

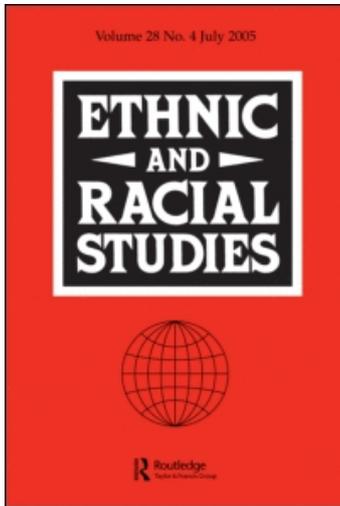
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Marriage in colour: race, religion and spouse selection in four American mosques

Zareena A. Grewal

Abstract

In this study, marriage serves as the point of entry into discussions about race, religion, and identity in American mosques. The experience of minority status in the US shapes the ways Muslim immigrants construct difference. The intersections of race, class, gender and religion emerge as Arab and South Asian Muslim Americans talk about interracial marriage and preferences for lighter-skinned mates. Muslim American children of immigrants test the boundaries of what constitutes an eligible spouse by drawing on religious sources that challenge their parents' ideologies of colour and racial prejudices. Islam serves as a common moral ground between generations that came of age in different cultures, creating a space for negotiating conflicting visions. Long after religion has faded as the cornerstone of social protest against racism in the US, Muslim youth in American mosques revive it in debates about race and colour.

Keywords: South Asian immigrants; Arab immigrants; Muslim youth; marriage; skin tone; racialization.

Culture vs. religion: a generational conflict

In some ways, Rashid's¹ relationship with his parents is not all that different from that of many 22-year-old Americans. His parents worry that he does not spend enough time on his schoolwork. They do not like the way he dresses. They do not like his friends. And they do not approve of the woman he loves.

Rashid is the son of Pakistani immigrants who came to Ann Arbor, Michigan, more than forty years ago. He rejects the word Pakistani wedged between hyphens in his identity. He identifies only as a Muslim. He would much rather pore over his books on Islam than those for his classes. He has grown a beard and wears a *kufi*, a Muslim

skullcap. He carries a Quran with him at all times. Most of his friends are Muslim and black, as is the woman he wants to marry.

I use the term “so-called Pakistani” because . . . I don’t like to identify myself on a race or nationality. . . . As long as we carry the cultural baggage . . . “We’re Pakistani . . . or Arab-American” . . . we’re identifying ourselves with the artificial names of geography. Once we get over that, we’re Muslim first. Then we can relieve all the problems we have in our community. Not the “so-called problems” of who my kids can and cannot marry. These are things our parents distract themselves with. I mean real problems, like carrying [Islam] in this country. (Rashid)

The spirit of religious reform that underscores Rashid’s critique is echoed by young Muslim Americans throughout mosque-based communities in the US, communities established by their immigrant parents. Most of these immigrants, typically Arabs from the Middle East and *Desi* immigrants from South Asia, arrived during the 1960s and 1970s and included large numbers of educated professionals who realized their dreams of financial success and quiet family life in American suburbs.² (I prefer the local term *Desi* to South Asian, which is not used by the subjects. *Desi*, literally ‘of the country’ in Hindi-Urdu, is used interchangeably with terms referencing nationality, like ‘Indo-Pak’).

The renewed interest in religion throughout American mosque communities is part of the global Islamic revival³ that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, which coincided with the influx of large numbers of post-’65 Muslim immigrants to the US as well as the increasing influence of western cultural models and social norms in Muslim societies. Although it is often misrepresented as a simple backlash against westernization, the global Islamic revival is a product and agent of the complex forces of globalization, fuelled by the increase in religious literacy, the speed and ease of communication and the fluid movement of people, practices and ideas across national borders (Roy 2004). Key features of the reformist discourse are consistent across the wide spectrum of revivalist Muslims throughout the world; however, the specific preoccupations and particularities of a religious community always inform religious debates and give them local character.

The rediscovery of Islam in diaspora⁴ takes a range of interesting forms. For many Muslim immigrants their religious identity takes on a prominence it did not have when they lived in Muslim societies. The ‘Muslim first’ identification is often even stronger for their children (Naber 2005). The ethnographic material presented here demonstrates the extent to which arguments about religion lace intergenerational

debates about marriage and identity in four American mosques. My focus is not on *why* first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants find Islam increasingly appealing, but on *how* they draw on Islam as a discursive resource. Marriage serves as a point of entry into examining the ways the experience of diaspora shapes their constructions of difference. I argue that religion must be integrated into an intersectional analysis that brings race, gender and class together as systems that mutually construct and interpenetrate one another.

As American-born children of immigrants, such as Rashid, come of marriageable age, they often have different ideas from their parents about the measures of a good spouse. The first generation grew up in Muslim societies where particular cultural practices (constructions of beauty, marital endogamy, etc.) are naturalized and taken for granted. However, the second generation, raised in the US, often dismisses its parents' practices as both racist and 'un-Islamic'. Interestingly, the term 'culture' sometimes takes on a negative connotation as a pollutant of 'pure' Islam in reference to first-generation Muslims in a number of diasporic communities (Glynn 2002; Schmidt 2002; Naber 2005). Ironically, the second generation often does not recognize its own American sensibilities as cultural and constructed in the same way as those of their parents. Setting their parents' 'cultures' in opposition to Islam, Muslim American children assume a moral higher ground and assert their own religious authority in the face of their parents' 'cultural' authority. Examining perspectives on interracial marriage and intra-racial colour preferences sheds light not only on the nature of the generational tug-of-war between 'cultural' parents and 'religious' children, but also on the complex ways that constructions of identity are transformed in culturally fragmentary contexts such as the US. The second generation's moral claims are persuasive because they draw on the same religious sources that their parents consider authoritative (Quranic verses, Prophetic examples, sermons at their mosques, etc.) rather than secular anti-racist logics.

Although they may perceive race as natural and fixed in nature, many in the second generation defensively invoke Quranic verses and colonial history in order to challenge ideologies of colour and race, insisting that an individual's worth is determined by faith and righteousness. The following Quranic verse is frequently invoked as evidence of the egalitarian spirit of Islam: 'O men! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware' (49, p. 13) (Asad 1980, p. 794). Interestingly, for many of these Muslims issues of race are arguably under overt religious scrutiny in ways that class and gender discrimination are not.⁵ Although there are religious

debates about gender and class discrimination in these mosques, these issues are peripheral when compared to the energy and attention devoted to talking about racial unity and egalitarianism in Islam.⁶ Clearly, Islam is not a static import in immigrant communities; it is a dynamic discursive resource for young adults who challenge their parents' ideologies of colour and racial prejudices as well as the racism that envelops the contemporary US. At a time when the edgy urgency of hip hop has made religious articulation of social protest, so prevalent in the civil rights era, sound antiquated and hollow, Muslim youth reinvigorate it, challenging the assumption that religion has ceased to be a compelling vehicle in the fight against racism.

Study methods

Muslims are now the fastest growing religious population in the US, primarily constituted by three ethnic/racial sub-groups: black American converts, Desi immigrants and Arab immigrants and the subsequent generations in each sub-group.⁷ The four Sunni mosque-based communities examined here are scattered throughout the greater Detroit area and overlap in terms of membership. The mosques in Ann Arbor, Canton, Troy and Franklin, Michigan, serve as social and religious centres for immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia and smaller numbers of black and white American-born Muslims and immigrants from other parts of the Muslim world. All four communities are largely middle to upper-middle class, and the children of immigrants are usually college bound regardless of their parents' educational level or economic standing. Muslim immigrants in the US tend to be upwardly mobile and better educated than their co-religionists in other western countries.⁸ 'Mosqued' communities such as these represent only a small segment of Muslim Americans.⁹

The research presented here is based on ninety in-depth interviews with college-educated, second-generation Arab and Desi Muslims between the ages of 18 and 30, supplemented with several interviews with their black and white Muslim peers, and with first-generation immigrants from these communities.¹⁰ The sense of a 'shortage' of eligible mates in these mosques characterizes many minority communities. Most of the subjects in this study rely heavily, sometimes exclusively, on family and community networks in order to isolate potential Muslim mates, although university groups (like the Muslim Students Association), religious conferences and internet matchmaking or social networking services (like naseeb.com or facebook.com) expose young people to potential Muslim mates beyond their parents' social circles. In this context, questions about conflicting notions of desirability and where to draw the boundaries of the pool of eligible Muslim mates become particularly important.

Immigration, Islam and whiteness

Arab and Desi immigrants have a long and tortured history in relation to American 'whiteness', as a legal and biological category and as a social or political construction. Whiteness was a prerequisite to naturalization in the US until 1952. Throughout the twentieth century, European immigrants suffered discrimination in the US and as an act of self-preservation became white by essentially choosing whiteness, deciding they were white and then struggling to be recognized as white (Roediger 1994). Joan Jensen (1988) and Ian Lopez (1996) provide detailed histories of the discourse of legal whiteness in US courts and analyse a number of early cases of Arab and Indian immigrants who contested the biological logic of race in order to be naturalized as US citizens, albeit unsuccessfully. In contrast to whites who trace their lineage to Europe, Middle Eastern immigrants continue to be perceived and defined as non-whites socially although they are also currently defined as whites and/or Caucasians legally (Naber 2000, p. 51). Desi immigrants straddle the vexed boundary between Asian and Caucasian in a similar fashion. First- and second-generation Muslim immigrants examined here consistently characterize the exclusion they feel as racial, although other Americans might identify their 'difference' from the white majority as merely ethnic.

The racially motivated hatred Muslim immigrants experienced throughout the twentieth century has intensified in the last half of the century due to the tenor of US foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly since September 11 (CAIR 2003; Volpp 2003). Nadine Naber (2000) perceptively directs our attention to the social and political 'racialization of religion', premised on the intrinsic inferiority of Islam, which *racially* marks Muslim immigrants in the US. I prefer Naber's argument and terminology to similar arguments made by Garbi Schmidt (2002) and others about the 'ethnification' or 'ethnogenesis' of Islam by second-generation Muslims in the west because of the softening effects of the language of ethnicity. In the 1970s, the category of ethnicity increasingly displaced race as the primary unit of academic analyses, shifting the focus from constructions of difference to internal group formation and the symbols of inclusion. This trend also, inadvertently, sparked a neo-conservative glorification of ethnicity and a self-celebratory nativism that boasted a 'new' American mosaic that extended beyond black and white, ultimately reducing ethnicity to a euphemism for race or a kind of racial subset. Making ethnicity the master concept over race often glosses over exclusions and hostilities with racial undercurrents, particularly in the ethnographic analyses of those groups ranked

between the poles of black and white (Omi and Winant 1994; Sanjek 1994).

In many Arab and Desi communities, whiteness is simultaneously coveted and disparaged. Although most Arabs and some Desis regularly check the 'white' box on official forms and may even enjoy the privilege of whiteness in particular contexts, they often reject that identification in other situations. Nayef, a blond Syrian, explains that whiteness is more than appearance.

The way being Arab manifests itself racially is [that] we see ourselves as different, as Arab Muslims. . . . To be labeled a white boy, it's the worst. You're like, "I ain't white . . . I'm Arab!" And everyone that's teasing you [might be] light-skinned [Arabs] but it's irrelevant. It's white, meaning American [whites].

Even those Arab Americans who have physical characteristics typically considered definitive attributes of whiteness (blond or red hair, fair skin, etc.) often reject whiteness as their racial identity within the spaces of their communities. Their rejection entails a political claim to the right to protection from discrimination as well as the reclamation of self-definition 'on their own terms, in the face of the state's and the media's distortions of their identities' (Naber 2000, p. 51). Furthermore, phenotype does not always guarantee the power to 'pass' as white for Muslims since it may be trumped by physical markers of their faith (i.e. Muslim women's veils, men's beards), which make them particularly vulnerable to discrimination.

As their claims to social, and sometimes even legal, citizenship are increasingly undermined, Muslim Americans often naturalize these racial and national exclusions by invoking race in order to talk about religious discrimination. Drawing on the language of race rather than ethnicity or religion in no way fixes Arab and Desi constructions of difference in relation to whiteness because of the inherent instability of race. Matthew Jacobsen defines race as a 'tablet whose most recent inscriptions only imperfectly cover those that had come before, and whose inscriptions can never be regarded as final' (1998, p. 142). The analogy of a tablet seems especially fitting for Muslim Americans whose definitions of race correspond to shifting social and political circumstances, yet these 'systems of "difference" can coexist and compete with one another at a given moment' (ibid., p. 140). Although religion is never constructed as biological, Muslim subjects' invocation of race does not necessarily reflect sloppiness or imprecision; rather, such contradictions may reveal their acute consciousness of the process of constructing difference (ibid., p. 170). Janet, a white American convert constructs her racial identity differently after becoming (visibly) Muslim.

Of course I know I'm still white and [Muslims] think of me as white but in my head I really identify myself as a minority now. . . . [Because of my scarf] other white Americans don't see me as white. They are always trying to figure out this imaginary accent and before this *hijab* [scarf] nobody used to ask me where I was born. . . . When I [say] Detroit, they [are] confused. A lot of white people see me as a traitor. . . . so that makes me identify much more as a Muslim than as white. I have to worry about discrimination like any other minority; I stick out in crowds. . . . How am I any whiter than a Syrian girl with blue eyes?

For Janet her 'cultural apostasy'¹¹ and the ensuing sense of alienation from other whites has led her to construct her racial identity differently after converting and wearing *hijab*. Although religious symbols are not racial markers, they may take on a racial cast. White converts continue to identify as white but they note that when confronting anti-Muslim prejudice their religious identity becomes more salient. In a study on white British women who veil, Myfanwy Franks argues that the discrimination they receive for betraying the invisibility of their whiteness 'demonstrates the shifting boundary not so much of "race" but of racism which can arc across boundaries by a process of uniformed association' with racially marked Muslim immigrants (2000, p. 926). Muslim Americans grapple with the expansions and contractions of racism, whiteness and social citizenship and their shifting and conflicted relationships to the dominant white majority are reflected not only in how they define themselves in relation to them, but also in the shifting internal ideologies of colour within their communities.

Intra-racism and spouse selection

Matrimonials advertising 'fair' skin are ubiquitous in the 'lonely hearts' sections of Muslim American publications and websites.¹²

Sunni Parents of Indian origin seeking suitable match for their two daughters:

- (1) Pharmacist, 24 years old, prefer someone in medical field.
- (2) Degree holder, 31 years old, employed in computer field. Both are US citizens, slim and *fair color*. (*Islamic Horizons* 2003, emphasis added)

Although some studies have examined the role matrimonial ads play in facilitating the matchmaking process for Muslim Americans (Hermansen 1991; Haddad and Smith 1996) my interest is on the significance of skin colour¹³ and the ways it intersects with gender

and class. Research on black Americans shows that the politics of skin colour still governs the most intimate of relationships (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992, pp. 107–8). Just as the skin colour of a spouse becomes a statement about social mobility and prestige among black Americans, the same phenomenon emerges in the overlooked cases of Arabs and Desis in the US.

Although constructions of difference may be transformed as Muslim immigrants assimilate the racial discourse in the US, race is hardly new to them. As post-colonial peoples, they have an intimate history with regimes of white supremacy, which is reflected not only in the ways they construct racial difference in relation to others, but also in the ways they link privilege and colour among themselves. Intra-racism is a term describing the phenomenon of a racialized group that internalizes white supremacy and redirects it at its own members. Since each group contains a wide spectrum of individual skin colours, people are stratified along this colour line. Those individuals at the lighter end of the spectrum are considered more attractive, and are therefore privileged. This privilege is embedded in ways that are not readily apparent, and the benefits, elisions and racial myths that accompany it are re-inscribed in everyday social interactions. Dark skin is stigmatized in parallel, often imperceptible, ways.

I argue that contemporary ideologies of colour in the post-colonial Muslim world are racial, although they are categorically different from western racism since they are fundamentally reactionary, derivative discourses. Partha Chatterjee's (1986) nuanced treatment of Indian anti-colonialist nationalism reveals the ways it was trapped in a framework of false essentialisms that necessarily reproduced exclusions among Indians because it was derived from British discursive categories. Intra-racism, I would argue, is similarly a derivative discourse, the reflection of self-hatred, the internalization of notions of inferiority and defect, perhaps the most tragic scar left by systematic racism. Constructions of difference and beauty are certainly not static or unchanging in South Asia or in the Middle East, just as they are not in the US;¹⁴ intra-racism, however, corresponds to the rhetoric of white supremacy in suggestive ways. While race should not be reduced to colour, dismissing the fetishization of fair skin as a random or benign aesthetic preference among post-colonial peoples neglects the power and continuing vitality of the rhetoric of white supremacy throughout the world.

The intra-racist ideologies of many Arabs and Desis emigrate with them and are reinforced and sometimes transformed by the racial climate in the US. Sultana, an immigrant from India, explains how ideologies of colour are reformulated in a society with a white majority. 'Most [Desis] are *samlā*, neither dark nor fair. So what is fair over there might be *samlā* over here. Like, in India, you would be

very fair, but here you won't because of the white Americans. So it depends on the comparison.' Sultana explicitly refers to white Americans as the standard to be measured against. Interestingly, although most Muslim immigrants in these communities construct whites as racially different from them, whites remain the point of reference. For others, such as Abdullah, the ability to 'pass' informs their colour preferences.

I think [whiteness] is the ultimate beauty standard. "She's so pretty, she's white-skinned." That's always the line [in Franklin and] in Syria. . . . My mother is very white and people are always surprised she's Arab. And she wants me to marry someone who looks like us.

The stigma of dark skin and the preference for light skin are coded racially as immigrants assess their status as minorities in the US and the benefits of 'passing' as whites.¹⁵ The significance of skin colour is linked to the broader racial climate of the US, where Muslim minorities from the Middle East and South Asia regularly experience discrimination. Additionally, the intersections with class are important since immigrants internalize the racialized 'American dream' and connect climbing the economic ladder with distancing themselves from racial minorities in order to obtain the benefits of whiteness.¹⁶ In other words, intra-racism is simultaneously a self-destructive internalization of white supremacy and also a strategy for operating within a raced class hierarchy.

Scholars of colonial history have demonstrated the ways marriage and mating were used to reproduce racial and class hierarchies and to police race, class and national borders (Stoler 1991). The derivative discourses of colour are also deeply gendered in these communities and marriage serves to regulate and reproduce the internal hierarchies of colour and class. In interviews, subjects explain how they evaluate potential mates, as well as what criteria they feel their communities hold them to. The Desis and Arabs largely have similar responses, with a few differences. More Desi men and women claim they find lighter skin more attractive and more Desi women express frustration over intra-racism than the Arab women interviewed. Since Desis, in general, consider themselves darker, they note that their definitions of what constitutes 'light' or 'fair' are more 'generous' than those of their Arab counterparts. As in most cases of male socioeconomic dominance, men tend to be evaluated on their success rather than their looks, and, not surprisingly, female subjects express much more anxiety about skin colour and beauty standards than male subjects, although men are certainly not immune to intra-racism. The popular Indian skin-bleaching cream Fair and Lovely, found in ethnic grocers throughout the US and Europe, recently began to share the shelves

with the male counterpart, Fair and Handsome. Interestingly, the ad campaign launching the cream featured Bollywood heart-throb Sharukh Khan and inspired a critical, race-conscious backlash among Desi youth in diaspora (Puri 2007).

If women are evaluated physically more than men are, then they suffer intra-racism more as well. Female subjects insist that darker skin makes it harder for women to marry in their communities. Khadija describes an on-going conflict with her Egyptian mother.

My mother is always after me to stay out of the sun [because] she thinks I get too dark. She's got green eyes and everything and she gets really mad when people think I'm black. She thinks it's cause I get so *samra* (dark) and cause I have what I guess you would call curly or kinky hair like *suwd* (blacks). She always says (in accent) "You're hair used to be so nice when you were a baby. I don't know what happened." Especially when the marriage topic comes up.

Khadija refers not only to the stigma of being darker-skinned but also to other features that are racialized in the US (and in the Middle East), such as kinky hair. As they become familiar with the ways race is coded in the US, those racial signs become more deeply ingrained in their own derivative racial discourses. Muslim immigrants often talk about race and colour in surprisingly explicit ways. This reveals their unfamiliarity with the taboos of the racial discourse in the US in contrast to their children and not necessarily more virulent racist streaks. In other words, Muslim immigrants are often unfamiliar with the ways Americans talk *around* race. Therefore, the explicit and unselfconscious ways that they talk about race and colour are often reflective of their lack of mastery of the linguistic taboos associated with race in the US. Many young Muslim Americans both challenge and re-inscribe the immigrants' racial ideologies, sometimes in the same breath.

Aunties, in general, make you feel less pretty if you're too dark. I mean, I guess I'm medium-dark. I know people bleach [their skin] and get coloured contacts. . . . and it looks good and you think about it. But it's fake and I hate that fake stuff. This is what God gave you. *Astaghfarallah*. [God forgive me.] (Sahar)

Sahar is conflicted about her complexion. She admits to being tempted to alter her appearance but, interestingly, her religious convictions prevent her.

The stigma attached to dark colour intersects with broader racial discourses in the US and sometimes echoes a biological racial logic. Sahar bemoans the plight of the single woman deemed unattractive. 'If

a girl has a major flaw, she's just stuck. It's sad. . . . In society, if [a girl is] very, very dark complected, these are all physical things, just physical abnormalities.' Like Sahar, Sultana, a Desi mother of three adult daughters, explicitly refers to dark colouring as a physical abnormality and deficiency.

Well, in [South] Asian communities, because there are so many shades, most everyone prefers light skin. . . . And it is much, much worse here than in India and Pakistan because over there if you are ugly . . . then at least you can make it up with money. "OK my daughter's not beautiful, but I can give you a house." But here . . . they all have money and so they can't compensate deficiency with money. See, we parents are afraid [of our children marrying dark-skinned mates] because, if not for this generation, then . . . our grandchildren. Because dark colour is dominant over light colour . . . and the children will carry the dark colour [because it] is a dominating feature [that] stays over the generations.

It is clear in her explanation that being dark is perceived as a defect, a genetic deviation that should be feared. Sultana invokes an arguably American racist logic that includes biological dimensions of race, racial degeneracy and fears of miscegenation.

The systems of gender, class and race mutually construct and interpenetrate one another. Many immigrants argue that things that are perceived as defects (such as unattractiveness) can be compensated for relatively easily in their home countries. For example, Sultana refers to the practice in the subcontinent of marrying a daughter off with a larger dowry to attract more potential mates.¹⁷ Interestingly, she notes that this practice does not work in her US community.¹⁸ Since suburban communities are generally homogeneous in terms of wealth, a larger dowry is not as attractive as it might have been overseas. In these cases, families may choose to bring over a spouse from their country of origin. Thus, class, like gender, also intersects with intra-racism. As intra-racist ideologies are re-formed in the US, they may gain a potency that they may not have overseas because they are conflated with socio-economic endogamy. Asma expresses her frustration with the ways colour and class are linked. 'I know people see me as dark, and I know people don't [propose] because of that. And I want to marry a professional person, so it's hard.' Just as in the black American case, financially successful men are perceived as being more eligible and, therefore, able to get the preferred lighter-skinned wives. In these communities, fair skin may be a vehicle of upward class mobility or maintaining upper-middle-class endogamy. Russell, Wilson and Hall document that colour is related to upward mobility for black Americans, so that light-skinned women 'have the best chance of

trading in on their color to flee the [ghetto], leaving the predominantly darker-skinned women behind' (1992, p. 116). Scholars must investigate whether similar patterns exist in Muslim immigrant communities.

Increasingly, young Muslim Americans in these communities draw on Islam to contest intra-racism. They often cast the fetishization of fair colour as a kind of racism, which they see as a symptom of colonialism and an eastern, 'cultural' corruption of 'pure' or 'true' Islam, revealing one of the ways post-colonial histories are reproduced in diaspora. Murtaza explains how that history haunts his community. 'I don't think being lighter makes you better looking. . . . It comes from colonialism; the British are right there in your face everyday and so it gets in your head, that you are dark, bad, bad-looking. . . . It has nothing to do with Islam.' Like Murtaza, Omar dismisses the beauty ideal that permeates but hardly represents his community by locating its roots in pre-Islamic history. 'My grandmother would make jokes about me getting a blond blue-eyed [Arab] wife and I'm like, "We're Arabs. What are you talking about? We hardly even know any Arabs like that!" It's a kind of *jahiliya* [pre-Islamic ignorance].' Many young people dismiss intra-racism as a form of ignorance that predates Islam or as 'culture' infecting people's views. 'Indo-Paks . . . are just infatuated with . . . who is white, whiter, whitest? . . . It has a lot to do with who you marry, the way the community perceives you and it's sad because that is just cultural garbage' (Aho). Interestingly, Aho refers to intra-racism as 'cultural garbage', distinguishing it from religion. These critiques of intra-racism often invoke a new, de-territorialized and 'purified' understanding of Islam characteristic of the revivalist discourse (Roy 2004).

Muslim American youth contrast Islam with 'culture', which is human, constructed and polluted, but this usage usually applies only to the stigmatized elements of the immigrants' cultures. Yasmin invokes the culture/religion opposition.

Every culture is into . . . white skin. . . . I don't care what they think. Why should I change what Allah gave me? Just because of what some stupid society thinks? So, no, I'm not going to dye my hair or get contacts or any of that stupid stuff. That's wrong. You should do what's Islamic, not what's cultural and it's sad that people feel pressured into that. They should get stronger *iman* [faith].

Yasmin criticizes the faith and strength of character of both those who propagate this intra-racism, as well as those who attempt to accommodate it by altering their physical appearance. These young Muslims draw on Islam as a discursive resource as they resist the ideologies of colour within and beyond their communities. They point out that intra-racism cannot be reconciled with Islam and criticize

those who conform to this intra-racist beauty ideal because it is based on characteristics that are prized by culture, a human construction, and not Islam, their divine standard.

One of the risks of doing a focused analysis on a cultural phenomenon such as intra-racism is that of exaggerating its prominence. Although discussing marriage abstractly allows interviewees to map out their criteria, what people say or think about marriage does not always directly correspond with whom they marry. It may be that the correlation between skin colour and marriage patterns is very low, especially when compared to other criteria named by the subjects in their spouse selection process, such as personality compatibility, religiosity, family reputation and career prestige. My aim here is not to suggest that colour preferences are more significant in spouse selection than other factors. Rather I isolate this phenomenon in order to examine the ways ideologies of colour intersect with gender, class and religion. I argue that Islam serves as a tool for undermining the system of intra-racism that privileges and affirms light skin in numerous, imperceptible ways in mosque-based communities and it translates across the generation gap in ways that secular anti-racist rhetoric may not. Religious references lace the debates about interracial marriage in parallel ways.

Interracial Muslim marriages

Although Muslims in the communities examined here believe Islam penalizes racism, they often accept race as a 'natural' category. For example, they absorb the language of race to distinguish Arab, Desi, white and black Muslims from one another. The subjects express with conviction that in Islam one's worth is determined only by the degree of righteousness and faith in God and they often criticize their communities' failure to implement the creed of Islamic egalitarianism. 'Last Friday I took a Jewish [friend] to *juma*' [services]. ... You got Malaysians, blacks, Arabs everyone all next to each other [in prayer]. No cliques, so he was very impressed. But in marriage who knows' (Abdullah). Abdullah echoes the racially egalitarian ethos that characterizes the religious discourse in these communities. However, he concedes that the Islamic principles of tolerance and unity may not be implemented in spouse selection. Interracial marriage between Muslims poses a 'boundary dilemma' that forces them to consider the meaning and consequences of 'marrying out' and to 'confront questions about the definition, meaning and significance of the boundaries that mark their identity' (Kibria 1997, p. 524). Marriage, then, may become the ultimate litmus test of an individual's views on race.

Immigrants are often confronted by children whose much broader vision of acceptable potential mates is shaped by the diversity of Muslims in the US and the often more expansive and diverse Muslim social networks the second generation has access to through university groups, professional associations, religious conferences and internet matchmaking and social networking sites. Additionally, children of immigrants often feel they have more in common with Muslim Americans of other race groups than with new immigrants from their parents' countries. Interracial marriage is a solution to the perceived problem of a limited pool of eligible mates. 'Even my parents are cool with [me] marrying a girl that's not necessarily Arab. They've even [suggested] girls to me that aren't' (Ibrahim). Although Ibrahim's parents are open to interracial marriage, for many immigrants it is a startling trend and sometimes a point of generational conflict (Haddad and Smith 1996, p. 25).

Overwhelmingly, the most common pattern among subjects is one where they prefer their own racial group among Muslims but are open-minded about interracial marriage and would consider it. One reason for the preference for endogamy is that many in the second generation want to preserve their culture in future generations, indicating that the negative connotation their parents' culture sometimes assumes is contextual. Stressing the importance of cultural, as opposed to racial, endogamy could be a thinly disguised racism, or, equally, a pragmatic approach to creating a successful partnership, or simply a reflection of a genuine attachment to one's heritage.

I think marrying out of [your] race is fine when other people do it ... but I never could because I'm way too cultural. ... I want my culture to be carried on to the future generations and ... both parents have to have the same culture for ... [your] kids to be pure Desi. (Sahar)

Although most subjects emphasize that religion is much more important to them than their cultural heritage, for some in the second generation preserving the 'purity' of culture is just as important as preserving Islam. 'Marrying out' may be seen as compromising their culture and making it more susceptible to disappearing over generations. For a number of Muslims in these communities, however, race plays no role in their choice of spouse. 'Only God knows [who I will marry]. I don't mind if they're not Desi at all as long as they're Muslim and they have a sincere heart and a good sense of humor and they can be honest with themselves, with me, with God' (Rafia). When subjects list religiosity among the most important criteria, all potential Muslim mates are on equal footing.

My findings suggest that the general sentiment in the mosque communities examined here reflects relative openness to the idea of interracial marriage, but for some the common faith does not necessarily make an individual outside of their race any more eligible. 'Islamically, you can't say no [in marriage] or discriminate on race . . . because religiously Muslims are obligated not to be racist. Culturally, you can't help it. Many first and second generation Muslim immigrants consider blacks the least desirable' (Abdullah). 'I think I can marry an Arab woman and I think my parents would be pretty happy about it as well. But to be brutally honest, with a black Muslim, I could see my parents having a fit. That's wrong but that's how they are' (Murtaza). Black Muslims often perceive the first generation as more intolerant than the second generation. Hajra, a young black woman, feels that the immigrants in her mosque harbour more prejudice than their children. 'You don't see prejudice much from people my age. But you do with [their] parents. . . . It's a colonialism thing. . . . Their image of black people overseas is really low because they think . . . we're the last rung on the totem pole.' Hajra alludes to the immigrants' insecurities about the racial hierarchy in the US and their histories of colonial subjugation, revealing the ways black Americans also participate in the production of post-colonial histories in diaspora. Black women such as Hajra not only suffer the racism of the white majority but also the racism internalized and refracted back at them by other people of colour. As immigrant communities assimilate American racial sensibilities, the black woman becomes the least acceptable daughter-in-law (Swanson 1996, p. 149). Farida explains how black women like her are disadvantaged relative to black men in mosque communities. 'There's no prestige or status in marrying a black woman. . . . For a black man all his options are open because, generally, the white converts to Islam . . . would consider him. For the black woman, she's not desirable to other races.'

In the context of contact with Muslims of other races in religious settings, Muslim immigrants in the US are often confronted on their racial prejudice (Hermansen 1991, p. 198). The intimate contact between different races in diverse American mosques often brings issues of prejudice and discrimination within communities to the fore.

Immigrants in these communities are often much more strongly opposed to interracial marriage than their American-born children. Interestingly, they sometimes frame their opposition in religious terms.

I tell my daughters that I think it's easier to marry within similar backgrounds. And I can't quote you a *hadith* [Prophetic tradition] but I know there is one that says try to marry within similar backgrounds, just to avoid conflict because, as [it] is, there are too

many differences in the marriage. This is why we parents say stay in your own race background. (Sultana)

Although the vast majority of Muslims hold that interracial marriages are acceptable in Islam, others, such as Sultana, believe that Islam discourages interracial marriage, although they did not produce scriptural evidence in the interviews. Another Desi mother concedes that interracial marriage is sanctioned by Islamic law but insists it should be a last resort.

The young people . . . think that, well, it's not *haram* [forbidden, sinful] to marry out, so what's the big deal? But the Prophet didn't say that. I mean, you have to start in and then go out. Nowadays, girls just say no [to suitors] without a good reason and that's *haram*. First you have to consider your cousins. If they are not good, then you look at other Indian boys. If you still can't, then Pakistanis. Arabs and other Muslims should be last. But the first thing some of these girls do is look outside even though they have very good cousins. They say nobody marries cousins in America but that's our tradition. (Amina)

In line with Sultana, Amina passionately defends her position on endogamy in vague religious terms. This demonstrates the extent to which arguments couched in sacred law may undermine eastern traditions and parental authority. Although the first generation recognizes the authority of revelation or lessons taught in their local mosque by religious leaders, their children often draw on those common sources of Islam to subvert their parents' vision. Clearly, Amina's vision of appropriate potential mates is much more limited (cousin marriages being optimal) than the second generation's. The young women Amina debates defend interracial marriage on religious grounds and dismiss familial endogamy by invoking Islamic law as well as cultural norms in the US. Of course, young Muslims raised in the US have also internalized the secular, anti-racist rhetoric that permeates American media and school curricula as well as the cultural norms couched in medical terms that stigmatize practices such as cousin marriages. Their multiple layers of discursive mastery may privilege them *vis-à-vis* their parents. Young Muslims often challenge their parents' values by framing their critique in strictly religious terms since Islam is a moral common ground across the generations in a way that American anti-racist discourses or American constructions of incest may not be.

Second-generation Muslims invoke religious purity in order to critique their parents' cultural practices, prejudices and attitudes that they feel cannot be justified or reconciled with Islam. As young

Muslims find the process of looking for spouses difficult due to small pools of eligible mates, interracial marriages within these communities become plausible and logically defensible on religious grounds.

If a Muslim has any questions about our marriage, he's already gonna be blasted because that's not Islam. You cannot be a Muslim and be racist because the [Prophet] said that a white does not have any superiority over a black, a black does not have any superiority over a white. . . . The only thing that divides Africa and Asia is the Suez Canal that was built in 1947 (*sic*). The Prophet encourages us to marry out. . . . That's how [civilizations and] communities are built. (Rashid)

Often, even if they are opposed to interracial marriage in principle, parents may find themselves unable to protest because their children are able to defend interracial marriage in Islamic terms. 'I would consider black or Arab guys but . . . my parents would, of course, ask, "Why not a good Desi boy?" But if we were happy together, then they would have to say yes because it's Islamic' (Iman). As communities engage their religious tradition in the US, old patterns of behaviour and reasoning need to be reconciled with new understandings of religion and culture. Increasingly, the first generation grants this religious authority to their American children. Momin admits that his 24-year-old son teaches him about Islam.

We were not [as] religious back in Iraq as he is here in America . . . And he argues with me and then I have to go back and read the religion. He tells me things I never thought of about Islam. . . . I read the whole Quran because of him. To fight with him [laughs].

As the generational conflict plays out in Muslim American families, Islam serves as a common discursive resource in constructing arguments both for and against interracial marriage. The tug-of-war between 'cultural' Muslim parents and their 'religious' children seems to favour the younger generation, armed with religious sources that their parents recognize as authoritative.

Not surprisingly, interracial marriages among second-generation Muslims are becoming increasingly common in Muslim American communities (Hermansen 1991, p. 198). Yusuf and Nora are among the high-profile Desi-Arab couples in these communities. Nora recounts that she never accepted the idea that she had to marry an Arab.

It's so hard to marry [someone] of your same race. We're in America, we go to school with . . . different people our entire lives. And then

parents ... say ... "I don't care if you've been friends with white, black, red, whatever, brown [Muslims]. Those are not people that you can fall in love with." (Nora)

Nora's father was adamantly opposed to her marrying Yusuf because he was Desi. She spent years begging him to reconsider while rejecting other suitors until her father relented. Nora and Yusuf's marriage shocked many and sparked debate in their communities.

It was racist. Most [Syrians] didn't think Yusuf was ... enough of a catch for you to cross the [racial] barrier and marry him, anyway. I don't think they found him to be attractive enough. Well, *astaghfarallah* [God forgive me] ... he's dark-skinned. [If he] was at least a doctor. [To] break that taboo you have to be extraordinary. (Abdullah)

Even though [interracial marriage] may be an option for some, for me ... I don't really understand how an Arab could marry an Indo-Pak or a black and I never could. ... That's how I was raised. (Nayef)

Intra-racist, racial, national and class references permeate the opposition to Nora and Yusuf's marriage. Some claim interracial marriages are justified only if the person in question is exceptional compared to the potential mates within the group. The fact that Nora had proposals from eligible Arab American bachelors and yet chose to marry outside her race continues to puzzle and alarm many.

Other young people admire interracial couples because they perceive them as defying the restrictive expectations of 'cultural' parents and embodying the more expansive possibilities of life in America offered by living according to 'pure' Islam.

I don't care what people say [about my marriage]. Some [girls] were happy that I sort of broke the barrier. ... So, if you have a crush and you're secretly talking to this Pakistani guy [it's] like ... [if] she did it, I can too. If you have *iman* [faith]. (Nora)

Like Nora's, Rashid's account of how his fiancée Shirin came into his life has a strong spiritual dimension.

I just did *hajj* and no one made that call. It's the *real* million man-woman march. It brings tears to your eyes. And when I was in Mecca all the brothers were talking about their wives ... and I was just like, dang, I need to get married! So, you know, I prayed at hajj. ... In December, boom! It happened. ... I've never felt this

way . . . I love her. I told my parents that I'm going to marry her and they always wanted me to marry a Pakistani and Shirin is black.

Rashid's impassioned account is laced with spiritual and political references. Rashid invokes Islam in ways that undermine cultural endogamy, parental authority and even secular politics. He describes Shirin as the answer to a fervent prayer, and he also locates that prayer at the hajj in Mecca, perhaps the most symbolically charged ritual embodiment of Muslim unity, tolerance and diversity.

Increasingly, voices like Rashid's command the attention of the first generation. Many community members continue to watch interracial couples such as Rashid and Shirin and Nora and Yusuf with fear and wonder. They are curious to see how they will make their marriages work, and how (or whether) they will be able to preserve their respective cultures. The second generation, armed with a scripture-based moral authority, is increasingly defiant of its parents and its critics.

My only criteria is righteousness. They've always stressed the Pakistani thing but I'm like, "See Mom, righteousness, and Shirin wants to practise [Islam]." Shirin said, "Rashid, it don't bother me that you're so-called Pakistani." She uses that word just like I do. "You're Muslim and I love you for your Islam and your righteousness. You're a hell of a good person." So I was like, "Ditto. Same to me about you, because of your righteousness." (Rashid)

In response to the scrutiny and criticism, interracial couples often stress that only Islam must be preserved in future generations and that it is their primary criterion. Those in the second generation who identify more strongly as Muslims than with a racial or cultural identity will be more willing to 'marry out' (Al-Johar 2005). As these communities grow more racially diverse, interracial marriage will become increasingly commonplace. For most, parental consent is essential and, sometimes, a point of conflict. In these cases, young Muslims often draw on Islam as they engage in intergenerational debates about marriage.

Conclusion

In this study, marriage serves as a point of entry into broader issues of race and identity construction in four immigrant mosque-based communities. Many young Muslim Americans in these communities identify themselves as 'Muslim first'. They employ Islam to subvert certain racial values and what they perceive as the restrictive expectations of their 'cultural' parents, demonstrating how culture

and religion can come to operate in a discursive opposition. As they test the boundaries of what constitutes an eligible spouse, they draw on religious sources that their parents recognize as authoritative in part because Islam serves as a common moral ground between generations that came of age in different cultures, creating a space for negotiating conflicting visions. Long after religion has faded as the cornerstone of social protest against racism in the US, Muslim youth in American mosques are reviving it in debates about race and colour.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.
2. This 'post '65 wave' of immigrants was sparked by the Lyndon Johnson administration's repeal of the National Origins Act, which had restricted immigration almost entirely to northern and western Europeans. The demographic picture of Muslim Americans differs from that of their co-religionists in Europe. Muslim immigrants in Europe are predominantly working class and, in contrast to the black American case, there have not been significant communal conversions of Europeans.
3. There is a vast and growing literature that documents the varied forms revivalist or reform Islam takes in Muslim societies as well as in the west. Most academic works focus on the militant transnational movements, which are often wrongly taken to represent the revival as a whole. The overwhelming majority of Muslims in the west and in Muslim societies who participate in the Islamic revival are peaceful, though certain purely cosmetic features of their calls for religious reform are shared with the militants, such as the emphasis on universalism and a global Muslim community that transcends any particular territory or society.
4. Although it would be a misnomer to talk about a Muslim diaspora since Islam, like Christianity, is a universal tradition and is not restricted to a place, the immigrants in these communities are part of ethnic diasporas. The social challenges they face in the US as diasporic peoples inform their understanding of themselves and shape the way they construct and mediate their relationships in their mosque communities.
5. Other studies document how young Muslim American women invoke a religious logic when negotiating their rights to education, marital choice and divorce (see Naber 2005; also, for a British case, Dwyer 1999); however, in the communities examined here these middle-class norms are usually taken for granted.
6. This is in sharp contrast to the exaggerated amounts of attention western critics devote to gender inequalities in Muslim communities. Since September 11, debates about gender in American mosques have become more prominent as a direct result of the increased external scrutiny (including the national media) (Grewal 2004).

7. There is great dispute among academics about the numbers of Muslims in the US, with estimates ranging from as low as Pew's recent estimate of 2.35 million to as high as the oft-cited 2005 Hartford Seminary study's figure of 7 million. Since the US census does not collect information on religion, experts agree that all figures are only 'educated approximations' (Pew 2007, p. 9). There is a corresponding scholarly dispute about the sizes of the ethnic-racial Muslim sub-groups relative to one another, as well.
8. This study seeks primarily to offer directions for further analysis. There are other, proximate mosque communities in the greater Detroit area that are working or lower middle class, for example, Arab communities in Dearborn or the 'down-river' Desi communities in the neighbouring suburbs. I was unable to include them in this study partly because I found mosque membership to be less fluid over these class lines in contrast to the overlapping membership of the four mosques examined. This limits my scope in interpreting the findings related to class and deserves further study.
9. See Naber (2000) for a discussion of how 'non-practising' Arabs are often linked to religion in ways that do not represent their beliefs or their sense of identity. Little scholarly attention has been devoted to 'secular' or 'non-practising' Muslims. An important angle for future research would be to compare the attitudes of 'mosqued' and 'non-practising' Muslim Americans towards race, colour and interracial marriage.
10. The majority of these interviews were conducted in these communities in 1997–8. A smaller set of follow-up interviews was carried out in 2002. Although the topic requires deeper analysis, I did not find significant differences in the attitudes of my informants on issues related to colour, race and marriage within their mosque communities since the tragedy of September 11. Despite the seeming continuities in their attitudes on these intra-community issues, subjects stress that 9/11 and the intensification of Islamophobia has heightened their sense of being a racially marked and politically vulnerable religious minority in the US.
11. I borrow this term from Sherman Jackson. For an elaboration on the ways that conversion to Islam is constructed as a rejection of American cultural identity or as an expression of black authenticity, see Jackson (2005).
12. Similar intra-racist language is commonly found in the matrimonial advertisements in the immigrants' countries of origin.
13. Although I use this ad to illustrate intra-racist constructions of beauty, a closer reading reveals the ways racial, national and class endogamies are reproduced as well.
14. Reading pre-modern skin-colour preferences as race in Indian or Middle Eastern history risks simply projecting contemporary, western signs of race backwards onto another time and place. Physical anthropologists have tried to determine whether racial markings, like narrow noses or light skin, were determinant factors in the caste system; however, the numbers of high-caste individuals with dark skin or flat noses in the anthropological record and the intra-caste variation in skin colour throughout Indian history suggests that, even if these factors were the original basis of caste in India, they did not remain so (Sanjek 1994, p. 3). Similarly, historians have amply documented the fluidity of the category of Arabness ('*aruba*') throughout Islamic history, a boundary penetrated by dark Africans well into the modern period (Jackson 2005).
15. Whether and to what extent transformations of constructions of difference are rooted in processes overseas or in the integration of Muslim immigrants in the US remains unclear and, to my knowledge, unstudied.
16. In *Islam and the Blackamerican* (2005), Sherman Jackson explores the evolution of the post-'65 immigrants' racial politics and of their relationship to their black co-religionists. He argues that immigrants' anti-western sentiments remained distinct from black opposition to white supremacy, which engendered an immigrant dominance of blacks within mosque communities. This incongruence may have prevented immigrants from identifying with a positive black identity, in contrast to earlier Muslim immigrants to the US (particularly the Ahmadiya) and Europe.

17. In examining these types of case, scholars must be careful not to conflate class and income level, since parents may seek out poorer individuals from high-status families.

18. The dowry enhancement Sultana references is specific to the subcontinent and should not be confused with the *mahr* in Islamic law, the material gift offered by the groom to the bride.

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