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1

The Culturally Contested Lives of Muslim Youth and American Teenagers

Sunday Morning at the City Mosque

I steer my rusty green Toyota Camry into a parking spot in the lot behind the mosque. I turn off the engine, step out of my car, and walk toward the back of the white, two-story building. I yank open the heavy back door and step into the open space of the social hall, set at the back of the mosque. The large room is alive with a bustling mix of adults and children—Arab American, African immigrant, East Asian, South Asian, and a few African American and white Muslim families as well. The adults' chatter and the kids' playful noises echo around me as I weave my way through the crowd and toward the opposite door, through which I pass into the more spacious and sunlit front lobby. Here I see Thomas, a short, balding, dark-skinned man, stationed at his normal post at the front reception desk, which is positioned oddly but as usual, facing away from the mosque's front door. Thomas's face breaks into a wide smile as I approach, and I briefly stop to shake his hand.

"As salaamu alaikum," I say.

He smiles and greets me in return: “*Wa alaikum as salaam.*”

“I’m going up to the youth program,” I tell him. He nods and jokingly sweeps his arm dramatically in the direction of the staircase, as if I don’t already know where to go. I swing around to my right and climb the winding, carpeted stairs to the second level, where I take a sharp right turn, walk a few steps, and push open the door to the youth room.

This room is even noisier than the social hall, with about thirty-five middle and high school-aged kids sitting and talking in various clusters. I scan the width of the space for a particular group of boys but don’t see them. I consider the possibility that they’re late today, which would not be surprising. Suddenly, I hear a voice from my left call out, “Hi, John!” I look over to see Miriam and Sana, two of the youth program’s older members, sitting side by side and waving to me. Today both of them are wearing their curly hair tucked under intricately decorated black *hijabs*, or headscarves. I wave back and say hello. Just then, Farah, one of the youth program’s leaders, crosses in front of me and says to someone else, “Are they in there?” I figure she might be referring to the “they” for whom I’m also looking, so my eyes track her as she walks toward the door to the youth program office—a small box of a room off the main youth room—and opens it. I peer around her and catch a glimpse of Muhammad and Yusef, perched on the edge of the desk at the back of the office. As Farah walks into the room, I slip in behind her. Yusef sees me and says, “What’s up, John?” and the other boys follow suit. Each of them gives me “dap”—a combination of a handclasp and half-hug—and says, “*As salaamu alaikum*” as they do. It took me a while to get the mechanics of this particular greeting down. But now, about a year into my time at the mosque, it’s become habitual.

Sitting on the large black desk at the back of the room, their legs dangling and swinging, are five teenage boys: Yusef, Ali, Muhammad, Abdul, and Fuad.¹ They range in age from fourteen to seventeen, are of various ethnic and racial backgrounds, and are all Muslim. I walk over and take a seat on the desk to the right of Fuad. Now we’re all

facing Farah, who stands directly in front of us, her eyebrows raised in an expression of stern expectation.

“Are you guys ready?” she asks. I ascertain that the boys are supposed to be preparing some sort of presentation and are expected to share their work with the rest of the group in a few minutes. They are each holding small white and green books of the hadith—abbreviated collections of the sayings and behaviors of the Prophet Muhammad authenticated by the ninth-century Islamic scholar Muhammad al-Bukhari, among others.

As if to reassure the group, Muhammad says, “We’re just doing the five pillars. It’s Sunday School stuff!”

I say, “You guys have to do the five pillars?”

Yusef says, “Yeah, it’s a hadith about the five pillars.”

From my own experience with Islam, I know that the “five pillars” are considered the core religious obligations of Muslims and include an initial proclamation of faith (the *shahadah*); prayer five times per day (*salat*); the paying of alms to the poor (*zakat*); ritual fasting during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*); and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*), which includes walking seven times around the *Kaaba*, a cube-shaped holy site. The review and reinforcement of the five pillars is often a standard activity within Muslim youth programs such as this one.

The boys speak rapidly, trying to determine which of them will present which of the five pillars to the larger group.

“Okay, I’m doing *shahadah*,” Yusef says.

“I’ll do fasting,” Ali volunteers, adding with a shrug, “That’s easy—Ramadan.”

“Okay, who’s doing prayer?” asks Yusef.

Muhammad raises his hand: “I’ll do it.”

Yusef replies, “Okay,” then turns to the remaining two boys.

Abdul says, “I’ll do *Hajj*.”

Fuad follows with, “I’ll do *zakat*. That’s easy; just giving money to the homeless. What is it—like 25 percent?”

“No,” I tell him. “It’s lower, like 2.5 percent.”

“Oh,” he replies.

Farah looks at me with a smile and says, “Okay, you’re in charge,” and leaves the office.

Adopting a tone that suggests it’s time to get down to business, Yusef turns to the others: “Okay, you guys. We gotta get this straight.” He raises the small book in front of his face and reads with sincerity: “These are the five pillars as recorded by . . . Bu-kar-i.” He stumbles over the name a little.

Fuad asks, “Bacardi?” Abdul and Muhammad crack up.

Yusef says, “Come on, you guys!” Then he pronounces it more carefully, using his native Arabic: “Bukhari . . . Bukhari . . . Okay. . . . After I read this introduction, we can each read the part about our pillar and then say whatever we want to add about it.”

They do a quick rehearsal. Ali reads the part of the hadith about shahadah and then adds, “This is the declaration of faith. The beginning of everything.”

Next, Muhammad reads the section about prayer and says, “You should do this five times a day.”

Yusef looks at Muhammad, frowns thoughtfully, and offers, “You could say that if people think it’s hard to pray five times a day that they should be thankful because it was going to be fifty times, but Prophet Muhammad went to the Prophet Mousa [Moses] and said, ‘My people cannot pray fifty times.’ So, it could have been fifty.”

Muhammad responds, with friendly aggravation, “Man, you got that from Omar!” He is referring to Omar Hashmi, the mosque’s religious director, who often gives lessons on Islamic education as part of the youth program. Many community members refer to Omar as the *imam*, or religious leader, of the mosque.

“So?” says Yusef, slightly defensively. “It’s a good story so people understand that it’s not that hard to pray five times a day.”

“Man, you’re like a baby Omar!” says Muhammad, smiling.

Fuad reads the passage about fasting and adds, “This is what we do during Ramadan.”

Abdul reads the section describing Hajj and states, “Hajj is a pilgrimage.” There’s silence as if the others are expecting more, but when Abdul remains quiet, the others start to laugh.

“That’s it?” asks Fuad.

“Um, you walk round the box seven times,” Abdul adds. When everyone laughs loudly and hoots disapprovingly, he continues, “Okay, okay, it’s a pilgrimage to the House of God, and you walk around the black box seven times . . . and I’m not talking about the cable box.”

Everybody cracks up. “Come on, Abdul!” cries Yusef, with an undertone of genuine frustration with his brother.

“Okay, okay,” Abdul replies. “You walk round the Kaaba seven times.” This seems to appease Yusef and everyone else.

Finally, Fuad reads the section about zakat, concluding, “This is when you give money to the homeless . . . or to me?” He smiles.

Farah opens the door and calls in, “Okay, you guys, it’s almost time to go.”

As the door closes again, Yusef looks around at the others: “Okay, are we straight?” He channels his nervous energy into a quick spinning dance move in the center of the office and remarks: “Hoo! That was like the Jackson Five.”

As we all gather and walk toward the door to the larger youth program room, I elbow Abdul and say in a teasingly accusatory tone, “Around the box seven times?”

Abdul smiles and nods: “I’m gonna say that.”

Ali eggs him on, “Yeah, yeah, you should really say that!”

“No, come on, you guys!” Yusef interjects with a flash of serious aggravation.

“See, he’s like a little Omar,” Muhammad says to the other three.

In response, Yusef unbuttons his khaki Dockers and tucks his blue and white–striped button-down shirt deep into his pants so that he can pull them comically high. “Here we go,” he says, in a mock-nerdy voice.

“Oh, no!” Muhammad and the other boys cry out, laughing hard.

As Yusef readjusts his clothing back to normal in preparation to step out the door and the group’s laughter dies down, Muhammad turns and faces his friend directly with a quizzical, thoughtful look on his face. “I don’t understand, Yusef,” he says. “How are you an

athlete, a math nerd, a rapper, a gangster, and an imam?” Yusef looks straight back at him with a bemused smile and shrugs his shoulders. They turn and walk through the open door together.

Muslim Young Men and Muslim American Lives

This book tells the story of a group of young men growing up together in early twenty-first-century America. At the time of my fieldwork, the friends at the center of the story—whom I call the “Legendz” after the name of their sometimes active hip hop group—were urban American teenagers and second-generation immigrants. They attended large and diverse public schools, were exposed daily to mainstream American media and pop culture, and lived in a multi-ethnic, working-class neighborhood in a major city in the United States. This social location meant that these young men faced expectations from school peers, community friends, and each other to engage in cultural practices, styles, and discourses associated with modern urban American teenage life, including hip hop music and fashion, dating and romantic love, personal independence and autonomy, and a low-key presentation of ethnic identity. In other words, they were expected to live a social and cultural life that was recognizably adolescent American. These young men were also at the very same time self-identified and practicing Muslims embedded in a tight-knit religious community. This social location meant that they were expected by parents and community adults, peers, and sometimes each other to meet the religious and social obligations of Muslims as understood within their local context, including praying five times daily, attending the mosque, fasting for Ramadan, abstaining from premarital dating and sexual intercourse, avoiding consumption of alcohol and drugs, limiting their exposure to potentially profane pop culture, and identifying as Muslims in public. In other words, they were expected to live a religious and cultural life that was recognizably Muslim. As some of the central cultural expectations associated with urban American teenage life were understood to be in tension

with or even direct opposition to those locally associated with being a “good Muslim,” these young men led what I call *culturally contested lives*. As such, the everyday lives of the Legendz were characterized in part by the presence of two competing sets of cultural expectations, or what I will call *cultural rubrics*: urban American teen culture, as manifested in their schools, peer groups, and the media they consumed, and religious Islam, as locally practiced in their mosque and by their families.

Because of this complex social position, the Legendz often faced practical situations of cultural tension in their everyday lives. The cause of this tension did not lie in any inherent or fundamental incompatibility between Islamic and American youth cultures but rather in the way that particular elements associated with each culture were often *treated* as fundamentally incompatible with or in opposition to one another by individuals who were socially significant to the Legendz—parents, religious leaders, other Muslim youth, friends at school, and, sometimes, themselves. When individuals who were important to the Legendz repeatedly emphasized alleged incompatibilities between specific aspects of religious Islam and specific aspects of American youth culture, a tangible sense of cultural tension could be perceived in these young men’s lives.

When the Legendz came up against these situations of cultural tension as they moved through their daily lives—situations that were usually centered around popular music, romance and dating, ritual commitment, and the presentation of Muslim identity in public—it could seem to them that the appropriately “Islamic” behavior or course of action was directly in conflict with the culturally “American” behavior or response. At these points, the Legendz faced a practical cultural dilemma: If they took the more culturally “American” adolescent course of action, they risked falling short of local expectations of acceptable Islamic religiosity and identity. If they took the more Islamically appropriate route, they risked losing their status as “cool” and culturally American urban teenagers. In response to these recurring and vexing dilemmas, the Legendz worked together to come up with and utilize an array of practical strategies for the management of their culturally contested lives. They used and adapted

tangible cultural materials, adopted and altered recognizable modes of speech, embraced and amended locally meaningful embodied practices, and both invoked and rejected particular aesthetic genres in subtle and ongoing efforts to signify complex identities, perform multiple and shifting states of belonging, and reveal themselves as both sufficiently “Islamic” and acceptably “American.” Precisely how these young Muslim American men innovated and applied these creative social solutions to their immediate cultural dilemmas, and how these efforts marked them as fundamentally similar to a broad range of other American teenagers, is the focus of this book.

EVERYDAY ISLAM AND YOUTH CULTURE IN THE LIVES OF THE LEGENDZ

At the heart of the Legendz’s friendship group were two pairs of brothers, Muhammad and Fuad, and Yusef and Abdul. The two older brothers—Muhammad and Yusef—first became friends at the age of nine while attending Qur’an classes at the City Mosque’s “Sunday School.” Over time, they and their wider families grew so closely intertwined and familiar that by the time I met them eight years later, all four of the boys referred to each other as “brothers,” regularly spent time in each other’s homes, and were alternately cared for and gently scolded by each other’s parents. Both families had immigrated to the United States when the boys were quite young, Muhammad and Fuad’s family (the Abdulkarims) from Sudan, and Yusef and Abdul’s (the Hussainis) from Jordan. In the United States, the boys’ families were all solidly working class, with their parents employed as taxi drivers, daycare providers, and social workers, and the boys attended large and diverse urban public schools. A central activity in their lives was regular participation in the Muslim Youth Program (MYP) housed at the City Mosque. It was in this context that they also pulled a few other young Muslim men closely into the orbit of their friendship circle, most notably two South Asian youths named Tariq and Salman, as well as a Somali young man named Abshir.

The particular form of Islam taught to the Legendz was shaped by and filtered through various historical and social forces, most

notably the worldwide Islamic revival of the 1970s and 1980s, which emphasized a return to basic texts (i.e., the Qur'an and the hadith) and practices (e.g., prayer and fasting)²; the City Mosque leadership's flexible approach to the interpretation of issues such as gender and music; and their parents' desire to raise their children as "good Muslims" who would maintain the minimum local requirements of that identity. For the Legendz, the cultural rubric of religious Islam took institutional and social form in their lives through their participation in the mosque, their family homes, and, to some extent, their friendship group. Among its other functions, the City Mosque served as a space where the culture of religious Islam was visibly present and alive, manifested in the call to prayer heard five times a day, when people would stop other activities and move toward the prayer area; in the prayer area itself, which was set off from the main lobby and held an ornate chandelier and framed selections of the Qur'an written in calligraphy; in the hijab worn regularly by some women and during prayers by all of them; in the Qur'anic verses (*suras*) recited together by the youth group at the end of their gatherings; in the names of young people called out across the lobby or playground outside ("Yusef!", "Omar!", "Aziz!", "Yasmin!", "Sara!", "Noor!"); in the warm greetings of "*As salaamu alaikum*" as people met one another in the social hall; and in the lectures of mosque elders Dr. Mubarak and Dr. Nasr as they spoke about an Islamic approach to bioethics or introduced new converts to the life of the Prophet Muhammad, their words ringing out through the lobby, amplified by a slightly too loud microphone.

The cultural rubric of religious Islam, as it was locally manifested, was also present in the homes of the Legendz's families. It was evident in the "*Bismillah*" ("In the name of God") spoken before eating; in hangings on the wall that depicted mosques in Medina or the ninety-nine names of *Allah* (God) in Arabic calligraphy; in the prayer rugs rolled up by those walls; in the call to prayer that resounded from a clock in the shape of a mosque; in a mother's question: "Have you prayed yet?"; and in the Qur'an and other Islamic books on the shelf. Part of what made the cultural rubric of religious Islam so central and meaningful in the lives of the Legendz was the fact that

this set of practices, symbols, and expectations for behavior was so tightly intertwined with their relationships with specific socially significant others—their families, their friends, and members of the City Mosque community.

American youth culture—and in particular the urban American youth culture of the early twenty-first century—was the second cultural rubric at the center of the Legendz’s social lives. While the social power of religious Islam rested partly in its association with family, Muslim friends, and the mosque community, the social power of urban youth culture stemmed primarily from its association with the Legendz’s adolescent peers, both Muslim and non-Muslim. As working-class youth of color attending diverse public schools in the urban United States in the early 2000s, the Legendz were expected to participate in or at least exhibit knowledge of hip hop music, videos, artists, and styles; romantic love and dating; parties with alcohol and drugs; MP3 players and smartphones; cars and motorcycles; skateboarding; Facebook and Twitter; urban gangs; fast food; and basketball. In addition, American teen culture assumes that every adolescent should be consistently gaining independence from his or her parents and should be relatively autonomous when it comes to decision-making and individual action.³ These are the numerous and cumulatively intensive demands of legitimate participation in American youth culture. The Legendz were regularly exposed to these cultural expectations through interactions with peers at school, neighborhood friends, mass media, and one another.

American Teenagers and Culturally Contested Lives

People like the young Muslim men of the City Mosque who are located at the intersection of multiple and sometimes contradictory sets of cultural expectations can be thought of as living *culturally contested lives*. In this book, I will refer to the competing *sets* of schemas, habits, symbols, and practices that such people face (e.g., “urban American youth culture” and “religious Islam”) as *cultural rubrics*.⁴ As I define these concepts, individuals living culturally contested lives inhabit a social context in which two or more of the

cultural rubrics central to their lives are highly demanding in terms of what constitutes legitimate participation, are associated with and enforced by groups of socially significant others, and are often treated—by both outsiders and insiders—as inherently contradictory. As a result, the daily experiences of people leading culturally contested lives are characterized by a high level of involvement in the active, ongoing, and strategic management of the multiple cultural rubrics that vie for their attention and allegiance in the course of their everyday lives.

People whom we might think of as living culturally contested lives in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America include working mothers, first- and second-generation immigrants, upwardly mobile working-class people, gay suburbanites, and highly religious scientists.⁵ But another social group whose members consistently face and wrestle with multiple sometimes contradictory yet highly demanding sets of cultural expectations—though we may not always think of them as such—are American teenagers. A brief look at how the lives of various groups of young people growing up in the United States—including white suburban public high school students, African American and Latino public high school students, second-generation immigrant youth, and youth from highly religious communities and families—also exhibit qualities of cultural contestation will assist us in placing the case of Muslim American youth within the broader sociological context of modern American adolescence.

DIVERSE AMERICAN TEENAGERS AND CULTURALLY CONTESTED LIVES

Foundational and contemporary sociological studies of high school-aged young people in the United States have usually focused on large, mostly white suburban or mid-sized city high schools and have situated teenagers in a social world populated by a range of competing peer cultures, each with its own associated set of styles and practices. The everyday labels of these peer cultures will be familiar to most readers and may conjure pleasant or not-so-pleasant

high school memories: “jocks,” “burnouts,” “nerds,” “goths,” “preps,” “skaters,” “gangstas,” “smokers,” and “cholos,” among others.⁶ While these social categories may seem frivolous to those with some distance from high school, such labels and their boundaries are immediate and meaningful for those experiencing adolescence and often serve as the symbolic categories through which status hierarchies in high school are mentally organized and socially maintained.⁷ The use of such group labels in everyday life, especially in the historically durable dichotomy recognized in most high school settings between the “jock”/“prep”/“popular” crowd and the “burnout”/“smoker”/“loser” crowd, can create the impression that these widely recognized social categories are in fact the most dominant and populous social groups within adolescent society, and that most high school students are members of one or the other. However, a close look at Penelope Eckert’s influential ethnography of a suburban American high school reveals that while the “jock”/“prep” crowd and the “burnout”/“smoker” crowd are certainly highly visible and symbolically significant social groups, the majority of young people in high school fit neatly into *neither* of these categories. Writing about the school on which her study was based, Eckert noted:

Not everyone in Belten High School describes themselves as a Jock or a Burnout. In fact, *only about 30 percent or 40 percent of them do*. But that does not make these categories any less powerful in the social structure of the school. The fundamental status of these categories is underscored by the fact that almost all those who are not professed Jocks or Burnouts describe themselves and are described as “in-betweens.” . . . Most of the In-betweens do not choose alternative behavior, but simply mix Jock and Burnout choices.⁸

Eckert makes an important distinction in this passage, one that will prove significant in understanding the social world of the Muslim American youth in this book. Although prominent youth social categories such as “jock” and “burnout” or “good Muslim” and “American teenager” are powerful lenses through which young people and adults organize their understanding of youth worlds, this does not

mean that the majority of young people consistently or completely inhabit social groups congruent with these categories *in practice*. On the contrary, and in keeping with Eckert's statement quoted here, sociologists of high school culture have repeatedly found that most young people *do not* consider themselves as fitting neatly into a defined social category but rather view themselves as inhabiting an "in-between" social space.⁹ Instead of embracing a coherent and singular social identity, most high school-aged teenagers maintain a more complicated identity and status located somewhere between two or more widely recognized social poles. Indeed, a survey of studies of other subsets of American teenagers reveals that a vast majority of them seem to inhabit a social situation quite similar to the one described by Eckert and others as typical of the average American high school student: one in which the adolescent is confronted by and exposed to multiple socially powerful cultural rubrics but in practice works to exist somewhere between them.

For African American and Latino teenagers growing up in American cities, the two "contrasting conceptual categories" central to their social worlds are that of the "decent" or "good" young person and that of the "street" or "ghetto" youth.¹⁰ In his influential formulation, Eli Anderson carefully specifies that the terms "street" and "decent" do not describe real groups of people, but rather "categories" that people may affix to themselves or one another and "orientations" that they may attempt to strategically adopt or reject.¹¹ African American and Latino youth's social location between these two rubrics—one associated with aspiration, responsibility, and morality; the other with deviance, laziness, and "cool"¹²—presents them with an ongoing practical cultural dilemma. While the cultural rubric and identity of a "decent" young person is attractive because of its alignment with academic and professional success, too close an association with this model of identity makes a person vulnerable to accusations by peers that he or she is "acting white" or is a "nerd" and may lock him or her out of local definitions of "cool." And although embracing the cultural rubric of the "street" risks consequential categorization as a dangerous deviant, engaging in this set of styles and behaviors may also be "thrilling" and carry tangible social rewards

of peer approval and aesthetic pleasure.¹³ The result is an African American and Latino adolescent version of a culturally contested life in which young people are faced with two distinct models of identity and cultural behavior that vie for their affiliation through their competing sets of social advantages and limitations. Ethnographers of urban American communities have repeatedly demonstrated that in responding to this culturally complex situation, African American and Latino youth often attempt to somehow move *between* these available models of teenage life, not fitting neatly into either category but rather striving to find a manageable mode of social life that vacillates between them.¹⁴

For second-generation immigrant teenagers, the two dominant cultural rubrics generally include one associated with “home country” culture or “tradition” and another associated with “American” culture that is often treated by socially significant others as in conflict with the first.¹⁵ As a result, the lives of immigrant youth often involve an ongoing series of low-level cultural dilemmas caused by their location between these rubrics.¹⁶ Such practical everyday dilemmas, which often involve choosing between more “American” or “traditional” courses of action or behavior, are frequently experienced as highly significant and consequential to immigrant youth themselves, in large part because these actions carry the potential for the young person to be interpreted by one or another party as “too American” or, alternatively, “too Vietnamese,” “too Indian,” or “too Mexican.” Ethnographic accounts of immigrant youth are rife with stories of social sanction faced by young people who have been seen by adults or other youth as not living up to an expected authentic immigrant identity.¹⁷ However, if these youth retreat too far from American youth culture and remain visibly and consistently ensconced in “home culture,” they are likely to be reprimanded for being “fresh off the boat” by peers working to establish themselves as authentically American.¹⁸ Adding to the complexity of the situation is the fact that the definition by parents, community members, school peers, or the larger society of what is sufficiently “Mexican,” “Indian,” “Vietnamese,” or “American” is often vague and shifting, rooted in the mutable social perceptions and cognitive interpretations of others.¹⁹ Thus, it frequently happens

that one-and-a-half- and second-generation immigrants, like Eckert's "in-betweens" and Anderson's neither fully "decent" nor completely "street" youth, actually desire a social existence somewhere between the poles of home culture "tradition" and American "independence"—one that allows them to participate meaningfully in both cultural rubrics and their accompanying social memberships—but face the practical social dilemma of how to craft such a life for themselves.²⁰

As with the subsets of American teenagers discussed earlier, young people from highly religious communities and families also generally find themselves in situations of cultural contestation among competing cultural rubrics, in which one set of expectations represents the norms, behaviors, and beliefs connected with being a "good" adherent to the faith, and the other comprises those symbols and practices associated with mainstream American youth culture and "coolness."²¹ The specific challenge for young people from highly religious communities and families is that the rubric associated with being "cool" in the popular sense often calls for behaviors, symbols, and practices—such as early romantic involvement, familiarity with salacious pop culture, exposure to alcohol and drugs, and emphasis on personal freedom over institutional authority—that may conflict with the behaviors condoned by their religious tradition. This cultural tension produces and shapes a practical dilemma for highly religious teenagers who also desire some measure of mainstream youth culture acceptance and participation. If young people move too far in the direction of religious propriety, deeply embracing the full set of behaviors, symbols, and practices associated with communal religiosity, they risk being seen by less religious peers as uncool, boring, or sanctimonious, or as mindless followers.²² However, if they move too far beyond the realm of communal religious norms, they risk losing their status as legitimate members of their communities and, possibly, of their families.²³ While there are those who respond to this dilemma by moving more deeply into either pious behavior or adolescent cool and deviance,²⁴ there are many religious young people who desire continued participation in *both* the religious cultural rubric and the teen cultural rubric and work to find ways of belonging to and identifying with both ways of life.²⁵

CRAFTING EVERYDAY SOLUTIONS TO CULTURALLY CONTESTED LIVES

If the lives of most American teenagers are characterized by a social existence positioned between multiple cultural rubrics and associated identities, with each competing for allegiance and affiliation, how do teenagers manage these complex situations on a daily basis? According to scholars who study American teenage life in a variety of settings, the most common way in which young people inhabit this cultural middle ground is through the ongoing, active, and strategic use of what Penelope Eckert terms “category symbols,” that is, the styles, behaviors, and objects that carry a strong association with some locally salient social category, identity, or rubric. As Eckert observes, “category symbols attain their value from association with clear differences in both form and content, developing around salient social differences between the categories, and maximizing distinctiveness in visible form.”²⁶ The category symbols that American teenagers strategically apply, withdraw, adapt, and combine in the course of everyday life fall into four loose types: material objects (e.g., clothes, cars, book bags, sneakers), behavioral practices (e.g., sports, dancing, the use of certain drugs or alcohol), cultural discourses (e.g., American individualism, religious piety, racial authenticity), and aesthetic genres (e.g., hip hop music, horror movies, punk rock).²⁷

While there are some teenagers who use category symbols in a focused manner to appeal for full membership in one particular social crowd (e.g., “jocks,” “punks,” or “goths”) or obtain affiliation with a highly visible group identity,²⁸ most young people engage in a more subtle and therefore more easily overlooked process of creatively applying, withholding, and combining category symbols to express sometimes strong, sometimes weak, sometimes single, sometimes multiple, sometimes shifting, and sometimes static affiliations with locally salient social identities and their associated cultural rubrics.²⁹ By strategically mobilizing particular styles, practices, and behaviors associated with one or the other locally salient social category, these many young in-betweens work to reap the social and personal benefits of affiliation with the cultural rubrics central to their social

worlds while striving to avoid an overly intensive, exclusive, or limiting involvement with any particular one. In this way, diverse American teenagers immersed in culturally contested lives engage with cultural elements—material objects, behavioral practices, cultural discourses, and aesthetic genres—in creative, ongoing, and patterned ways aimed at managing the immediate cultural contradictions present in their lives and maintaining a tenable mode of social life and identity within a context of continual and potentially socially consequential cultural cross-pressures.

A review of previous studies of subsets of American teenagers reveals an intensive and creative engagement with category symbols that is prevalent among diverse social groups of young people who live culturally contested lives. African American and Latino youth who are caught between the possible social categorizations of “good” and “ghetto” but fit neatly into neither work in the material, behavioral, aesthetic, and discursive realms to manifest a limited participation in styles, behaviors, and practices associated with the “street” while seeking to avoid the complete adoption of a dangerous lifestyle or full membership in a deviant social group. Some African American and Latino youth turn to material elements of fashion or style (e.g., jackets, gold chains, cell phones, baseball caps) to signify “street” affiliation, even though they do not actually participate in the illegal activities sometimes associated with this social category.³⁰ In terms of behaviors and discourse, generally “decent” African American and Latino youth often adopt ways of walking, talking, and looking at others that signify a deeper “street” affiliation; for example, they might engage in discourse on ghetto adventurism, telling tales of urban danger in order to burnish their “street” credentials.³¹ Young hip hop fans listen to this genre of music in part to experience and project a sense of “strength” and “power” and, sometimes, to symbolically “capitaliz[e] on the dangerous nature of blackness.”³² Limited involvement in the cultural rubric of the “street” holds powerful attraction for African American and Latino youth, not only because of this rubric’s links with racial and ethnic authenticity and association with social popularity, but also because it allows these young people to live out what most American

teenagers seem to yearn for: a lived—if temporary—sense of rebellion against mainstream society that does not entail a significant amount of real social risk.³³

Working to navigate the cultural rubrics associated with their “home” and “host” countries, second-generation immigrant youth use material, aesthetic, behavioral, and discursive cultural forms in strategic ways that attempt to position themselves as both “American” and affiliated with their country of origin. In accounts of American immigrant teenagers of Mexican and Indian origin, music, fashion, and sports are consistently identified as cultural media through which young people seek and often achieve satisfying experiences of bicultural social life. In actively consuming forms of popular culture that include or have been adapted to accommodate elements associated with both “home” and “host” country cultures—Indian and West Indian music with hip hop beats, for example, or traditional public religious rituals from Mexico adapted to a New York setting—second-generation immigrants are allowed to at least momentarily transcend the boundaries between the different cultural rubrics that frame their lives and to experience a bicultural moment.³⁴ Second-generation immigrant teenagers are also likely to apply discourses associated with either “home” or “host” country culture in strategic ways to forge practical solutions to everyday situations of cultural contestation. For example, Mexican young women support each other in their “traditional” decision to remain virgins by discussing this “choice” in a way that emphasizes an American-style voluntarism.³⁵ Similarly, Vietnamese American women seeking to curb domestic violence in their community frame the problem as one of traditional family responsibility, thereby avoiding affiliating themselves too closely with the “American” notion of individual rights.³⁶ In both cases, discourses associated with “traditional” home country culture (e.g., family collectivity, sexual modesty) and those affiliated with American culture (e.g., individual rights, voluntarism) are creatively adapted in an attempt to maintain allegiance with both “home” and “host” country cultural rubrics.

Youth from highly religious communities navigate participation in religious and teenage cultural rubrics in ways that closely resemble

the strategies practiced by immigrant, African American, and Latino youth. Like members of these groups, highly religious young people intentionally and creatively mobilize material, behavioral, and aesthetic category symbols (e.g., popular youth musical genres, forms of slang, and fashion) in attempts to complicate what they fear may be identities that are too “boring” or “good.”³⁷ Otherwise devout Christian and Jewish young people demonstrate their familiarity with popular culture (e.g., movies, television shows, music, sports, and video games) and current fashions and styles to show others as well as themselves that they do not exist strictly within an orthodox religious subjectivity but are also “cool” teenagers.³⁸ In a way that parallels the discursive strategies used by second-generation immigrant youth, highly religious young people working to navigate dual cultural rubrics regularly frame their religiously associated practices—attending worship services, dating in a responsible way, exercising sexual abstinence, and not drinking—as the results of a more culturally American “personal choice,” or even as a kind of countercultural independence, rather than as consequences of communal or religious pressure.³⁹ In these ways, religious activities that seem to pull against the expected behaviors of “cool” teenagers are placed within a discourse associated with the mainstream American and youthful values of independence, individualism, and personal pleasure. A consistent feature of the category symbol mixing done by highly religious teens is the negative and contrastive attention paid to those who are deemed *less* successful at such mixing and are therefore portrayed as “too religious.” This constant reference to and disparagement of those religious youth deemed too “good,” “boring,” and “culturally monochromatic” is a means through which highly religious youth who wish to appear “cool” try to maintain the existence of a category of religious youth who are relatively less cool and more restrictively “religious” than they themselves are.⁴⁰

In sum, most American teenagers live lives of cultural contestation, positioned between various cultural rubrics that compete for allegiance and are each associated with particular and meaningful social relationships, identities, and institutions. Most young people respond to this situation not by moving more fully into one or the

other rubric, but by attempting to navigate a middle path between them. While such processes may sometimes seem frivolous and facile to outsiders, for the young people involved, these decisions carry potentially severe social consequences, since a misstep can result in a real sense of distance or alienation from an important peer group, a significant religious or ethnic identity or community, or even one's immediate family. In other words, at stake in these navigations is not simply a sense of temporary or surface-level teenage "identity," but deeply meaningful experiences and feelings of belonging, community, and selfhood. In order to respond to this situation, most American teenagers continually engage in strategic (though often not coherently logical or completely conscious) attempts to signify belonging to and identification with multiple locally salient social categories. The principal way they do this is through the subtle use of cultural materials, behaviors, and aesthetic genres as category symbols to signify multiple belonging and complex identities, as well as the strategic employment of discourses that portray more "traditional" behaviors as youthful and American, or vice versa. As will be seen throughout this book, the Muslim American teenagers studied here consistently revealed their deep similarity with other kinds of American teenagers both through their shared position within a situation of cultural contestation and through their use of strikingly similar solutions to the common and culturally complex adolescent American predicaments they faced.

Muslim Americans Managing Culturally Contested Lives

My three and a half years with a group of Muslim American young men ultimately led me to this finding: the central concerns and pre-occupations of young urban American Muslim men are profoundly similar to those of most other American teenagers, focusing largely on coolness, pop culture, and fashion; girlfriends and romance; independence and pushing limits; and social acceptance, friendship, and family. The difference, however, lies in the fact that for the group of young men observed here, these concerns were continually intertwined with and sometimes experienced as being at odds

with the expectations that surrounded being a “good Muslim” as defined by their local community. Consequently, when these young people were together, much of their time and attention was focused on figuring out how to resolve, or at least temporarily reconcile, the tensions that arose between these sets of cultural expectations. Explaining exactly how these young Muslims worked together to manage the cultural tensions present in their day-to-day teenage lives—in the areas of popular culture, communal obligation, romantic love, and public identity—and demonstrating how these efforts at cultural navigation marked Muslim youth as fundamentally similar to rather than inherently different from other American teenagers are the central aims of this ethnography. This book thus offers an ethnographically detailed and sociologically contextualized answer to the question that Muhammad posed to Yusef in the City Mosque’s youth room one Sunday morning: “How are you an athlete, a math nerd, a rapper, a gangster, and an imam?” In other words, exactly *how* do you manage a culturally contested life?

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