“Strength in Numbers”
An Ethnographic Study of Connectivity Among Muslim American Youth

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Abstract

This thesis is based on approximately 4.5 months of fieldwork conducted in the spring of 2015 in Houston, Texas. It will concern the overarching anthropological themes of religion, gender, community and performance. It examines how these themes are interlinked in the construction of a community of Muslim youths at the University of Houston. In an increasingly Islam-hostile climate, such as the American society, Muslim youths are experiencing discrimination and misrecognition. This climate has inspired a ‘strength in numbers’ mindset, and the youths seek out communities and networks that resonate with the values and moral codes they want to live by. The university setting is examined as an arena where gender, religion and community are performed. Additionally, I will seek to understand the mechanisms of how the religious and pious self is constructed. My question is what is it that makes the University of Houston Muslim youth community attractive? Is it the security of being a part of a larger community? And is the fostering of this community resulting in a fostering of a pious self? These are all questions I seek to explore throughout this thesis.

These explorations begins with a case-study of the killings of three Muslim youths in North Carolina, which seek to describe and explain the way Muslim youths in America is connected. Further on, the post-9/11 climate under which these youths has grown up and become young adults is explored. It continues by laying the foundation of the thesis through thorough description of the study’s key informants and the two student organizations which was the stepping stones into this field. Furthermore, the arena of the university library is analyzed in terms of the concerns and social structures that unfold here. Performance of reputation and piety, inter-group policing through gossip, and space conversion are uncovered, theorized and analyzed in terms of the underlying mechanisms that drives this community. To better understand these mechanisms, the thesis zooms in on a category within this group, namely the Hijabis, and examines them in light of agency, power and patriarchal traditions. Finally, the thesis investigates inter-group policing in connection to religious outreach and the construction of a pious self and a pious community of Muslim youths.
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My sincerest gratitude goes to my supervisors, Nefissa Naguib and Unni Wikan, for their patience and constructive critique during the writing of this thesis. Your support has helped me through the rough patches, and guided me in the right direction when I was headed in the wrong one.

Most of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude for the Muslim youths, but especially the group of young women, whom I met in Houston. You have taught me so much, and given me your patience, knowledge and personal experiences. I hope to have depicted an adequate picture of who those individuals are, and the UH Muslim youth community as a whole, and any negative portrayal is my own mistake. Yani, thank you!
List of abbreviations:

UH – University of Houston
LC – Learning Center
SJP – Students for Justice For Palestine
MSA – Muslim Student Organization
UMR – United Muslim Relief
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On the 10th of February 2015, three young American Muslims were shot dead in their home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Deah, age 23 and his wife of only six weeks, Yusor, age 21 were living together in an apartment at the Finley Forest Condominiums in Chapel Hill. Yusor’s sister Razan, age 19 was visiting them at their home. The killings sent shockwaves through the Arab and Muslim American communities all over the country, which responded with grief and horror. Their neighbor, Craig Stephen Hicks, had turned himself over to the police as the perpetrator. Hicks told the police his action was a result of an ongoing parking dispute between him and his young Muslim neighbors. This was something the Muslim American community had trouble believing, and they were actively working for the killings of Deah, Yusor and Razan to be ruled a hate crime. Even though Hicks was trialed for their murders, the court did not rule his act a hate crime, instead believing his story of the parking dispute. In the aftermath of the brutal murders the victims were given a martyr-like status, and awareness of the injustice was spread online through the hashtags #HEROESOFCHAPELHILL and #OURTHREEWINNERS.
Chapter 1: Introduction

The strong and emotional reactions from the Muslim-American community following the deaths of #THEHEROESOFCHAPELHILL testifies to a connectedness, especially among Muslim youths across the nation. The three youths’ good morals, pious lifestyles and devotion to Islam had been stressed as substantial in the memory of them. Furthermore, the accentuation of these values makes for an interesting foundation for understanding this connectedness.

This thesis aims to explore the making of pious selves among the Muslim college community at the University of Houston, Texas. I will do so by examining the reactions to the deaths of #OURTHREEWINNERS to better understand the fostering of community among the Houstonian Muslim youths. By pious I mean a way of life where all one’s deeds are acted in order to get closer to God.

Moreover, a majority of the Muslim youths in this study has expressed a feeling of ‘coming home’ when they became members of the Muslim community at college. Within an American educational institution, these youths has established a religious network where they feel like they can be themselves.

An interesting part of this connectedness is the feeling of responsibility of the representation, but also the protection, of their community. A combination of da ‘wa (religious outreach) and inter-group policing is what contributes to the preservation of this network and its moral code. The da ‘wa and policing is taking place at the University campus, converting an educational institution to a religious and community space. The upholding of a pious body within this network is a way to not only keep each other ‘in check’, but one self as well.

The focus of this thesis is to show how the network of Muslim youths at the University of Houston is constructed and reconstructed through different aspects of their daily college lives. Within this community, a great concern was how to best convey the ‘true’ Islam to the non-Muslim community in Houston. This thesis will not venture into debates
regarding the true meaning of Islam, but will rather, look into and analyze the mechanisms behind this concern.

A secondary object will be to investigate how the growing hostility towards Muslims in America affects the construction of a Muslim identity for these youths. The murders of #THEHEROESOFCHAPELHILL reminds us of how gravely this hostility can impact young Muslims such as the Houstonian youths of this thesis. We will start off with a thorough examination of the ‘Chapel Hill Murders’ in order to get an understanding of the implications of the tragedy for the Muslim American community in general, and more specific, the Houstonian Muslim youths.

**Context of Field**

At first, the murdering of the three youths did not get lot of publicity, something that caused much distress among members of the Arab American and Muslim American community around the country. However, after a massive mobilization by Muslim and Arab citizens around the country, the killings were eventually given more coverage. The community’s main concern appeared to have been: Had the media been more interested in this case if the victims had been non-Muslim Americans and the killer had been Muslim?

This happened during my one-and-a-half-month stay in Detroit, and even though I had heard of the tragic events through social media, and later on through American news outlets, I did not think all that much about it before I reached Houston. It was first upon meeting members of the Muslim and Palestinian student organizations at the University of Houston in the beginning of March 2015, I understood that this incident was of great significance to the way Arab Americans and Muslim Americans experienced their place in the American society.

It took me a while to comprehend the impact it had on the people I met, but when I grasped how fresh the murders were in the Muslim youths’ memories, I saw patterns that worked as daily reminders of the legacies of the three young victims. T-shirts and stickers
had been made with the logo shown in Figure 1, which people would wear to school and
to different events. The logo frequently came with the hashtag\(^1\)
\#HEROESOFCHAPELHILL or \#OURTHREEWINNERS, referring to the martyr-like
status the three victims had been given. I was told that the deaths of these three youths
had left the University of Houston (UH) Muslim youth community in grief. The matter
was made worse when it was realized that the American media did not devote as much
attention to the incident as the students felt it deserved.

After protests and demonstrations erupted nationwide after being initiated by Deah’s
family, the media began covering the incident and its ramifications more widely. The
students in Houston joined in. I was told that the UH Muslim and Arab youths gathered at
the junction of Westheimer Road and Post Oaks Boulevard to protest the lack of media
coverage and state that ‘Muslim Lives Matter’\(^2\). This junction is where most
demonstrations that has to do with Arab, Palestinian and Muslim causes take place. The
vigil also got attention and attendance by many of the members of the Arab and Muslim
community of the greater Houston area.

After a while I started observing a trend in the discussions about
\#OURTHREEWINNERS. No matter if it was in the media, by their family or from any
of my informants, there was much focus on the lives of three victims and the bright
futures which lay ahead of them. Deah had grown up in America, he was studying to
become a dentist, had married the love of his life, and was ready to start his career. Yusor
was the typical all-American Muslim young woman who had just become a wife, had
finished college and was preparing to further her studies. Together with her sister Razan,
who had just finished High School, they both had bright futures ahead of them. Both
women wore hijabs, and all three of them were described as devoted (pious) Muslims.
This incident has been put in a religious context, and the memory of them has been

\(^1\) Used in social media like Instagram and Twitter to get an issue trending or noticed. In political
\(^2\) The statement that 'Muslim Lives Matter' is an extension of the 'Black Lives Matter' debate, which
started as a reaction to police violence, resulting in deaths, towards African Americans. Through an
increasing focus on how the African American population is treated in the American society, and especially
by police, 'Black Lives Matter' has become the frontline of demonstrations and social media campaigns
working to convey the message that 'Black Lives Matter'.
sanctified. Within the focus on #OURTHREEWINNERS’ purity and devotion to Islam lies the notion of their piety.

Their active participation in different charities and student organizations was especially emphasized in their commemorations. Previous to his death, Deah had started his own charity whose purpose was to help Syrian refugees in Turkey with dental care. It is said that his big dream was to travel to Turkey with a team of dentists and do hands-on work with these refugees, and Yusor and Razan had been working with him to achieve this dream. In this way, the #HEROESOFCHAPELHILL fulfilled the ideal of the pious Muslim, in which da’wa and charity work is significant traits.

The deaths of Deah, Yusor and Razan demonstrated to the Muslim community, and especially its youths, the dangers of xenophobia and how it has affected the American society. Their life stories, how they lived their life and their tragic ending, resonated with the youths I met in my field. Many of them were active in the same student organizations as #OURTHREEWINNERS had been members of, and the Houstonian Muslim youths intended to live their lives in much of the same way as them. Any one of them could have been Deah, Yusor or Razan.

This is probably what makes the reactions of the Muslim community so strong. The youths were not thugs or criminals. They were people who lived their lives according to the ideals valued by the Muslim American community. Hence, the killings of these three were also a symbolic murder of the ideal Muslim youth. The impact of the tragedy was expressed in various manners, and in what follows we will examine these expressions.

“Parking dispute tucked into his waistband met with silent stares of a nightmare”

Although there had been somewhat banal visual signs of its importance, the most interesting aspect of it was its place in the everyday conversations and in art performances. While having conversations with informants, the names of the three victims would be brought up in different contexts. My informants would quite often start
a sentence with “Like Deah, Yusor and Razan, I would like to…”, when talking about religion and charity work. Also in conversations about their experience of growing up as a Muslim in America, people would tell their story and then, when reaching present day say something along the lines of: “You know, when Deah, Yusor and Razan got murdered, I was reminded of…”. These statements shows how personally many of the youths took their deaths, and how the tragic ending of their lives have become a part of individual experiences of being young and Muslim in America.

While attending different events, there was one form of art that seemed the most popular among these youths. Many used ‘spoken word poetry’ to express their thoughts on politics, love and religion. The #HEROESOFCHAPELHILL had been given a place in this form of expression too. Small comments, almost unnoticeable to a person unfamiliar with the discourse around the tragedy, would appear in these performances.

One example is the poem “Blisters”, presented by a young woman who performed it this form of art for the first time, at an event called Muslim Writers Collective. Her piece was based on an incident that happened at her university, Texas Tech, where someone had spray-painted the words “NO MUSLIMS” at the seal at the entrance of the university campus. To explain how she experienced this incident, she used what happened to Deah, Yusor and Razan as a reference:

“I’ve heard of the affair that came before this, back of a white door, when I am in my apartment, and I expect a man to be holding a gun barrel to a keyhole, parking dispute tucked into his waistband met with silent stares of a nightmare”

In this verse, one can clearly see both the anger and the fear related to this performer’s reaction. The fact that the #HEROESOFCHAPELHILL was attacked in their home following a knock on the door causes increased anxiety and fear.

Another example is a poem performed at the MSA annual banquet, by one of the girls I interviewed during my fieldwork. Her name is Leila, and in her piece she refers to the Chapel Hill shooting:
“We live in a nation where our patriotism is only authorized after we apologize for crimes we did not commit
Where the media always places the label “Muslim” before “terrorist”
and sees my hijab as hiding the black and blues of oppression – they do not see the white and gold of my religion.
Where teachings of love thy neighbor from a Chapel on the Hill still can’t bring us peace
when will the world finally see that
#MuslimStrugglesMatter”

As referenced to in the poem above, “[...] where teachings of love thy neighbor from a Chapel on the Hill still can’t bring us peace [...]”, Deah, Yusor and Razan has been said to bring the teaching of Islam into every aspect of their lives, including how they treated people around them, exemplified here by love thy neighbor. There was a recurring focus on the purity of the victims’ souls, how they did not deserve this ending to their lives, and that they only did good in their private lives, in their work and their volunteering.

The three youths’ good behavior and an unlikeliness of them fighting with anyone over parking spaces has been connected to their religious belongings and devotions, by their family, friends and people who did not know them. In this way, the discourse presented the victims souls as pure in the eyes of Islam. This purity is connected to the notion of a pious way of leading their lives. To better understand this purity, I will now look into the definition of piety, together with a few additional terms that is important for this thesis’ argument.

**Overarching terms and theories**

In the midst of a development of a college identity, these youths has found their way into a religious community that provides clear boundaries and structures for how this identity can be developed. The glorification of personal piety can be interpreted in two ways, when it comes to the UH Muslim youths. This thesis will discuss the pious lifestyle in relation to two opposite underlying mechanisms of agency and power. Is the importance of piety rooted in a structure of power, or a personal autonomy, for these youths? I see it necessary to clarify a few terms that will be reoccurring throughout, in order to make the
arguments in the following chapters clear. I will use additional terms, which are more conveniently introduced chronologically.

Mahmood’s account of the Egyptian female mosque movement examines the Islamic revival and Muslim women in light of piety and agency. Saba Mahmood defines piety as “the quality of “being close to God”: a manner of being and acting that suffuses all of one’s acts, both religious and worldly in character.” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 122). Piety, in the way it is used by Mahmood, will be given considerable space throughout this thesis. and in the same manner as #OURTHREEWINNERS seemed to live every aspect of their lives in accordance to the pious worldview, the Muslim youths of the University of Houston aimed to adopt these habits as well.

Mahmood urges feminist anthropologists to examine women operating in patriarchal systems in terms of agency. She directs critique to the focus of feminist theory on Muslim women as oppressed and as “[…] pawns in a grand patriarchal plan[…]” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 1), and the assumption that these women have an inborn longing for freedom if they only had the possibility to break free. She wishes her research findings on the female mosque movement and the Islamic Revival to be a counterpart to these normative liberal assumptions (Mahmood, 2005).

Through her critique of the liberal feminist research Mahmood argues that their focus on subordination has caused a loss of insight into patriarchal societies. She writes: “Yet if we think of “agency”[…] as a modality of action, then this conversation raises some interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm, between performative behavior and inward disposition.” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 157).

By focusing on peoples confinement by patriarchal norms and rules, where agency can only be achieved through the act of resistance to the patriarchal system itself, Mahmood argues that the ways people can have agency within the system is overlooked. She urges researchers to consider agency as something that occurs in the navigation between social norms and codes within the patriarchal system, and the utilization of these norms and codes in the construction of self. I will rely on Mahmood’s take on agency in my thesis,
in relation to discussing the way my informants seek to become pious. Has the pious self been constructed through agency, or is it a result of the influence a patriarchal structure has over one’s religious body as a youth?

When talking about patriarchal systems and structures, there is a need to clarify the meaning of it in the context of this thesis. I am using the term patriarchy in the sense of Suad Joseph’s definition of religious patriarchy. She explains religious patriarchy as “the privileging of males and elders in religious institutions and practices.” (Joseph, 1996, p.17). I am using this definition in relation to the religious institution and practices of the MSA and the Muslim community at the university. As I will explain further in chapter 3, the values and moral codes that the MSA is promoting convey patriarchal connotations.

The data I have collected during my fieldwork in Houston will be used as a tool to shed light on the Muslim community at the University of Houston and their quest to find their pious selves. Although Mahmood wants us to look at agency within these patriarchal systems, I would also like to explore the potential influence patriarchal power structures has had over my informants’ choice to seek a pious life. The power structures within the patriarchy is well explained by Bourdieu’s theory of Symbolic Power.

Bourdieu defines symbolic power as a power of “world-making” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 21), an ability “[...] to manipulate the objective structure of society.” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). As such, “Symbolic power is a power to construct reality which tends to establish a gnoseological order; the immediate meanings (sens) of the world (particularly the social world) presupposes [...] a homogeneous conception of time, space, number, and cause which makes agreement possible between intelligences.” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 79).

As I understand Bourdieu’s definition of symbolic power, it is the ability to influence how people see and understand the world, especially the social world. Essential to Boudieu’s theory of symbolic power is that it lies within a “[...] determinate relationship between those who exercise power and those who undergo it, i.e. in the very structure of the field within which belief is produced and reproduced.” Bourdieu, 1979, p. 83). As such, the power relies on the recognition, or misrecognition, and legitimization of the executor of power. The people over whom power is being exercised must acknowledge
the executor, and believe in the structure of society which is ‘implemented’, in order for it to become legitimized.

Bourdieu’s symbolic power provides an interesting perspective through which one can assess the Muslim youth of this thesis’s involvement in a pious Islamic lifestyle. The topic of Muslims, religiosity and community in relation to power, oppression and agency is not a new finding, and these themes has been discussed in earlier anthropological research as well.

**From the Arab Oriental Other to the Arab in the West**

This thesis will concern the overarching anthropological themes of religion, gender, community and performance. I am interested in how these themes are interlinked in the construction of the community of Muslim youths in a university/college setting. I will examine this setting as an arena where gender, religion and community is performed.

Additionally, I will seek to understand the mechanisms of how the religious and pious self is constructed. My question is, what is that makes this community attractive to these youths? As previously mentioned, a feeling of ‘coming home’ up on becoming a part of this community has been expressed. Is the security of being a part of a larger community attracting these youths to the UH Muslim community? And is the fostering of this community resulting in a fostering of a pious self? These are all questions I seek to explore throughout this thesis. Before moving forward with the task at hand, I will begin with a short account of earlier and contemporary literature on Muslim and Arabs in America.

Starting from a perspective of orientalism and otherness, seeing Middle Eastern societies as a mosaic of peoples (Coon, 1958), the anthropology of the Middle Eastern region shifted its focus over to Islam and religion in the late twentieth century (Slyomovics, 2013). Edward Said called for a conscious reflection on the way the Arab and Arab societies was romanticized and exotified, by western researchers as the mystical other...
(Said, 1985), and although the process was long, anthropological views on the *Orient* changed.

The majority of anthropological literature on Islam has been dominated by a focus on male perspectives, thus marginalizing the role and activities of women. When women did appear in anthropological works, they were characterized in both a sexualized and oppressed way and more like background noise (Marranci, 2008). Later on, this traditional portrayal of women was challenged. Researchers, such as Nelson (1974) and Abu-Lughod (1989), urged for a replacement of the depiction of women as victims of a patriarchal oppression, with narratives of agency. Furthermore, contemporary research has turned its focus over on gender, femininity and masculinity, and how piety and modernity affect the construction of gender and self\(^3\) (Shami & Naguib, 2013).

The anthropology of Arabs and Muslims in America was previously most concerned with informing and correcting misrepresentations of Arabs, and shedding light on the oppression of the Arabs who were left in the Middle East (Zabel, 2006). The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the American people’s reactions afterwards, brought forth a shift and a booming growth in the literary works on the Arab and Muslim experience in the wake of the tragedy.

Additionally, the Islamic revival and the resurgence of the veil have brought forth another urgency of anthropology, as it has increased the religious awareness of Muslims around the globe (Ahmed, 2011). As such, it has also reached Muslims in the U.S. and I believe it is important to see the analysis drawn from the data presented in this thesis in light of the internationally increased religious awareness that the Islamic revival has brought with it. Many literary works, anthologies, and monographs have been written on the Arab and Muslim experiences in America, which focus on a range of topics.

Anthologies regarding Muslims an Arabs in America have been written about citizenship and belonging, and how 9/11 has changed communities and institutions, Islamic institutions and education (Ewing, 2008). Immigration history, national origin, race, class and gender are just some of the topics covered, and the performance and construction of

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identity among youths are interesting aspects of the Arab and Muslim American experience (Leonard, 2003; Zabel, 2006; Sarroub, 2005; Mavasti & McKinney, 2004). The leading researcher on the field of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S., Louise Cainkar, has been of major inspiration for my theoretical perspectives. Her thorough account of the experience of the Arab and Muslim population of Chicago, offers a unique understanding of how public and official reactions in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks has impacted this community. Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11 (2011) describes the governmental surveillance of Arab and Muslim Americans and how it affected their feeling of safety. She also describes the process of the social construction of the stereotypical Arab and Muslim, and links this to the American media and public. Finally, she elaborates on gendered discrimination and relates the discrimination of Muslim women with the representation of a threat to American culture and values. With Cainkar’s thorough work in mind, I seek to understand the college community of Muslim youths, and the construction of self within this context. To understand the experiences of my informants, it is important to get a better understanding of the immigration history of America.

**Backdrop and Numbers**

America is a nation built on immigration. The country changed its immigration laws in 1882, and started to act as a Gatekeeping nation, which “used immigration laws to exclude, restrict, and control allegedly dangerous foreigners, […]” (Lee, 2006, p. 5). The laws went through a shift in 1958, when president John F. Kennedy declared America a “nation built on immigration”. In 1965, the discriminatory systems that had governed immigration for decades were abolished (Lee, 2006).

What followed was a border more open than it had been since before the laws of the gatekeeping nation were set in place. Although the immigration laws were softened, “[…] Americans’ ambivalence about immigration remains deeply ingrained in both public discourse and immigration law.” (Lee, 2006, p.6). Then following the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the immigration policy became stricter once more. Measures were instituted to seek out suspected terrorists and those with links to terrorism,
and immigration regulation had become the responsibility of the newly created Department of Homeland Security (Lee, 2006, p. 6). Previously, this regulation was based on ethnicities. Now, the regulation was based more on religious belonging. Thus, Lee asks; *Can the United States be both a nation of immigrants and a gatekeeping nation?* (2006, p. 6).

The people in this thesis are all a part of this immigration history, one way or another. They are all second-generation Americans, with parents emigrating from countries such as Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. My informants were either born in America, or were only a few months or years old when they arrived. As the immigrants of Arab descent fall under the categorization of white (Cainkar, 2011), it is difficult to assess the number of individuals of Arab descent within the total American population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Muslim population</th>
<th>Race / Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33%</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Arab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Sub-Saharan African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Other Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Converts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>European</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cainkar, 2011, p. 102.

Cainkar reports that the number of Muslim Americans in the U.S. is quite disputed. She operates with a number between 6 and 7 million that was measured in 2005 (Cainkar, 2011, P. 102). As we can see from Figure 2, the Muslim American population is composed of different ethnicities. The Arab population is 25 % of the Muslim population in the U.S.
Early and contemporary research on Arabs in America emphasizes the matter of race and racialization in considering Arab American immigration experience. Louise A. Cainkar notes that the Arab American experience the first half of the 1900s were remarkably different than what was to come (Cainkar, 2011, p. 73). Arabs in America are considered as whites, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service in America asserted their whiteness and their eligibility for immigration and naturalization benefits in 1943 (Cainkar, 2011, p. 77). After the Six-Day War of 1967, the American media implemented an “us-and-them” dichotomy and portrayed a sense of triumph, while Arabs were regarded as the aggressor. This gave Arab Americans a feeling of not being part of a collective American “us”. Cainkar explains that: “Cultural constructs about the core of being Arab were undergoing transformation in American society, and Arab Americans found that they ceased to be embraced by the protection of whiteness, in particular its corollary of individual culpability.” (Cainkar, 2011, p. 87).

As Cainkar writes, many researchers have attempted to understand Arab American racial identification patterns. Although they are considered white on paper, Arab Americans racial identification varies. While some regard themselves as white, others do not identify with any of the formal American racial alternatives or they dismiss the whole concept of race. Moreover, scholars have had difficulties grasping “[…] what this variation correlated with – experiences, social class, religion, skin color, political alliances?” (Cainkar, 2011, p. 95). Most of my informants talked about themselves as brown people in opposition to white people, which were white Americans. Moreover, they were sympathetic to African American struggles, and could relate to their historical struggles with being a minority.

Cainkar ties together the racialization of Arab Americans with the Muslim American population by referring to three intersecting processes at the end of the twentieth century. First, the increasing levels of Arab immigrants to the United States, where the majority were Muslims, rather than Christians. This was a reversal of the earlier immigration tendency among Arabs to the U.S. The second was, as a consequence of the increasing number of Muslim immigrants, the growth in Muslim American institutions. And third,

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the Islamic revival, which raised Muslims religious consciousness, including Muslim Americans (Cainkar, 2011, p. 101). This thesis concerns itself with the aftermath of these processes. My informants have engaged in political and religious organizations and institutions, and seem to have been influenced by the Islamic revival, thus seeking to live out a religious and pious lifestyle.

The three processes that Cainkar mentions have made Muslims increasingly more visible in the American society. Additionally, prominent public personas in American have contributed to the impression [*] that Islam itself was intrinsically faulty and promoted violence [*]” (Cainkar, 2011, p. 101). Further on, the idea of Muslims posing a threat both home and abroad grew in the American public opinion. The rhetoric used to describe Muslims was similar to how Arabs had been described in the past. Therefore, it became difficult for Americans to distinguish Arabs and Muslims (Cainkar, 2011, p. 101). Cainkar explains; “As a result of conflations and confusions, the expanded social construction emerged of the Arab/Muslim/Middle Easterner, who had the same phenotypic traits, modes of dress, scripts and types of names as those with which the Arab had been understood with.” (Cainkar, 2011, p. 101-102).

This is the backdrop of the setting in which the data of this thesis were collected. The data depicts how the Muslim youths at UH have coped with increased visibility in American society, and how they maneuver their identity and religious belongings in a society increasingly characterized in Islamophobic terms. In order to understand my informants’ maneuverings, it is useful to have a closer look at Houston as a socio-geographical area and the area in which the University of Houston is located.

**Houston as Field Site**

The Houston metropolitan area has a population of 6.6 million people and thus makes it the fifth-largest among U.S. metropolitan statistical areas (Houston.org).
Because of the magnitude of this area, I needed to limit the geographical site of my fieldwork. Thus, the fieldwork which this thesis is based on was conducted at the University of Houston, located in Harris county. Harris is the county of the city of Houston, and it was also the county I lived in. All but one of my informants lived outside the university campus in suburbs of the city of Houston, as marked in red in Figure 4.
The University of Houston (UH) is marked in black in Figure 4. As we can see on the map, the distances between the suburbs and the university are quite large. My informants would cover these distances by car every day. As I did not have access to a car, I relied on the bus as means of transportation around the city.

The university of Houston is ranked among the best colleges in America and is very proud of their diverse student body (uh.org). Although a prominent institution, the area around campus does not have an equally good reputation. As one young woman told me, the university is in an area called ‘3rd Ward’, which is where some of the most dangerous and poor neighborhoods of Houston are located. This seems to have affected the feeling of safety among the students.

The groups of people that I spent time with were always offering to walk me to the bus station or drive me home. They always made sure that no one had to walk to their car by themselves, and if we were only a few, we even walked together to one car, and the driver of that car drove the others to their cars. There was always talk about dangers and safety at campus, especially at night. Although a result of the university’s location, I got
the impression that the concern with dangers and safety was something that permeated the entire society. This did not affect my fieldwork as such, but I was always reminded to keep safe and be proactive.

**Class in America and the Arab American Muslim youths**

The American society is a society of class structure. Sherry Ortner notes, in her anthropological work titled *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of ’58*, that class in America is intangible. She explains that class “[...] seems to exist and not exist, to be everywhere and nowhere, [...]” (Ortner, 2003, p. 10). Even though I can understand the ambivalence of class that Ortner explains here, I had a somewhat different class experience while doing fieldwork in Houston. I experienced class boundaries as very much existing in the American society, especially from the perspective I got by taking the bus every day. From what I saw, class seemed to be one of the issues running the everyday lives of Americans, and controls much of the structures of life.

As previously stated, UH is a prominent university and, as my informants told me themselves, tuition is expensive. The youths all drove their own car and could afford buying food at campus every day. Those who lived at campus had additional expenses to cover, in the form of dormitory services. Some of these youths had gone to Islamic school before they started college. Not all Muslim Americans are able to send their children to Islamic school. As a father of three told me, “I would very much like it for them to go to Islamic school you know. But it’s expensive, so expensive. I can’t afford that.” Thus, Islamic school is reserved for the families with the economic resources to invest in such an education.

These are all indicators of these youths’ class belonging. They were either middle- or upper class. These traits are also indicators of the amount of success their parents had had since they came to America. I use the word indicator, because, as Sherry Ortner has noted, class seems to be something that is not talked about in the American society (Ortner, 2003, p. 10). Thus I have had to draw conclusions based on these indicators. This thesis will seek to shed light on the upper class Muslim American youths in a college setting.
By living in what have been called, a ‘melting pot’ of ethnicities and identities, the way one identifies oneself may be quite complex. To be a Muslim, Arab or American, or all of those at the same time is something which is decided on based on the context of where one is at a given time. Within the Muslim youth community at UH, the youths this thesis encounters see themselves as Muslims first, and have constructed a network based on religious belonging.

 Outline of Thesis

I will start this thesis off with a short chapter describing the fieldwork from a perspective of method and the challenges connected with access and doing fieldwork in an urban setting. Following the methodical aspect, Chapter 3 will take on the framework and people of the fieldwork. Here I describe the concerns of being young and Muslim at college through a depiction of my first encounters with the two student organizations I used as entry points to the field. After a thorough description of the individuals who characterized my field and the two student organizations I spent time with, I will move on to Chapter 4. This chapter will seek to portray the performance of community, piety and reputation, and the making of sacred space (El Guindi, 2008). Moving on to Chapter 5, I will go deeper into the construction of a pious self through the analysis of the Hijabi identity, and discuss agency in opposition to power and the patriarch. Chapter 6 will sum up and seek to explain this community - what makes them connected and how the youths operate within the structures of the network. Finally, Chapter 7, with its concluding remarks, will seek to summarize this thesis and its arguments.
Chapter 2: Method and Access as a Challenge

As outlined in the previous chapter, it was the #OURTHREEWINNERS that inspired me to do fieldwork among the Muslim youths at the University of Houston, showing me the connectedness young of Muslims have across state lines. But when I decided on this focus, I had already spent one and a half months in the Detroit metropolitan area, trying to establish a foundation for my fieldwork. I had originally chose the city of Dearborn, part of the Detroit metropolitan area, as my field, because of its high number of Arab and Muslim inhabitants.

After arriving there, I quickly realized that this would be challenging field location, mainly because of the large distances I needed to traverse to meet relevant informants, which was made even harder due to the poorly developed public transportation system. After a month of struggling with the basic need of movement and waiting around in dodgy neighborhoods, in the freezing cold, for the next bus to arrive, I realized I was wasting precious time without making progress with my research. Two weeks later, I boarded a plane to Houston, Texas, where I had a distant relative who would help me with lodging and transport.

While in Detroit I heard of the Chapel Hill-shootings, and remember feeling shocked about the news. I was curious to know if the news had reached people back home in Norway, but they had not heard a word about it. The deaths of these three young Muslims soon drowned in the continuous flow of reports regarding murders and attempted murders, many of which were happening in close proximity to where I lived in Detroit. Deah, Yusor and Razan had not crossed my mind in a while, before I came to Houston and met my informants at UH. However, their tragic faith would shape my fieldwork to a big extent.

When I came to Houston, I tried to get in contact with relevant people quickly, as I felt I did not have any time to waste. Fortunately I came across the student organization Students for Justice for Palestine fairly early after I had moved. It was my experience from Norway that the Palestinian cause often attracts both Muslims in general, and Arabs in particular, so I explored the possibility of it being similar in Houston. I got the chance
to attend a meeting they had, where they were planning an upcoming event, the Israeli Apartheid Week, that were to be held a couple weeks later. I was also invited to volunteer at the event if I wished. At the meeting I met with the president of the organization, and she introduced me to some of the females members.

**Gendered field**

Being a female myself, I felt I connected more easily with the female members of the organizations. I was introduced to my informants through the ‘snowball effect’, meaning that the first people I befriended led me to more informants. This snowball effect resulted in an all-female network, where it felt complicated to reach out to the males in this milieu. As I will explain further on in this thesis, gendered social codes and norms regarding interaction between the sexes made it difficult to achieve trustful relations to the males. Fortunately the young women were comfortable spending time with me, and it was easy to earn their trust because I am female myself. Due to the limitations in time, I decided to focus on the young women and not dwell too much on the fact that I did not get access to all that many males. This was also influenced by the impression I had gotten, before I left for the field, that the voices and actions of young Muslim-American women were marginal in the scholarly literature.

**To fit in: A female perspective**

As mentioned above, my informants were all young and un-married Muslim women with a set of rules on how one should act around others. There was a lot of gossip floating around, and I got a good look at how other young women were talked about. I became well aware of how I acted around them and their reactions, so I avoided doing or saying anything that would jeopardize the access I had achieved. In this way, I embodied a somewhat pious persona.
As a child, I have spent many summers in Morocco, so I was familiar with Islamic and Arab social codes through my personal experiences. These experiences led me to assume that I would be able to communicate with, and navigate within, the set of rules these young women lived by. In retrospective, these experiences might have limited some of my experiences, because instead of learning as I went, I might have let the social codes I already knew about keep me from situations where I could have learned by doing the wrong thing. However, I believe that my former knowledge concerning social codes gave me an advantage and made it easier for me to fit in and read signals and tensions that were left unsaid.

**Living arrangements**

While staying in Detroit, I stayed with a Syrian Christian family who had lived in America the last eight years. They had arrived some years before the Civil War in Syria erupted, and they were deeply affected by the war in their homeland. They were also paying attention to the issues happening in, and around, Detroit, and they saw it as their duty as my hosts to inform me about potential dangers one could encounter when traveling around and outside of the city. They were especially worried about me taking the bus around on my own, and about my safety in general.

In Arab culture there is a fundamental perception that women need more protection than men, and that the family at all times has a responsibility to keep her safe. It was when I realized this, that I understood how quickly they had taken me in as a ‘daughter’. I was a part of their family, and thus in need of their protection. This aspect contributed to the already complicating issues of getting around the city, to the extent that I felt it negatively affected my research progress. They wanted me to follow their rules, expected me to be home before dark and always tell them the details of where I was going and with whom I was meeting. This thus made me feel more and more limited in my mobility. However, the main reason for me moving to Houston, Texas was the possibility of a finding a field more easily accessible.
Before coming to Houston, I arranged to live with a distant relative on my father’s side. She had just moved to Houston from Morocco, following her marriage to an Iraqi man named Arif who had lived in the city for about twelve years. I hoped this would be a more relaxed living situation that would make it easier to focus on the task at hand. Because Arif had lived in Houston for twelve years, and he had close relatives there as well, I hoped to be able to use these connections as stepping-stones into my research.

As the reality of everyday American life hit me, I understood that both Arif, and his family, had little to no leisure time, working until eight pm in the evening, coming home for dinner and then calling it a day. It felt intrusive to urge them to help me with my fieldwork in the middle of their everyday struggles, and I figured out that I would be better off seeking out a group of people who had a bit more time on their hands. This led me to the college students of UH.

**Arab and Muslim households**

In trying to gain access to the students at UH, I had to, as all anthropologists do, spend as much time with them as possible. As Okely says, “*In contrast to many social science approaches, the anthropologist interacts, indeed must interact directly and daily with people as subjects.*” (Okely, 2012, p. 125). What I probably should have predicted, but didn’t, were the social norms and rules I as a woman was expected to follow while living under the roof of an Arab man. Arif was not particularly religious, which may have contributed to my naïveté. He was, however, quite culturally conservative. I realized, after a few weeks, that he was not pleased with my behavior, much because of how often and late I stayed out of the house. A while into my stay I was told that he, as a man, could not accept that a woman living under his roof was out late without having been granted his permission. Because I knew I would have to prioritize my fieldwork my living environment became conflicted.

The experiences in both Detroit and Houston gave me personal insights into challenges of being female in the Arab-American culture, and gave me great knowledge about how the home life of a young Arab and Muslim woman may look like. The circumstances around
canceled appointments and vague answers I got from my informants was clarified when I found myself in the same situation as I assumed they often did. Should I prioritize getting more data by going out with the young women and thus risk angering my host family, or should I respect the man of the household, to not make the situation even more tense?

As Amelie Le Renard observed during her fieldwork among young Saudi Arabian women, relatives can to an extent control one’s ability to participate in activities outside the home. “In order to negotiate activities outside of the home, many of the young women I met had to convince their relatives that they would keep out of harm’s way. Some explained that they were very careful not to be noticed, for fear of their parents imposing additional restrictions on them.” (Le Renard, 2014, p.55). In the case of my informants, and myself, it was necessary to convince relatives that we not only stayed out of harms way, but that we also did not engage in inappropriate behavior.

**Access and the Urban field**

The young women I got to know often made plans with me, and then canceled because their parents had made other plans, or told them they had to stay in and do their homework or other chores. This made collection of data even more complicated. Although frustrating, I understood their circumstances well, because I was experiencing a similar situation. This is also a challenge that comes from the fact that my fieldwork took place in an urban setting. To do fieldwork in as big of a city as Houston demanded a lot of planning.

In the beginning I narrowed my field to the University of Houston, and later on the university library. This was a fruitful place to collect data, but I also wanted to get closer access to my informants, and wished to see them outside the college setting. While taking the bus to the University was easy enough after I had memorized the way there, meeting up with people other places around the city was challenging. The bus didn’t go everywhere, and I knew that by making plans with any of my informants, they would feel obligated to pick me up and drop me off again. Thus, additional to doing me the favor of
spending time with me and sharing their everyday lives with me, they had to help me with transportation.

I felt odd being a researcher without being able to offer any favors in return. The offering of one’s service back to informants can be a way to reciprocate the favors informants provides a researcher with. As Okely writes, these services can range from using one’s position in society to the advantage for their informants, such as a witness in trials, to their musical knowledge or photographic skills (Okely, 2012). Throughout my anthropological education I have learned the importance of reciprocity, both within a society⁵, and as Okely mentions, between the researcher and informants. Thus, finding myself in a situation where my resources were limited and depending on my informants, led me to feel like a burden.

Even though I got around with the bus, it could often take a few hours, and I couldn’t risk arriving home in the later hours. If I wanted to attend different events, I was dependent on one of my informants driving me home. In this way, not having a car was a challenge in regards to access, because I could not just go to places and events spontaneously if I heard about them. It took thorough planning, and I felt like I had to ask for permission from Arif as well. I therefore see, in retrospect, that I might have missed out on some events which could have been important for the access and data. This applied in particular in cases where I stumbled over events that would start shortly after I learned about them.

An effect of doing fieldwork is that one meets a lot of people for the first time. In these first encounters, people often offered me tours around the city, they suggested we should hang out and wanted to help out with my research. As a naïve Norwegian young woman who had never been in America before, I was taken aback by their welcoming, overly nice, greetings. In the beginning I thought I had made friends for life, and I had high hopes for the remaining of my fieldwork. I had been given phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and thought that if I could give all these people a call, or text, some of them would surely want to meet me again. I imagined my research would be off to a great start.

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⁵ Bronislaw Malinowski, often considered the father of modern anthropology, wrote of the importance of reciprocity among the Trobriander on Trobriand Islands in Melanesia (1922).
Reality soon hit me, and I understood that this was the American manner of greeting new people. I had not exactly made best friends with all the people I had met, and when I tried getting in touch with all of them, expecting the same type of exceptionally nice responses; I was thus more disappointed by the deafening silence of no reply. It proved difficult to access spheres outside the university; hence I decided to focus on the group I had gotten access to already. As Okely (2012) explains in her account of fieldwork and the ethnographic method, my experience is not unique to the field of anthropology.

Working to get access is a crucial part of doing anthropological fieldwork. Some settings are more easily accessible than others, and there is many different ways of being hindered in the field, but one thing is certain: there is no anthropological fieldwork without access. The monograph by Didier Fassin titled “Enforcing Order – an ethnography of urban policing” (Fassin, 2011) shows the importance of access while doing fieldwork with the police. He drives around with the anticrime squad in one of the largest precincts in the Paris region in France.

Fassin explains that he had to seek permission from many different levels of authority, and applied at the perfect time, as the government policies were softening up and information and research on the policing in France were welcomed. In anthropological fieldwork conducted in branches of the government, permission from the authorities is often crucial to one’s opportunity to get access. In an urban setting, limiting the geographical space of your field is what makes or breaks the chance of accomplishment.

Well aware that Fassin’s work has another framework than mine; I, however, recognize some of my field in his. Fassin undertook fieldwork in a different context and from another perspective than me, but some of the issues at hand are comparable. He studied urban policing of youth minorities in Paris. Many of the youths had Arab and/or Muslim backgrounds, and the anticrime squad’s aggressive and often discriminatory manner of confronting them dominates Fassin’s renderings of his field (Fassin, 2011). My informants were minority youths as well, and I had observed different perspectives on similar issues. Many of my informants’ narratives depicted discriminatory and confrontational experiences and a feeling of marginalization and categorization by society at large. As I will return to in chapter 5, Fassin argues that the marginalization
and discrimination of these minorities and youths has impacted the way they see their place in society. I will argue that some of the same mechanisms influencing the minority youths of Fassin’s study are applicable to my field.

During my fieldwork I mainly attended events and places at the college campus, expectant that ‘the group’ were there. I made sure that they were going beforehand, and tried to make appointments with them in attempt to get some level of reassurance that they would attend. However, difficulties with making appointments arose due their restricted movement, as outlined above.

Additional to Fassin, one can gain much insight from the urban ethnographic fieldwork done by Cainkar (2009) and William Foote Whyte (1993). Cainkar has done her fieldwork in Chicago, where she has done participant observation and extended interviews with 102 Arab Muslims with different backgrounds and social belongings (Cainkar, 2009, p, 11). Cainkar sought out her informants in Chicago neighborhoods with demographically high numbers of Arab and Muslim population. Simultaneously, her field was geographically narrowed. The fieldwork done by William Foote Whyte may have more similarities to my own fieldwork. Where as Cainkar did her fieldwork visiting the Arab and Muslim American people in their homes, Whyte’s method involved much hanging on the street corner with The Corner Boys (Whyte, 1993) in an Italian American slum in Boston. Through this method Whyte accessed different spheres by spending enough time hanging on the street corners that he became a part of the ‘gang’. In the same way as Whyte, I became a part of the youth group through hanging out with them over a long period of time. Through this method I was invited to come with them to different events, classes, and prayers throughout their day. Because I spent so much time with them, we developed a trustful relationship to each other.

Establishing a trusting relation with the people of the field is something that necessarily takes time. Thus the quality of one’s fieldwork may affected by the period of time spent in the field. I also experienced how dependent my fieldwork was on meeting someone who could take me in. Luckily I did end up meeting extraordinary people.
The Data

Thus, the data collected through this fieldwork and used in writing this thesis, has primarily been collected through conversations and a method of *deep hanging out* (Geertz, 1998). I spent most of my fieldwork together with a group of young women who have provided me with the chance to do participant observation in their company. It is also based on a handful of interviews which have been done with and without tape recorder. I have only conducted formal interviews with informants that have not been a part of the group of young women I regularly met with. I often observed prayer time while spending time with these women. I did not participate in the prayers during my fieldwork. My informants knew that I was not Muslim, and that I did not know how to pray. I also did not see it as necessary for the collection of data to ask for instructions on praying.

All the data was collected after informed consent had been achieved. I have informed all the individuals that appear in this thesis of my intentions of being there and talking with them. Furthermore, they have given me their consent based on the condition that their identity would be kept anonymous. Consequently, all the names and characters mentioned throughout this thesis have given aliases in order to protect their identity.

This data will be presented and analyzed in the following chapters, but first, we will start with a presentation of the key informants of this thesis and a description of the two student organizations that worked as entry points into the research topics that concerns this thesis.
Chapter 3: The Organization Life at College and The Concerns of The Muslim American College Student

This chapter takes on the task of presenting the essential frames and people of this fieldwork. First, I will start with presenting my key informants. The majority of them are a part of the group of young women I have spent most of my time. However, two of them were not a part of this group, as they mostly kept to each other. Through a description of my first meeting with the two student organizations, ‘Students for Justice for Palestine’ and the ‘Muslim Student Association’, I seek to introduce the reader to some of the youths of this thesis’ concerns connected to being young and Muslim at college.

The group

As initially explained, I spent most of my fieldwork together with a group of young Muslim women. They were a group of friends, who spent most of their time between classes socializing together. Here, I will give an introduction and description of these women, as well as a few other central informants who were not a part of that group.

Razan

Razan was the president of the student organization Students for Justice for Palestine. She was 20 years old, had a Palestinian mother and a Lebanese father, and studied pre-medicine at the University of Houston. She lived at home with her parents, in one of the suburbs outside of the city, and drove to campus every day. She gave me the impression of being both shy but at the same time very including, talking to people all the time and making sure they were doing okay. She did also wear a hijab. During my time in the field, she was always wearing a one-colored hijab loosely wrapped around her head and neck with some of her hair showing in the front right above her forehead, a t-shirt with a statement on it, a thin jersey with long arms underneath and loose jeans. Her t-shirts were often related to different events supporting the Students for Justice for Palestine or had
the #HEROESOFCHAPELHILL logo on them. She overall gave me the impression that she was very involved in the organizational life at campus.

Haya

I first met Haya at a Students for Justice for Palestine event. She was a 19-year-old pre-law student, with Palestinian parents and a strong political voice. In the beginning I got the feeling that my presence in the organization made her uncomfortable. Although when some other attendees asked me about my research, I seemed to catch her curiosity. She asked me about what I was researching, and when I told her I was doing fieldwork for my MA thesis in social anthropology, she enthusiastically told me she had taken an anthropology class the semester before, and found the anthropological mindset very interesting. After having established that we had something in common, she said she would be more than happy to help me with my fieldwork. She would bring me with her to different events and introduced me to new people. She also told me much about herself and her experience of growing up as Muslim in America, thus giving me a more profound understanding of the struggles facing Muslim American youths.

Haya often wore stylish, but comfortable clothes with earthly tones of beige, brown and grey. She wore her hijab in a different style than Razan, with much more fabric, making the hijab bigger, and it would always match the tones of the rest of her outfit. A student of pre-law, she hoped to make a career as a lawyer after graduation. She was involved in the Muslim Student Association as well as in Students for Justice for Palestine, and took great pride in her religion. She lived at home with her parents in one of Houston’s suburbs and had her own car. She cared deeply for the Palestinian cause. This was evident in her habit of writing “Free Palestine” on every blackboard nearby. Even though a habit she often made fun of, she also seemed proud to do it. Spreading the ‘Free Palestine message was something she explained as a personal responsibility for her.

Ghita & Hafida

When I met Ghita and Hafida, it was at a meeting planning for the first event I went to with the student organization in support of Palestine. Razan introduced me to them while they were sitting with another friend of theirs. They were very open and seemed eager to
talk to me about themselves and their families. Ghita’s parents were both born in Palestine, but grew up in Lebanon and moved to Houston as adults. Hafida’s mother was from Lebanon, her father Palestinian and they had met each in Houston as students.

I always saw them together and they kept much to themselves. They were not a part of the group that I spent most of my time with during my fieldwork, although I often met them when I went to the Learning Center (which will be explained further later in this thesis), and they offered to drive me home a couple of times each. Both of them had long and black hair, which they often wore down. Their fashion senses was quite similar. They usually wore skinny jeans, or skirts, and either ballerina shoes or converse. The duo was experts at knowing the latest gossip of the youth community, and I owe much of my understanding of the dynamic of this arena to them.

**Iman**

Upon meeting Iman, she grounded me without even knowing it. When I told her about my project she showed much enthusiasm and offered some much needed advice. She had long, dark brown and curly hair and wore glasses. Furthermore, she always wore a college-themed t-shirt with relaxed jeans. Iman had started her studies in mathematics at UH the previous semester, and was new to Houston. She lived at one of the campus dorms, and tried to integrate into the college life. She was also trying to find her religious self, and learn more about her religion. She was a part of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and another Muslim organization at the university, called ‘United Muslim Relief’ (UMR).

Iman’s parents came to the U.S. from Lebanon, and she grew up in a small Texan town close to Houston. She grew up Muslim, but she was not raised in a practicing religious household. She described her childhood as similar to how other children at her school grew up, even though her family was the only Arabs and Muslims in their town. I recognized much of myself in her, as I too was trying to find ‘my’ place in a new environment too. She had a hint of uncertainty about her, which I found charming.
Leila

Leila seized my attention at an MSA event when she performed a spoken word poem in front of a big crowd of MSA members and their parents. She stood tall at the stage, performing her poem with a strong and powerful voice. Leila called for an end to Islamophobia and discrimination of Muslims, commemorating #OURTHREEWINNERS as well as including humorous references to verses from the Quran and contemporary topics. All in one, a well articulated poem. Well on her way to becoming a doctor, Leila also involves herself in the political and activist life at her college. Her parents had arrived in the U.S. from Algeria, and she has two younger siblings. She lived with her parents and drove to campus every day. She was a tall, beautiful young woman who dressed in modest clothing and wore a hijab. The hijab was always in different colors and in a big, ruffled style. With a smile on her face, she was always eager to help me out.

Sofia

I was introduced to Sofia after the first day of the Israeli Apartheid Week (will be further explained in the following subchapter) was over. Razan asked me to join her and four of her friends for lunch. We all went to a campus diner. Sofia appeared to be very popular and the center of attention during the majority of the meal. Her friends asked her about a suitor, whom they insisted had to be “in love with her”. This was also the first encounter with one of the main means through which one’s piety could be assessed. Namely dating. Sofia answered that she would “never consider him, because he is so immature”. The other girls responded by nodding their head in agreement, all too familiar with this predicament, as we will explore further in chapter 4. During the Israeli Apartheid Week I ran into Sofia many times, and after a couple of days she offered to drive me home. She continued to offer me “a ride” throughout my fieldwork.

Sofia was a short woman of 18 years, and the youngest of my informants. She always dressed very, high end, as one may call it, and in expensive clothes and shoes. She was one of the few in the group I was with, who would dress up for occasions. She wore her hijab in neutral colors and in a tight way.
Sofia’s parents were Palestinian, and she lived with them outside campus, in the suburbs. This connection to Palestine made her especially involved in the Palestinian cause. I had the impression that her parents were strict, as she often canceled plans and planned events, because she had to stay home and do chores or study. However, when she was able to attend, she was very including and introduced me to people she knew.

**Amal**

Amal was a charismatic and shy young woman. She would often giggle embarrassed by something one of the other women had said. She was also often the ‘victim’ of inside jokes, because she was so easily embarrassed. When she got more comfortable around me, she would help me with a lot of information. She was always happy to talk to me, especially about potential suitors and her future plans of marriage, honeymoon destinations and the ideal husband.

Her family came from Saudi Arabia, and she often travelled there during breaks. She was mostly around when the group hung out socially, and I did not see her at events very often. She did also live with her parents, and drove to campus every day. Her clothing was what one might characterize as ordinary, loose jeans and college sweatshirts were her everyday outfits. She wore the hijab in a tight way, often in a thin fabric with floral patterns.

**Students for Justice for Palestine**

When I first arrived in Houston, the members of student organization *Students for Justice for Palestine* (SJP) were the first informants I got in the field. They worked for justice in Palestine through spreading awareness, participating in debates, and arranging events such as the annual Israeli Apartheid Week. SJP are openly anti-Zionistic and against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. They are also connected to the international movement called BDS, which stands for “Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions”. BDS has over the years become a major international movement for Palestinian solidarity. They
are advocating for boycott of Israeli goods and services, divestment from Israeli institutions and sanctions against Israel for their wrongdoings.

The student organization had many members; although I only met a few of them in person I could see that the number of members was high when I joined their group on Facebook. Due to their high member count, I expected a lot of people would attend the first meeting I participated in, where I first met the people who would be my informants.

When I arrived at the University of Houston, I was attempting to find the Agnes Arnold Hall, which was the building where the meeting would take place. This meeting was held to plan and organize the weeklong event “Israel Apartheid Week” and there were about 25 people present. The attendees’ ethnicities ranged from Palestinians, Lebanese and Syrian to Pakistani and Saudi Arabian.

They had ordered pizza and bought cookies and soft drinks, which were very popular. I noticed that the pizza was without meat and thought to myself that it probably was to make sure everyone could eat it, both Muslims who did not eat any other meat than halal meat, as well as for those who were vegetarians.

Razan, the leader of the organization, met me at the door. She wore black jeans, a t-shirt that read ‘Go Coogs’\(^6\) in bold, red letters and a sharp-green hijab. Because of her hijab I knew she was Muslim, and there were many other females present at this meeting who wore the hijab as well. Most of the male attendees of the group had beards, which I perceived as a marker of religious belonging. Thus, I got the sense that most of the males shared these women’s religious network and values. The aesthetics of religion works as markers, which a person can be identified by. In this case these markers was the hijab and the religious beard, both associated with Islam.

I sat down right in the middle of the room, and noticed none of the other attendees sat close to me. Most of the men sat on my right and most of the women sat on the left. Both groups kept in the back of the room. Although the seating had a very gender segregated pattern, there seemed to be no problem communicating across this gender boundary while

\(^6\) ‘Coogs’ (Cougars) is a slogan and nickname for the students of the university of Houston.
getting food and chatting before and after the meeting Razan held the meeting, which main goal was to agree on which members where to do what chores during the week, and to make posters that would say “Free Palestine”.

Three days of the Israeli Apartheid Week week had been reserved for “The Apartheid Wall”, a physical wall, made of wood, which had been created by a member who was not present at the meeting. It were to represent the actual wall in Palestine, segregating the Palestinian people from the Israeli land, and were to be erected on campus, near the University Library. The spot had been chosen because of it’s proximity to the Library and because most students would pass it throughout their day. The posters would be hung on the tables they would put up beside the wall, where there would be serving of food and also possible to get more information about the Palestinian struggle.

Razan introduced me to a group of three young women, Inas, Ghita and Hafida, after she was done delegating the different tasks. Not one of these females wore hijab, and they seemed like close friends. They were dressed in similar, fashionable western clothing. They had volunteered to make the posters, and had already begun discussing which one of them who would do what. I started talking to them about their family; where their parents came from and tried to get them to talk freely about their experience of being an Arab-Muslim in America.

Inas told me her father was from Palestine and her mother was from Libya, and that they had met in Houston while studying. Ghita’s parents were both born in Palestine but had moved to Houston from Lebanon. Hafida’s parents were from Palestine and Lebanon. While asking questions and listening to their answers I noticed the topic changed to being about men, marriage and age. The three women were all younger than me, and their age being 18, 20 and 21, respectively.

After talking for a little while another woman joined us. She was of Pakistani origin and wore a hijab as well. She jumped into the conversation and seemed to assume that, because of my age, I was stressed about finding a husband. She told me: “He will show up when you least expect it, I promise.” I was surprised by her statement, which she made before I had the chance to introduce myself.
After the meeting I said goodbye to all the women and we agreed that we would meet again at the event. I assumed, being as they took part in the meeting and volunteered to do the poster, that they would take equally as much part in the actual event. However, at the first day of the event they were nowhere to be seen. Throughout the week I only saw them three or four times, when they, still as a group, popped by the tables to get some food, or when there was a Palestinian spoken word poet who came to perform. I got the impression that they were not as much a part of the group as many of the other attendees, and that they often kept much to themselves.

Instead, many other people who engaged in the organization was there more frequently. Some of whom I had not spoken to at the meeting but had noticed were there, and others whom had not attended. I later realized that these people, approximately 15 in numbers, was a pretty close knit group, many of whom were active in the Muslim Student Association together, as well. Even though they had a lot of members, this group planned and attended the majority of the organization’s events and upheld SJP. The others stopped by here and there, but did not really take on much responsibility.

Most of the members with whom I spoke to had a connection to Palestine in some way. Many of them had a Palestinian parent. I was told gripping tales about parents and grandparents who had lost their homes, who were chased out of their country and who had lost hope of ever returning to their homeland. When I was given accounts of hopelessness and relatives who did not even mention Palestine anymore, I could not help but thinking that the next generations were keeping their struggle alive after they themselves have given up. Even though the majority of SJP’s that I spoke to had a connection to Palestine, it was mainly the political solidarity with the Palestinians that connected them. The ones who did not have Palestinian family members, did either have Arab or Muslim background, and all but two of the members I spoke to characterized themselves as both Arab and Muslim.\footnote{There were one female who had Palestinian Christian parents, and a male who considered himself an Arab American Atheist.} This religious uniformity is important to understand in order to grasp the make-up of this community of youths. The SJP members often described the solidarity with the Palestinian people as a Muslim cause. The majority
of the SJP members’ involvement with the Muslim Student Association is an example of this connection. We will now take a closer look into the Muslim Student Association, how they work and what they stand for.

**The Muslim Student Association**

The Muslim Student Association (MSA) is an American Muslim student organization with local affiliations at universities and colleges around the United States. They work with issues concerning the Muslim student body and their relations with other students and the American public in general. They also provide collective Friday prayer every week, and lectures concerning different aspects and teachings of Islam.

According to Leila Ahmed (2011), a group of Islamist activist students, with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, established the MSA in 1963. They later on established ‘The Islamic Society of North America’, and they proceeded to become the “largest and most important and influential Muslim organizations in North America” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 160). The organization grew quickly, and in 1968 it counted 105 affiliated associations on campuses across the U.S. and Canada (Ahmed, 2011, p. 161).

At UH the MSA had several members, some who did not participate much, while others, the so-called officers, were those who took part in planning events. Most of my informants were members, or involved to some extent, in this organization. I will now describe how the MSA works through one of their lecture programs which aim to teach the members of MSA about Islam, and a weekly event which purpose is to establish contact between the UH Muslims and the rest of the college body.

“Why men and women can’t be friends”

The gendered experience with the SJP’s was put in perspective while attending an event arranged by the MSA. Razan invited me to a lecture on gender relations after one of the SJP Israeli Apartheid Week events. This lecture was the last of many in a line of lectures the MSA arranged throughout the semester. The main purpose was to teach these college
youths how to behave according to Islam, both in their everyday lives and in a college context. When entering the room the lecture were to be held I noticed that the majority of the people I met at the SJP event had met up to this lecture as well. The seating was gender segregated, males on the right, females on the left, and there was a man in the front standing beside a screen with a video titled: “why men and women can’t be friends”. Unfortunately we did not see this video because of technical difficulties, however, the headline had sparked my curiosity.

In front of the rows of chairs stood a man, he looked to be in his late twenties, dressed in western clothing and wearing the Taqiyah (Islamic hat worn by males). He spoke with authority, and it was clear he was the one who would hold the lecture. The man was also quite handsome, something that had not gone unnoticed by the female attendees in the audience. They were whispering among each other about how good-looking he was, and some of the young women gossiped about his marital status afterwards. He opened the lecture with the sentence; “The prophet Mohammad, peace be up on him, says that women is the other half of men.” This was an interesting way of introducing the subject, and it made me interested in what awaited me the next hour or so. Would there be a patriarchal and traditional tone throughout? Or would perhaps these traditions be challenged during this lecture?

The main purpose was to explain how men and women should relate to each other in an appropriate way, according to Islam. The speaker continued to explain: “it’s about avoiding two extremes.” On the one side there is separation to the point where men and women would be utterly unable to interact. On the other side there is a need to avoid downright inappropriate interaction between the sexes. As examples of the behavior men and women should avoid, the speaker listed: to be alone in the same room together, touching, looking and flirting. Flirting was exemplified as unnecessary talk and showing interest in a person of the opposite sex. It should not be confused with good greeting manners, such as giving one’s Salaam to the opposite sex. These examples are all things that could be considered shouba (doubtful situations) and could further on lead to zina (fornication), which is one of the most forbidden actions in Islam.
When the lecturer mentions the term *shouba*, the females express agreement by nodding approvingly and whispering among each other. It seemed like this was an issue they often discussed amongst each other. The young men did not give any apparent reaction, but it was hard to observe them, due to my placement on the female side of the room. While the males might have been whispering among each other as well, the females were more apparent in their interest for this topic.

To explain how *shouba* and *zina* are to be avoided he included the audience, by asking for their solutions to different scenarios. He asked the crowd how they would behave if a *sister or brother* was to be working with the opposite sex on a school assignment, when would it be appropriate to have a conversation together and how long should it last and lastly, if a *brother* should walk a *sister* to her car late at night or not. The crowd responded positively on the question of working on school assignments, however, they should not have any unnecessary meetings or contact beyond the ones they needed to finish the assignment. The lecturer confirmed their interpretation. The same went for conversations in general, which were to be limited to necessity only and not to long because it could easily lead to *shouba*.

In the case of walking a *sister* to her car, the male crowd was quick to answer no, where as the females was a little hesitant. The lecturer added to the scenario, asking the males what they would do if the were driving past a *sister* walking alone at night, while it was raining outside. Would they give them a ride? The female crowd started to say things like “really?” and “are you serious?”, insinuating that they would expect the *brothers* to help them out. Most of the males said they would have helped the hypothetical *sister* in question, however, some still had a trace of uncertainty on their faces. The lecturer explained that the *brothers* had to assess the situation individually, but that by not offering their help they were doing something else that also would be wrong. He explained “as a Muslim, you’re supposed to be polite and nice to people, and to help people who need your help”. However, if the *brother* already were attracted to her, it would be wrong to be alone in a car together.

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8 The MSA used the terms *brother* and *sister* consistently when addressing their Muslim members.
While these rules were to be followed as carefully as possible, the lecturer wanted to know if the crowd could think of some situations where there could be exceptions. Continuing the dialogue between him and the crowd, the issue of *handshaking* came up. Because all unnecessary touching should be avoided, where does this leave *handshaking*?

The lecturer said that he himself did not shake hands with women, but that it took him a while to grow comfortable with avoiding the handshake, especially in public situations, and gave examples of some of the awkwardness that had found place in the past revolving the dodging of shaking hands. The crowd had questions about the circumstances around the handshake, making it obvious that this is one of the rules that many have had difficulties with in their everyday lives. Did they also obligie to scenarios where they as Muslims dealt with non-Muslims? How would they seem like if they refused to shake the hand of a non-Muslim of the opposite sex?

They could all agree that if they were to introduce themselves to a fellow Muslim there would be no need to explain why they couldn’t shake hands, however, in a similar situation with a non-Muslim it would be more complicated to explain without offending the other person. A young man in the crowd asked: “*What if by saying no to shaking her hand made her very offended and gave her a negative view of Muslims?*”. He was concerned about how his actions could affect the perceptions of Muslims as a group, if he refused to shake the hand of a non-Muslim woman. He continued to explain that even though it would make him uncomfortable, he would still do it, because he didn’t want to put other Muslims in a ‘bad light’. Others expressed similar concerns, and made agreeing sounds, making it clear that this was something many of them had thought about before.

The lecturer explained that all of these rules have to be dealt with individually, but as a guideline the shaking of hands should be avoided if you find the person of the opposite sex attractive, he or she is around the same age as you. Hence, these rules were situational, and could therefore be assessed when challenges occurred. The concerns about how society perceived them as Muslims become visible in the statement of this young man. Similar concerns often came up in conversations with my informants. As we will examine closer in chapter 5, the need to show non-Muslims a positive image of themselves were something that steered much of how they behaved in the society.
One of the ways Muslims can change the perception non-Muslims have of them is through *da’wa* (religious outreach). We will now take a closer look at how the Muslim youths use *da’wa* as away to change the way Muslims perceived in the American society. Additionally, we will see how *da’wa* could be used to achieve personal religious fulfillment.

**Da’wa**

As a way of reaching out to people, and in an effort to change Americans perception of Muslims, the MSA rigged up a stand out on campus twice a week, filled it up with cupcakes, cookies and other tempting pastries and hung up posters reading “*Da’wa table*” and “*Ask us about Islam*”. The members of MSA takes turns on welcoming people over to their table, telling them about different aspects of Islam and answers questions people may have about the religion.

Leila Ahmed explains *Da’wa* as *religious outreach* and shows how, among others, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt viewed *Da’wa* as an important way to make people see the positive sides of their religious movement. Through religious outreach, political non-violent activism, charity and humanitarian work, they hoped to get more people involved in their movement and thus be able to change the society (Ahmed, 2011 p. 69-76).

She also describes the MSA’s early years of existence, and that “*The MSA officers and members plunged into the work of outreach, teaching and preaching, setting up venues for congregational prayers, founding mosques and Islamic centers, establishing and running schools teaching Islam […]*”(Ahmed, 2011 p.162). During my fieldwork I mostly observed work within the organization, and attended events that was held for the members of the organization. The lecture outlined above is an example of such activities described by Ahmed. The purpose of such activities is to teach and preach Islam to an already Muslim audience of students. At all the events I attended, prayers had been facilitated for by a planned break in the event program, thus giving the members the possibility of praying at the right time.

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9There is five prayers a day, scheduled to specific times, making a prayer break during an event necessary for members in order to not miss any of them.
As mentioned above, Leila Ahmed connects *Da′wa* and MSA to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In the Muslim Brotherhood’s earlier days, they achieved much support among the Egyptian people through “[…] working for justice and the greater good of society as a whole […]” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 75). Their volunteer work helped numerous people, especially the poor, and “It was also a highly effective form of da′wa; […] they exemplified the genuineness of their ethical commitments and their dedication to serving those in need. Their example doubtless drew people to their cause, beliefs, and ways of practicing Islam.” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 75-76). As I explained in the introduction, these youths are living in an increasingly Islam-hostile society. To increase the support from the society at large, da′wa becomes a tool they use to better their status in the society. Da′wa can be connected to piety, thus making the action of da′wa a pious action.

Many of the Muslim youths at UH were involved in an additional student organization, the United Muslim Relief. Although I was not able to get much insight into this organization, they as well do much charity work and fundraising. One of the projects they were working on while I was there was called *Project: Downtown*. They planned a day every semester to pack bags with food and water, and hand them out to homeless people in downtown Houston. They were also planning a charity-run.

Many of the youths told me that they try to do similar things in their everyday lives, helping people out, whether they carried old peoples bags to their car while shopping, or buying some extra food and hand it out to ‘the homeless guy on the corner’. Much in the same way as the da′wa that Ahmed describes, the youths I talked to were very concerned with society at large, and saw it important to show people the ‘good of Islam’. One can see their charity work in the context of da′wa, their good deeds being considered ‘Muslim’ good deeds and contributing to a better perception of Muslims for non-Muslim Americans.

**The Da′wa table**

Even though one can see da′wa in many of the youths’ actions and involvement, the most evident action of da′wa at the University of Houston would be the *Da′wa Table*. The *Da′wa table* is a way for the MSA members to fulfill their duty of religious outreach. As
shown above, they seemed to feel a deep responsibility for the perception others had of Islam and Muslims. This activity is one of the tools young Muslim can use to meet non-Muslims in a way that opens up the possibility for dialogue. Although I seldom saw people by the table some were stopping by from time to time to ask different questions about the religion. Not once did it seem like an uncomfortable meeting. This might have correlation to the fact that all of these activities happened at the campus of the University of Houston, among fellow students. The university is known for its diversity, something that every person I talked to made sure to emphasize when describing the educational institution. In a university setting it may be less likely that the Da’wa table would become the site of heated discussions and uncivilized behavior. This was not always the case in circumstances outside college. I will come back to this in chapter 6.

‘Coming Home’

One may notice the absence of white and/or European Americans, and non-Muslims in these organizations. As the MSA is a Muslim organization, their Muslim membership body is quite logical. However, the connection between their members and the members of SJP makes the composition of religious belonging something we need to pause on. Both student organizations have a uniform ethnic and religious composition, making it difficult to become a part of them for an individual who does not match any of the ethnical/religious characteristics of the rest of the members. In this way, the ethnical and religious homogeneity can work as an excluder of others who do not have the ‘right’ characteristics to become a part of this network. If this is intentional or not, I am unable to say. Because these organizations are operating in an American educational institution, and as therefore a public space, they cannot officially exclude non-Muslims or non-Arabs. Still, one may wonder if this is an intentional way to ensure a homogenous membership composition. Or is it a coincidence?

The feeling of ‘coming home’ has been described in connection to the process of becoming a member in these organization, through which they have also become a member of the Muslim community and network in general. It might also be grounded in
an attraction to a milieu that feels familiar. As I have previously mentioned, I contacted the SJP because I had a preconceived notion of the characteristics of their members. Might the new members seek out these organizations based on the same preconceptions as I had?

The membership composition of Muslims and Arabs is contributing to maintain this community at college. Through lectures and teachers such as I have introduced above, the values, norms and moral codes is produced, and reproduced, by a common understanding of different aspects of Islam.

This chapter has focused on introducing the frames and people of my fieldwork, and simultaneously showed how I first encountered my informants and the topics religion, gender and community. As the introduction of my key informants has shown, they consist of a mixture of personalities and concerns. Nevertheless, their religious devotion has brought them together. They have been brought together through the SJP and MSA, and the collective network they share as a result of their memberships in these organizations. This network ensures its preservation through the homogeneous composition of members and the teachings of a collective religious path and understanding of the values and morals in Islam. The following chapter will examine how these values and moral codes unfold, how they are being challenged and the techniques through which they are upheld, within the college setting.
Chapter 4: Place Making and Performance

Maintaining Islamic tradition within the American institution of college

When starting college, many young Americans associate this period of their lives with partying, living away from their parents and being free of the expectations to uphold the rules and norms of their childhood. But what about religious youths, raised in conservative homes, many whom have attended religious schools from their childhood, how do they act when they suddenly find themselves at this crossroad? Do they assimilate into the American college life, or would they create a parallel community? In this chapter my objective is to show and explain how young Muslim students at the University of Houston navigate between the rules of their religion and the expectations related to attending the American institution of college. I argue that these youths have created a Muslim college community within the greater Houstonian Muslim community, and that the rules and values that many of them have been taught from early childhood, are continued when they move into a college setting. As swiftly touched upon in the previous chapter, these rules and values becomes reinforced through the MSA and the Muslim community and network I will use the social space of the library building at campus to explain how it could be seen as an arena where the values and the guidelines of this community unfold.

The Library Building

When prompted about the whereabouts of Arab and/or Muslim students attending the University of Houston (UH), my early acquaintances in SJP pointed me in the direction of the Learning Center (LC) located in the library building, stating that that is where “all the Arabs hang out”. I was told that the LC was the Arab and Muslim students’ territory, and that it was the ideal place to observe gossip and the UH Arab and Muslim culture on campus. From their description I imagined an arena where the intrigues and college life
of the people I was seeking to study unfolded, and where one’s identity would be performed.

The LC was a big room in the first floor of the library building, where there were computers and tables set up. It seemed like a place intended for working on individual and group projects, tutoring and writing papers. When I had been told about the LC, it had been described as a place that the Arab students had taken over, and that it were the place to catch up on all the gossip floating around in this milieu. However, it did not seem like the wild jungle I had imagined, based on the information I had been given.

Whereas the groups of people were mostly concentrating on school work and occasionally personal talk and quiet giggling, I had expected people being more loud, talking across tables and in general interacting in a more chaotic manner. Although some groups consisted of both sexes, most of the Arab and Muslim groupings were homogeneously gendered. This segregation did not become meaningful for my data collection until later on, when I was able to connect it to other observations made in the course of my fieldwork, such as the gendered segregated seating at MSA events and the gendered social codes I became aware of. Another early observation I made was that there was a mixture of ethnicities in the LC, in other words; there did not seem to be an Arab majority of youths there.

When entering the LC for the first time, I was hoping to find some of the people I had interacted with at the SJP meeting or during the Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW). I had gotten the impression that many of them used the LC as a hang out spot. When I couldn’t find anyone familiar, I decided to sit down by a table and try to observe some of the interaction described to me earlier. I quickly realized that I needed to be on the inside to perceive this arena in the way it had been described to me. Most of the people sitting there seemed to be working on something important, either by themselves or in groups, while others sat and talked quietly.

I recognized a group of young men that I had seen at the IAW, but I had not talked to any of them, and felt reluctant to interrupt their interaction. They were watching soccer online on one of the computers belonging to the LC. Although I knew they were Arab, Muslim,
or both, because I had met them before, I also heard them use some Arabic phrases when they talked to each other. However, their conversation was mainly in English. It was impossible to observe any of the gossiping that I had been told about beforehand from the outside, and I could not see how this room functioned as an Arab or Muslim arena.

Praying at School

I later on learned that it was not only the LC that was used as a gathering point for these students; it actually was other places in the library building as well. The basement was used for quick prayer between classes and the 9th floor was used for more structured prayers, often in groups. Since I spent most of my time with a group of young women who did not hang out in mixed-gendered group, I can only account for this arena from a female perspective. My informants did occasionally use the 9th floor for prayer, and to hang out before and after prayers.

The basement held some books and a small open floor space with a bathroom close by. The sinks in the bathroom was used for doing the Islamic ritual of washing before praying, called Wudu, being as there was not a prayer room or sink facilitated for the obligatory washing before prayer. When going along with Haya to different events or just to grab a bite to eat, we often stopped by the basement before or after, in order to not miss any of the day’s prayers. In the lady’s bathroom she did the ritualistic washing in my presence while talking to me about different aspects of her relationship with Islam. Other Muslims would pass through, most of them wearing hijabs, greeting each other with a Salaam. Haya would introduce me to most of them, indicating that they were familiar, and they would talk a little bit during the Wud’u. They acted out this ritual in a seemingly ordinary way, demonstrating how it has become a part of their everyday routine. I also noticed that they seemed unaffected by my presence as a non-Muslim.

The room of the basement seemed to naturally, and automatically, divide itself in a male and female side. This was a trend I observed in every other religious setting I

13 Wudu’ is “[...] an Arabic term for cleansing, not simply washing [...]” (El Guindi, 2008, p. 135-136).
participated. There were no signs telling people to separate this room into gendered sides, since the room was not actually intended for religious activity. However, these young Muslims seemed to place themselves on their respective sides without giving it another thought.

The females carried out their prayers on the left side of the room, in a small space that were at the bottom of a flight of stairs with three or four steps. I never really got an answer as to why they would carry them out in a small space lower than the rest of the floor space, however, it can signify some of the importance of being hidden from the male sex while praying. In a mosque, the women are placed behind the men, and their placement in the basement can be a way to maintain this tradition in a non-religious space. The males prayed on the right side and appeared to be able to make use of a much bigger part of the room as long as it was in an appropriate distance from the females. I found it interesting to observe how this space was constructed and conversed.

**Converting space**

El Guindi draws upon Durkheim’s theory of rhythm, to explain the function of space. She elaborates by explaining, “*The rhythm of collective life dominates time and space. Society becomes the model for time and space and reproduces them.*” El Guindi, 2008, p. 139).

In other words, the youths will understand time and space through the way they see the society, and the structures of society. The space will be socially constructed. Moreover, this way of understanding time and space will be reproduced by their understandings of the society. As I will further argue in chapter 5, the youths see the realities of the structured social world through the lens of Islam. The space, both of prayer and social communication, will therefore be socially constructed through the social structures of Islam.

On the 9th floor, past aisle after aisle of books, there was a big open space occupied by emptiness, perfect for praying in larger groups. However, there were not many of the students who took time to go all the way up there, as they mostly had to squeeze their prayers in between classes. The few times I were up there, it was together with a group of five young women who wanted to pray at the end of the school day.
One of the times I was up in the 9th floor with Amal, Razan and Sofia we had been sitting there for a while when Iman came into the room. She seemed happy to see us, but hurried into a small hallway, put on her prayer clothes14 and started praying. I was quite curious to know why she seemed to almost ‘hide’ while praying, while the other females prayed out in the open. I didn’t know her that well yet, and didn’t know how to ask her about it right then and there. It turned out I didn’t have to.

After I went to an MSA event with her, and the others were getting ready for a collective prayer in the middle of the event, Iman didn’t seem to have any intentions of joining them. She knew that I would not participate in the prayer, and asked me to join her out in the hall while the others prayed. When we got outside she asked me: “It’s a little bit weird just sitting there watching, isn’t it?” I asked her what it was she felt was weird.

She said that it felt strange to just sit and watch when she should be joining them. “But I just can’t. Not just like that, in front of all those people.”

Iman did not feel comfortable about praying in public, and I finally understood why it seemed like she were ‘hiding’ in the hallway of the 9th floor as well. Iman was quite new to the incorporation of prayers into her everyday routine, and had not yet adapted to the pious way, which the other females had incorporated into the way they lived their lives. Thus, she experienced the maneuvering between sacred and unsacred space as more challenging. Fadwa El Guindi writes about the daily routine of Muslims as the Rhythm of Islam, where “[…] the Muslim rhythmicity characterizing the Muslim day,[…] does not start or end but is continuous in its pattern of interweaving in and out, (between) sacred and ordinary.” (El Guindi, 2008, p. 136). In the example of Iman we can see that this rhythm is something that gets incorporated into a Muslims routine and taught to him/her, either by him/herself or by others. Because Iman had just started to explore Islam, and sought to teach herself to become pious, this incorporation was in the beginning of the process. Because the other women of the group had been born into more conservative

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14 Many of the women brought with them prayer clothing for prayers. It was in two pieces, one was a long skirt, the other were a upper piece that covered the head, all the way down to the waist, with a whole made for the face, making it look like a long hijab. Bringing this with them made it easier to pray anywhere and anytime necessary, because then they could be appropriately dressed for prayers at all times.
households, they were more used to the movement between *the sacred* and *the ordinary* (El Guindi, 2008).

Many of my informants used the space of the 9th floor as much for hanging out and being social, as for prayers. After having finished praying we would just sit around, talking and making jokes. The young women would sit there for hours, and there would be some men coming and going, often in groups and sometimes alone, to pray. Once or twice one of them ‘hushed’ at us, implying that the group were being too loud and disturbing them in their prayers. The young women would lower their voices and giggle a little bit, seeming like they were embarrassed, however, their voices would quickly return to the same volume as before. This had me wondering, how does the boundaries between prayer space and social space work?

El Guindi describes the way a praying Muslim can convert an ordinary space into a sacred space. She explains: “*Any undesignated area, facing the direction of Makka [sic], can be temporarily ‘designated’ as sacred Muslim space by the act of the prayer itself.***” *(El Guindi, 2008, p. 135).* Hence, the Muslim youths at UH can convert almost any space at the campus into sacred space by deciding to pray there. However, they have chosen particular areas of the LC, and established them as sacred space amongst each other. These spaces only become sacred for the Muslim individual operating in this space, as the youths’ fellow, non-Muslim students had no notion of the sacredness of the same space. The construction and conversion of space followed similar patterns outside of the areas reserved for prayer. As we move back to the LC, we shall see how the space is used as an arena of performance of *esteem symbols* (Goffman, 1951), which is what one’s reputation hinges on.

**Gossip and Reputation**

When going back to the LC with the group of young women and, at times, others who were not a part of that exact group, I was able to learn how this space was used to correct un-Islamic behavior through gossip and by watching each other’s demeanor. After having been hanging out in the LC a few times, I noticed how they would look at people entering
the room, take notice of who they were and whom they were with, and give each other looks. These looks were not explained to me, but I got the understanding that much were being said between them without the use of words. They would later talk about this and that woman, how she came in to the LC with a man, and discussing if they were secretly dating or not. Even though many of the young women were very concerned with behaving in accordance to Islamic values when it comes to the opposite sex, they were very curious to know and talk about other peoples relationship status as well as love and dating. Moreover, this monitoring of each other can be seen as a way of upholding the values and social codes of the UH Muslim community. Inter-group policing will be given considerably more space in the chapter Network & Loyalty.

The first time I met Iman she asked me: “So, you probably want to know about relationships and flirting and stuff, right?” I had not actually realized how important this was in my observations yet, although I had noticed the topic of ‘boys’ and relationships being brought up frequently. She made me aware of how much time these women spend pondering over these issues. “Actually, I hadn’t thought about it before I met you guys, but I can see it’s a hot topic around here” I answered without thinking. I could see she was a little bit embarrassed, so I explained to her that I was not at all judging her for jumping to that conclusion, and that I was starting to realize how important it could be.

When I was hanging around with these women I was questioned about my dating life a number of times. They tried easing into the subject by asking me: “So, Sara, did you ever meet any cute boys in Norway?” Every time this question popped up during hangouts, I felt like all eyes were on me and hesitant to the manner of which I could answer. I was afraid my answers could change their impression of me, hence jeopardizing the access I had achieved. I tried answering in a diffuse way and needed to be weary of how they reacted to my words. Because my goal was to blend in, not to spell out the main differences between us, I became very unsure of how to share my experiences with them. I therefore tried turning the question back to them.

By prompting me about my dating life, the young women seemed to want insight into the life of dating and relating to the opposite sex, in which they could not participate. To participate in the American and Western way of dating, one runs the risk of tainting ones
reputation. However, they signalized that this was a subject they were interested in, and it were brought up in all conversations I had with them, as well as the ones they had with each other.

When they were asked the same question, “Did you ever meet a cute guy here in Houston?” they avoided answering. In fact, much in the same way as I did not want to give them a bad impression of me, they seemed hesitant of answering anything outside the appropriate “Islamic box”. Their answers seemed almost rehearsed, as they would all say the same thing. “No, no one appropriate. All the guys here drink or smoke, or both.”

Women responsible of keeping the men in ‘check’?

One of the women who live at campus told me: “every time I see a Muslim guy at campus and tell my roommate about him she says she saw him at a party the other day and that he was so drunk.” She continued by telling me about male acquaintance of her, who’s father was an imam, and that he had lost his religion when he came to college. “He started drinking and smoking weed, and then he gave up his daily prayers too. I guess that happens to a lot of people, when they start university, they either lose their religion, or they get really into it.” She said she more often found that young Muslim college males lose their religious ‘path’, than the females. The concerns about the young Muslim men loosing their religious ‘path’ at college got me curious about the gender dynamics of who is keeping who in line?

A stereotypical assumption about Muslim and Arab culture is that based on the patriarchal structures of the Islamic ‘culture’, Muslim men has responsibility of the Muslim women’s religious righteousness. Farha Ghannam makes a point of enhancing the role women plays in upholding men’s social standing in urban Egypt through the chapter Women and the Making of Proper Men (Ghannam, 2013). She observes that “[...] women can greatly enhance or undermine the standing of a man in social life.” through “[...] offering material and emotional support, and instructing, monitoring, and modifying the conduct of their male relatives, [...]” (Ghannam, 2014, p. 104). Her observance makes for an interesting analysis of the young woman’s statement, which
expresses concern about Muslim males who are not acting in the correct Islamic manner. The hesitation to share any individual experiences with the opposite sex can be explained in two ways.

Answering without putting one’s reputation on the line

My first thought was that the young women’s hesitation might have been caused by my role as an outsider. However, I suspect that they were more worried about how their fellow sisters would perceive them, just as I had been when pondering how to give my answer. I’ve tried to understand their hesitation and way of answering by using resonance to relate to their situation. Wikan explains resonance as demanding “[...] something of both parties to communication, [...] an ability to use one’s experience [...] to try to grasp, or convey, meanings that [...] are evoked in the meeting of one experiencing subject with another [...]” (Wikan, 1992, p. 463). The term also “[...] resembles attitudes we might label as sympathy, empathy [...]” (Wikan, 1992, p. 465).

Although I can relate to their experience through my own, it is important to understand how our situations differentiate as well. Our answers inheres different stakes. Mine was the risk of affecting the access I had gotten to my field. They were risking their reputation. I could pack up and leave, and not be affected by it. In their case, their entire social and moral existence might depend on maintaining a clean reputation. I will come back to the importance of keeping one’s reputation clean further into this chapter.

Although avoiding answers in groups, I experienced something different when I spoke to the women individually, outside of the group. Iman explained that before she began her studies and met other Muslims, she was not “that into the religion”. Because she grew up in a non-conservative environment she had not yet become used to the way the others talked about, and behaved around the other sex. She told me, with her eyes fixed down on the table in a shameful manner: “I’ve had boyfriends before, I’ve even kissed a guy, but the other girls, they would not approve.”
She seemed to think that by admitting this to the others in the group, their impression of her would change for the negative. Interestingly, she felt comfortable telling me, a stranger, of her ‘past mistakes’, but worried about what the others in the group would think of her. This made me understand why the young women showed such hesitation earlier. Iman seemed to have a problem expressing herself in front of the others, unlike the way as she did when she was just with me. In the same manner, the other women avoided showing this side of themselves in front of each other.

In Le Renard’s study of Saudi Arabian women, she notices how women in groups of friends are hesitant in sharing their individual experiences on various issues, in fear of harming their reputation. She finds that the women’s “preoccupation with reputation [...] also influences the ways in which they commits to situations and get involved in relations with their peers.” (Le Renard, 2014, p. 99). The structures of her ethnography differentiate from mine, as the frames of Saudi Arabian society are much more closed and conservative compared to my field. Nevertheless, I recognize many of the concerns of her informants in what the young women of my field were concerned with. She observes: “[…], even with their close friends, the young women I spent time with gave me the impression of being particularly cautious concerning the boundaries of what could be said and what could not.” (Le Renard, 2014, p. 99).

As I previously mentioned, the group of females I talked to did not seem comfortable talking about themselves and their experiences. In the same way, Le Renard notes that: “[…], although […] no difficulty discussing the question of intimate relations outside of marriage in general, it is much rarer to talk about it in the first person.” (Le Renard, 2014, p. 99). She was entrusted with intimate knowledge about her informants, information that they would not share with their friends and family, and they made it very clear to her how important it was that their secret would be kept safe (Le Renard, 2014, p. 100).

It seems like, on the one hand, the women want to continue talking about topics like ‘boys’ and dating, as most other young women do. On the other hand, they are concerned about their reputation and that people will view their behavior as inappropriate and un-Islamic. They find themselves torn between participating in conversation and behavior
that feels exiting, but also is prohibited, and conforming into the appropriate and pious behavior.

Among the group of women Le Renard followed, the protection of one’s reputation ensured that they avoided the repercussions their family or the state could inflict on them, did they not follow the rules and norms of the moral and social codes of modesty (Le Renard, 2014). What concerned my informants the most, were to protect their own reputation and stay true to the moral and social codes of the Muslim community generated at the university. Thus, in an arena free of parental control, they have found a way to control each other.

By asking me about my dating life they could participate without risking their reputation. I did not belong there because I was not a permanent member of their group and a non-Muslim, as such, my reputation would not affect theirs. Had I been a part of their group and shared any immoral experiences, my reputation could have reflected theirs in a bad manner. As I explained above, when I turned their question back on them, they were deflecting, trying to answer in the way which are appropriate for female Muslims. I also noticed that gossiping, even though frowned upon among them, was a way for my informants to demonstrate how their reputation was pure compared to others.

Keeping a clean reputation

Keeping one’s reputation clean was very important for the group of women I met at UH. The concept of clean reputation inheres the possibility of making one’s reputation dirty. In Islamic and Arab culture, an unmarried woman’s reputation can become dirty if she is in contact with the opposite sex, and even though there is common agreement that the pollution happens in the context of sexual behavior, there is examples of Muslim societies that regard the female’s reputation as polluted the moment she is observed communicating with someone of the opposite sex (Zoeph, 2009. Ismail, 2009).

According to Mary Douglas, pollution ideas takes place at two levels, instrumental and expressive. At the instrumental level, these ideas are used as tools to “influence another’s
behavior” and as “reinforcement of social pressure” (Douglas, 1992, p.3). At the expressive level, Douglas finds pollution ideas to “carry a symbolic load.” (Douglas, 1992, p.3). She argues that “some pollution ideas are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order.” at the expressive level (Douglas, 1992, p.3). If one considers the precautions these women take to hinder the pollution of their reputation, one can easily draw lines to the social order of societies’ norms in regards to sexual behavior before marriage, thus keeping women from promiscuous behavior because of the fear of making their reputation dirty.

Douglas further suggests “[...] that many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system.” (Douglas, 1992, p.3-4). Following her suggestion, one can see the female’s preoccupation with the state of their reputation in connection to the patriarchal hierarchy in the Islamic religion. This has been brought into the setting of American educational institution and into the young women’s everyday lives.

**Reputation and social capital**

One evening I was walking with Ghita and Hafida to their cars because Hafida had offered to give me a ride home. They were telling me about a man who Ghita had been texting and talking with. She had been romantically interested in him but he had suddenly stopped talking to her, and there were rumors going around about him being romantically involved with another woman. Ghita apparently believed he was getting serious with this woman. Hafida interrupted her to say that “Ghita’s reputation is way cleaner than this new girl’s, I can’t even understand what he sees in her”. Ghita agreed with her, and said that she had heard that this new woman had been meeting up with other guys, and that she could not imagine his family approving of her.

The way young women in the group I spent time with performs the representations of selves is exemplified in the conversation described above. Both Ghita herself, but maybe more interestingly her friend Hafida, expresses a need to represent Ghita’s reputation as
clean. This shows the importance of a preserved reputation in order to benefit from the resources within her community. These resources can be called her social capital. Bourdieu defines social capital as collective resources that are stored in a resilient network of established relationships. These established relationships are embedded in group memberships, and supports its members with the capital they collectively owns (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248-249). The comment made by Hafida is interesting because by pointing out that her friends reputation is clean, thus assuring that a person that is often affiliated with her has her reputation intact, she is performing an upholding of her own reputation as well.

Erving Goffman defines performance as all the activity of a particular individual in a particular occasion, which aim is to influence the others participating in the same occasion (Goffman, 1971, p. 26). He also categorizes a performance as front when the performer seeks to convey a specific impression of him/herself. Thus the performer attempts to control the influence he or she has on the participants, and only let them see the qualities he or she wants others to see (Goffman, 1971, p. 32). The upholding of reputation is constantly being performed when these young women seek to present, and represent, a proper and pious self when they are around others who can assess their performance.

As Le Renard points out in her study of Saudi Arabian women’s self-presentation, they “[…] protected their reputation mainly because they feared that if any act of theirs were seen as compromising it, their families would restrict their mobility.” (Le Renard, 2014, p. 55). In the case of Ghita, and the other young women, I believe they are not as concerned of a polluted, or compromised, reputation restricting their mobility. However, a Muslim woman builds up resources in the social network that she is a part of, in this case the Muslim UH community and the Muslim Houston community, by keeping her reputation clean. In this way, her social capital relies on her ability to protect her reputation. The state of their reputation impact not only mobility, but also their social standing in the constructed Muslim community at UH, and the Muslim community of the greater Houston area. Furthermore, it can impact their ability to find a husband. If the
reputation is not clean, the community will gossip and the family of the potential husband may reject the woman.

When Ghita says that she could not see the man’s family approving of this ‘new girl’, she implies that his family would not approve of her as a potential wife for their son, based on her allegedly polluted reputation. By uplifting the purity of her own reputation, she implies that she has more resources, more social capital, than the ‘the girl’. Ghita also implies that she has been more successful in performing the esteem symbols which are the symbols through which her reputations are read. Goffman defines status symbols as the signs of the degree to which a person has performed the duties of his or her position (in this case reputation) in accordance with ideal standards (in this case modesty and piety) (Goffman, 1951, p. 295).

How to date

As the story about Ghita shows, dating can be problematic and fluctuating. In this milieu, a female has to protect her reputation and make sure it stays clean. At the same time, she is expected to get married young, and also to be able to choose her husband herself. Therefore she needs to find the man she is expected to marry, and she needs to get to know him according to the ways that are permitted and will keep her reputation intact. Thus flirting and dating needs to be kept under the radar and hidden from the people who could spread rumors and make your reputation impure. When Ghita told me about the young man she had been texting and talking with, this was her way of telling me they were dating. Because it has to stay a secret, dating happens mostly through the phone, thus making it difficult for anyone to ‘catch’ them. This way of dating is not considered a valid commitment, thus making the relationship fluent. As she explained, he had just simply stopped talking to her, and she had heard that he had started talking to somebody else. While telling me about this situation, Ghita appear saddened about the way the man she was interested in left things. Thus, it seems like the relationship’s existence consists of feelings and phone logs, but nothing concrete or material.
Casually Dating

The cell phone is often used as a dating tool in Arab and Muslim cultures, where the limitations of actual physical contact are limited. I remember reading a novel called Girls of Riyadh, written by Rajaa Alsanea, when I was younger (2007). I was fascinated by the importance of the cell phone in the dating life of the novel’s Saudi Arabian female characters. I noticed the same tendencies during my vacations in Morocco, while I was a teenager. These situations all had the texting and communication through the cell phone in common. Another way of communicating one’s love and affection within the strict structures of Arab and Muslim norms, has been exemplified through Lila Abu-Lughod’s monograph about the Awlad ‘Ali, Bedouins of the Western Desert of Egypt. Here poetry was used as a means of sharing one’s emotions and communicating one’s love. Poetry was the only accepted way Abu-Lughod’s Bedouin informants could share their feelings and thoughts, and was also used as a tool for flirting and dating, when there was no other way of communicating physically (Abu-Lughod, 1999).

Publicly Dating = Marriage

Going public with the relationship would lead to more commitment. Officially announcing the relationship, and especially telling their parents, would often imply engagement. In this way, ‘casual’ dating, in the American sense of going out for dinner or a movie, kissing etc., becomes complicated. Therefore, a relationship would entail either uncertainty or obligations through engagement and marriage. During my study, I spoke to women who talked a lot about marriage, their criteria for their future husband and concluding with the same standardized answer: “there’s no one appropriate”, giving me the impression that they really did not think there was anyone suitable, and that they did not have a clue of whom they would spend their future with. But when reaching the end of the fieldwork, many of the same young women announced their engagement with males who attended UH as well. Being, by then, a semi-outsider, I had not even gotten a clue of this happening. After taking their engagement public, they seemed like they were
much in love, and like they knew each other very well, making me captivated by their ability to keep it a secret.

Finding A Partner

As shown above, the group I spoke to seem like they had much autonomy in choosing their partner, and upon questions about how they would want to meet the person they were to marry, all answered that they would not accept anything other than finding him on their own. The only exception would be if they made no headway, then they would not mind asking their family for help. Haya told me that she had actually tried to help her cousin find a wife, as he was in his mid-thirties and still single. She had approached two other females at the campus, asking them if they were looking to get married, in which they had declined her proposition. She found the incidents embarrassing, especially because, as she concluded: “They later on became friends, and must have talked to each other about it. That’s so awkward, now everyone thinks I go around asking people to marry my family members”. Haya’s example shows how one goes about finding a spouse when one has difficulties finding one on his or her own. Dating therefore happens in the realms of the non-visible, and is actively hidden from others until the relationship is strong enough to be revealed. It is then revealed as an engagement, which is the appropriate manner to date in public.

Marital Expiration Date

Ghita and Hafida told me that Arab females, especially among Palestinians, are regarded as having an expiration date, and they felt they were closing in on this date soon. Being 20 and 21 years old, respectively, they had nothing to worry about. Saba Mahmood encounters similar issues among the mosque participants in Cairo, where the predicament of one woman brings forth the same ‘expiration date’ (Mahmood, 2005).

Mahmood mentions a conversation between a woman who works a couple of weeks at one of the mosques, where she did her research, and a friend who was asking advice. This
friend, who were in her late twenties, had been approached by a co-worker, asking for her hand in marriage while already being married to another woman. Mahmood had been taken aback by her answer, which advised her to ask the man to officially ask her parents for their daughter’s hand in marriage. The woman explained: “If you are unmarried after the age of say late teens or early twenties – as is the case with Iman – everyone around you treats you as if you have a defect [...] Wherever you go you are asked, ‘Why didn’t you get married [...]?’” (Mahmood, 2005, p.168). Even though the same words are not used, this example shows that the female mosque participants, and Egyptian women in general, encounter the same stressing matter of the expiration date as the Muslim American and Arab American youths at UH.

There are some differences between the Egyptian women’s and Hafida and Ghita’s accounts of the predicament of marriage. The woman Mahmood were talking to expressed frustration at the expectations to get married and the question of ‘Why didn’t you get married’, because the same people who are asking this question also know that women cannot find a husband and ask him to marry her. They have to wait for him to come to them (Mahmood, 2005, p.169-170).

The rules governing marriage and finding a husband are stricter in Egypt. The females at UH were often torn between the expectations of getting married before they ‘expired’ and finding an appropriate partner. They explained their predicament of feeling the stressing issue of getting married, but not being able to find a husband at their age that were ready for that kind of commitment. Touching upon the differences between the responsibilities males and females are expected to uphold in Islam and Arab culture, the young women struggle with the fact that men are able to date and act irresponsible without ‘staining’ their reputation., in the same way as women.

**The upholding of reputation as a performance**

In a way, all of the acts of the young women and men at the Library Building at UH can be seen as a performance of a *front*. The act of praying is something one, as a Muslim, need to do. However, as El Guindi explained, any space can be made sacred and
designed while praying. Why is it then, that the youths have constructed specific
designated areas for praying? Might it be to see, and be seen?

I believe the basement and the 9\textsuperscript{th} floor are turned into arenas where the act of praying,
and to be seen praying becomes a way to be recognized for the pious, modest and
righteous Islamic lifestyle one perform. The \textit{Rhythm of Islam} becomes a performance, as
well as a personal relationship between the sacred and unsacred parts of life. A performer
in this setting will be dependent on the success of the performance in order to maintain a
pure reputation. Thus, a pure reputation is performed by evaluating others through gossip,
making oneself distinct from individuals with polluted reputation and the ensuring of the
visibility of the actions that will be the indication of one’s performance (for example
prayers).

This chapter has attempted to account for the ways these youths has constructed the space
of the Library Building and applied meaning to the space. Additionally, we have
examined the measures taken in order to preserve reputation and the ways reputation
upholding is performed. We will now move on to chapter 5, to have a better look at how
the identity of a Muslim hijab-wearing woman is constructed, and where we will see that
the performance of the hijab-wearing woman is held to higher expectations than others.
Chapter 5: The Hijabi Identity

Returning to the story of #OURTHREEWINNERS, it is worth considering the to female victims’ appearance when understanding the reactions that were triggered after the murders. Both Yusor and Razan wore a hijab, making them Hijabis. The word hijab, which refers to the religious Islamic headscarf worn by some Muslim women, has been given additional meaning through the term Hijabi. Hijabi is used as a category of person; it is not simply something you wear, it is something you are.

Because the hijab is the essential object to be identified as a Hijabi by, the hijab bears meaning as a status symbol. I find Goffman’s definition of status symbols useful in understanding the established expectations for the Hijabi identity, where he defines the status symbol as a carrier of categorical meaning, which helps identify the social status of the person carrying the status symbol (Goffman, 1951, p.295). The status symbol can also express the values, moral codes and point of view that the person holds (Goffman, 1951, p.295). Furthermore, Goffman explains that a status symbol can be seen as sign-vehicles which decide which status a person belongs to, thus deciding the way others is to treat him/her. This decision is not something the person can control him/herself, but is decided upon by the people reading this sign-vehicle (Goffman, 1951, p. 295). Esteem symbols, as I swiftly touched upon in the previous chapter, is separated from status symbols, according to Goffman. The main difference is that the status symbol categorizes the person, and ascribes him or her a social status and the treatment that consequently follows this status, where as the esteem symbols is the assessment of the degree to which the person fulfills the expectations that follows his or her social status (Goffman, 1951, p. 295).

The majority of my informants wore this headscarf, making it one of the key elements of my data. All my informants, the Hijabis, those without hijab and the men, expressed that the characteristics associated with a Hijabi are much more profound than just being about the garment that some Muslim women wears on their head. To put Goffman’s definition to use, the hijab carries expressive significance in the way it symbolizes the expectations
held to the wearer’s religious belonging, her modest body, and the moral codes she values. Go

When distinguishing between *status symbols* and *esteem symbols*, Goffman touches upon an important difference beneficial to the understanding of not only the *Hijabi* identity, but moreover the identity of the Muslim woman in general: I hold that the *esteem symbols* are what their reputation relies on. Thus, the maintenance of a modest and pious self and representing Islam in a virtuous manner will be the vernaculars through which her reputation will be assessed.

The hijab-wearing woman is put, and may put herself, into the category of *Hijabi*. Consequently, the category of *Hijabi* will thus decide her social status and the manner of which she is to be treated. The hijab, and the status of the *Hijabi*, will also influence the way others relate to her. The hijab will, in some degree, work as an *esteem symbol* in its own right. However, other factors, such as modest clothing and behavior, will also be part of assessing the fulfillment of the expectations that is held to her status.

Two important considerations one need to take into account in understanding Goffman’s take on *status symbols* are that they “*visibly divide the social world into categories of persons, thereby helping to maintain solidarity within a category and hostility between different categories.*” and that they need to “*[…] be distinguished from collective symbols which serve to deny the difference between categories in order that members of all categories may be drawn together in affirmation of a single moral community.*” (Goffman, 1951, p. 294-295). I find these remarks significant because they open up for a discussion about what role the hijab and the *Hijabi* identity plays in the formation of a Muslim community. Is it representative of a collective Muslim moral community or does it exclude the Muslim women who do not wear it?

The *Hijabi* women of my study expressed that they felt they were part of a larger Muslim community, and so did the non-*Hijabis*. The non-*Hijabis*, however, could maneuver between genders and communities more freely, within the Muslim community and between this community and the non-Muslim communities. Where as the *Hijabis* talked about keeping away from the opposite sex, maybe giving them a nod or a *Salaam* but
nothing more, the non-Hijabi females had more contact with males. They also seemed to have more non-Muslim friends. This might have to do with the fact that they felt less pressure to live up to the expectations from the Muslim community at large.

Being held to another set of expectations can be viewed as a form of freedom. However, I wonder, can this freedom be an excluding element? I came over an article written by the young Muslim blogger Khadija Ahmed, titled “Hijab but not a ‘Hijabi’ – Let’s talk Hijab” (2016). Here she explains the odd feeling of being welcomed as a Hijabi when she first started wearing the hijab. People would tell her “oh Khadija, you’re a Hijabi now”, as if she “had converted into a ‘hijabi’ when in reality [she’d] always been a Muslim girl [...]”. She voices her concerns about the term Hijabi, worried that it “[...] leaves other Muslim girls in the dark, resulting in them feeling less’ (sic) Muslim or less righteous than those who do.” (Ahmed, 2016).

Following Khadija Ahmed’s concern, the distinction Goffman makes between status symbols and collective symbols becomes useful. As quoted above, status symbols work as a visible divider helping to maintain solidarity within a category and hostility between different categories, thus making the hijab a visible symbol that separated the Hijabi from other Muslim women. In her article, Khadija Ahmed urges Muslims to recognize other features of modesty that are stressed as just as important according to the Qur’an as covering the hair. She thus presents a way of including non-Hijabi women into the category of righteous Muslims.

**Ascribed and self-ascribed Hijabi characteristics**

The characteristics associated with the Hijabi seemed to be of two sorts. The first is that, by wearing the hijab, a woman is automatically seen as deeply religious. In this way, people will expect the Hijabi to behave in a religious manner, and her appearance could be associated with stereotypes that she herself might not relate to. This category refers to the religious expectations other people have of the women and is something that has become a part of the Hijabi as a consequence of encounters with the others. In meeting other Muslims, a Hijabi is expected to live up to the teachings on how to lead a righteous
Islamic life. How the Hijabi carries herself, as well as how she dress and her demeanor, is expected to be in coherence with the religious guidelines of how a Muslim woman should be.

At the same time, since they are such visual markers of Islam in the American society, the Hijabi would often be seen as a representative for how other non-Muslim Americans perceive Muslims as a group. Therefore, she would feel more pressure to communicate the correct image of Islam and Muslims to the majority of society. Thus, she would be expected to be both an example of the ideal Muslim woman within the Muslim community, and an example of the ideal American Muslim when encountering non-Muslim Americans.

The second category characterize the properties the Hijabi herself, as well as other Muslims not wearing the hijab, have ascribed to her. While spending time with the Hijabis during my fieldwork, I observed many instances where they would characterize themselves as stronger and more confident because they wore the hijab. It is through these properties that the Hijabis see themselves. They perceive their character to be strong because they have had the courage of being, as they saw it, true to their religion, despite the increased possibility of being insulted and discriminated against in public spaces.

The hijab was also seen as bringing the young women more confidence, and as Sofia put it “[She] would feel extremely self conscious without it. It gives [her] a feeling of confidence which is difficult to explain.” Her experience of wearing the hijab can be compared to that of one of the women in Saba Mahmood’s ethnographic work, where Mahmood writes about agency in the piety movement. The woman says: “In the beginning when you wear it (the veil), you’re embarrassed and don’t want to wear it […]. But you must wear it, first because it is God’s command, and then, with time, because your inside learns to feel shy without the veil, and if you take it off, your entire being feels uncomfortable about it.” (Mahmood, 2005, s. 157). Sofia expressed herself in the same manner saying: “I can’t imagine going out without it.”
It is worth mentioning that all the Hijabis I spoke to have just recently taken up wearing the scarf, they were therefore familiar with the experience of not wearing it as well. Their reasons for donning the hijab differed from woman to woman. Haya told me she donned the hijab for two reasons, the first being that it was “a requirement from Allah”, the latter was that she had grown tired of the focus others put on her appearance. Sofia told me that it just felt right one day, and she decided she wanted to start using the hijab.

When Leila was about to tell me about the circumstances around her donning the hijab, she said: “It’s weird, because all the other girls you have talked to most likely told you about a specific event or a life changing moment where they decided that they would start wearing it, but I don’t have a story like that. I had just decided on a date, and when that date came, I started wearing the hijab”. It is interesting that Leila expected others to have a memorable event or story connected to the day they put on the hijab for the first time, because most of the Hijabis I talked to had quite similar stories to the one she had. Some of the Hijabis told me about their parents’ skepticism to their choice, about mothers that warned their daughters about the challenges of wearing the hijab, and their resilience in wearing it nevertheless.

Although they described being a Hijabi as strengthening and giving them confidence, they also became more aware of how they were treated by others. It can also be a bit confusing at times, as Sofia explained: “when a man doesn’t open the door for me, but I just saw him holding it open for an all-American white woman, I don’t really know if its because he’s unsure of how to act when it comes to Muslim women, if he’s just being rude or if he’s straight up racist, you know.” Hence, the hijab also brought on insecurities in interpreting situations that did not occur in their pre-Hijabi experience. In this statement inheres also the need to interpret, categorize and find meaning to the incidents happening in their everyday lives.

**Being categorized**

As I have argued earlier, the hijab can be seen as a status symbol, and the possibility of this symbol working as a divider between Hijabis and non-hijab wearing Muslim women
have been discussed above. While it is possible that the hijab can be viewed as a symbol that divide the two into different categories of Muslims, it most certainly emphasizes the differences between non-Muslim Americans and Muslim Americans. Therefore it categorizes Hijabis, and people wearing other Islamic markers, as different from other Americans. I will now give two examples of how Islamic markers can be used to categorize Muslim young women. The first is an episode that developed at the 5th annual Palestinian Festival in downtown Houston. The latter is a conversation with Sofia that we had one night she drove me home.

When one is categorized by others as something one does not identify with, one can find oneself being dragged into uncomfortable situations. My informants described situations where discussions about Islam had emerged between Americans and Muslim Americans, and that such incidents “happened all the time”. An example from an art booth at the 5th Annual Palestinian Festival, concerning three young female volunteers, illustrates this well. I was volunteering at the art booth as well.

This was a non-religious context meant to celebrate Palestinian culture and heritage. An American couple came by the art booth, asking about one of the pieces, which had Arabic writing on it. The three young women who were standing there with me answered that it was a statement about the prophet Mohammed from the Quran18. The couple started asking questions about the statement and Islam, and suddenly the three women found themselves in the midst of a discussion about their personal relationship with the religion. The discussion lasted for about one hour, and I noticed the volunteers trying to pull out of it, uncomfortable with the situation that had developed.

The women told me later on that they had been dragged into these types of discussions before, and, as one of them put it, “honestly, [she’s] sick and tired of it.” This woman also explained that she avoided telling people that she was Muslim, because she was afraid she would end up in a discussion where she had to defend her religion. The two other women nodded their heads in agreement. She also told me she did not regard herself as a practicing Muslim, and that even though she was raised Muslim, the religion

18 The holy book of Islam.
does not affect her everyday life. The only ritual she practiced was Ramadan¹⁹, because she loved the closeness she felt to her family and the traditional aspect. In this way, answering questions about a religion that is not a part of one’s everyday life can seem absurd.

Another woman, Nadine, said she “feels like [her] religion should belong to [her], the relationship [she] has to God is [her] business.” She also said that she actually was very religious, but she did not want to express it to people, because she is often expected to participate in these kinds of discussions. These two young women had two very different approaches and personal relationships to Islam. The one had a non-religious relationship to Islam, and participated in, what one might call, a cultural manner. The other identified as quite religious and as such, the religion was a spiritual concern for her. However, they experienced being put into the same category of Muslim in encounters with non-Muslims.

The American couple ended the discussion on a friendly note, apparently they only wanted to understand and learn more about the religion. However, the women experienced the situation very differently. While the couple thought they asked innocent questions and saw their inquiries as a way to learn, the three of them expressed that they felt under attack. In a way, the couple ‘pushed’ them into the prescribed category of Muslims, even though they did not openly convey their religious adherence. The women were not wearing any form of religious clothing, or other religious markers, therefore the couple assumed they were Muslim based on the fact that one of them could read the Arabic text written on the painting. It could almost seem like the couple wanted them to be Muslim, therefore they were forced to bring their “Muslimness” forward.

Two very different relationships to Islam came forth in the two statements these women made. One saw herself as a non-practicing Muslim, and said the religion took little place in her everyday life. The other saw her relationship with Islam as very important, but as a private affair that no one else had any business meddling with. They are different in their sense of religiousness, but similar in the way they both attempt to conceal it in public.

¹⁹ Ramadan is a holy month where Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset.
In the example above, the hijab was absent, and was not the status symbol that ‘gave away’ the women’s religion. However, it exemplifies that the other visual references to Islam brings forth similar reactions. Sofia, like many other Muslims, experienced being held by different standards and expectations by the non-Muslim American community. One night, Sofia drove me home from UH after we had been to one of the lectures that were a part of the SJP Israeli Apartheid Week. During the 30 minutes drive she told me about her personal struggles with feeling American but not being recognized as what she identifies herself as. We reached the condominium I lived at and she sighed: ”Because we are Arabs, and because we are Muslims, we have to work twice as hard, be twice as nice and twice as pretty. And even then they would say we’re pretty nice for a Muslim or Arab.” I could hear the exhaustion in her voice, echoing the tiredness she had developed from this struggle.

Sofia voices three battles in her statement, showing me that (one) she is recognized as Arab and Muslim first, even though she consider herself American, (two) she has to work harder than other Americans to receive the same treatment, and (three) her American identity will never be recognized by others in spite of all her efforts to receive said recognition. Misrecognition has impacted the Muslim American experience gravely, especially after 9/11 (Cainkar, 2011). I will return to the different factors that have contributed to this misrepresentation later on in this chapter. However, as demonstrated by the two very different examples of categorization, many simply gets sick and tired of it.

As mentioned earlier in the thesis, Sofia wore a hijab, and told me she could not imagine going outside without it. She would feel vulnerable and weak without it. One might ask why she wears it when it makes her prone to discrimination, categorization and misrecognition. In a way, her hijab becomes her armor. It makes her feel safe and strong. And considering the concept of piety, becoming closer to God and fulfilling religious duties, such as modesty and veiling, might be a way of ensuring one’s protection by God.

Furthermore, she experiences a fourth struggle, one that I imagine Muslim young women experience more than young men. She says that she needs to be twice as pretty, meaning that she needs to exceed the beauty standards that are held to non-Muslim and non-Arab
Americans. Le Renard gained insight into the pressures and performances of consumerist femininity in the Saudi Arabian society. She depicts a practice of beauty standards which put much pressure on women when participating in social arenas which are gender segregated. By being in women-only spaces where the opportunity to be uncovered and reveal what they are wearing underneath the traditional abaya, they become vulnerable to the assessment and judgment from others. Le Renard explains that the “[...] stylization of relation to others implies specific modes of stylization of relations to self, which rely on consumer practices.” (Le Renard, 2014, p. 135).

With regard to the beauty pressure Sofia feels, some of the same mechanisms come into play. What Le Renard points out is that the way one styles the relations one has to others would indicate specific ways of styling the way one relates to oneself, and that, in her field, this way of relating to oneself relies on the consumer practices of that society (Le Renard, 2014). In Sofia's case, she would feel the pressure to fit into the American beauty standards. The way she relates to her own style will rely on the assessment of how Americanized her beauty is. Furthermore, this assessment will be used to recognize or misrecognize her.

**Communicating identity**

In these examples, different ways of communicating ones identity and belonging are revealed. el-Aswad [sic] describes the reaction of some Arab American interviewees after 9/11 in his article on the Dynamics of Identity Reconstruction, “[...] both Muslim and Christian, recounted that they changed their names, hid their faith, and did the best to keep low profile so as to live without fear of discrimination.” (el-Aswad, 2006, p. 114). Another reaction, as described by Abu El-Haj & Bonet, has been to “[...] embrace and publicly mark a religious identity.” (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011, p. 30).

Both el-Aswad and Abu El-Haj & Bonet illustrate different ways of responding to discrimination, especially after 9/11. The first example show that some, such as the volunteers at the festival, will feel the need to under-communicate their identity, to hide almost, in order to not be categorized or discriminated. Others, like Sofia, are expressing
their religious adherence by wearing religious markers. As previously conveyed, the Muslim youths at UH involve themselves in public demonstrations, religious organizations such as the MSA, and political organizations such as the SJP. Thus, one can say they are over-communicating both their religious and ethnic background.

**Fearing the public**

By wearing the hijab, Hijabis become more prone to situations of discrimination and therefore one would think they became more vulnerable. Paradoxically, the Hijabis identified as stronger and more confident, precisely because they wore a hijab. Leila shared some of her experiences with discrimination during my interview with her. Her parents are originally from Algeria and her father had come to America first. Leila’s mother followed later on, bringing Leila and her brother. She is pursuing a career in medicine, and wants to dedicate her life to people’s health.

When I asked her about her experience with discrimination, Leila told me about an incident that had happened when she was 17 years old. She had applied to a combined college and medical school, and gotten an interview with a prominent university in New York. She told me:

*This is one of the biggest things that happened to me, and it was just the worst experience. At first we had like a group interview, but we had been given interviewers for the single interview beforehand. When the group interview finished, and we were breaking into the single interviews, my interviewer came up to me and said: “I will be interviewing you”. Then he kind of turns his back to me, and goes up to the guy who stands next to me and said “I would just like to say that you speak very well”, and I were just feeling like “why would you do that right in front of me?”. So I came into the room and sat down in the chair in front of him, when I had the single interview, and the first thing he ask me is: “So, you’re Algerian?” And it was understandable that he asked, because I had written a portion of my statement about wanting to do volunteering in Algeria. And Algeria is a huge part of my identity, it was how I was raised. And he continues saying “Algeria, huh? Do you go?” And I told him I go every other year. He
asked, “Is Algeria a happy place?” And I told him that yes, it’s a happy place, it’s where all my family lives. Then he ask “Aren’t they terrorists?”, and I realized that the whole interview was over. I don’t really remember how the rest of it went. And I was 17 years old, can you imagine? It is actually one of my biggest regrets, not standing up to that. Being that young, I was too scared.

She did not get accepted into that university, something she already knew the moment the interviewer asked her about Algerians being terrorists. Moreover, in addition to this experience, which she herself describes as “the worst”, she has had people glaring at her hijab, calling her names and excluding her. Sofia, Haya and the other Hijabis had all experienced the same glaring attitude from others while out in public. They explained that it was not happening as much in Houston, but when they traveled to other Texan cities they noticed a significant change in the way people treated them.

Most of the Hijabi women had not experienced such blatant discrimination as Leila’s experience at the interview. However, they had both first hand experience with incidents, and knew of incidents experienced by others. Most of them have had people calling them terrorists to their face, or when they passed someone on the street. Furthermore, many of the young women told me that their mothers had often been yelled at with racial slurs when they were out shopping. Additionally, incidents where Hijabi women had been attacked by getting their hijab ripped off or thrown eggs at, were often reported in the media. These reports were often a conversational subject among the women, contributing to the increasing fear of something happening to them when they were out in public.

During my fieldwork, Adam, a young Palestinian American man who concerns himself with politics, the Palestinian cause and the teachings of Islam, gave me an interview. When we were talking about discrimination, he told me about an incident that happened to his mother at a restaurant a few years back; “We went to this restaurant, and my mother went up to order our food. My mother wears the hijab, by the way. The waiter said that he wasn’t going to serve a Muslim. My mom actually talked to the manager and got the guy fired.” He also told me that his mom often gets called terrorist and other discriminatory remarks while she is out shopping. He says that the women who wears the hijab is getting most of the heat, because they’re more visible as Muslims than women
who don't wear it. In that way they also become the most visual symbol of Islam in modern day American society.

What Leila and the other women’s experiences portray is that discrimination and misrepresentation of Muslims have reached different areas of society, and can have dire consequences. Even though these experiences has hurt and anguished Leila, it has inspired her to get involved in political activism. It has also inspired her expressive art, such as the spoken word poetry excerpted in the introduction. Both Leila’s and the mother of Adam’s stories demonstrate that even though discriminatory experiences are hurtful, many find the strength to push back. The study of Sirin & Fine on *Hyphenated Selves* from 2007 found Muslim youth to have anxiety and fear connected to their Muslim American identity. Moreover, the findings of the study proved that the youths who resisted discrimination reported experiencing fewer incidents of discrimination than those who just accepted it as a way of life. They also found that those who accepted the discriminatory treatment as a way of life struggled more with anxiety of discriminatory incidents, than those who resisted it (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 158).

These experiences have taken a toll on the young women of my study, and they have found different coping mechanisms to deal with them. Where as some of them coped with this treatment through pushing back and resisting it, others, such as the young women at the 5th annual Palestinian Festival, attempted to hide their identity. They have been gravely affected by this discriminating and assaulting treatment and they had become sick and tired of being put in situations where they were confronted with the misrepresentative picture others had of them. Sofia's solution included using her hijab as a protective armor. However, as revealed by her statement, this treatment got to her as well.

**Misrepresentation**

Although some Muslims solve the distress that discriminatory treatment gives them by downplaying their public display religiousness, this solution does not mirror the reaction of the majority of youths I spoke to. Throughout my conversations with my informants I
often heard them describing the need to represent the real Islam. In voicing the concern for the opinion of the non-Muslim American population, and feeling the responsibility to represent the real Islam, the majority of the youths of this study communicate, and even over-communicate, their identity. This responsibility can lead to an internal struggle, because an action acted out by a person could be interpreted as a ‘Muslim action’, thus stripping them of the benefits of individual culpability.

My informants would all talk about situations they had been in where they felt that they had to be overly nice and constantly put on a smile because they felt responsible for other people’s perceptions of Muslims. Many Arabs and Muslims in America feel misrepresented by the media and society at large. Louise Cainkar argues that the misrepresentation portrayed through villain roles ascribed to *the Arab or the Muslim* in Hollywood movies, and how Muslims are depicted in American media in general, to a large are responsible for the hostility towards Arabs and Muslims in American society today. In her opinion, the misrepresentation has been ongoing since before 9/11, and is in fact very much to blame for the Islamophobic and hateful reaction many Americans have showed towards Arabs and Muslims in the wake of the terrorist attacks (Cainkar, 2009).

Like Cainkar, Leila Ahmed regards the pre-9/11 misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims in America as a contributing factor to the strong reaction they faced in the wake of 9/11, (Ahmed, 2011). In addition to the Islamophobia and hate following 9/11, another reaction derived from the terrorist attacks as well- the ‘mission’ to save the oppressed Muslim women of the world, especially the women of Iraq and Afghanistan, developed simultaneously to the “War on Terror” (Ahmed, 2011).

Due to the picture painted of the oppressed Muslim woman, the hijab and the Afghan *burqa* became ultimate symbols of oppression (Ahmed, 2011, Abu-Lughod, 2013). Abu-Lughod discusses the term “pulp nonfiction”, the literature written on the *oppressed and abused Muslim woman* and sees it as a form of literary trafficking (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p.82-90). She explains that these literary works are fictional, but seem to evoke a perception with the reader: that he or she would believe they achieved insight into the real life of Arab and Muslim women. She further describes these literary works as very graphic, portraying Muslim and Arab women who are beaten and treated badly in an
almost pornographic manner (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 82-90). She also explains that the only representation of pious, Muslim women in this form of literature is as “[…] hapless victims, grievously betrayed by their silent God[…]” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 102). Due to the misrepresentation, mainly distributed to the American people by the media, the Muslim-American minority often experiences increased discrimination. My informants shared insight into such incidents of discrimination through the interviews and conversations mentioned above.

The Hijabis especially emphasized the feeling of being responsible of the representation of Muslims, because the hijab has become such a visual symbol of Islam in modern day American society. While living in a conservative climate in the southern part of the nation, the Hijabis have become more prone to discrimination than other Muslims, as they stand more out due to their visible religious markers, like the hijab. As Adam told me: “you know, they can’t see it [that they are Muslim] when they look at us [Muslim men], or girls without the hijab. Especially now that the beard has become a hipster thing, you can be taken for just another American hipster.” Thus the Hijabis stands out more than other Muslims, and will therefore be more vulnerable to public discrimination.

In conversation with two young Muslim men early on in my fieldwork, it seemed difficult for them to open up about their experiences of being Muslim in American society. One of them was wearing a long, black robe, with details around the neck, and the Taqiyah on his head, evident of traditional conservative Islamic clothing. The other young man wore more ‘western’ clothes with a kuffiyah around his neck. Both were hesitant about talking to me, and the young man with the kuffiyah explained to me that it was because they were scared that there would be repercussions if he said anything un-American. He explained that he even worried about wearing the kuffiyah, because it

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20 I use the word conservative in describing his clothing. This stems from the impression i got from the way he addressed me as well. When the young men accepted to talk to me, the man I describe as conservative avoided to look in my direction while he spoke to me. This is what I would characterize as a conservative interpretation of the rules and norms concerning gender relations. It is also an example of what the lecturer mentioned in chapter 4 said, about individual assesment of situations that can be considered shouba.

21 Jeans and a T-shirt.

22 Scarf associated with the Palestinian resistance and opposition to Israeli occupation.
signalized his pro-Palestinian views. Moreover, he emphasized that he worried, not of what could happen with him in public, but of governmental repercussions. I noticed that this fear of formal repercussions was common among the few males I talked to. The husband in the couple I lived with in Houston warned me about asking to move in with other Arab and Muslim families as a fieldwork method, because they might think I’m “FBI or something”. Adam told me about the need to keep his social media pages clean of political views, because he feared that it would affect his chances of advancement in his career.

Cainkar explores the way in which Arab and Muslims living in the Chicago suburbs were treated after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In retrospection, she finds that a gendered de-Americanization has taken place, making the experiences of discrimination different among men and women (Cainkar, 2011). She says; “[…]a division of labor seemed to have evolved: the management of men as potential terrorists was the province of government agencies, while the management of women as perceived flagrant violators of American values was left to private actors.” (Cainkar, 2011, p. 233). This division of labor sheds light on the examples above, where males were more worried of governmental repercussions.

Moreover, it can explain why the Hijabis in my study were more explicit in expressing the responsibility they felt. They have embodied this representational responsibility and fear of the public private actors, into their sense of selves. I would like to examine this through the terms interpellation and subjectification, used by Fassin. By adapting to the misrepresentation among the public by embodying an overly friendly and polite front (Goffman, 1971, p. 32). I hold that these Muslim youths, and especially Hijabis, fall victim to interpellation (Fassin, 2011, p. 6-7).

23 Fassin draws upon Foucault’s theory of subjectification.
Interpellation

Fassin operates with two forms of *interpellation*; one is in the “juridical sense, [...] (police questioning)” and the other is “in the figurative, and therefore political, sense, [where] *interpellation* (ideological hailing) is the action through which they [...] become aware that what is happening to them is related not to what they have done, but to what they represent.” (Fassin, 2011, p. 7). In relation to my experience among the Houstonian Muslim Arab American youths, and especially the Hijabis, I will be operating with the latter of Fassin’s two forms. While Fassin uses the term *interpellation*, or *subjectification* in regards to the French police’s discriminatory behavior against minority youths in the *banlieus* of Paris, I will use these terms in regards to the American media's portrayal and misrepresentation of the American Muslim (Fassin 2011:7). Moreover, Fassin explores these terms at an institutionalized level, where as I explore these terms at a public level with individual actors. As such, I explore the terms from a different angle than Fassin.

The torment, previously described so well through the words of Sofia, bear witness to a need to personally over-compensate for the misrepresentations portrayed of Arabs and Muslims by the media. The feeling of having to be **twice as nice, work twice as hard and be twice as pretty** was echoed in conversations I had with others. I interpret the experiences I have gained insights into as *interpellation* in the form of ideological hailing. These Muslim youths have adapted to the perception the public has of them - in other words, what they represent. Their actions in public are results of this adaptation, and they seem to have internalized the public's perception of them into their public personae. This internalization is a coping mechanism, in order to not be confronted in public or to contribute to the negative picture painted of the Muslim.

While spending time with these informants, I could observe how they acted towards cashiers at the store or to waitresses at restaurants. When I interviewed Leila, we went to a well-known café in downtown Houston. When the waiter came to take our order, Leila, who already had been exceptionally friendly to me, seemed to ‘up her game’ when communicating with him. Sofia did the same one of the times we went to eat at campus. It seems like an over-compensation has become a part of their subconsciousness, and that they somehow practice these coping mechanisms automatically. The effect of
misrecognition and non-recognition is explained well by Charles Taylor; “Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.” (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). As such, misrepresentation can affect the mode of being, the psyche, such as the volunteers at the art booth at the Palestinian Festival and Sofia expressed. Similarly, the studies of Sirin & Fine finds anxiety and anguish among the youths of their study as a result of discriminatory treatment.

**Piety and Modesty: Learning to be Comfortable**

To be a Hijabi affects every aspect of a woman’s life, from the way she dresses, to the way she speaks, and with whom she speaks. The need to incorporate all that is seen as good Muslim behavior in the way the Hijabi carries herself seems important to the young women in my study, not only because people around them expect them to, but also because they themselves value these qualities. In this way, being pious becomes important, where one’s religion affects every part of your life, and your mind, body and soul serves God. In Mahmood’s exploration of the piety movement in Egypt, she mentions modesty as an important part of living a pious life. The hijab, or veil, is tightly bound to the modest behavior. Mahmood explains that: “[…] for the women [she] worked with, […]: a modest bodily form (the veiled body) did not simply express the self’s interiority but was the means by which it was acquired. Since the mosque participants regarded outward bodily markers as an ineluctable means to the virtue of modesty, the body’s precise movements, behaviors, and gestures were all made the object of their efforts to live by the code of modesty.” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 161). Mahmood puts words to the mindset through which the Hijabi women at UH perceived themselves, and were perceived by others. Even though the hijab is an object which does not have agency on its own, it carries an expressive significance for the way the body that wears it is perceived. Hence, we see that there are similarities between the Hijabi youths at UH and the participants in the mosque movement with whom Mahmood has done her research.
The young women I spoke to shared their thoughts on different aspects of their lives in the terms of what they are comfortable with. They dress in a way they are comfortable with, they talk to the opposite sex (or refrain from talking to them) in a way they are comfortable with, and they behave in a manner they feel comfortable with. At the same time, the way they conduct their lives and what they are comfortable with resonates with how they are taught that a good Muslim woman is supposed to behave and dress. Hence, one may ask, does this comfortableness stem from within the circumstances in which these women have been brought up within, or does it reside in the agency they have?

I asked my informants how they learned what was regarded as good and bad behavior. They all answered it was from making a mistake and then, when their parents saw it, they were corrected. One of the women, Amal, gave me an example. She had been hanging out with her male cousin who was many years her senior. She was fifteen years of age. They had been watching a movie on her laptop, and were therefore sitting very close. Her father had come home and seen the situation as doubtful, even though she had not given it a second thought. He had yelled at her and told her never to be alone with her cousin again. She said: “He was almost thirty years old, I couldn’t imagine that it would be a problem. It wasn’t until my dad pointed it out, that I could see what was wrong with it.”

Similarly, the young women told me that they dressed differently now compared with before, because now they were aware of how they should dress. Many of them had experienced wearing something, and then being told to go change because it was not appropriate. Thus, what the female youths feel comfortable wearing now, is attire that has previously been identified as appropriate.

The experiences with learning what is good behavior and appropriate clothes can be seen in connection to the patriarchal privileging of men and elders. As we saw in chapter 3, in the example of the lecture on gender relations, and the values and moral codes the MSA conveys and teaches in general, the young women of my study learns the appropriate and Islamic way to behave through male/senior authorities, such as the MSA lecturer and their parents and other family members. As we will see in the following chapter, when
the women discuss the upcoming election of the MSA management, the Muslim student organization also preserves these patriarchal tendencies.

Although their behavior has been taught to them since childhood, their feeling of discomfort with doing things that are perceived as taboo or not ideal may also be a result of teaching oneself - one’s inside, as the woman in Saba Mahmood’s example called it - to be uncomfortable. From this perspective, the Hijabis may have internalized the social norms and codes they have been taught, and practiced them in such a way that their insides learned to feel uncomfortable and shy if they stopped following them. As I understand Mahmood’s take on agency, the Hijabis could be seen as having found a way to make the social codes and norms a part of their inside. However, being young and fairly new to the Hijabi identity, piety is something they have just started to strive for. A question one may ask is, have they chosen this path or has it been chosen for them.

**Power and Patriarchy**

I would like to bring the reader back to Bourdieu’s definition of symbolic power. I understand his definition of symbolic power as one that can change a person’s perception of the realities of the world, how he or she understands objectively the way the world is constructed and how one ascertains meaning within the structures of the social world. Whether this meaning gains a foothold depends on the existence of mutual notions of the aforementioned structures of the social world, in order to reach agreement amongst individuals that share the same perception (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 79).

The Muslim youths of this study, both the Hijabis, young women without hijab, and males, live, or attempt to live, their lives in accordance with Islam. Their immediate meaning of the world and what they perceive as the ideal structure of society is constructed out of their religious ties. In order to have agreement between the agents included in this community, they need to have the same conception of how the world is, or should be, structured. These youths had various relationships to the same religion. This would affect each individual, in which this constructed reality gains a foothold, differently.
Patriarchy is an aspect of the religion of Islam, which often is given focus in studies and conversations about Muslims, and especially Muslim women. To better understand how patriarchy and symbolic power can be connected with regard to the Muslim youths’ constructed reality, one can benefit from Joseph’s explanation of how the patriarchy works. According to Joseph, the patriarchy works because an individual will incorporate the patriarchy as a part of the psyche (Joseph, 1996, p. 18). In other words, an individual will perceive him/herself in relation to the patriarchy and the patriarchal self (Joseph, 1996, p. 18). The fostering of the patriarchal self is dependent on the way individuals is connected to each other. Joseph calls this connectedness ‘patriarchal connectivity’ (Joseph, 1996, p. 18).

The youths have a perception of what they view as the objective social construction of reality is. This perception is dependent on their shared conception of the world, in which the patriarchal self and patriarchal connectivity plays an important role.24

As the young women explain, they have been taught the appropriate behavior through being corrected by their family members, mainly their parents. Bourdieu’s definition of power could explain how their behavioral patterns have developed into the modest and pious way they express, or seek to express, their Hijabi identity now. As explained more thoroughly in the previous chapter, Joseph & Riedel found that Islamic schools contributes to the forming of the Muslim identity through providing an Islamic environment in their everyday lives. Furthermore, some schools, such as the Universal School in Chicago, require females to use the hijab after fifth grade (Joseph & Riedel, 2008). The home can also be a similar environment. Even though not one of the women I spoke to had used the hijab as a child, the same Islamic environment as Joseph & Riedel describes had been a part of the UH Hijabis’ upbringing. The one’s that had attended Islamic school have been taught to incorporate Islamic behavior into their character. They have, as well as the majority of those who had attended public schools, been taught this incorporation by their families. Add to this the uncertainty of being a young college student, many of them still in their teens, trying to find oneself in a new environment and

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24 This connectivity and the created structure of the social world will be discussed further in the following chapter.
community, much of their identity formation may be *constructed* through their surroundings and environment.

**Agency**

The tendency among feminist researchers from the west (Mahmood, 2005) of seeing the *Hijabi* identity in light of patriarchal power seems to fit well with the data I have collected during my fieldwork. However, inspired by Mahmood’s call for a change in the perspective we see agency from, I would like to share some thoughts on the young Muslim women’s autonomy in the construction of their identity. As previously explained, all of the young women had decided on when, and if, they would don the hijab themselves. It was their own decision to enter into the *Hijabi* identity and to seek out this community. They have made it a part of themselves, and as Sofia explained, she would feel vulnerable and uncomfortable without it. Instead of looking at the *Hijabi* identity as something that is imposed on these women, the donning of this garment may be read as a sign of agency. By deciding to wear the hijab, the young women can take control over their own religious identity, and step into the *Hijabi* role.

Moreover, they have constructed this character of the *Hijabi* American woman as strong, powerful and confident. As such, they are fighting back against the stereotypical image of the oppressed Muslim woman painted by the American media, and adopted by the American public. These young women do not let their religious appearance, with all its negative connotations, hold them back, even though they could have. Throwing themselves into studies, careers and art performances, they seem fearless and ambitious. Having started college with a limited capacity to do as they pleased, often having to return home straight after school, these youths seem to have negotiated the terms of their parental hold. As many of them told me, their parents had not understood why they were out late and always busy, when they first started college. Having found ways to be involved in college organizations and communities while maintaining the structures of Islamic values, one can say they have negotiated forth a freedom within the system of patriarchy.
On the one hand, the Islamic framework these young women has been raised within may have influenced the way they perceive the realities of the social world, and aspects within the social structures such as the concept of comfort. The Islamic framework, its environment, can therefore be perceived as a superior authority that contradicts the agency of these young women. On the other hand, one may regard the connection between the individual’s perception of comfort and the Islamic upbringing they have had, in light of Mahmood’s agency. In Mahmood’s approach to agency as something that can occur within the system, not only in resistance to it, the women’s embodied perception of what they are comfortable with will be quite similar to the Cairene informants in the mosque movement. Here the women describe the process of how the hijab becomes a part of your insides (Mahmood, 2005).

**Youth, Agency, Power**

The hijab as a symbol is in itself a paradox. It can be seen as a sign of agency, in the way it is used creatively in the construction of the Muslim American woman, and in the way the women ascribe meaning to their identity. Conversely, it also can be read as a sign of oppression, as it has historically been interpreted, in the way the hijab has become the vessel through which one can reach the ultimate state of modesty and piety. Thus, the power that the patriarchal traditions have over the construction and comprehension of the world, and oneself within this world, can determine the way the Muslim self is shaped. Consequently, at the nexus of symbolic power and patriarchy, the mechanisms driving it does not need to be apparent to the agents it includes. Hence, the identity an individual has constructed of herself will not necessarily spring out of her autonomy, even though she believes so herself.

Between agency and patriarchal power, we find a group of religious youths struggling to find their place in the social world, and at college. The paradox of the hijab makes it difficult to take a stand on the mechanisms that drive it, whether it is agency or patriarchal power. In an environment like the one these youths find themselves in, it is not possible to discount either of them. However, being young, new to college, and trying
to find community and belonging, I believe one can be vulnerable to influences that can manipulate or change the way one sees the world and it structures. In the next chapter I will focus on the way this community works, and how connectivity emerges.
Chapter 6: Network & Loyalty

The community at UH is based on a collective identification of being Muslims by its members. Jenkins explains that “Collective identification [...] evokes powerful imagery of people who are in some respect(s) apparently similar to each other. People must have something intersubjectively in common [...] before we can talk about their membership of a collectivity.” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 103). My informants collective identification is both based on them being Muslim at this particular university and, evident of the aftermath of the murders of #OURTHREEWINNERS has shown, as Muslim American youths struggling with finding their place in an increasingly Islam-hostile environment.

In chapter 4 we saw that monitoring each other, watching others and being watched, is a big part of the social interaction that takes place at the LC and in the prayer areas. An inter-group policing is contributing to the continuity of the social and moral codes that is valued in this network. The policing takes place between members of the community and in relation to outsiders. It also takes place between the same sex and between men and women. As Adam explained through his group of friends, all Muslim young males and fellow students at UH, during an interview, “We keep each other in check, you know? If we see that one of us is out drinking, or hooking up with a girl, we tell him, like, ‘bro, you shouldn’t do that’. We watch out for each other, you know?”. He continues to explain how much easier it is to have fun and be a ‘normal’ college student when his friends share the same values as him. Thus, he does not have to worry about being in a haram30 situation.

By keeping each other in check the students confirm their own modesty while making sure the people around them also stay modest. In this way, the making of a pious self entails the protection of the pious character of the members of the network. Thus, the individual piety becomes dependent on the piety of others. This dependency can be explained by Joseph’s term connectivity, which is the

30 The Islamic term for something that is considered religiously forbidden.
“ [...] psychodynamic processes by which one person comes to see him/herself as part of another. [...] each needs the other to complete the sense of selfhood. [...] the security, identity, integrity, dignity, and self-worth of one is tied to the actions of the other. Connective persons are [...] open to and require the involvement of others in shaping their emotions, desires, attitudes, and identities.” (Joseph, 1994, p. 55).

Although Joseph uses this term in relation to the bond between families with a patriarchal culture as foundation, his insights are applicable to the experience of the UH Muslim students as well. The traits that Joseph stresses as having been shaped through the involvement of others are traits that will is necessary to a modest and pious selfhood. In this way, the youths become pious, and stays pious, as part of another, namely the community they are part of. The way the members of the MSA educates the rest of the student community about the ‘real Islam’, and teaches them how to stay modest and pious at college, contributes to the production, and reproduction, of the connective self.

The policing of each other to ensure the piety within the community can also be seen as a form of da’wa. As we remember from chapter 4, da’wa is religious outreach, and by keeping each other in check, in other words, on the straight religious path, the youths are securing the state of the ummah. One might see the nexus of inter-group policing, piety and da’wa as a form of control of bodies. Scheper-Hughes and Lock describes three bodies in the assessment of anthropologist research on the body, the individual body, the social body and the body politic (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987).

Regarding the network at UH, and the possible correlation between the policing, piety and da’wa, I believe it would be useful to see the individual and collective body through the lens of the body politic. Scheper-Hughes & Lock explains that the body politic is “ [...] referring to the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies (individual and collective) [...] ” (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987, p. 7). Thus, we can see that the fostering of a connective body, regulated, monitored and controlled, is the fostering of a body politic.

31 The Islamic term for the whole of the Muslim community in the world.
To better understand how some of these youths have become a part of this particular community we need to take a closer look at some of the processes that have followed them since childhood. By looking at different experiences of growing up as a Muslim and the making of a Muslim self through an Islamic environment, we can understand the development of a connective selfhood. Further on, I will give an example of the mechanisms of the body politic through the presentation of a case. The Israel-Palestine conflict is often regarded as a Muslim cause. As this case will show, collective identification as Muslims and the connectivity among them manifests across borders. The case, which I have called ‘The Zionist Muslim’, shows how the Muslim community at UH feels the need to demonstrate dissociation from a Muslim man who considers himself a Zionist.

In his definition of collective identity Jenkins notes that to define a membership criteria is, at the same time, a definition of a boundary between what belongs and everything that does not fit into this criteria (Jenkins, 2008, p. 103. How this boundary definition works in praksis will be shown through an example below.

Finally, the desire for change within this community is examined. By looking into the gender discourse around an upcoming MSA election and Leila’s urge of changing the way the community sees ‘our women’, from within, one can see how change is reflected upon, and set in motion. The desire for change is expressed within the boundaries of the community. Thus, it might be perceived as a more legitimate urgency than that coming from critics of Islam.

**Growing up Muslim**

As previously mentioned, the religiously conscious milieu of UH was very new and unfamiliar for Iman. Her parents had not given much attention to the religious education when raising her and her siblings, so she told me that it had been her aunt who had taught her to pray, because none of her parents did. She was a bit shy, but very eager to talk about her experience growing up with a majority of white, Christian peers. She told me:
"You know, my parents let me do pretty much the same things as the other kids. They did not let me go to sleepovers often, and I really didn’t understand why. Now I know it was because one of the girls could have had an older brother, and that would be problematic, and so on. You know what I mean. But I didn’t really feel like I missed out on anything because we were Muslim, I had American friends and that was okay.”

As Iman did not grow up with strict Islamic rules, she apparently had made a real effort to conform to the same traits as many of the other females had learned throughout their childhood. She lived at campus, and before she got involved with the MSA, the religion was not such a big part of her everyday life. Instead she was trying to adapt to the college life among other American students. When she joined MSA she said it felt like becoming a part of something bigger, finding a community and being able to learn about the real Islamic values and behavior. She also explained that she felt like fish on dry land in the beginning, not knowing what she should and should not wear, or what to say and how to behave in different situations. One occurrence explained her confusion very well. She said:

“I went to my first MSA event, and I were running late. I just ran up the stairs and got seated in the first available chair I could see. After I had been sitting there for a little while, a bit embarrassed because of the way I stormed in, I started to look around me, and I realized I was sitting on the male side. Oh my god, I didn’t know what to do, it was horrible. I had never heard of this, you know? That the girls and the boys sat on different sides of the room. That’s the first time I’ve seen it.”

In this way, Iman were different from the other women I talked to through the study because she had just started learning the way of performing her Muslimness.

Some of the Muslim young women who I spoke to had actually attended Islamic private schools up until they started college. Others had attended public school. There was an apparent difference between these women when talking about their childhood experiences with growing up Muslim. Islam made up a big part of their lives, from preschool all the way up to high school. When starting college they became solely responsible for the maintenance of this strict religious framework. This religiosity was already a part of their every day life, although they suddenly found themselves on their
own. In this way, the performativity of the religion had been internalized from a young age and came naturally for them when they reached college. These women were also very aware of shielded their upbringing had been. Going to a school where everyone shared the same faith and values, and there was no bullying based on religious belonging.

In the Islamic schools students would learn how to act Muslim. As Joseph and Riedel writes about in their chapter *Islamic Schools, Assimilation, and the Concept of Muslim American Character*, one of the Islamic schools in their study had “[...] attempted to resolve issues of differences (both within and without the community) by conceptualizing Islam [...] as a system of universal values and virtues. [...] the school is working both to inculcate an authentically Islamic personality and to demonstrate that this goal is consistent with authentic Americaness.” (Joseph & Riedel, 2008, p.158-159). What Joseph & Riedel sheds light on here is the Islamic School’s focus on unifying the Islamic way of life with the authentic Americaness. They also write about the manner of which the students at one of the most established Islamic schools in the Chicago area, Universal School, has solved the task of “Islamiz[ing] education [...] through the provision of a self-described Islamic environment.”(Joseph & Riedel, 2008, p. 164). This environment entails everyday routines and instructions, such as appropriate attire (hijab is required after fifth grade), correct use of Arabic language in prayers and greetings, and religious norms such as which foods were allowed and which were forbidden, and gender segregation in situations where both sexes were gathered (Joseph & Riedel, 2008, p.164-165). Thus, what comes forth of this description of Islamic schools is that the children learn how to be and behave Muslim through the Islamic environment they took part in every day.

In comparison, all the women who had gone to public school had one or several stories of discrimination. None of these young women had started wearing hijab until recently; therefore they had not been that visible of a target. However, their classmates knew where their family originated from, and associated Palestinians, Iraqis and Yemenites with Muslims. They described their childhood as mostly happy, although there were some incidents that made the difference between them and the others apparent. My informants explained that they became aware of these incidents after 9/11, and as one
woman put it: “I was a small child at that time, so I don’t have a memory of how it was before, but I remember noticing things and comments and stuff after 9/11. I remember being very aware of having to say the pledge of allegiance every morning at school too.”

Haya told me about the first time she could remember she felt her religion and ethnicity became a problem. She explained:

“I was playing around with some other kids on the school playground, and it suddenly started raining. This was right after 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror had just started. One of the girls said “Let’s put our scarves on our head like the terrorist women on TV”. I wasn’t wearing a hijab then, but my mom was, and I felt like I had to hide that part of me. Another time, there was this girl who made a comment. We were talking about Saddam Hussein, and she said that they shouldn’t talk bad about him in front of me, because I liked Saddam and I would be sad. But you know, they are just ignorant, and their parents are ignorant. They can’t help it.”

Every time I heard someone’s story of discrimination, they ended it much in the same way as Haya did here. Explaining comments and actions by trivializing them down to ignorance seems like a coping mechanism to keep these incidents from hurting them.

When interviewing Adam, I was told a similar story. He was Palestinian, born in Lebanon and came to America at the age of two. In his early years of school he was in a class with many other immigrant children who had difficulties with the English language, many of them being Muslim like him. After he transferred to a class where he and another kid were the only ones with immigrant backgrounds, he started to get a little bit weary of his religion. He observed that the two other Muslim kids at his school were treated as outcasts and that they didn’t have any other friends. Hence, he started to downplay his religious, and to some extent ethnic, belonging. He started becoming too ashamed to say that he was Muslim, and one of his biggest fears was that his classmates

32 Abu El-Haj & Bonet ties such banal signs of nationalism as pledging allegiance in schools or the display of flags to Muslim youths having to make conscious decisions of alignment to the nation of America by participating (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011, p.33).
would see him with his mother, who wore a hijab, and then figure out that he was Muslim. Much in the same way as Iman, he said that it wasn’t until he started college and found others like him, that he felt comfortable with his religion, and that he became more devoted to, and proud of, Islam. He explained it like this: “*It’s a kind of power in numbers type of thing, I guess. When you meet many people who are the same as you, you feel like you can be yourself.*”

**The Zionist Muslim**

While volunteering at the Israeli Apartheid Week I met many young pro-Palestine activists and one of them was Sofia. As a Palestinian-American college student and an active member of both the Students for Justice for Palestine organization (SJP) and the Muslim Student Association (MSA), she sees herself as a devout Muslim, a Hijabi[^33], a Palestinian and an American. Her reasons for being active in fighting for freedom and justice for Palestinians are her strong connection to the Palestinian identity, as her grandparents and parents were forced out of their homes in Palestine under the 1st intifada[^34], a feeling of responsibility to be in solidarity with fellow Muslims and Arabs, and a humanitarian responsibility to fight any power that kills civilians. Her Palestinian background is something she has in common with many of the SJP members; her faith is another commonality.

One day she told me about an up-coming event that the pro-Israeli student organization had been inviting people to come to. It had stood “open for all” on the event Facebook page, however, Sofia meant that they had not really spread the word about the event wide enough and suspected that it was to prevent pro-Palestinians to attend. She told me the SJP’s[^35] felt that the organization had planned this event as a reaction, or kind of a

[^33]: A female who wears the Hijab (religious Islamic headscarf). I use the term Hijabi in the same way as they categorize themselves. I perceived their use of the term as describing a separate Muslim identity which differentiate from how Muslim women who does not wear the hijab identify.

[^34]: The first Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation, lasted from 1987 to 1991.

[^35]: Members of Students for Justice for Palestine.
mockery, of the event they were having, and that it was a way to delegitimize the SJPs efforts to reach out to the American students. She said; “You know, in the same way we have the Palestinian awareness week, or Israeli Apartheid week, they’re gonna have an Israeli Awareness Week. They’ve invited a Muslim, A MUSLIM, to speak on behalf of Israel, the Zionist movement and the occupation.” The thought of a Zionist Muslim who traveled around speaking on behalf of a country and a cause that she felt all Muslims naturally should be against clearly upset Sofia. She continued; “We’re planning to do a walk-out, like a silent protest, show up to this event and listen to what he’s saying, and then just get up and leave in the middle of it. Or maybe we will sit through the whole thing and ask a bunch of questions afterward, and make him see that he’s wrong. You should join us, it’s gonna be awesome!”. By showing up and demonstrating their opinion, Sofia and the other SJPs wanted to rectify his actions.

The event was happening three weeks after Sofia told me about it. I did not hear anything more about the protest in the following weeks, so I almost thought they wouldn’t go through with it. A week before the talk was to be held, I was invited to a Facebook group called “LEGIT Israel Awareness Week”, the title underlining how, in their opinion, illegitimate the initial Israel Awareness Week was. This Facebook group was to be used as a forum where they could mobilize a big group of people from the Muslim university community, and plan how they should go about demonstrating their despise of the event. They discussed how long they should stay during the talk, whether they should interrupt the speaker in the middle of his presentation or wait until the end and then ask critical questions, or if they should just get up and leave silently, stage a walk-out, as has been done previously.

The planning was thorough, and they ended up deciding they should stay until the end and ask questions, and even decided beforehand who should ask them, and how they should be articulated. The Facebook page was used to post examples of questions that could be asked, and also to prepare the attendees of what type of rhetoric the speaker would use. One of the posts explained what kind of arguments the speaker had made in previous talks, and advised people to look him up on YouTube to research his material. Many of the posts, and the comments underneath them, discussed the importance of not
showing anger or sentimentality, and how the most effective way of getting their message across was to use facts and a formal language. Some comments even urged people who could not “keep their cool” or stay unattached and unsentimental to drop attending, because the message they wanted to send across should be an intellectual and factual one. Where people would sit and how many who should sit together was also discussed, as there were uncertainty around whether a walk-out would find place in the end in case the speaker would respond to any of their questions with “something completely absurd”.

When I came into the room where the event was to be held, I noticed that it was much smaller than the rooms used by the SJP for their events. It was a small, elevated platform in one side of the room, with a projector-screen on the wall behind it. This was where the speaker would be standing. In the other side of the room three long tables had been set up, holding free drinks and snacks. All the events I attended had some kind of free food and drinks, probably to attract more people. The event organizers sat in the front row, to easily introduce and manage the event. Most of the audience was Muslim, supporters or members of the SJP and the pro-Israeli audience was in clear minority. Through thorough planning the pro-Palestinian activists sent their message loud and clear through the number of attendees. People even had to sit on the floor in the back of the room because there were no more chairs available. Many of the Hijabis sat on the front rows, their headscarf easily signalized which “side” they belonged to. These factors heavily affected the room’s atmosphere, and the first words the speaker sighed were “Wow, tough crowd”.

The speaker, a British Muslim man of Pakistani origin, started off talking about the way the Muslim and Pakistani community in Britain had talked about Israel and Zionism, and that their rhetoric had shaped his opinion of the conflict. He explained that the discourse around the conflict, in that community, encouraged hate and contributed to what he himself called extremism.

While explaining how he became an extremist and an activist in pro-Palestinian organizations he often referred to himself as having been uneducated, and that he had internalized the “anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist propaganda” that had been “fed” him at the time. He continued by talking about a turning point in his life, where he started to read Israeli or Zionist literature because he wanted to see the “Zionist propaganda” for
himself, however, he ended up questioning his own views, and the hatred for Israel that he had been exposed of. As a result, he decided to travel to Israel and see the apartheid and racism for himself.

He concluded by saying that he went to Israel and talked to Jews and Arabs, Christians and Muslims, Palestinians and Israelis, but did not once find any proof of racism or apartheid. Although the country has some challenges, he said, they could be explained by the country’s short and turbulent existence, and that the people he had spoken to also confirmed this. Therefore he went back to the UK with a changed mind, and started to spread his message to friends, family and other members of the Muslim and Pakistani community.

Throughout his talk he emphasized three main factors of his previous anti-Semitic attitude towards the conflict. The first was that the Muslim community considered themselves as victimized, especially after 9/11, and that he had started to see himself, and Muslims in different conflicts around the world, as purely victims of discrimination and hate carried out by the West. The second factor was the hatred, anger and extremism he carried with him while being a Pro-Palestinian activist. The third factor was the anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist propaganda Muslim activist leaders used to “brainwash” people into believing their narrative. He ended off by saying that he had moved from the UK to Canada because “some people” made it difficult for him to stay there, and that his family has condemned both him and his views, and therefore had distanced themselves from him.

The event was concluded with a Q&A part where the pro-Palestinian activists were hoping to show their strength and make the speaker realize how wrong he was. Their questions was well-articulated and thought through- the only problem was that they only got to ask very few of them, even though they had planned many more. Upon a question about the legitimacy of the Palestinian government and Hamas, the speaker cut the question short and declared his unwillingness to talk to the person asking the question.

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36 Questions & Answers
because he himself “view[s] Hamas as a terrorist organization” and would not enter into any discussion about Hamas’ legitimacy. Although they were not able to ask all the questions they had wanted, they were the only ones who asked questions. It ended when the speaker seemed uncomfortable with the critical questions and the man who had introduced him got up and thanked everyone for the big turnout.

After the event the pro-Palestinians talked about the event in terms that made it seem like they “won” the discussion. An extract of one of the posts applauding their collected efforts convey how accomplished they view the event.

“I am SO happy with how this turned out. We seriously did so well. Seeing all of us join together to combat what this man had to say and showing that we refuse to allow him to represent the Muslim community was incredible. We were expecting like 7 people to show up when we first made this event, so having more than 50 attend and overwhelmingly outnumber the Zionists was unbelievable.”

The post continue by describing the attendees as showing a strong unity, and expresses hopes that the unity can continue to support each other to raise awareness in all the causes they are individually passionate about, whether it be the Palestinian cause or anything else. Other comments underneath the post expressed similar statement about how well they felt it had gone, and that they had achieved their goal. This protest had a focus on the actors’ religious belonging to Islam, from the planning of the demonstration to the celebration afterwards. Had a backlash of this nature been evoked if the speaker had not been a Muslim? Most likely not, and the way the youths talked about the event gave evidence of that. When speaking about the main actor of this event the characteristics that were focused the most on was his ‘Muslimness’, and his disloyalty to the Muslim community and the Palestinian people.

The disapproval of the pro-Israel student organizations weeklong event was based on the two parts’ fundamental contradictory views on the subject. However, the outrage was a result of the speaker’s religion, a religion that he shared with the majority of the pro-Palestine activists. The fact that they need to communicate that this person would not be
allowed to be act as a representative for the Muslim community and the community’s view on the Israel-Palestine conflict, shows that the students vies Palestinian cause as being a pan-Muslim cause as well.

By calling himself a Muslim Zionist, the speaker seemed to provoke sentiments of betrayal among the Muslim pro-Palestine activists, and they expressed a feeling of responsibility to send him the message that he was stepping outside of the line. While talking to the pro-Palestinians and listening to the conversations among themselves, both before and after the event, I noticed that they could not really believe that he was a Muslim. The fact that he called himself a Muslim and he had a Muslim name was not enough, because through his support of Israel and Zionism, he became an anomaly in their understanding of what it means to be a Muslim. He was something that could not fit in with their world order, and it seemed like they did not really know how to deal with this type person. They clearly reacted much more strongly to his presence at this event than they would have done to other events organized by the pro-Israel students. They did not mobilize a big amount of people to send a message of disapproval to any of the other events that were held that week. This testifies to what the youths already had said themselves, that they expect Muslims to show solidarity with the Palestinian people, and that this responsibility should be a part of a persons Muslim identity.

Changing the Muslim experience – inside and out

During one of my interviews with Leila we talked about the conflicts Muslims encounter in everyday life. In the beginning she wanted to tell me about her childhood, her experience with starting to use the hijab and her experience with discrimination from white Americans. Leila uses her spoke word poetry to address issues many Muslim Americans faces in society, political issues and critique of the Muslim community internally.

Her performances have only been done in front of Muslim- and Arab-American audience, and she said she had to do some ‘tweaks’ if her work were to be performed in front of a non-Muslim crowd. “There’s a lot of references you know, from the Quran and from
Muslim everyday struggles, that would have had to be changed. Others wouldn’t have understood them.” She also said that even though her work mainly concerns Muslims’ encounters with Americans, it is very important that the Muslim community is able to direct some critique inwards as well. She says she feel like a lot needs to change, especially in regards to gossip and rumors, reputation and honor, and how “we see our women”.

In Leila Ahmed’s monograph *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s resurgence, from the Middle East to America*, she writes about ISNA, the Islamic Society of North America, and her studies of this organization. In her description of their annual conventions, she observes a generational change among the members and contributors. She also explains how gender issues became a pressing matter, mainly after 2002, but also on the rise as early as the convention of 2001, just before 9/11. One of the young female speakers at this convention calls for a “[...] fifty/fifty women and men.” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 247) composition in the leadership of ISNA, and wondered when she would be able to see that happen. Ahmed also mentioned the pleas of two young men’s, the first asked older men to yield their position in the leadership to women and younger people, the other were questioning the gender segregation in Muslim venues, such as ISNA gatherings. The latter called the arrangement absurd, and expressed frustration over the hypocrisy of gender segregating Muslim Americans who were living and participating in a “gender-integrated world” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 247). Another man “complained about foreign policy issues, [...] that their parents were obsessed with political matters affecting their home countries. But these issues,[...], were simply not their issues as young Americans.[...]'” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 247). The issues that come forth here, from both young women and young men, are issues that the youths at UH were concerned about. The gender distribution of the leadership and members of the MSA, and gender issues in general within the Muslim community in Houston, were matters that often were discussed between my informants, and in conversations with me.

One day, while hanging out with the group of women, I heard them talking about the upcoming MSA election, where there would chose a new president, vice-president and
new officers\textsuperscript{38} for the upcoming school year. They seemed to be frustrated about something, but I could not seem to get a hold of what it was. I asked what they were talking about and one woman said: "The MSA election. They\textsuperscript{39} are saying that there has to be a guy for president. Like, can’t we have a girl for president?" and rolled her eyes. I found this interesting, because I had attended a meeting with the MSA at the University of Michigan in Dearborn, during my last week in Detroit, and they had a female president. Thus, this appeared to be a local practice that is decided on differently within the local MSA fractions. Although frustrated by the gender homogeneity when it came to the presidential candidates of the MSA election, many females got elected to be officers. The vice-president, however, was also male.

As we can see from these two examples, there is frustration and a wish for change among some of the Muslim students at UH. These women express a wish for change, however, there are still many, such as the leadership of the MSA, who wants to keep to the traditional gender pattern. The fact that the MSA maintained gender-segregating seating during all their gender-mixed events is an indication of the same structural tendencies as the young speakers at ISNA wished to subvert. Even though some of the young women showed frustration over certain traditions that have been maintained, such as the male domination of the MSA presidency, there was not one critical finger pointed at the traditional segregated seating. As Iman told me about her first time attending a MSA event, she had sat down on a chair on the male side of the room, and it took her a couple of seconds to comprehend her mistake. Although embarrassed by her mistake and surprised by the seating arrangement, she did not make the same mistake again. Telling me this story, I detected no critical undertone in Iman’s voice.

None of the other girls expressed any negative opinions about this, and some of them had even incorporated it into their everyday lives. Haya had told me that she normally would give males that she knew at campus a nod, but nothing else. She was comfortable with staying away from them, and she only had necessary conversations and contact with

\textsuperscript{38} Officers were the title of the remaining members of the MSA leadership, besides the president and the vice-president.

\textsuperscript{39} "They" as in the current leadership.
them. Many of the other female youths expressed similar techniques in maneuvering through the gender-integrated world (Ahmed, 2011).

I want to address the last issue I mentioned from Ahmed’s experience at the ISNA convention, foreign policy. Contrary to Ahmed’s observance, I experienced the Muslim youth at UH as very invested in foreign policies and politics. Even though they considered themselves as Muslim Americans, they were especially concerned with the issues that affected their parents’ home countries. As many of my informants had a connection to Palestine in some way (most of them had one or both parents of Palestinian origin; others felt connection through the mutual religious belonging), they were very concerned about the Israeli-Palestine conflict. They seemed very involved and interested in foreign policy. However, this interest seemed to only apply to policies regarding Middle Eastern issues, witnessing of a geographically selective political interest. The differences between the youths I have spent time with, and the youths that Leila Ahmed mentions could be explained by their social background. There is no mention of the educational level of Ahmed’s speakers. My informants, however, could have been influenced by their educational background and class surroundings. Being a student at a prominent university, such as the University of Houston, usually indicate that one belongs to the middle class and upwards, due to the high tuition. One’s social background would be central to the level of interest taken in society, politically and socially.

**Strength in numbers and Muslim solidarity**

As this chapter has attempted to convey, the Muslim youths at UH has a strong feeling of connectivity and collective identity within their community. They expect each other to fall in line with the social norms and values that the community they are a part of expects of Muslims. This Muslim youth community does not only hold these expectations to this particular network, but also to the greater network of Muslims all over the world. The loyalty to alleged Muslim causes they expect from fellows Muslims, is here exemplified by the anomaly of the Zionist Muslim, and how the UH Muslim community coped with his disloyalty. Change is a natural process of a community and something that interests
the UH Muslim youths as well. Additionally, critique from ‘the outside’ may put change from ‘the inside’ on the agenda among these youths. A focus on gender issues, and separating between gender issues that need to undergo change and those that should still be a part of tradition, is a sign of reflection upon the position of tradition in the modern day America. The involvement in politics and foreign politics not only indicates educational levels, it also indicate the way they relates themselves to the rest of the world, and especially, through the Palestinian cause.
Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks

The impact of the increasing hostility towards Muslims in America is evident in the community of students at UH. Moreover, this is evident in the greater Muslim community of America. The murders of #THEHEROESOFCHAPELHILL evoked strong reactions, but also revealed the connectivity, among Muslims around the country. The tragically endings to the three young Muslims’ lives especially impacted Muslim American youths. This thesis has described this connectivity through the Muslim community at the University of Houston, and attempted to convey the ways the making of community, space and self is constructed through performance, place making and religion, in this particular setting.

I sought to depict the backdrop of this fieldwork in the first chapter. The post-9/11 America has affected the identity construction of the Arab and Muslim American, and contributing to a society characterized by and increasingly hostile and discriminatory climate for these groups of people. Furthermore, I attempted to lay a theoretical foundation for the rest of the thesis by introducing and defining the thesis’ main theoretical terms, piety, agency, patriarchy and symbolic power.

Chapter 2 focused on giving a thorough account on the method and challenges connected to the conduction of this fieldwork. Additionally I explored different kinds of access and explained the method I have relied on to collect the data presented in this thesis. I have reflected upon my role as a female researcher and the impact of my own cultural background in doing this fieldwork, as well.

In chapter 3 I have attempted to give detailed insights in the frameworks of the fieldwork this thesis is built on. A thorough description of main actors and the SJP and MSA, sought out to lay the foundation for the rest of the thesis, as it explains both how I got access, and what these students concerns themselves with outside the classroom. The space and place of UH, the student organizations and the individuals who helped with what they were able to offer, has been the location of fieldwork.
As chapter 4 aimed on giving insight into the concerns and social structures unfolding in the arena of the Library Building, the community ‘culture’ is depicted. In the midst of prayer and gossip, flirting and dating, attention was directed at piety and reputation making and upholding in order to understand the mechanisms behind the inter-group policing the youths practiced. Additionally, the difference between the youths who grew up in a religious household and went to Islamic schools, and the ones who recently discovered their religious selves are brought forth in the example of Iman.

Chapter 5 explained the Hijabi identity, and through this identity, the processes of the construction of a pious and modest self. I also go discuss the agency of the Muslim youths of UH in relation to power and patriarchal traditions. The argument for patriarchal power controlling these youths’ religious awakening is connected to the aspects of being a youth and in a new setting. I explore the possibility of how the feeling of finding one’s place in the world, and a need to be a part of a community could have overshadowed the individual control of a religious consciousness.

In chapter 6, the community and network of topic is analyzed in light of Joseph’s connectivity term (1994). The inter-group policing and monitoring through gossip is put in relation to da’wa and piety, and contextualized in terms of a body politic (Schepers-Hughes & Lock, 1987). Furthermore, the social codes and expectations of this community are exemplified through the example of Palestinian solidarity and the anomaly of the Zionist Muslim. Finally, I describe how this community can promote change within the social norms of the network.

Some of the UH Muslim youths portrayed in this thesis have several years left of their life as students and as members of this community. Others have already made the transition over to adulthood, with all its challenges and obligations. Within new structures and without the safety net that the UH Muslim community provided, I am curious and exited to see if, and how their identity construction changes. Will they seek out similar communities? Will they explore non-religious friendships, relationships and communities? Or will the foundation created through the membership of the UH community follow them throughout their adult life?
The recent election in America, which took place on the 8th of September, is very fresh in mind while attempting to conclude this thesis. Throughout the election campaign, one man stood out significantly from the other candidates. This man relied on hate rhetoric and scaremongering in order to mobilize support among the American people. Directing hateful and discriminating words at minorities in the society and ‘telling it like it is’, he rallied many of the government skeptics out to vote.

One of the minorities that this man singled out was the Muslim population, and he told his supporters that he was ‘calling for a complete ban on Muslims entering the United States’. This man, named Donald J. Trump, is now the president of The United States of America. In the aftermath of his win, many of America’s minorities have expressed fear for their futures. The same applies to many of my Muslim informants. Trump has yet to take office, however, it will be interesting to follow the actions and movements his presidency will inspire.
References


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