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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This book uses simplified, anglicized spellings of all Arabic words (Qur'an, Muhammad, *Jumma*, *khutbah*, *khateebah*, etc.) rather than follow academic conventions for Arabic transliterations in English. This both reflects how my interlocutors commonly rendered key Arabic terms in English and facilitates reading for non-Arabic speakers. For example, while I use ' to signify an internal *ayn* and ' to signify an internal *hamza*, I exclude the external *ayn* and *hamza* (e.g., *ulama*). There are also instances where a *ta marbuta* is signified by either an "a" or an "ah" depending on how the word is most commonly rendered in English (e.g., *ijaza*, Shi'a, Sunnah, *surah*). Lastly, when I quote from other sources, I maintain the spelling of the original source.

Introduction

Reimagining the US Mosque

What were the wives of the Prophet told to do by Allah? They were to recite the signs of Allah in his wisdom! . . . We know that four of the wives were *hafidhah*—that means they knew the Qur’an by heart. . . . Seven of the wives gave legal decisions and were judges and scholars, not just for women but to the entire community.

—Gail Kennard, from her August 2015 *khutbah* (sermon),
“The 12 Female Disciples of the Prophet Muhammad”

On Friday, August 28, 2015, Gail Kennard stood before a congregation of Muslim women and their interfaith allies in downtown Los Angeles and, in her characteristic soft-spoken but firm tone, detailed the ways that the twelve wives of the Prophet Muhammad were role models for all Muslim women. She noted that Muhammad’s wives embodied religious knowledge, authority, and moral excellence. Kennard, an African American Muslim in her mid-sixties, was the designated *khateebah* (female preacher) at the Women’s Mosque of America (WMA) that month. A former journalist, she served as the president of the oldest and one of the largest African American architectural firms in LA, which had been founded by her late father in 1957.¹ Her remarks on Muhammad’s wives made up the *khutbah* (sermon) that she delivered prior to leading *Jummah* (Friday prayer). This was eight months into the tenure of the WMA, an emergent multiracial women-only mosque in LA that hosts monthly *Jummah* for Muslim and non-Muslim women, girls, and boys under age twelve. After each *Jummah*, the *khateebah* sits together with the congregants in a circle and answers their questions about the *khutbah*, before entering into a general dialogue with them about topics usually related to Islam and women.

The khutbah, congregational prayer, and post-Jumma discussion circle are all designed to be intimate communal experiences that mark the Women's Mosque of America as a safe space for women. All those who participate, including the khateebah, are encouraged to share their vulnerabilities and anxieties with each other. Modeling this intimacy, before delving into how the Prophet Muhammad's wives are moral exemplars for Muslim women everywhere, Kennard confided in the congregation her visceral discomfort at the Prophet's polygynous marriages. Expressing her unease about it, Kennard described how while Muhammad had been in a monogamous twenty-five-year marriage with his first wife, Khadijah, after her death he married multiple women in succession, totaling twelve.² This troubled Kennard because she, like many other Muslims invested in gender justice, believed polygyny to be inherently oppressive to women, and these multiple marriages therefore disrupted her understanding of Muhammad as a morally exemplar husband.

To address her ethical concerns about the Prophet Muhammad's polygyny, Kennard detailed to the WMA congregation how she turned to the Qur'an, the sacred Islamic scripture that Muslims consider to be the revealed word of God, for answers. After searching within the scripture, she came to understand Muhammad's wives as divinely ordained to speak as religious authorities in the early Muslim community.³ Elaborating on her Qur'anic reflections before the congregation, Kennard cast the twelve wives⁴ of Muhammad as his disciples, chosen by God to disseminate his teachings. To her, the wives' task of spreading God's message was especially noteworthy because this role had historically only ever been delegated to men, and she cited the twelve disciples of Jesus and Jacob's twelve sons as examples. By reflecting on how marriage was the only way for Muhammad to legitimize his close access to the women who had been chosen by God to be his disciples, given the social mores of seventh-century Arabia, she came to terms with his polygynous practices.⁵

To Kennard, the fact that none of Muhammad's wives after Khadijah bore him any children who survived past infancy further confirmed that there was a higher, divine purpose to their marriages. Furthermore, she stated that in the Qur'an, God speaks directly to the wives, asking them to recite Muhammad's teachings and referring to them as the "Mothers

of the Believers.” At the beginning of her khutbah, Kennard described how she had previously only considered Muhammad’s first wife, Khadijah—a successful businesswoman fifteen years his senior who proposed marriage to him—as an empowering role model for Muslim women. By the end, she extended this categorization to all of his wives: “Let us embrace all of them, not just Khadijah. Their spirit is reaching across the centuries to remind us that we can do more than we think is possible. If they could do what they did in their time, why not us and why not now?”⁶ Kennard concluded by calling on congregants to draw inspiration from Muhammad’s wives to speak up and assert their voices in matters of faith. She identified the WMA as a space where Muslim women could carry on the legacy of Muhammad’s wives, using their own voices to spread religious knowledge and serve as community leaders.

The Women’s Mosque of America was indeed conceived as a space to elevate Muslim women’s voices. Its services officially began in January 2015, when it held its inaugural Jummah for an all-female congregation at the Pico Union Project near downtown LA.⁷ At the service, one woman called the *adhan* (call to prayer) while another delivered the khutbah and led prayer. Over one hundred supporters attended. Today, the WMA continues to host women’s monthly Jummahs as a part of its broader aim to empower women and girls through access to Islamic knowledge and leadership opportunities.⁸ In media interviews, its founder, M. Hasna Maznavi, a comedy writer, and then co-president Sana Muttalib, an international law attorney—both South Asian American women—described it as the first women’s mosque in the US.⁹

The WMA’s emergence fills a need in a US mosque culture that systematically yet unevenly marginalizes women in a variety of ways, including through inadequate prayer spaces, exclusion from leadership roles, and limited access to religious learning.¹⁰ Given that US mosques vary greatly with respect to physical space, size of the congregation, internal layout, and social norms, patterns of women’s marginalization are neither uniform nor universal. Yet broadly speaking, men and women’s respective worship spaces within conventional mosques across the country are both separate and unequal. Women’s quarters are usually smaller and inferior, though a 2011 survey found that African American-led mosques and Shi’i mosques are typically more inclusive of women than Sunni mosques with South Asian, Arab, or other ethnic majorities. This

mosque survey also revealed that over 60 percent of US mosques used physical barriers to mark off women's prayer space from the main space reserved for men.¹¹

In cases where women do not pray directly behind men and a physical partition, they are usually consigned to a poorly ventilated and dimly lit basement or other marginal space. As such, women often do not have access to the imam (the prayer leader) and in many cases are not even able to hear the khutbah. Those in the WMA community, including board members, khateebahs, and congregants, implicitly critique the various factors that contribute to women's subordinate status within US mosques. To be clear, patriarchal mosque culture is not unique to US Muslim communities. Around the globe, the mosque represents "a spatial expression of a patriarchal ethos," where men occupy its main spaces and assume leadership roles.¹² The WMA seeks to provide an alternative to this patriarchal ethos by creating space for women to worship and opportunities for them to cultivate religious authority. In so doing, the American Muslim women at the WMA collectively reimagine what a mosque is and what it should be.

Both the form and function of mosques have evolved over the course of Islamic history and differ across geographical region, Islamic sect, and individual Muslim communities. Moreover, for centuries, Muslim historians and contemporary scholars of religion and architecture alike have contested the criteria that properly constitute a mosque.¹³ *Masjid*, the Arabic term for mosque found in the Qur'an, signifies a place for prostration and could therefore broadly apply to a range of locations, temporary or purpose-built, within a private home or in an open space. Among Muslim historians, the Prophet Muhammad's house in Medina has been widely understood to be a mosque, in which ritual worship, religious instruction, and communal gatherings all took place.

As Islamic studies specialist Simonetta Calderini has shown, the criteria and distinct architectural features for a mosque became increasingly specialized in the centuries following Muhammad's death, with emerging restrictions around access that prohibited the entry of non-Muslims and those who did not meet ritual purity standards. She summarizes: "the meaning of the term 'mosque,' its physical shape and functions, are open to interpretation. These underwent changes over time which reflected diverse contexts, from an informal and multifunctional place of

gathering at specific times of prostration, to the material space which reflected and asserted the ruler's political authority and legitimacy."¹⁴ That mosques have never been fixed in meaning in either Muslim-majority or -minority contexts allows us to situate the WMA within a global and historical Islamic context. When WMA members raise questions about the right configurations and criteria for a mosque, they are partaking in debates that have been occurring for centuries.

In other words, the women in the WMA community are not breaking with the Islamic past by raising questions about right religious practices and contesting gendered marginalization in existing US mosques. Muslims have been voicing similar concerns since the early centuries of Islam. Rather, the WMA, as a living community of Muslim women and an emerging Islamic institution, legitimizes different existing configurations of Islamic authority and combines them to promote the notion that mosques should be gender-inclusive spaces where women lead prayer, interpret the Qur'an, foreground their experiences in exegesis, commit to multiracial and intrafaith inclusivity, and build interfaith community.

This book uses the WMA to illuminate significant trends and tensions relating to Muslim women's religious authority within and beyond the US context. Muslim women around the globe occupy various positions of authority across different religious networks, including as educators at Islamic institutions, board members at mosques, Sufi shaykhas, khateebahs, and prayer leaders. Shifts in Muslim women's religious authority proceed from uneven global processes of privatization and individualization of religion, which has resulted in the decentralization of established religious authorities. In the global Islamic context, scholars describe this process as a fragmentation of authority previously monopolized by the *ulama*, the Muslim scholarly elite, and its expansion to a wide range of lay actors.¹⁵ In the US context, this privatization of religion shapes religious congregations as civic institutions through which religious actors acculturate to American norms, including women's increased participation in public religious life and engagements in interfaith dialogue.¹⁶ Therefore, to understand the WMA, it is necessary to attend to both the global processes of Islamic authority and the privatization of religion in the US context. Analyzing how these contexts converge further illuminates global Islamic debates on the fragmentation of religious authority and the racialized criteria by which religions become Americanized.

In their constructions of Islamic authority, American Muslim women must negotiate their marginalization in their patriarchal religious communities while also navigating the Islamophobia prevalent in mainstream US society. The WMA provides a platform for Muslim women, particularly those without any formal Islamic training, to navigate both of these terrains; it creates space for them to cultivate forms of Islamic authority that are based on the Qur'an, center women, and also speak to the sociopolitical climate of the US. These forms include ritual authority to lead prayer and deliver khutbahs (explored in chapter 1), and interpretive authority to engage in oral exegesis in those khutbahs, based on English translations of the Qur'an (chapter 2). In their oral exegeses, khateebahs draw on their experiences as women to interpret sacred texts (chapter 3), and often also use their khutbahs to engage contemporary social justice issues and promote building multiracial (chapter 4), intra-faith, and interfaith community (chapter 5).

Gail Kennard's khutbah on the wives of Muhammad provides an introduction to the WMA's model of Islamic authority, illuminating especially the central role that the Qur'an plays in it, while also exemplifying the significance that the WMA community places on approaching scriptural interpretations *as women*. For example, to address her concerns about polygyny, Kennard turned to particular Qur'anic verses¹⁷ about Muhammad's wives to posit that they were divinely ordained to act as religious authorities. The Qur'an provided the basis for her argument that the wives of Muhammad are better understood as his disciples. Moreover, it was her discomfort, as a woman, with Muhammad's polygynous marriages that drove her exegetical inquiry into the roles of his wives in the first place, offering an example of the kind of unique contribution, according to the WMA ethos, that women can make in their approaches to Qur'anic interpretation.

Kennard cites the examples of the wives of Muhammad to encourage women in the WMA congregation to seek roles of religious authority. She explains that in seeking more information about them, she learned that four of Muhammad's twelve wives had the entirety of the Qur'an memorized, seven had been known to act as legal arbiters, and the early Muslim community had regarded all of them as authority figures. By drawing on Islamic scriptures and the legacies of prominent Muslim historical figures like the wives of the Prophet to argue that American

Muslim women, like those in the congregation, should take up similar roles, Kennard situates the WMA project within Islamic history. Additionally, by referring to Muhammad's wives as his twelve disciples, Kennard adopts a Christian framework recalling the disciples of Jesus. She also draws connections with the Jewish patriarch and Islamic Prophet Jacob and his twelve sons, demonstrating her sense of a shared religious history. These references are not only meaningful to Muslims but also work to welcome the WMA's Jewish and Christian congregants.

Two years later, when I was conducting my fieldwork interviews at the WMA, congregants repeatedly cited Kennard's khutbah on Muhammad's wives as his disciples as among their favorites. In particular, they appreciated hearing a woman's perspective on female figures in Islamic history. Broadly speaking, congregants sought female exegetical voices, increased Islamic knowledge, spiritual community, and adequate worship space in their religious lives, and were compelled by the WMA's potential to provide all of these things. As an institution, the WMA produces new ways for women to cultivate Islamic authority that bypass the requirements of formal religious training, which creates more opportunities for women's exegeses. In the absence of formal Islamic training, women's embodied experiences, their community activism, and their professional credentials grant them religious authority. For example, Kennard, who has been a WMA khateebah multiple times, was also a prominent member of various other Muslim communities in Southern California.¹⁸ Her respected position within different LA circles contributed to her religious authority within the WMA community.

The WMA community is diverse in age, race, and religiosity, and the size of the congregation has fluctuated over the years. The numbers have shifted from seventy to a hundred women every month in 2015 to approximately thirty to fifty women in attendance in subsequent years, with select months in 2018 and 2019 attracting up to seventy-five congregants. Attendance dipped to a dozen or so each month during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the WMA shifted its services to a virtual format over Zoom, although online views of khutbahs on Facebook and YouTube consistently hit several hundred views.¹⁹ The WMA runs on donations, and membership is voluntary and does not entail formal fees, though congregants are encouraged to contribute five dollars a month if they are able.



Figure I.1. Gail Kennard delivers her khutbah “The 12 Female Disciples of the Prophet Muhammad” at the Women’s Mosque of America (August 28, 2015). Source: Faezeh Fathizadeh, the Pluralism Project at Harvard University

Amid fluctuations in congregant numbers, there is a core constituency of African American Muslim women over the age of sixty, like Kennard, whom other congregants describe as the heart of the community. There are also white Christian and Jewish women in the same age range who come as interfaith allies. An ethnically diverse group of younger women in their twenties and thirties—Black, South Asian, white, Arab, East Asian, and Latina—are also in regular attendance. This racial and ethnic diversity itself is consistent with the majority of US mosques. A 2020 study confirms that mosques in America are among the most ethnically diverse religious bodies in the country, especially during Friday congregational prayers. However, this diversity is not evenly distributed and 75 percent of American mosques have one dominant ethnic group, with the number of African American mosque attendees declining between 2010 and 2020.²⁰ By contrast, no single ethnic group at the WMA dominates the congregation. Moreover, given that African Americans make up approximately one-fifth of US Muslims, the WMA’s diversity more accurately reflects the overall demographics of Muslims in America than do the majority of American mosques.

Through its analysis of the WMA, this book offers insights into the dynamism of Islam and the American Muslim women who interpret it, who approach the Qur'an as a tool to resist social hierarchies and empower themselves. It demonstrates how WMA khateebahs assert themselves as meaningful religious actors in the US and beyond, by intervening in debates about Islamic authority as the intersections of gender, religious space, and national belonging. The WMA's model of authority fits into a discernible American Muslim pattern of treating the English language as a Muslim vernacular, as scholars of Islam in America Mucahit Bilici, Justine Howe, and Timur Yuskaev have all shown.²¹ In its turn toward lay interpretive authority, the WMA also fits within global revivalist trends that emphasize individual interpretation of the Qur'an. While still a part of ongoing US and global Islamic trends, the WMA produces a distinctive model of authority through its khutbahs and the interactions between khateebahs, congregants, and board members. This model of authority combines new and existing trends that assert women's right to lead prayer, engage English translations to interpret the Qur'an, and center women's experiences and social justice issues in exegesis, as well as forge multiracial and intra- and interfaith solidarity. Authority, through the lens of the WMA, then, offers us an alternative to hegemonic models of authority that are rooted in maleness, Arabic language expertise, and formal Islamic credentials.

Religious Authority at the WMA

Authority, both how it is cultivated and the ways in which it is contested, has long been of interest in the study of religion. Historian of religion Bruce Lincoln defines authority as an "effect" produced when the actions of a given actor align with an audience's historically and culturally specific expectations.²² The relationship between WMA khateebahs and congregants reflects this dynamic. Supporters of the WMA share key assumptions about the patriarchal nature of US mosques and women's subordinate status within them. In other words, WMA members—broadly defined as khateebahs, board members, volunteers, and congregants, including those from interfaith backgrounds—all believe that Muslim women belong in positions of religious authority. This shared belief predisposes them to "attitudes of trust, respect,

docility, acceptance, even reverence” toward WMA khateebahs, and therefore meets the conditions to produce religious authority.²³ In other words, WMA members do not need to be persuaded to take khateebahs’ authority seriously since they arrive at the WMA already convinced of the merit they bring to the role. Likewise, their own self-professed commitments to social and racial justice inform their expectations of what makes a speaker authoritative, and they are receptive when khateebahs address subjects that are meaningful to them.

Thinking specifically about women’s religious authority, it is useful to consider gendered patterns of authoritative claim making across modern American history. Scholar of religion and Africana studies Anthea Butler helps us to think about how women have subverted patriarchal authority within religious institutions through both their selective acquiescence and resistance to male power. Butler shows that early twentieth-century Pentecostal African American women in the Church of God in Christ, in their negotiations for spiritual authority, upheld men’s exclusive right to preach while simultaneously eroding male influence by taking up alternative roles such as teaching in the church.²⁴ Women at the WMA are similarly judicious with which patriarchal norms they set out to contest, and as a result, they subvert male modes of authority by formulating new ones, even as they appear to defer to or tolerate male authority in some respects.

Women throughout American religious history have also cultivated their authority by developing auxiliary networks and institutions outside of their faith communities. Here, historian of religion Judith Weisenfeld provides a way to understand how women have carved out their own spaces outside of the formal structure of the church to exert influence and authority.²⁵ Weisenfeld’s research on African American women’s Christian activism in twentieth-century New York City illuminates how women’s venues created at the margins of the church, like the Young Women’s Christian Association, serve as rich sites for understanding the extent of women’s authority in and beyond their religious communities.²⁶ The WMA can be understood through this lens as an alternative space created outside preexisting LA mosques that operates exclusively under the authority of women.

These late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century examples of African American women within the various Protestant congregations that make up the institution of the Black church provide useful ways to think

about some of the moves that US Muslim women make in their own claims to Islamic authority. As African American Protestant women contested patriarchal power within their churches, they were simultaneously working toward Black liberation and faced intersectional marginalization on account of their racial and gender identities. Contemporary US Muslim women, many of whom are African American and other women of color, similarly exist in a space of “double liminality” as they challenge male power while also combatting anti-Muslim racism.²⁷

The WMA offers ways for lay Muslim women without formal Islamic training from religious institutions in the US or overseas to cultivate religious authority. The notion of religious authority based on criteria other than educational credentials can be traced back to women during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Female followers of Muhammad—those among his Companions, members of the *Sahabah* who had personal contact with him during his lifetime—served as transmitters and narrators of the Hadith, records of Prophetic sayings that Muslims consider the most authoritative source of Islamic law and norms after the Qur’an. Reflecting the literacy norms of the time, these female Companions were not required to be educated.²⁸ Rather, the prerequisite for transmission was proximity to Muhammad.²⁹ As Muslim scholars began to formulate Islamic law and canonize the Hadith in the early centuries following Muhammad’s death, an important form of authoritative claim making was to position the Companions of Muhammad as Islamic authority figures.³⁰ In this view, being a Companion of Muhammad was the primary qualification for authority rather than formal education or gender, and female religious authorities were afforded the same legitimacy as their male counterparts.³¹ However, the privilege of proximity to the Prophet was gendered. The wives of Muhammad, above all of his other Companions, male and female, were uniquely positioned to authoritatively narrate hadith traditions about his personal habits, including hygiene and conduct within the household. This helps us to better understand WMA khatibah Gail Kennard’s remarks that Muhammad’s polygynous marriages were necessary to legitimize his access to certain female disciples who then disseminated religious knowledge as authority figures in their communities.

Beyond the Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime up until the present day, Muslim women have continued to inhabit various positions of authority in the global context without formal credentials. As Hilary Kalmbach

shows, throughout Muslim societies prior to the late twentieth century, women were largely precluded from acquiring scholarly authority because only men had access to formal education.³² Muslim women therefore cultivated authority through other means in alternative sites. In Sufi lodges, for example, female leaders were spiritually equal to their male counterparts and could achieve sainthood and confer *baraka* (spiritual blessings) on their followers. Muslim women have also served as religious teachers in informal settings, where their authority was based on “reputation, teaching experience and personal style,” rather than on formal education.³³ Women were also Islamic scholars, Hadith transmitters, prayer leaders, khateebahs, or teachers in informal study circles as well as in madrasas, Islamic schools that teach on subjects such as the Qur’an and the Hadith.

Kalmbach also notes that those who possess Islamic knowledge do not exist as authorities in a vacuum devoid of community, but that “amassing legitimacy requires a multi-dimensional interaction in which the speech, dress, and conduct of the authority both influence and are influenced by those witnessing the performance, be they peers, students, or the general public.”³⁴ At the WMA, interactions between those in leadership positions and those in the congregation together produce religious authority. Religious authority does not simply trickle down from religious leaders into worship communities for congregants to passively receive. Rather, authority is layered and produced through dynamic interactions between different religious actors. While there is indeed hierarchy at the WMA, knowledge and authority are not disseminated from religious leaders to congregants, but shift and flow between and among them, much like the process Kalmbach describes above. The multidimensional interactions between Muslim leaders and congregations render a fluctuating relationship between formal religious credentials and Islamic authority at the community level.

The WMA promotes an explicitly gendered model of religious authority based on women’s lived experiences that does not replicate existing forms of male authority. For example, WMA policies for khateebahs encourage them to share vulnerabilities and offer advice on how to overcome personal struggles using the Qur’an and other scriptural sources.³⁵ Furthermore, on the basis of my field interviews, in the eyes of congregants, khateebahs’ experiences as women lent credence to their authority and qualified them to speak on particular subjects that, in their view, men could not meaningfully engage in a similar fashion.

WMA khateebahs center women's embodied experiences as a fruitful site of inquiry into the Qur'an and its meaning. Here, scholar of religious studies Debra Majeed's Black Muslim womanist theological reflections provide a frame to analyze their activities. Her womanist framework privileges African American Muslim women's lived experiences as they relate to a racist and patriarchal US context. Based on this framework, she argues for a Qur'anic interpretive method that is grounded "in the nuances of black struggles for survival, in quests for Islamic legitimacy, the adaptability of the Qur'an, Islam's emphasis on justice and equity, and in the social activism of African American Muslim women."³⁶ Majeed's emphasis on activism accords with the values at the WMA, where racial injustices in general and anti-Black racism in particular are collective concerns of the community. Accordingly, some khutbahs put Islamic scriptures in direct conversations with US social movements such as Black Lives Matter. Given that African American women form a core part of the WMA congregation, their institutional attention to anti-Black racism in the US again exemplifies their attention to lived experiences.

At the WMA, Muslim women are active mediators of the Islamic tradition. I draw on cultural anthropologist Talal Asad's concept of Islam as a discursive tradition to theorize Islamic authority as historically contingent and embodied within interpretive communities. The emergent model of authority that I conceptualize here relates to the past, but does not seek to comprehensively imitate it.³⁷ I consider how WMA members' interpretive activities fit into academic debates about the "crisis" of authority. Scholars characterize the crisis of Islamic authority as the fragmentation of authority previously monopolized by the ulama, the Muslim scholarly elite, and its expansion to a range of lay actors since the onset of modernity.³⁸ As historical anthropologist Zareena Grewal has shown, some US Muslims seek authority through formal credentials: studying Arabic and acquiring *ijazas* (Islamic certifications) on particular subjects, or attending an Islamic educational institution in the Middle East, Africa, or South Asia. In the process, they construct transnational moral geographies that link their religious identities to a global Muslim community.³⁹ These US Muslims place Islamic authenticity in a "sacred East."

Attitudes that equate Islamic authenticity with the "foreign" East situate the US at the periphery of the Islamic tradition and undermine certain American Muslims as legitimate religious actors and potential

mediators of the tradition. Islamic studies scholar Aysha Hidayatullah shows that critics discredit a substantial body of feminist exegeses of the Qur'an, produced by Muslims in the secular US academy, as inauthentic based on their "Western" influences. She situates these feminist exegeses at the "edge" of the Islamic tradition, "a place of animated change and the avowal and disavowal of tradition."⁴⁰ The WMA arises from precisely this place of animated change, growing from elements of the genre of Muslim feminist exegesis.

Yet it should be noted that the WMA does not brand itself as a feminist space, and indeed has carefully avoided this label. The feminist label, as we will see, is polarizing across many US Muslim communities. It is perceived by some as not authentically Islamic but a product of "Western influence," despite how Islamic feminists, in their scholarship and activism, have carefully documented the ways that they draw on their Islamic religious teachings and native cultures to frame their projects.⁴¹ Part of the WMA's avoidance of identifying as feminist then, has to do with appealing to mainstream US Muslim communities, or at least attempting not to alienate them. Even despite the WMA's institutional evasion, many congregants and khateebahs happily identify themselves as feminist. At the same time, there is also a broader reluctance among self-identifying US Muslim feminists themselves to identify with other US feminists, especially those who are white, because of anxieties that their own projects might be co-opted by both conservative and liberal imperialist narratives that denigrate Islam. For this reason, Black feminist and womanist scholarship that incorporates intersectionality as a way to work toward women's liberation while also combatting white supremacy provides a useful frame to think about the "feminist" moves of WMA actors, while still acknowledging the broader ambivalence many of them may have toward a feminist label.

Recognizing how the WMA emerges from the genre of US Muslim feminist exegesis and using Black feminist and womanist frameworks to situate their interpretive activities provides an opportunity to analyze the US as at the center rather than the periphery of debates over Islamic authority. Emphasizing the US as an integral site for Islamic studies debates over authority allows us to take seriously American Muslims' engagements with their religious tradition. It also allows us to recognize American Muslims, particularly women, as legitimate religious actors in the fabric of US society. Therefore, this book contributes to a deeper un-

derstanding of authority within both the global Islamic and the American religious landscapes.

Moreover, since the 2016 presidential election, white nationalism, misogyny, and Islamophobia have returned to the public sphere in full force. Alongside these trends, the stereotype of the subjugated Muslim woman has reemerged in American public discourse. Earlier scholarship on Islam and women focused on dismantling this trope through nuanced accounts of Muslim women exercising agency.⁴² Recent studies have gone even further to show the complexities of gender debates in US Muslim communities.⁴³ There is also a growing body of literature on transnational networks of authority and Muslim women's roles within them, as well as work on Islam in America that analyzes race and identity.⁴⁴ However, there is still insufficient scholarship exploring new developments in Muslim women's religious authority against a backdrop of patriarchal and racialized trends in the US context. Despite the public attention garnered by Muslim women increasingly taking up public roles in Islamic scholarship, leadership, and institution building in the US and Europe, academic scholarship on the subject remains scarce. As a result, scholarship in both US religions and Islamic studies overlooks American Muslim women's dynamism as religious actors who both shape and are shaped by the US context.

The WMA draws attention to new ways that American Muslim women are constructing religious authority by renegotiating normative assumptions around women's roles in their communities. American Muslim women who take issue with the marginal status of women in their religious communities are in a particularly tenuous position as they must negotiate change within their communities against the precipitous rise of Islamophobia in the US. Here scholar of critical race theory and law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw and religious studies scholar Sa'diyya Shaikh provide models to engage with internal critiques of sexism within Muslim communities, while keeping in mind the global imperial context in which ideas of Islam, women, and identity circulate.⁴⁵ Crenshaw, who coined the theory of intersectionality, notes that single-issue frameworks do not account for the multidimensional experiences of women, particularly in communities of color.⁴⁶ In other words, the different women featured in this book do not face discrimination based only on their gender, their race or ethnicity, or their religious identities;

rather, combinations of these factors and more shape their daily experiences and inform how they are treated and perceived by others. Advocating for an intersectional approach in the study of gender and Islam, Shaikh advances the utility of the multiple critique method, which simultaneously accounts for a multiplicity of inequalities and their interactions with one another—e.g., race, class, colonial status, sexuality.

Employing Shaikh's multiple critique method allows us to understand the contours of American Muslim women's marginalizing experiences. Applying such an intersectional approach enables us to account for how a Black Muslim woman's experiences would differ from a South Asian or white Muslim woman's experiences due to rampant anti-Black racism within US mosque communities, despite their shared identity as Muslim women. Likewise, while anti-Muslim racism and discrimination may create a shared experience in US Muslim communities across genders, women and LGBTQI Muslims are subjected to distinct forms of gendered Islamophobic violence that differentiate their experiences from those of cis-gendered men.

Taking seriously American Muslim women's recent engagements in cultivating religious authority provides an important scholarly opportunity to advance the study of Islam and gender beyond simply advocating for national belonging or dispelling negative stereotypes. In this book, I treat members of the WMA as meaningful actors within the fabric of American religious life rather than as exemplars meant to validate the broader Muslim presence in liberal societies. In so doing, I show how women at the WMA legitimize specific ways of being American Muslims. Furthermore, since the WMA is a multiracial community, I also examine the internal dynamics of historically tense relationships between Black and immigrant Muslims (including those of first and subsequent generations) in the US. As religious minorities in the US, Muslims are racialized as political others, and congregations develop in relation to hegemonic whiteness, which in turn has a profound effect on the relationships among Muslims of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In debates over religious pluralism, then, this book attends to the uneven balance of power that affords some religious groups positions of power in interfaith dialogue while marginalizing others.

To be clear, this book does not suggest that the WMA creates a *new sui generis* form of religious authority. As we saw earlier, members of

the WMA cultivate authority in ways that resemble earlier precedents from non-Muslim and Muslim contexts both in the US and globally. The WMA also shares a common orientation with contemporary US Muslim third spaces, which typically function as replacements for, or complements to, established mosques that do not meet the needs of all of their community members. Third spaces differ from first and second spaces, like home and school respectively, or in this case, home and the mosque, by adopting hybrid spatiality between the practical everyday and more formalized knowledge.⁴⁷ As Justine Howe shows, Muslim third spaces can transform modes of pious practices in US Islam by questioning existing modes of authority. She categorizes Muslim third spaces as sites structured by alternate modes of authority, textual engagements, and ritual expression.⁴⁸ By these criteria, the WMA would be considered a third space; however, in its own narrative, it identifies as a mosque. By branding itself as a mosque rather than as a third space, the WMA attempts to redefine what a mosque community should look like.

For example, while the majority of US mosques boast ethnically diverse congregations as we have seen above, many of them along with other US Muslim institutions reproduce, in anthropologist Su'ad Abdul Khabeer's terms, the "ethnoreligious hegemony" of immigrant Islam. Ethnoreligious hegemony refers to how, in particular, Arab and South Asian Muslims in the US monopolize defining the parameters of authoritative and authentic Islamic identity and practice over Black Muslims.⁴⁹ Many Arab and South Asian Muslims claim this monopoly based on their proximity to the Islamic East through their cultural heritage and infantilize Black Muslims in the process, often assuming religious authority over them even when they have less technical expertise in, say, Qur'anic recitation or knowledge of the Islamic legal tradition.⁵⁰ The WMA attempts to build a multiracial mosque that could offset the hegemony of immigrant Islam, beyond simply having a diverse congregation that continues to perpetuate anti-Blackness. It is certainly not the first space to challenge this ethnoreligious hegemony, as American Muslims operating outside of the structure of conventional mosques have routinely done so. For example, Khabeer's ethnography of young Muslims in Chicago shows how working and volunteering at a Muslim nonprofit dedicated to the arts and community activism helps build solidarity between non-Black and Black Muslims, and combats Arab and South

Asian hegemony by recognizing Black Muslim practices and customs as authoritative.⁵¹

In fact, the individual features of the WMA—a place where women lead prayer, use English translations to interpret scriptures, draw on experiences as a key exegetical method, build multiracial Muslim solidarity rooted in social justice concerns, and cultivate interfaith ties—are not new or unique on their own. Yet the combination of these features represents a form of authority that is indeed distinctive. The particular constellation of features of authority at the WMA continually shifts and adapts to new challenges and community pressures. The WMA therefore provides us with the potential to think about new directions in Islamic authority, in which English translations and women's experiences are valued in Qur'anic exegesis over Arabic language expertise and formal credentials; and where social justice activism is prioritized as a moral imperative, and interfaith relationships are cultivated as a result of, but also to combat, a broader climate of Islamophobia. In other words, women at the WMA make conceivable a kind of lay American Islamic authority that is an alternative to hegemonic models of authority rooted in maleness, Arabic language expertise, and formal credentials.

However, in its promotion of lay authority, the WMA is not anti-clerical. For instance, the WMA's model of lay authority does not discredit Arabic language expertise or formal credentials—or even maleness for that matter—as individually problematic or as an ill-suited basis for authority. Rather, the WMA illuminates how the combination of such criteria for Islamic authority precludes gender inclusive interpretations of scripture, and by extension inclusive religious communities. In so doing, the American Muslim women at the WMA enable us to think about alternative modes of authority that decenter Arabic language expertise and formal Islamic credentialization, and instead foreground gender-inclusive community norms.

Encountering the WMA

I first learned about the WMA through the media buzz and the intra-Muslim controversy that surrounded its early moments in 2015 while I was living on the other end of the country in Boston, Massachusetts. At that time my understanding of the WMA was framed by the social media

debates surrounding the legal validity of woman-led Jummah and non-Muslim media narratives about Muslim women “fighting back” against patriarchy by carving out their own religious spaces. Both the American Muslim and non-Muslim narratives about the WMA assumed the radical nature of the space, and so I had imagined that WMA congregants were likely united by their negative experiences in mosques and looking to revolutionize the status quo. This was not the case, and I would learn that, for many of its members, the WMA was but one of multiple mosques in LA where they were active participants. I had also assumed that interfaith allies only occasionally participated in solidarity, before observing that, in fact, they regularly attended the WMA every month. There was also a constant stream of occasional participants. These were floating members from the greater Southern California area who attended when their schedules permitted, as well as out-of-town-visitors who, while passing through LA, sought out the WMA as something of a pilgrimage site.

While the WMA is a living religious community of dynamic actors who shape new religious practices and debate established norms, it is also engaged in an ongoing discursive project to produce and publish women’s khutbahs. These khutbahs are meant to be consumed by a community beyond the WMA congregation in LA, signaled by their publication online and, since June 2018, through livestreaming on Facebook. By analyzing a selection of WMA khutbahs from the years 2015–21, I show how khateebahs interpret scriptures through their experiences, producing malleable, embodied, and local readings of texts. As an ethnographic field of study, the WMA contributes to our understanding of debates over gender and authority within and beyond the American Muslim landscape. Over the course of four months in 2017, I engaged in participant observation at monthly WMA Jummahs and its annual co-ed iftar (fast-breaking meal in Ramadan) and Qiyam (supererogatory night prayers in Ramadan) event. I also attended other Muslim community events in LA hosted by various organizations that WMA members often belonged to as well. During my time attending WMA Jummahs, I met visitors from Oregon, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and even the United Kingdom. So while the heart of this book is based on my textual analysis of WMA khutbahs, which are all published online, the ethnographic material provides a more complete picture of this interpretive community at large.

I conducted twenty-three ethnographic supplemental interviews with members of the WMA between May and September 2017 in LA. These interviews, unlike those in other ethnographies, focus solely on my interlocutors' relationships to the WMA and their reflections on its khutbahs, rather than on their personal lives as well. The ethnographic portions of the book therefore provide only brief glimpses into who these women are as individual people and offers instead their specific insights into the experiment in American Islamic authority that is the WMA. In other words, this is a book about an emergent model of lay Islamic authority cultivated in community that incorporates conversations with a sample of American Muslim women in Southern California who are its key authors. This book does not attempt to present a full portrait of these individual Muslim women, laying bare their personal triumphs or struggles, which might help to render them more sympathetic, or even simply more legible, to US readers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, who all operate within a climate of gendered Islamophobia. Instead, I ask that readers take for granted that Muslim women are complicated and diverse religious actors with storied histories, and understand the ethnographic elements of this book as a way to analyze the WMA's religious and cultural productions more fully.

Of my twenty-three interlocutors at the WMA, eight had served as khateebahs prior to our interviews, three were board members at the time of the interviews, and twelve were regular congregants who had not been formally involved in leadership. They occupied a diverse age range and came from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Three were in their mid- to late twenties, nine were in the thirties, five were in their forties, and six were in their fifties or sixties. All of them identified as American. Eight were of South Asian descent, including from Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Afghan backgrounds. Six were African Americans, five were white, two were Latina, two were East Asian, and one was Arab. All names have been changed to maintain anonymity and any identifiable information has been omitted, except for one who wished to be identified by her real name to defy the erasure of Black women's voices. I also spoke with founder M. Hasna Maznavi and a few WMA khateebahs explicitly about their khutbahs. In these instances, I use their real names since I refer to information that is already public either through the online publication of khutbahs or media interviews.

I used different approaches to recruit conversation partners for this study. A number of WMA khateebahs are public figures in their own right, and I sought out introductions to those whom I encountered at different community events or those whose khutbahs I was particularly drawn to from listening to them online. After providing background information about my research project, I would ask them if they had the time and inclination to sit down with me for a conversational interview about their experiences at the WMA. By contrast, with WMA congregants, I did not recruit specific individuals but let connections form organically. Over the course of various Ramadan social events, I had gradually started to recognize and be recognized by some faces from my WMA Jummah attendance. I would mostly seek interviews with those who had struck up conversations with me as a fellow congregant and expressed interest in my research after I had explained what brought me to the WMA. These recruits made excellent conversation partners who were happy to share their views on the topics I had prepared, and also on aspects of the WMA and other Muslim communities that I had not previously considered. These introductory conversations usually occurred when the discussion circles held after Jummah wrapped up, or afterward when congregants socialized outside of the venue by a halal food truck, whose proceeds went toward the WMA. I made one formal attempt to solicit participants to interview during the July 2017 Jummah, when I stacked a handful of flyers with my contact information on a table placed in front of the entryway to prayer area; I gained two interviewees through this method. I conducted most of my interviews at various coffee shops and cafes around LA and some at the Islamic Center of Southern California, one of the largest mosques in the area, conveniently located near downtown, where a number of WMA members were also congregants, and which also had parking spots readily available outside of prayer times, a major consideration when determining a meeting place.

In making such contacts, I felt acutely aware that my Muslimness and Bangladeshi American background facilitated the process of gaining conversation partners. While all self-identifying women, regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof, are welcome at the WMA, my being Muslim and of South Asian heritage likely made congregants more amenable to sharing their time with me. Nearly two decades of constant surveillance and state-orchestrated harassment of American

Muslims since 9/11, coupled with the anti-Muslim hostility sanctioned by the Trump administration, have made many American Muslim communities more guarded with outsiders. Spies and informants, planted by federal and state agencies to collect personal information on community members, have become commonplace in Muslim communities across the nation. As a result, many American Muslims are suspicious of outsiders to their worship communities who solicit information from them. There is also a more generalized suspicion of journalists and academics, myself included, who may have particular agendas in soliciting interviews. While my own background as an American Muslim woman granted me access to participate in the WMA Jummahs, it also requires a theorization of insider-outsider status. In many ways, my experiences that summer as a WMA participant mirrored those of the other women in my age group. I would often hear from interviewees in their twenties and thirties that they felt that the WMA community was a very nurturing space, particularly because of the elder African American women who, as regular congregants, continually made them feel supported. I felt similarly welcomed when I attended my first WMA Jummah in May 2017. I remember nervously making my way into the Pico Union Project, the interfaith facility near downtown LA that hosted the WMA for its first two and a half years, when I was immediately approached by Malika, a middle-aged African American woman, dressed in a black abaya and a brightly colored hijab, who was walking in at the same time. Malika had recognized that I was a newcomer to the WMA, and she warmly introduced herself and welcomed me with a hug.

Malika, I would soon learn, was a WMA regular who would often deliver the adhan for the congregation, and later that summer she shared her experiences with me for this book. I briefly mentioned my research to her during our chat, and Malika then took it upon herself to walk me around the prayer hall and introduce me to other women to whom she thought I should speak. As I situated myself in LA and its Muslim communities, I gradually gained conversation partners over the course of the next few months. Throughout that time, especially with respect to the six older Black women featured in this book, I would have the distinct feeling of being taken in by them, the way someone might guide a mentee or a younger sister. Through this particular dynamic, I would continue to reflect on my own experiences as a floating member of the WMA.

This book examines how gender is continually constructed and performed.⁵² I employ the concept of gender as a meaningful category of analysis to investigate the WMA's own assumptions about gender and sexuality.⁵³ Given the racial and ethnic diversity of the WMA preachers and congregants, as well as its emphasis on social justice, I take seriously in my analysis the categories of both gender and race, which never operate separately. Moreover, I see Islamophobia, which is particularly gendered and racialized in the US, as an important context against which members of the WMA justify their decisions. I argue that the WMA produces a distinct model of Islamic authority that is informed by the US context but also speaks to global Islamic trends. The first chapter details the formation of the WMA, focusing on the community debates that it generated on ritual authority. It analyzes critics' fixation with contesting the Islamic legality of woman-led prayer. I argue here that WMA members do not share the same level of concern as their critics with legal debates over women's ritual authority, and I unpack their various motivations, values, and perspectives that draw them to the WMA.

Drawing on the history of women's Qur'anic interpretations in the US, chapter 2 argues that the WMA reimagines the criteria necessary for interpretive authority. By inviting "everyday" women rather than religious scholars to serve as khateebahs, the WMA provides a platform for them to contribute to Qur'anic exegesis. Khateebahs promote individual relationships to scripture and the use of English-language translations of the Qur'an, contesting American Muslim norms that uphold Arabic as the sole language of God. Chapter 3 introduces the concept of embodied authority based on women's experiences, drawing on Sa'diyya Shaikh's *tafsir* (exegesis) of praxis, Black feminist epistemology, and Muslim womanist thought. Here, I demonstrate how the WMA community confers authority on its khateebahs by viewing them as in a privileged position to comment on particular subjects in sacred texts on the basis of their experiences as women. These subjects include, but are not limited to, motherhood, grief, and gender violence. Women at the WMA view its khateebahs as particularly authoritative because of their gendered experiences, not in spite of them. In so doing, the WMA promotes a feminine model of authority.

Chapter 4 investigates the WMA's commitment to social justice activism and building multiracial solidarity. Islamophobia and the racializa-

tion of Muslims motivate WMA khateebahs to put Islamic scriptures in conversation with social justice causes. Khateebahs thereby cultivate activist authority by using sacred texts to connect with social movements such as Black Lives Matter. In the eyes of its members, the WMA's engagement with contemporary American social issues like structural racism, environmental degradation, and gender discrimination bolster its religious authority. Nevertheless, despite the WMA's institutional engagements with confronting anti-Blackness, congregants come away with varied experiences of interracial solidarity.

The final chapter examines points of overlap and divergence among American Muslim, Jewish, and Christian women in their negotiations of religious authority. As a Muslim site of interfaith engagement, the WMA participates in an emergent trend of forging intersectional interfaith alliances and cultivating intrafaith inclusivity as a means to combat religious bigotry in post-2016 America.⁵⁴ While the WMA's intrafaith inclusivity offers a powerful corrective to discriminatory and often racist trends within Muslim communities, its interfaith relationships can have more complicated implications. Interfaith engagements, despite their merits, are for US Muslims often a part of a broader bid for national belonging, and the larger climate of Islamophobia can compel them to seek such alliances. In this way, the WMA's embrace of interfaith engagement is continuous with the post-9/11 trends in US communities to promote interreligious dialogue among the Abrahamic traditions. The WMA cultivates interfaith solidarity as a central part of its aims as a community, but there are challenges and limitations to these relationships.

Overall, the WMA offers ways for Muslim women, particularly those without formal Islamic training, to cultivate religious authority. It allows them to become active mediators of Islam as a discursive tradition, in which norms of authority are historically contingent and embodied within interpretive communities, on the basis of their own gendered experiences. As a product of the margins of the Islamic tradition, the WMA demonstrates the dynamism of Islam and the women who interpret it, who approach the Qur'an as a tool to resist social hierarchies, build community, and empower themselves. And as a result, the American Muslim women at the WMA make conceivable a model of lay Islamic authority that challenges patriarchal and other marginalizing trends in Muslim communities.