

MUSLIM AND LGBTQ INTERSECTIONALITY  
IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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This project seeks to identify the ways in which Queer Muslims construct the ‘self’ both within and outside of religious contexts — through identifying my participants’ behavioral differences and similarities in religious, family, and friend circles, my research seeks to address the dynamic ways in which these specific identities intersect and create new modes of being. This project also aimed to provide young Queer Muslim individuals in the United States an academic platform from which to share their own lived experiences and to contribute more greatly to the interwoven story of all people.

This thesis has been part of my life for nearly four years now. I walked with my graduating class in June of 2019, with all credits satisfied but my thesis requirement. When Covid hit, my plans to defend went by the wayside as I navigated our morphed reality. To finally close this chapter and officially defend my thesis is an honor and will allow me to move forward. This project massively shaped me and allowed me to uncover my passion for community and interpersonal relationships. I seek every day to uplift those around me and allow my perspective on the world to remain fluid, and to interweave these tenets into my future as much as possible by pursuing social work in

some form. Though my sample size was a mere two people, their stories are indicative of the endless ways people differ in their experiences. Hearing both their stories changed my life, and it contributes to changing the way Anthropologists view Queer Muslims as well. It is my hope that their words affect you as profoundly as they did me.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my primary thesis advisor, Dr. Ana-Maurine Lara, for her advice and patience in helping me understand the nebulous nature of Anthropology and of human nature more generally. Thank you also to my friend Fama Gedi for greatly assisting me in finding participants, Dr. Mark Unno for his insights, Dr. Tim Williams for his ongoing support of my academic pursuits, my family for their constancy, and my friends for their encouragement. Most importantly, thank you to my participants, without whom this thesis would not exist, for their trust and vulnerability in taking part in this project. All my love.

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## **Introduction**

Names and other identifying characteristics have been altered to protect my informants' privacy. Minor edits have been made for clarity and grammar correction. I have chosen to include what I believe to be the most pertinent portions of my interviews with as minimal editing as possible. Making overarching assertions about my participants' lived experiences and words is antithetical to the project's decolonial goal. My participants guided this project and I therefore chose to center their words and their analyses over my own.

### **Statement of Purpose**

In keeping with the backlash against Muslims in the United States and the harassment faced by LGBTQ individuals, it is feasible to expect that Muslim identities and Queer identities present complications to navigating wider society. While I do not posit that non-Queer Muslim individuals or non-Muslim Queer individuals' identities are any less complex or important, my thesis examines the particular complexities of being both Queer and Muslim in the United States. The interviews held with my participants illuminate just these complications. It is pertinent to note out of sensitivity and respect for the reader that within the following interviews the topic of rape is addressed.

I chose to use the broader term "Queer" for both my participants, in part because they both self-identified as Queer and then with more specific terms, and in keeping with the reclamation of the word by the Queer community. This term has been reclaimed by many people, largely beginning in the 1990s, after its use as a slur to be a term full of pride and unity among those of us who don't align with heteronormative

and/or cisgender standards.<sup>1</sup> It is in this sense that I refer to Queer people and Queer Muslims.

There are approximately 4,289,439 Muslims living in Oregon as of 2021<sup>2</sup>, and there are a reported 207,000 individuals self-reporting as LGBTQ as of 2020<sup>3</sup>, a number which is certainly skewed smaller considering the dangers of openly identifying as Queer. Each of these identities present a certain set of challenges. However, when there is an intersectionality of these two identities, a more complex set of challenges may arise. The National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance reported, “for those of us who are LGBTQ and Muslim, we wait to see which of our identities we will be more fearful of disclosing in a world that questions our existence and intentions daily.”<sup>4</sup>

My thesis examines the unique challenges encountered by individuals who identify as both Muslim and LGBTQ in the U.S. during the present day. I explore some of these unique challenges by interviewing a select number of participants who identify as both Muslim and LGBTQ. I explore how an individual’s intersectional identity creates unique challenges in three realms. First, how their identity complicates their Islamic beliefs and their ethnic identity as a Muslim, second how their identity complicates their relationships with family and friends, and third, how their identity makes navigating the current American cultural biases and discrimination highly challenging.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.cjr.org/language\\_corner/queer.php](https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/queer.php)

<sup>2</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/muslim-population-by-state>

<sup>3</sup> <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGBT-ND-Protections-Update-Apr-2020.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/06/13/481853353/what-queer-muslims-are-saying-about-the-orlando-shooting>

## **Positionality**

To further contextualize my reasoning for undertaking this project, I now present my personal background. I am a white cisgender woman raised in a largely conservative family from Southern California. I was also raised strictly Christian and attended a Lutheran school from preschool to 9th grade. This, of course, informed much of my knowledge about religion in general. When I started my university career at 18-years-old, I was unsure of what I wanted to study. Moving roughly 975 miles away from my hometown and my family allowed me to develop my own opinions about religion and the ways people should treat each other. While I had not really ever aligned myself with right-wing politics, this was the point in which I also let go of my instilled Christian beliefs. I chose to make Cultural Anthropology my major and Religious Studies my minor after trying out several possibilities in large part because my greatest passion is people. I am fascinated by the ways in which people think, behave, and interact and found the marriage of Anthropology and religion as key areas of study suitable to my interests. Further, after living as a Christian for the majority of my life, religion and varied beliefs are of keen interest to me. It interests me greatly to investigate how and why people have come to believe in the things they do. As part of my program, I had the opportunity to study abroad at the University of Oxford through the Clark Honors College program. During my time at Oxford, I undertook independent research for my tutorial on Gender and Sexuality in the Middle East. I conducted my research with the assistance of my inspirational tutor Dr. Susan MacDougall, an Anthropologist specializing in the Middle East. My independent research coupled with courses on Islam and the Qur'an, taught by Dr. Rick Colby, led me to choose the topic



of this thesis: *Muslim and LGBTQ Intersectional Identity in Oregon*. Choosing this topic also coincided with my coming out to trusted family and friends as bisexual. My entry into the Queer community inherently shapes my outlook on Queer issues and makes the topic of this thesis all the more important to me.

## **Methodology**

My research also stands in light of the Anthropologic field's problematic history as perpetuating colonial practices for the sake of "research." Anthropology as a field is in fact rooted in colonial practices wherein white Europeans exploit the narratives of people of color in order to gain prestige. Many Anthropologic accounts other the very people whose stories are being used — in this project, I seek instead to present the participants' stories and accounts in the spotlight without clouding the project with my own position. That being said, I am well aware of my privileged position as a researcher. I'm a white woman and am not a Muslim living in the United States as the participants are. Having collected and heard my participants' stories, it would be a disservice for me not to allow their words to be front and center. Following in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's footsteps, after reading her work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*,<sup>5</sup> I have aimed to decolonize my research at every turn to the best of my ability while still contributing this project to the canon of academic Anthropological work. This work must be recorded in the context of Anthropology, even with all its problems, in order to contribute to positive change in the field. As of yet, no other ethnography on Queer Muslims in the United States exists. The subject

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*. Zed Books, 2002.

pool for this paper is quite small, consisting of only two people. I found participants with the help of my Muslim friend from the University of Oregon. My participants' unique experiences deserve recognition in the academic realm, with their full consent and in their own words. By listening to and reflecting upon my participants' words, even just the two of them, a shift in perspective occurs and deeper compassion, curiosity, and involvement with those around us can be built. Going forward in this paper, when quoting the interviews, I refer to myself as DD and my participants by their initials for the sake of clarity.

## **Background**

Prior to and during the 1960s in the United States, homosexuality was highly policed and areas known for congregation by Queer people were often raided. The 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City, in which some 400 patrons of a known gay bar took a stand against police harassment and intimidation, sparked a new highly visible wave of LGBTQ rights activism.<sup>6</sup> Following this watershed event, Queer activists such as Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson organized movements to secure and recognize LGBTQ rights through organizations such as S.T.A.R. (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries). Following the Stonewall riots, on June 28 of 1970, marked the first officially recognized "Gay Pride" parade in the United States, initiating what has come to be known as the "Pride" movement. The Human Rights Campaign describes Pride as, "a celebration of queer life and sexuality in addition to a political and social

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<sup>6</sup> "Pride." Human Rights Campaign. [www.hrc.org/pride](http://www.hrc.org/pride).

demonstration.”<sup>7</sup> In an effort to bring LGBTQ individuals into the human and civil rights arena, the Pride movement largely centers around a paradigm of “coming out of the closet,” in which young Queer individuals are expected to ‘come out’ to their families and larger society about their sexuality. While perhaps aimed to validate LGBTQ identity, arguably, “today, one comes out not to be radical or change the world but to be a ‘normal’ gay subject.”<sup>8</sup> Queer people in the U.S. are expected to be ‘out’ to be validated in their Queerness.

The first Muslims to inhabit the United States were Africans abducted and enslaved dating as early as 1501. Upon their arrival, the Islamic faith was highly repressed, with many people being forcibly converted to Christianity, and thus was largely stricken from the narrative of U.S. history.<sup>9</sup> Following the Civil War, Muslim immigration to the United States increased markedly for refugee purposes from religious and ethnic persecution and war in the Middle East and South Asia, as well as due to the desire for economic and educational prosperity. However, Muslims continued to be othered from white American society and viewed as threatening to “Christian values.”

Following the September 11, 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by Al-Qaeda, an extremist militant Islamist group, public sentiment toward Muslims within the United States became even more vehemently unfavorable. In the years following the 9/11 bombing, Muslim identity has been highly politicized and

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<sup>7</sup> “The History of LGBT Pride, from 1970 to Now.” June 27, 2014.

<https://www.hrc.org/blog/the-history-of-lgbt-pride-from-1970-to-now>.

<sup>8</sup> Decena, Carlos Ulises. “Tacit Subjects.” GLQ 14:2-3, 339.

<sup>9</sup> PBS OPB, History Detectives Special Investigation. “Islam in America.”

<http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/islam-in-america/>

often utilized as a campaign tool. In December of 2015, former President Donald Trump issued the now infamous “Muslim ban,” barring any Muslim residents and visitors from entering the United States, and referring to Muslims as a “sick people.”<sup>10</sup> In such ways, Muslim identity has been publicly vilified and given a violent stigma following 2001. Queer Muslims between ages 18 and 25 are likely to experience particular forms of oppression and violence, both structurally and interpersonally. In a 2018 poll from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, it was reported that a higher proportion of Muslims than any other faith group experience some frequency of religious discrimination and among Muslims, those between the ages of 18 and 29 are one of the most likely groups to report experiencing religious discrimination.<sup>11</sup> My participants are therefore particularly vulnerable to discrimination based on their religion within their age range. Furthermore, young Queer individuals within the U.S. are also likely targets for discrimination based on their sexual/gender identity. For instance, in 2018, LGBTQ students in Bend, Oregon reported experiencing harassment and bigotry from their school faculty and students, and even being forced to read the bible as punishment.<sup>12</sup> All these factors implicate the experiences of Queer Muslim young adults in the U.S. and demonstrate the importance of research about this population.

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10 Friedman, Dan. “Trump cites ‘sickness’ in defense of Muslim immigration ban proposal.” Fox News. December 13, 2015.

11 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. “American Muslim Poll 2018: Pride and Prejudice.”

12 Haag, Matthew. “L.G.B.T. Students in Oregon Were Bullied and Forced to Read Bible, Report Says.” The New York Times. May 26, 2018.

## **Findings**

Through my research I found that the history of Muslim life and of LGBTQ life results in particular experiences and identity expressions. LGBTQ communities have historically been prominent and vocal in addressing civil rights and creating safe spaces. Muslim communities have also created spaces and cultural expression, yet the onset of Muslim life in the U.S. began through violent colonial practices. Queer Muslims in the United States navigate both contexts and exhibit different coping strategies, identity expressions, and interpretations of what being a Queer Muslim means than Queer Muslims elsewhere.

## Chapter 1: Brittany

Interviewee: Brittany Z.<sup>13</sup>, a 20-year-old bisexual Muslim woman as well as a university student.

Additional Participants: Brittany's boyfriend, also Muslim (but not Queer), sat in on the interview. I include some of his comments, where appropriate to the narrative of the interview and pertinent to Brittany's lived experience. This particular interview was unique also in that I had the opportunity to meet and engage with two other Muslim women as they dropped by to visit Brittany.

Number, Time, and Location: Our interview took place in person, in her private home, over the course of about one hour.

### Influence of Digital Space

Through my interviews with Queer Muslim individuals, it becomes clear that demarcating both physical and digital spaces are integral parts to this identity. This common theme runs through both of my interviews, as will become clear. Brittany explained that the media and online spaces were formative to her identity as a bisexual Muslim woman:

Up until about high school, I thought women shouldn't wear skimpy clothing, women shouldn't be alone, this and that, if they get raped it's their fault. And not just because that's the ideology that I grew up with. But then, as I got older and I started talking to more and more people and I started going on social media and seeing others' experiences and what they have to say, that kind of started to change my mind... Oh yeah, social media [has] changed me a lot. I was talking to all these different people from different backgrounds, I was talking to LGBTQ people, and up until that point I was very homophobic. I was like, gay people go to hell, you're not supposed to do that, it's unnatural. But then I started seeing all these stories of LGBT people who had been discriminated against, who had been disowned, who had been beaten and sent to

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<sup>13</sup> Pseudonym used to protect privacy.

conversion camps and I just saw all the horrible experiences they had to go through because of that mindset and I saw this is wrong! This is not what my religion is about, nobody should go to hell for loving somebody. So I kind of started... it's fine if you're gay, but you're still going to hell and then I turned to, 'oh they're actually not going to go to hell.' Because I did more research on that and found that those verses that people use to justify that gay people go to hell are not actually interpreted in the right way usually. And then that's when I found that I was Queer, so I was like, 'oh!' [laughs]

As she explains, Brittany's self-identity changed through her encounters with others in the online realm. Though her familial and religious upbringing led her to believe that Queerness is sinful and "unnatural," online communities and resources allowed her to learn about homosexuality within Islam in a different light. Elaborating on a Qur'anic verse that is often used to demonize gay and Queer folks, she explains:

Similar to the Bible, it's about Lot [translated as Lut in the Qur'an] and the people of Sodom. What it says in the Qur'an, and I think in the Bible too, it's like, 'a man should not lay with another man,' and people interpret that as homosexuality or homosexual sex. But the way that I and many other people have interpreted it is that they're talking about a man taking advantage of another man, like a man molesting another man just to boost his ego, which is actually something that happens a lot in Arab countries. Men will sleep with other men when they're not attracted to them just to assert their authority over those men. And that's actually what is the sin and not homosexuality, where two people are intimate because they love each other. That's my interpretation of it. Also, people think that the city of Sodom was destroyed because of homosexuality but in reality there were so many other terrible things that those people were doing — they were cheating, they were stealing, they were killing people and all those other things. It wasn't homosexuality at all.

Brittany's comment above highlights the similarities between traditional Islamic and Christian conceptions of homosexuality as sin. The Christian Bible and the Qur'an include many similar stories and teachings, the story of Lot, spelled "Lut" in the Qur'an, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah being one. This story outlines two male angels of Allah/God who arrive in the sinful twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The citizens attempt to come inside and sexually assault these angels, who they perceive as

foreigners. Lot offers his virgin daughters to the assailants instead of the visitors.<sup>14</sup> Thereafter, the angels destroy the two cities for their crimes.<sup>15</sup> This story is often presented as condemning homosexual sex and Queerness in general. Many Christian and Muslim people utilize this to rationalize homophobic stances, both personally and politically. What is so important about these parallels is the demonstration that Christianity, generally considered the “most American” religion, and Islam, which gets conceptualized as “anti-American” and the “religion of terrorists,” are incredibly similar in ideology and teaching. Not only are many similar parables and stories used, but the morals are highly comparable. For instance, while not believing in Jesus as the son of God as in Christianity, Islam recognizes him as an important prophet. It is said in the Qur’an 3:45-47, “(Remember) when the angels said, “O Mary, God gives you good news of a word from Him (God), whose name is the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, revered in this world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (to God). He will speak to the people from his cradle and as a man, and he is of the righteous.”<sup>16</sup> These similarities bring up a difficult yet necessary conversation about the ways in which religion is conceptualized in the United States. Brittany’s experiences with misogyny and homophobia in Islam can be easily compared to those hurdles faced by Queer people involved with Christianity in the United States.

A pertinent example is the “Hope for Wholeness Network,” founded in 1999. This group is a proponent of the idea that homosexuality is a sin which dooms those

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14 Qur’an, Surah 11, Ayah 78.

15 Genesis 19:1-29.

16 Ibrahim, I. A. “You Are Here: Islam Guide Home > Chapter 3, General Information on Islam > What Do Muslims Believe about Jesus?” Islam Guide: What Do Muslims Believe about Jesus?, [www.islam-guide.com/ch3-10.htm](http://www.islam-guide.com/ch3-10.htm).



who identify as such, but can be changed through conversion therapy. In their current mission statement, they state, “God intended all sexual relations to occur between a man and a woman united in marriage,” and that, “homosexuality (whether in practice or identity), as well as *other sexual addictions*, is against God’s plan for mankind.”<sup>17</sup> This group also attributes homosexual tendencies to the “demonic realm.”<sup>18</sup> This is only one example of many Christian groups who attempt to ‘convert’ Queer individuals into being heterosexual. Ironically, McKrae Game, the founder of Hope for Wholeness Network, came out to the media as a gay man in 2019. The Washington Post cited his quote as, “It’s all in my past, but many, way TOO MANY continue believing that there is something wrong with themselves and wrong with people that choose to live their lives honestly and open as gay, lesbian, trans, etc.,” Game, 51, wrote on Facebook... “The very harmful cycle of self shame and condemnation has to stop.”<sup>19</sup>

Brittany pointed out that bigoted religious people conveniently interpret this story as being anti-LGBTQ as justification for their prejudice, but that it is not necessarily what the story means. The townspeople are condemned for their propensity to rape men, women, and children, rather than for homosexual sex between consenting parties. Brittany, and many other religious scholars, interpret this story as warning against sexual violence, not against homosexuality, allowing for Queerness and religious belief to coexist. Brittany, through her own research, especially online and in

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17 Edit: my original source, <https://hopeforwholeness.org/mission-and-beliefs/>, has since been removed from the internet as the organization disbanded in 2020.

18 <https://hopeforwholeness.org/mission-and-beliefs/>

19 Iati, Marisa. “Conversion Therapy Center Founder Who Sought to Turn LGBTQ Christians Straight Says He’s Gay, Rejects ‘Cycle of Self Shame’.” The Washington Post, WP Company, 6 Sept. 2019, [www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/09/03/conversion-therapy-center-founder-who-sought-turn-lgbtq-christians-straight-now-says-hes-gay-rejects-cycle-shame/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/09/03/conversion-therapy-center-founder-who-sought-turn-lgbtq-christians-straight-now-says-hes-gay-rejects-cycle-shame/).

conversation with other Queer Muslim folks, empowers her own femininity and sexual identity through this verse rather than accepting the largely mainstream Muslim interpretation of these events.

### **Family and Extended Family Relationships**

The topic of parental influence and judgment was also forefront in Brittany's interview and contributes to the ways in which she demarcates her space in society.

When asked about her decision to move to another state in order to attend the college of her choice, she brought up her parents immediately.

I wanted to come [to the University of Oregon] in the first place but my parents wouldn't let me. They were like 'It costs too much money' but really they don't want me to go far away. My school back home had an exchange program where I could come study here for the same tuition price of that University, so I did that. I made my parents see how much happier I was here and how many more opportunities I have here and they were like 'Oh, okay, fine.'

(DD) Do your parents just want you to stay close to home just because y'all are close?

(BZ) [scoffs] My mom is more lenient on it, she wants me to go out and do my own thing and be successful on my own. My dad wants me to stay at home because he doesn't think that women should be alone or living away from their families. He's still very resistant to that. But when I came here I was like 'Okay, peace out, I'm leaving, you can come see me off or not.' I didn't really give him much of a choice.

(DD) Has he said anything about it?

(BZ) He does comment on it once in a while, he's like 'It's a sin for a woman to live alone, a woman shouldn't be traveling alone.' I just ignore him. I know whatever he's saying is wrong.

Brittany's representation of her Muslim parents', and especially her father's, views on women outside the home environment is complicated. His belief that it is a, "sin for a woman to live alone, a woman shouldn't be travelling alone," is not uncommon in Muslim communities in the Global South. Brittany's parents are first-generation

Pakistani migrants to the United States. Brittany's personal desire to move away from her family to attain her educational goal is clearly at odds with what her nuclear family wants for her. She, however, follows her desires anyway. This feat, alongside the fact that she was not supported by her family, is a testament to Queer Muslim women's strength and independence in the modern day United States in general as well as her own personal strength in diverging from her ancestry. Her choice, though, is complicated by Islamic scholarly debate about what constitutes choice, rights, and tradition.

While her father's ideas about women seem highly outdated in the U.S. today, it is worth noting that his opinions largely align with those of men and women in what are considered 'traditional' Muslim cultures, specifically when it comes to women's education. Fida Adely enumerates on this point in her article "Educating Women for Development: The Arab Human Development Report 2005 and the Problem with Women's Choices."<sup>20</sup> The Arab Human Development Report of 2005 claims that education is essential to expanding choices and that women "across all Arab countries" are deprived of education.<sup>21</sup> While education undoubtedly allows people to make better informed choices about their lifestyles, claiming that women in all Arab countries are denied education on a greater scale than are men is both inaccurate and problematic. This conclusion drawn in the AHDR works backwards from data that does not align with what is perceived as the natural result of education. It is assumed that with education, women will naturally choose employment outside of the house, will make

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20 Fida Adely, "Educating Women for Development: the Arab Human Development Report 2005 and the Problem with Women's Choices," 106.

21 Adely, 110.

more money, and will have fewer children. Yet, this is not always the case. In reference to her specific area of study, in Jordan, Adely notes that, “despite high levels of schooling for girls, Jordan continues to maintain a comparatively high fertility rate as well as significantly low rates of labor-force participation.”<sup>22</sup>

Though women may be granted the right to attend school, they do not necessarily make what is deemed the ‘right choice’ (in Westerners’ eyes) as the result. Adely claims that the AHDR’s conclusion that women have been denied rights because they are not working more actively outside of the home represents:

the failure to acknowledge that females might be acting on their own preferences— preferences that are often shaped by the desire to have a career that will enable them to spend more time with their future families and children. Readers are led to believe that women either have no real choice because they are being forced to pursue paths that are determined by rigid gender barriers or that they are suffering from a form of false consciousness that prevents them from even imagining alternative pathways. This analysis oversimplifies the decision-making process and fails to account for the full range of factors that work to shape and influence decisions about field of study and future career and family trajectories.<sup>23</sup>

This analysis better frames Brittany’s father’s attitude as a Pakistani man. Her father’s assertion that women should always live in the home is more-so culturally based than religiously. Sara Ababneh testifies that, “in most Muslim families what women are or are not allowed to do is based on certain traditional and cultural understandings, rather than on the rights they are given in Islam.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Brittany’s father’s thoughts on the matter of his daughter’s choice to move away from the family cannot be pinned

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22Adely, 108.

23Adely, 113.

24Sara Ababneh, “Islamic Political Activism as a Means of Women’s Empowerment? The Case of the Female Islamic Action Front Activists,” 13.

solely on an Islamic understanding of what a woman's role should be, but rather is culturally situated.

### **Sexism and Assault within the Mosque**

We then return to Brittany's understanding, rooted in the recorded teachings of Muhammad, that women and men, while they may inhabit different societal roles, are of equal status. However, while the mosque is often conceptualized as a communal meeting and worship place for Muslims, for Brittany, and many other Islamic women alike, the mosque presents a challenge. She explains about her local mosque:

I don't go very often, um, just because it's not a very inviting place for women. But whenever I do go I like interacting with the women there, they're all really great. And I like being able to pray with community members, that's a really nice feeling, especially since it's really hard for me to pray when I'm by myself. So I don't go there as often as I'd like to but maybe next year that'll change, who knows.

(DD) What do you mean when you say it's not inviting for women?

(BZ) The first ever time that I went there I didn't know that women were supposed to go around the back to their little portion of the mosque, so I went in through the front door and there were like a couple of men there and I was like, 'Oh, as-salāmu 'alaykum [Peace be upon you]!' And they just kind of glared at me. They didn't say what are you doing here but that's what their faces said. I started to take off my shoes and put them in the cubbies and they said 'Oh, no, no, no. Just take your shoes and go in the back.' I'm like, 'oh, okay...' They were just kind of heckling me, like 'just leave!' And then that happened again when I went during Ramadan with my professor and some other people, they acted like that towards the women in that group too, they were like, 'just go to the back, go to the back, go to the back.' I had food in my hands that I needed to put down. I was like, 'okay just give me a second, let me put my food down and just take my shoes off.' They were right up behind me and just like, 'just go to the back.' It was just... I got very, very flustered because there were these grown-ass men who were like, 'women shouldn't be seen with me, they should go in the back.' They were right up in my face telling me to move, like almost pushing me to move. So that really sucks, that's why I don't like being in that space because it's very much male controlled and male dominated.

This experience highlights some of the challenges women, especially Queer women, face in Muslim religious spaces. On top of sexism, bisexual and otherwise Queer woman face the additional challenge of homophobia within their religious community.

Brittany elaborates on the predatory potential of men in such spaces:

There are a couple of men there who are not very good people who have had bad interactions with one of my friends and she doesn't feel comfortable or safe going there because of that individual. And the mosque has been trying to handle it but they haven't been handling it the best that they could.

(DD) How have they tried to handle it?

(BZ) So, this person has been harrassed. My friend. He actually assaulted her. He also makes other women feel uncomfortable and he's always flirting with the younger women there. A lot of the women at the mosque have complained about it. And then, he [gesturing to her boyfriend, Joe<sup>25</sup>] went in and he told one of the mosque leaders exactly what had happened to our friend. He [mosque leader] said that he'd do something about it and that person wasn't allowed to pray in the space anymore, he had to stay up in the little room that he had at the mosque, because he lives there... but, some women just don't feel comfortable around that person. You know, he's still allowed to be there.

(DD, addressing Joe) What was your experience going in, when you went in and talked to him? What was your impression of what was going on?

(Joe) So, I talked to the head of the mosque and his reaction seemed genuine. He was cursing a lot about the whole thing, specifically about the guy for doing what he did. And it did look like [with] the stuff he promised to do, he was keeping his word. Especially during Ramadan I would go there quite frequently, every night, and I wouldn't see the guy be in the prayer area at all. He used to be a pretty big figure. He would teach kids about the Qur'an. If the media came, like after the Christ Church shootings in New Zealand, when the media came, he was a spokesperson for the mosque. So he had a big influence. And after we spoke, the head of the mosque and I, we agreed he shouldn't be a spokesperson anymore and that was upheld. I haven't really seen him at the mosque, especially during Ramadan. There are times where he does come in to pray with all the men in the common area. But every time the head of the mosque sees him, he goes away and goes back upstairs. There's obviously some stuff being done but there still have been instances that are questionable, like during our Eid prayer the guy was leading one of the prayers. The Eid prayer is when the most people come, and the most women. So I was really shocked as to why he was

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25 Pseudonym used to protect privacy.

leading the prayer because I thought we agreed he was not going to be that figure. It's also just a sticky situation because from my understanding of Islam the mosque is a place for sinners too. I know the head of the mosque and people are struggling with kicking him out Islamically. But then there's also the question of Islam is about justice and what's right and everyone should feel comfortable at the mosque, so there is that struggle. And even, I've talked to one of the women at the mosque and she has even said, you know she's one of the women who has talked about him being disgusting and kind of a pervert and she even said we can't just kick him out. So yeah, it's a sticky situation.

(DD) Do you agree that he should still be allowed in?

(Joe) Uh, I think I propose that he shouldn't be in the main area at all. If he's going to pray, he should pray outside by himself, and that's what's been happening. In terms of kicking him out at the mosque like even I've struggled with doing that just because it's just weird to handle and to kick someone out of a mosque and even talking to the victim, she's said that's not what she wants. And she'd probably feel even more stressed that that would happen, albeit that sometimes she feels too much sympathy for him, but still I feel like it's just a very sticky situation for me in terms of how to handle that. Personally I think if we don't want to deal with kicking someone out of the mosque and whatever that may bring upon, I think that he should completely not be allowed to interact with anyone inside the mosque. He shouldn't be a spokesperson at all, he shouldn't be teaching little kids, he can pray outside alone, that's it. I obviously don't think you can stop someone from praying and hopefully he's repenting for his sins —

(Brittany interjects) I don't think he is! I don't think he thinks he did anything wrong. He's tried to justify it so many times.

(Joe) He's tried to get people at the mosque on his side and I know he doesn't like me or her.

(BZ) Oh, he definitely doesn't like me. He's scared of me. He knows I don't like him and I'm very outspoken about issues like this. I don't care if he's a dude, if he tries to say something I'm going to go for his throat and he knows that. This also just brings about a whole bigger conversation about sexual assault and how it's handled in different communities and in Muslim communities in general. In Muslim communities, it's very much pushed down, nobody really wants to talk about it and if they do talk about it they always blame the victim, they always blame the woman. It's very frustrating. But yeah, that's why I don't go to the mosque very often. But for next year, since I'm MSA [Muslim Student Association] president for next year, I'm going to try to mend the MSA's relationship with the mosque because it's the only mosque in [the town] and I feel like we should have some relationship with them. But I'm going to make sure I talk to the leaders there and have them actually listen to the women there

and their needs. We're also going to be starting a fundraiser to expand the women's section so it's not so tiny and awful.

On top of the discrimination women already face in Brittany's mosque, such as smaller, confined spaces and less direct access to prayer, Brittany's friend experienced assault by one of the prominent religious leaders of the space. This traumatic experience creates an even more personal and painful barrier to not only Brittany's friend directly, but women at the mosque in general. The threat of sexual assault, already a very real fear for women everywhere in their daily lives, in one's religious space is a terrifying prospect sure to deter women from attending. Brittany's friend who was assaulted by the religious leader at the mosque likewise represents many women who find themselves in predatory situations within their own religious communities. While it is difficult to find statistics on how many women are sexually assaulted or harassed in their religious communities, according to a 2011 study, one in five women will be raped in their lifetimes. 40.8 percent of those women report being raped by an acquaintance.<sup>26</sup> While a 2014 study reports only 1% of women in the United States as being Muslim<sup>27</sup>, 24% of people worldwide are Muslim.<sup>28</sup> Statistics about Muslim adherents are likely to be skewed, however, due to religious discrimination in the United States and persecution of Muslims worldwide. Bearing this in mind, there is a high probability for

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26 Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., Stevens, M. R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 summary report. Retrieved from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: [http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS\\_Report2010-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf)

27 "Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 9 Sept. 2020, [www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/gender-composition/](http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/gender-composition/).

28 Lindsay, Jessica. "Which Religion Has the Most Followers Worldwide?" Metro, Metro.co.uk, 12 Dec. 2019, [metro.co.uk/2018/04/04/religion-followers-worldwide-7440217/](http://metro.co.uk/2018/04/04/religion-followers-worldwide-7440217/).



Muslim women to be assaulted by a man whom they know from their own religious circles.

Returning to the importance of Brittany's bisexuality when it comes to discrimination and danger in religious spaces, Queer and trans people face even higher rates of sexual assault and violence in the United States. Bisexual and lesbian women are at higher risk for sexual assault, with, "44% of lesbian women, 61% of bisexual women, and 35% of heterosexual women experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime"<sup>29</sup> per a 2010 study. And, according to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, 47% of respondents, "were sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime."<sup>30</sup> These statistics are staggering. Being at such high risk for sexual and violent assault, as well as general shaming and rejection, also drives people out of religious spaces. "Two-thirds (66%) of the survey sample had been part of a faith community at some point in their life." Furthermore, "People of color were rejected by their faith communities at higher rates, with one-third of American Indian respondents (33%) and almost one-quarter of Black (24%) and Middle Eastern (24%) individuals leaving for this reason."<sup>31</sup> This demonstrates the homophobic, transphobic, and racist threats that Queer people of color face every day in religious spaces and creates a fear and mistrust within the community.

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29 "NISVS: An Overview of 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation." The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 2010, [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cdc\\_nisvs\\_victimization\\_final-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cdc_nisvs_victimization_final-a.pdf).

30 James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality. <https://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/USTS-Full-Report-FINAL.PDF>. 15.

31 Ibid. 77.

Returning now to the topic of the mosque and how it is structured in a way which puts women at a disadvantage in physical space and in access to prayer, I asked Brittany her thoughts on the roots of such issues.

(DD) I've only been in the women's section so I don't know how it compares, but why do you think it's been created as this... what are your impressions of why this has happened?

(BZ) Because it's a patriarchal society, you know. That's really just what it is. People justify it as 'it's always been like this, religion is like this,' but that's not true because when Islam first came about, men and women prayed in the same room. They didn't get separated until much later when other people started to enforce that. So, it's not like it's more Islamic for men and women to be separated. I do understand that there are women who feel more comfortable praying in their own separate room, and that's fine. But the women who do want to be in the main area, who do want to pray with their families, should be allowed to do that. And also if you're going to have a separate area for the women you should make sure it's just as nice as the men's area so that women aren't treated like second-class citizens.

Her insight speaks to the insidious roots of sexism throughout history and the ways in which she, along with other feminist Muslim scholars and believers, respond. She points to patriarchal Muslims as the perpetrators of disempowering women throughout history, which results in physical obstacles such as women being confined to smaller, worse quarters to worship and pray than men. Likewise, her assertion that those women who desire to pray in a separate room should have that right, and should have their spaces bettered, aligns with Lila Abu-Lughod's analysis on the importance of differentiating between making choices for Muslim women's betterment and giving Muslim women access to their own empowerment. She ponders, "We should want justice and rights for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or even choose, different futures from

ones that we envision as best?”<sup>32</sup> Abu-Lughod, as well as Brittany, point to the nuances and intricacies required of Muslim women when making changes to their surroundings and their statuses.

### **Perceptions of Queerness among Muslim Peers**

Towards the end of our interview, two of Brittany’s friends dropped by unexpectedly to say goodbye to her before going back home to Pakistan. Both friends are Pakistani Muslim women. This portion of the interview was particularly enlightening — Brittany told her friends about the topic and their reactions are demonstrative of how Muslim women, particularly those from Muslim-dominant areas in the Global South, may perceive Queer Muslim individuals. After greeting each other, Brittany and her friend, began talking about her interview:

(friend) You’re the LGBT Muslim she could find?

(BZ) Yeah.

(friend) No. Where’s the LGBT Muslim she could find?

(BZ) [quietly] Me.

(friend) I never knew that!

(BZ) Yeah, a lot of people don’t. I don’t really, like, outright say it.

(friend) Oh, my god! I never knew that.

(BZ) Yeah.

(friend) You never mentioned that... I was certainly (mistaken). I (just learned) a few things then. You never mentioned that!

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32 Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Harvard University Press, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/detail.action?docID=3301358>. 43.

(BZ) Yeah, I never really outright say it to people unless it comes up in conversation, you know.

(Joe) [This is] really funny.

(friend) So, how was the interview? How is it going?

(DD) Great! Yeah, I'm loving it (both laughing).

(friend) It's interesting.

(DD) Yeah, as far as my thesis goes, I want it to be really centered around LGBT Muslims, but there's not a very big group—

(friend) Yeah. And the main thing is acceptance. There is no acceptance for this thing. I don't know.

(BZ) I was just talking about [how] LGBT Muslims are kind of thrown aside in the Muslim community and the LGBT community. It's a little hard. That's why I don't, like, go around talking about it. I have been talking about it more often, though, I think now. Especially on my social media where I don't have very many judgmental people on there.

(friend) Yes, of course. Especially on social media or whatever. [pause, both laugh] But yeah, it's a realization for me, too. I've never talked about this thing. Especially, we belong to the country where it's not really acceptable. But I knew a couple of people who were here from Pakistan, and they are--I don't know if, I never met the person, but [name omitted] was one person from Karachi, and he belongs to the LGBT community...

(friend 2) Of course, I know that there are people, but I know the other fact that the community is not really open because there is no social acceptance for this thing. So, if there are people, they don't really, I think... make it clearer to the world that they belong to this community... Did you mention any hardships you ever faced?

(BZ) I mean, just the hardship that I can't really come out to very many people. I haven't told you until now. I haven't told very many of my friends. I don't think I could ever tell my parents or any of my other family about it. I can talk to my sister because she's also Queer. But yeah!

(friend 2) I'm so happy to hear about that.

(BZ) Aw, thank you!

Brittany's friends' initial surprise upon finding out that she identifies as Queer alludes to the ways in which one's sexuality necessarily remains a mostly private topic in Islamic communities. After Brittany told her friend, there was a palpable surprise in her friend's tone and actions. She was rather taken aback. Yet, she was more than willing to ask about the topic and engage with Brittany about it. Both women, while surprised, were not disturbed or put off by the news. Their reactions instead point to an open-mindedness and compassion toward their friend. Neither woman made any remarks about Brittany's sexual identity as being averse to Islam, which further solidifies Brittany's interpretation of Islam as an accepting and loving way of being rather than an inherently oppressive religion. The oppression Queer Muslim people face is the fault of those who interpret the Qur'an and Islam in a way which suits their already bigoted ideology.

After Brittany's friends said goodbye, I remarked about how the women had seemed surprised:

(BZ) Yeah she was definitely, I think it's because she is thinking in more binary terms, like straight and gay, which is fine because she just now has been more exposed to LGBT people and that idea. Because she's been in Pakistan her whole life, she just came here this fall to teach for a year on her Fulbright scholarship. So, just like me, she hadn't been exposed to any other ideas until now.

(DD) Yeah, she was saying, 'I'm like a changed person.' Do you think that's because of coming to the United States, or being in a University setting, or... ?

(BZ) I think it's both, because people at a university away from home, they're more comfortable to be themselves so... they feel, like, safer here. Especially at [university] where it's more like a liberal setting, even though we do have a lot of problematic people here [laughs]. But yeah, I think being here at this particular university versus some other university that's more conservative, I think that would have changed her experiences, like, dramatically. Because even as a Pakistani person I think she would have had different experiences anywhere else but here.

(Joe) That's kind of the thing, I think we all bag on the U.S. since we live here but I think we forget that in terms of acceptance of people the U.S., it obviously has a lot of problems, but it's far better than like India, [or] Pakistan, in terms of LGBTQ and other marginalized groups.

(BZ) Yeah.

(DD) How does that line up with... well, I don't know, I guess not line up but... it's interesting that there's a more accepting kind of 'vibe' in the United States.

(BZ) You wouldn't think that if you're living here, [you think], 'oh it's terrible, there are so many people who are bigoted and trying to take away my rights,' and all that. But then, we do have a privilege living here because a lot of other people don't have that living in other places. Homosexuality is punishable by death, you know. And here it isn't. So I think that's something that people who live here need to take into account.

(DD) But then like, being, and I don't know if this is a correct analysis, but it would seem like then it's also such a different experience being Muslim because that is something that's very ostracized in white mainstream American culture, so it's just an interesting thing to pair more acceptance with LGBTQ people and then still there's been backsliding a lot of people would argue, as far as with the Trump regime, for Muslim folks.

(BZ) For sure, absolutely, yeah, this country has a LOT of work to do, a lot of work, a lot of work. But there is a privilege that comes with it. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't keep fighting for rights for marginalized people, or we shouldn't keep fighting for acceptance.

I found the portion of Brittany's interview with her friends to be particularly enlightening. The conversation between them illuminated some differences between the cultural perspectives on sexuality between the U.S. and Pakistan. I was allowed to witness a very personal firsthand account of a Muslim, Pakistani woman finding out her friend is Queer. Her reaction, while she was taken aback, demonstrated understanding and love. While much of this interview centered on Queer Muslim Americans not finding support or acceptance from mainstream society, Brittany and her boyfriend also point out that being Queer and Muslim in the United States is a privileged position.

Yet, her friend who had only recently been exposed to the United States' cultural conception of LGBTQ life was immediately ready to accept her friend as she is. This aligns with Brittany's view of Islam as a religion of love:

(BZ) To me specifically, Islam means surrendering and that's what it means to me. Part of that is me speaking out for other people and standing up for people who are usually silent, which is why I'm going into journalism, which is why I'm an activist. It's because Islam has inspired me to stand up for people who have been oppressed, who have been marginalized, and make sure that people who are terrible, who abuse their power, are brought to justice. Because that's what Islam is for me, that's what Islam advocates — it advocates peace and love and love for everybody, for your family, for your neighbor, for your enemies. For everybody. To me, Islam is just not a religion of hate and it's so frustrating when very powerful religious leaders preach Islam through hate and they say all these terrible things. They're the ones who perpetuate this oppression of women, of LGBT people, of people of color. I feel like they have lost sight of what Islam really is. So, for me, Islam is about being connected to God and finding peace with myself through my relationship with God, but then also worshipping God through standing up for other people.

(DD) Was your relationship with God affected by your identity as bisexual/Queer at all?

(BZ) Not really by that. My relationship with God has been affected but that's because of depression, my relationship with my family, and my relationship with the mosque and how I was brought up. Even now, it's very hard for me to get up and pray five times a day even though I try to. But being away from that whole environment has helped me out a lot. And then being able to pray with him [Joe] or my friends at the mosque has helped me connect with God more. So, my relationship with God did get affected, not by my identity at all, but I am trying to repair that relationship while incorporating my identity into the way that I worship and the way I pray to God.

Brittany here synthesizes how her religious beliefs influence her to help, love, and accept others, which is just what her friend did for her as well. Her point comes across throughout the interview that Islam itself provides support for all identities and it is the practitioners who take hateful stances who create barriers for Queer people in the religion.

## Chapter 2: Yannis

Interviewee: Yannis H.,<sup>33</sup> a 21-year-old living near Washington, D.C. He was born to Syrian parents, in Syria, and moved to the U.S. with his brother in 2013. His entire family is Muslim, he says, with “some that are not religious.” He identifies as a gay man.

Number, Time, and Location: Yannis and I had two separate interviews. Each lasted one hour in length. Our interviews were held over the phone.

### Influence of Digital Space

I discussed the topic of the Internet’s role in providing a network for Queer Muslims in the United States to connect with Yannis. The community, from what I have gleaned in my interviews, is small and rather sparse throughout the states. As noted in Chapter 1, social media had an effect on and shaped Brittany’s views on sexuality. In my interview with Yannis, too, he addresses the importance of media in connecting Queer Muslims as well as the risk of outing oneself online:

(DD) Is there either a big or secure support group or web for Queer Muslims in the United States?

(YH) Web for sure. It’s a lot, or not a lot, but I think it’s enough, like it’s good. I’ve seen a lot of people, there’s like the Queer Muslim Project and a bunch of other things that are on Instagram that are really fun.

(DD) So it’s a big online community mostly?

(YH) Mmhmm. And I have my cousins blocked. But, like, I have a lot of first cousins, like aunts and uncles, kids, and so out of them I have theories on who’s Queer. My Instagram is private because I know I get gay tags because of what I search, or like the Gay Muslim Project, so I have mine on private in case they find it. But they won’t because I have them blocked too.

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<sup>33</sup> Pseudonym used to protect privacy.



(DD) Because that would cause a big deal for them to see that you're part of these online groups?

(YH) Online groups. Even though they're visiting because they're gay too. Or some of them are.

Yannis' sexuality impacts the way he interacts with social media. He has some family members blocked because he doesn't want them to see the pages he likes or follows which might signify him as gay. Interestingly, he points out that those family members who find the pages he brings up as signifying Queerness would also likely be Queer themselves. Ingrained homophobia, Yannis implies, would lead even his Queer family members to judge him. He, unlike Brittany, decided to tell his family about his sexuality.

### **Family and Extended Family Relationships**

Similarly to Brittany, however, his relationship with his family is complicated by their views on Queerness. He details his 'coming out' experience:

It was funny because the story goes like this, and my brother doesn't think it actually happened. And I'm like, I remember this very clearly, it's a big day in my life. But he's like no, none of this happened in terms of the craziness. I came out to them after we were on a long walk because we were outside fishing or doing something. We were on a long walk, we had just gotten to our apartment which is my brother and I's, and his friend [name omitted] was always over, like all the time. He was showing me this girl he was talking to and then out of the blue he was like, 'Also, you never mention anything about being into women or girls, anytime I show you a photo you just seem uninterested. Are you gay?' And I said, 'Nooo...but you keep asking me this, this is the first time you've asked me in front of my brother which is interesting. Why now?' So, he just upset me a lot and I got really mad. Long story short is I got really mad and I said, 'Yes, I'm fucking gay, and so what?' My brother didn't believe me, he thought I was just acting and that me and his friend were just bluffing. And then I came out to my family because my brother was like, 'Don't ever come out to them because it will be very hard.' Like, after he realized that it's true. And I was like, well, I'll still do it. So I ended up doing it and my mom wasn't okay with it, she wasn't happy, but she was like... she thought that it was worse than, um... because I told her that I was going to let her know about some bad news, so she thought it was something even worse. But then she also did say that the

death of her mother was less painful than hearing me say that I'm gay. So I'm like, oh, damn. Yannis' mother's reaction was extreme and, yet, he described the situation calmly. To me, this demonstrates the familiarity Yannis has with negativity surrounding his sexuality, especially from his family. This can be starkly contrasted with Blair Imani, a Black Queer Muslim woman who is a prominent advocate for the LGBTQ community, and her experience with family. She explains in her TED talk how accepting her family was of her sexuality when she came out as a 15-year-old.<sup>34</sup> She, however, grew up in an accepting, liberal Catholic household in the United States and converted to Islam in 2015. Yannis' experience with his Syrian Muslim parents is very different and thus must be examined for all its complexities.

His brother, with whom Yannis is very close, did not initially believe him when he came out. Interestingly, his brother's friend seemed to think Yannis was gay before he came out and brought it up often. What may have been apparent to him was lost on Yannis' brother. We discussed why this might be:

(DD) So you kind of wanted to tell your parents because your brother told you not to?

(YH) To a certain extent, also because I just wanted to prove him wrong. And I think there's a lot, I would say I'm more optimistic than pessimistic.

(DD) Why do you think your brother didn't believe you initially?

(YH) I actually don't know, I think he just didn't want it to be true. Because he's cool with it but I think he just didn't want it to be in his family.

(DD) Is he [a] practicing Muslim?

(YH) No.

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34 Imani, Blair, director. Queer & Muslim: Nothing to Reconcile | Blair Imani | TEDxBoulder. TEDx Talks, 9 July 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IhaGULmO\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IhaGULmO_k).

(DD) Okay. What made you decide to frame, like ‘I have some bad news for you,’ you said that to your parents. Was it just to your mother or were you also talking to your father?

(YH) Well, I wanted my dad to be up but he was too tired after work. It was in Syria, it’s really hard, he didn’t get up, he was too tired. And so I just told my mom and then she told him the next morning I guess, and then that night he did stay up and was really sad. I’m like damn, well. Yeah.

(DD) So did you frame it as ‘I have some bad news’ because you wanted to soften the blow or because you knew that your mother would think it was bad news?

(YH) I knew it would shock her and I knew that she wouldn’t be happy. And it was kind of sad, some of the things she said. But overall, it met my expectations. I feel differently about it every day. Like whether or not it meant what I thought it would or wouldn’t. Because now she’s much better, but is she much better or am I just accepting the fact that she’s not better? And so I’m living in this weird limbo where I’m just forcing myself to ignore it?

Yannis clearly feels conflicted about how his mother is handling his sexual identity. He did not mention much more about his father’s reaction but reflected on how mother may or may not have changed her attitude about his sexuality. He’s uncertain if his mother’s outlook actually has shifted or if he has just grown accustomed to it. Yannis also notes that his parents told him that he’s “just Westernized and gay because of America.” They in a way place blame on the U.S. for ‘making’ their son gay. He responded to this sentiment:

I feel like that’s something that I believed, I was like, ‘oh, maybe that’s something that’s potentially [true].’ This was early on, two and a half years ago, when I first came out. I was like, maybe that’s true. But then the more I learned, I took different courses and I read a lot of series and things out of Islam and secular and non-secular, whatever, all beliefs about being gay. So then I was like, okay, this is something that’s valid, maybe. But then eventually, like now, I laugh at it, but back then I was like maybe this is rational. Because, you know, I’m not a believer in blindly following something, so even within my sexuality, I questioned everything.

So, though he now disagrees with his parents about the U.S. ‘making’ him gay, he did initially internalize their opinion. This is illuminated further by works such as Momin Rahman’s “Queer as Intersectionality: Theorizing Gay and Muslim Identities,” in which he describes, “the assumption of mutual exclusivity whereby the identities of ‘gay’ and ‘Muslim’ are seen as the product of mutually exclusive ‘cultures’: ‘gay’ is understood as Western, and ‘Muslims’ as unable to accept gay public equality.”<sup>35</sup> This article discusses the experience of being Muslim and Queer in a post-9/11 climate. He argues that the existence of gay Muslims in the West powerfully exemplifies intersectional identity which simultaneously challenges hegemonic discourse (949). Gay Muslims inherently challenge both the categories LGBTQ and Muslim. He goes on to challenge dominant identity categories as a whole as being incomplete and necessarily excluding ‘others’ (953). By rejecting dominant ontological identity categories, Queer Muslims can be recognized as beyond a mere hybrid of identities. Yannis, for example, identifies as Queer, Muslim, Syrian, and American. His parents understand his gay identity as being American and his coming out as indicative that he has become ‘too Western.’ However, Yannis’ identity necessarily transcends those bounds as he is now American and remains also Arab. His Queer identity intersects with his American and Syrian identities — it cannot be isolated from the rest of his personhood and thereby simplified.

Especially interesting in the argument Yannis parents made that his gay identity is a byproduct of Western culture is the notion that, in fact, Muslim civilizations used to

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35 Rahman, Momin. “Queer as Intersectionality: Theorizing Gay and Muslim Identities.” Sage Publications Journal Volume 44(5): 944-961. 2010.

be viewed as highly sexually tolerant by white Christians, not sexually restrictive. Mehammed Amadeus Mack insists, “From the earliest points of contact between Christian and Muslim civilizations, Muslims were faulted not so much for their sexual *intolerance* as they were for their sexual *permissiveness*,” citing the fact that homosexuality was in fact invented by Europeans and not a category used in Islam prior to colonization and forced Christianization of Muslim peoples.<sup>36</sup> Europeans criminalized and vilified homosexuality which then spread to majority Muslim countries through colonization processes. The West’s takeover of the LGBTQ movement in recent years, however, has flipped the narrative into one wherein Islam is intolerant and restrictive.

Due to the multiplicitous pressures from society, family, and friends, both Brittany and Yannis figured out differential ways of being depending on their current company. They both necessarily negotiate their modes of being to protect and empower themselves to the best of their ability. Yannis spoke on behaving and presenting differently according to whom he is around:

...so, non-religious communities I usually just have the ability to express my opinions without much of a filter just because they [religious people] believe in it and if I do say things out of filter then they get offended because they’re.... When you have faith in something, it’s very personal. And so you’re attacking their person, so I realize that that’s what you’re doing. Because they have it so close to them. You know what I mean? So, it’s like, to them, you’re attacking them. It’s not even like you’re just attacking the religion in a scholarly way. It becomes who they are, obviously. And so, with some I don’t press God or, I don’t do things like that or question it in the same way. Whereas if it were in a secular conversation, sometimes I even laugh, like, ‘I can’t believe I even believe this!’ But then, other years I’m like, oh, I do believe it. It’s so stupid.

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36 Mack, Mehammed Amadeus. “What Does the Koran Say About Being Gay?” Newsweek. 15 June 2016. <https://www.newsweek.com/what-does-koran-say-about-being-gay-470570>.

(DD) What sort of things might you say about religion in a non-religious setting, or might you say about Islam in a non-religious setting that you wouldn't say to your religious or practicing friends?

(YH) The process... for example, I can't believe I just thought of this, it's funny. The Prophet basically climbed up a socioeconomic ladder. He was born to someone who was poor, and he was a shepherd, or whatever. And then, he married someone of better class than him, and so that helped him a little. And then he took over her business, so he grew his sheep and he had a farm or something, and he became better off. And then I think he married someone who was even wealthier, and then he just started marrying people of different ages. That's the story. But not everyone believes that he married that many, [they] think it was more like a parental companionship to all the homeless girls. But then, some scholars say, 'no, he actually had sex with them, too.' And so, I'm like, damn, that is very fucked up! But if I say that, they're like, 'no, we don't believe.' I don't know, for me, I also question it, but then I also believe that it did happen because there's no way he didn't. You know? Like... it was just fucked up because he had so much money at that point and he married literally the wealthiest, and he was just very well-off. So, obviously, he had options, and no one can control him. Because he was powerful. And people believed his faith! That's what happened with Christianity, with Jesus, like, damn! Who's going to create this again, and then Islam, literally, years later, they're like, 'oh! Here we are, we're doing that again.' And the process of that. Do you know what I mean?

Yannis recognizes how intrinsic religious beliefs become to one's identity and how this might make him express or not express certain things depending on who is around. He addresses how he may speak critically of the Prophet Muhammad among non-Muslim people but refrain when around other Muslims. Clearly an independent and deep thinker, he challenged the way Islam is structured in his conversation with me, as did Brittany. Each of them approaches their belief system in fresh ways which align with their value systems and allow for their Queer identities to fit into the religion rather than be pushed out by others' judgment.

## Geographic Differences in Perception of Queerness

Of course, there are differences between the ways Pakistan and Syria, Brittany and Yannis' respective places of lineage, view Queerness compared to the United States. When asked whether there are generational differences in the perceptions of Queer Muslims, Yannis responded:

(YH) Yeah. I think it's also geographic.

(DD) How so?

(YH) Like, if I was comparing my siblings, I would say my siblings are more accepting because they lived in Brazil and they lived in the U.S. for years, but they're the same age as my cousins. Does that make sense? So, geography and location also impacts the lessons that are open but they're the same age. So that's very different.

(DD) Do you think that has anything to do with media exposure?

(YH) Um, I think it's also... okay, I'm really sad about this. Because, if the [Syrian Civil] War didn't happen I feel like we would live a different life. They would be more accepting than they are now. I think because of the war we've been held back. It's not just the media because there are a lot of Queers that are out there in Syria too. Not a lot, but a handful that would cause some serious issues but no one cares about it because we're all struggling together against this war. I feel like that's the same for Palestine. My friend is like, 'yeah, my mom knows what being gay is. She's not okay with it but she doesn't hate it like other areas.' And so, because we're going through a war I feel like there's a common struggle. But then, I've never thought of this that way. I'm learning a lot through talking.

(DD) Yeah, that's really interesting. Because of the war that's kind of impeded people's development of understanding Queerness?

(YH) Exactly, yes! Because I don't think we're actually that closed minded. That's the thing, my siblings are able to understand it because they lived here, and we had an easier life compared to my cousins. And then when they left, my siblings had a harder life than I. Because some of their friends died in Syria. I don't think they were close friends, but they were classmates.

Yannis points out that in the hierarchy of needs, when Syrian people were fighting to survive, communities had less time to focus on LGBTQ rights. Those non-Queer

individuals in his family who lived elsewhere, apart from the Syrian Civil War, had the time and security to learn about Queer identities and become involved in the global conversation. Speaking strictly of the United States, whose civilians have not seen a war on their actual soil since 1865 (despite the countless wars the U.S. has waged against other nations), there has been social progress led by Queer people on the front of LGBTQ rights. The general U.S. citizen's attention has not been directed toward the immediate threats of war as has the Syrian public's. In this way, Queer individuals in Syria have been put on the backburner more so than Queer individuals in the U.S., as Yannis describes.

I then asked Yannis what his experiences have been with discrimination, specifically with his sexual identity. He told me:

I think just standard bullying, but then again, I was saying, I'm pretty resilient. I was also a bully when I was in elementary school, so I thought of it as my way of being paid back. Because when I was in elementary school, we went to school in Syria at a public school and I was in the first grade's strongest gang [laughs]. Literally! But this was a public school with kids of difficult backgrounds or refugees, a lot of them, because of Iraq and Palestine at that point. Especially because of the war. [It was] literally 2004, right when it started happening. And so, they just had different lives. When they were there it was pretty violent, it was a bunch of little kids just going crazy. There was a shit ton of kids compared to adults because their parents were off slaving away somewhere else. Syria gave refugees all citizenships. It's the only nation that's done that.

(DD) And then looking at how the United States deals with Syrian refugees... [chuckles].

(YH) Mmhmm, yeah.

(DD) And also anywhere else, kind of.

(YH) Mmhmm, but maybe earlier I might have mentioned me being white passing. I don't know if I did in terms of me being gay, Arab, and Muslim. I think I'm more palatable than other migrants. At least that's how I've seen it in terms of social studies that I've read in college or just my theory. But examples,



like Mexicans in cages, none of the Syrian refugees in America are in cages. It's only brown and darker bodies.

Upon bringing up discrimination due to sexual identity, Yannis delves into discrimination on a wider front. For Yannis, discrimination in his life is not contained to merely his sexual identity. As a Syrian man, he also notices discrimination due to his skin color and heritage. Again, in a post-9/11 United States, there still exists extreme prejudice against those from the Middle East/Global South. Yannis cannot simply pinpoint the discrimination against him to his sexuality; he must also grapple with the discrimination he deals with due to his nationality in the U.S. While he does not outright say it, we can infer that the 'bullying' he enacted toward Iraqi and Palestinian peers, due to their difference in nationality and outsider status, mirrors the kind of bigotry he as a Syrian experiences in the United States. He rightly emphasizes, however, that those with darker skin face worse profiling as well as intellectual and physical discrimination everywhere. He contends that he is "white passing" and, therefore, "more palatable" than other migrants to the U.S., despite his sexual identity being looked down upon and othered in both Muslim and U.S. cultures. This, of course, further complicates the way different identities intersect with being Muslim and Queer.

Though the concept of 'race' is biologically unreal, racism in fact is very real. Humans are remarkably uniform genetically. Humans are the most genetically similar to each other of all existing species. Genetically speaking, humans have extremely low levels of genetic variation relative to closely related species, such as chimpanzees. In fact, most genetic variation exists within population groups (such as those who share nationality) rather than between different population groups. The concept of 'race'

emerged as a way to classify humans, largely to benefit slave owners who desired to justify the use of brutal, unpaid slave labor and abuse on a biological basis. Carolus Linnaeus, in his work *Systema Naturae* (1735), classified humans into four distinct races: *Americanus*, *Asiaticus*, *Africanus*, and *Europeanus*. These classifications were then relied on and ranked by those who wished to use/abuse people for free labor on the basis that they looked different. Those such as Georges Buffon, Franz Joseph Gall, Samuel Morton, and Josiah Nott in the 16th-18th centuries published information claiming that non-white ‘races’ could be ranked lower in mental capability and social aptitude. Through this legacy of scientific racism, the U.S. has established itself as a country in which the perceived idea of ‘race’ plays a large part. Both Yannis and Brittany are non-white, factoring into how they navigate their identities in the U.S. Being non-white and Arab adds an additional hurdle to their access to acceptance in a white-dominated society.

### **Discrimination and Intersectionality in Sexual Relationships**

Yannis points out that the intersections of sexual and religious identity are not separable from racial stigmatization. He elaborates upon racial stigmatization and conceptions of masculinity, familial dynamics and his parents’ perception of sex as Muslim migrants from Syria, and age gaps in the Queer community:

(YH) And in terms of sex and my family, they don’t know that I have sex, and so there’s always this guilt. And I feel like that ties into Islam and pre-marital sex. I feel like it’s beyond the fact that I’m gay — being gay adds extra flavoring, like a layer of shittiness according to their standards. Oh! And I think that’s what I was talking about last [interview] too. When I realized that my religion is mine, not based on what people think of me.

(DD) Right.

(YH) I think I said something like that.

(DD) You did, yeah.

(YH) What was I saying? Oh yeah, pre-marital sex. My parents would kill me. So every time I have sex, literally one of the first people I think of are my parents. [laughing] I don't think that's ever going to end and I just have to get over it.

(DD) In kind of a guilt way, where you're just like, oh what would they think?

(YH) Yeah, like, what if someone took a screenshot of what was happening. Like, a fly on the wall took a photo and just shared it with my family, what would happen?

(DD) Oh my gosh, yeah.

(YH) Exactly. I always have that in the back of my mind. And I also feel like there's almost a sense of fetishization — I don't know if that's how you say it — here in this area because you have all these people from all backgrounds and all walks of life, there are a lot of groups that are fetishized and I feel like I have been. And it's not direct, or it's subconscious things that I process after the hookup. You know?

(DD) Uh-huh. So what sorts of things do you think get fetishized?

(YH) Um, so, the fact that I'm Arab makes people think that I'm automatically supposed to be the more masculine one, and I think that is associated with like... well, obviously the hairiness, but I feel like it's more of a violence. Like, 'you're the violent Arab, the Arab that's masc and very much like... from a war-torn area, you have to be...' you know what I mean? They assume that because of the stereotypes, like these terrorists, slash ultra-masculine, slash hairiness, slash like physical appearance, makes me more masculine, automatically more dominant.

(DD) Right, or more aggressive or something?

(YH) Yeah, exactly. So they place assumptions on me in terms of sex. And then also I've had sex with older men, in their 40s, and so I feel like they also... well, I guess I'm fetishizing them because of their age, too.

(DD) Err, I think it's different, it can be a different dynamic though. I've heard a lot about, or maybe it's just from media, and from my young 20s, like 18 to young 20s gay male friends have talked about hooking up with older guys. It seems like kind of a common thing. What do you think that's about?

(YH) Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think a lot of... [sighs] I feel a lot of, for me, I feel like it's because, A) I feel like I'm more mature than people my age and so I'm more attracted to older people just because they give me that level of maturity, sexual awareness. And whenever I hook up with older people, the pillow talk is great [laughs]. Because we talk about life, and sex in general, and sexuality, and existence, and all these fun things. I've just learned a lot. So I actually enjoy it. And then in terms of experience, they're really good [laughs]. Because they've had sex like ten times the amount that I've had sex! And so it's great. But then I feel like, on a deeper level, and I guess it might be nasty because that's what people assume, but like a lot of people have issues with their parents. Like your relationship with your parents isn't perfect, and so I feel like there are maybe some quote-unquote 'daddy issues' or 'mama issues,' you know what I mean? I feel like there are some issues with that, so that's translated into some kind of sexual act. I feel like it's not necessarily because of the relationship, but an aspect of the relationship is introduced into the sexual relationship. So an aspect of my relationship with my dad and my mom, figures that are parental, that's translated into this adult — and I don't know how to word it better. But I feel like there's some form of connection in terms of knowing that this adult, because they're older, they're comforting. And so, when I sleep with — and I've slept with about three people who are what I would consider older, which is 30 and above, about three of them I've slept with. And so I feel like whenever I did with them, there's always this nurturing vibe and aspect to them. They check up on me at the end, they're like, 'Oh, would you like any food? I can make you something.' They just have that nature. So, it's really nice [chuckles].

(DD) Yeah! Yeah, that definitely makes sense. I can see that. And also just, yeah, you being more mature and wanting that. And I can kinda... I don't know if I'm making connections where there aren't any, but I can see how if you can kind of be spun around or fetishized in this way that, like, you're supposed to be the sexual aggressor, you're supposed to be the more dominant, blah blah blah, but then if you're hooking up with someone who's older then maybe there's less pressure in that way. Like maybe that feels like a relief for you? I don't know if I'm putting words in your mouth.

(YH) Yeah, yeah! No, for sure. No, no, write that! Yes.

Yannis conceptualizes sex with older male partners as “comforting” and “nurturing,” which he in part attributes to the relationship (or lack thereof) he has with his parental figures. He may seek comfort and security from someone older because he does not feel he receives that from his parents. Yannis goes on to further his point of racial stigmatization in terms of race and masculinity. He here notes how his sexual

partners might assume that because he is Arab he is more sexually domineering. As Catherine MacKinnon explains in her article ‘Intersectionality as Method: a Note,’ “The conventional framework fails to recognize the dynamics of status and the power hierarchies that create them, reifying sex and race not only along a single axis but also as compartments that ignore the social forces of power that rank and define them relationally within and without. In this respect, conventional discrimination analysis mirrors the power relations that form hierarchies that define inequalities rather than challenging and equalizing them.”<sup>37</sup>

Upon further analysis, the concept that Yannis broaches wherein presumably non-Arab gay male partners perceive him to be sexually dominant is possibly also rooted in the patently racist cultural notion that Muslims are inherently more violent, especially toward Queer individuals, than ‘Westerners’ are. Director of the Institute of Race Relations Liz Fekete also provides some further background to changing opinions about Muslims in the Western world following 9/11. Speaking from a European standpoint, Fekete notes that, “some feminists and gay activists are now part of an overtly right-wing consensus that calls for immigration controls specifically targeted at immigrants from the Muslim world. Central to such a process is a generalised suspicion of Muslims, who are characterised as holding on to an alien culture that, in its opposition to homosexuality and gender equality, threatens core European values.”<sup>38</sup>

This points to the impact of 9/11 on perceptions of Muslims in areas which are

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37 MacKinnon, Catharine A. 2013. “Intersectionality as Method: A Note.” *Signs* , Vol. 38, No. 4, *Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory* (Summer 2013), pp. 1025.

38 Fekete, Liz. “Enlightened Fundamentalism? Immigration, Feminism, and the Right.” *Race & Class* Vol. 48(2): 1-22. 2006.

primarily secular or Christian and mirrors MacKinnon's point that Islam is seen as antithetical to the practices of white, Western Queer peoples.

As aforementioned, following the events of 9/11 in the United States, Muslims in the U.S., be they native-born or migrants, became perceived as more violent and unpredictable and as having oppositional views to those held by supposed 'real' Americans. I contend also that those from predominantly Muslim nations, such as Yannis, are viewed as less advanced (read: more 'primitive') by white people from the United States, further contributing to the culturally ingrained sentiment that Arabs are violent and dichotomous to white Westerners (despite the West's long, violent history of colonialism). In her work "Stuck between Islamophobia and Homophobia: Applying Intersectionality to Understand the Position of Gay Muslim Identities in the Netherlands," Soumia Akachar writes, "from the views of integration and sexuality, authors such as Jivraj and De Jong (2011) have warned against an encompassing of the Dutch emancipation of gay rights as a model for sexuality and integration politics. In the same line of reasoning as Rahman's (2010), they argue that the focus on the discourse of gender equality as Western and modern ethics being incompatible with the core values of Islam 'fails to grapple with the complex subjectivities of diasporic queer Muslims' (Jivraj & De Jong, 2011, p. 145). The result of such controversies is a normalisation of homosexuality where cases of homophobia identified as predominating in Muslim communities are presented as antagonistic to that normalisation. Such understandings of sexuality and ethnicity tend to disregard the location of gay Dutch

Muslims, embodying intersectional identities (e.g., ethnicity, religion, sexuality).”<sup>39</sup>

Though she describes the Queer Muslim predicament in the Netherlands, her sentiments validate my assertion that all Muslims, be they Queer or not, in majority-white Western nations are perceived as opposed to the modern ‘normalisation’ of homosexuality.

Therefore, it stands to reason that even Queer Muslims could be classified by their partners as inherently dominant and even potentially violent sexual partners. Akachar goes on to note that her, “paper’s query resulted in a majority of the articles (forty-one of sixty-four) reproducing the discursive connection between homophobia and gay-bashing by young Muslims on the one hand and the incompatibility between gay rights, homosexuality and sexual freedom and Islamic norms and values on the other.”<sup>40</sup>

Queerness and Islam are viewed in Western cultures as dichotomous, by Queer and non-Queer peoples alike.

On one hand Yannis is fetishized for being Arab and on the other he is rejected for being Queer. His simultaneous desirability and exclusion within both the Queer community and hegemonic United States culture puts him in a precarious position. He is viewed by others as dangerous and alluring in the same stroke and must contend with these judgments in the way he goes about his life. Yannis finds comfort in his relations with older men and also feels as though he is expected to fill a sexually domineering role; he can discuss aspects of religion more openly with non-Muslim peers and must grapple with the stigmas placed on him for being Muslim.

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39 Akachar, Soumia. 2015. “Stuck between Islamophobia and Homophobia: Applying Intersectionality to Understand the Position of Gay Muslim Identities in the Netherlands.” *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1-2 (2015), pp. 176.

40 *Ibid.* pp. 179-180.

He adapts to this by seeking community online and in mature partners who may better understand the complexities of his identity.



## Conclusion

Through the lenses of my two participants, we have gotten a look at some of the particular complexities arising from Queer Muslim identities. It is also clear that there are different ways of interpreting Islamic law and the Qur'an. Brittany and Yannis touch on similar concepts such as parental fears, understanding their sexualities in terms of Allah and their communities, and the ways in which race interplay with sexual and religious identities. Brittany's experience as a second generation Pakistani woman in the United States is somewhat comparable to Yannis experiences as a first generation migrant from Syria in terms of race, sexuality, and religious affiliation. Both touch on topics of discrimination in their respective countries of origin versus in the United States. They also each discuss the importance of media, television and movies, and the internet community in learning about their identities and their positions in Islam. They both researched feminist interpretations of the Qur'an which allow for Islam to maintain relevance and provide compassion for all identities in the modern age. However, of course, there are significant differences between my two participants' experiences, which proves that Queer Muslim identities in the United States cannot be simplified under one umbrella. Yannis identifies as a gay man and Brittany as a bisexual woman. Yannis is 'out' to his parents while Brittany is not. They have different familial backgrounds. Brittany is a practicing Muslim while Yannis is not. Differences such as these necessitate a broader understanding of Queer Muslim identities in the U.S. as interwoven yet distinct.

I am reminded of the film *Naz & Maalik*, which follows two gay 18-year-old Black Muslim men throughout a day of their lives in New York City.<sup>41</sup> The two are romantically involved, yet Naz and Maalik have differing opinions on morality and what is permissible in Islamic law. In one scene, they purchase a live chicken to slaughter “halal style” as a gift to Maalik’s mother for her birthday. Afterward, they begin to kiss. As things progress, Naz stops and says they should restrain themselves because their sex is haraam (prohibited and sinful). Maalik, on the other hand, remains unconvinced, even telling their friend Dan earlier in the film that there are things much more haraam than them being gay. Naz is also reluctant to slaughter the chicken although it is halal and considered compassionate by their faith. He says it’s “sacreligious,” while Maalik says it is “very religious.”<sup>42</sup> These conflicts point to the tension between the two men’s morality concerning what is acceptable by Allah. In a sense, throughout the movie, there is in fact tension between morality itself and Islamic law — the two things do not seem to always align for Naz or Maalik. They sell lotto tickets on the street and they go to mosque to pray. They have sex with each other and they eat halal foods. In such ways they craft their own forms of morality and ways of being to navigate their identities, similarly to Brittany and Yannis. Brittany stands against what has become the traditional separation of men and women in the mosque, and also aims to pray five times daily. Yannis has separated himself from Islam as a religion, and asserts that he is Muslim. Just as Queerness is a spectrum, so is religious

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41 *Naz and Maalik*. 2015. Directed by Jay Dockendorf.

42 *Ibid.* 56:00-1:12.

identity, and both participants demonstrate that they negotiate their identities on both fronts to be accepted but also live authentic lives.

This project aimed to provide young Queer Muslim individuals living in the United States an academic platform from which to share their own lived experiences. This knowledge hopefully alters the lense of the public stereotypes and stigmas to more accurately portray Queer Muslims. As per the most recent Pew Research Center report, Muslims (over the age of 18) account for 1.1 percent of the total population in the U.S.<sup>43</sup> As a small, niche population here in the United States, Muslims are left largely under-represented in academic work. Even more so, the Queer Muslim experience in the U.S. is not accurately subsumed by the Queer community or the Muslim community.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, this project aims to deepen knowledge of intersectionality in the fields of religion and gender/sexuality. This research further contributes to Anthropology and specifically to both Queer Anthropology and the Anthropology of Religion. The interviews with my two Queer Muslim participants, Brittany and Yannis, presented here, will ideally lead to a better understanding of Queerness in religious contexts and religious identity in Queer communities. This project seeks to identify the ways in which Queer Muslims construct the ‘self’ both within and outside of religious contexts — through identifying my participants’ behavioral differences and similarities

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43 Pew Research Center. “New estimates show U.S. Muslim population continues to grow.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow/>.

44 Concept developed per Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” She asserts herein that, “many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (2).

in religious, family, and friend circles, these interviews address the dynamic ways in which these specific identities intersect and create new modes of being. Furthermore, my work has broadened my own personal perspective and instilled in me the capability to better “find coherence within complexity, sharing within multiplicity.”<sup>45</sup> In listening to each other in a way which permeates our narrow scope of vision, we are better able to create something new, something better, of ourselves rather than repeating history.

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<sup>45</sup> Bateson, Mary Catherine. “Improvisation in a Persian Garden.” *Peripheral Visions: Learning along the Way*, HarperCollins, New York, 1994, pp. 9.

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