

Muslims at the American Vigil: LGBTIQ Advocacy, Religion, and Public Mourning

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Abstract

The 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting at a gay dance club in Florida fomented a surge in Islamophobia, as pundits blamed the perpetrator's Muslim identity for his hateful act. In the aftermath of the violence, vigils across the United States offered forums for Muslim Americans and other groups to publicly express their shared grief and to address homophobia and Islamophobia together. Responses to the Orlando tragedy heightened the visibility of LGBTIQ Muslims, presenting opportunities for this doubly marginalized minority to advocate for their belonging in the larger Muslim community. Some Muslim American religious leaders resisted these expansions, revealing tensions internal to the Muslim American community about the legitimacy of LGBTIQ Muslim identities within normative articulations of Islam as well as the potential for mosque leaders to serve as LGBTIQ allies. This local ethnographic study of vigils in Michigan examines how the Orlando aftermath encouraged conversations among local Muslim civic and religious leaders about LGBTIQ Muslim inclusion while considering how these conversations reflected national debates among Muslim American scholars about the limits and potentials for interpreting Islam. Tensions within Muslim American communities over how to negotiate connections between religion, same-sex desire, Islamophobia, and protest are shaping the emergence of LGBTIQ Muslim visibilities in the United States today.

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In the early morning hours of June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen opened fire on guests dancing at Pulse, a popular gay bar and dance club in Orlando, Florida. The massacre left 49 dead and 53 injured. It was Latin night at the dance club, and the victims were mainly LGBTIQ people of color, including many of Latino/a/x background.¹ On the first sundown after the tragedy, I attended a vigil to honor victims of the Orlando shooting in a park in the center of Kalamazoo, Michigan—the West Michigan city where I live and work. By the time I arrived at Bronson Park, throngs of people were already there, including representatives from several local news agencies. As I made my way through the crowd, I observed families and friends standing together in groups, some people sobbing and embracing. Many assembled wore rainbow shirts, ribbons, or caps, or bore other symbols of gay pride. The focal point of the gathering was a broad, raised stage with a rainbow flag cascading over its front steps. As darkness started to fall, community and religious leaders on stage addressed the crowd.² Reverend Ruth Morderdyk, who identifies as a lesbian and is a pastor of the Disciples of Christ Congregation in Kalamazoo, spoke:

It grieves and distresses me to know that some who claim to share my faith as followers of Jesus have rejoiced in the deaths Sunday morning, and use it to promote agendas of homophobia and Islamophobia, (...) pray for Orlando, (...) but do not stop there. Pray for the guidance and guts to know what you must do next to help stop the hatred of homophobia, transphobia, racism, Islamophobia, and the violence it spawns.

Several other leaders at the Kalamazoo vigil noted the rise of both Islamophobia and homophobia in the aftermath of the violence. Some also mentioned Muslims as LGBTIQ allies. But at the Kalamazoo vigil, no Muslim leaders were present among the religious and civic leaders who gave public addresses or read the names of the Orlando dead from the stage. Dr. Carol Anderson, chair of the Religious Studies department at nearby Kalamazoo College and an LGBTIQ-rights activist, had invited a local imam to speak, but he could not attend the vigil due to a family emergency. Instead, the imam had asked Anderson to convey that he regretted his absence and that he and his congregation were praying for those who were slain. The imam's comments, as relayed via Anderson, were met with loud cheers. So were the words of Jay Maddock, a trans man and the executive director of Out-Front Kalamazoo, who announced in his opening speech, "Islam is not our enemy."³

On the same night, about 150 miles east of Kalamazoo, 100 people gathered in Clark Park at the center of Southwest Detroit's Mexicantown. About a dozen speakers stood on stage, including Catholic priests with rainbow stoles, immigrant-rights activists from the neighborhood's Latin American community, and Muslim civic leaders. Rashida Tlaib, a former state representative who was soon to become one of the first Muslim women to enter Congress, said:

As a Muslim, I see what happens to so many people over the weekend, the dehumanization that happens, because of our faith, because of who we love. If my son was to love a man, I don't care. I will love him because love is love. (...) So please, I want you to reach out to LGBTIQ, the Muslim, Latino, (...) African American, our living victims of mass shootings.⁴

In an interview with me after the event, Tlaib explained that she had stressed her Muslim identity to emphasize the compatibility between her religion and her support for LGBTIQ individuals, noting that such emphasis was particularly important given the rise of Islamophobic rhetoric as the 2016 national elections approached.⁵

In fact, Tlaib's rhetoric foreshadowed an unprecedented surge in nationwide dialogue about the relationship between Islamophobia and homophobia in the weeks after the Orlando shooting. Some of this dialogue was showcased in vigils across the US, including the Michigan vigils I attended and researched. The Muslim identity of the perpetrator and the location of the shooting in a gay bar had a large impact on both groups. However, the people affected most intensely were LGBTIQ Muslims, who, as one journalist put it, were "caught in the crossfire of identities" in the wake of the Orlando shooting.⁶ In addition, the fact that most people inside the Florida bar that night were Latino/a/x—or came from other communities of color—made the shootings a significant event for all racial or ethnic minorities.⁷

Vigils and media coverage of the Orlando tragedy offered LGBTIQ Muslims a moment of heightened visibility, presenting opportunities for this doubly marginalized minority to advocate for their recognition and belonging in the larger Muslim American community. In vigils, demonstrations, and virtual exchanges, individuals identifying as Muslim, LGBTIQ, Latina/o/x, and/or African American mourned together and testified about the personal and political meanings of the mass violence, elaborating on the value of coalition building across race, class, ethnic, religious, and gender lines. This opened a space for the public presentation of new

LGBTIQ-inclusive forms of coalition building and intersectionality.⁸ The absence of Muslim religious functionaries at some of the inclusive, Michigan-based Orlando vigils I studied constituted a deliberate and telling omission in some people's eyes.⁹ The fact that local mosque leaders avoided certain types of Orlando vigils, opting instead to create alternative sites of mourning within mosques, reveals the tensions between Muslim advocates of LGBTIQ inclusion and those religious leaders who adhere to normative articulations of Islam that condemn and discourage the public visibility of same-sex desire, orientation, and relationships. Those tensions evident on the ground reflect the dynamics of national-level debate among Muslim American scholars.¹⁰

Since June 2016, I have been conducting a local ethnographic study in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and in the Detroit Metro area on intersections among Muslim, LGBTIQ, and racial or racialized minority identities in the aftermath of the tragedy. As part of this study, I carried out interviews with 25 people who took part in the Orlando vigils, who were involved in organizations whose members were represented at one or more vigils, or who served as media spokespeople directly after the Orlando shooting. I spoke with five individuals who identify as part of the LGBTIQ Muslim community, five whom I categorize as Muslim civic leaders,¹¹ and four whom I categorize as Muslim religious functionaries or mosque leaders. Those I interviewed came from a range of backgrounds and positionalities, including Muslim, Christian, and secular activists working on interfaith, multi-racial, anti-poverty, pro-immigration, and other kinds of coalitions; individuals who identified as members of African American, Latino/a/x American, Arab American, South Asian American, Arab American, and white ethnic groups; and those identifying as gay, bi, straight, or transgender. I gathered data on eight vigils taking place in Southwest Detroit, Dearborn, Ferndale, and Kalamazoo. I attended two of the vigils and gathered data on the others through video recordings, newspaper articles, blogs, and social media posts about the events coupled with interviews with people who attended and helped organize them.

My analysis of the vigils and other activism addressing the Orlando tragedy focuses on the personal and cultural work of mourners as they came to terms with the shooting and developed their public responses to it, both via individual processes and as part of collective efforts. In a variety of forums, including at vigils, on blogs, in newspaper interviews, and in their interviews with me, individuals conveyed complex public and political messages about how they understood the tensions among religion, politics,

violence, sexuality, and minority identities. The Orlando moment intensified ongoing dialogues among members of three groups on a national level: LGBTIQ Muslims, Muslim civic leaders, and Muslim religious functionaries. Individuals from each of these three groups addressed the relationship between normatively defined Muslim identity and the LGBTIQ question in the wake of Orlando from a distinct positionality.

First, Muslims who participated openly in vigils for Orlando as members of the LGBTIQ community, or who shared self-images as LGBTIQ Muslims on blogs and newspaper reports in response to Orlando, were witnessing with their bodies, joining LGBTIQ members of other religious groups who have also grappled with normative elements in their religions to demonstrate that one can be both LGBTIQ and a legitimate member of a religious tradition.¹² This embodied activism by LGBTIQ Muslims materializes a style of Islamic discourse, evident in both scholarship and activism, that is characterized by a human-centered reading of religious texts and traditions. This approach, exemplified by scholars such as Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, Nadeem Mahomed, and Junaid Jahangir and Hussein Abdullatif, finds a path through religious texts to support the full recognition of the bodies, needs, and sexualities of LGBTIQ Muslims. These scholars insist that LGBTIQ Muslims represent a category of people with an innate disposition who have the same right as others to divine mercy and the avoidance of undue hardship (*ʿasr*) that would come from depriving themselves of intimate partnership and living in hiding.¹³

Second, some Muslims who did not publicly self-identify as LGBTIQ, including civic leaders and residents, mourned the Orlando dead in ways that recognized, named, and honored the gender and sexual identities of the LGBTIQ Orlando victims. The public interventions of these Muslim allies implicitly and explicitly demonstrated their belief that their religion allowed them to stand as advocates for LGBTIQ communities—and in some cases even demanded it.

Third, some Muslim civic and religious leaders organized vigils and spoke to the press in a way that amplified a normative voice within Islam that discourages the reification and legitimization of LGBTIQ identities and same-sex desire in public discourse. This positionality was reflected the tenor of the open letter “A Joint Muslim Statement on the Carnage in Orlando,” in which more than 450 Muslims, including many religious functionaries, decried the violence perpetrated as outside of Islamic justice without elaborating on the LGBTIQ identities of the victims.¹⁴ Other

religious functionaries avoided or downplayed the issue of homophobia and the LGBTIQ question in their condemnation of the shootings.

In their interviews with me, detailed below, some Michigan-based LGBTIQ Muslims and Muslim activists expressed disappointment that local mosque leaders did not use the Orlando moment to come forth as members of religious alliances committed to recognizing the legitimacy of LGBTIQ identities, including gay Muslim identities. The expectation that Muslim religious functionaries mourning the mass shooting would emphasize the victims' LGBTIQ identities relates to a central principle in gay rights activism: in order to effectively combat hate crimes against LGBTIQ people, activists must first recognize the legitimacy of LGBTIQ identities and promote LGBTIQ visibility as such.¹⁵ However, as will be discussed, this mode of recognition-based activism stands in sharp tension with normative articulations of Islam, whose proponents argue against the possibility that a identity based in a queer or non-homonormative orientation could be recognized in Islamic discourse.

In framing their arguments, both local LGBTIQ Muslim activists and Muslim religious functionaries drew on the scholarship of those they consider to be experts on the issue of homosexuality and Islam, including the work of theologians, academics, and those whose expertise spans the two. Scholarly writings calling for a reconsideration of same-sex sexuality in Islam began to gain traction in the last few decades.¹⁶ Since then, a range of Muslim scholars, most notably Junaid Jahangir and Hussein Abdullatif (2016, 2018), Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle (2003, 2010, 2014), Nadeem Mahomed (2016, 2017), Farid Esack (2017), Hassan El-Menawi (2012), and Khaled El-Rouayheb (2005) have put forth a robust body of work that argues, both on theological and academic grounds, for a reconsideration of same-sex sexuality in Islam.¹⁷ Their work is read both by scholarly communities and popular audiences.

Since the publication of those texts, some scholars have denounced these reconsiderations of same-sex sexuality, both on the grounds of their general viability and on specific terms decrying their methods. For example, in his 2017 article-length critique of Kugle's work, Muslim scholar Mobeen Vaid wrote that certain aspects of the LGBTIQ question are beyond the pale of serious reconsideration, given what Vaid describes as the "full and unbroken Islamic consensus" on the question of same-sex-sexuality among scholars within the Islamic tradition.¹⁸ As Vaid comments in his

2018 reflections, his 2017 piece garnered significant attention from Muslim scholars on both sides of the debate.¹⁹

These contestations of same-sex desire and behavior relate integrally to debates among Muslims over the question of authority within Islam. As anthropologist Zareena Grewal and other scholars note, the questions of who speaks for Islam, how they gain the authority to do so, and what room the religion has for incorporating novel interpretations and traditions are especially relevant for Muslims living in western countries in a global age.²⁰ Such tensions in Muslim communities—over both religious interpretations of same-sex sexuality and the question of who has the authority to make these interpretations—are shaping the emergence of LGBTIQ Muslim visibilities in the United States today.

Framing the Debate

At the Kalamazoo vigil, volunteers passed around tall white candles in disposable holders and scattered rainbow origami cranes on the steps of the stage. Community and religious leaders stood shoulder to shoulder at the front of the gathering. They were gay, straight, trans, Black, White, and Latino/a/x. Some signified their status as religious leaders with clerical collars or other vestments. Reverend Moerdyk draped a rainbow stole over her shoulders, a garment that harmoniously signifies religious authority and LGBTIQ identity at the same time. As she gave her address, her pitch and pacing changed from everyday speech into a keening that riveted peoples' attention with its urgency and emotion:

Lament for the harsh heart of a nation that breeds malice and violence against lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer. Lament for the doubled and tripled targeting of LGBTIQ kin who are Muslim, Latino, Asian American, African American, Native American, immigrant, refugees, poor (...) because at the heart of lament lies honest courage and furious, fearless love. (...) Love breaks all of our hearts and brings us together today in solidarity. (...) We also claim and proclaim the words of the prophet and professor and poet Cornell West: "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Moerdyk's elegy and her quote from West stressed the connections between love, justice, and public visibility, placing her message about LGBTIQ acceptance within a long line of race-based social justice activists and thus connecting to that civil rights history.²¹ In her speech, she named the sexual and gender identities of those who were slain, carefully spelling out "lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer" in the middle of the speech, rather than collapsing

these identities into their familiar acronym, to emphasize the importance of fully naming sexual and gender minority identities. She honored the Orlando dead by suggesting that the fearlessness of LGBTIQ individuals who have come out could serve as a model for the kind of bravery needed to improve society. Further, as an out lesbian, Moerdyk engaged in embodied spirituality, where she witnessed with her body by positioning herself as an object lesson in the compatibility between religion, spiritual authority, and same-sex-desiring identity.

In interviews after the vigil, Moerdyk and Carol Anderson, the academic activist mentioned earlier, discussed how the public visibility of Christian religious leaders as LGBTIQ allies had hit a new high in Kalamazoo with the Orlando vigil. They related how the quick rapprochement of religious leaders from most of the churches surrounding Bronson Park and from other parts of the Kalamazoo area was a testament to several decades of labor on the part of Kalamazoo's queer community to build alliances and solidarity with religious communities. This solidarity was accomplished in part by the religious alliance group Outfront Kalamazoo, of which Moerdyk and Anderson are both leading members. Anderson and Moerdyk emphasized the special importance of religious leaders coming out as allies in moments such as the Orlando vigils, and Moerdyk discussed the "spiritual injuries" that many LGBTIQ people suffer from having grown up in the church under the shadow of rejection. Religious leaders who are LGBTIQ allies, Anderson explained, recognize those experiences and try to atone for the injuries that the church inflicts upon LGBTIQ followers by doing things differently, by showing up and embodying more welcoming face of the church.

While the presence of Christian religious leaders was ubiquitous across all the eight vigils I studied, Muslim religious functionaries were present in some kinds of Detroit-area Orlando vigils but not others. Specifically, in two of the area's largest mosques, mosque leaders conducted vigils of a type that I categorized in an earlier work as "private religious vigils."²² These vigils took place inside the respective mosques and were geared toward mourning Orlando victims along with victims of other mass shootings. These private religious vigils did not incorporate gay pride signs and symbols, such as the rainbow flags featured in Kalamazoo and Southwest Detroit; rather, their speakers presented an opposition to all hateful acts of violence, without commenting extensively on homophobia or the vulnerabilities faced by LGBTIQ communities. In contrast, local mosque leaders

absented themselves from another type of vigil that I have categorized as a “public secular vigil” in previous work.²³ The gatherings at Bronson Park and Clark Park epitomize this type of vigil, which tends to unite many individuals, including religious leaders and others across different interest groups, under the banner of gay pride. In the Detroit Metro area, Muslim civic leaders, rather than Muslim religious functionaries, attended these large, diverse, generally open-air vigils.

The absence of Muslim religious functionaries at the widely attended “public secular” vigils and their hosting of “private religious” vigils that mourned the Orlando dead without emphasizing LGBTIQ concerns directly fell in line with guidance proffered by Muslim American scholars such as Imam Dawud Walid, the longtime director of CAIR-Michigan and a respected religious leader. In his book *Towards Sacred Activism*, Walid encourages Muslims to speak out against the violent targeting of LGBTIQ individuals, while maintaining a mode of discourse that stops short of recognizing them as composing a distinct class of people. Characterizing the LGBTIQ question as “one of the most testing, and perhaps confusing issues among many Western Muslims,”²⁴ Walid asserts that:

Vocalizing a position against the slaughter of innocent people at the Pulse nightclub, a gay nightclub, on June 12, 2016, was proper when motivated by the spiritual guidance of the Qur’an and Prophetic example. Thus, it is a working principle that Muslims should oppose any sort of vigilante violence and mayhem, including threatening the lives of or killing members of any group, including the LGBTIQ community.²⁵

However, Muslim scholar activists must be careful not to cross the line when advocating on behalf of LGBTIQ rights and recognition:

When it comes to those who believe that homosexuality should be protected under civil rights law and that same-sex marriage is not forbidden in Islam, these Muslims have gone against over 14 centuries of Islamic legal consensus that same gender sexual intercourse is completely forbidden (...) Muslims who state that homosexuality is a positive self-identify [sic] and believe that Islamic tradition has somehow been incorrect since the earliest generations have clearly taken a position against Islamic orthodoxy. Celebrating that one is gay or lesbian is no more a positive identity to champion, according to Islam, than lauding a person for being a fornicator or fornicatress.²⁶

As discussed by Nadeem Mahomed, and in contrast to what Walid advocates here, some Muslim scholars such as Jonathan Brown (2016) and Abdullah bin Hamid Ali (2015), who also reject possibilities for the religious acceptance and inclusion of LGBTIQ identities and behaviors in the Islamic tradition, nevertheless recommend that Muslims support LGBTIQ Muslims in some aspects of the civic realm.²⁷ Yet despite that contrast, Walid's writing reflects the work of these (and other) Muslim scholars writing against LGBTIQ inclusion insofar as that body of scholarship rests its argument on the interpretation of the main sources of authority within Islam (Qur'an, hadith, sunna) and on consensus (*ijmā'*) and analogy (*qiyās*). These scholars invoke what is characterized as seamless scholarly agreement with regard to the condemnation of same-sex sexuality in Islam.²⁸ As exemplified by the work of Scott Kugle, Junaid Jahangir, and Hussein Abdullatif, methodologies variously invoking these same sources of authority have *also* been used to advocate for LGBTIQ acceptance within Islam. However, within normative traditionalist scholarship, as exemplified by Mobeen Vaid, the tendency is to characterize the works of Muslim scholars who advocate for LGBTIQ recognition as lying outside the boundaries of acceptable norms of Islamic scholarship and reasoning. That characterization is based, in part, on the idea that any scholarship seeking to assert a place for LGBTIQ Muslims is already in breach of normative traditions.²⁹

A key factor in this debate is the question of whether LGBTIQ orientation can be considered as constituting an inborn or innate quality. Muslim scholars writing against the acceptance of LGBTIQ identities and same-sex unions are more likely to characterize same-sex attraction as a preference or choice that is subject to change.³⁰ For Vaid:

The Sharia's conceptual framework presents an understanding of sexual desire and conduct that diverges considerably from the essentialist notions of orientation and disposition currently popular in the West. Far from being predetermined or immutable, sexual predilections are conceived of within a framework that accounts for their general heterogeneity vis-à-vis human experience. Indeed, any individual may feel attracted to someone else, and the presence of that desire is not essentialized into any defining identity. Rather, ethical valuations focus on what remains within the purview and concern of the sacred law, namely, *governable actions*.³¹

And further,

If we dispense with the contingent category of an essentializing homosexuality, then individuals who experience same-sex attraction can more readily situate their struggle within the context of similar struggles and not conceive of it as an exceptional condition calling for special stigmatization or for full embrace and “validation” on pain of being “untrue” to one’s core self.³²

From the idea that LGBTIQ tendencies are not innate and inborn, it follows that same-sex desiring individuals can reorient their sexuality and that they may find reasonable substitutions for same-sex intimacy. In contrast, Jahangir and Abdullatif assert that the idea of requiring LGBTIQ Muslims to reorient their sexuality by marrying the opposite gender, for example, would cause undue hardship (*‘asr*) and thus is not a viable option:

Nothing in Islam is forbidden without there being a legitimate substitute for the prohibited act. This principle fails in the case of same-sex unions where there is no alternative. Prescribing LGBTIQ Muslims to marry the opposite gender is like asking them to cover their need for drinking water by eating salt as a substitute. Therefore, both permanent celibacy and sham marriages cause unnecessary *‘asar* (undue hardship) and are the markings of human beings when they ignore *al-ṭarīq al-wasat* (the middle path). Such human prescriptions generally lead to *taklif mā lā yuṭāq* (Creation of obligations that cannot be met and as a result of not taking a reasonable approach to understanding the texts in light of the fact, as recognized by Shāṭibī (d. 1388), that some human dispositions are so inherent that to deny them would be to harm human beings irreparably). These prescriptions can be challenged on the basis of Ibn Taymiyyah’s suggestion that when scholars discover their decisions are causing suffering (as in the case of permanent celibacy) or that people are seeking worse loopholes (as in the case of sham marriages) or that people end up living in haram (as is the case of many who are unable to live without intimacy) then it is time for scholars to revisit their conclusions.³³

Scholars across both sides of the debate agree on the frankness of the Qur’an and of the Islamic tradition in recognizing people’s needs for intimate companionship and the centrality of marriage in Islam as the solution for enshrining and containing individual’s sexual and emotional needs in a legitimate, socially productive way. Furthermore, for scholars like Mahomed, who press for LGBTIQ inclusion, the primacy of marriage itself constitutes an argument for the compassionate treatment of LGBTIQ Muslims:

The emphasis placed on marriage (...) is so evident that it does not require further elaboration (...). It is remarkable that contemporary Muslim scholars would in the first instance insist on refusing even to consider extending these social goods to LGBTIQ Muslims. The banality of the current status quo is that it effectively entrenches a pernicious homonormativity that not only proscribes all queer forms of intimacy and conduct (...) but also rejects an ethical framework that attempts to treat LGBTIQ Muslims in a dignified and equal manner.³⁴

“Never About One Thing”

In the absence of Muslim religious leaders at local public, secular vigils, Detroit-area Muslim civic leaders bore the representational burden of condemning the shootings and expressing their alliance with LGBTIQ groups. For example, as mentioned earlier, Detroit-area Muslim civic leaders who spoke out at Clark Park included former State Representative Rashida Tlaib, a Detroit lawyer who was then running for a congressional seat in a primary that paved the way for Tlaib, along with Minnesota State Representative Ilhan Omar, to become the first two Muslim American women to occupy this role. Other Detroit-area Muslim representatives included those from the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS)—including those affiliated with its anti-racist Take on Hate Campaign—and an individual representing the Michigan Muslim Community Council. Fazia, a Muslim American community activist, explained her presence at a vigil in southwest Detroit as follows:

I found out about it [at work] because I got an email notice from the director of the department and it said something to the effect of supporting the LGBTIQ community and (...) out colleagues. As soon as I read that I got up and left. (...) For the people I knew there for sure were Muslim, [there was] a need and a desire to protest this tragedy with their presence. Sometimes just to be present speaks more than words can ever say. (...) I took myself and my hijab as a symbol of the narrative that we just don't support that. For me my hijab is not so much a religious mandate—for me it is my own personal marketing campaign.

Over the past few decades, Muslim community activists such as Fazia have gained expertise in defending Muslims in general against politicized charges that the violent, irrational actions of individuals represent the attitudes, opinions, and tendencies of the whole. For Fazia and other Muslims

who came to the Orlando vigils to represent Islam, standing under the rainbow flag while bearing signs or symbols associated with Muslim identity was a new dimension of this embodied anti-Islamophobia activism.³⁵ Likewise, for some LGBTIQ individuals and allies, standing with Muslims and adopting anti-Islamophobia messages as part of their rhetoric was new and exciting.

As one vigil organizer put it, “demonstrations are never about one thing.” Rather, demonstrations draw together large groups of individuals who come with their own sets of inter-related concerns that they connect to the issue at hand.³⁶ When vigil participants display signs and symbols pertaining to different causes, those who respond by cheering or standing beside them to be photographed demonstrate their solidarity and agreement across a range of issues. Media forms that convey these images of solidarity extend the ritual into the future, while commentary from reporters, participants, and readers adds new layers of meaning.³⁷

On national and local levels, Muslim civic and religious leaders were quick to point out that LGBTIQ groups have rallied with Muslims on anti-Islamophobia issues since 9/11 and also that these groups quickly came to the fore to protect Muslims during the Orlando moment. Muslim civic leaders used the Orlando moment as a chance to acknowledge this support, pledging reciprocity. Nihad Awad, the executive director of the Council of American-Islamic Relations, said in a public statement:

For many years, members of LBGTQI community have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Muslim community against any acts of hate crimes, [I]slamophobia, marginalization and discrimination. Today we stand with them shoulder-to-shoulder. (...) Homophobia, transphobia, [I]slamophobia are interconnected systems of oppression, and we cannot dismantle one without dismantling the other.³⁸

Partly echoing these sentiments in a private interview with me, an area mosque leader known as Iman Elias, who did not attend any Orlando vigils, interpreted Muslim visibility at the vigils this way:

It sends the message first to the gay community that we are saddened by this. It's like saying to them [the gay community]: You and I both know that we may have a difference of opinion, but we're together in this. We stand with you just like you have stood with us in times when we were hit with the hate and violence. So, it sends a message of unity first toward the gay community. Then, the two different worldviews standing at the same

place mourning together, making condolences together, sends a message to the Islamophobes that Islam or Muslims don't condone such things. They do not condone violence, no matter who it is against.

Even while invoking a need for cooperation between the two groups, Imam Elias also implicitly posits a tension between the "gay community" and Muslims: he frames his address to an imagined "you" (the gay community), from "I" (the Muslim community). He characterizes these two groups as embodying "two different worldviews" (e.g., over the issue of same-sex desire), leaving out the possibility of a third and fourth group: gay Muslims and Muslims who are LGBTIQ allies.³⁹ Here, the project of identifying a common cause between those who are the target of homophobia and those who are the target of Islamophobia is also used as an opportunity to re-inscribe lines of difference between Muslims and LGBTIQ communities.⁴⁰

Towards Sacred Activism author Dawud Walid acknowledges the strong support that LGBTIQ groups have offered Muslims Americans since 9/11. However, Walid cautions Muslim Americans against deriving from this support an ethical obligation to return the support in a *quid pro quo* fashion.⁴¹ For Walid, such an exchange would reflect the logic of liberal secular coalition building but falls short of the dictates of sacred activism. In his opinion, the demand for Muslim Americans to lend their support to identity- and rights-based LGBTIQ movements is an effect of the "minority discourse," a hegemonic social construction dictating that "in order for Muslims to secure their rights as a religious minority, those rights are tied to the rights of other minorities to freely express themselves within civil society."⁴²

Utilizing the Islamic concept of *al-walāʾa* (allegiance) to inform a specific notion of ally-ship, Walid asserts that: "Allegiance is based on an affinity for others who believe and seek to implement the spiritual healing and socio-political guidance contained within the Qur'an and Prophetic sunnah. In other words, allegiance is rooted in a belief in transcendent values and an ethics based upon sacred guidance; allegiance is not simply based on identity politics."⁴³ As such, the Muslim conception of ally-ship (*al-walāʾa*) as a framework "differs from the language put forth in the contemporary social justice world, which is primarily shaped by secular liberalism even when religious language is interwoven."⁴⁴

Reflecting this dynamic tension, two Muslim religious leaders in Dearborn advertised the vigils taking place in their large mosques in the week after the Orlando shooting as interfaith memorials for victims of *all* recent

mass shootings, rather than using them as an effort to showcase recognition and alliance formation with LGBTIQ activists. The names of those who were slain in Orlando were recited, but the LGBTIQ identities of the victims and the fact that Pulse is a gay nightclub were not made central to the speeches. In an interview with me, Rafeeq Naqawi, one of the organizers of a mosque vigil, said this choice was deliberate:

We consciously avoided making that central to the message we were conveying. Because, obviously, there are some sensitivities in many faith traditions about what their stands are on homosexuality. (...) We didn't want to bring any kind of opportunity for controversy [from inside] or outside the community.

For Rafeeq the formula of mourning the victims by name, but not by identity, seemed to him a productive way to resolve the tension of speaking out against the Orlando violence without reifying the LGBTIQ identities of the victims. He said:

These types of vigils are really two-fold (...) to send a message of love and solidarity with the families of these people that were killed. And (...) to renew our connections with ourselves [as an interfaith community]. And by doing that, we believe we are inoculating ourselves against detractors and attacks.

At the Islamic Center of America, perhaps the nation's largest mosque, a vigil eight days after the shooting—held very close to the one-year anniversary of the Charleston shooting—was billed as an “Interfaith Prayer Service in Memory of Lives Lost in Charleston and Orlando.” A second Detroit mosque, the Islamic House of Wisdom, also hosted a private religious vigil for Orlando. This event was the scene of a tense exchange: a young, queer-identified Muslim woman challenged the imam who was leading this event after his opening address dedicated the vigil to victims of violence everywhere. As detailed by a *Detroit Free Press* reporter, the young woman called out: “Excuse me, I just want to be clear. Who are we lighting this vigil for?” When the imam reiterated, “this is a candlelight [vigil] for all victims of violence, hatred and terrorism from Orlando to California to Paris,” the young woman contradicted him: “No, this is about Orlando. This is why we're here. We're here for Orlando. We're here for the queer people.”⁴⁵

Several queer Muslims and allies, some of whom had attended the event and some of whom had heard about it from friends, related a version of this exchange to me, elaborating on its significance to the local Muslim

community. To them, it marked the first time that someone had publicly asked an imam to clarify his acceptance of LGBTIQ identities at a mosque. Salwa, a self-identified queer Muslim who attended the event, explained to me in an interview that she was heartened by the vigil and the dialogue that had taken place there. She said that even though she was disappointed that the imam had fallen short of embracing LGBTIQ identities at the event, the vigil and dialogue that went on there was nonetheless “the first step” to greater acceptance. “So, I am upset that we are not there,” she explained, “but I appreciate the fact that we’re starting.” For Salwa, the factors working against the welcoming of queer Muslims are so great that even a one-sided exchange—in which her perspective is at least heard in the space of a mosque—is welcome.

LGBTIQ Muslim Attitudes about Religious Leaders and Mosque Communities

Other LGBTIQ Muslims and their allies whom I interviewed expressed keen regret that area mosque leaders mourned Orlando victims in ways that neither fully acknowledged their LGBTIQ identities nor addressed the existence and needs of LGBTIQ Muslims. Some also conveyed their wishes that Muslim religious functionaries would have used the media attention they gained during the Orlando moment as a chance to publicly commit themselves to helping to resolve issues related to the well-being of LGBTIQ Muslims. One young gay Muslim man named Farooq explained it this way:

I knew the imams were going to speak up because they don't want Muslims to get a bad rap and all this media attention on look what Muslims are doing and how they are terrorizing all the United States. But they didn't say hardly shit about homophobia or that we won't tolerate homophobia in our communities. (...) Are we going to hear them say (...) we accept everyone, here is a list of mosques nationally that accept LGBTIQ Muslims? (...) Orlando was a time to put your money where your mouth is. If you are against homophobia, how much are you against it? Are you against it enough to outwardly accept and welcome gay Muslims? Because if you are not you are kind of okay with queer folk getting killed.

Farooq's comment reflects Nadeem Mahomed's critique of the one-sided demands that Muslim leaders make on LGBTIQ Muslims to remain invisible:

These responses, which are representative of the dominant view in Muslim communities, lack a candid and sincere concern and interest in the well-being of LGBTIQ Muslims: their complicated relationship with Islam; their sexuality and what it means; and their need, like other non-LGBTIQ Muslims, to form romantic relationships.⁴⁶

Likewise, Muneer, a gay Muslim and Detroit-area LGBTIQ Muslim community activist, told me in an interview that he was dismayed that there were no mosque leaders standing alongside other religious leaders at the large, public, secular Orlando vigils. He described his reaction:

It's nice seeing leaders of other faiths there, but there were no imams there. I don't want to use the word jealous, but if there are these leaders from other faiths, why can't imams be there? Especially knowing what the Qur'an says about homosexuality or lack of what it says about it. I assumed you have researched this, correct?

Here, Muneer indicates that his own interpretation of Islam does not support the point of view that homosexuality is a sin. He alludes with confidence to a body of research by scholars and theologians that supports this point of view and states his expectation that I am familiar with this research as well.⁴⁷ Muneer then answered his own question about why so few imams were coming out publicly as LGBTIQ allies: "Two reasons: first, I think they believe that homosexuality is a sin, and second, they are afraid of the backlash from within their own congregations."

The perspective stated by Ziad, an official at a Detroit-area mosque, underscores Muneer's concerns:

Love the sinner, but hate the sin is the tradition that Catholics have. And I don't think that the Muslims are much different. (...) Faith traditions (...) have to have standards, and those standards are really the glue that keep the faith tradition viable. Even if you want to say, "Oh yeah, we embrace all gays," you destroy something in the process. And no matter if the intention to do it is noble, you are not doing anyone a favor by going in that direction in such a drastic way.

In direct contrast to Muneer's assessment of the Qur'an's ambiguity on the question of homosexuality, Zaid confidently asserts that recognizing the viability of homosexual identity and behavior is not only impossible within Islam, but in fact that the refusal to do so is one of the essential standards for the maintenance of the religion (although certainly one doesn't need to hate the sinner or commit violence against them).

All five of the Detroit-area LGBTIQ Muslims whom I interviewed connected the lack of frank alliances between LGBTIQ people and Muslim religious leaders during the Orlando moment to the general absence of LGBTIQ visibility within local mosque communities. Their understanding reflects Nadeem Mahomed's assertion that "same-sex desire and sexual conduct is considered unnatural and abnormal, immoral and unconscionable by the majority of Muslims and the Muslim scholarly and clerical establishment (...) [which] firmly maintain[s] the position that there is no place for any type of acceptance or tolerance whatsoever of homosexual conduct within Islam and Muslim communities."⁴⁸ Relatedly, a 2015 community needs assessment found that LGBTIQ Muslims in the area did not perceive mosques as welcoming spaces.⁴⁹ One young man in the 2015 study reported that he had not encountered direct expressions of homophobia at the mosque, but also that a thick silence around this issue would preclude any discussion.⁵⁰

None of the Detroit-area LGBTIQ Muslims whom I spoke to regularly attended a mosque, although each of them had grown up in the mosque community and currently identified as Muslim. Some LGBTIQ Muslims I interviewed cited their process of coming to terms with their sexual or gender identity as one of several factors that led to their decreased involvement at the mosque. Farooq, an African American gay man who had converted to Islam when he was at university, explained:

A big draw for me coming to Islam was the community piece. [But then] I began to feel like if I want to be about integrity and honor myself in who I am, then I can only be a part of communities where I know where they stand with regard to queer folks. But then how can I have that conversation with the institution? Honestly, it is dehumanizing to have to call up a mosque and say: "Do you accept my kind, even though we are both Muslim? It is like the whole coming out conversation, as long we continue to frame it like that we are giving straight people the upper hand on the coming out experience: will they accept us, will they not? I think that is a problematic framework to have when you are working on loving yourself.

Here, Farooq alludes to "the double-bind LGBTIQ Muslims routinely experience: in order to exist within religious communities and spaces they need to remain silent and invisible in relation to their sexual orientation."⁵¹ Ziad, the mosque official cited earlier, suggested that the lack of LGBTIQ

visibility at mosques could be attributed to LGBTIQ Muslims' self-censorship, rather than lack of welcome from religious functionaries:

I think that [LGBTIQ] Muslims are torn, just like Catholics are torn, between their gay identity and their faith. I mean, they want to be faithful, they have spiritual needs and consider themselves spiritual beings, and want to worship and practice in the faith that many of them grew up in, but there's some underlying issues throughout the community that make it difficult for them to worship and to present their identity of who they are and what they are. I think that they recognize the balance that needs to be struck among members of our community who are not as open minded, and who may consider themselves more conservative and have different points of view. I think there's enough maturity in the LGBT community to recognize some of those complications.

In this analysis, Ziad commends the LGBTIQ Muslims for their sensitivity to the conservative members' perspectives, implicitly praising them for remaining invisible and describing their willingness to do so as a positive way of striking an appropriate "balance" at the mosque. In this formulation, Ziad places the onus on LGBTIQ Muslims alone, rather than imagining multiple groups as being part of the work of striking a balance at the mosque or that the possibility of a balance would not weigh so heavily on the side of the majority.

None of the Detroit-area LGBTIQ Muslims that I interviewed expressed optimism that they would gain a sense of acceptance from their local religious leaders any time soon, or that the tensions between LGBTIQ advocates and area religious leaders could or would be resolved. Nabeel, a Muslim American LGBTIQ community organizer in his twenties, suggested that younger generations were more likely to inspire change:

Maybe with younger imams who are going into training in the US. As younger imams come into play, they are going to have to deal with this issue of homosexuality, but there are more and more Muslims who are identifying as LGBTIQ and are open about it than they were before. I think as a community, especially the older generation, holds strong to these values and beliefs that homosexuality is a sin. With the younger generation of Muslims, you can have more of these conversations, at least in the US, maybe in Europe as well.

In Nabeel's perspective, current religious functionaries in the area remain forces of conservatism on this issue, while change may arise from three

directions: ordinary young Muslims who will reinterpret Islam's message through the lens of an inclusive social-justice mindset,⁵² a new generation of young imams, and the influence of area political leaders who have made LGBTIQ inclusion part of their platforms.⁵³ He explained:

There are a lot of young Muslims that have a social justice mindset (...) and we have examples for [LGBTIQ inclusion among Muslims] locally in terms of Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, who is running for governor, and Rashida Tlaib, who is running for state rep. They are paving the way for younger Muslims to pursue careers in politics, or become more politically minded, with a social justice mindset.

Change from Below

Rather than looking to mosque or even civic leaders to initiate change, some LGBTIQ Muslims and their allies place the onus on themselves to create spaces for the expression of queer Muslim spirituality and also to inaugurate processes leading to acceptance of, and advocacy for, non-heteronormative individuals among religious communities. The principle of placing the burden of action on those who are marginalized echoes central tenets within Marxist and feminist social movement theory and standpoint theory. In these models, the push for change in any system must come from those most marginalized by that system, because only those who are oppressed by the dominant class have access to the double consciousness that allows them to draw upon opposing perspectives to create change across two or more worlds.⁵⁴ This reflects Jahangir and Abdullatif's argument that queer Muslims hold a privileged position in advancing new interpretations of religious texts. Further, Jahangir and Abdullatif argue that "those with cisgender heterosexual privilege will have to recognize that those who have a greater stake in the issue are in a better position to reasonably address the subject of same-sex unions."⁵⁵

Theologians, activists, and scholars working from within specific religious traditions have combined anti-racist, Marxist-, and feminist-based social movement principles with religious or spiritual social justice models to create distinct liberation theologies centered upon the perspectives of oppressed and marginalized populations.⁵⁶ Some have emphasized racial minorities, postcolonial populations, and/or those from economically oppressed classes.⁵⁷ Others have emphasized the perspectives of women⁵⁸ or sexual or gender minorities.⁵⁹

In a public interview, prominent Muslim American public intellectual Reza Aslan applied principles compatible with Marxist, feminist, and queer liberation theologies to the case of LGBTIQ Muslims:

If we want to transform the way our religious leaders and houses of worship think and talk about [homosexuality], it requires that gays and lesbians express themselves spiritually. An individual who manages to express a deep-seated Muslim spirituality at one with his queer nature is much more effective at transforming the way that people of faith think about gender and sexuality than any theological or scriptural argument could be.⁶⁰

Aslan calls for a grassroots politics of witnessing led by LGBTIQ Muslims who publicly embody minority sexuality and Muslim religious identities. This embodiment, in a way, offers a physical resolution to the tensions between those who assert an LGBTIQ Muslim identity and those who say that such an identity is impossible within Islam. This point is modeled by public figures such as openly gay Muslim scholar Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle and by openly gay religious leader Imam Daayiee Abdullah, who use their (contested) religious expertise and authority to re-interpret texts and traditions.⁶¹ This principle also informed the activism of the LGBTIQ Muslims who joined Orlando vigils.

Indeed, the idea that young gay Muslims did not have to ask permission from imams or any other religious authorities to be gay and Muslim at the same time was a common theme among three of the LGBTIQ Muslims I interviewed. Instead, gay Muslims come out, or accept themselves, as same-sex-desiring individuals via their own reading of religious texts, especially the Qur'an and the work of select scholars and theologians. Na-beel said:

I have finally accepted that I can be gay and Muslim. (...) What the Qur'an and hadith say can be interpreted in many ways. But what it comes down to is what's in your heart, *niyya* (intention). To process everything about my identity about being queer and being Muslim is a journey to get to what is in my heart and what I believe. There is a Sufi quote that says, "as many hearts there are in the world, that's how many paths there are to God."

In such a model, the source of change within Muslim traditions—doctrinally, socially, and culturally—comes from the theological engagements and embodied experiences of practicing Muslims themselves. This model

partially follows ideas that run parallel to the kinds of revivalist Islam practiced especially by young Muslims in North America and Europe that encourage the faithful to access the texts and interpret them for themselves or to choose teachers whose ideas resonate for them. Yet Nabeel's revivalism dispenses with the need to square his interpretations with recognized members of the religious elite, a requirement found within some revivalist circles.⁶² Nabeel's politics of embodied spirituality also stems from Sufi ideas about gaining wisdom and insight from one's own heart. In such an interpretation, the body itself is a text to be read.

Digital Community and Advocacy

Laying the burden of change upon LGBTIQ Muslims has some limitations due to the risks faced this population in becoming visible. That some same-sex-desiring Muslims can pass as straight sometimes protects them and gives them options about how and when to publicly embrace a stigmatized identity, but it can also alienate them from potential allies. When I spoke with LGBTIQ Muslims and their allies, they emphasized the risks involved when LGBTIQ Muslims come out. Nabeel explained:

The idea of "coming out" is a very western thought process for me because a lot of Muslims do not have the privilege of fully coming out. I know there are LGBTIQ Muslims that are fully out, but most likely with the consequence of losing your family and being isolated from your community and then leaving the faith completely. (...) So, for me, coming out to myself is more important than having to come out to different individuals. It is not as important [to come out to others as it is] that I, myself, can be gay and live this way and not have to feel guilty.

Reflecting Nabeel's comments, the LGBTIQ Muslims I interviewed who came out to families and communities reported different levels of backlash and stigmatization. Especially for young people who are dependent on their families of origin, the consequences can be devastating.⁶³

Some LGBTIQ Muslims who are hesitant to come out to families, friends, or mosque communities find solidarity, recognition, and acceptance in LGBTIQ Muslim groups online, which allow them to maintain confidentiality. The Internet permits some degree of privacy or anonymity and can thus play a significant role for LGBTIQ Muslims in fulfilling psychological needs, building community, and launching political activism.⁶⁴ These forms of online community can include closed Facebook groups or other website-based discussion groups.

Additionally, the Internet offers Muslims a space for developing ways of discussing and representing their same-sex desires apart from the dominant—generally white, western—forms of representation associated with coming out or publicly expressing sexual identity. The unique aesthetics of LGBTIQ Muslim visibility are demonstrated by social media websites such as the Queer Ummah Project.⁶⁵

Nabeel's ideas about coming out being a "western thought process" partially reflects the scholarship of political scientist Joseph Massad, who argues that the paradigms used by same-sex desiring Muslim around the world to understand their desires and identities have arbitrarily been shaped by the imposition of what he terms the "Gay International," a western hegemonic regime that skirts over, flattens, and misrecognizes distinctive aspects of their experiences.⁶⁶ For two of the LGBTIQ Muslims I interviewed, sexuality, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is as a deeply private issue and not one that they wish to "wear on their sleeves." For example, a young LGBTIQ Muslim man named Naji reported that he did not feel comfortable with what he perceived as the dominant norms of what he called "white, western LGBTIQ culture," which he characterized as centering on "bars, parades, flags, and parties." Like some other LGBTIQ Muslims whom I consulted, Naji insisted that he did not wish to come out in that style or to come out to people beyond a close circle of friends and colleagues. For Muslims like Naji, the Internet offers space for discussing, representing, and experiencing their same-sex desire in ways that they see as unique and specific to their spiritual practices and cultural references.

Naji and others draw connections between their preference for constructing private modes of association between same-sex desiring Muslims and the cultures and traditions of premodern Arab and Muslim societies. According to Scott Kugle, "When one looks through the historical and literary records of Islamic civilization, one finds a rich archive of same-sex desires and expressions, written or reported about respected members of societies."⁶⁷ Muslim scholars on both sides of the debate agree that that the construction of sexuality in pre-modern societies differed markedly from how same-sex desire is understood and represented today. Scholars advocating for LGBTIQ Muslim acceptance bring up such historical and literary examples to buttress their argument that Muslims in past eras have found ways to reconcile the tension between homosexual visibility and Islamic forms of sociability. In contrast, scholars upholding normative articulations of Islam argue that the undeniable existence of such literary or

journalistic expressions is a moot point, since this does nothing to prove or demonstrate that Muslim scholars in these eras specifically condoned same-sex behaviors.⁶⁸

Contemporary Muslims are engaged in ongoing debates over the relevance of historical examples to contemporary religious practice. This debate signals larger contestations among Muslims about what kinds of Islamic discourse can be used to inform opinions about Islamic permissibility. For scholars such as Kugle, the attitudes, behaviors, traditions, and practices of Muslims from past eras can count as reference points for understanding the different ways that Islam can be lived and interpreted.⁶⁹ On the other hand, scholars like Vaid emphasize a narrower set of reference points to inform their thinking, such as the written texts of the religious elite.

For some same-sex desiring Muslims, the confidential modes of Internet communication that allow for private modes of association between same-sex Muslims serve as a satisfactory means to develop community. For other LGBTIQ Muslims, these online forms also serve as a means to other ends. A young gay Muslim man named Jameel envisions the Internet as playing an important role not only for LGBTIQ Muslims themselves, but also for mosque leaders who are allies, or potential (but closeted) allies, of LGBTIQ Muslims. Mosque leaders rely on the goodwill of a majority of their congregations to keep their positions. They risk censure from the congregation and blame for community fracture over the issue if they push too hard to bring concerns related to LGBTIQ advocacy to the fore. As a solution, Jameel explored a vision where mosque leaders could participate in what he termed online “listening campaigns,” in which they initiate online dialogues with LGBTIQ Muslims:

When I was on the DL (down low) and not out, and thinking about how I can help people like me, people who don't want to be seen, people that don't want you to know. It is really hard, but I know that online is a start because that is the safest place I can go and try to erase my tracks. But if the mosque started more digital conversations, I think that would get further than trying to do face-to-face when they are still figuring out what their position is on gay folks.

For Jameel, an online dialogue could allow mosque leaders to connect with LGBTIQ youth in a way that would be less jarring to mosque communities than in-person forums would be. Online dialogue could allow mosque leaders to gain firsthand knowledge about the number of LGBTIQ Muslims in their communities, a sense of how and why they feel alienated from

the mosque, and an understanding of their needs vis-à-vis mosque leaders and the larger mosque community. Most importantly, it could give mosque leaders a chance to develop their own supportive models for ministering to same-sex-desiring Muslims, even if how they do so differs from models of ally-ship developed by churches or other non-Muslim religious communities.

Beyond Online

For some LGBTIQ Muslims in search of spiritual connections, online community is insufficient. Most of the Detroit-area LGBTIQ Muslims I interviewed expressed a longing for physical spaces in which they could congregate for prayer and fellowship while being recognized and respected as LGBTIQ and Muslim. Yet in Detroit (and nationally), these spaces are scarce.

Khalil, a young man who identifies as Muslim and gay, led a group of LGBTIQ Muslims in Michigan to establish a face-to-face support group in 2016. The group had a few initial planning meetings, but they could not establish a regular meeting schedule due to the long distances that separated some of the members, who were distributed from Ann Arbor to Detroit. Group members changed their format to a WhatsApp texting forum, which currently has about twenty members. They share experiences and news about events relevant to the community. It is helpful for its members, but it was not what they had originally envisioned.

Indeed, some Muslims who participate in online and phone support groups still long for spaces of connection where they can be physically present and face-to-face with others who share several identity characteristics, including spirituality and sexuality. Farooq explained the limits of online community and his longing for an embodied spiritual connection this way:

With Islam, it is hard to have a digital prayer. It's very much about the body and watching the body and being in group conversations with other bodies where everyone is making the same movements at the same time and you know there is a dialogue and a community built by use of the body. I think, yes, [with online forms of congregation] you lose that part. For gay Muslims, your body is the very thing that is pulling you away from community. Your body, not necessarily your thoughts. The body in Islam could be used to unite people against racism, that experience of praying together telling us we are all the same. But then for gay Muslims,

now you don't feel comfortable in a mosque, so what physical space do you have as an alternative?

In this context of a push toward an embodied politics of witnessing and worship, “the camp”—the annual “Retreat for LGBT Muslims and Their Partners” that takes place in Philadelphia—is an important example of access to a non-virtual space where participants can congregare with other Muslims while being open about their gender and sexual identity.⁷⁰ Another venue is various educational events hosted by local- or national-level Muslim groups. For example, in 2013, Kick—the Detroit-based African American gay and lesbian group—partnered with the national Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) to bring in Imam Daayiee Abdullah from Washington, DC, for a conference event called the Queer Muslim Gathering.⁷¹ In 2018, MPV hosted a workshop in Dearborn entitled “Inclusive Islam: Is LGBTIQ Halal?,” featuring the Algerian-born French imam Ludovic-Mohamad Zahed, who also publicly claims a gay identity.⁷²

Having a place to physically gather and pray together with other Muslims without feeling a need to hide one's sexual identity was figured as very important to some of the LGBTIQ Muslims I interviewed. The camp and other seminars were described as exhilarating, unique experiences that fulfilled a deep need—but that also made the longing for more stable, regularly available communities more intense. The camp does not have any local affiliate groups, and it meets only once a year. Likewise, the events mentioned above, in which national groups bring gay imams from across the nation and abroad to address Detroit-area Muslims, are infrequent. For comparison's sake, some of the LGBTIQ Muslims I interviewed pointed to other cities in the US, Canada, and Europe that have LGBTIQ-inclusive centers or mosques, explaining that there was nothing like that in the Detroit area.

Muslims who stop going to the mosque as part of their coming-out process may find no alternative places for the expression of embodied spirituality in real time. To develop his support network, Naji (a young man quoted earlier) focused on personal and work relations with other LGBTIQ individuals. On the other hand, Farooq found community by becoming active in other LGBTIQ circles that reflected his racial identity but not his religious one.

On national and local levels, the gathering spaces afforded by the Orlando vigils offered temporary places for developing the visibility of LGBTIQ Muslims and their Muslim allies. The media coverage of LGBTIQ

Muslim visibility at these vigils, and of other LGBTIQ Muslim responses to the shooting, offered lasting images that testified to the presence of LGBTIQ Muslims in different places across the nation.

In Detroit, media coverage of the Orlando shooting included local LGBTIQ Muslim voices, often using pseudonyms or first names only.⁷³ One gay Muslim in Detroit explained to me that the Orlando shooting pushed him to speak out on behalf of queer Muslims. He said: “I wanted to get my voice heard to let people know queer Muslims exist. I wanted to get in front of any positioning around anti-Muslim rhetoric that people would use this as an opportunity to get queer folks and Muslims and put them against each other.”

In the week after Orlando, Rasheed, a gay Muslim man whom I interviewed, wanted to send other messages for and about LGBTIQ people in Detroit. Since a gay dance bar was targeted, he decided to organize a dance party that would offer a safe space for LGBTIQ people in the area, especially LGBTIQ people of color. This dance party became an annual event and is now in its third year and attended by several hundred people. Rasheed explained:

After the shooting, I knew that party space which is important to queer people was going to be challenged. (...) So, I threw a house party (...) and I had more than 125 people show up. I advertised it as a party that is queer-, trans-, and people-of-color-centered. I let folks know that allies are welcome, but this party is for those folks. Now the party happens every year in June and it has been growing every year. (...) It is Asian people, South Asian, African, just all different kind of people. (...) The party—this is what Orlando birthed for me.

Some LGBTIQ Muslims would not attend such a dance party because they shy away from public displays of sensuality, such as dance, or from being around the alcohol that may be served. They long for a space where they can express their same-sex-desiring identities in what they consider to be a Muslim way.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, other gay Muslims, like Rasheed and some of his friends, value this form of congregation as a safe space and a place to build community and visibility as an embodied form of witnessing for LGBTIQ Muslims.

Vigil as Testing Ground

The Detroit-area LGBTIQ Muslims and their allies whom I interviewed described both an absence of public LGBTIQ visibility in the area and a

lack of physical spaces where they could congregate and openly express the fusion of their spirituality and sexuality in a supportive environment. They had access to events geared toward local LGBTIQ Muslims hosted sporadically by national organizations, as well as to conferences and meetings for LGBTIQ Muslims on a national level. Additionally, some found support via online groups geared toward creating community for LGBTIQ Muslims. Yet Detroit-area LGBTIQ Muslims generally felt discouraged about the creation of local, physical spaces in which they could meet regularly to pray, study, and worship as Muslims, without having to hide their LGBTIQ identities.

In the immediate aftermath of the Orlando shootings, there was a rise in the visibility of LGBTIQ Muslims and their Muslim allies, as members of these groups felt called to counter misinformation and to protest the hate speech that welled up after the event. Nationwide, gatherings such as the Orlando vigils served as temporary spaces of visibility for LGBTIQ Muslims and their Muslim allies. The public vigils served as a place for Muslim civic leaders to come out publicly as LGBTIQ allies and to network with a broad spectrum of LGBTIQ-inclusive social justice activists. Local and national media captured and disseminated representations of Muslims who addressed Islamophobia and homophobia at the vigils, amplifying these voices in an extension and memorialization of that moment of visibility.

Some Muslim religious leaders resisted these expansions, revealing internal tensions among Muslim Americans about the legitimacy of LGBTIQ Muslim identities in a normative Islamic context and the potential of religious functionaries to serve as LGBTIQ allies. These tensions were materialized in the absence of Muslim religious functionaries at the LGBTIQ-inclusive Orlando vigils, in the way some mosque leaders organized alternative vigils for mourning the Orlando dead without naming their sexual or gender identities, and in the way some Muslim religious leaders represented Orlando tragedy in the media. Tensions found within these local and national level representations of Muslim American modes of mourning the Orlando victims reflect and intersect with the dynamics of scholarly debates carried out by academics and theologians about the potential (or not) for Islam to recognize LGBTIQ identities and to legitimate same-sex behavior.

One mode of reasoning employed by Muslim scholars who advocate for LGBTIQ inclusion is a mode of hermeneutics that was popularized by Islamic feminist Amina Wadud in her landmark study *The Quran and Women* and taken up by other Muslim scholars in their interpretations of

the religious tradition.⁷⁵ In such a method, individual parts of the Qur'an are read against the Qur'an as a whole. The Qur'an as a whole is found to be a source that advocates for freedom and justice among people; a source which repeatedly asserts that religion is meant to make life easier for followers, rather than cause oppression and difficulty; and a source in which equality is ordained for all. In line with these liberatory readings of the Islamic tradition, LGBTIQ Muslims at local vigils, on blogs online, and in the media testify with their full selves—as intellectual and embodied beings—that the normative readings of the Islamic tradition are causing them undue hardship, harm, and risk. They are witnessing, bodily, against normative interpretations that require the invisibility of certain innate facets of themselves or the pain of being cast out from the circle of those who are considered righteous members of the society.

One LGBTIQ Muslim activist I interviewed believed that the attention paid to LGBTIQ Muslims after Orlando was “a ripple that went away,” but other activists I interviewed believe that the Orlando moment may have planted the seeds for further change in Detroit and across the nation. The Orlando vigils—and the coming out of LGBTIQ Muslims and their allies that was part of the response to Orlando—encouraged debate and conversations about LGBTIQ Muslim visibility and about the possibility that Muslim activists and mosque leaders could address Islamophobia and homophobia together, in concert. The Orlando moment provided a context for imagining what greater LGBTIQ Muslim visibility and an intentionally Muslim advocacy for LGBTIQ communities might look like in the future.

Endnotes

1. Rick Jervis, “49 Dead, a 36-Hour Shift and a Daily Reminder: Pulse 6 Months Later,” *USA Today*, December 11, 2016.
2. Al Jones, “Call for Love and Acceptance Rises at Vigil for Orlando Shooting Victims,” *MLive*, June 13, 2016.
3. The vigil was hosted by Outfront Kalamazoo, then known as the Kalamazoo Gay and Lesbian Resource Center.
4. An expanded version of this quote was cited in Alisa Perkins, “Muslim Detroit after Orlando: The LGBTIQ Question, Rituals of Inclusion, and Coalition Building across Racial and Religious Lines,” in *Muslims and US Politics Today: A Defining Moment*, ed. Muhammad Hassan Khalil (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

5. I use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of most individuals I interviewed, except for recognizable leaders like Rashida Tlaib commenting on their own public engagement, in which cases I was granted permission to use real names.
6. Brenda Gazzar, "Orlando Mass Shooting: Being Gay and Muslim a 'Crossfire of Identities,'" *The Press-Enterprise*, June 17, 2016.
7. Laura Rodriguez, "The 'Sacredness' of a Latino Theme Night at Pulse and Other Gay Bars around USA," *Chicago Tribune*, June 12, 2018.
8. Perkins, "Muslim Detroit after Orlando"; Perkins, "Islam Is Not Our Enemy," *Anthropology News* 57, no. 11 (November 2016): 95–102.
9. By "religious functionaries" I mean "people who hold an official office or serve a public function related to Islam": Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 14. My use of the term "religious functionaries" is interchangeable with "mosque leaders", including imams, mosque board members, and mosque officials.
10. Nadeem Mahomed, "Queer Muslims: Between Orthodoxy, Secularism and the Struggle for Acceptance," *Theology and Sexuality* 22, nos. 1-2 (2016): 57.
11. I define "Muslim civic leaders" as those who identified themselves as representatives of secular institutions, such as community centers, immigrant rights organizations, or anti-defamation associations.
12. Niraj Warikoo, "LGBTIQ Muslims Find Voice, Identifying with Different Worlds," *Detroit Free Press*, June 24, 2016.
13. Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010); Mahomed, "Queer Muslims"; Junaid Jahangir and Hussein Abdullatif, *Islamic Law and Muslim Same-Sex Unions* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016).
14. Shaykh Abdallah bin Bayyah et al., (website) "A Joint Muslim Statement on the Carnage in Orlando," Reviving the Islamic Spirit, last modified June 13, 2016, accessed August 3, 2018, <http://risconvention.com/orlando/>.
15. The mode of activism stressing LGBTIQ visibility was developed especially by groups such as ACT-UP, beginning in the 1980s, and in subsequent LGBTIQ civil rights movements centering on gay pride. See Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
16. Mahomed, "Queer Muslims," 64; Mobeen Vaid, "Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts? Qur'anic Revisionism and the Case of Scott Kugle," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 34, no. 3 (2017): 46.
17. Jahangir and Abdullatif, *Islamic Law and Muslim Same-Sex Unions*; Junaid Jahangir and Hussein Abdullatif, "Same-sex Unions in Islam," *Theology and Sexuality* 24, no. 3 (2018): 157–173; Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, "Sexuality,

- Diversity, and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, edited by Omid Safi (London: Oneworld Publications, 2003). See also Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*; Kugle, *Living Out Islam*; Mahomed, “Queer Muslims”; Nadeem Mohamad and Farid Esack, “The Normal and Abnormal: On the Politics of Being Muslim and Relating to Same-Sex Sexuality,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 1 (2017): 224–243; Hassan El-Menawi, “Same-sex Marriage in Islamic Law,” *Wake Forest Journal of Law & Policy* 2, no. 2 (2012): 375; Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
18. Vaid, “Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts?” (2017), 45-46.
 19. Mobeen Vaid, “Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts? Meditations on the Past Two Years,” *Maydan*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.themaydan.com/2018/07/can-islam-accommodate-homosexual-acts-meditations-past-two-years-2/>.
 20. Zareena Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).
 21. This credo of Dr. Cornel West, prominent Harvard University professor, theologian, and activist, has been adopted by LGBTIQ and, especially, transgender groups to express the need for public visibility of their identities and affinities as a mode of achieving justice.
 22. Perkins, “Muslim Detroit After Orlando.”
 23. Ibid.
 24. Dawud Walid, *Towards Sacred Activism* (Washington, DC: Al-Madina Institute, 2018), 57.
 25. Ibid, 63.
 26. Ibid, 58.
 27. Mahomed, “Queer Muslims,” 60; Jonathan Brown, “The Shariah, Homosexuality, and Safeguarding Each Other’s Rights in a Plural Society,” *Al-Madinah Institute*, June 18, 2016, <https://almadinainstitute.org/blog/the-shariah-homosexuality-safeguarding-each-others-rights-in-a-pluralist-so/>; Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, “Reflections on a Supreme Court Verdict: Gay Marriage,” *Lamp Post Educational Initiative*, July 30, 2015, <https://lamppostedu.org/reflections-on-a-supreme-court-verdict-gay-marriage>.
 28. Vaid, “Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts?” (2017), 45-46.
 29. Mahomed, “Queer Muslims,” 63.
 30. Vaid, “Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts?” (2017), 53.
 31. Ibid., 52.
 32. Ibid., 53.
 33. Jahangir and Abdullatif, “Same-sex Unions in Islam,” 165.
 34. Mahomed, “Queer Muslims,” 64.

35. In an earlier article, I further describe connections between Islamophobia and homophobia: Alisa Perkins, "Negotiating Alliances: Muslims, Gay Rights, and the Christian Right in a Polish American City," *Anthropology Today* 26, no. 2 (2010): 19-24.
36. Erik Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 151.
37. Johanna Sumiala, *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 21.
38. United States Institute of Peace, "Muslims Condemn Orlando Attack," *The Olive Branch*, (blog), June 14, 2016, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2016/06/muslims-condemn-orlando-attack>.
39. On the pervasive invisibility of queer Muslims both in popular representations and in Muslim scholarly discourse, see Mahomed, "Queer Muslims," 59, 60-61.
40. Mahomed, "Queer Muslims"; Khaled Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 183-187.
41. Walid, *Towards Sacred Activism*, 56.
42. *Ibid.*, 59.
43. *Ibid.*, 52-53.
44. *Ibid.*, 54.
45. Warikoo, "LGBTIQ Muslims Find Voice."
46. Mahomed, "Queer Muslims," 61.
47. See Jahangir and Abdullatif, *Islamic Law and Muslim Same-Sex Unions*; Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*.
48. Mahomed, "Queer Muslims," 59.
49. Emily S. Pingel et al., "Al Gamea Community Needs Assessment: Final Report Focus Groups with LGB Youth of Middle Eastern Descent in Southeast Michigan" (Ann Arbor: Center for Sexuality and Health Disparities at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, 2015), 5.
50. *Ibid.*, 6.
51. Mahomed, "Queer Muslims," 61.
52. See Kugle, *Living Out Islam*, for an ethnographic portrayal of 15 LGBTIQ Muslim activists.
53. Rashida Tlaib spoke out during the Orlando vigils as an LGBTIQ ally and has pledged her support for this population. Abdul El-Sayed, a Detroit-area medical doctor who in 2018 ran for governor of Michigan, also publicly vowed his advocacy for LGBTIQ rights and protections. Rashida Tlaib (website), "Priorities," Rashida for Congress, accessed July 31, 2018, <https://www.rashidaforcongress.com/priorities>. Abdul El-Sayed (website), "Issues," Abdul for Michigan, accessed August 4, 2018, <https://abdulformichigan.com/issues>.

54. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).
55. Jahangir and Abdullatif, "Same-sex Unions in Islam," 168.
56. Miguel De La Torre, ed., *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008).
57. Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014); Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam: Lectures by Ali Shari'ati*, trans. Hamid Algar (Oneonta: Mizan Press, 1979).
58. For a discussion of Islamic feminism as a religious social justice movement, see Jamillah Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).
59. Patricia Beattie Jung and Joseph Andrew Coray, eds., *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*.
60. Shahirah Majumdar, "Have Queer Muslims Gained Acceptance in Their Communities Since the Pulse Shooting?" *Vice*, October 11, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vdqbbd/have-queer-muslims-gained-acceptance-in-their-communities-since-pulse.
61. Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle has authored several foundational texts on same-sex desire in Islam. Imam Daayiee Abdullah is a gay-identified, African American convert to Islam. He is a lawyer, activist, and scholar. In 2011, Daayiee became the Imam and Educational Director of the LGBTIQ-inclusive Masjid An-Nural Isslaah (Light of Reform Mosque) in Washington, D.C. In 2015, Imam Daayiee Abdullah founded the MECCA Institute, an online seminary that offers a certificate in Islamic Chaplaincy and continuing education for laypersons to learn about Islam. Lou Chibbaro Jr., "New LGBT-Friendly Mosque to Host Community Meeting," *The Washington Blade*, August 25, 2011; Mecca Institute (website), "About," MECCA Institute, accessed July 24, 2018, <http://mecca-institute.org/about/>.
62. See Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*; Jeanette Jouili, *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).
63. Pingel et al., "Al Gamea Community Needs Assessment," 12-14.
64. Mariam Mustafa, "Confidential Publics: Digital Reconciliation and Queer Muslim Identities" (MA thesis, Western Michigan University, 2018); Aisha Geissinger, "Islam and Discourses of Same-Sex Desire," in *Queer Religion Volume 1*, ed. Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 82-84.
65. Queer Ummah: A Visibility Project (website), accessed August 5, 2018, <http://queerummah.tumblr.com>.

66. Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
67. Kugle, "Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics," 198, cited in Vaid, "Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts?" (2017), 50.
68. Ovamir Anjum, "Elements of a Prophetic Voice of Dissent and Engagement," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 34, no. 3 (2017), xv-xvi; Vaid, "Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts?" (2017), 50-51.
69. Kugle, *Living Out Islam*, 11.
70. The Retreat for LGBT Muslims & Their Partners (website), "About Us," accessed August 4, 2018, <http://www.lgbtmuslimretreat.com/about-us.php>.
71. Niraj Warikoo, "Conference for Gay Muslims Continues," *Detroit Free Press*, March 2, 2013.
72. The presentation was part of a four-city United States tour co-organized by the France-based CALEM Institute (Confederation of Associations LGBTIQI European and Muslim) and the US-based Muslims for Progressive Values. The presentation was given by CALEM founder Imam Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, an Algerian-born religious leader, scholar, and social reformer. In 2012, Zahed founded the first mosque in Paris that specifically welcomes LGBTIQ members. That same year, he became the first French Muslim to enter a civil union with another man. See Ani Zonneveld (website), "Ramadan and Proud," *Robly*, accessed August 4, 2018, <https://app.robly.com/archive?id=dacdc11f7a762b9e02b555d143371fbd&v=true>; Confederation of Associations LGBTIQ European and Muslim (website), accessed July 24, 2018, <http://www.calem.eu/home.html>; Robin Banerji, "Gay-Friendly 'Mosque' Opens in Paris," *BBC*, November 30, 2012.
73. Warikoo, "LGBTIQ Muslims Find Voice"; Laura Weber Davis (website), "Being Gay, Black and Muslim in Metro Detroit," *WDET*, accessed July 21, 2018, <https://wdet.org/posts/2016/06/20/83336-being-gay-black-and-muslim-in-metro-detroit/>.
74. Since 2003, Al Gamea (the GLBT Association of Middle Eastern Americans) has run its Arabian Nights dance party several times a year. Proceeds from the dance party fund Al Gamea's efforts to provide "support, socialization, education and awareness" for the populations it serves. Jason A. Michael, "Middle Eastern Gays in Michigan Emerging from 'Out of the Shadows,'" *Pride Source*, October 31, 2017.
75. Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).