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## African-American and Arab American Muslim communities in the Detroit Ummah

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*University of Iowa*

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND ARAB AMERICAN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN  
THE DETROIT *UMMAH*

by  
Lisa Gail Omanson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of  
Arts degree in Religious Studies  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Richard Brent Turner

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Lisa Gail Omanson

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts  
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## INTRODUCTION

In November of 2011, TLC ran a new television show called “All American Muslim”. This show highlighted five different Arab American Muslim families in the Dearborn, MI area. “All American Muslim” thrust a largely unknown community onto television and into mainstream media. According to TLC’s website, “each episode offers an intimate look at the customs and celebrations, misconceptions and conflicts these families face outside and within their own community.”<sup>1</sup> “All American Muslim” was groundbreaking, but not long lasting. The show was cancelled after two months, amid much controversy. While TLC claimed low ratings as the reason for the cancellation, many advertisers were hesitant to have their commercials run during the show. Major companies, such as Lowes pulled their advertisements. Conservative groups also claimed that the show went against American values.<sup>2</sup>

The American mainstream’s negative reactions to “All American Muslim” clearly shows that Islamophobia is still a major factor in the United States. The television show presented a one-sided view of Islam in America and especially Islam in the Detroit area. Detroit is an important city for Muslim Americans. “All American Muslim” showed there is a large, Arab American community in the area, but it ignored the city’s historic African-American Muslim community. Both Arab and African-American Muslim communities have been a significant part of Detroit culture since the early twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> “All American Muslim” (Discovery Communications, 2012), <http://tlc.howstuffworks.com/tv/all-american-muslim>.

<sup>2</sup> “TLC Cancels Underperforming ‘All-American Muslim,’” accessed December 8, 2012, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2012/03/tlc-cancels-underperforming-all-american-muslim.html>.

Detroit is a major American metropolis. It was one of the largest cities in the United States in the 1960's and has some of the largest American Muslim communities in the twenty-first century. The city was a haven for immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth century because of its automotive industry. According to Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, "the Ford Motor Company's commitment to pay five dollars a day for eight hours of work drew many...immigrants to Detroit."<sup>3</sup> Detroit became a city where Muslim immigrants could find jobs to support themselves and send some income back to their families abroad. Detroit was also a major city of the Great Migration, or the movement North by millions of African-Americans from 1915 to the 1970's. The Great Migration was a demographic and cultural factor that influenced the conversion of thousands of African-Americans to Islam in the twentieth century. While Northern cities such as Detroit were certainly not free from racism, African-Americans could still find work in the automobile industry, often for higher pay than other Northern cities.<sup>4</sup>

However, the diversity of ethnic and racial groups did not help to unify Detroit. The abundance of jobs attracted thousands of people in a short period of time. Jack Glazier and Arthur W. Helweg's *Ethnicity in Michigan* demonstrate that "competition, rather than cooperation, between blacks and whites for jobs, health care, housing, and leisure characterized relations between the races."<sup>5</sup> Detroit expanded very quickly to

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<sup>3</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 140.

<sup>4</sup> Laurie Lanzen Harris, *The Great Migration North, 1910-1970* (Omnigraphics Inc, 2011); Joe W. Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Indiana University Press, 1991); Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, Reprint (Vintage, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Jack Glazier and Arthur W. Helweg, *Ethnicity in Michigan-Issues and People* (Michigan State University Press, 2001), 32.

accommodate all the immigrants and migrants, making prime housing a special source of tension. Whites, African-Americans, as well as the increasing Arab populations remained highly segregated in a “patchwork quilt”<sup>6</sup> of separate communities. Whites and blacks did not come together as neighbors, but instead violent race relations characterized Detroit and culminated in race riots in the 1960’s.<sup>7</sup>

Detroit is one of America’s most racially segregated cities in the twenty-first century. White flight to the suburbs had a major impact on the city, making inner-city Detroit an African-American majority. Susan Welch writes, “in just 20 years [1960-1980], overwhelmingly white Detroit became overwhelmingly black Detroit. By 1990, 9 of every 10 whites in the Detroit metropolitan area lived in the suburbs.”<sup>8</sup> With the collapse of the auto-industry, the shrinking black and white population, and the economic downturn of 2007, Detroit, and especially inner-city Detroit, suffered. In 2009, the city had over a 29% unemployment rate.<sup>9</sup> The vast class differences between the economic conditions in the Detroit suburbs and the inner-city only deepens poor race relations and tensions between African-American and Arab American Muslims.

Arab Americans in this instance are largely grouped with white Americans. The US census does not have a separate category for Arabs, so they are technically considered white. Arab Americans certainly experience discrimination and religious prejudices because of their ethnicity and this will be further explored later in the paper. However,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Welch et al., *Race and Place: Race Relations in an American City* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Reynolds Farley, *Detroit Divided* (Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Welch et al., *Race and Place*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Okrent, “Detroit: The Death — and Possible Life — of a Great City,” *Time*, accessed December 8, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1926017,00.html>.

they share a prosperous socio-economic status with white Americans.<sup>10</sup> Arabs have largely escaped the economic racism of Detroit's African-Americans and many Arab immigrants have settled into the white dominated suburbs outside of the city.

This paper will focus on the tensions and unities between Arab American and African-American Muslim communities in the Detroit area. Detroit is a fascinating study of vibrant American Muslim communities, both for Arab (and other immigrant) Americans and African-Americans. The Detroit suburbs hold the most concentrated pocket of Arabs in America, making it a distinct Muslim group (even though the majority of Arabs in the area are Christian). Detroit also has an important history in the African-American Muslim community because the Nation of Islam began there in 1930. Especially after 9/11, the need for a unified Muslim American community was clear, but the two groups often have difficulties in becoming a unified American *ummah*, specifically in Detroit. Some of the tensions in the *ummah* result from different cultures, languages, racial identities, views on women, as well as different presentations of the religion. Tensions occur within both communities as well, as both the Arab American and African-American Muslim groups are extremely diverse.

I will provide an overview of the two larger Muslim communities in Detroit (African-American and Arab American), their differing views on theology, racism, and women's rights issues, as well as the places where they are united. I will look at the reasons for diversity and evaluate if it is feasible that Detroit Muslims will eventually develop a united *ummah* or if they will continue to construct distinctive but separate American Muslim identities and communities in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>10</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and John L. Esposito, eds., *Religion and Immigration: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Experiences in the United States* (AltaMira Press, 2003), 132.



Aminah Beverly McCloud views these interactions and tensions between the African-American and immigrant Muslim communities as moving between two Arabic concepts of Muslim community. The first is *'asabiya*, which McCloud defines as Muslim community built on “group affiliations that comprise national and cultural identities...namely, the theme of *nation-building*.”<sup>11</sup> McCloud emphasizes that African-American Muslim communities often use this strategy. *'Asabiya* is opposed in many ways to the other form of community that McCloud discusses, which is *ummah*. McCloud defines *ummah* as “many particular groups who can put aside their individual identities and mutual suspicions in order to uphold what is right...” and build a universal Muslim community.<sup>12</sup> *'Asabiya* and *ummah* become opposed to one another because a “community must decide whether to make its priority the formation of *'asabiya* or the experience of *ummah*.”<sup>13</sup> I will be using McCloud’s theoretical framework of the tensions between ethnic or racial identity group solidarity and attempting to create a united American Muslim community. Both the Arab American and African-American Muslim communities have to negotiate these models of Muslim community. The question in Detroit becomes whether African-American and Arab American Muslims will be able to move beyond *'asabiya* communities and into a true American *ummah*.

The first section of the paper will outline the history of the major Muslim American communities in Detroit – African-American Muslims and Arab American

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<sup>11</sup> Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam*, New edition (Routledge, 1994), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Muslims. Exploring the histories of the communities and their particular issues will lay the foundation for the modern issues in Detroit today.

The second section of the paper will look at broader scholarly research in the American *ummah*, focusing on issues that cause tensions and unities in Muslim communities. The research of this section is broader, and it includes studies from a variety of American Muslim communities throughout the country, but is also crucial to understanding the unique situation of Islam in Detroit.

The final section of the paper will focus on Islam in Detroit and will give special attention to the struggles for unification within the Muslim communities in the city area. Unique situations in Detroit, such as the media and scholarly attention, create new issues for the *ummah*. While Detroit has many opportunities for ‘*asabiya* Muslim communities, it also has the possibility to create a highly diverse yet connected *ummah*. Finally, I will discuss the future of Detroit and how the social justice values of Islam can unite the city.

## CHAPTER I

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISLAM IN DETROIT

Islam has been a vital part of Detroit's culture since the 1800's. The high concentration of Arab immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has contributed to this unique cultural aspect, but beginning in the 1930's, African-Americans also contributed to the Islamic landscape of Detroit. This first section will briefly outline the histories of the two major Islamic groups in the Detroit area – Arab Americans and African-Americans.<sup>14</sup>

#### **West African and African-American Muslims in Detroit**

##### *Muslim Slaves*

Our discussion of African-American Muslim communities in Detroit begins with their West African Muslim roots in slavery. Enslaved West Africans were likely the first Muslims in the Americas and they were forcibly transported with Spanish explorers in the 1500's.<sup>15</sup> Many of these African slaves were practicing Muslims, often able to read and write in Arabic because they were born into urban ruling elite families in West Africa.<sup>16</sup> Their literacy and leadership skills were compelling to some slave owners. Sylviane Diouf notes "there is some indication that the Muslims succeeded in the slave

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that these are not the only two Muslim groups in the Detroit area. Detroit also has a large population of South Asian Muslims, for example. The scope of this paper is not able to include a full discussion of all the Muslim groups in Detroit.

<sup>15</sup> Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 8; Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (NYU Press, 1998); Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition, Second Edition*, Second Edition (Indiana University Press, 2003). Chapter one of this text discusses Muslim African slaves that read and spoke Arabic.

structure, that they were promoted and trusted in a particular way.”<sup>17</sup> This favoritism by the slave owners did not mean, however, that the Muslim slaves were able to practice full religious freedom. Most slave owners still insisted on Christianity as the official religion of all slaves.<sup>18</sup> Allan D. Austin estimates that enslaved Muslims were only fifteen to twenty percent of the U.S. slave population and they faced difficulties from every direction in the transmission of their faith because of their isolation and limited opportunities to marry Muslim spouses.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars have traced the history of famous West African Muslim slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Omar Ibn Said in North Carolina, Bilali Mohammed and Salih Bilali in the Georgia Sea Islands, and Abd al-Ruhman Ibrahima in Mississippi.<sup>20</sup> These slaves wrote manuscripts in Arabic and were part of the largest Muslim community in North America in this era in the South Carolina and George Sea Islands. The Sunni Islam of those early African slaves did not survive in the United States after the Civil War in 1865.<sup>21</sup> Ex-slave, Mohammed Ali ben Said came to Detroit to work as a teacher in 1862 and he may have been the first Muslim in the city. Said, born in West African in a family of merchants and military people was enslaved in North Africa,

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<sup>17</sup> Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 102.

<sup>18</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, Reprint (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 43.

<sup>19</sup> *African Muslims in antebellum America : transatlantic stories and spiritual struggles / [edited by] Allan D. Austin.*, [Rev. and updated ed.]. (New York ; London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition, Second Edition*, 23–46. The second half of this chapter goes into details of the lives of these extraordinary Muslim slaves.

<sup>21</sup> Edward E. Curtis, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (SUNY Press, 2002), 7. This section of Curtis’ book explains that slave Islam did not survive. He also theorizes that because the Islam of slaves did not survive, it made newer Islamic communities difficult when believers tried to incorporate African Islamic traditions.

Turkey, Russia, and the Americas before his arrival in Detroit. He fought in the 55<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Massachusetts Colored Volunteers during the Civil War and published his autobiography in *The Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>22</sup>

Thus in the early twentieth century, when new African-American Muslim communities began to re-emerge, the sense of African roots was an important aspect of Muslim religious identity in Detroit. While there were many important African-American Islamic communities, such as the Moorish Science Temple of America, the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, and the Islamic Mission to America, the most significant for Detroit was the Nation of Islam.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Nation of Islam***

Islam became a major factor in African-American Detroit with the emergence of W.D. Fard Muhammad and Elijah and Clara Muhammad in 1930. Elijah and Clara Muhammad came to Detroit from Georgia, like many other African-Americans, seeking jobs in the booming auto industry, hoping to escape the violent racism and lynching in the South. However, with Northern Jim Crow segregation, African-Americans still suffered in Detroit. Muhammad's family experienced racism in Detroit that made it difficult to hold jobs and the Great Depression wiped out many banks and black churches that were important support systems. He and his wife met Fard in Detroit as Fard was peddling silks and goods from Asia door-to-door in the black community of Paradise Valley in 1930. Muhammad soon became convinced that Fard was a divine presence.

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<sup>22</sup> Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition, Second Edition*.

<sup>23</sup> Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America* (State University of New York Press, 2002); Curtis, *Islam in Black America*; E. E. Curtis, "African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim Identity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2005): 659–684; Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition, Second Edition*. These texts go into more detail of other new Islamic communities important for African-Americans.

Elijah was Fard's main disciples and was deeply influenced by his teachings. Specific details about who Fard truly was are not known, but he was an immigrant Muslim from Asia, possibly from Iran, Turkey, or India.<sup>24</sup> Fard had a dramatic impact on Elijah Muhammad. In his book, *Islam in Black America*, Edward Curtis describes Elijah Muhammad's identity with Fard. "Fard, Muhammad believed, was God in the flesh; Muhammad understood himself to be His Messenger... Muhammad later claimed that Fard was an immigrant from Mecca, Saudi Arabia, who came in 1930 to 'mentally resurrect' the so-called Negro from his deceptive views of self."<sup>25</sup> Elijah Muhammad and Fard's teachings soon formed Allah's Temple of Islam, eventually called the Nation of Islam (NOI).

One of the key theological differences in the NOI from Sunni Islam is the focus on the supremacy of blacks and the special message of Allah to blacks. According to Richard Brent Turner, "the idea that separated the Nation of Islam almost irrevocably from the larger Muslim community and other black American political and religious groups was the 'hidden truth' that W.D. Fard taught Elijah Muhammad, positing the notion that black and white people did not come from the same God."<sup>26</sup> This belief of a special message to blacks, as well as human divinity for W. D. Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad as a new messenger, were the major factors in the NOI's unique theology. While Elijah Muhammad did not stay in Detroit and moved to Chicago in the 1930's, Detroit is still an extremely important city as the birthplace of the NOI. Elijah

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<sup>24</sup> Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition, Second Edition*.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 63, 69. This section of Curtis' book goes into much more detail of the beginnings of the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad's background.

<sup>26</sup> Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition, Second Edition*, 157.

Muhammad was incarcerated as a political prisoner during World War II but re-emerged powerfully in the 1950's because of Malcolm X's work. Many Arab American Muslims in Detroit did not view the NOI in the realm of Islam, but instead as a distinctive and separate religious identity for African-Americans. Yet Elijah Muhammad maintained a cordial and fascinating interracial relationship with Nasser, the Arab Muslim president of Egypt in the 1950's and 60's.<sup>27</sup>

***Warith Deen Mohammed***<sup>28</sup>

The Nation of Islam continued to grow under Elijah Muhammad and his most successful Imam, Malcolm X, throughout the 1960's. Though the NOI was growing in influence, Elijah Muhammad had trouble passing his racial-separatist religious beliefs successfully onto his son, Warith Deen Mohammed. Mohammed was chosen to assume leadership of the NOI with his father's death, but he had trouble accepting all of the theology of the NOI. He was born in Detroit in 1933 and eventually studied Islam and Arabic in Muslim schools with immigrant teachers from Egypt and Jordan in Chicago. Mohammed was a Sunni Muslim and questioned the racial-separatist theology that his father taught in the NOI, but he remained in that religious community.

W.D. Mohammed was highly influenced by traditional Sunni Islam, and when he took over the Nation of Islam in 1975, he quickly removed the non-Sunni aspects such as the divinity of W.D. Fard Muhammad and his father's claim to be a "Messenger of Allah". Curtis argues, however, that Mohammed did maintain the importance of black community. "Though Imam Muhammad divorced himself from his father's biological

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<sup>27</sup> Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition, Second Edition*.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. This text outlines the reasoning behind Warith Deen Mohammed's name change from Wallace D. Muhammad.

views of blackness, he did adopt a definition of group identity that stressed black ties to the African continent and to an African Muslim ancestor in particular.”<sup>29</sup> W. D. Mohammed transformed the NOI into a Sunni Muslim community, establishing linkage to mainstream Islam in the United States. He also changed their name to the American Society of Muslims. However, Imam Mohammed maintained the community aspect teachings of his father. He stressed African-Americans coming together and supporting each other financially, so that they would not have to be dependent on whites. The American Society of Muslims’ theology was based in the Qur’an and the Five Pillars of Islam and Mohammed taught that mainstream Islam is compatible with African-American culture. Imam Warith Deen Mohammed died in 2008 and his religious community is dedicated to work on behalf of a united *ummah* that respects the distinctive culture and history of African-American Muslims.

### ***Louis Farrakhan***

The Nation of Islam as Elijah Muhammad led it did not die after the succession of Imam W.D. Mohammed. In 1977, Louis Farrakhan broke away from the leadership of W.D. Mohammed and continued teaching the racial exclusive theology of Elijah Muhammad. Minister Farrakhan has successfully led the Nation of Islam until the present day, with notable accomplishments such as the Million Man March. In his personal, insider account of the Nation of Islam, Vibert L. White Jr. writes about this historic event.

On October 16, 1995, Farrakhan led over one million black men to Washington, D.C., for prayer, atonement, and the creation of a new sense of responsibility to their families, communities, nations, and foremost, themselves. The one-day event signified the largest all-black demonstration in American history. Minister

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<sup>29</sup> Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 117.



Farrakhan, the mastermind, persuaded several of America's most influential and powerful leaders, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Maya Angelou, and Rosa Parks, to name a few, to address the crowd with inspirational presentations that encouraged positive and progressive action.<sup>30</sup>

The Million Man March legitimized Farrakhan as an African-American leader who has power and extreme influence. His teachings are dynamic and important to the community, though they are controversial in American media even today.<sup>31</sup>

### **Arab Americans in Detroit**

Arabs have been in America for over one hundred years, the first immigrants coming in the 1860's.<sup>32</sup> They were from a variety of Middle Eastern and North African countries and came to Detroit to work in the auto industry. Like many immigrants at the time, Muslims of the same ethnicity and nationality tended to form small enclave communities of immigrants. Glazier and Helweg's research shows that,

The process of social fragmentation increased considerably when more immigrants came to work in factories located near Detroit and other cities in Michigan. This in turn encouraged immigrants to retain a strong sense of ethnic identity. Also, better communication with home countries contributed to the survival of old world ethnicity.<sup>33</sup>

This early wave of immigrants was largely blue-collar, unskilled male laborers, drawn by the Ford Motor Company's unusually high pay. These immigrants were largely from

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<sup>30</sup> Vilbert L. White Jr, *Inside the Nation of Islam: A Historical and Personal Testimony by a Black Muslim*, 1st ed. (University Press of Florida, 2001), 159.

<sup>31</sup> IV, *Islam in Black America*; Curtis, *Islam in Black America*; Edward E. Curtis IV, *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History, 2-Volume Set*, 1st ed. (Facts on File, Inc., 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Rosina J. Hassoun, *Arab Americans in Michigan*, Discovering the Peoples of Michigan (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 23.

<sup>33</sup> Glazier and Helweg, *Ethnicity in Michigan-Issues and People*, 26.

Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Palestine, and North Africa.<sup>34</sup> The small communities of Arabs in Detroit were extremely close and kept their culture alive.

Contrary to popular belief, the majority, currently 58%, of Arabs in the Detroit area were, and still are, Christian.<sup>35</sup> There is a large concentration of Assyrians and Chaldeans who associate themselves with the ancient Christian church from the first century CE. While these groups separate themselves from Arabs, claiming other identities before Arab, the Assyrians and Chaldeans come from the areas surrounding Iraq, which is an Arab country.<sup>36</sup> America was seen as a religious haven for Christian Arabs from Muslim majority countries.<sup>37</sup> While Muslims may not have been the majority group in Arab communities in Detroit, there was still a high concentration of Arab Muslims in the Detroit area. Mosques began being built by different Muslim communities as a way to continue their religious and cultural education to their children.<sup>38</sup>

After the immigration act of 1965, immigration became much easier for non-European immigrants. Racist laws limiting immigration allowed larger numbers of Arabs to come to America. Many of the Arabs that came to the United States after 1965 were better educated than immigrants who came before them and got white-collar jobs.<sup>39</sup> As

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<sup>34</sup> Rosina J. Hassoun, *Arab Americans in Michigan*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Nabeel Abraham, Sally Howell, and Andrew Shryock, *Arab Detroit 9/11: Life in the Terror Decade* (Wayne State University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Rosina J. Hassoun, *Arab Americans in Michigan*, 6–7. While this paper will largely focus on the Arab Muslim population, this book outlines some of the issues of the Christian Arab community in Michigan.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 55.

<sup>39</sup> GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 293.

conflicts continued in the Middle East, many Arabs also came to America for safety or as refugees. Many Arabs still settled into established nationality communities present in the Detroit area. As immigration increased, the Detroit area was a safe place for Arabs to settle. Communities were already established, making transitions to American life a bit easier.<sup>40</sup>

Detroit is also an interesting area for American Muslims because of its high concentration of Shi'a Muslims. The majority of Arab Muslims in the Detroit area are Shi'a and not Sunni.<sup>41</sup> This creates unique tensions and dynamics in Detroit that other American Muslim communities do not deal with as strongly.<sup>42</sup> In his Detroit Mosque Study, Ihsan Bagby addresses some of the issues of the Sunni and Shi'ite relations in Detroit.

Detroit has a sizable Shi'ite community, mainly older immigrants from Lebanon and newer immigrants from Iraq. Six of the 33 Detroit mosques are Shi'ite, which means that 82% of Detroit mosques are Sunni and 18% are Shi'ite. Relations between the Sunni and Shi'ite masjids are not hostile but they are not close. The unity council of Detroit mosques, the Council of Islamic Organizations of Michigan, which has not been active for the past few years, includes Sunni and Shi'ite mosques, and they have sponsored dialogues between Sunnis and Shi'ites. The Detroit Mosque Study shows that Detroit mosque-goers are supportive of the idea of cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'ites, which is a positive indicator for the potential of improved relations between the two communities.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Rosina J. Hassoun, *Arab Americans in Michigan*, 42–45.

<sup>41</sup> Abraham, Howell, and Shryock, *Arab Detroit 9/11*, 3. Pages 34 and 35 break down the percentages of the Arab population in Detroit in more detail.

<sup>42</sup> "Islamic Center Marks 50 Years of Serving Metro Detroiters," *Detroit Free Press*, accessed March 23, 2013, <http://www.freep.com/article/20120715/NEWS05/207150496>. This is an interesting article that discusses some of the recent struggles between the Sunni/Shi'a tension in Detroit.

<sup>43</sup> Ihsan Bagby, "Strengths, Challenges and Ideology of Detroit Mosques: Reflections on the Detroit Mosque Study (2003)," *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 9 (2004): 102.

As Babgy comments, the Sunni and Shi'a relationship is not perfect, but the Arab Muslims in Detroit have a desire to be a united community. Hassoun also argues that religious sectarian differences are not as important as a factor to cooperation as nationality and/or place of origin.<sup>44</sup>

In the early twenty-first century, the Detroit area has the largest concentration of Arabs in America. Again, while the majority of Detroit Arabs are Christian, the large numbers give the Detroit Muslim Arabs unusual power and attention in the American Muslim landscape. In 2005, Zogby estimated that there are 490,000 Arabs living in greater Detroit. Suburbs, such as Dearborn, are bilingual places, with numerous Arabic signs and stores. After 9/11, this community became an important place for defining Islam in America. Since the community was large, it became a target for many questions about the terrorist attacks.<sup>45</sup> While the Detroit Arab Muslim community may not be completely representative of all Arab Muslims in America because of the "safety" of the Detroit area for Arabs and the amount of influence the group has, it has become the subject of much scholarly attention. Detroit represents a distinctive American Muslim community with a separate immigrant identity based ethnicity and language.

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<sup>44</sup> Rosina J. Hassoun, *Arab Americans in Michigan*, 46; B. Wilson, "The Spirit of the Motor City: Three Hundred Years of Religious History in Detroit," *The Michigan Historical Review* (2001): 52. B. Wilson's text also comments on the Sunni/Shi'a split in Detroit.

<sup>45</sup> Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* (Syracuse University Press, 2008), 120.

## CHAPTER II

## RESEARCH ON AMERICAN ISLAM AND AMERICAN MUSLIMS

Much of the general research of Islam in America focuses on the larger immigrant Muslim community. This can include not only Arabs, but also South Asians, Persians, Sub-Saharan Africans, and Asians.<sup>46</sup> Most studies and scholars agree that the composition of American Muslims is almost evenly split across the three main ethnic groups. Numbers vary slightly, but Arab Americans, South Asian Americans, and African-Americans each make up about 25-30% of the Muslim American population.<sup>47</sup> While my discussion of Islam in Detroit will focus on specifically Arab Muslims, the scholarly conversation on immigrant Islam in general is an important aspect of understanding Islam in Detroit. Many of the issues of the immigrant community in general are also factors in the Detroit community.

Several scholars have published books specifically on the Detroit Muslim and Arab community in the last decade.<sup>48</sup> The attention that the Dearborn area has because of its large concentration of Arabs in America is one of the factors leading to new research. Especially after 9/11, Dearborn and the surrounding Arab-populated Detroit suburbs became a target for both scholarly and media attention.

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<sup>46</sup> Aminah Beverly McCloud, *Transnational Muslims in American Society*, 1st ed. (University Press of Florida, 2006). McCloud provides an excellent overview of the general immigrant population, with information specific to each immigrant group.

<sup>47</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *Becoming American?: The Forging of Arab and Muslim Identity in Pluralist America* (Baylor University Press, 2011), 3; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Section 2: Religious Beliefs and Practices," *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, accessed September 26, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/section-2-religious-beliefs-and-practices/>.

<sup>48</sup> Abraham, Howell, and Shryock, *Arab Detroit 9/11*; Andrew Shryock, "Finding Islam in Detroit: The Multiple Histories, Identities, and Locations of a City and Its Muslims" (Stanford University, n.d.), <http://stanford.edu/dept/france-stanford/Conferences/Islam/Shryock.pdf>; Jamal and Naber, *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*; Rosina J. Hassoun, *Arab Americans in Michigan*.

While there has been recent scholarly attention on the Arabs of Detroit, there still is little scholarly information on African-American Muslims in Detroit. Much of the scholarly research of African-American Muslim communities focuses on other major metropolitan cities such as New York, Chicago, Atlanta, or Los Angeles. The research I discuss later in this section is often from these cities, but again, the major issues that these African-American Muslim communities are facing are often similar to the issues in Detroit specific to the thesis of this paper.

In one of the first comprehensive studies of Muslims in America, *Islamic Values in the United States*, Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis broadly categorize Muslim Americans into two main groups. “In the most general terms, the Muslims of North America can be divided into two distinct groups: immigrant Muslims and indigenous Muslims.”<sup>49</sup> The implication in Haddad’s scholarship is that all African-American Muslims are heterodox and all immigrants are orthodox, which is an incorrect assumption. The problem that some scholars see in the book is its misreading of history implied by the terms that Islam began in the United States with immigrant mosques such as the mosque in Cedar Rapids in the 1920’s. Scholars have proven this assumption wrong, as stated earlier, because West Africans were likely the first Muslims in America.<sup>50</sup> This text sets up a division between immigrant communities, such as Arabs and South Asians, and African-American Muslims and sets the stage for the legitimacy of immigrant Muslims over African-American Muslims.

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<sup>49</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1987), 3.

<sup>50</sup> Diouf, *Servants of Allah*; Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition, Second Edition*.

This classification can lead to thinking of the immigrant community as the group practicing “true” Islam and African-Americans often practicing less authentic forms of Islam. Simply using the terms heterodox and orthodox assume a “correct” and “incorrect” Islam. While branches of African-American Islam are non-Sunni, it is important from a scholarly perspective to include all forms of Islam. Also, the majority of African-American Muslims now practice Sunni Islam. In his text, *Islam in Black America*, Edward Curtis strongly argues against exclusion of non-Sunni Islamic groups. He states, “...wherever and whenever a person calls himself or herself Muslim, scholars should include this person’s voice in their understanding of what constitutes Islam. The mere fact that one has labeled oneself a Muslim indicates some sort of participation, however slight, in the process of Islamic history.”<sup>51</sup> Non-Sunni Islamic groups have had a dramatic impact on the American religious landscape, and it is crucial for scholars to acknowledge and include these groups in their studies. Many American Muslims and Muslim American communities are a part of the American *ummah*.

While there is sometimes a false dichotomy of immigrant versus African-American or black versus white that much recent scholarship is attempting to move away from, there often are lived boundaries between Muslim American communities based on race, class, nationality, ethnicity, etc. These boundaries are not static, but are constantly changing across time and spaces. However, important issues still separate the larger immigrant Muslim, and specifically Arab Muslim, communities from the African-American Muslim communities. This section of the paper will review some of the major

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<sup>51</sup> Curtis, *Islam in Black America*, 6.

issues that affect the Muslim Americans, focusing on those that tend to divide and unite the larger immigrant and African-American Muslim groups.

### **Factors that Divide the *Ummah***

#### ***Race and Racism in the American Ummah***

One of the most prominent divisions between the immigrant and African-American Muslim communities is race. Racial divisions among American Muslims are largely between the African-American and white immigrant Muslim communities. American society has institutional racism towards blacks in general, and research shows that many immigrants consequently adopt some of these racist tendencies. In her book, *American Muslim Women*, Jamillah Karim argues that African-American Muslim communities experience racism from immigrant Muslims. She writes, “the pursuit for acceptance causes immigrants to differentiate themselves from blacks and also drives them to perceive and treat blacks with a scorn taught by the dominant racial discourse.”<sup>52</sup> Karim argues that racism is so embedded in American society that even new non-white immigrants desire to be considered white instead of people of color. Immigrants often feel they can only be true American citizens if they associate with the dominate white culture.<sup>53</sup> She continues, “other African-American Muslims, who watched immigrants strive at all costs to be accepted by whites, questioned why immigrants had not made as much effort to build alliances with African-Americans, with whom they shared an *ummah*.”<sup>54</sup> African-Americans may feel under-appreciated by immigrant communities

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<sup>52</sup> Karim, 28

<sup>53</sup> Karim, 32

<sup>54</sup> Jamillah Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender Within the Ummah* (NYU Press, 2008), 128.



who spend more energy reaching out to white communities instead of supporting and embracing African-American Muslims in the *ummah*.

Other studies show that racism within the American *ummah* extends not only to existing communities, but to converts as well. Haddad shows that “African-American converts also complain that immigrants tend to be more enthusiastic about new Anglo members of the community than they are about blacks. African-Americans thus experience racism again, this time in the very religion they believed could offer an alternative.”<sup>55</sup> Islam teaches social justice and acceptance of racial and ethnic diversity, but American culture does not always create an environment that fosters such ideals. Racial divisions and discrimination within American Muslim communities threaten to keep black and white Muslims from one another

### ***Socio-Economic Divisions in the Ummah***

Another factor that threatens the unity of American Muslims is the income level of Muslim families. Socioeconomic status largely determines where families live and thus affects potential interactions between communities. Income levels therefore become a major factor in the composition of mosques, even surpassing race.<sup>56</sup> Immigrant Muslims often have a much higher socioeconomic status than African-American Muslims. In their book, *Religion and Immigration*, Haddad, Smith, and Esposito argue, “the immigrant community has at least ten times the wealth of the African, Hispanic, European, and Native American community. They therefore have the best facilities, including those for providing Islamic schooling, and can take advantage of ready access

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<sup>55</sup> Haddad, 59

<sup>56</sup> Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research* (Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2003), 72.

to the Muslim world.”<sup>57</sup> This drastic income difference clearly influences the interactions between Muslim groups. Immigrant Muslims in general are in the middle to upper class of society with high levels of education. Upper middle-class status gives their communities access to superior education, living conditions, potential jobs, and opportunities to increase their socio-economic advantages with each generation.

This class differences between many African-American and immigrant Muslim communities especially affects their residential living patterns. Racial divisions are often associated with lower income levels and unfavorable housing locations for African-American Muslims. Jamillah Karim’s research demonstrates that, “this residential division, often spoken of as an inner-city versus a suburban division, is a major theme in intra-*ummah* discussions of race.”<sup>58</sup> Many immigrant Muslim communities are located in wealthy suburban areas, while many African-American communities are in poorer urban centers. The class issues between many immigrant and African-American Muslims affects the needs and wants of a particular Muslim community and mosque.

### ***Primary Language Issues in the Ummah***

Language is a critical factor in the American Muslim *ummah*. Diverse native languages among Muslim Americans are an important factor affecting both the relationship between African-American and the immigrant Muslim communities, as well as relations within the immigrant Muslim community. Although the Qur’an is written in Arabic, a study by Ishan Bagby on American Mosques shows that Arabic is not the

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<sup>57</sup> Haddad, Smith, and Esposito, *Religion and Immigration*, 172.

<sup>58</sup> Karim, 40

primary language of most of the Muslims in America.<sup>59</sup> In an article for the New York Times, Andrea Elliot comments on the issues of language and how language affects religious power. “At the heart of the conflict is a question of leadership. Much to the ire of African-Americans, many immigrants see themselves as the rightful leaders of the faith in America by virtue of their Islamic schooling and fluency in Arabic, the original language of the Koran.”<sup>60</sup> Arabic and non-Arabic native languages such as English create tensions between different Muslim groups and limit the integration of services and leadership at local mosques.

African-American Muslims are often discredited by the immigrant Muslim community because of their general lack of knowledge or experience with Arabic and foreign Islamic cultures. Even as African-American Muslims embrace their religion and religious history, many immigrants still discriminate against the African-American community. McCloud argues, “no matter how much African-American Muslims mastered the Islamic sciences or for how many generations they had existed as Muslims, they were still considered new and uncultured *mawali*. More significantly, they could not be allowed to define Islam, because they are not Arab.”<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, African-American Sunni Muslims in Warith Deen Mohammed’s Muslim American Society assert that they are practicing Islam based on African-American Islamic culture and experience. Again, racial issues interact with language divisions, but the importance of Arabic to Islam gives native speakers a leadership edge over those who do not speak Arabic.

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<sup>59</sup> Ihsan Bagby, *The American Mosque 2011* (CAIR, January 2012), 13, <http://www.cair.com/Portals/0/pdf/The-American-Mosque-2011-web.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> Andrea Elliott, “Between Black and Immigrant Muslims, an Uneasy Alliance,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2007, sec. New York Region, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/nyregion/11muslim.html>.

<sup>61</sup> McCloud, 132

### ***Women's Roles in the Ummah***

Women's roles in Islamic communities create tensions across the globe. Many communities have difficulties balancing women's roles as described in the Qur'an, social traditions, and modern views of feminism. These tensions are only heightened in the American Islamic community because of its diversity of theological views, ethnicities, and cultures.

There are some striking differences between women's roles in African-American and immigrant Muslim communities. Throughout African-American Islamic history, women have played important roles within their faith communities, such as Clara Muhammad and Aminah Beverly McCloud. African-American Muslim groups often do not follow as strict of rules limiting women leadership and involvement, as many immigrant groups do. In their book, *Muslim Women in America*, Haddad, Smith, and Moore speak to the changing situation of women in Muslim America. "African-American mosques today have the highest number of women leaders – over 80 percent allow women on their boards – and profess themselves to be quite open to female participation. South Asians have the fewest female board participants, and Arab mosques are somewhere in the middle."<sup>62</sup> African-American Muslim communities are typically used to strong women who have active roles in mosques and in their culture. As interactions between immigrant communities and African-American Muslim communities increase, tensions arise about women's roles, especially in mosques.

In many Islamic countries, men and women are completely separated in mosques, so as not to be a sexual distraction during prayers. Karen Leonard states, "in 81 percent of

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<sup>62</sup> Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Muslim Women in America*, 66.

immigrant mosques, women pray behind a curtain or in another room, but in only 30 percent of African-American mosques do women do this.”<sup>63</sup> Many mosques in America do not have such strict policies separating men from women. Haddad, Smith and Moore continue their discussion of Muslim women in America noting that, “many immigrant women come from cultures in which women seldom if ever attend the mosque...Muslim women in the United States for generations have been able to attend the mosque if they want to.”<sup>64</sup> The presence of women in mosques can sometimes create uncomfortable situations and limit mosque membership. African-Americans typically have their own mosques that allow women involvement, while immigrants typically have their own mosques that have different rules for women.

### ***Theological Tension in the Ummah***

Theological differences between different Muslim communities in America also create tension. The groups that feel this tension most prominently are African-American communities, especially the Nation of Islam. Since the Nation of Islam is not a Sunni Muslim group, many immigrant communities discredit the legitimacy of this group. Nation of Islam followers do not feel accepted into the American *ummah*, even by other African-Americans.<sup>65</sup> Many African-American Muslims who are Sunni still face discrimination because of the Nation of Islam. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri argues that some immigrants group all African-American Muslims together and associate non-mainstream

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<sup>63</sup> Leonard, *Muslims in the United States*, 78.

<sup>64</sup> Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Muslim Women in America*, 62.

<sup>65</sup> McCloud, *Transnational Muslims in American Society*, 136.

theological practices with all black Muslims. This discredits the value of all African-American Muslim groups, whether or not they are Sunni.<sup>66</sup>

Another increasing theological difference in American Muslim communities is Sunni versus Shi'a. These sects have differing theological views in areas such as Muslim leadership. Many Shi'as, especially in America, come from Iran. Sunnis vastly outnumber Shi'as in the world, but the Shi'a global community is strongly connected.<sup>67</sup> Prior to 9/11, hostilities between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims were diminished in America in part because there were so few Shi'as in America, but also because the communities had a somewhat fresh start in a new country.<sup>68</sup>

The increase of immigrant Muslims from both sects, however, and the increased American interaction with the Middle East have brought some of the discrimination back onto American soil.<sup>69</sup> "Many Sunni Muslims refuse to acknowledge them [Shi'as] as Muslims at all, sustaining centuries' old arguments."<sup>70</sup> These scholars, such as Smith and McCloud, argue that these sect issues are likely to increase as America's interactions in the Middle East and migrations from the Middle East increase.

### ***Competing Social Needs in the Ummah***

Religions play an important role in believers' lives beyond their spiritual needs. Religious communities are a vital aspect of social relations and can be important

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<sup>66</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States: A Study of Los Angeles* (Praeger, 1997), 172.

<sup>67</sup> McCloud, *Transnational Muslims in American Society*, 95.

<sup>68</sup> Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 267.

<sup>69</sup> Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America, Second Edition*, second edition (Columbia University Press, 2009), 197.

<sup>70</sup> McCloud, *Transnational Muslims in American Society*, 95.

communities of support in all areas of life. Muslim communities in America are prime examples of this – a believer’s mosque functions more than simply a prayer-house: it also provides social and economic support for its members. Different groups of Muslims, however, may have drastically different needs and desires for social uplift.

The American Muslim groups that seem to have the most drastic differences in social needs from their religious communities are the African-American and immigrant Muslim groups. Part of these different needs come from the average socioeconomic levels of the communities, with African-Americans typically at the lower end of the capitalist system.<sup>71</sup> For example, a study done in Los Angeles by GhaneaBassiri showed that many African-American Muslims felt that immigrants did not share their concerns, which resulted in the two groups building different mosques. “In Los Angeles, most African-American mosques are located in the inner cities, for that is where the social problems such organizations are trying to deal with are most evident. Many immigrant Muslims have never visited such areas or attended such mosques.”<sup>72</sup> Immigrant Muslims in this community were not dealing with the same issues as a result of poverty and poor living conditions as African-American Muslims were, so the Muslim communities never united.

African-American Muslim communities have a deep historical legacy tied to fighting racism and promoting social and racial equality. The Nation of Islam, for example, taught black supremacist ideals, which the community still feels today.<sup>73</sup> One of

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<sup>71</sup> Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 56.

<sup>72</sup> GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States*, 175.

<sup>73</sup> Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition, Second Edition*, 225.

the leading figures in African-American Islam is Malcolm X. Malcolm X played a vital role in initially bringing the Nation of Islam to the public and eventually bringing Sunni Islam to the African-American Muslim community. Despite the shift towards Sunni Islam, Malcolm X still saw the importance of fighting against racism and its ties to Islamic faith. Manning Marable cites Malcolm's words in his book *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*:

[Malcolm] could... see the role Islam would play not just in his spiritual life, but in his work...[Malcolm] concluded that "our success in America will involve two circles, Black Nationalism and Islam". Nationalism was necessary to connect African-Americans with Africa, he reasoned. "And Islam will link us spiritually to Africa, Arabia, and Asia".<sup>74</sup>

Islam is a religion that promotes human rights and welfare, and African-Americans especially relate this value to their struggles in the United States. Immigrants do face oppression and racism in America as well, but it manifests itself differently than the African-American struggle because many immigrant Muslims are white.

The different needs of Muslim religious communities are clearly illustrated by American Muslim organizations. The most popular and influential Muslim organization in America is ISNA – Islamic Society of North America. This group, founded over fifty years ago,<sup>75</sup> in particular does not always address the needs of the entire Muslim American community, but rather focuses on the needs of the immigrant community.

While ISNA is designed to be an organization of all American Muslims, some African-Americans still perceive it as devoted primarily to the needs of members of the immigrant community. In her book, *Islam in America*, Jane Smith discusses the tensions

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<sup>74</sup> Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, Reprint (Penguin Books, 2011), 311–312.

<sup>75</sup> "ISNA :: Islamic Society of North America," *ISNA*, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.isna.net/>. ISNA does not provide a specific date of founding.



with certain African-American Muslims and ISNA. Imam Warith Deen Mohammed's followers in the Muslim American Society tend not to go to annual ISNA conferences but to hold their own national meetings to address topics of particular interest to African-American Muslims. In some cases, African-Americans even feel they are unwelcome and unappreciated by those involved in ISNA. Karim argues that some of this tension stems from immigrants not creating social space for African-Americans, as well as the socio-economic divide that is present in many ISNA events. ISNA's annual conference, for example, is too expensive for many African-American Muslims.<sup>76</sup>

ISNA is extremely influential in America, but the tendency of the organization to focus on the needs of one community over another is a major factor towards the divisions in the American *ummah*. A. Chande in an article *Islam in the African American Community*, argues,

African-American Muslims cannot understand why immigrants will send donations to all sorts of causes in other countries forgetting to address the economic plight of their religious compatriots here in the US. Moreover, they do not understand why prayers are addressed to God to ease the problems of Muslims in Palestine, Kashmir, etc., whereas no mention is made of the problems of the inner city dwellers in the US.<sup>77</sup>

Poverty and inner-city issues are especially relevant in the Detroit area. Since the majority of African-American mosques are located in the metro-Detroit, and the majority of Arab mosques in the suburbs, the lack of focus on inner-city Detroit is a major source of tension between the two communities.

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<sup>76</sup> Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 54–55. This section of the text describes a particular ISNA conference held in Chicago in 2002.

<sup>77</sup> A. CHANDE, "Islam in the African American Community: Negotiating Between Black Nationalism and Historical Islam," *Islamic Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 235.

Racism, miscommunication, and spatial and economic division between the African-American and immigrant Muslim communities contribute to the division of the American *ummah*. GhaneaBassiri argues this point persuasively. He states, that the differences in class, culture, language, and race are difficult issues to negotiate. Immigrants in particular have a difficult time understanding their place in American culture and have a hard time distinguishing how to interact with American Muslims. “Consequently, these two Muslim communities”, he continues, “though faced with the same problems of keeping an Islamic faith and identity in an American context, remain for the most part segregated and distinct.”<sup>78</sup> These misunderstandings create miscommunication and disunity throughout the entire community.

### **Factors that Unite the *Ummah***

#### ***Discrimination in the Ummah***

Although most Muslims in America face discrimination after 9/11, immigrant communities in particular are targeted because of their race and physical appearance. Karim even argues, “in the face of the post-9/11 backlash, it is better to be an African-American Muslim than an immigrant Muslim.”<sup>79</sup> This targeted racism on immigrant Muslims, often termed as Islamophobia, however, has helped the immigrant community better understand the struggles that the African-American community has been dealing with for hundreds of years in America. Their joint discrimination is helping to create a new, uniquely American Islam.<sup>80</sup> All Muslims in America now have to routinely defend

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<sup>78</sup> GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States*, 177.

<sup>79</sup> Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 40.

<sup>80</sup> Smith, *Islam in America, Second Edition*, 77.

their faith and their right to live in America, despite their race and ethnicity. Fighting against Islamophobia creates a common goal – Muslims from all groups have to fight against stereotypes and biased information. Chande argues that “one of the interesting consequences of 9/11 is that immigrant Muslims are now more willing to consult African-Americans on civil rights issues over which African-Americans have a lot of experience.”<sup>81</sup> While this is not a pleasant experience by any means, and the types of discrimination are not identical, the fact that the entire American Muslim community is doing something in common helps to unify the different Muslim American groups.<sup>82</sup>

Muslims in Detroit have a particularly hard battle to fight against discrimination in the post 9/11 world. The recent media attention on the Detroit area because of its economic plight and the high concentration of Arabs makes Detroit an easy target for questions and harassment towards Muslims there. Jamal and Naber, in their book *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, state,

Only 38 percent of Americans in the Detroit metro area believe that Arabs and Muslims are doing all that they can to fight the war on terror. Muslims and Arabs across the United States are consistently asked to apologize for 9/11, as if they were behind the attacks. And yet, ironically, the numerous and countless condemnations emanating from mosques and organization in the United States that emphatically denounce the attacks have received little media attention...When asked whether Arabs and Muslims could be trusted, Americans in the Detroit metro area ranked them as the least trustworthy subpopulation.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the efforts from the Muslim community in Detroit and its suburbs, many Americans do not trust the American Muslim community.

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<sup>81</sup> CHANDE, “Islam in the African American Community,” 239.

<sup>82</sup> Smith, *Islam in America, Second Edition*, 186.

<sup>83</sup> Jamal and Naber, *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, 120.

One organization that is having a dramatic effect on Muslim stereotypes and perceptions in America is CAIR – the Council on American-Islamic Relations. CAIR was founded in 1994 and has continuously worked in the media and political sphere to fight for civil rights and positive portrayals of Muslims in America. Especially after 9/11, CAIR has had an active role in protecting and defending Muslims against hate crimes and violations of rights. CAIR also provides literature for the American community to help educate Americans about Islam and Muslims.<sup>84</sup>

Muslims are also realizing that they cannot continue to attack each other from within their own community. In her book, *Mecca and Main Street*, Geneive Abdo argues, “Most Islamic leaders, such as Abdul Malik, believe that after September 11 Muslims must unify. And, although great tensions remain, September 11 did inspire at least some immigrant and African-American Muslims to begin chipping away at an icy relationship that dates back decades.”<sup>85</sup> Both African-American and immigrant communities see the need for a united Muslim American front, which again gives all Muslim Americans a common goal and purpose. 9/11 created a difficult situation for Muslims in America, but as Smith argues, its backlash and community effects may prove to be beneficial for Islam in America.<sup>86</sup>

This idea of all Muslim Americans joining together is represented in Detroit. In 2009, Imam Luqman Ameen Abdullah was shot in an FBI raid in Detroit. Imam Luqman of the Masjid Al-Haqq mosque was accused of being part of a radical Islamic movement,

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<sup>84</sup> “CAIR: Who We Are” (CAIR, October 23, 2012), <http://cair.com/about-us/cair-who-we-are.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Geneive Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), 121.

<sup>86</sup> Smith, *Islam in America, Second Edition*, 195.

“Ummah”, but those close to Luqman believes his murder was unjust.<sup>87</sup> The tragedy of Luqman’s death, however, has provided a bridge from the Arab Muslim community and the African-American Muslim community. While Imam Luqman was black and not Arab, he was an extremely influential leader to one of the poorest communities in the Detroit area. His death was a symbol of multi-layered racial and religious discrimination. As Sally Howell states, “For the first time since 9/11, the Detroit NAACP and CAIR have found they have much in common.”<sup>88</sup> Discrimination affects both the African-American and Arab American Muslim community, and many Muslims are realizing that combining their efforts can bring change.<sup>89</sup>

### ***Global Community Connections***

The *ummah* in America has the tools for unification due to the teachings and worldview of Islam. Islam is a religion that unifies its members and stresses their spiritual connections to each other. The word *ummah* itself means the global community of Muslims. Haddad, Smith, and Eposito argue, “one of the most significant issues facing Muslims in America today is the integration of the many varieties of immigrant Islam with the Islam of the indigenous American community. The religion of Islam is dedicated to the ideal of one *ummah*, or overall community, with no boundaries of race or ethnic identities.”<sup>90</sup> Muslim Americans must realize that their faith stresses the unification with all Muslims, regardless of race, ethnicity, and class. The creation of a united front,

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<sup>87</sup> Alex P. Kellogg, “Detroit Imam Killed, Six Arrested in an FBI Raid,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125677249132814537.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Abraham, Howell, and Shryock, *Arab Detroit 9/11*, 176.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 169–177. This section of Howell’s essay goes into more detail of the death of Imam Luqman.

<sup>90</sup> Haddad, Smith, and Esposito, *Religion and Immigration*, 165.

instead of an *‘asabiya* in this country is especially important in light of Islamophobia, to addressing the discrimination against Muslims in America and Muslims around the world.

Beyond defending their faith against others, however, worldwide Muslim unification is an important ideal stressed by the Prophet Muhammad. In his last sermon, he stated, “All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white.”<sup>91</sup> The challenge is presented to Muslims from the Prophet Muhammad himself, that racial differences should have no place in their *ummah*.

Another important figure for expressing Islam’s global connection and racial particularity in America is Malcolm X. Malcolm X is an extremely important person in the African-American Muslim community and in America as a whole. The nature of his conversion to Sunni Islam in 1964 illuminates the racial tensions and the possibilities for change. In his text, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, Manning Marable quotes Malcolm’s words about his experience of the hajj.

“Islam brings together in unity all colors and classes... Everyone shares what he has, those who do have share with those who have not, those who know teach those who don’t know.” The common faith shared by all participants appeared to eradicate class divisions, at least as Malcolm could perceive them.<sup>92</sup>

Here, Malcolm X argues for the unity of Islam, showing that all Muslims can be unified in religion, despite differences in race, ethnicity, and culture. Imam Warith Deen

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<sup>91</sup> “The Prophet Muhammad’s Last Sermon” (Fordham University, 1996), <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/muhm-sermon.asp>.

<sup>92</sup> Marable, *Malcolm X*, 309.

Mohammed continued this line of reasoning soon after he became the leader of the Nation of Islam in. In his article, “African-American Muslim Leaders and the War in Iraq”, Lawrence A. Mamiya writes, “at a June 18, 1975 meeting at McCormick Place in Chicago, he announced, ‘There will be no such category as a white Muslim or a black Muslim. All will be Muslims. All children of God’.”<sup>93</sup> These are vital statements for the future of Islam in America, spoken by men who continue to influence Muslims in America, especially the African-American communities.

There have been recent steps to unify the immigrant and African-American Muslim communities. Two Muslim organizations, the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), established in 1968,<sup>94</sup> and the Muslim American Society(MAS), established in 1993,<sup>95</sup> have taken positive steps to teach about the history of Islam in America.

Mohamed Nimer, in his book *The North American Muslim Resource Guide*, states, “A sign of the transitional nature of today’s ICNA and MAS is their requirement that members be aware of the Muslim roots in North America, the history of Malcolm X, American Muslim community-building models, and the American political process.”<sup>96</sup> Actions such as these point to the overall desire of Muslim unity.

While no community is perfect in achieving this goal of global unity through Islam, Muslims in Detroit are conscious of the idea of unification. In his essay, “Finding

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<sup>93</sup> Lawrence H. Mamiya, “African American Muslim Leaders and the War in Iraq,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2008): 40, doi:10.1080/15570274.2008.9523323.

<sup>94</sup> “Home,” [Http://www.icna.org](http://www.icna.org), accessed January 21, 2013, <http://www.icna.org/>.

<sup>95</sup> “About Us” (The Muslim American Society, n.d.), <http://www.muslimamericansociety.org/main/content/about-us>.

<sup>96</sup> Mohamed Nimer, *The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2002), 71.

Islam in Detroit”, Andrew Shryock discusses the desire of Detroit Muslim communities. “The idea that Muslims of diverse backgrounds belong (or ought to belong) to a single community is widely accepted in Detroit. Senegalese Tijanis, Lebanese-born imams, African-American mosque leaders, and even an Ahmadiyya imam (whose beliefs would be considered heretical to many Detroit Muslims) have assured us that the basic principles of Islam are shared, and that internal differences are based on ‘culture’ or ‘error’.”<sup>97</sup> For a variety of reasons, Muslims in Detroit recognize that Islam is a unifying factor between all the communities.

### ***Common Beliefs***

While differences in theology and social, political, and racial identities exist between Muslim American groups, Muslim Americans do have more similarities than differences. In light of 9/11 and the discrimination this group has faced, many Muslims in America are attempting to join communities together to create a unique American Islam. Haddad, Smith, and Moore state, “Muslim families today face many issues and concerns. They are often forced to find their communal relationships in nonfamily structures, a new experience for many immigrants and even for African-Americans.”<sup>98</sup> While differences in communities clearly still exist, American Muslims still can come together to form communities over their shared religious beliefs. An African-American and immigrant Muslim may have more in common in core beliefs, for example, than a secular American and Muslim: these common core beliefs are leading Muslims of all sects and communities to find common ground. “They are looking again at each other, wondering

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<sup>97</sup> Andrew Shryock, “Finding Islam in Detroit: The Multiple Histories, Identities, and Locations of a City and Its Muslims,” 3.

<sup>98</sup> Haddad, Smith, and Moore, *Muslim Women in America*, 93.



where are the common bonds that render Islam a single faith, albeit with a wide range of possible interpretations and understandings, within the whole complex of multi-faith America.”<sup>99</sup> Muslims in America have a difficult task of finding unity in spite of differences in lifestyle, culture, and theology, but many Muslims recognize the need for a cohesive Muslim community in America and are attempting to find the common ground.

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<sup>99</sup> Smith, *Islam in America, Second Edition*, 186.

### CHAPTER III

#### ISLAM IN DETROIT

While the next logical section of the paper would be an in-depth ethnographic study of the Muslim population in Detroit, money and time issues have limited this option. While interviews would be ideal, there is still a wealth of information on the Detroit Muslim community that can help to understand the complexity of issues in the area. *The People's History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn, uses a method of drawing from print sources to explore the struggles of American people. Zinn uses information from print sources to tell the history of ignored or marginalized Americans, and I will use a similar content analysis in this section.

In this analysis, I will explore the theories and major themes that scholars have studied on American Islam in general, and apply them to the specific situation in Detroit. By using Detroit-specific studies, newspaper and magazine articles, and data and statistics, I will show that Detroit Muslims struggle with many of the same issues that general Muslim American population does, but Detroit Muslims have a unique opportunity for both unification and additional divisions because of the media attention on the Detroit area. Detroit is an example of a heightened microcosm of Arab American and African-American Muslim relations. There is a high concentration of Arab American and African-American Muslims in the area, and the tension between the two groups is amplified from the media attention. The paradigm of Detroit shows how Arabs are perceived as legitimate Muslims, African-Americans are marginalized, and therefore not perceived as legitimate, and how the effects of this marginalization are played out in the

media. Arab Americans are presented as the “true” Muslims and the media argues that Arabs, not African-Americans, will save Detroit.

### **Arab American Muslims are Dominant over African-American Muslims**

#### *Arabs have Assumed Legitimacy*

There are many significant factors that lead both Arab American Muslims and the general American population to assume that Arab American Muslims are the legitimate American Muslim voice. Factors such as cultural origins, language, and education give Arab American Muslims credibility in the Islamic faith and their general higher socio-economic status gives them power in the community.

#### *Cultural Legacy*

Islam was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia through the Prophet Muhammad and has a powerful influence over Arab culture. Some scholars even argue that Arab culture cannot be separated from Islam.<sup>100</sup> Islamic education, therefore, is intertwined throughout the Arab world – from North Africa to the Middle East. Islamic history and culture is a natural part of Arabic culture and many Arab Americans continue to pass on this Islamic history when they immigrate to America. This ethnic connection to the Prophet and the cultural emphasis on Islamic viewpoints gives Arab Americans a sense of assumed authority and knowledge of Islam.

#### *Language*

As the second chapter showed, Arab Americans have an assumed degree of legitimacy that African-Americans will never have because of the native language of Arabic and the connection to the birthplace of Islam. Some of this supremacy can be

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<sup>100</sup> Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham, *The Arab World and Arab-Americans: Understanding a Neglected Minority* (Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1981), 7.

argued to be valid factors. Arabic is crucial to Islam. The Qur'an is only truly considered the Qur'an by the majority of mainstream Sunni and Shi'a Muslim schools of thought when recited in the original Arabic. A mastery of the language and the specific recitation becomes a critical aspect of prayer services at the Mosques. Since many African-Americans did not come into the Islamic faith with an education that taught Arabic and Islamic history, African-Americans are at a disadvantage in language. These factors can lead to Arab-dominance in American Islam, whether intentional or not.<sup>101</sup> Even with the more recent focus on learning Arabic and Islamic culture in the African-American Muslim community, African-American Muslims are seen to have less authority because they are not native speakers and may not be able to recite the Qur'an or communicate with other Muslims from the Middle East or North Africa.

*Arabs are "True" Muslims*

One of the most damaging aspects of the de-legitimization and marginalization of African-American Muslims in Detroit is that the assumed legitimacy of Arab Americans projects Arab Americans as the "true" Muslims in America. Scholars argue that this is common in all of America, that immigrant or Arab Islam is projected as more authentic than African-American Islam because of its Arabic cultural roots.<sup>102</sup> "The second way that immigrant identity is privileged is in the way that American Muslim identity translates into 'American Islam', a version of Islam that, in the view of many immigrants, can never be as authentic as the Islam practiced in the countries from which they

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<sup>101</sup> Elliott, "Between Black and Immigrant Muslims, an Uneasy Alliance."

<sup>102</sup> Many scholars such as Zain Abdullah, Aminah McCloud, Jamillah Karim, and Suad Abdul-Khabeer are actively fighting against these stereotypes and portrayals of African-American Muslims as marginal.

came.”<sup>103</sup> Arabic culture is intimately tied to Islam and can be viewed as the only “real” way to be a Muslim. Many African-American Muslims in Detroit, however, argue against this.

Imam Saleem Rahman of Masjid Wali Muhammad in Detroit distinguished between immigrant Muslims, who rely too heavily on “culture,” on the “symbols, not the content” of the faith, and African-American Muslims, whose culture and history have equipped them to embrace and reform Islam. “If you want to know about Islam in American,” he told us, “you’ve to know that it started right here.” In Detroit.”<sup>104</sup>

Islam has been a vital part of Detroit culture, and African-Americans have a claim to at least part of Detroit Islam. They, like many other African-American Muslims across America, are fighting for that claim. “Many African-Americans, not only seek to challenge the notion held by immigrant Muslims that are just because they were born and raised in an Islamic country they know more about Islam than African-American Muslims, but see themselves as those primarily responsible for upholding and propagating the teachings of Islam in the United States.”<sup>105</sup> African-American Muslims may say that they know more about the United States and how to fight for civil and human rights than any other Muslim ethnic group in this country. After all, civil rights movements in America originated with African-American institutes in the early twentieth century. African-American Muslims are fighting for legitimacy and authority of Islam in America, but their objections may prove ineffective because of their widespread marginalization.

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<sup>103</sup> Karim, *American Muslim Women*, 41.

<sup>104</sup> Andrew Shryock, “Finding Islam in Detroit: The Multiple Histories, Identities, and Locations of a City and Its Muslims,” 4.

<sup>105</sup> GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States*, 174.

### *Racial Visibility in the Ummah*

Arabs in Detroit also gain power from their visibility. Since there is a large and growing population of immigrants, the Arab community is intriguing. Other cities in America do not have the Arab-dominated suburbs and neighborhoods like the Detroit area, which makes suburbs like Dearborn highly visible. Since the general American population is interested in Arab-pockets of Detroit, such as Dearborn, the Arab American Muslim community is paid attention to, unlike African-American dominated inner-city Detroit. Arabs are new and novel, which does present new forms of racism. There is some evidence that immigrant Muslims in the U.S. may be more persecuted and marginalized as Muslims in the post-9/11 than African-American Muslims who are not dealing with an ethnic identity that the intelligence community equates with terrorism.<sup>106</sup> While Arab Muslims especially are persecuted, the increased attention also increases the Arab American Muslim voice.

### ***The Marginalization of African-American Muslims in the Ummah***

African-American Muslims are marginalized across America, but the focus on Detroit highlights specific areas where African-American Muslim's legitimacy can be reduced. Detroit's special connections with the Nation of Islam, the general socio-economic status, as well as the extreme segregation are examples of how African-American Muslims are marginalized.

### *Nation of Islam*

The immediate association of African-American Muslims with the Nation of Islam can weaken African-American Muslim credibility. The African-American Muslim

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<sup>106</sup> Abraham, Howell, and Shryock, *Arab Detroit 9/11*.

communities in the 1960's, especially Nation of Islam, did not have favorable media attention, making the general American views more negative than positive. The non-Sunni beliefs of the Nation of Islam also weaken legitimacy in the eyes of many Arab American Muslims, who do not view the NOI as "true" Islam. While an argument for the inclusion of the Nation of Islam within the American Muslim community can be argued (as opposed to the inclusion of NOI in scholarly discussion), the larger issue becomes the association of the Nation of Islam with modern African-American Sunni Islam. What is particularly interesting about the NOI, in relation to its struggle of legitimacy, is that W. D. Fard claimed to be from Muhammad's tribe and clan, an argument used by many Arabs today for legitimacy. Fard claimed that,

"I am W. D. Fard and I came from the Holy City of Mecca"... According to Elijah Muhammad (the successor and trusted minister of Fard), he maintained that he was born the son of a wealthy member of the royal dynasty of the Hashemite sharif, a branch of the tribe of Quraish (the Prophet Muhammad's tribe). These links with Orthodox Muslim history and these ethnic connections accredited Fard in the eyes of his followers.<sup>107</sup>

These claims of connection to Muhammad, however, do not seem to give NOI legitimacy from the outside or the Arab population.

As stated in the history section, many African-American Sunni Muslims have ties with W. D. Mohammed, who was the leader of the Nation of Islam after his father, Elijah Muhammad, died. Though WD Mohammad quickly brought the NOI to a mainstream Sunni interpretation of Islam, the ties with the NOI are not forgotten and often not understood by some Arab American Muslim communities. "Many immigrant Muslims question whether Nation members should be called Muslims. Even the followers of

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<sup>107</sup> Nuri Tinaz, "The Nation of Islam: Historical Evolution and Transformation of the Movement," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 16, no. 2 (1996): 193–209, doi:10.1080/13602009608716338.

Warith Deen Mohammed are criticized by some for giving more weight to his pronouncements than to the holy texts...<sup>108</sup> The significant ties that many African-American Muslims have with the NOI, whether they are present members or not, influences how others view them. Though the NOI does have some beliefs that differ from mainstream Sunni Muslims, there have been recent movements towards more religious unity. During his final speech, for example, Louis Farrakhan spoke of the need for the American religious communities to come together.<sup>109</sup>

### *Money in the Ummah*

While there is a wide range of income levels in the Detroit area, generally the Arab Americans have a higher economic level than African-Americans.<sup>110</sup> Many of the older immigrants that have been in Detroit, such as those who came during the auto-boom in the 1930's, are blue-collar workers, the more recent immigrants are wealthier, largely white-collar workers. Many of the recent Arab immigrants in the Detroit area are coming for higher education and jobs in the medical field. Many other Arabs have also created successful small businesses and shops that have increased their economic status over time. Arabs, in general, are wealthier than African-Americans in the Detroit area.

The higher income levels give Arab American Muslims more resources, which can increase their influence in the area. Not every Arab American Muslim community is significantly wealthier, but Arab Americans do have the nicest and largest mosques in the area. The mosque in Dearborn, which has a majority of Arab American members, is a

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<sup>108</sup> NEIL MacFARQUHAR, "Nation of Islam At a Crossroad As Leader Exits," *New York Times*, February 26, 2007, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/848151234/abstract?accountid=14663>.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Both Arab Americans and African-Americans, however, have a lower education, and likely income level than the Caucasians in the area. Abraham, Howell, and Shryock, *Arab Detroit 9/11*, 47.



significant landmark in the area. This mosque has the resources to provide community activities and education for youth, which some other mosques cannot. These activities and resources can have a dramatic effect on the surrounding area and draws attention from the outside community as well. Smaller and less wealthy mosques, many of which are predominately African-American and in inner-city Detroit, are at a disadvantage of influencing the surrounding community.

### *Racial Segregation in Detroit*

As stated in the history section, Detroit is one of the most racially segregated cities in America. Although statistics vary, a recent study in 2006 stated that metro-Detroit is 98% African-American.<sup>111</sup> This segregation has expanded to the suburbs of Detroit as well. African-Americans live almost exclusively in four suburban towns. “Almost nine out of every 10 black residents in Metro Detroit lives in one of five cities: Detroit, Southfield, Pontiac, Inkster or Highland Park. The remaining 131,000 African-Americans are sprinkled in communities with a combined population of more than 3.3 million.”<sup>112</sup> The US census categorizes Arabs as white, so they are included in these statistics as such. African-Americans living in Detroit are therefore highly segregated into specific communities, and typically, they are not living with Arab-dominated populations, such as Dearborn.

A recent article commented on the history of Dearborn in particular, highlighting the struggle that African-Americans have had in the Detroit area.

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<sup>111</sup> Mucahit Bilici, *Finding Mecca in America: How Islam Is Becoming an American Religion* (University Of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>112</sup> Gordon Towbridge, “Racial Divide Widest in U.S.,” *The Detroit News*, January 14, 2002.

Arab Americans ended up here [Dearborn] as soon as they opened the Model T plant," says Ahmed. "It was every type of immigrant you can think of—except African-Americans." The absence of black residents in Dearborn is in some great part due to former Mayor Orville Hubbard...[who] railed against blacks and other minorities and became one of the North's most prominent bigots. Metro Detroit is profoundly segregated. When Jim Crow-style mechanisms failed, whites retreated to the suburbs, taking advantage of government-subsidized roads and mortgages. No suburb insisted on its whiteness so brazenly as Dearborn, a city where few of the many blacks who labored in Ford's Rouge plant could buy a home...The 1980 census recorded just 83 black people living in town.<sup>113</sup>

Arab Americans have had struggles in the Detroit area and have not been considered white by all Detroit residents, but African-Americans have had especially difficult times finding places to live. The specific form of discrimination in housing towards African-Americans has led to segregated areas, which in turn affects Muslim communities and mosques. While mosques in America are generally dominated by one ethnicity, Detroit in particular has a higher than average ethnic majority in mosques.<sup>114</sup> This segregation of Muslim communities can in turn lead to lack of communication because Muslims of different ethnicities are not regularly interacting with each other at a common mosque, nor are they even likely to be living near each other.

Some of this extreme segregation may be changing, however. Many charter and private schools in the Detroit area are beginning to target Muslims. Detroit has been given grants that allow Detroit residents to have some flexibility in what schools to send their children to and the schools are aware that the Muslim presence in Detroit is significant. While the schools largely target Arab American Muslims, African-American Muslims have also been able to reap some of the benefits. The schools "...provide

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<sup>113</sup> "Dearborn: Where Americans Come to Hate Muslims," accessed January 27, 2013, <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/neighborhoods/2012/09/dearborn-where-americans-come-hate-muslims/3360/>.

<sup>114</sup> James Heft, *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Fordham Univ Press, 2006), 220.

African-American families the opportunity to assimilate their children into a Muslim-only educational and moral community and to opt out of (or perhaps write a new chapter in) Detroit's legacy of urban/racial crisis."<sup>115</sup> Schools with Muslim-educational programs are a way for Muslims of all ethnicities to have their children learn together and possibly create a new, united Detroit Muslim community.

*African-Americans in Detroit Mosques*

According to Ishan Bagby's Detroit Mosque study, there are fewer African-American mosques and those mosques have generally lower attendance than Arab American dominated mosques. Though exact numbers are not certain, it is likely that there are fewer African-American Muslims in Detroit, although Bagby's study did not include African-American dominated non-Sunni communities such as the Nation of Islam. In his study, Bagby also argues that African-American mosques may not be as strong as Arab American mosques.

The Detroit Mosque Study points to a conclusion that African American mosques are not entirely healthy. Attendance figures in African American mosques do not seem to be strong, the growth rate of African American mosques is not robust, and conversions among African Americans seem to be down. From 2000 when the National Mosque Study was conducted to 2003 when the Detroit Mosque Study was conducted, two African American mosques have closed. Although African American Muslims have historically constituted an important component of the Detroit Muslim community, the Detroit Mosque Study establishes that only 7% of the total Friday Prayer attendance is African American, while 18% of all Detroit mosques are attended predominantly by African Americans...African American mosques have significantly smaller attendance at Friday Prayer.<sup>116</sup>

This information presents a number of issues. Clearly, African-American Muslims are losing members or failing to grow in the ways that Arab American Muslims in Detroit

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<sup>115</sup> Andrew Shryock, ed., *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (Indiana University Press, 2010), 212.

<sup>116</sup> Detroit Mosque Study

are. The number of African-American Muslims in Detroit is also smaller, making the population more susceptible to outside factors affecting the community negatively. This is significant especially when the general lower income of the African-American Muslims community in Detroit is considered. Arab American Muslims may have a larger “cushion” than African-American Muslims in Detroit.

### **Media Images Strengthen Arab Dominance**

#### ***Attention on Arab Community***

In his recent book, *Finding Mecca in America*, Mucahit Bilici discusses some of the ways in which Muslims, especially immigrant Muslims, are exciting for the media. He points to the typical stories that are presented in the media and newspapers, citing terrorism abroad and discrimination in America as the top two types of articles. He explains that some of this has to do with a “curiosity” about Islam and while he does not explicitly state immigrant Islam, the underlying implication is there. Islam is new and novel in America, especially by “foreigners.”<sup>117</sup> This idea again associates Islam with immigrants, especially Arabs, instead of African-Americans.<sup>118</sup> Geneive Abdo argues in her book, *Mecca and the Main Street* that “Many African-American Muslims resented the fact that the public perception of Islam in America was shaped by the image of Muslims as either Arab or Pakistani, but not African-American.”<sup>119</sup> African-American Muslims are aware of the attention on the general immigrant and Arab community and how this is marginalizing African-American Islam.

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<sup>117</sup> Bilici, *Finding Mecca in America*, 2–5.

<sup>118</sup> This also has serious issues for the immigrant, and largely Arab, community. The focus on terrorism and discrimination also reflects serious racist ideas. I am not attempting to state that these issues are not as serious, simply that the multi-layers of discrimination still give legitimacy to Arabs as the “true Muslims”.

<sup>119</sup> *Mecca and Main Street*, 121

*“Arab Detroit” and the Ummah*

One of the notable examples of the focus on the Arab community in Detroit is through the phrase “Arab Detroit” that appears in many scholarly and printed works. The majority of texts and articles dealing with Islam in Detroit focus on the Arab American community. This is a typical trend through Islam in America scholarship. “Academically, the field of American Muslim studies is still new and fragmentary. In the past, most works focused exclusively on immigrant Muslim experiences. The few that dealt with the African-American experience tended to treat it separately.”<sup>120</sup> As presented in the second chapter, there is at times a false dichotomy between immigrant/Arab Islam and African-American Islam in America. This trend is clearly played out in Detroit Islamic studies.

Through my research, I have found numerous books, article series, and focus given to Arab Americans in Detroit and the surrounding suburbs. This attention is justifiable - the Detroit area is one of the most Arab-concentrated places in America, which makes it an exciting community to do social and anthropological studies in. The amount of studies on the Arabs in Detroit, however, is potentially problematic for two reasons. One is that it falsely inflates the significance of Arab American Muslims in Detroit. The majority of Arab Americans in the Detroit area are Christian, not Muslim. This can cause issues for the Christian Arabs that live in these areas. Christian Arabs suffer religious discrimination even if they are not Muslims.

The scholarly attention on the Arab American Muslim community also continues to marginalize the African-American Muslim community in Detroit. The immediate association with Muslim living in Detroit is that the Muslims are Arab, not African-

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<sup>120</sup> Bilici, *Finding Mecca in America*, 19.

American, despite the rich history that African-American Islam has in the area. “Despite some very bright spots, when it comes to documenting religion in Detroit, the relatively stunted state of scholarship on Black Islam in the city is, unfortunately, the norm and not the exception.”<sup>121</sup> African-American Islam is isolated and marginalized in much of the current research of Detroit.<sup>122</sup>

***“All American Muslim” and the Stereotypes about the Ummah***

The most striking example of media attention on the Arab, not African-American, Muslim community is the TLC show “All American Muslim”. While the introduction briefly discussed this show, I want to continue to highlight the significance of the underlying message. The title suggests that it is attempting to show what a “typical” American Muslim’s life is. The show follows the daily lives and ordinary struggles of Muslims in the Detroit area. What is significant, however, is that the show is composed entirely of Arab Americans. Whether TLC intended to or not, the message is that the “All American Muslim” is an Arab American. The lack of African-American, or even South Asian American, Muslims sends a stereotyped message about Muslims in America. There may have been reasons for the Arab only choice, such as to provide unity or a more streamlined plot, but the lack of other ethnicities remains. Especially in Detroit, there is a rich Muslim base, and the producers could have easily included other ethnicities.

This media attention on the Arab American Muslim community is reflected in Edward Said’s famous text, *Orientalism*. Some of Said’s theories seem to be playing out in the media attention in Detroit, and specifically with “All American Muslim”. Said

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<sup>121</sup> Wilson, “The Spirit of the Motor City,” 54.

<sup>122</sup> Many of the studies of African-American Muslim communities are focused on New York, Chicago, and Atlanta.

argues that the “Orient”, or Asian and Middle Eastern countries, is often presented in Western cultures in a way to diffuse fear of the unknown and to assert control over different cultures. He states, “The Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West’s contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in – or fear of- novelty.”<sup>123</sup> In “All American Muslim”, TLC has the chance to present a “novel” religion, Islam, through its most “novel” followers – Arab Americans. TLC is able to show that Arab Muslims are both new and exciting, as well as familiar.<sup>124</sup>

While my focus is not on the issues with “All American Muslim”, nor to present a theoretical critique on its effects on American culture, but it is to show an example of how the media selectively chooses the “American Muslim” face, and consistently chooses an Arab face. Even casual viewers of the show will have an Arab-exclusive view of Islam in Detroit and could be unaware of the African-American Muslim community.

### ***Arab Americans and the Future of Detroit***

A recent development in news stories of the Detroit Muslim community is presenting the Arab American population as a savior figure for the restoration of Detroit. While this information is not always “Muslim” specific, many of the articles associate the Arab American community with Islam and the Muslim community is a factor in the conclusions. The information continues to show the marginalization of African-Americans in Detroit in general in association with the Arab Americans of Detroit.

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<sup>123</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed (Vintage, 1979), 59.

<sup>124</sup> Said also comments about how selective images can create characters of the Orient, which is especially applicable in a reality television setting. His thoughts on this issue are on page 66.

Series of articles from Time and Newsweek, as well as scholarly sources, comment on the dramatic economic impact that the Arab American community is having in the Detroit area.

The Arab communities in metropolitan Detroit represent an important component of the region's economy. Arabs are known to be very active as entrepreneurs in the area's small-business sector as owners and managers of a wide array of businesses, including restaurants, grocery and convenience stores, gas stations, fruit and vegetable markets, and more. Many of these are small family-owned businesses that provide employment for a considerable number of kin and other community members.<sup>125</sup>

Arab Americans are creating economic growth with their willingness to invest and buy property in Detroit and its surrounding suburbs. They are also moving into areas that were previously failing and losing residents. "Additionally, without the steady influx of international immigrants in recent years, the Detroit region would have experienced a net population loss because of continuing domestic out-migration."<sup>126</sup> These factors are having a positive impact on Detroit.

This presentation of the *ummah*, however, becomes problematic because it is again marginalizing the African-American community. Arab Americans are creating new businesses in Detroit, but are not necessarily including the vast majority population of African-Americans in inner-city Detroit. "The controversial question, though, is whether Arab-American prosperity will remain at the edges of the city, at arm's length from the predominantly poor African-American population, or produce jobs and other benefits for the whole of Detroit."<sup>127</sup> Many African-Americans in Detroit fear that the increase in

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<sup>125</sup> Abraham, Howell, and Shryock, *Arab Detroit 9/11*, 49.

<sup>126</sup> The Center for Urban Studies, *Arab American Economic Contribution Study* (Wayne State University, March 1, 2007), 4.

<sup>127</sup> Bobby Ghosh, "Arab-Americans: Detroit's Unlikely Saviors," *Time*, accessed December 8, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2028057,00.html>.



stores and the economic boost coming largely from the Arab American community will present new forms of racism against African-Americans.

Another deterrent is the fear of racial conflict with Detroit's predominantly black population. The two communities have a relationship that is, if not openly hostile, one of mutual suspicion. In private conversations, Arab Americans say their businesses – especially liquor stores and gas stations – are disproportionately the victims of crime and suggest racial resentment is part of the reason. And African Americans complain that Middle Eastern businesses charge high prices and provide few jobs to those outside their community.<sup>128</sup>

It is unclear whether this tension will continue to grow or find ways of unity. This new growth of Arab Americans may be another way in which African-Americans are marginalized and pushed to the outskirts of the city or to undesirable places in Detroit.

It is also troubling that these news articles make no mention of growth and prosperity from the African-American community, especially mosques in the area.

Instead, Arab Americans are instead highlighted as the ones responsible for cleaning up the areas and keeping the peace.

Perhaps Dearborn accepts its Arab-American population because they have kept Dearborn clean—and relatively prosperous. Immigrants have restored it to what it looked like when O'Reilly was a kid. Retailers pack city streets and most homes are occupied. "Now with the Arab-American community here, Warren Avenue is back with these owner-operated shops," the Mayor tells me. "I go there all the time. I love it."<sup>129</sup>

Arab Americans may have had a dramatic impact on the area, but this article and others like it can have a dramatic impact on public perception. These articles subtly argue that Arab Americans are the only group able to restore Detroit, again marginalizing African-Americans, who make up the vast majority of inner-city Detroit. Arabs, not African-Americans, will save the "Black City" of Detroit.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> "Dearborn."

Overall, Detroit is a city in which African-American Muslims are marginalized and de-legitimized on multiple fronts. Racial stereotypes circulate images that their Islam is not as “true” or “pure” as Arab Americans, they are not masters of Arabic, and they are not helping the community as much as Arab Americans are. These portrayals of the African-American Muslim community support the false assumption that the vast majority of Muslims in Detroit are Arab. These factors reflect larger issues about race, class, and ethnicity in the United States. There is a chasm between immigrant Arab Muslims and African-American Muslims, and African-American Muslim identities are continuously marginalized.

## CONCLUSION

Detroit is an example of American Muslim communities forming ‘*asabiya*’ communities instead of forming a more unified and connected *ummah*. Though there are legitimate issues that separate Arab American and African-American Muslims, Islam provides the social and spiritual values to connect the two communities. The major issue for Muslims in Detroit is not about which community represent “true Islam” as the media presentations of it because there are many Islams in America. The larger issue is about moving the *ummah* forward in the hostile post-9/11 world to reclaim the city of Detroit. Arab American Muslims deal with Islamophobia and forms of ethnic discrimination, but many African-American Muslims have found a way to fuse civil and human rights into their religious communities that deal with similar forms of discriminations. The resources between the two communities provide Detroit Muslims with the tools to unite and fight against anti-Muslim stereotypes and discrimination. Islam teaches unity among believers, so the religious foundation is set for Detroit Muslims.

Coming together is especially important in light of the economic struggles of Detroit in the twenty-first century. The Detroit Governor, Rick Snyder, appointed a special Emergency Manager, Kevyn Orr, to help get Detroit out of its economic downturn in March 2013. An article by Time reports that “Detroit, which at one time was the symbol of American progress and held great political power thanks to the auto industry, has lost a quarter-million people during the last decade and remains saddled with a \$327 million budget deficit and more than \$14 billion in long-term debt.”<sup>130</sup>

Detroit is the largest American city that has implemented city-controlled finances. The

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<sup>130</sup> Associated Press, “Bankruptcy Expert Named Detroit Emergency Manager,” *Time*, accessed March 26, 2013, <http://nation.time.com/2013/03/14/bankruptcy-expert-named-detroit-emergency-manager/>.

economic problems are not just inner-city Detroit's struggles, however. Suburbs are dependent on the industries of major cities, so if Detroit fails, the richer suburbs will suffer as well.

Detroit is a historically important Midwestern city that has the strength to rise above its struggles. Even with the housing segregation between the metro-city and the suburbs, mosques and other Islamic organizations have a unique opportunity to improve Detroit. African-American mosques located in Detroit could collaborate with suburban Arab mosques, for example, to provide services to those in need. Service and charity are major aspects of Sunni and Shi'a values. Working together on these key issues is a way for the two Muslim communities to come together. Many mosques and organizations are already working in the community. The Muslim Center Detroit, which follows Imam W. D. Mohammed, has weekly activities and services such as a soup kitchen, a health clinic, and clothing drives.<sup>131</sup> ACCESS, an Arab American Service organization, though not exclusively Muslim, outreaches to the impoverished sections of the Dearborn area.<sup>132</sup> Organizations such as these exist in Detroit to combat the poverty that has become common in the city, but there is room for Muslims from different suburbs, neighborhoods, and religious communities to come together even further in Detroit.

Detroit is an example of a divided Muslim community, but there are many links to creating a more united *ummah*. The history of Muslims in Detroit shows that all immigrants, migrants, races, and ethnicities came there to work hard, support their families, and practice their religions freely. Arab American Muslims and African-

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<sup>131</sup> "Mosque and Community Center Programs," *Muslim Center Detroit*, accessed March 23, 2013, <http://muslimcenterdetroit.com/programs/>.

<sup>132</sup> "About Us" (ACCESS, n.d.), [http://www.accesscommunity.org/site/PageServer?pagename=About\\_Us](http://www.accesscommunity.org/site/PageServer?pagename=About_Us).

American Muslims both took refuge in Detroit and helped make the Detroit area one of the richest models of Islam in America. The Detroit Muslim community highlights many of the issues of the larger American Muslim population. Immigrant Muslims and African-American Muslims have many differences that perpetuate 'asabiya communities. Race, socio-economic status, the role of women, language, and theological issues are significant factors that drive the communities to separate. The new forms of discrimination, Islamophobia, and the global unity of Islam are creating new ways for the 'asabiya communities to create an American *ummah*. Detroit in particular heightens these dividing and uniting factors because of the intense media attention and the drastic housing segregation there. The spiritual values of Islam could indeed provide the foundation for Detroit Muslims, as well as all American Muslims to create an *ummah* and a united Islam in America in the twenty-first century.

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