

Excerpted from Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

Introduction

Unmapping the Muslim World

On a sweltering July afternoon, I absently drove through a neighborhood known as the heart of Arab Detroit. The quiet suburb of Dearborn, Michigan, is famously home to the headquarters of the Ford Motor Company and also home to at least thirty thousand Arab Americans. “The Middle East in the Midwest,” as Dearborn is often dubbed, is a regular stop for journalists and TV crews searching out Muslim man-on-the-street sound bites or exotic b-roll footage—the street signs along Michigan Avenue written in Arabic, halal McNuggets at McDonalds, or burqa-clad women rollerblading. That is why, driving along in the summer of 2007, I barely took notice of the cameramen setting up on the street corner. But then I came upon a swarm of police cars blocking off the street for at least a mile. Anxiously, I craned my neck to see what the gathering onlookers were fixed on. I could hear muffled cries in Arabic and a growing crowd of teenagers waving Iraqi flags further down Warren Avenue. Hoopties with boys piled on the roofs and Arabic radio stations blaring were slowly circling the police lines, Iraqi flags and outstretched arms hanging out the windows. In the distance, drums pounded. A little boy darted between the squad cars waving his Iraqi flag and ignoring the reprimands of the police.

I scanned through the car’s radio stations for news coverage of the war in Iraq. A white police officer directing traffic off Warren Avenue waved me toward a side street. Leaning out of my car window, I asked him, “Did something happen?”

He studied the amorphous mob of Arab teenagers in the distance. “A lot of things are happening right now,” he muttered.

The fear in his eyes made my thoughts race. A few months earlier, I consulted on a major survey on Muslims in the US for the Pew

Foundation; the report had just been publicly released and caused a bit of a media stir. Despite the overall rosy findings of the report (reassuringly titled *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*), Fox News and other conservative media focused on the findings highlighting the political disaffection of Muslim American youth.¹ Anti-Muslim right-wing bloggers and pundits made alarmist arguments in the media about how the report proved that neighborhoods like “Dearbornistan” constituted a “home grown threat.”² This is what was on my mind as I turned onto a residential street. Seconds after I rounded the corner, loud gunshots fired. My heart sank as I imagined the headlines, the photographs: Muslim youth, born and bred in America, holding violent demonstrations. I spotted a middle-aged woman with a hot-pink scarf tied over her hair bouncing a toddler in her lap in the shade of her front porch.

“*Shoo sar?*” I asked from my car window.

“Iraq won the Asia Cup!” she yelled back, smiling broadly.

Then she lifted her hand in the air and shot an imaginary, celebratory bullet into the sky.

Dearborn may be a quaint “Little Beirut,” but it is also a domestic front in the War on Terror. Locals pride themselves on producing the best Arabic food outside the Middle East and the first Muslim Miss USA. But Dearborn also has the distinction of being the first American city to get its own office of Homeland Security after September 11th, even before New York. Across the US, Muslim American communities such as Dearborn inspire fear and fascination; they are constantly scrutinized and talked about by researchers, by law enforcement officials, by pundits on the nightly news. For all this attention, Muslim Americans are still rarely heard. Millions of dollars are spent on survey research on the Muslim American population to answer burning questions about their demographics, their political views, the degree of their devotion to Islam, even their happiness.³ The goal is always the same: to discern “good” Muslims from “bad” ones, “Little Beirut” from “Dearbornistan”; when surveys find Muslim Americans have strong commitments to Islam and strong attachments to Muslims in other parts of the world, the statistics are routinely treated as ominous, threatening, as if religiosity and a global sense of religious community are an obstacle to the cultivation of attachments to Americans and America. These surveys



Fig. I.1. Iraqi American teens in Dearborn celebrate Iraq's Asia Cup win as the US-led forces remain at war in Iraq against opposition forces that see "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and "Operation New Dawn" as military occupations. (Photo courtesy of Reuters)

promise a window onto the Muslim American "street," but the love of soccer and the emotional and psychological significance of the Iraqi win in Dearborn are, needless to say, impossible to capture in a survey. These surveys are like a picture taken from far away, and the details are often so blurry that a jubilant celebration can look like a riot degenerating into chaos.

A more intimate picture might capture the finer textures of some of the most important issues facing Muslims in communities such as

Dearborn: what does it mean to be Muslim and American in our global age? What ties Muslim Americans to Muslims around the world? Who speaks for the stunningly diverse population of American Muslims? These questions are inextricably linked to questions about the nature of American citizenship as well. What are the cultural criteria of national belonging that allow one to be recognized as American? In Dearborn, everyone understands that citizenship is more than a legal status, that national belonging is fragile and that it can be withheld from those who are deemed foreign and different even if they are technically legal citizens. These days at ethnic events and citywide Islamic holiday parties in Dearborn, recruiters from the US armed forces, the FBI, and the CIA are regular sponsors but not always warmly received ones. Amid the carnival rides and food carts at the Arab International Festival, Arab children receive free balloons and spy swag at the CIA's air-conditioned "Top Secret Lounge" and scale the US Army's rock-climbing wall as stories of wrongful arrests and the scents of grilled kabobs swirl through the crowds below.

The gap between legal citizenship and social citizenship belies the idea that the nation is a natural entity, merely a territorially bound political unit; rather, the United States is a place both physical and also imagined, one that is produced and perpetually reproduced by a community of citizens who collectively imagine that they share a deep, horizontal kinship.⁴ On the nightly news, the weather report presents our national borders as natural features of geography, crossed by cold fronts and warm fronts. These simplified maps are one of innumerable representations that naturalize the moral geography of the nation, treating cultural difference like a feature of the terrain. The imagined community of the nation is often apprehended in geographic terms. When we talk about the US as the "City on the Hill," the "Leader of the Free World," or the "Nation of Immigrants," we construct the nation as an exceptional community in the world, but these national mythologies also conjure an imagined geography of an exceptional, value-laden place. Moral geographies are constituted by a set of ethical and political assertions about a piece of land that produce a shared, conceptual map among that land's inhabitants.⁵ The ethical and political assertions that accompany a moral geography are so taken for granted, so integral to the identity of the place, that they are "facts" of life,

silent, unspoken. As Donald Pease notes, “a nation is not only a piece of land but a narration about the people’s relation to the land.”⁶ The collectively imagined affiliations among American citizens—and the corresponding imagined separation from people outside the nation’s borders (as well as outsiders within), the perpetually appealing notion of “us” versus “them,” of “We the people” in contrast to the “Others”—sustain the imagined community of the nation, the idea that the nation is a container of a singular, all-encompassing culture, a national way of life bound by the water’s edge.

Like the nation, the Orient is also a moral geography of an exotic but inferior culture that is treated as though it were merely a place. The late cultural critic Edward Said argues in his classic book *Orientalism* that centuries of Western production of artistic and scholarly representations of the Oriental (Muslim) Other as weak, decadent, depraved, irrational, and fanatical operate as a form of backhanded self-flattery, confirming through contrast that the West is civilized, dynamic, and superior. The central point of Said’s *Orientalism* is to challenge the authority and political neutrality of this body of self-referential knowledge about the (Muslim) Other, this powerful discourse that operates independently of and in political service against the actual lands and peoples it claims to represent.⁷

Americans have inherited this centuries-old discourse. When Americans refer to the “Muslim World,” they reproduce, amend, and complicate Colonial Europe’s moral geography of the Orient. Often Americans mistakenly use the terms “the Muslim World” and “the Middle East” interchangeably; both terms refer to far more sweeping groupings of peoples and lands than those defined by the specific and narrow American political and cultural interests in these geographies over time. Historically, American popular attitudes and US foreign policies toward the Middle East have been neither uniformly hostile nor consistent: as “the Holy Land,” it has been a site of religious significance since the country’s founding; as a source of oil, it has been an economic linchpin since the Second World War; as a proxy, bloody, Cold War battleground against the USSR, the region became a site of national, geopolitical interest; as a source of terrorist threats in the late twentieth century and even more dramatically in the twenty-first, the region became a site of national security interest.⁸ In addition, American minorities,

particularly African Americans, have contested the dominant American discourse about the Muslim World, developing their own alternative investments in Islamic peoples and places as inspirations of racial justice; their transnational attachments to Muslims abroad who are not Americans destabilizes the idea of a “people” at the heart of citizenship.⁹ In contrast to European colonialists’ sustained preoccupation with the Orient, historically, American interests in the “Muslim World,” those of whites or racial minorities, are characterized by spurts of cultural and political attention and material investment “followed by virtual silence,” cycles of discovery and forgetting, reimagining and remapping.¹⁰ Today the “Muslim World” figures as a place and an idea that is strategically important to the US despite being, in the eyes of most Americans, regressive, dangerous, and distant, both geographically and culturally.

Of course, cultures, peoples, ideas, and beliefs do not actually map themselves onto the terrain of the earth in this simple way. There is, in other words, no place we can call the “Muslim World.” If the “Muslim World” is the modern equivalent of Islamdom (lands ruled by Muslims), it would refer only to Muslim-majority countries; countries with significant minorities of Muslims, such as China, will be left out. If the “Muslim World” is a euphemism for the Middle East (sometimes including Afghanistan and Pakistan), it fails to account for the indigenous populations of Christians and Jews and other religious minorities throughout the region as well as the fact that 1.9 billion Muslims live outside the Middle East.¹¹ Ultimately, the term “Muslim World” implies both that Muslims live in a world of their own and that Islam is an eastern religion and there is a foreign place—a distant, contiguous part of the world—where Islam properly belongs. Where does that leave the American Muslims who are the focus of this book? Do places like Dearborn make the United States part of the “Muslim World”?

Islam Is a Foreign Country unmaps the moral geography of the “Muslim World” as a place and a people outside American geographic and cultural borders by mapping an alternative, transnational *Muslim world* imagined by American Muslims that includes them and the US. To mark the dominance of the moral geography of the “Muslim World” as a foreign place and a source of foreigners in the West, I capitalize both words; when referring to Muslims’ aspirational moral geography, the “Muslim world,” I do not. Rather than a foreign region, the Muslim

world is a global community of Muslim locals, both majorities and minorities who *belong* to the places where they live and who, in their totality, exemplify the universality of Islam.

Central to this book are Muslim American youth at the dawn of the twenty-first century who are preoccupied by this conundrum, one that American Muslims have been grappling with for decades: What makes Islam belong to a place? Can Islam be an American religion without being compromised, diluted, disfigured, assimilated? Living with both the possibility and the impossibility of Islam being an American religion, American Muslims have internalized what the great black scholar W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as double consciousness, “a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double classes, must give rise to double worlds and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism.”¹² Through the journeys of American Muslim seekers abroad, through their studies, struggles, and soul-wrenching debates about their place in the US and in the world, *Islam Is a Foreign Country* offers an account of deeply religious and politically disaffected American Muslim youth. They are not “homegrown” terrorists, but they fit what has become the de facto profile of “radicalized” Muslim youth, in their opposition to the political status quo, their global vision of justice, their attachments to Muslims abroad, and their sense of alienation from the American mainstream. Perhaps it is their idealism that is most radical, the persistence with which they desire a home.

The War on Terror shows us how high the political stakes and the costs of imagining Islam in terms of geographic borders and imagining American citizenship in terms of cultural, religious, and even racial criteria can be. Immediately after September 11th, President George W. Bush cautioned Americans against lashing out at fellow citizens just because they were Muslim; despite his insistence that the terrorists did not represent “real” Islam, the underlying message of his “with us or against us” mantra rang loud and clear: unless proven “good,” every Muslim was presumed to be “bad.”¹³ War on Terror policies at home and abroad collectively punish Muslims for the 9/11 attacks. Iraq and Afghanistan became formal battlefields in retributive military conflicts an ocean away. Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, and

Yemen became informal battlefields, their populations subject to economic sanctions, missile and drone attacks, covert operations, and targeted killings undertaken by the US government. Domestically, Muslim Americans became the mass targets of surveillance and a wide range of punitive US government policies that systematically criminalize Muslims and “Muslim-looking” people through a body of legislation that is race-neutral in its language but targets and racializes these special populations in its effects.¹⁴ Most prominently, immigration legislation is now a proxy for legal measures that are selectively applied to brown and black Muslim populations through incarceration, mass deportation, and denial of entry without the due process of law. Such policies and attitudes are not simply a reaction to the 9/11 terror attacks; like other cases of scapegoating American minorities, these policies and attitudes depend on preexisting social conditions that treat Muslims both within and outside US borders as people who would readily participate in or approve of terrorism and, therefore, populations who ought to be held collectively responsible for the attacks.

Before September 11th, there was a growing political consensus on the right and the left that racial profiling was an inefficient, ineffective, and unfair policy. Ironically, at a campaign event in Dearborn in 1999, then presidential candidate Bush promised to roll back the profiling of Muslims.¹⁵ After September 11th, the national consensus flipped, with people on the right and even many on the left embracing the profiling of Muslims in the name of national security. In the wake of 9/11, Gallup polls found significant approval for the internment of Arab Americans (one-third of New Yorkers polled), and in 2006, a Gallup poll showed that 39 percent of Americans believe all Muslims, even US citizens, should be forced to carry special identification cards.¹⁶ Just as punitive immigration legislation is selectively applied to Muslim cases by the government, the profiling of Muslim-looking people is often recast as patriotic vigilance. The same perverse logic that undergirds racial profiling is simply taken to its logical extreme by those who commit acts of “backlash” violence: the hunt for terrorists is a hunt for “Muslim-looking” people. Hate crimes against Muslims are treated like crimes of passion; while the violent effects of the perpetrators’ displaced anger are roundly condemned, their anger over 9/11 and their love of the nation are widely shared emotions.¹⁷ In contrast to terrorist violence, which is

consistently represented in the media as incomprehensible, hate violence meted out against “Muslim-looking” people is typically represented as unfortunate but predictable, regrettable but understandable.

Muslim Americans are long familiar with being treated with suspicion; however, the political pressures and the hyperscrutiny of their communities, whether from the government, the media, their neighbors, or even researchers, intensified dramatically after September 11th. Immediately after, many Muslims draped their bodies, cars, homes, and workplaces with American flags, sometimes as much out of fear of racial violence as out of patriotic mourning.¹⁸ The appearance of the flags also signaled the disappearance of other “marking” signs; many Muslim women quietly removed their veils (just as “Muslim-looking” Sikh men removed their turbans) in anticipation of the backlash, or after suffering its real and sometimes violent consequences. A few days after September 11th, I was saddened to find a few Dearborn housewives bent over the back fenders of their minivans, carefully peeling off their “I ♥ Islam” bumper stickers. What, after all, could be more American than an “I ♥ —” bumper sticker?

This picture of the tenuous quality of American citizenship, the contradictory assertions of inclusion and exclusion that pervade Muslim communities such as Dearborn, are rarely highlighted by journalists and television producers covering the Arab/Muslim American street. They usually use Dearborn’s photogenic mixture of exotica and American small-town charm to tell a far more optimistic story about the nation, about the American Dream, a story that echoes the same foundational myth as America’s many Chinatowns and Little Italys and sustains the national narrative of Americans as a quintessentially diverse and tolerant people, the moral geography of the US as a Nation of Immigrants and a Land of Opportunity.

In contrast to most Muslim-concentrated neighborhoods in the US today, the Arab community of Dearborn dates back to the early twentieth century, made up mostly of Ellis Island immigrants (Ottoman peddlers and laborers from what is now Lebanon, Syria, and Israel/Palestine) who settled down as factory workers in auto plants and whose grandchildren and great-grandchildren still make up a major population of the city. Like many ethnic enclaves in the US, there are families who have been there for generations and who continue to bring their

relatives to the US, as well as new immigrants who have just arrived. Dearborn is a diverse community in terms of religion, including Arab Christians and Muslim Sunnis and Shias, and diverse in terms of nationality and ethnicity, with immigrants from Syria and Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq, Egypt and Yemen. Historically, immigrants in Dearborn enjoyed upward class mobility, and in many ways they have fared better in an increasingly anti-Muslim political climate than have newer, less established Muslim communities in other parts of the US.¹⁹

This is a fair portrait of Dearborn, but on closer inspection, Dearborn also tells us a less optimistic and far more fractured story about America. Dearborn's changing demographic picture reflects a history of domestic policies that are profoundly racist, such as the introduction and reversal of immigration laws over the course of the twentieth century which denied or limited entry of nonwhite immigrants through quotas, as well as a long history of US involvement in bloody, military conflicts in the Middle East—refugee populations came to Dearborn as a result of the creation of Israel and the subsequent wars between Arab states and Israel, the civil wars in Lebanon and Yemen, the Iran-Iraq war, and the US-led wars in Iraq.²⁰ The shifts in Dearborn's population also reflect the booms and busts of greater Detroit's economic history. When Henry Ford doubled the average factory worker's pay to five dollars a day in 1914, he revolutionized the auto industry and started a "gold rush" to Detroit by drawing thousands of people from around the country, including many Arab Americans. As the auto industry has dramatically shrunk and weakened after decades of capital flight and urban decay, the population of Detroit has also shrunk, with Arab Americans searching for economic opportunity in other parts of the country and even abroad, some returning permanently to the Middle East. Today the working-class Arab neighborhoods act as a (brown) racial buffer zone between (black) Detroit and the (white) more affluent, western half of the suburb, a legacy of the history of "white flight" (and capital flight) from the city to the suburbs in the sixties and a reminder of the persistence of racial tensions that segregate greater Detroit.

Both local racial tensions and global conflicts in the Middle East heighten suspicions of the Arab community of Dearborn, of their political loyalties. Although not quite white, Arab Americans enjoy certain racial privileges not accorded to blacks in neighboring Detroit, such

as the privilege to be able to live and work in a predominantly white suburb such as Dearborn. Yet Arab Muslims lack the social citizenship that blacks enjoy in a post-civil-rights America, in which blacks are frequently represented as quintessentially American even as they continue to suffer the brutalities of American racism.²¹ As the African American case demonstrates, attaining social citizenship is not always equivalent with attaining social justice; however, many American Muslims cling to this hope, this particular American myth, that the former leads to the latter. Moustafa Bayoumi argues in his book *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?*, which lifts its title from Du Bois's 1904 *The Souls of Black Folk*, that the obstacle that prevents Arabs and Muslims from attaining social citizenship is not a lack of representation. He argues that the problem is that Arabs and Muslims have too many representations that dissolve too easily into abstractions, leaving these communities unknowable, perpetually foreign. Our pop culture is awash in the images of Arabs and Muslims, yet, he notes, "sometimes when you are everywhere, you are really nowhere."²² "Nowhere" is the point on the map of the nation where you are demanded to perform your citizenship and belonging as the very possibility of real inclusion is denied in the same breath. "Nowhere" is a place American Muslims, like me, have navigated all our lives.

Native Orientalist

Not all of the Muslim neighborhoods in Detroit are as telegenic as the Arab community of Dearborn. My earliest childhood memories are of living in a working-class Punjabi neighborhood in Detroit. Like many other first-generation immigrants, my parents came to the US from Pakistan as economic refugees, trying to escape the poverty and political corruption endemic in postcolonial countries like Pakistan that although independent from formal colonial control remain locked in a state of dependency on the US.

When I was four, we moved because my father landed a job as a technician at Ford Motor Company, radically changing our class status and planting us firmly in suburbia. I was lonely in our new, white neighborhood of evenly spaced single-family homes and English-speaking children. In order to help me make friends and learn to speak more

English, my parents enrolled me in a private nursery school in the afternoons. Quickly I began speaking almost exclusively in English, but my parents were most surprised by the fact that I spoke “black English.” At first they assumed that this was just the English I had heard first, in Detroit, and that, eventually, living in a white community, I would learn “proper English.” But as the months went by, I seemed to be picking up more and more black colloquialisms. (My mother, in her thick accent, would drill into me, “Don’t say ‘ain’t I,’ say ‘amn’t I.” Years later, I would have to drill “amn’t” out of my vocabulary.) The teacher’s aide finally solved the mystery of how I was learning “black English” in a white school when she confessed to my father that the head teacher was a racist. My teacher prevented me and the only other nonwhite student in my class, a black girl named Kecia, from participating in class activities and sitting at the main table, relegating us to a separate table in the back of the room.

My father was livid. He was a university student and a political activist (and a hippie) in the US during the sixties, active in the civil rights movement, which he saw as part and parcel of a global anticolonial, human rights struggle that connected Detroit to Karachi. Since he worked the evening shift at Ford, he began a kind of “sit-in” during my afternoon classes, stonily reading a newspaper in the back of the room, at the table that had been for Kecia and me. In the end, my parents pulled me out of the school in disgust. I learned then that my place at that table had to be fought for, that sitting at the table was not the same as being welcome at the table.

That kind of overt, biting racism was the exception for us, however, not the norm. I made new friends easily in our sleepy suburb, and my parents developed warm friendships with our white neighbors and a few other families that were also new to the neighborhood, immigrants from Albania, Iraq, India, and Vietnam. We kept in touch with the families from our old neighborhood, and one by one each of those Punjabi families followed our lead and moved to the suburbs once the men secured auto assembly-line jobs.²³ For my father, however, our suburban life was a holding pattern; America was a turnstile, not our destination. He always insisted that we would eventually move back to Pakistan, which was why we should not accumulate too many toys or clothes or replace unreliable appliances or cars too quickly. And, every few years,

our family went through the same process of almost moving back: my father would start a small import-export business on the weekends, our house would go up for sale, and my father would make a dramatic scouting trip to Pakistan, to see if we could really do it. The end was always the same: his dejected return to America and to Ford, followed by weeks of cross-Atlantic phone feuds over inheritance with his family and, finally, by his failing business shuttered and all our savings gone. Then my mother would dig the “For Sale” sign out of the front yard and persuade my father not to give up on the American dream: “This is the best country in the world, the land of opportunity.”

Slowly, we began to socialize with a wealthier, suburban Muslim community that shared my mother’s dream of a permanent and prosperous future in America. The suburban Muslim community was very different from the Punjabi neighborhood of my earliest memories. Primarily made up of a professional class from Pakistan and India, the collective obsession was on “arriving,” fulfilling the American dream of wealth and privilege while assuaging the guilt of realized dreams with immigration sponsorship papers for relatives left behind and vacation suitcases heavy with store-bought gifts from *Amreeka*. Within this subculture of South Asian immigrants, often termed “a model minority” for their comparative economic success and the ease by which they move in (and into) white neighborhoods, those of us in the second generation were largely geared toward two career fields: medicine and engineering (even law school was considered risky). Anthropology and other social sciences (“the sciences that don’t raise you,” as my father-in-law dubbed them) are particularly suspect because they are dangerously close to philosophy (a discipline he blamed for “our civilization’s downfall”). As a graduate student attending my parents’ dinner parties on holidays and weekends, I explained to our friends and relatives with embarrassment that anthropology is the study of culture and that I planned to research the global Islamic revival and debates about Islamic authority—hastening to add that I would be improving my Urdu alongside my Arabic. I was usually met with open and predictable disapproval.

I was challenged on two fronts simultaneously: Why I would want to learn about Islam from Orientalists? And why I would waste money on a career without job security? Our Punjabi friends and relatives would

remind me of stories I knew too well, of my distant uncle who read borrowed books by street light in the little town of Faisalabad and came to the US on a scholarship; he was the one who took pity on his orphaned cousin, my father, and helped him get a partial scholarship to the University of Michigan. My father was an excellent student but struggled to pay his tuition and rent; he worked at the library and secured babysitting jobs by impressing American children in the park with his expert kite-flying skills, but it was never enough and he was forced to drop out after only three semesters. Here I was, they marveled, thirty years later, the overeducated daughter of a simple kite-runner-turned-technician, studying with Orientalists!

Yes, I would admit, I was guilty of the luxuries of a college girl—reading important books so that I might become Something and spending our hard-earned Ford dollars on university classes to learn languages I had half forgotten and the history of our subjugation. I knew my parents' friends had not read Said's book; they did not realize what an insult it was to call me an Orientalist. These friends would ask me, politely, expectantly, how many more years were left before I would actually *be* an Orientalist? My parents found this hilarious, and it continues to be something of a running joke for us: my PhD in Orientalism. And I always laugh. But, in a way, it is really not that funny.

It is a half-innocent mistake but also a reminder that the discipline of anthropology has been intimately linked to the history of colonization that haunts my family, that haunts Pakistan, and that continues to aid the imperial interests of the US government. Immediately after the attacks of 9/11, I watched an earlier generation of discredited anthropological scholarship become reenergized as weapons for use by the US military's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, books such as anthropologist Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind*; it was painfully clear that the sudden surge of academic interest in Islam and the sudden bounty of funding for research in the Middle East was not politically neutral.²⁴ For my parents, this half-serious joke is also a way to remind me to remember where I come from, to remind me that while I studied in one of the finest universities in the country and am now afforded the luxury to write books, I could have just as easily been married off out of high school, living in an urban ghetto like my friends from our old neighborhood. Or I could have been like my cousins in Pakistan, dreaming of a Green

Card, mailing flattering pictures to the pre-med sons of Pakistani immigrants scattered throughout American suburbs, praying to somehow get to *Amreeka* while cursing its bombs. My picture travels across borders in the haughty navy-blue vinyl of a US passport, announcing to the border patrol in pastel stamps that I can go (almost) anywhere, that I am nobody's mail-order bride, that romance and research and travel are luxuries I can afford. Still, such luxuries are a responsibility and do not count as "real" work in my family; even now, so many years later, when voices are raised and doors slammed, my suspicious "college books" are cursed. Things might have been different, so I had better think twice.

And I have thought about it, countless times over the years, what it means for me to inherit anthropology.²⁵ Just as the Orientalist's scholarly authority and cultural superiority rests on a detachment and *distance* from the eastern object/region of his expertise, so too is the anthropologist's discovery of cultural difference through travel predicated on a physical and, more importantly, ontological distance, preserving the essential framework by which "we" study "them." Muslims in the communities that I grew up in are keenly aware of the political and ontological distance that separates them from scholarly experts on Islam; but at the same time, most know little about the ways in which disciplines such as anthropology have reinvented themselves in the wake of Said's *Orientalism* and other path-breaking critiques. Anthropologists, along with scholars in literature, history, area studies, and a wide range of disciplines similarly invested in cultural analysis, now look more closely and critically at the scholarship produced by their disciplines about cultural Others, a movement known loosely as postcolonial studies.²⁶ On the first day of my first seminar as a graduate student, the class grappled with Said's challenge to redefine the discipline of anthropology, "to forget itself and to become something else [or] remain as a partner in [imperial] domination and hegemony."²⁷ Whatever nervous jitters or romantic fantasies about the world of ideas that I brought with me into that seminar room on that first day were suppressed by the urgent pitch of the debate around the conference table. Could anthropology salvage itself from its imperial history, or would that be another futile phantom chase, like anthropologists salvaging disappearing cultures, dying languages, and endangered noble savages?²⁸ After all, the

discipline was born out of the Western desire to know others in order to better rule them, to disparage them, or, as Said famously illustrates, to fuel fantasies about the West itself. Was anthropology anything more than a discipline premised on race and difference, doomed to a perpetual cycle of reproducing and deconstructing its own representations? Our class agreed that anthropology could redeem itself by reinventing itself, although we could not agree on what it was that made anthropology worth salvaging as a discipline.²⁹ Sitting around that long conference table on the first day of class, faced with a history intertwined with imperial interests and a methodology appropriated so easily that its intellectual distinctiveness seemed to evaporate before our eyes, the insistence on the importance of rigorous training in a discipline with an identity crisis, a discipline urged to forget itself, seemed hollow, insular, like a narcotic buzz, like false bravado—or, maybe, a bad omen.³⁰

Strangely, being trained during a time when anthropology was mired in its own crisis of authority better equipped me to approach Muslim debates about the crisis of Islamic authority that are the subject of this book. Muslims in the US and around the world grapple with a basic, burning question: who defines Islam today? In the process of mapping Muslims' own global debates about Islamic authority and Islam's place in the US and in the world, I found myself seeing problems and debates that I was trying to document and analyze with new eyes, and often anthropology's crisis acted as a kind of illuminating mirror. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes the challenge to reformulate anthropology for the global age as the unraveling of a conundrum: "what is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world?"³¹ It occurs to me that Muslim Americans ask the same question in religious terms: what might an authentic, American Islam look like in the context of a mobile, heterogeneous, transnational community of believers? What makes a religion, a people recognizably American? Of course, I did not search out the burning questions that drive the religious debates I map in this book; I learned them first as my parents' different and competing visions of America, as my father's great dilemma: is the US only a turnstile, or can it be a home for us? Inheriting anthropology has put me in the position to turn those questions into objects of analysis, to narrate the lives of Muslim American youth and the lives of those debates, to claim a kind of expertise.

The Trouble with the Native Point of View

Classic anthropology's intellectual mission is split at its root; the oxymoron of its method, "participation observation," involves a double move of intimation and distancing: immerse yourself among them and then, once the grant money runs out, come back home, translate all you saw and heard. But I never expected to be able to simply dust myself off and leave the subjects of this study behind me because the conversations that constitute this ethnography, and all ethnography, are ongoing and unfinished, what anthropologist Ruth Behar likens to rabbinical scholars' commentaries upon commentaries on Jewish ritual law that stretch over generations.³² Fears of anthropologists "going native" in the field and suspicions about whether "native anthropologists" can be truly objective are long outdated, absent in the critical anthropology taught in college classrooms today. Anthropologists no longer imagine the "field" as a distant location where the anthropologist lives among the ___ people; rather, fieldwork is defined in terms of a politics of location, of shifting insides and outsides, of affiliations and distances.³³ The fierce debates among anthropologists about the politics of representation that were my introduction to the discipline taught me to see the fragility and shifting quality of what determines whether I am inside or outside the communities I study at any given moment. What I also learned as a graduate student, and not from my professors, is that in the wake of September 11th the demand in the American book market for tell-all accounts written by "native informants" (especially brown or black Muslim women) has only grown stronger—as the authority of the "native anthropologist" has fallen out of currency in the discipline. Browse an "Islam" shelf in any American bookstore, and alongside (and often indistinguishable) from scholarly books, you will be sure to encounter several best-selling treatises penned by Muslim women "experts" who will explain the real cause behind terrorism (Islam), the global oppression of Muslim women (Islam), every episode of violence in Muslim history (Islam).

Foremost among them is Irshad Manji, a Bengali-Canadian gay rights activist and media personality who is a regular expert on Islam on American radio and television programs. Usually, my Muslim family and friends are not up-to-date on who's who in the world of Ivy

League fellowships, but they follow Manji's career with grave interest. I found myself explaining to them, again and again, why, after all those years and dollars and books, she and I ended up with the same professional title, at the same elite university. ("Why did your Yale make her out to be some kind of expert on Islam?") Manji is one of a growing number of what cultural critic Hamid Dabashi names "native informers," experts whose authority is derived by the twin sources of their status as "natives" (although they often describe themselves as "former" or "recovering" Muslims) and the facility by which they reproduce the tropes, images, and obsessions of Westerners through the classical Orientalist methodology of circular citations, only referencing evidence that confirms the thesis of Muslims' racial and cultural inferiority.³⁴

Manji's claim to fame is a *New York Times* best-seller titled *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*, intended as an open letter and "wake-up call" to the global Muslim community, which she describes in her book as "an army of automatons [marching] in the name of Allah."³⁵ Manji's neo-Orientalist argument is a simple, pure form of what anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani calls "culture-talk": in the West, we have culture, but in the East, their culture has them. Our culture is creative, heterogeneous, and constantly evolving, while Muslim culture is constructed as empty habit, monolithic, mindless conformity to lifeless customs and mummified rules in ancient texts. Culture-talk reduces Muslims to a destructive and "museumized peoples [who cannot] make culture, except at the beginning of creation, . . . people . . . incapable of transforming their culture, the way they seem incapable of growing their own food."³⁶ Like classic Orientalism, the sheer scale of culture-talk allows it to wield considerable cultural authority as a kind of "common sense" about Muslims and Islam, even when it makes little sense, reproducing and exacerbating the imbalances of power between Westerners (including Muslim Westerners such as Manji) who claim to know Muslim lands and peoples and the actual societies and peoples in question. Manji diagnoses the "Muslim mind" as pathological (brutally violent, barbaric, oppressive, misogynistic, inherently intolerant and racist), and she traces these pathologies back to the original Arab "desert-mindset" of the seventh century, the founding period of Islam, such that devout Muslims, wherever they are and whoever they are, can only march in deadened lockstep behind

progress, blind both to the oppressive qualities of their “brain-dead” religion, as she calls it, and to the freedoms offered by the West.³⁷ Manji promises her Western audiences “insider” information, and ultimately, the dirty, little, Muslim secret that only she has been brave enough to reveal confirms what they already suspected: that everything Muslims do is motivated by Islam!

From the perspective of scholarly critics of native informers, the trouble with Manji and her ilk is that their explanations of what drives Muslims and Islamic history are nonexplanations, crude replications of long-discredited Orientalist arguments.³⁸ From the point of view of Manji’s lay Muslim critics, the trouble with her work is not that her critique of Muslim violence or sexism or Muslim history is a betrayal of “her people” but that the premise of her “reform,” like classic Orientalists, aligns her with a number of insidious and imperialistic political agendas. Manji intends her nonmilitary, religious reform campaign, “Operation *Ijtihad* [Reason],” to enter Iraq and Saudi Arabia behind US tanks, offering it as a way to ensure the US’s national security.³⁹ Manji is hardly alone in her prescriptions of religious and cultural solutions for Muslims in theaters of military conflict rather than political ones or in her assumption that these religious and cultural reforms ought to serve the US government’s interests. In official and unofficial discourses in the US, from the right and the left, diagnoses of Islam’s various “crises” are ubiquitous: the crisis of violence, of backwardness, of stasis, of women’s oppression. In fact, within the post-September 11th US political sphere, the reform of Islam became an explicit national interest, and parallel to preserving our national security, military interventions in the Middle East and South Asia are justified by their promise to reform Islam and “resolve” Islam’s crisis.⁴⁰ In the mainstream US media, political commentators and pundits incessantly proclaim that acts of religious “terror” committed by Muslim actors are indicative of a “clash of civilizations” and “the crisis of Islam”—both terms made famous by Orientalist Bernard Lewis, who argues that the crisis of Islam is a symptom of its pathological essence.⁴¹ As a native informer, Manji echoes Lewis’s culture-talk but modifies it by offering good Muslim reformers such as herself as a source of redemption for this doomed civilization. “The cancer begins with us [Muslims],” Manji writes, and she locates that cancer in “nasty” verses of the Quran.⁴² Manji rejects the veracity

of the Quran itself, not just particular interpretations of the text. This makes her a bold reformist in the eyes of many Americans who are convinced that Islam is in dire need of a reformation and who wrongly equate the Quran's normative status in Islam to the Bible's normative status in Christianity or Judaism. In fact, the Quran's status is more akin to Jesus's status among believing Christians, as the divine incarnate, the Word; but that does not mean that the way Muslims understand the text is set in stone, nor does it render the message of the Quran beyond debate. The Quran itself invites readers to reflect and interpret its verses, both those that are self-evident in their meaning and those that are metaphorical and difficult to decipher. Rather than Manji engaging the ongoing debates about the meanings of Quranic verses that trouble her, she essentially calls Muslims worldwide to rip out the offending pages of their Qurans. Since from a normative Muslim perspective the Quran is inviolate, Manji's directive is widely perceived as absurd and outside the conversation of reform, just as Christians would not recognize the denial of Jesus Christ as a legitimate reform of their faith. Manji also dismisses the Prophetic hadith (traditions of Muhammad) wholesale, which are the second source of revelation for Muslims, because of the possibility of forgeries (a favorite obsession of Orientalist scholars). In addition to rejecting both sources of revelation, Manji parrots a long string of stereotypes and historically baseless myths about Islam, from the idea that Islam was "spread by the sword" to the classic and widely discredited Orientalist narrative of twelfth-century Muslim scholars closing the doors to reason (*ijtihad*), a crude distortion of the history of Islamic law.⁴³ As a final example of her provocative and profoundly insulting tactics, Manji compares the Prophet Muhammad to terrorists at length, making a parallel between his military victories against the pagan armies that outmatched him in seventh-century Arabia to the ways "Bin Laden's cavalry used box-cutters to attack a superpower."⁴⁴

Native informer "tell-all" accounts do not explain how Islam figures in local contexts or in a broader history; they simply demonstrate that Islam explains every episode of Muslim violence in history, at every scale, from a dysfunctional nuclear family to a war between medieval empires. Manji's troubled childhood is the basis for her authority: she grew up witnessing the brutal violence of her abusive father in her home, and she links this experience to the stultifying

Sunday-school lessons in her mosque in Canada, which she characterizes as a “madrasa” where her white chador flattened her hair and her spirit.⁴⁵ (This is why my Muslim friends joke that Manji’s book ought to have been titled “The Trouble with My Childhood” rather than *The Trouble with Islam*.) Manji’s memoir serves as a point of departure for a long list of episodes of oppression and violence at the hands of Muslims throughout history (when non-Muslim parties are implicated partners in the same violence, she simply omits them), and she insists again and again that Islam is the cause of this oppression. Manji identifies herself as the ideal “good” (albeit barely) Muslim, a courageous voice of dissent against Islam and (only) Muslim governments.⁴⁶ Manji’s book combines polemic and memoir, disparate and distorted historical accounts filled with an exhausting number of inaccuracies, a passionate defense of the governments of the US and Israel and conservative policy recommendations. She applauds George W. Bush, the Patriot Act, and racial profiling and pushes for more loans from nongovernmental organizations in poor Muslim-majority countries and assaults multiculturalism, yet her best-selling book received nearly universal praise in the liberal as well as conservative US press.⁴⁷ Indeed, despite her clear disgust with Islam’s founder (and Arabs, in general), many people (even Oprah) consider her the ideal candidate to lead what are presumed to be the necessary global political and religious reforms to resolve Islam’s “crisis.” Aside from her Security Studies fellowship at Yale, followed by an endowed faculty position at New York University, Manji was the first recipient of Oprah’s *O* magazine Chutzpah Award, an award that recognizes courageous women activists, because she stands up to “Islamic bullies and terrorists.”⁴⁸

For me, the trouble with native neo-Orientalists such as Manji is the pervasiveness of their ideas. I have to explain again and again that their (“native”) explanations are different from my (“native”) explanations because mine are based not on the color of my skin or my individual experience in Sunday school but on years of research, on the disciplined study of history and culture. As a researcher, the question of whether Islam is “in crisis” is a point of investigation for me, not an assumed fact as it is in the polemics of native informers. My questions guided me through hundreds of hours of piecing materials together in archives and through hundreds of interviews with American Muslim

youth in the Middle East and the US. This book does not offer a definitive reform program in order to resolve Islam's presumed crisis; rather, it offers a far more complex and revealing picture of global debates both about and among Muslims that get at the heart of anxieties (both most Americans' and Muslims' own) about Islam's place in the world.

Although in earlier periods of American history Islam was associated with Eastern wisdom and scholasticism, albeit in romantic and Orientalist terms, today many Americans imagine Islam to be a profoundly anti-intellectual tradition devoid of reason, an assumption bolstered by headlines about the extreme measures of a few Islamist militant movements, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Boko Haram in Nigeria. For most Americans, these troubling cases have made the word *madrasa*, which in Arabic simply means "school," synonymous with mind-numbing lessons in guerrilla warfare. In this hyperpoliticized context—when capturing the hearts and minds of Muslim youth is the goal of a war both global and endless and when madrasas are seen as medieval outposts and bastions of anti-intellectual dogma—I sought out beauty and complexity in precisely these unlikely places, in unofficial communities of Islamic learning in the Middle East that attract Muslim American youth. In these pedagogical networks overseas, American Muslims debate the place and future of Islam in the US as they grapple with their obligations both to their country and to their *umma*, the global community of believers, and as they study their tradition. They also debate what constitutes religious authority, how to resolve what they deem Islam's crisis of authority. Calls from outside for resolving the "other" crisis of Islam, the crisis of violence, of backwardness, of stasis, come from multiple directions and political locations and, in this study, act as a distant but relentless buzz of background noise. Through the journeys and studies of Muslim American youth in the Middle East, this book foregrounds Muslims' own debates about the reform of Islam, debates that are rarely understood on their own terms.

Questions about Islamic learning, specifically questions about its nature, purpose, and scope, are at the core of Muslims' own global debates about religious reform. However, these debates bear little resemblance to the diagnoses of Islam promulgated by Manji or the State Department, which casts the "problem" with Islamic learning as a thinking problem and a curriculum problem: the curriculum taught in madrasas fails to

instill the reflexive questioning of modern thought. The notion that the Islamic intellectual tradition has somehow escaped the process of squaring itself with secular critical inquiry that Christianity and Judaism have successfully undergone is a false problem. Contrary to the stereotype of an unchanging, medieval madrasa system that has somehow survived into our day, and a religious tradition that is only recently grappling with the challenges of modernity, Islamic education around the world has undergone dramatic, modern reforms for over a century, reforms that have profoundly redefined Islamic religious authority for Muslims around the world. Anthropologist Robert Hefner writes, “Islamic education is characterized, not by lock-step uniformity, but by a teaming plurality of actors, institutions, and ideas. . . . Indeed, if there is a struggle for the hearts and minds of Muslims taking place around the world, which there certainly is, madrasas and religious education are on its front line.”⁴⁹ Rather than passive objects, hearts and minds to be won in a war without end, I engage with American Muslim youth as subjects in these global debates about Islamic authority and reform.

A Map in Fragments

Critical anthropologists have abandoned the modern conception of the discipline as an objective, exact science and with it the conceit of closure and finality for our analyses.⁵⁰ Today anthropologists pay close attention to the ways knowledge is produced, reading all positions as contingent, all histories as local, all subjects as constructed, and all claims as competing, including our own. I offer this book as a critical and, I hope, artful translation of global Muslim debates in the form of a fragmentary map that destabilizes the boundaries of the US and the Muslim World and deterritorializes the anthropology of Islam. As anthropologist Fernando Coronil writes, “Points on maps make a point. Like lines in a play, they become meaningful by being joined to each other by the authors and publics who join them. . . . They represent an external reality from within it. Their truth is measured by their exactitude as models of the world they image, but it is realized by the world they help create.”⁵¹

This book is a map of our world in fragments; each point in it corresponds to a place and a point in history. This map corresponds not

to the exactitude of my scholarly methods of research but to the exactitude of what appeared significant to me as I tracked these global debates about Islam's crisis of authority in the Middle East and in US mosques and the mainstream American media. My critical mapping of these debates is not a filling of gaps in knowledge so much as an attempt to "create useful knowledge—producing [a map] that can guide us toward, and define, desirable ends."⁵² By concentrating the work and words of devout Muslims onto these pages, I stretch and fragment a set of debates about American citizenship and the reform of Islam not only to make a text about the world but to capture the textures of our world. By focusing on the "site" of the Muslim world as it is variously imagined by Muslims in global debates about Islamic authority and Islamic knowledge, this historical ethnography is anchored in many different and discontinuous spaces on both sides of the Atlantic.

This book is divided into two parts. Part 1 situates the debates about authority and the place of Islam in the US that preoccupy young Muslim American seekers today in a twentieth-century history of the transformations of Islamic authority and of American Muslims' transnational moral geographies. Part 2 maps the movement of ideas and intellectuals between the Middle East and the US through an ethnography of students and teachers in global pedagogical networks and, more recently, in the American media spotlight. In chapter 1, I offer a conceptual key to this fragmentary map and an introduction to these unofficial networks of learning in the Middle East. The global networks that connect US mosques to Muslim intellectuals in the Middle East have a genealogy to the reclamation projects of earlier generations of Muslim American seekers and intellectuals; chapters 2 and 3 offer a kind of conceptual history which excavates earlier Muslim American intellectuals' claims to Islamic knowledge and expertise through study and travel, both real and imagined, intertwined with their claims to American citizenship. The ethnographic chapters in part 2 each take up different sets of debates that animate the global pedagogical networks, destabilizing conventional assumptions about the stasis of Islamic learning, the authority of women, and a monolithic view of the US in the Middle East. Chapter 4 maps debates about Islamic pedagogy and reform, contextualizing them in terms of the history of colonial and postcolonial secular reforms to Islamic education and the emergence of the global Islamic revival. Chapter 5 explores the ways religious authority

is conceptualized, with a particular focus on the challenges of Muslim American female intellectuals in these networks. Chapter 6 tracks the ways the diagnosis of an authority crisis constrains debates about Islam's future in the US. Finally, in chapter 7, I return to the lives of debates about reforming Islam in the US, represented in the mainstream US media as a battle for hearts and minds, with prominent American Muslim intellectuals on the front lines. These American Muslim leaders represent an earlier generation of seekers who studied Islam abroad; navigating a fraught, post-September 11th America, these intellectuals negotiate their Islamic authority and their American identities in US mosques, the official spaces of the state, and the mainstream American media.

Islam Is a Foreign Country intervenes not only in the debates in my scholarly fields but in the debates that are the object of this study, debates about Islamic orthodoxy and authenticity, debates about the meaning of American citizenship in a global age. I could not divorce my emotional and ethical investments in these debates any more than I could erase those of the subjects; it is precisely these emotional and political investments and our shared experiences of displacement that give this book's debates—both the arguments I develop and those I document—their urgency. I must admit I worry about the different eyes roaming these pages for recognition, from different traditions, with different sets of expectations and, maybe, different kinds of disappointment. After all, my own claim to authority, to integrity and competence, both intellectual and cultural, is precariously balanced on these unsteady pages.⁵³ Over the course of my research, I had to reconcile the intrinsic tensions between the different intellectual traditions I navigate, the ways in which anthropology necessarily disciplines and secularizes my analyses, ways in which I may not always be conscious. As Said notes, geographical “dislocation, secular discovery, and the painstaking recovery of implicit or internalized histories . . . stamp the ethnographic quest with the mark of a secular energy that is unmistakably frank.”⁵⁴ While for Said these qualities are a mark of anthropology's worldliness, my Muslim friends and family, in their own words, identify them as intellectual limits, limits they have been warning me to anticipate since I first started out on the path of becoming a scholar.

As a way of sensitizing myself to these tensions and limits, I became the student of a Ghanaian scholar and Islamic jurist, a shaykh,

throughout my first few years of graduate school. Although he also holds a PhD in Islamic studies from the University of Michigan in addition to his religious credentials, he often urged me to balance my secular education as he bemoaned the fact that so many Muslim academics know more about Western philosophy than they do about their own intellectual tradition. Eager to maintain my intellectual footing in both canons, I struggled to supplement my university course packs with the reading required by my “other” education, but it remained hopelessly imbalanced, always more “high” theory than Islamic legal theory. After a long week of seminars and heavy reading loads, on Saturday afternoons I would drive out to an old, quiet Detroit neighborhood, where my shaykh had converted an old blue house neighboring his own into a modest, free counseling service center for Muslim families. Here, the other students and I would pile into a tiny, dusty room and crowd around a wobbly table for our *halaqa*, an Islamic study circle. For hours we would go over an Arabic text on Islamic legal theory at a painfully slow pace due to our difficulties with the classical Arabic. Occasionally, the class would be interrupted by one of the shaykh’s small children hunting his deep pockets for a lollipop or by a new convert with a quick question or by a troubled, worn-out couple needing an argument mediated. Although we took our studies seriously, the study circle also became a springboard for innumerable tangential discussions. The shaykh welcomed these, made that dusty room a safe place to make any criticism or ask any question. This is where I would voice my frustrations with the racism, classism, sexism, and political impotence that permeate the Muslim communities that I work in, both in the US and in the Middle East.

The study circle also became a place to bring questions from my other intellectual world, the world of graduate classes, course packs, and postmodern dilemmas that sometimes would snowball into faith crises. Often the shaykh would be unable to satisfy my questions and doubts or even to allay my frustrations with a Muslim history replete with not-so-“Islamic” episodes. I complained to him about feeling stifled by the plaintive expectations of my community, desperate for me to write about our Golden Age, when “we” were the most “civilized” and Europe slept through the Dark Ages until the Enlightenment (“which we gave them, anyway,” they remind me). I would also express my own doubts

about the value of my work in the current political climate, the futility of trying to represent Muslim hearts and minds as anything other than objects to be won or lost in a global battle of civilizations. Still, I was inspired and comforted by how the shaykh would listen to my often overly tortured ranting or my painful questions and remain utterly unmoved by what I found so disappointing. Many of the issues that kept me up at night hardly fazed him. He would simply say that Islam could not be reduced to Muslims, often hastening to add that America too fell far short of its ideals; he would remind me that although we can only approximate justice in this world, human failures cannot diminish the ideal of justice that binds us all. And although I admit I never felt a faith so pure and strong, it always made me feel better knowing that it existed out there, in the wise, kind eyes of my shaykh, in his open, brilliant smile. I would pray for his solid faith, his easy courage, and that my work might touch people the way his kindness had touched me.

It was over a year before I discovered that I was passing by my old childhood neighborhood every week on my way to the *halaqa*. I am not sure why it never dawned on me, but memory works in strange ways. It did not look like the home I knew from faded photographs and monochromatic memories. It looked like a ghetto: sad, dirty, small streets, crumbling houses that seemed like slumped shoulders, garbage in piles, just another poor black neighborhood surrounded by too many empty warehouses and liquor stores, indistinguishable and unrecognizable to me. That discovery forced me to think more carefully about why it was that as I was mastering a canon, training to be a scholar, maybe even an expert; I found myself seeking knowledge and authority elsewhere, too, traveling across the borders of class and race, across the borders of secular and religious, across the borders of English and Arabic, now and then, across the borders between who I had been, who I might have been, and who I was becoming. The questions I explore here emerged out of those personal links between place, authority, and identity.