

“I’m a Black female who happens to be Muslim”: Multiple Marginalities of an Immigrant Black Muslim Woman on a Predominantly White Campus

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# ***“I’m a Black female who happens to be Muslim”: Multiple Marginalities of an Immigrant Black Muslim Woman on a Predominantly White Campus***

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*Often scholarship concerning religion and spirituality overwhelmingly privileges White, male, Christian students’ perspectives and fail to interrogate the interplay of cultural, gender, and racial dynamics within these investigations. Even further, very few studies examine the experiences of those who occupy multiple marginalized social categories. Therefore, this study seeks to advance our collective knowledge by closely engaging the narrative of an individual case of a Black, Muslim, immigrant, female college student born in Saudi Arabia. Using intersectionality, particularly Collins’ matrix of domination, as the basis of the theoretical framework, we present findings that relate to how her gendered, religious, immigrant, racial, and ethnic identities influenced interactions across multiple communities and the strategies she used to navigate diverse educational spaces.*

**Keywords:** religion, gender, race, college students

## **INTRODUCTION**

Although it has been over a decade since a group of individuals connected to the Islamist organization al-Qaeda hijacked four airliners to carry out suicide attacks in cities across the United States, the legacy of September 11, 2001 continues to live with us. In addition to drastically shifting notions of safety and security, these attacks transformed domestic and foreign geopolitical and sociopolitical relationships. One lasting effect was the construction of the dangerous, militant, and unpredictable “Muslim Other” whom, if wise, we should fear (Sirin & Fine, 2007). In the aftermath of the attacks, the United States sought to contain this fear through unprecedented doctrines of war and an expanded carceral state, which were “used to justify the detention of ‘any bodies’ suspected of being terrorists” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 75). This reality was made pointedly clear when many people shared stories of negotiating a racialized and religious state of terror through Twitter using the hashtag #afterseptember11 (Chiel, 2015).

Considering the large impact of these events on contemporary sociopolitical realities and the developmental processes of young people (Sirin & Fine, 2007), it is somewhat surprising very few studies have examined the lived realities of Muslim undergraduate students (Ali, 2014; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006), which reflects the collective understudied experiences of religiously minoritized students (Smalls, 2011). Even further, very few studies examine the experiences of Black, Muslim women, who occupy multiple marginalized social categories (Ali, 2014; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). There are at least two reasons for this knowledge gap. First, most college student identity research tends to segment marginalized students’ identities, often conceptualizing the complexity of students’ identities as discrete, nominal categories (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Second, in research and political discourse, immigrant Muslims are often assumed to be Brown, while Black Muslims are assumed to be U.S. born (Jackson, 2005). This is a function of both the increased presence of Muslims from the Middle East and Asia post-1965 after the repeal of the National Origins Act<sup>1</sup> and Asiatic Barred Zone<sup>2</sup> as well as the continued impact of the emergence of the Nation of Islam among Black Americans in the 20th century (Jackson, 2005). As a result, less attention has been paid to the experiences of individuals who do not fit neatly into predetermined categories.

Crenshaw's (1991) concept of political intersectionality is instructive. Her analysis of the ways Black women's lived experiences were not adequately addressed in Black liberationist and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s is akin to the ways Black Muslim immigrant-born women are rendered invisible. Concerning the present study, such an approach allows one to examine the lived experiences of immigrant-origin Black Muslim women who are often missing from larger discussions about being Muslim (i.e., Brown immigrant) and Black Muslim (i.e., U.S. born). Using Black Feminist Theory of intersectionality and Collin's (1991) matrix of domination, as the basis of the theoretical framework, we present a nuanced analysis of how gender, religion, race, and nationality influenced Yasmin's (pseudonym) interactions across multiple communities and her strategies for navigating diverse spaces. Therefore, this study of a Black, Muslim, immigrant-origin, female student shifts from an additive notion of multiple identities of minoritized students and seeks to advance the collective knowledge by closely engaging the narrative of a Black, Muslim, immigrant, female college student born in Saudi Arabia.

### ***Religiosity and Spirituality in Higher Education: The Privileged and the Minoritized***

Traditionally, higher education research focused on the religious and spiritual lives of college undergraduates has overwhelmingly centered the experiences and perspectives of the racially, gender, and religiously privileged (i.e., White, male, Christian students; Watt, Fairchild, & Goodman, 2009). As a result, the literature remains largely devoid of investigating the experiences of religiously and racially minoritized students (Smalls, 2011). Religiously marginalized students are those affiliated with non-Christian religions and are considered double religious minorities as these students are minoritized both on-campus and within mainstream U.S. society (Bowman & Small, 2012). These students are also often uniquely situated in multiple marginalized social categories (Ali, 2014; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006), which higher education research has yet to interrogate with regard to the interplay of racial and cultural dynamics in college students' lives (Stewart & Lozano, 2009).

However, research on religiously minoritized students has, in fact, investigated their perceptions of and experiences within campus climates (Bowman & Small, 2012; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Seggie & Sanford, 2010) as well as student engagement (Ahmadi & Cole, 2015). With regard to Muslim women students in particular, the literature has linked perceptions and experiences closely to the religious representation and the performative of veiling—a variation of scarf coverings for the head (i.e., hijab)—but, in addition, may also include the covering of the neck and shoulders (i.e., khimar), face (i.e., niqāb), or entire body (i.e., chador or burqa). Such visibility, even before 9/11, incited discriminatory experiences for Muslim women students, which led some Muslim women to reevaluate and subsequently discontinue veiling practices (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Not surprisingly, such experiences of exclusion and marginalization for Muslim students generally, both American and international, and Muslim women students in particular have also been substantiated in studies after 9/11 (e.g., Ali, 2014; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Shammass, 2009).

Several studies have also sought to examine religiously minoritized students' engagement and experiences with campus support. Ahmadi and Cole (2015) found student engagement challenges experienced by religiously minoritized students were exacerbated by a lack of support and understanding from college administrators not sharing nor understanding minoritized religious beliefs. Conversely, support for and understanding of religiously minoritized students led to positive gains in religious growth. As noted by Mayhew and Bryant (2013), college administrators and faculty can minimize coercion on campus by developing non-coercive policies for recognized student religious, spiritual, and secular organizations on campus and modeling the principles of constructive exchange within the classroom and co-curricular programming. Bowman and Small (2012) also stressed the importance of intentionally tending to the needs of religiously minoritized students to support their spiritual and religious growth and development in college (see also, Bowman & Small, 2010). Despite a variety of challenges, Muslim students productively contribute to diversity on college campuses, obviously through their presence, but also in their interaction

across religious (and racial/ethnic) difference with the religious and campus majorities (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). As a result, greater institutional embrace of Muslim students could increase the development of more diversity-enriched campus environments.

### ***Religious Performativity and Gender Representations***

Another dimension of scholarship on Muslim women has focused on the performative and representative aspects of religious identity. More specifically, studies investigating perspectives from and experiences of Muslim women with regard to the practice of veiling have emerged over the last decade. Cole and Ahmadi's (2003) pre-9/11 qualitative study revealed Muslim women ascribed religious meaning to their initial veiling practices, noting veiling was a modesty practice of "good Muslims." Additionally, Nasir and Al-Amin (2006), both of whom are Muslim women, express the collective sense of pressure to actively negotiate others' perceptions of Muslims while also finding ways to meaningfully connect to their institutions. Specifically, they posit the negotiation of religious minoritized identities are often raced and gendered. Altogether, this is what we describe as the uniqueness "of being Muslim in academic spaces" (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006, p. 23).

Ali's (2014) study explored racialized representations of the Muslim Other and the ways in which such representations have and rooted themselves in Muslim youth navigating the politics of their identities amidst the post-9/11 War on Terror (Ahmed, 2004). Specifically, Ali offers three characterizations of the Muslim Other: (a) pre-modern Muslim (i.e., illogical and unable to participate in liberal democratic society), (b) Muslim as a physical threat to Western life (i.e., embodied, live domestic targets), and (c) gendered Muslim stereotypes (e.g., hypermasculine, violent men and effeminate, docile non-agentic women) in public discourse. Conversely, Bilge (2010) has interrogated pervasive conceptions of veiled women as non-agentic victims of patriarchal subordination as well as veiling merely as a performative practice of resistance to Western hegemony. Using an intersectional framing, Bilge asserts the veil as a signifier of Muslim women's religious agency with which they enact their intentional and willful submission to Allah.

Notwithstanding the important contributions of this body of work, much about the embodied realities of religiously minoritized college students remains unknown. Furthermore, scholarship focusing on Muslim college women's gendered experiences primarily attend to their decisions concerning veiling and thereby, does not account for other ways students' experiences are gendered. Moreover, the present narrative analysis advances an intersectional examination of Muslim women's multiple marginalities, consistent with some of the scholarship reviewed in this section (Ali, 2014; Bilge, 2010; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006).

### ***Intersectionality and the Matrix of Domination***

This study uses intersectionality and matrix of domination to understand the multiple marginalities a racially, gender, and religiously minoritized undergraduate immigrant student experiences. Intersectionality allows for the examination of interconnected ideologies, policies and histories as the person is influenced by systems of inequity (Crenshaw, 1991). Black feminism is particularly useful in the current analysis for several reasons. First, Black Feminist Theory offers an intersectional analysis that accounts for the ways macro-level processes structure micro-level experiences. Second, Black Feminist Theory emphasizes the rich heterogeneity among Black women, which include religion and nationality. Lastly, Black Feminist Theory honors Black women's agency in the face of multiple oppressive systems and ideologies.

In order to understand Yasmin's micro-level interactions and daily experiences, one must recognize how these are related to her interconnected social identities. Yasmin's identities, while fluid, emerge from structural categories in which she has been placed within a macro-systematic social context and from a sense of in-group membership and attachment to that social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The interplay of these multiple, interlocked minoritized groups can influence the stigmatization, questioning, tokenizing, policing, and othering the person will experience (Goff & Kahn, 2013).

Shifting from dichotomized thinking where the dominant side is “privileged while the other [minoritized side] is denigrated”, allows us to understand how interlocked systems of oppression operate within a hegemonic, structural, matrix of domination (Collins, 1991, p. 225). Situating the minoritized person in the center of analysis, and focusing not only on comparative descriptions of multiple systems of marginality, Collins (1991) rejected the “additive approaches to oppression” and (re)conceptualizes power based on, for example, the empowerment and self-determination of the minoritized person. Therefore, we focus on Yasmin’s agential capacities and her interactions to learn more about processes of systematic domination through Collins’ (1991) analysis of the three levels of domination in which persons’ experience and resist oppression: (a) lived experiences, values, motivations, consciousness; (b) cultural context of social identities, and (c) systematic social institutions. Centralizing the minoritized person in the analysis can be useful in resisting traditional, dominant-group knowledge that regularly replaces the subjugated knowledge of oppressed persons and “perpetuates [their] objectification and dehumanization” (Collins, 1991, p. 230). This framework provides a more holistic perspective on Yasmin’s identity development beyond the confines of additive models, allowing one to examine the ways in which her lived experiences exist within a matrix of domination whereby her social identities mutually shape and are shaped by multiple marginalities. Moreover, the analysis presents how these sociocultural categories collectively relate to her interactions across multiple communities and her strategies for navigating such marginalities.

## **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

### ***Site, Data Collection, & Participant***

The present study was a part of a larger study conducted at one highly selective, predominantly White, private research university in the Northeast United States. In order to recruit potential participants for the larger study, the lead author visited five student organizations, sent an email by way of one student organization’s listserv, and visited one undergraduate course where approximately 25 Black students were enrolled. The only criteria for participation was that students self-identified as Black. Meaning, there were no restrictions based on gender or religious or spiritual affiliation. Ultimately, 21 undergraduates (16 women, 5 men) volunteered for the study and all were accepted as each met the established criteria. Yasmin participated in one individual, semi-structured interview (Patton, 2002) as well as the member checking described.

The decision to focus solely on Yasmin’s narrative was motivated by the uniqueness of her narrative in relation to the larger study’s sample. Although efforts were made to recruit students from a wide array of backgrounds, an overwhelming majority ( $n = 17$ ) were raised in Christian households. The remaining students were raised in either completely secular ( $n = 2$ ) or secular with Christian overtones ( $n = 1$ ) households. As such, while she shared similarities with other Black women’s lived experiences, Yasmin’s narrative was a “unique case” (Yin, 2003) largely in part to her religious affiliation and immigrant status. At the time of the initial interview, Yasmin was a 21-year-old senior majoring in International Relations, who identified as spiritual-and-religious. Yasmin’s narrative speaks to how religion, gender, and nationality informed her negotiations of Blackness, Black (secular and religious) communities, and Muslim communities on campus in ways that was distinct from her non-Muslim Black peers and her non-Black Muslim friends. Despite being unable to make larger generalizable claims due to the singular focus, we are able to draw what Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) referred to as *sociological generalization*, which “illuminates a particular. . . social-structural location in a society or institution or social process” and “how agency can operate at [that] locus” (p. 129).

### ***Research Design***

Narrative analysis was employed in the larger qualitative study (Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 2008) to better understand Black students’ spiritual identities, as well as the sociopolitical work these stories accomplished in explaining who they were and how they arrived to be who they were

(Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). Narrative analysis highlighted the pedagogies of socializing agents and spaces critical to students' identities. Informed by the methodology, we focused on turning points and defining moments in the students' stories. In placing students' current spiritual and religious identity statuses within their autobiographical histories, insights into how they came to understand themselves and value certain ways of being are gained.

### ***Data Analysis***

Using Riessman (2008) and Mishler (1986) typology of how narrative studies are analyzed, each interview was systematically analyzed thematically and interpersonally. Related to the present study, thematic analysis was accomplished by reading across multiple transcripts and tacking between theory and data (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007) to answer the larger study's research questions:

- What factors influence students' spiritual identities prior to and during college and
- How are students' spiritual identities raced and gendered and interact with their sexual identities?

This analysis occurred in two distinct phases. First, the lead author read through each transcript, jotting down initial sense-making of the data. After compiling all of the notes, phrases were transferred to an Excel sheet to reflect the notes that had been taken. In the second phase, the lead author read through each transcript again using phrases from the Excel sheet to code data for emerging themes. Furthermore, interpersonal analysis allowed the lead author to account for his locations in data collection and analysis as well as examine how context—immediate/local and macro/global—informed students' narrative statements. This occurred in the third phase of analysis which involved listening to each audio interview, while simultaneously reading the printed transcripts, to get a sense of the affective qualities of students' narratives.

Yasmin was the only Muslim student in the larger study, so gender, religion, and race emerged in her narrative in ways that were distinct from other participants. As such, her narrative was selected for further examination to address the following research questions:

- How did religion, race, and gender influence Yasmin's lived experiences, and
- How did Yasmin negotiate responses to her religious, racial and gendered identities?

### ***Trustworthiness and Quality Insurance***

Two strategies were used to increase the trustworthiness and quality of the present study: (a) member checking and (b) peer debriefing teams (Patton, 2002). Concerning member checking, Yasmin was sent a copy of her professionally transcribed and coded interview with the code book, which included a key so that students could understand what each code represented. She was then invited to edit any narrative statements, provide a pseudonym, as well as challenge the lead authors' sense-making (i.e., codes) of her story. Yasmin also reviewed the findings and analysis section of the present study. In addition, the lead author assembled two peer-debriefing teams of experts in student development, spirituality, or qualitative research methods. Each team was sent a list of the research questions along with three different transcripts ( $n = 6$ ), of which Yasmin's narrative was one. The team members read through their respective transcripts, using the research questions to guide their reading, made notes of what they believed students' narratives were saying, and sent their remarks to the lead researcher. The lead researcher further facilitated feedback by organizing Google Hangout (a video conferencing platform) sessions with each team.

### ***Limitations***

Despite the efforts described above to maximize and ensure trustworthiness, there were several methodological limitations to the study. First, while there are certainly strengths of single-case analyses, more participants would have increased the robustness of the study. Second, there is

potential for selection bias; there are very likely other Muslim students for whom their spiritual-and-religious identities are not as salient in comparison to the participant's narrative reflected in the present study. Third, interviewing Yasmin only once may have limited the ability to probe deeper into her narrative. Additional interviews would have likely provided deeper insights into the phenomenon under study. Lastly, as none of the authors identify as Black Muslim women, there are potentially blind spots in the analysis that were at least adjudicated in the member checking process.

## FINDINGS

When asked where she would like to begin the story of her spiritual-and-religious journey, Yasmin shared that her "journey started from Day 1" when she was born on a military base in Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s. Her earliest memories of attending public school confirm this, as she does not recall learning "anything outside of memorizing the Qur'an." After emigrating from Saudi Arabia to the United States at 10 years of age, Yasmin's world underwent a drastic shift. Leaving an environment where religion was explicit and omnipresent and entering a cultural landscape where her religious identity was minoritized, placed her "[in the] middle of a desert storm." However, it was an early schooling experience that challenged Yasmin to rethink the ways religion and nationality could flatten out important distinctions among large groups of individuals with the ultimate consequence of dehumanizing them:

That first day of class, I will never forget. I walked in. I knew no English but hi, bye, [and] a few alphabet letters. And my teacher asked if there was anyone that wanted to help me. And half the class raised their hand. They were just really excited. They wanted to meet me. And I thought, "wow, these are the same people that I was supposed to hate."

Despite their demonstration of openness and enthusiastic welcome, Yasmin was often the target of intense questioning and scrutiny from her peers because of her religious identification. Immigrating to the United States two years after September 11, 2001 meant that her coming of age occurred during the rise and intensification of Islamophobia—a central tenet of and justification for the United States' constitutionally dubious policing tactics and military invasions of Iraq. In addition to the material effects of increased surveillance by an extended carceral state domestically and preemptive imperial presence abroad (e.g., use of drones in Yemen and Pakistan), the state marshaled its citizens as pseudo parapolice—encouraging them to report suspicious behavior or people in an attempt to thwart potential threats. Animated by the idea that America would not cower to terror (Ahmed, 2004), the nebulous and discursively hollow "suspicious person" was invested with racial, gender, and religious specificity. That is, Brown Muslim men of presumably Arab descent were the bodies to which the ideology of fear and terror was attached (Ahmed, 2004). Yasmin stated, "especially after 9/11 hit, and I came to the US, I realized that I kind of had to categorize my life."

This reality of consistent surveillance is arguably best captured by an exchange that took place in Yasmin's government class during tenth grade:

And somehow, my teacher wanted us to do a model law case or something along those lines in class. Long story short, I was a lawyer. And they had another girl be a lawyer. And I had to represent—I don't know how it came to be—but I was representing Guantanamo Bay prisoners. And she was representing the government . . . And as I was standing there, I realized that the whole class was against me because everybody was asking me all these questions, and nobody is asking this girl anything. And I thought "Wow." . . . And I will never forget that day actually because it was since that day really that I became really loud about how I felt and what I cared about and what I wasn't going to shut up about.

While developing her critical and political voice was one unintended outcome of Yasmin's experience with being Othered, this encounter also reinforced the fact that in a "largely Christian society, you're automatically the outsider when you're Muslim." The vigorous questioning that

Yasmin was subjected to, in contrast to her peer, shows that Yasmin's religious identity was linked to Guantanamo Bay detainees in that to be Brown, Muslim, and from the Middle East was to be at best sympathetic to terrorists. Consequently, she was being positioned as an enemy of the state, which made her interrogation both allowable and necessary.

As a young person who really only "cared about . . . trying to fit in," Yasmin described her lived realities of being "the Muslim girl in class" who was constantly exposed to the Othering from her peers as one of her greatest challenges along her spiritual journey:

I think the biggest challenge though was the fact that, especially post 9/11, there were just questions that I couldn't answer because I didn't know that much about [my] religion. And until this day, I can't say I can answer all of them. But when you're young, and someone is asking you "Does it make sense that someone is beating their wife? Does it make sense that it says to go blow yourself and kill people?"

The implicit messaging communicated through such line of questioning demonstrates at least two important realities. First, to embody a Muslim identity meant that one was often expected to speak up for, represent, and defend all Muslims despite one's own alignment or identification with those individuals. Second, Islam was being reduced and tethered to unjustifiable violence against the innocent and feminine oppression. These consistent, often subtle, accusations delivered a psychoemotional cost:

. . . it's almost as if you're in an abusive relationship with someone because you love them so much, and so you can't let go of it. But this person is causing you a lot of pain and hurt physically. But you can't let go of it.

Yasmin's narrative statement speaks directly to the always present potentiality that one may internalize the negative discourses circulating in one's broad ecological context. Similar to Ali's (2014) findings that constructing Muslims as pre-modern was articulated vis-à-vis a constellation of discourses that assumed their collective

inability to use rational logic, participate in liberal democratic society, or engage in dialogue to express disagreement [as opposed to social or political violence, p. 1251], at the young age of 13 Yasmin even began to think "maybe I wasn't being a rational thinker."

While the Othering Yasmin experienced was most certainly predicated on the reading and policing of her religious and ethnic identities, it was also very much gendered. A large part of constituting Muslims as the dangerous Other involved constructing the Middle East as a composite of nation states antithetical to the United States' liberal democratic project—an ideological export often employed as cover and conduit for imperialist and capitalist aims—especially in their regressive gender politics toward women. As Mahmood (2001) posited, women in non-Western societies were forced into "simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy" as "scholarship on the Middle East. . . portrayed Arab and Muslim women for decades as passive and submissive beings, shackled by structures of male authority" (p. 205). If one recalls the barrage of questions hurled at Yasmin—"Does it make sense that someone is beating their wife?"—one can see how Muslim women appeared as the violently subjugated (feminine) counterpart to the unpredictable-and-thus-dangerous (masculine) terrorist Other. Yasmin was cognizant of how this amalgamation of presumably evident identity markers always already existed within many Americans cultural imaginations: "I always thought that because people had this notion, this preconceived notion that Islam oppressed women that I had to combat that by being the loudest person in the room or by being the person in the Vagina Monologues. . ." This preconceived notion was in direct opposition to Yasmin's own theorizing and sense-making of her lived experiences:

Because to me, being a Muslim female was always very, very empowering. It almost made me feel like you're the queen, and you have to boss all these men. They have to go through all these things to be your rock or whatever. And so to me that was always empowering, and maybe that's because I come from like a very old, conservative whatever. But I mean, that's just how it functioned. And so I always had to redefine what that meant when I was surrounded by certain people. . .



Of further interest were Yasmin's strategic responses to the associations being projected onto her Muslim-female-non-Western body. This was poignantly reflected in what she shared about her presence during discussions about rape and sexual assault with co-members of the *Vagina Monologues* cast:

We would have a lot of meetings outside of rehearsal . . . just to talk about why we're doing this. And to be quite honest. . . I just didn't know anything about it. So I thought let me just learn. And I would be at meetings where people would try to define what rape is and what it's not. A lot of times, rape was defined as something . . . that got no consent. But if both people are drunk—there's just a lot of gray areas.

To be clear, the “gray areas” Yasmin points to should be understood as more reflective of her wrestling in a relatively new political-intellectual terrain instead of a tortured attempt at explaining away sexual assault. Even the insistence to note this speaks volumes to the haunting specter of Muslim women as complicit with and defenders of patriarchy. Although it may have been developmentally productive for Yasmin to raise these questions she thought, “I can't be the Muslim person that's pro-rape or something.” Yasmin's attempts to proactively deconstruct this stereotype involved performing explicitly legible political gestures that she hoped would register as sincere. The necessity of these distancing strategies demonstrate the constraints on the performative; particularly how macro material-ideological processes (e.g., War on Terror, oppressed Muslim women) are grafted onto bodies and imbued into the air, by way of Steele and Aronson's (1995) stereotype threat of micro interactions.

The limits associated with self-authored embodiment and performance was particularly pronounced in Yasmin's negotiations of her Blackness. Yasmin's racial and gender identities were very salient within her institutional context: “so if someone were to ask me what I was, I'd say I'm a Black female who also happens to be Muslim. And I think that's how I've carried myself at [University].” This purposeful carrying of oneself was a calculated negotiation in part a result of Yasmin's experiences in Muslim communities on campus where “[she] was often the only Black person in the room” and encountered “a lot of microaggressions . . .” In part, this was reflective of her family's experiences in Saudi Arabia. For instance, Yasmine recalled her father returning “from work physically beat up by people because they didn't see him worthy as a Black or as an African to be in a position of power in the office.” Moreover, as Yasmin and her family had immigrated to Washington, DC, she “was accustomed to being around other Black people and kind of adopted the Black culture of the US.” Her precollege racial socialization combined with “back fired” moments “pushed [Yasmin] into leadership positions in the Black community; having friends that [were] pretty much mostly Black.”

While Yasmin considered the Black social and educational communities safe spaces and an overall benefit, the challenges she encountered disrupt any attempt at romanticizing Black communities as always already safe and supportive. For instance, her desire to pursue a romantic relationship proved very difficult and in fact, she did not know any Black Muslim college men. As many of her Black peers were either Christian or raised Christian, navigating these communities offered unique obstacles: “. . . in the back of your head, you're always thinking ‘I can never get really close because . . . they're never going to convert. I'm never going to convert. It's done.’ Which . . . actually has been a really, really sad story.” Being one of few active and visible Black Muslims on campus meant Yasmin was often the only Muslim person in many settings. Beyond some of her Christian friends' proselytizing impulse, other peers considered a Black Muslim an impossible subjectivity:

. . . they were a little confused as to why I had kind of adopted this Black identity simply because of the fact that I was Muslim, which I thought was really weird because to me that was a sign that they just really didn't know anything about Black people in America because the picture of Malcolm X that you always have. Hello?

In pointing to the iconic Malcolm X—whose words, images, and body maintains a global vitality despite (or because of) his death—Yasmin exposes the erasure of his embodied religious identity as it is subsumed by his Blackness. To a certain extent, this represents the ways in which Black bodies are presumed to always be Christian, disregarding the historic and contemporary presence of Islam throughout the African diaspora. In *Islam and the Blackamerican*, Sherman Jackson (2005) offers a critical analysis of how the experiences of many Blackamerican Muslims “resists telling” (Crenshaw, 1991) as they are considered inauthentic by many Black Americans and Middle Eastern Muslims.

Furthermore, by suggesting that Yasmin had “adopted” her Blackness, some of her peers were challenging her place within the boundaries of authentic Blackness in part due to her immigrant status: “I think also one of the biggest problems that I ran into was that not only was I Muslim, I wasn’t really American.” That is, because she did not share the history of what has come to overdetermine the Black experience concerning the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Gilroy, 1993), her ability to comprehend, absorb, and represent the true Black experience was considered compromised. Internalizing some of these messages, Yasmin even began to question her place in the Black community. Recalling a moment after returning from winter break in Sudan, she shared:

And I came back, and I thought for the past whatever, 10 years of my life, I really thought—or not thought but I had really integrated myself into this Black community. But I try really hard, but maybe I’m just not that. And I need to stop pretending that I am that. That coupled with the fact that there were always people that were questioning my identity within the Black community. I don’t know why this conversation is always so . . . at the forefront. For some reason, you have to validate yourself as a Black person for the Black community. Your Black skin is not the only thing that’s going to get you in the door.

Authenticity tests Yasmin was expected to pass, she argued, were a reoccurring conversation within Black student communities. Further explaining whether she attributed these effects to conscious actors, Yasmin posited that had these ideas not been presented to her directly they would not have crossed her mind. Some of these comments were predicated on the belief that Yasmin was “nothing more than a rich, African who is trying to be part of this.” Despite the pain that resulted from these experiences, Yasmin unequivocally claimed, “at the end of the day, it’s the safest place that I found at [University]. And the only space that I don’t mind being vulnerable and maybe even in tears at times because I loved it so much.”

Much of Yasmin’s narrative statements explicitly augment the critical role space and place—ideological, material, and interpersonal—play in who we are and are allowed to be in the world. Notably, Yasmin argued that her identifying as a “Black female who also happens to be Muslim” was more of a reflection of her external environment than her own understanding of what constituted her sincere self. Although she understood herself to be multidimensional, Yasmin’s selective (re)presentations were necessary depending on her environment:

So when I go home, I’m Muslim because I’m praying. But when I’m at school, I’m just like the Black girl because I’m trying to mix with folks. That’s the one identity that I could really use to connect with. When I’m at work, I’m none of these. I’m just trying to do my thing.

The Yasmin that showed up (or was disclosed) was inextricably linked to where she was. In fact, when asked what the most salient aspects of her identity were, Yasmin pushed back the hierarchical notions of identity ranking implicit in the question itself:

I mean, I think I stand in this weird intersection between being a female—being a religious minority and being Black at University. And I think all these things are kind of inseparable from each other in my head. I mean, I think I grapple with whether when to highlight one identity versus the other in certain capacities. But I wouldn’t say one is more salient than the other.

Not all of the spaces Yasmin lived within presented such explicit constraints. Yasmin explained the impact of witnessing the embodied religious practices of a Black Muslim community within the city where she attended college had on her:

[The mosque has] a few afterschool initiatives. And I went there one time. And the classrooms were filled. And I thought, “Wow. Here’s my religion at work, and it’s so cool.” Especially as someone who is, like I said, kind of the oddball out for being Muslim and being Black, or being Black and being Muslim.

In addition to the afterschool initiatives, the local mosque Yasmin visited also once held a gun rally. Yasmin shared that it was these socially engaged and embodied religious practices that “empowered me to be that much more in tune with being a Black person in America, but also being a Muslim in this community.” Despite the affirmation and relative liberation she experienced while visiting Spain, Morocco, and the mosque, overall Yasmin always had to struggle against potentially distancing herself from her identities:

So actually, I share this story a lot. But I remember by the time I reached high school, I took an Arabic class. And my Arabic teacher asked me to say the Arabic alphabet, and I couldn’t say a single letter but one. So I had gone from being fluent to not knowing a single letter. And so I think that speaks volumes to the journey that I had taken. I think subconsciously I decided that the only way for me to really hurry up the assimilation process was for me to forget all that was there. And so yes, that not only kind of applies to Arabic but I think also to my religion . . . I went from praying five times a day to trying to with my family as much as I can. But they were busy. We were a working class family. They were never home. So the chances that I did get were slim to none. And so I think, unfortunately, the process was a process of forgetting and of shutting down a lot of these things in hopes of fitting in.

Although this narrative statement captures Yasmin’s lived experiences prior to college, it is very telling what was expected of her to navigate the various educational environments. To be certain, Yasmin pushed back, challenged, and resisted these environmental pressures. Notwithstanding, the intensity of assimilation and marginalization were always already present and worked to foreclose the possibilities of her being her whole self.

## DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Findings from our present study demonstrate the gendered nature of the continuing significance of post-9/11 Islamophobia in the lives of Muslim college students and the nuances of intragroup heterogeneity among Black women undergraduates at the intersections of gender, religion, race, and nationality. Consistent with previous approaches (Ali, 2014; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Sirin & Fine, 2007), our findings show how contemporary and historical macro-level processes and policies are grafted onto marginalized bodies and grounded in the quotidian realities of individual, micro-level interactions. In this way, our work shares similarities with student development scholarship categorized under the umbrella of human ecology (Patton et al., 2016). Yasmin’s narrative exemplifies the multiple ways shifting the material and ideological geopolitical realities inform students’ lived experiences. In part, Ahmed (2004) posits that this is an effect of the purposeful mobilizing of citizens’ fear by United States government agents whereby, “Citizenship here is translated into a form of Neighborhood Watch; the citizen must ‘look out for suspicious others’” (p. 78). That is, the safety and freedom of U.S. citizens was tethered to the restriction of freedom of Muslims to adorn, fly commercially, gather for worship, and simply exist. As such, when Yasmin was vigorously questioned during her social studies presentation, her peers were enacting their notions of citizenship at Yasmin’s psychological and educational expense.

Furthermore, our findings illustrate the socially constructed nature of Blackness in postsecondary educational contexts. While racial heterogeneity may be a debate settled among progressive activists and scholars, Yasmin’s narrative demonstrates that in the lived realities of Black college students, racial authenticity tests remain contested. In opposition to the notion that race is a biological fact mapped by physiological coordinates, Yasmin’s narrative points to how

race is always more than phenotype and community boundaries are spiritedly policed. In this way, our findings resonate with Stewart's (2015) empirical study of racial identity, performance, and embodiment. In her analysis, Stewart found students' negotiations of their racial performativity were situational, deliberate, and most influenced by the internal audience of their Black peers who also attended their college. Within their social contexts, one's Blackness was judged by hair texture, word choice, musical preferences, political ideology, among other factors.

Yasmin's narrative also compliments and extends Stewart's (2015) findings by highlighting the particular ways immigration, religion, and perceived class status explicitly inform notions of authentic Blackness. First, as Yasmin was born in Saudi Arabia, her ability to fully understand the U.S. Black experience was often questioned. In these instances, Blackness was over-determined by national status. Second, because Christianity is the religion most associated with Black Americans historically and contemporarily, Yasmin's religious identity further complicated her place within Black communal spaces. Yasmin's account about forgetting Arabic in order to hurriedly assimilate reflects the tension in the identity development of immigrant women: wanting to fit in by adapting quickly to the American identity marker that is the English language, while having regret in forgetting her own home language encompassing her immigrant identity, to overcome the stigmatization of being an immigrant (Casanova, 2012). Lastly, as a Black immigrant, she was assumed to be a "rich, African" who could not relate to the authentic Black experience, assumed to be rooted in lower-or-working class communities. We argue that a part of this contention results from recent discussions on the greater percentage of Black immigrant students attending selective colleges and universities in the U.S., compared to native-born Blacks (Massey et al., 2007).

Moreover, Yasmin's narrative demonstrates the affective cost of living under repeated suspicions of others. Whether the stereotypes attached to her religious identity or the difficulty of pursuing romantic relationships, Yasmin's story is an example of how lived realities are not simply how one perceives themselves and the world, but also how one feels themselves and the world. Relatedly, our findings reveal the calculated and strategic negotiations required of students who occupy multiple marginalized positions. For example, considering how her colleagues thought about Muslim women—as non-agential, oppressed, and regressive in their gender politics—Yasmin had to carefully position herself in conversations about women's rights. These stereotypes often contextualize the experiences of Muslim women, which are found to have higher levels of discrimination-related anxiety (Sirin & Fine, 2007). As a Black Muslim attending a predominantly White institution, Yasmin purposefully socialized within Black communities because it was the "safest place" she found. However, this decision came with its challenges, as she was often the only Muslim in many social settings. While Yasmin's experiences are her own, they also shed light on the ways other Black women (some who are Christian) experience PWIs, particularly as related to a perceived lack of support (Patton & McClure, 2009).

While Black Feminist Theory of intersectionality, specifically Collins' (1990) matrix of domination, guided our analysis toward the ways Yasmin was multiply marginalized while simultaneously acknowledging her agential negotiations across multiple contexts, we found Edwards' (2001) suggestions of rethinking the use of diaspora in African diaspora is helpful to further make sense of Yasmin's embodied realities. In acknowledging shared characteristics among the African diaspora and other "classic" diasporas (e.g., Jewish Diaspora)—origin anchored in being uprooted and scattered, history of forced and traumatic migrations, and a real or imagined homeland—Edwards is invested in using diaspora to push against imposed nationalist frameworks that delimit the study of African diasporic histories, cultures and consciousnesses. Additionally, however, Edwards (2001) argues for a theorization of diaspora that does not rely on the "comfort of abstraction, an easy recourse to origins, but that it [diaspora] forces us to consider discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference" (p. 64). Influenced by Stuart Hall's (1996) notion of diaspora as articulation, Edwards reads against Léopold Senghor (1971) to propose that we think of diaspora through the French term *décalage*, which embraces "difference

within unity” (Edwards, 2001, p. 65). Put differently, Edwards argues any attempt to construct racial coherence across time, space, and geography is only a prop.

The richness and nuance of Yasmin’s narrative speaks to the challenges of embodying and living diaspora as multiplicities of places and ideas in a world lethally committed to material and ideological borders. Edwards’ rethinking of diaspora through *décalage*, is equally useful to our sense making of Yasmin’s life world. Instead of thinking of multiple facets of embodied social locations as always already coherent, Yasmin’s narrative exemplifies the ways coherence is resisted and challenged in most of her social contexts. Consequently, we may benefit from thinking of Yasmin’s narrative in particular and rethinking college student identity in general, as “difference within unity”—a form of difference that resists ready-made translations across time and space.

## CONCLUSION

In centering the voice of a Black, immigrant, Muslim college woman, our present study challenges the anti-Black racism underpinning the often taken-for-granted position that Muslims are non-Black or that members of Arab societies are Black. Our study also pushes against anti-feminist notions of Muslim womanhood as inherently non-agentic and subjugated. Therefore, Yasmin’s narrative should impress upon student affairs professionals as well as college and university faculty the need for recognizing the complexity of students’ identities generally and Black women students specifically. Educators should engage students in discussions concerning the heterogeneity among particular marginalized groups as a way to recognize students whom live at various intersections and creating pathways to more easily navigate postsecondary life as their fullest selves. Lastly, we argue that universities should require all personnel to participate in on-going professional education that helps them to develop content-specific knowledge and skill-sets necessary to create empowering and validating spaces for Black women.

Yasmin’s narrative also holds implications for future research. Most notably, more research is needed on the experiences of Black Muslim women in college; those who are of immigrant-origin as well as those who are U.S. born. Furthermore, scholars should investigate the experiences of Black Muslim women in institutional contexts where a critical mass of Black Muslim students exist as this is likely to yield different insights.

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<sup>1</sup>In 1924 Congress passed a discriminatory immigration law that restricted the immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans and practically excluded Asians and other nonwhites from entry into the United States. This act instituted admission quotas by using the 1890 census to determine the population of a particular nationality group; the government then only allowed 2 percent of that population into the nation. In addition, the act completely barred immigration for all those whom the Supreme Court prohibited from obtaining U.S. citizenship, specifically Asians. The National Origins Act drastically lowered the annual quota of immigration, from 358,000 to 164,000. Congress abolished the national origins quota system in the 1960s.

<sup>2</sup>Creation of the Asiatic Barred Zone by the U.S. government highlighted the country’s negative attitude toward Asian immigrants during the early twentieth century. American fear of Asian immigration continued into the twentieth century with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1917. This law created the Asiatic Barred Zone, which designated a region whose native peoples were barred from entering the United States. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 eliminated the Asiatic Barred Zone, improving American relations with Asian countries.

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