American Muslim Women and Cross-Gender Interaction on Campus

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Abstract

This article is based on a study of American Muslim undergraduate women's identity construction via gendered behavior in university spaces. I conducted the study in 2002-03 at two private East Coast universities. My research questions centered upon the religious, ethnic, gender, and cultural/racial identities of American Muslim female undergraduates. I was also interested in the nature of pluralism at American college campuses; I believed that an interesting test of this pluralism would be to see how hospitable it was to the development of American Muslim women's identities.

Introduction to the Framework

The research literature is poor in terms of ethnographic data on religious minority students, especially Muslim students, and my dissertation research attempts to contribute to filling this gap.[1] Conrad Cherry et al.[2] claim that diversity of practice and choice characterizes student religious practice on campus. My own dissertation research shows that this "diversity" of choice is really divided between core/dominant and periphery/marginal practices, with minority (e.g., Muslim) practices falling into the latter category.

The "pluralism" of campus life is, in my view, a flawed pluralism, one in which students have the "choice" to be marginalized by their own minority practices. Qualitative research such as mine demonstrates how marginal perspectives are silenced in spaces of higher education as well as how dominant discourses are "inscribed" upon people, thereby limiting them to the choice of complying, resisting, or both.[3]

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University campuses employ a great deal of rhetoric about diversity and establish administrative structures to represent student diversity. However, *peer culture* rather than the rhetoric in official documents exercises the most powerful normative influence upon students. The analysis of everyday rituals of peer culture on campus helps us examine the "cultural center and margins" in campus culture.[4] In this article, I examine the gendered rituals of dating and other cross-gender interaction on campus and how they place Muslim female undergraduates in cultural centers and/or in cultural margins.

Like Dorothy Holland et al.'s delineations of individuals,[5] in my depictions of American Muslim women's cross-gender interaction I acknowledge both the dominant majority's power over the individual and the individual's agency. Though people's ability for self-objectification plays into "their domination by social relations of power," it also allows for "possibilities for (partial) liberation from these forces."[6] As we see in this article, the possibilities are not unlimited and "the constraints are overpowering, yet not hermetically sealed."[7] Thus, I also examine the constraints upon American Muslim female students' gendered identity construction, as they "[use] the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded [them] in the present."[8] These women work within a limited range of cultural resources and subject positions, attempting to come up with new "Muslim" and "ethnic" responses in order to stretch the range of these positions into American-Muslim and American-Pakistani (etc.) positions. However, they also often adapt to the same limited range of possibilities by adopting majority practices and/or concealing their minority practices.

Harvey Sacks' concept of learning to do "being ordinary" sheds light on American Muslim women's responses to dominant norms and practices.[9] "Being ordinary" shows "that a person is not simply 'ordinary' but is always working at achieving this identity."[10] Our identities, rather than being inherent, are developed through interaction with others.[11] In a White-majority North American context, this means that others' negative estimation of Muslim ethnic and hybrid identities can obstruct Muslim women's agency of identity construction, which leads to ambivalence, contradiction, desire, and disavowal vis-à-vis identity backgrounds.[12] My research participants, aware of being by default *not* ordinary, worked constantly to be ordinary, "covering up stigma and avoiding social breaches," working to "pass" as ordinary,[13] using "disidentifiers" to establish themselves as "normal"[14] or to "pass."[15] While "ordinary" and accepted normative cultural patterns often go unquestioned, if we investigate "the strategies of the stigmatized," we are able to uncover "not only the routines that we all use unconsciously each day, but also every life's inevitable existential compromise."[16]

I also draw inspiration from notions of "third space" and hybridity in post-colonial studies and cultural studies. In this body of scholarship, dominant discourses maintain a symbolic order between the "normal" and the "deviant." Homi Bhabha shows how power is incomplete and how hybrid strategies fracture the power of the dominant so that efforts to silence the "other" are never complete.[17] American Muslim undergraduate women engage in identity construction within cultural circumstances of inequality, but are constantly engaged in attempts to rewrite peer culture and fracture the power of the dominant majority youth culture. They create a "third space" in which they can produce "discourses as sites of resistance and negotiation."[18]

The Research

I conducted my doctoral dissertation research at two private East Coast universities by using ethnographic methods, including participant-observation, in-depth "talking diary" interviews,[19] and document analysis (e.g., journals, university websites, and participant blogs). I had thirteen participants from each university (twenty-six in all), all American-born and/or raised Muslim female undergraduates (ranging from freshmen to seniors). Ethnically, my research participants were roughly representative of the American Muslim population: Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Iranian, Arab, Black, White, and mixed race. I conducted fieldwork from late July 2002 to June 2003 at these two universities, excluding two weeks in August and the months of December and January.[20]

The Importance of Cross-Gender Interaction in Muslim Female Students' Identity Construction

This article discusses the modalities of American Muslim undergraduate women's interaction with men, which I refer to as cross-gender interaction. This was one of the issues that cropped up frequently in my interviews as an important ingredient in Muslim women's construction of gendered religious and cultural identities. Where interaction with men was concerned, the peculiarities of college culture obliged many of my participants to confront, engage with, resist, perform, and transition from difference.

Often, the salience of difference in their identity constructions led Muslim women to prefer exclusively Muslim social and reference groups. In general, however, those who were second-generation immigrants tended to find a third space,[21] one located between various dominant majority campus cultural norms and various religious/cultural community norms. In different spaces and contexts, they inclined toward different points on the contin-

uum stretching between internal (community) and external (majority) norms.

Romance and Sex on Campus

The absence of parents and non-school home spaces, as well as the presence of a community composed mostly of teenagers/young adults, "heats up" college culture so that romantic/sexual activity flourishes in residential colleges. For my participants, college culture intensified peer pressure to replicate the dominant majority norms on gender interaction.

Yasmin, a Pakistani-American sophomore, did not identify as a strictly religious woman. But even she felt strongly the stress of difference between Muslims and the general culture, where dating is almost universal:

> Definitely the most stressful thing for a lot of Muslims is living in a culture in which most people are boyfriends and girlfriends, and struggling with that. And I think that's the number one thing and hardest thing for everyone. *And where you stand on it defines you in a way.* … The world that doesn't fit is when you go to your mosque, and you go to your parents and your parents talk to you about getting you married. … That's the world you ignore and try to forget when you go to school. [Emphasis added].

Dating, like drinking, was a factor that defined Muslims publicly in terms of their religious identities and practice. Dating enabled women like Yasmin to become part of one's culture; spaces such as the mosque and family (with its discourse on arranged marriage) brought out one's difference in sharp relief. For Yasmin, unlike many of my participants, the source of difference was the home culture and religion, rather than the dominant majority.

Like Yasmin, Heather's non-Muslim high school friends perceived not dating as an essentially foreign practice. Heather, a White convert and a senior, told me how, when she was in high school (and was not Muslim), her friends denounced their Muslim friends' parents for forbidding their children to date:

> [My friends said:] "Why don't they date?" People think it's crazy! … My friends were like: "Their parents are insane. They need to let them be normal and let them date. … They came to America: they need to just accept the fact that their kids are American."

Her friends' comments reflected how dating was fundamental to being a normal, American youth. Their outrage was also related to agency: they assumed that Muslim youth *must* want to date and the entire impetus for not

dating must originate from (non-American) immigrant parents and non-American cultures and religions. Heather's White friends advocated freedom for their school friends, assuming that they were burdened by the restrictions of a foreign religion and culture. On the contrary, however, the dating culture at college became a burden and a restriction for some of my participants.

The notion of psychic duality[22] is also relevant in this context, as my participants were constantly aware of the gaze that categorized, contained, and stereotyped them. With reference to dating, a common list of stereotypes and desirable attributes emerged from the interview data. The stereotypes in the left column were often used to characterize Muslim women's identities, and many Muslim women tried to "pass"[23] or embody the "normal" or "ordinary" attributes listed in the right column. At the same time, they remained strongly aware that, by default, the stereotypes were what their peers associated Muslims with; the "ordinary" attributes were identities that Muslim women had to *work* to project.

Stereotypes	"Ordinary" attributes
Marginal	Core
Restricted	Free
Uptight	Uninhibited, easy-going
Stickler	Easy-going, broad-minded
Under-confident, timid	Confident, adventurous
Unattractive	Attractive
Naïve	Sophisticated, worldly
Provincial	Cosmopolitan

Since many non-Muslim peers perceived Muslim women's gendered behavior as "weird," many of them avoided close friendships with their dominant majority peers. This "protected" them from ridicule and judgment. Heather spoke of sharing dorm rooms with non-Muslim friends. She did not think that living with non-Muslims had adversely influenced her religious practice, but she felt that the prevalent dating culture on campus rendered her social experience in dorms less fulfilling:

> I don't really think my practice of Islam was harmed at all by living with [a non-Muslim in dorms]. I mean, to some degree it's sort of annoying. … Everyone's talking about boyfriends coming to town, or them getting a hotel room. Or, you know, the party the weekend before, or how they're going on a date Friday night, or how that guy's hot. … I'm not the type that's going to be like, "*Haram*,[24] we don't speak about boyfriends because it's a *haram* relationship." On the other hand, I really don't have anything to contribute.

Though she did not try to impose her norms on them, she felt left out because romance and sex were such essential elements to the lifestyle. She was clearly inhibited in publicly constructing her identity as a Muslim woman who did not date, because her values appeared drastically different from those considered ordinary. Her sarcastic comment ("*Haram*, we don't speak about boyfriends") points to the enormous gulf between observant Muslims – who would recoil, scandalized, at the mention of premarital sex – and the everyday norms of American youth, where dating, boyfriends and girlfriends, and sex are routine matters. If anything, dating in ordinary American culture has positive connotations of enjoyment, romance, freedom, and fulfillment. Holland et al.[25] and Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart[26] show how powerfully the discourse on romance becomes "naturalized" in American college culture. Dating was at the center of college culture, and Heather's values rendered her marginal to that culture.

One was marginalized by not dating on campus, and one's identity expression was somewhat inhibited by living with non-Muslims. Heather, therefore, disapproved of Muslims who did not date but had friends who dated:

> There are people who would never date … but they're going to hang out with the people who do and probably be good friends with them. … So what do you do? Sit around, talk with them about their girlfriend when that's something you don't even do? … Some people are just not leaders and they just don't know how to stand up for what they believe in and they suddenly get caught up, and it's much harder to get out of a situation than it is to never get into it in the first place.

To Heather, the Muslim who did not date or drink yet was close friends with people who did was a contradiction in terms. S/he was a coward who allowed him/herself to become marginalized. Emphasizing one's minority perspective was of important symbolic and political value. A Muslim participant in majority spaces was obliged to stand up for her beliefs, and the inability to "stand up for" one's beliefs compromised the religion politically. Such behavior also created problems for the "weak" Muslim, for it placed such a person in situations she could have avoided by being direct in the first place. Heather also thought that one's religious practice might be compromised by living with non-Muslim roommates,[27] although she regarded herself as "immune" from such influence.

Even though much of the above discussion has centered upon the Muslim–non-Muslim divide, the pervasive dating culture transcended this divide. Amira, a Pakistani-American sophomore, had a Muslim roommate

who drank and had a boyfriend. This roommate minoritized Amira's prefer-
ence for a single-gender living space in the "Muslim housing" provided by
the university.[28]

> I came back [to the apartment from my parents' home] on Sunday morn-
> ing … But it's so lucky that [my father] didn't come upstairs, because
> when I came upstairs into the apartment, my bedroom door was locked.
> ... And she opens the door and she's sitting there alone with [her
> boyfriend]. … What if my father had come in? … What position does that
> put me in?

In other words, the dating culture seamlessly entered "Muslim" spaces
and endangered Amira's mobility vis-à-vis her parents' monitoring.[29] In
Muslim housing, Amira was beleaguered.

Amira also had a non-Muslim roommate, Emma. In her application for
a dorm space in Muslim housing, Emma had expressed strong interest in a
Muslim lifestyle (the Muslim housing apartment was in a much-coveted
location, across from the campus gates). Since the apartment rules required
that a man and woman could not be alone together at any time, Emma's
boyfriend was not permitted to stay overnight. Amira's Muslim roommate
Yasmin did not object to him staying, but Amira did, and Amira was in an
awkward position of being a "stickler." Sure enough, Yasmin and Emma
wore her down, accusing her of being hypocritical and self-righteous:

> Well, when I heard I was going to be living with one non-Muslim girl and
> she had a boyfriend, I told her from the start: "You realize that he cannot
> be there all the time?" … I'm just sickened because … [Emma] did not
> take an interest whatsoever in Islam and this was just a matter of safe
> [guaranteed] housing. … [Emma said to me recently:] "Well, look, last
> semester, it was really hard for me because I barely ever get to see him."
> … I said: "Why did you choose to live in Muslim housing? You're
> infringing upon my standard of life. *And I don't want to infringe on your
> standard of life, but you can easily go to his house.* I can't go anywhere
> else." … And my other roommates were like: "Well, that is the rule, but
> we can look the other way [and let Emma's boyfriend stay overnight]." [I
> refused]. … I could have lived in *any* other dorm and faced this. … But
> it just made all three of them resent me, as if I'm some kind of stickler!
> [Emphasis added.]

The university-imposed policies of Muslim housing became irrelevant
when dominant practices and norms overrode it. Although she had policy on
her side, Amira was isolated both by Muslims (who dated) and a non-
Muslim and forced to abandon her position. Even in the limited minority

space accorded to Muslims by the administration ("I can't go anywhere else"), the dominant culture took over. She was marginalized when the non-Muslim White woman took up a spot in the "Muslim apartment" claiming to be interested in Islam, but possibly mainly interested in the best choice of housing.

For some women, not dating meant a blow to their gendered self-esteem, and being different was a source of stress. Zareen "liked" Sinan, who already had a girlfriend. This situation made Zareen feel conflicted about not dating:

> Zareen: [I saw Sinan and his girlfriend,] she's hugging him, and he looks over her shoulder and sees me. And I just look at him, and just like, after coming home from one of those parties … and just like, oh, *great*. … It's just annoying at times. And with this social scene, the Muslim girl who doesn't –. …
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> S: You're also watching all these people getting together.
>
> Zareen: Right. And some people are like: "Well, if that's the way to be, then I guess I'll be that way." … And I don't want to ever succumb to that. … [They think:] "It will make me happier; it will make me fit in; this is what everyone else is doing, and there must be something wrong with me if I'm not doing it."

Some Muslim women, as Zareen put it, felt the need to start dating; they felt as if there might be "something wrong" with them if they were not dating and thought it would enable them to belong in their peers' culture. When everyone around them was becoming romantically involved with significant others, Muslim women felt "wrong" in college culture and wondered if they were unattractive, naïve, and inexperienced. Zareen did not wish to "succumb" to this oppressive experience, but she felt the pressure. She expressed frustration with difference and felt that the way she became identified in college culture with a religionized identity – "the Muslim girl who doesn't" (drink, date, party) – was a reductive identity.

Marriage-focused Undergraduates

Marriage was of great importance for Muslim women who did not date as well as for those who did. They were strongly aware that their dominant majority peers on campus regarded marriage as a "weird" goal for an undergraduate. Since most of my participants postponed sexual activity in theory and/or practice, they looked forward eagerly to marriage and reflected on potential mates at college. But many were self-conscious about discussing marriage within dominant majority spaces:

> S: Okay, is it really weird to think about marriage if you're an undergrad?

> Rana: Some people would say yes. … I think it's American culture. Because it's just too young. Because most Americans don't get married till they're twenty-five or something. And the other end is the immigrant Muslims who are like: "My mom, she got married at nineteen so –."

According to dominant norms of academically competitive college students, young people dated rather than got married. For many observant Muslim students, "early" marriage was not only (or not necessarily) a precedent set by their parents, but a preventive to premarital sex.

> Charlise: I know that the longer I stay unmarried, the more chances I'm going to sleep with somebody, and I don't want to do that. … And a lot of people see dating as a way to get stress out and just sleep with whoever, and find out what you like. … And they're like: "[If you don't date] well, you can control yourself" [i.e., not have premarital sex]. And I'm like, I shouldn't have to! Especially within Islam. … You're supposed to get married; marriage is half of your faith.[30] … Especially when I was eighteen-nineteen, I was like: "Yo man, I just want to get married and have five kids." And *everybody* came down on me for that. … And I was like, okay. I must be nuts. … It was hard at that point.

Charlise was under pressure, especially from her African-American Christian parents, to postpone marriage. Her mother had compromised her education and career due to financial pressures and the birth of her children, and her family was determined that Charlise should not be forced to make such compromises. But she was eager to get married partly because, after her conversion, chastity became more important to her. In the majority culture, however, premarital sex is fairly common, as she observed in her Church group as well. Apart from immigrant cultural influence, this is why Muslim students seemed to ponder and discuss marriage more than the majority. This may also be the case for more religiously observant Christian and Jewish students; but culturally, I would argue that Muslims – especially those of immigrant origin and converts who occupy immigrant-dominated spaces – tend to place more value on chastity before marriage. The desire to maintain racial and cultural purity reinforces the impact of religious structures.

Rather embarrassed with her desire to get married, Haseena apparently concealed it from her non-Muslim friends. She had assimilated into majority norms by dating Zafar, but, in order to remain "ordinary," did not speak of her marital plans to her dominant majority friends.

Haseena: If my friends knew we're planning on getting married they'd be like:z "You don't know what you're doing."

S: Most Americans, don't they think about marriage?

Haseena: They do, but no one would ever bring it up in a relationship, I mean, marriage in a sophomore year college relationship. Because that would just be really weird for the other party if one party brings it up.

Marriage emerged as an almost-taboo subject among students. Muslim women who seriously discussed marriage were infantilized by their peers ("You don't know what you're talking about."). This aggravated Haseena's situation; she wished to salvage her socially and religiously unsanctioned relationship and to secure marriage and legitimacy. She was stuck between American college youth norms, which promote individualism, fun, and freedom rather than marriage, and South Asian Muslim immigrant norms for young women.

Hybridity

My participants drew upon various types of religious (Islamic) and cultural (American and immigrant) sources to construct a third space while working out their cross-gender behavior. Their identity work included normalizing/ indigenizing work. In establishing their ordinariness, Muslim women also showed that they were *differently* ordinary. "Ordinariness" or "normalcy" was a static notion, as it occurred in the dominant majority imagination. My participants stretched this notion by constructing identities based on practices that are not "ordinary" in American culture.

American Muslim women constructed third spaces[31] by combining various dominant majority norms and Muslim/ethnic norms. Generally, they distanced themselves from the "extremes" of religious conservatism and liberal behavior on gender interaction issues and constructed "moderation," although their interpretations of "extremes" and "moderation" varied. There was a range of gendered behaviors among Muslim students on campus when it came to romantic or semi-romantic relationships with the opposite sex. Some dated and engaged in sexual relationships, some "dated" but did not have sex, others socialized with opposite-sex friends a great deal, and some countenanced casual dating among their close friends but did not engage in it themselves.

Heather's non-Muslim friends asked her many questions about how she interacted with her fiancé Mohamed. She perceived her religious practice as pedagogical work (among Muslims and non-Muslims), teaching both communities about an Islamic lifestyle. For example, she had a "religious"

engagement period to demonstrate the viability of the religious life in the face of her peers' sense of pre-marital sex as a biological, social, and cultural necessity. The "irreligious" gendered behavior of many campus Muslims disrupted her identity work. Heather constructed her identity as an engaged woman in a third space between the dominant majority norms (adopted by "irreligious" Muslims) and the norms of conservative Muslims who avoided most cross-gender interaction. She was constructing a "middle ground" that was authentically Muslim and yet recognizably American and ordinary.

> A lot of them [non-Muslim students] have the impression that the [male] Muslims they knew in high school were totally against dating, which meant they didn't speak to girls at all. Or the kids were dating, and the parents were like: "Dating is not allowed!" … So for people to realize that there's a middle ground that's not sketchy –. People are like: "Oh, that's understandable." … I'm sure the no-hugging thing, or no-touching, is probably really weird to people. ... There's certain things you explain [to non-Muslims] and certain things you just leave out.

In Heather's identity work, Muslims who did not interact with members of the opposite sex at all embodied total difference and not-ordinariness; they fit the Orientalists' static image of Muslims. Those who engaged in "normal" "American" dating were ordinary, but projected no difference to differentiate themselves from the majority. These "ordinary" Muslim youths performed difference for their parents' gaze (while secretly dating). Their parents were different and not ordinary. "Dating is not allowed!" represents the position of the stereotypical immigrant Muslim parent who constructs conservative norms on cross-gender interaction to embody total difference. In contrast to these "extreme" positions, Heather constructed a middle ground of different ordinariness for American Muslims. She avoided "sketchiness" (religiously inauthentic behavior) as she constructed ordinariness in cross-gender interaction. In doing so, she also concealed the "no-hugging" rule, since it was "really weird to people" and was therefore a stigma.

Like Heather, Myra refrained from explaining the intricate details of Muslim cross-gender codes of behavior to non-Muslim friends and preserved the privacy of her religious practice from the dominant majority gaze:

> I'm always like: "Yes, I've never had a boyfriend." I wouldn't be like: "Oh, I don't ever *want* a boyfriend!" Or like: "A boyfriend for me is never a *real* boyfriend!" You know what, I'm not going to be like explain all these details. I'll just be like [shortly]: "Yeah. Never had one."

Myra constructed her hybridity within the American Muslim youth community's praxis. Her ordinariness was based in the praxis of a social

group. Heather, on the other hand, constructed her ordinariness from a theological, text-based critique of the majority culture, conservative Muslim practice, and liberal Muslim practice. She chose a point on the continuum closer to conservative Muslims than Myra would have preferred. Her identity construction was drawn from textual sources, while Myra's was drawn from a combination of textual religion and community praxis.

> Myra: I've had close guy friends but it's never like, physical. …
>
> S: Do you feel compared to other people, very different, in college?
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> Myra: See, when it comes to guys, I don't really compare to like, what all the other kids are doing. I'll compare to what all the other *Muslim* kids are doing. … I feel like Muslim kids are more reserved when it comes to interacting with each other. They'll talk and be friends but … [they don't do] little things like people [men and women] always hitting each other. If someone [a male friend] was saying something dumb, I'd push them and be like: "Oh, you're so dumb!" It wouldn't be like: "*Ooh*, that [touching him] is so wrong!" But at the same time, I wouldn't run over and be like: "Oh, give me a big hug!"

Myra did not feel very different in college, because she looked to her Muslim peer group, which was a site of resistance for her identity work.[32] The "Muslim kids" were "more reserved" than dominant majority youth; they had opposite-sex friends but consciously avoided unnecessary (and sometimes flirtatious) physical contact that was ordinary to the dominant majority. She emphasized that if someone was saying something silly she would not be prudish about pushing them, although she would not seek out affectionate physical contact ("I wouldn't run over and be like: 'Oh, give me a big hug!'") Like Heather, Myra was constructing a middle ground too, but Heather's code explicitly said "no-touching" and "no physical relationship *at all*." Both were differently ordinary, but Heather was more *different* than Myra.

To Myra, Heather's "no touching" rule would probably be "extreme," but hugging would be too "ordinary." Even though she defined her reference group broadly as "the Muslim kids," Myra tacitly specified her choice of peer group by eliminating majority students as a reference. However, she did not choose the more conservative Muslim peer group either, such as Rana and Heather, who would criticize playful physical contact (such as "pushing" a man who said "something dumb"), or Muna, who had no male friends. But at the same time, she explicitly excluded the "more liberal" Muslim students.

> I think a lot of people don't care [about avoiding physical contact] as much as I do. … I think it's more about the way your parents raised you. I've noticed my mom never gives … another man a hug. … And a lot of the

> Muslim families we go to *masjid* with, do. … For me and my sister, we hug the auntie, and the uncle comes and it's like – move away, you know. … Before that my parents were like totally friends with the *hijabis*,[33] so we used to go to Saturday school and [it was] all girls, everything, and you never even saw the uncles. They'd say *salam* from afar, like [distantly]: "*Salam alaykum, baita*."[34] And all of a sudden these people are coming to you and you're like, what is going on here?

Myra's construction of hybridity was complex, existing among multiple points, beyond a simple matter of Muslim and non-Muslim or even religious and irreligious Muslim. She concluded that her preferred approach to cross-gender interaction was based on the cultural transmission from her parents. When her parents were socially close to "the *hijabis*" (the more conservative religious Muslim men and women), her family's values were in accord with the friends from the mosque. Then they made friends with other Muslim families (not the "*hijabis*"), some of who thought little of cross-gender hand-shaking and hugging. This created situations such as the one she describes above, which disrupted her sense of shared community values.

Although Myra was engaged in third space construction through different ordinariness, she continued seeking ordinariness in the majority culture.

> S: In interacting with non-Muslim guys, do you ever wish they knew what your boundaries are?
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> Myra: Yes, actually that's happened to me a few times. … I was on the computer and [a boy] comes up from behind and puts his arms around [me] and, tapping on the computer, he puts his head on my head. I was just like: "Okay, I have to go to the bathroom." …
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> S: Would you feel comfortable telling a non-Muslim guy if he was being really touchy-feely: "Can I have some personal space?"
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> Myra: I think I'd just push them away and be like: "What are you doing?!" I don't think I'd be like: "Oh, I need personal space." … I think I'd be more inconspicuous and more like: "Ew, what are you doing, get away from me." So they'd just be like: "Oh, well, maybe she doesn't like me!" … Well, maybe I do look at it from other people – White people's point of view, because I won't make a statement about it. … [If I did, they might be like:] "Why? … You're so weird!"

Since the non-Muslim majority was largely unfamiliar with Muslim norms, constructing a third space was complicated work. If a male student invaded her personal space, Myra unobtrusively left the scene; in doing so, she pursued the purpose (avoiding physical contact) instead of the political act of asking him to modify his behavior and making her religious/cultural

norms public. In the same way, if a male student made "excessive" physical contact, Myra would refrain from "making a statement about it" (she would certainly not use my phrasing about "personal space," ludicrously academic in some youth spaces). Instead, she would be "more inconspicuous" (ordinary) and use a more indigenous tool, one more familiar to American youths ("Ew, what are you doing, get away from me") so as to avoid being "weird." She preferred a male student to think that she did not like him, rather than having him discern that, as a Muslim, she was uncomfortable with physical contact. The former was "normal"; the latter was different. Some of my participants emphasized their difference from the dominant majority, but people like Myra avoided doing so. Myra constructed difference, but made sure it was also ordinary, and refrained from publicly stating her difference.

Heather was performing, through her practice and discourse, Muslim norms that would be reasonable or "ordinary" to her non-Muslim friends. She was performing difference that would be ordinary to non-Muslim Americans.

> Like, it's very difficult [for non-Muslims] to understand [not dating]. I'm like, it doesn't mean you can't get to know someone. It just means that one, no physical relationship *at all*. Two, you're not hanging out alone together. And three, it has to be with the intention of marriage. … But I sort of leave [some details] out of the conversation with non-Muslims. I mean I'm not going to be like, [pompously:] "Yeah, you need to check your intention and not hang out with them too much, so as not to get overly attached before you're married, because love really comes after marriage." I mean they're going to be like [sarcastically]: "Right!"

According to Heather, not dating is abnormal in American culture. Americans think of "not dating" as entirely foreign and "not dating" conjures up for them the binary opposition of dating versus a strictly arranged marriage. She explained how the difference between dating and not dating was partly a reified difference: Islamic courtship encompasses "getting to know someone," which is the main purpose of marriage-driven dating. Heather identified the "different" features of Islamic courtship (e.g., no physical relationship, no solitude, and the intention of marriage, so that the relationship is sanctioned by religion). At the same time, Heather tried to construct Muslim gendered praxis as ordinary, with a few conditions. Aware of how this praxis was perceived as inherently different, she also tried to veil parts of it that might be a target of ridicule. Her mock-pompous remark ("Yeah, you need to check your intention … love really comes after marriage") indicated her dual role as a White person and as a Muslim. She was strongly conscious of the gap between the dominant majority and religious Muslim worldviews. A religious Muslim's spiritually reflective examination of her intention to ensure

that the entire process of courtship is not overtly sexualized and is purpose-driven is not "ordinary."

Interestingly, Heather also pointed out that she believed that for Muslims "love comes after marriage" or that love ought to follow marriage in order to ensure that the pre-marital period was sexually chaste. Needless to say, this is not a universal belief among Muslims. Her suggestion that "Muslims don't date" was an over-simplification for religious pedagogical purposes, as well as a slogan mainly inspired by the relative ubiquity (from a religious perspective) of sexuality in dominant majority romantic relationships. "Muslims don't date" is meant to construct an "ideal" contrast to this dominant majority practice.

> I sort of frame [dating] in the context, like, I think dating is very much contingent upon a physical relationship in American culture. There's no one who's dating that there's not an element of it. … I think that's why Muslims are like: "We don't date!" Basically, when I've explained stuff to non-Muslims, I'm like, it's not totally against dating *per se*. It just means that there are certain things you can't do before you're married. … They're not going to talk about sketchy things either. … It's one thing to talk about: "How did you do on your test?" But you're not going to be like: "You look hot today!"

Heather deconstructed the common statement "Muslims do not date" by considering different definitions of "dating." According to one, dating was inherently physical, but with important proviso; as courtship, dating was acceptable.

> I get non-Muslim responses like: "Oh, well that makes a lot more sense." Because *their* whole conception is: "You will have an arranged marriage, no choice." And the other element is, you're not going to be hanging out with that person twenty-four hours a day. … [And] they're going to be like: "Why?" … So it's just one of those things you're probably not going to get into to spell out specifically for people.

In representing the "Muslim" perspective on courtship, Heather worked to free it from connotations of arranged marriage, restrictiveness, and the lack of individual choice – all very un-American notions. At the point where non-Muslim peers accepted Muslim courtship as "ordinary," she stopped providing further information, such as how men and women should not spend too much time together. This would appear too different and restrictive to non-Muslim Americans.

Heather was also concerned with the "Islamic" basis of marriage. She constructed love (alone) as a more "American" basis of marriage, family-

arranged marriage as more immigrant in flavor, and American Muslim marriage as a judicious ("moderate") combination of love, "rationality," and compatibility. Clearly, however, her positioning contains contradictions between different perspectives. This indicates that there are different forces at play.

> I would say most [American] Muslim marriages, even if they're "Islamic," have a certain element of like, love involved in them, prior to marriage. … I mean, [they're] not even arranged but sort of set up, where it's an issue of compatibility and rationality, as opposed to emotion. And I mean, I think it's difficult to live in this country and grow up in this culture and feel like you're marrying someone simply because it makes sense rather than because you like them. … And so, I think there's some people who get stuck in that situation where they're like, great family, great everything, great person, but that one little emotional element isn't there. Which to me would be a big deal.

Initially, Heather constructed her notion of hybrid Muslim American marriage based on a middle ground between love and rationally evaluated compatibility. She felt that Islam required that love follow marriage, rather than vice versa, but was personally ambivalent about this. She seemed to believe that in the United States, this was not necessarily the case. Personally, she seemed to accept the American "love" norm despite her theoretical adherence to the idea of love coming after marriage ("Obviously Islamically love comes after marriage."). So in this respect, she appeared to maintain norms that were "American" and "Islamic" and possibly contradictory; however, she would prioritize the "American" ingredient. As for American Muslim arranged marriages, they were not "true" arranged marriages, but merely set-up "love" marriages – and therefore "normal."

Race played an important role in the construction of hybridity. Teresa, a White senior, felt that she could take more liberties in cross-gender behavior.

> [As a White woman] I can talk to a guy from Pakistan, for instance, without having to observe Oriental behavior and norms, though I may be aware of them. I know that it would not be proper for a Pakistani girl, at least a *hijabi*, to talk with a Pakistani guy beyond basic academic issues.

Whiteness freed Teresa from norms that a Pakistani man and woman would share so that she could talk aimlessly with a man. While she gained freedom from not sharing a culture and a background with, say, Pakistani men, Intisar, a Somali-American sophomore, felt that for her, as a black woman, cross-gender interaction with (South Asian-American) men was more problematic.

> I don't know a lot of these guys. And they're almost – what, 99% from
> South Asia, right? And here I am, the only black sister. … But if it was
> like a black brother, I could sort of like, feel a *little* more comfortable. …
> [Some of the other South Asian men and women] just have fun, joke
> around [with each other]. But I know, there's no chance for *me* – for us to
> have a comfortable [relationship] …with like a South Asian guy who …
> who has a *kufi* on and a beard. … It's always a barrier because I don't
> know – how far can I go with you, without crossing over, or making you
> mad, or making you uncomfortable, really?

Intisar found that South Asian-American men and women tended to have more "comfortable" relationships with each other, for although they were Muslim, a shared ethnic culture and race liberated them to be friendly with each other. Intisar felt somewhat deprived of male Muslim friends, especially when the South Asian men performed conspicuously religious identities. Even though she shared their religious background, she still felt distant enough from them not to possess a sufficient amount of shared cultural capital to have comfortable, casual friendships. Teresa, as a White woman, felt liberated from immigrant-cultural boundaries in interacting with men. But for Intisar, as a black woman, not sharing a particular immigrant Muslim culture with men deprived her of shared cultural comfort that permitted men and women to interact comfortably.

Many religious young Muslim women disapproved of attending the South Asian dance shows,[35] but Roshan, a Bangladeshi-American sophomore, enjoyed attending them. However, she had stopped going to nightclubs because she felt that the environment and behavior of club attendees was sexualized.

> Some Muslims maybe [are] like: "I don't go to the *bhangra* show: it's the
> same environment [as a nightclub]." I'm like, when you go [to a dance
> show], you sit down. You're not getting up and dancing.

Roshan constructed her third space of religious moderation and pragmatism between people who did not attend the dance show and those who attended nightclubs, basing her choice on the quality of the environment and the attendees' physical participation. She argued that a nightclub featured personal and physical interaction of bodies on the dance floor, while a *bhangra* show separated the dancing bodies from the seated audience. Thus, the *bhangra* show did not create a sexualized environment in which one could physically participate, since participant enjoyment was more individualized.

My participants constructed third spaces in different ways. No one appeared to have any clear religious/cultural answers to the "how to" prob-

lems of love and courtship – problems that were crucial in the construction of religious, cultural, and gender identities.

> Heather: I feel like marriage is [Islamically] a very undefined realm. Especially in the U.S. versus different countries versus culture. … And is there a middle ground so you can combine a little bit of the two? And some people are like, "no way," and other people are like, "we don't know how much is okay."[36]

A complicating factor in the construction of theological answers to these questions is that although most Islamic scholarship originates from non-western cultures, American Muslims construct religious identities in western cultures. The foreign ("source") cultures become "Islamic," while American Muslim cultural strategies are often perceived as un-Islamic. Much Muslim religious and cultural reflection occurs with an omnipresent "western other." "Identity Islam"[37] generally posits that constructing "middle grounds" entails compromising one's religious identity to "the West." Fatima argued that in the absence of religious clarity about "Islamic" courtship, pragmatic necessity (in other words, "what a woman's gotta do") should play an important role. Her friend became a subject of gossip in the Muslim community just for "talking" to a young man.

> Islamically, I don't think there's like a very clear method that's ever been [defined]. … This [American] culture is dating, and arranged marriage is [South Asian] culture. … This friend of mine who's interested in a guy – everyone just talks about her, and it makes me sick. And I'm like, look, we all don't know how to go about this. … And they [the gossipers] are like: "Well, maybe there's a time when you tell your parents." And I'm like, when? You don't tell them right away when you *see* someone. … But [my conservative friends] don't have an answer, you know! … And if I ask … my *conservative* Muslim friends, they're like: "No, absolutely not, you wait for the guy to approach *you*." But then I'm just like, you know, you wait for a proposal to come or something. That's not something I'm totally crazy about.

Like many of my participants, Fatima felt that there was no stable, generally accepted set of "American Muslim" norms on gender interaction. Given the lack of clarity on hybrid "American Muslim" norms, Fatima felt it was unfair that local constructions of gendered behavior were heavily monitored by the community. "Conservative Muslims" seemed to adhere to many norms closer to their parents' immigrant origins, so they advocated a process in which women would play a less active role, and, for example, would wait for men to approach them.[38] Conservative Muslims believed that

the women's parents should be involved in their "courtship" from the very early stages, prior to commitment, since parental involvement might preclude any romantic or sexual activity. Fatima disagreed; she felt that immigrant parents did not know how to help their children find compatible mates, so it was up to the youth to develop their own answers in the third space.

Conclusion

Based on my research data, I argue that college campuses are cultures that do not facilitate "healthy" identity work for many minority students. In these cultures, dominant constructions are imposed upon marginal groups and individuals, obliging them to engage with these constructions during their identity work, to comply and/or resist them.[39]

American Muslim women worked out complex third spaces in the midst of the normalizing pressure of majority American-style dating at college, nebulous and diverse religious/cultural community norms, parental expectations, their Muslim Student Association's official norms and practices, and their Muslim peers' practices. Muslim women were often categorized as "not ordinary" if they rejected the dominant norms of romance and sex on campus. Whether they dated or not, they were aware of the decisive/divisive nature of the dating/not dating line: this practice determined "where you stood" [culturally] in American youth culture. Being unclear about where you stood on dating could put a Muslim student in the position of appearing to compromise a female student's religious identity. But being clear could render her identity reductive and merely religious. Muslim women also perceived a strong interest in marriage and courtship as minoritizing and culturally marginalizing in campus culture. Thus, they were often inclined to conceal their interest in marriage from their peers.

Although non-Muslim students were not the only peers who minoritized Muslim women in terms of the dating culture, the dominant dating culture also pervaded minority Muslim spaces. Minority spaces are by no means "safe" zones for minority students merely because they are labeled "minority spaces," because the dominant majority's power is pervasive.

Muslim women were actively engaged in the cultural production of "different ordinariness." Many of them rejected the total ordinariness of assimilation and the total difference of immigrant parents and ultra-conservative Muslims, working instead toward a "middle ground" of "moderation." In the process, they evaluated the dominant majority for its ability to accept or understand religious/cultural practices (such as not hugging one's fiancé) and

concealed them and/or translated these practices into "local" (youth culture) practices, so as not to publicly define their difference.

While dating-with-sex comprised the core of dominant majority peer culture, Muslim women identified different influences among their Muslim/ ethnic peer groups: some were the more religiously conservative, and some were the less conservative and less "textual" groups. Muslim women made sophisticated and critical choices among these, instead of accepting dictated solutions to their questions from others, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. Young converts like Heather and Charlise were more likely to made "textual" choices than were second-generation immigrants like Myra. Gendered behavior and courtship are normatively nebulous areas in American Muslim communities due to the diversity of practices, and most choices were seen as risky practices that endangered identities and social status. The struggles of hybridity often resulted in Muslim students' withdrawal to Muslim-only friendship circles, as the dominant gaze subjected their efforts to stereotyping, ridicule, and pressure to conform, while the Muslim community's gaze(s) subjected them to scrutiny and control.

Under the dominant majority gaze, Muslim women often disguised difference as ordinariness by trying to represent their difference as a *different* ordinariness. These identities were not singular and static; rather, they were multiple, shifting, and complex, ranging between dominant majority norms in the United States and conservative Muslim norms, and appearing at different points of a continuum in different roles, spaces, and contexts.

Endnotes

1. Shabana Mir, "Constructing Third Spaces: American Muslim Undergraduate Women's Hybrid Identity Construction" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2006.
2. Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield, *Religion on Campus* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
3. Dorothy Holland, William Lachiotte, Jr., Debra Skinner, and Carole Cain, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 26.
4. Peter M. Magolda, "The Campus Tour: Ritual and Community in Higher Education," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2000): 42-43.
5. Holland et al., *Identity and Agency*.
6. Ibid., 5.
7. Ibid., 18.
8. Ibid., 18.

9.   Harvey Sacks, "Doing 'Being Ordinary,'" in *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation,* eds. Dwight Atkinson and John Heritage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 413.

10. Betsy Rymes and Diana Pash, "Questioning Identity: The Case of One Second-Language Learner," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2001): 279.

11. Sacks, "Doing 'Being Ordinary'"; cf. G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1934).

12. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge 1994); Shahnaz Khan, *Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2002).

13. Rymes and Pash, "Questioning Identity," 280.

14. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 44.

15. Ibid.

16. Rymes and Pash, "Questioning Identity," 280.

17. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

18. Khan, *Aversion and Desire*, xxiii.

19. Wendy Luttrell, *Schoolsmart and Motherwise: Working-Class Women's Identity and Schooling* (London: Routledge, 1997).

20. For details on methodology, see Mir, "Constructing Third Spaces," chapter 3.

21. Khan, *Aversion and Desire*; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

22. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet/Penguin Books, 1995).

23. Goffman, *Stigma*.

24. *Haram* (Arabic) means "forbidden."

25. Holland et al., *Identity and Agency*.

26. Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart, *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

27. Heather spoke of how some hijab-observing Muslim women had non-Muslim roommates whose boyfriends slept in the same dorm room sometimes. There was probably an unenforced rule against overnight guests.

28. "Muslim housing" apartments were university dorms governed by certain Islamic regulations (e.g., a man and a woman would not be alone in a room together, drinking was not permitted, and so on).

29. Amira was very nervous about parental monitoring and about her dorm environment, because even her non-Muslim friends' dating patterns ended up reflecting badly on her. This was why the presence of Dallal's boyfriend in her locked bedroom in the morning made Amira nervous. Previously, during her first week at college, Amira's father (a liberal upper-class Pakistani who drank alcohol on occasion) was helping her move into the dorm. He saw Dallal's boyfriend and became very nervous and irritable. "And he started lecturing me

in the car, as if I was the one who had the boyfriend," she said. "He's like: 'You have to tell her, either move out [or] get a new roommate. He can't be there!'"

30. According to a prophetic hadith: "When a person marries, he has fulfilled half of his religion." The reasoning behind this is that marriage protects one against promiscuity.

31. Khan, *Aversion and Desire*; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

32. Jasmin Zine, "Redefining Resistance: Towards an Islamic Sub-culture in Schools," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 3, no. 3 (2000): 293-316.

33. *Hijabi:* a term popularly used in the Western Muslim diaspora in place of the Arabic *muhajjibah* (a Muslim woman/girl who wears a headscarf).

34. *Baita* (Urdu) means "child."

35. These performances featured *bhangra*, *rass*, and other regional South Asian dances, performed by college students. The shows were immensely popular, and regional contests were held between colleges on the East coast.

36. Men were also confused about the theological details of "Islamic courtship." Rana said: "I know a couple younger guys actually approached me; they're like: 'Rana, I'm interested in someone; what do I do Islamically? Can you please bring someone who can give a lecture or something about it?' … I mean, *I* don't know what I'm supposed to do if I'm interested in someone. … I think it's just not talked about."

37. Marcia K. Hermansen, "How to Put the Genie Back in the Bottle: Identity Islam and Muslim Youth Cultures in the United States," in *Progressive Muslims: On Pluralism, Gender, and Justice*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 303-19.

38. This would presumably be immodest and might cause unseemly behavior simply because it was relatively unusual. However, the other reason could be that due to general American Muslim uncertainty on the issue, Fatima's conservative Muslim women friends advocated "waiting" so that *they* would not be put in a position of making any mistakes, for which a religious or social price might be paid.

39. Holland et al., *Identity and Agency*.