Making Space and Finding Voice for the Narrative of Muslim American Youth: The Educational Journeys of Female Muslim American High School Seniors

A doctoral thesis presented

by

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Abstract

Muslim American high school seniors navigate their educational spaces at a time when the 2016 Election has unleashed a rhetoric that is riddled with Islamophobia. The experiences of four female participants engages us in their counter-narratives debunking stereotypes and assumptions that exist about their demographic. The formal and informal experiences of the educational journeys of these participants help us explore the role of family, faith-based education, mosque, and community in the lives of these students. The social and academic learning opportunities for these participants showcased instances of inclusion and marginalization, where there were times when the students underwent a double consciousness. Transitioning from faith-based schools to the public education system became easier when positioned in a climate of diversity. The students’ intersectional experiences of multiplicities of identity was a complex endeavor when it came to acculturation, and the students traced their points of acclimation to American culture. Muslim American students experience a dichotomous pull between religious values and American culture and remain cognizant of these differences.

Keywords: Muslim American youth, acculturation, Islamophobia, informal and formal educational experiences, transition, identity, Critical Race Theory, MusCrit, multiplicity, counter-narratives
Making Space & Finding Voice for the Muslim American Narrative: The Educational Journeys of Female Muslim American High School Seniors

Chapter One

Introduction

Students in a private Muslim school gather in the prayer room to watch the live streamed funeral service for Muhammad Ali. Proud that they carry the legacy of the champ as they uphold their faith, these students stand a little taller at Jackson’s (2016) words honoring not only the boxing legend, but the courage it takes to stand up for justice and embrace one’s identity. A few days later, the students follow the news of the Orlando shooting with apprehension that the attacker might be Muslim, and they would once again have to hang their heads in shame.

The topic. Criminalized for the crimes of others, Muslim youth face repercussions in society where they are consistently judged for not being American enough if the label of religion is tagged to them. Carrying the burden of guilt by association when acts of terror are perpetrated, these youth face experiences that are particular to their demographic. Regardless of their differences based on language, culture, ethnic origin, etc., Muslim American youth are bracketed as “designated Others” due to their religious identity and made “targets of reflexive hatred” by the mainstream (Suarez-Orzoco in Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. xiii). According to Sirin and Fine (2008), in the post 9/11 context, the “two cultural identities, “Muslim” and “American” were reinvented” (p.11). In the light of the attacks on the twin towers the possible multiplicity of identities of Muslim Americans was not only questioned, but also sabotaged as they were demonized for their religious association. The last few years have seen a 78% increase in Islamophobic attacks on Muslim Americans due to the political climate of bigotry during the presidential campaign which is representative of a continued demonization of this population.
(Lichtblau, 2016). Each time there is a mass shooting or terrorist attack, the immediate concern of the population is not where and how it occurred, but an internal plea that it’s not a Muslim who perpetrated it, as that translates itself in a blanket demonization of everyone with that religious association.

Muslim American youth today continue to face a dilemma of twoness similar to that which DuBois (1903) explicated more than a century ago in his discourse on race and national identity, where being Black and being American were antithetical to each other and extolled a continuous effort on the part of the marginalized demographic to consistently prove how these two aspects of one’s identity could be present in any one individual. Being a young Muslim American today necessitates forging “collective identities that honor both their parents’ culture of origin as well as their home” here in America, all the while walking a “tightrope of scrutiny” of their own community and the larger mainstream (Suarez-Orozco in Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. xiii). The Muslim American experience similarly evokes practicing a hyphenated identity that questions the legitimacy of nationality because of the religious guilt by association attached to it (McCloud, 2010). How one can be truly American if they are Muslim as well is a question that faces this demographic because of the presumed exclusivity of these two titles. More than a hundred years ago DuBois wished “to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American” for he had no desire to “Africanize America”, nor “bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism” (1903, pp. 1-4). Muslim American youth stand at similar crossroads, however the experience of this population remains largely unexplored within academia.

**Research Problem**

Through his ecological theory, Bronfenbrenner (1979) posits the inter-relational impact of the macro, exso, meso, and micro in creating a multifaceted and interdependent identity and
experience for individuals (also Hernandez, 2016). In a context where white mainstream is the acceptable definition of American, and often promulgated as being antithetical to all else that is non-white, an identity dichotomy is assumed. Muslim American youth have their narratives to share in their particular experience of being the demonized non-white.

“Double Consciousness” and Oppression of Muslim Americans

In coining the term “double consciousness”, DuBois (1903) offered critical race theorists a platform to situate the conversation about the identity of marginalized people. Lewis detailed DuBois’s concept of double consciousness as one in which the individual “dwelt equally in the mind and heart of his oppressor as in his own beset psyche” (as cited by Dixson, Anderson, and Donnor, 2017, p. 14). In other words, being a marginalized individual entails a daily practice of seeing oneself through one’s own eyes as well as through those of the oppressor, and often times, standing at the crossroads of this very dichotomy. Black (2012) explicates a representation of double consciousness “when being an “American” means African Americans have to be integrated, assimilated or marginalized for subordination and invisibility instead of their being included as full citizens on their own equally negotiated terms” (p. 6). The predicament that emerges is the contradiction that may occur in how one perceives herself personally and publicly due to the superimpositions by the mainstream white (Black, 2012).

Similar to African-Americans, other people, who sit outside of the norm of the mainstream United States culture, face a similar struggle of justifying the harmlessness or authenticity of their identity to the dominant. An example of a group who fits this characteristic would be Muslim Americans. Regardless of whether Muslim American youth were born before or after 9/11, or that they have no association to the 9/11 atrocities personally, they are demonized by virtue of holding a Muslim name, or their parents’ country of origin, or their
choice of clothing (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Levinson (2011) urges us to consider “double consciousness” not as an ailment, but as a perspective that allows us to see the multiplicity that exists in identities that are not monolithic, but rather boldly intersectional and multi-faceted, where it is possible to be Muslim American unapologetically. Whether marginalized Muslim American students navigate their identities with this “gift of second sight” (Black, 2012) that celebrates this multiplicity, or grapple with the struggles of situating themselves, can best be learned through their own story-telling.

**Racism and Religious Oppression**

According to the National Research Council (2006), racial discrimination also includes “differential effect or treatment on the basis of factors other than race”. This component of the definition “broadens its scope to include decisions and processes that may not themselves be racially motivated, but have the ultimate consequence of systematically disadvantaging minority groups” (Pager, 2006, p.2). In other words, multiple types of oppression can be understood through the use of racism as a framework, because it hinges on the presence of discrimination which is common to such experiences.

Religious bigotry, like racism, promulgates supremacist tendencies seeking to dominate all others that may represent fear or threat for the mainstream due to their difference as “Others” (Lorde, 2007). According to Choper, (1994) even though “race may seem to be a more immutable condition than religion, and religious belief systems may appear to have a more interwoven effect than race on the conduct of people's lives, both traits have been the object of public (and private) stereotyping, stigma, subordination and persecution in strikingly similar ways” (p. 492). More specifically, while one’s race may lie on a color binary and therefore evoke stereotypical prejudice, religious markers also are treated with similar discriminatory reaction.
Comparing prejudice based on religion and race, Choper states succinctly, “intentionally disadvantaging individuals because of their religion is the constitutional and moral equivalent of invidiously discriminating against people because of their race” (p. 501).

Muslim Americans are a diverse group that represent a make up of multiple genders, races, languages, cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities. Despite these differences, due to their discrimination based on their religion, they share a common experience (Tindongan, 2011).

Simpson and Yinger (1985) in their analysis of prejudice towards racial and cultural minorities shed light on the commonalities of different minorities’ experience in their interaction with the mainstream. They state that minorities share these experiences because they are a non-dominant group that holds on to identifiable cultural traits and practices, which are held in low esteem by the mainstream. In this sense, Muslim Americans also share the experience of oppression with other oppressed groups in the United States. As Simpson and Yinger (1985) suggest, “relations among [different] races have a great deal in common with relations among groups that think of themselves as different on other grounds- culture, nationality, religion” (p. 24). The markers and implications of prejudice remain the same whether the target is racially or religiously centered. Prejudice seeks to generalize about a group, stereotyping and misjudging all in one broad stroke (Choper, 1994).

**Purpose Statement**

The founding principles of this nation are a testimony to the ideal of creating a society that guarantees freedom and justice for all (Dorn, 2014). These ideals also translate into our educational system’s stated goals to provide a relevant and appropriate education to all students, regardless of their differences (Calbos, 2014). However, we notice that in reality some students’ experiences continue to be nullified and they remain marginalized (Reyes III, 2007). If authentic
democracy is to flourish, and the principles of social justice and equity truly realized, then all students, regardless of demography, need to be given a voice and space (Brown, 2006; Shields, 2004). The purpose of this study was to explore the currently underrepresented educational experiences of Muslim youth that would allow us to develop means in which they can be empowered to becoming visible citizens of their country.

**Justification for the research problem.** Institutionalized oppression against Muslims ranges from microagression, microassaults, and microinvalidations to outright violence and blatant bigotry (Bonet, 2011; Sue, 2010). Being born or growing up in a country that seeks to avoid, ignore, invalidate, and demonize one’s experiential narrative is akin to being shunned to a life of invisibility or consistent apologetics (Sirin & Fine, 2008; Shields, 2004). The current political climate in the post-2016 Election where media and presidential rhetoric have unleashed an irresponsibly Islamophobic campaign are testimony to the exacerbation of this social injustice of institutionalized oppression that had increased dramatically post-9/11 (McCloud, 2010; Kimberly, 2011; Sarwar & Raj, 2016; Said, 1997).

As a religious minority, Muslim Americans define themselves as a duality, a “hyphenated identity”, in a consistent effort to bridge the gaps created by bias (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 195). While other religious groups living in this country may refer to themselves as Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Sikh, or Hindu with ease, Muslims are wrought in a cycle of apologetics where they define themselves as Muslim American to assure society that they are safely patriotic and not of a singular religious identity (McCloud, 2010).

Extant research on marginalized populations holds generic value for this study and are expounded upon in greater detail in the review of literature. Taking Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) recommendation, we can gauge that environment and social experiences have a deep impact in
shaping identity. Berry (2005) speaks at length about the process of acculturation and provides solid theoretical grounding on the experiences of minority populations as they navigate the space between two cultures. The works of DuBois (1903), hooks (1994), Delpit and Dowdy (2008), and Freire (1973), offer insights into what constitutes a meaningful and socially just education. Specific to the Muslim context of marginalization, we find a few examples of research, including Fatima (2011), who offers an interesting take on the multiplicities involved in identity-making and what it constitutes to be considered a valid Muslim, and the varied layers that contribute to an identity construction. Tindongan (2011) explores the post-9/11 climate for Muslim youth, while Jilani (2015) focuses on Muslim students’ experiences in high school.

Deficiencies in the evidence. Currently, educators find a dearth of materials and curriculum supplements that can address the Muslim American experience in a relevant manner. Literature most commonly associated with the demographic includes Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner, and Malala Yusufzai’s I am Malala. This literature flaunts the example of an exceptional Muslim protagonist who fights the by and large oppressive, violent, and backdated Muslim majority in a far-flung country, further distancing the Muslim American experience as irrelevant and building stereotypes simultaneously. The narratives of Muslim American youth can fill this void and offer authentic and poignant insights into their diverse experiences.

Nullification and evasion in curriculum can, therefore, be addressed by these voices and the space they create in capturing the narrative (Eisner, 2002). Implications on instructional practices and policy making can only result from an extant conversation and availability of evidence and resources. This study becomes a stepping stone towards that direction.

There is some availability of literature around the Muslim American youth experience that hinges primarily on the post-9/11 era (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Jilani (2015), Tindognan (2011),
Fatima (2011), and Bonet (2011) offer us insights into aspects that can inform pedagogy while developing cognizance of this demographic. Muslim American youth are often demonized and face hostility due to their religious associations, but we find limited space making for their narratives. By drawing parallels to the experiences of youth other historically marginalized “Other” communities in America, we can begin to grapple the post-9/11 experience for Muslims in the country (Sirin & Fine, 2008). This group, however, has its distinct layers of complexities to unravel that slip through the cracks in theoretical frameworks which have left the Muslim experience under-considered. Creating space and finding voice for the Muslim youth of America is integral to creating a truly representative society that provides avenues for growth to all.

Relating the discussion to audiences. This empowerment that comes with enabling a platform for voice can lead to change and the establishment of social justice on a larger scale where the stories of these youth can open dialogue and conversation among educators, academicians, and policy makers. As change agents, scholar-practitioners have the imperative task of realigning the heart of education with the experiences of the very students it seeks to serve (hooks, 1994).

Significance of Research Problem

This narrative study sought to make space and find voice for the narrative of Muslim American high school seniors. This study holds relevant and timely significance considering the impact of an Islamophobic discourse on Muslim youth as they navigate their presence in their communities. This increase in bigoted discourse has also been met with diverse people coming together in unison to speak against injustice. Muslim American youth find themselves navigating their identities in a time of hostility and support without light being shed on their educational experiences that are particular to them. This qualitative study hoped to “illuminate and
interrogate asymmetrical power relationships, and engage with others in local resistance to
dominating ideologies that marginalize and oppress” (Jenlink, 2005, p. 6; see also Brown, 2006)
while becoming a platform to “publicly raise uncomfortable and critical questions” that confront
dogmatic orthodoxy and the status quo, and in this process enable both learners and facilitators to
raise awareness around the issue (Jenlink, 2005, p. 7). This study has resounding implications
within academia and scholarship. Policy makers who impact by carving democratic ideals into
reality also need to be cognizant of the issues this study brings to attention. Educators and school
leadership, curriculum experts and counsellors must be equipped with an understanding offered
here towards achieving true inclusion in our educational system. When students’ experiences lie
at the heart of teaching, their learning becomes relevant and meaningfully connected to their
personal and public lives (hooks, 1994).

On an individual level, therefore, students are given the opportunity to share what it is
like to navigate their identity at a time that is rife with hostility and bigotry towards their
religious group. This study hoped to explore the different coping mechanisms (Ngo, 2010) that
students utilize in their journey through identity-making, and where we can locate examples of
resilience and strength among Muslim American youth (Berry, 2005). Often considered
culturally deficient (Yosso, 2005), how do Muslim youth feel about being part of the
demographic and navigating their way through the twoness of being Muslim and American
(DuBois, 1903)?

**Positionality Statement**

Identity work is essential in making ourselves attuned to our positionality and also
challenging our presumed notions about ourselves. In tracing our personal histories we are able
to garner a glimpse of events, experiences, and relations that impact the way we are, the way we
see ourselves, and the way we choose others to see us. Not only does the past have this impact on identity work, but so does the present context with its expectations and biases. This positionality statement is limited in its scope of exploration, in that it is limited by the choices I make. While a lot goes unsaid, it attempts to capture some salient experiences that have shaped my positionality on this issue of social justice.

Several strands woven together create the identity of a scholar practitioner. The influence of ethics and positionality add to the complexity of this identity and impact the choices the scholar practitioner makes about the facets that concern her most. Jenlink (2005), aptly refers to this tapestry of experiences that shape positionality as “bricolage”, a construction that has various layers, both subtle and distinct. The scholar practitioner collaborates pure and applied sciences while conducting her research (Labaree, 2003) and juggling the groundwork with evidence based studies. An important consideration in this process is that I was only part of the Other that I was researching, making my positionality both inclusive and exclusive (Briscoe, 2005). As a Muslim American researcher, I had to maintain a sharp consciousness of my biases when it came to interviewing participants in that my questions were not leading (Roulston & Shelton, 2015), nor my discourse subordinating (Briscoe, 2005). Maintaining an ideological check that the validity of this dissertation lay in its universal application was going to be of paramount importance. Additionally, Labaree (2011) points out the importance of the scholar’s experiences, concerns, and struggles, and urges us to see research and practice as “normative, practical, experimental and particularistic” (p. 17) where the educator does not make a compromise between her role as teacher and student, at the same time developing her learning and informing her practice. A scholar practitioner navigates the reality of her own positionality and authentically investigates the myriad realities that surround him in a process of meaning
making that is representative of truth. A collaboration of theory and practice, where activism and a quest for information work in unison, create a culture of praxis that Freire urges us to aim for (2013, as cited in Flinders & Thornton.

**Personal Experience.** I went to a private, all-girls, Catholic school in Pakistan for my elementary and middle grades. This allowed for a unique interfaith experience of being in a Muslim majority country in a Christian minority school. While most of the student population was Muslim, the school was run by missionaries and the faculty were mostly Christian. Being part of this private school was considered an elitist symbol and the most obvious sign of this privilege was that you came out thinking and speaking in English while 85% of the nation struggled with illiteracy. This appears to be my first experience with colonization and indoctrination of the supremacy of white culture. Growing up in Pakistan, then and even today, is plagued with a color complex; white is fairer, better, and goes further, hence the market for skin whitening creams. English is a weapon of supremacy that the elite use to put down, control, and subdue the masses. White culture is better; English songs are cooler; Western clothing is more modern. Therefore, growing up with an understanding that we were deficient culturally was a given (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Leonardo, 2002; Yosso, 2005). While basking in privilege there was also a nagging sense of discomfort at the irony of being supremacist towards one’s own people, and simultaneously not good enough by the espoused white standards.

The climate at the school was rigid and disciplinarian. In my twelve years there, I came across only one teacher who was congenial. My lack of confidence and low self-esteem took a complete turn when I went to a co-ed high school. A 60 year old teacher there, was a complete source of inspiration for any person who crossed her path. She set my life in motion and taught me that full throttle was the only way to be. I became a debater, coach, and judge on the national
speech and debate team, won awards in acting and poetry reading, and was appointed head girl. Extracurricular did for me what academics had not even touched upon. It is because of her that I am invested today in my students and sons in getting involved in as many meaningful experiences as possible. This journey led to my coming to the United States for my undergraduate studies which I left after a year to return to Lahore to spend time in a traditional seminary and reclaim religious identity. The journeying between places and mindsets has encouraged me to deeply consider the question of identity making in youth. Paired with that is the experience of raising two boys in America, and watching them navigate their Muslim identity in a faith-based school and the community at large. My own children’s interactions on the soccer field, or a public high school, a desire to change names to make it easier for mainstream populations to address them, all bespeak this same concern.

While I studied in Charleston, SC or Lahore, the teachers who were friends to their students became the role models for my own classroom leadership. In my one year at a traditional seminary, I came across one leader who was authentic and the other garnered people power by rhetoric. Rhetoric generated rhetoric, and with it came judgement which is a recipe for breeding unauthenticity. This has deeply impacted my positionality in that I perceive the role of educators to be a fatal toss between enabling and disempowerment based on the choices they make. A sensitivity to rhetoric, nullification, and evasion in curriculum has left me deeply concerned with the under- and misrepresentation that continues. My desire to reshape curriculum and carve something that becomes a platform of strength for students stems from this.

On a deeply personal level, I have on my own oscillated between covering and uncovering my hair, and wearing and unwearing the niqab (face cover). My own transitions through religious symbols and their impact have left me sensitive to their effects on identity
crafting in young people. Furthermore, being part of a Muslim minority puts the added pressure of whatever I do as being reflective of the faith at large, and a lot of my sense of urgency in leading community efforts stems from the fact that I do not want to us become an invisible or despised people in the face of Islamophobia and Trump-incited bigotry. I have experienced my own fair share of bigotry being called a terrorist or receiving racial slurs. All of these incidents hone in the seriousness and relevance of this study in the creation of a truly equitable society. Becoming a role model of active participation as a Muslim American woman originally from Pakistan, I want to teach my students that stereotypes are meant to be broken, and the work of change begins at home, with oneself. This active engagement has been my clarion call at my school for the last six years, and I have been able to create a climate of participation with students.

**Professional Experience.** Currently I am the principal at a private, community-based, Muslim school in Massachusetts that caters to Preschool to eighth grade students. Being Muslim in America places on my students the guilt of 9/11 even though they were not born when the terrorist attacks took place. In my work with eighth graders, I often witness conversations where they talk about the discomfort that Islamophobia causes them, the fear of being hated without cause, and the anxiety that people have judged them without knowing them. During the reading of *Hana’s Suitcase*, my fifth grade students consistently drew parallels between the language of hostility in their country today and Hitler’s in the past. Ospina and Su (2009) acknowledge that “social identities (such as race-ethnicity) create communities with collective grievances and aspirations that must be addressed from within” and this is exactly the burden I see for myself (p. 136). According to Brown (2010), “the emphases faculty place on social issues do influence student variables, including student interest and activism” (p. 702). Nobody is going to tell their
stories, so enabling them to remember and create their narratives is essential. Bearing this in mind, it is essential that I allow the students to express their perspectives and provide them a platform where they can discuss these issues, and learn the importance of speaking truth to power. While I speak of resistance, it is equally important that they don’t put the burden of bigotry on every white person and avoid the creation of the very stereotypes they face. This facilitation towards social justice and equity is only possible with a readiness to learn and acknowledge that in a thirteen-year old’s life, religion may place a burden on them.

Another initiative towards social justice and equity has been in the mentorship I provide our students. Whether it is leading Robotics, Speech & Debate Club, Earth Day initiatives, or community service at shelters, food pantries, refugee relief programs or the local library, I seek to provide opportunities for my students to increase their civic participation. Growing up as young Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 world places a burden on my students for acts of terrorism that they have nothing to do with. This leads these students to feel marginalized and invisible to sometimes the extremes of being despised, demonized, and mistrusted. These environmental constraints are exacerbated by Islamophobia, and twisted representation and fear mongering by the media. The results are often feelings of being unwanted members of the community, who need to keep a low profile, and remain unwelcomed. Our elementary and middle school students often felt that a lot of experiences outside of the comfort zone of the school were off limits for them, because of their minority status. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) would call these a part of white privilege where whiteness becomes the most coveted property and curriculum opportunities and intellectual property are shaded an exclusive white. Involving my students in these initiatives, where they not only participate but also achieve
accolades, allows them to see that the world is not all a daunting place, and that sometimes space is not made for us, but must be made by us.

In my teaching experience I noticed that students also face a lack of representation in the curriculum, where their narrative is often absent therefore their lived reality rendered invalid. When we legitimize silencing, students’ needs are removed from the “heart of educational equity” and their social experiences and lived realities are deemed voiceless (Shields, 2004, p. 110). A lack of Muslim characters in texts makes my students more marginalized than other demographics. Establishing a dialogic leadership that allows for conversations on disparity, social injustice, and inequity, rather than avoiding them as one opts for comfort or political correctness, lies at the crux of finding a voice for social change, a voice finding that lies at the heart of critical race theory (Shields, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As a teacher and mentor, my social responsibility impacts students. On this front, skirting the issue, pretending color, religious, or class blindness casts students into invisibility and a silenced lived reality. According to Ospina & Su (2009) the use of “deliberate strategy to name and tackle issues of race may be more than an unavoidable dimension for American social change” (p. 132).

**Doctoral Experience.** During the course of my doctoral program I learned that the urgency for activism toward the establishment of social equity and justice have been the clarion call from DuBois (1903), Freire (1973), and Said (1997), to Stevenson (2012) and Robinson (2006), among several others. Creating a paradigm shift in ideas is not the work of isolated scholars even when they spearhead the challenge of rethinking and provoking introspection. Ideas are fueled to an active reality when we all partake in the process and begin with ourselves, fixing our practices within individual spheres of influence.
Earlier in the program, I had been reluctant to speak about my experience as a female American Muslim in the discussion board because it is largely unfamiliar to my doctoral colleagues. I chose to write about social inequities for those communities who have begun a conversation in academia and define myself in terms that were more generic than specific. We were introduced to texts that confronted color blindness, or bias toward sexual orientation. The academic literature on the Muslim American experience has the same awkward silence that I feel prevails in children’s literature for this community. It was during my coursework on a class on social justice and equity, that I acknowledged this aspect of my positionality and voiced the silence. This feat was particularly interesting because I had been advocating it among my students for the last four years, yet realized now that among a group of adults, I showed restraint myself. This experience in identity making, picking, and choosing what we speak about is reflective of the struggles in my young students. The discussion forum was an awakening for me that we still have a long way to go. My colleagues understandably, were disconnected from my experience, sometimes not having anything to say, and at other times acknowledging that they hadn’t considered the impact of bigotry on young Muslim children. However, this realization that I was choosing silence and invalidation for myself brought home the urgency of the endeavor. Seeing a lack of Muslim representation in academia is nothing short of a crisis call that this community is a long way from visibility. The doctoral journey caused me to steer in the direction of social justice, which I had always been passionate about but had considered disconnected from the field of education.

**Research Question**

My positionality, including my professional and personal experiences in conjunction with the extant literature, lead me to the following research question, which guided this study: What
are the lived experiences of Muslim American high school seniors in their formal and informal educational journeys?

**Summary**

The individual’s subjective reality impacts the nuance that she relates to in her environment. Social consciousness, culture, interdependence between author and reader, history, and personal experiences all lead to a process of interpretation that is distinct, but no less true than the next. DuBois (1903), hooks (1994), and Freire (1972) have offered me interpretations of the work of scholar practitioners in a context that speaks volumes to the integrity of this life endeavor. Speaking truth to power, realizing the potential of human relationships, building compassion in our work are the stepping stones towards the construction of a democratic society partaken by change agents. Passion provides impetus for meaningful work; however, it is equally necessary to be cognizant of bias in the process and allow for data to speak for itself in a way that is not colored by one’s own assumptions. Remaining open to the diverse experiences that participants bring to the study, so as not to disqualify realities that one may want to consider as outlying was essential.

The scholar practitioner’s next feat is to extend the conversation forward and provide impetus in society for dialogue, reconsideration, and advocating for social change in areas that were previously ignored or misrepresented. Jenlink (2005) reminds us that the scholar practitioner’s task is to “illuminate and interrogate asymmetrical power relationships, and engage with others in local resistance to dominating ideologies that marginalize and oppress” (p. 6). In this sense the scholar practitioner becomes the transformative leader who aims to “publicly raise uncomfortable and critical questions” all the while leading to confrontation with dogmatic orthodoxy and the status quo (Jenlink, 2005, p. 7). Transformative leadership therefore becomes
a trait of the scholar practitioner as it takes her on a path where social shortcomings and inequities are addressed (Brown, 2006). Our personal and professional experiences inform the causes of social justice and equity that we feel drawn to. Bronfenbrenner (1979) aptly suggests considering the impact that environment and socialization have on shaping our identity, which doubtlessly shape one’s positionality (Briscoe, 2005).

**Theoretical Framework**

**Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) to Examine the Experiences of Muslim Americans**

Authentically capturing the experience of Muslim youth in America is possible with a utilization of a Critical Race Theory framework (Petro, 2017; Hernandez, 2016) which allows, through its tenets, a deeper exploration of nuances such as marginalization and whiteness and their implications on the experience of an undervalued group. Minority groups share common experiences even as they have their share of particularities. Central to any discourse on undervalued social groups is an understanding of the marginalization that prevails. CRT has afforded academia a framework that allows the exploration of power dynamics and resultant oppression. CRT has maintained that racism is endemic, and neutrality a false claim. CRT bases its argument on the premise that whiteness is perpetuated as a norm and all “other” therefore is inferior (Harris, 1995).

Using the lens of CRT, scholars have studied the experiences of non-white students’ isolation and marginalization (Harper, 2013). This isolation could be seen in the experiences of people of color such as in the experience of African-Americans (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002), just as it could be witnessed in the case of Native American children, who also faced marginalization due to their “otherness” (Feagin & Feagin, 1999). Briscoe’s (2004) work described at length the implications of “othering” where all that is non-mainstream is considered
inferior and despicable. Despite a long history of fighting against discrimination “perceptions of difference across racial/ethnic groups remain pervasive in American society, with racial and ethnic minorities viewed in a consistently negative light” (Pager, 2006, p. 6). Muslim American youth face a similar marginalization as they live out their daily lives despite demonizing media portrayals of their religious association. Stereotypes of terrorism, oppression, and barbarism remain a prominent part of mainstream discourse on this demographic (Gerhauser, 2013).

While CRT is originally seen as a framework that studies the relationship between race, racism, and power dynamics, the place of religion in human interaction has similar implications (Petro, 2017). Racial and religious identities for non-white populations are a prominent marker on the ladder of marginalization and process of othering. Heschel (2015) calls this the “slippery nature of racism” which allows it the ability to masque itself, altering its manifestation as it racializes religious identity (p. 3). Today CRT is not limited to a racism centered on race alone, but discrimination that results from an oppression of a marginalized people (Hernandez, 2016). Grosfoguel (1999) refers to this as cultural racism, which is based in premises on ethnic absolutism that declares the supremacy of a dominant culture while demeaning all others. According to Omi and Winant (2014), racialization includes the “extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified” group (p. 111). Racialization, therefore, occurs with minority populations who are often perceived as inferior because of their differences from the mainstream. As these differences are highlighted, markers of distinguishing identity are created around this distinct demographic, featuring certain characteristics of “group-ness” that sets them apart from the dominant (Garner & Selod, 2014, p. 14). A necessary result of racialization is then the occurrence of stereotypes, macroaggressions, discrimination, and power dynamic, the very concerns of CRT (Gerhauser, 2013). It may be suggested that Muslim cultures are considered
the Other in their contrast to mainstream whiteness. Whether it be the broad stroke generalization of the ‘clash of civilizations’ forwarded by Huntington (1996), who Said (2008) famously called out, or the everyday disparities that exist, marginalization is a key experience in the lives of Muslim American youth.

Critical Race Theory studies the power dynamics that occur in the interactions between the dominant demographic and the oppressed (Ladson-Billings, 2013). It considers racism to be an endemic, socially constructed and pervasive part of society and negates the presence of color-blindness, meritocracy, or neutrality (Bell, 1995). CRT has also explored the role of intersectionality in the experiences of marginalized people and proposed the telling of counter-narratives by the underrepresented population (Delpit, 1998). Using CRT as a framework for this study allowed me to give voice to and create space for a marginalized segment of society.

**Tenets & Application of Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory has certain identifiable tenets which include: (a) the permanent and endemic nature of racism; (b) the importance of counter-narratives by marginalized people; (c) whiteness as norm and property; (d) interest-convergence as a means of initiating change; and (e) challenging concepts of neutrality (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). According to Housee (2012), CRT not only hones on macro issues of policymaking, instructional strategies, curriculum, and the like, but also “on the micro picture of interpersonal behavior, classroom interaction, participation, and related matters” (p. 104). It is in this micro space that counter-narratives emerge which allow for a platform that documents and represents the experiences of the undervalued or demonized group (Delpit, 1998). Documentation and representation of Muslim American youth’s experiences as a marginalized population were the intended goals for this study in particular, and therefore found a necessary alignment in CRT as the framework of
choice (Housee, 2012; Decuir & Dixson, 2004). Counter narratives are an essential feature of CRT, and in the case of this study, also became the choice of a narrative research methodology. As Writer (2013) explains “CRT allows for the contestation, deconstruction, and reshaping of the master narrative” by bringing to the front counter narratives that trigger a catalytic change (p. 3).

**Challenge to mainstream.** Seen through a critical race theory (CRT) lens, which, according to Solorzano (1998), includes a challenge to mainstream ideology and proliferation of social justice causes, “intercentricity of race and racism”, focus on people’s “experiential knowledge” and “utilization of interdisciplinary approaches”, the Muslim American predicament requires further exploration (in Yosso, 2005, p.73). Solorzano (1998) posits that while “race and racism are at the center of a critical race analysis, they are also viewed at their intersection with other forms of subordination such as gender and class discrimination (p. 122).

The Muslim American experience finds application of CRT in its explication of daily social injustices and inequities, but lacks independent and specific representation within academic circles. What is required is to go beyond Shield’s (2004) call, in that, not only do avoidance and silence have to be challenged, but in fact, a new conversation in CRT begun, that is not only academically theoretical, but also hinges at the very narrative experience of the people it seeks to study. This includes reshaping the dialogue on social mobility being possible only through its reliance on achievement of the white norm (Olneck, 2000), to introducing the concept of “community cultural wealth”, creating a counter-narrative, and questioning why knowledge that counts is so exclusive (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Bourdieu (1997) and Hirsch (2006) are prominent names in speaking about a cultural literacy that leads to social mobility, and similarly, Landsman (2001) attempt to teach this white literacy to her students for the sake of social progression. Yosso’s (2005) debunking of this assumption of social capital is a clarion call
for a further exploration of the Muslim experience whose narrative is consistently shunned to invisibility. A “liberatory or transformative response” to oppression and discrimination thus lies at the heart of CRT (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 8).

According to Allen (2013), “CRT seeks to challenge dominant claims of race and gender neutrality, objectivity, universalism, ahistoricism, colorblindness, and equal opportunity” because such claims numb the actuality of marginalization and “camouflage the self-interests and privileges of dominant groups and maintain the status quo of racial inequalities” (pp. 174-5). This tenet of CRT which assumes racism as a permanent feature of American society found application in my study. Challenging dominant ideology (Allen, 2013) is another avenue pertinent to CRT, and while this study seeks to capture the experiences of the oppressed, it cannot touch all aspects of the discussion and address the entire spectrum of meritocracy, neutrality, color-blindness, and the like in isolation, but rather as a broader stroke. Sue’s (2010) work explicates in detail the covert microaggressions that prevail in a society against marginalized populations. While overt hostility and bigotry is often called out (Allen, 2013), the underlying covert instances are often missed. Subtle remarks that someone looks pretty even in a scarf, or that it’s surprising one doesn’t have an accent, or said something smart, are all examples of microaggressions (Sue, 2010). The Muslim experience is wrought with examples of such hostility. Tracing the experiential knowledge of an oppressed people is an essential component of CRT (Tindongan, 2011) and needs to be conducted in the case of this underrepresented demographic as well.

**Whiteness.** Marginalization finds its roots in the belief of white supremacy over all other, which results not only in an ‘othering,’ but also a shunning of the other as inferior (Leonardo, 2002). In their article on whiteness, Clarke and Watson (2014) describe it as “an
invisible and oppressive center: a social norm that is parasitically attached to layers of hidden privileges” (p. 70). While Kress (2009) labels whiteness as a “society shaping force” (p. 70), Leonardo (2002) emphasizes that whiteness is a “social concept” and a “racial category” that has historically been violently oppressive and sought to discriminate, enslave, marginalize, and segregate Others to maintain its own supremacy (p. 32). Additionally, Leonardo (2002) mentions the common refrain of whiteness to the marginalized when racism is discussed is to tell them to go back where they came from. This refrain is not one used against blacks alone, but also used against Latinos and Muslims today, just as it was used against the Irish and the Japanese. However, research for the Muslim demographic in this area is lacking (Abdullah, 2013; Jilani, 2016) and this study through its application of CRT exposes the impact of supremacy on the demonized.

Whiteness makes everything blatantly visible except itself, according to Leonardo (2002), and this holds true for the Muslim women who might consider taking the headscarf off so they would lose the visibility that the whiteness perspective offers them (Fatima, 2011). This perspective is written by whiteness itself and boldly interprets the headscarf as it deems fit, as a symbol of oppression, related to terrorist households, and the like (Housee, 2012). Whiteness thus claims to comprehend people better than they understand themselves, offering a decoding of their worldview and creating a narrative for them, but without them and despite them (Leonardo, 2002). Writer (2008) reminds us that CRT contests the notion that racism is not isolated discriminatory incidents, “but rather historical, systemic, and ideological manifestations of power to serve, maintain and protect white privilege” (p. 2).

In trying to address these injustices whiteness tends to suggest that the problem does not even exist, or is only marginally present and that non-whites are fussing over nothing (Sue, 2010;
Leonardo, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991). Also, whiteness offers to comprehend the experience of non-white without offering a space and voice to the oppressed, hence sabotaging their narrative with its own interpretation (Leonardo, 2002). We find a lack of exploratory literature on the dynamics between whiteness and the Muslim American experience in academia.

**Intersectionality.** Remaining cognizant of intersectionality is an important premise in CRT (Ramsay, 2013). Oppression and privilege are not singular but rather a dynamic representation of an intersection of history, politics, identity, economics, gender, ethnicity, race, and religion (Ramsay, 2013). CRT recognizes that anti-essentialism is a necessary reality when trying to grapple the nuances of human experience. It is in this niche carved by intersectionality that we see a space emerge in CRT that recognizes the impact that religious association can have in marginalizing a population further. Housee (2011) states that it is important to avoid assumptions about what an ethnic minority or religious identity might mean because identity is based on multiplicity and varied interpretation. Housee’s (2011) acknowledgment of religion as a marginalizing reality places religious association and identity in the crux of CRT’s concern with social justice. Crenshaw (1995) emphasized that because no individual is monolithic he/she stands at the crossroads of many social experiences that shape reality. While this study does not focus on intersectionality, because according to Delgado (2011) “identity categories are infinitely divisible…and lead to paralysis of critical work amid a mosaic of never ending difference” (in Gillborn, 2015, p. 279), it is imperative to acknowledge the presence of this reality. Muslim American youth navigate the intersectional reality of multiplicities of identity on many fronts. These include the color of their skin, the heaviness of their accent, their gender, choice of clothing, countries of origin, spectrum of practice to name a few. A bi-racial English Language Learner Muslim girl in a private school, from a refugee family holds a complexity of
multiplicities of identity that can be hyphenated several times over to capture the intersectional nature of her being.

**Endemic nature of discrimination.** CRT contests the claim that racialization is not a central issue and that it only exists at the frays of societal makeup (Bell, 1992). To explicate the farce of neutrality, Leonardo (2002) argues, that racial democracy is not the norm and that whiteness informs the central curriculum and worldview that is taught to our students. Leonardo reminds us of the Thatcherist era that sought to make Britain great, just like Trump calls for making America great again today, by waterboarding Muslims, calling Mexicans rapists, and showing us that Black lives just don’t matter. Racial and religious identity have become key markers for non-white populations with a comfortable assumption of its legitimacy.

One might argue like Bell (1992) and state that racial disparity is a hopelessly intrinsic part of our reality and perhaps the best we can do is to help our students navigate it with some level of success (Landsman, 2001). However, offering a white hand of support while maintaining a culture of disparity continues to marginalize on a global level. Bettez (2011) makes a similar point as Leonardo (2002), Cole & Maisuria (2007), and Decuir & Dixson, (2004) albeit mildly, that a pedagogical space making for critical conversations lies at the heart of sowing the seeds of progress towards social justice.

**Off-shoots of Critical Race Theory**

CRT has accommodated under its umbrella several sub-categories that pertain to different marginalized groups. Misawa (2012) for instance explains how the six tenets of CRT can find application in QueerCrit which he refers to as a micro-theoretical perspective of CRT. He posits that this subset allows for intersectionality and homophobia, challenging the mainstream, confronting ahistoricism, focus on lived reality, multidisciplinary view, and emphasis on social
justice (Misawa, 2012). In the works of Simone de Beauvoir (1989), in the early years of FemCrit, we see a conversation initiated not just on the political rights of women, but on their social and cultural definition (Moi, 2000; Bergoffen, 1996). Intersectionality within CRT also then picks up the conversation on gender.

Brayboy (2006) explicated how “locating theory as something absent from stories and practices is problematic” in his proposal for the creation of TribalCrit. While he acknowledges the impact of several theorists in his work, he faced a predicament when scholarship did not explicitly understand and address concerns that were part and parcel of the American Indian experience. The creation of TribalCrit found its roots in CRT but goes beyond that scope to incorporate basic commonalities in Indigenous communities, all the while being cognizant that within the communities there may be a wide variation. These commonalities serve as the founding principles for TribalCrit’s tenets that see not racism, but colonization as endemic (Brayboy, 2006). Additionally, TribalCrit focuses on the imperialistic nature of U.S. policies and their impact on social identity and education, indigenous people’s desire for self-awareness in its many forms, focus on tradition and culture, the importance of story-telling, and activism (Brayboy, 2006). Creating this micro theory TribalCrit was able to capture issues of language loss, natural resource usage, and other social justice and educational issues that are challenging for the indigenous communities (Brayboy, 2006; Writer, 2008; Reid, 2014).

Similarly, LatCrit has utilized CRT to emphasize issues particular to the Latina/o population such as immigration, everyday life, language and the like (Fernandez, 2002). Four functions by Frank Valdes of LatCrit appear in literature as being the production of knowledge, pushing forward transformation, connection of struggles, and building a community (Fernandez, 2002; Aoki & Johnson, 2008). LatCrit focused on a commitment to anti-subordination and anti-
essentialism, by developing broad functions and by developing an inclusive scholarship towards social justice (Aoki & Johnson, 2008). This creation of a subset beyond original conceptions of CRT occurred partially by contesting and moving beyond the original Black/White binary that CRT focused on (Davila & Bradley, 2010).

AsianCrit too, has focused on considering minority stereotypes, immigration, disenfranchisement, language and accent among other issues (Kolano, 2016). Museus (2013) built on stereotypes of exoticization and emasculation when exploring a nativistic racialization that would be a focus for AsianCrit. This subset also outlines tenets particular to this ethnicity in the role that historical contexts play in understanding the power dynamics that exist today, acknowledges the complexities that construct identities, importance of anti-essentialism, intersectionality, storytelling, and a commitment to social justice (Museus, 2013). Kolano (2016) builds the conversation further in exploring the cultural capital and smartness stereotype as an example of a counter narrative within AsianCrit.

**CRT and Racialization of Religious Identity**

While many subsets of CRT developed over the years like FemCrit, LatCrit, QueerCrit, AsianCrit, and TribalCrit, a critical theory for the Muslim experience did not catch on, although the marginalized experience of this community is similar. Even as CRT blurred the parameters of race in its subsets’ exploration of QueerCrit and FemCrit, a niche in CRT that explores religious oppression did not get carved. As a distinct subset, the Muslim experience does not find representation in Critical Race Theory, a framework that aims to study the marginalized experiences of a people. The first step in doing so is to acknowledge the racialization of Muslims regardless of their ‘race’, but rather on the stereotypical markers that cluster them as an oppressed minority. Meer (2012) points out “the virtual absence of an established literature on
race and racism in the discussion of Islamophobia” and undertakes aligning religious bigotry as a racialization (p. 2).

A discourse about racialization demands also an understanding of its place in a conversation on racism that may focus on the color binary alone (Omi & Winant, 1994). To this end, scholarship suggests that racism existed prior to discriminatory practices that manifested themselves around pigmentation. Thomas (2010), suggests that while many may think of the development of “race as a post-Enlightenment ideology built upon the Atlantic slave trade, hinged upon observable phenotypical human differentiation” such as skin color and other physical and biological characteristics, in actuality these “discourses of modern racism not only antedate the social taxonomies arising out of nineteenth-century scientific thought, but it was Christianity which provided the vocabularies of difference for the Western world” thereby placing religion as a primary marker of racialization (pp. 1738-9). Thomas’s work thus situates religion as a marker predating color-based racism.

Omi and Winant (1994), mildly call religious bigotry a “rehearsal for racial formation” (p. 61); Meer (2012) argues that a discourse on racialization “needs to commence earlier in order to observe how racialized categories have saturated cultural portrayals of Muslims” (p. 4). According to Miles (1989), racialization broadly constructs “differentiated social collectivities as races” (p. 79), and is a “nimble meta concept” that need not be limited to “biological determinism” but includes also social collectives such as religion, language, and culture (Meer, 2012). Gans (2016) similarly emphasizes the racialization of refugee and immigrant populations in research work to include the experiences of marginalized people when the marker may not be purely biological. Racialization therefore “integrates physical features and social characteristics” as often individuals are “assigned a new racial identity, interestingly on a social rather than
phenotypical basis” (Fassin, 2011, pp. 421-3). Garner & Selod (2014) refer to this as “groupness” rendering a clustering of a social collective (p.14). Amrani (2017) suggests that religion is “raced” when a line is drawn around a demographic such as Muslims due to their choice of clothing, name, accent, or country of origin, thereby “reducing an individual to one aspect of their identity” (p. 25). According to Selod (2015), Muslim Americans are racialized and face greater surveillance and scrutiny if they are identified by Muslim markers. Therefore, while racial discrimination may commonly be seen as limited to physical characteristics, an exploration of racialization suggests that marginalized social groups such as Muslim Americans are also bracketed as a “race” despite their inherent diversity, based on the common association to religion.

Abdullah (2013), in his dissertation, proposes Critical Muslim Theory (CMT), which is centered on the following tenets: (a) Islamophobia is endemic, (b) Islamophobia is a social construct, (c) there are legal implications for being a Muslim male, (d) intersectionality as a tenet is informed by Muslim women’s experience while wearing the scarf, (e) storytelling offers Muslim men and women a voice, and (f) CMT is critical of how Islam is viewed by dominant society (p. 230). While this proposition of CMT is a step in the direction of creating a niche in theory, it oversimplifies in its specificity of sub-themes. Legal implications and intersectionality, for instance, are not theoretically or experientially gender specific. In addition, the emphasis on Islamophobia steers the Muslim American experience in the direction of hate crimes and blatant discrimination like Anti-Muslim protests or Muslim bans, and does not seek to capture the nuance of everyday microaggressions that this demographic may face. While Abdullah (2013) recognized this, and changed the original title Critical Islamophobia Theory to CMT, an exploration of the tenets shows an emphasis on Islamophobia as opposed to that of the Muslim
experience. How does a Muslim American define herself, what are the shared commonalities of his experience as he is racialized into this group, what instances of support or resistance does she find from her own community, how does she view herself through the eyes of the mainstream and her own, are all questions that seek to capture something deeper. The question here is not the impact of Islamophobia, but rather that of being a part of a racialized group.

**Significance of CRT to this study**

CRT offers us a framework through which race relations and power dynamics are not only studied, but also a momentum for activism towards social justice is also created. A utilization of CRT “moves the center of analysis from individual, to the individual in relation to her political, racialized, environment” (Hernandez, 2016, p. 168). The tenets of CRT include the centrality of race and racism in society, its clarion call to challenge dominant society’s perceptions of marginalization and the marginalized, a focus on the validity and truth of the lived realities of all people, and an interdisciplinary focus that pushes the cause of social justice in all fields. Topics of whiteness, the myth of color blindness, cultural capital, FemCrit, LatCrit, TribalCrit are all pertinent explorations within the CRT framework and intertwined with the purpose and implications of my study that seeks to create a counter-narrative, by creating a space where these students’ experiences can be given a voice and validation.

To capture the formal and informal educational experiences of Muslim American high school students, a qualitative narrative study will do justice to the task of space making and voice finding for this youth. While we worked with the assumption of power structures and creating change, the questions were open ended enough to capture the totality of experience in that they did not probe for struggles alone, but also stories of strength, support, and resilience so that suggestions for change could be offered. Quantitative, numerical responses would fail to capture
the nuance that a narrative offers insight into and CRT seeks to foster an exploration and validation of experiential knowledge as a necessary tenet. CRT offers a vantage point not only as theoretical framework but pivots as a methodology (Cook & Dixson, 2013). Additionally, the purpose of the study in and of itself was to carve a niche within CRT to fill the void around a Muslim voice.

An exploration of CRT prior to indulging in the study had afforded me the opportunity to gauge the work that had been done for marginalized populations in general and provided me a framework where their experiences can find validation and voice. Considering application of the framework to the Muslim context can therefore be founded on what had worked similarly in the past for other demographics. CRT shaped the interview questions in that it sought to capture the experiences of these students and explore the prevalent power dynamics that exist. It allowed a platform from where change can ensue. These students found voice and space through this experience, and educators and policy makers will better be able to serve marginalized communities by breaking these pathologies of silence (Bowman, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995). On lines of curriculum, an alternative voice can offer to shape a more inclusive dialogue and representation.

Within the academy, a niche for what I refer to as, MusCrit can be carved for which the urgency is greatest in this political climate. I coined this term with an intentionality of contributing to scholarship a first, yet concrete step in acknowledging the specificity of the Muslim American experience. As discussed earlier, creation of subsets within CRT serve the purpose of a mindful space making for the marginalized not as the generic “Other.” Instead, creating a specific subset validates the particularity of the lived experience and its relevance through specificity. Having a distinct subset within CRT with a focus on the reality of this
demographic is critical to giving it relevance and validation within mainstream academia. Baer & Glasgow (2010) push for a utilization of CRT in exploring how Muslim cultures can be introduced to a mainstream audience in an attempt to address stereotypes and Islamophobic tendencies. Khalifa & Gooden (2010) explored the lived realities of Muslim American students as they oscillate between resistance and assimilation when placed in an educational environment that does not resonate for them. CRT’s development from Critical Legal Studies was centered on this very idea of bringing to attention racial and discriminatory practices that have a systemic presence in the educational system. Housee (2012) turns to CRT in her exploration of Islamophobia and using students’ voice to work towards the resultant social injustice.

**Limitations of CRT**

Limitations of CRT in my study include an assumption (albeit obvious) that an oppressive power structure exists which is largely influenced by white supremacy. It was possible, however, that if the questions were kept open ended the findings would represent a range of experience and avoid total generalizations. An example of this may be the support that Muslims have found from the mainstream after the proposed Muslim Ban in the many protests and lawsuits that have resulted after the executive orders. It was concerning that if the study were to consider tenets of CRT like whiteness, cultural capital, marginalization and the like, it would become a work too broad in spectrum. For this reason, it was important to focus on particular strands and limit the study in certain tenets. In this case, even though whiteness may be an underlying premise, the interview questions avoided questions on whiteness and rather gathered narratives that bespoke a navigation of identity and acculturation instead, so that some concrete work as a change agent is undertaken and a counter-narrative provided. A common criticism of CRT as a theoretical framework is the charge that the stories shared may not be objective,
typical, or accurate (Farber & Sherry, 1995), to which Fernandez (2002) responded by stating the importance of voicing subjective experience. This criticism of CRT, paired with the particular that narrative inquiry seeks to explore, became the bedrock of this project.

**Conclusion**

There is much scope for exploration and collection of the American Muslim narrative so that history does not repeat its mistakes of incurring social injustices over a people because of their otherness. It is my hope that this study serves as a building block for a niche for *MusCrit* and that I am continue research in this area to better capture the nuances in this narrative. True change will occur if the students’ needs and experiences lie at the heart of praxis and pedagogy is inspired by the reality of all learners.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election shaped not only the political climate of the nation, but also brought to question ethical and social justice issues on a global scale. With a steady rise in hate crimes following November 9th, the public domain is charged with movements for social justice and equity. The current political climate is rife with examples of marginalized populations facing micro and macro aggressions in various forms (Sue, 2010; Allen, 2010). One such population constitutes Muslims in America, who while coming from various ethnicities, are associated to a religious group that is often negatively portrayed by the media. The research question sought to explore the formal and informal experiences of Muslim American high school students during their educational journeys. Extant literature suggests that Muslim youth in western countries have considerable struggles in navigating their identity in light of the Islamophobia that is prevalent today (Gulson & Webb, 2013; Ozyurt, 2013). In the post-9/11 world, Muslim American youth have grappled with identity politics during the last fifteen years and have stories of resilience and fatigue to share (Appleton, 2005; Bhatti, 2011; Tindongan, 2011; Jandali, 2013; Sabry & Bruna, 2007). Their stories span many European nations, Australia, Canada, and the United States creating a sense of global urgency that begs for a deeper exploration and understanding.

For Muslim American youth informal and formal educational journeys are no simple feat as they are riddled with complexities of marginalization that undervalued groups like themselves are faced with in their daily lives on both micro and macro scales (Leonardo, 2002, Sue, 2010). Acculturation in minority groups in a time that is rife with xenophobia and Islamophobia posits a challenge for the demographic within their immediate and larger communities (Asvat & Malcarne, 2008; Awad, 2010; Stuart & Ward, 2011). Exploring the nuances of gender (Hamdan,
2007; Hefner, 2015), and racism (Cole & Maisuria, 2007; Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Leonardo, 2013) can offer us insights into creating safe spaces for this demographics’ narrative, as found in extant literature. Pertinent in this area of research is a utilization of Critical Race Theory to understand the power and oppression at play that have been a huge undertaking of the likes of hooks (1994) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006).

A significant body of literature exists that explores the post-9/11 experiences of Muslim youth in different western countries. Despite the work that is present on marginalized populations, and the use of Critical Race Theory and acculturation framework in understanding the implications of whiteness in creating power structures, much work remains to be done as we travel the unchartered waters of the post-2016 Election era. The last presidential campaign and election have left the Muslim population in the throes of anxiety and uncertainty about what lies ahead. While heated debates continue and memes and videos appear on the social media newsfeed speculating a Muslim registry similar to the Holocaust, there is a dearth of literature and academic research around this contemporaneous issue. Significant work has been done around the macro theme of marginalized populations. It is in funneling down to the Muslim narrative that we find less research and identify a gap in literature to the post-Election situation in America as it impacts Muslim youth. This literature review will consider the topics of educational experience, identity making, and acculturation.

The experience of Muslim youth in America can be discovered through an application of a Critical Race Theory framework which focuses on a deeper exploration of the nuances of marginalization and oppression in their implications on the formal and informal educational experiences of an undervalued group. Minority groups share experiences in common even as they have their share of particularities. A closer look at identity making and the impacts of social
trends and community living on this crafting seeks to capture part of the lived reality of the demographic. Exploring the acculturation process as minority groups partake in a juggling of cultures at hand holds significance as being part of their experiential truth.

**Educational Experience**

A student’s educational experience lies at the heart of societal health and development. In many ways the school is a microcosm of society at large and represents for the students an impactful journey, whether positive or negative, towards self-discovery. According to Giroux (1994), “Schools cannot be abstracted from the larger society where histories mix, languages and identities intermingle, values clash, and different groups struggle over how they are represented and how they might represent themselves” (p. 36). It is important to engage in the discourse on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and education, the range of educational experiences, and the place of academic and social learning experiences in the lives of students.

**Critical Race Theory & Education.** CRT has offered an understanding of racism, power, and oppression that makes it a clarion call for social justice in educational settings. Bell (1992) and Delgado (1995), among others, are frequently considered the founders of CRT in education as an offshoot of Critical Legal Studies. According to Housee (2012), CRT “argues that racism is endemic and is deeply ingrained legally and culturally” and suggests “objectivity is false because there is no neutrality” (p. 104). CRT pushes for a thorough, accurate, and relevant understanding of non-white people’s experience of racism to a call for social justice activism (Housee, 2012). Because of this interaction between academia and activism, CRT continues to evolve as this dialogue continues. It is in the works of Freire (1973) and later in hooks (1994) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), that we find a focal emphasis on praxis in the field of education, where the student’s lived reality lies at the center of the educational experience, and
does not discount, invalidate, or silence their perspective (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Shields, 2004; Leonardo, 2002). Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) contended the racial inequities within the educational experience for African American students due to the marginalization that they suffer. Solorzano and Yosso (2009) emphatically call for a transformative pedagogy that studies the interactions between the dominant and the oppressed. In this vein, the lived experience of Muslim American students demands a voicing that aligns with the mission of CRT. The informal and formal educational experiences of Muslim American youth are riddled with episodes of marginalization and invalidation that have been under represented.

Spectrum of educational experience. In Dewey’s (1938) seminal discourse, *Experience and Education*, he proposes that educators must first understand the nature of human experience before addressing the question of what constitutes education. According to Dewey education must have both long and short term goals that benefit both the individual and society. Educational experience cannot be content or individual centered alone, but rather be cognizant of the “continuity” and “interaction” that formulate this very experience (Dewey, 1938). For Dewey therefore, it was experience that was both the means and the goal of education. Because students’ experiences have a subjective quality, their educational experience is varied from one person to the other. Meeting the student where he is at and providing a relevant educational experience lies at the heart of praxis (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1973).

Educational experience is not limited to the classroom and textbooks alone, but rather interwoven in formal and informal learning experiences in students’ lives (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). The explicit or implicit curriculum, interactions with faculty and peers, engagement in and availability of extra-curricular activities, interactions with family, tradition, and mentors, the social climate on campus or associated religious organization, all impact a student’s educational
journey just like content, standards, books, and instruction do. According to Certo, Cauley, and Chafin (2003) in their mixed method study of 33 students from 7 different high schools, gauging students’ experience in high school pertains to students’ learning experiences through the instructional programs, their interactions with teachers, their relationships with peers, and the activities they engage in. These four aspects can help gauge the level of relatedness, autonomy, and competence that a student may experience in a successful high school journey (Connell and Wellborn, 1991).

These three ideals of relatedness, autonomy, and competence become the benchmarks of an activated high school experience because they bring relevance, empowerment, content knowledge, skill set, and independence to the forefront of a meaningful educational experience (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Groves and Welsh (2010) in their study of 14 high school students determined a similar trend as they noticed that according to students’ perspectives the key pieces of an educational experience included interactions and quality of teachers, opportunities for responsibility, autonomy, and student voice, and a space for their needs being met. This research suggests that students are highly cognizant of what holds relevance to their educational journey and its impact on the formation of a confident identity.

Walton (2010), in a study of the high school experience of African-American students, found that interactions with teachers and peers as well as a culturally relevant curriculum were the most important areas of concern. These studies indicated that from a students’ perspective of whole education, the journey of learning includes formal and informal parts (Walton, 2010; Connell & Wellborn, 1991). The more formal parts included the explicit curriculum and classroom discourse that centers on that content in the presence of instructors (Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003). Additionally, the informal part included their interpersonal interactions on
campus, the implicit, evaded, or null curriculum that is part of the environ, and the activities they may engage in outside of their regular studies. Informal educational experiences also included interactions that students have with their family and community (Groves & Welsh, 2010).

**Academic learning experience.** The academic learning experience of students in high school is centered on the curriculum, standards, and instructional practices (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). The choices that lead to a particular curriculum’s implementation are of consequence to the degree of relevance students of different demographics will find therein (hooks, 1994; Giroux, 1994). In this sense, Giroux (1994) posited that “curriculum is also political in that state governments, locally elected school boards, and powerful business and publishing interests exercise enormous influence over teaching practices and curriculum policies” in this selection process (p. 36). In other words, the stories that find representation in curriculum set the norm for classroom discussion of valid experience and all those students whose experiences are not represented, under represented, or misrepresented are pushed to the peripheries of valid lived realities (Shields, 2004). Students’ engagement with this content became a large parcel of their academic experience in an explicit way (hooks, 1994).

Language plays an important part in influencing the mainstream discourse. Giroux (1994) argues that “language used by administrators, teachers, students, and others involved in either constructing, implementing, or receiving the classroom curriculum actively produces particular social identities, "imagined communities," specific competencies, and distinctive ways of life” (p. 35). He posits that the very language of curriculum highlights those “depictions of the larger world through representations that people struggle over to name what counts as knowledge, what counts as communities of learning, what social relationships matter, and what visions of the future can be represented as legitimate” (Giroux, 1994, p. 35). Those narratives that do not make
it into the textbooks are invalidated through this process and create a pedagogical environment that may not be fully representative. In this way, the implicit, null, and evaded aspects of curriculum carry substantial repercussions for students because they may reflect the very same invalidation, under-representation or outright silencing that can be witnessed in the macrocosm outside the school.

**Learning beyond the text: Implicit and explicit discussions of race and oppression.**

Beyond the text, there are often classroom discussions among peers and with faculty where racism and racialization is discussed. An important argument by Leonardo (2002) that resonates with the Muslim American experience is that “postmodern racism fragments educators and students’ ability to discern the difference between democracy and dictatorship”, and often the freedom in America is not critiqued even as it simultaneously demonizes an entire population (p. 36; Annamma, 2014; Kress, 2009). Whiteness seeks to nullify and ignore the realities of racism, and Leonardo goes as far as to question and deconstruct the responses of white students in conversations about whiteness, pointing out that their very reactions and responses are an offshoot of guilt projection back onto the Other, rather than an acknowledgement and gateway by the mainstream, to work towards equity. Leonardo (2002) appears impatient at the “snail pace of white racial consciousness” as delicate concerns for hurting sensibilities of the whites impedes conversations that are brutally honest (p. 41).

The role of educators is one of great significance as they direct these very conversations about oppression, supremacy, and privilege, and either support or question the dominant discourse (Groves & Welsh, 2010; Shields, 2004; hooks, 1994). Giroux (1994) hopes that “teachers recognize the political nature of their own work” as one which is an essential component “of a broader critical effort to make them self-reflective of the interests and
assumptions that shape their classroom practices” (p. 37). The direction a discourse takes in the classroom can be steered by the educator, and it is for this reason that research of students’ high school experiences sought to explore the scope of student-teacher relationship to gauge the experience accurately (Groves & Welsh, 2010; Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003). Pullman (2013) further explains the power of conversation when she states that “discourses function as framing devices, ontologically stipulating examination, judgment, measurement, and control. Rather than purely representing phenomena, discourses establish relations of inclusion and exclusion, stabilizing, fixing, and ordering phenomena through socially constructed sets of relations” (p. 175). More specifically, when educators establish the mainstream as norm, the experience of all else is nullified and the implication is one of devalue. In the framing of conversation, students’ lived realities can either find space or their narratives ignored. In the opportunity of discourse lies the potential for creating representation, relevance, and comfort for the marginalized, or provoking introspection on the nature of privilege.

**Social learning experience.** According to Giroux (1994), “the culture of the school is often representative of those features of the dominant culture that it affirms, sustains, selects, and legitimates” (p. 36). For the Muslim American high school student, an experience in a non-faith based school represents the mainstream cultural norm and Muslim American students may not find themselves represented in curriculum, their holidays not represented, their dress code having to be explained with consistent struggles of assimilation and acculturation (Jilani, 2015). An educational experience for students therefore hinges not only on what goes on in the time devoted to academics, but also that when other non-academic interactions takes place. For this reason, Giroux holds that schools are “a site that actively produces different histories, social groups, and student identities under profound conditions of inequality” without creating a space
to theoretically tackle the impact of such discrimination upon students (p. 36). Muslim American students, can often feel marginalized and demonized when the mainstream discourse in the school reflects stereotypical labeling of Muslims (Sirin & Fine, 2008). In the school environment, therefore, social groups may classify themselves as popular (dominant) or unpopular (inferior). Muslim American students can often be labeled as the Other in such a culture, and considered culturally deficient (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

Due to the demonization of any social group, a resultant predicament is that a person from an undervalued social group is considered responsible for the image of their entire group, so the work of one Muslim has the burden of representation of the entire faith (Crenshaw, 1991). Thus, prejudice in news reporting leads to the creation of an institutionally oppressive climate bringing down an entire population and not just the criminal (Tindongan, 2011). On campuses this can be seen in acts of bullying and insults. This oppression results in developing defense mechanisms like young students choosing to self-isolate, self-loathe, disassociate themselves from their home culture, all the way to resorting to violence and suicide (Ngo, 2010). Behavioral, biological, emotional, cognitive, and social health of marginalized populations is jeopardized due to microaggressions, making it necessary to question the absence of these concerns from curriculum (Sue, 2010). This marginalization can also be seen in curriculum where the narrative of Muslim experience is riddled with bias (Sabry & Bruna, 2007). While one may contend that Election 2016 saw an acceptance of covert aggression, this development is too current for extant scholarship.

In their support of informal methods of education Scribner and Cole (1973) posit that “school represents a specialized set of educational experiences which are discontinuous from those encountered in everyday life and that it requires and promotes ways of learning and
thinking which often run counter to those nurtured in practical daily activities” (p. 553). Where formal education may focus on particular content, informal education opens avenues for real-life exploration. According to Scribner and Cole (1973) informal education fosters traditionalism, “fuses emotional and intellectual domains”, and can be regarded as socialization because students are provided different opportunities of interaction (p. 555). In a similar vein, according to large scale study by Ivaniushina and Aleksandrov (2015), 6,992 surveys collected by students found that “extracurricular activities, or education beyond the classroom, are a powerful resource for the development of the personality and social competencies” (p. 19). By providing opportunities of such engagement “extracurricular activities, especially structured ones, present a special environment for socialization and create conditions for the acquisition of different social skills, which may not always be developed in the course of normal studies in school” (Ivaniushina & Aleksandrov, 2015, p. 20). These activities may also be the space where organic discourse between peers ensues for the development of interpersonal relations.

**Summation.** Critical Race Theory offers us a framework through which race relations and power dynamics are not only studied but a momentum for activism towards social justice in education explored. In the context of this study using CRT as framework allows an exploration of an alternative narrative and counter-stories that captures otherwise underrepresented experiences. Marginalization and dominance are deeply interrelated in the creation of oppressive experiences of others and exhibit themselves in myriad aspects of a student’s academic and social learning. These can have a far-reaching impact on one’s perception of self-identity. A study of extant literature showcases how discourse within and outside the classroom can either empower or disable students. Implicit and explicit curriculum, interactions with peers and
teachers, opportunities for and engagement in extracurricular activities all comprise the formal and informal educational experience of students.

**Issues of Identity**

The Muslim identity is no simplistic feat to define or experience as it includes nuances of ethnicities, diverse cultures, linguistic and denominational preferences, and geo-political placement that make for several multiplicities (Bhatti, 2011). Recent news regarding Muslims, whether it be local instances of hate crimes (Sirin & Fine, 2008) or large scale Islamophobic rhetoric (Jilani, 2015), are evidence that identifying with the group comes with its set of challenges. These challenges can showcase themselves as a “double consciousness” among students, which plays a pivotal role in how students navigate their identities personally and socially. In an exploration of identity, it is important to consider if the youth experience hindrances in their social engagements because of their identity and the role that their religious domain plays in crafting their sense of self.

**Multiplicity.** Muslim youth in America navigate not only dual identities of religion and nationality, but also carry interwoven threads of multiple experiences that cannot be isolated from each other. Bhatti (2011) in an ethnographic study explored the multilayered experience of young Muslim men in the UK and found that the group felt simultaneously as insiders and outsiders in England where they were born and raised because of the perceived multiplicities within their identities. The experience of the participants showed how while they held high aspirations for their social and educational journeys, they felt misunderstood and misrepresented. A multiplicity in identities was apparent in what appeared to the participants as conflicting family, social, religious, and personal values, because of the presumption that identity must be singular.
In some cases, the students were reluctant to make choices about keeping a beard or engaging in activities that identified them as Muslim; in others they chose to appear defiant to dominant culture (Sabry & Bruna, 2007). Similarly, Archer (2001) in her study of Muslim, black, British young men expounds on the multiplicity of identities in this era and how individuals crisscross between these complex variables. Sabry & Bruna (2007) would contend that there is a third-culture or rootlessness at play here when one feels no dominant bond to one identity. According to Tindongan (2001), due to the “multiple identities as adolescents, immigrants, and Muslims, these students face a rough terrain of obstacles because of who they are and where they come from” (p. 73). Multiplicities of identity in Muslim youth posit a set of challenges and choices for this demographic particularly in a time that is rife with Islamophobia.

**Islamophobia and identity.** Multiplicity of identity and the agency required in the post-9/11 world to challenge stereotypes of identity when the climate is extremely Islamophobic holds paramount significance (Tindongan, 2011; Jandali, 2013; Sabry & Bruna, 2007). We see these trends emerge globally and Muslims in America are no exception to this experience. Housee (2012) writes in detail about negative media portrayals of Islam that institutionalize fear mongering and stereotyping of the religion as barbaric, aggressive, hostile, and terrorist. These dehumanizing labels posit for the demographic a challenge of being uncomfortable in their own skin as they are depicted as “folk devil” who seek to cause damage in a mainstream West (Housee, 2012, p. 106). DuBois (1903) wrote about the complexities of having a “double consciousness” where one simultaneously views himself through the eyes of the other as the Other (Tindongan, 2011).

When possessing a Muslim body equals to being a terrorist there is some serious identity politics at play that can no longer be considered transparent, but instead is thick with multiple
factors at play (Fatima, 2011). Tindongan (2011) suggests that the “Othering is manifested in various ways in U.S. society from television shows about sleeper cells to racial profiling and even to the overrepresentation of news coverage of peoples and events presumably associated with Islam” (p. 73). Similarly, in Australia, an “ambient fear” of Muslims taints the urban politics and inhibits a social climate that would be inclusive further creating resistance among Muslims as they are faced with dehumanizing rhetoric, othering, and misunderstanding (Gulson & Webb, 2013; Hassen, 2013). While many practices may symbolize one’s association with Islam, Fatima (2011) posits that exclusion or distinction holds deepest implications as a common identifier that one belongs to this religious group.

**Identity and social presence.** A shared sense of exclusion poses challenges to opting for social engagement. Islamophobia and the push for a social visibility are explored at length by Hamden (2010) who points us in the direction of working towards solidarity and coalition building in an Islamophobic West. Basit’s (2009), mixed method study in UK also explicated that Muslim youth believed in the importance of civic engagement and good citizenship while considering religion to be an integral part of their identity. However, they faced challenges because of the stereotypical bias against Muslims featured in microaggressions, looks, or attitudes exhibited by the majority. The youth asserted that a legal status in the country was evidence for citizenship, but were simultaneously cognizant of underlying prejudice. In an empirical study conducted in British universities Appleton (2005) gathered experiences of Muslim students in the post-9/11 world where a majority of the students were vehemently opposed to the attacks. His study highlights the psychological stress and fear caused by Islamophobia among the participants where they had experienced verbal or physical racism, and feared police authority and speculation. While campuses did not appear hostile, the general
environment for the participants seemed fearful and tense. In the face of Islamophobia, these students found solace in associating themselves with other Muslims and their religious organizations (Appleton, 2005).

Facing up to the challenge, Muslim youth attempt “confounding broader secularizing trends in British society, and turning their faith from a matter of personal piety into a vehicle for social integration and advancement” and are heavily engaged in causes of social justice (Appleton, 2005, p. 313). Jandali (2013) and Fatima (2011) point out that the increased political participation of Muslims is riddled with also a fear of being in the spotlight and appearing obviously Muslim. In the process of definition, Muslim bodies are marked as such because of their beards, hijabs, or skin color. While some may have opted for a physical appearance that does not identify them as Muslim there are others who chose to don the appearance as their version of resistance (Fatima, 2011).

Identity and religious organizations. Religious organizations like mosques and Muslim schools impact the formal and informal educational journeys of Muslim youth in America. While sometimes they foster a spirit of resilience and association to heritage (Eck, 2001), at other times the same institutions may provide challenges to identity navigation (Fatima, 2011). Eck (2001) emphasizes the role that Muslim schools have played in maintaining Muslim identity among youth. This is done by curriculum add-ons like the instruction of Islamic Studies, Arabic, and Quran and by the implementation of a modest dress code, segregation, prayer times and other rituals and beliefs.

Students often face issues of multiplicity within Islamic schools as well because there are many ethnicities at play (Hassen, 2013). This occurs particularly when the Islamic school or mosque has a specific ethnic majority presence that directs the implicit and explicit curriculum
(Eisner, 2002) in that environ. Marginalization within the Muslim community leads to judgment and myopic understandings of what constitutes a Muslim enough identity that in turn poses a challenge for the youth even within their own religious group (Fatima, 2011).

**Summation.** While Britain, Canada, and Australia have produced substantial work on identity issues for Muslims in the post-9/11 world, the same cannot be said for scholarship in America. It is too early to find research on the current political climate’s implications on identity building as there is impending fear about registry of Muslims, toughened surveillance of mosques, increase in hate crimes, and a crackdown on the immigration policy. Muslim American students experience a “double consciousness” as a marginalized segment of society. Navigating their identities in a climate where Islamophobic tendencies impose stereotypical labels on this demographic is no easy feat. Additionally, outside of the school the role that community members and mosques play in identity building can be impactful.

**Acculturation**

A twoness in identity was discussed by Du Bois (1903) as he spoke about the marginalized African American population and their attempts to reconcile these two aspects of identity. Muslim American as a term to define this minority implies a duality that assumes a level of dichotomy or compromise to patriotism. Habermas (1994) wrote about the impact that majority culture has on the expectation for minorities to assimilate. Acculturation among Muslims has complex undertones as it is impacted by social norms and expectations (Asvat & Malcarne, 2008), Islamophobia (Tindongan, 2011), the life at the mosque (Awad, 2010) and the heritage culture which may be considered deficient by the mainstream (Tindongan, 2011).

**The acculturation process.** The Muslim demographic in America not only navigates their religious and citizen identity, but also those of their heritage cultures which may be Asian,
Arab, European, Native American, Latino, or beyond (Fatima, 2011). Seminal work on the acculturation framework by Berry (1980, 1992, 2005), suggests that acculturation takes place when two cultures, dominant and heritage, encounter each other. Four processes can result during acculturation, which include assimilation where the minority highly adopts cultural values of the dominant culture but does not retain heritage culture to that extent (Asvat & Malcarne, 2008). Integration occurs when the minority individual is able to adopt dominant culture and also retain heritage or ethnic culture, whereas a separation or segregation occurs when dominant culture is rejected and heritage culture is retained. Berry (2005) also suggests marginalization occurs when the individual feels disconnected to both dominant and heritage culture.

Acculturation study for minority (immigrant and refugee) populations has received considerable attention in the last decade (Berry, 2005), with some focus given to Muslim students as well (Asvat & Malcarne, 2008).

**Acculturation among Muslims.** Research on acculturation of Muslims tends to look at the Muslim culture as heritage and American culture as the dominant, without much consideration for ethnic cultural subsets within Islam. Unidimensional and bidimensional acculturation studies show some inconsistent results relating acculturative stress to depression in minority groups. Asvat and Malcarne (2008) in their cross-sectional, quantitative study of 68 students explored the repercussion for Muslim students where there was a match/mismatch between their acculturation and that of their families. Prior to their research there was no study exploring this demographics’ experience of acculturation, even though it can be assumed that acculturative stress is bound to occur among Muslims when their heritage values interact with the dominant culture. They found that Muslim students who have a match between individual
life and family life about their heritage culture were protected from depression in the short and long term.

Stuart and Ward (2011) posit in their mixed method study of Muslim immigrant youth that the demographic seeks to balance their personal, familial, and social lives in a successful manner. To achieve this multiple identities and cultural aspects must be navigated and is done by “alternating orientations, blending orientations and minimizing differences” (Stuart & Ward, 2011, p. 255). The participants exhibited strategies where they were mindfully engaged in understanding and cultivating their identities. Their study is cautious in exploring not only the stressors in the processes of acculturation but also the resilience and aspects of strength that can be found in Muslim immigrant youth in New Zealand which is generally considered a tolerant society unlike the current post-election climate in the United States.

The mosque & acculturation. An important parameter to consider here is the assumption in Asvat and Malcarne (2008) and Awad (2010), that there are huge differences between dominant and heritage Muslim cultures that create tension in the acculturation process. Awad’s (2010) study considered acculturation of the Arab-American population who are not generally considered as a minority because of the specificity of the subset. While it is true that heritage Muslim cultures tend to be family oriented with an emphasis on gender segregation (Awad, 2010), it is also important to consider the changing face of Muslim presence in the current times. Bagby’s (2009) research on 25 American mosques, even though published a year prior to Awad (2010), considers the American mosque experience and contends the assumption that mosques belong to heritage culture and are therefore antithetical to acculturation. Bagby (2009) posits in his research coupled with two other studies that the American mosque is the cure to terrorism because it breeds an overwhelming majority of contextualist Muslims who are
highly proactive in community service, civic engagement, and political participation and interpret faith in light of their current setting. According to Bagby (2009), mosques become the grounds for proliferation of acculturation and have congregants who may be critical of social immorality on lines of sexuality and drugs, but think highly of other American values and norms.

Ironically the greatest resistance to acculturation found in the congregants came from the African American Muslim subset, perhaps not because of religious identity but racial resistance (Bagby, 2009). The assumption that assimilation is a natural social phenomenon that is enhanced over the years (Alba and Nee, 1977) is contestable because we see elements of resistance or retention in some second or third generation Muslim Americans. A majority of the congregants were maintaining their American and Muslim identities and were open to pluralism, which was not absent prior to 9/11, but did become solidified after the catastrophe (Bagby, 2009). There has been considerable call from contemporaneous Muslim scholars in America to highlight the commonalities between Muslim and American values. It is interesting to note here that Babgy (2009) opines that Muslim congregants are adopting extrinsic values of the dominant culture such as language, socialization, clothing, while maintaining the intrinsic values of their faith. Ozyurt (2010) also found in her study that mosques play a significant role in enabling the acculturation process of their congregants. It was found that Muslim immigrant women’s acculturation is facilitated by mosques whose leaders have futuristic and progressive mindsets. Only 12% of the religious leaders interviewed considered the dominant culture to be antithetical to Islamic culture in Ozyurt’s (2010) study and fostered a separationist worldview. Ozyurt’s (2010) study focuses on acculturation of the immigrant population and therefore considers the mainstream culture as the host culture. Literature on the mosque’s impact on the acculturation of youth who were born and raised in America is lacking.
Islamicophobia & acculturation. Islamophobia in the current climate has implications on acculturation of Muslims. Islamophobia has been defined in various ways and we refer to Islamophobia as “fear, avoidance, and danger-related attitudes towards Muslims” (Kunst, Sadeghi, Tahir, Sam, & Thomsen, 2016, p. 251) Kunst, Sadeghi, Tahir, Sam, and Thomsen (2016), in their two-part study of 202 Christian and atheist Norwegians and 210 Norwegian-Pakistanis suggest that Islamophobia itself hinders the acculturation process because of the heightened incongruity between the mainstream and minority group. According to Kunst et al. (2016), isolating religious differences as the cause for segregation is inaccurate, since societal assumptions make acculturation a difficult process for Muslims. Negative media influence and group devaluation can cause minority groups to separate further (Tindongan, 2011).

Islamophobia, therefore not only creates an expectation of assimilation from Muslims by the majority, but also, pushes Muslims further into separationist tendencies as they experience perceived discrimination.

Cultural Capital. Acculturation expectations stem from seeds in the cultural deficit model. Another important actualization of institutionalized oppression to consider is when the only culture considered worthy is white and all Others are shunned as socially and culturally deficient (Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Olneck, 2000). This deficit model reduces the experience of Muslims in America as one that is unworthy and alienating, and their culture is misunderstood, and considered foreign or backward (Sirin & Fine, 2006). Yosso (2005) challenges the deficit interpretation of Bourdieu (1997) on the issue of cultural capital, and calls for a retheorizing that empowers disenfranchised and marginalized populations who are oppressed further by the continued emphasis on cultural deficit. When the narrative of whiteness becomes the lens through which all others are seen, and it repeatedly argues that marginalized population suffer
from a deficit that needs to be overcome or considered, these populations are being put in a race that they have already lost.

Yosso (2005) contends the deficit model and argues that marginalized populations have plenty of cultural wealth that is often unrecognized and unacknowledged. Yosso (2005) makes an important point when she keeps her work open to communities of color. While not explicitly stated in her work, Muslim American communities have their own cultural wealth to offer but are often demonized to maintain a forced invisibility or be buried under a plethora of stereotypical battles that they must fight. The six aspects of cultural capital have an applicability to the Muslim American experience and we see this at play in the lives of these students within faith based and public schools deliberated upon in existing literature. Yosso (2005) suggests that communities of color often have aspirational, social, linguistic, familial, resistance, and navigational capital. In highlighting these assets of cultural capital, Yosso (2005) hopes to “transform education and empower People of Color to utilize assets already abundant in their communities” (p. 82). According to Olneck (2000), the “incorporation of students’ cultural repertoires reorganizes school practices in ways that dissolve dichotomies by which minority students had been classified negatively” and this is an important step in reducing the impact of consistently discounting the experience of Others (p.324).

The analysis of these assets by Yosso (2005) show how marginalized communities exhibit a wealth of experience in inspiring their youth to continue with their goals and space making, even in the face of hostility. These students can have a rich linguistic background where they may be conversant in more than one language. Social and extended family networks provide these students a rootedness and nurturing that can be life-changing (Yosso, 2005). Furthermore,
marginalized students must keep up their resistance in the face of discrimination and can have a keen understanding of issues of social justice. Navigating their way through social structures that have forever considered them as Other requires a persistent spirit that cannot be undermined (Yosso, 2005). These characteristics of cultural capital are found in Muslim American students’ lives as well, but discounted to an overarching non-white deficiency. Franceschelli & O’Brien, (2014) posit in their UK based study, drawing from Bourdieu’s (1997) theory on cultural capital, that ‘Islamic capital’ is transmitted intergenerationally among Muslim families. Muslim parents transfer this capital to their children and it serves as a moral compass and focal point of family life in this demographic enabling them to identify themselves with heritage cultures, and engage in mainstream cultures with a consciousness of their roots.

According to Coburn (2011), pushing for youth work towards a building on cultural capital can have positive outcomes because it helps “enhance their sense of well-being in terms of who they are, or may become” (p. 475). Coburn’s (2011) ethnographic study while conducted in the UK offers implications for the American context as she recommends that youth do engage in an “accumulation of capitals through participation in programs that enabled them to interrogate their beliefs and values and to inform their reshaping of intersecting identities” (p. 488). If opportunity is provided to youth with real life engagement, cultural and social capital can be cultivated. Also, introducing the cultural capital to an academia that is selective in its choice of theory and space making for marginalized narratives is an integral step towards speaking up for social justice.

**Summation.** Studies on acculturation of Muslims are not entirely specific to youth and have also not been given longitudinal consideration. Furthermore, quantitative research on
acculturation relies on participants who share religious identity, however since Muslims are a pan-ethnic group (Awad, 2010) there may be several variables at play that a study of this nature will not be able to account for. It is not possible to weed out a particular subset within the Muslim population when they are riddled with variations of ethnicity, immigration or refugee status, language barriers, sense of belonging to extended or nuclear families, denominational differences, to mention just a few. Quantitative research on acculturation offers us glimpses into the experiences of minority populations but does not capture the nuance of lived reality that a qualitative collection of their narratives would offer. Similarly, focusing on the cultural capital of this demographic and their experience of validating it demands further exploration.

**Literature Review Conclusion**

This research study seeks to create space and find voice for the Muslim American narrative by exploring the formal and informal experiences of the educational journeys of high school seniors of this demographic. In our exploration of marginalization and whiteness’s implications on undervalued populations through a Critical Race Theory framework we can uncover various aspects of overt and covert micro and macro aggressions. The avenues of educational experience that constitute a high schooler’s journey are necessary to be explored. The educational experiences can be explicit or implicit, sometimes giving strength and resilience, and at other times invalidating or nullifying their lived reality as a demonized minority.

Identity making is no simplistic task for Muslim youth in America because there are multiple layers to unfold and acknowledge in the process. This navigation of “double consciousness” is further complicated by the pressures of Islamophobia and the Muslim community’s own expectations on the youth. Muslim youth make varying choices for identity representation, acculturation, and civic participation based on their personal experiences, support
systems, and resilience or fear. We are surprised to see the generally positive impact of religious community on acculturation, despite assumptions and media portrayals that suggest otherwise. This study explores how Muslim American high school seniors navigate their identity at a time of increasing complexity.

Limitations in the current literature however justify the need of this study at hand. These limitations can be found on three fronts. Firstly, the current political climate created during and post-2016 is so contemporaneous an issue that no scholarship exists that pertains to this time in capturing Muslim youth’s response to the prevalent circumstances, speculations, and fears. While post-9/11 literature may hold substantial application, the current rhetoric resonates more with that of the Japanese internment and the Jewish Holocaust. This is a time where youth may experience anxiety and isolation or resilience and social mobility. To ignore this occurrence and struggle would be a failure on the part of the academia. Capturing this experience brings us to the second limitation of extant literature, which is substantial narrative and qualitative data collection of Muslim youth in America. While scholarship in European countries, Canada, and Australia has explored this topic there still remains a need to tap into the narrative experience of this youth in America. Thirdly, a niche for studying the Muslim American experience has not received attention in CRT even as we see other marginalized groups gain academic support through LatCrit, FemCrit, DisCrit and the like. For literature of this nature to build momentum it is essential that this demographics’ experience is represented. A furthering of such research allows the academia to be true to their praxis (Freire, 1973) and engage in tasks of social justice so that inequities are confronted and both marginalized and mainstream can engage in dialogic transformation (Shields, 2004).
Considering the limitations in existing literature it holds paramount significance and urgency that we explore the formal and informal educational journeys of Muslim youth in America. Inside and outside the educational setting, through implicit, null, and explicit curriculum these young adults’ experiences to be given voice and made space for. Accordingly, this quantitative narrative study was designed to capture the lived experiences of Muslim America freshman who could reflect on the journeys they partook in the past and the navigation required of them in the present Post-2016 Election era.

It is hoped that by furthering exploration of Muslim American youths’ narratives they not only find a validating space and voice for themselves, but also open the doors to an underrepresented area within academia. Themes of relational power, supremacy, marginalization, and whiteness continue to impact the identity shaping and acculturation processes riddled with challenges of Islamophobia and micro hostilities. Overcoming silence through the creation of counter narratives is our hope for social change.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This qualitative study sought to create space for the narratives of Muslim American youth, because their experiences are currently under represented. More specifically, this study was guided by the following research question: what are the formal and informal experiences of Muslim American high school seniors in the educational journeys?

Critical Race Theory as a Method

For the purposes of exploring the informal and formal educational journeys of Muslim American high school seniors in this study, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as a theoretical as well as a methodological framework (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). From its early years in the 1990s when CRT developed as an offshoot of Critical Legal Studies to address issues of inequity in education by Bell, Delgado, Ladson-Billings and Tate, to twenty years later with Dixon & Anderson (2017) who analyze the progression of CRT, certain commonalities can easily be identified as remaining the hallmarks of this theoretical framework. These tenets of the theoretical framework formulate the fundamental standpoints as a methodology as well. CRT continues to hold that racism is: (a) an endemic reality that is socially constructed, (b) counter narratives are not only a tenet, but a tool for bringing to light the inequities that prevail and the voicing that is necessary for validating the marginalized, (c) interest convergence (Dixon & Anderson, 2017) is a reality, without which inequitable experiences are not given consideration, (d) whiteness continues to portray as property, forcing all else as culturally deficient, microaggressions remain a pervasive and malignant reality that are often ignored as too minor, (e) and that intersectionality offers a glimpse in the varied aspects of experience bringing to the table opportunities for coalition building as we continue to work for causes of social justice (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Similarly, CRT as a methodology posits that creating counter-narratives by
marginalized populations addresses the deficit otherwise prevalent (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

CRT as a methodology “generates knowledge by looking to those who have been epistemologically marginalized, silenced, and disempowered” by turning the “margins into places of transformative resistance” as the oppressed are given an opportunity to voice themselves through counter-narratives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, pp. 36-7). It is in this purpose that CRT serves not only as a framework but also a methodology. According to Solorzano and Yosso (2002), counter-stories serve four functions, which include:

1. Build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice.
2. Challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems.
3. Open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position.
4. Teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone.

(p. 36)

This study served these four purposes of CRT methodology by creating a space for the narratives of Muslim American high school seniors who belong to a marginalized population, thereby teaching others about the lived reality of this group. It will serve as a platform for voicing the stories of these students to open doors for understanding. Conducting a narrative research on the informal and formal experiences of Muslim American youths’ educational
experiences not only creates a space and voice for the students themselves, it also places their narrative as its own distinctive experience within scholarship. Richard Delgado (1989) posits that marginalized groups have instinctively relied on story-telling, or counter-narratives, to draw strength as they are reminded of traits of resilience and strength through them (in Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Hernandez (2016) uses CRT in her research as methodology for the very reason that its tenets create a paradigm shift in research as the center of analysis shifts from the individual to the “individual in relation to her political, racialized, environment” providing avenues for better capturing the nuance of one’s lived reality (p. 168). By using CRT as a methodological precept, Hernandez (2016), was able to find methodological support for exploring inequities and marginalization (p. 170). Similar to her work, this study attempts to create a space for the marginalized demographic of Muslim American youth, thereby providing an opportunity for their narrative to be heard.

By using CRT as a methodology we were able to capture both how an individual acts and how she is acted upon by the context of her surroundings, interactions, and experience (Jones, 2009). Hernandez (2016) points out that researching identity navigation through such a process “for marginalized populations recognizes the increasing complexity of the ways that inequitable social systems may constrain and inform the individual’s developing sense of self, and the ways that individuals manage and make meaning out of contextual influences” (p. 168). Similarly, in this study, an exploration of the formal and informal educational journeys of high school students was bound to pull largely from the students’ experiences with the curriculum, campus, as well as interactions with teachers, peers, and the larger community. By using CRT as a methodology for this narrative study we tapped into the lived experiential reality of a
marginalized population as they navigate their way through making meaning of themselves and society. Stories of racialization, resilience, struggle, while experiencing a “double consciousness” (DuBois, 1903) or “hyphenation” (Sirin & Fine, 2006) are nuances that counter-narratives alone can capture. A story is always multi-faceted and touches on many avenues for which reason narrative research becomes an apt choice.

Borrowing from Baxter Magolda (2011 as cited by Hernandez, 2016), the research questions probe three dimensions of development that include the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal in that they sought to capture how and what we know about our experiences, “how we view ourselves” and “how we construct relationships with others” (p. 168). A narrative research study seeks to not just ask these questions, but also grapple with the nuance of experience that is shared through this story-telling. When students experience a “double consciousness” due to the racialization that surrounds them, it becomes meaningful to explore through their own narratives the “external and internal self-definitions” that emerge (Hernandez, 2016, p. 169). Price (2009) also suggests the utilization of CRT when addressing the experiences of racialized people as it enables a shifting of paradigm to focus on social justice. Areas of experience such as immigration, ethnicity, national origin, assimilation, and language can be analyzed through this lens (Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Price, 2009).

Because CRT seeks to challenge dominant ideology by questioning conversations on meritocracy, color-blindness and neutrality, and is committed to social justice by working “toward the elimination of oppressions and the empowering of underrepresented groups”, as a framework and methodology it offers an opportunity to explore these avenues (Hernandez, 2016, p. 170). Experiential knowledge is a central component to CRT and the purpose of this study was to capture this very experience of Muslim American students. The central question that shapes
this project was: what are the formal and informal experiences of Muslim American high school seniors in their educational journeys? This central question then exhibits itself in interview questions that sought to explore the students’ experiences in relation to the curriculum, interaction with peers and teachers, the students’ engagement with and access to extra-curricular activities, and their learning experiences through family, tradition, and faith-based organizations around them.

**Research Design**

Narrative research as a qualitative methodology allows for a space and platform to retell the stories of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Within CRT as a theoretical framework and methodology, these stories are referred to as counter-narratives, the ownership of which lies with the marginalized population itself (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Care is given that the descriptions remain thick and true to the voice of the tellers. First-hand accounts of the participants’ experiences are garnered through the process of a narrative research (Butin, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2006; Ponterotto, 2005; Merriam 1991). Through the process of narrative research, the interviewer and participants embark on a journey that is exploratory in nature with a mission to give voice to stories that may otherwise go unheard (Creswell, 2007). Episodes are created through the collection of stories with special attention to accuracy and authenticity of the participants’ experiences (Riessman, 2008). Chase (2011) describes narrative research as “meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions over a period of time” (p. 421).
**Research Tradition**

This methodology also has philosophical underpinnings in work that is transformational in nature, because it seeks to capture the nuanced experience and lived reality of its participants (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013). In this way, narrative research undertakes the bold task of providing undivided attention to the stories of people and their interpretations of occurrences in their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This kind of work is set on the premise that the researcher and participants share a relationship of trust and confidence, where the interviewee is not the other being studied, but rather a part of a collaborative effort in weaving and bringing to light a meaningful narrative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). For these reasons, the researcher’s positionality and authentic relationship with the participants becomes critical as both journey through the work of storytelling (Clandinin, 2013). The researcher pays careful attention to constructing a rapport that will be open ended enough to allow for a sharing of personalized experiences (Clandinin, 2013). In this manner, narrative research is a post-modern methodology that seeks the critical goal of voicing people’s experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), John Dewey’s work on experience lies central to the philosophical pretext of this methodology. Because all experience’s interpretation is centered in context, the stories remain ever evolving and open to further growth. Erik Erickson’s theory of identity development can also be seen as impactful in certain strands of narrative research where the goal is to see connections between stories of participants and their implications on identity (Chase, 2011).

Josselson (2013), Riessman (2008), Rosiek (2007), and Clandinin (2013) are some of the key scholars in the field of narrative research. Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013) wrote about the three-dimensional nature of narrative research that seeks to consider the overlapping creation
of episodes while focusing on “temporality, sociality, and place” (p. 574). Chase (2011), bases narrative between “biography, history, and society” (p. 421). Furthermore, great emphasis is always placed on the telling and retelling of the lived experience of participants at a particular juncture in time when events took place and later when the information of the experience is shared by the participant. This retelling equates a reliving of sorts where the participant and researcher collaboratively revisit a prior episode from life and rebuild an interpretation.

Carr’s (1986) concept of narrative coherence remains central to this methodology as episodes are crafted from the many stories that a participant may have to share. Through this cohesion it is not just the stories that are being formulated but rather a learning and living of the experience itself. This continual sense of growth that occurs through narrative coherence holds together the praxis. Riessman (2008) suggests that the implications of storytelling are varied because through a sharing of narratives not only is a context being projected, but also the very interpretation is taking place in another context. This revisiting allows for memories to take a more concrete shape that can then foster a larger conversation, be therapeutic, or engage others. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) suggest that narrative research’s central concern should be the experiences of everyday life itself without trying an imposition of generalization of static themes (Chase, 2011).

Narrative research remains a continually evolving field and so does its definition (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013). Narrative methods may be used in different types of research, therefore within scholarship there is an emphasis on differentiating narrative inquiry as a methodology and phenomenon as opposed to a study that uses narrative as data. A key feature in scholarly debate around this research methodology has been the use of the terms “narrative inquiry” and “narrative research” interchangeably. According to Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin
(2013) an ambiguity of definition posits problems in scholarship, while at the same time allowing for a capturing of nuance. Caine et al., (2013) suggest that “narrative inquiry, defined as both research methodology and a view of phenomena, is the intimate study of an individual's experience over time and in context(s)” (p. 577). It may be reasonable to suggest by Caine et al., that narrative inquiry has a longevity to the process.

The fluid and ever evolving nature or narrative research and inquiry posit multiple approaches that were used within the methodology of this study. Another way of looking at narrative inquiry would be to suggest that it seeks also to place a broader theoretical concept to the episodes generated through the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), whereas narrative research seeks to showcase the experiences and stories themselves and let them lead the way to what can be found, while always remaining cognizant that these are limited in their scope of interpretation and the choice of sharing or silencing made by the participant (Clandinin, 2013).

Narrative research was well-suited to this project because it sought to explore the Muslim American narrative regarding high school seniors’ formal and informal educational journeys. This methodology aligned seamlessly because through counter-narratives it hoped to create space for a marginalized demographic. Upon closer examination we can see that narrative research conducts itself around an “urgency of speaking…being heard…the urgency of collective stories, and… public change” (Chase, 2011, p. 427). The intention of this study is to bring to light the lived realities and experiences of Muslim American students so this marginalized population can find a means to begin a larger conversation that casts them out of invisibility and validates their experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Not only is this a means of activism and engagement for the students in question, but more so a call to educators, policy makers, curriculum analysts, and academicians to see the nullification of experience for this
demographic and propel change. Furthermore, this study is placed within an interpretive-critical (Ponterotto, 2005) paradigm because it pursues an exploration of the impact of marginalization on students. This work diverges from narrative inquiry towards narrative research as it makes space within scholarship and academia to engage with the stories of students who are underrepresented in theory and hold experiences that are very particular to this group.

**Participants**

The participants of this study were 4 students who identified themselves as Muslim American. The small number of participants aligned with qualitative research methods because the emphasis was on thick descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). All participants were high school seniors at the time of the interviews. There was no exclusion in sampling based on gender, ethnicity, first language, or race. Level of religious practice was also not factored into the selection of participants. Students came from any high school, but were not homeschooled or enrolled in an online high school program. Two participants had gone to a Muslim elementray and middle school and were at a public high school. The other two participants had gone to a Muslim school throughout. Convenience and snowball sampling was used for this process (Creswell, 2013).

**Recruitment and Access**

The participants for the study were recruited by posting for this research in two local mosques and alumni of Muslim schools of a suburban county in a northeastern state. All information regarding the project was properly disclosed to participants’ who were willing to continue. Muslim community members were sent an informational letter that explained the nature of the project, role and confidentiality of participants, and a link through the weekly email listserv (See Appendix A). Approval for sending this communication was requested from the
presidents of three Friday gatherings (See Appendix B). Alumni of a local, private, Muslim school was also contacted through their parents’ email (See Appendix C) after receiving authorization from the school’s Board of Directors (See Appendix D). Participants’ informed consent was a mandatory step to undertake before the research process and it included an understanding that they were 18 years or older (See Appendix E). IRB approval through Northeastern University was first obtained about the proposed research.

**Data Collection**

Many diverse data collection methods can be used when it comes to narrative research (Chase, 2011). Riessman (2008) states the many options going beyond interviews in the collection of stories such as varied visual representations. Participants could produce collections of photographs, paintings, drawings, or collages, to represent their lived experiences. Questions in semi-structured interviews have to be left open ended so that they lead participants to tell stories that the researcher can then probe them further about (Clandinin & Connelly, 2013). The location of interviews is also important because sometimes a formal setting may not yield a conversation as a walk in a place of significance would. Each interview in this study was held in a comfortable location of convenience for each participant. The participants were interviewed twice. Each of the interviews lasted around 60 minutes. In the first meeting we went over the interview protocol (See Appendix F), signed the necessary consent forms, and began our first round of open-ended questions. These questions in the first round gathered information about the students’ demographic background, what they were studying, plans for college, family, and interests to get to know the participants better and develop a connection. In the first round questions about informal educational experiences in school were asked. These focused on the educational experiences of the students outside of school (See Appendix G). These included the
role of family, friends, and community members, the mosque, and Sunday school. At the end of the interview the participants were asked to bring with them next time an artifact or photograph that held significance for them as Muslim Americans. The second interview tapped into curriculum, interactions with peers and teachers, and extra-curricular activities, and club memberships, if any. The conversation in the second interview stemmed from the artifact or photograph that the student brought along to represent their identity. Transcriptions of interviews were shared with participants to ensure transparency and have member checking (Saldana, 2016).

**Data Sources**

The two main sources of data in this research were interviews and the photograph/artifact. Czarniawska (2004) on story recording mentions various pathways to gather either prompted or spontaneous sharing and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommend the use of field notes, letters, documents, and artifacts as well (in Creswell, 2007). The reason behind gathering information through more than one interview and one source is to allow for triangulation of data. For this reason, the questions were kept open-ended, so that while the researcher prompts the participant in a direction to stay on topic, there is simultaneously enough flexibility allowed to share a narrative that is personal. The photograph or artifact that is brought from home allowed for a spontaneous choice to be made by the participant (Saldana, 2016). These can often serve as jumping boards for a conversation or story as the participant shares their associations. Observations also play an important part when these stories are being shared. This includes paying attention to the nuance and emotion the participant exhibited while sharing their stories. For this study, close attention was paid to content of the interview and the direction that open-ended questions allowed for the sharing to go. The conversations from the participants
prompted the researcher to probe deeper. This is in turn allowed for a sharing of very personal experiences by the participants. During the research period, the author also conducted analytic memos as a means of reflection. These memos helped determine if more clarification was required from participants.

**Data Storage**

Audio recordings of interviews were kept on an online portal, Rev.com, which was then used to transcribe the content. All printed materials with interviewee data were kept locked in a cabinet. Electronic files were kept on a password protected computer. These measures ensured confidentiality.

**Data Analysis**

The transformational nature of narrative research is a change agent for the readership but also in the more particular strand of narrative therapy as offering insight and healing to the participants themselves (Trahar, 2009). While Rosiek (as cited in Chase, 2011) stresses on the stories themselves, other narrative researchers may be more interested in how the stories were told and offer a critical analysis of the choices people make in their retelling and why.

Data analysis for my narrative research went through stages of coding to yield meaningful results. Madison (2005, as cited in Creswell, 2007) recommends utilizing abstract or concrete codes and then working your way up to the construction of themes and patterns, and then finally creating a point of view from which angle the story is to be shared and for whom (in Creswell, 2007). For this reason, I performed three main rounds of coding with the interview transcriptions (Saldana, 2016). The three rounds of coding began after getting the transcript from Rev.com and cross-checking it manually with the recording for accuracy. The first reading included what Saldana (2016) refers to as precoding and preliminary coding where while
checking the transcript, I remained cognizant of any patterns that stood out. Analytic memos through the process of data collection and analysis allowed for me to check my own interpretations or analysis. Huberman and Miles (1994) are more meticulous in the early stages of data analysis with extensive note taking in margins, as passages, and then in the creation of a summary sheet. Codes and memos then lean to noting patterns and themes by deciphering the frequency of codes. Creswell (2007) also mentions Wolcott’s (1994) analytic method that begins within highlighting information found in transcripts and then moves on to determining regularities in patterns. My first and second rounds of manual open coding therefore constituted note-taking in the margins and highlighting recurrent topics, as well as quotes that were significant. Coding can take place manually or through software, however care must be given to make sure that coding is authentic and the software is not misreading frequency of words outside of context. For this reason I conducted all the coding manually in three rounds to confirm that accuracy and authenticity was maintained.

In this research study, the first round of interviews was recorded on Rev.com and transcribed. I then tallied the transcription manually to the recording to check for accuracy. During the interview some precoding took place as I took notes, and preliminary coding also occurred during the first reading and cross-checking of the transcript. The first round of open coding included reading through the text again and using Initial Coding for highlighting key phrases or codes that emerged (Saldana, 2016). The coding process was inductive, allowing the codes to emerge from whatever the participants had described. In the second reading, axial coding took place as I took notes in the margins to identify any emerging patterns and themes (Saldana, 2016). In this stage the “goal is to strategically reassemble data” that were compartmentalized in the initial coding to create dominant categories (Saldana, 2016, p. 244).
The second round allowed for categories to emerge from the initial codes. As expected, some amount of recoding and recategorizing emerged between stages one to three as participants delved deeper into conversation (Saldana, 2016). After some broad themes had been identified, I was able to go forward with a second round of interviews and follow the same procedure (Saldana, 2016). Questions about the artifacts were included in the second interview. As such, data based on the artifacts was coded in the same manner as the interviews. The themes that emerged from the second round of coding, along with specific vignettes and stories, were be used to construct individual narratives of each participant. After the narratives are constructed, I analyzed across each narrative, for similarities and differences within each of the participants’ experiences.

The third round of provisional coding (Saldana, 2016) was deductive, and I used pre-determined codes from the theoretical framework and literature review to understand how information from my participants’ narratives connected back to previous scholarship.

Beyond this stage the information was placed within the theoretical framework to determine context, which in this case was Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Analytic methods needed to be transparent and rigorous in the evidence they gathered. Interview analysis was then paired with information garnered through the sharing of the artifact. It was for this reason that two cycles of interviews with a request for photograph/artifact of significance was made. The larger meanings of stories were identified in this manner and the most crucial events showcased with a sensitivity to the nuance.

Contextualizing the stories also became necessary in an approach with this focus because the stories then cannot be separated from the location and time of occurrence and retelling. Trahar (2009) identified three similar areas of criticism for narrative inquiry in that the purpose
analysis or therapy, which she contests is possible to align by the very nature of this methodology in that it brings stories to light and in doing that, becomes a change agent on a personal and larger level. Another criticism noted is that while all stories are based around the individual, the researcher cannot seek to homogenize them so as to cost them their uniqueness. Trahar (2009) also suggested that individual nuance can still be preserved while discovering patterns that are common to participants’ experiences. A third criticism mentioned is that of lack of authenticity when the researcher conveys the stories to a readership. Riessman (2008) was meticulous in her standards for trustworthiness in the narrative process and suggested the researcher’s role in collaboration towards meaning making as opposed to the imposition of interpretation.

**Data Presentation**

I chose vignettes from the participants’ narratives to be shared in an unadulterated manner so that we could remain true to the nuance. The vignettes were presented as part of a constructed narrative that stemmed from central themes which emerged from coding and analyzing the data. The presentation from the interviews had a heavy reliance on direct quotes (Clandinin, 2000). While, I would have liked to embed the visual representations (pictures of artifacts/photographs) into my study that the participants relied on to share their experiences, I was not able to do so due to confidentiality issues. Despite the lack of visual representations, an exploratory conversation is shared about each one (Clandinin & Connelly, 2013). It was unwise to use a chronological approach for representation of the lived realities of the participants’ because each one may not view their world in similar sequence, but instead look for thematic relevance. The presentation of participants’ narratives were not sequenced in that manner, but followed a thematic representation.
**Trustworthiness**

An important concern that arises in a narrative research is the role of the researcher in connection to the participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2013). Because meaning making depends on the engagement between both, it is imperative to be mindful that the researcher’s own positionality is stated clearly and that the process and conversations remain authentic (Clandinin & Connelly, 2013). Often times this is referred to as a transaction between researcher and participant, with the researcher remaining cognizant that he does not color the information, and allows for areas in the conversation that are sacred spaces, that the participant chooses not to share (Clandinin & Connelly, 2013). Solorzano & Yosso (2002) write at length about displaying a “theoretical sensitivity” and “cultural intuition” when collecting counter-narratives, so that the researcher can capture the nuance in the conversation of marginalized people without tainting it (p. 33). Josselson (2007) and Riessman (2005) have written extensively on the role of the researcher, who while establishing trust with the participants, must not taint the data with questions that are overly structured or leading in any way.

Trustworthiness and validity of data remain important discussion points in narrative study because of the nature of the work. Triangulation of data, checking digital transcripts by cross-referencing manually to audio recordings, and sharing transcription with interviewees ensures that the participants trust the transparency of the process. Additionally, it was beneficial for the researcher to keep an analytic memo of her own development so she could track her own growth. While consent forms, approvals and proper procedures remain key for these methods, it remained essential to also pay attention to ethical concerns and transparency in the recording and transcribing of materials (Josselson, 2007).
Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to capture the lived experiences of Muslim American high school seniors in their formal and informal educational journeys. All four participants in this study happened to be Muslim women who had spent a substantial amount of time in Islamic schools. This chapter seeks to showcase the narratives of these four participants and share their stories of navigating a Muslim American identity. The four participants shared experiences that were similar and different in several ways, however, certain themes emerged from these extensive interviews. These included, the definition of self and American-ness, the role of values and culture, the role of the community and parents, conversations about diversity and belongingness, Islamophobia, and issues of transition to non-faith-based spaces. All participants also shared an artifact that held meaning for them.

Hafsa’s Story

I wouldn't know how it's like not to be an American because I haven't lived anywhere else. – Hafsa

Participant’s Background

Hafsa (pseudonym used) is a senior at a public high school in a small town in a Northeastern state in the United States. While her mother and father are both originally from Pakistan, she was born in Germany, and moved with her family to America in 2001, when she was less than two years old. Hafsa is the oldest of three siblings, the rest of whom were born in America. Unlike her younger brothers, Hafsa went to a private, community-based, not-for-profit Muslim school for her elementary and middle school years. Upon graduation from the Muslim School (pseudonym used), Hafsa transitioned to the public high school of her district. She lives with her parents and two siblings as a close-knit family.
Hafsa described herself as academically highly motivated, and greatly enjoyed science-based activities like Robotics and computer programming. As she applied to college, she had in mind a future in medicine. While, she had already received college acceptance letters and scholarships, she was sure of what she was looking for and was waiting for the perfect fit. She participated in the Robotics club, ran on the track team, and started a coding club for girls at high school. Hafsa was also considering traveling to Pakistan for a summer internship at her parents’ alma mater. According to Hafsa, her parents played a pivotal role in the setting of her academic goals and drive to achieve. Her informal and formal educational experiences as a young Muslim American speak of her navigation feats through the high school years to finding her voice and staying true to her values.

**Informal & Formal Educational Experiences**

Hafsa’s time at the high school was one that moved from an experience of isolation to finding her voice through extra-curricular activities. The role of the community and mosque were juxtaposed to her early high school experience of seclusion. Hafsa looked for a sense of belonging in her school, while keeping a focused lens on her Muslim values and using them to guide her choices. Hafsa shared stories where she had to make tough decisions to stand up for herself.

**Difficulty in transition to high school.** The transition from a faith-based elementary and middle school to a public high school in a predominantly white town proved to be a difficult transition for Hafsa. She was the only student from her previous school at her new public school and she spent her freshman and half of sophomore year being alone. Hafsa mused that she was not outgoing in nature and did not know how to make friends outside of her comfort zone; therefore, her transition was hard. She felt that her peers from the Muslim School who went to
other public schools found the transition almost seamless because they had each other to bank on. While her academic focus continued, she was afraid to reach out and make friends, because she was afraid to mix with people who would not hold the same moral values as her:

I think it was more that the Muslim School is like our whole community, and we all know each other very well. Our parents know each other very well, and we lived with each other since kindergarten. Going from that close-knit community to this high school, where a thousand plus kids are, and everyone has their own little groups, and you can't switch between groups, and you don't know which group is good, which group is bad, which group is more like you. So, that was, I think, the hardest thing.

Hafsa felt that while there were not enough Muslim students at her high school to band together for a sense of community, there were more Muslims than one would think. She said most of the Muslim girls did not wear the headscarf, so while they may not be identifiable there were Muslim students who held the same values as she, “we all just have our boundaries set, and a lot of people know to respect those.” When asked if people around her knew she was Muslim, she said a lot of them did. Her comfort zone remained the Robotics team, where people knew her well. Prayer at the high school became an issue for Hafsa in her first three years, because there was no assigned space for Muslim students to pray. Hafsa would “hide in the locker rooms” to sneak in the afternoon prayer, because the school had not announced an assigned space.

The strengthening role of the community. The mosque played an integral role in providing Hafsa comfort during a time when she was friendless at high school. She still had friends from her previous school, and greatly enjoyed going to the mosque and interacting with people from the Muslim community outside of school. This gave her a sense of comfort that
even if she was lonely at school she did have friends elsewhere. The mosque allowed her a space to be spiritually reflective, where she could pray, and ponder upon her good and bad decisions. Hafsa mused the mosque was a place “where I felt closest to being whole.” In her trips to the mosque for Friday prayers or during the nights of Ramadan, Hafsa said, “I felt like I can get rid of all my sins and feel more pure here, and that I could pray happily and be focused on my prayers and what I wanted, and weed out what I didn’t want.” Being in a space of prayer allowed Hafsa to think about some tough choices she had made and how she was proud of having stood her ground for the values she held dear.

Hafsa spoke fondly of the “nostalgic” time at her Muslim school. Recently, she had met the Robotics team of the Muslim School at a First Lego League Tournament and felt that there was a difference between how her public-school team’s support was like as opposed to the Muslim School:

It was really cool because our team- it was just our team [members] there, and the few parents, but for the Muslim School, everyone came. It was the whole community, and that was just really sweet, and I really miss that.

The support that the community network provided Hafsa as a young Muslim American gave her a sense of comfort and belonging.

**Finding belongingness in high school diversity.** Hafsa found a group of like-minded people in the Robotics club at her high school. She shared that the reason why she got along so easily with everyone on the team was because it was very diverse; in fact there was a joke on campus that “all the colored kids flock to the Robotics team.” About segregation on color lines, Hafsa sensed “all the white kids tend to hang out with each other anyways, and then you have our group of Asians with the occasional white person” who gravitated towards Robotics because
they were “the top of their class” and motivated academically. The diversity in the Robotics team was not representative of the school itself, which has a predominantly White population. According to Hafsa, the students on the Robotics team all exhibited the same kind of values and understood her better. Her experience at the prom last year, when she did not have a date, was still comfortable because the Robotics group hung out together. In the absence of a Muslim student group at school, which is what she was used to at the Muslim School, Hafsa could find friends in a club that showcased diversity and represented inclusion. She believed that now her Robotics friends had merged with other Asian students and she was glad that she had found like-minded people. Hafsa felt she wouldn’t have been as “social, loud, and techy” as she was, had she not been on the Robotics team:

A lot of them share the same values as me, which I'm really glad of, that I found people like that because I didn't want to have to either change mine or find others or change them, or not even be with people for the rest of the high school.

Impact of religious values. Hafsa’s religious values became the moral compass for a lot of her choices in high school and often put her at the threshold for making decisions that would align with her lens even when they were not popular among the mainstream. Hafsa stated, “I think that just in general, the biggest thing that changed me was the transition from the Muslim School to high school, in that I had to find my boundaries, my values.” When hoping to make friends in her freshman year, Hafsa shared her experience from the first day of school. She had to take several placement tests during the first half of her day, so the first class she went to was Physical Science. In that class she overheard the White students talk about which drugs they would choose to do if they could. Hafsa states that became her first impression of all students at her high school, and she was afraid then to even try to be friendly. “That's the first conversation I
heard in high school, which is really not representative of what our high school is, so that really scared me off for a lot of the time.” She later realized that her high school had different types of White kids. Hafsa also faced times when she had to take decisions based on her religious values that many other students would not have to consider.

One recurrent example of this was in the matter of clothing. Even though Hafsa did not wear the headscarf, her mother did, and that impacted the choice of conservative clothing that Hafsa made. When shopping for her prom dress, Hafsa and her Muslim friend, had a difficult time finding anything that would be appropriate according to their religious values and be good enough for a prom. Exhausted after traversing the mall looking for something that wouldn’t be revealing, Hafsa’s friend said, “Why don’t we just wear a burka (traditional Muslim attire) to prom, because we are not going to find anything.” Eventually, she let her mom take charge and find her something “decent.” Hafsa also stated that she did sometimes get into arguments with her mother about clothing choices. An instance was when it came to sports attire, where she had mostly worn sweatpants and sweatshirts for gym. It took convincing from Hafsa for her mother to agree that she could wear sports leggings to school.

Hafsa stated that her choice of sports was restricted due to the clothing norm at school. She shared that when she did track at school, the meet uniform caught her by surprise, because she wasn’t expecting it comprised of shorts and a tank top. She was told that not being in uniform would not allow her time to count. Finally, she worked out a solution where she wore full length spandex leggings and a full-sleeve shirt under her track uniform to be able to participate. Hafsa shared that boys from the other team whistled at the girls on her team who were in the track clothing. This made her uncomfortable, as did being in the presence of the boys’ team who were also in track uniforms. She felt revulsed by the boys’ uniform and spent
most of the time inside the building so she wouldn’t have to see them. Hafsa shared that because she wore leggings and a full sleeved shirt underneath she “kind of felt very out of place during those meets, but I remember just saying to myself, "Oh, this is only temporary. Just deal with it now and you'll be fine later".”

By stating these examples of how her values and choice in clothing differed from the mainstream, Hafsa explained how clothing choices were “second nature” to her, and while she might consider the clothes of those girls pretty, she certainly didn’t feel the desire to wear them, “I'm not gonna walk around in shorts at school because it just feels wrong... It's not something that I want to do, and it's not something that I do.” Hafsa stated that even though the mainstream wore short dresses she didn't feel like she wanted to do it, too, “it's been so well-drilled into me that I don't even want to do that.” Hafsa realized that it was important how one perceived themselves, because mostly other people didn’t really care or notice, and it was just self-perception that was over-bearing. In fact, Hafsa felt that others were generally respectful of her clothing choices, “I think it's just more, like when you do things like that, that are a bit different from everyone, it's more internally that you feel different than externally.”

Dating became another issue where Hafsa had to stand up for her values, because it would be considered religiously inappropriate to be romantically involved with someone. Promposals are a big thing at her school, and while she said she would happily record other people’s promposals she didn’t want to be asked out herself because refusing would be hard. Both her Muslim friend and she were trying to escape being asked and found it embarrassing to then refuse. Despite trying to “avoid” being asked, Hafsa was asked and then ran into an “awkward” situation of having to refuse him in public. Hafsa stressed however, that she worked as friends on the robotics team with everyone: “I work with them, and I'll help them and they'll
help me, but then if something weird happens and we're getting way too close, then I'll back off.”

Hafsa reiterated that her values became the guideline for interactions with the opposite gender. These aspects of her identity were ingrained in Hafsa to what she referred to as “second nature”, based on her upbringing and her schooling at Muslim elementary and middle school:

A lot of it has been drilled into me in the Muslim School, and it's just second nature to me. If some male holds my hand for example, I will instinctively just pull away and say, "No, don't do that." I won't have to think about it.

Hafsa refers to this as the “whole modest thing” which is just part of her being where she doesn’t have to consciously think about her identity when she makes decisions.

Hafsa was also reflective in Ramadan and during the interview about her choice to not try drugs when someone at school noticed that she was very stressed and had offered them to her. Her reasoning followed a three-step process:

I remember for a second being like, what if I actually did do this? And then a huge part of me was just like, "Okay, number one, medically that is stupid. Number two, what will everyone think of me at the mosque and our community if they heard that I did this? And number three, I'm a Muslim, I should not be doing this."

Reflecting upon her ethnic roots from Pakistan and her religious association to Islam, Hafsa stated, since they're so tied together in being modest and not doing specific things, “I don't think of it as I'm doing this because I'm Pakistani or I'm doing this because I'm Muslim, I don't really differentiate those two.” Thus, her ethnic and religious identity were synonymous to each other in that they asked for a similar mindset of modesty and collective consciousness. Outside
her home, Hafsa was also particular about eating only vegetarian if the meat was not Halal. This was a conscious choice on her part and significantly limited her choices.

Hafsa explained at great length a difficult situation she was in during her junior year. With the pressure of AP classes, SATs, considering college applications, and Robotics, she made a friend at school who grew very attached to her. The friend was a White American girl who came from a disturbed family situation. Hafsa realized soon that the girl became heavily reliant on her, to the extent that Hafsa felt she was “like her mother.” Detecting suicidal tendencies in her friend, Hafsa had to take the bold step of going to the school counselor to report her friend. Hafsa was advised to stay away from the girl because she had begun to experience burnout, her grades were dropping, and she was stressed to the point where her teachers noticed this impact. A mediation was held between the girl and Hafsa, where the vice principal intervened and had them sign an agreement on maintaining personal space. For Hafsa, the point of departure was most stressful because she felt a responsibility to help the girl:

I thought about it a lot, especially over the summer, and I guess I realized that the reason why I helped her is because especially in the Muslim School and in our religion, we're told to help people in their times of need, and I felt very guilty even leaving her for a bit because I would be like, she needs my help and I need to be there for her.

Hafsa decided not to share the details of this episode with her parents and gave them a filtered version of the story, because she was overwhelmed with having to deal with it at school and did not want to bring it home.

A lot of her stories too, they were just really overwhelming for a girl my age, and for me being Muslim, like ... her first boyfriend abused her. Her second boyfriend
… had to leave her because she was a lot to take in. Her third boyfriend… raped her. So, you have me listening to all this and being like, "I can't do anything. What do I do now? Especially me being Muslim and hearing about her sexual things, that was just really uncomfortable for me. You won't hear these kinds of things from someone like these people in the picture [referencing her childhood friends in a photograph]. We'd have our petty things that we talk about, but then hers were actually real and things you read about in those stories.

Hafsa spoke about the immense guilt that followed her in breaking away, because from a very young age both at school and at home the duty to help others was drilled in like an obligation.

**The role of parents and acculturation.** Hafsa’s parents were deeply committed to the academic achievement of their child and provide her support and motivation. They kept a keen eye on her grades and did not allow her to slack in her academic performance. She felt that her mother was largely unaware of the socialization challenges at school and could not have helped Hafsa adjust better in her beginning years in high school. She laughed about how her mother was completely unaware of the use of drugs on campus. Hafsa opines that her mother and father hold different perspectives about religious practice. While her mother attended religious classes regularly and wore the headscarf, her father worked in an environment where he interacted with many different types of people. Hafsa also cited an example about her parents differing viewpoints. One evening as her mother came to pick her up, she saw Hafsa standing alone talking to a male teammate. Her mother cross-questioned her intensely about who he was and what they were talking about. The next day her father came to pick her up. That evening she was also standing alone talking to another male teammate. Her father didn’t notice this as odd and did
not question her at all. Hafsa reflected that they both very different in their understanding of socialization norms:

I think my Dad, since he works in such a diverse work environment, he understands that there shouldn't be a physical barrier between you two, that you can talk and not have anything going on. I really appreciate that about my Dad because he helped me realize that too, in that at robotics, I'm not going to be 10 feet away from the guy as he's working on the robot because I need to be doing my things, too.

Hafsa chose many times not to share concerns with her parents, or “downplayed” them because she didn’t want to worry them unnecessarily. She felt that it hadn’t yet begun to dawn on her that she may have to move away when she went to college, and hoped that she would still be visiting home every two weeks if she did.

**Defining American and intersectionality.** When Hafsa traveled to Pakistan recently it allowed her insight into what made her American. Her visit comprised of two locations, a cosmopolitan urban city, Lahore, and a suburban traditional city, Sheikhupura. Hafsa felt that in Sheikhupura “they all just really stared at me, so I didn't like it that much.” She discovered by comparison parts of her that were very distinctly American. In Pakistan, women generally do not drive a motorbike, when they do ride one as a passenger the cultural norm is that they sit with both legs on one side of the vehicle. When Hafsa, sat on it centered with each leg on either side her uncle said, “Wow, this really makes you look American, just sitting like that in that way.” She also felt that people would stare at her there if she wore “American clothes like sweatpants” so she made sure to only pack Shalwar Kameez when she traveled to Pakistan. Hafsa felt there was judgement about her not being able to cook, or not being interested in clothes that other
Pakistani girls were interested in there. Most interestingly, Hafsa felt an American aspect of her personality was being able to fix gadgets that other girls in Pakistan would not attempt. She felt empowered as an American girl to be able to do this. She reminisced that when she went to Pakistan (when she was going to the Muslim School as a fourth grader), she had blended in seamlessly. However, in her recent visit, her family in Pakistan felt that she had changed a lot “here (America), I start to blend in more, but over there (Pakistan) I really stuck out, and it was bad. Even in the way that I walked, they were like, "you walk too openly" or the way I sit. There were just little criticisms for everything in Sheikhupura.” Hafsa felt as an American she had the privilege of more “exposure to things” than girls in Pakistan did, who she believed were to get married after they turned 18. Speaking of food, Hafsa was upset at herself that her palate had changed over the last four years, where previously she used to enjoy desi curries, now she leaned more towards American food.

**Connection to curriculum.** Hafsa could not recollect a time when she found herself specifically represented in the curriculum. During a class on European History, she chose to do a presentation on Muslim contributions and found representation in that activity. In the character of Atticus from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she found a character who like her stood for his beliefs. Hafsa joked about *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and how the character made a “big stink” about wearing long robes and covering herself, whereas Muslim women do it without that concern.

**Islamophobic interactions with peers.** During her classroom experience, Hafsa remembered one instance when a Trump supporting student at the time of the presidential campaign spoke in favor of Muslims being deported. The conversation ended when Hafsa spoke up, identified herself as Muslim, and argued with him if he had ever had a problem with her. She felt that most of her classmates supported her, but she was now acutely aware that this kind of
bigotry was not only prevalent in the South as she had first thought. Speaking about those students Hafsa said, “They’re like the cocky kind of kids who say they want to vote for Trump, and they'll be really open about it too. They made the Republican club that year, and you just had Trump posters all over our school.”

Hafsa reflected that either she did not pay attention to bigoted statements in her first two years, or they just didn’t occur. She felt that even if they did, back when she was a freshman she would probably have just stayed quiet or put her head down. She felt that due to her experience and belongingness with Robotics she had found her voice. Hafsa shared another offensive incident that took place during class:

A lot of kids in our school tend to make the “Allahu Akbar” jokes, because of the whole ISIS thing and also my last name is Akbar, so sometimes during attendance if the teacher will call out my name, people will under their breath go, "Allahu Akbar." One time that happened, and I was like, "Okay, number one, you shouldn't be saying this because it's hurtful to my religion, and it's just plain stupid, the way you're saying it, too."

Hafsa shared that mockery due to her name occurred more often than not, and she had shut quite a few of them down, but there were still others who did it while she was not around. Hafsa decided not to take this to administration or report it because she felt shy due to her first reporting regarding the suicidal student. In addition, Hafsa felt that the administration would not be able to do anything about it, the students would continue on in hushed voices, that she was about to graduate anyways, and also because she did not want to scar their school records.

Thinking back to her experience in the Muslim School, Hafsa remembered taking a field trip to Boston, where they encountered a man who spewed racist slurs at the students because
they were wearing hijabs and could be identified as Muslim. One of the teachers told the students then to ignore his rant, because disengaging and ignoring him would cause him to stop eventually. Hafsa felt that was the correct approach, and ignoring them was the right choice so she could “move on.”

**Interactions with teachers and microaggressions.** During gym, Hafsa had an interaction with her gym teacher where a “very very white” teacher said to her, “Oh, you're a Muslim, I thought you were supposed to be shy and all that," to which Hafsa responded “that's like saying all Christians should be the ones who go to church and act really nice to everyone, and I don't see you doing that.” She chose not to report that incident, but was pleased that he had been relocated in the district. When asked to describe what Hafsa meant by the teacher being “very, very white” she explained that these were people she was sure were Republican:

> In our school, if you describe someone as basic white, all that, you're talking about the rich, the white, the Christian, the WASPs. Someone taught me this acronym once, and I like to use it a lot... he was a total WASP, and he was also very strong about his beliefs.

Other than this one interaction, Hafsa felt her overall high school experience with instructors had been clear of discriminatory speech.

**Finding strength through others.** Hafsa spoke about her first attempt at mechanics in Robotics which was possible because she decided with another Muslim girl to pursue it together. Even though the other girl left the year after, and Hafsa continued, she felt that the decision to give it a try had to do with finding support from another Muslim peer. Additionally, after three years of praying in vacant locker rooms, she got courage to go with a fellow Muslim student to the English teacher and request if they could use his empty classroom daily for the afternoon...
prayer. In gym, Hafsa recalled having another Muslim student who wore a hijab and thinking if she can play with confidence, then Hafsa did not need to feel reluctant either. In a high school where among 1400 students Hafsa could identify five as being Muslim finding strength and belongingness was a task.

Participant’s artifact

Hafsa chose to share two artifacts of significance to her Muslim American identity. She brought along a photograph of her friends in the third-grade classroom at the Muslim School. In the photograph the students were doing a small presentation on the different rituals of Hajj. Hafsa fondly said that she had this copy of the photograph in an album and up in her room. She mused that it held special meaning as it was:

A representation of where I spent 11 years of my life, and because the Muslim School was a huge part of my life. It wasn't just school, it was our community. It was our way of living, and it's where our parents also went a lot. The Muslim School was more home than home.

Hafsa spoke with nostalgic fondness about the memories at the Muslim School, as a place of her first belonging where she felt truly at home. Her second artifact was a bracelet she had made herself out of two old wires and a bolt from Robotics at the high school, a group where she felt she found her “voice.” Hafsa explained “it's from the robots that I helped build, and it just reminds me that I can actually do this stuff no matter what people tell me.” Hafsa felt that despite the stereotypes that exist around girls not being able to do mechanical aspects of things, she was part of the robot building team and did not limit herself to the sewing, accessories, and imagery aspect of the robot that most female team members of her team opted for. She felt most girls did not opt for mechanical aspects because they were male-dominated, and they felt uncomfortable
working in the workshop with them. Hafsa said for other Muslim girls it was both their religious identity and being a girl that made them feel uncomfortable, however she felt she handled it well because her boundaries told her how far she could go while still working in close proximity to the boys. She felt her religious identity was not a hindrance, rather it helped her maintain a professional distance that others around her also knew how to respect.

**Major Takeaways from Hafsa’s Story**

Looking back at Hafsa’s shared narrative we see the impactful role that her faith-based schooling had on her connection to values. Hafsa experienced a rootedness to faith due to the upbringing at home and school so much so that her choices were second nature to her, without causing much internal conflict. The cultural capital of resilience and strength in social network were founded on the commonalities between mosque, community, school, and family. Hafsa differed in her acculturation experience from her parents, and this resulted in her not being able to share the entirety of her high school experience with them. Her coping mechanisms were carried out independently of her parents. Hafsa’s experiences with whiteness and Islamophobia ranged from discomfort to receiving racial slurs, however she opted not to report any of these occurrences.

In Hafsa’s narrative we saw the experience of breaking into her-self, and finding confidence in her own person. This journey for Hafsa was largely made possible by the positive impact of informal educational experiences and spaces of diversity. Structured informal educational experiences like clubs allow students social skills and opportunities to bond together over common goals that they have chosen for themselves. Unlike the classroom, where you are placed with a random selection, clubs like Robotics become spaces of like-minded individuals. Hafsa was able to successfully navigate the social space of high school after considerable effort
over the first two years of the transition. The hardship of belonging to a marginalized and
demonized population in a predominantly white school was undeniable in Hafsa’s experience.

**Amber’s Story**

*I think the fact that I have such light skin and the fact that I don't wear a hijab is what's kept me from ever experiencing outright discrimination.* - Amber

**Participant’s Background**

Amber (pseudonym used) goes to large diverse public high school in a growing small
town in suburban Massachusetts. Prior to high school, Amber went to a faith-based, community
run Muslim School (pseudonym used) for her elementary and middle school. While Amber was
born and raised in this state, both her parents originally come from Morocco. Having traveled to
France for their PhDs, Amber’s parents then moved to Massachusetts for work before Amber
was born. She lives as a part of a close-knit family with her parents and two sisters. Amber’s
extended family live all over Europe, North America, and Morocco and she spoke fondly of her
own travels to visit them across the globe.

Amber described herself as academically motivated and enthusiastic to try new things.
From her freshman year when she joined a plethora of clubs to explore what high school had to
offer, she had stuck with a deep and continued commitment to robotics, swimming, and track
until her senior year. Amber organized a girls’ STEM event at the local YMCA and liked to be
involved in community service. Despite her parents being scientists and her love for robotics,
Amber hoped to pursue a degree in Criminal Justice. Amber had achieved several accolades at
her high school.
Informal and Formal Educational Experiences

Amber shared stories of engagement and involvement in many different activities, which not only eased her transition to high school, but also defined her personality and attitude. Amber’s struggles with identity were minimal as she navigated her social spaces with ease. The role of the mosque and community offered her comfort as did knowing that in a diverse world she was not much different than others around her. Amber took decisions of finding herself with choices of integration and assimilation over her high school years.

Defining self, race, and ethnicity. In a recent activity during her Human Geography class, Amber was given the task to pick ten words that identified her. Her original list included words like student, sister, pole vaulter, Muslim, Moroccan, American and more. By the end of the activity, the students were asked to engage in conversation with their peers and strike out one identifier at a time. They were supposed to justify the choices of elimination that led to one final remaining word. For Amber, the final remaining word was Moroccan. She felt that between the terms Muslim and Moroccan, when asked to give up one, she gave up Muslim, knowing that being Moroccan came with the assumption that one was most probably Muslim as well, whereas if she picked Muslim, it would not capture her ethnicity at all. Ideally, she would have wanted to say Moroccan American, but for the activity that was an invalid choice:

When you think American like in the sense of today what an American is, it can mean anything. It's such a broad range. I feel like if I say Moroccan, people understand my background a little bit better than just throwing myself into a melting pot.

Amber explained that the Moroccan aspect of her was what made her unique from most people around her. She identified her features, the food she ate, and her ability to speak the native
Arabic dialect, even if she struggled to read and write in it as being distinctly Moroccan. When asked if Amber had been asked to do the same activity on identity in a Moroccan high school, where everyone else around her shared that aspect of ethnicity, she reflected that her remaining identifier in that geographical setting would have then been American instead:

If I were in Morocco, then everyone there would already understand the connections to the word Moroccan. In America, it has a totally different meaning. People see it as a foreign word, but it defines who I am. If I was already there and everybody identifies the same way, I feel like if I was doing an activity where I wanted to show other people more about me, I would probably pick American.

Later, Amber mused, if she was in a third geographical location, she would go with Moroccan, and if allowed to pick a double identifier she would go with Moroccan American. Being unique therefore, was the most significant marker of identity for Amber. Race and ethnicity held clearly different meanings for Amber, one as something that others identified you based on how they perceived you physically, and the other as a self-identifier. Amber reflected “race doesn’t really exist”, when asked to identify her race, however her ethnicity was very clearly Moroccan, but her identity was Moroccan American.

**Willingness to explore experiences.** Amber had over the last four years in high school been a part of several clubs. She loved participating in outdoor activities and volunteered through each of the clubs that she was a part of. Amber greatly enjoyed connecting with people and trying out new things. She spent countless hours at sports practices, working on the award presentations for robotics, and engaging in community service. Amber insisted that while other students may pick activities so they look good on their college application, she truly did it to explore her options, “the reason I sought out so much… would be to get involved. I did track
because I wanted to be with my friends, and be in that group experience.” At the end of her four years, Amber decided to pick those activities which really mattered to her and not overfill her schedule, “I wanted to focus on getting better rather than just remaining stagnant, and just doing rather than growing.” Meaningful participation, rather than just being around friends made Amber commit to varsity swimming, track, and robotics.

**Finding strength in diversity.** Overall, Amber did not feel that her identity as Muslim American impacted her life in any significant way, “I'm not doing anything that would require it to play a huge role in my life. I usually go to school, come home, go to work/robotics.” Amber mentioned how when faced with food choices, she steered clear of eating pork, but there were other meat and vegetarian options that were always available for her to choose from. Being a part of her high school was easy because Amber found it to be very “inclusive.” About her track team Amber mentioned:

There are a lot of Muslims on the track team. It's great because there are the people that wear their Hijabs and the Under Armor (referring to the complete leggings and full-sleeved attire under the sports team attire), but there's also people that will wear shorts and tank tops. They all identify as Muslim, and we interact all the time. It's really interesting to see because there's not many places where you'll see such a mixture of people.

Amber felt that her high school was diverse in that it had many students of color, primarily including people for Southern and East Asia. She stated that her high school supported students “being true to their faith” and celebrated uniqueness in students. The Muslim Student Club at the high school had several participating students. According to Amber, the Muslim students in school were mostly identifiable, not always because they chose to wear the scarf, but because the
school culture was okay with people being different. Amber mentioned many other Muslim students on her Robotics team and how everyone knew they were Muslim because of their food choices which always came up when the team ate together. Amber felt that because there were also many Hindu team mates, the coaches were very mindful of making sure that the menu on meeting days was inclusive. Amber reflected:

We have such a mix of people of different faiths and different ethnicities that there's always someone there that doesn't fit the general majority, and so even if you do feel different, there's always other people that are doing their own thing too. So, you never feel completely alone.

**The role of the community in providing rootedness.** Going to the Muslim School gave Amber her closest friends and inculcated in her basic religious values. Amber mused, “I feel like if I hadn't attended a private school that really reinforced Islamic education and things like that, a lot of things would just not have stuck in my mind.” Amber felt that her elementary and middle school years “reinforced these ideas” and that she may not have remembered how to make ablution or pray had she not gone to the Muslim School. Amber was comfortable in the mosque when she went there. She felt that because of the Muslim School she remained connected to the friends she made at her time there, even though they were mostly at different schools now.

Going to the mosque served as a place for Amber, after the Muslim School, where she could connect with the Muslim community and be surrounded by that many Muslims. Going there for Friday prayer, or Ramadhan night prayers, or Eid served as a point of connection for Amber with others from the community. Amber connected the feeling of being in the mosque to putting on the hijab. While she does not wear the hijab in her daily life, she puts it on when going to the mosque and felt that there was a sanctity to it:
It's also when you're wearing a Hijab and you're at the Masjid, you feel a different sense of security as opposed to just being with a different group of friends outside of the Masjid. I don't know how to describe it. You just feel differently. Because I grew up with it, and it's like a part of who I am, I'd say it's comforting in a way being with all those people that are the same as you, and that all identify with the same faith as you. It's like a home, I think.

The role of parents and acculturation. Amber felt that her parents’ greatest role in her identity formation was in that they chose to send her to the Muslim School, and now made it possible for her to engage in all the extra-curricular activities that she was a part of. Additionally, Amber thought that her parents made a concerted effort to pass on the Moroccan heritage to her: They raised me speaking Arabic, so it was my first language and I spoke it better than English until a large part of my younger childhood, and they do take us back to visit Morocco so they have played a large role in keeping me connected with my heritage and my Muslim roots.

Additionally, when Amber just joined high school, her mother would often remind her of the years of learning at the Muslim School, and that Amber should keep those values as guiding principles through high school. Her mother often reminded her, “remember you’re a Muslim….remember, you're not allowed to do this, you're not allowed to do that…keep your faith as your number one priority…don’t go drinking, don’t go to parties.” Regardless of the advice her mother gave her, Amber explained that her parents had not hindered her, “they've let me, throughout my four years of high school, they've given me advice and what not, but it's been on me to figure out who I am.”
Transition to high school. Amber had a smooth transition to public high school even as she came from the private Muslim School experience:

It wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. I was expecting like a jarring like, "Oh my God, this is the real world", but it wasn't that bad. It was weird not having as many close friends there, and having to make new friends and interact with new people, but I think that's the experience anywhere you go. If I were to go to college, that would be the same case there. Or get a new job, I wouldn't know anyone either.

Amber recalled that when they were at the Muslim School it felt they “were in a little bubble”, but the community projects that they were involved in during their 8th grade gave them one of the best exposures to the larger community. Amber shared that her project in Religion class had been about animal rights. For that project, she had to go with her team to interview experts and visit animal shelters. The project helped her develop social and life skills and it culminated in the team raising funds and then going to donate at a shelter. Amber felt that this experience shaped into reality for her the possibility of engaging with people outside of her comfort zone. Amber thought to some of her classmates who were also involved in similar projects, who did struggle in their high school transition due to the lack of diversity at their public high school and because they were one of very few Muslims there. Compared to them, Amber had a smoother experience because quite a few of her classmates from the Muslim School came to her public high school. She felt had she gone to another high school her experience would have been different because those friends who went to private high schools were primarily surrounded by white, affluent students and did not get the same level of diversity to offer support.
**Finding belongingness in high school.** Amber was able to keep a primary group of seven friends all the way from her freshman to senior year. Of these friends, two had gone to the Muslim School with her. The classes Amber had enjoyed most in her four years in high school were the ones in which she had had one of these friends. This core group understood her well and was comprised of “people who were open-minded.” She mentioned that of all her friends in the group one was a practicing Christian and the rest did not have a religion that their parents followed. Speaking of one of the girls (not Muslim), who Amber considered her best friend, she said:

> She is one of the kindest, most open-minded people I know. She's just always there if you ever need anything, and when it comes to ... when we celebrate Eid or something, she always wishes us Eid Mubarak on Eid. Also, during Ramadan when we can't eat and we're fasting at school, she is always like really careful to not eat in front of us. She doesn't want us to feel like we're suffering because she's gulping down water next to us. They're really good about that. They always try to help out however they can and be understanding.

Looking back to her four years together with them, she felt nostalgic for how much they had grown together, and how close they had become. Moving on to college was a bittersweet thought because they would all be moving to different locations.

Being on several clubs, traveling with her sports teams, going out of state for Robotics, attending the Sophomore dance, and several other opportunities allowed Amber over the four years to solidify her experiences. Amber also recalled meetings that were held with the Muslim Club at high school. Around the time of Eid, she remembered having a wonderful time at the club playing games with other Muslim students, and being able to shout out stuff in Arabic or
making cultural and religious references that everyone in the room understood. Amber mused, “it just felt comfortable because it felt like the Muslim School again, where we could just be 100% Muslim amongst people that completely understood what we were talking about. You didn't have to change things.” She spoke about how she could have a conversation or enjoy humor with her Muslims friends on a different level, because there was a shared experience between them. Amber felt the Muslim Club allowed the students to get together, and that was refreshing because mostly everyone hung out with their other core groups.

**Impact of religious values.** Amber felt that she had been very lucky in the friends she made during freshman year as they did not partake in drugs or wild parties, “in the times that it has come up with other people, like friends in different classes or people on the robotics team, I have avoided things like that because of my religion.” When made an offer to try drugs, Amber would think what the experience would gain her. “It'll be like a minute of bonding with these people, but why do I want to bond with these people when I have such close other friends who don't care about this stuff?” Vaping was a common experience at Amber’s high school, but she felt she steered clear of it because of both her religious identity and common sense, “I think in a sense because being Muslim, you're given a set of rules to follow, and a lot of them connect to just common sense. It's like don't do this because it will hurt you, and don't do this because it's bad.”

Amber mostly chose not to pray at the high school. She felt that many times the afternoon prayer fell at a time when she couldn’t make it, and sometimes she had missed the afternoon prayer because the next prayer of the day came up. Prayer fell during lunch hours and she preferred to do her lunch instead of finding space and time to pray. During the month of fasting, she had prayed because she didn’t have to eat lunch. She felt that there wasn’t a great space for
prayer. “It’s not a designated space. It's the presentation room. It's empty during lunch, so if you go talk to the administrators they'll open it up for you”. Because it had a tiled floor, “it was not the most ideal place”, the place seemed grimy to Amber and she would have to carry her own prayer rug in” so she said she preferred to do her prayers at home instead.

The experience of buying a dress for prom was not very difficult for Amber. While she was not looking for something long-sleeved, she did want “something that was closed for the most part. I definitely didn't want a leg slit or something like that, or a completely open back or low cleavage.” She felt there were plenty of options to choose from in that range, and knew of people who got their dresses altered for modesty by adding mesh or length. She said there were Muslim girls who went for dresses that covered more, and everyone was understanding of their choices. While Amber did go to prom with a boy, she felt it was okay because they were all part of a Robotics group. Amber loved dancing at the prom, and recalled how she got in trouble at the Muslim School for dancing around in fourth grade, where her teacher called her mother to report the “inappropriate behavior.”

Amber participated both in the swimming and track team at high school and felt that people didn’t care if one dressed differently, it was simply in one’s own head that they looked different. There were many Muslim students on teams and they all dressed in ways that they were comfortable. Over the four years Amber felt, she herself had been more conservative in the beginning and now wore “more revealing clothing.” During her freshman year, when other girls would be wearing tanks and shorts and when she wouldn’t people would ask her, "Aren't you dying in your jeans?" And she would respond, "Oh, it's actually not that bad," but she felt they all thought it was weird. In her senior year, because of the support of her friends this kind of
conversation would not occur. Also, her choice of clothing had become more mainstream over the years.

While Amber felt that being Muslim American did affect parts of her life, “But when I'm in school learning, it doesn't change or it doesn't make me any different from the person sitting right next to me.” Coming from the Muslim School, one of the adjustments that Amber had to make was getting used to seeing couples walking in the hallways. This was weird for Amber, coming from an environment that had been heavily gender segregated. Amber felt at the Muslim School there was great emphasis on seating boys and girls separately, but in high school they were assigned projects together. She soon realized that all students worked together and hung out together despite the gender. Amber recalled being taught by a guest speaker at the Muslim School about having an “arm’s length distance of a personal bubble around” oneself from boys. She remembered her classmates laughing about this long after his talk, and going around stretching their arms out, telling their classmates they were going to report them for coming too close. Amber reflected of how she had grown from:

Her years at the Muslim to the four years of high school I think that once you leave a sheltered place like the Muslim School and you're brought into, whether it be high school or college, it's now on you to develop your own idea of the world. You can't constantly have the same ideas that people have been telling you your whole life. So, once you get past a point, people have given you as much information and guidance as they can, but you reach a point where you have to make your own decisions and your own judgments based on what you yourself feel.
**Interaction with peers.** In the post-Trump Election time, Amber spoke about how shocked she was at the results. They had been watching the debates over the previous year and holding discussions in class with a level of humor and “lightheartedness” at the statements being made. With the school, like the town, closely split between Republicans and Democrats, Amber recalled the day after the election walking into the school in a state of shock. Group chats with her friends were riddled with comments like “Okay, this is it. We're all going to get deported now" among her Muslim and immigrant friends. Amber felt, while there was slight humor in their conversations:

> But then there was also the fears of like, oh, is this actually going to happen? Is he going to hold true to everything he said? Is there going to be a law in coming years? We just didn't know. There was just that question hanging above all of us, like what's going to happen now?

She felt that being a Muslim American allowed her to share an experience in the classroom that several of her peers would be unaware of. In a recent classroom discussion on DACA, Amber took the side of the Dreamers because she felt that the experience of marginalization there was similar to that of her own demographic.

Amber also recalled an incident with her younger sister earlier this year in high school where some of the male students “were putting their shirts over their faces and saying, "Allahu Akbar, I'm a terrorist," in her sister’s class. Hers sister was really upset, but “she didn't want to say anything because she was the only person who would have said something against that and everybody else stayed quiet.” When her sister shared this incident with Amber, they decided not to report it, but Amber had since then been unable to even look at the student who did it, because she found it disgusting. While, Amber knew of other students who were darker or who wore the
scarf face discrimination outside of the school with racial slurs hurled their way, she did not feel that she had been discriminated herself. Amber reflected that this was because she was not physically identifiable as Muslim.

Defining American. Amber felt that in discussions around the Election when students spoke in favor of making America great again, they focused only on the economy at the cost of values that she considered truly American. “If we're sacrificing our values and undermining the rights of others, then there shouldn't even be a question.” Being American to Amber meant “being open to others, accepting immigrants, having a fair country where we don't judge people based on racial features or sexual orientation.” Despite the rhetoric, Amber never questioned the American aspect of her identity and not for one moment considered herself an immigrant. Her fears of deportation were linked to being a Muslim, instead:

I just thought that it was going to end up being like when Hitler took charge in Germany, and things slowly progressed with the Jews in that they first had to identify themselves, which is what he was saying, “we're going to have to have Muslims carry identification”- That's scary that they don't trust people enough to have to register everyone. It's not fair. So much of the country is in trouble because of what people of all races are doing, and for him to just pinpoint Muslims as being the sole aggravators in the country, it's not fair.

For Amber, it was troubling that despite her clear identification with citizenship and the values she stood for being American, she would not be welcomed to her own country because she carried the additional identity of being Muslim.

Living with Islamophobia. Amber felt that the current climate was such that the mainstream was not focused on Muslims, due to the gun control issues plaguing the country post
the Florida school shooting. Any time there was an act of violence perpetrated in the country, Amber’s first thought was one she believed most Muslims have. “I think the first thought for any Muslim was I hope it wasn't a Muslim that did it”, because then you know everyone's going to be talking about the fact that it was a Muslim, not the fact that there was a mentally unstable person shooting up a school.” Amber was deeply disturbed by the loss of lives in the shooting, but also concerned at the discrepancy that exists in perspectives:

Well, it seemed like most school shootings in America. It was, “oh, they're going to give this guy some kind of he's mentally ill excuse, and then focus on the fact that he somehow acquired a gun when he shouldn't have been able to”. When, if it was a Muslim, they probably wouldn't have been focusing on that. They would have been focused on the fact that he was Muslim, how'd he get into the country, or something like that. So, it's just two completely different arguments, depending on who did it.

Amber also thought back to the time of the Orlando shooting, where the perpetrator was identified as Muslim, and what that meant for her as someone who identifies with the faith:

It's more difficult than if it's a random white person shooting, because then people ask more questions regarding faith, and sometimes it is related that they're extremists and they will blame it on Islam, and that God told them to do it for Jihad… not all Muslims are like that, but people just don't get that. They'll hear the news and then they'll just automatically assume, “oh, all Muslims are going to start killing us.” That just starts a lot of conversations on “Muslims are peaceful”… and it seems like every single Muslim has to contribute to making us seem innocent, even though we did nothing wrong to begin with.
While most teachers tend to avoid conversations that could turn Islamophobic, according to Amber, there was this lingering discomfort that she experienced after an episode of violence, not only for the loss of life involved, but due to association of religious identity of the perpetrator. Amber navigated a space of feeling American and knowing well the racialization of religious experience.

**Participant’s artifact**

Amber brought a craft wreath she had made at the Muslim School in her late elementary grades around Thanksgiving time. The wreath had been hung at her mother’s science lab for some time but it held significance for Amber because it reminded her “of connecting the Muslim School with more American things. That was when our projects became more broader, in terms of art. We used to focus specifically on painting masjids and doing specific religious arts and crafts before that.” This craft held special meaning for her because it served like an entry point into the culture of the country “like leaving a Muslim shelter, and going out into the world, or blending the two.” In many ways Amber’s high school experience was an actualization of just that stepping away.

**Major Takeaways from Amber’s Story**

Amber’s educational journey during her high school years had been one of ease due to her outgoing personality and several points of assimilation into mainstream culture. Amber believed that her light complexion, coupled with the fact that she did not wear the hijab had been the reason why she did not face marginalization. While Amber felt comfortable with her Muslim friends she felt that her choices had become more liberal over the last four years and allowed her to find what resonated best with her. Amber did not feel her religious identity to be a conscious part of her at all times and navigated her social spaces with ease, making decisions that were safe
and ethical. Amber pulled from the cultural capital of her heritage in her understanding of social justice. In Amber’s experience, diversity made her transition to high school an easy one.

Selma’s Story

*I'm so ready to represent the Muslim Ummah in a way that I know others have done before me, but I want to hop on that bandwagon as well.* - Selma

Participant’s Background

Selma (pseudonym used) described herself as a Muslim American while also being Palestinian and Syrian. Her mother was well grounded in faith, and a Palestinian born and raised in America, whereas her father was a Syrian immigrant, and liberal in his practice of faith. Having parents from diverse backgrounds and levels of religiosity gave Selma a unique experience at home. Selma went to Islamic School (pseudonym used) in the Tristate area, since third grade all the way through high school. The second of four siblings, Selma and her younger brother and sister went to the Islamic School, whereas her older brother remained at public school throughout his education.

An entrepreneur in trying various freelance projects for herself, Selma had varied interests that kept her busy such as her passion for art, business, and photography. Selma spoke fondly of the role her teachers and mother had played in making her a practicing muhajjibah (woman who wears a scarf). Admitted to the college of her choice, Selma looked forward to her experience in a diverse educational community. Selma was proud of her high school which she described as a college preparatory school, despite its offering limited courses to students due to its size and resource limitation. Strongly committed to her faith, Selma looked forward to what life had in store for her, while also being nervous about what the transition to college would be like.
Informal and Formal Educational Experiences

Selma spoke of incredible strength and conviction in her values and Muslim identity. Her experience of Islamic education all the way from 3rd grade to high school meant that her first point of transition to public education had not yet occurred. Selma shared her fears of what this transition would be like, having already tasted some of the difficulties of wearing a hijab in public. Despite the preparedness on her part, fostered by her mother and teachers, Selma was acutely aware of the Islamophobic climate and its repercussions.

Transition to a faith-based school. Selma transferred to the Islamic School in third grade from the public school system, because her mother wanted to give the children an Islamic education. Selma struggled with subjects like Arabic, Quran, and Islamic Studies, which she had not studied formally before, and felt that other students who started the school earlier than her did have a better grasp than her even in the later years. Thinking back to third grade Selma said:

Making friends was interesting because I didn't have girls in my class named Jessica or Lauren or Kelly, I had girls named Maham and Fatima and Rahma, and I was like, “okay, this is different, but I can make friends with you, my name is Selma, and you guys can pronounce my name right, not like the girls in my public school.”

In that sense adjusting to the Islamic School was easy socially, but slightly concerning on the academics front due to the new subject areas that she had to study.

The role of parents and acculturation. Selma shared that her mother had attended religious school on the weekends growing up, and was strong in her faith and practice, even though she was born and raised in America. Her father had immigrated from Syria and according to Selma, “when people come from a foreign country, they try to assimilate as much as possible,
so my Dad wanted everything away from the (home) culture” because the goal of immigration to America for them was to make money. Selma hoped that he would become religious “I would like him to go to more Jumu'ah prayers, I would like him to ask more about the religion as opposed to not caring if I had something to tell him about what happened in Islamic Studies class.”

When she recently started wearing the hijab out of choice, her mother supported her decision and hoped that she would maintain the practice. Her father, however questioned her as to why she was wearing it. Selma felt, that her father even though he came from Syria, did not have the opportunity to get religious education that Selma did in going to the Islamic School. Selma felt that she wouldn’t have become the person she did, if were not for her mother giving her that foundation at home and providing her the opportunity for Islamic education. In addition, Selma shared a time when her mother had introduced Selma to her friend’s daughter. Selma shared she was 15 at that time, and in her mind the girl was much cooler than her because she was White American and went to a public school. The girl asked Selma, which school she went to, to which Selma responded “North School.” Selma explained that she was embarrassed to share that she went to a Muslim school, and that she would come across as weird to this girl, so she decided to make up a name of the school that sounded more mainstream. Selma’s mother overheard this conversation, and pulled Selma to a side right there and said:

"Why aren't you proud of where you go? Why aren't you proud to be a Muslim? You go to a Muslim private Islamic school. I pay tuition every three months for you." It's a really expensive school we go to. She's like, "Be proud of who you are. You think I didn’t hear you, I’m your mother, I hear everything"."
She asked Selma what she had just said and why. Selma then recalled her mother telling her, that she should be proud of where she came from, and who she was instead of hiding it. Her mother then told her to go back to the girl and tell her which school she really came from. It was awkward for Selma to do this, but she did do it, and it served as reminder to her to have pride in herself, “I remember just being like, this could have been so much easier. Then from that moment I was just like, I'm going to be proud of where I go.”

**Impact of religious values.** Islamic values were a strong part of Selma’s identity. She remembered how just a few years ago this had not been the case. Selma reminisced about how much she had grown in the last four years. Earlier if someone asked her name, she would say it as a shortened Americanized version of the name and she was also not wearing the scarf at that time. If someone asked which school she went to, Selma would say that she went to a private school as opposed to saying that she went to a Muslim school. She described this as being “insecure about identity”, and Selma shared, “my educational experience in my school has affected me greatly in terms of my identity, because my school stresses on the importance of being educated, and also being a great Muslim.” An interesting example she cited of strength in identity, was when she was with her friends at a Dunkin’ Donuts and it was time to pray. Selma and her friends decided to go out to the parking lot, stand next to their car, put their jackets on the ground and started praying. Selma said, “It was so cool because I was like, "Oh my God, we're doing this right now" and people are driving by and we're literally so obviously Muslim.” She remembered it feeling weird, but she knew that she also wanted to do it again. She didn’t feel nervous because:
The one focus that I have right now is making my prayer on time, and it's just you and God. So, I was like “it's me and Allah right now, and I'm making my prayer to Him. I'm doing it on time, and I'm doing it in a parking lot.”

For Selma, the decision to wear the hijab a year and half ago was a very conscious decision that she wanted to take before she went off to college. Her friends considered her religious because of this choice, and while Selma was proud of her decision to wear the scarf she was also humble about how a physical scarf was not enough of a marker of one’s religious practice:

You can wear the scarf, but if you're not making your prayers on time if you're not doing good deeds, if you're not giving charity, if you're not doing X, Y, and Z, what we're supposed to do as Muslims what does the scarf really matter? It's just a veil.

Selma was reflective about her decision to wear the hijab. In her journey she consistently questioned her intentionality. She shared “I was going into 11th grade I was like, you know what I want to put it on. I had toxic people in my life at that time, and I felt like I was doing it just to impress a particular person, or impress all my friends.” As a Muslim, it was important that she not do it to show off to people, but that she do this from her heart and purely for the sake of pleasing God. To this end, she rethought her decision a few times, taking it on and then taking it off, wearing it for making an impression on people, to finally doing it because of her recognition of it being a command of God. She remembered being exasperated with herself as she oscillated between different emotions about wearing the hijab, wondering if her heart was in it or not, doubting herself, wanting to take it off, and thinking what people would say, to finally at one point it just clicking with her:
I was like yo, my heart is in this forever. I'm like, and I hope it stays in my heart forever, because I love the scarf, I love what it identifies me as like a strong, powerful Muslim woman. This scarf that I'm wearing, ancestors before me have worn this scarf like some of the most influential women in Islamic history have worn this scarf, I want to wear it.

Being a symbol of her faith meant a lot to Selma and she felt that whether it was wearing the scarf, or representing Islam in any way. “It's not a burden. I think it's a privilege really. I think representing my people or representing the masjid that I attended or representing the scarf, I think that's all a privilege. I'm grateful to have that.”

Selma volunteered regularly with different charity organizations including feeding the needy and homeless. Serving the destitute was an integral part of her faith, and she did it as a service to God, however, in this service she knew she was also making a statement about stereotypes:

As a Muslim American, giving back to those in need speaks volumes, because people will label me as a terrorist or a towel head, or all those racial slurs, but I'm trying to give back to the community, and if you label me as this terrorist, how would someone that's evil-rooted do this?

It gave Selma courage to see young Muslims finding representation in recent years as bloggers, in the Olympics, politics, and the fashion world. Selma felt that while there was this rampant Islamophobia, there were also new opportunities for Muslim women that previously did not exist, “I think we’re getting to the cooler part of being Muslim. Does that sound wrong?” Selma reflected upon her statement because oftentimes a perception of what is Islamic is rooted in traditionalism.
Defining American. Acutely aware of her strength and conviction, Selma attributed these to her Palestinian heritage. Even though she identified with the Syrian part of her ethnicity she was disappointed in her father’s family’s lack of attempt to keep her generation connected to Syria. Selma felt her family was very “Americanized” because her mother was raised here and her father’s family had very deliberately “assimilated.” Her examples of being Americanized included that her parents spoke to her in English at home, they ate spaghetti and meatballs, and her parents were okay with her talking to boys and having male friends. Selma suggested that this would be considered non-traditional to other families that came from origins similar to those of her parents, because her friends who considered her household American ate ethnic foods more often, were not allowed to interact with boys, and the parents spoke to the children in Arabic. Selma felt that she had an “American equality mentality”, as she recalled an incident that took place in class. There was a discussion taking place on the use of “N” word, and if that fell within the realm of freedom of expression. The discussion was student-lead, based on an opinion piece the students had read in class, and the teacher was simply listening in on the debate. Selma vehemently supported the viewpoint that racial slurs were wrong across the board, and never okay. She spoke about how it felt like if someone called Muslims “terrorists” or “towel heads”, and that the experiences of all minority populations were equally offensive to human dignity. After class was over, the teacher pulled her to a side and commended for her mature responses, and told her that she “would go very far because of her American mentality.” According to Selma, speaking for justice and equality was an American core value.

Anxiety about transition to college. Selma was cognizant of the challenges that might face her when she moved to college, because this would be her first step away from the comfort zone of a community school. One of her criterion in making the choice of college was based on
how diverse the school would be. At the Islamic School, Selma said, “Everyone knows I'm Muslim, everyone knows I'm Palestinian Syrian, everyone knows that my name is Selma and how to pronounce it”, but at college she felt even though she would fit in or stand out, there would be this voice inside of her saying, “Oh, I kinda care what they think”, and that would be different to the level of comfort she had at the school.

Selma had been thinking about the impending transition and given it considerable thought and discussion. She related a time when she had talked to someone about transitioning to college and they told her, “You have to be very careful as a Muslim American surviving” because she had a disadvantage and may be walked over. When she asked what her disadvantage was she was told, “You're a Muslim American, and you wear the hijab and you identify as that, and people could walk all over you and they think you won't talk back.”

When she told me it's a disadvantage, I was like, wow, that's very hard ... because she was like, “That's why a lot of girls take off the scarf, and that's why a lot of girls don't want to identify as that, or they change their name from Jannah to Jen, because they don't want to have that Muslim identity.” When that girl told me it's kind of a disadvantage, I was like, actually I kinda think it's my advantage because I'm different, I'm unique, and although there are 1.7 billion Muslims in the world, most Muslims are being labeled as something they're not, and I'm gonna prove people wrong. I want to represent my Muslim Ummah in the best way possible.

Selma felt that her experience growing up in a household that had one parent supporting her association to religious identity and one parent not understanding her desire to do so, had in a way prepared her to live with differing viewpoints about her practice.
Selma was hopeful that she would be able to maintain her faith and keep her strong sense of identity when she went to college. She knew that this would be her last year in an Islamic environment and she had to move on. At the same time, however, she was very nervous about some things she had heard from her friends about Muslim girls who had gone to college and soon decided to take their hijabs off, partied hard, and had drifted away from their values. She said, “Now, I'm very strong within my deen (faith). I couldn't be happier, and I know that in college it's going to be tough, but I hope, inshallah, I remain so intact with the scarf.” Selma prayed that she would remain strong, because those girls practice in high school had been similar to hers.

She was also scared about being in New York among diverse people, if there was another extremist attack and the perpetrator was Muslim. She was afraid that people would judge her on the streets and be afraid of her because of her hijab. Selma was prepared to speak on behalf of the Muslim Ummah, if there were people making Islamophobic comments. “I'm just a Muslim girl trying to survive, basically, in this country, and to represent my Ummah well and educate myself.”

Living with Islamophobia. One of the things that made an impression on Selma was that her older brother did not come to the Islamic School, and continued his education in the public school. Despite being a popular kid there, she shared that after 9/11 people would come up to him and ask if he was a terrorist. He had said to her, “In a public environment, you don't know which kids are Islamophobic or racist, xenophobic” and wasn’t sure if she would be strong enough to handle the hate.

In her own experience, Selma felt that she had experienced more Islamophobia ever since she had started wearing the hijab. Before she wore it, she felt she could pass off as white and not
a Muslim, because she was light-skinned and unidentifiable as Muslim. While driving around, she recalled an older man show her the finger for no reason, except that obviously she was Muslim. In another incident, when she was giving out free food samples outside her father’s deli, she was told by people “move away from me” and “go back to your country” a few times. Selma reflected that she knew how life was when she did not wear the scarf, and how the perception about her in people differed because of her choice of covering when she did start wearing it:

I know the difference right away because when I used to not wear the scarf, I would be treated like, "Hey, what's up," from anyone. I would get smiles from strangers because they wouldn't know that I'm a Muslim, they wouldn't know that I'm Arab, because I'm not wearing a scarf. My hair is down. But I wear the scarf, it's a completely different situation. When I used to not wear the scarf, I would be a light-skinned girl with whatever color my hair is, and I would walk around, go on the beach, go on the boardwalk, and everyone would treat me, "Hi, hey, what's up." I would get a slice of pizza and the guy wouldn't look at me like I was like, "What, wait, you speak English?" It's so crazy because when you wear the scarf, and you talk in English to a person that's American, just look at their face, because they look at you and they're like, “Oh my god, they can speak English.”

The Trump presidency was an example of increased bigotry to Selma. She felt that racism had always existed but the president’s rhetoric had made it worse. She said:

This whole ideology of we're putting America first, you basically are saying you're putting white people first. Just say it like that. Don't say America, because the first attack a Muslim makes in America, you label them as a terrorist, but the
kid that just killed 17 kids in the Parkland shooting, you labeled as mentally unstable.

Despite studying in a faith-based school, where everyone around her was Muslim, the first thought that crossed Selma’s mind in the face of any news of a shooting was the same one of panic:

Every time there's a shooting, me and my classmates, we're all like, "Oh, was he Muslim? Was his name Ahmed? Was his name Mohammed? Was his name Ali?

Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god."

Upon finding out in cases when the perpetrator was not a Muslim, there was always this sense of relief among her friends, because it would take the light way from religious association on media coverage. The associations made between Muslims and violence were stereotypical and hurtful.

Selma shared a story of her going to the local DMV for her permit, and the employee there looked at her and asked if she knew how to use a gun, and suggested to her that a local shooting range had just opened nearby where it would be safe to practice shooting. Selma shared the incident with her mother, but they did not report the incident or the employee. When Selma, went to vote recently for a local election at her predominantly white town’s voting center, she felt all the eyes suddenly fall on her as she entered to cast her vote.

The role of teachers in identity making. One of Selma’s teachers, Ms. Nader, had impacted her religious identity deeply. Before her classes with Ms. Nader, Selma felt religion was just a grade, another course that she had to take, but the classes with this instructor left Selma connected to her faith. She wished she could take Ms. Nader to college with her to serve as motivation. Even though there were some things about Islam, that Selma “found hard to
swallow” she knew that she had to accept them because they were part of her faith. Selma shared that Ms. Nader had taught her an important lesson:

We may be this fancy accredited school, with nice technology within our walls, but that's not what really matters. What matters is your Islam. You come to this school because your parents want to protect you. You don't go to public school like most kids do because your parents had that opportunity, they had that rizq (means) to put you in a private Islamic school, because they want to protect you.

Selma shared several conversations that Ms. Nader had with Selma and her classmates about what faith looked like. One of the conversations was about hijab, and what constituted a void hijab. She said her teacher felt that people who wore hijab as a fashion statement, experimenting with it by styling it in a way to look attractive, or showing part of their hair within hijab were not doing the right hijab. Even though, Selma’s mother wore the hijab, she never asked Selma to wear it. All that Selma learned about hijab was through her school and teachers.

Additionally, Selma felt that the teachers and mentors at her school had given her the strength and confidence in herself. From helping her with ADD to developing life skills, she had found nurturers in the adults around her in school. As part of the UN mock trial team, she was proud of representing her school on a team that did exceptionally well in the state. She shared that even though they appeared like a sore thumb with their hijabs at the competition, they could win because of the work the teachers put into the process.

**The dichotomous role of the community.** For Selma, there was a close association between the Islamic School, the mosque, and her Muslim community because they were all situated in the same locale. The school was associated with the mosque and even if families did
not have their children in the Islamic School, the mosque was used as place of worship and community center by the larger Muslim community of the area. It was therefore, difficult for Selma to separate these three entities, except that the day school was clearly the school, but other than that there were several overlapping interactions. The mosque had been proactive in arranging for the community to go to Washington D.C. for a large rally protesting the immigration ban. The administration of the mosque had opened this trip up to Muslims and non-Muslims. This trip gave Selma the opportunity to collaborate with other people for a cause of social activism. She mentioned that on the bus ride, because she was surrounded by individuals who could be considered allies, she was confident about speaking about her identity as a Muslim American, who went to the Islamic School.

The Islamic School, for Selma, was a comfort zone where she could easily resonate with all those around her.

Since I go to an Islamic private school, I'm around other Muslims, so it's not like I'm experiencing anything different than what they are experiencing. If I was in a public school, or even just a private school, but not Islamic, I feel like I would experience something that the others wouldn't experience. Because I would be like the outsider, I would be like okay, this is crazy I have to tell people why my name is this, and why I eat these type of foods, and why I wear the scarf, and who I am, and stuff like that.

Selma referenced how other people she knew who did not go to Islamic School had a difficult time because of their difference, “My experience as an American Muslim in my school has been great, because I don't feel uncomfortable.”
Within the community though, Selma felt that her school was predominantly desi (coming from South Asia), and she was Arab. She got along fine with everyone, but felt that at times she did feel different because of her ethnic origin. Similarly, when she started wearing the scarf, and other girls were not wearing it outside of school, she would feel slightly out of place, especially when the other Muslim girls would call her religious compared to themselves. Selma shared that eventually most of the girls did start wearing the scarf because they understood that it was a command of God.

In the larger community, Selma felt there were always Muslims who were judgmental and stuck in the old times who would make unwarranted comments, “There are always like a bunch of Muslim women that go up to my mom, and they always question, “oh, you let your daughter wear that”, or “you let your daughter talk to this girl”, or, “you let your daughter talk to the boys as friends”.” Selma explained:

I tell my mom everything about what I do, so there shouldn't be judgment. I'm not doing anything wrong, I know what I am. But there's always some drama in the Muslim community, and in the masjid (mosque). Muslims are the best for drama when it comes to that.

Once when Selma was casually speaking to one of her male classmates at the mosque a woman came and complained to Selma’s mother, and told her to keep an eye on Selma. On the flip side, Selma felt that when she started wearing the hijab the community members were very proud of her and happy about her choice. She felt she got more respect from the community for her choice.
Participant’s artifact

Selma shared two photographs as artifacts that represented her identity. Not only were these important to her because of her love for photography, they resonated with her due to the symbolism they carried. The photograph she had taken, featured the open landscape of California. It was taken while she was in a car, and caught her in the sideview mirror holding her camera. Selma felt that the photograph captured her spirit of moving forward as she let her passions for photography and travel guide her. As Selma transitioned to college, she felt that the photograph represented her vision. Another photograph that Selma shared was taken in Washington D.C., where she participated in the rally against the immigration ban. Selma had taken several photographs at the rally of the signs people were holding. This one photograph that resonated with her, was of a teacher who had come to the protest to support her first grade Somali student who was afraid that he might not be able to live in the country. Selma felt it was heart-warming that people from all walks of life were coming to speak against oppression of Muslims. This artifact represented for Selma the many examples of support and possibilities of being in a country where seemingly different people like Jews, LGBTQ, Muslims, all come together to stand together against discrimination. Selma felt after her interaction with the teacher at the rally that she was young and needed to bring these stories to the front, “I need to advocate for people”, so she shared it on her social media, and felt that had she not done that no one would have known about it. This artifact reminded Selma, that she was the next generation, and it was upon her shoulders to voice a representation of Muslims in different aspects, including the arts, design, and photography.
Major Takeaways from Selma’s Story

Selma’s narrative was centered in a proud Muslim American identity, where themes of marginalization, stereotyping, Islamophobia, and whiteness were clearly evident. Selma’s confidence in her choices yet her anxiety about transitioning to a non-faith-based institute were juxtaposed precariously yet understandably in an intersectional space. Racialization of religion and its resultant discrimination were recurring experiences for Selma. She met these challenges with the strength of her cultural capital which she derived from her mother and teachers at the faith-based school. Selma’s grasp of space making had contemporaneous relevance, as she joined protests, celebrated diversity, saw commonalities in the experiences of the oppressed, and remained hopeful of a creation of a counter-narrative of and by Muslims in the age of information.

Rida’s Story

_If you come to my school, you're not going to feel like it's an American school. That's not how it's designed._ -Rida

Participant’s Background

Rida (pseudonym used) went to the Islamic School (pseudonym used) from Pre-K to high school. Both her parents were originally from Pakistan, but she was born and raised in America. Her father came for college and her mother came here after having attended medical school in Pakistan. Her parents got married here. Rida had never visited Pakistan, because most of her family lived in America, with one set of grandparents in Virginia, and the other in Texas. Rida was the older of two sisters and they both went to the same school.

Her parents put the children in the Islamic School to provide them with a religious environment that matched the values at home. Rida greatly enjoyed reading everything from
fiction to news articles on CNN. She taught herself new forms of exercise, including hip-hop. Rida enjoyed learning new things independently and she had participated in several extracurricular activities like the school’s debate team, soccer, Science Olympiad, Tae Kwon Do, and the Spanish Club. She felt that all learning had to have a purpose and was always inspired to do new things. Interested in pursuing medicine in the future, Rida was waiting to hear from colleges of her choice. A quiet young adult, Rida appeared to be an introvert, but held strong opinions about her educational experience.

**Informal and Formal Educational Experiences**

Rida’s family provided her religious foundation that served not only as her moral compass, but gave her the very lens through which she perceived the world. Anxious about her transition to college, Rida loved to explore new things. The experience that stood out most in Rida’s narrative was in her criticism of her faith-based school experience, which she believed focused only on the religious aspect of identity. Rida felt unready for the transition ahead, and felt that the school environment had been isolated and removed from mainstream culture.

**Defining self, race, and popular culture.** Unable to define what a “Pakistani mentality” was, Rida did not feel there was much Pakistani about her, except liking a few food and clothing items from there, since she had never really visited Pakistan. Rida identified herself as Muslim in that she went to the mosque and prayed. Rida felt, however that she was American in terms of pop culture. These included her taste in music and shows. Rida described herself as a “hijabi Muslim American” who was interested in pop culture. Being a Muslim American for Rida, meant having an equal opportunity for all things except one, “I think you have to work harder to show people that you are not different from them.” Rida believed that for Muslim American women if they wore the hijab, it was not a leveled field, because in any interaction they started
off with stereotypical perceptions that the mainstream held about them. Once that wall was broken initially, people saw the similarities over the differences.

Growing up, Rida believed that she was not as “cultured” into Americanness as she was now. Her parents did not have the Disney Channel at home, and the TV was used to play videos on tape for the children. When in school, Rida would hear other children talk about shows on the Disney Channel. Looking back, Rida reflected that it was in her late elementary and middle school years that she found out about American culture. This for her included movies, TV shows, music, and food. She felt she was more American than her parents in that she knew the cultural references better than her parents did. Over the years her choice of food had changed as well from ethnic foods like biryani (chicken and rice) to burgers. While all this was American for Rida, she felt it was tradition that was Muslim about her. Tradition included clothing and food choices that her family had ingrained in to her, but also choices about “morality, such as how to treat other people, and concepts of humility and justice.”

Anxiety about transition to college. Rida was anxious about transitioning to college after having always only been in the Islamic School. She was hoping to find friends who would not change the way she was. She explained her cause for nervousness:

That I'm a Muslim means I have to take time out to respect parts of my religion that, especially if I'm attending a college next year, it's like an American college but I also have to preserve my identity as a Muslim, which is important to me, that I can't get side-tracked and lose parts of myself; that means that I have to pray on time and that I have to retain my religious values, and when I'm hanging out with my friends and the opposite gender and all that kind of stuff.
Rida shared that when she moves away from here into college she would still be doing the same things but in an environment, that was now different. There were certain parts of her identity that Rida would be tested greatly through, and they all fell around areas of socialization and interaction with new people:

I'm gonna have to go to parties, I'm gonna have to do those kinds of things. So how to not get side tracked. Like how do I know I won't drink, or something like that later on in the future. Because I could get coerced, so I'm afraid that I won't have enough confidence to maybe keep doing the things I am doing right now.

Rida was in a deep nagging state of concern about whether she would be able to prove herself strong enough in the face of freedom, choices, and opportunities that college would have to offer, and acknowledged her self-doubt:

There's always a chance and I don't know myself well enough to know, 'cause I've never been in that kind of environment before, I've always been secluded in the school that I attend. It's always been the same people. It's always the same religion. So I wouldn't know, and that's what scares me.

Despite her fears of what choices she might make, or what challenges she may face, Rida was convinced that she would not take the hijab off, because it was an absolute part of her identity. While she was afraid that someone might be harassing or discriminatory toward her due to her hijab, she had never really experienced any bigotry so she felt her fear may be unfounded. Rida was surprised at the results of the Trump presidential election, but had faced no discrimination after. She believed this was so because she only moved around in safe spaces, whether it be her all Muslim school, or extra-curricular activities where she had been going for several years and people knew her well. Had she been in college the experience would be different:
It does worry me. It worries me that I won't be able to survive on my own. It's been so secluded. I've heard stories of people who just went off on and just on a different kind because they were given so much freedom right after they left for so many rules.

Transition to college posited two challenges for Rida, one of losing faith, and the other of being outside of her comfort zone and safe space where she may be prone to discrimination.

**Impact of religious values.** Rida shared that she had started wearing the hijab when she was in second grade, just like that. Her sister started wearing it when she was in fourth grade. While Rida’s mother also wore the hijab, she did not tell Rida and her sister to wear it. In fact, her mother often reminded her that it was a choice she had made on her own, but that it was something to be proud of “because it made you a walking symbol of Islam.” Rida felt that wearing the hijab in America was a symbol of strength, because it was done despite the rhetoric of hate. While Rida had never experienced any instances of racial hate, she had been asked the question of why she wore the scarf in safe inter-faith spaces by students of other religious associations. Her answer had been that hijab was a sign of modesty and that it protected women, and that it was not intended to oppress in any way.

Similar to how her hijab had become an integral part of her, so had the choice of eating halal food. Rida felt that she didn’t really have to think about food choices, because they were an intrinsic part of her. Rida ate only at halal restaurants, or ordered vegetarian if she was elsewhere. Rida explained that there were things that just had to be done, regardless of whether one felt weird about it. One such example was praying in public. At the movie theater, she remembered praying in the corner with her family because it was time and they would have missed their prayer if they didn’t make it right there. She felt weird doing it, and thought about
how she might appear to people who were not familiar with the practice; however, that did not deter her from praying in public. Several of Rida’s friends would often forget about praying when the time came, but she did have one friend who reminded her when they were together. Rida also remembered times when she had prayed at the mall, by going inside one of the changing rooms to pray. That experience was definitely more comfortable for her than playing at the movie theater.

When it came to shopping for modest clothing, Rida was of the opinion that “people overcomplicate clothing too much.” She said her school was an example of a place where there was unnecessary micromanagement and judgement over students’ clothing. Rida felt there were more serious things in religion that needed attention rather than getting fixated on the parameters of acceptable clothing:

It's a little bit on your knee, a little bit below your knee, a little bit up and down your arm. I feel like there's so many things in the religion that are so much more drastic and important than your clothing choices.

Rida complained that the school was overly strict about implementation of girls’ choice of clothing. They fined students four dollars for a modesty violation such as length of shirt being short or pants being too tight, or a little bit of hair showing. While seniors were not obligated to wear the uniform the school office administered these fines at its discretion, with each violation adding the amount of money fined. Rida believed that general guidelines like not wearing a tank top, or something sheer would be acceptable but her getting fined for wearing a really long shirt, with a slit on the sides was uncalled for. She was fined that the slit allowed her glimpse of her legs that were covered in tights. While the school had not prepared Rida for the transition, there was the expectation that the students must remember who they are, and this was meant to suggest
“Make sure you pray. Don't take off your hijab. Don't drink. Don't do drugs, that kind of stuff. Don't go get a boyfriend, that kind of stuff.”

An integral value that Rida thought formed the foundation of her practice and faith was the trait of humility. She saw a religious precept in not being conceited and not considering oneself better than others. She also knew not to judge others on face value and to give everyone a fair chance because her faith demanded that tolerance and lack of judgement.

The comfort of community. Rida felt that her community gave her “a sense of security” because these were the people she had always known and grown up with. She also felt that going to college would be a completely different experience, because she would now no longer be around people that she had grown to be so comfortable around. Her house was located near the mosque, so her family frequented it quite often for praying communally and breaking fast together over mealtime during the month of Ramadan. The mosque, community, and school held an overlapping association for Rida because they were located in one precinct.

The role of the school. Rida felt that the school could have done a better job of building a foundation of faith among students. She felt that the curriculum of religious and secular education was rather redundant, and several teachers had been inexperienced. This impacted her learning, which she felt would have been more effective had the school made a greater effort. The religious studies curriculum appeared to be haphazard to Rida and she did not think highly of the instruction.

Additionally, Rida believed that the school culture was “ messed up.” She felt that the school lacked expertise and did not provide support in the college application and recommendation process. She felt that not only was she not prepared for the transition to high school, the management did not communicate well overall:
I think the management just doesn't communicate with us properly. I think they just yell at us a lot. I think they don't tell us, they don't treat us like adults. They treat us like younger children. They don't treat us like we are responsible. I feel like that's a problem because students get frustrated really easily and then there's no communication between the students and the authorities and that's a problem. They should trust us more, they should let us do things. They should allow discussion on a variety of topics like they should be so secluded. I don't know how to explain this into any difference. There's things that happen in the world and they shield us from that and we should act like we don't know about them, but that is not how it works.

Rida felt that the school’s vision was to protect the Muslim identity of students by excluding them from the mainstream culture. Topics pertaining to LGBTQ, safe sex, substance abuse, or interactions between boys and girls were considered off limits for discussion. Rida felt that several students in her school were in relationships with each other, but the school opted to not discuss it because “oh it is haram” (impermissible). Rida opined that the environment was largely inflexible and refused to look at issues that were relevant to students.

Rida felt that the school made a big deal about pointing out if students of the opposite gender stood or sat next to each other. Her parents were equally agitated about this mentality at school. Rida avoided hanging out with male classmates in school because she didn’t want to get in trouble. She felt that going out to eat together in a group, or sitting next to each other for work or just hanging out were okay and that the school classified everything as “haram”, which in her mind was a “traumatic” thing to do to students. Rida shared an incident where a photograph of a group of kids was being taken and a boy from her Spanish class was standing next to her. Even
though he was not touching her, the adult taking the picture labeled that as “haram” and told her to create a further distance. In Rida’s experience the scope of the educational experience at her school was not expansive and because many instructors followed a strict code, they did not delve into conversations on many topics. In this regard, Rida opined that while it was a safe space to pray together, and attend religious classes, the school had failed to create a strong sense of Muslim American identity in the students. The instructional methods were teacher-centered and did not allow for critical thinking or student discussion.

The Islamic School only associated itself as Muslim, according to Rida, and therefore did nothing to cultivate a Muslim American identity in students, “they don't really like to introduce cultural aspects, especially American culture into the curriculum.” Rida felt that her American identity was cultivated disassociated with her educational experience, “the school environment does not expand me as an American person within American culture basically.” The sheltered and exclusive environment was described as:

It's like a very closed-off type of universe. It doesn't feel like we're very connected to the world outside. We're not like other schools. We're not as open.

We're not as culturally expansive. We're not free to do similar things. We can't do the smallest things.

Rida was disgruntled over administrative restrictions in the school like seniors not being allowed to drive to school, or go out for lunch, or having lunch delivered, or being provided senior internships only within the school premises. She was offended at the plethora of limitations thrown their way which made school a claustrophobic environment, including disallowing the use of phones and laptops, closing out rooms during recess and more:
One time we had a party for one of the teachers who was leaving and they got really angry, "You didn't run it by the high school administration, so you can't have a party." The smallest things like that. They constantly pick on us. In the hallways, "Why are you walking like that? Why are you talking like that?"

The administration seemed judgmental to Rida and also untrusting of the students’ choices: They don't want some parts of American culture entering the school. If people do that, something like, let's say you're wearing nail polish or something? I guess they'll judge you for that. They'll fine you. It's like a strict part of the dress code to not wear it.

Rida shared an interesting episode where her classmates went to the Town Hall style meetings at school and complained to the Board of Directors and advisory panels about the school. As a result, the administration’s response was one not conducive to critical feedback from the students:

Every time we would tell them something ... You know what they do when they get mad at us? They bring us into the office and they yell at us. They accuse our parents of not raising us properly. They're like, "is this how your parents raised you? Is this what your parents taught you to do? Is this what you're supposed to be doing?" We told the administration, "You shouldn't be talking to us like that. We don't feel comfortable." Instead of apologizing they were like, "Are you accusing me personally of accusing your parents of not raising you properly? Is that what you're saying to me right now? That I'm the one who was doing that stuff?"
In this sense, the school seemed not only to have been irrelevant to students’ experience, but sometimes also limiting and restrictive.

**The strengthening role of family.** Rida described both parents as practicing Muslim professionals. She was deeply connected to her family and spent a lot of time doing things together. Her mother wore the hijab, and while she had not forced Rida and her sister to wear it, both girls decided to wear it in grades two and four respectively. Because Rida was very young when she wore it she could not remember if it was due to the modeling of her mother. She did know, however, that her mother had stressed that wearing it meant you became a representative of the religion as a whole and that was something to be proud of. When Rida was fined for inappropriate clothing at school, she felt that her family’s understanding was more flexible than that of the school. After having taken Arabic at her school until 8th grade, Rida was done with it, so she opted for Spanish in high school on her mother’s suggestion. Rida holds her mother advise dear to her around several issues. When it comes to interacting with people:

> My mom would always tell me that once you meet people or people in public and if they do happen to be discriminatory, once you start talking to them and they see that you are just like them. They will start to accept you.

When the school did a mediocre job at building a faith foundation, Rida felt her parents had taught her more about daily Islamic living than the school, because they had a more balanced and practical approach to living faith. She felt the school was in “overkill” mode with instruction, “I feel like these things that I learned at home from my parents are more effective and stuck with me way more than the things I learned at school.” Her family prayed in congregation at home, with their father leading them. When vacationing together, the family made time to pray together as well. At home religious supplications could be found posted
everywhere as reminders. Because there are religious supplications for daily tasks like eating, stepping in or out of the house, drinking water, going to the bathroom etc. her parents tried to remind the children of inculcating these practices into their daily lives. The family fasted together, and made a concerted effort to build family bonds around religious practice. Rida referred to these as life lessons from her family that ranged all the way from identity building, faith in practice, relationships and interactions.

Between her parents, who she was incredibly connected to, she felt it was her mother who was more American. Rida felt her father was not as adept about American culture and did not get many of its references. At home, there were two cuisine preferences with her father wanting ethnic food and the children wanting American.

**Participant’s Artifact**

The artifact Rida brought in to share was a small wooden train that had the letters of her name on it. Hand-crafted and painted the train was a reminder to her of the wonderful relationship she had with her mother. She remembered crafting this train together with her when she was six or seven years of age. They got the supplies from a craft store to piece this toy train together. Rida was proud that it was not from a kit, and that she and her mother had really bonded over this creative experience.

**Major Takeaways from Rida’s Story**

Rida’s experience at the Islamic School represented a setting that was closed off to American culture and where students were made to feel restrained at most times. Rida derived strength in religious values and practice from her home and did not feel that the school environment resonated with her. Her sphere of interaction was limited to spaces of proximity and comfort, so she had not encountered Islamophobia personally. Rida, however knew that the
mainstream white had a different set of norms that may cause her to struggle when she moved out of a faith-based environment. While her parents’ country of origin had minimum impact on her, Rida thrived from her connection with her mother and found her family to be the compass of her worldview.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the informal and formal educational experiences of Muslim American high school seniors. From the stories of these four, female, high school seniors we were able to garner the ways in which they navigated their spaces for safety, belongingness, exploration, learning, and identity making. The students described in all four instances how they had evolved in the last few years. The choices of growth made by the students sat squarely on the spectrum of acculturation, where they navigated their faith-based educational experiences, and the families’ heritage cultures to the larger world. Sometimes, the choices were liberal in the extrinsic sense, when it came to clothing or gender interactions, while still remaining true to their understanding of religious ethos. At other times, the choices were resilient and sought grounding in the religious tradition itself. The roles that their families played were critical throughout the four narratives. While the community offered a sense of the “known”, it also posited judgement and served as the collective conscience and moral compass for the students. In this sense, we saw the value of cultural capital in the lives of these four students.

All four students struggled to find representations of themselves in curriculum. Questions about curriculum were all met confoundedly as the students had not encountered texts that spoke about them. While they carried the burden of stereotypical bias against their religious affiliation, the students found comfort in knowing that their experience of marginalization was not the only
one, even as it was unique. In this way these students were finding strength through diversity and connecting with experiences of oppression in other communities. The participants all carried the burden of fear even if they had nor faced direct discrimination. Whether or not they had a personal encounter with Islamophobia, all students were acutely aware of whiteness being the acceptable length in mainstream experience and saw themselves in a peripheral light. While this was perceived as a disadvantage at some fronts, the participants also shared that this experience was what made them unique. Interestingly, the participants all mentioned “values” as being different from “culture”, and themselves standing at crossroads of both, with values being mostly intrinsic to religion, and culture being extrinsic to American trends.
Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2013), was to explore the educational experiences of Muslim American students at a time that is rife with political bigotry and hate speech against their demographic. The research question of this study asked, what are the informal and formal experiences of Muslim American high school seniors during their educational journeys? It asked this question with an intentionality to create space and find voice for the narrative of a racialized group that is often misrepresented, invalidated, or even demonized. Extant literature spoke of the marginalization of this demographic in the post-9/11 era (Tindongan, 2011), and lacked research in the contemporary setting of the post-2016 Trump Election. Muslim American students navigate their spaces with a double consciousness (DuBois, 1903) in place and represent a hyphenated identity (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

This narrative study centered its findings around the stories of four female participants who self-identified as Muslim American. Their stories are wrought with episodes of resilience and empowerment on one hand and fear and uncertainty on the other. A review of literature had allowed us to consider the whole experience of education as it comprises of both formal and informal experiences. A mix of both these experiences allows students to develop their academic skills in their interactions with curriculum, peers, and teachers inside the classroom (Giroux, 1994). Social skills are also developed in a student’s informal educational journey as extracurriculars and clubs, opportunities of engagement, the culture of an institution all weigh in on different avenues of learning (Giroux, 1994). For students of minority populations, the educational experience is perceived through a lens of othering, which by default then brings us to a conversation on “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 1903), which in this case was the perceived
dichotomy of simultaneously being Muslim and American, seeing themselves through the lens of their heritage culture and then also that from a cultural deficit model set in place by the white mainstream (Yosso, 2005; Berry, 2005). Critical Race Theory (CRT) provided us a framework that emphasized on keeping the students’ experiences at the heart of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; hooks, 1994). In the participants’ experiences shared in Chapter 4, we saw a navigation played out by a marginalized demographic with the additional burden of microaggressions (Sue, 2010) and mainstream assumptions of terrorism.

The review of literature had also explored issues of identity (Appleton, 2005). First and foremost, students of marginalized populations experience a hyphenation which does not limit itself to a duality in identity (Sirin & Fine, 2008; Housee, 2012). Many students experience multiplicities of identity based on the rich variations they bring with them (Bhatti, 2011). This multiplicity is essentially intersectional in nature and CRT (Archer, 2001) reminds us that the range of experience cannot be demarcated in a cookie cutter manner. The participants in this study were not Muslim American alone, they also came from families of diverse ethnic backgrounds, were women, came from different towns and states, practiced faith in liberal and traditional manners and much more (Sabry & Bruna, 2007). Not only are students navigating multiplicities, but also they are doing so in relation to their community, family, mosque, and Muslim school. Support, comfort, and a sense of belonging are provided on one end, but at the other students also experience a disconnectedness and inauthentic relationship between these aspects of their lives to the American. Islamophobia also impacts identity choices made by the students, where in some instances it causes anxiety and in others pushes the students to exercise resilience (Gulson & Webb, 2013; Hassen, 2013; Fatima, 2011).
The third strand in the review of literature explored the concept of acculturation and its relationship to the mosque, Islamophobia, and cultural capital (Awad, 2010; Tindongan, 2011; Fatima, 2011). The four participants in this study shared their journeys of acculturation and compared their earlier years to themselves as seniors. Their conversations about family, acclimating themselves to American culture, thinking deeply about religious values were all indicative of an ongoing acculturation (Asvat & Malcarne, 2008). The research question explored the students’ informal and formal educational experiences at the crossroads of identity, Islamophobia, and acculturation with the use of a CRT framework. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of the study in relation to the extant literature and position them within the Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). At the end of the chapter, the limitations of the study as well as implications for the future will also be discussed.

**Discussion of Findings**

The participants, Hafsa, Amber, Selma, and Rida shared experiences of their educational journeys during this research study. Many salient themes emerged from these stories. These included the role of family, community, the Muslim school, and the mosque, Islamophobia, representation in curriculum, interaction with peers and teachers, finding belongingness, the impact of diversity, defining American, and the impact of culture and values, with the students’ personal narratives of acculturation.

**Critical Race Theory.** CRT as the theoretical framework of the study served to position the study methodologically as well. One of the tenets of CRT is the use the counter-narratives as a means of returning ownership of stories to the underprivileged leading them to tell their own tales (Delgado, 1995). In this study, we found an eagerness from the participants to share their stories and while doing so also shatter assumptions that may be prevalent. All four participants,
counter to popular assumption, were empowered young women, ready to take on new challenges and push the bounds of exploration. The participants were unafraid to share their experiences openly and held strong opinions about the social systems where they navigated themselves. This reshaping of the narratives, according to Writer (2013), is an essential component of reclaiming ownership.

While Amber and Rida had not experienced overt discrimination or bigotry, they knew well that they were the exception in this, Rida because she only moved in the safety of the Muslim community, and Amber because she was unidentifiable as Muslim due to her anglicized name, fair skin, and not wearing the hijab. Islamophobia and marginalization was endemic according to their understanding and all four of them dreaded each time there was a terrorist attack, with the premonition that if the perpetrator was Muslim they too would be demonized because of it. All four participants believed that a whiteness lens was used as the acceptable standard, so much so that if a white person committed a mass shooting, such as in the case of Florida, they were given a pass due to a mental condition. When the criminal was Muslim, mental health was not a topic of discussion and religious affiliation became the focal point.

CRT allows us to look at the endemic nature of discrimination where whiteness is norm, and all else sidelined as inferior or barbaric (Housee, 2012). Essentially, all four participants mentioned multiple times that their experience was one of a marginalized population in a white mainstream norm. Amber passed off as white and felt that she did not experience discrimination because of that mere fact. Selma had experienced both sides of the coin, when she could pass off as white prior to wearing the hijab, and undergoing several episodes of bigotry after having donned it. Olneck (2005) had posited in his work this reliance of the white norm as the only acceptable means of social mobility. Hafsa’s conversations about navigating herself as brown in
a school that was predominantly white was dotted with experiences of encountering white privilege. Rida had only moved around in safe spaces that were colored and of her religious affiliation, but it caused her fear to think what it would be like in college when the comfort of the familiar would no longer surround her. Solorzano and Yosso (2009) made a clarion call to study the dynamics between the marginalized and the mainstream, so that these very experiences of power dynamics are not only explored, but also acknowledged.

Hafsa, Amber, Selma, and Rida experienced intersectionality in their daily lives as women of a hyphenated identity and marginalized population. Yet another layer of experience that emerged from these conversations was the participants seeing Islamic values as a strength, yet it being positioned as dichotomous to American culture. Following the works of Freire (1973), hooks (1994), and Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) it is essential to center our educational praxis on the lived realities of all our students so that they are not invalidated and they do not choose invisibility for themselves (Harper, 2013; Harris, 1995). While our four participants were bold, young women, they had chosen never to report an act of discrimination because they did not think it imperative to do so. These students had never found themselves represented in curriculum, and did not realize that this was dismissive of their experience either.

CRT also posits that while deliberate othering by the mainstream is rampant (Gerhauser, 2013; Hernandez, 2016), it is with interest-convergence that the status quo can be questioned. Amber, Hafsa, and Selma had all experienced times when other white people who understood marginalization spoke truth to power. The participants saw value in a coming together of marginalized people to awaken the masses and jolt the system. Whether it was in the classroom discussions where they sided for the causes of oppressed people, or attending rallies for justice, all the participants felt that there was a need to recognize oppression wherever it took form.
The major tenets of CRT were thus positioned at the heart of the findings of this study with a poignant relevance and application (Allen, 2013). The participants’ association to Islam was racialized as a blanket category by the stereotypical views and biases held by the mainstream (Omi & Winant, 2014; Garner & Selod, 2014). As a result of this categorization, the participants faced the repercussions of religious association when identifiable, and were also held responsible for the “group-ness” due to this very association (Garner & Selod, 2014).

**The role of Islamic education.** The educational experience of students hinges not only on curriculum but also the non-academic structures that are prevalent in the school and the dynamics in the larger society (Giroux, 1994). Dewey (1938), wrote about the interaction between the experiential realities of both the individual and society. This study had not intended to be one that would reach out to four participants who had specifically had experiences of Muslim school education. At the end of the data collection, however, there are very clear findings that pertain to Islamic education in America when it comes to formal and informal experiences of these students. A recurrent theme that emerged through the interviews with the students was the role that going to a Muslim school played in inculcating a sense of identity in the students. All four students derived a sense of comfort and belonging from their experiences at the Muslim schools they went to. Hafsa and Amber had experienced Islamic education in their elementary and middle school grades (Appleton, 2005). They both felt a familial connection to the community. They believed that their parents’ choice of Islamic education had provided them a foundation in their early years, beyond which they could make their own judgements. While both Amber and Hafsa did not wear the hijab, they held on to certain values that the school had passed on.
In thinking back, Amber found it worth mentioning when her school made an effort to step out of the bubble and expose students to the mainstream. A project where she had to reach out to the larger community, do service tasks for an animal shelter, interview vets, and generate funds to support the shelter was the most memorable part of her experience. She also remembered the time when she first made a thanksgiving wreath because it represented a time when her school accepted the larger American presence. Amber, Rida, Selma, and Hafsa all felt that gender segregation in Islamic schools was drilled to a point of unreasonableness. All four participants believed that creating a distance between boys and girls to that extent was unrealistic because they were all going to leave Islamic schools at some point and then have to interact with the opposite gender. Rida, in particular, felt that the Muslim school environment was pointlessly restrictive and did not allow for students’ creative expression because the premise it functioned on was one of mistrust of the students. Amber remembered being called out for dancing in class when she was in fourth grade, and Rida received uniform violation fines even though she was modestly covered.

All four participants felt that the religious studies curriculum at their schools was redundant and taught the same materials year after year. Internalizing faith was left to chance, personal inspiration, or sometimes a motivational teacher, but by and large the students shared that nine to eleven years of Islamic education taught them surface level content only without encouraging critical thinking, debate, or even discussion on contemporaneous issues. The religious studies curriculum therefore, was largely disconnected from practical implications for students. Rida opined that the school had taught her virtually nothing about her Muslim American identity, and that her parents are the ones who had given her a solid foundation.
Amber reflected that while the school had taught her the content it was now her choice to grow as she pleased and saw best.

In terms of core curriculum, the participants did not feel that they had been disadvantaged in any way by the Muslim schools’ educational offerings. The students were satisfied with the extra-curricular activities made available to them through their school and were empowered by the experiences they provided. Whether it was excelling at Robotics, or Model UN, or the Debate team, all four participants found strength and confidence through these informal educational experiences provided to them. The impact of a comprehensive experience on a students’ learning was similarly suggested by Certo, Cauley, and Chafin (2003). The benefits of autonomy and empowerment, through these choice activities, was found to be beneficial in the study by Groves and Welsh (2010). The choice of curriculum at these schools was aligned to the state standards and the students even though they went to a Muslim most of their lives could not think of a single text where they could resonate with the character based on identity. Giroux (1994) pointed to the political nature of curriculum, and this in relation to instructional strategies sets the stage for the entire academic experience (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). The fact that the school is faith-based and serving students of a particular demographic, still requires that the lived experiences of students in the context of their communities is kept pivotal to choices of praxis and pedagogical practices (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1973).

**Transitioning outside of Islamic education.** For Amber and Hafsa who went to a Muslim school until 8th grade, the transition to a public-school system came earlier than for Selma and Rida, who in addition, went to a Muslim high school. It was important to note that Amber had a smooth transition to high school because of the diversity and spirit of inclusion there. Also, she was lucky to have two Muslim friends in her core group who she knew from
before. Amber also came from a liberal family and she enjoyed exploring her options and joined several clubs to give herself exposure. Hafsa experienced a very difficult transition to high school because she went to a predominantly white high school that was mostly of a Republican leaning during the presidential campaign. She personally encountered episodes of racism and chose not to report them. Hafsa was finally able to break into the social circles at her high school because of her involvement in the Robotics team. Extra-curricular activities and clubs allowed for these students the chance to socialize and make friends at their new schools (Groves & Welsh, 2010; Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003).

All four participants described their time at the Muslim schools to be one that was protective, sheltered, and exclusive. They used the word “bubble” to explain the experience there. Hafsa and Amber felt that transition was inevitable and they got to do it four years earlier than students who might have a Muslim high school experience elsewhere. Amber and Hafsa were confident that they would be able to make it through college, because they knew themselves well now, and also knew how to make friends outside of their comfort zone. They were comfortable in their skins and saw themselves with a perception different from the one they had fresh out of Muslim school in their high school freshman year. Hafsa and Amber remembered being very conscious of themselves in that earlier period and thinking that they were standing out because of their differences, particularly when it came to making choices of modest clothing. Over the years, they had grown comfortable in their choices and also changed their clothing style a bit. Amber remembered herself dressing very modestly in freshman year with her legs and arms covered, whereas now she did not do that. Hafsa remembered wearing only sweatpants earlier on during gym, but was now wearing sports leggings, while still keeping her legs and arms covered. Regardless of the changes in their clothing, they both felt self-
perception was more glaring than how others perceived you, and therefore invoked more fear and doubt than not.

Both Selma and Rida, were deeply concerned and nervous about what transitioning to college would mean for their faith. They had several conversations regarding this transition among friends and were genuinely anxious about how strong they would be in the face of all the choices and freedoms college would offer them. They prayed to keep faith, and wanted to remain motivated through the journey ahead. Rida and Selma were also concerned about standing out because of their hijab and being identifiable as Muslim. Amrani (2017) and Selod (2015) confirmed that having identifiable markers of religion can be the cause of not only racialization, but also increased scrutiny and hostility. They were concerned that coming out of the shelter of Islamic schooling, they would now be in a situation that could be Islamophobic. Selma had undergone several episodes of microaggressions, and outright racial slurs, and knew that bigotry was a very real experience, similar to those mentioned by Sue (2010). In the past, Selma had never reported such incidents so she had no experience of self-advocacy. Rida and Selma were also concerned that if another shooting or attack were to take place with the perpetrator being Muslim they would be targeted. Both the girls also felt that while opportunities were countless they were both starting out in a field that was not leveled because of stereotypical misgivings about Muslim women in hijab. They felt that people were mistrusting of them, and assumed that they were backdated because of their choice of clothing.

Diversity. Seeing inclusion around them gave all four participants a sense of belonging and comfort. For Hafsa, after struggling to make friends for a year and a half because of her inhibitions, she was finally able to find like-minded people who shared her values in the Robotics team that was mostly colored in a school that was predominantly white. Going to the
prom without a date, but as part of a team, made even that experience memorable for her. Amber
found the transition to her high school easy because that institution has a very diverse population
and there are always people around who do things differently, or are different than the white
mainstream. The participants’ stories resonated with Giroux’s (1994) statements on the culture of
the school and its impact on the students’ experiences. Selma had for this reason, made a very
deliberate choice to apply to college that was known to be diverse. Her experiences at the rally
where she saw people of diverse backgrounds coming together to protest the immigration ban
gave her confidence that while there was bigotry there was also support and that marginalized
populations shared experiences of oppression.

**Academic learning experiences.** All four students had robust learning experiences in the
core curriculum whether it was at the faith-based school or the public-school system. They all
felt they had equal access and opportunities to develop their academic learning and did not feel at
a disadvantage in any way. In their daily lives, while going about their learning, the participants
felt no different from anyone else around them and did not feel their identity to be a hindrance.
An advantage of the identity they noticed was being able to empathize with other marginalized
people that might be inaccessible for students coming from a place of white privilege. In this
way, the students felt they had something to offer and brought something to the table that was
unique.

Prior to the interviews, the students had not thought about if they found themselves
represented in curriculum (Sabry & Bruna, 2007). This conversation caught all four participants
by surprise as they had never expected a representation and tried hard to make connections
within curriculum to texts that resonated with their lived reality and identity experience. The
students were not able to resonate with stories like *I am Malala* or *The Kite Runner* Hafsa and
Amber did try to think of novels where a character stood strong for what they believed in. Hafsa recalled presenting during History class on Islam and thought that resonated with her.

Within the religious studies curriculum at their faith-based schools, they felt largely unmotivated. They felt the religion curriculum was mundane and often times based on a regurgitation of text and content with little scope for critical thinking or connectedness. Selma had a positive experience in 12th grade with the religion teacher who she found motivating, and Amber remembered the value of a social engagement project they had done as part of her religion class.

Social learning experiences. Amber and Rida felt that teachers at the public high school generally avoided discussions that could take a racist or Islamophobic turn. While current affairs were discussed in class, the teachers maintained a safe space for discussion in Amber’s school. Hafsa, however had an experience of a student calling out for banning Muslims during a classroom discussion because he was an ardent Trump supporter. In their interactions with peers at the public high school, Hafsa had experienced racist remarks by her classmates who mocked at her last name “Akbar” implying that she was a terrorist. Amber’s sister had also experienced a similar thing at her very diverse high school where a couple of male students covered their faces by pulling up their shirts and chanted “Allahu Akbar” to be explicit about religious connections to acts of terror. Giroux’s (1994) work corresponded with the participants on the role of teachers and peers. Selma and Rida had no such experiences of bias in their faith-based high schools, even though Selma did feel that she was somewhat different from her peers in that she was not desi (South Asian descent), and most of her peers were.

Extra-curricular activities like Robotics, Model UN, Debate, etc. gave all four participants a sense of confidence and empowerment (Ivaniushina & Aleksandrov, 2015). The
Muslim students’ club at Amber’s school was not as active as she would have wanted it to be, but it was a place of belongingness for Amber. She felt that when she was with the club members they could all really be themselves, and laugh and joke about things that all those students had a common reference point for. These were like “inside jokes” to the Muslim community, or they could say something in the Arabic vernacular, that was commonly understood by non-Arab speaking Muslims as well, and not have to explain it. The club had taken on initiatives like community service outside of school, but also asked for a space to pray, and an exemption to go elsewhere during lunch in Ramadan. It was the club members who would bring to the administration’s attention to things like a scheduling conflict between Eid and a final exam.

Hafsa had experienced isolation because of the lack of such a club at her school, and it took her time and reliance on a friend to finally ask a teacher at the end of her junior year, if they could pray in his empty classroom. Amber chose not to pray at school because of the uncomfortable space provided, and Hafsa had spent a large part of her time at high school finding empty locations to hide and pray. Rida and Selma did not experience this and were grateful for the daily space and time crafted at their school for praying in congregation.

Sports activities were not limited for Amber due to her religious affiliation because she opted not to follow clothing regulations. For Hafsa, however, several sports activities were out of bounds because they would require her to dress a certain way. Hafsa shared her experiences on the track team when she realized before the meet that she was expected wear a tank top and shorts. Both Amber and Hafsa, talked about the presence of other female Muslim students on sports teams who covered completely under the crew or track uniform. Role models like Ibtihaj Muhammad, the American Olympic fencer, gave Selma the confidence in knowing that participation was possible even if it looked different than others.
Multiplicities. A hyphenated identity of Muslim-American was a given for all four participants (Sirin & Fine, 2008). The students considered themselves American by right, and did not think of themselves as belonging anywhere else. All four students, however expressed fears of the immigration ban and Muslim registry ideas because these proposals questioned their right to be American. Amber, Hafsa, Rida, and Selma felt Muslim at the same time. There was, however, a variation of consciousness among them. Amber did not feel the Muslim part of her identity was a conscious thought and believed that it did not impact her daily life much. She felt like a regular teenager at most times, except when it came to consciously choosing not to eat pork. For Hafsa, the awareness of her Muslim identity was a little more pronounced as she chose to shop for modest clothing, refused substances, or chose not to eat foods that were not halal. She also maintained a physical distance from boys at all times and had established these parameters very consciously with others. Her interactions with some peers and teachers had also made her conscious of her religious identity. For Rida, the Muslim aspect of her identity was always a given, but she felt she had become more American over the years in her tastes with exposure to pop culture. For Selma, the Muslim part of her identity had become more pronounced as she put on the hijab two years ago. She was simultaneously very conscious and proud of her Muslim identity. She knew that wearing the scarf was a disadvantage, but she considered it more an honor than a burden as she carried the legacy of her faith. Rida also felt that she was a representative of her faith. Both Rida and Selma had experiences of praying in public that they shared during the interviews.

Beyond this hyphenation, there were also deeper layers of multiplicities that the participants spoke about (Bhatti, 2011; Sabry & Bruna, 2007; Archer, 2001). Hamdan (2007) and Hefner (2015) wrote about the impact gender can have on such populations, and that
conversation appeared in terms of perceptions of empowerment among the participants. Hafsa mentioned, for example that while she could not segregate the Pakistani and the Muslim in her mind, she became acutely aware of her Americanness when she traveled to Pakistan. While there, she was able to spot the differences in her lifestyle and opinions compared to people who lived there. She felt over the years, she had become more American than Pakistani, while still being Muslim. Being a girl in a STEM field was yet another dimension that Hafsa mentioned several times. A sense of empowerment at breaking the stereotypes was an important aspect.

Amber delved into a meaningful conversation about the difference between race and ethnicity, and opined that while her race was not easily identifiable to people she knew that she was ethnically Moroccan. When asked to define herself in an interesting experiment in school, Amber chose to pick Moroccan as her label because it mentioned what was unique about her. It appeared that Amber would pick Moroccan American to describe herself, were she given the choice of hyphenation. Amber came from a family where both her parents were scientists and held PhDs. All of Amber’s siblings were sisters, so she did not feel that gender impacted her in any way. Rida also came from a family with parents in engineering and medicine and had one sister. She did not feel that gender impacted her choices in any way. She felt there were a few aspects of her identity that were Pakistani, when it came to some traditional festivities. Selma, felt strongly about her Palestinian heritage as part of her identity. She credited her ethnicity for her strength and bravery. While Selma’s father was Syrian, she was disappointed that he had not passed down that side of the culture down to his children. Selma felt that her outspokenness was clearly American, and she also proudly carried her Muslim identity. Gender played a strong role in Selma’s self-perception, as she navigated her role as a hijab-wearing/carrying Muslim woman, who felt empowered despite stereotypes.
**Identity, Islamophobia, and social presence.** Amber felt that she easily passed off as white due to her skin color and not wearing the hijab. She believed that because of this she had not faced any discrimination or Islamophobic hostility (Gulson & Webb, 2013; Hassen, 2013; Jandali, 2013; Fatima, 2011). She was certain that had she worn the hijab she would have experienced the like. In Hafsa’s experience, people were aware that she was Muslim and this had caused her to experience outright bigotry in school. Her PE teacher’s comment and her peers’ words were all examples of microinsults hurled her way. Selma noticed a clear difference in the way people interacted with her when she had not worn the hijab compared to when she did (Sirin & Fine, 2008; Tindongan, 2011). When she had not worn the hijab she had also passed off as white and people would talk to her like they would to anyone from mainstream. After wearing the hijab, just within the course of two years, Selma had experienced multiple interactions that were Islamophobic. Rida had not experienced any such assaults because she believed she only moved around in spaces that were known to her. None of the participants had reported any of the incidents that took place because they didn’t feel anything would be done about it. The participants chose not to make a deal of the slurs.

While both Rida and Selma were proud of their hijab, they both knew it came with the disadvantage of prejudice. People held assumptions about them being oppressed or having terrorist associations, or being foreign (Housee, 2012). Existing in a mainstream white social space meant that they had to make considerable effort to break the barrier of bias and alienation (Basit, 2009). This meant partaking in actions of community service, or consistently being both symbolic and literal representatives of the entire faith (Crenshaw, 1991; Tindongan, 2011; Hamden, 2010). It also meant that they had to become spokespersons for the faith and the questions that came their way. It was not allowed for them to pass as regular American
teenagers, because their religious affiliation was seen as antithetical. Selma had pointed out that in certain parts Islam was becoming more visually present due to women like Ibtihaj Muhammad and Halima Aden. This representation was allowing for the social narrative to alter from the usual.

**Acculturation.** Two terms that repeatedly came up in the conversations were the participants’ use of the words “values” and “culture.” All participants were clearly drawn to a culture they labeled as American. This included their tastes in music, movies, TV shows, clothing (with or without religious modifications), and food. All four participants talked about the American food that was consumed at home as an example of that part of their identity. The students referenced values to be those of their religious association. So, the choice of modesty, abstaining from substance abuse, being involved in community service, maintaining a distance with the opposite gender were values these students held, which according to them were not part of mainstream American culture. While all participants knew about women empowerment as being a part of Islam, they correlated their choice to speak up, or try new things, or be empowered as part of an American culture instead.

The students had interesting experiences to share about acculturation when it came to their families (Berry, 1980, 1992). Rida, for instance, believed that she had only become acclimated to American culture in the last six years. When she was younger, she had largely been clueless about pop culture; her family did not have a TV at home, and their social circle was limited to the mosque and friends. It was in her middle school years that she became familiar with trends. Her mother understood and knew references to American culture better than her father did. Food preferences were positioned squarely between two camps at home, with her father wanting ethnic food, and the two daughters wanting American. Rida felt the school did
nothing to cause this acculturation, in fact the school was closeted in its own bubble teaching an only Muslim identity that was disassociated from the American identity. Rida opined that the school was only interested in creating a Muslim identity. Her family however, had been very flexible in letting Rida navigate her space and had given her a sound foundation of faith that did not disconnect itself from nationality (Asvat & Malcarne, 2008; Stuart & Ward, 2011).

Hafsa shared a similar experience of acclimation over the years. She felt that in her case, her mother had a sheltered view of what American culture was like and did not, therefore, completely understand the challenges or the norms that came with it. Hafsa chose not to have conversations about her suicidal friend, or substance abuse, or discrimination at home because they did not have the context for it. Hafsa had to convince her mother that wearing sports leggings was okay and that it was possible for her to talk to boys without it being romantic. She felt her father understood American culture better than her mother. At their house also, food choices were symbolic of degrees of acculturation. It was in Hafsa’s trip to Pakistan that the extent of her own Americanness became apparent to her. The way she walked, or sat on motorbike, or dressed were all commented on by everyone as being too American. When in America, the Muslim part of her identity became apparent every time she had a choice to make regarding religious values.

For Selma, the experience was slightly different because her father’s family had rather deliberately assimilated into mainstream culture, leaving most of their Syrian/Muslim identity behind. Her mother was born and raised here. Unlike Rida and Hafsa’s parents, who came to America when they were older, Selma’s parents had been here a long time. For her, retracing the Muslim values was an experience juxtaposed with her father’s acculturation, to the point where he did not understand why she would want to wear the hijab. While there was certainly
dichotomy in Selma’s mind of what was white and what was Muslim, she did not see a dichotomy between being Muslim and American. Selma narrated incidents when younger, she had tried to Anglicize her name for fitting the norm, or changed the name of her school around in a conversation with a white girl to fit social relevance, and her mother had spoken to her about having pride in her identity.

Amber’s family was originally from Morocco, but her parents had lived in France to get their PhDs before moving to America. Amber did not feel the Muslim part of her identity as impacting her choices except when it came to relationships with boys, eating pork, or substance abuse. According to Amber, her clothing choices had become more liberal over the years and fit easily into the mainstream, while still confidently defining herself as Moroccan American.

**Cultural Capital.** The participants’ spoke about strength and rootedness they found at home (Eck, 2001). All four participants came from families that were tight-knit and put a moral compass in place for their children. Whether it was praying together, learning the daily supplications, and fasting together in Rida’s case, or having conversations about substance abuse or knowing their roots in Amber’s case, or sharing experiences of hijab and identity with her mother in Selma’s case, or going to shop for modest wear with her mother, in Hafsa’s case- all four participants were grounded in family life. Even as their families showed a different level of acculturation from them, this bonding was something all the young women got strength and confidence from.

Another point of cultural capital came from knowing the legacy of Islam and priding themselves in its rationale. All four participants referenced that it was common sense that Islam prohibited the use of pork, substances, or alcohol, so making these choices were easy. Selma admitted that some things about Islam were not clear to her, but she trusted that there were
answers out there. The hijab was meaningful for Selma not only because it was a command of God, but because strong Muslim women before had worn it as a symbol of faith.

The participants also drew strength from their identities despite the marginalization and discrimination that occurred. In knowing that their entire community experienced in a similar manner and that other marginalized communities also went through this, taught these students the lessons of resilience, and holding their ground. The students had not reported any incidents of bias that took place, and that was because as a group Muslims have only recently begun conversations on reporting. While one may sense defeatism in this lack of reporting, it can also be read as a resilience.

The sense of community with other Muslims gave both Hafsa and Amber a sense of peace, security, and belonging as they went into the public education sector. When they visited the mosque, or met old friends from the Muslim community, the familial comfort was something known. Outside of the Muslim community they felt having to explain themselves, or explain jokes, or points of reference, whereas with Muslims all those were givens in the fabric of their shared narrative. These students also remember thinking when making choices, what the community would think or say if they were seen doing something religiously inappropriate. This “collective conscience” helped them in identifying their communal values and presence (Durkheim, 1912). While all four students frequented the mosques at varying degrees they did not feel that it grew their learning or acculturation experience (Awad, 2010; Bagby, 2009; Alba & Nee, 1977). This may be because their time spent at the mosque was limited and perhaps because there wasn’t enough programming offered for youth engagement. All four participants shared experiences of judgment from within the community, when students felt they had done something not Muslim enough, or religiously inappropriate based on an adult’s interpretation.
Whether it was dancing in fourth grade, or talking to a boy, the element of judgment was prevalent in the community.

**Synthesis of Findings**

Critical Race Theory as a framework allowed us to explore the experiences of marginalization, racialization, and othering for the four participants. Rida, Amber, Hafsa, and Selma shared at several moments the juxtaposition of their Muslim values to mainstream American culture. While all students completely saw themselves as American, they practiced a “double consciousness” with acute awareness that white America saw them as the Other. The experience of hijab as a choice meant for these students an identity mark that was a source of pride within their faith, but a disadvantage outside of it. The students’ experiences of microaggressions and at times outright Islamophobia were met with resilience from the students, but also a defeatism in not reporting it and not wanting to make a big deal of it. These experiences of the students did not find representation in curriculum, and often students felt themselves not fitting in with the norm due to their choices. Creating counter-narratives where the demographic gets ownership over their own stories that are not based on assumptions and stereotypes was essential. Our review of literature allowed an exploration of CRT and education positioning the findings of this study as central to the students’ experience and counter narrative.

The students’ social and academic learning experiences as investigated in the literature review and this study itself, pointed us to the spaces where this marginalized population found connectedness and belonging and where it experienced an isolation. School environments that were non-faith-based but diverse offered opportunities of inclusion and confidence. Islamic school education provided foundational strength to the students, but often seemed to be fostering an isolation from American culture. The students felt most connected and engaged when they
were allowed academic projects that encouraged them to participate outside of their comfort zone. While the mosque provided a space of comfort and belonging to faith, it also validated a community climate that was judgmental and intrusive. All students stood tall for social justice causes and were very vocal about equity. Their experiences at faith based schools and mosques had left them not with tendencies of isolation and exclusion, rather had left them wanting to engage in the larger community.

Islamophobia was an experience that all participants felt impacted the way others perceived them. Despite being American, these students felt an othering against themselves. The students shared their process of acculturation from their childhood to youth and how their choices had been informed by faith. While navigating the intersectional nature of multiplicities of identity these students’ families had played prominent roles in their lives. The research question for this study had sought to explore the formal and informal experiences of Muslim American students’ educational journeys with the purpose of creating a space for this marginalized demographic. In the creation of these counter-narratives students took ownership of their stories and shared nuance of their experiences.

**Limitations**

The current narrative study conducted an in-depth exploration and retelling of the stories of four, female, Muslim American high school seniors. One limitation of the study was the small size of the participant group, which may not be representative of the larger experience. Maxwell (2004) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) both wrote about the nature of narrative inquiry and its rich focus on individual narrative albeit the small size. Another limitation was that while unintended, the recruitment process garnered four female participants initially. The study was not meant to focus on the female experience, but was lead in that direction during recruitment. The
study therefore excluded the experience of male Muslim American students. These four participants had experience of Muslim school education. Two of them had gone to a Muslim school in their elementary and middle grades, while the other two had gone to a Muslim school for their elementary, middle, and high school. The study therefore, did not include narratives of students who went to a public school throughout, and relied solely on family, Sunday school, the mosque, or the community for their religious bearing. Interestingly, the two participants who went to a public high school did not wear the hijab, so the study did not explore the experience of this physical marker in a public-school system. The two participants in the private high school also wore the hijab out of choice, so the study excluded the experience of students who may not be wearing the hijab out of choice.

This study did not question the religious denomination of the students. Exploring the experience of a religious minority, the Shi’ite sect for example was not included. All four participants had parents that were born into this faith, so the experience of Muslim American students who come from bi-racial families, or have parents that converted is not addressed.

Intersectionality and multiplicities of identity can come with an infinite variation, so it is difficult to capture the nuance of a monolithic Muslim identity. The hyphenation showcased itself in myriad ways, with each experience holding its own relevance.

**Implications for Further Research**

This research study allowed us a glimpse into the formal and informal experiences during the educational journeys of four Muslim American young women. During the interviews an avenue that emerged as important was the transitional experiences of students from private faith-based schools to the public educational system. Those students who transitioned after Middle School seemed less nervous about the transition to college, but had also made choices of
more liberal religious values. While these choices may not be problematic, the students who were yet to transition were afraid of being placed in a transition where these choices would be put before them. Following the students through these experiences of transition are an unexplored area of research.

Another important avenue to explore would be that related to different ethnicities, students coming from biracial families where there is more than one heritage culture, refugee families, and students who come from families that converted into Islam. Anecdotal evidence and peripheral data suggest that there is marginalization within Islamic demographics as well, so many times the experience of African American or Latina/o Muslims is more complex than that of others. The same could also be said for Muslims that belong to the Shi’ite denomination as opposed to the Sunni one.

Additionally, it is imperative to consider space making for the male Muslim American perspective. While certainly initially unintended, this study became one that centered on the experiences of female participants. Male students may not have similar challenges of wearing the hijab, but may still have identity markers associated to them. It may be that their experiences or terrorist stereotypes are greater, or they may face challenges that carry a different nuance. For this reason studying the experiences of Muslim American males is essential.

While in the beginning it seemed like finding participants who fit the demographic and were still high school seniors while having turned 18 was difficult, soon there were more students wanting to come forward and share their experiences. During the course of the study I was able to find five other participants who had experiences that included the ones listed above. It is my hope that during the course of the year, this study will be extended to include the narratives of more participants. With a larger pool of participants, it is also hoped that the study
could become longitudinal in nature, and follow up interviews done with these students the year after to see how the transition to college panned out. Part of this dissertation was presented at the Islamic Society of North America’s Educators’ Forum earlier this year, and it opened conversations with Muslim educators from around the country. This dialogue points us in the very clear direction, that enough research has not been conducted around these students, and often adults have chosen to hand over a narrative to the youth, rather than empowering them to craft their own.

**Implications for Practice**

There are several implications to consider as a result of this study that could impact the educational journeys of Muslim American students. Both public and private schools and educators have tasks that need to be undertaken on philosophical, instructional, and social fronts. Parents, mosques, and the Muslim community belong to the micro and meso system in the lives of these students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and impact their formal and informal educational experiences in several ways. The exosystem and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), places these students in experiences of marginalization, and cultivates a culture of endemic racialization and discrimination if the students’ religious affiliation is identifiable. It therefore becomes more urgent for scholarship within the academia to push forth this conversation and create a space of validation (Shields, 2004) so that policymakers are also challenged.

**The public school experience.** It is imperative that public schools invest in cultural sensitivity training for their staff members and faculty. Creating a climate where both students and teachers are aware of what microaggressions look like is imperative. When the participants faced discrimination they all chose not to report it because they did not believe the administration would do anything. The educational experience of Muslim American students
often asks them to make a choice of comfortable assimilation at the cost of giving up certain practices that are inconvenient in the public school because they are not part of the white norm or mainstream experience. Students having to hide in empty classrooms or locker rooms to squeeze in prayer times, or having to go through a complicated process to get access to a room to pray were an invalidation of their experience. Avoidance of conversations by teachers is akin to color-blindness and invalidates the experiences of minority students even if these are uncomfortable conversations for the norm (Leonardo, 2002; Kress, 2009; Pullman, 2013).

Schools that had diverse populations and showed greater inclusion and made accommodations for students who were fasting during Ramadhan during their lunch period. Gym was often a time for discomfort because of mainstream expectations of dressing a particular way that did not fit the modesty code for Muslim students. While many students opted for vegetarian options in the cafeteria, having kosher choices available would be more inclusive. The Muslim students got strength from each other’s presence and practice, but for schools where there were too few Muslims, the schools need to make an effort of inclusion. All four participants struggled to see where in curriculum they found themselves represented. In the curriculum that the students were exposed to in school there was no representation of the Muslim American demographic, except during history class or in the reading of texts that reiterated the Muslim terrorist narrative. Evaded or null curriculum seeks to invalidate the lived realities of these students and needs to be addressed. It also becomes important that public high schools are cognizant of transitioning challenges that students for Muslim schools may be facing and create opportunities for students to make that transition easier.

The private school experience. There was much to learn for Muslim schools from the experiences of the participants in the study. They all felt that the religion curriculum was
redundant and repetitious in nature. The students wanted more opportunities of critical thinking and discussion of issues that were contemporaneously relevant to the Muslim American experience. Where students were allowed to step into project-based learning and lead independent projects regarding social engagement, they felt these projects benefitted them greatly in developing not only a sense of empowerment, but also seeing themselves as productive members of a larger community. Ironically, at the Muslim schools too, the students did not find themselves represented in literature. The private school experience was a comfortable and safe space for students and all of them had a familial sense of belonging with it. References were made to the judgmental and closed nature of policies and conversations within Muslim schools. Private Muslim schools in America need to reevaluate their vision and align it to the needs of their students to remain relevant and pluralistic. It is equally important for Muslim schools to develop a transition plan for students who will graduate and move to the public school setting. Whether it is connecting them with private school alumni who underwent the transition for a workshop, or pairing them with alumni mentors for an ongoing association. Either is bound to lend support to transitioning students. Engaging parents in the transition process is also critical. Opening conversations about challenges that these students may face ahead, and creating mock situation trials for them as to how they can answer questions about faith, or how to identify, respond to, and report bigotry are critical pieces of a transition plan.

**The Muslim community experience.** The Muslim American family exhibits a great source of cultural capital for these students as they navigate their way through identity making. While all students found strength and their moral compass through their families, they often chose not to share experiences of marginalization with them, and chose not to report them as discrimination either. It is therefore, imperative for the Muslim community to begin this process
of educating its congregants to identify what discrimination looks like, and to advocate for themselves and report it. Transformative leadership in mosques is required that could then help build a generation of change agents that speak up for social justice. Mosques, therefore should not only be places of education, but places of collaboration with other marginalized people. The mosque largely served the purpose of a safe gathering space for these students where they could practice prayer and spirituality with other congregants. There were elements of judgment that students sensed in the community, when others looked down upon the choices of these young adults. Creating tolerant places of worship that address the needs of youth, beyond the ritual prayer are essential in cultivating a sense of belongingness for these students where they could then find strength. The students often saw a dichotomy between their values and culture and the community could make a more concerted effort to bridge the gap.

**The role of academia.** Critical Race theorists in education have explored the experiences of many marginalized populations and resulted in subsets like TribalCrit, QueerCrit, AsianCrit, FemCrit, and LatCrit. Demographics that faced racism and discrimination have sought to find validation and representation of their lived experiences. Within academia and scholarship, a niche has been carved to make space and find voices for the narratives of these groups. The Muslim American demographic has experienced the racialization of its religious affiliation and has its own unique stories to tell. While no student in this doubted themselves as being American, they all faced fears of expulsion from the country, and were afraid of stepping out of the comfort zones of their religious community. The religious community while offering a sense of belonging, was also many times disconnected from the American aspects of their identity. This dichotomy of double-consciousness (DuBois, 1903) and hyphenation (Sirin & Fine, 2008) as students navigate their ways through evaded and null curricula, while fearing marginalization
and judgment require an in-depth evaluation. On these fronts, it was obvious that CRT lacked a particular space in scholarship for the demonized experiential reality of this demographic. As mentioned in the beginning, in chapter 1 (see page 40) I propose what I call MusCrit as a subset to explore this very experiential reality. A space of this nature can be created by allowing for the development of a subset MusCrit to emerge within the academia which will validate the need to study this demographic further. We can see in the cases of QueerCrit, FemCrit, LatCrit, TribalCrit, and AsianCrit that the creation of these subsets was an integral step within scholarship in space making and validation of the experience of these marginalized groups. The specificity of experience for this demographic requires its one niche within CRT. It is only when these conversations about endemic marginalization generate enough momentum that policy makers can be prodded to introduce legislative change on a broader scale.

**Conclusion**

The beginning of this research study was based in my positionality and my personal, professional, and educational experience. My interactions with 8th grade students over a period of five years had repeatedly brought to my attention the experiences of Muslim American youth. As a scholar practitioner this study allowed me interactions with four participants who were gracious and brave enough to share very personal and nuanced experiences from their lives. The students were sensitive to the world around them and treaded a challenging space.

As the principal of a faith-based school, there were several takeaways from the conversations with the participants. Building a culture of inclusion, tolerance, and openness is critical for space making for a marginalized population. The students’ interviews pointed us in the direction where providing them a comfort zone while still maintaining a collective conscience is integral. It remains essential that our mosques and faith-based schools are places
that don’t exclude and are connected to reality of our larger American context. As I consider curriculum, it is important to carve within the students’ formal educational experiences opportunities of relevance and social engagement. Teaching our students what microaggressions look like, and how to address them are critical. Creating opportunities where the students’ experience steers the pedagogy is the work of truly transformative leadership.

As a scholar practitioner, I also hope to become a change agent in leading conversations that are centered on students’ experiences within the Muslim community. At education conferences of Muslim schools in America, I hope to continue presenting this work and engage in dialogue with school leadership. My membership in several faith-based collaborative efforts provides me a platform to promote the urgency of this research. In the public school domain, I am hopeful of building a partnership with the district’s superintendent of schools and the school committee to consider inclusion of literature that is diverse and represents marginalized populations.

This study started out with the lofty goal of making space and finding a voice for the Muslim American narrative. In its exploration of the informal and formal experiences of Muslim American high school seniors in their educational journeys, it brought to light the stories of four young women who navigated their identity with all its multiplicities. Their experiences of belonging to a marginalized demographic represented the “double consciousness” that DuBois (1903) explicated many years ago. These were narratives of empowered women who treaded a social space that blares the rhetoric of bigotry, yet they remain hopeful for owning this very space. Balancing between values and cultures, choices and experiences these participants shared stories of sensitivity and resilience.
Glossary of Terms

Alhumdulillah: A common phrase meaning, “Praise is for God”.

Allah: The Arabic term for God.

Dhuhr: The afternoon prayer, which mostly falls during school timings.

Dua: A prayer.

Eid: The final holiday/celebration after the month of fasting is over.

Hijab: Headscarf worn by Muslim women.

Insha’Allah: A common phrase meaning, “If God wills”.

Masjid: Mosque

Muhajjibah: A woman who wears a headscarf.

Ramdhan: The month of fasting, when Muslims fast all the way from sunrise to sunset.

Salah: The obligatory prayer in Islam. Five prayers are performed each day.
Appendix A

Letter to Community Members

***Community Members

(Month) (Day), 2017

Dear **** Community Members,

As a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University, I am conducting a study on the educational experiences of Muslim American high school seniors. More specifically, I am interested in exploring the formal and informal educational experiences of these students. This study seeks to ask questions about curriculum, student engagement, and identity as Muslim American students in the current era.

The intention of the study is to recruit four high school seniors who identify as Muslim American. Two interviews will be held with the students at a location of convenience to the student. Complete confidentiality will be maintained during and after this study.

The results of this study will help us learn about the experiences of our youth. I will share the results with you when I complete my study. Please email me at ali.noo@husky.neu.edu to volunteer if you are an 18-year-old high school senior and interested in participating.

Thank you for your support.

Best wishes,

Noor Ali

Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University
Appendix B

Letter to Mosque President

*** President

(Month) (Day), 2017

Dear Brother ****,

As a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University, I am conducting a study on the educational experiences of Muslim American high school seniors. More specifically, I am interested in exploring the formal and informal educational experiences of these students. This study seeks to ask questions about curriculum, student engagement, and identity as Muslim American students in the current era.

The intention of the study is to recruit four high school seniors who identify as Muslim American. Two interviews will be held with the students at a location of convenience to the student. Complete confidentiality will be maintained during and after this study.

The results of this study will help us learn about the experiences of our youth. I will share the results with you when I complete my study.

I am writing to you to request permission to post flyers for this study in the mosque. Additionally, I would appreciate it if you could share the flyer for it through your weekly newsletter and electronic listserv. Participation is entirely voluntary for all students.

Thank you for your support.

Best wishes,

Noor Ali

Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Appendix C

Letter to ***Alumni

*** Alumni

(Month) (Day), 2017

Dear **** Alumni,

As a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University, I am conducting a study on the educational experiences of Muslim American high school seniors. More specifically, I am interested in exploring the formal and informal educational experiences of these students. This study seeks to ask questions about curriculum, student engagement, and identity as Muslim American students in the current era.

The intention of the study is to recruit four high school seniors who identify as Muslim American. Two interviews will be held with the students at a location of convenience to the student. Complete confidentiality will be maintained during and after this study.

The results of this study will help us learn about the experiences of our youth. I will share the results with you when I complete my study.

I am writing to you to request permission to post flyers for this study in the school. Additionally, I would appreciate it if you could share the flyer for it through your weekly newsletter and electronic listserv. I would also appreciate it if this could be sent through your listserv to the alumni of ***. Participation will be entirely voluntary.

Thank you for your support.

Best wishes,

Noor Ali
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Appendix D

Letter to Principal

Principal ***
(Month) (Day), 2017

Dear **** Principal,

As a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University, I am conducting a study on the educational experiences of Muslim American high school seniors. More specifically, I am interested in exploring the formal and informal educational experiences of these students. This study seeks to ask questions about curriculum, student engagement, and identity as Muslim American students in the current era.

The intention of the study is to recruit four high school seniors who identify as Muslim American. Two interviews will be held with the students at a location of convenience to the student. Complete confidentiality will be maintained during and after this study.

The results of this study will help us learn about the experiences of our youth. I will share the results with you when I complete my study. Please ask any 18-year old student who is interested in this study to email me at ali.noo@husky.neu.edu. Participation is entirely voluntary.

Thank you for your support.

Best wishes,

Noor Ali
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Appendix E

Questionnaire to Narrow Selection of Participants

1) Do you identify yourself as Muslim American? Yes No

2) Are you 18 years or older? Yes No

3) Are you a high school senior? Yes No

4) What kind of school did you go to in the past? Islamic Public Other

5) Male Female

6) Sunni Shiaa Other

7) How would describe your ethnic background? _______________________________
Appendix F

First Interview Protocol and Questions

Interview Protocol Form

Institution: Northeastern University

Interviewee:

Interviewer: Noor Ali

RESEARCH QUESTION: What are the lived experiences of Muslim American high school seniors in their formal and informal educational journeys?

Part I:

Introductory Session Objectives (5-7 minutes): Build rapport, describe the study, answer any questions (under typical circumstances an informed consent form would be reviewed and signed here).

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about your experiences as a young Muslim American. My research project focuses on Space Making and Voice Finding for the Muslim American Narrative. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into the formal and informal experiences of Muslim American high school seniors.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview?[if yes, thank the participant, let them know you may ask the question again as you start recording, and then turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the recording which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?
This interview should last about 45-60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

**Part II:**

Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of the participant in general along lines of the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

1) Please tell me a little bit about yourself, how old are you, and your family background, etc.?

2) Where is your family from? When did they come to America?

3) How do you describe your identity? What does it mean to identify as an ethnicity, as Muslim or American?

B. Questions about informal educational experiences

1. How does your identity as Muslim American impact your experiences in daily life?
2. What are your activities of choice on campus?
3. How does your identity impact your choice to participate in these in any way?
4. How does being Muslim American provide you with opportunities that you would not have had otherwise?
5. Can you describe the role the mosque played in your identity?
6. Tell me about the role your family members play in your daily life? How do they impact your identity?
   - Tell me about your friends or the people you are closest to? How do they impact your everyday life? What kind of experiences do you share with your friends that are centered around how you identify yourself?

Thank you for your time. For our next meeting, I would like for you to bring an artifact, picture, drawing, or photograph that holds special meaning to your identity.
Appendix G

Second Interview Protocol and Questions

Part I:

Thank you for taking time to meet with me again. I am going to share with you the transcript of our last meeting. When you go home, I want you to take a look at it and see if it accurately represents what you said and meant. Last time, I had asked if you could bring in an artifact or photograph etc. to share its importance to your identity with me. Do you have something to share? If yes, thank participant, and ask for significance, also ask for permission to photograph it.

Questions about artifact

1) Tell me about the artifact you brought along to share?
2) What is the significance of this artifact? Why did you choose to share this particular artifact as significant to your identity?

Part II:

I’m interested in finding out about your experiences as a Muslim American that relate to your identity. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about some of the key experiences you encountered in your formal educational experiences. If you mention other people, please do not mention names. You say that you are giving the person a pseudonym.

Questions about formal educational experiences

1) You have had several formal educational experiences in the classroom at school. I want you to think about your high school years and think about how your identity as Muslim American impacted your educational experience?

2) Share with me some instances about which areas of curriculum did you find yourself best represented? Why and how do you think those instances resonated with you?

3) Think about classroom discussions. How does your Muslim American identity impact classroom discussions with teachers and peers in any way?

4) Share with me some stories of your experience in high school that really stands out to you.

5) Describe a time when you felt yourself as different from other people at high school?

6) Have you ever experienced discrimination or been treated differently? Why do you believe you were targeted? Please describe the incident(s). What were you able to do about the incident? What do you think should be done about this type of discrimination? What role did family, friends, teachers, or administration play in these instances?
7) Do you feel there may be other students who would have had similar experiences to yours? Tell me more about those experiences.

7) Do you ever consider yourself privileged or to have an advantage? How so?

Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.
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