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CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND THE POLITICS OF MUSLIM SPACE

ZAIN ABDULLAH, PH.D.

Abstract

In the late 1980s, the area on and around 116th Street in Harlem was severely plagued by vacant storefronts, drug activity and crime. With the rapid migration and settlement of West African Muslims into New York City, outward displays of traditional clothing designs, masjids (mosques), and ethnic businesses created a new sense of community and altered the local public sphere. This article explores the politics of Muslim space, by which I mean the bodily activity or built environment that signify and sustain Muslim identity, and how African immigrants deploy culture as a resource in the construction of community life in Harlem.

When Amadou Diallo was killed in a hail of bullets shot by four New York City police officers, a New York Times article revealed that his Guinean countrymen feared losing not only their life to police brutality, but also feared losing their “culture” to assimilation.¹ For many, the destruction of one’s customs constitutes a social death, a fate far worse than the demise of a single individual.² To preserve their values and cultural practices, African immigrants engage in the “invention of tradition,” in the language of Eric Hobsbaum, seeking to create traditions and institutions that sustain their sense of community in urban spaces like New York.³ The media blitz also revealed that Diallo belonged to a large and expanding West African Muslim population. Unlike most African migrants arriving in the mid-sixties who spoke English and had Christian leanings, this new wave is predominately French-speaking and Muslim.⁴ This distinction, however, says little about the cultural complexity of this new population, which comprises both a range of African languages (spoken along with French) and religious orientations.

While these immigrant populations are rapidly increasing in cities like Houston, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, New York has been an initial point of entry, and their Islamic practices have created a new “Black Mecca” of sorts.⁵ Most are Wolof, Fulani, Malinke or Dyoula speakers from Senegal, Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire, with an expanding Bambara population from Mali. Somali Muslims from East Africa are also present but less numerous, among a smaller number of Muslims from Arab-speaking countries. Longtime African-American Muslims practice versions

of both traditional and less conventional Islam, against a backdrop of Black churches and Afrocentric venues. In his *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, Robert Dannin chronicles some of this history for African-American, Sunni (orthodox) Muslims. And my recent work, *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem*, provides a contemporary look at West African Muslims who are attempting to navigate this religious and cultural landscape.⁶ But what does it mean to preserve one's traditions or forge community ties in such a dense environment? And what role does culture play in all of this?

The Arabic inscribed on many West African masjid awnings, for instance, does more than identify them as Islamic places of worship. More so, the Arabic signage equally symbolizes their unique presence among Muslim communities in locales such as Harlem as well as the larger Muslim world. But it is their African routine (the African products sold near the masjid entrance, the African languages spoken before and after services, the ethnic attire worn to prayers) that allows us to understand how culture is linked to the built form and how communities actively conceptualize the space they occupy (Figure 1). In fact, this spatial behavior signifies a new kind of engagement with the pre-existing material world of Harlem. By converting storefronts and old commercial outlets into “venues of the spirits,” as Robert A. Orsi writes, religious migrants “dramatically re-placed themselves on cityscapes that had been explicitly designed to exclude them or to render them invisible or docile.”⁷

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that people from Muslim and less-developed countries “are seeking to slow down industrialization so as to preserve their traditional homes, customs and representational spaces from the buffeting of industrial space and industrial representations of space.”⁸ In a similar vein, Africans in Harlem create a Muslim space that helps prevent the loss of their identities. But what impact does this have on the wider community? In his work on the prison system, Michel Foucault reminds us of how architectural structures can act as a means of control, particularly for members within a community, and become a symbol of domination for outsiders.⁹ And while some residents welcome the site of African masjids and businesses, others view these structures with scorn and contempt.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the arrival of over 100,000 Africans to New York has led residents to dub Harlem “Little Africa” or “Africatown.”¹⁰ There has even been a street sign hung at a major intersection in downtown Harlem that reads “African Square” (Figure 2).¹¹ Other regions have been named by Africans themselves such as, “Fouta Town”—a term indicating a heavy Muslim Fulani settlement.¹² In 2003, my formal mapping of the area revealed that there were over seventy-five African businesses and institutions (including five African masjids) in



Figure 1

*Masjid Aqsa Awning with African Women selling products by curb
Photo © Zain Abdullah 2006
(Image courtesy of the author)*



Figure 2

*African Square Sign © Zain Abdullah 2007
(Image courtesy of the author)*



Figure 4

*African Muslim clothing performance amid deli and liquor stores in public space © Zain Abdullah 2007
(Image courtesy of the author)*



Figure 5

*African women publicly marching in Islamic dress in Harlem as spectators watch © Zain Abdullah 2007
(Image courtesy of the author)*

the vicinity of 116th Street alone.¹³ Masjids and other “sacred sites,” Louis P. Nelson writes, “rouse in adherents a sense of belonging, and they do so by reminding the individual of their place in a body of social relationships.”¹⁴ By occupying vacant buildings and setting up their own institutions, West African Muslims have infused their presence into the urban landscape of Harlem. This article explores this Muslim space, by which I mean both the bodily activity and built environment that signify and sustain a Muslim identity, and how African immigrants in New York City deploy their “culture” as a means for maintaining a sense of community.

Embodied Space

This discussion on Muslim space must begin with how African bodies constitute the initial markers of culture and community. In New York Masjid, Jerrilynn D. Dodds discovered that while Muslim communities in New York raise funds to build better facilities, the masjid “architecture means nothing.”¹⁵ This is certainly not to suggest that the structure and aesthetic design of masjids are unimportant. But unlike many churches, where images and decorative elements can encourage spiritual practice, the masjid abstains from interfering in religious acts, embodying each adherent as an individual site for divine encounter. For this reason, Setha M. Low, in her discussion on masjids in the cities of medieval Spain, quotes John Brookes saying that “[t]he traditional Islamic concern is primarily for the feel of space within [...]. The result is an internal architecture, inseparable from the fabric of the city, less concerned with buildings in space, more with space itself.”¹⁶ In this sense, Africans themselves embody Muslim space and engage the public arena as markers of an Islamic culture and community.

Because Westerners tend to view Islam as an Arab religion, many are oblivious to the Muslim identity of African immigrants. But few can miss the flutter of African robes or wide-sleeved, boubous with tasseled hats or gele head wraps as African Muslims stroll along New York streets. This sartorial practice both asserts Muslim presence and transforms public space. “[T]he practice of walking in the city is a matter of telling one’s own spatial stories,” Fran Tonkiss argues, “drawing on a mobile and private language of the streets.”¹⁷ This spatial behavior, Tonkiss goes on to say, “highlights the interplay between social relations, material forms and subjective positions in the city.”¹⁸ It also helps to mark social boundaries and allows newcomers, who may be in dispute with residents about community borders, to establish their own parameters.¹⁹

In a way similar to Pierre Bourdieu’s discourse on the multidimensionality of space, the world these new immigrants construct is heavily nuanced.²⁰ Many African Muslims view the public wearing of traditional clothing as a religious act. For outsiders, however, this attire clearly identifies them as African but not necessarily as Muslim.

Still, African clothing is defined by what it does rather than what it is. Doran H. Ross, for example, argues that the kente cloth of Ghana was “made for movement” and was meant to be “danced.”²¹ And when the athan or call to prayer sounds in Harlem, Ivorian Muslims and others dressed in flowing, Islamic robes rush to pray in nearby African masjids. Not only is the ethnic dress indicative of their Islamic affiliation and respective countries, but, when combined with the movement of responding to the call to prayer in this new setting, the clothing contributes to a performance of Muslim identity, publically establishing a direct correlation between the African community and their Islamic activities. That is to say, Western residents are typically unable to recognize the religious or Islamic underpinnings of African clothing in Harlem. But the politics of space, as Fran Tonkiss writes, is based on how “individuals exercise their spatial rights while negotiating the spatial claims of others.”²² In *Visibly Muslim*, Emma Tarlo asserts that “regional clothing traditions around the world are themselves in a state of flux and have long been caught up in complex histories of colonization, fashion, and reform.”²³ All this suggests that bodily adornment stakes a unique claim on space and, given the combined performance by African immigrants of donning cultural/religious dress while engaging in Islamic practices, it also establishes the contours of a new Muslim presence in New York City (Figure 3).

For West African Muslim women, their traditional wear can be read differently by insiders and outsiders. In her work on Islam in secular spaces, Jocelyne Cesari writes about how a European official “declared that in Islam the veil was a political symbol of female submission rather than an actual religious requirement.”²⁴ However, just as boubou clothing can signify more than African identity by the way it embodies Muslimness as well, any intransigent views that ossify the hijab as a symbol of oppression misses the subtle ways this Muslim head covering marks a community of sisterhood and female empowerment. The Islamic clothes African Muslim women embody can delineate where one community begins and another ends. Moreover, their distinctive dress and headgear underscore a womanly bond, and a sense of belonging is forged even among strangers because their sartorial practice infuses space with an Islamic sensibility (Figure 4).²⁵

As space markers, their African and Black identities are likewise apparent in this same costuming. Moreover, the Muslim space this community constructs is shot through with several African ethnicities. While the Senegalese may follow their own ethnic style of dress, one that indicates a composite of African and Islamic forms, the Malinke adheres to a somewhat different arrangement. Furthermore, Mandingos differ in how they wear their clothing from the Fulani, who can be distinguished from the Hausa or Bambara and so on. At the same time, this ethnic differentiation is changing, as African immigrants are realizing that their separate ethnicities matter little in a country



Figure 5

Impressive structure of Masjid Malcolm Shabazz

© Zain Abdullah 2006

(Image courtesy of the author)



Figure 6

The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood's awning with red-black-and-green emblem above Arabic inscription

© Zain Abdullah 2010

(Image courtesy of the author)



Figure 7

The mosaic design of the Islamic Cultural Center of NY

© Zain Abdullah 2008

(Image courtesy of the author)



Figure 8

Futa Islamic Center

© Zain Abdullah 2010

(Image courtesy of the author)

that characterizes them simply as “Black.” Meanwhile, African-Americans, adopting African style clothing as a way to reclaim their heritage, are creating overlapping spatial identities. African Muslim clothing practices, then, signify a major way they spatialize their cultural concerns and mark the public arena as Muslim space. Still, the sacred spaces of masjids reflect another important aspect of identity construction, and they often erect social boundaries few outsiders care to cross.

Masjid Space

Until recently, most Muslim immigrants relegated religious activities to the inner sanctum of home-style, Quranic study circles and nondescript places of worship, such as a room or basement within a private home or unmarked storefronts. As Pnina Werbner writes of Muslim immigrants in the UK, Islamic practices were “confined within fortresses of privacy, [...] and these fortresses protected immigrants from external hostility.”²⁶ The outward visibility of contemporary masjids, however, brings the Muslim community face-to-face with the society at-large. This gives the sacredness of masjids a public character. In *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, Akel Ismail Kahera has argued that “the American urban mosque is a public place that must respond to social and cultural as well as religious needs.”²⁷ But how does such a private place, a site reserved for devoted practitioners, enact such a public character?

Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, for example, is a huge three-story corner building on 116th and Lenox Avenue (now Malcolm X Boulevard) in Harlem. Because it towers over the residential and commercial buildings in the area, its overpowering structure—like that of cathedrals—was meant to produce a sense of awe and grandeur for Muslims and other community members.²⁸ Its massive green dome and arched panel windows were designed to draw attention, symbolizing an alternative religious experience and a very different lifestyle for outsiders (Figure 5). The eastern motif also serves to culturally link its African-American members to the larger Muslim world. Despite strained relations with African immigrants, however, Masjid Shabazz has begun a shift away from an Asian or Arab design and now favors an African aesthetic. Jerrilynn D. Dodds cites Imam Kareem at Masjid Shabazz as saying, “This dome has served us well, but we are thinking that in our next mosque we might turn to West-African Islamic architectural style.”²⁹ As African-American Muslims at Masjid Shabazz look to visually assert their African heritage in the masjid’s next design, any structural alteration will obviously impact Harlem’s spatial and cultural dynamics, and likely change public perception of Masjid Shabazz’s identity in the community. The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood (MIB), an African-American Muslim community space on the corner of St. Nicholas and 113th, is

housed in a community-based brownstone resembling many other buildings on the block. The Islamic signage, however, marked with a red-black-and-green, Black nationalist emblem, reveals the race-consciousness MIB has historically shared with the larger community (Figure 6). Unlike Masjid Shabazz, the style and structure of MIB reflects a different relationship with the neighborhood. Rather than overwhelm the public arena, it punctuates the space with an Afro-Islamic aesthetic.

On Third Avenue between East 96th and 97th, the Islamic Cultural Center of New York (ICCNy) is less imposing. Despite its rich modern structure and Arabesque design, the edifice is dwarfed by the many high-rise apartment buildings surrounding it. And because it is situated in a high-rent district, its more working- to middle-class congregation typically resides in other areas. In contrast to Masjid Shabazz, whose members live in the area and share a common racial makeup and class status with their area neighbors, the Muslim community at ICCNY is heterogeneous and originates from all over the Muslim world. The socio-cultural significance of ICCNY, however, differs from most masjids in New York City. “Religion,” Nilüfer Göle argues in her work on Islam in public space, “provides an autonomous and alternative space for collective self-definition of Muslims in their critical encounter with modernity.”³⁰ And given its mosaic design, its modern structure, and multicultural population (e.g., an array of ethnic dresses, foreign sounds, and exotic scents), ICCNY accents the Upper East Side with a cosmopolitan flair, a presence that complements the community’s bohemian lifestyle rather than competes with it (Figure 7).

In Harlem, Masjid Aqsa, which is located on 8th Avenue near W116th, Masjid Salaam on W116th near 7th, which closed by the end of 2007, and the Futa Islamic Center on 8th near W137th, collectively present a very different case. Because these West African Muslims are typically multiethnic, entrepreneurial and working-class, their masjids blend quite evenly into Harlem’s commercial district. In fact, because a number of African immigrants attending these places of worship may be undocumented, the unassuming character of the masjids brings less attention while, at the same time, affording worshippers a vital link to the Islamic community. Still, this is not to suggest that these masjids are any less visible. The five daily prayers, ongoing cultural events, and lightweight vending give the area a distinctive quality. The Futa Islamic Center is similar to MIB in that it hosts a community that is primarily of the same ethnicity, since the majority of Futa’s members are from Guinea. Masjids Aqsa and Salaam, however, cater to a diverse group and their signs represent this universal posture. As a title, *aqsa* is an Arabic reference to the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam, and *salaam* connotes “peace,” a general greeting among all Muslims and a divine attribute of God in Islam. Using more common titles for their masjids, rather than any ethnic affiliation, is clearly emblematic of the diverse populations (who possess an array of cultural practices) attending



Figure 9

*Thousands from the Murid Sufi order march in the Bamba Day Parade to make a public display of their culture and community © Zain Abdullah 2007
(Image courtesy of the author)*



Figure 10

*The office of the Senegalese Association of America next to a Senegalese 99¢ store on 116th Street near 7th Avenue © Zain Abdullah 2010
(Image courtesy of the author)*

these sites and the politics of responding to their needs in a complex commercial area (Figure 8).

On the corner of Edgecombe Avenue and 137th, Masjid Touba, under the auspices of the group's House of Islam, is a reference to the holy city of this community's Sufi order in Senegal, and it occupies a different place in Harlem overall. As African Muslims at Touba, the majority of its members adhere to the principles of a Sufi order or what is termed Sufism, which comprises a specific set of spiritual practices designed to increase Muslim faith. There are many branches of Sufism (Islamic mysticism) in Islam, but the path (tariqa) members of Masjid Touba follow is called Muridiyya. Cheikh Amadou Bamba, the group's founder, also founded the city of Touba in 1887, and, besides the masjid, many may adopt the name for their businesses as well.³¹ While Masjid Touba is a large, four-story corner building, it maintains a residential demeanor, since there is no sign posted on the outside except on special occasions. The only hint that the building is a masjid is the communal activity that hums around it for weekly, Friday jum'ah prayers or during religious events and holidays, when hundreds of celebrants fill the street wearing their best multicolored African attire. Of course, one must keep in mind that residential areas may keep strict codes preventing their building's use for ecclesiastical or business purposes.

Unlike the masjids in commercial areas, the location and physical presence of Masjid Touba underscores how the community embeds itself into the social life of the neighborhood. On holidays like eid al-adha, the festival of sacrifice following the hajj or annual pilgrimage, Murids (followers of the Muridiyya Sufi order) visit neighbors offering food charity. At the same time, the needs of the community at Masjid Touba are less public than private. The annual Cheikh Amadou Bamba Day Parade, however, captivates the city and makes the cultural and religious presence of the Senegalese Muslims all too visible.³² Besides this, their *L'Association des Sénégalais d'Amérique* (Senegalese Association of America), on 116th near 7th Avenue operates daily and works to better relations between Murids and the neighborhood community (Figures 9 - 10). Altogether, the range and scope of masjids in urban America reflect a very complex cultural arena. The African Muslim's engagement with their masjids creates a Muslim space and alters the urban terrain. Still, these masjids do not operate in isolation. They are intimately linked to other social, cultural and economic structures.

Built Space

The masjids and the Muslim businesses surrounding them are closely connected. Throughout the day, when the athan is heard coming from the masjids, shop owners, workers and association members in the vicinity routinely slip in and out. Others, unable to leave, make prayers insides their shops, reemerging after fifteen minutes

to find customers waiting at their glass doors. One might also find a woman in hijab making thiker, reciting God's praises, or prayerfully prostrating behind the counter. In these and other ways, the African masjids and their businesses maintain a symbiotic relationship. Yet, by the same token, the African-owned variety stores, boutiques, and restaurants create a built space that speaks to their cultural values and community ties. In other words, unlike masjids, the entrepreneurial culture at these shops extends beyond formalized ritual practices and informs these Muslim communities' ongoing daily routine. It is in this sense that African Muslims in Harlem are able to embed themselves into the larger community and experience an attachment to place.

The social life Muslims experience at the shops is also a visual manifestation of their Islamic community and the values that support it. "Religious texts provide the sacred core of the community of Muslims," Nilüfer Göle asserts, "however, [...] the religious text, in itself, is not sufficient. Communal practices of the belief are at the center of the community construction." She goes on to say that "[b]y performing communal activities, such as praying, eating together, engaging in conversation [...], and economic activity in accordance with Islamic precepts, a sense of community is constituted."³³ The many restaurants operated by Harlem's African Muslims are unlike most eateries in the city. African restaurants, for example, inscribe identity by employing religious symbols or wording like halal to guarantee that the food is authentic and religiously "pure." The stores may also bear the name of spiritual guides (Mbacke), the holy city in Senegal, Touba, or a combination of both. On the other hand, some businesses like Restaurant Le Baobab, a popular Harlem eatery on 116th near Malcolm X Boulevard, uses familiar imagery like the African Baobab tree to publically indicate its more common character. Other African restaurants employ names that demonstrate a cross-cultural appeal to both an African clientele and the local American population, such as the Senegalese-owned Blues Café directly across the street from Le Baobab. The African dishes, products and services consumed in these establishments are communal acts that perpetuate African cultural beliefs and construct a shared Muslim space.³⁴

These businesses and the cultural behavior around them also create a vibrant "street presence," as Robert A. Orsi described it. Orsi argues that the "Catholic urban experience in the cities of the industrial North and Midwest was so thoroughly articulated to place that Catholics identified their neighborhoods by the names of their churches."³⁵ Catholics, Orsi continues to say by quoting the work of John T. McGreevy, "'used the parish to map out—both physically and culturally—space within all of the northern cities,' creating disciplined moral worlds in which 'neighborhoods, parish, and religion were constantly intertwined.'"³⁶ In a similar way, African businesses have "street presence," because roving bodies, masjid life, and built forms intersect one another and heavily mark the

physical environment with a Muslim awareness. This mass presence, however, certainly creates what Fran Tonkiss terms an “architecture of authority.” Tonkiss says, “One of the most visible ways of exercising power, after all, is to occupy or to control space; [...] urban architecture is readable as a ‘landscape of power,’ a built environment of dominance and subordination that is also legible in the spatial assertions of a corporate skyline, the decaying hulks of redundant urban industries, or in the blank spaces of deteriorated zones that capital has rejected.”³⁷

While the businesses, masjids and associations do not belong to a single group but instead represent several ethnic communities from West Africa, their combined presence as African and Muslim underscores a common identity to outsiders. As such, many longstanding African-American residents stated feeling under siege. Harlem has long been celebrated as a Black cultural center, particularly since the glory days of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s and 30s. With the decline of this cultural movement, Harlem suffered. Discriminatory practices such as redlining, which indicated the minority areas where banks would not invest, exacerbated urban decay in Harlem and other black neighborhoods. Today, the ongoing effects of rapid gentrification have likewise proved harmful for poor and working class residents and many Blacks and Latinos are being routinely displaced, because they can no longer afford to reside in Harlem. A massive influx of African immigrants into an already depressed area has created some resentment on the part of previous residents. This feeling, undoubtedly, has much to do with how African immigrants have so pervasively impacted the physical environment. However, following the Cheikh Amadou Bamba Day Parade on July 28, 2001, a series of lectures were held at the United Nations in which a Senegalese official announced that “by opening legitimate businesses and demonstrating their economic empowerment, Murids hope to earn the respect of Harlem locals.” Because they are in a capitalist society, he argued, “economic power is a crucial symbol of success.”³⁸ While some residents may be impressed, many more have expressed their disdain. In the end, built spaces can certainly foster cultural values, mark community boundaries, and help to maintain a Muslim sense of self, but this can also backfire and produce unintended consequences.

Reflections: Culture, Community, Space

I end this discussion by raising a few points about culture, community, and space. In *Design Criteria for Mosques and Islamic Centers*, the authors write that immigrants must “translate their memories” and “display a self-conscious synthesis between culture and environment.”³⁹ This statement, as I read it, raises an important question about the nature of culture itself and the myriad ways researchers refer to it. That is, what does it really mean when

immigrants “self-consciously” imagine their culture as something that can be synthesized with something else? Further, what does it mean to engage in a public display of this synthesis? As I mentioned at the outset of this article, West African Muslims in Harlem feared losing their “culture” to the pressures of assimilation and violence. As a result, many consciously chose to preserve it by wearing African clothes, worshiping in African masjids, and consuming African cuisine and products. In essence, culture is viewed as an “object,” something tangible or something that could somehow be put forth into the public sphere. “The cultural work of migrants, refugees, and exiles,” David H. Brown writes, “does not involve merely the simple implementation of original, traditional, and bounded cultural contents on unproblematic urban frontiers. Some groups must patch together remembered and encountered cultural resources and devise strategies and tactics of cultural reterritorialization in order to ‘transform space into place,’ including the invention of new ‘homelands.’”⁴⁰ This “cultural work” of which Brown speaks underscores a crucial point about how immigrants may objectify their culture—or view culture as an object to be used as a resource for survival.

In a multicultural America, diverse groups are encouraged to invoke their unique cultures, acting them out on the public stage for evaluation or, at times, for entertainment. In American anthropology, however, a discipline where the “culture concept” has been a primary area of study, the idea of culture has been understood in numerous ways. Early on, culture was perceived as a key source for understanding how people organized themselves in relation to their environment, giving rise to the field of cultural ecology. Later, others were concerned with an idea of cultural evolution or how cultures and societies change overtime, which essentially questions the relationship among social structure, values and the development of more efficient technologies. But the most recent idea that culture is a system of symbols and their meanings, as David Schneider and Clifford Geertz formulated in the 1970s, is informative for what it reveals about how African immigrants navigate their way through urban America.⁴¹ In *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, Richard Handler endeavored to understand the politics around how the Québécois treated culture as a “thing,” allowing them to “stand back and look at themselves, their ideas, their symbols and culture and see it as an entity.”⁴² Moreover, Handler discovered that at folkloric events—like “fairs, festivals, feasts, and dances—culture and tradition became objects to be scrutinized, identified, revitalized, and consumed.”⁴³ In this sense, when Africans speak of efforts to preserve their “culture” against change, what is meant is an effort to actively engage in the process of identity formation or the politics of representation. In this way, culture is treated as a tangible object that can be converted into religious or economic assets, which in turn might support claims for collective rights and self-determination. While there is little room to explore the scholarly literature on

the objectification of culture here, I argue that researchers must not simply study the “culture” of a group but also include an investigation into how groups deploy the notion of culture itself.⁴⁴

In a post-Fordist, deindustrialized world immigrants are entering a new urban terrain unlike that of their predecessors. In the past, community and an attachment to place could be based on the sharing of long-term employment, local shopping, and fraternal organizations. But in an age of globalization, when people increasingly appear to be more transient than stable, what defines a community? “As a category,” Homi Bhabha writes, “community enables a division between the private and the public, the civil and the familial; but as a performative discourse it enacts the impossibility of drawing an objective line between the two. . . . [and] disturbs the grand globalizing narrative of capital, displaces the emphasis on production in ‘class’ collectivity, and disrupts the homogeneity of the imagined community of the nation.”⁴⁵ In Bhabha’s view, community as a concept and its lived reality are two separate things, because the latter is a construction that responds to or acts upon the exigencies of the world. Moreover, as Fran Tonkiss suggested, when we talk about community we are often talking about a racialized entity. In other words, one rarely speaks of community as it refers to the majority population such as the “white” community. So, she argues, community is typically a euphemism for race or a “code for ‘race’, a politer means of lumping people together on the basis of skin or culture,” she argues, “a way of identifying a problem.”⁴⁶ It is not my intention to exaggerate the point of these categories but to remind readers that any discussion of them as static entities is problematic. This is particularly the case when a category like community might obscure the fluid collectivities or flexible arrangements people create.

Lastly, in her edited work on Muslim space, Barbara Daly Metcalf defines these spaces as “embodiments of Muslim ritual and practice.”⁴⁷ That is, anywhere one can ascertain a Muslim presence constitutes a Muslim space. Elsewhere, I have added that a Muslim space is comprised of “the social relations (e.g., Muslim gatherings or ritual performances), cultural productions (e.g., reinvention of old narratives or traditions) and physical objects (e.g., Islamic clothing, Muslim architecture, incense aroma, Islamic bumper stickers) that signify and sustain a Muslim presence or identity.”⁴⁸ Despite these attempts to delineate how Muslims map an Islamic identity onto spatial forms or what one might call the spatialization of Islam, it is important to note that the boundaries that indicate Muslim space are, in fact, mutable and unfixd. Because they are cultural constructions, Louis P. Nelson reminds us that “the meanings of sacred spaces are an unstable construction of human context and vary as those contexts change.”⁴⁹ As masjid participants engage one another in the ongoing travails of social life, the boundaries marking Muslim space will simultaneously be defended and contested, redrawn and erased, improvised and reimagined. Either way, scholars

will do well to realize that our analytical categories like culture, community and space must be interrogated with as much rigor as is employed for the people and places we study. The rewards for doing so will result in a much deeper understanding of the societies we research.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Amy Waldman. "Killing Heightens the Unease Felt by Africans in New York." *New York Times*, (1999) Feb. 14: 1
- ² Orlando Patterson wrote about the social death of enslaved Africans and illustrated how the plight of these people was in some respects just as devastating as the destruction of millions crossing the seas. See Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- ³ Eric Hobsbaum. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- ⁴ The size of the West African Muslim community in New York City varies, depending on the source one uses. For an overview of their presence, see Zain Abdullah. "African 'Soul Brothers' in the 'Hood: Immigration, Islam and the Black Encounter." *Anthropological Quarterly* (2009) 82/1 Winter issue: 37–62. For a fuller treatment, see Zain Abdullah. *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- ⁵ For the resettlement of African immigrants into other American cities like Houston, see Sam Roberts, "More Africans Enter US Than in Days of Slavery," *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 2005 (Sec. A, pg 1). The term "Mecca," a major pilgrimage city in present-day Saudi Arabia and the holiest site in Islam, is used in popular parlance to describe any place as the center of an activity. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, Harlem was called the Negro Mecca or Black Mecca for its high cultural and social development.
- ⁶ Robert Dannin. *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Abdullah, *Black Mecca*.
- ⁷ Robert A. Orsi. "Introduction: Crossing the City Line." In Robert A. Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 41.
- ⁸ Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 122.
- ⁹ Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).
- ¹⁰ Waldman, "Killing Heightens the Unease Felt by Africans in New York,"; Janet Allon. 1995. "A Little Africa Emerges Along 2 Harlem Blocks." *New York Times*, Sunday, Dec. 3, sec. 13:6.
- ¹¹ The "African Square" street sign which was posted in 1983 is still present. The location of the sign is on several corners at the intersection of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard or 7th Avenue and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard, which is W125th Street. For more information, see Sanna Feirstein. *Naming New York: Manhattan Places and How They Got Their Names* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 153.
- ¹² Sylviane Diouf-Kamara. "Senegalese in New York: A Model Minority?" *Black Renaissance / Renaissance Noire* (1997) 1(2).
- ¹³ Zain Abdullah. *Islam, Africa, and the Black Encounter: Boundary Shifting among African Muslims in Harlem*. PhD Dissertation (New York: New School for Social Research, 2004), see Appendix.
- ¹⁴ Louis P. Nelson. "Introduction." In Louis P. Nelson, ed., *American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Spaces* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 8.
- ¹⁵ Jerrilynn D. Dodds and Edward Grazda. *New York Masjid: The Mosques of New York City* (New York: Power House Books, 2002), 65-67.
- ¹⁶ SETHA M. LOW. *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 92.
- ¹⁷ Fran Tonkiss. *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Malden, MA: Polity Press), 128.
- ¹⁸ Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory*, p. 94.
- ¹⁹ Joseph Sciorra. "'We Go Where the Italians Live': Religious Processions as Ethnic and Territorial Markers in a Multi-ethnic Brooklyn Neighborhood," in Robert A. Orsi, ed. *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 328.
- ²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu. "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups." *Theory and Society* 14 (1985): 734.
- ²¹ Doran H. Ross. *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*. Vol. 2. (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 9
- ²² Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory*, 59.
- ²³ Emma Tarlo. *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (New York: Berg, 2010), 7.
- ²⁴ Jocelyne Cesari. "Islam and the Secularized Nation: A Transatlantic Comparison," in Nigel Biggar and Linda Hogan, eds., *Religious Voices in Public Places* (New York: Oxford University Press), 301.
- ²⁵ Emma Tarlo quotes several women who felt that their hijabs helped them create a community, even among women unfamiliar with each other. See Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim*, pp. 37, 54, 55, 64, 89.

- ²⁶ Pnina Werbner. *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims: The Public Performance of Pakistani Transnational Identity Politics* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2002), 117.
- ²⁷ Akel Ismail Kahera. *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press), 107.
- ²⁸ Michael Tavinor. "Sacred Space and the Built Environment," In Philip North and John North, eds., *Sacred Space: House of God, Gate of Heaven* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 31.
- ²⁹ Dodds and Grazda, *New York Masjid*, 90.
- ³⁰ Nilüfer Göle, "Islamic Visibilities and Public Sphere," In Nilüfer Göle and Ludwig Ammann, eds., *Islam in Public: Turkey, Iran, and Europe* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press), 16.
- ³¹ For more information on Muridiyya and the city of Touba, see Cheikh Anta Babou. *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853-1913* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007) and Eric Ross. *Sufi City: Urban Design And Archetypes in Touba* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006).
- ³² For a comprehensive examination of the parade, see Zain Abdullah. "Sufis on Parade: The Performance of Black, African, and Muslim Identities," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2009) June 77:2.
- ³³ Göle, "Islamic Visibilities and Public Sphere," 31.
- ³⁴ Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, 114.
- ³⁵ Orsi, "Introduction," 50.
- ³⁶ Ibid. Also see, John T. McGreevy. *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15, 22.
- ³⁷ Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory*, 60.
- ³⁸ Abdullah, *Black Mecca*, p. 199 [The quote refers to the uncorrected proof copy, but interested readers may see the beginning of chapter 8, "Family Matters."]
- ³⁹ Akel Kahera, Latif Abdulmalik, and Craig Anz. *Design Criteria for Mosques and Islamic Centers: Art, Architecture, and Worship* (Burlington, MA: Architectural Press), 8.
- ⁴⁰ David H. Brown. "Altered Spaces: Afro-Cuban Religions and the Urban Landscape in Cuba and the United States," in Robert A. Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 157.
- ⁴¹ For the original sources that correspond to this brief genealogy of the culture concept, see Julian Steward. *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1955); Leslie White. *The Evolution of Culture: The Development of Civilization to the Fall of Rome* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959); David M. Schneider. *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1968); Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books 1973).
- ⁴² Richard Handler. *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 14.
- ⁴³ Handler. *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, 12.
- ⁴⁴ For studies on the objectification of culture, instructive and recent works include Roy Wagner. *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1975); Franseca Merlan. "The Objectification of 'Culture': An Aspect of Current Political Process in Aboriginal Affairs." *Anthropological Forum* (1989) 6(1), 105-116; Virginia R. Dominguez. "Invoking Culture: The Messy Side of 'Cultural Politics'" *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (1992) 91, (Winter, 1), 19-42; Neriko Musha Doerr. "Global Structures of Common Difference, Cultural Objectification, and Their Subversions: Cultural Politics in an Aotearoa/New Zealand School." *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* (2008) 15: 413-436; Steffen Dalsgaard. "Claiming Culture: New Definitions and Ownership of Cultural Practices in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* (March 2009), vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 20-32; Robert Baron. "Sins of Objectification? Agency, Mediation, and Community Cultural Self-Determination in Public Folklore and Cultural Tourism Programming," *Journal of American Folklore* (2010) 123(487): 63-91.
- ⁴⁵ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge 2004), 330.
- ⁴⁶ Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory*, 9.
- ⁴⁷ Barbara D. Metcalf. "Introduction: Sacred Worlds, Sanctioned Practice, New Communities." In Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1996), 11.
- ⁴⁸ Abdullah. "African 'Soul Brothers' in the 'Hood," 58, note 5.
- ⁴⁹ Nelson, "Introduction," 9.