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Latino Muslim by Design
A Study of Race, Religion and the Internet in American Minority Discourse

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Religious Studies

by

Harold Daniel Morales

September 2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Latino Muslim by Design
A Study of Race, Religion and the Internet in American Minority Discourse

by

Harold Daniel Morales

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Religious Studies
University of California, Riverside, September 2012
Dr. Jennifer Hughes and Dr. Jonathan Walton, Co-Chairpersons

A growing community of Latino Muslims in the United States expands already dynamic categories of what it means to be a Latino and what it means to be a Muslim at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Through various avenues, including the Internet, Latinos have come into contact with Islam and Muslims in the U.S. A small but notable number of Latinos have adopted Islam as their religion. Despite their modest numbers, lack resources and inability to unify nationally, various organizations have managed to garner a dominant voice in the public sphere. In its relation to other media forms, the Internet, I argue, has been integral to the formation and dissemination of a particular Latino brand of Islam that focuses on narratives of ethnic marginalization, reversion to Islam and roots in Muslim Spain. *Latino Muslim by Design* is a study of race, religion and Internet discourse as they intersect to form new minority groups within minority groups in the U.S. and further expand the already dynamic categories of Latinos and Muslims in America.

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INTRODUCTION

A LATINO MUSLIM IDENTITY

SCOPE, METHODS AND THEORY OF THE STUDY

*It is You we worship and You we ask for help.
Guide us to the straight path -
The path of those upon whom You have bestowed favor,
not of those who have evoked [Your] anger or of those who are astray*

Qur'an 1:5-7
(Translation by Muhammad Assad)

I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self.

- Michel Foucault in *Technologies of the Self*

On Sunday mornings in Southern California, members of the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association, LALMA, gather at the Omar Ibn Al Khattab mosque on Exposition Boulevard. Here they recite, delve into and wonder at the beauty, solemnity and wisdom of the Qur'an while at the same time raise energetic children, catch up with each other and discuss organizational matters over *café y pan*. The day begins with Arabic lessons in a large room on the third floor adjacent to the prayer hall. Like most Sunni Muslims, translations of the Qur'an are not considered to be the complete message of God. Week after week, this Los Angeles community therefore commits itself to the study of Arabic, in order to one day study and recite the Qur'an. And until that day comes, the group also tirelessly turns to a Spanish translation of Muhammad Assad's English translation of the Qur'an. Each member has been given a copy, which is a beautifully produced five

volume mix of Arabic Calligraphy and type, Latin character transliteration, Spanish translation and commentary by Muhammad Assad, 1980. After the initial one hour study of Arabic led by various instructors who volunteer their time, the group begins a doctrinal study of Islam in which the Assad translation and commentary is referenced. The commentary is vital in the study of the Qur'an, since unlike Jewish and Christian scriptures, it does not follow a linear narrative. Instead, the Islamic text serves to preserve the message, which is primarily oral. There are tonal qualities, crucial use of empty silence, important breathing techniques and rhythms, and essential body movements meant to produce not just a linguistic understanding, but a total experience.¹ The Latino Muslim Sunday gatherings are designed to teach new converts the pronunciation of Arabic script, the understanding of the Qur'an's linguistic meaning and most importantly, the ritual recitation of the Qur'an in Arabic prayer.

After two hours of study, the Latino Muslims on the third floor conclude their Arabic and doctrinal lessons and make their way down to the prayer room at about one in the afternoon. After performing *wudu*, a ritual cleansing with water, and removing their shoes at the entrance of the prayer hall, each person finds a spot on the striped carpet indicating the direction of Mecca, sits, and waits. When the *imam*, prayer leader, finally begins, each person follows the prayer movements ending in full prostration in near unison. Throughout the prayer, various *surahs* or chapters of the Qur'an are recited. And it is here that the Islamic scriptures exert the full force of *dhikr*, the morally guiding remembrance of God is employed, and that individual differences are transcended to

¹ For a description of the Qur'an as a "sound image," see Michael Anthony Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an : the early revelations*, 1st ed. (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999).

create a sense of universal equality amongst all Muslims. Once the prayer is over, the Latino Muslims who had gathered either say their goodbyes to each other, *hasta la otra semana*, or continue to enjoy each other's company over a late lunch at a *halal*, Islamically permissible, restaurant near the Omar mosque on Exposition Boulevard.

The white mosque's green dome and minaret lay nestled between the public museums, grass fields and Olympic Stadium of Exposition Park on one side of the boulevard, and the rod iron fences and brick paved paths and buildings of the University of Southern California on the other. A new railway, the Expo Line, picks up and drops off passengers directly in front of the Omar mosque to take them either still deeper into the heart of the metropolis or further away to the less crowded suburbs. Members of LALMA enthusiastically welcomed the new railway. More people would attend the group meetings, I am told, if only travel were not such a daunting task. And though only about twenty individuals consistently attend the weekly meetings, LALMA's over one hundred listserv members stay connected through frequent email notifications.

LALMA is one of over thirty Latino Muslim organizations spread out across the U.S. According to Pew's 2007 report on Muslim Americans, there are an estimated 94,000 Muslims that identify as Latino the majority of which are converts to Islam.² The

² The little demographic information available on Latino Muslims is mostly contradictory. A 2007 report by ISNA, the Islamic Society of North America, estimates that there are 40,000 Hispanic Muslims in the United States (*Latino Muslims Growing in Number in the US*. ISNA.net.<http://www.isna.net/articles/News/Latino-Muslims-Growing-in-Number-in-the-US.aspx> Accessed on October 3, 2011); whereas the American Muslim Council reported an estimated 200,000 in 2006 (Conci, Pilar. "Latinos Converting to Islam." *The Dallas Morning News*. <http://religionblog.dallasnews.com/archives/2008/03/latinos-converting-to-islam.html> Accessed on October 3, 2011). Perhaps one of the best estimates comes from the The Pew Charitable Trusts-funded Hispanic Churches in American Public Life national survey (n = 2,060) which put the number of Latino Muslims at approximately 47,000 when the percentages were imputed to raw numbers and updated per the 2010 U.S. Census (Gastón Espinosa, *Changements*

group generally reflects the demographic patterns of Latinos in metropolitan areas so that the majority of Latino Muslims in Southern California are, for example, of Mexican descent whereas those in New York are predominantly Puerto Rican. Although modest in number, they attract quite a bit of journalistic and new media attention and raise important issues regarding the character of two of the most rapidly growing and arguably most stigmatized groups in America: Latinos and Muslims.

Despite mass media stereotypes of Latinos as lazy, licentious, inebriated, superstitious and illegal, and of Muslims as polygamous, misogynistic, violent, puritanical and as terrorists, both the Latino and Muslim categories of identification encompass a vast variety of traditions and lived experiences. It should therefore not be surprising that Latino Muslim identities reflect the vast lack of uniformity within the ethnic and religious categories of Latino and of Muslim. Diversities in religion, nationality, class, and gender rupture stereotypes of Latinos as a culturally and politically unified group. Likewise, racialized divisions between African American Muslims and immigrant Muslims, between Arab, Persian and other ethnicities, between approaches to negotiating between Islam and the ideals of the United States, between Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, Ahmadiyya communities and specifically American forms of Islam including Moorish Science, Ansaru Allah and the Nation of Islam, all make it impossible to understand

démographiques et religieux chez les hispaniques des Etats-Unis, *Social Compass: International Review of Sociology of Religion*, 51(3) (2004): 309-327). The 2007 Pew report on Muslim Americans estimated that there were 2.35 million Muslims in America (p.3), and that of these American Muslims 4% also identified as Latino (p.18) for a total of 94,000 Latino Muslims in the U.S. (Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream. Pew Research Center, May 2007. <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslimamericans.pdf> Accessed on October 3, 2011). I decided to follow the 94,000 figure because of the report's large sample size and because it specializes on Islam in America.

Muslims in America as a homogenous group. It should therefore not be surprising to learn that Americans who are both Latino and Muslim reflect the rich diversities of both groups. What is surprising, however, is the emergence of a particular brand of Latino Islam that has come to dominate mass media representations of this highly diverse population group. Emphasizing narratives of ethnic marginalization, of reversion to Islam and of the Islamic influence on Spanish culture for a sense of unity, this representation of pan-Latino Muslim identity has failed to produce a nationally unified organizational front. In its stead, various organizations are regionally centered in the cosmopolitan areas of New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and other areas where large Latino and Muslim populations come into contact with one another.

Many of these organizations share similar narratives of what it means to be a Latino Muslim in the U.S. Latino Muslim narratives of ethnic and religious marginalization, for example, express shared experiences of neglect or of negative treatment by African American and immigrant Muslim communities, as well as by non-Muslim Latinos who many times interpret conversion to Islam as a rejection of Latino culture in favor of an Arab one. Reversion to Islam narratives are also a prominent element of Latino Islam. Islamic tradition teaches that all humans are born in submission to God, and that because the term *Muslim* translates as one who submits to God, all humans are born Muslim. It is only family and culture who cause individuals to stray from their original Muslim nature. The term 'reversion' is therefore preferred over conversion in Latino Muslim discourse in the public sphere. When questioned whether or not a Latino can be a Muslim, a popular response is to point out that Islam is natural to all

people, including Latinos. The historical Muslim influence on Spanish culture from the eight to the fifteenth century constitutes a third prominent narrative of Latino Islam. Many Latino Muslims say that in addition to being born into a state of Islam as all humans are, their Latino ethnicity is also historically rooted in Arab-Muslim language, cuisine, art and other cultural elements. Narratives of ethnic marginalization, reversion to Islam, and a shared history in Islamic Spain are integral to a particular pan-Latino Muslim vision that seeks to unite an otherwise highly diverse and highly fractured minority population group in the U.S. Not only are inter-ethnic and inter-religious diversities seemingly surmounted in the vision for a pan-Latino Muslim identity, but also divisions between religion, race and technology are made to cohere as an *intersecting* and *hybrid* identity.

The Internet, I argue in this dissertation, has helped shape and make possible the creation and dissemination of a vision for a pan-Latino Muslim unity characterized by shared narratives of ethnic marginalization, reversion to Islam and historical roots in Muslim Spain. The Internet has also, however, generated a proliferation of distinct Latino Muslim organizations in virtual spaces that have made it increasingly difficult to create offline unity despite attempts by various Latino Muslim leaders.

Scope and Methods of the Study

This dissertation is a cultural study of Latino Muslim identities embodied within the margins of broader religious, racial and Internet communities in America. Drawing from Clifford Geertz' strand of American cultural studies, I examine individual and

communal discursive practices as texts to be read, interpreted and written about. My research therefore includes over two years of ethnographic fieldwork primarily with the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association in Southern California, and interviews conducted at mosques, Islamic centers and with individuals in New York, New Jersey, Florida, Georgia, Chicago and Texas. From Stuart Hall's strand of British cultural studies, I examine media productions as ideological sites of meaning contestation. My research therefore also includes a significant analysis of news articles, magazines, books and new media productions that are mediated and or remediated on to Latino Muslim websites. These media texts are approached as sites of meaning making and of meaning contestation, where the 'Latino Muslim' category remains fluid despite attempts to crystallize it.³

In particular, I focus on *PiedadIslam.org* (see figure 1.1), a national women's piety organization, *LatinoDawah.org* (see figure 1.2), a primarily Internet based international organization, and *LALMA.org* (see figure 1.3), a regional Islamic study group. The websites belong respectively to *Propagación Islámica para la Educación e la Devoción a Allah el Divino* (PIEDAD) or Islamic Propagation for Education on and Devotion to Allah the Divine; the Latino American Dawah Organization (LADO); and the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association (LALMA). Formed in the late 1990's, these constitute three of oldest and most prominent Latino Muslim organizations still active at the time of this study. Two other organizations are also given considerable attention for their historic and current rise in prominence, respectively. The *Alianza Islamica*, Islamic

³ For a description of Islam as an ongoing process of crystallization, see Berkey's *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*, 2002.

Alliance, was established in 1975 as the first Latino Muslim organization in the U.S. Consequently, many of its structural and ideological characteristics continue to serve as a model for newer Latino Muslim organizations, LMOs. Islam-In-Spanish is one of the latest LMOs to be established. It focuses on producing cutting edge and high quality Islamic media for Spanish speakers. Together, along with various other LMOs, this dissertation provides a description and analysis of an emerging Latino Muslim identity embodied within the *margins* of broader religious, racial and Internet communities in the U.S.



Figure 1.1. Screenshot of PIEDAD’s website. The organization had previously used a Blogspot site then had a static site designed by LADO president Juan Galvan. This third site was professionally produced by Iman Studios. Their logo was also professionally produced and combines an image of red rose with the Spanish world for piety as an association between beauty, femininity and religious piety. <<http://www.piedadislam.org>>.

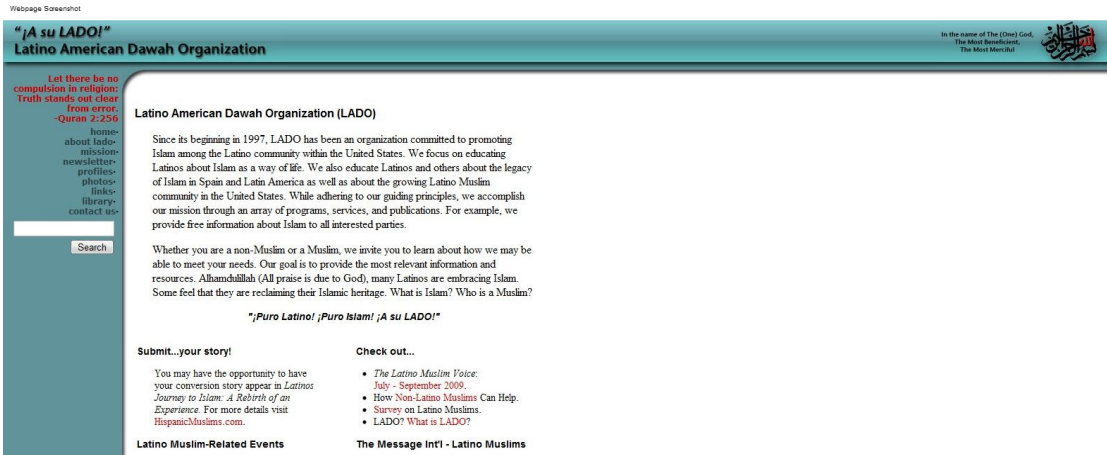


Figure 1.2. Screenshot of LADO’s website. The organization first met on AOL Chatrooms, then designed and hosted their first site through an AOL account. LADO’s current president, Juan Galvan designed the organization’s present website represented above. Though LADO’s logo is not present, the website does showcase the LMO’s slogan “A Su Lado” at your side, on the left header and the Qur’anic invocation “In the name of The (One) God, The Most Beneficent, The Most Merciful.” <<http://latinodawah.org>>.



Figure 1.3. Screenshot of LALMA’s website. The organization’s first website was designed by LADO president, Juan Galvan. This current website was designed by a non-LALMA member who is an immigrant Muslim. Though originally a member of the same mosque LALMA met at, he no longer lives in the Los Angeles Area, making updates difficult and late. LALMA’s logo (upper left) is an image of the globe with only the Americas visible, there is a crescent shaped shadow on the left and star on the right as an association between Islam and the Americas, the latter of which are further represented in a sequence of national flags. <<http://latinodawah.org>>.

Theories of Marginality

My interpretation of Latino Muslim identity draws from various theories of *marginality* that focus on both the oppressive and constructive aspects of belonging and not belonging to multiple and opposing communities at the same time. Most of Michel Foucault's theorizing of human identity focused on the ways in which the self is "objectified through scientific inquiry."⁴ Within this line of investigation, he examined the relationship between power and the production of knowledge and the discursive development of various disciplinary processes such as the *gaze*, which seeks to categorize, identify and control society's individuals.⁵ In particular, he examined how discursive formations were defined in large part by identifying that which lay outside its boundaries. Scientific discourse, for example, may be defined in contrast to religious discourse. Such boundaries and boundary making are however areas of contestation and arenas for expressing domination in the production of knowledge. Discourse on identity is not only defined in terms of binaries, but is also shaped by hierarchical relationships of power. Black identities, for example, have been defined not only in contrast to White ones, but have also been shaped by various forms of power that have historically failed to acknowledge the voice of those identified as Black in defining the parameters of the

⁴ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish : the birth of the prison*, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge*, (New York: Pantheon Books,, 1972), <http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?SOTH;S10021789>; Michel Foucault, *The birth of the clinic; an archaeology of medical perception*, [1st American ed., World of man (New York,: Pantheon Books, 1973).

⁵ In Foucault's analysis, power and knowledge are described as almost synonymous and therefore employed as a single term: power/knowledge. Define gaze & bio-power. For more, see Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/knowledge : selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*, 1st American ed. (New York, N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1980).

Black and White binary.⁶ Before his death in 1984, Michel Foucault had been working on a set of ideas he termed “technologies of the self.” The work represented a shift in his focus away from the objectification of the self and toward the question of how “a human being turns him- or herself into a subject.”⁷ This dissertation is a discursive analysis of technologies of the self that are both objectifying and subjectifying, i.e. Latino Muslim identity is approached as a discursive field constituted in the margins of objectivity and subjectivity, outsider and insider and domination and liberation.

Critical Race Theory approaches marginality in legal terms, considering both psychological and structural forms of discrimination against minority groups. If structural forms of discrimination stem from individual physiologies influenced by cultural consumption, then perhaps reform is best achieved through laws that regulate or censor cultural commodities. If on the other hand individual physiologies are understood to be of secondary importance to structural discrimination then reform is perhaps best achieved by regulating the otherwise unequal distribution of resources such as housing, education, employment, political and legal representation and so on. With regard to Latinos, Muslims and Latino Muslims, we might ask which issues are most pressing. Is censoring discriminatory language towards these groups in mass media and creating alternative models the most pressing task at hand, and will such an approach eventually result in structural reforms as well? Or, is language and psychological valuations of secondary importance or perhaps even of no consequence in comparison to the struggle for equal

⁶ Cornel West, *Prophesy deliverance! : an Afro-American revolutionary Christianity*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982). 47-68.

⁷ Michel Foucault et al., *Technologies of the self : a seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). 3.

social, legal and political resources? Critical Race Studies scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, have also identified discriminatory issues stemming from intersecting identities.⁸ A Latino or Muslim may also be a man or a woman; heterosexual or lesbian, bisexual, gay or transsexual; may be Black, White or “Other.” A Latino or Muslim may also be a Muslim who has a Latino heritage, a Latino who practices Islam, or a Latino Muslim, the difference here being on what identity is emphasized, marginalized or ignored. In Critical Race Theory, intersectionality is approached in terms of legal and organizational representation.⁹ If a Latina woman feels discriminated against in the work place for her intersecting and marginal identities as a woman and as a Latina she might sue for racial discrimination. Her employer might however be able to show that they in fact do not discriminate against Latino men. If the plaintiff sues instead on the basis of sex discrimination, her employer may alternatively be able to show that they do not discriminate against White women. Her experienced discrimination must then be shown to stem not from race or sex, but from being identified as both at the same time. Furthermore, if she were to seek support from Latino organizations, she may find that her experiences and interests as a woman are given marginal attention in comparison to issues perceived to affect both genders. Alternatively, women’s organizations may fail to address her experiences and interests as a Latina. Should she support and seek support

⁸ See Crenshaw’s *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 1991

⁹ See Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical race theory : an introduction* (New York ; London: New York University Press, 2001). And David Ingram, *Rights, democracy, and fulfillment in the era of identity politics : principled compromises in a compromised world* (Lanham ; London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

from both organizations? What does she gain and/or lose by participating in both communities and by identifying and being identified as both at the same time?

In a similar way, Latino Muslims are at the margins of both their broader Latino and Muslim communities. Additionally, within this already marginalized sub-group, some members are further discounted for their racialized, gendered and other competing forms of identification. Intersecting identities may thus be characterized as minorities within minority groups. They are complex, multiple and conflicting sets of both belonging and not belonging at the same time; they are an existence within the margins whose positioning is related to representational access to legal and organizational resources.

Latino studies have also closely examined the category of marginality. In the seminal work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Latino identity is situated within the borders, in the in-between spaces. She writes: “The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian--our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people.”¹⁰ Within religious studies and Latino theology, Virgilio Elizondo and others have described Latino religiosity as Mestizo, or hybrid. They identify and are identified as both members of and as foreigners to the U.S. and to the Latin American countries of their ancestry. The *Mestizo* category itself signifies a racially mixed identity. It emerged within the Colonial encounter between the Spanish and “Indios”¹¹ of the new world, took on different

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands : the new mestiza = La frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987). xvii.

¹¹ “Indio” was the general Spanish classification assigned to various Nahuatl, Mayan, and other ethnic groups encountered in the Americas.

political meanings in the establishment of Mexico as an independent nation state, and has also come to signify something new for Latinos in the U.S.

The Mestizo identity was a prominent colonial category developed within discursive margins between imagined taxonomies of race and practical markers of legal and cultural identity. Works within the colonial art genre of the *Casta Paintings* (see Figure 1.4) illustrate complex sets of what Cornel West terms “classificatory categories of the normative gaze.”¹² The normative gaze seeks to align biologicistic understandings of race with visual types. In the *Casta Paintings*, this is accomplished by codifying dozens of new visual types that emerge from racial mixing. The Mestizo, the offspring of Spaniard and Indio parents, is recognized and given a unique legal status by the Colonial state. However, no such recognition is given to other racial “types” within this imagined system of classification. This is because most of the racial mixtures were established not on empirical observation, but rather on the *a priori* logics of Enlightenment and Darwinian conceptions of race.¹³ The dozens of racial types represented possible mixtures, crystallized in the Spanish Colonial imagination through various archives such as the *Casta Paintings*.¹⁴

¹² West, *Prophesy deliverance! : an Afro-American revolutionary Christianity*: 47-68.

¹³ See Marilyn Grace Miller, *Rise and fall of the cosmic race : the cult of mestizaje in Latin America*, 1st. ed. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004).

¹⁴ See Cristelle Louise Baskins and Lisa Rosenthal, *Early modern visual allegory : embodying meaning* (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Magali Marie Carrera, *Imagining identity in New Spain : race, lineage, and the colonial body in portraiture and casta paintings*, 1st ed., Joe R and Teresa Lozano Long series in Latin American and Latino art and culture (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); Ilona Katzew, *Casta painting : images of race in eighteenth-century Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).



Figure 1.4. Casta Painting by Luis de Mena, dated 1750. Like other paintings in the Casta colonial art genre, the figure above consists of several consecutive frames each depicting a family unite. Each child represents the offspring of biologically formulated racial mixture. Bellow the first frame (top left), the caption translates as: “From a Spanish woman and an Indian: Mestizo;” the second frame to the right of the first has a caption that translates as: “From a Spanish woman and a Mestizo: Castizo;” the third: “From a Castiza and a Spaniard: a Spanish girl; and the fourth: “From a Black woman and a Spaniard: Mulato.” Unlike most other casta paintings, the above figure displays landscape scenes from the New World on either side of an image of La Virgin Maria de Guadalupe.

The Mestizo represented a significant and growing population within the colonial New World. Beyond signifying racial mixture between Spaniards and “Indios”, the

category was a site for ideological contestation. It could connote¹⁵ a negative “basterdization” such as in the *La Malinche* figure, i.e. the raped victim of Spanish power whose progeny belonged to neither the Spanish nor the indigenous people. Alternatively, Mestizo might be used to signify cultural and legal superiority over the *Indios*. Indeed, the political discourse leading up the establishment of an independent Mexican state employed the Mestizo and not the *Indio* category to establish a national identity distinct from the Spanish. In the figure of *La Virgin de Guadalupe*, the Mestizo signifies a spiritual conquest over both *Indio* and Spanish religiosity.¹⁶ Domestically however, the meaning of Mestizo continued to be contested and related to in terms of visual types. Within a spectrum, Mestizos that identified more closely to the *Indio* through skin pigmentation, dress, speech, education and other cultural elements were recipients of stronger forms of structural and physiological discrimination than those who tried to pass as *Ladino*, or “Whiter” types.

In the U.S., various Latino studies scholars continue to debate the significance of the Mestizo category. Drawing on the work of José Vasconcelos and liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, Virgilio Elizondo developed a unique interpretation of the Mestizo, which characterized Latinos as ambassadors of a new universal and cosmic human race.¹⁷ The Galilee that Jesus identified with was a cosmopolitan region of Rome

¹⁵ For a theoretical treatment of ‘connotation’ as a potentially subversive set category usage, see Hall, Stuart. “Encoding/Decoding” in Simon During, *The Cultural studies reader* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993). 98.

¹⁶ See Luis D. León *La Llorona's children : religion, life, and death in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands* (Berkeley ; London: University of California Press, 2004).

¹⁷ For more on Elizondo’s influences, see Virgilio P. Elizondo, *Galilean journey : the Mexican-American promise*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000). José Vasconcelos and Didier Tisdell Jaén, *The cosmic race : a bilingual edition*, Johns Hopkins paperbacks ed., Race in the Americas (Baltimore,

where according to Elizondo, “a natural, ongoing biological and cultural mestizaje was taking place.”¹⁸ In an attempt to better understand his own never fully rejected but never fully accepted split identity as a Mexican-American Elizondo writes, “As the Jews in Galilee were too Jewish to be accepted by the gentile population and too contaminated with pagan ways to be accepted by the pure-minded Jews of Jerusalem, so have the Mexican-Americans in the Southwest been rejected by two groups.”¹⁹ Jesus, as a marginalized Galilean Mestizo, thus became a source of liberation for Elizondo. Through Christ’s transcendence of marginalization and suffering, Elizondo could better understand the marginalization of his people and also articulate a hope and struggle toward a transcendence of their realities. In *The Future is Mestizo*, Elizondo concludes that through contact between various sets of Mestizos, a “new humanity” is emerging where, “Differences are not being destroyed, but they are being transcended and celebrates as together we usher in the beginning go the new race of humanity.”²⁰

Despite Elizondo’s foundational work with the Mestizo category, its meaning and use has produced criticism and controversy within Latino religious studies. One camp of scholars argue that the Mestizo category must be abandoned. Miguel De La Torre, for example, argues that terms like *mulatez* and *mestizaje* should not be used to conceptualize Latino religions because of their “racial history that tends to indirectly mask intra-

Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation : history, politics, and salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

¹⁸ Ibid., 57

¹⁹ Ibid., 77

²⁰ Virgilio P. Elizondo, *The future is mestizo : life where cultures meet*, Rev. ed. (Boulder, Colo.: University Press of Colorado, 2000). 111.

Hispanic structures of oppression and racism.”²¹ Others continue to identify the category as a site of contestation in which the term Mestizo can be appropriated in politically subversive ways. In *Rethinking Mestizaje*, Manuel Vásquez asks: “Does mestizaje explain the power asymmetries that still exclude and divide many Latinos? Can it help us organize and mobilize resistance against domination?”²² After providing a summary of how the term came to be used in U.S. Latino/a theology (by Vasconcelos, Elizondo and as subaltern identity and a theoretically licensed banner of resistance),²³ as well as noting the various problems with the term (such as its root in functionalist ideology that homogenizes and reduces its subjects for the benefit of its elite users)²⁴ ... Vasquez concludes that by focusing on the *otredad* or multifacetedness of mestizaje, the concept can offer “a powerful critique of the still hegemonic bipolar racial formation in the United States.”²⁵ However, while many have embraced or reformulated the concept of mestizaje others have critiqued its use altogether.

Like ‘Latino’ and ‘Mestizo,’ the category ‘Muslim’ is a site for meaning making and for contesting meaning. In its foundational period, as in its current manifestations, discourse regarding who is a “real” Muslim and why, has varied between attempts to ground the religious identity on fixed criteria on the one hand and to critique such crystallizations on the other. Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in the year 632 C.E., a burgeoning Muslim community became divided between those who

²¹ See Miguel De La Torre in Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio P. Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, eds., *Latino religions and civic activism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). 249-62.

²² *Ibid.*, 129.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 145

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7

formulated their identity as either a tribal allegiance to Muhammad as a powerful leader or as an allegiance to a universal God and the revelation of God. In addition to theological discourse, the dispute was settled in the *Ridda* wars in which various tribes who had previously claimed to be Muslim, defected, refused to pay the Islamic *zakat* tax and were consequently defeated in battle by Muslim forces under Abu Bakr in 632-633 CE. Muslim identity as an allegiance to a God that transcended Arab cultural and political practices was thus crystallized in the historical identity of the early community as such only after the death of the Prophet.

Though originally regarding issues of who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community or *ummah*, the great schism between the Sunni and Shia also came to signify political, racial and religious difference. Though both Sunni and Shia share common beliefs and practices, differences have often served to negatively establish identity: e.g. a Sunni orthodoxy was established in part through a contrast to the Shia's distinct collection of *hadith* scriptures, legal schools, veneration of Ali and so on.²⁶ Over time, the Sunni and Shia formulations of what it meant to be a Muslim also took on particular political histories which came to identify Sunni as promoting Arab language, culture and civilization but came to identify the Shia as promoting Persian language, culture and civilizational descent.

²⁶ For a history of the split between the Sunni and Shia, see Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, [1st ed., History of religion series (New York,: Holt, 1966). John L. Esposito, *Islam : the straight path*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Marshall G. S. Hodgson and American Council of Learned Societies., *The venture of Islam conscience and history in a world civilization*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,, 1974), <https://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00894>.

In Sunni formulations, the sincere proclamation of faith: “there is no God but God and Muhammad is God’s Messenger,” known as the *shahadah*, is all that is required to be considered a Muslim. Medieval Muslim scholars resolved that “sincerity” can only be determined by God. Therefore, though humans may perceive some Muslims to be more pious than others, only God and not Muslims can determine other Muslims to be sincere, nominal, inauthentic, or even non-Muslim. Despite this general approach to Muslim affiliation, several Sufi mystics, sects and prominent groups were characterized as participating in heretical innovation, or *bida’*. Various modern Islamists, such as Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayid Qutb and those influenced by his writings have engaged in broader excommunications, *takfir*, for what they perceived to be inauthentic Muslim identities.²⁷

Thus, Muslims have formulated themselves, on the one hand, as a fixed and universal identity that when transgressed calls for excommunication. However, what exactly constitutes this fixed meaning is itself a site of contestation. On the other hand, Muslims have formulated themselves as a dynamic category that allows for certain forms of cultural innovation. *Mawalid*, commemorations of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, serve as a prominent example of such disagreements regarding innovations. *Mawalid* commemorations, and many other Islamic expressions, take on particular cultural forms that vary from region to region. These diverse commemorations are according to some Muslims innovation to be discouraged or altogether rejected while others understand these practices to be an acceptable form of Muslim piety, which God will reward.

²⁷ See Sayyid Quòtb and Albert Bergesen, *The Sayyid Qutb reader : selected writings on politics, religion, and society* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

The Association of Islamic Charitable Projects of Anaheim, California, AICP-CA, hosts an annual Mawlid celebration with various Islamic presentations. On February 27, 2010, the AICP-CA's sponsored *Mawlid* celebration included musical performances, drum presentations, youth chants, video presentations and various speeches designed to showcase cultural diversity within Islam. The event culminated with most of its over five thousand attendees lining up to see, and perhaps touch or kiss, an object presented as the hair of the Prophet Muhammad. Drawing from scriptural references that describe individuals as receiving *barakah*, blessings, when in the presence of the Prophet, participants from various ethnic and national backgrounds waited for their turn to receive blessings through their contact with the relic. Among the crowd was a Latino Muslim who had invited me to the event. He is of Native American background but having grown up in Latino neighborhoods in Los Angeles, identifies as a Latino. He married a Latina Muslim, has Native-American/Mexican-American children and leads a Latino Muslim group. He is also a member of the AICP-CA and helped organize the *Mawlid* celebration. He also brings other objects, such as prayer beads, into contact with the relic of the Prophet so that they too may transmit the blessings.

At another event, various Latino Muslim organizations from the Southern California region gathered in 2011 at a park overlooking Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, California. The aim of the picnic was to overcome differences in their various formulations of Islam and in their goals as Muslims. Latino Muslim leaders, family members and children gathered to cook and eat *halal* tacos and *pollo asado*, to have their children play with a piñata decorated in the colors of the Mexican flag and to pray as a

Latino Muslim community. Here, the Native-American convert to Latino Islam gifted a set of Muslim prayer beads that had come in contact with the hair of the Prophet at the *Mawlid* celebration. The gifted bead necklace was to serve as a conduit of blessings and as an opportunity to teach other Latino Muslims about the *Mawlid*, the concept of *barakah* and to share his understanding of Islam with others. Within the group of Latino Muslims who had gathered, valuations of such object veneration varied. Some considered it to be an allowable or encouraged practice while many others considered it a religious innovation to be discouraged or rejected. The category of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam,’ that is, who counts as a “real” Muslim and what is “true” Islam, is an unsettled matter even amongst small Latino Muslim population groups. Often, this unsettled question takes on the discursive form of a division between authentic religion on the one hand and encouraged, allowable, discouraged and forbidden innovations on the other.

The early rapid and extensive expansion of Islam in the 7th and 8th century, whether characterized as the result of military expeditions by the Umayyad Caliphate or as processes of accretion and reform,²⁸ resulted in various innovations. Some of these came to be included within the umbrella of Sunni Islam, while others were characterized as beyond the allowable limits. Contact between Muslims of different regional and historic backgrounds resulted in innovations that have been described as hybrid.²⁹ Building on his seminal work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes himself and culture as the hybrid result of inequitable contact between the colonizer and the colonized in

²⁸ See Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian history* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁹ See Howard M. Federspiel, *Sultans, shamans, and saints: Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007). 24-88.

Culture and imperialism.³⁰ Drawing from Said and other prominent theoreticians, Homi Bhabha further examines colonial hybrid identity as the “articulation of the ambivalent space,” the subversive lack of fixed identities that escape and “de-formulate” the discriminatory and disciplinary gaze.³¹

Post-Colonial theories of hybridity such as Bhabha’s describe marginality as resulting from and in multiplicity; i.e. as resulting from inequitable colonial contact and as de-forming and re-forming colonizing categories of identity. Understood as such, Latino Muslim identity can be described as marginal and at the same time as marginalizing; as subversive to and re-inscribing of inequitable structures of power, dominance and discrimination. Even as Latino Muslim organizations seek to address the needs of individuals with intersectional identities, they have helped develop an identifiable category that can be put under surveillance, discriminated against and disciplined. Further, the category also seeks to crystallize what it means to be a Latino Muslim, and or who counts as one. I situate the emerging Latino Muslim identity within the margins of racial, religious and media technologies to express both its subversive and its discriminatory discursive processes of identity formation.

Technological Determinism and Latino Muslim Identities

The formation of racialized and religiously grounded Latino Muslim identities in the last two decades has moved alongside contemporaneous technological transformations. It is therefore only in relation to each other that the categories of race,

³⁰ Edward W. Said, *Culture and imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).

³¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

religion and technology take the particular shape that they do. In the following section, I describe the relationship between various technological developments and the construction of a Latino Muslim identity. In particular, I am interested in theories of technological and media determinism, historical relations between technology and Latino Muslim spaces, and the role of new media in the formation of ethnic and religious identities. 20th Century innovations in reliable air travel, large scale farming and computer mediated communication technologies helped shape the demographic contours that brought Latinos into contact with Muslims in the U.S. One of the most prominent LMOs in the U.S. was formed and continues to exist solely on the Internet. Though most other LMOs are predominantly offline communities, these also rely heavily on the Internet to communicate with each other and to form carefully thought out representations of themselves in the digital public sphere. Online representations of individual Latino Muslims and of LMOs then serve as models for other Latino Muslims and for journalists and academics who go on to create their own representations of Latino Muslims based largely on these Latino Muslim websites. It is therefore of critical importance to consider the relation between media technologies and the construction of particular identities when discussing Latino Muslims.

In *The Poverty of Philosophy* Karl Marx wrote, “The windmill gives you society with the feudal lord: the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist,”³² that is to say, technology determines the character of society. Jesuit priest, philosopher and technological determinist, Walter J. Ong, argued that the shift from orality to literacy

³² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The poverty of philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963).

prompted by the invention and adoption of the printing press was the single most influential technological development to shape the form of human consciousness to date.³³ The related subset of media determinism focuses on the ways in which media technologies determine societies. According to this view, public opinion is shaped or determined by mass media. Philosopher, literary and communications scholar and media determinist, Marshall McLuhan, famously argued in his seminal work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* that “the medium is the message,” or, a society is not defined by the content of its discourse but by the media technologies that frame and carry such content.³⁴ Concepts of the self and of democracy exist in society only through the technologies that make their articulation possible. In this view, a society is free to express meaning and value only within the boundaries set by technologies of communication.

However, even if communication technologies determine the messages expressed by a society, a society determines which technologies are adopted, ignored or rejected. Further, the technologies that do become available are produced by individuals that reflect the values of a society within their inventions. The printing press, for example, was adopted by European societies not simply because it came into existence, but because there was already a demand for texts during the medieval scholastic period. Likewise, mass media technologies not only shape popular opinion, but are themselves shaped by and reflect popular opinion. British cultural studies theorist, Stuart Hall,

³³ Ong had been encouraged by his graduate mentor Herbert Marshall McLuhan to study Ramus. McLuhan’s later work *The Gutenberg Galaxy* drew extensively from his student’s perspective on Ramism. For more, see Johns, Adrian. Foreword. Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, method and the decay of dialogue : from the art of discourse to the art of reason* (Chicago, Ill. ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2004). v-xiii.

³⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: the extensions of man* (London: Sphere Books, 1967).

argued in “Encoding/Decoding” against media determinism.³⁵ In its stead, Hall advocated a theory that takes the entire media cycle into account where each stage of development, production, dissemination and consumption retains related though independent interpretations of the communicated narrative event.³⁶ In his seminal work on the information age, Manuel Castells argues that, “... the dilemma of technological determinism is probably a false problem, since technology is society, and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools.”³⁷ Or in the words of Donna J. Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto*, “We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism,” creatures of both fiction and lived social realities.³⁸ We are the airplanes that fly us, the farming tools that help feed us, the computer networks we plug into. It follows then that Latino Muslims identities are hybrid: they are both biological and technological entities, authentic and designed, multiple, complex and diverse in lived experiences and mediated representations.

A good example of how technology and society work upon one another to create hybrid identities can be seen in the following illustration of 20th Century Puerto Ricans in New York. On June 31, 1936, the Boeing Aircraft Company of Seattle, Washington, was awarded a contract by Pan American Airlines to produce the 314 Clippers, widely considered to be the apex of flying boat design. Developments in aircraft technologies revolutionized concepts of space. Distances that once took twelve days by boat could

³⁵ Hall, Stuart. *Encoding/Decoding* in During, *The Cultural studies reader*.

³⁶ *Ibd.*

³⁷ Manuel Castells, *The rise of the network society*, Information age : economy, society and culture (Malden, Mass. ; Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). 5.

³⁸ Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, cyborgs, and women : the reinvention of nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991). 150.

now be regularly bridged in about half a day and at a much more affordable rate. In 1946, at the low cost of \$100, Pan American Airlines became the first to commercially offer fares between Puerto Rico and New York along with hope for a better future.³⁹ The emergence of this particular technology, along with other historical factors that included the Great Depression and World War II, set the stage for the *Gran Migración*, or “Great Migration” of Latinos from the island of Puerto Rico to New York that began in the mid 1940s.⁴⁰

In the 1960s, growing tensions between island-born and New York-born Puerto Ricans led to demarcations between Boricuas and Nuyoricans. Though used broadly by Puerto Ricans to signal pride in their pre-Columbian Taíno ethnicity, the term ‘Boricua’ was at this point used to distinguish island-born from New York-born. Nuyoricans were looked down on by island-born Boricuas for what they perceived to be a partial rejection of Boricua language and culture in favor of an identity highly influenced by the language and culture of New York. The negative connotations of the term ‘Nuyorican’ were rejected by future Nuyoricans, however, who adopted the term as a positive and creative outcome of intercultural contact that for some included contact with various forms of Islam. Some of the earliest Latino converts to Islam in New York not only identified themselves proudly as Nuyoricans but interpreted Islam through the complexities of a New York-Puerto Rican experience.

³⁹ Pan American, Latin America Fare Chart. July 1, 1949. Accessed October 7, 2011, <http://www.everythingpanam.com/images/1949%20Jul%201%20Latin%20Fare%20chart.jpg>

⁴⁰ Kal Wagenheim and Olga Jimâenez de Wagenheim, *The Puerto Ricans : a documentary history* (New York,: Praeger, 1973). 236.

Studies by the Pew Hispanic Center currently estimate the Latino population in New York's metropolitan area to be at 4.05 million. Of these, Puerto Ricans make up the largest Latino group at over 1.19 million.⁴¹ The New York-Puerto Rican experience, which includes discrimination from multiple segments of society, has been a central component of Latino contact with and conversion to Islam. The African American forms of Islam which responded and contributed to the civil rights and civil disobedience movements of the 1960s and 70s had direct and symbolic links to Latino Muslim movements that originated in New York. The Nuyorican founding of the first Latino Muslim organization in the United States, *Alianza Islamica* "Islamic Alliance," was as a social justice movement inspired by Malcolm X's critical turn to Sunni Islam.

On the opposite side of the country, the demographic and religious shape of Latino Muslims in California presents a stark contrast to those in New York. Some of the earliest Latino conversions to Islam in the West Coast occurred through contact between Mexican and Punjabi farm workers in the early 20th Century. Revolutions in agricultural technology led to the advent of California's massive farms in contrast to the small family farms in the East and Midwest. The large farms required a large labor force that was mainly supplied by Mexicans and to a lesser degree Indians from the Punjab. Though a majority of the Punjabi migrant workers who came to California in the early nineteenth century were Sikh, many were also Muslim. According to the children of Punjabi-Muslim/Mexican-Catholic parents, the majority of Muslim farmers were not actively observing prayers and did not have prayer rugs or copies of the Qur'an, though at least

⁴¹ U.S. *Hispanic Country-of-Origin Counts for Nation, Top 30 Metropolitan Areas*. Pew Research Center, May 2011. Accessed on October 3, 2011, <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>. 7.

one Latina Muslim convert married to a Punjabi Muslim actively engaged in the propagation of Islam.⁴² Punjabi Muslims eventually became more active in the transmission of Islam to their children, and in 1946 established the first Mosque in California in the state's capitol of Sacramento.⁴³

Presently, California has more Latinos and more mosques than any other state. About 13.68 million of the nation's 50.5 million Hispanics reside in California. Among the state's densely populated metropolitan areas, the Los Angeles-Long Beach region has the largest number of Latinos in the United States at 5.76 million, 84 percent of which are of Mexican origin. California's farms, Bracero programs (1942-1964), and farm worker's rights movements are central to the Mexican-American experience in California. California based organizations such as the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association, LALMA, have focused on learning about Islam from local scholars associated with public universities rather than engaging in social uplift programs and political activism. This is also a general difference between LALMA and La Alianza Islamica. This is not to say that Latino Muslims in California do not engage in activism or that those in New York do not learn about Islam from university professors, but rather that each experiences their Latino ethnicity and Islamic religion in historically and regionally specific ways and thus are motivated by distinct visions of the future of Latino Muslims in the United States.

⁴² Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making ethnic choices : California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*, Asian American history and culture series (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992). 130.

⁴³ Burg, William. *Sacramento's Southside Park*. (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 58-59.

If innovations in reliable air travel and large scale farming constitute vital technological developments for understanding Latino Muslims in New York and in California, the advent of ICTs, information and communication technologies, are of monumental importance for understanding the global spaces that Latino Muslims occupy on the Internet. The Internet's federally funded late 1960s predecessor, ARPANET, Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, was developed with survivability in mind. For many, the desire to develop a resilient national communications network that could withstand various kinds of disasters was informed by the Cold War fear of a nuclear attack on the United States. Originally only connecting governmental and university computers, the transition from federally funded to privately funded innovations in the field led to the commercialization of ICTs in the 1970's and 80's. The development of more affordable personal computers, landline networking, and the Netscape graphical browser led to a first wave the Internet's popularization in the 1990s. Then came the AOL revolution, which at its peak put more than 30 million Americans "online." The most prominent Latino Muslim organization today, the Latino American Dawah Organization, has no physical address, is embodied in cyberspace, and began on AOL chat rooms and on an AOL-hosted website.

The *Internet*, like all linguistic formulations, serves as a signifier, not of a fixed language-independent object, but as a referent to discursive formations with complex, competing and unstable significations. It may refer to a materialistic metaphysics, a set of hardware components including processors and memory chips, key boards and mice, digital screens and power cables, router and servers, telephone, cable, fiber optic and

wireless satellite lines and so on. Or, the Internet may refer to process rather than substance, server and package switching code, operating system and interface software, browsers and search engine code, websites and web apps and other such sets of digital codes written in various digital languages. Additionally, the Internet is referenced as a set of human activities: it may be a cyberspace inhabited by cyber-citizens who connect via their personal computers, tablets and smart phones; a form of communication with its own grammar and language, a tool for banking, shopping, networking and branding for economic, political, religious and other ends; a site where moral selves are developed, disseminated and consumed; where cyber-crime, war, surveillance, voyeurism, racism and censorship are performed alongside the formation of altruistic, democratic and religious identities. The Internet is in all of these ways, a technology of the self.

The Internet amalgamates other technologies of the self as well, including journalistic, academic, religious and other kinds of print, audio, video and graphic media and communication forms. It is a unique technology in its hybrid use of all of these media forms: it is static like a newspaper, present like live TV, immediate like a telephone conversation, interactive like a videogame. As a set of human activities, the Internet blurs boundaries between the private and public, synthetic and authentic, between fixed and fluid, egalitarian and authoritarian, moral and immoral, human and machine. The Internet reflects and shapes moral aesthetics. In short, the Internet is a set of arguments, a site for making and contesting meaning; it is an unstable signifier and a technology where Latino Muslims are digitally designed.

Websites such *LALMA.org*'s static text template, *LatinoDawah.org*'s graphically stale but data heavy structure and *PiedadIslam.org*'s visually stunning and powerful data base design demonstrate the exceptional attention some Latino Muslims are giving not only to their Internet representation but also to the aesthetic style of these representations. Additionally, these sites point to a digital divide between those that either do or do not have access to ICTs. PEW estimates that 64 percent of Latinos utilize the Internet as compared to the 78 percent non-Latino national average.⁴⁴ Perhaps more importantly, there exists a digital divide between those who have more or less abilities to navigate and manipulate Internet technologies to their socio-economic advantage.⁴⁵ LADO's *LatinoDawah.org* site, for example, was developed by internal members trained in computer programming but not graphic design. And though the site is not graphically appealing, it does host an impressive amount of documents and information published in such a way as to consistently dominate search engine queries for "Latino Muslims" on Google's, Yahoo's and Microsoft's search engines over the last few years. Other dominant organizations and individuals have enough resources to pay for professional graphic design companies to develop their sites. There are nonetheless dozens of other Latino Muslim sites that lack such resources and do not rank high or even make it onto the results of search engine queries. These sites therefore require users to know their specific URL address, and the little traffic they do receive is garnered mostly through word of mouth.

⁴⁴ Livingston, Gretchen. *The Latino Digital Divide: The Native Born versus The Foreign Born*. Pew Research Center, July 2010. Accessed, October 3, 2011, <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/123.pdf>. 2.

⁴⁵ Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing race : visual cultures of the Internet*, Electronic mediations (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

The distance between those who are on the one hand either highly trained in ICTs or have access to professionals and on the other hand those who rely on cursory understandings of the technology presents deeper issues beyond simple *have and have-nots* binaries. Still, even as corporations that control info-graphical interfaces (e.g. Firefox, Google, Facebook, design industries, etc) and the flow of data bytes (Comcast, ATT, Verizon, etc) and as governmental entities engage in cyber-surveillance (e.g. FCC, FBI, CIA, etc.), marginalized groups – including some Latino Muslims – have managed to secure dominant spaces on the Internet. As the threat of cyber-crime and cyber-terrorism and the corporatization and governmentalization of the Internet is intensified in public discourse, the future of cyberspaces carved out by marginal groups such as Latinos who convert to Islam is yet to be determined.

The question of media determinism has been used as a lens for discussing the *Arab Spring* of 2011-2012. Was the series of revolutions produced by social media or did a group of social agents redefine the technology of *Twitter* and *Facebook*?⁴⁶ This lens may also be applied to the development of a pan-Latino Muslim identity. Have media technologies such as the Internet determined societal innovations such as Latino Muslim enclaves, or do social elements such as Latino Muslim organizations determine what and how media technologies are used? Castells' conclusion that technology and society cannot be understood as separate entities and instead should be understood as inextricably linked, renders my description of Latino Muslims who organize and occupy cosmopolitan and cyberspaces as doing so through a socio-technological existence that must consider

⁴⁶ See Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: the power of the people is greater than the people in power: a memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

race, religion and the Internet as inextricably linked rather than as distinct subjects of inquiry.

Conclusions

Academic literature on Latino Muslims is scarce. With the exception of Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez' book *Latina/o Y Musulman: The Construction of Latina/o Identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States*, only a handful of books and articles address Latino Muslims in passing. Martínez-Vázquez' work has been important in bringing the subject of Latino Muslims to the attention of scholars of Latino religions and in identifying the importance of reversion narratives and of a revisionist or "postcolonial" history of Al-Andalus to Latino Muslim identity. Along with twenty interviews, Martínez-Vázquez' initial research for the book was conducted on the Internet. In addition to citing the online research data, Martínez-Vázquez identifies the Internet as an "important mechanism in the establishment of U.S. Latina/o Muslim communities across the United States."⁴⁷ Though Martínez-Vázquez' work provides an important and initial treatment of Latino Muslims, a history and critical analysis of their organizations and websites has yet to be produced.

Current religious studies research within the fields of Latino religions, Islamic studies and religion and Internet, has only recently recognized the value of examining the categories of race, religion and new media as inextricably linked. Though the field of Latino religious studies has recognized its subject as intersecting the categories of race

⁴⁷ Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o y Musulmán : the Construction of Latina/o identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publ., 2010).

and religion from its inception, and has produced substantial works that also examine the importance of news media on print, radio and television, there is little work that also takes the accessibility, immediacy and interactivity of the Internet into account. Within the field of Islamic studies, a great deal of excellent work on new media and Islamic authority has been and continues to be produced. It has failed, however, to substantially address the ways in which ethnic minorities have used the Internet to design and disseminate their particular brand of Islam. Though the broader field of religion and the Internet has produced seminal studies of ‘religion on the Internet’ (i.e. the use of Internet technologies by offline religious communities) and ‘the Internet as religion,’ (i.e. communities formed and embodied solely within the Internet), the category of race has not received much attention.

Lisa Nakamura’s work presents one of the few instances in which race, the Internet and to a lesser extent, religion are examined as inextricably linked categories. In *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, Nakamura examines the Internet as a *remediated* collage of older forms of media and as itself a form that is re-remediated onto these older forms. Through this lens, Latino Muslim websites should be understood as comprised of older media forms including logos, magazine layouts, photographs, audio and visual recordings and printed text. Of seminal importance to this study is the remediation of journalistic news articles onto Latino Muslim websites. These articles, sometimes critiqued as not reflecting the views of the Latino Muslims who remediate them onto their websites may nonetheless offer a form of legitimization to the site and or organization. Indeed, it is to these websites and their organizations that most journalists

turn to for interviews to produce the very articles that get remediated onto the Latino Muslim websites. Further, perhaps due to the scarcity of academic work on Latino Muslims, most pre-interview research on Latino Muslims consists of surveying Latino Muslim websites.⁴⁸ Many journalistic productions directly cite Latino Muslim websites, effectively crystallizing a self-contained media circuit of mutual remediation.

Nakamura uses the lens of the remediation circuit to examine the contemporary design, production, dissemination and consumption of racial formations. She begins the monograph by describing the proliferation of the Internet as inextricably linked to technological developments that put America on a graphical, rather than purely textual, interface of the Internet. Further, the racialized shape and content of the Internet's visuality must also be understood as emerging alongside the neoliberal "color blind" politics of the 1990's.⁴⁹ During this period, vice president Al Gore, described the White House's position on the Internet as a "humanitarian mission" comprised of "Private investment. Market-driven competition. Flexible regulatory systems. Non-discriminatory access. And universal service."⁵⁰ In this way the universally equal citizens of cyberspace were imagined within the color blind paradigm, a "behind the veil of ignorance," race-less population. The Internet offered a space in which race and other identifying markers could remain hidden or ambiguous. However, rather than as technology which allows its users to avoid race identification, the Internet, argues Nakamura, has largely remediated offline racial formations. Nakamura briefly examines the relationship between race, the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Nakamura, *Digitizing race : visual cultures of the Internet*: 2. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial formation in the United States : from the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁵⁰ Nakamura, *Digitizing race : visual cultures of the Internet*: 4.

Internet and religion when considering veiled IM or instant messaging buddies. Though users may choose from dozens if not hundreds of IM buddy templates, these choices remain limited to what is available to and made available by web designers.

Websites frame and limit possible interpretations and discursive formations on the Internet while naturalizing a sense of choice. They offer greater accessibility to those with otherwise limited resources while at the same time reflecting class discriminations linked to racial ones. They are technologies for constructing selves as both objects and subjects. They are spaces for performing subversive identities while at the same time discriminating against others. Websites frame discourse on race, religion and the Internet, just as discourse on race and religion frame understandings of the Internet.

Latino Muslim by Design, is therefore a study of the complex relation between race, religion and the Internet in the formation and dissemination of a Latino Muslim identity by assessing historical developments and discursive logics. Chapter One of this work considers the relation between the first Latino individuals to convert to Islam and the formation of the first LMO, *La Alianza Islamica*, the Islamic Alliance. The experience of ethnic marginalization and relationship with historian of Islamic Spain, T.B. Irving, that these early Latino converts to Islam shared, I argue, helped shape a Latino Muslim vision and program adopted by later LMOs. Chapter Two identifies various theories as to why Latinos are converting to Islam including those contained within Latino Muslim reversion stories. In it, I hypothesize that explanations of conversions serve multiple, complex and competing ends and that therefore Latino Muslim reversion stories are best described as narratives that reveal mediated aesthetics

and desires rather than scientific explanations. In Chapter Three I trace the development of PIEDAD, LADO and LALMA as prominent LMOs whose structured goals are to realize the desires reflected in the reversion stories examined in the previous chapter. In Chapter Four, I further examine the leadership structure of LMOs, this time with an emphasis on its predominantly female characteristic. By first identifying various archetypes of Muslim women's piety and scriptural reference to women's issues in Islam within LMO discourse, I examine the way in which Latina Muslimah leaders negotiate their roles as female leaders within the patriarchal structure of Islamic authority. Many of the Muslim women's issues that receive negative media coverage such as representations of forced veiling, polygamy and domestic abuse are addressed by LMO discourse as cultural phenomena and not sanctioned by Islam. Chapter Five further examines the discursive division between religion and culture not only as a response to negative formulations of women in Islam, but also as a response to ethnic marginalization, as a critique of the Latino/Muslim binary, and as a rationalization of a Latino Muslim identity. The division between race/ethnicity/culture on the one hand and religion on the other is itself surmounted through a division between tolerance and intolerance. And in my concluding chapter, the division between the West and Islam, tolerant and intolerant Muslims and Latino Muslim inter-generational survival are considered in relation to ongoing LMO discussions of a pan-Latino Muslim identity within broader post 9/11 discourse on democracy and Islam in America. Through a sustained examination of race, religion and the Internet as inextricably intertwined categories and technologies of the self, this dissertation seeks to produce interpretations of Latino Muslim identity as

marginal and in-between, both fixed and fluid, lived and mediated, and subversive to and re-inscribing of discriminatory structures.

CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINS OF LATINO ISLAM

LA ALIANZA ISLÁMICA AND THE EMERGENCE OF A PAN LATINO MUSLIM VISION

This day, I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.

- *The Message of the Qur'an* 5:4
(Translation by Muhammad Assad)

The Alianza was founded by men who came of age during the 1960s and were involved in anti-war protests, civil rights protests, and Puerto Rican nationalist movements. Amin, the caretaker of the masjid (mosque), removes his skullcap to show his scarred scalp -- "all from police batons," he chuckles.

- Hisahm Aidi in "Olé to Allah: New York's Latino Muslims"

On July 30, 2006, the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association, LALMA, gathered in solidarity with hundreds of other protestors. In an airstrike during the 2006 Lebanon war, the Israeli air force bombed a building in Lebanon killing twenty-eight civilians including sixteen children. Under the "Actividades" or activities page of *LALMA.org*, four photographs of the group's engagement in political protest against the Israeli bombing that took place in Anaheim, California are displayed. They hold up cardstock signs that read "Alto a la Matanza de Civiles" (stop the killing of civilians), "Alto a la Destrucción" (stop the destruction), "Alto a la Masacre de Inocentes" (stop the massacre of innocents). Marta, president of LALMA, wearing black shades and a blue veil, foregrounds a stage and crowd of protestors waving Libyan flags in solidarity and in political protest. LALMA's activities and those of other LMOs are informed in large part

by the legacy of the first Latino Muslim organization in the U.S. founded in 1975, La Alianza Islamica and its response to social problems through political activism, social services and the propagation of Islam.



Figure 2.1. (Left) Photograph of LALMA at anti-Israeli bombing protest, 2006. From left to right the signs translate as: “stop the killing of civilians,” “stop the destruction,” “stop the massacre of innocent people.” LALMA’s president, Marta, is on the right wearing a blue headscarf and sunglasses. The photograph is hosted on LALMA’s website <<http://www.lalma.org/activities/>>

Figure 2.2. (Right) Photograph of a La Alianza America political March in New York city. The sign reads: “Alianza Islamica, El Barrio, N.Y., reclaiming our Islamic heritage.” The photograph is hosted on LADO’s website and by Wikipedia which features the photograph on its “Alianza Islamica” and “Latino Muslims” pages <<http://www.latinodawah.org/photos/>>

Six years after the protests in Anaheim, I asked Marta in an interview what LALMA hoped to accomplish in the future. Without hesitation Marta responded, “we really would like to, again, provide more social services.” This statement had followed the following fuller description of LALMA’s goal to increasingly provide needed social services:

right now, we are involved with humanitarian days usually its through Ramadan, we go through South Central L.A. and provide to the needy people different services from taking blood pressure, health wise, health screening, giving away food, giving away clothing. Right now its minimum the outreach that were doing. LALMA should expand more, Insha'Allah [God willing], next year were going to organize different social services to the community besides just giving food or, we would like to do counseling, immigration, we have an attorney, who can give, who is an immigration attorney, and we have somebody who is an accountant,

and somebody who is a computer expert, so we are trying to organize and give some better social services especially to the needy community who have no access, have no access to schools, or trying to go to a class, something like that ... so that is our project for next year.

Marta and other Latino Muslim leaders have many complex reasons for forming and or running organizations that propagate Islam, provide social services and are politically engaged. However, whatever other reasons they may have, they all look to the La Alianza Islamica (the Islamic Alliance) as a model for structuring their own Latino Muslim organizations, LMOs.

In the 1970's Spanish Harlem and 1980's barrios of Brooklyn, New York, a group of Puerto Rican Muslims formed the first LMO, La Alianza Islamica. Isolated reports of Latinos converting to Islam in the U.S. date back to the early nineteenth century both in East coast immigration detention centers and in West coast farm worker communities. Individual conversions continued into the 1960's within various Sunni, Shi'a and American forms of Islam. Immigration law reform, economic disparity and technological developments led to ethnic and religious demographic changes in the U.S. Ideological movements within Islamic, Latino and other minority discourses developed various pan-identity formations. Increasingly mobile and globalized communities made it possible for a handful of individuals to form, organize and mobilize a particular pan-Latino Muslim vision in New York. This vision formulated Latino Muslims as united in their shared experience of ethnic marginalization and a shared reclamation of Latino culture as historically rooted within Muslim Spain. The legacy of this vision has continued within various other LMOs in New Jersey, Florida, Texas, Chicago, California and other

cosmopolitan spaces where Latino and Muslim communities come into contact with one another.

In this chapter, I provide an origin narrative of Latino Islam that begins with individual Latino conversions to various African-American formulations of Islam in America. I also described Dar ul-Islam and the Islamic Party of North America as critics of these Muslim groups and as precursors to the first LMO in the U.S., La Alianza Islamica. I then describe emergence of La Alianza Islamica as a specifically Latino Muslim organization that formed in response to its members' negative experiences with non-Muslim Latinos and non-Latino Muslims. Lastly, I examine the development of a pan Latino Muslim vision that took shape through a network of relationships between historian of Muslim Spain, T.B. Irving, Latino Muslim Carl Amin Askia and the Alianza Islamica. My goal in this chapter is therefore to trace the origins of Latino Islam in its historical specificity.

Early Latino Converts to Blackamerican Islam

In this section, I trace the development of the first LMO in the U.S, La Alianza Islamica, as emerging from the Islamic Party of North America and individual Latino conversions to *Blackamerican* Muslim groups that include: the Moorish Science Temple, the Ahmadiyya, the Nation of Islam (NOI), the conversion of NOI members to Sunni Islam including Malcolm X, and the Five Percenters. The term 'Blackamerican,' argues scholar of race and of Islam, Sherman Jackson, highlights the historical specificity of racial formations in the U.S. rather than ignore the oppressive but distinct experiences

“between blacks or Africans on the one hand and Blackamericans on the other.”⁵¹ And it is to the historical specificity regarding Latino conversion to Blackamerican Islam that I now turn to.

The Moorish Science Temple of America was the first mass organized religion to identify itself as Muslim in the U.S. It was a Blackamerican group founded in 1913 by Noble Drew Ali that by 1930 had communities in Newark, New Jersey, Chicago Pittsburg and Detroit. However, the religion had little resemblance to traditional forms of Islam. Instead, the group drew from texts such as the *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus*, Marcus Garvey’s pan-African movement and Ali’s own version of the *Holy Koran*, for doctrines concerning the divinity of individual members, including Ali’s, the characterization of heaven and hell as states of mind, the establishment of Moorish-American businesses and communities, and a revisionist history that framed its members not as “Blacks” or “Negroes,” but as “Moors.”⁵²

The religious organization was covered favorably by Blackamerican newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* as a positive social movement within Blackamerican communities that empowered its members and created a sense of respectability. In a 1928 description of a Moorish Science meeting that detailed its “general work and civic accomplishments” by the *Chicago Defender*, the newspaper article concluded that, “These examples of collective effort show that the members of the Moorish temple and their leader have a sound economic program and are blazing the trail and marking the

⁵¹ Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican : looking toward the third resurrection* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). 24.

⁵² Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America*, 2nd ed., Columbia contemporary American religion series (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). 80-81.

pathway over which our posterity may travel unhampered and unafraid.”⁵³ The group was, however, described with suspicion and as a potential threat by non-African American writings, including the FBI’s over 3,000 page report on the Moorish Science Temple.

In addition to both sympathetic and critical outside sources such as these, the Moorish Science Temple produced its own bi-monthly periodical, the *Moorish Guide*. Within the *Moorish Guide*, Bowen identifies “a Juanita Richardson-Bey, who is listed as the managing editor and was also the secretary-treasurer of the Young People’s Moorish League.”⁵⁴ Bowen admits that her seemingly Latina name, ‘Juanita,’ the possibly Spanish title of her published poem “Dio de mio,” and Drew Ali’s eulogy in English, Arabic and Spanish offer only circumstantial evidence of Latino converts to Moorish Science. Nonetheless, he concludes that given the Moorish Science Temple’s “openness to all races, and the continuing rise of Latino immigration, taking into account numerous online anecdotes confirming it, it is highly probable that Latinos have been members since the 1920s.”⁵⁵ As a precursor to other Blackamerican forms of Islam in the U.S., possible Latino conversions to the Moorish Science Temple offer an initial introduction to Latino Islam as intertwined with Blackamerican Islam.

Latino conversions to Ahmadiyya Islam in 1920 constitute the first well documented instance of Latino conversion to Islam in the U.S. The Ahmadiyya were

⁵³ http://muurishgansul.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=126&Itemid=48
(7/24/2012)

⁵⁴ Patrick. “Early U.S. Latino — African-American Muslim Connections: Paths to Conversion” Bowen: 400; Patrick D. Bowen, “Early U.S. Latina/o - African-American Muslim Connections: Paths to Conversion,” *The Muslim World*, no. 100 (2010).

⁵⁵ Bowen, “Early U.S. Latina/o - African-American Muslim Connections: Paths to Conversion,” 401.

founded in the nineteenth century by Ghulam Ahmad, a Muslim from the Punjab. After his death in 1908, his followers split into two factions. The Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement maintained that their leader had been a *Mujaddid* (divine reformer) while affirming the Sunni belief that Muhammad was the final messenger of God. The second faction, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, maintained instead that Ghulam Ahmad had not only been a *Mujaddid*, but also a prophet and the awaited Messiah and *Mahdi* (literally means “the guided one,” a successor of the Caliph/Imam Ali in the Shia tradition). In both its forms, however, the Ahmadiyya followed a form much closer to Sunni formulations than did the Moorish Science Temples, including its practice of the five pillars of Islam. In 1913, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community began sending *dawah* (missionary) workers to North America. These missionaries found a receptive audience in African American communities who had been largely ignored by other Muslim proselytizers. And in 1920, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq of the Ahmadiyya was detained by customs in Philadelphia when entering the U.S. Muhammad Sadiq was suspected of breaking polygamy laws because officials had incorrectly believed that all Muslim men had multiple wives.

Upon his release, Muhammad Sadiq successfully began to propagate Islam. One year later, he had established the headquarters of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Chicago and founded the group’s periodical *The Moslem Sunrise*. In it, Muhammad Sadiq recounts his arrival to the U.S. and being immediately placed in the customs detention hall. While in the detention hall, Sadiq began teaching fellow detainees about Islam. Following his *dawah* efforts, “a Spaniard, a Portuguese, two men from the Azores, and

one Honduran” converted to Islam.⁵⁶ Sadiq and other Ahmadiyya proselytizers were not only successful in converting some of the minority populations they came into contact with, but were also transformed by the groups they sought to religiously reform. By critically addressing discriminatory structures in America, the Ahmadiyya became an important ideological precursor to the civil rights movement through its decisive condemnation of American racism. In, *The Moslem Sunrise*, Muhammad Sadiq published the following critique of American racism:

There are people fairer than North Europeans living friendly and amiably with those of the darkest skin in India, Arabia, and other Asiatic and African countries... In Islam no church has ever had seats reserved for anybody and if a Negro enters first and takes the front seat even the Sultan if he happens to come after him never thinks of removing him from the seat.⁵⁷

To some African Americans and Latinos living in early 20th century Jim Crow America, who preached and listened to the doctrine of Christian love for all humanity but experienced a deep and unjust racial divide, the Ahmadiyya message of tolerance, equality and dignity, was an attractive alternative that many chose to accept. Beyond Ahmadiyya newsletters that propagated its authors’ religion by identifying Latino converts amongst other articulations of Islam’s racial inclusivity, little is however known about the group’s Latino members.

In addition to the Moorish Science Temple and the Ahmadiyya of America, the Nation of Islam (NOI) has had direct and indirect influences on Latino Islam. Latino members of the NOI, NOI activities specifically directed toward gaining Latino adherents

⁵⁶ Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American experience*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). 114-17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 122. Michael Angelo Gomez, *Black crescent : the experience and legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). 252.

including the formation of an NOI temple specifically for Spanish speakers and the influence of Malcolm X on non-NOI Latino Muslim leaders have had a more direct ideological and structural impact on LMOs. The NOI was founded by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad in the early twentieth century. Narratives of Fard Muhammad are shrouded in mystery and controversy. According to FBI accounts he was an ex-convict. According to others, Fard had once been a member of the Moorish Science Temple that eventually split off and started his own organization, the Lost Found Nation of Islam, after the death of Drew Ali. To many of his followers in Detroit, Fard was a prophet. But to one follower, Elijah Poole - a soft spoken and uncharismatic public speaker, Fard was God. Subsequently, Fard promoted Poole to chief minister, changed his name to Elijah Muhammad and mysteriously disappeared in 1934. Eventually taking control of the group and slowly building its membership, the Nation of Islam became a small but potent force within various metropolitan areas across the U.S.⁵⁸ Elijah Muhammad taught that Fard had been God, making him God's prophet. He taught that all humans had originated from the black race and tribe of *Shabazz*. And that a cunning and devious scientist by the name of *Yakub* had created the white race who eventually took control over the black race in a historical period roughly coinciding with the colonial era. White-humans were thus characterized as devils, and Black-humans as divine. Like the Moorish Science Temple, the NOI taught that heaven and hell were states of mind, rather than "pie in the sky fairytale lands," and accordingly taught that social improvement through segregation from White-America was of paramount importance for achieving salvation.

⁵⁸ Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: a life of reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011).

While in prison, Malcolm Little learned of the NOI teachings through his family members most of whom had become members, began corresponding with Elijah Muhammad, converted to the NOI and had his name changed to Malcolm X.⁵⁹ His father and mother had been devoted Garveyites and Malcolm found in the NOI a program that did justice to his parents' legacy, provided a religious eschatology lacking in Garveyism and cemented his otherwise fractured family. Drawing from his life embedded within the streets and musical life of Harlem, and from his devotion to self-education and debate within prison, Malcolm X emerged from Norfolk Prison Colony, Massachusetts in 1949 with a fiery message from Elijah Muhammad and a rhetorical voice of his own. Malcolm X had a gift for addressing Blackamerican masses in their language, for understanding the political complexities of his time and for using mass media to his advantage. He quickly ascended the NOI ranks to become Elijah Muhammad's prime minister, successfully founded several new temples and drew in tens of thousands of new members.⁶⁰

During the early and mid 1960's the NOI numbered between 75,000-100,000 members and had an economic empire of businesses and land worth over a quarter of a million dollars. Though various schisms would eventually temper its prominence, the NOI was a beacon that not only attracted to it diverse groups of Blackamericans but also a few Latinos. The NOI's periodical *The Final Call* and later *Muhammad Speaks* distributed between 600,000 and 900,000 copies of its bi-monthly publication at its peak, an extraordinary rate never achieved by any other Blackamerican periodical before or

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

since then.⁶¹ Tynetta Nelson, later Tynetta Deanar Muhammad or Mother Tynetta to NOI devotees for having mothered several of the late Elijah Muhammad's children, had been a columnist for *The Final Call*. Additionally, Mother Tynetta is thought to be of Latino descent by those who point out that she accompanied Elijah Muhammad on all his trips to Mexico and "can likely speak Spanish."⁶² In 1998, she established Temple #15 in New York, the first NOI temple for Spanish Speakers. And her son, Minister Ishmael R. Muhammad, "lived and studied Islam in Cuernavaca for seventeen years before being requested by Louis Farrakhan to assist the group at the Chicago headquarters. For the last several years efforts have been made to prepare the way for his succession to the head of the NOI."⁶³ Beyond the leadership of Tynetta and Ishmael Muhammad, less visible Latino NOI members continue to join, represent Spanish speaking communities within the NOI and maintain a Spanish language NOI website at *LaNacionDelIslam.org*. Even more important to the formation of Latino Muslim organizations were the various schisms with and outgrowths from the NOI.

Though Latino members of the NOI had and continue to have a presence in the American religious landscape, albeit a muted one, early and still dominant Latino Muslim communities gravitated toward the racially inclusive Sunni reforms espoused by Malcolm X after his critical turn away from the NOI. This gravitation is manifested in both Latino members of The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood (an outgrowth of Malcolm X's Muslim

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Bowen, "Early U.S. Latina/o - African-American Muslim Connections: Paths to Conversion," 405.

⁶³ Ibid., 406.

Mosque Inc.) and in Latino Muslim references to Malcolm X as an important influence on their understanding and practice of Islam as social reform.

Malcolm X had been an important leader for the NOI and a prominent public speaker that had captured national media attention. Amongst many other works, he appeared in a seminal and nationally televised interview that greatly impacted the lives of the hundreds of thousands of viewers who tuned in and the structure of televised news still in its infancy. The series of interviews were titled “The Hate Which Hate Produced,” which like Erik Lincoln’s seminal work *The Black Muslims in America*, framed the NOI as a hate group, the logical result of White supremacist discriminatory violence. Ever a master of mass media, Malcolm X either outright rejected the characterization of the NOI as a hate group or critically focused on the rhetorical goal of framing the NOI as a hate group.

Escalating conflict between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad’s children and other NOI leaders eventually led to a final standoff however. Following the assassination of president John F. Kennedy, Elijah Muhammad instructed all of his ministers, especially his increasingly politically involved protégé Malcolm X, to abstain from any critical comments of the late president because of the late president’s popularity within the African American community. And when Malcolm X told the press that it was a case of “chickens coming home to roost” and added that “chickens coming home to roost never did make me sad, they've always made me glad,” Elijah Muhammad disciplined Malcolm X with a seven month silencing and ban from NOI temples. The ban was extended, and it eventually became clear to Malcolm that it would never be lifted. In

1964, Malcolm X announced his break away from the NOI, traveled to Mecca in Saudi Arabia to perform *hajj*, Islamic pilgrimage, and formed two new organizations. The Muslim Mosque Inc. (MMI), would serve as a religious organization much like the NOI. The Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), would instead focus on political activism and work with both Muslim and non-Muslim activists to try to bring the United States to trial before the United Nations for human rights violations against Blackamericans.

On February 21, 1967, Malcolm X was murdered. Both the MMI and the OAAU eventually dispersed. The MMI was however later revived as the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood. Under the leadership of Shaykh Tawfiq's, who is both of Native American and African American descent, the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood aligned with Sunni teachings, presently boasts about a twenty percent Latino Muslim membership.⁶⁴ In the film and trailer to *New Muslim Cool*, which follows the life and trials of Hamza Perez, a Puerto Rican Muslim hip hop artist, Perez is depicted walking up Malcolm X Boulevard in New York and into the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood. In other scenes, Perez wears t-shirts with prints of the Malcolm X icon and describes his social work within "the projects" as in the spirit of Malcolm X. "We have to deliver in the strongest form possible our message," Hamza narrates, "it is the way of Malcolm X." For many Latino Muslims, including ex-NOI member Benjamin Perez, Malcolm X continues to inspire a vision for a nationally united Latino Muslim front against social injustice in America.

⁶⁴ More research needed on the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood in general and its Latino membership in particular. For a reference, see Robert Dannin, *Black pilgrimage to Islam* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). 69.

In 1957 Benjamin Perez, a Latino and Native American, joined the Nation of Islam in Oakland, CA. Recalling his initial interaction with the NOI, Perez told an A.P. reporter: “I saw there was a lot of knowledge in their teachings to black people. Their food was delicious. They were friendly. I liked it there and I stayed.” The relationship would not last however. Like W.D. Muhammad and a great mass of ex-NOI members disillusioned with separatist ideologies, Perez converted to Sunni Islam. He then dedicated his life to teaching Islam to Latinos and Native Americans, and became widely recognized as one of the oldest living Latino Muslim converts, a pillar and important symbol to the emerging Latino Muslim identity. In 2009, Perez was diagnosed with terminal cancer. A blog was set up to provide updates on his ailing condition and to raise support and funds for Perez and his family.

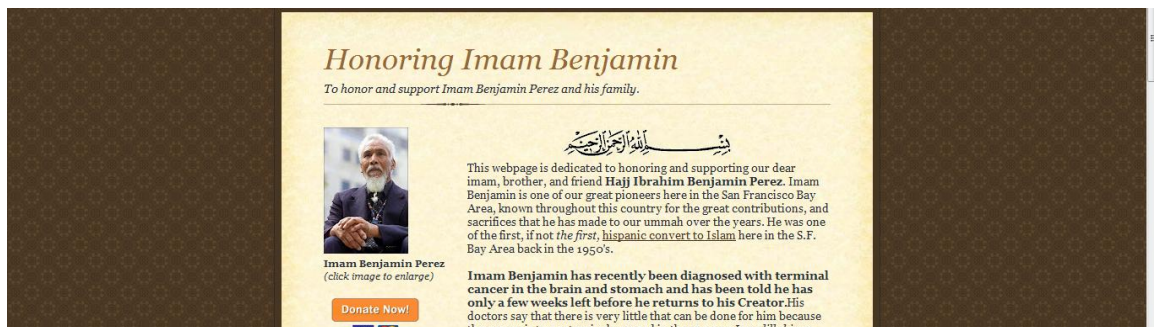


Figure 2.3. Screenshot of a Blogsite page dedicated to the late Native-American/Latino Imam Benjamin Perez. The title of the site reads: “Honoring Imam Benjamin: To honor and support Imam Benjamin Perez and his family.” Bellow the title, to the left, is a photogrpah of Perez and a “Donate Now!” button. To the right there is a paragraph that begins with the Qur’anic invocation, the bismalah, followed by a description of Perez as “one of the first, if not the first, hispanic converts to Islam.” <<http://imambenjamin.blogspot.com/2009/11/about-this-site.html?showComment=1261700600373#comment-c5464157032171463726>>

One blogger posted the following message to Perez and his family: “May Allah bless you immensely Imam Benjamin. You have been a great light in my life. Your beautiful and

grateful attitude is truly an inspiration for us all. May Allah make it easy for you.” Nearly a month later, Benjamin’s grandson responded:

Thank you all for your prayers. Imam Benjamin is my grandfather and it is a blessing to us to know how many lives he has touched during his journey. I would like for you all to continue to pray for him as he makes his way home. Imam Benjamin Perez has passed, today December 8, 2009 at 8:22 PM. He was surrounded with family and a brother in faith. He passed peacefully in his sleep.

Regarded by many Latino Muslims as a pioneer and inspiration to many LMOs, Perez is honored as “one of the great treasures of the American Muslim community.”⁶⁵ Through his experience with and departure from the NOI, Perez seems to have been one of the first Latino Muslims to have engaged in dawah specifically directed toward other Latinos prior to the mid 1970’s apart from Blackamerican Muslim groups.

In addition to Malcolm X and other individual NOI dissidents, Latinos joined other NOI offshoots such as the Five Percenters, and other groups critical of the NOI such as Dar ul-Islam and the Islamic Party of North America, from the first LMO emerged. The Nation of Gods and Earths also known as the Five Percenters, broke away from the NOI in the early 1960’s. While incarcerated in 1965, founder Clarence Edward Smith (also known as Clarence 13x or Allah) gained new disciples. Among these was Armando X, a Puerto Rican who had previously been a member of Harlem’s NOI Temple No. 7. As part of the Five Percenter practice, Armando X underwent a series of name changes. For some time the initials of his Puerto Rican identity, P.R., became code for Power Rules. Later, P.R.’s name was changed to god Sha Sha for being the first to

⁶⁵ For more on Ibrahim, see his family blog at <http://imambenjamin.blogspot.com/> & Latino Muslim leader Khalil Al-Puerto Rikani’s blog at: <http://khalilpr.blogspot.com/search/label/Chicano%20Muslims> (Accessed: 8/24/2011)

bring the Five Percenter teachings to Puerto Rico. Other notable Five Percenter Latinos include rappers Big Daddy Kane, AZ/Anthony Cruz, and the graffiti artist Lee Quinones featured in the *Illmatic* album-*Wild Style* documentary.

The NOI, Five Percenters and to a lesser extent the Ahmadiyya were understood as engaging in *bid'ah*, unacceptable innovations by immigrant Sunni Muslims who were exponentially growing in number and influence after the immigration act of 1965 debarred individuals including Muslims from Asia from entering the U.S. The State Street Mosque in New York also endeavored to direct Blackamerican Muslims away from the groups perceived to be deviations of orthodox Islam. Established in the late 1920's by Sheikh Al-Haj Daoud Ahmed Faisal from the Caribbean island of Grenada, the State Street Mosque had been witness not only to the unique developments within African American Muslim theologies and practices, but also to the social injustices that informed these. Interpreting the Qur'an as promoting a struggle toward justice through non-militant means, Ahmed Faisal's community engaged in various social programs such as education, feeding the hungry, and prison visits. However, by the early 1960's a schism occurred over accusations that Ahmed Faisal was not "doing enough to help the material conditions of African Americans."⁶⁶ Influenced by the *Tabligh Jamaat*, a group of State Street Mosque members eventually broke away to form the Dar ul-Islam organization in the U.S. In the seminal work, *Islam in America*, Jane I. Smith reports that the Alianza Islamica (est. 1975), considered to be the first Latino Muslim organization in

⁶⁶ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith, *Muslim minorities in the West : visible and invisible* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002). 77-106.

the U.S., emerged as an “outgrowth” of the Dar ul-Islam.⁶⁷ A fuller description would characterize the Alianza Islamica as an outgrowth of the Islamic Party of North America (IPNA) which like Dar ul-Islam had broken away from the State Street Mosque.

In this section, I have traced Latino Muslim conversion to various Blackamerican Muslim groups including to the Moorish Science Temple, the Ahmadiyya, the Nation of Islam (NOI), the NOI’s turn to Sunni orthodoxy including Malcolm X’s, and the Five Percenters. Lastly, I briefly described the Dar ul-Islam movement as critical of these Blackamerican forms of Islam and as a precursor to the IPNA which was itself a precursor to the first specifically Latino Muslim organization in the U.S., La Alianza Islamica. In Sherman Jackson’s estimation of Blackamerican Islam and its adoption of Sunni Traditions (what W.D. Muhammad referred to as the *Second Resurrection*), a Third Resurrection is needed in which Blackamericans master and appropriate the Sunni tradition without merely adopting immigrant forms of Islam. The Third Resurrection writes Jackson, refers to “the era in which Blackamerican Muslims emerge as self-authenticating subjects rather than dependent objects of and in this [Sunni immigrant] tradition.”⁶⁸ A group of Latino Muslims in New York that would eventually form La Alianza also began to worry that they would become “dependent objects of and in” the non-Latino Muslim traditions they converted to and began to develop a distinct vision grounded in a Latino experience.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Islam in America*: 68-70.

⁶⁸ Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican : looking toward the third resurrection*: 5.

The Nuyorican Experience of La Alianza's Founders

**Nuyorican (nü yôr 'ē kân) (New York + Puerto Rican) 1. Originally Puerto Rican epithet for those of Puerto Rican heritage born in New York: their Spanish was different (a Spanglish), their way of dress and look were different. They were a stateless people...*

- Miguel Algarín

*I was brown when I stared
Black when I walked
And some of them said I was white when I talked*

- Ed Morales

The founders of La Alianza Islamica were Puerto Ricans from New York. In the 1970's, New York born Puerto Ricans suffered from multiple forms of discrimination. Marginalized by island born Boricuas, the emerging generation was perceived to be the mixed up result of contact between Taíno, Spanish and New York culture. New York born Puerto Ricans were perceived as *other* to both communities from New York and Puerto Rico. Originally a pejorative term for this otherness, various musicians, poets, artists and writers proudly adopted the term *Nuyorican* as a positive symbol of their hybrid identity. Caught in the middle of intersecting interests including the civil rights and Puerto Rican nationalist movements and in the middle of interesting discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, politics and religion, Nuyoricans of the 1970's balanced and negotiated multiple and competing identities. In a description of the Nuyorican experience, the poet Miguel Algarín wrote in 1975:

A new day is born. A new day needs a new language or else the day becomes a repetition of yesterday. Invention is not always a straightening up of things. Oftentimes the newness disrupts. It causes chaos. Two languages coexisting in your head as modes of expression can either strengthen alertness or cause confusion the streets resound with Spanish and English. The average Nuyorican has a working command of both and normally uses both languages simultaneously. Ordinary life for the Nuyorican happens in both languages. The

factory laborer reads instructions in English but feels in Spanish. Thus he expresses responses to the conditions of his environment in Nuyorican.⁶⁹

In 1967, Piri Thomas published *Down These Mean Streets*, a seminal work of Nuyorican literature. The memoir tells the brutally vivid story of Thomas' experiences with racial discrimination, crime, violence and prison in the *barrios* or Spanish Harlem of New York. An Afro-Latino of Puerto Rican and Cuban descent, Thomas poetically struggles with issues regarding identity, freewill and responsibility, being born in a foreign land and a foreigner to his homeland, "How to be a Negro without really trying," waking up in a prison hospital while not remembering why, and finally finding a Nuyorican language of liberation as he proclaimed "Hey Barrio - I'm home". While in prison, Thomas found a mentor which he calls Chaplain and eventually converts to Islam. While in prison, Thomas learns to pray in Arabic but did not continue to identify as a Muslim after released from prison. Piri Thomas's narrative serves as a literary example of the Nuyorican experience and conversion to Islam shared by the founders of La Alianza Islamica.

While negotiating their Puerto Rican/New York identities within the Spanish/East Harlem of New York, Rahim Ocasio and Ibrahim González courageously and desperately ventured into the 125th Street Mosque at the age of seventeen. They had grown up in a revolutionary center for political activism and struggle for civil rights and had become disillusioned by their results. Ocasio tells us, "We had fervor to continue the struggle but no place to go. We were disenfranchised. We sought other outlets and came upon Islam. We became serious young men seeking to elevate ourselves within our society. We got

⁶⁹ Algarin, Miguel (July, 1975 - Nuyorican Village - New York City)

this from Islam.”⁷⁰ González adds to their recollection, “Islam introduced spiritual practices that were different from the Catholic upbringing of many Latinos, such as five daily prayers, fasting and a more direct connection with God... Prayer was the first thing that brought me closer to being a Muslim. It became a source of strength and peace.”⁷¹ (3d) Prayer and Islam became an alternative to ongoing struggles against internal racism and external military violence in Vietnam and within the U.S. “We didn’t want to give up the struggle,” continued Ocasio, “so we looked to different places. Islam represented a place for us to be part of a larger community. When we realized that within Islam there was every spectrum of people, regardless of class, regardless of race, we were attracted to that universal principle of human interaction and communion with the divine.”⁷²

However, Ocasio’s and González’ enthusiastic embrace of their newfound Muslim community encountered unforeseen challenges. Through various negative encounters with other Muslims, the two became increasingly aware of anti-Latino sentiments within the Muslim communities they wanted to become a part of and quickly learned to not greet each other in Spanish while at the Mosque. Islam was for them a lonely path during these first years. Like many converts, Ocasio and González were accused of being inauthentic by Muslims who had been born into the faith. The two recent converts did not speak Arabic, the language of the Quran, and did not adhere to regional practices and were therefore considered suspect among Muslim communities

⁷⁰ Lisa Viscidi, "Latino Muslims a Growing Presence in America," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, no. June (2003).

⁷¹ Sameera Iqbal, "U.S: Hispanics and Islam," *abc News* (2007).

⁷² Daniel J. Wakin, "Ranks of Latinos Turning to Islam Are Increasing; Many in City Were Catholics Seeking Old Muslim Roots," *New York Times*, January 02 2002.

that were ethnically and or racially different. Nevertheless, both Ocasio and González persevered in their newly adopted religion of Islam, and went on to form *La Alianza Islámica* after Ocasio joined and the left the Islamic Party of North America.

The Islamic Party in North American: A Precursor to La Alianza

National immigration reform signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 along with political turmoil in many Muslim majority countries resulted in a wave of Muslim migration into the U.S.⁷³ The shift in America’s demographics produced important changes in Islamic institutions that came to be increasingly racially, ethnically and nationally demarcated. The Islamic Society of North America, ISNA, made up of mostly immigrant Muslims is for example contrasted to the now dispersed American Society of Muslims, ASM, which was made up of mostly African-American Muslims. While navigating the American divide between Black and immigrant Muslim communities, who are at the individual mosque level many times themselves divided, Latino Muslims seemed to have de-emphasized their Latino identity while hyper-emphasizing a Muslim identity not completely disentangled with other racial, ethnic and nationalistic practices. Regarding this matter, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith write: “It seemed Latinos believed it was essential to obliterate all vestiges of their ancestral heritage. Dressed in turbans and robes, they would even refrain from speaking Spanish in the masjid...”⁷⁴ Similarly, Khalid Fattah Griggs reports that Latinos in the Islamic Party of North America, IPNA, “even wore Pakistani style dress including a long

⁷³ Smith, *Islam in America*: 52.

⁷⁴ Haddad and Smith, *Muslim minorities in the West : visible and invisible*: 97.

green shirt, black pants, and black kufis or skullcaps.”⁷⁵ The co-founder of La Alianza, Rahim Ocasio and his family were among the Latinos who joined the IPNA and adopted its Pakistani style of dress.

The IPNA was founded by Yusuf Muzaffaruddin Hamid in 1971. Muzaffaruddin’s youthful passion had been jazz music, particularly as a trumpet player. And it was in pursuit of this passion that Muzaffaruddin moved from Atlanta to New York where he first encountered Islam through fellow jazz musicians who were Muslim. Influenced by racial formations in the U.S., African Americans had been largely ignored by most immigrant *dawah* efforts at the time. This practice solidified the prominence of the Ahmadiyya, the Moorish Science, Nation of Islam and others who made concerted efforts to reach out to African American populations. Muzaffaruddin came under the sphere of Ahmadiyya influence early on in his life as a Muslim musician, and through this contact adopted early on an aversion to the NOI. Muzaffaruddin then traveled throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia for four years to learn more about Islam. During his travels, he became familiar with various Islamist groups, i.e. political forms of Islam, including the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-e-Islami. He returned to the U.S. in 1969 and began working at the Islamic Center in Washington D.C. but became frustrated with what he perceived to be a “tourist attraction” that failed to address the needs of the inner city.⁷⁶ Influenced by the grassroots structure and social programs of Muslim organizations he encountered during his travels in the Middle East,

⁷⁵ Edward E. Curtis, *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American history*, 2 vols., Facts on File library of American history (New York: Facts on File, 2010). 293.

⁷⁶ Haddad and Smith, *Muslim minorities in the West : visible and invisible*: 83.

Muzaffaruddin and others left the Islamic Center of Washington D.C. to form *Masjid Ummah* (community mosque) in 1969 whose name was changed to the Islamic Party of North American, IPNA, in 1971.⁷⁷ Early rhetoric in the IPNA called for an Islamic revolution, but by the mid 1970's the organization directed its activities and speech toward civic engagement modeled after the grassroots social programs of Maulani Maududi's organization the Jamaati Islami-Pakistan.⁷⁸ Its ideological foundation, however, drew largely from Malcolm X's struggle for Black liberation and his passionate critique of White supremacist structures. In 1975, Muzaffaruddin decided to dissolve the individual chapters of the IPNA, calling for all members to make *hijra*, a religious migration, to the Washington area to consolidate all of its resources and members at its national headquarters.⁷⁹ Several Latinos had joined the IPNA prior to the migration and many moved to D.C. including Rahim Ocasio, who was at the time a recent Latino convert to Islam.⁸⁰

In search of a community for social justice, racial and ethnic equality and Muslim acceptance of his Latino heritage, Ocasio joined the IPNA. When in the mid 1970's, the organization called all members to undergo *hijra* to Washington D.C., Ocasio, his wife Fiaza and their six children piously complied. Ocasio and other Latinos had found in the IPNA a community that was more accepting of their Latino heritage than others had

⁷⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁷⁹ "When DC was the Hub of the Islamic Movement." Accessed, August 15, 2011, <https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.muslimlinkpaper.com%2Findex.php%2Fcommunity-news%2Fcommunity-news%2F1324-When%2520DC%2520was%2520the%2520Hub%2520of%2520the%2520Islamic%2520Movement.pdf> and Curtis, *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American history*: 292-93.P292-293

⁸⁰ Haddad and Smith, *Muslim minorities in the West : visible and invisible*: 97.

been. However, the limited character of this acceptance deterred Ocasio from pursuing *dawah* to Spanish speakers even though the area of D.C. had a large Latino population, “Mostly, we sort of just tried to blend in with everyone else [at the IPNA],” reported Ocasio.⁸¹ He and his family eventually left the IPNA and return to New York where Ocasio and his old friend Gonzales visited a mosque in Newark. They were surprised to find a small community of Latinos there that regularly attended the mosque to pray. Having stumbled upon a model for Latino acceptance within a Muslim community, Ocasio and González were inspired, began a small group in New York and soon after formed the Alianza Islamica in 1975. Along with changes in America’s racial, ethnic and religious demographic and political landscape, Latino encounters with Islam sometimes included training in political and civic activism in addition to religious education. “In their own East Harlem neighborhood with a few other friends [the Alianza Islamica] became the earliest recorded Latino Muslim organization in the U.S. and a place, González said, that “drew our hearts together.”⁸²

La Alianza in the Spanish Harlem and in the Bronx

After about eleven years of impromptu meetings at various locations, the Alianza was able to lease office space of its own in 1985, on Lexington Ave & 107th street. Within the Spanish Harlem of New York, Ocasio found himself situated in an area “fertile for Dawah” once again. Rather than trying to blend in with another Islamic

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Lyndsey Matthews, "The Latino Crescent: Latinos make a place for themselves in Muslim America," *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2009.

community, Ocasio, Gonzales and the other members of the Alianza actively participated in *dawah* and social work as a specifically Latino Muslim organization. This work included anti-gang violence programs, drug & prostitution prevention, brokering truces between gangs such as the notorious Puerto Rican street gang the Latin Kings, developed martial arts training programs to promote neighborhood security, and mentored and supported various groups within the neighborhood and within local prisons.⁸³ The organization's productivity at this location would eventually come to a halt however in 1997 when the Alianza moved out of the Spanish Harlem and into Alexander Avenue in the Bronx. Its leadership believed that their Muslim landlord had unfairly raised the rent because of their Latino ethnicity even though they were both Muslims.⁸⁴ Members of the Alianza's interpreted the encounter as further evidence of anti-Latino Muslim discrimination by non-Latino Muslims. Narratives of Muslim discrimination against Latino converts to Islam such as these worked to legitimize their conviction that Latino Muslims must organize in solidarity with one another.

After moving to its new location in the Bronx, the Alianza encountered a new source of conflict, this time from beyond its religious affiliation. Disagreements with members of a nearby Evangelical church, Tercera Iglesia Bautista Española, resulted in an Alianza approach to *dawah* that focused on social service while deemphasizing their religious identity. Rather than as a Muslim organization, the residents referred to the Alianza as the AIDs for their work in providing referrals and counseling. Leaders and members of the Alianza that followed Ocasio and González managed the group into the

⁸³ Hisham Aidi, "Olé to Allah: New York's Latino Muslims," *Africana* (1999).

⁸⁴ Curtis, *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American history*: 48.

early 1990's. Yahya Figuero, the last director of the pioneering organization had, like Ocasio, been a member of the IPNA but did not move to D.C. as Ocasio had.⁸⁵ Drawing from his work in the IPNA, Figuero led Alianza programs that discussed physical and spiritual health within prisons while preaching that the Nation of Islam was not true Islam. Though publically identified as a social service organization, the Alianza provided a space where a Latino Muslim identity was not only accepted but celebrated. In addition to prison services, the Alianza also held Friday *jumu'ah* communal prayers, sermons and meals, celebrated weddings, shared Puerto Rican meals without pork, held music and poetry gatherings and communed, that is embodied their shared Latino and Muslim identity.



Figure 2.4. Photographs of a La Alianza on LADO's website. The photograph on the left shows various members gathering outside of the Alianza building space. The addition of "INC." on the LMO's building sign resembles its use by Malcolm X in titling his non-NOI religious group "Muslim Mosque Inc." The photograph on the right shows another angle of a scene in Figure 2.2. < <http://www.latinodawah.org/photos/>>

Developed alongside and within the civil rights movement, the Alianza Islamica's membership and activities slowly decreased after the 1980's, the organization lost its

⁸⁵ Haddad and Smith, *Muslim minorities in the West : visible and invisible*: 97.

physical space in the Bronx, and eventually came to end around 2005. Islam had held the promise of racial equality for the Puerto Rican Muslims, but its vision was forged within a struggle for civil liberty and equality against America's dominant social structures, against the Latino communities that rejected their Islamic religion and against the Muslim communities that rejected their Latino identity. The Alianza's now vacant and abandoned office space is today but a ghostly reminder of a legacy that continues to inspire the work of newer and still present Latino Muslim organizations.

The History of Muslim Spain and the Concept of Reversion in La Alianza

Latino Muslims in New York found it difficult to maneuver within their increasingly complex identities. Marginalized by both the Latino and Muslim communities they wished to be a part of, individuals like Occasio and González became an answer to the question of how one could be both a Latino and a Muslim at the same time. In spoken poetry, co-founder of La Alianza, Ibrahim González, AKA the Mambo Dervish, proclaims:

*We Know What Time It Is
We see what's coming: more scapegoat, jingoistic doublespeak.
Always blaming the oppressed when it comes to violence...
Occupied Palestine, Occupied Vieques. Is there some kind of connection here?
Puerto Ricans, Palestinians. Our flags even have a similar design...
This connection I'm talking about.
Can it possibly explain why a Puerto Rican can consciously embrace Islam,
consciously embrace Andalusia, turns towards Mecca for the Haj...
We know what time it is.*

- Ibrahim Gonzales,
co-founder of the Alianza Islamica

The history of Islam in Al-Andalusia and its influence on the Spaniards who colonized and then became Latin American, became a powerful narrative for Ocasio, Gonzales and many other Latino Muslims. The Spanish they spoke, the food they ate, the songs they danced to and the religion they lived all had traces in Islam. These traces had been generally ignored by historians, covered up by a dominant public opinion, which held that Latino ethnicity was not Muslim nor was it compatible with Islam. The work of uncovering hidden traces of Islam in Latino ethnicity was, among others, taken up by public intellectual and Canadian convert to Islam, Thomas Ballantyne Irving.

Irving was born in Cambridge, Ontario, Canada in 1914 and converted to Islam in 1930's Toronto. When asked why he converted to Islam in a 1992 interview by Sheila Musaji published by *The American Muslim*, Irving responded:

I became a Muslim (never changed, never was anything else, just as the Prophet says) in the 1930's at Toronto. Please don't call me a "convert" because that implies change and what did I change from? I "became" a Muslim only in the sense that at a point in time I realized that was what I was. I personally feel that I am not a convert and not an "indigenous" as opposed to an immigrant Muslim. I have met very few American Indians who were Muslims. The Blacks often call themselves this, but they are indigenous to Africa (look this word up in a good dictionary). I think what they mean is native-born Muslims. I am a native-born Muslim, except I come from Canada, and my family was indigenous to Scotland.⁸⁶

Born locally Canadian, ethnically Scottish, and ontologically Muslim, Irving rejected the term 'conversion' preferring instead a description of "becoming" as: realizing that he (and all humans) were born Muslim. The rejection of the term 'conversion' has also been central to dominant Latino Muslim narratives. Irving's response to the question of

⁸⁶ Musaji, Sheila. "Interview with Professor T. B. Irving" *The American Muslim*, Winter 1992
http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/profile_professor_thomas_ballantine_tb_irving
Accessed on: February 17, 2012

‘conversion’ elicited a careful clarification of identity markers. Reflecting the Latino Muslim concern to precisely identify the terms of an American Muslim identity and to critique the terms that create hierarchical divisions between the convert and non-convert, Irving was well situated to be a leading voice for the Latino and Native American Muslim communities he worked with. His organizational services, along with Sheila Musaji and Hakim Archuletta, in helping to plan the First North American Muslim Pow Wow held at Abiquiu, NM in 1992 has been critically important to Native American Muslims.⁸⁷ Similarly, Irving participated in many Latino Muslim organizations, events and talks. It was his academic work addressed to a popular audience however that we now turn to.

After “realizing” he was born a Muslim, Irving went on to study modern languages in pre-doctoral work and received a Ph.D. in Near Eastern studies from Princeton. He is best known by most American Muslims for his American-English translation of the Qur’an, written in modern English and in which he controversially translates الله as ‘God Alone,’ whereas most would prefer to simply transliterate *Allah*. His historical work on Islam in Spain has been more important to Latino Muslims however, most of whom use other more prominent translation of the Qur’an. Irving’s list of academic positions and accomplishments are impressive; however, his work in the Spanish language is of particular importance. Irving’s son still lives in Guatemala, where his father taught at the University de San Carlos, the nation’s most prestigious institution

⁸⁷ For more on Native American Muslims, see Smith, 2010 p.68-70; Curtis, 2010 p.50-51, and Sheila Musaji, http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/pow_wow_an_overview_of_the_1993_north_american_muslim_pow_wow/ Accessed on: August 14, 2012

of higher learning. There, T.B. Irving produced and published, in Spanish, *Halcon de España* (Falcon of Spain) in 1951 which was subsequently translated to English in 1954 in Pakistan by Lahore: Orientalia.

The *Falcon of Spain* begins by briefly sketching out the Umayyad rise to imperial power. Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, the rapidly expanding community of Muslims was ruled by four successors dubbed by the majority of Muslims as *The Rightly Guided Caliphs*. In 661, the Umayyad, a branch of the tribe of *Qurysh* which had previously ruled Mecca, re-ascended to power after defeating Ali in battle, the fourth and final “rightly guided” caliph in Sunni Islam. Within twenty years of Umayyad rule, the Islamic empire expanded throughout Asia and Africa. As the Umayyad caliphate made its way closer and closer to Morocco and Spain, Persian and Abbasid dissidence erupted.⁸⁸ Following the Abbasid’s conquest of the Umayyad Empire in 750 C.E., the faltering Umayyad family’s sole survivor, Abd al-Rahman I, fled for his life from the Islamic capital of Damascus to Iberia, Southern Spain. There, far from the Abbasid’s arm of influence in Baghdad, he found disparate and feuding Islamic city states that had been established under his family’s rule. The separated Muslim powers found a military falcon in Abd al-Rahman that unified and founded the Umayyad Emirate of Córdoba in 756. The region under this neo-Umayyad rule was henceforth referred to as Al-Andalus. In 929, three generations after Abd al-Rahman’s establishment of a migrated Umayyad polity and culture in Al-Andalus, Abd al-Rahman III was declared to be “the true Defender of the Faith, the legitimate caliph of the whole Islamic world, and the religious

⁸⁸ Thomas Ballantine Irving, *Falcon of Spain : a study of eighth-century Spain, with special emphasis upon the life of the Umayyad ruler ‘Abdurrahmān I, 756-788*, 4th ed. (Lahore: Sh. M. Ashraf, 1980). 1-4.

leader of all Muslims.”⁸⁹ Though many internal factions challenged the authority of this lineage, the Al-Andalus Empire flourished economically and culturally through policies of tolerance. Regarding the golden age of Al-Andalus, Irving writes:

Arab Spain was the epitome of refinement and courtesy. While the rest Europe lived in stables and slept on straw, the Andalusian had all the delicious luxuries known to Syria, Persia, and Byzantium: patios and fountains; balconies carved in wood and stone; arabesques traced on stucco and meta; frail columns and ornate chandeliers; furniture made of precious woods inlaid with even more precious mother-of-pearl ivory gold, silver, lapis lazuli or rock crystal; exquisite porcelains and priceless mosaics; jewelry and filigree; marble baths with hot and cold running water; libraries and schools. Perhaps it was through these Spanish Arabs and their passion for cleanliness and comfort that we derive our similar mania today.⁹⁰

Philosophy, math, science, architecture, art, music, literature, food and other cultural products are hailed as the luxurious result of intercultural mixing between Muslims, Christians and Jews by Irving.⁹¹

The golden age of tolerance maintained in Al-Andalus came to an end however in 1090 when the Almoravids, Berber tribesmen who established Moroccan polity and who had helped establish the neo-Umayyad Caliphate in Al-Andalus, took over the empire.⁹² The Almoravids attempted to institute their brand of Islam, which in turn provoked civil unrest and upheavals. At the same time that Muslim power was becoming increasingly divided, Christian powers gained momentum against the Islamic forces under the impetus of Pope Innocent III, which was carried out by the united crowns of Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon. The great cities of Cordoba in 1236, Valencia in 1238, and

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 152.

⁹¹ This is a position also held by Maria Rosa Menocal, *The ornament of the world : how Muslims, Jews, and Christians created a culture of tolerance in medieval Spain*, 1. ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).

⁹² Irving, *Falcon of Spain : a study of eighth-century Spain, with special emphasis upon the life of the Umayyad ruler 'Abdurrahmān I, 756-788*: 43.

Seville in 1248 fell to Catholic Spain in the *reconquista*, re-conquest, that ended in 1492 with the fall of Grenada that last Muslim held territory.⁹³ In January 1492, the ten year Granada war came to an end with a treaty that handed the city over to the Catholic Crown in return for a guarantee of certain rights to region's remaining Muslims, including religious tolerance. Many of these rights were however revoked by the Alhambra Decree of March 1492. By the end of the year, Jews then Muslims in 1501 were given the choice to convert or be expelled from Spain, bringing a discouraging end to what had been described as a culture of tolerance.

The *Falcon of Spain* and various other pamphlets written by Irving in Spanish and English were produced for a popular audience. In addition to being written in Spanish, the popular form of Irving's historical work on Al-Andalus made it particularly accessible to the growing number of Latino Muslims. However applicable the subject, language and style of Irving's writings were to Latino Muslim communities, it was his personal work with these communities that solidified his relationship to and influence on an emerging pan-Latino Muslim vision.

While still active, La Alianza Islamica had developed a partnership with Latino Muslim Carl Askia-Amin who had envisioned a national Latino Muslim organization. At the core of his unifying vision was the sense of a shared history. And it was this vision that animated his work with the Alianza and the Bism Rabbik Foundation. Though the Alianza no longer exists as a physical entity, its legacy is embodied within various Latino

⁹³ Ibid., 47

Muslim organizations and in digital cyberspaces with lives of their own.⁹⁴ The Bism Rabbik Foundation, founded by Askia-Amin, maintains a web-site in which various essays by the Alianza are archived including an article written by the Alianza Islamica titled “Malcom X = Malik Shabazz: Why Did He Change?”⁹⁵

In addition to Alianza essays, the site maintains a bibliography of academic works on Al-Andalus. At the top of the list is T.B. Irving’s *Falcon of Spain*. Irving had personally worked with Askia-Amin to help Latino Muslims reclaim the Islamic heritage within their Latino ethnicity. After Irving’s death on September 24, 2002, Askia-Amin published a letter on the *BismRabbik.org* site celebrating the scholar’s life and lamenting the lack of attention paid to his passing:

We need to remember our scholars. We need to be there for them with our concern, our Dua and our good wishes, especially in the last moments of their lives... Born in Preston, Ontario (Canada) in 1914 C.E., this professor, writer, translator and activist [and convert] is best known for his translation of the Qur'an entitled, *The Qur'an: First American Version* (1985 C.E.). The work is an attempt to make the English translation of the Qur'an more readable to an audience not used to the old style of English common in most translations... The cover of the 1993 C.E. edition of this translation features a photograph of the dome of the Great Umayyad Mosque of Cordoba, Spain. This provides a hint at another passion of his: Muslim Spain... Irving was considered a leading expert on the Arab-Islamic period in Spanish history, especially with his book: *Falcon of Spain*. [His numerous other publications include:] *Stories of Kalil and Dimna*; *The Mayas Own Words*, as well as various articles on Central American Literature... [During] Dr. Irving's last years, [his] son, Nicholas, moved from Guatemala to take care of his father... I visited him last year, while he was in a nursing home. Standing next to his bed, I felt each time I said Shahadah (the Islamic declaration of faith), he moved as though he was trying to respond to it. May Allah forgive him and grant him Paradise for his contributions to humanity.

⁹⁴ The Tri-State Latino Muslim Organization, founded by Rahim Ocasio’s son, has no physical address and organizes through Google Groups, an online social networking site. For more see Matthews, "The Latino Crescent: Latinos make a place for themselves in Muslim America."

⁹⁵ In an interview, I was informed that Askia-Amin had purchased land for a Muslim Cemetery through the Bism Rabbik Foundation, and had subsequently lost control over either the land and or the organization. Askia-Amin failed to respond to my numerous attempts to contact him.

Bism Rabbik's footnote:

As a personal friend of Dr. Irving, I feel a great loss and sadness, and will miss him. We have worked together over the years to establish Islam in the Spanish-speaking community. He has written other books not mentioned above, primarily text books, which he has placed in our possession for translation into Spanish. Over time, inshallah, we will translate and publish those books..... Carl Askia El-Amin, Executive Director⁹⁶

The Canadian scholar, convert to Islam and Latino enthusiast had devoted much of his academic and activist work to assist in the shaping of a Latino Muslim identity based on a particular history of Al-Andalus. A network between Rahim Ocasio's Alianza Islamica, Carl Askia-Amin's Bism Rabbik Foundation, and T.B. Irving's *Falcon of Spain* solidified a trajectory adopted by future Latino Muslim organizations to celebrate their Islamic-Latino heritage located within the history of Al-Andalus. "Today," proclaims the Mambo Dervish, "some Latinos feel they are reclaiming their Muslim heritage by returning to the religion. We felt Islam, within our culture, was a hidden treasure."⁹⁷

Conclusion

I have provided in this chapter a narrative of the origins of Latino Islam. Toward this end, I identified individual Latino conversions to Islam within the Moorish Science Temple, the Ahmadiyya, the NOI, the NOI's and Malcolm X's turn to Sunni orthodoxy and the Five Percenters. I also described Dar ul-Islam and the Islamic Party of North America as critics of these Blackamerican Muslim groups and as precursors to the first

⁹⁶ Bism Rabbik Foundation, Irving. http://www.bismrabbik.org/irving_en.htm Accessed on: August 19, 2011.

⁹⁷ Iqbal, "U.S: Hispanics and Islam." <http://abcnews.go.com/Exclusiva/story?id=3871913&page=1> Accessed on: August 18, 2011

LMO in the U.S., La Alianza Islamica. I then described La Alianza as a specifically Latino Muslim group that formed in response its experiences of ethnic marginalization from non-Muslim Latinos and non-Latino Muslims. In addition to shared experiences of ethnic marginalization, I examined the Alianza's introduction to Muslim Spain through a network of relationships between historian of Muslim Spain, T.B. Irving, Latino Muslim Carl Amin Askia and La Alianza Islamica. By tracing its relation to various formulations of Islam in America, my goal in this chapter has been to describe Latino Islam as grounded within shared experiences of ethnic marginalization, reversion to Islam and a shared reclamation of Latino culture as historically rooted within Muslim Spain. The following chapter examines these unifying strands within the emerging Latino Muslim reversion narrative genre.

CHAPTER 2

LATINO MUSLIM REVERSION STORIES

CONVERSION PATTERNS AND NARRATIVES IN THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

*So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth.
[Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people.
No change should there be in the creation of Allah .
That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know.*

- *Qur'an* 30:30
(Translation by Sahih International)

If anyone were to ask me when I became Muslim, I guess the only feasible answer would be that I was born Muslim, but just wasn't aware of it. We are all born into a state of Islam

- Themise Cruz in “Becoming a Muslim”

None of us saw her type out the email and click the send button. No one saw how masterful or slow the process had been; or whether or not she was as exuberant as the words on the screen might have been read: “This coming Sunday, brother Ismael has finally decided to take his *shahadah*, and also, a new sister named Griselda!” Marta’s email went on to stress the importance of making them feel welcome within the new family they were adopting and that everyone should bring something for the potluck. I brought a salad. I also helped film the event which turned out be even more dramatic than what I had expected. Ismael, an immigrant from Guatemala who lived alone, several states away from his adult children, was apparently having second thoughts. This wouldn’t be the first time he had backed out of a religious commitment. Ismael had

seriously considered becoming a Catholic priest in his youth. And now, after devoting almost two years of his life to learning about Islam from the Los Angeles Latino Muslim association, LALMA, Ismael's serious consideration of what it would be like to be a Muslim came to a climactic end. "I'm very grateful," began his long, apologetic, soft spoken and almost mumbled speech that left most of us present confused, especially Marta. Was he taking the shahadah or not? She had spent almost two years talking, sympathizing with, and guiding Ismael. She had notified the mosque's Imam of the shahadahs. The Imam had prepared certificates for the new Muslims to use to gain entry into the holy pilgrimage site in Mecca. The celebratory potluck had been organized, the people had arrived... the emails had been sent.

There would be at least one *shahadah*: Griselda did not disappoint. As we left the meeting room and headed down the stairs to the prayer hall, I talked to Ismael. He told me he wanted to learn more about other religions. Perhaps he would take a philosophy and religion course at a community college. He silently considered the idea as we took off our shoes and entered the main prayer hall. The Imam, Marta and Griselda stood at the front of the hall. The three of them faced the rest of us, about thirty present. She repeated the words in Arabic first, *lā 'ilāha 'ilā l-Lāh, Muḥammad rasūlu l-Lāh*. Then in Spanish, *No hay más dios que Alá y Muhammad es su profeta*. And lastly in English, *There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God*.

This chapter is an examination not of conversion experiences per se, but rather of the narrative explanation or retelling of those experiences. After further describing the

shahadah in Latino Islam, I discuss social scientific narratives of conversion in the American religious landscape. In particular, I identify several PEW studies and their conclusions regarding the decline of American Protestantism, the losses and gains in Catholic affiliates, and the impact of Latino and Muslim immigration into the U.S. These explanatory narratives of why general population groups convert to different religions provide a basis for further explanatory narratives regarding the rise in Latino conversion to Islam. One social scientific narrative argues that Latinos are converting to Islam because it offers a solution to or more appealing explanation of their experiences of race based discrimination. Another argues that changing demographic patterns put Latinos and Muslims in contact with one another in ways that have inevitably ended in Latinos converting to Islam. A strand of this narrative identifies the high number of Latinas that convert to Islam only after becoming engaged to or marrying a Muslim man as evidence that the conversions are caused by matrimony. Online Latino Muslim reversion stories that recount first person conversion experiences offer a different set of explanations. They explain conversion in terms of dissatisfaction with Catholic and Protestant beliefs and practices, as emerging from moments of existential crisis, and as resulting from their realization of Islam's truth and beauty.

Rather than provide my own explanation of why Latinos are converting to Islam, I address both Social scientific and Latino Muslim reversion stories as explanatory narratives that tell us more about mediated aesthetics and desires than about language independent realities. Both kinds of narratives seek to make Latino conversion to Islam understandable, and in doing so, frame the category as an anomaly in need of

explanation. Rather than offer objective explanations of why Latinos convert to Islam, Latino Muslim reversion stories seek to naturalize the Latino Muslim identity for their readers. They are a narrative response to the question of whether a Latino can be a Muslim and are addressed to non-Muslim Latino community members and potential converts to Islam, to non-Latino Muslims, and to other people such as journalists and academics who ask in amazement and confusion: “why are Latinos converting to Islam?” As a narrative genre, Latino Muslim reversion stories are framed by a particular theological understanding of the *shahadah*.

Reversion as a Naturalization of Latino Muslim Identity

The *shahadah* marks a change in direction. It is a fresh start, a wiping away of all previous sins. For Muslims, it's not that humans are born naturally predisposed toward sin; it's that we are forgetful. We need to be constantly reminded of the path we were meant to take, and the *shahadah* is a publically witnessed testimony of an individual's commitment to a disciplined life. After the *shahadah*, a new Muslim's life becomes structured by five daily prayers which serve as constant reminders. Prescribed by the Qur'an and exemplified by the Prophet, the prayers are a remedy to moral amnesia. Converts can only hope to become good Muslims through steady and constant reminders, *dhikr*, such as prayer.

After saying her *shahadah*, everyone present warmly greeted Griselda as if she had only just entered. The non-believer vanished and in her stead, a new honored guest graced the community with her presence. But Marta, who had now been a Latina convert

to Islam for almost three decades, knew that acceptance was not so simple. What else would the new convert have to do to prove she was a good Muslim worthy of full integration into the universal sister-brotherhood? How many five daily prayers, *khutbahs* (*sermons*), and conference attendances would it take to dispel all suspicions? Would she first have to memorize a long list of Qur'anic verses, master Arabic and an elaborate set of ritual movements? How do Muslims talk and dress, and how accurately could these be mimicked before it is no longer, "just a performance." How long must a convert live Islamically before they are fully accepted? Did Marta, thirty years into it, ever feel fully accepted? Was there more that she could have done?

In an announcement directed to Griselda, but declared loud enough for everyone to hear, Marta offered her a Spanish language translation of the Qur'an based off of Muhammad Assad's English translation. Griselda seemed to be more comfortable with English than with Spanish. But Marta personally knew that acceptance into a Muslim community could come at too high of a cost, their Latino identity. Perhaps it was only herself she was trying to prove it to, or perhaps it was to her new religious community, her old ethnic one or some combination of all three. Whatever the reasons, Marta felt she had to abandon certain aspects of her Latina identity, and the price was sometimes more than she could reasonably bear. Even if she had decided to change her style of dress, for example, what would she have replaced it with? Arab, Persian, Moroccan styles? And how could the replacement of one cultural dress with another be a reasonable requirement for acceptance into a global Muslim community, itself consisting of great diversities? There would indeed be a loss, but their language, Marta resolved, would not be part of

this sacrifice. Their Spanish language, sometimes spoken out of necessity other times for aesthetic or political reasons, represents a pillar in the great edifice of the Latino ethnic identity.

The *shahadah* is a testimony that must be witnessed by other Muslims. These witnesses comprise a communal gaze meant to help keep the new convert on the straight path. But sometimes, the gaze also serves to sustain binaries between converts whose “unrefined knowledge of Islam” is considered suspect by those who are born into Islam and who sometimes question if a Latino can be a good Muslim? Racialized conceptions of Latinos are often characterized as predisposed to pork eating, alcohol drinking, licentious activity and therefore as incapable of being good Muslims.

Perhaps the convert can never shed the suspicion of not being a real Muslim. Perhaps it is impossible to shed one’s nature and replace it with another. Nevertheless, even if this were indeed the case, Latinos who say their *shahadah* do not consider themselves converts because they do not believe they are changing to something new. Instead, Latino Muslims tell us, they say *shahadah* and revert to something previous. The Islamic theological concept of *fitrah*,⁹⁸ maintains that all humans are born predisposed with an innate belief in *tawhid*, the absolute oneness of God. The term ‘Islam’ means submission to the singular God. When a Latino says their *shahadah*, it is believed that they are returning to their original ontological *fitrah* state, which was, by this logic, Islamic. Because the term *reversion* denotes a return to an original or previous state, it is considered to be a more appropriate term than conversion, which denotes a change to

⁹⁸ Mohamed, Yasien. “The Interpretations of Fitrah” in *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, 1995), 129-151

something new. For Marta and other Latinos who embrace Islam, reversion provides a narrative in which they remember and re-embrace their formulation of human nature rather than abandon a Latino ethnicity.

The preference for the term reversion over conversion is manifested in many forms. A few Latino Muslims have replaced the term conversion with reversion in their everyday language. A more prominent usage of the phrase occurs however within an emerging narrative genre termed *reversion stories*. The website *HispanicMuslims.com* was designed by Juan Galvan to collect and publish reversion stories, including his own. *PiedadIslam.org* has a page titled “Muslim Reverts/Our Stories” which contains four reversion stories including one by its founder Khadijah Rivera. Additionally, the page contains links to three news articles that reference various reversion stories. *LALMA.org*'s home page has a sidebar titled “Latino Muslims revert Stories,” with links to six reversion stories, including Marta's. On the web, this narrative genre dominates public representations of Latino Muslims and has effectively replaced the prominence of the term conversion with reversion in the digital sphere. Before examining Latino Muslim reversion stories on LMO websites, I now turn to various PEW studies that read as explanations of how and why conversion occurs in America.

Survey Explanations of Conversion in America

Chapter two, “Changes in Americans’ Religious Affiliation,” of PEW’s seminal 2008 report on America’s religious landscape opens with the following summary statement: “Religion in the United States is often described as a vibrant marketplace

where individuals pick and choose religions that meet their needs, and religious groups are compelled to compete for members.”⁹⁹ A conception of religion in the U.S. as a marketplace filled with diverse religions for shoppers to choose from reduces the phenomenon to market analogies whose baseline interests are measured in membership quantities. Within this framework, we might begin to ask, as it is indeed asked, who are the winners and losers of changes in religious brand affiliation.¹⁰⁰ What are reasons for shifts in religious supply and demand? We might analyze these shifts in terms of successful or failed branding strategies. Many religious leaders might also adopt the marketplace approach to religion in American and seek to revitalize their religious brand by emphasizing and deemphasizing different aspects of their product, by designing new logos and websites, by retraining their “salespeople” and so on.¹⁰¹ If what we are after is measuring a religion’s success in terms of quantifiable brand loyalty, then an analysis of religion in the U.S. as a competitive marketplace seeks to understand how religions are made to stand out from the crowd and appeal to its potential customers. What makes a religious brand more appealing than others? And why are particular demographic groups abandoning certain brands while embracing others?

The question and explanations of why people convert, I argue, are therefore already framed within and shaped by the marketplace analogy. In this section, I identify

⁹⁹ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey - Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic February 2008*, p.22

¹⁰⁰ See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The churching of America, 1776-2005 : winners and losers in our religious economy*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005). And Robert Wuthnow, *After the baby boomers : how twenty- and thirty-somethings are shaping the future of American religion* (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁰¹ See Brian Goff and Michelle W. Trawick, "The Importance of Brand and Competition in Defining U.S. Religious Markets," *Southern Economic Journal* 74, no. 4 (2008).

Pew survey explanations of conversion in America with particular attention to Catholic, Latino and Muslim affiliation and the impact of immigration on America's religious landscape. Other significant reports have addressed similar Catholic, Latino or Muslim demographic phenomenon and in some instances have been more critically attentive to statistical problems that arise from misunderstandings and misframings of their subjects and questions. The Hispanic Churches in American Public Life (HCAPL) report published in 2003, for example, has provided valuable information that is perhaps not only more accurate than the Pew findings with regard to Latino religion in America, but has also provided critically important insights regarding the framing of Latino religion within such survey work.¹⁰² The Pew reports, though in some instances inaccurate in their findings, have been chosen for the following discussion not as a definitive understanding of conversion trends in America, but rather as an example of an institutionalized set of survey explanations that address Latino, Muslim and broader non-Latino and non-Muslim American populations. These explanatory narratives of conversion in America provide us with valuable but not unframed conclusions. More importantly to this study, the survey narratives also create a pattern for reading articulations and explanations of the question: why do Latinos convert to Islam?

The United States is, "on verge of becoming a minority Protestant country," the survey goes on to tell us.¹⁰³ According to the report, only 51 percent of Americans

¹⁰² See Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda "Hispanic Churches in American Public Life: Summary of Findings," (Notre Dame, IN: Latino Studies Institute at the University of Notre Dame, 2003). And Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda, *Latino religions and civic activism in the United States*.

¹⁰³ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey - Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic February 2008*

currently refer to themselves as Protestant and the number is projected to continuously decrease.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the Protestant brand is itself highly diverse in terms of denominational and political affiliations and does not comprise a monolithic whole in any efficacious manner. The largest single Protestant grouping in PEW reports are Baptists at 10.6 percent of America's total population. Changes in religious affiliation and immigration patterns are contributing to America's increasing religious diversity. About 28 percent of Americans abandon the religion they were brought up in. In terms of sheer head counts, the biggest loser of religious adherents in America has been its largest single unified religious institution, the Catholic Church. While 31 percent of Americans were raised as Catholics, only 24 percent of these still describe themselves as Catholic. This reduction of total adherents would be even greater if immigrants had not added to the number of Catholics in America, a significant number of which are Latinos.¹⁰⁵ According to the Pew findings, about a third of Catholics in America are currently Latinos.

Latino religion in the U.S. has been 'statistically' characterized as "deeply influenced by spirit-filled forms of Christianity."¹⁰⁶ Known as charismatic in the Catholic tradition and renewalist in the Protestant, spirit-filled forms of Christianity are identified as emphasizing direct experience with God in the form of the Holy Spirit, the third part of the Triune conception of God. Direct experiences with the Holy Spirit are followed with

¹⁰⁴ A survey by the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion found that the number of Protestants was closer to 60 percent in 2006. For more see Rodney Stark, "American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US," (2006).

¹⁰⁵ According to Pew's 2007 findings, Immigrants are also disproportionately represented among several world religions in the U.S., including Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism

¹⁰⁶ Pew Hispanic Center, *Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion*, 2007. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2007/04/25/changing-faiths-latinos-and-the-transformation-of-american-religion/> Accessed on: August 14, 2012.

emotional displays such as dancing, laughing, crying, convulsing, *glossolalia* (speaking in divine tongues), revelations from God, divine healing and other miraculous and spiritually edifying occurrences. According to Pew findings, over 50 percent of Hispanic Catholics identify themselves as charismatic, whereas only a little over 12 percent of non-Hispanic Catholics do so.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, the Pew study argues that more than 50 percent of Hispanics Protestants self identify with spirit-filled religion, whereas only 20 percent of non-Hispanic Protestants do so.¹⁰⁸ In addition to ‘spirit-filled’ influences, Latino religion in the U.S. has been described as consisting of “ethnic-oriented worship,” in which ethnically Latino religious communities are formed and whose practices include specifically Latino elements. Quinceañeras, a religious and cultural celebration of a young woman’s rite of passage on her fifteenth birthday, the religious rituals, dress use, food served and music danced to provides one set of examples of Latino ‘ethnic-oriented worship’ within the U.S.

A significant number of Latinos, 18 percent, leave the religion they were raised in. A majority of Latinos are Catholic, 67.6 percent. Nearly 70 percent of Latinos who convert to religions outside of the traditions they were raised in are former Catholics. About 51 percent of Latino evangelicals are converts, and 43 percent of these are former Catholics. More than 80 percent of Latinos who convert from one religion to another cite

¹⁰⁷ Unlike the HCAPL report, Pew’s 2007 findings regarding charismatic Catholics misframed its subject by failing to run the charismatic number against the born-again question and thus producing questionable findings.

¹⁰⁸ By including traditions like the Assemblies of God, Victory Outreach, the Apostolic Assembly, or an Independent/Non-Denominational Charismatic church in addition to Pentecostal/Charismatic options within the survey, the HCAPL found that the number of Hispanics Protestants that self identify with spirit-filled religion is closer to about 64 percent of the U.S. Latino Protestant population. See Espinosa, Elizondo and Miranda (2003), p.16.

“the desire for a more direct, personal experience with God” as an important reason for the conversion. 48 percent of Latino converts report coming into contact with their new religion through relatives, 26 percent through friends, 14 percent from members of the religion they converted to and 2 percent report first learning about their new religion through mass media such as radio or television.¹⁰⁹

Muslims in America represent a diverse set of groups consisting of different beliefs, practices, traditions and languages. Globally, 87-90 percent of Muslims identify with Sunni Islam, whereas only 50 percent of Muslims in the U.S. do so. Another 22 percent of Muslims in America say they are “just Muslim, without any particular affiliation;” 16 percent Shia; and 5 percent identify with other traditions.¹¹⁰ Muslims in America originate from at least 67 different countries, including the U.S. 37 percent of Muslims who immigrate to America come from Arabic-speaking countries in the Middle East and North Africa, 27 percent from the South Asian region including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, 8 percent from European countries and 6 percent from other parts of Africa. 16 percent of America’s current immigrant Muslim population arrived prior to the 1980’s, 23 percent in the 1980’s, 33 percent in the 1990’s, and 28 percent in the 2000’s. Racially, 38 percent of all Muslims in America describe themselves as White; 26 percent as Black; 20 percent as Asian and 16 percent as other or mixed race. In contrast to the total Muslim population in America, 56 percent of Muslims that are born in America describe themselves as racially Black, some of whom additionally describe themselves as ethnically Latino. Latinos represent 4 percent of all

¹⁰⁹ Findings from Pew, the remaining 10 percent report Self-discovery/other/don’t know

¹¹⁰ Pew reports that 7 percent of the survey opted to not answer this question

Muslims in America and 8 percent of African American Muslims. The majority of converts to Islam in the U.S. are African Americans. Almost 25 percent of all Muslims in America are converts, and most convert from some form of Christianity.¹¹¹ 58 percent of converts to Islam cite religious reasons such as “the truth or appeal of Islam’s teachings, the belief that Islam is superior to Christianity, or that the religion just ‘made sense’ to them,” for their conversion. Another 18 percent cited relational reasons such as marriage to a Muslim for their conversion. The survey question and explanations of why people convert to and away from Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam and other forms of Latino religiosity are framed within and shaped by the marketplace analogy. In addition to providing us with valuable, though not unframed, explanations of conversion in America, survey narratives by highly regarded institutions such as the PEW Charitable Trusts legitimize and crystallize a pattern for reading articulations and explanations of the question: why do Latinos convert to Islam?

From Survey Explanations of Conversion to Latino Modes of Contact with Islam

Latino Muslims have themselves provided survey and explanatory narratives of why Latinos convert to Islam. However, I argue that these should instead be considered narratives of the modes in which Latinos come into contact with Islam. Within this framework, I identify and describe spatial, relational, mediated, and emotional modes of Latino contact with Islam. My goal in distinguishing between explanations of conversion

¹¹¹ Pew reports: “Two-thirds (67%) of all converts to Islam in the U.S. came from Protestant churches, 10% came from Catholicism, and just 5% from other religions.

on the one hand and descriptions of modes of contact on the other is to frame the Latino Muslim narrative genre as itself a mode of identity formation.

The Latino American Dawah Organization (LADO) has been conducting an ongoing Internet Survey of Latino Muslims (SLM) on its website. The SLM project is introduced on the website in the following statement:

LADO is conducting an ongoing survey on Latino Muslims in the United States. Statistics about Latino Muslims are difficult to find. We are interested in answering many questions about the Latino Muslim community. Questions such as: Are there more men or women Latino Muslims? In which states, do most Latino Muslims live? Are most Latino Muslims immigrants or native born?¹¹²

The digital survey consists of input fields and drop down menus asking several types of questions. The first set of questions regards the participant's *general information* (e.g. name, email, date of birth, languages spoken, number of children, etc.). The second regards *Latinos and Muslims* and asks the participant to estimate the number of mosques, Muslims and Latino Muslims in their area, to state whether or not they feel like part of their local Muslim community, and to check all that best describes their madhab/sect (the following fields are made available: Sunni, Shia, Sufi, Other, Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, Hanbali, Salafi, Modernist, Reformist, Jafari, Ismaili, and Zaydi). A *Latino Converts* set of questions asks what year the participant took their *shahadah*, what their previous religious affiliation was, whether their family accepted or rejected their conversion to Islam, what other religions they researched before converting to Islam, and why did they convert to Islam (this is left as an open input field where participants can type any and as many words as they'd like). LADO has not yet published the SLM's current findings.

¹¹² LADO.org, Survey on Latino Muslims. <http://latinodawah.org/services/latinosurvey.html> Accessed on: August 10, 2012.

However, in an interview published by *Islamic Horizons*, a publication by the Islamic Society of North America, the following information was released:

... there are more Latina than Latino Muslims, 60 percent of all Latino Muslims who completed the survey in 2006 were women, California has the most Latino Muslims, Mexican Americans represent the community's largest percentage, and most Latino Muslims were born in America. However, immigrants make up a significant percentage of the community... most Latinos Muslims are married and have more than one child. As is true of most Latino families, Latino Muslim families are traditionally larger than their American counterparts, which helps explain the community's rapid growth. It is not only about individuals converting, it is about entire families embracing Islam. According to the SLM project, more than 90 percent of Latino Muslims are converts.¹¹³

These initial findings provide us with a rough sketch of Latino Muslims as consisting of mostly converts and women. Additionally, the SLM findings may suggest that many conversions include entire families and not just isolated individuals, and that there are significant immigrant converts in addition to Latinos born in America. The 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by PEW also identified the significance of immigration on Muslim and Catholic religion in America. According to the survey, roughly two-thirds of America's Muslim populations are immigrants. The survey also found that roughly ten percent of all Americans are former Catholics, yet the number of Catholics in America has remained relatively stable due to high immigration and birth rates. The reason Catholic affiliation has not declined more dramatically in the United States despite the great loss of affiliates is due in large part to Latino immigration into the nation.¹¹⁴ Both the national PEW reports and the SLM project identify the importance of immigration on Latino religion. According to these demographic narratives, "...constant movement

¹¹³ Galvan, Juan. *Who are Latino Muslims?* Islamic Horizons Magazine. July/August 2008, Pg. 26-30.

¹¹⁴ U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic. The Pew Research Center. February, 2008. <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>
Accessed on: October 3, 2011. 6.

characterizes the American religious marketplace.”¹¹⁵ Explanations of Latino conversion to Islam thus include immigrant and family dynamics within a volatile American religious landscape.

Another set of theories as to why Latinos convert to Islam was produced by a Latino Muslim on the Internet by the blogger name Khalil Al-Puerto Rikani in an article titled “Latino Conversion to Islam: From African-American/Latino Neighbors to Muslim/Latino Global Neighbors.” Rikani describes the article as employing social scientific methods and is itself referenced in the academic work of Hjamil A. Martinez-Vazquez. In it, the growth of Latino Muslim populations is explained as “the result of multiple conditions and situations over the course of time” that include: (1) Puerto Rican/African-American interactions; (2) the Internet; (3) Latinos living among immigrant Muslims; (4) prisons; and (5) marriage.¹¹⁶ I agree with Rikani’s identification of the importance of interactions between Latinos on the one hand and Blackamericans, the Internet, immigrant Muslims, prison and marriage experiences on the other. In my estimation however, these are necessary interactions but not sufficient explanations of why Latinos convert to Islam. Instead, I argue that these should be considered as modes of contact rather than as explanations of why Latinos convert to Islam.

In addition to the spaces in which Latinos come into contact with Islam discussed in the introduction, it is important to consider the relational modes of contact as well. Many Latinos start learning about Islam from acquaintances, friends or relatives before

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁶ Martínez-Vázquez, *Latina/o y Musulmán : the Construction of Latina/o identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States*: 15.

converting to Islam. At a Latino Muslims gathering in New Jersey, at least one non-Muslim Latino guest was brought to the event by a co-worker. Another individual recounted the story of how his parents converted to Islam after seeing the change in his life. In addition to co-workers and family members, many Latino Muslims first become deeply interested in Islam only after becoming interested in their future spouses. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that such relational encounters necessarily lead to conversion for several reasons. First, according to Islamic principles, Muslim women are forbidden from marrying non-Muslim men; Muslim men may however marry non-Muslim women but cannot force their brides to convert to Islam. There is to be no compulsion in matters of religion. There are indeed several Latina women who do not convert to Islam, though married to Muslim men.¹¹⁷ Secondly, in light of such counterexamples, the explanation of Latinas converting to Islam as the result of marriage is far too reductive and fails to account for the other religious and non-religious reasons converts have conveyed to various audiences. A more accurate interpretation of Latina marriages to Muslim men is as a relational mode of encounter with Islam rather than as a causal reason for converting to Islam. Of the various relational modes of contact between acquaintances, co-workers, family members and spouses, the latter may indeed require unique consideration given the question of how the couple's children are to be raised religiously. One Latino Muslim whose wife continues to identify as an atheist seven years into their marriage, nonetheless described the partnership as not extraordinarily difficult. She's fine with their children receiving an Islamic education, so long as they are not

¹¹⁷ Interviews in California and New Jersey

forced to accept it as their religion. Marriage is a relational mode in which Latinos come into contact with Islam. Through such contact Latinos become increasingly familiar with Islam but do not always convert.

When examining interpersonal modes of contact, the highly mediated characteristic of communication within such contact should be considered.¹¹⁸ For example, a conversation between two people that takes place on the streets of New York is spoken and interpreted through the lenses of media productions that the individuals involved are already familiar with. The *dawah* speaker or propagator of Islam might draw from Islamic commentaries, pamphlets, instructional videos and even popular culture as examples. In some instances, communicators of Islam draw on Spanish language media productions to discuss the religion. One prominent example is T.B. Irving's *El Falcón de España*, "The Falcon of Spain." Originally published through the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala in Spanish, the monograph chronicles the story of how Abd al-Rahman I fled the Abbasid empirical powers to establish an Umayyad Caliphate in Cordoba, Southern Spain. A Canadian-born scholar of both Arabic and Spanish language, Irving was himself a convert to Islam. Having worked extensively within Spanish-speaking communities both in Guatemala and in the United States, Irving's work was directed to a popular audience, and his narratives of Islamically rooted Latino culture have become a powerful medium through which Islam is expressed and understood by

¹¹⁸ For more on hypereality, i.e. "highly mediated" forms of understanding, communicating and interpreting, see Umberto Eco, *Travels in hyper reality : essays*, A Harvest book (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986). and Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*, Body, in theory (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

many Latino Muslims. Other media forms used to communicate Islam include graphic art, pamphlets, film and music.

Though it is possible that Latinos become familiar with Islam through Muslim-produced media, it is far more likely that first encounters are made through non-Muslim mediations of the religion. In the book and documentary film by Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, the negative portrayal of Muslims in popular films such as *True Lies*, *Back to the Future*, and Disney's *Aladdin* are documented.¹¹⁹ In his book, *Covering Islam*, Edward Said documents the negative portrayal of Muslims in news media.¹²⁰ And in his article *Let us be Moors: Islam, Race, and Connected Histories*, Hisham Aidi documents the orientalist portrayal of Muslims in *El Clon*, an extremely popular *telenovela* produced by Telemundo.¹²¹ The films, news media and Spanish-language soap operas documented in these critiques have a much wider audience than the critiques themselves. And for many Americans, including Latinos, these negative portrayals inform much of their understanding of Islam. Face-to-face conversations on Islam between Latinos and Muslims are thus highly mediated, i.e. they are conversations largely framed by the tropes and stereotypes employed by various mass media sources. This may explain why many of the initial questions that Latinos ask of Islam reflect the biases of Western mass media: why do Muslim men wear turbans and women veils, does Islam promote

¹¹⁹ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel bad Arabs : how Hollywood vilifies a people*, Rev. and updated ed. (Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press, 2009).

¹²⁰ Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam : how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*, Rev. ed. (London: Vintage, 1997).

¹²¹ Hisham D. Aidi, "Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and "Connected Histories", " *Souls* 7, no. 1 (2005): 38.

terrorism, and aren't all Muslims Arab? In turn, much of Muslim-produced and or promoted media seeks to positively address these very same questions.

One such Latino Muslim production includes the musical work of the Mujahideen Team. The CD's cover art is an interpretive expression of a previous media product: the widely popular images of Che Guevara produced from Korda's "matrix" photograph.¹²² Mimicking the revolutionary Che Icon, the faces of both M-Team members are in black and white negatives on a revolutionarily red background. The song "Amerikkkan Me" mixes trumpet and conga drum sounds onto a hip-hop beat and PuertoRonic (Arabic-Spanglish-Ebonics) vocals whose lines begin with: "Ghetto *poeta*, *salen* cries *de mi tierra*, revolutionary blood of Che Guevara." Visual and sound images of Latin American revolutionary Che Guevara and "PuertoRonic" vocals rhythmically used in the song reference both Latino culture and Islamic religion. Within a backdrop stylized to signify Cuban landscapes and while wearing Islamic prayer beads over their baggy clothes, the M-Team artists rap: "chupacabra, Pedro Navaja, M-Team serving Allah." These images and phrases are used as signifiers of Latino culture and Islamic religion in order to make the argument that not all Muslims are Arab, and that in fact, the very M-Team members being listened to are themselves Latino and Muslim at the same time.

A final mode to be considered is the emotional manner in which Latinos come into contact with Islam. In his article "Jihadis in the Hood: Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror," Hisham Aidi argues that:

¹²² David Kunzle and University of California Los Angeles. Fowler Museum of Cultural History., *Che Guevara : icon, myth, and message* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, 1997). 25, 56-61.

At root, the attraction of African-American, Latino, Arab, South Asian and West Indian youth to Islam, and movements that espouse different brands of political Islam, is evidence of Western states' failure to integrate minority and immigrant communities, and deliver basic life necessities and social welfare benefits-policy failures of which Islamic groups (and right-wing Christian groups) are keenly aware.¹²³

The reference to Latino attraction to Islam is largely drawn from Aidi's work with the Nuyorican-founded Alianza Islamica organization. Here, endemic social and economic problems are recognized as dissatisfactions with the world as Latinos experience it. Finding no appeal in other proposed solutions, a politicized version of Islam in America becomes attractive to the Latino who has lost hope in other activist movements. At the seventh annual Hispanic Muslim Day held in New Jersey, one individual gave a speech in which he recollected his introduction to Islam. He was tired of fighting, physically and politically. But when told that Islam was just about believing in the oneness of God, he responded, "I can dig that" in a slow, slurred and almost whispered tone. This particular individual had been a part of various social justice struggles during the 1960s and 70s and had concluded that these movements were unsuccessful at best. The simplicity of the manner in which Islam was presented to him was appealing, but the real allure was in the hope for a better future. Social justice, he and many other Americans came to conclude, could only be achieved through faith-based activism. Emotional dissatisfaction with other political ideologies is therefore yet another mode in which Latinos come into contact with Islam.

¹²³ Hishaam D. Aidi, "Jihadis in the Hood: Race, Urban Islam and the War on Terror," *Middle East Report* 224, no. Autumn (2002). 36-43.

Doctrinal and existential dissatisfaction with previous religious beliefs and practices also serve as emotional modes of contact. Some of the most prominent doctrinal dissatisfactions with Christianity expressed by Latino Muslims include: the veneration of Saints and images, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the general dismissal of modern scientific knowledge. Latino Muslims that come from a Catholic background point out that in Islam, prayer is connected directly from the individual to God, no mediating priest, saint or image is necessary. Mediators of religion such as these have been interpreted as subjects and objects of corruption in Latin American countries and more recently in North America as well. Latinos of both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds also acknowledge frustration with the logic, or perceived lack thereof, of Trinitarian doctrines. "How can I believe that one plus one plus one equals one, it just doesn't make sense, it never did," I was once told. Evangelical religion is described by many converts as promoting a broader disregard for reason and scientific knowledge in general. Claiming that evangelical conversions are based on emotional whims, some Latino Muslims contrast what they understand to be the sudden conversion of evangelical Christians to the long, highly researched and rationally evaluated conversion process to Islam. Though these dissatisfactions with various Latino Christianities may very well constitute the emotional mode in which Latinos first come into contact with Islam, the contrasting references also serve to identify themselves as who they are not. By pointing out how they use to be but no longer are Catholic or Protestant, Latino Muslims are able to tell us who they are now. Doctrinal and existential dissatisfaction with Latino Christianities, and other spatial, relational, mediated, and emotional modes of Latino

contact with Islam are therefore also, like Latino Muslim reversion stories, modes of identity formation.

Latino Muslim Reversion Stories on HispanicMuslims.com

The website *HispanicMuslims.com* was designed by Juan Galvan (who is now also the president of LADO) with the purpose of publishing Reversion Stories by Latino Muslims. These stories serve as *dawah* for non-Muslims to learn about Islam and as technologies for producing individual and communal Latino Muslim identities. The site is made up of nine web pages: Home, About Islam, Our Mission, Reversion Stories, Articles, Humor, Photos, Links and Need Help. Each page provides some textual content, a set of links and YouTube video at the foot of each page. The “Home” page introduces the upcoming publication *Latino Muslims: Our Journeys to Islam* and provides a link to another of Galvan’s websites, *LatinoMuslim.com*. This site is dedicated solely to promoting the *Latino Muslims: Our Journeys to Islam* publication and provides detailed guidelines for submitting Latino Muslim reversion stories:

Guidelines

Stories should have a beginning, middle, and an ending. Make us cry, choke us up, make us laugh or say "Mash'Allah" at the end of your story.

Don't worry if you're not the most articulate writer. We will edit for grammar and translate your work to English as needed. Submissions can be up to four pages.

Please email your conversion story to us through our "Contact Us" page. Questions, comments, and suggestions are strongly welcomed.

Story ideas

Your story is important! What can Latinos, Muslims, and non-Muslims learn from you? You may want to consider the following questions as a good starting point for your

story.

What you may want to mention in your story:

1. Background information.

- Where were you born?
- Where did you grow up?
- What was life growing up?
- What were your friends like?
- What kinds of things did you enjoy doing?
- Do you have a high school diploma? Any college?

2. About your family, friends, and current life.

- Are you married?
- Do you have kids?
- Where do you now live?
- How did your family and friends react to your conversion?
- How do they deal with your conversion now?
- What do you do for a living?
- What are your goals? In Islam? Family? Education?

3. About your experiences with your previous religion.

- Did anything unique prompt you to reconsider your religion?
- Why did you leave your previous religion?
- Why did you decide to embrace Islam rather than another Christian religion?
- Why did you embrace Islam? What about Islam did you find attractive?

4. About your experiences with your new religion.

- What can Muslims and non-Muslims (Latino and non-Latino) learn from you?
- What was most difficult about embracing Islam?
- Any interesting experiences/stories as a Latino Muslim?
- How have you benefited from Islam?
- How can others benefit from Islam?¹²⁴

Though these guidelines may help encourage Latino Muslims to write their reversion stories, they also have the effect of producing a homogenous structure to the genre.

¹²⁴ Galvan, Juan. "Submit Your Story," LatinoMuslim.com http://latinomuslim.com/submit_story.html
Accessed on: August 14, 2012.

HispanicMuslims.com had been the original publication medium for the collection of stories. Now that print has been chosen over the Internet, many of the stories have been pulled off of the website. Nevertheless, eight stories have been left on the “Reversion Stories” page of *HispanicMuslims.com* and it is to these that I now turn to.

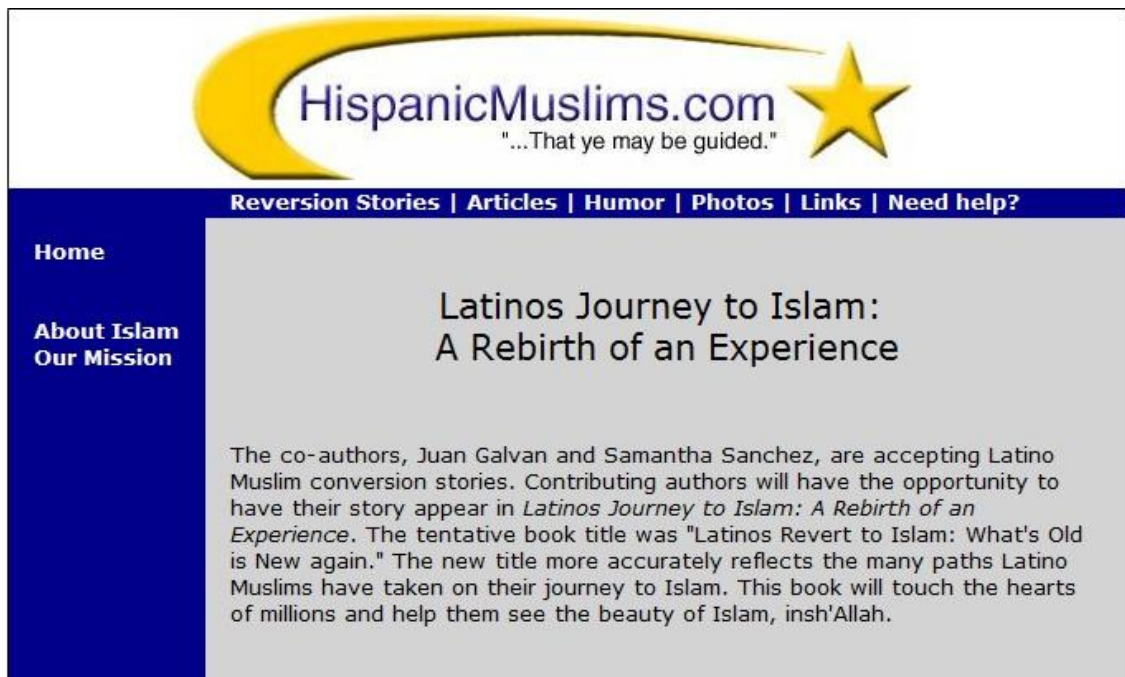


Figure 3.1. Screenshot of HispanicMuslims.com website. The website was designed by LADO president Juan Galvan primarily to collect and digitally publish Latino Muslim Reversion Stories. < <http://www.hispanicmuslims.com> >

“You are probably wondering what reversion means,” writes Galvan as an introduction to the “Reversion Stories” page:

“... Well, we Muslims believe people are born Muslims. Our parents and society are what make us choose other religions. We believe people are born in a state of fitrah. Fitrah is our natural tendency to believe in one God. Consequently, by embracing Islam, you return to your natural disposition.”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Galvan, Juan. “Reversion Stories,” HispanicMuslims.com <http://hispanicmuslims.com/stories/> Accessed on: August 2, 2012

Bellow this explanation, there are eight links to individual reversion stories titled:

[“How Allah Found Me in Texas](#) (by Juan Galvan)

[A Chicano's Story of Becoming Muslim](#) (by Ali)

[From the Watchtower to the Minaret](#) (by Raphael Narbaez, Jr.)

[Conversion Story: Walter 'Abdul-Walee' Gomez](#) (by Walter 'Abdul-Walee' Gomez)

[From Juan Alvarado to Shafeeq Abdullah Muhammad](#) (by Juan Alvarado)

[Elizabeth's Testimony](#) (by Elizabeth)

[How I Became a Muslim - Monica](#) (by Monica)

[Becoming Muslim](#) (by Themise Cruz)”¹²⁶

In the following, I describe prominent narrative themes within the eight reversion stories on *HispanicMuslims.com*. Each story begins with background information on the reverting protagonist. “My background:” begins one narrative, “I am a Mexican-American who comes from a modest background.”¹²⁷ Of the eight reverts, five are men and three are women. Only one is described as an immigrant (from Ecuador), two as Mexican-American, one as Salvadorian, another as having a “Latin American descent,” and three others do not reveal their ethnic identity in their narrative. The reverts’ religious backgrounds are also diverse: five of the eight were Catholic at some point, one converted from Catholicism to “Protestantism” before converting to Islam, another left their Catholic religion to experiment with “Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Santeria and various New Age or Occult movements.” Of the three that were never Catholic, one had been a Seventh Day Adventist, another a Jehovah Witness, and another had practiced an unspecified form of Christianity. Through such background information, the reader can

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

begin to form a rough sketch of the protagonist's character, their history, dissatisfactions with the present and hopes for the future.

Usually before coming into contact with Islam, the reversion story's hero describes a feeling of dissatisfaction with their life. Several of the reverts reported not knowing what the meaning of life was before converting to Islam. One described having an "Allah shaped hole," that is, a missing element in her life that only Allah could have filled.¹²⁸ All of the reverts describe an increasing dissatisfaction with Christianity. "What is the purpose of life," asked one revert of Christian doctrines, "how can the Father be the Son? Why can't God just forgive anyone He wants? What happens to babies who die before baptism?"¹²⁹ After expressing their dissatisfaction with Christianity in the narratives, the reverts come into contact with Islam. Contact is identified as having an eventual or immediate, but in either case, decisive effect on the events that follow. Three encountered Muslims in college, another was given a copy of the Qur'an while they "sampled the weed" at a dealers house, another met a Muslim woman while being filmed for a movie, and another had a friend who converted to the NOI after several gang related near death experiences.

Contact with Islam, in its various narrative forms, is then usually followed by a period of self-education which involves either reading the Qur'an, researching the history of Islam in Spain or having theological conversations with Muslims. The education process either leads to or serves as a hermeneutic for understanding the *crisis* in the Latino Muslim reversion narrative. Of the eight narratives, four recount either near death

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

experiences or having had someone close to them die. It is moments of crisis, some more dramatic than others, that the narrative's protagonists make their final decisions to embrace Islam. At this point, the weight of the narrative has built up, culminated in a crisis event and is brought to bear in a rationalization of Islam's appeal. Islam is described in reversion narratives as appealing because it is true, because it brings peace to the hero, it adopts the revert into a universal brotherhood, because it is beautiful, because it reveals "God's mercy," it preserves Latino reverence for Jesus and Mary, explains the cause and prescribes solutions to social problems, and because it is a clear expression of Latino faith. The narratives conclude with either a dramatic account of the protagonist's *shahadah*, proclamation of faith, or go on to briefly describe their life after the *shahadah*. One narrative jokingly describes the *shahadah* as a Muslim baptism, another writes that there are no words describe the experience, another recounts the *takbir* (God is greater) chants, hugs, and tears that followed a profound sense of redemption. One revert wondered if they would be a good Muslim after the *shahadah*, another questioned why they wrote the story concluding that it might be helpful to other Latino reverts to Islam, another described Islam as a cure from their previous lifestyle, another said converts have more faith than most Muslims who are born into Islam and that they shouldn't be discriminated against, and another described life after their *shahadah* as an ongoing struggle, a personal *jihad*.

The structure of Latino Muslim reversion stories thus follows a generally uniform narrative pattern: an introduction to the protagonist's character, a description of building dissatisfaction with their life as introduced, contact with and education on Islam, crisis,

rationalization, *shahadah* and sometimes life after the *shahadah*. This pattern is read, studied and reproduced by other Latino Muslims who write their own reversion stories, tell them to friends and family members, and report them to journalists. They are both a tool for propagating Islam and for designing a narrative of self and of community.

Reversion Stories by LMO Leaders

Latino Muslim reversion stories are prominent among various LMOs including PIEDAD, LADO and LALMA. They seek to naturalize a Latino Muslim identity in order to propagate Islam to Latinos and to solidify individual and communal Latino Muslim identities through a shared narrative pattern. As examples of Latino Muslim reversion stories and as introductions to the founders and or leaders of the three most prominent LMOs still active, I have included three full unedited reversion stories by Khadijah Rivera (founder of PIEDAD), Juan Galvan (president of LADO and author of *LatinoDawah.org*, *HispanicMuslims.com* and *LatintoMuslim.com*), and by Marta Felicitas Khadija Galedary (co-founder and acting president of LALMA).

Reversion Narrative #1

My Hispanic Muslim Legacy: by Khadijah Rivera

What Islam means to me: To be qualified is to know GOD?

I was raised as a Roman Catholic from a very strict and practicing Hispanic family. To even think of leaving the aristocratic Catholics was considered a sin. Actually having been raised by nuns in private schools taught me that one did not have the luxury of questioning the Bible or even the Catechism that was engraved in our memory banks as children. I once had the audacity to ask my teacher why we did not study the Bible; her answer was a blunt, “You might misinterpret it.” As an adult I once asked the very same question of priest, and once again I received a similar response. In other words, they had

led me to believe that only qualified officials of the church teach and understand “God’s Word.” How sad, I thought; soon after I began to search for an answer.

The strongest component of Catholicism was the belief in the Trinity. It believed that there were three gods of equal weight in the heavens, and that upon birth we inherited a mortal sin. So, right from the start we were sinners and needed repentance or a sacrament to clear away this sin. As a parent it was hard not to question if the smile of innocence behind an infant could hide a deadly sin. What if the infant died before performing the Catholic rite of Baptism? Did that mean he/she would go to hell? And if Jesus Christ had not died in the cross for the sins of man, did that mean that we would all have fire as our ultimate destiny?

Reverting to Islam would be complicated by my childhood training that Jesus Christ was my savior and salvation. To pray to anyone but him would be blasphemy. I therefore studied several religions when I left my church and its rigid teachings. But they were all Christian and not much different from the original one. Of course they all believed that the papal aristocracy was nonsense and I praised them for that. But they could not justify Jesus Christ in a sensible nor logical manner. Point in fact: ask three Christians of different denominations to explain the Trinity or better yet, ask them if Jesus is the son of GOD. Ask them what version of the Bible they read, and you will also find astonishing variations. I actually turned away from religion completely for many years and became a leftist. I left the religious dogma and found a replacement.

A replacement to religious dogma?

In my college years I opened up to a radical way of saving the world. I believed that if we could promote change in the political realm, then we could bring equality and economics that would ultimately change and save the physical world. I was an American activist going from marches to study groups of Dialectical Materialism, Maoism and Socialism. All this journey proved was that I was still empty – for it left a gap in my very existence. I had one thing in common with the Christians and one thing opposite the ones I was attempting to emulate: “I loved God!” I just needed a vehicle to surrender.

For years I watched closely the events in Iran and yet the student movement that I was following could not afford me a way to make change in that country. I joined student marches and met with like-minded idealists. While we sat in brainstorm sessions planning our next poster spread in Manhattan, an old man sitting on a rug in Paris dictated a revolution. He told the dictator Shah of Iran to leave because he was coming back to Iran – and guess what, he left! I began to study this man’s political assessment, but the more I read about what he proposed to resolve in Iran the more I understood the religion of Islam. At no time was I looking for a new religion as I was a diehard Christian who was not even practicing. But this became a turning point in my life. I had to evolve as a human, in order to evolve as a Muslim.

Surrender to GOD

On October 22, 1983 I took my vows of submission as a Sunni Muslim with sincerity to ONE GOD. *Allahu Akbar* (God is great). I have been a practicing Muslim for over twenty-two years and have never regretted it. In fact, in the face of tyranny and prejudice I have become stronger and more resolved to not only raise a family of Muslims but also to become a *Da'iee* and spread the good word [of Islam] among Hispanics. After the tragedy of 9/11, many Muslims removed their veils for fear of assaults. I was destined to die as a Muslim if need be, for my only defense was faith! *Alhamdulillah* (all praise be to God), neither did I remove the veil nor hide. I stood up and went on live television to speak to Hispanics on Telemundo on the noted Christina Show from Miami. I had become a modest but resonant Muslimah. Rather than rollover, I made an uproar about the injustices done to Muslims.

The faith of Islam has brought me strength in the face of adversity and an inner peace which I never had. It was not difficult for my extended family to accept my new found faith. But for my immediate family it was very difficult. I lost all my non-Muslim friends that I had grown up with, but found an extended family in Islam. I no longer pray to a saint in order to request intervention with Jesus Christ. I now understand that if I follow the true teachings of all the prophets and the Ten Commandments that there can only be ONE GOD. "Thou shalt not bear false gods before me." Therefore, my destiny with Islam is fulfilled. I worship Allah directly, as it should be.¹³⁰

Reversion Narrative #2

When Faith Is Shaken, selection from *How Allah Found Me in Texas* By Juan Galvan

In high school, I received a jolt to my long-held belief when a Christian friend told me that the Holy Trinity was not true and that Jesus was not God. "He was wrong" I told myself. Jesus had to be God. God and humanity were disconnected by the sin committed by Adam and Eve. God sent his only 'begotten' son to die because He loved us so much. Because only God forgives, Jesus had to be God. I even had the Bible quotes to prove it! Indeed, being a devout Roman Catholic Christian, I have read almost the entire Bible. In high school, I was a lecturer, usher, Eucharistic minister, and CCD teacher. I am the godfather for a nephew and a niece. The idea that Jesus was God made much sense.

I am a Mexican-American who comes from a modest background. I spent my adolescent and teenage years in such small Texas Panhandle towns as Quitaque, Turkey, Lakeview, and Memphis. None of them has a mall, a movie theater, or a McDonald's. Memphis, Texas, population 2,300, proudly proclaims itself "The Cotton Capital of the World." In Memphis, if you hear a fire truck or police car, either your neighbor's house is

¹³⁰ Khadijah Rivera, "My Hispanic Legacy," *The Latino Muslim Voice* October-December(2009).
<http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k9.html> Accessed on: August 14, 2012.

on fire or your neighbor is being arrested. Growing up in small communities gave me much appreciation for the simplicity in God's creations.

I graduated from Memphis High School in Memphis, Texas in 1994. I did well in high school and would attend Texas Tech University in Lubbock. In 1998 I began attending the University of Texas at Austin. I graduated with a bachelor's degree in MIS in December 2001. Not bad for a kid who had to hoe cotton most of his junior high and high school summers to pay for his clothes and school supplies! My dad was a cotton ginner. Now, he is a custodian at a junior high school in Pampa, Texas. I had eight siblings, but in 2000 my 17-year old sister died in a car wreck.

I have always had respect for other religions. I would often attend other Christian churches and join interfaith Bible study groups. While in one such group, I told my friend Chris that I was a Catholic. Chris blatantly told me that the Catholic Church was "a false doctrine." As you can imagine, I defended my religion. Chris accused me of worshipping Mary, Saints, and the Pope. I argued that we only revere them. Around this time, I happened to see a man praying. His knees, hands, and forehead were touching the ground, and he was barefoot. After he finished praying, I introduced myself to him. He said his name was Armando, and that he was a Muslim. I thought to myself: "Ok, freaky, you're Muslim. You can't be Muslim. What's this Hispanic guy doing praying to Allah?" He later told me that Spain was Muslim for over 700 years and that thousands of Spanish words have Arabic roots. The ruins of mosques with Qur'anic writings have been found in Cuba, Mexico, Texas and Nevada.

Most importantly, Armando spoke to me about Islam. I began to realize that my reverence for Mary and Saints was much more than mere reverence. Chris was right. However, we were both worshipping Jesus! Armando said that Jesus was only a prophet and that nothing and no one is worthy of worship but Allah. Allah literally means "The God" in English and "El Dios" in Spanish. Muhammad (pbuh) perfected religion. Islam is the true, universal religion of God.

Many of my questions were answered! What is the purpose of life? How can the Father be the Son? Why can't God just forgive anyone He wants? What happens to babies who die before baptism? In Qur'an 5:83, Allah states: "And when they (who call themselves Christian) listen to what has been sent down to the Messenger, you see their eyes overflowing with tears because of the truth they have recognized. They say: 'Our Lord! We believe; so write us down among the witnesses.'"

Indeed, my eyes overflowed with tears as I read that verse. Yet I did not embrace Islam until three years after meeting Armando, because I did not want to change. A struggle occurs within everyone, everyday, and everywhere. We struggle to attain what is most important for us. By embracing Islam, we tell Allah (swt) that He is most important and that we are prepared to struggle to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. I am a Mexican-American Muslim.¹³¹

¹³¹ Juan Galvan, "How Allah Found Me in Texas," *HispanicMuslims.com* June 6(2007).

Reversion Narrative #3

Khadija's Revert story by Marta Felicitas Khadija Galedary

I embraced Islam in December 1983. Mexican born; became U.S. Citizen in 1987.

During my college years in Mexico City, I was influenced by Marxism, existentialism, feminism and leftist friends. These relationships and books took me away completely from my strong Catholic beliefs to the point that I stopped believing in God. I thought I could survive with no God and no rituals. I found myself lost, confused and living an extremely conflictive and painful life. I could not find the reason for my existence nor mission in this world. I was influenced by extreme feminist ideas against motherhood.

In the summer of 1981 while living in Mexico City, I travelled to England to practice my English. At this point God had reserved for me the opportunity to meet the most important people in my life: Hassan, Ismael and Kitar Muslim students from Brunei. (in Malaysia)

These three students never talked to me about Islam. The most important factor that attracted my attention was the way I was treated as a woman, with respect, kindness, and a clean attitude. I had the feeling of being safe with them. The only conversation we had on one occasion was about God. Since I told them that I believe in God, they adopted me as a Muslim, without me knowing anything about Islam.

As I returned to Mexico, I kept in touch with my Muslim friends. I received a copy of *Islam in Focus* and I started reading. I memorized the Shahada and I always sought refuge from Allah in dangerous situation. I was amazed to experience the solution of my problems after I recited the Shahada, at this point I still did not understand Islam nor the meaning of the Shahada.

Later on, I decided to travel to the USA on a summer vacation in 1983. I enrolled in a public adult school to continue practicing my English. I met more Muslims from Turkey and Bulgaria. Also, I became friendly with a Muslima teacher of Jewish background who was married to Senegalese Muslim. I asked to be taken to a mosque, since I was reading a book on Islam. The first time I stepped in a mosque was very emotional; with mixed feelings of peace and fear, my heart started beating faster.

I attended introduction to Islam classes for non-Muslims and new Muslims for several months.

In December 1983, close to Christmas time, I gave my testimony of faith by saying "I bear witness that there is only one God and Muhammad is His last messenger." My English teacher was my witness. I was in tears during my prayers. Finally, I had found peace in my heart; I knew that Allah was with me, I knew what my role in this world was and the reason for my existence. I have returned to the One God and I will never be lost again.

Islam has given me a new life and has enlightened my way of life and thinking. The more that I learn about Islam the more I strengthen my faith in the One God and Muhammad as the last messenger. I have embraced the duty of sharing my experience to the large population of non-Muslim Latinos by providing them with information on Islam and making them aware that the history of religion does not stop with Christianity.

I also enlighten them to the fact that many Latinos have Muslim ancestors and the proof is that many Latinos have Middle Eastern and North African features. The time has come for Latinos to find out the truth about their Muslim origins, a truth that has been denied to Latinos for over five hundred years. With these emotions and newborn ideas, four Latino Muslims and I started forming LALMA in 1999.¹³²

Conclusions

Explanations of why Latinos convert to Islam serve multiple, complex and competing ends. Whether by authors inside or outside of the Latino Muslim experience, sociological or journalistic, online or on print, they are best described as narratives that reveal mediated aesthetics and desires rather than language independent realities. As media products, Latino Muslim reversion stories follow a general pattern and are framed by the logics of *fitrah* - the belief that humans are naturally born believing in the oneness of God prior to their cultural upbringing. A Latino who was once a Catholic or evangelical Christian is therefore understood as reverting to their original Muslim nature rather than as converting to a new nature or new direction.

Doctrinal and existential frustrations are often presented as moments of crisis in Latino Muslim reversion narratives. They serve to build up a tension that must be resolved by a reversion to Islam experience. And though this resolution may read at times as explanations for conversion, the more vital work performed by these moments of crisis

¹³² Marta Felicitas Khadija Galedary, "Khadija's Revert story," *LALMA.org*. <http://www.lalma.org/> Accessed on February 4, 2012.

is that of *dawah* and of identity formation. The story of how a Latino Muslim identity is distinct from a Latino Catholic or Evangelical identity seeks to naturalize the Latino Muslim identity by destabilizing dominant paradigms of who Latinos are. By first addressing what are perceived as intellectual and existential shortcomings of the dominant Latino religious paradigms, the reversion narratives shape a particular understanding of Latino Islam as filling in specific gaps left by Latino Catholic and Evangelical experiences in the changing American religious landscape. Reversion stories frame particular individuals as both Latino and Muslim at the same time. In effect, these narratives seek to naturalize a Latino Muslim identity otherwise perceived as an innovative hybridity. Within this framework, the narrative explanation of why conversion occurs is of less importance to naturalizing the Latino Muslim identity for both Latinos who are already Muslim, and for Latinos who might convert to Islam through LMO *dawah* efforts:

I think that Islam is the answer for the problems of the youth and society in general. I hope my story Insha'Allah (God willing) will attract more Latinos and people of all races to the light of Islam.

- Ali in "A Chicano's Story of Becoming Muslim"¹³³

¹³³ Galvan, Juan. "Reversion Stories," HispanicMuslims.com <http://hispanicmuslims.com/stories/> Accessed on: August 2, 2012

CHAPTER 3

"¡PURO LATINO! ¡PURO ISLAM! ¡A SU LADO!"

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LATINO MUSLIM ORGANIZATIONS

*And why should ye not fight in the cause of Allah
and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated (and oppressed)?
Men, women, and children, whose cry is: Our Lord! rescue us from this town, whose
people are oppressors; and raise for us from thee one who will protect;
and raise for us from thee one who will help!*

- *Qur'an* 4:75
(Translation by Muhammad Assad)

*Often overlooked by those who perform dawah, Latino Muslims face a lack of literature
about Islam in Spanish and Portuguese, making the work of groups like LALMA and
LADO all the more important.*

- Amel S. Abdullah in "Latino Reverts Add to Mosaic of Islam"

Every year, during the month of Ramadan, LALMA hosts a dinner in the banquet hall at the Omar mosque attended mostly by Latino leaders from the Catholic Archdioceses of Los Angeles. Other non-Muslim Latino community and family members are also invited, though just a handful of these attend. The event is part of a set of outreach programs designed and executed by LALMA to address various social issues. The dinner is always held in the evening, after sun down when the Muslim participants communally break their day's fasting. Fasting during the Islamic month of Ramadan is prescribed by the Qur'an and hadith and is held as one of the five pillars of Islam by

Sunni and Shia orthodoxy. Fasting - abstaining from all foods, liquids, sex, and other commodities from sunrise to sunset - is an extremely difficult and rewarding task.

In many Muslim majority societies, schedules are altered where work, homes and public spaces come alive in an almost festive atmosphere at night when no one is fasting and go to sleep during the day, making fasting a bit easier. Such rescheduling is not possible in the U.S. and some Muslims resort to diet pills to make the daytime fasting easier to accomplish. For others, rescheduling, diet pills and other coping mechanisms are interpreted as missing the point of Ramadan. Instead, it is stressed, participants should accept and directly experience the difficulty of fasting as a form of *dhikr* (remembrance), in order to come closer to God and to better understand and deal with the plight of the needy.

In 2011, I was invited to the LALMA hosted Ramadan dinner and attended along with my wife and almost three year old son. We arrived late, and only caught the tail end of various lectures designed to introduce non-Muslims to the doctrines and practices of Islam and to “debunk various myths about Islam.” Following these lectures, most everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims, went up to the prayer hall to either participate in or observe the Muslim prayer. Only a few of the Latino Catholic guests participated in the prayer, and most quietly observed from the rear of the hall. Those that did participate had little difficulty mimicking the various prayer positions and prostrations, including my son who to my surprise had followed me, intently observed my movements and attempted imitate them. At that point I began to wonder what was more important to individual Muslims engaging in prayer, the physical movements, the prayers recited either silently

or out loud, or the measure of sincerity in which either or both are performed? Surely, I concluded, the sense of connectedness and solidarity with others must also be of paramount significance to the prayer.

Once the prayer was completed, we all headed back down to the banquet hall. Other speeches and events were planned, and Marta asked me to set up her video camera and film the remainder of the dinner. There were about forty individuals in attendance, mostly Spanish speaking Latinos though a few were not. And most of the lectures and speeches were conducted in Spanish, making it difficult to follow for those who waited for shortened and sometimes mis-translated versions of the dialogue. During the dinner, Muslims were paired with non-Muslims, so that each could learn about the other on a one on one basis in a less formal forum rather than from a lecturer. Many of the conversations compared the Arab plates of food to Mexican mole sauces, as Latino Catholics interacted with Latino Muslims at a more personal level. After dinner, tickets were passed out free of charge for which prayer rugs, Egyptian jewelry and other “Muslim” objects were raffled off. I won a pair of earrings from Egypt. Those who knew me jubilantly applauded and cheered. It was a joyous meeting of two different faith groups.

The celebratory atmosphere was however interrupted by a woman who entered the hall and began asking for then finally demanding *zakat*, almsgiving. She and her children had recently arrived to the U.S., they were poor, homeless and starving. She was a Muslim in need and knew her rights, she began to shout. The Muslim leadership offered her a plate of food and invited her to stay and participate in the dialogue, which she

refused. Eventually, and only after a private conversation, the unexpected guest apologized to everyone for the interruption and left the mosque with several plates of food. It was a poignant example of Ramadan's ability to both generate a sense of joyous comradery and to help remember and address the plight of the needy. The evening was concluded with a speech and prayer by a Catholic leader and hailed by most as a success as we said goodbye to one another.

Latino Muslim organizations, LMOs, are social technologies that create a sense of communal identity, they engage in *dawah*, the propagation of Islam, and they seek to address the plight of the needy. The previous chapter examined the structure and work of Latino Muslim reversion narratives and included three full stories by prominent LMO leaders. In this chapter I return to the biographies of these leaders with a focus on their development of PIEDAD, LADO and LALMA as situated within the legacy of the Alianza Islamica and within the context of late twentieth century American society.

PIEDAD: A Multi-State Women's LMO

On February 9, 2007, the Muslim women's organization PIEDAD dedicated its blog's home page to historian of Al-andalus, T.B. Irving. The page included a letter originally published by Askia El-Amin and on his LMOs website, founder of the Bism Rabbik Foundation and affiliate of the Alianza Islamica. In it, Askia El-Amin introduced Irving to PIEDAD's blog readers as an invaluable scholar to the Latino Muslim

community and addressed his death.¹³⁴ In addition to Askia El-Amin's remediated letter, PIEDAD founder Khadijah Rivera published the following:

Dr. Irving was once a fixture at Muslim conventions. I met him and was sincerely moved by his professional presentation at one of our PIEDAD lectures on Mudejar Art in Latino America. He was inspiring when chatting about Andalusia and how my roots were Hispanic even before birth. He pushed me to lecture and socialize among Latinos and other Muslims. He gave me his braveheart to do outreach in spite of what my Id told me [sic]. Al hamdulillah he was my teacher and I am forever grateful of the times I met him or read his books. Allah grant him paradise.

This author, professor, and translator of the first American English translation of the Quran who accepted Islam over 50 years ago passed away peacefully on the morning of September 24, 2002 in his Mississippi home. He had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Few Muslim publications or media know about his death or published anything about his condition while he was sick. We need to remember our scholars. We need to be there for them with our concern, our Dua's and our good wishes, especially in the last moments of their lives. Warmly, Khadijah Rivera”¹³⁵

¹³⁴ A portion of Askia El-Amin's letter addressing the life and Death of T.B. Irving is printed on chapter 2 of this dissertation.

¹³⁵ Khadijah Rivera, "Dr. T B Irving - Frontier for Latino Dawah in USA," *Piedad-LatinoDawah.Blogspot.com* (2007). <http://piedad-latinodawah.blogspot.com/2007/02/dr-t-b-irving-frontier-for-latino-dawah.html>
Accessed on: August 12, 2012.

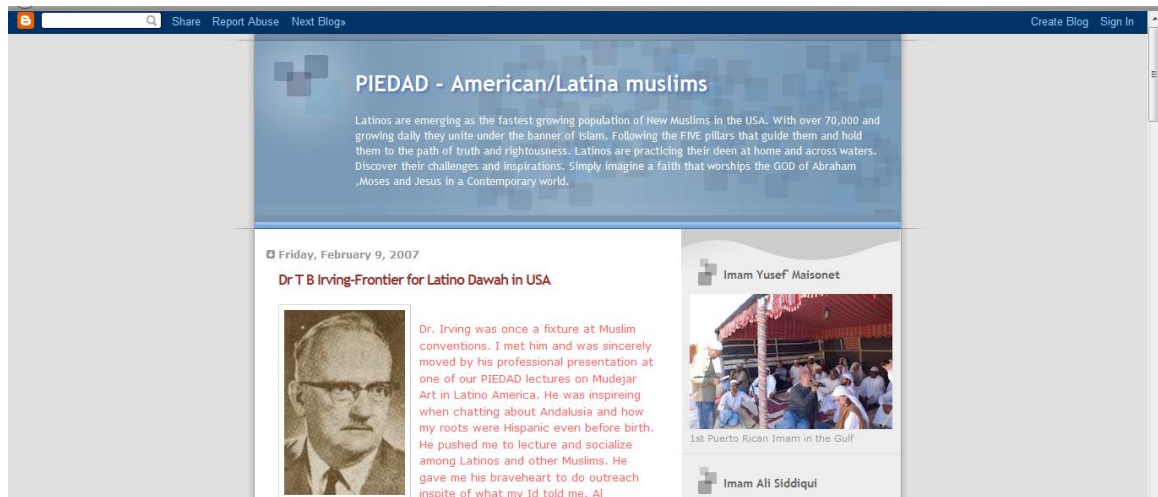


Figure 4.1. Screenshot of PIEDAD’s Blogger website. Below the title “PIEDAD – American/Latina muslims” the blog provides a brief description of Latino Muslims as a rapidly growing population group. The latest blog entry depicted in this image is dated February 9, 2007, and is titled “Dr T B Irving-Frontier for Latino Dawah in USA.” <http://piedad-latinodawah.blogspot.com/2007/02/dr-t-b-irving-frontier-for-latino-dawah.html> >

T.B. Irving had not only worked directly with Askia El-Amin and the Alianza Islamica, but had also directly mentored Khadijah Rivera, founder of PIEDAD. Rivera was born on the island of Puerto Rico. Her parents were Catholic and she was raised as one. As a child, Rivera dreamed of becoming a nun. Her Latina ethnicity was entangled with her Christian religion. Though she felt at home in her Catholicized ethnicity, Khadijah’s embrace of her childhood religion was not uncomplicated. She loved, yet feared the bloodied Christ image at the center of her places of worship, education and dwelling. As she grew older, Khadijah became increasingly disenchanted with various Christian doctrines. Like the dual faces of her Latino Catholicism, Khadijah had given birth to a beautiful yet frightening idea within her inner thought life. The idea was born shortly after Khadijah gave birth to her first child. She gazed deeply into the eyes of her baby and asked herself whether she was looking at an innocent newborn or at a consequence of

original sin? The religion of her childhood dreams and became increasingly incompatible with the manner in which Khadijah experienced the world.

She eventually moved off the island of Puerto Rico to go to college on the “mainland.” She studied psychology at a college in New York but also had an interest in the comparative study of religion that was emerging in the 1960’s. Khadijah’s academic studies were influenced by and had an influence on her participation in political activism. She was a student activist; she would go from political marches to Dialectical Materialist, Maoist, and Socialist study groups and to lectures on Feminism at college. While studying foreign policy in college, Khadijah became interested in the Iranian revolution. The research resulted in an embrace of and participation in pro-Iranian activism in the U.S. This combination of research and activism eventually led to an increasing interest on the religion of Islam. Compelled by her research findings, and especially the teachings of the Qur’an, Khadijah took her *shahadah* as a Sunni Muslim on October 22, 1983. Recollecting her first encounters with the Qur’an, Khadijah wrote: “Here’s a book that explained to me in a logical matter why we’re on earth... What we’re supposed to do and where we go afterward. All the questions you could ask are answered in the Koran.”¹³⁶

Soon after her conversion, Khadijah married an Egyptian Muslim man. Gradually, she noticed that several of her husband’s co-workers were married to Latinas. Through continued interaction with these women Khadijah became convinced that they would all benefit from a support group for Latina converts to Islam. Together, the women could learn about Islam and how to be a good Muslim, discuss the changes they had

¹³⁶ Rivera, "My Hispanic Legacy."

undergone after conversion, the hardships they experienced especially from non-Muslim Latino family members, and commune in solidarity with one another. In 1987, Khadijah founded the first LMO dedicated solely to women with these goals in mind. The organization was also the first LMO to follow the Alianza Islamica. It was called PIEDAD, the Spanish word for piety, and was also an acronym for: *Propagación Islamica para la Educación de Ala el Divino*, “Islamic Propagation for Education on and Devotion to Allah the Divine.”¹³⁷ The LMO is a women’s piety movement that seeks to promote Islam through education and social services, to support new women converts, and to empower women.

Though originally formed as a Latina women’s group, PIEDAD expanded its focus to include any and all women converts to Islam regardless of their race and or ethnicity. According to PIEDAD leadership, the change occurred partly due to concerns by the LMO members and non-Latino Muslim community members that a focus on Latina ethnicity created unnecessary divisions in an otherwise theoretically unified *ummah*, global Muslim community. Perhaps as important, many of PIEDAD’s members were not of Latina descent, and so the organization expanded its mission statement to more accurately reflect its membership. The women’s LMO was founded in New York but went on to establish several other offices in Florida, Chicago, Georgia, Illinois and New Jersey. Its organizational model promotes a four step *dawah* process that includes friendship, teaching, inclusivity, and a continued life of learning:

¹³⁷ Or 1988 according to Yasmin Essa, "Interview with LADO / Piedad," *MB Muslima Magazine* 2010. http://hispanicmuslims.com/articles/lado_piedad.html Accessed on: August 14, 2012

Our first step has always been to form sincere and deep friendships that allow mistakes and are non-judgmental. Secondly, to teach only what we are sure is correct and for deeper questions always have a sheikh or imam available for advice. Our religious advisor to date is Imam Ali Siddiqui of California. Third, and most important is to assure the new Muslimah that Islam is for everyone and that we are not to separate ourselves from any other Muslims as “only Hispanic Muslims.” And last but not least, to seek Islamic knowledge for the rest of their lives and never be satisfied with their comprehension but to have the thirst of learning in their hearts solely for the pleasure of Almighty Allah, SWT... After a sister learns to make salat and has an elementary understanding of Islam, she is directed to the nearest Islamic center to continue her studies and she is referred to books that she can study to further her knowledge. If a sister wishes to go further in order to serve Allah SWT she may want to join us in da’awah and for that we do Daiyett training. It is basically a continuation of their studies in Islam and the practice of the deen in the service of Allah SWT.¹³⁸

Sincere, deep, non-judgmental allowance of mistakes has been PIEDAD’s primary tool in forming lasting friendships and a tightly knit community. Because new converts struggle with trying to accurately perform ritual prayer movements, words and pronunciations, as well as with understanding a labyrinth of Islamic scriptural writings and competing schools of thought regarding those scriptures, new converts consequently struggle with trying to be a “good” Muslim. PIEDAD promotes piety as a process and not as an overnight experience. It therefore understands that ritual, doctrinal and moral mistakes will be made along the way and that patient guidance is necessary. Because the group is made up of women who know firsthand what it is like to struggle through the newness of Islam, the group is considered to be well positioned to address the specific needs of new converts were other mentors might become frustrated and give up on individual converts.

In addition to being a support group of converts who understand and are patient with each other, PIEDAD members receive Islamic education from religious experts.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Additionally, the LMO gains legitimacy amongst broader Muslim communities by deferring to and maintaining Islamic forms of religious authority. In particular, the guidance of a *sheikh* or *imam* beyond the ranks of Latina Muslimahs has been vital to PIEDAD's work. This forms an important distinction from the Alianza Islamica whose organizational leaders were also considered *imams* and therefore maintained their own religious authority without deferring to non-Latino experts of Islamic piety. By outsourcing religious authority from beyond Latina Muslimahs and sometimes even from beyond Islamic leaders on the East Coast, PIEDAD expanded its network to include broader, non-Latina communities from across the nation.

PIEDAD's mission also includes training and participation in *dawah* work, the propagation of Islam. PIEDAD never leased office space of its own as the Alianza Islamica had been able to do. For that matter, no other LMO since the Alianza has had enough resources to maintain a space of their own. Instead, PIEDAD, like most other LMOs, holds meetings at homes, Islamic centers and mosques. PIEDAD was however able to procure enough resources to purchase and maintain a toll-free number, 1-800-44-ALLAH. The financial costs of the telephone services were maintained through a collaborative effort by five PIEDAD chapters in Georgia, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey. The goal of the phone number was to create a channel through which anyone in the nation could access the services provided by the LMO. Interested individuals or recent converts could talk to and learn about Islam from a PIEDAD member and setup or attend individual or group meetings.

PIEDAD's phone service was eventually replaced with a much more cost effective yet simple website that provided basic information on Islam. Rather than an archive on Islamic knowledge, the site was however more of a tool for connecting PIEDAD members to those who wanted to know more about Islam or become part of the convert community. In its first design, the website was a replacement for telephone technology, and was initially used mostly for networking rather than branding.

The site has more recently been replaced with a professionally designed data based website that allows for massive amounts of information to be uploaded by PIEDAD members without much training in web design or Internet coding. The website's visual aesthetic consists of a contrast between beige and grey Islamic geometric patterns and a crimson red color pallet. The website's header has a black and white image of an out of focus and veiled woman along with the organization's logo which combines the letters 'PIEDAD' with a red rose (see figure 1.1). It was constructed by the incorporated design company, Iman Studios (*Iman* is the Arabic word for 'faith'). The Los Angeles centered web design firm was established in 2001 and has a portfolio that appears to cater mostly to Muslim individuals and organizations, including musician and producer Akon, professional basketball player Gilbert Arenas, the *UmmaClinic.org*, *DawaCorps.com*, *UmmahFilms.com* and *TheDeanShow.com*.

In addition to its dawah efforts through face to face, phone and online conversations, PIEDAD has engaged in various activities that have led it to be recognized by larger audiences. In the early 1990's, PIEDAD hosted talks at Columbia University and other institutions, held the first Hispanic Muslim conference, and sent representatives

to the Islamic Society of North America, ISNA, for a conference that featured Latino Muslims.¹³⁹ PIEDAD's founder, Khadijah Rivera, was nominated by the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association to attend the Second Annual Latino Islamic Congress in Spain which sought to foster a global Latino Muslim community. In the winter of 2008, PIEDAD members joined the American Congress for Muslim Youth, ACMY, and sent one Latina to study in the United Arab Emirates. Regarding the ACMY's sponsorship of PIEDAD members, it published the following statement:

We believe that American Muslim women need to undergo similar education such as the Imam Training Program thus the American Muslim Women's Leadership Training Program has been designed. The goal of the program is to educate American Muslim women and Emirate women. This education will serve as the foundation for women's empowerment.¹⁴⁰

By training and providing Muslim women with leadership roles within Islamic communities, PIEDAD seeks a religious path toward women's empowerment. Seminary programs in the U.S. devoted to training a specifically American Muslim clergy for Islamic communities in the U.S. question the fit of a Muslim clergy unfamiliar with the social, cultural and political context of the adherents they serve. Likewise, PIEDAD's call for more Muslimah training programs not only identifies women as well suited participants in Muslim organizations, but also emphasizes women's rights. This zeal for empowering Muslimah leaders reflects PIEDAD founder Khadijah Rivera's life long struggle for equality on various fronts, including gender. On November 22, 2009, Rivera

¹³⁹ Khadijah Rivera, "One god, One People, One Belief.. ISNA 2001," *Piedad-LatinoDawah.Blogspot.com* August 10(2008). <http://piedad-latinodawah.blogspot.com/2008/08/one-god-one-people-one-belief-isna-2001.html> Accessed on: August 14, 2012.

¹⁴⁰ Malika Rushdan, "American Muslim Women's Leadership Training, United Arab Emirates (UAE)," (*Piedad-LatinoDawah.Blogspot.com*2009). http://piedad-latinodawah.blogspot.com/2009_01_01_archive.html Accessed on: August 14, 2012.

passed away, leaving Nylka Vargas in New Jersey in charge of the organization. On the *SuhaibWebb.com* virtual mosque, one participant wrote in honor of Rivera's life:

she not only fed empty stomachs, she touched hearts, of the fallen and downtrodden. she not only believed in what she said, she had set an example of mutual respect and dignity for those who have lost it in the eyes of the world. i pray and hope that Allah Almighty has honored her with the best of rewards and saved her from hellfire.¹⁴¹

What had begun as an organization aimed at addressing specifically Latina Muslimah issues, expanded to include women converts from all racial and ethnic affiliations. It continues to work alongside and with Muslim males though its membership is exclusively female. The focus on gendered experiences and issues also serves to empower women in leadership and *dawah* capacities. Lastly, like the Alianza Islamica, PIEDAD has and continues to serve the disenfranchised of all ages, genders and races it comes into contact with.

LADO: An Online Network

In the mid 1990s, people from diverse backgrounds began filling up Internet chat rooms to discuss a variety of topics, including religion. The chat room forum produced various kinds of virtual enclaves that had no communal existence outside of the Internet.¹⁴² And it was on these chat rooms that the three co-founders of the Latino American Dawah Organization, LADO, met each other, organized and formed the LMO.

¹⁴¹ Suhaib Webb Video <http://www.suhaibwebb.com/miscellaneous/announcements/in-honor-of-khadijah-rivera/> Accessed on: February 21, 2012.

¹⁴² See Brenda E. Brasher, *Give me that online religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

Currently, LADO is the most prominent LMO in the U.S., it has a national constituency and global reach. It also continues to operate almost exclusively on the Internet.

Juan Alvarado was born in the Bronx to Dominican immigrants fleeing from repression, persecution and economic uncertainty in the 1960's. He was raised a devote Catholic. As a teenager, however, Juan renounced the religion he was raised in and began exploring other options in the American religious marketplace. When he was twenty, Juan came across a publication by the Ansar Allah or Nubian Islamic Hebrews. After three years of probing into Islam, Juan took his *shahadah* at age 23 with the Ansar Allah. One day, a member of the Alianza Islamica noticed a tattoo on Juan that signified his affiliation with the Ansar Allah. The Alianza member explained to Alvarado the difference between Ansar and Sunni teachings. Two years after his initial conversion, Juan took a second *shahadah*, this time with the Alianza Islamica as a Sunni Muslim. In search of community to belong to, Juan began to occupy the spaces he felt most connected to: the virtual chat rooms and message boards shared by an America, on-line (AOL Inc.).

Samantha Sanchez had come across a Latina convert to Islam at her Jesuit college. Intrigued by the question of why a Latina would choose Islam, Samantha focused her master's thesis on Latino Muslims and began interviewing anyone she could find and talk to. It was during this research that she met Juan on a chat room, interviewed him there and continued to stay in touch through email correspondence. Samantha's research led to profound personal revelations, and she eventually accepted Islam as her own creed. The same day that Samantha took her *shahadah* at the Islamic Center in

Queens, Saraji Umm Zaid publically took hers “with a Latina sister from New Jersey” in 1997. Saraji had made her *shahadah* as a teenager, but it was not until she met fellow Latino converts to Islam that she drew enough courage to publically confess her Islamic faith. Juan, Samantha and Saraji met each other on an AOL message board and became close friends communicating with each other frequently through email, chat rooms and online message boards. As the small group of online Latino Muslims developed, the increasing need for a community that would cater specifically to a growing Latino Muslim population was recognized. The trio began their first email newlist. It was designed to organize a plan of action for developing such a Latino Muslim community. Centralized communication and coordination would be a key component to its success. They decided the best way to accomplish this was by creating an organization that would identify and address common Latino Muslim needs by organizing and mobilizing individuals from around the U.S.

Amongst these needs, *dawah* work tailored specifically to Latinos in the U.S. was the first to be unanimously acknowledged. The organization would make requests for Islamic literature in Spanish to both its members and to larger Islamic organizations. The organization was envisioned as the voice of the then voiceless Latino converts to Islam within the U.S. *ummah*, community: “I wanted something established,” reported Saraji, “so that by the time my daughter was old enough to think for herself and notice how the world works, she would see Latinos represented in the Ummah.”¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Juan Alvarado, "The LADO Genesis: Evolution of the Latino American Dawah Organization," Latino American Dawah Organization, <http://www.latinodawah.org/about/ladogenesis.html>.

Along these lines the three began to work toward a name for the organization that would express both their ethnic and religious identity and their focus on *dawah*. The final product: LADO, the Latino American Dawah Organization, with slogans that followed such as “¡A su LADO!” at your side and later “Puro Latino! ¡Puro Islam! ¡A su LADO!” Fully Latino! Fully Islamic! At your side! Juan, Samantha and Saraji thus gave birth to LADO in 1997 through a process of identifying the lack of Latino targeted dawah, managing strategies for addressing such needs and branding the organization with an acronym, and slogan to express a specifically Latino Muslim identity.

Regarding its approach to Latino *dawah* and emotional needs, LADO produced the following statement:

We openly acknowledge and emphasize the importance of education and cooperation as a prerequisite to dawah efforts... LADO disseminates Islam by providing Islamic literature in the form of books, brochures, and other media in English, Spanish and whenever possible, Portuguese... As a way of educating our own selves and others, we are committed to attending, visiting, and working with mosques, attending special Islamic events, interfaith talks, various lectures, translating existing literature, and writing articles and editorials among other things... we also need to address the emotional needs of new or potential Muslims. Our dawah efforts have attempted to address these needs in various ways. For example, Saraji offers practical advice for new Muslims in her article: "How do I tell my parents and family I've become a Muslim?" I attempt to address common misconceptions about Islam in a lighthearted way in my article: "Is Your God Black?" Saraji recalls that the mother of one Latina Muslimah complained because her daughter stopped eating her pastels. Pastels and tortillas do not necessarily have to be haram, or prohibited in Islam. We have been fortunate to address these kinds of misconceptions among Latinos. Many articles by Latino Muslims can be found on LADO's online newsletter.¹⁴⁴

Given that LADO had itself emerged from online activities, the organization's leadership concluded that "a website would be the most cost efficient way of offering free

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. Accessed on: August 14, 2012

information about Islam.”¹⁴⁵ Samantha used her personal AOL homepage which was offered as part of the subscription to the internet service provider. Through the website, LADO was able to produce *The Latino Muslim Voice*, the longest running and most prominent newsletter by and on Latino Muslims. In addition to contributions by Juan, Samantha and Saraji, the newsletter’s contributing members slowly grew and came from various states across the U.S. Articles included Qur’anic quotes of the month, poems, songs, recipes, discussions on doctrinal issues, news events on Islam and Latino Muslims and announcements for and coverage of organizational programs.

“Life’s twists and turns are strange,” wrote Juan Galvan in a *Latino Muslim Voice* article titled, “The LADO Genesis,” published in 2005.

After some time, I lost touch with Samantha and the other LADO people. After regaining Internet service, I either forgot all of the people’s e-mail addresses or they had been changed. Years later, while working for the Los Angeles Times, I came across an article in the New York Times mentioning LADO and Samantha. Alhamdulillah, I was able to contact her and Juan to find that LADO continued. I have found a good 'virtual' friend and brother with [Juan] Galvan. I am only one of the many Latino Muslims who are grateful for the opportunity to have met other Latino Muslims through LADO.¹⁴⁶

In 2001 Juan Galvan joined LADO from his home in Texas. Galvan had met and befriended a Latino Muslim who taught him about the history of Islam in Spain, the beliefs and practices of Islam, and convincingly answered his questions regarding the purpose of life. “How can the Father be the Son? Why can't God just forgive anyone he wants? What happens to babies who die before baptism?” And so on. After learning about Islam for three years, Juan officially embraced Islam by taking his *shahadah*.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

While searching for more Latino Muslims to commune with, Juan came across LADO on the Internet, joined and became a leading figure for the organization. Galvan's education and bachelor's degree in Management information systems from the University of Texas at Austin proved to be a pivotal piece in the development of LADO's online presence and that of several other Latino Muslim organizations designed and maintained by Galvan.

LADO has published a timeline of its accomplishments in which Galvan's early digital contributions are anonymously detailed. In 2001, the year Galvan joined LADO, the now dominant '*LatinoDawah.org*' domain name was registered, the ongoing national and online Latino Muslim Census begun and the production of *HispanicMuslims.com*, a collection of reversion narratives was produced by Sanchez and Galvan. Also in the same year, representatives of the organization attended the Annual Latino Muslim Conference, the organization was endorsed by ISNA and ICNA, was featured in various news media outlets including the Islamic Horizons Magazine, established relationships with various other Muslim organizations across the U.S., and produced a YahooGroup social networking site with limited editorial involvement. In January 2002, LADO overhauled its website and moved it off the AOL service to its own privately hosted server using the *LatinoDawah.org* domain it had obtained the previous year. The new website's structure allowed it to maintain, add and manage vast amounts of data. This feature would be integral to publishing the rapidly increasing production of articles on and by Latino Muslims. Also in 2002, LADO attended the 3rd Annual Latino Muslim Conference, coordinated the first ever magazine dedicated to American Latino Muslims published by Islamic Horizons in its July/August issue, and presented talks at the 39th Annual ISNA

Convention. In 2004, LADO attended the second Annual Hispanic Muslim Day held in New Jersey, and coordinated a Latino Muslim November/December edition of *The Message International*, a nationally distributed Muslim magazine.

In 2005, LADO redesigned its website again through a collaborative effort, this time including a Spanish version. The LADO website usually receives almost 90,000 hits per month, and consistently dominates search engine queries for searches on Latino or Hispanic Muslims.¹⁴⁷ In addition to publishing its mission statement, history, the *Latino Muslim Voice* newsletter, photos, links and libraries to Muslim resources and reading materials, the site connects Latino Muslim organizations and individuals to one another. The organization's website is a central component of its activities, serving as a hub and gatekeeper to information on and by Latino Muslims. LADO is today one of the, if not the most recognized and well connected Latino Muslim organizations in the U.S. Its prominent role within various Latino Muslim organizations and broader publics has been maintained through a loose and fluid structure. In this regard, Galvan published the following statements:

LADO is a very loosely knit organization. LADO does not have physical offices, such as a headquarters. Although people may constantly move, LADO remains available online to provide a number of services. LADO understands that the Internet allows information to be easily and inexpensively distributed to anywhere and accessed from anywhere. LADO also understands that the Internet allows people to easily and inexpensively communicate with other people from around the world. As mentioned previously, LADO provides a way for Latino Muslims from different states to be accessible via the Internet. We are not a virtual or online community, because our activities are not limited to the online world. LADO strongly believes that the mosque must continue to be the center of Islamic

¹⁴⁷ Galvan, Juan. "Faq's About the LADO Group" *United States of Islam*. Latino American Dawah Organization http://www.usislam.org/latinos/English/faqs_about_the_lado_group.htm Accessed on: February, 10, 2012.

life. When I first joined LADO, I wanted to make LADO into an organization composed of traditional chapters that revolve around a national headquarters. However, it is not feasible on our limited resources. Therefore, LADO tries to have dedicated people from throughout the fifty states because we receive requests for assistance from states that are not traditionally associated with having large numbers of Latinos... LADO consists of almost 5,000 members and representatives throughout the United States and abroad... Our current organizational structure takes into account that the Latino Muslim community is still very young and is constantly changing. Because LADO needs to be flexible, I am also reluctant to create new leadership positions. I plan to eliminate any titles within LADO with the exception of members and representatives.¹⁴⁸

After describing LADO as an organization that makes Latino Muslims accessible through the Internet, Galvan goes on to stress that it is not a “virtual or online community.” Instead the mosque is promoted as the “center of Islamic life,” and LADO’s website as a tool that connects Latinos whose lives are centered within mosques communities. Because the essential elements of Latino Muslim religiosity are to be lived within the mosque, and because the organization lacks resources of its own, LADO does not have a national headquarters, offices or any physical spaces, individual chapters or a hierarchy of various positions. Instead, the organization is described as a “loose knit” organization made up of members and representatives. The one exception is Juan Galvan, who, following the lack of involvement by other founding members is now LADO’s “executive director.”

LALMA: a Regional Study Group

In 1953, a group of Near Eastern immigrants and indigenous converts in Los Angeles formed what was to become the Islamic Center of Southern California, ICSC.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

Along with the Islamic Center of Orange County, ICOC, established in 1976, the ICSC is one of the oldest and most prominent Islamic communities in California today. The first mosque designed specifically as a Muslim place of worship in Los Angeles, however, was built by the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation in 1982. And though the earliest manifestation of Los Angeles' oldest and most prominent Latino Muslim community began at a storefront mosque, its more recent life has been within the ICSC, the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation, and the ICOC. Each of these predominantly non-Latino Muslim mosques and Islamic centers have expressed interest in gaining and aiding new Latino converts while granting various degrees of autonomy to the distinct Latino Muslim communities meeting within their facilities. However, before LALMA had formed relationships with these prominent mosques and Islamic centers, it held meetings a storefront mosque in the same Olympic park neighborhood the Omar mosque is located in.

The African American Muslim organization, Intellect, Love and Mercy or ILM Foundation was established in 1998 at a storefront mosque across the street from Los Angeles' Exposition Park, home to the 1932 and 1984 Summer Olympics. Its founder, Imam Saadiq Saafir, had previously been a member of the NOI but turned to Sunni Islam in 1971. The organization has been described as a "true" angel within the City of Angels to watch over and serve "the most indigent and destitute of human beings within Los Angeles," and by:

nurturing and advocating human dignity, social change and positive development by providing help to the helpless and most underprivileged of citizens living in Los Angeles, mainly Latinos who represent fifty-nine percent of the population in

South L.A. and African Americans representing nearly thirty-six percent, according to 2000 census records.¹⁴⁹

Initially meeting within the ILM Foundation's facilities, one of the first Latino Muslim organizations in Los Angeles adopted the African American group's vision for social change. However, rather than focusing on social uplift programs as the ILM Foundation had done, *la Asociación Latina de Musulmanes en las Américas* (the Latino Association of Muslims in the Americas) was founded in 1997 as a non-profit organization for translating, publishing and distributing Islamic literature in Spanish. Eventually numbering thirty Latino Muslims, the group began to organize as the Latino-Muslim Movement (LMM,) in early 1999. The LMM's founder, Reymundo Nur, had converted in his home country of Panama after learning about Islam from his martial arts instructor who was a Muslim.¹⁵⁰ Nur traveled to various countries in the Middle East to receive Islamic education and eventually become a scholar and religious leader. The immediate effect of his travels on the LMM was however the loss of leadership. In Nur's absence, the once thriving organization dissolved. By the end of the same year, however, some of the LMM's members began meeting at the Islamic Center of Southern California to study the Quran and in 1999 formed LALMA, the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association. As one of the oldest and most prominent Latino Muslim organizations in California today, LALMA actively engages at various levels with the City of Angels.

¹⁴⁹Faisal Ansari, "ILM History," *Western Knight Center* (2005): 1.

¹⁵⁰ Ramirez, Margaret. "New Islamic Movement Seeks Latino Converts" *Los Angeles Times*, Monday March 15, 1999 <http://www.islamawareness.net/LatinAmerica/latin.html> Accessed on February 15, 2012

Presently located at the Omar masjid, LALMA's weekly lessons and special lectures are led by local scholars, most of whom are associated with public institutions such as USC, UCLA, the Claremont Colleges, and U.C. Riverside. In return, LALMA representatives are regularly invited by these scholars to give guest lectures, presentations and public talks on Latino Islam to the public institutions they work within. Of particular importance is LALMA's relationship with a al-Murabitun Sufi community located in Spain. The relationship began on the Internet. The Spanish Muslims have been prolific translators of Islamic scholarship into the Spanish language and have made their translations freely available on their website, *VerdeIslam.com*. LALMA has used many of the website's documents for its study sessions including work by the Sufi imam Al-Ghazali.

LALMA also participates in interfaith dialogue at various Christian institutions and hosts an annual dinner for Hispanic Catholics that want to learn more about Islam in Spanish from Muslims. In 2011, the dinner began with various lectures on basic Islamic tenants, the history of Islam in Spain and was followed by one on one talks over the evening's meal which concluded with a free raffle of "Muslim" items such as prayer rugs, other textiles, frames Egyptian earrings and so on. In their attempt to seek broader recognition and more accurate understanding of who they are through such public and interfaith forums, LALMA also works with the LAPD's yearly public forum on dealing with Islamophobia and hate crimes.

LALMA has also held many cultural ceremonies including weddings, baby showers and presentations, sharing of hajj experiences, and *shahadah's* (public

profession of faith). LALMA's *Shahadahs* are overseen by the Omar mosque's Imam, who presents the convert to be to the community and briefly discuss the importance of the public proclamation of faith as initiating the individual to the *ummah*, universal Muslim community. The words, *there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God*, are repeated by the new convert in Arabic, English and Spanish. If the individual is male, the men who have gathered to witness the *Shahadah* line up to greet, shake hands with, sometimes embrace and welcome the new member of their community. If it is a woman, the women line up and do the same, while members of the opposite sex might say a few words, and offer a warm smile as a token of acceptance. Following the greetings, the new convert is given a copy of the Qur'an in Arabic, Spanish transliteration and Spanish translations. The translation and commentary of the Qur'an endorsed and gifted by LALMA is always by Muhammad Asad, which is considered to be a more accurate and less "puritanical" version of other Spanish translations. The particular Qur'anic translation and commentary used by Latino Muslims varies from community to community, and the use of Asad's version is less appealing and sometimes controversial among other groups who interpret the translation and commentary as too liberal.

LALMA has also been involved with various programs sponsored by the Islamic Circle of North America's dawah organization, 'Why Islam?' Most recently, Why Islam? sponsored the rental of a booth at the Fiesta Broadway celebration in Los Angeles. Originally organized and sponsored by patriotic clubs for Mexican migrants in the 1920s, the *Cinco de Mayo fiesta* came increasingly under commercial control. Today it boasts several large corporate sponsors including Telemundo (a Spanish-language broadcasting

corporation), which televises and provides funds for a large performing stage and various performing artists, and other sponsors such as the Home Depot, Kmart and Coca Cola and others who all rent booths at the annual celebration. The WhyIslam? booth was located between these corporate giants and other smaller companies hoping to expand their brand. The booth promoted the organization's brand of Islam printed onto various flyers, newsletters, audio CDs which were distributed by mostly Latino Muslim volunteer workers, though not all of the Latino Muslim workers at the booth agreed with all the particular teachings of the WhyIslam? media. The fiesta had taken place on May 8, 2011, just six days after the killing of Osama bin Laden by U.S. military forces. One volunteer reported that he was derogatively referred to as Osama bin Laden by a Fiesta Broadway attendee. Otherwise, the volunteers were mostly pleased with the positive attention their booth received at the event. The Latino spaces that Latino Muslims continue to occupy in Los Angeles are highly contested as well as highly mediated.

At a Latino Muslim picnic held at Elysian Park overseeing Dodger Stadium, Latino Muslims gathered for a *carne asada* that did not include pork but did include a green, white and red colored Mexican piñata. Non-Muslim park goers that stumbled into the Latino Muslim celebration quickly left with puzzled looks on their faces. Various Latino Muslim organizations including LALMA attended the picnic, which was in effect, an effort to unite an otherwise highly fractured set of individuals and organizations within Southern California. LALMA is a regionally located community and a well connected network of relationships with many Muslim and non-Muslim organizations and institutions.

LMO Activities: Dawah, Social Service and Networking

In 2001, the Bush administration launched the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI), bringing together debates over religious approaches to aiding the country's needy on the one hand and the constitutional division of church and state on the other. Organizations such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the American Civil Liberties Union argued that the OFBCI violated the Establishment Clause by funding specific religious traditions using tax money. Reflecting the spirit of the OFBCI approach, many Latino Muslim organizations argue on the other hand that social problems are symptoms of deeper spiritual ones that can only be addressed through religious entities such as theirs. LMOs fuse missionary with social service work while also engaging in networking activities.

Dawah, the propagation of Islam seeks to present Islam to non-Muslims so that they can make a decision to accept or reject its teachings. Citing the Quranic passage 2:256, "*No cabe coacción en asuntos de fe*," Latino Muslims often remind each other and non-Muslims that there is to be no compulsion in matters of faith. The propagation of Islam as simple instructions without "rhetorical tricks" tends to fit in well within public institutions and interfaith dialogue. The Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association has developed a program in which its members are trained to give lectures that blend lessons on the five pillars of Islam with historical ones on Al-Andalus/modern day Spain and are usually followed with time for questions and answers.

The five pillars include: (1) the *shahadah* profession that there is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet; (2) *salat*, the five daily prayer; (3) *zakāt*, almsgiving; (4)

sawm, fasting during the month of Ramadan; and (5) *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if possible. The history lesson includes a timeline of the rise, golden age and decline of Islamic states in Southern Spain, images of Islamic architectural, infrastructural and artistic achievements in Spain and lists of Islamic scientific and linguistic contributions to Western societies through Al-Andalusian Muslims. *Dawah* workers also prepare to answer questions regarding various issues. Muslim women's rights are addressed by citing Quranic passages that discourage polygamy, ban female infanticide practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia, and highlight the religious authority of women such as Khadijah and Aisha. Veiling practices are explained as a choice, as promoting modesty while discouraging the sexualized male gaze, and as comparable to traditional Catholic practices throughout Latin America. The greater, more important *jihad* is clarified as an inner moral struggle, and the lesser *jihad* as an external struggle against social and political forces that make it impossible to be a good Muslim. And that even when engaging in external *jihad*, LMOs do so through political activism and their social services and not through terrorism.

By presenting Islam through informative and historical lectures complete with power point presentations rather than as missionizing polemics, LMOs are able to fulfill their religious duty to propagate Islam while also complying with the acceptable norms of interfaith dialogue and talks at public institutions. LALMA's annual Ramadan dinner with Latinos from the Catholic Archdioceses of Los Angeles during the month of Ramadan is only one of its many other interfaith projects. Additionally, LMOs participate in talks with public institutions such as LAPD public forums on religion, at libraries on

the history of Spain, and at various local colleges and universities interested in religious diversity. The Internet is yet another forum in which Islam is presented as public information. The Latino American Dawah organization promotes their services on *LatinoDawah.org* as providing educational information on Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims as well as to English and Spanish speakers. A segment of LALMA's mission statement published on their website reads, "By providing knowledge about Islam the main objective is to deter hate crimes directed towards the Muslim community. [And to] Improve Islamic knowledge to the existing Latino Muslims through education and collaboration with the multiethnic Muslim community in Los Angeles."

LMOs integrate *dawah* work with social service programs. PIEDAD, Propagación Islamica para la Educación y la Devoción a Allah el Divino (Islamic propagation for education and devotion to Allah the divine), was established as an organization by and for women converts. Originally located in Florida, PIEDAD today has branches in Georgia, New York, New Jersey and Illinois. One of PIEDAD's flagship programs, "Project Downtown," was a partnership between the LMO and a local MSA, Muslim Student Association, in Florida. The idea was simple: Fulfill the Islamic call to feed the hungry by regularly visiting specific homeless communities in downtown Miami. The weekly visits were so consistent that homeless communities came to expect if not rely on the meals provided by Project Downtown members. Members of these communities would make it a point to congregate in specific areas where they would not be harassed by local law enforcement but could easily be located by the *dawah* workers. During summer breaks when many MSA members were no longer in town, PIEDAD would

completely take over the responsibility of preparing and distributing meals that many times included Latino dishes. Through their social service work, PIEDAD was also able to promote a Latino style of being Muslim. Just as important as providing meals for the hungry, PIEDAD understood their work as alleviating suffering by engaging with the homeless in conversations, literacy education and even chess playing. The recipients of Project Downtown work received aid, an understanding of Islam through the piety of Latina Muslim women and were engaged as valuable members of the human race.

Dawah and social services provided by LMOs are sustained through what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to as social capital, an institutionalized network of mutually recognizing relationships.¹⁵¹ Affiliations with specific organizations work to legitimize LMOs that lack large memberships and resources. In 2006, representatives of various Latino Muslim organizations gave presentations at the largest gathering of Muslims in America, ISNA's annual convention. And in 2007 and 2008, ISNA published two editions of their *Islamic Horizons* periodical devoted entirely to Latino Muslim stories and issues. The publications were overseen by representatives of Latino Muslim organizations.

At its 2012 annual fundraising banquet, the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California, ISCSC, recognized the outreach work that Marta and LALMA perform within the Latino community. Alongside LALMA the work of Ahilan Arulananthamand from ACLU was also recognized. The ACLU in partnership with the ISCSC had won a historic "Freedom of Information Act" lawsuit forcing the FBI to reveal information about its

¹⁵¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction : a social critique of the judgement of taste* (London: Routledge, 1986). 248.

surveillance of Muslim community leaders and organizations in Southern California. Arulananthamand walked up to the podium, received the award and gave a brief lecture on the importance of fighting against structural discrimination. As he stepped away from the podium, the ISCSC/ACLU partnership was promoted as justification for the organizations' existence, "what's happening in New York could not happen here in Southern California thanks to the ISCSC," those in attendance were told. The statement referenced current events which received considerable news coverage and regarded unwarranted NYPD surveillance of Internet activity and mosques in New Jersey.¹⁵² Then Marta was introduced as "sharing the history of the Andalusian era with people of Abrahamic faiths. Professionally sister Khadijah [Marta's Muslim name] is a full time registered nurse and dedicates the rest of her time to serving her faith and bringing together the people of Abrahamic faiths of Southern California and beyond, she's doing amazing work, ladies and gentlemen please welcome sister Khadijah and her entire team." Marta went up to receive an award and made the following announcement: "We are going to be organizing workshops in your community... if it's time to reach out to your [Latino] neighbors... I know you don't speak the language, come to us and we'll come to your masjid."

Through prominent organizations such as ISNA and the ISCSC, Non-Latino Muslims are introduced to LMOs, and can then offer and request volunteers and resources. CAIR, for example, provides copies of the Quran in Spanish for free or at a

¹⁵² Matt Apuzzo and Adam Goldman, "NYPD Spying: How A 911 Caller Outed NYPD Surveillance Of Muslims In New Jersey," *Huffington Post* 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/25/nypd-spying-new-brunswick-muslim-surveillance-new-jersey_n_1701340.html Accessed on: August 14, 2012

fraction of the cost. The organization Why-Islam prints and freely distributes Spanish translations of their *dawah* pamphlets. Their “Who is Jesus,” pamphlet has been translated into Spanish as *Quién es Jesús* and recounts the familiar and revered story of the Virgin Mary’s immaculate birth of Jesus from a Quranic point of view. The Islamic telling of Jesus’ birth does not include Joseph stepping in to defend Mary’s reputation but instead reads, ““In defense of his mother and of the truth, the infant Jesus spoke saying, “I am a servant of God. He has given me Scripture and has made me a Prophet. He has blessed me wherever I may be and has made prayer and charity my duty as long as I live.” This put the detractors to rest.””¹⁵³ Other important organizational partners are located in Spain and include *Verde Islam* and *la Comunidad Islámica en España*. The growing Spanish and American network of Latino Muslims led to a landmark 2005 convention held in Spain where leaders of various Latino Muslim organizations visited the birth place of their Latino *Islamidad*, learned more about their Al-Andalusian heritage, and discussed issues of religious diversity, freedoms and rights with their Spanish counterparts.

On a local level, most LMOs lack the resources to obtain meeting and office spaces of their own and instead rely on partnerships with local mosques and organizations. These relationships are vital not only for the spaces obtained but also for providing Islamic scholars to help guide them. Access to sponsoring Islamic scholars is vital for legitimizing the activities of small organizations within broader Muslim communities. Many LMOs make use of local university scholars of Islam in addition to

¹⁵³ Quien fue Jesus? WhyIslam.org. <http://whyislam.org/Portals/0/Order%20Literature/Literature/44.pdf>
Accessed on October 16, 2010.

resident Islamic clerics. However, as new media such as the Internet continue to offer spaces free from traditional religious authority and from traditional modes of mutual recognition, authoritarian hierarchies are being reconfigured.¹⁵⁴ Many online Latino Muslim organizations lack any physical presence and are comprised of one or two tech-savvy members and a website. LMOs on Facebook and Yahoo groups have larger memberships than those in local mosques but lack any centralized and editorial authority. Partnerships with non-Islamic Internet corporations such Google, Facebook and Yahoo present different forms of authoritarian relationships that involve access, data mining and surveillance issues. One Latino Muslim YouTube user reported that his account had been closed down by Google without warning and without ever providing the user with a reason for the censorship. Considering that the source of a substantial amount of LMO website content comes from media corporations, the role of corporate authority in online spaces becomes more pertinent. *PIEDAD.org*, for example, features YouTube versions of a televised news series on Latino Muslims. *LALMA.org* hosts articles from the Los Angeles Times and La Opinion, a Spanish language newspaper distributed mainly in the Los Angeles area. LMOs and media corporations are creating new relations of content interdependency. Media journalists rely on the organizations for interviews, and the organizations rely on journalistic productions to fill in the content of their websites. Even as new media redefines the use and importance of social power for some organizations, others continue to reify older patterns of mutual recognition on the Internet. For example,

¹⁵⁴ See Anderson, Jon W. "The Internet and Islam's New Interpreters," in Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, *New media in the Muslim world : the emerging public sphere*, 2nd ed., *Indiana series in Middle East studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). 53.

ISNA maintains a web-link to online information on its now annual convention on Latino Muslims, and Latino Muslim organizations such as LADO provide web-links to ISNA's website. Hyperlinking practices such as these provide inter-organizational modes of mutual recognition and procuring of social capital. Even in cyberspace, prominent organizations such as PIEDAD, LADO and LALMA increase their resources and ability to provide *dawah* and social services through institutionalized networks of mutually recognizing relationships. These networks of influence reflect the goals of each LMO's leadership - the majority of whom carefully negotiate their positioning as Muslim women leaders within in patriarchal societies.

CHAPTER 4

LATINA MUSLIMAH

WOMEN'S PIETY, ISSUES AND LEADERSHIP ROLES

Behold! the angels said:

*O Mary! Allah hath chosen thee and purified thee-
chosen thee above the women of all nations.*

- *Qur'an* 3:42

(Translation by Yusuf Ali)

Though Hispanic women make up a small fraction of the nation's 6 million Muslims, those converting to Islam are exerting influence beyond their numbers, teaching Spanish-Arabic classes, forming Hispanic-Muslim organizations and distributing the Koran in Spanish.

- Alexandra Alter in "More Hispanic women converting to Islam"

I received an email invitation from Marta to an interfaith symposium titled "Muslim Neighbors" that LALMA would be participating in. It was to be held on February 12, 2011 at Mount St. Mary's College in Los Angeles, California. I arrived late and briskly made my way through the campus searching for the auditorium where the talk was being held. When I finally found the place and walked in, I was relieved to see that Marta was still there, sitting on a stage while another person addressed the audience. As soon as Marta recognized me, she enthusiastically waved from the stage. I was further relieved that Marta was happy to see me even though I was late. I had never seen Marta without a *hijab*, the veil or head covering worn by many Muslim women, and was surprised to see her not wearing it now. Though I had seen her liberally readjust her veil on previous occasions, this time, while Marta patiently sat on stage, in front of an

audience full of Muslims and non-Muslims, women and men, Marta comfortably displayed her unveiled head for in attendance to see. Through conversations, I knew she did not regularly wear the *hijab* while working as a registered nurse. Perhaps, I thought, this was an ecumenical gesture designed to dispel the myth of forced veiling.

The speaker at the podium finished talking and Marta was introduced. She stood up and began to narrate her conversion story. Marta took us to mid-twentieth century Mexico through narrative. She conjured up for us the depth of her family's Catholicism by referencing an older sister who became a nun. Then, she began to describe her grandmother's piety. She was a good Catholic, Marta told us, morally excellent and religiously devout. And as was the tradition in Mexico, Marta recalled, her grandmother practiced her religious piety as a woman through the visuality of modesty, through the material cloth of a veil. And as we, through Marta's story, imagined her grandmother practicing visual piety, veiled in early twentieth century Mexican pueblos, churches and homes, Marta brought us back to the twenty first century interfaith dialogue being held at Catholic University in Los Angeles, California. While describing her grandmother's head covering, she pulled her own veil over her head. Marta had performed, at the same time and with the same veil, both her grandmother's Catholic piety and her own Islamic piety. La Virgen Maria de Guadalupe, Marta went on to report in her speech, has been a central and traditional model of women's piety for those of Mexican descent.

It is reported in the *Hadith* that the Prophet said: "*The best women in the entire world are four: the Virgin Mary, Asiya the wife of Pharaoh, Khadijah Mother of the Believers, and Fatimah, daughter of Muhammad.*" Along with Khadijah, Fatimah and

other female companions of the prophet, Islamic scriptural references to Mary form the hermeneutical basis for the performance of a Latina Muslimah piety. This understanding of piety is in turn used to interpret and critically analyze various issues regarding women in Islam by LMOs, including issues of domestic violence, veiling, polygamy and marriage rights. Of particular importance are the women's leadership roles within LMOs that are grounded upon these models of piety. This chapter therefore examines the models of piety that inform the construction of women's issues and leadership roles within LMOs.

This chapter examines the role of women in Latino Muslim organizations in general and the discussion of women's piety, rights and issues on *PiedadIslam.org* in particular. The LADO survey of Latino Muslims finds that over sixty percent of Latino Muslims are women. Within my primary field site at the Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association, LALMA, almost eighty percent of its consistent attendees are women. LALMA's leadership is likewise made up of mostly women. The numerically large female presence within Latino Muslim populations in general and within specific Latino Muslim organizations including LALMA, PIEDAD and LADO, present us with interesting questions regarding interpretations and structural responses to these demographic numbers by LMOs. The first section of this chapter thus examines the character of women's leadership roles within various LMOs. Though LALMA's membership and leadership continues to consist of mostly women and to reflect this reality in many of its core missions, it does not define itself as a women's organization as

PIEDAD does. PIEDAD on the other hand is, as its website announces to us, “a national network of Muslim women coming together for the common good: spiritual development, community building, sisterhood, and educational outreach, with a focus on the Latina/Hispanic community.” The second section of this chapter thus examines the discussion of women’s piety, rights and “hot topic” issues on *PiedadIslam.org*. The website discusses a Muslim woman’s, or Muslimah’s, religious piety through ideal character types including Hajar, Maryam, Khadija, Aisha and other Qur’anic and hadith expressions of pious femininity. Aisha, in particular, is used to exemplify the role of women as strong community leaders. PIEDAD’s web page “Women in Islam” provides various collections of Qur’anic references, articles, books and videos on women’s rights in Islam. Its page “Hot Topics” features information on the women’s shelter program Baitul Salaam, as well as links to various *TheModernReligion.com* pages on issues such as domestic violence, veiling, polygamy and marriage rights.

Hermeneutical Models of Muslimah Piety

Mariam, Khadijah, Fatima, and Aisha form the core of scriptural characters used to understand Muslimah piety by LMOs. The following discussion on Mariam is based on two online sources: a digital brochure by WhyIslam.org and the digital book *Hazreti Mariam* hosted on *LALMA.org*. My treatment of Khadijah, Fatima, and Aisha are based mostly on the women’s organizational *PiedadIslam.org* documents. Additionally, ethnographic data has and will continue to inform my analysis of Mariam, Khadijah, Fatima, and Aisha as hermeneutical models for LMOs.

The Islamic story of Mariam's Immaculate Conception is used to exemplify the ideal of sexual purity by various sources, including WhyIslam.org Spanish language brochure on Jesus. WhyIslam is an organization based in New Jersey which was initially founded by volunteers from ICNA (Islamic Circle of North America). Its mission, as advertised on WhyIslam.org's *About Us* page, reads:

Islam does not expect the individual to suspend her faculties of reason and logic. On the contrary, it exhorts every individual to sincerely ponder over Creation and to free her mind from the shackles of false idols and ideologies. With this in mind, the WhyIslam project strives to bring reason and logic to the discourse on Islam.¹⁵⁵

WhyIslam.org is responsible for producing print and digital copies of various pamphlets addressing Islamic issues, including on women in Islam. Its media productions are made widely available in both English and Spanish to various Islamic institutions including LMO's for free and are usually present at LMO offices and events. WhyIslam brochures that address women's issues include: *El Estatus de la Mujer en el Islam*, "The Status of Women in Islam," *Revelando el Misterio del Jiyab*, "Revealing the Mystery of the Hijab," and *Los Derechos Humanos en el Islam*, "Human Rights in Islam." Of particular relevance to the model of Mariam is its pamphlet, *Quen fue Jesus?* "Who was Jesus?" which devotes the entire front page to the immaculate conception as referenced in various Qur'anic surahs including the nineteenth, *Surah Mariam*. Beyond its reference to the name of the Qur'anic surah, the Spanish language brochure refers to Mariam in the Spanish form, Maria. The brochure's introductory content makes it abundantly clear that in Islam, the virgin birth does not mean that Jesus or Maria was divine. Nonetheless,

¹⁵⁵ "About," WhyIslam.org <http://www.whyyislam.org/islam/about-us/> Accessed June 19, 2012.

“The truth is,” the pamphlet opens, “*hubo algo especial*,” “it was something special.” Maria was a righteous woman, *una mujer recta*, we are told. Her mother had dedicated Maria to the service of God and was raised by the prophet Zacarias who inculcated in her *la hermosa cualidad de tener fe en Allah*, “the beautiful quality of having faith in Allah.” In her adolescence, Maria withdrew to “a sanctuary in the East” in order to further purify herself before God. There, an Angel appeared to her and revealed that she would give virgin birth to a child. Fearing that her family would believe she was both pregnant and a virgin, Maria fled and

in her despair she cried out to God for oblivion, a voice soothed her and she found shade and a cool spring. Under a date-palm in the warmth of late summer, she made her dwelling and there bore the child unlike any other in human history.¹⁵⁶

The narrative of Maria is complex in that it is a model that values both women’s sexual purity as well as their reproductive role, in this case to the male prophet Jesus.

Maria’s story also provides a source of continuity for Latino Muslim converts and an example of female leadership at the highest level within an Islamic tradition. The Microsoft Word document *Hazreti Mariam*, is a *LALMA.org* hosted book written by Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak al-Jerrahi. Sheikh al-Jerrahi is described in the opening of the work as a contemporary Sufi master from Istanbul. The work itself is then described as transcending the usual laws of logic and experience, just as the virgin birth of Jesus also transcends these laws:

Este largo poema en prosa es una semilla espiritual que será sembrada en el corazón del lector comprensivo con poder iniciativo palpable. Entonces, ocurrirá un nacimiento místico virginal dentro del corazón receptivo; un nacimiento

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*

milagroso de pureza e iluminación comparable a la experiencia de la bendita María.

This long poem in prose is a spiritual seed that is planted within the heart of the reader who comprehends and is empowered through it. Then, a mystical virginal birth will occur within the receptive heart; a miraculously pure and illuminated birth comparable to the experience of the blessed Mary.¹⁵⁷

The transcendental story of Maria's Immaculate Conception is here viewed not as logically leading to a particular interpretation, but rather as representing the transcendence of logic, or "virginal birth" of a new consciousness, that must occur within the reader in order to truly understand the narrative's power and purpose. The poetic book is thus meant to serve as an indirect guide to a mystical journey rather than as a direct representation of truth. Along the way, however, the Sufi Sheikh al-Jerrahi provides a rational argument whose true meaning perhaps lies beyond its logical form:

Generalmente se considera que todos los profetas han sido hombres, sin embargo, hay algunos eruditos que reconocen a María como un alma de altura profética. Esta conclusión se basa en que el Sagrado Corán reporta que el arcángel Gabriel, el Digno de Confianza, visitó a la Virgen en varias ocasiones. Esto es prueba suficiente, puesto que el bendito Arcángel desciende solamente a los profetas.¹⁵⁸

It is generally considered that all of the prophets have been men, nonetheless, there are some scholars who recognize Maria as a prophetic soul. This conclusion is based on the Qur'anic report that the archangel, the Worthy of Confidence, visited the Virgin on various occasions. This is sufficient proof, given that the blessed Archangel descends only to the prophets.

The deductive conclusion that Maria was a prophet necessarily follows from the premises that the Archangel Gabriel ONLY speaks to prophets, and that the Archangel Gabriel spoke to Maria. Though Sheikh al-Jerrahi does not seem, in this passage, to be interested

¹⁵⁷ Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak al-Yerrahi al-Halveti, *Hazreti Mariam*. 1.

http://www.webislam.com/biblioteca/59395-hazreti_mariam.html Accessed on: August 14, 2012.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 7

in transcending the usual laws of logic and experience, he is indeed transcending a patriarchal tradition that formulates prophet-hood as an exclusively male title. The highest leadership role afforded to humans within Islam, is in this reading of Maria, afforded to both men and women.

If Maria is read as a model of sexual purity, continuity, mystical transformation and prophetic female leadership, Khadijah is a LMO model for practical, honest and beloved leadership. *PiedadIslam.org* discourse on Muslimah models of piety does not include Maria. Instead, the online writings focus on Hajar, Khadija, Aisha and others. With the exception of Hajar, each woman is discussed through Microsoft Word documents hosted on and hyperlinked by *PiedadIslam.org*. The links to these documents therefore necessarily carry users beyond the organization's website, and many times beyond the Internet where they can either read the stories from their screens or read printed hard copies. All of the documents are adorned with a double solid lined border. The same crimson red rose that PIEDAD uses for its logo are also at the head of each document. And though some of these documents are produced by the organization PIEDAD while others are not, they all share the same graphic aesthetic used by PIEDAD to brand its identity. Even the story of Hajar, which is contained in a brief paragraph on *PiedadIslam.org*'s "Wise Women" page above the hyperlinks to its various Word documented stories, is branded with the crimson red rose:

The story of Hajar offers the Muslim woman the most marvelous example of deep faith in Allah (SWT) and sincere trust in Him. Ibrahim `May peace be upon him' (PBUH) left her at the Ka`bah in Makkah, above the well of Zamzam, at a time when there were no people and no water in the place. Hajar had no-one with her except her infant son Isma`il. She asked Ibrahim, calmly and with no trace of panic: "Has Allah (SWT) commanded you to do this, O Ibrahim?" Ibrahim (PBUH) said, "Yes."

Her response reflected her acceptance and optimism: "Then He is not going to abandon us." Reported by Bukhari in Kitab al-Anbiya¹⁵⁹

The story of Hajjar relates that a woman should exhibit “deep faith” and “sincere trust” in God by speaking words that represent these ideals, “He is not going to abandon us” and by speaking them without a trace of panic. This task is compounded when Hajjar circumstances are taken into consideration, as the brief narrative relates. She is a mother who must now take care of herself and her young child, suddenly without the help of her husband, in a land barren of both water and people. To speak “deep faith” and “sincere trust,” in such circumstances, is the first Muslimah ideal conveyed on *PiedadIslam.org* and as such frames the stories that emerge through the click of a button.

Bellow the introductory paragraph on Hajjar, the title "Mothers of the Believers and Sahaabiyat (the female companions of the Prophet)," frames a list of hyperlinks titled after various Muslimahs. The first link is “Khadijah bint Khuwaylid.” The Word document is titled identically to the hyperlink, providing continuity between the on-and-offline digital productions. Unlike the hyperlink, the Word document title is followed with the following parenthetical performance of word processing piety: “**(May Allah be Pleased with her).**” This phrase is honorary and distinct from the “(Peace be upon him)” or “(PBUH) / (pbuh)” that is always assigned to the Prophet after his name is written. This form of piety, it seems, does not need to be performed on hyperlinks.

Khadijah was “born in the year 68 BH,” around 555 CE. Her name translates as “always ahead,” as in, she was able to understand and or react appropriately to a situation before others could. “She was raised on praiseworthy characteristics and was well-known

¹⁵⁹ PiedadIslam.org. “Wise Women.” <http://piedadislam.org/wisewomen/> Accessed on: May 14, 2012.

and praised for her intelligence, chastity, and prudence until people began to call her “Tahirah” or “the pure one.” The significance of names and honorary titles receive a good amount of attention within PIEDAD’s “Wise Women” texts. Names not only signify the namer’s desires for the named, e.g. ‘Khadijah’ is a popular name for many Muslim parents who hope their daughters will grow up to exhibit some of her noble characteristics, honorary titles also signify existing characteristics when received later in life. According to the narrative, Khadijah did not receive her title “Tahirah” until she consistently and continuously performed unspecified, as of this point in the narrative, acts of purity. Likewise, Khadijah’s other honorific names, Ameerat-Quraish (Princess of Quraish) and Khadija Al-Kubra (Khadija the Great), would have been earned through consistent and continuous public performances. Names are therefore one manner in which the conceptual division between internal characteristics and external manifestations of the internal are constructed.

It is important to note that both titles of “always ahead” and “the pure one” were earned before she met the Prophet. Khadijah earned these titles during a period of her life where she managed her own inherited wealth as a widow. Her caravans were successful in part because of her reputation as an honest trader. Because she did not accompany the caravans personally, she relied on hired men to represent her honesty. Based on her distant cousin Muhammad’s reputation as an honest man, Khadijah employed him to “go with her wealth to ash-Sham as a merchant. In return, she would give him more than she used to give to the other traders.”¹⁶⁰ Muhammad’s higher rate of compensation for his

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

work as Khadijah's representative was based on his reputation. The brand was honesty, and it was a successful, lived description for both Khadijah and Muhammad.

After considering accounts of Muhammad's excellent performance as her representative of honesty, Khadijah said to him "indeed, I like in you our blood relationship and the undoubted nobility of your descent, your trustworthiness and sincerity, as well as the integrity of your character and the truthfulness of your speech."¹⁶¹

The PIEDAD narrative then tells us that she suggested marriage to him, and they were married: "She was 40 years old when she married the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon him), and he was 25 years old. She was the first lady that the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon him) married, and he never married anyone else as long as he was married to her until she died."

Khadijah and the Prophet had six children together. She was the first person to accept Muhammad as the messenger of God and the message he had been given. Khadijah was a lifelong source of comfort and support to the Prophet. When he worried the revelations might be signs of insanity, Khadijah reassured him otherwise: "Khadijah (May Allah be Pleased with her) then accompanied him to her cousin Waraqah b. Nawfal b. Asad b. 'Abdul-'Uzza, who, during the Pre-Islamic Period became a Christian and used to write the writing with Hebrew letters." Khadijah's wise and learned Christian cousin Waraqah reassured Muhammad of his experience with the angel, saying: "This is the same one who keeps the secrets (angel Gabriel) whom Allah had sent to Moses."¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

In addition to describing her admirable support of Muhammad, the PIEDAD document recounts various narratives regarding the Prophet's admiration of Khadijah: "And the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon him) used to honor her and cherish her. And he used not to disagree with her before he received revelation. Then he used to remember her a lot after her death, and he didn't get tired of praising her." The Prophet's recollection and praise of his late wife Khadijah was so frequent that his last wife 'Aisha became jealous. On one occasion, 'Aishah said to the Prophet: "Verily, Allah has given you better than that old woman," at which he angrily responded: "No, by Allah, I swear that Allah has never given me better than her. She was the wife who believed in me when everyone else disbelieved in me. She affirmed my truthfulness when everyone else accused me of lying. She supported me with her money when everyone else deprived me. And Allah provided me with children through her when no other woman has given me children."

Khadijah had twice been a widow. She was a successful, wealthy and independent business woman. She hired Muhammad as her employee, as a representation of her honest trading. She suggested marriage to Muhammad, believed and comforted him after receiving the revelation. She gave birth to Muhammad's only children. She loved and was beloved by the Prophet and the Muslim *ummah*, as the pure and honest mother of the believers.

Khadijah (May Allah be Pleased with her), the Mother of the Believers, died helping the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon him) in conveying the call to Islam. She died three years before the migration to Madinah at the age of sixty

five. The Prophet (Peace be upon him) then buried her with his own hands. Her death was a great misfortune for the Prophet (Peace be upon him).¹⁶³

Along with Mariam and Khadijah, Fatima (the daughter of Muhammad and Khadijah, wife of Ali and mother of Hasan and Husain), the wise and strong willed Aisha (the Prophet's last wife) and other female members of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (the family of the house of the Prophet), form core hermeneutic models for developing discursive representations of Muslimah piety, women's issues in Islam and Muslim women leadership roles.

Women's Issues in LMO Discourse

In addition to Muslimah archetypes, scriptural proclamations generally concerning women also serve as a foundation for understanding issues regarding veiling, domestic violence and human rights. The *PiedadIslam.org* page "Women in Islam" contains an embedded YouTube video, a list of ten linked documents, half in English the other half in Spanish, and about 1,300 words of static text listing various passages of the Qur'an explicating "The Condition of Women in Islam." The YouTube video is titled *La Mujer en el Islam: Parte 1, La Mujer en el Coran*, "Women in Islam: Part 1, Women in the Qur'an." The video is narrated by a male voice and Spanish language text that fades in and out over a static image of a pink rose and out of focus green leaves. The narrated text first tells its viewers that in terms of spirituality, the Qur'an says men and women are equal and that the only measure of greater honor is that of piety. A narrator then recites the Qur'an in Arabic, while the text quotes it in Spanish: "En verdad, el más honrado de

¹⁶³ *ibid.*

nosotros ante Dios es el más piadoso (Corán 49:13).”¹⁶⁴ The narrator then identifies surah 4, “Women,” as an example of the various rights afforded to women in the Qur’an. After reviewing several other verses and topics, the video concludes with three URL addresses that may be visited for more detailed information, www.verdaderoislam.blogspot.com; www.islamhouse.com; and a chat room for non-Muslims at www.islamreligion.com/es.

One of the hyperlinks beneath the YouTube video is a Microsoft Word document produced by <http://www.maryams.net> (presently an empty site) which lists various passages of the Qur’an and hadith that address women’s rights. Alternatively, the PIEDAD web page offers, in static text below the list of hyperlinks, a Spanish language list of scriptural references on women’s issues. This list and many other *PiedadIslam.org* documents come from www.NurElIslam.com. The text opens with the following:

*Para las mujeres, el Islam es una bendición especial y el profeta del Islam es en verdad el más grande de los benefactores de las mujeres. En Arabia, antes de que llegara el Islam, el nacimiento de una niña era considerado una desgracia y vergüenza.*¹⁶⁵

“For women, Islam is a special blessing and the prophet of Islam is truly the greatest benefactors of women. In Arabia, before Islam, the birth of a girl was considered a disgrace and shame.”

Qur’anic passage condemning female infanticide are then cited (Qur’an 16:58-59). The list also references passages that state men and women were equally produced (49:13); as having mutual rights (4:1); and equal possessions (3:195). A hadith from al-Bujari is also cited which narrates a dialogue with the Prophet. To the thrice repeated question of who

¹⁶⁴ PIEDAD. “La Mujer en el Islam: Parte 1, La Mujer en el Coran,” Youtube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQVXE4oCl7s&feature=player_embedded#! Accessed on: May 22, 2012

¹⁶⁵ La Condición de la Mujer en el Islam.” NurIslam.org. <http://www.nurelislam.com/Mujer/condicion.html> Accessed on: May 22, 2012

has the most right to be treated with more courtesy, the Prophet responds three times, “your mother.” And it is not until the fourth time he is asked that he responds, “your father.” Another cited hadith within the text moves beyond condemnation of female infanticide to identifying rewards for doing otherwise:

Si alguno de vosotros cuida tres hijas, las disciplina, las hace casar y es amable con ellas, irá al Paraíso.

“If any of you cares for three daughters, disciplines, marries them off and it is kind to them, you will go to Paradise.” (Abu Dawud)

The text concludes with a final passage from the Qur’an, surah 66:12:

Nosotros soplamos en ella de nuestro espíritu y ella atestiguó la verdad de las palabras de su Señor y de Sus revelaciones y fue una de las devotas.

We breathed into her of Our spirit and she testified the truth of the words of her Lord and of His revelations and was one of the devout. (Corán 66: 10-12)

In scriptural passages such as these, women are referred to in general terms. Rather than providing models to be emulated, these passages serve as the foundation for moral codes regarding women. These moral codes along with Muslimah models of piety thus serve as a basis for PIEDAD’s online discourse, including on veiling, domestic violence and human rights.

For many Latina Muslimahs, the veil is a source of dignity and a sign of modesty. Sometimes however, it is also a source of conflict. For new Muslimah converts, the decision “to veil or not to veil” is difficult to separate from the desire to prove to their selves and to others the authenticity of their conversion. For Marta and others, the continuity of the virgin and veiled Maria within both the Latino Catholic and the Islamic traditions provides one interpretation of their choice to veil. They veil, in part, because

their Latino and Muslim models of piety veiled. For Marta, veiling not only signifies her embrace of Islam but also of her traditional Mexican practices. For many non-Muslim Latino family and community members, however, the veil is viewed with suspicion, as a sign of lost freedom, and as a rejection of Latinidad (of being Latino). On *PiedadIslam.org*, the issue of veiling is addressed within several documents, including a WhyIslam.org brochure promoted on the “Women in Islam” page and nine web pages dedicated to the issue of veiling produced by TheModernReligion.com.

“In the name of God, the most compassionate the most merciful,” opens the *Revelando el Misterio del Jiyab*, “Revealing the Mystery of the Hijab,” a WhyIslam.org digital brochure that is also available in print. “*El velo es una externa manifestación de un compromiso interno al adorar a Allah - simboliza un compromiso de piedad*, “The veil is an external manifestation of an internal commitment to worship Allah - it symbolizes a commitment to piety.”¹⁶⁶ The brochure explains that at its most “basic and primordial” level, the decision to veil is based on obedience to God:

¡Profeta! Di a tus esposas, a tus hijas y a las mujeres de los creyentes que se cubran con el manto. Es lo mejor para que se las distinga y no sean molestadas. Allah es indulgente, misericordioso...

Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw the mantle. It is best to be recognized and not molested. Allah is Forgiving, merciful ... (Qur'an 33:59)

Immediately after framing the decision as an act of obedience, the brochure attacks the dominant means of mass communication for creating and supporting distorted and “totally erroneous” generalizations regarding Islam and veiling:

¹⁶⁶ http://d1.islamhouse.com/data/es/ih_articles/single/es_revelando_misterio_del_jiyab.pdf (Accessed: 6/23/12)

*Las musulmanas que cubren sus cabezas son frecuentemente estigmatizadas injustamente, son señaladas por un lado como oprimidas, y por otro como fanáticas y fundamentalistas.*¹⁶⁷

Muslim women who cover their heads are often unfairly stigmatized, they are identified on the one hand as oppressed, and on the other as fanatical and fundamentalist.

In an attempt to clarify such misconceptions, the brochure quotes an interviewee described as “una Cristiana revertida” a Christian who reverted to Islam. The Latina revert to Islam describes her veiling as a demonstration of modesty. Being asked to unveil in public, she reported, would be analogous to not wearing a top in public; both would be embarrassing and shameful acts. The *Cristiana revertida*, then says she can’t help but ask herself, “what would happen if they had asked Maria (peace be upon her) the mother of Jesús (peace and blessings be with him) to uncover her head?” The brochure then considers the misconception that women are forced to wear the hijab, promptly responding that for the vast majority of women, nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, it is *una decisión muy personal e independiente venida de apreciar la sabiduría y el conocer los mandatos de Allah y el sincero deseo de complacerlo*, “A very personal and independent decision coming from an appreciation of the wisdom and knowledge of Allah’s commandments and the sincere desire to please him.” The veil is thus described as a gift from God. It is an external manifestation of an internal commitment to piety. Still, there are difficulties in choosing to wear the veil. Particularly worrisome is the level of discrimination reportedly received by Muslim women who veil in the U.S.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

In addition to the WhyIslam.org brochure, *PiedadIslam.org*'s "Hot Topics" page lists the following hyperlinks on veiling:

- [Quranic Verses about Hijab](#)
- [Basic FAQ on Hijaab](#)
- [Hijaab - An Effective form of Dawah](#)
- [The Veil as a Political Metaphor](#)
- [A lesson to be learned](#)
- [The Veil Is Not Oppression, It's Chic, Say Muslim Women](#) **NEW!**
- [British Consulate rejects Passport Photo with Hijaab](#)
- [A Muslim Woman's Victory over UK Home Office: Guidelines changed](#)
- [Hijab Activism - Every Public Moment becomes Dawah](#)¹⁶⁸

All of the links are portals to the English language website [TheModernReligion.com](#). The website was self reportedly created,

on March 28th 1998 by a teenage girl. She wanted to share with others everything that she loved about Islam - she was just a learning then and so the first version of ITMR [Islam, the Modern Religion] was just a page with a link to the English translation of the Quran. Today, ITMR has grown with its webmaster - it has over 2000 files... The use of the word modern is not to connote changing Islam to suit modern times. Is it called modern because the Islam, revealed 1400 years ago is still applicable as a solution to modern problems of today like AIDS, single parenthood, poverty, violence, racism and sexism. Islam is the way of life that continues to remain suitable because the values and prescriptions are timeless and universal.¹⁶⁹

In addition to it's "over 2,000 files," *TheModernReligion.com* publishes emailed suggestions, corrections and conflicts on its "Debates" page in a narrative form. This feature may reflect her understanding of both Islam and the Internet as promoting free and open dialogue, even if she has and exercises final editing power over the "open

¹⁶⁸ PIEDAD. "Hot Topics," *PiedadIslam.org*. <http://piedadislam.org/hot-topics/> Accessed on: May 23, 2012.

¹⁶⁹ The Modern Religion. "When was the "Islam - The Modern Religion" website founded and why?" <http://www.themodernreligion.com/about> Accessed on: May 23, 2012.

forum.” The following three passages are published on the first *PiedadIslam.org*

“Quranic Verses about Hijab” link to ITMR:

O you Children of Adam! We have bestowed on you raiment to cover your shame as well as to be an adornment to you. But the raiment of righteousness, that is the best. Such are among the Signs of Allah, that they may receive admonition. (Quran 7:26)

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, or their brothers' sons or their sisters' sons, or their women or the servants whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex, and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O you Believers, turn you all together towards Allah, that you may attain Bliss. (Quran 24:31).

O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognised and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful. (Quran 33:59)

In addition to serving as a commandment from God, ITMR and PIEDAD promote the use of veiling as “An effective form of Dawah.” The ITMR page is a static text remediation of Dr. Aisha Hamdan’s article “The Hijab as Daw'aa,” published by AlJumuah Magazine, Volume 10, Issue 5. In it, Dr. Aisha Hamdan provides *dawah* workers with the following talking points when addressing Christians:

- "Did you every wonder why Mary, the mother Jesus (alayhes salam) wore clothing very similar to that of Muslims?"
- "Why do Catholic nuns dress the way they do?"
- "Did you know that in the Canon laws of the Catholic church today there is a law that requires women to cover their heads in church?"
- "Have you read in I Corinthians (Bible, 11:3-10) the verses that Paul wrote: 'Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And evey woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head - it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman doesn't cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace

for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head."¹⁷⁰

Throughout *PiedadIslam.org*, the *WhyIslam.org* brochure *Revelando el Misterio del Jiyab*, and the various ITMR pages on veiling, the practice is described as anything but a simplistic and contradictory generalization of it as oppressive and as an act of fanaticism and fundamentalism. While the choice to veil is uniformly described as an act of obedience to God, the external performance of an internalized piety, various other important factors are also considered. The conflict and difficulties of veil based discrimination are considered as are the veil as an act of modesty, a deterrent to the male sexual gaze, a performance of dignity, a form of dawah, a form of anti-colonial political activism, and as a liberating and “chic” form of self expression.

In addition to the many complex significations of veiling detailed above, the veil is often described in LMO discourse as cultural. That is, as a pre-Islamic practice in the Arabian Peninsula, and as a pre-Islamic practice in traditional Latino culture. The division between religion and culture in LMO discourse is complex and in no way fixed. The differentiation between both categories is further explored in the following chapter of this dissertation. Here, I bring up the categorical division only in reference to LMO discourse on issues regarding veiling and on the controversial issues of polygamy and domestic violence. The practice of having multiple wives, for example, is attributed to Arab culture rather than to the religious sanctioning of polygamy. Qur’anic inspired law sanctioning up to four wives is, according LMO readings, a limitation of polygamy

¹⁷⁰ Aisha Hamdan, "The Hijab as Daw'aa," *AlJumuah Magazine* 10, no. 5 (1999).
http://www.themodernreligion.com/women/w_hijabdawah.htm Accessed on: August 14, 2012.

practices rather than a promotion of it. Furthermore, Islamic scriptures are read as promoting monogamy as the ideal in societies that allow for it. The seventh century Arabia in which the Prophet lived should be understood as consisting of few males and an abundance of widows due to constant tribal warfare. Polygamy was a solution to a specific historical and sociological context, not the universal ideal. The practice of polygamy, though allowed by the Qur'an in specific contexts, is ultimately understood as a cultural practice and not a religious ideal.

Domestic violence is also attributed to cultural patriarchy rather than to religious ideals within LMO discourse and is a particularly prominent discussion on *PiedadIslam.org*. Unlike polygamy, domestic violence within Islamic scriptures is interpreted as unlawful by LMOs. On various occasions, LALMA leaders have attempted to explain to their various audiences that the controversial Qur'anic passage 4:34, which appears to condone the practice of "corrective" "wife beating," should be understood by both Muslims and non-Muslims as a gentle "love tap" that need not be tolerated by the wife who can instead divorce the would be "correcting" husband.¹⁷¹ *PiedadIslam.org* addresses the issue of domestic violence in its "Hot Topics" page by first and foremost promoting peaceful, loving and merciful marriages between Muslim couples: "And among His signs is this, that He created mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in peace and tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts); Verily in that are signs for people who reflect." (Qu'ran 30:21) Immediately following the Qur'anic heading, PIEDAD published the following statement regarding

¹⁷¹ This Qur'anic passage and interpretation is further discussed on pg 166 of this chapter.

the organization's stance on domestic violence: "As'Salaamu 'Alaikum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatuhu! As part of PIEDAD's healthy community initiative we strongly condemn domestic violence and participate in efforts made to eradicate it in our communities." To the left of these textual passages and statements is a Wafa House logo, which links to the social service's organizational website at WafaHouse.org. The New Jersey located Wafa House is: "a support center dedicated to educating and assisting victims of domestic violence" whose purpose is "to maintain a facility that will strengthen and reinforce the family unit while emphasizing the value of human life through intervention and community awareness." The center offers "a variety of culturally sensitive services targeted towards --but not limited to-- women of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent. All services are free of charge and completely confidential."¹⁷²

In addition to the Wafa House Logo, the PIEDAD "Hot Topics" webpage dedicates about a third of its space to Baitul Salaam, an organization that is like the Wafa House, also dedicated to addressing domestic violence issues. Baitul Salaam's Facebook published wishlist is remediated in unedited form on the "HotTopics" page. In addition to other services, the Georgia based organization offers a shelter for victims of domestic violence, and is requesting resources such as financial support for sponsoring individual victims, maintaining their facilities, office materials and internet services costs, and staff stipends. Additional requests for non-financial resources include items such as non-perishable food items, personal care items, shelving for food pantry, and hangers and clothes racks to hang up donations.

¹⁷² "Mission," WafaHouse.org <http://www.wafahouse.org/mission.html> Accessed on: June 23, 2012

A second section of the “Hot Topics” page is framed by a light purple background setting it apart from the rest of the page’s white background text space. It is a direct and unedited remediation of ITMR’s page on domestic violence, both in text, color palette and in layout.¹⁷³ The purple space is divided into two vertical columns. The right column consists of thirty links to self produced and remediated articles hosted as ITMR pages as well as links to other websites belonging to various organizations that deal with issues of domestic violence. Below the thirty links is a logo for the webring “The Phenomenal Women of the Web against Domestic Violence” whose purpose is to form an online coalition. The webring’s website PhenomenalWomen.com is no longer active, but its logo is still actively promoted on many Internet sites including ITMR’s and PIEDAD’s.

The left column opens with the following text:

Domestic Violence exists in all quarters of society. This section was created to specifically address domestic violence within Muslim communities. This is not to say that domestic violence is a Muslim problem. A woman is beaten up every 9 seconds in America. See [Domestic Violence in the West](#).

The above quoted text is a condensed variation of the opening paragraphs of another blog page created by ITMR’s webmaster, which in its long version is as follows:

Domestic Violence exists everywhere. It exists all over the world and within all cultures, communities and religious groups. As the webmaster of "Islam - The Modern Religion", I have created this section, with the help of God, so as to address domestic violence within Muslim communities in particular.

This is not to say that I believe domestic violence is a problem only in Muslim communities and nowhere else. No way - domestic violence is rampant in Non-Muslim communities as well. To see what is going on in your own backyard, please visit [YWCA San Diego, Domestic Violence Stats](#) or [Domestic Violence in the West](#).

¹⁷³ “Domestic Violence,” TheModernReligion.com http://www.themodernreligion.com/women/w_dv.htm
Accessed on: May 23, 2012.

As a Muslim, it's my responsibility to first address the problems within Muslim community. As a religion and way of life, Islam offers the most privileges to the woman and her rights as a human being equal to man.

Therefore, regardless of the ubiquitous nature of DV, Muslim men should be the LAST people on this earth to commit such a horrid act. They have NO excuse to abuse their wives. Absolutely NO excuse and if they really followed Islam, they wouldn't.¹⁷⁴

The long version of the opening paragraph expands on the previous statement, “This is not to say that domestic violence is a Muslim problem” by describing domestic violence as a problem that is universally present in “all cultures, communities and religious groups.” Unlike veiling and polygamy, domestic violence is not attributed to culture. Instead, it is formulated as a universal human problem that is materialized and sometimes supported by both culture and religion (note the two categories remain divided within this text). The long version of the introductory text concludes that despite the “ubiquitous nature” of domestic violence, adherence to Islam demands Muslim men abstain from “such horrid” acts while providing Muslim women with protective rights.

The first hyperlink within the purple section of the “Hot Topics” page is a path to ITMR’s remediated article “A Commentary on The Qur'an 4:34” by Dr. Ahmad Shafaat.¹⁷⁵ The article is an Islamic commentary on both the verse and the various controversial readings it has produced. The English translation of the Qur’anic verse provided within the document is as follows:

Men are (meant to be righteous and kind) guardians of women because God has favored some more than others and because they (i.e. men) spend out of their

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Shafaat, Ahmad. “A Commentary on The Qur'an 4:34,” TheModernReligion.com. <http://www.themodernreligion.com/women/dv-4-34-shafaat.html> Accessed on: May 24, 2012.

wealth. (In their turn) righteous women are (meant to be) devoted and to guard what God has (willed to be) guarded even though out of sight (of the husband). As for those (women) on whose part you fear ill-will and nasty conduct, admonish them (first), (next) separate them in beds (and last) beat them. But if they obey you, then seek nothing against them. Behold, God is most high and great. (4:34)

Dr. Ahmad Shafaat argues against the “two extreme reactions on the part of some Muslims” toward the command to “beat them,” “unruly wives,” “The first reaction is being apologetic or ashamed of the suggestion. The second is to use it as a justification for indulging in habitual wife battering.”¹⁷⁶ Both reactions are according to Dr. Ahmad Shafaat wrong. According to his commentary, beating is only to occur under the following conditions: the husband must have “moral superiority” over his wife; she must be first admonished and deprived of sex; it must be done only once as a last resort to mend the relationship; the beating must not cause injury, bruise or serious hurt; and she cannot be obligated to take the beating.¹⁷⁷ According to this reading, beating is not a feasible practice and “There is therefore, absolutely no license here for the type of regular and continual wife beating that goes on in some homes, where each time the husband is angry with his wife or with someone else he turns against her and beats her up.”¹⁷⁸ Another ITMR document remediated on PIEDAD, related the following: “Once a number of women came to the prophet, on whom be peace, to complain that their husbands had beaten them. The prophet announced that men who beat their wives are not good men. The prophet also said, “Do not beat the female servants of Allah.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Smith, Shawn N. “Muslims against Wife Abuse,” TheModernReligion.com.

http://www.themodernreligion.com/women/w_abuse1.htm#say Accessed on: May 24, 2012.

Even as “beating” is seemingly allowed in the Qur’an, LMO discourse emphasizes contrasting women’s rights, including the right to refuse the beating and demand a divorce. If the Qur’an is used by a society to justify continued beating without adhering to its other guidelines, LMOs attribute this is to a cultural misreading of the religious ideal. Additionally, women ideally have the right to refuse marriage proposals and are theologically protected from forced marriages (An-Nisa 4:19). Women have the right to collaborate equally with their husband on domestic affairs (Al-Taubah 9:71). Women have a right to education (Bukhari Volume 9, Book 92, Number 413). A wife has no obligation to economically provide for her family, and cannot be forced to work for income. And though she has a right to all of her husband’s possession, her husband has no right to any of her possessions (Sunan Abu Dawud: Book 11, Number 2139). Lastly, with regard to spirituality, women and men are regarded as equals by God and the Prophet. The only measure of spiritual superiority is that of an internal piety exhibited through external acts (Al-Ahzab 33:35).¹⁸⁰

Islamic scriptural sources that address both specific women and women generally serve as hermeneutical keys for developing and understanding LMO discourse on issues regarding veiling, domestic violence and human rights. These sources also serve as keys for understanding the various leadership roles women have developed and institutionalized in LMO structures.

¹⁸⁰ PIEDAD. “Derechos en el Islam.” PiedadIslam.org.
<http://piedadislam.org/fckeditor/editor/filemanager/connectors/aspx/uploadedImages/file/Collection%20of%20References%20from%20the%20Quran%20and%20Hadeeth%20about%20the%20Rights%20of%20Women%20guaranteed%20by%20Islam.doc> Accessed on May 24, 2012.

The Structure of Muslimah Leadership

PIEDAD, LADO and LALMA leadership has consisted mostly of women. This dynamic has resulted in innovative negotiations with the role of female leaders within a patriarchal system of religious authority. PIEDAD's organizational structure resembles LALMA's more than LADO's in its commitment to small study sessions. Like LALMA, PIEDAD's study groups are sponsored by Muslim scholars that provide doctrinal guidance and lessons on Islam. And like LALMA's founder Marta, PIEDAD's founder Khadijah Rivera had received an undergraduate college introduction to feminist and Marxist literature. Rivera held the position of PIEDAD's president until her demise in 2009 at which point Nylka Vargas took over and remains president to this day. PIEDAD is distinct from LALMA in two important ways however. First, PIEDAD is a national network of local chapters through various states, whereas LALMA's study groups are limited to the Los Angeles area. Secondly, though PIEDAD relies on male Muslim scholars and collaborates with male members of other Muslim organizations, it is self defined as a women's organization. With the exception of the Muslim scholar, study sessions are closed to both Muslim and non-Muslim men. Additionally, when involved in interfaith and other public dialogue, PIEDAD focuses on women's issues to a greater extent than does LALMA. As part of its public dialogue, the content of its website *PiedadIslam.org* also focuses mostly on women's issues.

In contrast to PIEDAD's and LALMA's singular leadership, the Latino American Dawah Organization, LADO, was led in its formative years by its three founders, two of which were women. During the period when LADO lost contact with co-founder Juan

Alvarado, the LMO was led by its other two co-founders Samantha Sanchez and Saraji Umm Zaid. LADO was not without male leadership for long however. Four years after it was founded, Juan Galvan joined LADO in 2001 and is today its sole president. Unlike PIEDAD and LALMA, LADO has never held doctrinal study groups other than informal Internet chat room sessions, and has therefore not found a need for sponsoring resident scholars of Islam. Instead, LADO has been an online network of individual Latino Muslims and LMOs across America. Galvan's expertise in computer programming, management skills and ongoing commitment to LADO have resulted in the long term security of his position as its president and relative autonomy from outside religious authority.

LALMA's membership and leadership is mostly made up of women. In an interview, the LMO's president reported the following, "... I used to be very feminist, in Mexico. I went to the university for a year. I remember my readings on feminism, existentialism, Marxism. So it gives me this, obviously, you know is like feminism: you have the power, you're a woman. Then, I discovered [that in] Islam, quite the contrary [to what] many individuals think, that women and Muslim women are supposed to be just domestic women or just house wife woman with no knowledge, school, education... I discovered a major feminism in Islam [sic]. And the other women, we discovered, wait a minute, Islam give us these rights fourteen hundred years ago." Though they receive doctrinal lessons by a sponsoring male Imam or scholar of Islam, only sponsors that promote women's rights are chosen by LALMA's female leadership. One such sponsor was the late Dr. Fathi Osman, who was a colleague of the prominent Muslim

Brotherhood ideologue, Said Qutb. Dr. Osman left the Brotherhood when it took a more radical turn while he a more moderate one. Dr. Osman's views are summarized in a *New York Times* publication as: "offering an expansive, liberal interpretation of Koranic teaching on topics like the rights of women; democratic pluralism; the competing claims of Islamic, or Shariah, law and civil law; and the obligation of Muslims in the West to embrace Western civic values." Regarding Dr. Osman's relation to LALMA as one of its sponsoring scholars, one interviewee reported the following: "we brought Dr. Fathi Osman, so we have always looked [for] knowledge from people that are knowledgeable in the field and promoting women's rights. Therefore, we are always giving this topic to new Muslims or those that are interested in Islam and women's rights..."

Though LALMA was founded as a study group by five Latinos, Marta is currently the only active founder (the others visit from time to time but do not now attend regularly). She has secured the title of its sole president for the foreseeable future. LALMA is currently in the process of becoming a 501(c) tax exempt non-profit organization. Through this process, LALMA began to put together a structured board committee. The committee has not met consistently however. Further, the position of president was never up for vote, mostly because no other consistent member has volunteered to be president. There have been a few visiting male individuals who have expressed interest in leading the group as its imam. None of these propositions have materialized however due to ideological differences and unrealized commitments. In one instance, a Shia cleric attempted to reform the mostly Sunni Latino Muslims of LALMA, he was politely heard but not engaged, and was not invited to return. Marta's relative

security as president of LALMA is reflected in the confluence between the LMO's ideals and her own. Marta's interest in Muslim spirituality and Sufism has, for example, informed LALMA's past studies on *Hazreti Mariam*, Muslim mystic Imam Al-Ghazali, and the LMO's current studies on spirituality and the three Islamic levels of *nafs*, spirit/consciousness.

One LALMA member reported that many Latina women convert to Islam only after they had a Muslim fiancé, and that this has had a great impact on the kind of Islam they are most likely to adopt, i.e. the kind of Islam that their fiancé practices. LALMA sees this as a potentially problematic conflation between religion and culture: "...I'm sorry to say, Muslims that are born in Muslim countries don't know much about Islam. They only know culture, and they repeat what their parents did, how they see the parents doing, you know, they fasting, yes, and their praying, but it just remains like a cultural thing. And its, you know, you discover that Islam is more than culture... they don't know what is culture and what is religion. They never learn it that way. It's society that judges, that they don't care about women's rights, you know, that women can be beaten. And they don't go to the Qur'an..." LALMA therefore teaches that religion and culture are different, that Latino culture should be celebrated, and that the lack of women's rights in some Muslim majority countries should be attributed to culture rather than to the religion of Islam.

CHAPTER 5

‘RELIGION’ AND ‘CULTURE’ TALK

CATEGORICAL DIVISIONS IN LATINO MUSLIM DISCOURSE

Behold, the only [true] religion in the sight of God is [man's] self-surrender unto Him; and those who were vouchsafed revelation aforetime took, out of mutual jealousy, to divergent views [on this point] only after knowledge [thereof] had come unto them. But as for him who denies the truth of God's messages - behold, God is swift in reckoning!

Qur'an (3:19)

(Translation by Muhammad Assad)

They ask why I want to change my culture. I tell them I'm changing religion, not culture. I still eat tortillas.

- Sylva in H.G.Reza's "Embracing Islam, Praying for Acceptance"

"I pray in Spanish," she responded when asked how she prays. LALMA was having its first of many sessions to come with Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi. Marta was very excited that he had agreed to be their organization's sponsoring Muslim scholar. Dr. Siddiqi is an esteemed local leader, a prolific academic, a public Muslim spokesman in Southern California, director of one of the two most prominent Islamic centers in Southern California, the Islamic Society of Orange County, and is the current chairman of the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California. So Marta was appropriately enthusiastic when he agreed to the commitment of teaching Islam to the Latino Muslims of LALMA. Marta was also eagerly looking forward to the topic of the first session, Islamic spirituality.

Several days before LALMA's first lesson with Dr. Siddiqi, Marta expressed her concern about the lack of attention being given to matters of spirituality not only within Muslim communities, but within other religious traditions as well. She argued that too many Muslims focus too much on Islamic law, that they practice rituals without experiencing the deeper forms of consciousness they are meant to incite. She talked about one of LALMA's first group readings outside of the Qur'an and hadith, al-Ghazzālī's book *Muslim Character* and its concept of a *hermandad*, a brotherhood, that could mystically surpass ties between family members. Mohammad al-Ghazzālī was an 11th century Persian Muslim jurist scholar and Sufi mystic. He is accredited as theoretically devastating the Neo-Platonist Mu'tazilah school of Muslim scholars. Additionally, he provided a unifying theory between Sunni formulated in terms of sharia on the one hand and Sufi mysticism on the other. Though the two strands of Muslim thought came to influence one another, the division remained crystallized despite al-Ghazzālī's unifying theory. The work did manage to bring the two strands of thought into close enough dialogue with one another that neither resorted to pervasive and sustained condemnation of the other. For her part, Marta remained an avid reader and proponent of al-Ghazzālī and his focus on Islamic spirituality.

The class with Siddiqi was held in May of 2012 at the Islamic Society of Orange County, ISOC. Most of the LALMA members that attended the class met at the Omar mosque in Los Angeles and carpooled to the ISOC. After prayer, the group met in a conference hall with both U.S. and California state flags on either side of the speakers table. Siddiqi sat next to a LALMA translator, who took diligent notes and would restate

his English lecture in Spanish after every five to ten minutes or so. Islam, began Siddiqi, is a whole way of life, it is not just about *halal* and *haram*, what is permissible and forbidden. The individual must instead participate in *iman* (faith), the five pillars of Islam and *ihsan* (to be connected with God). The body is made of earth or dust; it has race, gender and so on. But the human spirit transcends these. And just as the body required nutrition, so to does the spirit. To connect the spirit to its source, God, it is not enough to simply engage in the ritual prostrations and repetition of prayers. Instead, a particular state of being is required. The spirit must become aware of living in the presence of Allah. At this point, Siddiqi asked the LALMA members present, how they prayed in order to achieve such awareness of God's presence. One member responded saying, "I try to remember something I'm really grateful for. Something specific, like my sight."

Then Siddiqi asked another member, how do you pray? "I pray in Spanish," she responded in English. Siddiqi was taken aback, "Why do you not pray in Arabic?" "I feel God understands all languages, I can explain everything I want in Spanish." "Te sientes mas conectada," you feel more connected, another LALMA member understandingly chimed in. After recovering from the surprise, Siddiqi explained, "In Islam we have two prayers: *salat*, the way that Allah wants you to pray [ritual prostrations and Arabic recitations], so you have to learn to pray this way. And *duah*, the way you want to pray... in any language in such a way in which you are sure that Allah is hearing you."

After the small confrontation between "student and teacher," the lecture was opened up to questions and answers. Marta, hoping to learn more about spirituality asked about *nafs*, the levels of the spirit or consciousness. After Siddiqi's explanation of the

three levels of *nafs* and having had gathered that most of the LALMA members could understand and speak English, he asked do we need to translate or shall we move on. To which the member who prays in Spanish responded, “No, I need a translation!” “pero con amor, con amor,” but with love, with love, her understanding co-member soothingly pressed. Toward the end of the Q&A session, Siddiqi asked me if I had any questions, I did. For the new convert to Islam, I asked, is it better to first understand the meaning of the Qur’anic prayers or to learn their correct Arabic pronunciation and enunciation? Meaning, was his response. And that the language barrier can be a blessing, was another response to my question by a LALMA member, “someone who doesn’t know the language may have a deeper connection.”

Latino Muslims comprise a group identity in their shared experience of ethnic marginalization. In Latino communities, Latino conversion to Islam is many times understood as an abandonment of Latino ethnicity. In Muslim communities, Latino ethnicity is often approached as foreign to Islam if not incompatible. Thus, most formed ethnically distinct LMOs in response to either direct discrimination or a perceived sense of systematic neglect by broader Muslim communities. Spanish language, for example, becomes an overarching rallying cry for all LMOs. Much LMO discourse is therefore dedicated to critically addressing both Latino and Muslim characterizations of each category as incompatible with the other.

Categorical divisions or diversities are surmounted or unified only through further divisions. The material and immaterial are made one in Plato’s emanationist metaphysics

of being and becoming. The Jew and Gentile are made one in Paul's division between the believer and non-believer. And the Latino and Muslim are made one in LMO discursive divisions between religion and culture. This chapter examines theoretical and LMO divisions between religion and culture in the formation of a Latino Muslim identity. In particular, formulations of 'culture' within British cultural studies, American anthropology and critical race theory are explored. These works provide a theoretical grounding for examining the division between religion and culture in Latino Muslim discourse, which in this chapter is limited to searchable content on *PiedadIslam.org*, *LatinoDawah.org* and *LALMA.org*.

Searchable content on the Internet yields interesting quantitative and qualitative data, both of which are catalogued and analyzed in this chapter. Culture, within this content, is characterized on the one hand as less important than religion, as divisive and as responsible for causing Latinos to stray away from their original Muslim nature. On the other hand, Islam as an all-encompassing way of life includes culture; culture is in a positive formulation also characterized as a valuable identity marker and an enduring memory of peaceful and creative interactions between the Muslims, Jews and Christians of Al-Andalus. The division of culture from religion within LMO discourse is thus complex and as such serves as a multivalent response to the marginalizing question of whether a group can be both Latino and Muslim at the same time. By way of a conclusion, the division between religion and culture is explored within Dr. Siddiqi's (LALMA's sponsoring scholar of Islam) Internet essay on the Islamic concept of *Unity in Diversity*. Here, Siddiqi offers both a critique and justification of LMOs. In order to

situate Siddiqi's and LMO discursive divisions between 'religion' and 'culture' within broader academic theories of the two categories, I now first turn to formulations of culture as process, as religion and as race.

Culture as Process

"American Academics are currently waging culture wars. (Not many dead)," begins Adam Kupper's introduction to *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*.¹⁸¹ In Kupper's conclusion, 'culture' is the site of a conflicting set of narratives by academics, spokespeople and everyday language users. The French tradition, developed in eighteenth and nineteenth century, formulates culture as a progressive and cumulative universal human achievement that historically culminated in France, though theoretically it could have been anywhere. The German tradition reacted to the secularist French formulation of culture as civilization by promoting spiritual, often Protestant, values against materialism, authentic language and arts against artificial cosmopolitanism and rationalism, "in short, for *Kultur* against *Civilization*." Therefore, culture is either formulated as a universal division between the cultured and uncultured or as a regional division between the authentic and artificial. "Culture," concludes Kupper, "is always defined in opposition to something else."¹⁸²

In a narrow sense, rather than signify conflict over which set of ideals will prevail in a given society, the phrase "culture wars" more closely resembles Masuzawa's

¹⁸¹ Adam Kuper, *Culture : the anthropologists' account* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). 1.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 5-8.

following analysis: “The cultural idea is therefore less a conceptual tool than a bundle of arguments, moral persuasions, in brief, an icon of a certain epistemological position we are persuaded to assume.”¹⁸³ Rather than as a signifier of certain practices and objects, which are themselves signifiers of particular values and ideals, culture is here theoretically formulated as an adopted lens for viewing and interpreting the world. If the world is ordered between what is and is not culture, then it is of paramount importance to understand the distinct formulations of such boundary making. In what follows, I offer a brief description of three such formulations by Raymond Williams, Clifford Geertz and Omi and Winnant in order to ground my examination of LMO divisions between religion and culture.

In the seminal British cultural studies text, *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams distinguishes his conceptualizations of culture to those that emerged in the eighteenth century. In the latter, culture is formulated as a process of civil and social cultivation resulting in a division between “high’ and low” culture or “cultured and uncultured.” It is intimately tied to the academic disciplines within the humanities such as literary studies, whose canons serve to distinguish between cultured and uncultured classes. His own conceptualization is as a non-hierarchical *process* of meaning making that everyone engages in. This second formulation of cultural is as an anthropological tool that seeks to interpret the meaning of linguistic and non-linguistic human activity, a specific kind of hermeneutics applied to all human activity, that is, culture as “a whole

¹⁸³ Mark C. Taylor, *Critical terms for religious studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). 90.

way of life.” Cultural studies theoretician, Stuart Hall described the Williams formulation of culture in the following:

It shifted the whole ground of debate from a literary-moral model to an anthropological definition of culture. But it defined the latter now as the ‘whole process’ by means of which meanings and definitions are socially constructed and historically transformed, with literature and art as only one, specially privileged, kind of social communication.¹⁸⁴

Rather than as producing distinctions between high and low culture, the “whole process” formulation broadens the scope of academic studies of culture to include otherwise excluded process. Textual analysis of mass media, for example, “should be conducted in relation to an analysis of the institutions and social structures producing them.”¹⁸⁵ Instead of serving to distinguish between upper and lower classes, culture is referenced as a hermeneutical lens that seeks to uncover the relation between institutional power and ideology. An analysis of Latino Muslim culture thus conceived, would seek to subvert hegemonic structures by articulating its processes of development, dissemination and consumption as inextricably related, though not determined, to institutional structures of dominance.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Graeme Turner, *British cultural studies : an introduction*, 3rd ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003). 45.

¹⁸⁵ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and literature*, Marxist introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). 46

¹⁸⁶ Williams draws from the work of Althusser to develop a theory of *articulation* as distinct from explanation and description. Articulation seeks to examine the complex and necessary but insufficient relations of society (Ibid., 88, 109). For his understanding of the relation between hegemony and ideology, Williams draws from Gramsci in order to describe the subjective submission to power as inextricably linked to cultural meaning making (Ibid. 108-112).

When understood as a process, culture should no longer be expressed in a “habitual past tense.”¹⁸⁷ Instead, immediate experiences of change become the foci and expressive mode of culture. Changes in language, for example, from one generation to another can be “defined in terms of additions, deletions, and modifications, but these do not exhaust it.” Instead, the general change is best described through the literary term, ‘style’ and “can be observed in manners, dress, building, and other similar forms of social life.”¹⁸⁸ These are *changes of presence* that “do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.”¹⁸⁹ Williams’ term, *structures of feeling* is thus used to emphasize a distinction from ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’ in order to examine both fixed and actively lived and felt structures. Williams’ formulation of culture as process thus directly effects manner in which he observes and interprets it. It is an argument against the reductive study of stasis, and an argument for the anti-reductive study of living processes that are “more widely experienced.”¹⁹⁰ Williams thus formulated culture as constructed, as an entire process, as having a form that cannot be determined by empirical examination alone, as ideological struggle between competing forces and as structures of feeling.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 128

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 131

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 132

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133

Culture as Religion

The humanities' move away from the social science's hard explanation to interpretation of meaning was adopted and decisively promoted after the 1960's by the highly influential American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Following the contours of this trajectory which identified the human capacity for symbolic behavior as its central defining feature, Geertz understood culture as a text to be read, interpreted and written,¹⁹¹

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.¹⁹²

Geertz thus interpreted culture, such as ritual Balinese cockfighting, as a web of meanings which in the case of the Balinese culture brings its hermeneutic of a violent world into view.¹⁹³ Cultural studies should thus address important factors not seen by economists and social scientists, because it is a distinct and local symbolic system in contrast to and in isolation from social organization.¹⁹⁴ For Geertz, a traditional state is comprised of culture and social structure and is continuously challenged by modernity. The epitome of culture in traditional states is religion, whereas in modern society it is ideology.¹⁹⁵ Culture as religion is defined by Geertz as:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a

¹⁹¹ Kuper, *Culture : the anthropologists' account*. 82.

¹⁹² Clifford Geertz, American Council of Learned Societies., and ACLS Humanities E-Book (Organization), *The interpretation of cultures selected essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01005>. 5.

¹⁹³ See Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures : selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

¹⁹⁴ Kuper, *Culture : the anthropologists' account*. 83.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

*general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.*¹⁹⁶

The characterization of religion as the epitome of culture, that is, the epitome of a symbolic system or “values that rule in a society,” ultimately aligned Geertz with the civilization model of culture.

By characterizing religion as the epitome of culture, Geertz creates a hierarchical division between religion at the top and the remainder of culture below. In *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Talal Asad critiques the Geertzian reduction:

The two stages that Geertz proposes are, I would suggest, one. Religious symbols - whether one thinks of them in terms of communication or of cognition, of guiding action or of expressing emotion - cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial.

The reduction of religion as culture, argues Asad, causes the study of religion to suffer from a problem with Geertz’ general approach to culture: the idealist failure to address issues of power. Kuper also address this failure by first quoting Geertz on his anthropological approach to culture: “I am going to revel in culture-specific accretions, pore over processes of ratiocination, and plunge headlong into symbolic systems... That does not make the world go away: it brings it into view.”¹⁹⁷ Geertz was dedicated to the isolated study of culture, that is, of meaning or immaterial ideas. And in the quote above, such a program is framed not as a problematic neglect of the world by Geertz, but rather

¹⁹⁶ Geertz, Clifford. ““Religion as a Cultural System,” in Michael Banton, Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth, and Jesus College (University of Cambridge), *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion*, A S A monographs (London,: Tavistock Publications, 1966).

¹⁹⁷ Kuper, *Culture : the anthropologists' account*. Kuper, 121

as a vital, albeit anti-materialist, focus on the world. “Yet part of the world does go away,” Kupper concludes of Geertz, “National politicians, Indonesian soldiers, CIA operatives, overseas Chinese entrepreneurs are lost to view. The world that we are introduced to in Geertz’s later work seems to be very different from the world in which we are accustomed to live.”¹⁹⁸ For his part, Asad draws from Foucault’s understanding of knowledge and power as inextricably linked to critique Geertz. The failure to address the relation between historical processes of discipline and force on the one hand and Geertz’s formulation of culture as isolated and local symbolic systems on the other are for Assad naïve and devastating.¹⁹⁹

Culture as Race

“Latinos are made in the USA,” that is, the category ‘Latino’ is a construct produced within a racialized American public discourse.²⁰⁰ In their highly influential work *Racial Formations in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant formulate culture as a definitive element of the ethnicity paradigm of race. Prior to the 1920’s, *biologicistic* paradigms dominated discursive understandings of race. Regarding the biological paradigm of race Omi and Winant write:

Race was equated with distinct hereditary characteristics. Differences in intelligence, temperament, and sexuality (among other traits) were deemed to be racial in character. Racial intermixture was seen as a sin against nature, which would lead to the creation of “biological throwbacks.” These were some of the

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 54.

²⁰⁰ Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela Páez, *Latinos remaking America*, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press,, 2002), <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/uchicago/Doc?id=10054450>.

assumptions in social Darwinist, Spencerist, and eugenicist thinking about race and race relations.²⁰¹

Biologicistic paradigms of race draw from Enlightenment ideals and Darwinian doctrines to define race as determining not only skin pigmentation but also physical, intellectual, and religious characteristics and consequently, sovereignty and individual rights as well. Though no longer the dominant paradigm in public discourse, the biologicistic conceptions of race continue to be articulated in contemporary speech. Within LMO discourse, for example, Latino identity is sometimes characterized as being transmitted, “por la sangre,” through bloodlines: “there is “el llamado de la sangre.” Your blood, culture, and roots naturally pull you to people who are like you.”²⁰²

After the 1920’s, ethnicity paradigms that characterized race as cultural constructs displaced the prominence of the biologicistic formulation. Ethnicity came to be understood as the result of “a group formation process based on culture and descent.”²⁰³ Accordingly, *culture* was theorized as consisting of religion, language, arts and customs. *Descent* was on the other hand hereditary, “suggesting that ethnicity was socially primordial, if not biologically given, in character.”²⁰⁴ Like the biologicistic paradigm, the “primordial” characterization of ethnicity framed culture, including language and religion, as given rather than constructed. Despite the progressive move away from biologicistic paradigms of race, the ethnicity paradigm failed to promote democratic equality for America’s racialized minority groups in both its assimilationist and multiculturalist forms.

²⁰¹ Omi and Winant, *Racial formation in the United States : from the 1960s to the 1990s*. 15.

²⁰² LADO, *Latino Muslim Voice*. <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k5.html> Accessed on: July 2, 2012.

²⁰³ Omi and Winant, *Racial formation in the United States : from the 1960s to the 1990s*.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

Assimilationists such as Robert E. Park sought a domestic policy that promoted the integration of minority groups to dominant forms of American society. If minority groups would only abandon their culturally distinctive characteristics and adopt those of the dominant culture, it was argued, they could gain access to all the freedoms and rights offered by the U.S. Latinos could, for example, theoretically gain acceptance by rejecting their ethnic forms of Catholicism in favor of American Protestant forms of Christianity. Multiculturalists such as Horace Kallen, argued against such assimilationist programs while promoting the retention of distinct and diverse ethnic identities as strengthening American democracy. After all, it was theorized, had not European immigrant minorities such as Irish Americans retained their cultural distinctiveness while gaining equal access to democratic process? In the end however, both assimilationists and multiculturalists failed to identify important distinctions between White immigrant groups and non-White minority groups. Most Black Americans, for example, did not constitute a new immigrant population. Latinos, many of whom are also Black, have also presented a conundrum to the assimilationist and multiculturalist paradigms. Many Latinos continue to remember Southwestern territories as Mexican and only recently as “unjustly annexed.” Further, early twentieth century immigration patterns such as that of Mexicans into the South West through the bracero program were designed to import a temporary and cheap labor force. The result of such programs has been a perpetual framing Latinos in public discourse as undesired foreigners. Policies such as these have not only rejected Latino assimilation into American society, but have also worked against it. Assimilationist and Multiculturalist programs based on the successes of White

European immigrant integration cannot be a model for non immigrant and non White minority groups.

When minority groups such as Blacks and Latinos failed to achieve democratic and economic equality despite the shift toward ethnicity paradigms of race, Latino culture and hereditary were blamed. “If Chicanos don’t do so well in school,” it was argued, “this cannot, even hypothetically, be due to low-quality education; it has instead to do with Chicano values.”²⁰⁵ Latino inequality was, in other words, not the result of failed state policies, but instead the result of a hereditarily received set of cultural values. Despite its lip service paid to ethnicity as socially constructed, intellectual, religious and other such characteristics were attributed, as in the biologicistic model, to values causally transmitted by descent. In their essay “The Structuring of Hispanic Ethnicity,” Candace Nelson and Marta Tienda provide a counter definition of Hispanic ethnicity as:

... a social construct rather than simply as a collection of ascriptive traits. While their importance as rallying points drawing people of similar cultural backgrounds together cannot be denied, the explanatory power of primordial ties or ethnic group solidarity conflicts with what is essentially a social phenomenon... One becomes an Ethnic by virtue of leaving the homeland and by subsequent status vis-à-vis the dominant majority in the receiving society.²⁰⁶

Though not all Latinos constitute an immigrant population, all Latinos are subjected to dominant stereotypes of Latinos as undesired immigrants. Latino ethnicity is in this conception constructed not only by the dominant discourse, but also in response to it by Latinos themselves. Rather than taking the position of victimization, economic and political inequalities are reformulated as common foes with the potential to create a

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 21.

²⁰⁶ Candace and Marta Tienda. Nelson, "The structuring of Hispanic ethnicity: Historical and contemporary perspectives," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 8(1985). p9

unified Latino identity in opposition to them. Likewise, the experience of ethnic marginalization by Latino Muslims has been discursively used by LMOs to rationalize the development and dissemination of a Latino Muslim identity that is in opposition to the marginalization of Latino Muslims.

A Methodology for Internet Based Research

The PIEDAD, LADO and LALMA websites constitute the texts being examined in this essay. Limiting the analysis to these three websites differs sharply from current trends in Islamic new media studies which tend to take Internet activity within nations as their objects of study. Valuable as this approach may be, the field currently lacks the methodological tools and or resources to manage the vast quantity of data that is the Internet. Though a narrower focus might limit our ability to draw nationally or globally wide conclusions, it provides us with a more manageable data set and the possibility for more precise conclusions. Limiting my research to Latino Muslim discourse on these three websites, *PiedadIslam.org*, *LatinoDawah.org* and *LALMA.org*, provides a foundation for developing further data management techniques.

The textual content of these sites were further managed through the tools of Google Advanced Search.²⁰⁷ Using these tools, I was able to confine searches to specific terms within specific websites. One or more of the words ‘culture,’ ‘cultural’ (which is an exact cognate for the Spanish), and ‘cultura’ (Spanish for culture) were found in seven

²⁰⁷ Google, Advanced Search. http://www.google.com/advanced_search Accessed on: March 3, 2011

pages or documents within *PiedadIslam.org*, seventy-eight pages or documents within LatinoDawha.org and twenty-nine pages or documents within *LALMA.org*.

In addition to providing statistical data regarding references to specific terms, Google Advanced Search provides a methodology for indexing an otherwise unmanageable quantity of data on the Internet. Once I identified ‘culture’ as particularly relevant to my research, I was able to produce a catalogue of a little over 100 references to ‘culture’ within all of the content of the three websites. Each of these references were then summarized and grouped into categories that emerged from the summaries. The more heavily populated categories include references to culture as: (1) explicitly referred to as distinct from religion (2) unifier between Latino Muslims; (3) needing to be guided by the Quran; (4) unifier between Latino and Arab Muslims; (5) responsible for veiling and polygamy; (6) the Latino Muslim legacy of Moorish Spain; (7) requiring a unique form of dawah; (8) a diverse contributor to the U.S. *umma*.

Categories: culture as...	total	Piedad Islam.org	Latino Dawah.org	LALMA.org
1 explicitly referred to as distinct from religion	12	4	6	2
2 unifier between Latino Muslims	10	2	7	1
3 needing to be guided or reformed by scripture	9	2	4	3
4 unifier between Latino & Arab Muslims	8	1	5	2
5 responsible for veiling and polygamy	5	4	1	0
6 the Latino Muslim legacy of Moorish Spain	5	0	5	0
7 requiring a unique form of <i>dawah</i>	5	1	3	1
8 a diverse contributor to U.S. <i>umma</i>	4	1	3	0

Table 6.1. Frequency and use of the tem ‘culture’ in Latino Muslim websites: PiedadIslam.org; LatinoDawah.org; and LALMA.org. This data was obtained using Google Advanced search engine, which allows users to search text within a particular website.

On the Quantitative Data

Rather than demonstrating a weightier dependence on or interest in the term ‘culture,’ LADO’s significantly more numerous use of the term within all but one category (#5 - veiling and polygamy) accurately reflects its primary activity of publishing and maintaining the *LatinoDawah.org* website since the mid 90’s. Even though the organization PIEDAD pre-dates LADO, it did not publish a data based website able to manage large quantity of documents until the mid 2000’s.²⁰⁸ *LALMA.org* on the other hand is both a younger organization than both PIEDAD and LADO and further, does not as of yet have a data-based website, relying instead on a difficult to reach web-designer

²⁰⁸ A template based website by PIEDAD still exists at: <http://www.angelfire.com/pq/Andalusia/> and was last updated on February 16, 2001. The new data based website was commissioned by Nylka Vargas who now leads PIEDAD after the passing of Khadijah Rivera on November 22, 2009.

for one or two updates a year.²⁰⁹ The numeric disparity in search results between the three websites on the term ‘culture’ should therefore not be interpreted as reflecting divergent interests in the term, but rather should be understood as the result of varying access to and competency with Internet technologies.

A Google Advanced Search of the term ‘culture’ within the three websites under investigation thus corroborates theories regarding a digital divide in the U.S. that is best understood not as a socio-economic division between the have and have nots but as a scaled competency with Internet technologies. The latter understands the digital divide to be between those who have and have not been trained and are able or unable to use the Internet in order to advance their socio-economic status.²¹⁰

Given the overwhelming support of a digital divide based on competency instead of simple access by the Google Advanced Search data, PIEDAD’s out-referencing LADO within the category of ‘culture as responsible for veiling and polygamy’ may in this case be understood as a weightier interest in this particular instance. PIEDAD has out-referenced LADO in this category not because PIEDAD is more competent with Internet technology, but because its organizational objectives are specific to Latina Muslims, who, according to LADO’s ongoing online Survey on Latino Muslims (the SLM project) make up 60% of Latino converts to Islam.²¹¹ As such, addressing negative discourse concerning what is perceived to be oppressive and required veiling practices and unjust polygamy

²⁰⁹ Lack of data based website last confirmed on March 14, 2011. Information on LALMA’s relation to its web-designer is based on fieldwork retrieved in February of 2011.

²¹⁰ Nakamura, *Digitizing race : visual cultures of the Internet*.

²¹¹ LADO, *Latino Muslim Voice*. <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k6.html#3> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

allowances is indeed of particular importance, and numerically referenced, by *PiedadIslam.org* more than *LatinoDawah.org* and *LALMA.org*.

A future addition to this analysis might examine the sources of the texts. Tracing Latino Muslim discourse within specific websites to documents originally mediated elsewhere will provide us with a historical overview of intersecting discourses and spheres of influence. We will, in other words, be in a better position to say in which way Latino Muslim discourse is drawing from and moving beyond particular discourses outside of itself. We might find it particularly interesting, for example, that academic discourse is prominent and news media discourse is scarce within *PiedadIslam.org*, *LatinoDawah.org* and *LALMA.org*.

Shortcomings and possible problems with the Google Advanced Search produced data include the following: *first*, that various Arabic terms that may be considered/translated as ‘culture’ such as *din/dien/deen*, *adat/ada*, *urf*, as well as any other reference to culture beyond the terms ‘culture,’ ‘cultural’ and ‘cultura’ were completely excluded from the search. *Second*, that the categories were constructed from my summaries/translations of text sections into short phrases may prove problematic in that readers are not provided with full texts and are therefore introduced to the categories through incomplete contextual grounding. *Further*, a project that specifically seeks to “see” or “read” division may be susceptible to over-determining the resulting categories as highly motivated. This may be the case not only with regard to the categories, but also to all the omitted references absent from the sample catalogue. *Lastly*, Google Advance Search is not capable of producing data on non-scripted text, such as in videos and

images. This is particularly important to keep in mind with regard to our findings on *PiedadIslam.org* which contains the least amount of textual references to ‘culture’ yet the most amount of videos. Perhaps the site actually refers to ‘culture’ more than *LatinoDawah.org* and *LALMA.org* but in non-textual ways. Managing the quantity of non-textual data on Latino Muslim websites is a daunting task that should not be conducted through hap-hazard “surfing” of content. We are therefore still in need of developing further methodological tools in this regard.

Sample Catalogue

In addition to producing quantitative data on the numeric use of culture in Latino Muslim discourse, Google Advanced Search results produces a list of live hyperlinks to the website pages where the references are located. While examining the references I also collected them onto a website specific catalogue on a separate document in the order of the Google generated hyperlinks list. On yet another document, I produced summaries of the catalogued references, which I then used as categories to place each quote within. This then became an index for locating each website specific reference within the categories. The following is a sample of the index:

Culture explicitly referred to as distinct from religion:

- PIEDAD: (catalogued reference #) 1, 2

- LADO: 13, 17, 18, 19

- LALMA: 2, 6

Total references: 8

Using this index, I finally produced the following sample catalogue of references to culture within the Latino Muslim discourse of *PiedadIslam.org*, *LatinoDawah.org* and

LALMA.org, all quotes and grammatical errors were left unedited to preserve their original form.

(1) *Culture* explicitly referred to as distinct from religion:

PIEDAD: ...understanding a certain religion from the attitudes and the behaviour of some of its nominal followers is misleading. Many people confuse **culture** with religion, many others do not know what their religious books are saying, and many others do not even care.²¹²

LADO: Islam rejects the notion held by **cultural** anthropologists that the early religion of human beings was polytheism — which gradually evolved into monotheism. In fact, Muslims believe just the opposite, human **cultures** descended into idolatry during the intervals of time between the many Messengers of God.²¹³

LADO: the divine commandments are essentially no different from the values which human beings have cherished and striven to maintain throughout history, regardless of **cultural**, racial, linguistic and socioeconomic differences²¹⁴

LALMA/Quran (5:48 - commentary 66): The terms *shir'ah* and *minhaj* are more restricted in their meaning than the term *din*, which comprises not merely the laws relating to a particular religion but also the basic, unchanging spiritual truths which, according to the Quran, have been preached by every one of God's apostles, while the particular body of laws (*shir'ah*) promulgated through them, and the way of life (*minhaj*) recommended by them, varied in accordance with the exigencies of the time and of each community's **cultural** development. This "unity in diversity" is frequently stressed in the Quran...²¹⁵

(2) *Culture* as unifier between Latino Muslims:

PIEDAD: Since September 11, 2001, Muslims in the United States have become the subject of genuine curiosity and compassion as well as increased government surveillance and harassment. Who are these Muslims? What is their history, and where do they come from? Do they share a common **culture**? Do they vary in their beliefs?²¹⁶

LADO: We need to advise Muslim world organizations about our **culture** and about the ways to approach others like us. Cooperation is important. For example, we could encourage Muslim camps and conferences to invite counterparts from all over the world and from all nationalities.²¹⁷

LADO: like Arabs, religion is very much a part of our **culture**. Sometimes, it's hard to separate the two. Also, there is "el llamado de la sangre." Your blood, **culture**, and roots naturally pull you to people who are

²¹² <http://www.piedadislam.org/fckeditor/editor/filemanager/connectors/aspx/uploadedImages/file/Women%20in%20Islam%20Versus%20Women%20in%20the%20Judeo.doc> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²¹³ <http://www.latinodawah.org/library/english/monotheism.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²¹⁴ <http://www.latinodawah.org/library/english/islamintro.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²¹⁵ http://www.lalma.org/quran/sura_5.htm Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²¹⁶ <http://www.piedadislam.org/> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²¹⁷ <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k7.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

like you. I could jump for joy whenever I meet another Latino/Hispanic/Chicano Muslim, male or female.²¹⁸

LALMA: We provide spiritual support to the "New Latino Muslim" during the transition from Christianity to Islam by sharing the same **culture**, experience and language.²¹⁹

(3) *Culture* as needing to be guided or reformed by scripture:

PIEDAD: Something is fundamentally wrong in the society we live in. A radical change in the society's life style and **culture** is absolutely necessary. A **culture** of modesty is badly needed, modesty in dress, in speech, and in manners of both men and women. Otherwise, the grim statistics will grow even worse day after day and, unfortunately, women alone will be paying the price. Actually, we all suffer but as K. Gibran has said, "...for the person who receives the blows is not like the one who counts them."²²⁰

LADO: All the Prophets and Messengers of God, from Adam to Muhammad, called people to worship God alone, without partner or intermediary. This is the purest, simplest, most natural faith. Islam rejects the notion held by **cultural** anthropologists that the early religion of human beings was polytheism — which gradually evolved into monotheism. In fact, Muslims believe just the opposite, human **cultures** descended into idolatry during the intervals of time between the many Messengers of God. Even while the Messengers were among them, many people resisted their call and practiced idolatry despite their warnings. Subsequent Messengers were commissioned by God to bring people back to monotheism.²²¹

LADO: The success of civilizations and **cultures** is directly related to the extent of their practice of the righteous way of life revealed in the teaching and commandments of God, and set forth in the monotheistic religions which are confirmed by Islam. God's revelation enshrines the highest values of humankind, and the divine commandments are essentially no different from the values which human beings have cherished and striven to maintain throughout history, regardless of **cultural**, racial, linguistic and socioeconomic differences. Success in this life is directly related to the practice of these values.²²²

LALMA/Quran (17:108 - *commentary* 131): the Quran, henceforth destined to guide man at all stages of his spiritual, **cultural** and social development.²²³

LALMA/Quran (36:6 - *commentary* 4): In the Wider sense of this expression, the "forefathers" may be a metonym for a community's **cultural** past: hence, the reference to those "forefathers" not having been "warned" (i.e., against evil) evidently alludes to the defectiveness of the ethical heritage of people who have become estranged from true moral values.²²⁴

(4) *Culture* as unifier between Latino and Arab Muslims:

LADO: Do you find any similarities between the Latino and Muslim **cultures**?

²¹⁸ <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k5.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²¹⁹ <http://www.lalma.org/nosotros.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²²⁰ <http://www.piedadislam.org/fckeditor/editor/filemanager/connectors/aspx/uploadedImages/file/Women%20in%20Islam%20Versus%20Women%20in%20the%20Judaic.doc>. Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²²¹ <http://www.latinodawah.org/library/english/monotheism.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²²² <http://www.latinodawah.org/library/english/islamintro.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²²³ http://www.lalma.org/quran/sura_17.htm Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²²⁴ http://www.lalma.org/quran/sura_36.htm Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

There are many. Because Latin American nations are rooted in Spain, they have much to recognize as common ground in Islamic heritage. We are both family-oriented people. We both have much respect for elders. Our languages have common roots. Many Spanish words are derived from Arabic. Camisa (shirt) and gato (cat) are just two examples. People from Latino and Muslim **cultures** often look alike as well.²²⁵

LADO: HAJJ (Pilgrimage to Makkah): Hajj is an act of worship that is to be performed at least once in a lifetime, provided that one is physically and financially able to do so. During this time, Muslims meet from all corners of the world in an international congregation for the sole purpose of responding to the call of Allah. It also reminds the participants that all Muslims are equal, irrespective of their geographical, **cultural**, or racial origins.²²⁶

LALMA/La Opinion: Los latinos parecen musulmanes naturales, creo que tienen muchos valores **culturales** que son afines con el islam, como la unión familiar.²²⁷ [English Translation]: "Latinos appear to be natural Muslims, I believe they have many **cultural** values that are related to Islam, like family union."

(5) *Culture* as responsible for veiling and polygamy:

PIEDAD: veiling of women is not a specifically Islamic practice but an ancient **cultural** heritage with analogies in sister religions.²²⁸

PIEDAD: For other societies, like most African societies today, the most honorable outlet is to allow polygamous marriage as a **culturally** accepted and socially respected institution.²²⁹

PIEDAD: Critics of the decisions of Latinas to convert to Islam say they are adopting a religion just as patriarchal as the Roman Catholic faith that many are leaving behind. "While it's true the Latino **culture** tends to be more male-dominated, and there's a tendency toward more machismo, I would venture to say it exists [in Islam] as well," says Edwin I. Hernández, director of the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame.²³⁰

LADO: One of the common myths is to associate polygyny with Islam as if it were introduced by Islam or is the norm according to its teachings... **Cultural** practices on both extremes do exist. Some Muslims emulate non-Islamic **cultures** and adopt the modes of dress, unrestricted mixing and behavior resulting in corrupting influences of Muslims and endangering the family's integrity and strength. On the other hand, in some Muslim **cultural** undue and excessive restrictions is not seclusion are believed to be the ideal. Both extremes seem to contradict the normative teachings of Islam and are not consistent with the virtuous yet participative nature of the society at the time of the Prophet Muhammad.²³¹

(6) *Culture* as the Latino Muslim legacy of Moorish Spain;

²²⁵ <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k7.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²²⁶ <http://www.latinodawah.org/library/english/yourbirthright.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²²⁷ <http://www.lalma.org/Latinosmusulmanes%20a%20Opinion.pdf> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²²⁸ <http://www.piedadislam.org/fckeditor/editor/filemanager/connectors/aspx/uploadedImages/file/Women%20in%20Islam%20Versus%20Women%20in%20the%20Judaeo.doc> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²²⁹ <http://www.piedadislam.org/fckeditor/editor/filemanager/connectors/aspx/uploadedImages/file/Women%20in%20Islam%20Versus%20Women%20in%20the%20Judaeo.doc>. Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²³⁰ <http://www.piedadislam.org/fckeditor/editor/filemanager/connectors/aspx/uploadedImages/file/US%20Latinas%20seek%20answers%20in%20Islam.pdf> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²³¹ <http://www.latinodawah.org/library/english/genderequality.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

LADO: Christians' cuisine absorbed Moorish influence, firstly, through the effect that Moors' foodways had on Christian upper classes during the Caliphate and Ta'ifa's periods (10th – 12th c.), when al-Andalus (Iberian Muslim Kingdom/s) was a **cultural** model to imitate. This was the golden age of Al-Andalus, and for the Christian World "Moorish style" meant luxury and exoticism.²³²

LADO: Do you find any similarities between the Latino and Muslim **cultures**?

There are many. Because Latin American nations are rooted in Spain, they have much to recognize as common ground in Islamic heritage. We are both family-oriented people. We both have much respect for elders. Our languages have common roots. Many Spanish words are derived from Arabic. Camisa (shirt) and gato (cat) are just two examples. People from Latino and Muslim **cultures** often look alike as well.²³³

LADO: Many Latinos are also amazed to learn that Spain was Muslim for over 700 years, and Islamic Spain's influence on Hispanic **culture**. Thousands of Spanish words are derived from Arabic. Archaeologists have found Islamic inscriptions throughout Cuba, Mexico, and Texas that date back before 1492.²³⁴

(7) *Culture* as requiring a unique form of dawah;

PIEDAD: For some, the **cultural** differences are the most trying. "I can't eat pork, I can't wear [form-fitting] clothing, I can't dance in the clubs, I'm not gonna attend church," says Ms. Yanez, who is of Cuban and Spanish descent. "But I keep my language, and there's still things that we do as Latinos that they don't have to change." Within the Islamic community, Latina Muslims report being warmly received, although language barriers sometimes exist for Latinas who only speak Spanish. There are few Spanish services at mosques and a limited number of Islamic texts in Spanish.²³⁵

LADO: We need to advise Muslim world organizations about our **culture** and about the ways to approach others like us. Cooperation is important. For example, we could encourage Muslim camps and conferences to invite counterparts from all over the world and from all nationalities.²³⁶

LALMA: We provide spiritual support to the "New Latino Muslim" during the transition from Christianity to Islam by sharing the same **culture**, experience and language.²³⁷

(8) *Culture* as a diverse contributor to the U.S. *umma*.

PIEDAD: You are invited to participate in a study that will help shed light converts to Islam in the US and how they affect the US's larger **culture**.²³⁸

LADO: While Islam is rooted in many beautiful and diverse **cultures**, I see a need for Islam to express itself here in the United States. Converts to Islam bring a different experience of the faith. Moreover,

²³² <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k7.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²³³ <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k7.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²³⁴ <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/apr-june2k2.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²³⁵ <http://www.piedadislam.org/fckeditor/editor/filemanager/connectors/aspx/uploadedImages/file/US%20Latinas%20seek%20answers%20in%20Islam.pdf> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²³⁶ <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k7.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²³⁷ <http://www.lalma.org/nosotros.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²³⁸ www.piedadislam.org/.../INFORMED%20CONSENT%20FORM2.doc Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

Latino Muslims also contribute to the culture of converts here in the US. As we continue to develop our 'umma, it will be interesting for all of us to bring our Ramadan experiences together.²³⁹

LADO: Exploring other **cultures** always implied a culinary exchange to me. When meeting someone from an unfamiliar culture, the first thing I ask is, "So, what do you all eat?" Not all Muslims do the same thing; they are not homogenous, not now or in the past. They also do not eat the same food, so why was I giving myself a hard time preparing wedding food everyday? Could I not make Islam "practical," for lack of better words? Did Islam have to be something foreign? Islam and all of its "practical" manifestations could be extremely foreign because they are cultures and not universal truths, but it was the universal truths found in Islam that gave rise to these cultures. I had to make Islam real to me. I had to make dinner. I am a third generation Mexican-American convert who had no connection to Mexico and its culture. I was also denied cultural citizenship as an American because of my skin color, so I was a foreigner. After my conversion, I did not want to become a practitioner of a culture; I wanted to be a Muslim. Yet, despite my best efforts and my husband's, the practicality of daily life intervened - what were we going to eat? I grew up eating a S.A.D. diet (Standard American Diet) and that way of eating was just no longer acceptable. I had no ethnic tradition of my own to call upon and I had never eaten Moroccan food, but I was willing to try both. I was determined to find a new way to cook to match my new life. We lived on the premise that, "if it is halal, eat it." That is what we did and that is how these two cuisines became fused to help nourish and sustain our Islamic practices at home.²⁴⁰

On the Catalogue

The following discussion of the above sample catalogue identifies an explicit distinction made between culture as malleable and religion as fixed. Malleable culture is considered more or less developed to the extent in which it aligns itself to the fixed ideal of religion. As such, scripture represents epistemic access to religion and therefore to the ideal that should guide culture. Culture as needing to be guided by scripture is then read as either (1) a group of people, (2) foods, dress and language, or (3) an attitude(s) toward these. The success/survival of al-Andalus culture is directly related to righteous living within the sample catalogue, and continues to enjoy success in Latino Muslims. Therefore, rather than as an incompatible culture needing to be abandoned when converting to Islam, Latinidad is celebrated as an heir to the successful culture of al-Andalus/Moorish Spain.

²³⁹ <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k5.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

²⁴⁰ <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k6.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

(1) *Culture* explicitly referred to as distinct from religion:

The *first* reference, “understanding a certain religion from the attitudes and the behavior of some of its nominal followers is misleading. Many people confuse culture with religion, many others do not know what their religious books are saying, and many others do not even care,²⁴¹” makes a clear demarcation between the terms culture and religion. It also makes the claim that religion is epistemologically accessed through “religious texts” and not through the “behavior of some its [the religion’s] nominal followers.” The *next* reference seems to corroborate my reading of the first where scripture represents an epistemic access to religion. Here, religion is defined as the “divine commandments” universal to all “human beings” regardless of “cultural, racial, linguistic and socioeconomic differences.” These universal commandments, or *din*, then take the shape of particular laws (*shir’ah*) and ways of life (*minhaj*) depending on the state of “each community’s cultural development.” This last phrase assumes a hierarchy between cultures that are closer to the religious ideal and therefore more developed and those that are further from the ideal and thus less developed, i.e. culture as in the cultivation of human beings. Two positions are then contrasted in the following: the cultural anthropological position that “the early religion of human beings were polytheistic” as opposed the Islamic position that “human cultures descended into idolatry.” The first appears to be value neutral whereas the second, idolatrous, has been clearly assigned a negative value. Religion as becoming idolatrous may complicate other

²⁴¹<http://www.piedadislam.org/fckeditor/editor/filemanager/connectors/aspx/uploadedImages/file/Women%20in%20Islam%20Versus%20Women%20in%20the%20Judaeo.doc> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

references to religion as fixed, as it has in this case said to have morphed from monotheism to idolatry.

(3) *Culture* as needing to be guided or reformed by scripture:

It is unclear if culture refers to an attitude or approach to dress, speech and manners or if these are the very elements of culture in the following: “A culture of modesty is badly needed, modesty in dress, in speech, and in manners of both men and women.” The distinction is important as it provides a clue as to how scripture may be employed to guide culture. If “a culture of modesty” refers to an attitude, than scripture should be aimed at guiding attitudes which will in turn, it may be hoped, be made manifest in the physical elements of dress, speech and manners. Conversely, if ‘a culture of modesty’ refers to these physical elements, than scripture should be aimed at guiding these regardless of attitudes. Further, a clear agenda for reform may be pursued as in the banning of certain types of dress and promoting others.

That “the success of civilizations and cultures is directly related to the extent of their practice of the righteous way of life revealed in the teaching and commandments of God, and set forth in the monotheistic religions which are confirmed by Islam,” alludes to responsibility, i.e. being rewarded with success or punished with failure based on righteous living or the failure to do so. We are then left with the question as to what defines the boundaries between who is and is not part of a civilization, culture or group and who is and is not held responsible and thus rewarded or punished? The following quote provides one possible response to this question: “forefathers” may be a metonym

for a community's cultural past." Perhaps culture refers to a collective that are related to each other through a biological genealogy. However, if culture is on the other hand read as signifying an attitude such as modesty or material element such as dress, various narratives as to what is at stake emerge. Success may refer, for example, to the genealogical survival of either (1) a biologically defined group of people or (2) to a set of attitudes or (3) to material elements such as dress and language. We are then left with the question of whether Latino-ness is to be read as a culture that must be rejected, reformed or celebrated?

(6) *Culture* as the Latino Muslim legacy of Moorish Spain:

"The Christians' cuisine absorbed Moorish influence... al-Andalus (Iberian Muslim Kingdom/s) was a cultural model to imitate." In addition to food, cultural elements such respect for elders, language/words such as "Camisa (shirt) and gato (cat)" and physiological features: "People from Latino and Muslim cultures often look alike as well," are claimed to have succeeded/survived to this day in Latino -ness. Culture as distinct from and needing to be guided by religion is, as in the previous references to culture, read as either (1) a group of people - in this instance genetically defined, (2) foods, dress and language, or (3) an attitude(s) toward these. If the success/survival of al-Andalus culture is directly related to righteous living, its fall to Spain in the Reconquista may be read as the result of a misalignment with the religious ideal. On the other hand, elements of al-Andalus culture that survive in Latinidad today may be read as the result of a correct alignment with the religious ideal. The resulting conclusion is that rather than

being an incompatible culture to be abandoned when converting to Islam, Latinidad is celebrated as an heir to the culture of Moorish Spain.

Conclusions

Latino identity is the site of multiple and competing formulations of culture within LMO discourse. Latino culture is celebrated by Latino Muslims as a story of success, a narrative of what their “forefathers” got right in al-Andalus. However, if “Catholicism is so ingrained in the Latino community that converting to Islam is sort of like changing out of being Hispanic,”²⁴² that is, if Latino culture is formulated as inseparable from the religion of Catholicism, then Latino culture becomes incompatible with Islam and must be abandoned. If on the other hand the ‘Latino therefore Catholic’ paradigm signals a historical process rather than stasis, Latino culture need not be abandoned but only reformed or itself divided between Latino culture that has been guided by the religious ideal and therefore celebrated and that which has strayed from it and therefore abandoned.

In the web article “Unity and Diversity” published on *IslamForToday.com*, LALMA’s sponsoring scholar Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiqi promotes the concept of “unity in diversity.” Siddiqi begins the polemic by describing diversity as a “beautifying” fact of God’s created nature and cites the chapter 30 verse 20-22 of the Qur’an:

And from amongst His signs is this that He created you from dust; and then behold you are humans scattered far and wide. Among His signs is this that He

²⁴² <http://www.latinodawah.org/newsletter/july-sept2k10.html> Accessed on: March 10, 2011.

created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between you. Verily in that are signs for those who reflect. And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variations in your languages and colors; verily in that are signs for those who know.²⁴³

Diversity is understood as ideal even when “Islam does not consider all viewpoints correct or of equal value,” because the existence of incorrect “viewpoints” is a token of God’s mercy. Rather than forcing or making “correct” living compulsory, God grants humans the freewill to choose between right and wrong paths. Unity is also valuable so long as it is not formulated as “the total negation of diversity.” Instead, argues Siddiqi,

Unity in Diversity means to explore and enhances common values that emphasize interdependence, equality, justice, human rights, and the sanctity of each individual’s dignity. The goal should be to further a unified vision and recognition of the principle of “unity and diversity” and of the fact that we all are fellow-citizens of an emerging global village. We must try to build a more inclusive community grounded in respect of differences based on age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, political affiliation and national origin.²⁴⁴

Unity that recognizes diversity is in the Islamic tradition accomplished through the division between Islamic religion and culture. Here, religion is formulated as universal, unchanging and accessible through scripture. Culture on the other hand is local, fluid and can be aligned or dis-aligned with Islamic religion. Rather than basing his conception of unity on a universal and unchanging religion, Siddiqi draws from the multiculturalist paradigm of race to ground unity on the ideal of tolerance and respect for human dignity.²⁴⁵ Latino culture should therefore not only be tolerated as either aligned or dis-aligned with Islam, but celebrated as a beautiful fact of nature unified in mutual respect

²⁴³ Siddiqi, Muzammil. “Unity and Diversity,” IslamForToday.com <http://www.islamfortoday.com/diversity.htm> Accessed on: July 29, 2012

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

for human dignity. LMO divisions between religion and culture seek to unify the Latino and Muslim categories, distinguish the Latino Muslim from non-Muslim Latinos and non-Latino Muslims, and as a distinct ethno-religion, strengthen America's unity in diversity. Religious and racial diversity is surmounted, that is made one, in Siddiqi's article through the division between the tolerant and intolerant. Nevertheless, the latter, Siddiqi laments in conclusion, continues to threaten American unity through sustained discrimination of its Muslim, and I add – Latino, populations.

CONCLUSION

LATINO MUSLIM TRAJECTORIES AND VISIONS IN POST 9/11 AMERICA

*And if your Lord had so willed,
He could surely have made mankind one **Ummah**
[nation or community (following one religion only i.e. Islam)],
but they will not cease to disagree*

- *Qur'an* 11:118
(Translation by Muhsin Khan)

Our most precious asset in the face of such a dire transformation of history is the emergence not of a sense of clash but a sense of community, understanding, sympathy, and hope, which is the direct opposite of what Huntington provokes.

- Edward Said in “The Myth of ‘The Clash of Civilizations’”

In the winter of 2010, Latino Muslim Antonio Martinez was arrested for attempting to blow up a military recruitment center in Catonsville, Maryland. An NPR headline by its counterterrorism correspondent Dina Temple-Raston read: “Officials Worry About Some Latino Converts To Islam.” The article situated Martinez within a “pattern” consisting of three other Latino Muslim would be terrorists, including Jose Padilla (“the former Chicago native who pleaded guilty to training with al-Qaida”), Daniel Maldonado (“a Latino-American who was one of the first U.S. citizens to join an al-Qaida affiliate group in Somalia”) and Bryant Neal Vinas (“a Latino from Long Island who found himself in al-Qaida's inner circle”). “What has got people's attention,” former deputy national security adviser in the Bush administration, Juan Zarate, reported to Temple-Raston,

...is the nature of individuals who have been caught in this web... It's both the nature of these individuals but also their case studies, the substantive dimensions of their work, and who they are in contact with, and what they represent that I think is why Latino converts have garnered some attention from counterterrorism analysts and the community.²⁴⁶

The article's central question, is there a connection between Latino nature, conversion to Islam and radicalization, reflects a persistence of the biologicistic understanding of race still active in public discourse.

Media coverage in general however, gave much more attention to the role the Internet had played in the radicalization of both Martinez and another non-Latino American convert to Islam who was also closely monitored and arrested by the FBI for an attempted bombing. Neither had ever traveled outside of the United States or had face-to-face contact with real terrorist organizations. Their relationship to the "seedy" underground of militant religiosity consisted entirely of virtual associations, of surfing through and occupying *jihadi* websites, and of performing a particular form of Islam on Facebook. It was indeed their digital performances on Facebook that caught the attention of the counterterrorist officials who had vested interests in allowing the show to go on beyond the Internet's stage and onto real vehicles filled with hyper real props, that is, fake bombs. "He wasn't very sophisticated," said former terrorism prosecutor Patrick Moran in reference to Latino Muslim Antonio Martinez, "but that's maybe what you would expect from a person who has come about his views via the Internet."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Dina Temple-Raston, "Officials Worry About Some Latino Converts To Islam," *NPR*, August 31 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2010/12/09/131916271/officials-worry-about-some-latino-converts-to-islam> (Accessed 8/1/12)

²⁴⁷ Dominguez and Jessica Gresko. "Md. Bomb Plot Suspect Clashed With Mom Over Views." FoxNews.com. December 9, 2010. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/12/09/md-bomb-plot-suspect-clashed-mom-views/> (Accessed 10/ 21/2011).

Islamic studies scholar Kambiz Ghaneabassiri argued that the FBI left itself open to charges of entrapment by presenting the previously “all virtual talk” Muslims with a false choice limited to either remaining “all talk” or becoming active bombers. And in this way, he accuses the FBI of converting virtual radicals into real-life decision makers of false dichotomies, when an off-line situation without FBI involvement may have never presented itself in this manner.²⁴⁸ While the FBI and the media have focused on a dualistic view of Latino Muslim radicals as either “all talk” or active terrorist, a third option exists in which critical discussions of American injustices are converted into constructive off-line social service work and political activism.

Immediately following news of Martinez’ arrest, LALMA held a special session to discuss interpretations of the news story and draft an official response. Some argued it was entrapment, while most, including Marta, agreed with media stories that the Internet was indeed leading to an increase in extremist forms of Islam. In the wake of the attempted bombing, the first action taken by LALMA was to publish the following statement in larger print than any other text on the homepage of their website:

The Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association (LALMA) unequivocally condemns all acts, or attempted acts, of terrorism by any Latino who identifies himself or herself as a Muslim. LALMA rejects literature or propaganda that violates the peaceful core of mainstream Islamic teachings. We, the members of LALMA, are part of the American Muslim community and we strive to be productive, law abiding citizens.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ GhaneaBassiri, Kambiz. “For God or for Fame? The Making of a Teenage Bomber.” ReligionDispatches.com. December 9, 2010. http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/culture/3869/for_god_or_for_fame_the_making_of_a_teenage_bomber/ (Accessed 10/21/2011).

²⁴⁹ Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association. “La Misión de Lalma.” <http://lalma.org/nosotros.html> Accessed on: October 18, 2011.

The organization also agreed to become more active in promoting a moderate form Islam among Latino communities and especially to new Latino converts. Toward these ends, LALMA's publishing branch began working on a Spanish-language translation of Khaled M. Abou El Fadl's book *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*. The goal of the translation is to deglamorize extremist or puritanical forms of Islam while promoting a moderate form. LALMA plans to distribute the publication as widely as possible through their website and as a hardcopy for those without access, focusing especially on Spanish speaking prisoners looking into Islam. Rather than remaining "all talk" or becoming terrorists, LALMA members understand themselves as active agents of positive social change through the work of translation.

On the East Coast, Puerto Rican Muslim hip hop artists and brothers, Hamza and Suliman Pérez, engage in their own brand of translation and social activism. Their music, their leading role in the nationally broadcasted P.O.V. documentary film *New Muslim Cool* and their relation to LMOs including PIEDAD, LADO and LALMA, anchor my discussions of post 9/11 Latino Muslim identity throughout this chapter. I begin with a description of the increase in negative media coverage of Muslims that followed the September 11 attacks and the LMOs' response to these negative representations of their religion. Journalists have termed the increase in negative media coverage of Muslims and the Middle East: *the 9/11 factor*. LMOs use the term however to also reference the increase of Latino conversions to Islam due to this increased media coverage.

Though many have adopted an “any media coverage is good coverage” attitude, several Latino Muslims have expressed concern that Latinos who convert after coming into contact with extremist representations of Islam may be prone to adopt this media image of it. LALMA, for example, had in the case of Antonio Martinez, agreed with media coverage that the Internet was to blame for his radicalization. LMO websites are thus used by Latino Muslim leaders to combat negative stereotypes in a media battle over which representations of Islam will dominate the American discourse. For his part, Latino hip-hop artist Hamza Perez has no qualms representing this battle in militant and *jihadi* terms. The name of his hip-hop group, for example, is the Mujahideen team, the doers of *jihad*.²⁵⁰ And in their album, titled after Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations*, the M-Team describe their media productions as “a conflict of ideas. A combat of visions. A war of words.” This perceived “culture war” by Muslim and non-Muslim media in America has constructed the highly reductive and highly problematic binary between good Muslims and bad Muslims, an “either with us or against us” divide that leaves little room for positive representations of politically active Latino Muslims.

Formulated within the culture war paradigm, the question of which form of Islam Latino Muslims will adopt has been a central concern for LMOs in the post 9/11 era in which a new generation of Latino Muslims are emerging. As the first generation of Latino converts to Islam retire and or pass away, a new generation of Latinos born into Islam is struggling to maintain and or reformulate a Latino Muslim identity. Addressing the question of what form of Latino Islam this new generation will adopt, a new sense of

²⁵⁰ In the film *New Muslim Cool*, Suliman Perez defines his jihad as an inner struggle to be a good Muslim.

urgency has reanimated the desire to unite Latino Muslims under a pan-Latino Muslim umbrella organization, The League of Latino American Muslims Organizations, LLAMO. It remains to be seen however, if LLAMO will achieve unity in - either, both or neither - of the offline and Internet spaces they occupy and importantly, what divisions they will adopt to seek out such unity.

The 9/11 Factor: The Impact of Negative Media Coverage on Latino Muslim Identity

On July 13-14, 2004, journalists from around the world gathered to discuss “Changing Media Perceptions: Professionalism and Cultural Diversity” at the first conference sponsored by the Qatar based news media channel Al Jazeera. There, participants discussed “the ethics involved in live telecasts of armed conflicts, ...the relationship between media and government, ... their profession’s values and also the current trend to promote “infotainment” at the expense of “newsworthiness.”²⁵¹ The conference’s third session was titled, ““The 9/11 Factor”“A New Watershed,” and examined how media coverage of Arab and Muslim nations and groups changed after the attacks in the U.S. The change was characterized as twofold. Firstly, coverage, in general, increased dramatically, and according to David Rhodes of the Fox News network, this “could only be a good thing.” Secondly, coverage increasingly framed all political forms of Islam negatively as terrorists groups. These two trends in U.S. media coverage of

²⁵¹ Hanley, Delinda C. “Al Jazeera World Forum Takes a Hard Look at Freedom of the Press,” Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. October 2004, pages 14-15<http://wrmea.org/component/content/article/8909-special-report-al-jazeera-world-forum-takes-a-hard-look-at-freedom-of-the-press.html> (Accessed 8/5/2012).

Muslim groups after the September 11, 2001 attacks were of great interest and concern to Latino Muslims.

Popularized by journalists as a reference to the media effects of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the phrase, “the 9/11 factor,” is used by Latino Muslims to reference an increase in conversion that followed an increase in negative media coverage of Muslims. The full impact of the events of September 11th on Latino expressions of Islam remains to be determined. However, the fact remains that many Latino Muslim reversion narratives cite negative media stories as sparking initial interest in Islam.²⁵²

In 2009, the Spanish language U.S. television channel Telemundo aired a three part series on Latino Muslims titled *Hispanos Detras Del Velo* (Hispanics behind the Veil) by reporter Carmen Dominicci. In it, Dominicci provided her viewers with edited interviews with a handful of character types including an academician, a lawyer, and a few Latino Muslims. These characters became the experts in the series; they are the ones who teach Telemundo viewers about Latino Muslims rather than the reporter who merely frames and edits the discussion while developing and reinforcing gender and cultural stereotypes. One such caricature of Islam is reflected in the title itself, *Hispanics Behind the Veil*, which repeats the tired and dualistic practice of framing discourse on Muslims as either oppressive of women or not, with no substantive questioning of this dichotomy. In fact, while suggesting a “fair and balanced” portrait of the issues, the series clearly favors the idea of Muslims as oppressive to women by framing the programs with

²⁵² For some published examples of references to ‘the 9/11 factor’ by Latino Muslims, see “Curiosity Spawned by 9-11 Leads Some Latinos to Convert to Islam,” by Hernán Rozemberg in the San Antonio Express-News, January 25, 2005. And “From Cross to Crescent: Why Latinos are Increasingly Converting to Islam” by By Anthony Chiorazzi in BustedHalo.com, May 14, 2007.

opening video clips that show a veiled women being violently beaten by a man wearing a turban followed by another veiled woman on her knees about to be executed at gunpoint.

Although Telemundo's audience is primarily Latino, in this series Latinos are stereotyped as people who love to drink and dance, as having men who are *machistas* and women who are inordinately interested in putting on makeup in order to present a sharp contrast to morally somber Muslims and Latino Muslims. At the end of the three part series, Diminicci reveals that she had been surprised to find out how ignorant she had been on the subject before doing the piece. But now, now she had analyzed it, portrayed it, characterized it, given instant courses on it, and consequently she had made it known to both herself and to Telemundo's audience. The final production is, however, more of a caricature than a representation of the complexities that make up Latina and Latino Muslims.

The *Hispanos Detras Del Velo* series was a point of controversy within LMO discourse. Many interpreted it as highly offensive, offered sever critiques of it and rejected the media production altogether. Other Latino Muslims, however, accepted the Telemundo representation of Latino Muslims as flawed or misrepresentative, but important nonetheless. Indeed, the news videos have been placed on YouTube by various Latino Muslims as a talking point, to bring attention to the Latino Muslim population, and to offer "more accurate" representations in contrast to and in correction of the Telemundo production. Indeed, a YouTube remediation of the television series is itself remediated onto *PiedadIslam.org* and onto *CasaIslamica.org*. The remediation of

negative or misrepresentations of Latino Muslims onto LMO websites reflects an “any publicity is good publicity,” attitude.

In addition to its news media representation of Latino Muslims, Telemundo also produced a wildly popular 2002 *telenovela* or soap opera representation of Spanish speaking Muslims in *El Clon* which takes place and was filmed in Miami, Florida and Fez, Morocco. The story follows a struggle between Lucas and his clone to win the heart of the beloved and exotic Jade whose Arab ethnicity is represented through her performance of Islam, the use of a few Arab words and phrases, her dress (she sometimes veils and other times wears a revealing belly dancing outfit) and other such *Orientalist* representations.²⁵³ The series presents Jade as herself struggling to maintain her Islamic traditions in a modern world, as if the two were fundamentally opposed. The *telenovela*'s reductive and Orientalist misrepresentations reportedly reached 2.8 million viewers in the United States, 85 million in Brazil, and tens of millions across Latin America.²⁵⁴ Despite such negative representations, LMOs seem to be capitalizing on the media coverage and report dramatic increases in membership since the Sept.11 attacks. However, many of these LMOs, such as LALMA, also continue to reflect Ghaneabassiri's concern that negative media coverage is not only resulting in an increase rate of conversion to Islam, but also in an increase adoption of extremist forms of Islam.

²⁵³ In his seminal book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said formulates the term 'Orientalism' as a form of violence perpetrated by Western Scholars of the Orient in their reduction of richly dynamic sets of differences to a static and monolithic whole.

²⁵⁴ Aidi, "Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and "Connected Histories"." 39.

Clash of Civilizations: Formulating Latino Muslims as Cultural Warriors

As a response to the negative media coverage perceived to be producing extremist adoptions of Latino Islam, Latino Muslims have produced their own media representations. These productions are, however, often combative responses formulated within a perceived culture war. In his album *Clash of Civilizations*, Hamza Pérez of the M-Team adopts Samuel Huntington's articulation of the culture war as a clash between Islam and the West. However, through an examination of other media products it is made clear that the M-Team's significations of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis are unstable and complex. In one signification, the clash is expanded to include pan-Latin American, pan-Islamist and pan-Blackamerican unity in conflict with Western hegemony. In yet another instance, Perez provides a contrast to Huntington when 'clash' is used to signify a positive and creative result of inter-cultural contact. M-Team's multiple and contradictory significations of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis serves as a prominent example of Latino Muslim media as a response to the negative effects of the 9/11 factor.

Www.MySpace.com/M-Team (The Mujahideen Team): from a black computer screen, the image of a Puerto Rican flag emerges. Below a set of Arabic text is a red revolutionary fist. Images of Hamza and Suliman Perez, each passionately speaking Islamic protest-poetry into a microphone, frame the flag on either side. A black shadow figure emerges with a flaming machete raised in hand, lights fire to the afore described image, until all that's left are the ashes of the Puerto Rican flag used to color in the sharp edged modern *kufi* Arabic Calligraphy that now fills the background. Along with and above its brand name, the stylized *kufi* text forms the logo for the record label company,

Remarkable Current. A new, refined set of color images of the Perez brothers now replaces the previous black and white action poses. The brothers are calm but project a critical gaze, sport shades and leather jackets, the image behind them is raw, but they are cool. They are the digital representations of Latino Muslim hip hop artists, the Mujahideen Team, the doers of *jihad* (see figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1. Screenshots of Adobe Flash animated introduction on M-Team's MySpace website. <<http://myspace.com/mteam/>>

The Point Of View film *New Muslim Cool* by Jennifer Maytorena Taylor aired on June 23, 2009 on PBS. That same day, the *New York Times* published an article titled “New Muslim Cool: Islam, Hope and Charity Inspire Dealer Turned Rapper” by Ginia Bellafante.²⁵⁵ Shortly after, the *New York Times* article was published on *HispanicMuslims.com* by LMO leader Juan Galvan. The re-remediated narrative begins with an almost thankful tone that the film “has no investment in cool at all,” and focuses instead on the character of Puerto Rican Muslim rapper Hamza Perez as “an opportunity to access a closer view of human decency.” In its brief synopsis of the film, the article summarizes Hamza’s opening words in the film: “I would always have two consistent dreams my whole life. One that I was going to experience death at twenty one. The other one that I was going to be in jail. And then, both of them came true.” Both dreams came true at age twenty-one Hamza converted to Islam and began working as prison chaplain. “New Muslim Cool,” writes Bellafante, “possesses a kind of beauty that sneaks up on you: it is in Hamza’s humility, in the dignity with which he confronts so much of his misfortune, in his commitment to rehabilitating drug dealers because, in his mind, no one else will.” In his indiscriminate remediation of both negative and positive representations of Latino Muslim news articles on *HispanicMuslims.com*, Galvan adopts a nuanced form of the “any coverage is good coverage” attitude, believing that media consumers are able and willing to discriminate between good and bad reporting. Through the Bellafante article however, Galvan is able to design a Latino Muslim identity as humble, dignified

²⁵⁵ Bellafante, Ginia. “New Muslim Cool,” *New York Times*. June 23, 2009
<http://hispanicmuslims.com/articles/newmuslimcool.html> Accessed on: March 7, 2012.

and decent by referencing the Bellafante news article, which references the Taylor film, which references the life of Latino Muslim, Hamza Perez.

One scene in *New Muslim Cool* opens with a close up of a “Malcolm X Blvd” street sign in New York. Hamza is wearing a black t-shirt with a Puerto Rican flag. He and his brother Suliman Perez walk up the street and into the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood Inc., the “lineal descendant” of the Muslim Mosque Inc. founded by Malcolm X, in 1964 after his departure from the Nation of Islam.²⁵⁶ Hamza Perez is then introduced by a live radio broadcaster: “... you’re a single dad, now you’re married. You’re a married man, you’re a Muslim, you’re American, you’re Puerto Rican, from the hood, you’re an artist, you’re a rapper, you’re a... ha! You sound like America’s worst nightmare!”²⁵⁷ This reference to Hamza’s intersecting identities, introduces Latino Muslims as a counter to stereotypes that characterize Latinos as Catholic and Muslims as Arab. In another scene within Suliman’s home kitchen, the two brothers further discuss their intersectional identities in a joking manner:

Hamza: “We don’t know full Arabic, but we know, Arabic-Spanglish-Ebonics.”
Suliman: “We don’t know English well, we don’t speak English well, we don’t speak Spanish well or Arabic.”
Hamza: “So we’re translating the language of...”
Suliman: “... Puerto Rican Ebonics, Puertorronics!”
Hamza: “Puertorronics!”

The English, Spanish and Arabic words he speaks, the Puerto Rican flags, *kufis* (skull cap), Islamic prayer beads and hip hop attire he wears, the biological family he

²⁵⁶ <http://stopthemadrassa.files.wordpress.com/2007/10/a-brief-history-of-the-mosque-of-islamic-brotherhood.pdf> Accessed on: March 2, 2012.

²⁵⁷ Taylor, Jennifer Maytorena (Director). (2009). *New Muslim Cool* [Documentary]. United States: PBS - Point of View.

communes with and the religious one he prays with, and the life he lives ‘off and on’ media representations are evidence of inter-cultural contact between Latinos and Muslims. Contact is not always described as a peaceful process however.

In his 1990 article “The Roots of Muslim Rage” published in the September edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Bernard Lewis concluded that, “It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement in Islam far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations.” In 1993, Samuel P. Huntington published his article “The Clash of Civilizations?” in *Foreign Affairs* and in 1996 expanded it to a book titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. In these works, Huntington argued that after the conflict between Cold War communist and capitalist ideals came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union, global politics has and will continue to be characterized primarily by cultural and religious conflict. Nearly a decade later, on January 1, 2005, the Latino Muslim hip hop group, Mujahideen Team, doers of *jihad* - struggle, released their album titled *Clash of Civilizations*, self described as “a conflict of ideas. A combat of visions. A war of words,” the album is itself described as a Latino Muslim attack on Western culture.²⁵⁸

Though seemingly adopting Huntington’s ‘clash of civilization’ thesis in their Album’s title, by referencing various pan-unity movements in opposition to Western hegemony, the M-Team rejects Huntington’s characterization of Western culture as

²⁵⁸ The M-Team’s previous album was titled *Wretched of the Earth* also named after a book: “we name our albums after books so our listeners can check out certain books. Many revolutionaries like Malcolm X, the Panthers, and the Yong Lords read the book *The Wretched of the Earth*.”

morally superior to Islamic culture, they instead flip the script to present good Muslim piety as combating corrupt and evil Western culture rather than as vice versa. The opening track to M-Team's *Clash of Civilizations*, "Clashtro," begins with the invocation, *bismillah*, in the name of God, followed up with a slow steady beat punctuated by an occasional church bell, a Spanish guitar and a jazz piano and trumpet in the background. But the track's main content is a sampled speech given by Che Guevara, in Spanish to the United Nations general assembly on December 12, 1964:

There is no small enemy nor insignificant force, because there are no isolated villages. As stated in the Second Declaration of Havana: "No nation in Latin America is weak, because it is part of a family of two hundred million brothers, who suffer the same miseries, who harbor the same feelings, have the same enemy, dream about the same best destination and the solidarity of all honest men and women in the world."²⁵⁹

Che Guevara's revolutionary struggle for Latin American sovereignty in Cuba and Bolivia and the M-Team's reference to the Second Declaration of Havana exemplify strands of Pan-Latin American visions for unity against American imperialism. Many Muslims across the globe have also strived for a pan-Muslim unity as a response to European colonialism.²⁶⁰ In the 1960's, U.S. groups such as the Nation of Islam drew from both pan-Muslim and Marcus Garvey's pan-Africanism to form a vision of unity against forces of White supremacist structures of dominance. Currently, Latino Muslim media, such as M-Team's, draw from Pan-Latin American, Pan-Islamist and Pan-Blackamerican unity movements that echo nationalist paradigms of race, i.e. a set of distinct nations such as the Nation of Islam, Native American and Chicano nations within

²⁵⁹ <http://www.culturabrasil.org/discursoche.htm> Accessed on: February 28, 2012.

²⁶⁰ See John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, *Islam in transition : Muslim perspectives*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

the broader nation of the U.S. Though still evoked by individuals such as the M-Team, a pan-nationalist clash against Western civilizations has by no means dominated Latino Muslim discourse, even within M-Team media. Instead, the two strands of the ethnicity paradigm, assimilation and multiculturalism continue to dominate racial formations in the U.S.

Huntington's own formulation of the 'clash of civilization' thesis aligns itself with the assimilation model for dealing with minority groups in the U.S. rather than with pan-nationalist paradigms for dealing with Western hegemony. In a discussion regarding the 1994 Los Angeles protests against immigration reform law that discriminated against Latinos, Huntington zeroes in on the usage of Mexican flags over and above American ones. The use of Mexican flags and absence of U.S. flags was critiqued in the press as being indicative of the Latino protestors' un-American character. In response, the protestors began waving U.S. flags, purposefully arranged upside down. The gesture seemed to have worked against the protest movement when in November of 1994 prop. 187 was approved by 59 percent of Californian voters. "In the post-Cold War world," Huntington writes, "flags count and so do other symbols of cultural identity, including crosses, crescents, and even head coverings, because culture counts, and cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people."²⁶¹ After identifying culture as the primary cause for current and future conflict in global politics, Huntington makes several proscriptions. First, foreign policy should "exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states to support in other civilizations groups sympathetic to

²⁶¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). 20.

western values and interests...”²⁶² Second, domestic policies, according to Huntington, should on the other hand drastically reduce legal immigration to the U.S. so that those who are already here can “adequately assimilate.” For Huntington, and many other influential voices in the mass media, Latinos and Muslims who do not assimilate in such a way as to embody “western values and interests” represent a threat to American civilization.

The M-Team’s track “Clashtro” draws from other mediations to frame the album as a Latino Muslim subversion of Huntington’s assimilation paradigm. The steady beat of the track is disrupted by a scratch mix and ends with a standalone sample of renowned philosopher of language and political anarchist and activist Noam Chomsky: “now, let’s get back to this clash of civilizations thing.”²⁶³ The “Clashtro” mix ends and the album begins. Chomsky’s unedited lecture however goes on to critique Huntington’s theory as non-factual and contradictory to current U.S. foreign policy aligned with Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia.²⁶⁴

For those that disagree with the assimilation paradigm backed by Huntington and others, it is becoming increasingly urgent to demonstrate that the problem of how to integrate Latinos and Muslims into American civilization is a false one. False because American culture has been shaped in important ways by Latinos, Muslims and many others. And false because the meaning of categories such as ‘Latino,’ ‘Muslim’ and even ‘American civilization’ are fluid and constantly change within public discourse.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Chomsky, Noam. “On the ‘Clash of Civilizations’.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT64TNho59I>
Accessed on: February 29, 2012.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

Huntington's clash of civilizations between the West and Islam is therefore a contradictory theory because neither the West nor Islam exists in any unified sense outside of particular instances ideological discourse. Additionally, the West and Islam, as ideological categories, overlap and bleed into one another. The "West" is comprised of elements from "Islam" and vice versa.

The "Clashtro" mix's concluding reference to Chomsky's critique of Huntington's 'clash of civilization' thesis provides us with a clue to understand M-Team's album not as a simple adoption of Huntington, but as a multiple, complex and contradictory set of significations. M-Team member Suliman Perez described the album as "jumbo gumbo soup," a raw and creative meeting of various individuals from different cultures. Each track references different sounds from Latin and North America but are united through a common, urgent and revolutionary theme. The track "Axe And the Machete," begins with a sample from Puerto Rican salsa singer Héctor Lavoe's song "Hacha y Machete" and promptly transitions to a funky set of sounds and rhymes:

mobilize...
we're Columbians, and Peruvians,
Puerto Ricans, Blacks and Andalusians,
y el Profeta sigue brillando, una cosecha, M-Team está ganando...
hacha y machete, café con leche, cuando llegara el día de mi suerte?
Revolution, *hasta la muerte!*
mi gente... Jesucristo, la Virgen María,
Profeta Muhammad, la luz de la vida

"I think with this album," reported Hamza, "were bringing a side of hip hop that's dying out, and it's a diversity... it's reviving the thing that brought and created hip hop, it was a combination of American, African and Latino culture." The term *clash* is therefore being used in multiple ways by the M-Team. In the above instance culture clash is a meeting of

cultures capable of resulting in creative and productive sounds, ideas and relationships. But for theorists like For Huntington, the term signals only a violent conflict between two incommensurable cultures, the West and Islam in which the West is hierarchically formulated as the ideal. On the CD cover of M-Team's album the term is defined as a war of ideas and words, and revolutionary poetry as their weapon of choice. The track "Clashtro" references the phrase in terms of a pan-nationalist opposition to U.S. hegemony. These multiple significations of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis offer important critiques of simple binaries between bad Muslims threatening good Western civilizations that dominate media representations of Islam after the 9/11 attacks.

Good and Bad Muslims: a Replacement of Huntington's Binary

In his article "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," Mahmood Mamdani offers a critique of culture talk as producing a-historical causal links between religion and politics. That is, he critiques the idea that if a Muslim's political activism is extremist than it is her or his religion that is to blame and in need of reform. The implication of this argument is that good Muslim religion will result in good Muslim politics. Continuing the trajectory of this type of thinking, it would follow that in order to thwart a perceived rise in Latino conversions to extremist forms of Islam, a culture war is needed that promotes a "good," or moderate form of Islam in mass media. In response to negative representations of Islam, such as Huntington's, mass media productions such as *New Muslim Cool* have made it a point to introduce "good" Muslims

to American media consumers. Several media productions of Hamza's character have, for example, sought to frame the Latino Muslim artist in a favorable light.

In *New Muslim Cool*, those who react to Hamza's Muslim identity as a threat, namely the FBI, are themselves portrayed as villains for engaging in what are framed as discriminatory practices. The film's narrative introduction to Hamza's character gives much more attention to his focus on family than to his music. Hamza's mother and her recollection of her son as a child, adolescent and young adult serve to place Hamza within a Puerto Rican family life. Hamza's goal to get married so that he can raise his two children from a previous marriage within a "good Muslim home," also serves to establish his character as family-oriented. The film dramatically reenacts Hamza's search for a wife by panning between screen shots of a computer screen, his eyes focused on the screen and his hands clicking away on a mouse and typing away at a keyboard. Hamza surfs the Internet, finds his way to *Naseeb.com*, a "Muslim social networks" site, and searches for his wife to be. Regarding the process, Rafiah, Hamza's wife to be, reports to the viewer:

When we first started communicating with each other, we communicating with each other online, so I was able to ask all the important questions ahead of time. I actually liked the process, because it eliminated anything, it eliminated any, like, lust or attraction were you get distracted and you don't ask the important questions.

Several scenes later, Hamza is filmed walking into a Barbershopshop. As he is groomed for the wedding, Hamza chats with his barber and tells him that the wedding will be "a clash of civilizations." His mom and family are Latino while his wife and her family are Black: "You'd be surprised," Hamza tells his barber, "all the Latinos want the Black's

food and all the Blacks want the Latino food.” Next, the couple are wed, they obtain a new home together and raise their children. Hamza and his two children and Rafiah and her daughter are now a family, and this is essentially the focus of the film: Hamza’s struggle to raise a family, with one important caveat, he is a Latino Muslim in the U.S.

After the film attempts to frame the character of Hamza as primarily a family man, and portrays his family life as seemingly going well, he ominously tells the camera, “when things are too good, I start to worry.” A few scenes later, Hamza is shown celebrating The Fourth of July with friends and family members and vegan kabobs and sparkler fireworks. A pulsing sound begins along with a remediation of breaking news coverage of an FBI raid on Hamza’s mosque during Friday prayer. Various theories as to why the mosque was raided by the FBI are then explored in the film. Perhaps the FBI was searching for ex-convict Larry Williams who had stayed at the mosque the night before. Or perhaps, Williams had given the FBI an excuse to search the mosque and its members who had, as it turns out, been under surveillance for some time. “I start thinking about my kids you know what I’m saying, where would they go, who’s gonna stay with them if I get locked up.” In another scene, Hamza offers a new interpretation of the raid: “I just looked at it like as a, you know, just waking me up a little bit. Letting me know the state of and the reality of being Muslim in America.” Through the film, we are meant to understand that though Williams was a bad Muslim, not all Muslims are bad. Hamza the family man is but one example of a good Muslim.

Hamza’s Latino Muslim identity is formulated through media productions in a way that will seem familiar and good to many mainstream Americans. A focus on

Hamza's music as Islamic political activism would move beyond this characterization however and mold the story in terms of the '9/11 factor,' i.e. as representing all political Islamic groups as extremist. Instead of a "good family focused - Muslim," Hamza's flaming machete, militant lyrics (e.g. "If these *kafirs* [unbelievers] want beef, we can take to the streets on the battlefield of jihad, you got gun we got guns... its time to rise up in jihad... its either the sword, the gun the war of the *nafs* [levels of spiritual consciousness]) and pan-Latino/pan-Muslim call for *jihad* against American imperialist diffusion of materialistic ideals could be easily used to frame Hamza as an extremist/bad Muslim. LALMA and other LMOs reinscribe the good/bad binary not as 'political therefore extremist,' but between politically active Muslim groups that can themselves be formulated as either good moderates or bad extremists. Indeed, the focus on "good" family values and "good" political activism are understood to be inextricably intertwined projects by Latino Muslims seeking to transmit their Latino brand of Islam to their children, the next generation of Latino Muslims.

Conclusion: Inter-Generational Survival

This dissertation has traced the development and analyzed the logics of a pan-Latino Muslim vision that emphasizes narratives of ethnic marginalization, reversion to Islam, and the historical Muslim roots of Latino culture. This brand of Latino Islam has dominated mass media representations of the emerging group while at the same time ostracizing Latino Muslims who do not identify with these three unifying narratives. Symbolic capital and access to Internet technology have been central to these attempts by

various LMOs to create a nationally unified Latino Muslim front. The contours of the dominant formulation of Latino Islam have been shaped in large part through a gendered dynamic between patriarchal traditions of Islamic authority and women's leadership roles in LMOs. The division between religion and culture has been used in LMO discourse to explain oppressive patriarchal practices as cultural rather than Islamic. This categorical divide is also used to rationalize unifications of Latino and Muslim identities. By tracing the development and analyzing the logics of Latino Muslim identity, I have sought to describe the current state of Latino Islam as a historically specific attempt to nationally unify diverse formulations of Latino Islam. Conflict between distinct visions of Latino Muslim identities are, however, now entering a new phase which reflects broader trends in post 9/11 forms of Islam in America. Formulations of Islam in mass media are becoming increasingly demarcated between labels of extremism and moderation. These dominant paradigms leave little room for richer and more diverse understandings of an exceedingly complex American population that identifies itself mostly as Latino converts to Islam.

As Latino Muslim converts grow older and new generations of Latinos born into Islam continue to grow in number, questions as to what kind of Latino Islam, if any, will be transmitted and preserved trans-generationally also grows in urgency. What aspects of a Latino identity will be internalized by Muslim born Latinos? And where will the source of this identity come from: their Latino Muslim parents, their non-Muslim Latino families or other communities? Will they be taught Islam in Spanish? Will Arabic displace Spanish as a second language? Will they even identify in any substantial way as

Latino? Given the volatile characteristic of religious affiliation in America, we might also ask if Latinos born into Islam will continue to identify themselves as Muslim throughout their entire lives? Will they raise their children in Islam, and if they do, what forms of Islam? Will it be a Latino form of Islam, or will future Latino Muslims assimilate into more dominant forms of Islam in America intertwined with non-Latino racial, ethnic or nationalistic identities?

Will future generations of Latino Muslims gravitate toward labels of moderation or extremism, will this binary be displaced by a new one, or might all of these options and others materialize? It therefore remains to be seen if the shared narratives of ethnic marginalization, reversion to Islam and roots in Islamic Spain will continue to be the hallmark of public representations of Latino Muslims or if these will become more prominent, become stagnant or become but a past expression of America's diverse portfolio of religious cultures. The imperative nature of these questions has prompted a reinvigorated attempt to clearly articulate a pan-Latino Muslim vision and community.

Like other pan-Islamic movements, many individuals maintain that gendered, racial, ethnic and national divisions must be subsumed under a global Muslim identity, and that therefore the promotion of a Latino Muslim identity divisively works against the unity of a universal *ummah*. Puerto Ricans in New York were initially drawn to Islam for its aesthetic appeal, its simplicity (e.g. with regard to the doctrine of the oneness of God) and its promotion of social equality. Their lived experiences within African American, Middle Eastern and Asian immigrant Muslim communities did not reflect the universal *ummah* ideals, however. Instead, it was precisely the marginalization of their Latino

ethnicity - sometimes by Blackamerican Muslims other times by immigrant Muslims from the Middle East and Asia - that animated the creation of specifically Latino Muslim communities. The Alianza Islamica, for example, promoted social equality from a Latino Muslim source by offering educational and martial arts defense training, support for HIV and AIDs victims, food and blankets for the hungry and cold and other such social services. In addition to improving the material conditions of their neighborhood residents, the Alianza Islamica promoted social equality by producing and disseminating information on Islam in Spanish that emphasized the Islamic roots of Latino ethnicity. By doing so, it was hoped that Latino and Muslim communities could come to accept Latino ethnicity as historically and culturally Islamic. The historical work on Islamic Spain written for a popular audience by T.B. Irving was originally published in Spanish, making it an early and important source for the emerging pan-Latino Muslim vision. The Alianza's relation to Irving's work and subsequent Latino Muslim organizations is demonstrative of the complex networks that gave rise to this vision. Entities such as PIEDAD, LADO and LALMA have inherited and pushed forward the Alianza's legacy to new directions with the aid of new media technologies. They have been integral to various other groups and dominant discourse on and by Latino Muslims.

Other Latino Muslims voices have also emerged, some are able to garner a bigger audience than others. *Islam In Spanish*, is for example, a well funded organization that produces high quality video, audio and graphical media on Islam, in Spanish. It is based out of Texas and has a national audience through its professionally produced website. Other local communities have also emerged including the Latino Muslims of the Bay

Area, the Chicago Association of Latino-American Muslims, Hablamos Islam out of New Jersey, the Tri-State Latino Muslims in the East Cost, the Atlanta Latino Muslim Association and various others. The result is a numerous and equally fractured verity of organizational fronts. Though most of these LMOs promote the dominant narratives of ethnic marginalization, reversion to Islam and roots in Moorish Spain, the terms ‘Latino’ and ‘Muslim’ remain highly contested even within Latino Muslim discourse.

One Latino Muslim made the following comment regarding the signification of Latino ethnicity: “Our meetings usually got stuck around food [and] what cultural dishes would be most appropriate... We have to have rice and beans, but what style beans? Black or Pinto Beans? Central American style, Caribbean style or Mexican Style”²⁶⁵ The more contested arena has been, however, centered on what forms of Islam are to be adopted and transmitted to the next generation of Latino Muslims.

Various attempts have been made to organizationally overcome ethnic and religious differences. One of the latest and most ambitious attempts to unify Latino Muslims has been the formation of the League of Latino American Muslim Organizations or LLAMO in 2010. In an interview, Imam Yusef Maisonet, a Puerto Rican convert to Islam, reported that LLAMO had been the “brain child” of the late Khadijah Rivera (founder of PIEDAD) and a few other Latino Muslims. Having had worked with Rivera on various other projects, including a missionary trip to visit Muslim communities in Puerto Rico, Maisonet was deeply affected by her death and decided to work along with

²⁶⁵ Espinoza, Kathryn. “Latino Muslim Cultural Night,” *The Latino Muslim Voice* (October-December 2010), <http://latinodawah.org/newsletter/oct-dec2k4.html> Accessed on February 2, 2012.

others toward realizing her vision of a nationally united Latino Muslim front. LLAMO's mission statement is published on their website as follows:

LLAMO's MISSION - Our mission is to disseminate Islamic information within the Latino-American community to promote understanding of Islam and the Muslim community; forming bridges among the multireligious and multiethnic communities in the USA. OBJECTIVES - LLAMO's principal objective is to bring different Latino Muslim groups together under one name, and become the vehicle through which Latino Muslims will:develop Islamic programs to non Latino/Hispanic Muslim population. To contribute to the social and moral growth of the society we live in, as determined by Islam. Establish multicultural communities that will foster peaceful coexistence by using Islam as their foundation.²⁶⁶

The vision for a pan-Latino Muslim organizational front has been shared by many and can be traced back as far as Rivera's and Askia's work in the 1980's. Galvan also attempted to accomplish this goal when he joined LADO in 2001,

When I began revising the LADO mission statement in 2001, one of the initial main points for the mission statement was to unite the Latino Muslim community of the United States. I was not aware of all the complexities of such a goal... You need to understand the methods in which your organization is seeking unity with other organizations.²⁶⁷

For Galvan, these complexities included various options. The first is to dissolve the various organizations and consolidate assets and titles under an existing organization. A second option is to create a new national organization for all assets and titles to be transferred to. And a third is to create a new federation that maintains the autonomy of existing organizations under its umbrella. Regarding the creation of LLAMO, Galvan writes:

²⁶⁶ <http://www.llamo.org/index.html> Accessed February 15, 2012.

²⁶⁷ Galvan, Juan. "FAQs About the LADO Group," USIslam.org. http://www.usislam.org/latinos/English/faqs_about_the_lado_group.htm Accessed on: August 14, 2012.

Various Latino Muslim organizations, including LADO, attempted to take the third option by developing an organization called the League of Latino American Muslim Organizations (LLAMO). We did not go much farther than selecting a name, a mission statement, and goals. We described LLAMO as “a national umbrella organization whose purpose is to coordinate Islamic outreach activities among different Latino-Muslim organizations at local, regional and national levels.” One of LLAMO’s main goals includes providing “a nationally unified front representing the Latino-Muslim community.”²⁶⁸

However, the difficulties of managing various groups under one umbrella has curtailed many of LLAMO’s goals,

Currently, Latino Muslim organizations do not have the assets to take on such a great endeavor. Even with assets, decisions regarding details would continue to be the more difficult part of reaching unity. Many difficult decisions must be made. When member organizations maintain all their assets, the new organization suffers due to the lack of contribution that each member organization could have potentially brought to the new organization. Various organizations working together as LLAMO must be more valuable than various separate organizations. LLAMO would need to be the dominant Latino Muslim organization in the United States. We would need to successfully manage the transfer of some assets to LLAMO from member organizations.²⁶⁹

Due to such complications, the 2011 goal of holding a LLAMO conference in the U.S. went unrealized. This is representative of LLAMO’s other unrealized activities as well.

LLAMO, as an umbrella organization, has drawn from dominant narratives and local organizations to justify its formation and has been inspired by the life, work and death of various individuals including Khadijah Rivera. Nonetheless, its stagnant representation on the Web is a reminder that a unified Latino Muslim identity exists more so within mass media networks than in individually and communally lived experiences. As a discursive formation, Latino Muslim identity is, after all, at the margins between

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

lived experiences and hypereal mediations. Latino Muslims are a discursive hybridity between race, religion and Internet technology.

Toward the end of the film, *New Muslim Cool*, the county jail revokes the security clearance of two Muslim clerics and also takes Hamza's clearance away. In the film's final moment of crisis, Hamza's license to work at a prison is revoked by the FBI. He is not given a reason for the revocation, and as a result of the patriot act we are told, none is needed. Three and half months of FBI silence are finally broken after the ACLU becomes involved on Hamza's behalf. The FBI cited an interview published on an older version of the M-Teams website as its central reason for pulling his clearance to work at a federal prison. Hamza's case worker has the website up on her computer screen as she explains the specific quotes that had perhaps alarmed authorities: "The government doesn't give a crap about us, so don't kiss their a** and the situation is just going to get worse... Stop collaborating and sleeping with the snake," to which she explains, "I think that the county solicitor recognizes that the jail does have security concerns and so your right to speak at a jail is not going to be as broad as your right to speak outside of a jail. You know you can't say anything you want to the inmates. But when you're talking on your free time outside of that employment context, you have a first amendment right to engage in speech." Hamza's clearance was therefore returned, and he enthusiastically made his way back to his interfaith work at the prison.

"I felt so bad when I watched the movie," Juan Galvan (president of LADO and web-designer of *LatinoDawah.org*, *HispanicMuslims.com*, *LatinoMuslim.com* and a host

of other LMO websites) told me in an interview. “Hamza asked me to design his website, but I needed content. So I put the interview on the site because he hadn’t got back to me.” For Latino Muslims in need of websites, Juan Galvan has been an answered prayer. He has single handedly designed more Latino Muslim websites than any other individual or organization. Today, Galvan is the executive director of the most prominent, best connected and almost completely virtual LMO in the United States. Toward national unity, however, LADO’s most important feature is connecting LMOs to one another. It provides a networking service rather than a unified mobilization of Latino Muslim individuals and recourses.

The Internet has provided minority groups with technologies to design and disseminate their identities, to gain a potentially more dominant voice in the public sphere, to create networks with one another and to mobilize for particular causes (e.g. the translation of Islamic media into Spanish). The Internet has helped shape and make possible the creation, dissemination and mobilization of a pan-Latino Muslim vision characterized by shared narratives of ethnic marginalization, reversion to Islam and roots in Muslim Spain. The Internet has also however generated a proliferation of distinct LMOs in virtual spaces that make it increasingly difficult to create offline unity. LMO approaches to the question of what form of Latino Islam if any will be transmitted to a second generation of Latinos born into Islam and how this will be accomplished presents a difficult set of practical and ethical questions. What new divisions will be used to create new unities? Will these new divisions be more ethically appealing than previous ones? Will they invoke Latino ethnicity as producing ideal religion or grapple instead with the

historical specificity of their identity? And will the mediums in which such questions are asked and answered be themselves critically scrutinized? It is unclear whether or not LMOs will be able to sufficiently answer these questions, whether they will be able to achieve unity online, offline, both or neither, and whether or not Latino Islam will survive trans-generationally. What is clear however is that the growing number of Latino Muslims in the United States and the media they produce expands already dynamic categories of what it means to be a Latino and what it means to be a Muslim at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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