Islamic Sisterhood
Islamic Sisterhood:

*The Meaning of Veiling in Post-9/11 New York*

By

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This book is dedicated to my loving husband, Robert, for his endless support and to Yuuki and Sena. You guys are my sunshine.
“why the subjects do unusual things and why the movement grows is because by doing them, they create qualities of experience that they do not otherwise know. In this special case, where revelation is the subject’s motivation as well as the ethnographers’ objective, the how is the why” (Katz 2002, 68).
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“Come on in Etsuko. I can show you my room,” Aisha said as she invited me in during a party one evening. As I entered her room, I saw a large framed photograph hanging on the wall next to the desk—it was Aisha standing with two other young women and a young man. “Who are they?” I asked. “Oh, they’re my sisters and brother. Our parents took us to a studio to take that picture about three years ago,” Aisha said. Looking at the picture, I was surprised to see that Aisha was wearing an Islamic headscarf—I knew that she had only started veiling two years ago. When I asked why she was wearing a veil in the picture, she smiled and responded, “Oh, look really closely. The hijab you see in the picture isn’t real. I added it later. Look, can you tell?” She took the picture down from the wall and handed it to me. Sure enough, a piece of black construction paper had been cut out into the shape of a hijab and glued over her hair. It was done with such perfection and attention to detail that it was hard to see the addition. “Why did you do such time-consuming work?” I asked. “In your own room you don’t really have to worry about any men besides your family members ever seeing this picture.” Still smiling, she said, “Well, it really doesn’t matter…. I just can’t think of seeing myself without hijab any more…. You know, my life has completely changed after starting this. Actually, I regret that I didn’t start it earlier.”

My first visit with Aisha, a twenty-year-old college student and daughter of Pakistani immigrants who was living in northeastern Long Island, left me with a lasting impression of her intensity in insisting on defining herself as a wearer of the Islamic headscarf, hijab. Indeed, her attachment to her ethnic and religious roots stands in bald contradiction to not only the popular image of veiling as a symbol of Islamic oppression of women, but also classic theories of ethnicity that link upward mobility with the loosening of ethnic ties (Alba and Nee 2005; Glazer and Moynihan 1964; Gordon 1964; Park 1928; Portés and Rumbaut 2001; Whyte 1943). And Aisha is far from alone among her peers in her choice to return to the custom of veiling. Today, a number of second-generation

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1 I have changed the names of all individuals in this study to protect their anonymity.
Arab and South Asian–origin collegiate women are voluntarily returning to a custom that has widely been seen as a fundamentalist religious practice.\(^2\)

The Qur’an, the central religious text of Islam, states, “Say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and not display their ornaments except what appears there of, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands” (Chapter 24:30-31). Although the interpretation of this verse varies, many Islamic religious leaders worldwide advocate veiling as a basic practice for adult Muslim women. In addition, modern fundamentalist Muslim practice, which aims at adhering to the core religious doctrines of Islam and the traditional teachings of those who knew and followed the prophet Muhammad during his time on earth, generally advocates veiling of one type or another.

Many of the veiled college women that I met had not, however, been raised in particularly observant families. In fact, many of these women told me that their parents had not been especially influential in leading them to see veiling as a natural or desirable practice. On the contrary, a number of their mothers had never worn the hijab, even before arriving in the United States, and some of their fathers were very unhappy that they were veiling. In general, these women were both socioeconomically assimilated and native-born; we might expect them to continue the trajectory of assimilation and aim for more complete Americanization. Instead, they chose to return to their ethno-religious roots by wearing the hijab. How and why did they come to this decision? That is the question driving this book. To answer this question, I conducted a three-year ethnographic study of the meanings of veiling for U.S.-born Muslim women students at two New York City universities. I found that veiling was part of a dynamic process of resurgent religious identity construction among second-generation South Asian Muslim women in the post-9/11 era.\(^3\) This book tells the story of what veiling meant to these young women

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\(^2\) Although there are no official statistics on this phenomenon, in 2008, when I was writing the first draft of this book, the Muslim Student Association National had nearly 600 chapters in colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, a dramatic increase from 10 in 1965. About half the members of these organizations are female. According to my observations and interactions with MSA members during my fieldwork the majority of these young women practice the religious dress code of veiling in their everyday lives.

\(^3\) For the sake of convenience, this book uses the terms second-generation, American born and raised, and native born and raised interchangeably.
as they went about constructing their own identities in relation to their family dynamics, friendship circles, marriage possibilities, and neighborhoods.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks and subsequent political tensions negatively affected the lives of many Muslims living in the United States. According to the FBI’s annual hate crimes report, incidents targeting people, institutions, and businesses identified with Islam increased by 1,600 percent in the year following the attacks of 9/11 (U.S. Department of Justice 2002). Young women who wore the hijab were especially vulnerable, as their attire became the most visible marker of Islamic affiliation.

Because of the increase in assaults and harassment targeting veiled women, the Council on American-Islamic Relations urged them to avoid public areas during this chaotic period. To offer some form of protection, volunteers and activists began escorting hijab wearers as they performed such basic activities as going to the supermarket, the hospital, or school.

These forms of anti-Islamic sentiment and violence are still prevalent today in both the United States and Europe as numerous groups and individuals claim their terrorist activities under the name of Islam. As a result, many innocent Muslim citizens in these Western nations face growing Islamophobia and hate crimes in their everyday lives.

In the face of this escalating violence, danger, and anti-Islamic sentiment, why have some women chosen to emphasize and highlight what has become a stigmatized identity by wearing the Islamic headscarf? Is it simply that their religious faith overwhelms their desire for safety and acceptance? My research indicates that the answer is more complicated than that. To the American-born, collegiate women in this book, veiling is one part of a broader effort to affirm an identity that is as much pan-ethnic as it is religious.

When I use the word identity in this book, I’m talking about a sense of group belongingness or solidarity that comes from two intertwined experiences: the experience of belonging to a particular social category (in

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4 For scholastic discussion of this issue, see Judith Lorber “Heroes, Warriors, and ‘Burqas’: A Feminist Sociologist’s Reflections on September 11,” Sociological Forum, Vol. 17, No. 3. (2002): 377-396. For examples of incidents, see Newsday archive articles: “US. Muslim Women Must Speak Out for Freedom” (January 23, 2000); “Essay: Against the Veil, From Head to Toe” (December 20, 2001); “City Life: Intolerance Follows Muslim Women Here” (October 9, 2001); “America’s Ordeal: Muslim Women Seek Change” (September 23, 2001); “Terrorist Attacks: NY Muslim Women Taking Precautions” (September 18, 2001); “Fresh Voices: Muslims Here Are Suffering” (September 17, 2001); and “Terrorist Attacks: Muslims Fear Fellow New Yorkers’ Revenge” (September 12, 2001).
this case, Muslim) and the experience of having relationships and connections with other people in that same category. This understanding of identity combines two classic perspectives on racial identity: essentialist and constructionist. Essentialist understandings of identity highlight *ascribed* identities: identities assigned to us that place us in socially and politically constructed categories—categories such as race, gender, and class. The definitions of these categories are relatively fixed, and people have relatively little choice about which category they belong to at any particular time. Constructionist theories, on the other hand, underline people’s shifting subjective viewpoints, understanding identity as a reflection of the “unstable, multiple, fluctuating nature of the contemporary ‘self.’” For constructionists, identity is fluid, changing, and “fundamentally situational and contextual” (Brubaker et al. 2000).

It’s important to think about identity from both essentialist and constructionist perspectives. This is especially true for nonwhite groups, because their identities are both fixed and fluid, assigned and chosen. We can see this when we consider the emphasis on constructionism and choice in studies of white ethnic identity. For example, one study found that second-generation Jews were eager to reject some aspects of their cultural inheritance, such as language and traditional customs, but eager to retain other forms of ethnic identification, such as values and ideals that they associated with their ancestral heritage (Fishman and Nahirny 1964). Similarly, Herbert Gans (1979) argues that people express white ethnicity by focusing on the symbols and feelings they associate with their ethnicity, without the need for “practiced culture.” And Mary Water (1990) suggests that descendants of early European immigrants freely chose from applicable ethnic attributes and deemphasized their ethnic identity depending on the social context.

Things are different for members of nonwhite ethnic groups. People that society defines as white can largely choose how and when to present themselves as members of an ethnic group. But the ethnic affiliation or, at least, the “minorityness” of people of color is always visible, so their choices are far more limited than their white counterparts’ choices.

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5 This definition is a gloss of Brubaker et al.’s (2002) understanding of identity as jointly produced from “the categorical commonality and relational connectedness among individuals who share the objective and/or imaginary commonality.” (22) This book largely employs Brubaker and Cooper’s (2002) definition of “identity” as “an analytical idiom sensitive to the multiple forms and degrees of commonality and connectedness, and the widely varying ways in which actors (and the cultural idioms, public narratives, and prevailing discourses on which they draw) attribute meaning and significance to them.” (21)
Nonwhites’ ethnic identity is not necessarily fixed, but it is more frequently forced upon them.

Because of this critical distinction between white and nonwhite experiences of ethnic identity, this book does not aim to establish whether the religious-ethnic identities of the young minority women I studied are fluid or constant. Instead, I focus on context. We all form our identities in relation to the various social contexts in which we live our lives, and that is true for the young Muslim women I studied too. They live their lives and form their identities in relation to a variety of contexts, including their birth families, friendship, and courtships and marriages, in addition to the more public contexts of their universities, neighborhoods, and city of residence. How do these young minority women preserve, diminish, and transform their ascriptive identities in relation to these various contexts—and when, why, and how do they choose to do so? This book examines these key contexts one by one, using detailed observations and in-depth interviews to show how these young women defined themselves, connected with and differentiated themselves from others, and related to their own ethnic and religious traditions. In all these contexts, these young, second-generation immigrant Muslim women used the veil as a central symbol to strategically navigate their own identities in relation to the sometimes conflicting ideological pulls of Islamic fundamentalism and Western individualism and feminism.

**Deviance and Youth Culture**

In Western society, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, Muslims are stigmatized as different and “other.” How do Muslims respond to this stigma? Classical theories of deviance suggest that they would be likely to do everything they can to downplay their difference and fit in with the norms of the dominant society. Erving Goffman (1963) argued that when people’s physical traits, behavioral patterns, and psychological characteristics don’t fit expected norms, they get labeled as “deviant” and their identity is, as he also put it, “spoiled.” Goffman argued that people who have been labeled as deviant tend to manage their spoiled identities by either withdrawing from social interaction or attempting to “pass” as “normal.” Goffman, then, would predict that, in the face of stigma, discrimination, and harassment, Muslims would either withdraw from the larger society or do everything they could to play down their Muslim identity in an effort to fit in with socially prescribed, non-Muslim norms.

What I observed during my fieldwork among young, female, Muslim university students was quite different. These young Muslim women
understood that wearing the headscarf made it likely that they would be singled out among their friends, discriminated against in settings such as job interviews and travel, and harassed by strangers. In some cases, even their own parents saw their decision to veil as deviant behavior that violated appropriate social norms. These women could have responded, then, by refraining from wearing the headscarf to conform to the expectations of the dominant culture—and Goffman’s theory would predict exactly that. Instead, they chose to openly and publicly display their “spoiled” identity by wearing the headscarf. Why?

Part of the answer is that these women are not only members of a stigmatized religious-ethnic minority—they are also college students, and they were participating in a particular youth culture, one of a number of different but interconnected pre-adult cultural groups. Veiling, for them, was one of many day-to-day practices through which they defined a unique, pan-ethnic, youth cultural milieu.

Talcott Parsons (1942) first coined the term “youth culture” to describe a distinctive world of youth structured by age and sex roles with a value system that opposes adult values for productive work, responsibility, and routine. For contemporary analysts, the term “youth culture” has come to define a way of life characterized by beliefs, values, symbols, and activities that young people share, live, and express (Frith, 1984). Frith (1984) argues that in studying youth cultures, social scientists should strive to not only identify young people’s shared activities, but also reveal the values that lie beneath their activities and behaviors. While youth culture may conflict with the adult values of conformity and responsibility, it also serves as a valuable analytic resource to help make sense of the shared issues that young people face.

Most scholars of youth culture agree that nonconformity with and deviance from adult norms and values are central to the development of youth culture. Scholars also recognize, however, that youth culture is about more than just adolescent rebellion. Researchers such as Stuart Hall and Richard Jefferson (1993) of the Birmingham School conceptualize youth as cultural producers and consumers who cultivate a “look” for specific sociological purposes. Youth cultures, in their eyes, are the means and patterns of life that socially identifiable youth groups use to deal with the distress in their lives and give expressive forms, or “maps of meaning,” to their social and material existence (Clarke et al. 1976, 10). For example, Clarke et al. (1976) argued that working-class youths’ public displays of nonconformist styles and deviant behaviors were a way for them to express working-class resistance to middle-class authority. Studies in this tradition see youth cultures as responses to the hegemonic
relationship between the dominant culture and subordinate ones; they show that the youth cultures of working class and racial/ethnic minorities in particular include repertoires of strategies, responses, and ways of coping with and resisting the incursions of the dominant culture (Clarke et al. 1976).

Where the Birmingham School emphasized the role of class dynamics in youth culture, more contemporary studies highlight the diversity of youth cultures as examples of the multidimensional nature of resistance. Recent studies investigate youth cultures organized around race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and geography (Austin and Willard 1998; Back 1996; Bennett 2000; Blackman 1995; Cross 1993; Kitwana 2002; Padilla 1992; Redhead 1993; Ruddick 1996; Sefton-Green 1998; Skelton and Valentine 1998; Yablonsky 1998; Wooden and Blazak 2001).

New research also underlines youths’ agency and the proactive approaches young people take to cultural production and consumption. For instance, Andy Bennett (2000) points out that youth actively generate norms and values: they use their bodies, ghetto walls, city streets, the press, television programming, and online publications as sites for cultural expression and practice. In doing so, they present their experiences and aspirations to society at large, often making use of the most advanced forms of technology and other effective means of publicizing their views.

Contemporary studies see youth cultures not simply as forms of resistance to class subordination, but also as forms of engagement with the dominant culture—ways that young people articulate and affirm their own multifaceted lived experiences and identities. For instance, Bakari Kitwana (2002) points out that while black hip-hop culture has become commercialized and popularized in mainstream American culture, black youth continue to use it as a form of public and private expression of their own experiences. In so doing, they define black youth identity and worldviews as distinct from not only other Americans but also an older generation of African Americans.

Taken together, this body of research suggests that veiling may, counterintuitively, be a strategy for coping with the distresses associated with having a “spoiled” identity. It may be an element in a “map of meaning” that young, Muslim women use to express their unique experience in post-9/11 New York. It may be a form of resistance to the hegemony and constraints of the dominant non-Muslim culture; young women may be using their bodies as sites of expression as part of an effort to articulate their lived experience and affirm their ethno-religious identities.
Islamic Sisterhood draws on these insights as sensitizing concepts as it identifies the values underlying young Muslim women’s decisions to veil in the context of post-9/11 New York. At the same time, this book contributes to research on youth culture and deviance in multiple ways. Empirically, this is one of the first ethnography-based books on Islamic fundamentalist youth in the United States. And while most literature on deviance focuses on male behaviors or behaviors shared by men and women, this book focuses on women and includes a feminist perspective in its analysis.

My analysis of these young women confirms that youth culture is not simply a class-based phenomenon, nor does it only take rebellious forms. This study adds to the growing body of contemporary literature showing that the values, actions, and motivations that make up youth cultures are multifaceted and cannot be reduced to adolescent or class rebellion. The case of young, female, Muslim college students highlights intersections between not only race, ethnicity, and gender, but also generation and immigrant status.

The case of young Muslim women who decide to veil shows that people with deviant or “spoiled” identities do not always try to hide or downplay these identities. As U.S. society becomes more and more diverse, members of deviant subcultures have access to more and more opportunities to connect with one another and form supportive communities. Like the women in this study, members of stigmatized subcultures can use identity markers (such as the headscarf) to strengthen their solidarity with other group members, increase their status within their own community, and empower themselves individually and collectively.

Finally, Islamic Sisterhood introduces a transnational perspective to discussions of youth culture and deviance. I argue that in immigrant and diaspora communities, youths’ deviant behaviors and subcultures are influenced by not only domestic socio-political circumstances but also the relationship between their immigrant community and their ancestral homeland.

Veiling and Female Youth in the West

Our understandings of youth culture and deviance have developed beyond the classic models, but women, especially nonwhite women, are still underrepresented in studies in this area. Women have played critical roles as producers, consumers, and distributors of youth culture, and as contemporary feminist scholars have pointed out, gender shapes identities and perceptions, interactional practices, and the very forms of social
institutions in race- and class-specific ways. But most studies of youth cultures have overlooked women, instead continuing the classical emphasis on delinquency and masculinity (Johansson 2007; McRobbie 2000). By focusing on young Muslim women, this book contributes to the empirical and theoretical development of this area of research.

The young women introduced in this book are not “representative” of all young Muslim American women or even all female Muslim American college students. Yet we can learn a great deal by examining the values and motivations behind their participation in veiling in the midst of an anti-Islamic environment. Islamic Sisterhood examines the problems that young ethnic minority women must deal with and constructs a theory of possible responses to racism and religious bigotry in the United States today. More specifically, this book has three aims.

First, this book documents the diverse ways that structural forces such as hegemony, racism, sexism, and anti-Islamism have affected young Muslim women since 9/11. I show how these forces shaped socialization for the groups of women I followed, and how these altered forms of socialization affect how they express, represent, and negotiate their now stigmatized identities. Here, I use the term, “socialization” for the meaning commonly used in sociology referring to the process through which people learn their expected behavior and roles associated with one’s status in their respective society and community. This analysis adds a new dimension to recent feminist literature on minority youth cultures: it shows how young, second-generation, South Asian, Muslim women construct identities in relation to their race, ethnicity, and gender.6

Second, this book shows youth culture as an active creation: we see young people actively critiquing, transforming, and reframing existing norms into distinct cultural practices. The young women in this community struggled with their marginalization, but they were still active in choosing among, developing, and deploying their own norms, values, and cultural practices. They actively negotiated with traditional roles, religious patriarchy, and social pressure to conform to the norms and practices assigned by their male counterparts, immigrant parents, and larger society.

Finally, this book illustrates the complex process through which these women internalized the seemingly contradictory demands of Islamization and Americanization in their everyday lives and constructed a distinct second-generation identity in the process. In particular, we see that their

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6 See especially Julie Bettie’s Women without Class (2002) for an examination of the intersection of race, class, and gender identities.
veiling, which on the surface seems so contradictory to American practice, was, in fact, informed by their acculturation to core American ideologies of economic success, democracy, capitalism, and gender egalitarianism. Many theories of migration and second-generation youth presume that the process of assimilation is a linear one (see, for example, Park 1928, Gordon 1964, and Portes and Rumbaut 2001). These theories typically assume that immigrants and their children aim to behave as closely as possible to the way an “American” would behave by learning the mainstream culture and concealing their ethnicity in public spaces, although they might still practice their ethnic culture at home. In this book, we see a multi-directional process of assimilation that goes forward and backward depending on the resources available to the immigrant youth group and the social contexts that they engage in at various times. As the following chapters show, these young minority women understand their veiling and associated gender roles through traditionalist viewpoints in one context, transform them into a highly Americanized fashion choice in another context, and in other contexts they combine the two conflicting cultural norms to best make sense of their choice to veil when in the public.

*Islamic Sisterhood’s* main argument is that resurgent veiling among young Muslim women in the United States is both a subjective and a practical reaction to the consistent racism, sexism, and anti-Islamism they face in their social lives and is simultaneously a way for them to express a new, second-generation, pan-ethnic sisterhood identity in a multicultural society. Their decision to wear the hijab is not simply a matter of resisting their parents’ authority, class pressures, or the dominant white youth culture, but rather a carefully constructed way of dealing with a set of conflicting values and practices.

The women in this book are not alone in this regard. In a study of the role of religion among second-generation Korean Evangelical Protestant groups, Chong (1998) says that “the strong sense of ethnic identity and exclusivity observed among second-generation church-goers reflect a form of defensive ethnicity against their perceived ‘marginal’ status within American society as a non-white minority group” (262). For first-generation immigrants, religion is often a vehicle for preserving their cultural interests, but, as Chong says, “the paradoxical appeal of religion for many second-generation members lies in this capacity to provide a kind of ‘refuge’ from this sense of marginalization, and along with it, positive social identity and group empowerment” (262).

The incidents I describe in this book parallel those Chong describes in many ways, but they also suggest a slightly different interpretation:
resurgent identity is not just “defensive.” The women in this book were actively engaged in fighting what they saw as ongoing racism and sexism, and as part of that fight they wanted to construct a new connection to their perceived cultural heritage. Their very marginality created a space, a limbo, a fluid environment in which they were able to appropriate and refashion the distinctive cultural practice of veiling and rewrite their identities to define themselves as resilient and magnetic.

These women’s patriarchic religious tradition and marginalized ethnic status limited their options. In response, they worked to increase their autonomy and control by finding ways to choose, discard, and reform existing norms, practices, and boundaries. They developed sisterhood circles not only as shelters from racism and sexism, but also as a gendered expression of ethnic pride.

On Ethnographic Case Studies

Studies of identity have often used ethnography-based social analysis. Participant observation and informal interviews allow us to analyze interactions in and between groups in their natural environments (Burawoy et al. 2000; Lofland 1966; Marshall and Rossman 1999; Whyte 1955). But different ethnographic researchers connect their ethnographic data with sociological theory in different ways. My analysis began with a methodological tradition in which ethnographic cases are used to modify and rebuild existing theory. Drawing on Michael Burawoy’s (1991) extended case method and Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory, John Walton (1992) suggests that a “case” can be used to enhance, modify, and rebuild a theory or to construct new theory. Walton conceptualizes a case as an exemplar of a general law, saying, “cases embody causal processes operating in microcosm” (121). The logic of the case study, according to Watson, is to demonstrate a causal argument by indicating how general social forces take shape and produce results in a specific setting. That demonstration is intended to provide at least “one anchor that steadies the ship of generalization until more anchors can be fixed for eventual boarding” (121).

This book uses the case of young Muslim women who decide to veil to enhance theories of deviance and youth culture. Existing theories of deviance suggest that people with deviant identities generally try to hide their deviance and fit in with dominant norms. Theories of youth culture, meanwhile, have relied heavily on studies of young men and their responses to domestic class dynamics and, to a lesser extent, issues of race and ethnicity. This study speaks back to both of these sets of theory by
investigating a subculture of young, elite, second-generation immigrant women who are stigmatized on the basis of their religious status in intersection with their ethnicity and gender.

This case also challenges popular understandings of veiling among Muslim women. Why do elite young Muslim women wear the headscarf? When I first began the research that led to this book, I asked this question of my friends and colleagues. Both secular and religious Muslim friends said that these women wear the headscarf because of their religious faith. And indeed, when I began my fieldwork, many of the women I was studying told me that they wore hijab because of their religious faith. But I later learned that many of these young women had not been especially devoted to Islam and had never even read the Quran closely when they began wearing the headscarf. At the same time, my observations and informal discussions began to reveal additional, sociological motivations behind their choice. I sensed that the answers to my “why do they do this” question were more deep and complex than even the women themselves realized.

For help in getting at this depth and complexity, I turned to the work of Jack Katz (2001, 2002), which aligns with the principle of inductive reasoning in ethnographic research and theory development. In deductive approaches such as the extended case method, researchers begin with a theory and a clear set of hypotheses. In inductive approaches, by contrast, theories and tentative hypotheses are developed through observation.

Ethnographers focus on a particular community with a small sample size and look closely at people's everyday lives. The purpose of a research project is not to develop a general theory but rather to document a collection of similar behavioral patterns among similar social groups that can eventually be brought together to form a new theory.

Katz characterizes ethnographic studies as moving from thick description to explanation; in other words, shifting from a focus on gathering descriptions of social life to a focus on analytically reorganizing data along explanatory lines. He suggests that to make this transition, ethnographers should initially ask a “how” question rather than a “why” question, because the most compelling data contains lenses indicating why social life takes the forms we observe.

Expanding on Katz’s (1997) work, Robert R. Alford (1998) maintains that the model relationship between data and theory lies in “dialectical explanation.” He argues that a theoretical question is a search for an explanation of something and answers the question “why.” An empirical question, meanwhile, asks for a description of an association or pattern of the events, behaviors, activities, beliefs, perceptions, and interests that
constitute social life. Thus, an empirical association becomes evidence that is relevant for answering the theoretical question.

Katz (2001) emphasizes the importance of asking “how” instead of “why” in the course of ethnographic data collection; he argues that “just asking a ‘why?’ question results in unsatisfactory, disappointing data giving us only the conventional and comfortable explanation. . . . Why I did it is never really as simple as top of the head explanations that ‘moral reasoning’ suggests” (446). This is especially the case when a researcher investigates an enigma, a paradox, or an apparent absurdity in the subject group’s choices or deviant behaviors. According to Katz, “why the subjects do unusual things and why the movement grows is because by doing them, they create qualities of experience that they do not otherwise know. In this special case, where revelation is the subject’s motivation as well as the ethnographers’ objective, the how is the why” (68).

Katz was right: in investigating young Muslim women’s decisions to veil, just asking “why” was getting me only a general and superficial answer. Instead, I needed to ask a “how” question: how do these women practice their religious tradition of wearing the headscarf? I started to closely observe their everyday lives, collect descriptions of their behavior, talk with them about nonreligious things, and become one of them. At first, some of these activities seemed to have little connection to my research question; yet analyzing them naturally led me to that question’s answer.

My data collection and analysis, then, included constructing thick descriptions of how these women wore the hijab in various social contexts and what kinds of social behaviors went along with the veiling, including styles of dress, manners, what they said about themselves, and the interactions that accompanied veiling. As my fieldwork proceeded, these descriptions led to a causal explanation of their decision to veil. I set up a flexible relationship between my data and theory that enabled me to move back and forth between them as I conducted fieldwork, organized and analyzed my data, and began writing. Through this flexible, back-and-forth process, I started to see the possibility of conceptualizing what seemed to be a set of deviant practices as not just “results” of some set of social forces but also “causes” for further social action and transformations of identity by the women I was studying. This process enabled me to identify interrelationships between my respondents’ micro-level actions and their macro-level social circumstances. The chapters of this book draw on my thick descriptions to explain these various interrelationships.
Fieldwork in New York

I used two ethnographic methods in my fieldwork: participant observation and in-depth interviews. I participated in and observed the activities of two Muslim sisters’ groups associated with the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at two public universities in New York City from September 2002 to December 2005. One of these universities, which I call Eastern State University, is located in an upper-middle class suburban area on the north shore of Long Island. The other, which I call Metro University, is in a lower-middle class metropolitan area. The two sisters’ groups are similar in many ways. Both are affiliated with large, secular, public universities. Although the group at Eastern State University is larger than the one at Metro University, both are among the largest Muslim student organizations in North America, with membership bases of 500 to 800 people on and off campus and about 150 to 200 active members who participate in activities on campus at least once a week. About 60 percent of the membership of each organization is men, and 40 percent—organized in “sisters’” groups—is women. The overwhelming majority of sisters in both groups wear the hijab on a daily basis; only a few in each group do not. Most of the sisters are full-time undergraduate students of South Asian origin between 18 to 23 years old. More than 80 percent are Pakistani in origin, while the remaining 20 percent are Indian, Bangladeshi and Afghan in origin, along with a small number of Middle Easterners. The majority are daughters of post-1964 Muslim immigrants.

One significant difference between the two groups is the members’ class backgrounds and associated sociogeographic environments. Most of the students at Eastern State University are upper-middle class, with fathers who are highly educated professionals—physicians, professors, scientists, engineers, business owners, and the like. Their mothers also work as professionals or assist their husbands in a family business. In addition to having parents who have experienced socioeconomic assimilation, all the members of the Eastern State University group grew up in upper-middle class “white” and “Christian” suburbs. In contrast, many students at Metro University come from lower-middle or working-class backgrounds and grew up in urban enclaves dominated by recent East and South Asian immigrants. Although a few of their fathers own small stores and one is a lawyer, the majority of these parents work as store clerks, contractors, parking lot attendants, waiters, etc. Their mothers work at similar jobs, although some stay at home.

Conducting fieldwork in contrasting socioeconomic sites was helpful in two ways. First, it allows us to see what role class plays in the women’s
processes of identity construction and boundary formation. Because the two schools were otherwise so similar, we can systematically examine how class background and the racial relations associated with local class environments interact with the women’s resurgent ethnic practices. Second, examining two groups whose memberships have almost identical ethnic and racial backgrounds increases the reliability of the conclusions that this book makes. The following chapters demonstrate a number of similarities between the two groups in both their veiling and their group dynamics. This consistency strengthens the book’s conclusions while at the same time showing that class is not as significant as other factors in the decision to veil.

I conducted participant observation in more than 150 on- and off-campus activities of these two sisters’ groups. Each sisters’ group consisted of 60 to 80 members. Each group had a set of leaders—a sisters’ representative, a secretary, and a treasurer—who were elected by the members of the association annually. These women were responsible for organizing events and committee meetings, publishing newsletters, and maintaining the group website. All this work was volunteer, and many association activities were not university subsidized.

As a group member, I participated in religious gatherings, including prayers and Quran reading circles, Jumu’ah prayer (worship services every Friday), Figh (general Quran study meetings), Tajweed (Quran study meetings for sisters), Quran recitation, Arabic classes, meetings with a sister from a local mosque, and other Quran discussion groups. I also participated in nonreligious events such as general body meetings, a fundraising dinner, an on-campus lecture series, a field trip to New York City, soup kitchen service, annual student conferences, Ramadan dinners, and antiwar protests. I also participated in social activities, including weekend-trips, picnics, farewell parties, ice-cream socials, pajama party nights, ice-skating parties, bowling nights, and volleyball and basketball games. Finally, I attended several of the associations’ off-campus activities, including American MSA conferences, a bus trip to a Six Flags theme park, field trips to Muslim communities in Manhattan, volunteer work at the Islamic Summer School on Long Island, and other similar events. I recorded both individual and collective utterances, behaviors, interactions, and performances in addition to taking pictures in all these social arenas. I also collected data from several other sources, including group e-mail messages, newsletters, members’ virtual chat rooms, and event flyers.

At the end of my fieldwork in each site, I conducted in-depth interviews with three group leaders and 17 other members of each group,
totaling 40 interviews. To supplement my fieldwork findings, I later went back to both sites and conducted ten additional interviews at each site with men who were members of the MSA. I used the snowball technique to select interviewees and interviewed one person at a time in either my office, the respondent’s house or dormitory room, or a student lounge on campus, depending on the interviewee’s preference. I left the interview questions open-ended while paying special attention to the following three points: 1) How did the interviewee come to join the association, and how did she come to veil publicly? 2) What was her social experience before and after starting to wear the hijab? 3) How did she get along with her parents and members of her parents’ generation, her peers, and male members of the MSA? Each interview lasted between one and three hours. I tape recorded and transcribed all interviews.

I was initially concerned that the groups would react negatively to me as a non-Muslim researcher. I am an East Asian secular female and was more than 10 years older than the majority of the members at that time when I first approached them. Despite my concern the members welcomed me from the earliest stages of my fieldwork. After my first visit to a weekly Arabic study meeting at Eastern State University, I had a conversation with some of the women leaders for about an hour, and by the next week I was invited to one of their off-campus gatherings. I made significant efforts to build on this early rapport with them, actively volunteering for their events and participating in informal gatherings during intersessions. As a non-Muslim I do not wear a hijab, however I did veil when participating in prayer services with them to reverence their religious observance. I also chose a conservative clothing style, wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts during meetings with them. Because of my increasingly close relationships with these women, I was even invited to some important life events, including wedding receptions, commencements, and bridal showers.

The leaders at Eastern State University told me that because I am a humble and serious woman, they trusted and respected me even more than some of their sisters who did not respect their dress code or seldom attend their events. Some of the members who did not veil confessed that they felt even more comfortable talking to me than to their leaders because they did not feel any pressure from me about the need to start wearing the hijab. For this reason, I realized that, throughout my fieldwork, my very “non-Muslimness” gave me greater access to both the leadership and to

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7 This hierarchical relationship between hijab wearers and non-wearers in each group was one of the most significant motives for their identity construction and boundary formation and is discussed at length in Chapter 1.
new association members than I had expected. Indeed, assuming that I was unfamiliar with their ethnic and religious norms, members were more likely to articulate their sentiments, not only about their veiling, but also about their relations with parents, peers, and young men. These
confidences were especially helpful in my attempts to examine identity construction in this cultural enclave, a process that is generally private, formless, and unspoken to others.

What Lies Ahead

Each of this book’s six chapters examines the meaning of veiling in a different social context. Chapter 1 discusses the meaning of wearing the hijab in the context of friendship and sisterhood. The women in this book see the hijab as the central icon of a conceived Islamic sisterhood. They broadcast the notion that wearing the hijab is not only a meaningful representation of shared identity and loyalty to other Muslim women, but also a heroic action. In doing so, they strengthen their communal ties while at the same time drawing clear boundaries between themselves and secular Muslim women. They’re fully aware that veiling publicly situates them in a sea of anti-Islamic sentiment. But they also see veiling as part of belonging to a sisterhood that separates them from the racial, ethnic, and gender stratifications of the larger society. This sisterhood provides a reliable social space, a sense of belonging, and a means of feeling socially secure.

Chapter 2 discusses the motivation for veiling in the context of family relations. I look at how these young women used veiling, a practice that seems to reflect religion-based patriarchal domination, to increase what they considered their limited autonomy and to alter the expected gender roles in their families. It illustrates the significant effect of social class on parents’ reactions to their daughters’ veiling and, consequently, on the rationale for veiling that daughters present. At the same time, it reveals that class was not a major factor in the decision to veil, though women of different classes used veiling to accomplish different things in their families. Women from families of lower socioeconomic status tended to use veiling as a bridge to unite their families, filling the cultural gap between immigrant parents and Americanized children. These women’s mothers veiled, so by choosing to veil themselves, they were literally embodying the commonality of religious practice and a sense of togetherness with their parents. Veiling helped them identify with their parents. By contrast, many women from upper-middle-class families faced strong parental opposition to wearing the veil. These parents believed that veiling imperiled their daughters’ occupational and economic success. The daughters, meanwhile, perceived their parents as denying their ethno-religious identity in exchange for economic success. For upper-middle-class young women, then, veiling was a means of quiet rebellion against