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"How American Am I?": Comparing American Identity among US Black Muslims

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“How American am I?”: Comparing American Identity among US Black Muslims

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ABSTRACT

Much sociological attention has focused on Black identity within the United States. Less attention, however, has been given to understanding how immigrant and native-born streams of US Black Muslims articulate American identity, a particularly important empirical gap given the connections among race, religion, and national identity. In this study I ask: how do second-generation American Black Muslims and indigenous Black American Muslims compare in the ways they narrate connections among race, American identity, and Islam? Using data from 31 in-depth interviews with Black Muslims living in Houston, I find that racial double-consciousness complicates American identity for US Black Muslims regardless of immigrant status. While indigenous Black American respondents critique racist US histories and structural inequities, I argue that in certain spaces Muslim identity has the potential to reinforce American identity for indigenous Black American Muslims. For second-generation respondents, however, American identity is reinforced through immigrant status. Second-generation respondents compare their own experiences living in the United States with that of their immigrant parents. This study makes a case for “triple-consciousness” to explain the way Black Muslims perceive their racial, religious, and national identities within the context of the United States and the Muslim American community. More broadly, I demonstrate how intersecting identities can fuel micro and macro processes that can shift the way American identity is understood.

Keywords: American identity, Black identity, Black immigrants, Indigeneity, Muslims
With the name of Allah, The Compassionate, The Merciful.

Muslims make up one of the fastest growing and most ethnically diverse religious communities in the United States (Pew Research Center 2017). Black Muslims have a particularly unique position within the United States as a group occupying historically marginalized religious and racial identities. The first Muslims to come to the United States were enslaved Africans (Diouf 1998; Gomez 2005). Islam survived within Black America, despite the disruption of slavery, through small religious movements that gained notoriety in the early 20th century (Chan-Malik 2018; Gomez 2005; Miller 2019). Groups like the Ahmadiyya, the Dar-ul-Islam, the Moorish Science Temple, and the Nation of Islam sparked a Muslim revivalism and directly connected faith with struggles for racial justice (Chan-Malik 2018; Miller 2019). While many of these communities still exist, some merged into larger Sunni Muslim communities (Gomez 2005; Jackson 2005). While many Black American Muslims came into Sunni Islam through conversion, a large proportion of Black American Muslims were born into Muslim families that had a historical connection to many of these early American Muslim communities (Gibson and Karim 2014; Jackson 2005; McCloud 1995). This history of what religious studies scholar Sherman Jackson (2005) calls “Blackamerican” Muslims, began a generation of Black Muslims indigenous to the United States. These “Blackamericans” are distinguished from other US Black communities because they are linked to the foundation of the United States through the institution of slavery (Jackson 2005). Their identity history, however, differs from immigrant Black Muslim communities who are racialized as Black in the United States but whose histories and lineage do not include US chattel slavery. I refer to these communities as “indigenous Black Americans.” Here, “indigenous” should not be confused with Indigenous peoples who are historically and geographically native to the Americas; rather, I use indigenous throughout this
paper to distinguish between second-generation Americans who are the children of Black African immigrants. By invoking indigeneity, I intentionally highlight the connection indigenous Black Americans have to the United States through the history of chattel slavery that positioned them as the first “Black” people within American history.

After the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965, new immigrant streams from non-European countries made it possible for many global Muslim communities to make a home in the United States (Karim 2008; Leonard 2005). The Hart-Cellar Act effectively ended US immigration quotas and allowed immigrant communities to expand (Ecklund and Cadge 2007). The expansion of immigrant communities through this act not only transformed the racial and ethnic landscape of the United States but diversified the US religious landscape as well. While the US Christian community became more racially heterogeneous, other immigrants brought with them new forms of non-Christian traditions (Ecklund and Cadge 2007). Included were Muslims from Eastern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Black African Muslims, like other Black immigrant communities, had to contend with both the challenges of adjusting to a new land and living in a racist society that conflated all communities of Black people (Magan 2019; Waters 2014, 2008). Rather than challenge this, many Black immigrant communities relied on their immigrant background to make distinctions between themselves and indigenous Black American communities (Abdi 2020; Jackson 2005; Waters 2008, 2014). As Black immigrant communities began to establish roots within the United States, however, the salience of anti-Black racism provided challenges to second-generation children (Sall 2019; Waters 2008, 1994). These challenges, along with the realities of living in a post-9/11 US society, positions both second-generation Black American Muslims and indigenous Black American Muslims to reassess their place in American society. These histories reveal deep connections among race,
religion, and American identity; and yet there is little contemporary empirical work that examines how both streams of US Black Muslims understand American identity.

Drawing from 31 interviews with indigenous Black American Muslims and second-generation Black American Muslims, I ask: *how do second-generation Black Americans and indigenous Black American Muslims compare in the ways they narrate the connections among race, Islam, and American identity? and how do religion and race intersect to shape American identity?* I find that Black identity complicates American identity for US Black Muslims regardless of immigrant status. I argue that while both streams of US Black Muslims may be critical of American identity because of US racial categories, being Muslim may reinforce American identity for indigenous Black American Muslims in some contexts. For some second-generation Black American Muslims, however, immigrant status can strengthen attachment to American identity. This study demonstrates how intersecting identities can fuel micro and macro processes that can shift the way American identity is understood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

*Black Identities in the United States*

Current sociological literature places much emphasis on the impact nativity has on shaping socioeconomic outcomes and integration among Black communities in the United States (Agiepong 2018; Clerge 2014; Emeka 2019; Showers 2015; Waters 2014, 2008). However, not much attention has been given to understanding how US Black communities may converge in their perceptions of American identity. The early American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois (1903) first used the term “double-consciousness” to describe the paradoxical experience of Black people in the United States—of being born into a country that ideologically promotes freedom and equality but does not afford them the opportunity to fully experience these ideals. DuBois
(1903: 5) describes double-consciousness as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” Black individuals in the United States experience this sense of “twoness” by virtue of being aware of the inconsistencies within the constitutional framing of the United States and the injustice and inequities Black lives must face (DuBois 1903:5). The concept of double-consciousness challenges the idea of national belonging and American identity for Black people in the United States. Double-consciousness, however, is predicated on indigenous Black American identity and histories; and does not directly address nuances of nativity, religion, or gender within US Black communities.

For Black immigrants from African countries, the experience of double-consciousness may not always share the same meaning. Much of the immigration from Africa to the United States occurred after the 1965 Immigration Act that brought waves of immigrants from non-European countries that were previously restricted from entering the United States (Adjepong 2018; Emeka 2019; Mooney 2009; Phinney and Onwughalu 1996). While African immigrants had to contend with colonial realities in their home countries, they were disconnected from the lineage of slavery within the United States. For some Black immigrant communities, these recent histories and immigrant origins can serve as a social and structural advantage (Sowers Johnson 2008; Waters et al. 2014; Waters 2008; 1994). Black immigrants have the highest rates of English proficiency among US immigrants; and when compared with the US population, higher levels of educational attainment (Anderson and Conner 2018; New American Economy Research Fund 2020). These factors may enable children of African immigrants to sustain better socioeconomic outcomes when compared with their indigenous Black American counterparts.

Scholars such as Sowers Johnson (2008) and Waters (2008; 1994) particularly look at how, for Black immigrants, national origin can be used as a social buffer, allowing Black immigrants
to make distinctions between themselves and indigenous Black Americans, and to separate themselves from perceiving racism as an integral part of the American experience. Because racialization within the United States depends on a combination of physical characteristics, (skin color, hair texture, body features), and non-physical characteristics (clothes, names, accents), Black immigrants—particularly their children—can be perceived as indigenous Black Americans (Emeka 2019; Waters 1994, 2008; Wheeler 2020). While first-generation Black Americans to the United States may emphasize non-physical traits like accents, dress, or names to distinguish themselves from indigenous Black American communities, for second-generation Black Americans non-physical characteristics may hold less salience as accents disappear and English takes linguistic precedence (Emeka 2019; Waters 1994, 2008). Without explicit markers that point to immigrant status, second-generation Black Americans are conflated with indigenous Black Americans, and may not only experience but also challenge US racism. In the racialized context of the United States, this means that Black immigrant communities may be subjected to the same structural barriers as indigenous Black Americans native to the United States. Waters (1994) argues that for second-generation Black Americans, the conjunction of perceived Black identity and the acknowledgement of racial discrimination allows them to construct a more racially salient Black American identity. According to this logic, race is what positions American identity.

However, other scholars argue that Black immigrant identity does not create a buffer against racism, but rather compounds the experiences of inequality and social and structural marginalization (Griffen and Cunningham 2016; Showers 2015). The distinctions that Black immigrant communities may make in separating themselves from indigenous Black Americans speak to their unique experiences and the added disadvantage of being “foreign.” Unlike
indigenous Black Americans, Black immigrants may be unable to leverage certain forms of social and cultural capital within the United States such as language, accents, or gender norms. This may prove to be particularly salient within professional and academic spaces, where accents and linguistic fluency can directly impact outcomes, opportunities, and social perceptions (Showers 2015). Showers (2015) distinguishes the outcomes of this additional disadvantage as especially salient for Black African immigrants when compared with Black Caribbean immigrants. While immigrants from the Caribbean may be able to leverage things like language or even cultural and geographic proximity to the United States, African immigrants deal with the perception of “foreignness” (Showers 2015).

Despite these differences in understanding the way that Black immigrants relate to indigenous Black American communities, there is little debate regarding the fact that for children of Black immigrants, racial identity becomes more salient (Adjepong 2018; Benson 2006; Showers Johnson 2008; Waters 1994). The meanings that second-generation Black Americans may ascribe to Black racial identity, however, may differ from their indigenous Black American counterparts. While there is a shared racial identity with indigenous Black Americans, immigrant heritage can impact what being Black means (Adjepong 2018; Emeka 2019; Benson 2006; Sall 2019). Emeka (2019), for example, finds that US-born Nigerian children generally retained their ethnic origin identity with the exception of those from lower-income families and with lower educational attainment who were more likely to only identify as Black. While Emeka (2019) suggests that this form of ethnic attrition may be due to associating Nigerian identity with high educational attainment and other socioeconomic measures of success, this also has implications for how US-born Nigerian children interpret what it means to be Black.
This association between Black identity and lower socioeconomic outcomes is reiterated within the sociological literature on Black immigration to the United States (Emeka 2019; Waters 2008; 1994). However, it would be wrong to assume that the salience of Black identity for second-generation Black Americans is only associated with so-called “downward assimilation” patterns (Kasinitz et al. 2002; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waldinger and Feliciano 2004). Downward assimilation diverges from previous theories of immigration which argued that immigrants to the United States would follow patterns of early European immigrants, losing socioeconomic distinctions and integrating within the social, cultural, and socioeconomic fabric of the White American middle class (Portes and Zhou 1993; Waldinger and Feliciano 2004). Instead, downward assimilation contends that not all immigrants can assimilate equally. Low-income and racialized immigrants may instead assimilate into the lower socioeconomic native-born communities and inherit the socioeconomic challenges that these communities face (Portes and Zhou 1993; Waldinger and Feliciano 2004). Downward assimilation predicts that Black immigrant communities may begin to identify as “Black” primarily out of assimilation with adverse cultural and socioeconomic influences among indigenous Black American communities (Kasinitz et al. 2002; Waldinger and Feliciano 2004). Although theories of downward assimilation acknowledge the influence class and race may have on the ability for some immigrant groups to fully integrate into middle-class White America, the embedded assumptions ignore the way that racism is endemic to US society and simultaneously molds the lives and outcomes of indigenous Black American communities.

While scholars on other immigrant communities have argued that with time children of immigrants may abandon ethnic origin identities in favor of “American” identities alone, for children of Black immigrants becoming “American” may mean becoming Black (Emeka 2019).
Because of US racial-logics, Black identity may have more everyday relevance for the children of Black immigrants, which connects them with indigenous Black Americans (Adepong 2018; Emeka 2019). Experiences with racism and marginalization serve as a point of connection between both groups and create a Black identity that is only realized within the context of the United States (Adepong 2018). In other words, African immigrants and their children may “become Black” in the United States and illustrate a case of racialized assimilation as a part of their integration into American society (Adepong 2018; Emeka 2019; Sall 2019).

Religion and Black Identity

Religion, in particular its role in orienting political beliefs and creating social cohesion, has played a significant role within the study of sociology and in terms of its intersection with racial identities, in particular (Durkheim 1912; Ecklund 2006; Lincoln 1961; Perry and Whitehead 2019; Prickett 2018; Weber 1905). For Black American communities, religion has been particularly important in helping to organize individuals and frame sociopolitical consciousness (Daulatzai 2012; Gibson and Karim 2014; Jackson 2005; Lincoln 1961; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). While studies on religion and American identity have outlined the way that White Christians can draw upon religion and national identity to promote White supremacist Christian Nationalism, there is evidence that Black Christians also draw upon religion to contextualize American identity in a way that directly challenges racism and other forms of structural marginalization (Perry and Whitehead 2019; Peifer et al. 2014; Tinsley et al. 2018). Black Christians have historically challenged the United States’ nominally Christian identity, arguing for a reform of policies and laws to reflect a Christian perspective that confronts oppression and emphasizes justice and equity (Perry and Whitehead 2019). Similarly, Black Muslim communities have drawn on their faith to frame understandings of American identity.
Indigenous Black American Muslim communities in the early 20th century used Islam as a way to directly confront the American conception of race, and to connect them with histories and communities beyond the United States (Chan-Malik 2018; Daulatzai 2012; Miller 2019).

For Muslim communities, ethnic diversity, geopolitics, and transnational linkages help serve to racialize Muslim identity in the United States (Chan-Malik 2018; Daulatzai 2012; Selod and Embrick 2013). Religion has historically been used as a racial marker, and in the post-9/11 US society, religion has become an even more salient classification and identity (Daulatzai 2012; Said 1978). Selod and Embrick (2013) argue that it is the presence of perceived Muslim identity that further racializes immigrant communities as not only “foreign” but specifically Muslim. Although visible Muslim markers create challenges, being negatively treated as Muslim can occur regardless of visible religious markers (Beydoun 2018; Said 1978; Selod and Embrick 2013; Selod 2019). Embodied traits and other markers, such as language and names, become sites of perceived Muslim identity (Beydoun 2018; Said 1978; Selod and Embrick 2013; Selod 2019). It is for this reason that some scholars identify this discrimination as the racialization of religion, rather than religious discrimination (Beydoun 2018; Considine 2017; Gotanda 2011; Selod and Embrick 2013). Theorizing Muslim identity as a form of racialization, however, may overlook the salience race already has for Black Muslim communities in the United States as well as the distinctive salience of religion (Gallonier 2015; Guhin 2018; Scheitle and Ecklund 2020). Black Muslims represent one of the highest demographic proportions of Muslims in the United States (Leonard 2009; Beydoun 2018), and the first Muslims to settle US soil were enslaved Africans (Diouf 2013; Wheeler 2020). Because of the historical effects of US racism and the racial categorization of immigrants, Black Muslims can often experience isolation and discrimination within the United States and within the largely multiethnic Muslim American
community (Chan-Malik 2018; Prickett 2018; Karim 2005). Both indigenous Black American Muslims and Black Muslim immigrant communities experience an intersection between racialized and marginalized religious identities.

Relatively little research has been done to uncover the diversity within the Black Muslim American community. Although many immigrant Black Muslim communities are genealogically connected to Islam through family lineage, their Muslim heritage often does not preclude them from the influence of racial hierarchies within the broader US society and the reproduction of these hierarchies within the Muslim American community (Husain 2019; Karim 2008). Indigenous Black American Muslims face similar challenges, in addition to dealing with biases within the Muslim American community for not having generational Muslim heritage (Husain 2019; Karim 2005; 2008). By generational Muslim heritage, I refer to the reality that most immigrant Muslim communities are born into generations of Muslim family members. Despite their diverse backgrounds, Black Muslims, immigrant and non-immigrant alike, are challenged with the effects of race and religion and their relationship to American identity.

**Filling Gaps**

Although race is often considered a primary factor that can structure social, economic and political outcomes within the United States, within post-9/11 US society, Muslim identity also structurally impacts aspects of life such as policing, surveillance, and professional opportunities (Beydoun 2018; Khabeer 2016; Selod and Embrick 2013). It is important to understand the relationship between religion and race, and the effects it may have on US Black Muslims. Existing scholarship looks at the way that Black identity and Muslim identity individually impacts American identity. Limited scholarship empirically examines the way the juxtaposition of Black Muslim identity impacts American identity across nativity. This study provides a much-
needed analysis of the connection between race and religion on national identity. Most sociological literature on US Muslims and American identity has focused on Muslims of South Asian or Arab descent; and while there is increasing literature on Black Muslims in the United States, there is no sociological study of how the lived experiences of both immigrant and indigenous streams of US Black Muslims compare in the ways they articulate American identity.

METHODS

To understand the relationship between being a Black Muslim and American identity, I conducted a qualitative study using 31 in-depth interviews with self-identified Black Muslims living within the Houston area. Houston is both the fourth largest city in the United States and has a relatively large Muslim community (Kinder Institute for Urban Research 2020). It also has a growing and diverse Black population, with one of the highest populations of Nigerian Americans in the country (New American Economy Research Fund 2020). The diversity of the Black population in Houston is not only reflected in ethnic origins, but also socioeconomic status, education, and religion. Houston presented a good site to qualitatively gain insight into how diverse US Black Muslim communities understand American identity. Although Black Muslims make up a significant proportion of Muslims in Houston, they are still a relatively small community. Qualitative interviews were used to best present the perspectives of this group and to encourage future research on the identity processes of US Black Muslims.

Sample

Prior to conducting interviews, for 10 months during 2018-2019 I visited different Muslim communities in the Houston area. I relied on target sampling and respondent-driven sampling to expand my pool of interviewees (Becker 1998; Corbin and Strauss 2007; Ecklund 2006; Heckathorn 1997; Weiss 1994). I visited eight different masjids (mosques), and attended
congregational Friday prayers, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) convention, Ramadan iftars (diners), women’s circles, and other events. Through engaging in community activities, I was able to meet potential respondents and get a better sense of the spatial, ethno-racial, and cultural dynamics of Muslim communities in Houston. My 10 months of participant observation allowed me to make connections with individuals that regularly frequented these community spaces. These initial respondents were key in referring me to others outside these spaces, who were also interested in participating in my study.

Of the 31 interviews, 16 of my respondents identified as Black/African American and 15 identified as the children of African immigrants to the United States. I interviewed a total of 17 women and 14 men. Of the 16 Black/African American respondents, ten converted to Islam and six were born into Muslim families. None of the second-generation respondents converted to Islam. Five Black/African American respondents lived outside of the US for some period of time, and 11 traveled outside of the United States. Among the second-generation group, 11 lived outside of the United States for some time, and all second-generation respondents traveled outside of the United States. Of second-generation respondents, seven were of Nigerian descent, two were of Ugandan descent, one was of Somali descent, one was of Eritrean descent, and four were of Sudanese descent.

**Interviews**

I began my interviews during the fall of 2019 and ended interviewing in the summer of 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I adapted my initial in-person interviews to be conducted virtually via WhatsApp video-meeting or over the phone. I conducted 12 in-person interviews and 19 interviews over the phone or through WhatsApp. Interviews lasted between one to three hours. Interview questions ranged from topics regarding personal faith identity, religious
upbringing, community affiliation/preference, race, Black identity, American identity, and transnational identity. Respondents were also asked to complete a short demographic survey at the end. This allowed for a better comparison in terms of age, education, and gender. Respondents were also asked to provide the contact information of potential respondents to continue to expand my pool of interviews.

**Approach to Data Analysis**

To analyze the interview data, I use an inductive approach to data analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2007; Ecklund 2006; Weiss 1994). While there is existing literature written on Black Muslim identity within the United States, there is no sociological study that compares the way both indigenous and second-generation streams of Black Muslims view American identity. To truly understand the way these communities interpret American identity, I looked for patterns within the interview data that reflect each case. I transcribed the interviews using a mix of AI software and transcription services to aid in the process. I edited these transcriptions and highlighted sections for key quotes that could be useful to include in the paper or to look back at for further analysis of potential themes. I organized the descriptive coding myself through a spreadsheet based directly on respondents’ quotes in response to the interview questions. Along with the quotes, I coded respondents’ answers into 0 if they did not experience some aspect of what was asked, or 1 if they did identify with what was asked. I then made a brief comment about how each response helped answer a piece of the research questions, or any other questions it brought up. This allowed me to more closely see how respondents compared with each other in their responses and explanations of their multiple identities. This also allowed me to notice patterns unique to each case, or patterns that overlapped between indigenous and second-
generation respondents. From here, I wrote short memos about what themes that emerged and began to formulate a more interpretive view of how respondents’ identities related to each other.

Positionality

Being a Black Muslim woman aided my ability to enter the local community and eventually connect and gain the trust of my respondents. However, as a woman, it was initially challenging to connect with Black Muslim men. Although the Black Muslim masjids I frequented were not completely gender segregated, the space and events are often sequestered based on gender. Many of the men I initially interviewed were the husbands of women respondents. Additionally, it was harder to meet second-generation Black American Muslims. Some of the Black immigrant mosques I went to were less open to speaking with me, as someone not already embedded within the community. I found it easier to meet second-generation respondents at events, particularly geared to young Muslim professionals or through other second-generation respondents. Phone interviews also allowed for more anonymity regarding my own background. While respondents were often aware that I am a Black Muslim, they were not always aware of my own identity as an indigenous Black American. I believe this particularly helped build connection with second-generation respondents.

RESULTS

In my interviews with 31 US Black Muslims living in Houston, I find that US Black Muslims engage race, religion, and immigrant status to articulate their place within the United States. While racial double-consciousness is shared among all respondents, second-generation status can contribute to more positive descriptions of what it means to be American. Respondents acknowledge challenges associated with being Muslim in the United States, however, they
articulate that their experience being Muslim is different because they are Black. Black Muslim identity contributes to a self-awareness that I call “triple-consciousness.” Triple-consciousness refers to racial double-consciousness and religious marginalization experienced by respondents within the context of US society, and the racial self-awareness that respondents have within non-Black Muslim American spaces. Respondents argue that Arab and South Asian identity is privileged within many US Muslim spaces, which can serve to marginalize Black identity within Muslim American communities. Although this happens on some level for all my respondents regardless of immigrant status, it is particularly salient for indigenous Black American Muslims. This is largely because within Muslim communities, as well as in the broader United States, Islam is associated with heritage rooted outside the United States. Indigenous Black American Muslim respondents frequently mentioned feeling culturally isolated in some Muslim spaces because of language, (assumed) conversion status, dress, and cultural norms. Ironically, for many indigenous Black American respondents, many of these immigrant Muslim spaces helped reinforce their own American identity. Because indigenous Black American respondents do not have Muslim family lineage outside the United States, being American can serve as the way to narrate the historical and cultural context of their faith identities.

**Racial Double-consciousness and Perceptions of American Identity**

Of my 31 respondents, most described feeling a sense of tension between being Black and being American. Although most do not specifically reference DuBois or use the term “double-consciousness,” I interpret their descriptions as DuBoisian double-consciousness. For indigenous Black American respondents double-consciousness was directly linked to histories of slavery and segregation, structural constraints, and systemic racism; while second-generation
respondents described double-consciousness as the systemic longevity of racism as evidenced by contemporary public displays of violence. One indigenous Black American woman reflected:\(^1\)

...it is important to see how society sees oneself...I tried to move through the world as just a person, and it was the people on the outside who wanted to remind me "oh no, you’re Black" or "there's something about you that's only okay for these things but for this thing, no" and that hurt. So I guess there's something around the need for healing...so I think about my children, to have them be mindful that they can call themselves Black American, they can call themselves African American, they can call themselves just American, they can say "I'm a human being" - OK. And you understand this world unfortunately will see you in a certain way. That stuff isn't made up. Why is it that I have to show my son \textit{When They See Us}? Why is it that my parents thought that there was value in me seeing the place that Martin Luther King was killed? So, I think it's all related to that...

For this respondent, the tension between Black identity and American identity is described as generational. She describes learning from her parents the importance of understanding how the world sees her. Although she describes her attempts to move through the world without the weight of race, she was quickly reminded that she cannot. She interprets this as a structural constraint because of the external perception of her as a Black person.

\(^{1}\) jj
This conception of double-consciousness, or perceiving oneself through the lens of US society, was not surprisingly a recurring theme among all respondents. However, when asked to describe their own affinity towards American identity, indigenous and second-generation respondents differed. Indigenous Black American respondents were much more critical of American identity and the United States because of their generational relationship to the country. As one respondent\(^2\) reflected:

…I know that it has changed, for me, through my life. I mean, of course, while the police brutality and things like that - I mean, we grew up with that and we grew up being at the very least cautious of America or before - or our relationship with America or the American government. But I can say now, I don't - I mean, when I was young and not understanding myself in relation to my country or my government, I saw myself as being stolen from the lands my ancestors called home. And so, I looked at America through that person. Now, I've reconciled with that. I've gone from thinking that that was my narrative as far as being stolen [from] my country, to the narrative that story is quintessentially American. If we as African Americans are not American, then who is? Because surely, isn't White folk… So, I've gone from thinking that, "Maybe I should go back to the motherland” and all this other stuff, to “No,

\(^2\) BAM15; Male
man, they're not pushing me out.” This is my place. This is my land. I built this.

While this respondent shares that he feels strongly American through the reconciliation of his historical narrative, he is not uncritical of the impact it has for him personally or Black communities. His identification as an American has evolved because of his acknowledgement that the legacy of Black people in the United States is authentically American. From his perspective, indigenous Black Americans must reappropriate what it means to truly be American. Legacies of trauma, racism, forced labor, and injustice compel indigenous Black American respondents to have a more critical view of American identity, even when they choose to accept it.

While second-generation respondents also described feeling a sense of racial double-consciousness, they were more positive in their assertions of American identity. Second-generation respondents often compared their affinity for American identity with the social realities of living abroad. One respondent\(^3\) shared:

> So, when I think of American identity, I think of certain ideals like freedom of expression, freedom of choice… Everyone thinks America is - yeah, at first there's issues capitalism, blah, blah, blah, blah, and the disparities within socioeconomic, whatever. But aside from all of that, I feel as though having been born and raised here the privilege of this freedom and also like being granted education is like, - I could not be who I was without it… So, it's

\(^3\) BIM04; Female
funny - as much as I dream about living all over the world, my home base has to be somewhere here because I can always come back to this freedom… I feel proud to have that blue passport.

While this respondent acknowledges existing inequities within the United States, she highlights what she believes to be the opportunity for individual achievement that is ingrained within American society. She feels that despite the challenges of being a Black Muslim in US society, her options are still better relative to challenges that she could face outside of the United States. While this comparison was not shared by all second-generation respondents, second-generation respondents embraced American identity less critically than their indigenous Black American counterparts.

*Triple-consciousness*

Despite distinctive perceptions of American identity, respondents point to the ways that racial double-consciousness can contribute to an understanding of what it means to be Muslim in the United States. I describe this self-awareness as “triple-consciousness.” Although Muslim identity is not described by respondents as having the same relationship with the United States as Black identity, respondents describe racial double-consciousness as a way of also interpreting their position as Muslims. My respondents shared that their experiences being Muslim in the United States often differed because they are Black. Here, a respondent⁴ described an instance at work where his Muslim identity was overlooked because of his race:

… I mean I've had people at my job who knows that I'm Muslim. I remember them having a conversation about, I think Bin Laden

⁴ BAM06; Male
might have still been alive then. But they were talking all of this stuff about Islam, dah, dah, dah. And I'm just standing there like, "Dude, what they don't see" - you know what I'm saying? …So, the brain’s not processing it, wait a minute…This is the guy who works during Ramadan. Over Ramadan is like, "Has Ramadan started?" they're asking me. But then, when they have this conversation it doesn't enter their mind like, "Hey, we could be insulting this guy." Because I'm a Black man. I mean this is a guess. I would assume that they equate a Black man being Muslim the same way we might view a White person practicing Buddhism.

This respondent illustrates the way that Black Muslims can be disregarded from being perceived as truly Muslim within the American public. Despite knowing that the respondent identified as a Muslim, here his coworkers are oblivious to their association of Islam with terrorism. This is largely due to the American perception of Muslims as being juxtaposed outside of the US context. Within the American public, authentic Muslim identity is only associated with “foreignness.” As an indigenous Black American man, he is not regarded as someone who could be fully considered Muslim.

However, it is not only the broader American public that assumes that to be Muslim is to be foreign. Indigenous and second-generation respondents also shared examples of how immigrant identity, specifically Arab and South Asian identity, is privileged within Muslim American spaces. Masjids and other community spaces may reinforce Arab and South Asian
identity through language, food, and dress. This may in turn isolate Black Muslims. One woman\(^5\) said:

They don't know me because I wear hijab. Most people think I'm a foreigner. Because again, why would you as a Black person, you know, a Black American choose to dress like that. [laughs] And be, you know, oppressed is what they say. So, nine times out of ten when people talk to me, they'll ask me where I'm from, even though they can hear flat accent Texas twang. And all that. “Are you originally from?” and I'm like, “I'm from Texas” you know? And then they'll say, “No, no, no, where are you really from?” But the only people who asked that second question are usually Pakistanis or Indians and in the masjid.

This respondent speaks directly to the intersectional experience of being a Black Muslim woman. Her position as a woman who wears hijab and a Black person from the South, creates confusion about her identity as a Muslim and as an American for other Americans and for non-Black Muslims. She acknowledges that within US society, there is an association between Islam and foreignness. She extends this further by noting that this assumption exists within the Muslim American community as well. From the perception of other Americans and non-Black Muslims, there is no reason that a Black woman in the United States would willingly wear a hijab unless they are an immigrant. This demonstrates the way that triple-consciousness necessitates a self-

\(^5\) BIM10; Female
awareness not only of what it means to be Black and Muslim in America, but also a self-awareness of what it means to be Black and Muslim in the Muslim American community.

Indigenous Reinforced American Identity

Religion was a catalyst for reinforcing American identity, particularly for indigenous Black American respondents. Muslim spaces provided the context in which indigenous Black American respondents more easily recognized their identities as generational Americans. Because the Muslim American community is one of the most ethnically diverse religious communities in the United States, Muslim spaces often double as ethnic centers for immigrant communities. Respondents remarked that Arab and South Asian identity and culture are often regarded as normative within masjids and other Muslim spaces. Second-generation respondents also acknowledged that Muslim lineage outside the United States is generally privileged within Muslim spaces. As one second-generation respondent\(^6\) elaborated:

I come from the experience of having lived overseas where in Muslim majority countries where other people accepted that as a Black person, I could also be Muslim because they understood what it is to be Sudanese. Even though there was racism there I don't think there was ever a question of us being less Muslim…In the United States, it's been a different experience where I think people do have that perception, and primarily immigrants have that perception of we are more Muslim than Black people…So, I think to me, the problem comes from other people who don't understand

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\(^6\) BIM15; Female
who have maybe some problematic views of what it means to be Muslim and how Muslim you are based on your family history.

This respondent makes a distinction between the way that Black identity is perceived in the United States and within Muslim-majority countries. While Muslim-majority countries are not immune to anti-Black racism, Blackness is not always considered to be outside of the realm of Muslim identity. However, in the United States, Black identity is scrutinized within the Muslim American community because of the misconception that Black people lack Muslim lineage. Within Muslim spaces in the United States, this assumption further marginalizes indigenous Black American Muslims. While Black immigrants and their children may be able to claim extensive Muslim lineage in countries such as Somalia, Sudan, or Senegal, indigenous Black American Muslims may be the only Muslim in their families or have more recent Muslim lineage. Social mores, food, dress, and language are all various ways in which Muslim spaces can be isolating for many indigenous Black American respondents. As one respondent\(^7\) reflected:

So, when you first become Muslim - especially when I first became Muslim, Sunni Islam, it was seen as foreign. You have to relearn everything. There are certain - what do you call it, certain things, that are - cultural things, that Muslims who are maybe Arab or maybe Southeast Asian, what they do - and it's totally strange as far as the culture that I come from. For instance, when men kiss each other on both cheeks, that was very, very odd for me. I don't allow any man to come close to me like that. But now, I've grown

\(^7\) BAM15; Male
accustomed to it...So, there were cultural difficulties that I had to
get over, that it seemed was better when I went to the mosque that
I first went to, which was like almost all African American.

The respondent’s description of his experiences within the masjid illustrates the way that
American identity is highlighted in Muslim spaces. He alludes to the idea of personal space as a
norm within US society. For him, becoming Muslim also coincided with becoming aware of the
ways in which the United States had shaped him and his cultural context. He also alludes to the
ways that being in Muslim spaces with those of similar cultural backgrounds, can make the
social experience of being Muslim easier.

Although respondents believed that their faith did not depend on being within
communities of similar racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds, they did consistently highlight the
ways in which being in Black American Muslim communities was conducive to a more positive
social religious experience. As one respondent⁸ shared:

That's not really important to me. As long as I can worship – yeah.
As long as I can worship with Muslims, I really don't – I guess I'm
more comfortable to worship with someone that's Black or
someone that's American over some[one] that is not either of those
two. As long as there's a Muslim and they don't have any, you
know, hate in their heart for me or treat me in a poor manner that
really is not important to me.

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⁸ BAM 16; Female
Similarly, indigenous Black American respondents shared that indigenous Black American Muslim spaces enabled them to feel at home in their identities as both Black people and as generational Americans. While some second-generation respondents also spoke about the importance of having religious spaces that welcomed diversity and centered Black people, these spaces often existed for them within the context of ethnic communities.

Language was another key aspect that helped to reinforce American identity for indigenous Black American respondents. Because Arabic is the original language of the Quran, Muslims try to learn Arabic to read and recite ritual prayers. While Arab Muslims may learn to recite from family or resources within their own cultural context, indigenous Black American Muslims, especially those within convert families, are challenged with finding adequate resources to be able to engage with religious materials in Arabic. Here a respondent\(^9\) reflected on her family’s experience of struggling to understand Arabic:

I guess I’ve had a sore feeling about like English being my native tongue and since that's different than what the Holy Quran is, so like I know that there are plenty of people like for instance in my family who struggle with Arabic. And so, they struggle with like pronunciations and things like that. That's one of the ways, but I think that's less about being Black and more about being American. So I think – I mean that's one of the ways that it would impact based upon where you're actually from as opposed to like the race.

\(^9\) BAM16; Female
Another way that American identity was reinforced was through dress. Dress was particularly salient in the way that indigenous Black American women struggled to express themselves and their unique identity as Black women with cultural and historical heritage tied to United States. Respondents shared feeling ostracized at times because of a lack of cultural dress that was also considered inherently Muslim. Arab and South Asian clothing such as abayas and salwar kameez are often regarded as “Islamic” dress. This at times limited the way that indigenous Black American women felt they could appropriately express themselves as Muslims and as Black and American women. Indigenous Black American women respondents highlighted the ways that clothing impacted their experiences within Muslim spaces. One respondent\(^{10}\) shared:

> Do you know how long I struggled with finding clothes- and hijabs and stuff like that? Again, it's so different for men. It's so different. They can wear anything. I tried my best to dress modestly and wear long shirts and skirts and stuff like that. And I feel at that time, also converting, I felt I've lost a little bit of my American and African American identity when it came to dress.

Another respondent\(^{11}\) elaborated further, describing the way that she explicitly chose to style her headscarf in a way that retained aspects of her indigenous Black American heritage:

> So because I'm African American, I guess the culture somewhat influences for instance, dress. So I would probably dress more similar to African Americans versus like, just in general as a Muslim. I'm not going to wear something that's of someone else's

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\(^{10}\) BAM14; Female

\(^{11}\) BAM04; Female
culture… I’m also influenced by American society. And so because of that, I have certain ideas that even though I’m Muslim, for instance, this idea just popped up into my head. Polygamy in America isn’t allowed. Even though it’s allowed in Islam, and I understand the reason behind it, [laughs] I’m not gonna be one of those people who are like, “yeah.” You know? ...But I guess that's, I don't think Black women would be down for that type of stuff. So- But I also think that, that could be something from just being an American, not specifically from being Black.

Here, the decision to cover one’s hair out of religious awareness is also juxtaposed with the desire to express one’s cultural heritage and identity. The respondent explicitly states her decision not to adopt another cultural way of covering her hair. Instead, she asserts her own identity as a Black and American woman in the way she chooses to dress as a Muslim woman. Likewise, the respondent compares her expression of her American heritage in her dress to the social norms that she believes to be acceptable within her own cultural context. The concept of polygamy, specifically the permissibility of Muslim men to have four wives, is evoked as a way in which her American identity is reinforced. While she does not deny the fact that polygamy is traditionally accepted within Islam, she argues that her American context makes her personally un receptive of it. Because indigenous Black American respondents were raised within families that were shaped by an American cultural context, being in multicultural Muslim spaces enabled them to fully realize the extent of their own American identity.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION
Here I find that both indigenous Black American Muslims and second-generation Black American Muslims engage intersecting identities of race, religion, and immigrant status to articulate their place within the United States. This articulation happens at both micro and macro levels, as they navigate Black Muslim identity in both the Muslim American community and within broader US society. Respondents acknowledge challenges associated with being Muslim in the United States, however, they articulate that their experience being Muslim is different because they are Black. Black Muslim identity contributes to a self-awareness that I call “triple-consciousness.” Triple-consciousness refers to racial double-consciousness and religious marginalization experienced by respondents within the context of US society, and the racial self-awareness that respondents have within non-Black Muslim American spaces. Within Muslim communities, as well as in the broader United States, Islam is assumed to be centered outside the United States. Indigenous Black American Muslim respondents are culturally isolated in some Muslim spaces because of language, dress, and cultural norms that all point to their generational American heritage. Despite indigenous Black American respondents’ critique of the United States, Muslim spaces help to reinforce their own connection with American identity. Because indigenous Black American respondents do not have Muslim family lineage outside the United States, being American can serve as the way to narrate the historical and cultural context of their faith identities.

While indigenous Black American Muslims use macro processes to critique American identity because of anti-Black racist US histories and structural inequities, their experience within the Muslim American community pushes them to use micro processes to reexamine their proximity to American identity. Macro processes refer to the way respondents perceive American identity with regards to the US collective, while micro processes refer to the way
respondents perceive American identity with regards to their local contexts. Indigenous Black American respondents question the concept of American identity because of racial double-consciousness. Despite experiences with religious discrimination, being Muslim can help reinforce American identity for indigenous Black American respondents. This is largely because indigenous Black American Muslims are positioned within a multicultural religious community comprised of multiple generations of immigrants. Within Muslim American spaces, things like language, dress, food, gender roles, and social norms get highlighted in a myriad of ways that reflect immigrant heritage. While US born second-generation Black American Muslims may also experience this, as children of immigrants they are able retain proximity to their parents’ national origin identities. This fissure impacts the way indigenous Black American Muslims regard their identity as Americans.

Second-generation respondents also engage macro processes to examine American identity and their relationship to anti-Black racism and inequality. However, they also use macro and micro processes to embrace aspects of American identity. Second-generation respondents’ affinity to American identity is relative to the perceived advantage US citizenship provides them when broadly compared to the realities of living outside of the United States. Second-generation respondents compare their own experiences living in the United States with opportunities and challenges their parents gained and faced as immigrants. While they acknowledge the collective challenges that Black and Muslim communities face in the United States, most did not believe that the challenges compared to the sociopolitical challenges of living outside of the United States. Second-generation respondents believed that their parents’ choice to immigrate to the United States resulted in their own privilege of being American.
This study provides more precision about exactly how race and religion overlap and aids our understanding of the conditions under which both work together to shape American identity, regardless of immigrant status. Additionally, this paper makes an important empirical contribution to the study of US Black Muslims. A large amount of sociological literature on US Muslims and American identity has focused on Muslims of South Asian or Arab descent. There is no sociological study of how the lived experiences of both streams of US Black Muslims compare in the ways they articulate American identity. While Islam may serve as a form of racialization for Muslims of Arab and South Asian descent, Blackness complicates all other intersecting identities for Black Muslims in the United States.

Through an examination of indigenous Black American Muslims and second-generation Black American Muslims, I argue that overlapping identities of race and religion fuel micro and macro processes that help US Black Muslims articulate American identity. Although macro processes can contribute to a more critical articulation of American identity for indigenous Black American Muslims, micro processes have the potential to reinforce American identity. Second-generation respondents narrate their connections to American identity not only through religion and race, but through their families’ migrant stories and ethnic origins as well. This may encourage second-generation Black American Muslims to embrace their identities more easily as Americans. Indigenous Black American respondents narrate their connections to American identity through religion, race, and family origin as well. Because indigenous Black American Muslims have been culturally and historically shaped by the United States, being in multicultural Muslim spaces can reinforce their identities as Americans.

While this study examines both streams of US Black Muslims, future research should more closely examine each groups’ individual interpretations of American identity. An in-depth
analysis of second-generation Black American Muslims could be useful in determining some potential differences in the connections between respondents’ race, religion, and American identity based on distinct ethnic origins. Additionally, an in-depth study of indigenous Black American Muslims would provide a closer analysis of the impact of heritage Muslim identity. Similarly, future research should be done to examine the experiences of Black Muslims who converted to Islam. While not all indigenous Black American respondents in this study converted, a sizable percentage did. Conversion may impact the way that these respondents articulate the connections between religion and national identity. Finally, more research should be done to examine the effects of gender.

Overall, this study is a crucial contribution to the field of sociology. It is a steppingstone in our understanding not only of US Black Muslims, but also to begin to disentangle the connections among race, religion, and national identity. This study demonstrates the interconnectedness of each of these identities and helps to illustrate how overlapping identities can both highlight and reinforce each other.
References


