspiring community
7. they are really nice ...
8. and they put on a REA:::lly great conference *masha'allah*
9. and, ahm, we were like really inspired by it
10. and we’re thinking that you know, maybe
11. that in the future *insha'allah*
12. the MSA could put on something like this
13. it was really great

In Excerpt 7, Amina, one of the converts I discussed in the last chapter, uses the term 

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40 Keane (1997) notes the religious indexicality of this kind of incorporation in his work as well: “I have observed Indonesian Christians take on Arabic-inflected pronunciations to index the religious (albeit not Muslim) character of a speech event. Linguistic form is multifunctional, however, and such devices are likely to entail more than just a shift of frames. For example, when practitioners of local religions in the Indonesian backcountry take words from the prayers of their Muslim neighbors, they are also trying to tap into the power held by politically dominant groups and to claim some of the status associated with spatially distant sources of knowledge.” (pp. 52-53)
masha’allah to praise her friends in the MSA for helping her learn more about Islam and overcome “the language barrier” of Arabic:

(10) Amina
1 really I mean <masha'allah masha'allah>
2 these kids are amazing
3 and just being around them I have learned so much
4 I didn't even knew before

As in the above examples, the women of the MSA regularly embed these ritualistic Arabic terms into English. In their perspective, these terms provide a quoted replica of God’s words, as spoken in the original act. According to Maria, “when you say these terms, it always has God in it and it has God’s power.” They thus perceive these terms as untranslatable, for as Nisreen says, translating them into English “would be kind of awkward.” The use of these religious phrases in everyday speech leads to the perception that the words come from some source beyond the present speech situation, and thus to the decentering of discourse (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Keane, 1997).

Yet MSA women also use the terms insha’Allah, masha’Allah, and alhamdulillah to mark themselves as Muslims to their peers. The terms therefore function as community-building linguistic tools. As Nisreen points out, even converts who do not know Arabic quickly pick up this discursive strategy: she mentions one friend of hers in particular who “doesn’t speak Arabic but she’d use alhamdulallah and insha’allah and all that.” This register, in that it can be shared by both born-Muslims and converts, becomes indexical of a religious identity that is uniquely situated within the contours of the MSA.

In an investigation of the usage of insha’allah in various conversations of Muslims in the United States and in Egypt, Nazzal (2005) discovers that Muslims have various motivations for
reciting Qur’anic verses in ordinary discourse that exceed their original Qur’anic meanings. *Insha’allah* can have diverse pragmatic functions, such as mitigating one’s commitments for carrying out a future action, confirming the participants’ religious, cultural, and linguistic identities, or establishing a “rhetorical strategy for indirect persuasion to lend credibility to the claims they wish their prospective audiences to act upon” (p. 251). From this functional point of view, the terms align with a progressive view of language and are no longer exclusively anchored in the Qur’an.

The Qur’anic verses are picked up from larger structures of discourse that circulate within the group, and each transformation adds or subtracts meaning from the previous, depending on the intentions of the speaker. Consequently, religious language acts as a social conduit “to exert some influence on each other’s attitude and behavior” (Nazzal, 2005, p. 259-260). Members of the MSA understand every subtle difference of how and to what end the Qur’anic verses are used and accept the type of discursive action implied. The usage of these phrases builds group-specific norms in terms of religious performance in the community.

In sum, applying scriptures in everyday life is not a straightforward recontextualization of the old into the new. Instead, as Ayubi (1991) observes, these scriptural applications are essentially new improvised formulations and “even when the original ‘scripture’ is invoked and when the old jurists are quoted, the methodology applied is highly selective, and the concepts assembled are then radically reconstructed” (p. 156). Hirschkind (1997), in his research on “political” Islam, shows that “the success of even a conservative project to preserve a traditional form of personal piety will depend on its ability to engage with the legal, bureaucratic, disciplinary and technological resources of modern power that shape contemporary societies” (p. 15). In that sense, the women reassign values to Islamic rituals that speak to contemporary events.
and preconceptions. Religious language is “culturally construed to lie beyond ordinary experience, whether that be in the past, the future, at a spatial distance, or across an ontological divide” (p. 48), while being “deeply implicated with underlying assumptions about the human subject, divine beings, and the ways their capacities and agencies differ” (p. 49).

**Case Study Two: Tradition and modernity at the SSoIW festival**

According to Keane (1997), the relationship between quoter and quoted speech is always subject to historical reconfiguration. Being formulaic, the Qur’anic surahs are easy to “transport” to different discourse contexts since they draw on a preexisting linguistic forms. An important concept in this respect is *entextualization* (Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Keane, 1997), which explains “the process of rendering discourse extractable,...[so that] it can be lifted out of its interactional setting” (Bauman & Briggs 1990, p. 73). This process relies on the internal cohesion and autonomy of a stretch of discourse that is perceived to stay constant across contexts. Furthermore, “it permits stretches of discourse to be removed from one context and resituated in another as reported speech” (Keane, 1997, pp. 62-63). The surahs are not recited in isolation, but gain meaning in context both as part of current action and by what they presuppose. In this concluding section, I illustrate how the multiculturalism framework of the SSoIW festival breaks down this distance between the transcendent and the mundane, as well as the distance between the foreign and the local.

While in the SSoIW festivals ethnicity is an asset, as I explain shortly, in the weekly general meeting of the MSA, a discourse on ethnicity is avoided. Members assert that neither ethnicity nor nationality should be factored into a Muslim identity since it could cause alienation
or exclusion from the group. Instead, Islam is the primary category uniting all members. The members claim that ethnic discrimination is “un-Islamic,” since God commanded Muslims in the Qur’an to go to all nations and meet all people. When ethnic differences are discussed in the meetings, it is mainly done jokingly in a staged rivalry between being “black,” “Arab,” or “brown.” As I mentioned in Chapter 5, the Islam of the group is de-chronotopized, implying that it is devoid of specific times, spaces, or persons and thus can be applied to all individuals. This metaphysical or abstract interpretation of Islam is necessary to the MSA’s functionality because (1) the MSA has to accommodate Muslims from many ethnicities and backgrounds that potentially could be linked to tension-causing issues tied to authoritarian leaders, nationalism, etc.; and (2) the MSA has to respond to media accusations that Islam is an Arab or “ethnic religion” in the remote Middle East. Since the members’ da’wah includes claiming space for Islam in the United States, they dispel this stereotypical Islam by creating an English-mediated space that is open and unrestricted.

Yet at the SSoIW festivals, ethnic Arab identities, in addition to an Islamic identity, are highlighted and celebrated. These festivals, along with similar ones held by the South Asian Student Association (SASA) and the Persian Student Association (PSA), are annual university events held to convey a multicultural perspective on the university campus. As at many universities in the United States, the University of Colorado at Boulder has institutionalized multiculturalism. The university’s Center for Multicultural Affairs (CMA), for instance, envisions the university as fostering a collective commitment to freedom, equality, dignity, fairness, social justice, and respect for all its students, and especially for underrepresented

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41 However, one member brought up a touchy issue, namely that some Sunnis won’t come to the MSA because there are Shias in the group. Furthermore, during the time I spend there as a researcher, some Muslims refused to come to the MSA because it was headed by an officer team whose members described themselves as liberal and progressive.
populations. The SSoIW festivals are set within this framework of cross-cultural dialogues, multicultural awareness, and exploring identity development in an increasingly diversified world.

During the SSoIW festivals, the members of the MSA design the large ballroom in the university’s student union as a foreign cultural setting. Booths frame the ballroom, presenting flags, items, and pamphlets informing interested visitors about Islam, the Qur’an, and different cultural aspects of Islamic countries. One member draws henna on women’s hands, while another offers to write visitors’ names in Arabic calligraphy. Most MSA members dress in traditional attire because they take part in the fashion show that has been held for four years at the end of the festivals. Along with visiting families and friends, they wear traditional garments from their respective countries. The women often wear colorful formal hijabs and gowns, sometimes embellished with gold edging. The men wear long, usually white or beige gowns, or Western-style suits. Ethnicity, regionalism, and religion are highlighted in the aim to construct a favorable version of Islam. Of primary relevance is loyalty to one’s heritage, to an Islamic upbringing, and to pride and enjoyment in a present Islamic practice.

The 2010 SSoIW festival, which is the subject of this analysis, was titled Islam in the Golden Ages. It provides a special case of Keane’s moral narrative of modernity, since it places a nostalgic recreation of past traditions within the context of a multicultural American present. Yet multiculturalism, along with its moral prescription of ethnic and religious equality, relies on producing nostalgia, which is a form of remembering an imagined past. Hirschkind (2001) writes that nostalgia implies that “secular forms of memory secure their privilege: in recoding nonsecular forms of memory as romantic sentimentality, the terms secure the transparency and authority of secular historical practice” (p. 25). The discourse of nostalgia then is “an affective
expression of the modern logic of linear and forward-looking temporality, in which the idealized quality of the past is perceived to be permanently lost and irrecoverable” (Inoue, 2004a, p. 2-3).

In the opening speech of the 2010 festival, the host, a male Palestinian undergraduate student, welcomes the audience and outlines the schedule. The purpose of this festival, as he expresses it, is to subvert negative media images of Islam, since “Islam is diverse, contrary to popular beliefs and just like any other religion.” Moreover, the festival aims to “demonstrate different ethnic and cultural members of the Islamic world and to celebrate Islamic advancement in the Golden Ages.” While for the non-Islamic world, the time period of c. 800 CE to 1300 CE is thought of as the Dark Ages, the Islamic world in the Middle East produced sophisticated intellectual advancements in the areas of medicine, astrology, and mathematics, as well as stability and prosperity, an achievement that is often highlighted by members of the MSA. For instance, one of the booths next to the stage featured a poster entitled “1001 Inventions,” an analogy to *1001 Nights*. Audience members were invited to uncover 1000 years of science and technology as a “Muslim heritage.” This booth was flanked by booths on *General Islam* and *The Five Pillars of Islam*, which include informational pamphlets and an open Qur’an, written in Qur’anic Arabic.

Yet shortly after the host’s introduction, the Golden Age event is disrupted when a male member, abiding by Islamic custom, calls for prayer (*adnan*). The host urges the already assembled audience to be silent and not to applaud until the prayer, which lasts for thirty minutes, has ended. Ironically, the host is worried that the prayer might be mistaken for performance, despite the fact that the decision to pray on stage, before a large audience, is inherently performative. Given the participant frameworks associated with stage and audience, the ritual that follows is necessarily viewed through the lens of performance, even though its
procurers frame it as “real.” The male member who cites the Qur’an follows rules of pronunciation and intonation, as established through the Prophet Muhammad. These rules require that the Qur’an be cited in melodic passages shaped by reading rules and is often perceived as a reproduction of the sound of revelation (Keane, 1997, p. 55). While the men pray on the stage, the women assemble behind the stage in an area segregated by a black cloth divider that shields them from male gaze.

When the salat is finished thirty minutes later, the scheduled “performance” of sights and sounds of the Islamic Golden Age resumes. MSA members project slides of Islamic scholars living within the time period of 750 CE to 1250 CE. The first scholar highlighted in the slide show is Abu ‘Abdallah Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, a Persian mathematician, geographer, astronomer, and native of Baghdad who lived in approximately 800 CE. He is followed by Ibn Sina, a physician, philosopher, and mathematician who wrote over 20 books describing the human eye.

The images of these two scholars, and many more, are projected throughout the festival while members perform skits that portray contemporary Islamic or cultural customs in a lighthearted way. A merger of past and present temporalities emerges within each performance. In one skit, for instance, a woman acts as an extremely frustrated student when she reaches an impasse in her algebra homework. Male actors disguised as scholars of the Islamic Golden Ages appear to her, telling her about their great achievements, but not helping her in problem solving. The audience laughs heartily when a scholar says, “I wrote the first book. Computer language comes from Algebra. Building and designing all come from algebra. Flying too!” This statement is instantly followed by R. Kelly’s contemporary pop song, “I believe I can fly.” Another male
member performs a Muslim man at prayer with fellow Muslims, who gets annoyed when other Muslims recite the surahs better.

Later performances juxtapose an Iranian poetry reading in Farsi and English against songs by Rumi, a 13th-century Persian poet, theologian, and Sufi mystic. Many songs are performed in Arabic, such as the song Tala al badr (the full moon has risen), which depicts people greeting Prophet Muhammad when he migrated to Medina. A group of Bosnian Muslims perform a traditional song in Bosnian that incorporates Slavic and Turkish folklore, depicting the many contemporary political conflicts associated with the Balkans. The band that plays in the beginning and during the break is The Reminders, a Muslim hip-hop band. Middle Eastern food is delivered from a nearby restaurant. A Muslim comedian pokes fun at Muslims and Arabs alike. A fashion show features members wearing traditional garments from the countries of their heritage, waving flags and dancing to traditional music. At the end of the event, all members dance on stage and invite the audience to participate.

Although the theme of this festival aligns with Abu-Rabi‘s claim that “Muslim revivalist movements in recent centuries have looked for inspiration to the past, when Islam was in its strength and glory” (para. 21), these events are squarely situated in the progressive present of U.S. multiculturalism. The event that I have described here suggests that ethnicity, as an intersubjective socially produced identity, is strongly chronotopic since it links an individual both to a specific social group, society, nation, or region and to a specific historical lineage. These linkages are highly ideological, often leading to stereotypical typifications of appearance, language, or origin. Although such typifications are generally shunned in meetings and interviews, they are celebrated on the stage of the SSoIW festival, where MSA members become the agents of this discursive production, not its victims. Performers invite the audience to align
with hybrid understandings of Islamic identity, such as disdain for the colonial injustices of the past over and against adherence to liberal democratic values of liberty, freedom, and multiculturalism. Thus, as with the incorporation of Qur’anic Arabic into everyday English conversation, MSA members are able to ally themselves with the power held by politically dominant groups, even while asserting themselves as critical of this powe
I never set out to write a dissertation about Islam and modernity – two intrinsically diverse and substantial research topics. Nevertheless, after becoming acquainted with the concerns of the women in the MSA, I was struck by their broad concern with negotiating a new moral geography in response to post 9/11 media discourse. Large-scale political events, like the controversy over the Islamic Center near Ground Zero, are reflective of smaller-scale Muslim identity constructions within the MSA. This dissertation uses various linguistic frameworks to uncover how the women renegotiate time, space, and personhood, i.e. how they position themselves as Muslims, U.S. citizens, and modern subjects. The women frame and discursively construct Islam as timeless, pure, and unchangeable, but they also align themselves with local understandings of what shapes the individual: studying, learning, struggling to overcome hardships, and self-discipline.

The findings in the previous chapters reveal inconsistencies and questions that need to be addressed in further research. Do the women in the MSA align their social identity predominantly with homogenous empty time and their individual identity with messianic time, applying a pure and unchangeable Islam to their selves? Do the women conceive the purity and abstraction of a perfect Islam as merely serving the religious development of the individual, or are they conceiving their own religious development as a way of bringing themselves in contact with this perfect Islam? Additionally, do the women take a detour via modern precepts of
purification and individualism to a pure Islam? If so, how much are these factors a function of the context and how much are they a function of da’wah?

Chapter two analyzes the women’s overt identity statements about being “Muslims” and “Muslim women” using Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA). The membership categories comprise discursive patterns that recreate the chronotopic, ideological, and political bifurcation of “the West” and “Muslims.” The women’s discourse reproduces negative attributes of the West, such as its ignorance, superficiality, and tendencies towards globalization, while distancing Muslims from these attributes (who, in their wording, are “not that way”). This rhetorical strategy allows the women to circumvent a cultural interpretation of Islam that is tied to what they refer to as sectarian divisions as Shia or Sunnis, or to racial, ethnic, or national divisions among Muslims. As mentioned before, one speaker, Catherine, claims that “we are all Muslims” and Fahida depicts any divisions among Muslims as “political.” The women’s abstraction of Islam dissociates all Muslims from unfavorable cultural attributes and reverses the moral superiority that the West claims for itself.

Chapter three demonstrates the women’s indirect alignment with social types that highlight their identities as “independent thinkers,” “scholars,” and “victors.” The women implicitly convey the importance of education and seeking knowledge by drawing on the norms of both the academic environment at the University of Colorado and the Islamic doctrine of \textit{ijtihad}. According to the women, this doctrine compels the individual to acquire knowledge in order to find and understand the true nature of God and of the Qur’an. This emphasis on acquiring knowledge is coded in the linguistic patterns of impersonal \textit{you} statements, which are used to express abstractions and claims of universal truth. The women shift from the local chronotope of the interview (the \textit{I} that is anchored in time and space) towards a universal, de-
spatialized and de-temporalized realm that you (i.e. everyone, including the interviewer) should align with. For the women, the universals are studying, learning, struggling to overcome hurdles and becoming better Muslims (and therefore better human beings) with the aid of the *hijab* and *jihad*. Since the women apply “truths” that are grounded in both Western and Islamic precepts, and they apply these truths to themselves and others, they strive to convince the interviewer of the legitimacy of their da’wah. In short, abstraction and universal truth leads to the creation of pure Islam, which in turn leads to their identities as better Muslims.

Born Muslims’ autobiographical narration of how their faith developed from childhood (Chapter 4) assimilates to a narrative pattern called the *chronotope of the open road* (Bakhtin, 1981), a genre that underlies much autobiographical narration in the West. The genre depicts the journey of the self through time towards self-realization and self-improvement. Along the way, there are roadblocks that need to be overcome. For the women, these roadblocks include ritual practices of Islam that they did not understand as children, “wrong” interpretations of Islam, or “bad events” in the world blamed on Islam. Notably, encounters with non-Muslims in the United States or in Canada, or simply the journey to Colorado itself, are crucial aspects of this maturing process. Through these encounters, the women learn the true meaning of the rituals they performed as children. In short, narrating these types of spatial displacements allows the women to leave behind their prior, deficient ways of practicing Islam and develop into adults who, similar to a Western sense of maturity, understand the meaning of what they are doing. Thus the rituals are not ends in and of themselves. The women “purified” their Islamic practice involving, in the moral narrative of modernity, what would be called false beliefs. Interestingly, the women’s journey to this type of purified ritual and maturity as Muslims is triggered not by a submission to God, but by their goal to achieve personal awareness and sophistication.
The re-/conversion narratives discussed in Chapter Five resemble in some ways the Pauline conversion narrative of born-again Christians. These narratives present the personal transformation of a non-religious person to a Christian believer. However, the narratives of Tamara, Catherine, and Amita diverge from this genre in three important ways: (1) their transformations are the result of deliberation, and not of divine intervention, as characteristic in Christian born-again narratives; (2) their transformations are not sudden and miraculous, but a result of meeting Muslims and gradually becoming a Muslim themselves through, as discussed earlier, studying and learning; and (3) their transformations are preceded neither by a phase of transgression nor a sinful past. Instead, the women implicitly deny a split between their past and present selves. It might be argued that the concept of reversion influences these narratives, which might be superimposed with modernist ideas about the fulfillment of one’s true nature. These modernist ideas also underlie other narratives of contemporary modern subjecthood, such as the “coming out” narratives of the LGBT community. The women can be seen as reverting to a pure state of Islam that is not anchored in their pre-socialized selves, but is rather newly constructed and emergent in the context of their da’wah. Also in contrast to prototypical Pauline conversion narratives told by contemporary conservative Christians, these re-/conversion narratives do not provide an alternative to a “secular” way of life.

The last chapter on the impact of language ideologies incorporates the women’s metalinguistic evaluations of their heritage languages, of English as the MSA’s lingua franca and the language of da’wah, and of Qur’anic Arabic as the pure language of God eternalized in the Qur’an. While the heritage languages and English can be categorized as conveying homogenous empty time, the interlacing of English with Qur’anic Arabic creates a hybrid of homogenous empty time and messianic time. Qur’anic Arabic indexes messianic time due to its
untranslatability as the word of God. This renders Qur’anic Arabic as both pure and purely Othered. The women also think of Qur’anic Arabic as the language of salat, which involves worship of and submission to God. However, this alignment of Qur’anic Arabic with purity and submission to God changes in different environments, such as when salat is performed on stage at the Sights and Sounds of the Islamic World festival. Here, a different chronotope applies: instead of Qur’anic Arabic being rooted in the past and tied to God, the Prophet Muhammad, and present-day Saudi Arabia, it is instead famed by the chronotope of contemporary entertainment and cultural education as part of the multicultural endeavor of the university. This chronotope projects Qur’anic Arabic and the salat as ethnic and cultural entertainment and the members of the MSA as entertainers. In that sense, the Qur’anic Arabic functions in a similar way to the ethnic exhibitionism of the festival, which is a function of a modernist emphasis on multiculturalism.

In sum, when remapping the ideological geography of Islam in the United States, the women ironically draw on local, Western, non-messianic, non-purified, and non-morally superior modes to convince non-Muslims of their cause. They map their own journey to purity, knowledge, and truth in Islam, but they talk about it as an individual achievement, which is characteristic of U.S. modernist toleration with its emphasis on materialism, individualism, self-reliance, and self-transformation. They sort out proper relations among, and the boundaries between, words, things, and objects, which is driven by their desire to project themselves as both modern and pious religious women. These words and things have a historical dimension and are in constant motion. Moreover, in some circumstances, people’s ideas about words, things, and people include assumptions about history – for example, that history can be understood as a narrative of moral liberation.
Although the concept of modernity remains a controversial analytic framework, the moral narrative of modernity, as proposed by Keane, becomes crucial for the analysis of a stigmatized religious minority group – the MSA – that is assumed to be in opposition to such modern precepts as individuality and agency. After all, versions of modernity “underlie everything from venerable depictions of religion as an opiate, to liberal ideas about self-fulfillment, to Western denunciations of Islam” (p. 5). Aspects of this narrative of modernity shape the religious expression of the MSA’s women. By carefully selecting elements of this narrative as well as elements of Islamic doctrine, they construct themselves as educated individuals in the discourse of da’wah.

Bringing together Islamic practices, claims to modernity, and sociocultural linguistic frameworks required an analytical focus on the relations between time, space, and personhood within the ethnographic data collected for this project. Analyzing temporalities, spatialities, and identities, along with their ideological and moral implications, allowed me to uncover a dialectic between the individual Muslim women, U.S. society, the scriptures of Islam, Islamic practice in the MSA, and large-scale societal ideologies that position Muslims as anti-modern, anti-American, and anti-emancipated. All of these aspects are represented in the women’s discourse of da’wah, which is partially influenced by the Islamic precept to invite Muslims to Islam. This analytic focus on time, space, and personhood also allowed me to bridge two apparently irreconcilable forces in the study of Islam: (1) a global Islamic doctrine, often tied to a literal interpretation of the Qur’an; and (2) the local Islamic practice, as lived and experienced by Muslims in their immediate communities. As Hanks (2005), Bucholtz and Hall (2004), and many other linguists have pointed out, the repertoire of language that speakers adopt is a function of the environment they live in and the relationships they can sustain. All these environments are
chronotopic: the immediate interview situation is established explicitly by the interviewer (a white, female, non-Muslim academic) meeting with the MSA’s women (daw’ees) whose intents are to rectify perceptions of Islam and to reach out to non-Muslims, including the interviewer.

I hope that this ethnography of Islamic practice encourages more ethnographic research on a complex issue that extends across the academic fields of religious study, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics. Considering the scope of this project, I hope to make four main contributions: First, I hope to further an understanding of Muslim identities as a multilayered, continuous, and complex discursive process shaped by various discursive powers within Islamic and American temporalities and spaces. Second, I want to advance our understanding of the role of mass-mediated religion on community building and identity construction. I provide insights into the extent of media’s centrality for culture (Spitulnik 1997) in terms of how media discourse circulates and in what conditions this circulation is possible.

Third, I hope to contribute to the field of sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz & Hall 2005), which advocates bringing together various frameworks of linguistic analysis. In this dissertation I merge the notions of chronotopicity, media reception, Islam, and modernity, which have, to my knowledge, not yet been systematically applied to a linguistic anthropological analysis of local Islamic communities in the United States. My ethnography diverges from traditional anthropological accounts of “the indigenous” (Spitulnik 1997) towards an analysis of a manufactured culture whose religious identity, I argue, has been reshaped by the media and subverted into a discursive rhetoric or da’wah. Linguistic anthropology has only recently begun to address media discourse,\(^4\) which has traditionally been thought of as the domain of critical

\(^4\) There are notable exceptions of linguistic anthropologists looking at mass mediated social processes through the categories of gender (Inoue 2004a) or ethnic difference (Spitulnik 1997). In general, these scholars focus on how communities resist mass media ‘realities’ and construct different meanings for media texts, and therefore actively produce meaning.
discourse analysis (CDA) (Agha 2007; Hall 2009, personal communication). In the panel “Beyond Individual and Society: Mass Mediated Forms of Personhood” at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropology Association in 2007, linguistic anthropologist Asif Agha called for linguistic anthropologists to explore how “mass mediated representations make common models of personhood widely available in society, thus equipping persons to achieve widely recognized and fractionally common forms of individuality.” Yet, as he puts it, questions of “how such patterns emerge, what forms they take, and how persons acquire stakes in them, have not yet become the focus of systematic inquiry in linguistic anthropology” (Agha 2007). In that sense, my ethnographic and qualitative analysis is enriched by the understanding that power differences in wider social practices are discursively shaped (Foucault 1970) and that these differences are linguistically analyzable (Fairclough 1995, 2003; Van Dijk, 2008; among others). Especially important to this part of my analysis is Fairclough’s (2003) argument that media representations have implicit presuppositions “which contribute to producing or reproducing unequal relations of power, relations of domination” (p. 14).

My fourth contribution is to show that temporality and spatiality are not just locales of background information in qualitative analysis, but can also be the goal of the analysis. Perrino & Lempert (2007) state that a scholarly pursuit of temporality in language “often hurries past the discursive and semiotic means by which mnemonic acts and artifacts can be said to have ‘uses’ at all” (p. 205-6). The linguistic anthropologist Miyako Inoue (2004) agrees that the analysis of time and space, often historicized in terms of “origin,” “history,” or “change,” should be “a vital concern not only for historians, but also for those interested in the construction and reproduction of contemporary social formations and the attendant practices of self-knowledge, identity, and politics, because these are inevitably predicated on a sense of time and history” (p. 1). This
dissertation has aimed to illuminate how sociocultural linguistics with its emphasis on interdisciplinary linguistic analyses contributes to the large endeavors of analyzing Islam and modernity.
8 REFERENCES


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