Facets of Faith:
*Sadaqa* as a motivator for self-advancement and community development in North Philadelphia

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Acknowledgements

A few months ago I first stepped foot, nervous and jittery, into Baabun Nasr. I was anxious about starting a project that has come be incredibly meaningful to me, as someone who is both invested in community activism and the representation of Islam in the United States. However, the warmth of the women at Baabun Nasr, which is apparent in every interaction they have with patrons and volunteers quelled my fears. They welcomed my questions with patience and grace, and were “a door to help” for my own senior thesis research. So to my informants, thank you.

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Abstract

Over the past few years, Philadelphia has sustained budget cuts, which threaten the social and economic welfare of many individuals in the region. Baabun Nasr is an Islamic charity which strives to alleviate burdens faced by impoverished individuals in North Philadelphia. Over a six week period, I conducted field work at the site of the charity through participant observation and interviews with the women who staff Baabun Nasr. In this thesis, I examine how the women at Baabun Nasr use the Islamic value of *sadaqa* as a means of motivation for their community work and personal spiritual growth. In order to demonstrate how their choice to convert to Islam was informed by a racial context, I draw upon history of Islam in America, and notable African American Muslim communities. Furthermore, I investigate many facets of identity that the women chose to adopt when describing themselves and their work to me and the greater community. The women at Baabun Nasr are community activists who are committed to the impoverished local community, and in addressing the needs of this community shatter stereotypes of Muslim women and African American women alike. By being forthright about their work and beliefs they educate individuals about why they believe being a Muslim and a community activist are inseparable. By studying these women and the charity, I hope to share the stories of these Muslim American Women, a pertinent voice to hear in a post 9/11 United States.
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Chapter One: Introduction

“Baabun Nasr is a valuable asset to the city of Philadelphia. From bringing joy to children by providing them toys to play with, or giving out coats to keep people warm during the winter, they truly are a door to help for the community.” – Review of Baabun Nasr on Great Nonprofits

Background of Baabun Nasr

Baabun Nasr is an Islamic charity\(^1\), which uses a framework of *sadaqa*, or voluntary almsgiving, to address struggles faced by impoverished Muslim and non-Muslim individuals and families in North Philadelphia. It is located in North Philadelphia, specifically in the 19121 zip code of Fairmont North/Brewerytown, and is one of the poorest areas of Philadelphia\(^2\). The directors of the charity specifically chose to move from their previous location in West Philadelphia to the current location in North Philadelphia because it is an area of such high need.

Baabun Nasr (BN) is a small, Islamic charity that started out as a project in the basement of the founder, Umm Iman’s, West Philadelphia home. Today BN is a twelve thousand square foot facility that boasts a thrift store, food pantry and community hall. The initial goal of BN was to collect clothing, home goods, and baby supplies, and distribute them to those in need within the community. Today, the charity still collects and distributes these goods, as well as offering SNAP and WIC registration assistance, self-defense classes, and much more. According to one of the directors, Umm Kareem, the mission of BN is to be a community resource center where individuals and families can gain access to basic necessities, like food and clothing, as well as gain access to social services and support networks to help alleviate their burdens.

Like other American Muslim welfare projects (Schmidt 2014:1), BN seeks to augment the limited government resources available to individuals and families in the area. The women who run BN are active participants in the local neighborhood and use their religious identity to

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\(^1\) Meaning that it is a charity founded on Islamic values and teachings.

\(^2\) For a visual representative see Appendix I: Figure A. Over fifty percent of individuals currently living in this area are living below the poverty level (Pew Charitable Trust 2013).
promote community development in their area. Because charitable giving is an important tenet of Islamic behavior, BN as an Islamic charity enables these women to ascribe to Islamic practices, such as *sadaqa*, while facilitating community development.

*Sadaqa* can most easily be defined as giving voluntary alms (Singer 2006:315), which is emphasized as an integral aspect of Islamic practice (Singer 2008:18). BN sees *sadaqa* as the foundation of the charity and uses it as a framework that addresses a variety of poverty related issues in the neighborhood. Throughout my thesis research I examine how the practice of *sadaqa* informs the behavior of the women running BN, who view the practice as a means of cultivating community improvement with the eventual promise of religious salvation.

**Research Goals**

In order to situate the role of BN as an American Muslim charity, I investigate the history of Islam in America. Furthermore, because BN is predominately run by and patronized by African American women, I pay particular attention to how race and religion intersect within this particular community. From there I engage with the value of *sadaqa* itself, and trace how the women of BN define their charitable work and behaviors through this value. I draw parallels between Weber’s discussion of work in the Protestant community and *sadaqa* in the BN community to show how religious rewards, like attaining salvation, inform individual behavior. After addressing *sadaqa* as an integral part of Islamic behavior, I show how the value is understood as a means of improving communities. Conversations with these women brought forth questions about identity formation. To address this topic, I use Hall’s theory of hybrid identities to explore the many facets of these women’s identities.

I conducted participant-observation fieldwork over a six-week period in North Philadelphia and also conducted formal interviews with the directors of the organization, which I
will describe further during my methods section. Some of the questions I address during my research are: how does BN use *sadaqa* as a motivating force behind community improvement in North Philadelphia? How do the women’s identities inform their work at BN, and how does BN inform how these women define themselves? Lastly, why is it important to study this American Muslim population when thinking about how Islam, and women and Islam are viewed in the United States?

**Research Setting and Methods**

My fieldwork was conducted over a six-week period at BN’s location in North Philadelphia. I walked north for about fifteen minutes from the Cecil B. Moore subway stop near Temple University to the charity’s location on North 19th Street. On my walk I noticed how the area near Temple was populated, and relatively clean, with a variety of open businesses. However, as I moved towards BN the area eventually emptied out, becoming more dilapidated as I got closer to my destination. Most of my walk was down streets whose sidewalks were covered in garbage, and were bordered by run down and boarded up houses. However, one patch of my walk, about eight minutes from BN, was filled with neat, single story homes complete with green lawns and fences. These homes seemed to be the product of recent gentrification and seemed out of place with respect to the larger brick townhouses filling the neighboring streets. Demographically, I knew the area was poor, but my walk to BN always provided me with a visual to the poverty of the region. I could see markers of poverty, like the relative emptiness and lack of waste management. Furthermore, each week, I witnessed how busy the charity was, which emphasized the high need for the charity in the region.

The building of BN is a twelve thousand square foot property, built almost entirely of concrete. It is a former pickle factory and has multiple rooms, though some are currently
uninhabitable. The interior of the charity is dusty and damp, and the recently installed lighting is dim. The main section of the charity is a large room, with high ceilings, and hosts the Baab Thrift Store. Clothes are organized all throughout this main room by gender and age, and are then stuffed onto mismatched metal racks. To the side, there is a small office that is used by Umm Iman and Umm Kareem to hold private conversations and deal with the business aspects of the charity. There is no central heating in the charity, so in the winter heat dissipates into the main room through two small space heaters. The food pantry is located in a small room off of the area of the thrift store and is filled with standard canned goods, formula and baby food. The donations, which are referred to by BN staff as *sadaqa* are mostly given by Islamic community members, through individual donations and donations from local *masjids*.

I collected ethnographic material through formal interviews and informal conversations during participant-observation. As a volunteer, I worked with others to sort clothing that would be put out for sale in the dollar thrift shop. In this capacity, I mainly sorted clothing that needed to be put out on the Baab Thrift Store racks, and worked alongside the teenage daughters of the founder of BN. We talked about their lives, as teenage girls are often eager to share, and their own experiences at BN. However, the testimonials I share focus on the founder and director of the charity, Umm Iman, and the associate director, Umm Kareem. Because the size of the staff at the charity is small there were not many interviews I could conduct besides those with Umm Iman and Umm Kareem. I chose not to interview patrons of the charity after consultation with Umm Iman, who believed that people at the charity preferred to keep to themselves, and would be wary of my questioning. I opted instead to focus my ethnographic research on participant observation, and informal conversations with BN directors and staff.
My own identity as a Muslim women facilitated my research. I believe it enabled the women to trust me, as were shared aspects of identity, which I will describe further in Chapter Four. All the regular volunteers I interacted with, beside myself, were Muslim women who embrace conservative dress by covering fully. Umm Iman, the founder, who I believe is in her late thirties or early forties, converted to Islam about twenty years ago and wears the *abaya* and *niqab*. Umm Iman also chooses to wear gloves, and she is the only one to do so at Baabun Nasr. She is originally from Brooklyn, and speaks with an urban lilt. Her husband is Puerto Rican and they have been together, though not married, since she was sixteen. Umm Iman has four daughters, who are active at BN, and whose ages range from twenty-one to fourteen. Umm Iman is involved in every aspect of BN, and always knows what is happening in the building. She describes herself as direct, highly independent, and someone who values honesty over everything else. When prompted for advice, she states that she gives Islamic advice, drawing upon Islamic principles and teachings. Umm Iman did not consent to a recorded interview, stating that she thought it was inappropriate for a women’s voice to be recorded, a sentiment I believe influenced by her adherence to orthodox *Salafi* Islam.

Umm Kareem, the associate director, also covers fully but does not cover her face or her hands like Umm Iman. She wears lots of silver jewelry on her wrists, which jangle when she speaks to you. Umm Kareem was the only person I ever saw in BN who was not African American. Like Umm Iman, she is a convert and converted to Islam thirteen years ago. Her family is Italian Catholic, but she stated that it was important for her to mention that her family is supportive about her decision to convert. Umm Kareem stressed that she herself was no stranger to poverty, and grew up in the projects of South Philadelphia. Umm Kareem met Umm Iman

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3 I will define the *abaya* as an overgarment which covers the wearer’s entire body, the *hijab* as a headscarf and the *niqab* as a veil which covers the nose and mouth. These are all examples of Islamic dress women choose to wear. Men choosing to wear Islamic dress at BN opted to wear long tunics, knit or circular hats and loose pants.
when she was going through a difficult period in her life and was inspired and touched by Umm Iman’s warmth. She is on her second marriage, the first of which was to a Yemeni man, which prompted her visit to Yemen a few years ago. Both the husbands of Umm Iman and Umm Kareem were supportive of their work but not present at BN, which is perhaps due to the regulation of gender found within Salafi Islamic teachings. Umm Kareem oversees the business aspects of BN; she has college degrees in both education and business.

Other individuals who I often talked with included Khadija, Ms. Wilmaand Umm Iman’s daughters: Iman, Fahimah, Aliyah, and Farah. Khadija is a middle-aged woman who also converted to Islam. She tended to wear blue over garments and a niqab. She primarily sorted the clothing sadaqa and oversaw where it should go out on the floor. Khadija lived with her son and his wife; however, they forbade her from praying in their home\(^4\), which was extremely difficult for her, as she had nowhere else to live. Khadija and Ms. Wilmaoften joked with each other. Ms. Wilmawas not a weekly volunteer to BN like Khadija but I saw her once and it seemed as though she was familiar to BN. I do not know if she was Muslim or not, but she was the only woman beside myself who did not cover at all.

Iman is Umm Iman’s oldest daughter and is currently studying for her Bachelor’s degree at a local university. Aliyah is the second oldest, and is about eighteen, and has two children, who often run around the store. I saw Iman and Aliyah less frequently then their younger sisters. Fahimah is the third oldest and is in high school, and Farah is the youngest and is in middle school. I spoke frequently with Fahimah and Farah as we often were given the task of sorting through the donated clothes together. All daughters wear the abaya, and Fahimah also wears the

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\(^4\) Umm Kareem expressed that the act of family preventing their converted family members from praying was quite common.
niqab like her mother. Iman and Farah would wear brighter abayas whereas Aliyah\(^5\) and Fahimah would stick to black.

Through my ethnographic research I show how the women at BN are community activists whose focus on community improvement is motivated through their religious belief. However, as converts to Islam, and as Muslims in the United States after 9/11, they face challenges towards their identities as well as challenges towards their charitable institution. Through their actions in promoting community development in North Philadelphia, I show in the sections that follow that the women at BN depict a positive, and historically rooted example of Islam in the United States.

Chapter One is an overview about BN and my research methods. However, in the sections that follow I engage my fieldwork with theoretical frameworks to find responses to my guiding questions. In Chapter Two I provide a brief history of Islam in the United States, with particular attention towards the African American community. By focusing on the African American population I demonstrate how race and religion interact within the community at BN. From there, I provide a historical and religious background of the definition of sadaqa in Chapter Three. I draw on Weber’s idea of the work in the Protestant community as a means of attaining salvation in my discussion of how sadaqa, influences the behavior of women at BN. Within Chapter Three, I will also introduce how sadaqa facilitates community development, but I address how the women themselves are community activists in Chapter Four. Chapter Four engages with Hall’s theory of hybrid identities, to show how the women at BN have multi-faceted identities that inform their worldviews. Through these chapters I will address how

\(^5\) Aliyah was sometimes referred to as the more rebellious sibling by Khadija and Ms. Wilma. She has two children under 3 and is unmarried which Khadija and Ms. Wilma were unapproving of. She has a piercing above her lip, which was some of the only body jewelry I saw. Her mother, Umm Iman, has a small nose piercing.
sadaqa influences community development in North Philadelphia, and why it is important to study these women and their charitable work in the wake of 9/11.
Chapter Two: A Brief History of Islam in America

“All they see when they see Islam is this cult mentality that blows things up. They have no idea exactly what Islam is” – Interview with Umm Kareem

Umm Kareem’s quote is telling because even in a city like Philadelphia, where there is a substantial Muslim population, 9/11 created an environment in which being ignorant about Islam and hostile towards Muslims became more accepted. 9/11 has not been easy on the Muslim population in the United States. It is an experience that American Muslims recognize as moment in which their religio-cultural identity suddenly became prominent, in ways that were not always positive. Though the United States has a history of Islamophobia (GhaneaBassiri 2010:3), 9/11 exacerbated these sentiments, resulting in hate crimes and increased surveillance of Muslim, Arab and South Asian populations. The experiences of the women at Baabun Nasr (BN) reflected the nationwide sentiment that suddenly their cultural identity as American had been compromised, by the actions of the nineteen hijackers on that fateful day. 9/11 furthered conceptions of Islam as “foreign” and “anti-American”. However, I argue that these conceptions of Islam ignore the experiences of ordinary American Muslims, like the women at BN, whose Muslim and American identities are interwoven and compatible. The idea that Islamic identity is in opposition to American identity ignores the rooted history of Islam in America, as I will show in the section below.

Antebellum America

The historic presence of Islam in the United States can be seen through the slave trade. Islam came to the shores of the United States during the slave trade, particularly through the

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6 Though I will not go into much detail here, the conflation of Arab and South Asian, like that of Muslim and Sikh is one that is extensive and problematic in the United States and has led to misdirected hate crimes and surveillance.
Evidence that some of these slaves were Muslim exists through the diaries of literate slaves like Prince Abdul Rahman, Job Ben Soloman and Bilali Mahomet (GhaneaBassiri 2010:19, 31; Smith 2010:79), who were West African Muslims that were sold into slavery in the United States. Further evidence of Muslim slaves exists through records kept about slaves that were granted freedom. Because Muslim slaves were often viewed as more educated and civilized through their knowledge of Arabic and the Qur’an they were more able to facilitate their own freedom, which was recorded (Ansari 2004:226).

Muslim slaves tried to retain their traditions and practices but were not always able to do so. In particular, I believe that retention of Arabic names in current African American communities suggests that Islam was well established in Muslim slave communities. Other examples of Islamic behavior, such as avoidance of pork products when possible and rampant prayer show how Muslim slaves tried to retain their religious practices, even under scrutiny from their slave masters (Ansari 2004:226). By performing ritual prayers, Muslim slaves connected to the larger Muslim community (ummah), through their retained ritual practices (GhaneaBassiri 2010:69)\(^7\). This may have offered comfort because the practice connected Muslim slaves to their brothers and sisters back home through the shared ritual, despite the lack of control slaves had over their own lives. Though records exist of Islam within slave populations, an exact number is Muslim slaves is difficult to ascertain due to lack of documentation, and widespread conversion to Christianity. Regardless of knowing the exact numbers of Muslim slaves, the knowledge about this population facilitated the creation of the Moorish Science Temple and the NOI.

\(^7\) When a Muslim performs these acts individually, knowing that Muslims in other parts of the world are carrying out the same acts in more or less the same fashion and around the same time they not only bring themselves physically and religiously into relation with God but also other members of the ummah. Consequently the localized practice of Islam is imbued with universal significance, while concomitantly the universality of the practice among Muslims worldwide imputes Islamic value to (or Islamicizes) the local context in which it is performed” (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 70).
Immigration and Notable African American Islamic Movements

Islam gained prominence within the African American community during the nineteenth century. At the same time, Islam as a religion reentered the national spotlight because of the weakening structure of the Ottoman Empire. Waves of immigrants from the Levant and Turkey came to the United States at this time bringing with them their faith and practices (GhaneaBassiri 2010:196). During this period, Satti Majid\(^8\) was gaining prominence as a Muslim leader and was bridging ties between Muslims from the Levant and African American populations. African Americans were drawn to Satti because he taught that Islam was a religion that espoused social and racial equality. Satti’s teachings about racial equality were especially salient to the African American population, who at this point faced high rates of racial discrimination and oppression. Because my research has been conducted within a predominately African American population, I primarily focus on African American Muslim movements rather than the experiences of immigrant Muslims.

Though there were many different Muslim groups in the United States during the period between World War One and World War Two including the Ahmadiyya Movement, the Shriner Movement, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the most rapid conversion of African Americans to Islam occurred from the early 1920s to the late 1960s through the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam. Though the Moorish Science Temple no longer exists, the Nation of Islam remains an important and influential African American Islamic institution.

The Moorish Science Temple (MST) was founded by Timothy Drew, later Drew Ali, in Newark, New Jersey in 1913, and provided a foundation to merge Black Nationalism with Islamic teachings. The teachings of the MST were developed on values of peace, love, truth, 

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\(^8\) Satti Majid was a Sudanese missionary who lived in the USA in the early 1900s (Bowen 2013)
freedom, and justice, and had a following that was about twenty to thirty thousand individuals at its peak (Ansari 2004:235). The MST defined itself as an Islamic group (Smith 2010:80), however, its scripture, the Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple, has been cited as completely incongruous with the Islamic Qur’an (Smith 2010:80). Drew Ali’s primary message was that salvation could only be achieved if African Americans shed identities cast upon them by their white oppressors (Smith 2010:80), which was appealing to a population that had been oppressed by whites. His message promised a new conscious identity that would enable African Americans to cultivate self-respect and dignity through Islamic teachings (Ansari 2004:235). It was particularly appealing to “little-educated blacks suffering from economic deprivation, bitter about their lot in American society, and desperate to find an identity that separated them from white oppression” (Smith 2010:80). Though the MST was criticized because of inconsistencies with mainstream teachings of Islam (Ansari 2004:246; Smith 2010:88), it gained support because it provided a system of belief that found reason behind racism in America. This vision of Islam as a means of transcending out of an oppressive social structure was used by the Nation of Islam, and has remained as motivation for African American converts today.

An offshoot of the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam (NOI) arose in 1930 to provide a new, powerful, and chosen identity for African Americans across the United States. Wallace D. Fard founded the NOI in 1930 in the streets of Detroit among poor, black individuals (Turner 1997:148). There, Fard, guised as a mysterious, Arab street peddler shared Islam with those in Detroit through a narrative of exile from an Eastern homeland. He connected African American history to the history of the East and began acquiring followers eager to hear more about their supposed home country and heritage (Turner 1997:149). Fard was able to connect to these individuals by declaring that African Americans had lost their heritage, including their real
names, because of the slave trade and were in fact “long lost members of the tribe of Shabazz” (Turner 1997:151). Fard also rejected American identity, stating instead that African Americans were Asiatics. By demonstrating how African Americans were disconnected from American heritage, Fard provided African Americans with explanations for why they were treated as others within the United States.

One reason why the NOI became popular was because it gave thousands of African Americans “a higher purpose of life” by encouraging its members to avoid criminal behavior, alcohol and drugs, and find stability in their lives (Ansari 2004:242). Fard himself stated, “[black Americans] must give up completely the use of stimulants, especially liquor. They must clean themselves...If in this way they obeyed Islam, he would take them back to the Paradise from which they had been stolen” (Turner 1997:151). Here, Fard emphasizes that the use of drugs and alcohol were detrimental to the lives of African Americans. I argue that this emphasis of cleaning the body of intoxicants represents how Fard believed that the first step out of oppression was to be clean in body and in mind, and that in order to be mentally clear, the body must first be clean. Many African American converts to Islam, including the women at BN, describe how they choose Islam as a means to “get out of bad behavior” (Karim 2008:86; field notes) and reform themselves in body and mind. The women at BN describe how regulating their bodies through Islamic practices enabled them to find their true selves. The conversion narrative of many African Americans who convert to Islam includes an embrace of the practice of regulating the body as a means of shedding the past behaviors. However, I will delve further into this topic when discussing identities, and will now return back to the history of the NOI.

Elijah Poole, later Elijah Muhammad, a charismatic disciple of Fard, and later leader of the NOI, viewed Islam as a practice that would liberate and empower African Americans (Curtis

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9 Shabazz is presumably located in Asia
The rising number of converts to the NOI during the mid 1900s was in part due to the Great Migration (1915-1930) where large numbers of African Americans left the South to find work in the north (Turner 1997:153). The Great Migration promised skilled and semi-skilled African Americans opportunities in the North for economic advancement, however the structured racism in the North prevented these migrants from attaining opportunity and equality. African American workers, unlike migrants from Europe faced entrenched racism preventing eventual assimilation and resulting in systematic poverty (Turner 1997:153). As a result, African Americans frustrated about the lack of opportunity promised up north, and bitter about blatant racism turned to the NOI. These disenfranchised individuals were drawn to its narrative of black superiority over whites, and its recognition that African Americans were oppressed within the United States.

Like the Moorish Science Temple, the NOI connected with disenfranchised African Americans fed up of the surrounding inequality, and offered an empowered identity through religion. Although the NOI is often remembered for its radical teachings of militant black supremacy, and the demonization of whites, “[the NOI’s] doctrines served a major purpose; they created a new sense of belonging and enabled the converts to look toward the future with serene self-confidence” (Ansari 2004:242). Ansari shows how the NOI was able to gain support within the African American community through this promise of a dignified identity that transcended racial oppression.

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10 Membership to the Klu Klux Klan was increasing as African Americans moved north. In Detroit membership increased from 3,000 in 1921 to 22,000 within 1.5 years, and klansmen were actively involved in politics (Turner 1997:156)
One of the most famous converts to the NOI was Malcolm Little, later Malcolm X\textsuperscript{11}, and later still El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. Malcolm was inspired by the NOI during his time in Norfolk Prison, MA (Turner 1997:183) and moved from his life as a sexually promiscuous, drug toting, zoot-suit wearing, criminal (Turner 1997:181), to a structured life as a NOI member. He was drawn to the NOI by its messages of equality and used its teachings to promote the advancement of the African American community in the United States. Though he is known as one of the NOI’s most charismatic ministers, he left the NOI for orthodox Sunni Islam in the 1960s after becoming disillusioned with incongruities between the teachings of the NOI and what he saw as universal Islamic teachings.

In 1964, Malcolm went on hajj to learn about the universal Islamic community (\textit{ummah}), which resulted in his decision to embrace Sunni Islam. On hajj, Malcolm spoke with other Muslims and learned about their views on Islam (Smith 2010:89; Turner 1997:215). He was entranced with the universality of Islam, and its ability to reach people of multiple ethnic and racial backgrounds. After seeing how Islam seemed to be “color-blind” while on hajj\textsuperscript{12} (Turner 1997:215), Malcolm became frustrated with the ideologies of the NOI. Furthermore, he was embarrassed by the demonization of the whites taught by the NOI and believed that other narratives could also promote the advancement of the African American community within the United States (Ansari 2004:242). At this time, Malcolm was also becoming increasingly frustrated with the internal politics of the NOI. These politics escalated as allegations of Elijah Muhammad having extra-marital affairs and fathering illegitimate children were broadcast

\textsuperscript{11} Malcolm X is notable in the history of Islam in American because he is often remembered in tandem with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the context of the civil rights movement. However, Malcolm X is viewed as a militant radical, whose radicalism is tied to the NOI, highlighting how the NOI, and perhaps other Muslim groups, are viewed by the American mainstream.

\textsuperscript{12} Meaning that Islam was accessible for all races and ethnicities
(Turner 1997:212). For Malcolm, this behavior stripped away the grand vision he had of Muhammad because such behaviors were discouraged by the NOI’s values (Turner 1997:212).

Malcolm’s journey to Mecca brought to light further incongruities that the NOI had with mainstream Islam. After meeting with other Muslims, Malcolm realized that Elijah Muhammad’s proclamation that he was a prophet was not in accordance with mainstream Islam (Smith 2010:88), which states that the founding prophet of Islam, Muhammad, was the final prophet. Malcolm also found fundamental differences in ritual practices performed by the NOI and individuals he met on hajj. In the 1960s these differences between the practices of the NOI and mainstream Islamic practices incited discontent within the certain members of the NOI. Members of the NOI who were discouraged by these incongruities followed Malcolm’s espousal of orthodox Sunni Islam (Ansari 2004:247). This embrace of orthodox Sunni Islam depicts how different interpretations of Islam, beyond the NOI, are historically interwoven into the African American community.

Another important individual who broke away from the NOI was Wallace D. Muhammad, later Waraith Deen Muhammad. W.D. Muhammad was the son of Elijah Muhammad, and was selected by his father to be his successor. However, he did not ascribe to all of the teachings of the NOI and disbanded it, renaming the community the World Community of Al-Islam in the West (Turner 1997:225). Through the adoption of orthodox Sunni teachings, this new community developed such that it would be normative with Islamic teachings. W.D. Muhammad “was able to persuade his followers that his father was not even aware of the true teachings of Islam and his claim to be a prophet was not correct. Likewise, the Black-centeredness of the Nation of Islam was cleverly discarded in favor of Islamic Universalism” (Ansari 2004:252). By ascribing to universal understandings of Islamic teachings, W.D.
Muhammad built bridges with immigrant, Muslim communities. However, not all members of the NOI were impressed with W.D. Muhammad’s leadership and vision, and one member, Louis Farrakhan, an ardent follower of Elijah Muhammad’s teachings, decided to reconstruct the NOI in 1977.

For many African American Muslims today, Islam represents a means of self-regulation, which provides structure to an individual’s life not attainable in a local environment. Ascribing to Islamic practices and beliefs provides a means of self-transcendence out of social woes, like poverty, crime, and drug addiction (Karim 2008:86) so it is not difficult to understand why conversion to Islam is popular within the African American communities, which are disproportionately affected by such social conditions.

**Islam in American post 9/11**

Islamophobia has existed prior to 9/11; however, the impact of 9/11 has for some, solidified pre-existing stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. Lori Peek, a sociologist, shows how a particular image of Muslims has been constructed for the public when she states, “For decades [pre 9/11], Americans have been bombarded with derogatory images of Muslims in film and television. On the big and small screen, the Islamic faith is regularly linked with the oppression of women, holy war and terrorism” (Peek 2011:13). Peek shows how media is crucial in creating a stereotype that represents a whole community. Furthermore, the conflation of Arab and Muslim in the American public is problematic, especially considering that many Muslims are not Arab and there are many Arabs who are not Muslims. As Peek expands, “the 9/11 attacks solidified the preexisting image of Muslims as dangerous and threatening outsider” (Peek 2011:169),
being Muslim became synonymous with being un-American and an “other”¹³. The historic Muslim community of the United States complicates the idea of Islam as a foreign “other” because it has existed in the United States for so long. However, indigenous interpretations of Islam in the United States are not viewed favorably well, and tend to be remembered only in the context of the NOI, which is painted as a militant, radical group (Lee 2010:147).

As an Islamic charity, BN strives to not only improve standards of living within its community but also to address such stereotypes of Islam in the United States. During my time at BN I noticed how the charity strove to provide a positive example of Islam in the community, whether it was through individual conversations, or through materials about the charity. On their website, the organization states, “We have been facilitated to be a positive example of the Islamic identity and way of life. We relish in the opportunity to dispel prejudice and misconceptions of Muslims” (BN website). The organization has many interactions with a variety of people who are initially often wary about the women and charity as an Islamic institution. However, as conversations with the women of BN will show, they use such instances to teach about Islam and themselves as Muslims, and view the charity and its work as an integral component of their Islamic identity.

¹³ This image of the Muslim as an “other” is not unique to 9/11 nor is it unique to Muslims. Indeed, “othering” has been used throughout American history to perpetuate a public perception of a certain group, and to justify excessive government surveillance of the “othered” group, as was done to members of the Nation of Islam, and the American Japanese population in the wake of WWII.

Dhanani
Defining sadaqa

Almsgiving and charity are long-standing traditions in Muslim communities, and are among the core principles of Islamic praxis (Alterman and Von Hippel 2007, Smith 2010, Singer 2008). As Amy Singer, a leading scholar on Islamic charity, states, “charitable giving has been and continues to be a universal, life-long obligation for Muslims, one that permeates Islamic societies both as a religious ideal and as a social practice” (Singer 2008:18). Charity serves both spiritual and communal needs by offering services in the community to those facing hardships. Sadaqa refers to voluntary almsgiving, and is practiced throughout the Muslim community to promote individual spiritual growth whilst cultivating community development. The root of the word sadaqa is to be sincere (Singer 2008:68), and reflects how a donor’s belief in Islam is presented through his or her engagement in sadaqa.

Sadaqa as voluntary almsgiving is often talked about in tandem with zakat, obligatory almsgiving, which is required of all Muslims as one of the pillars of Islam. Though zakat has been institutionalized as an obligatory yearly financial charitable contribution calculated on the basis of assets, sadaqa is vague and voluntary; a practice uniquely determined by each individual. Sadaqa is a better framework for my fieldwork at Baabun Nasr (BN) because the actions of almsgiving and goodwill are called sadaqa by the women at BN, and are not financial donations. Furthermore, by choosing to focus on sadaqa rather than zakat, in the way that BN categorizes their work, I can see how such individually regulated practices inform the women at BN’s understandings of salvation, community development and formation of identity, all of which I will discuss further at a later point.
Sadaqa is mentioned in the Qur’an as well as the Hadith (Prophetic sayings or behaviors). Within the Qur’an, sadaqa is repeatedly recommended\(^{14}\), demonstrating its centrality as an Islamic practice. Singer describes sadaqa as a religious, humanitarian action (Singer 2008:66) that acknowledges that all humans are the same in the eyes of God\(^{15}\). Sadaqa is mentioned throughout the Qur’an as a good deed, which Singer elaborates upon, stating that “prayer is worthless without giving” (Singer 2008:18), suggesting perhaps that giving charity is as important as prayer to Muslims. Shariq Saddiqi, a theologian, describes sadaqa as, “any act done in obedience to God and for the sake of another” (Saddiqi 2010:31). The definition of sadaqa may be vague, yet it is clear that the action is essential to spiritual growth (Saddiqi 2010:32). As stated, practicing sadaqa benefits both the giver and the receiver, and may have larger benefits for society overall (Saddiqi 2010:32). Sadaqa is interwoven into the history of American Muslims, from the slave trade to the work being done by the women running BN today.

**History of Sadaqa**

A leading scholar on the topic of Islamic charity, Amy Singer, looks to Ottoman texts in her exploration of sadaqa to show how charity is not only a relationship between donor and receiver, but extends beyond the individual to the community and the state. Singer’s work responds to the relatively little research done on the “ideals and practices of charity” (Singer 2008:3) which have been absent from historical discussions of Muslim society, even though charity has been and is embedded in the lives of Muslims worldwide. Singer states that her book responds to heightened scrutiny of Islamic charities after 9/11 (Singer 2008:2; ACLU 2009), and

\(^{14}\) Mentions of sadaqa within the Qur’an (Yusuf Ali 2001 Qur’an 2:271, 276; 9:58, 60, 79, 103-104; 51:19; 58:12-13; 75:31; 92:5)

\(^{15}\) Which is an idea emphasized by Umm Iman as well
uses charity as a lens to view Islamic practices historically and socially. In the wake of the closings of Islamic charities after 9/11, the need to demonstrate sadaqa as a core Islamic principle, and its role in the historic presence of charity in Muslim communities, including those in the United States, became instrumental in addressing Islamophobic attitudes towards American Muslim charities (ACLU 2009).

Oral history accounts of antebellum America show the presence of sadaqa within communities of Muslim slaves. These accounts describe the practice of ritual prayer (salat) on Fridays (jummah) (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 70, Diouf 2013:86) and the observance of communal relations through the distribution of saraka. Slyviane Diouf, a historian, describes saraka as a cake like dish made from rice and sugar that was cooked by African Muslim slave women and distributed to Muslims and non-Muslim specifically on Friday (jummah), the customary Muslim day of prayer (Diouf 2013:92). Though the word saraka in popular memory refers to this dish, the name itself “is the Arabic sadaqah, meaning ‘freewill offering’” (Diouf 2013:92). As an offering, saraka served as both a religious practice and a means of sustaining the community. Indeed, as Diouf argues, “the saraka of the Georgian women perfectly filled its charitable function. It is easy to imagine how youngsters whose diet was poor and monotonous could appreciate the sugary cakes” (Diouf 2013:93). These sugary cakes fulfilled the value set forth by Islamic precepts that sadaqa, as a form of charity, be distributed to whoever was in need. Diouf argues that this includes both non-Muslims and Muslims given that records of saraka exist in the non-Muslim community (Diouf 2013:267). This practice of offering sadaqa strengthens internal communal relations, and forges new relations with those in the surrounding communities, such as other slaves. The practice of saraka by enslaved African Muslim women documents the
history of *sadaqa* in the United States, a practice which is continued today, and will be the focus of my own research.

As a small Islamic charity, BN is founded on the value of *sadaqa* and was borne out Umm Iman’s desire to alleviate the material struggles of local Muslim women she had met at the *masjid*. Umm Iman describes how in her decision to convert, the act of *sadaqa* spoke to her as a means of identifying with her new faith. Her dedication to *sadaqa* motivates her to keep BN afloat, even as it is barely able to be financially sustainable. Throughout my experiences at BN the word *sadaqa* was often used to refer to the donated goods, like clothing, household items and canned foods. By calling these donated items *sadaqa* the women at BN extend the benefits of the donation not only to the receiver, but also to the donor, regardless of the donor and receiver’s own religious beliefs. I asked Umm Kareem what *sadaqa* meant to her and BN and this was her response:

There was a *hadith* that the prophet said, that you’ve never had a new garment until you’ve mended it. So we always think about the *hadith* because never think you’re too good for something that used to be someone else’s not only does the person who donated that get a reward but as you wear it you give them further reward, and then you’re getting reward because you’re wearing something new because somebody else has already worn it, and it’s something that you’re giving down to each other, and you’re teaching to reuse, and Allah loves moderation and he loves consistency, so if we’re consistent in aiding each other and giving to each other building upon *sadaqa*, whether it’s a smile, whether it’s a handshake, or a sock, or an over garment or pants. These are the things that are gonna aid us and lead us down to better so *sadaqa* is the primary focus of BN and that the reason why we do it. Because the littlest thing, it could be the sister who came in that was having a bad day, her children are getting on her nerves, her husband’s ill, she’s ill, she hasn’t worked, she doesn’t know how they’re paying their rent, and she just wants to talk and be amongst people who are going to make her forget what she’s dealing with at home, and she can line up with us and pray, and possibly take home something that’s gonna aid her family. That’s what we’re here for. For that, and hoping that those little goodesses, those kindnesses, and that *sadaqa* is what’s going to weigh heavy for us when we stand before Allah. And that’s our promise. (Interview with Umm Kareem)

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16 “When we stand before Allah” is an allusion to the Day of Judgment where an individual’s soul stands before God and testifies for the individual’s actions
In her description of *sadaqa*, Umm Kareem touches on the unique practice of *sadaqa* as both a means of judgment on the Day of Judgment, and as a small, personalized action that benefits both the donor and receiver. In the next section I theorize how *sadaqa* is a means of attaining personal salvation as well as a means of promoting community development through this relationship between donor and receiver.

**Theoretical examinations of *sadaqa* – the individual and the community**

*Individual Spiritual Growth and Personal Salvation:*

Work in the Protestant community and *sadaqa* in the Muslim community share a role as motivators, which promote behaviors that facilitate personal salvation. In this section, I draw parallels between the Protestant Ethic as described by Weber and the ethic of *sadaqa* in the Muslim community and draw upon their use of paradise as a reward for adherence to specific behaviors.

In his seminal work, “*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905)” Max Weber argues for a religious reason behind Protestants’ greater wealth and adherence to capitalism as compared to other Christian groups. In sum, Weber demonstrates through his example of the Puritans that the group viewed work as a means of attaining salvation. Weber states that the desire for wealth is not a motivator for the success of capitalism, as is commonly thought, but rather the motivation stemmed from fear of the afterlife. Stephen Kalberg, a sociologist, depicts how the Puritans believed that “by organizing their lives on behalf of God’s laws, the faithful were able to ‘bear witness’… [convincing] themselves of their favorable salvation status” (Kalberg 2002: xxxii-iii). Through Protestant asceticism the Puritans organized their lives around moral principles that they believed would cast them favorably in God’s eyes. Such principles were determined by the belief that “God wanted a rational and utilitarian use of
wealth on behalf of the basic needs of the person and the community” (Kalberg 2002:115). As a result the Puritans avoided the spontaneity and impulsiveness of capitalism (Kalberg 2002:116) yet at the same time embraced the idea of a self-made man. Since my focus is on how religious beliefs influence ritual behavior, Weber’s discussion of the asceticism in the Puritan community is of more relevance than their significance for capitalism.

The Puritans organized their lives around strict observance of proper behavior and methodical work, and this specific work ethic visibly separated them from other communities. However, because they believed that work would provide them with salvation, they transformed work into a religious ritual. As Weber emphasizes, “psychological rewards originating from the domain of religion, were bestowed on labor…Work now became sanctified, or providential; it acquired a religious value” (Kalberg 2002:xxxv). These psychological rewards, such as salvation provided meaning behind the work the Puritans engaged in. However, the Puritans are only one example of a religious group where religious rewards promote certain behaviors. Sadaqa in the Muslim community promotes behaviors of goodwill towards others, and offers good standing in God’s eyes.

Just as the Puritans used work as means of seeking salvation through ritualized behavior, many Muslims believe that performing sadaqa is necessary to attain salvation. Sadaqa is a ritual that is an expression of Muslim faith, which is divinely prescribed by the Qur’an. Based on her exploration of Qur’anic and Hadith related discussions of sadaqa, Singer demonstrates that “charitable giving improves the donor’s chances of ultimately attaining Paradise” (Singer 2008:101), in the same way that work is used to improve an individual’s chance at attaining salvation. As Singer demonstrates, sadaqa provides “spiritual benefit in the next life for the donor and the well-being of the Muslim community (maslaha)” (Singer 2008:100). In both
groups, Puritans and Muslims, worldly behavior has profound effects on eternal peace. As Singer shows, “Charitable acts, both as zakat and sadaqa, play a key role in the religious beliefs of Muslims...without them faith is incomplete. They are an integral aspect of the relationship between God and human beings during their lives and with reference to an afterlife” (Singer 2008:218). Singer emphasizes the individual benefit that sadaqa offers towards believers, and cites it as an unignorable aspect of Islam. She goes on to state that the Qur’an and Hadith both make it clear that sadaqa cannot be ignored, as it is a “crucial means for redressing one’s personal balance sheet before God” (Singer 2008:112). As seen in the Protestant Ethic, personal relationships with God are essential in providing access to salvation in the afterlife. Similarly, many Muslims believe that sadaqa is essential in showing oneself as a good Muslim. It is important to note that it is sadaqa and not zakat that has such a profound influence; I suggest that this is because sadaqa is voluntary and zakat is mandatory.

Muslim commitment to charitable giving is inscribed into daily life and practice. Acts of charity are considered to be an integral part of Muslim identity because they reaffirm the notion that all things belong to God (Saddiqi 2010:30). In order for individuals to legitimately make use of their wealth they must devote a certain part as God’s by rendering a percentage of their total wealth to the poor (Saddiqi 2010:30) through zakat. By devoting this percentage to the poor in remembrance of God, Muslims complete an important step towards the purification of their own souls. Muslims value the role of sadaqa holding that failure to practice it can result in loss of spiritual worthiness in the eyes of God. Practicing sadaqa increases an individual’s spiritual benefit. Yusuf Ali shows the benefits of sadaqa in his translation of the Qur’an when he states, “[Allah] will give increase for deeds of sadaqa” (Yusuf Ali Qur’an 2001 2:276). Singer

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17 Indeed the term zakat itself means “purification”
18 I put in sadaqa instead of the translated word charity to avoid confusion with zakat
acknowledges the importance of *sadaqa* and claims that *sadaqa* is so important that it can intercede on behalf of an individual (Singer 2008:110), marking a large responsibility on Muslims to be cognizant of those who are in need around them.

*Sadaqa* promotes individual spiritual advancement while also promoting equity in the distribution of resources. By engaging in *sadaqa* Muslims are reminded that all humans are the same in the eyes of God (Singer 2008:66) and deserve to be treated as such. Umm Iman follows this ethic, and my interactions with Umm Iman show that this value is the driving ethos behind why she chose to found BN. The work of BN is done “solely for the sake of Allah” (BN website), demonstrating how the work of volunteers is for the community, but within a larger context of religio-moral responsibility.

**Community Development:**

*Sadaqa* offers benefits for the afterlife, yet its worldly effects profoundly affect community development. By working through a religious framework of *sadaqa* the women at BN promote community development, while facilitating a narrative of personal salvation, which meshes with and drives their goal of providing for their community. The BN community is made up of the individuals and families near the charity’s location in North Philadelphia. In such an impoverished area, people have little control over their own lives¹⁹ and lack resources to improve the area through traditional top-down forms of development. Instead, community development is enacted by the women at BN through the management of the individuals and families that set foot into the charity.

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¹⁹ There is little control because people lack choices about housing, food, and the safety of their neighborhood
BN sees its mission as a religiously prescribed means of promoting individual self-sufficiency within the community. BN’s vision states:

We want to be a community resource center where comprehensive social services are effectively provided and basic needs are met. We want to help families and individuals who are having a difficult time making ends meet by providing the basic necessities such as free food, free clothing and free supplies in order to help them along the way to sustain themselves and their families” (BN website)

Notice here how the staff at BN refers to themselves as a means to helping individuals gaining self-sufficiency. In this way, BN sees community development not through large-scale outreach programs, or public education initiatives, but rather through individual self-management. BN sees itself as community resource center committed to North Philadelphia, and the specific needs of that area. The women at BN understand their role in the community as a public resource available to all, using sadaqa as a means in which they can achieve what, Singer describes in her study as a way “[to] strengthen society and serve the public good” (Singer 2008:137). Charity for BN becomes of supporting individuals in a community through providing basic services.

The women at BN see community development as improvements on the level of its constitutive beings rather than larger scale infrastructure improvements, or major societal shifts. This difference is important to highlight because the focus on improving one individual or one family’s life projects an imagined community (Anderson 2006) that revolves around a self-sufficient unit (either as an individual or family) rather than a unilateral focus on the whole community.

By choosing to focus on a self-sufficient unit, BN is more able to address the realities of North Philadelphia. My experiences walking around the neighborhood suggest that there is little money coming into the area, with the exception of gentrification projects closer to Temple

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20 Self-sufficiency is especially important for individuals who are constrained by poverty, and whose lives are controlled by social services
University. In my research I define development as the integration of infrastructure into an area to provide a safer and more productive community. Development in the area surrounding BN is not occurring through building new, physical infrastructure. In my conversations, the only government funding I heard about was in reference to recent SNAP and WIC cuts in the area. I did not see non-profits besides BN in the area, but I did see an NAACP headquarters, which seemed to be the only other community development group whose office was busy.

Benedict Anderson writes that, “communities are to be distinguished not by their falsities/geniuses but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 2006:6). I argue that BN sees the local community through the creation of self-sufficient units, which eventually are able to manage their own lives without the help of BN. This idea of a self-sufficient unit is articulated by Umm Kareem when she says, “when you [the patron] leave we want you to leave feeling like you’re gonna be able by next month to say ‘you know what, I’m grateful for [BN’s] help, but I can do it on my own this month’. And that’s [BN’s] goal” (Interview with Umm Kareem). By focusing their efforts on such a micro level, BN sets themselves apart from larger community improvement organizations, and demonstrates what they see as the most pressing issues facing the community, namely the lack of basic necessities. They address these issues through a variety of initiatives such as home grocery delivery, clothing vouchers, and individual meetings to help patrons receive state and federal assistance.

BN provides philanthropy publically, challenging a common view that considers private engagement in sadaqa to be more appropriate. Shariq Saddiqi, a theologian who advocates for private engagement with sadaqa, defines it as “any act in obedience to God and for the sake of another” (Saddiqi 2010:31). Though this definition of sadaqa itself is open, Saddiqi states that because sadaqa provides spiritual growth (Saddiqi 2010:32), it is considered most productive
when performed in private, which prevents pride. Saddiqi finds evidence for this claim throughout the Qur’an, which emphasizes the benefit of privately performed *sadaqa* (Saddiqi 2010:32; Yusuf Ali Qur’an 2001 2:271)

Al –Ghazali, the twelfth century author of the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, also provides an authoritative perspective on almsgiving in his work the *Kitab Asrar al-Zakah* (Mysteries of Almsgiving). Al-Ghazali lists criteria for *sadaqa*, providing instruction on how it can best be performed. He states advantages for both secret and public almsgiving, and although he states his preference of almsgiving in secret as more acceptable, he believes that public giving is a product of human nature and is not always detrimental. Al-Ghazali key points about public almsgiving are that it “promotes sincerity and truthfulness, frees man from pride and self-sufficiency, and does away with vainglory and haughtiness and the obligation of gratitude, which is mandatory in Islam” (Ghazali 1963: 220). In sum, al-Ghazali’s argument states that open charity is permissible so long as it is given with sincerity and honesty and that it ignores hubris and embraces humility (Ghazali 1963:220). Al-Ghazali also places responsibility on the individual engaging with *sadaqa* when he states that “[open charity] depends on the state of your mind at the time of the charity” (Ghazali 1963:221). This statement provides sound understanding for how public displays of almsgiving are present throughout different Muslim communities, but emphasizes how they are individually understood.

As an Islamic charity, BN sees its action within the sphere of public *sadaqa*. However, BN is clearly not an individual performing *sadaqa*, rather it is an institutionalized form of *sadaqa* comprising of individuals engaged in *sadaqa*. Since BN is a public charity, the ability of persons who participate in it to perform *sadaqa* privately is compromised. However, by
embracing tenets set forth by al-Ghazali’s discussion of open charity they are able to perform *sadaqa* in a manner that is both public and normative.

By individually following al-Ghazali’s tenant of gratefulness, the women at BN demonstrate the charity’s ability to enable individual *sadaqa* through the framework of an institution. Umm Iman’s told me that part of being Muslim is to always be aware of Allah and part of that awareness is being grateful for what you have (field notes). Her work at BN follows al-Ghazali’s guidelines for open charity, because the women at BN embrace humility. In my conversations with these women, it was clear that they are cognizant of their own fortune, and are grateful to have shelter, and food, which many of their patrons do not. During the day, they constantly thank God for what they have by saying, *alhamdulillah*, and said this in reference to having a space for BN, and for having donors who provide food and clothing. Their work at BN, and their sincere thanks fulfills the obligation of gratitude articulated by al-Ghazali, and on a more worldly level demonstrate their recognition of the relative ease with which they could lose their charity. BN is barely financially sustainable, so they are acutely aware of how quickly they could lose their space in the community, which in turn would impact the lives of the many individuals who seek services from BN.

BN uses public media like Twitter and Instagram to mark itself as an institution. The public nature of their work, though contradictory of traditional guidelines for *sadaqa* is further mediated by how they do not use their public image to self-promote their good deeds. Though BN uses public interfaces, it uses social media to try and reach people, especially the broader Muslim community rather than prideful self-promotion. Furthermore, the use of social media enables BN to find donors to support their charitable work, and achieve their fundraising goals (BN website), which in turn allows them to serve more people.
Because BN is an institution, it allows for individuals to perform *sadaqa* on multiple levels of varying involvement. Naturally, the women who work at BN perform *sadaqa* through the quotidian activities of providing food and clothing to those who need it. However, the institution goes beyond the regular volunteers and organizers and seeks outsiders to provide donations. Muslim donors therefore can see their act of donating clothes, household goods, or food as means of performing *sadaqa* because their action is one that is a charitable, individually regulated choice, which goes beyond mandatory *zakat* giving.

The insistence on charity in Islamic societies perpetuates the understanding of charity as a tenet of good Muslim behavior. BN is open to the whole community, and both Muslims and non-Muslims are present at the charity. The women at BN see themselves in response to their own work and the charitable work they perform contributes to their own understanding of themselves as Muslims.
Chapter Four: Identity/Identities: Who are these women?

“I’ve been a fighter since I was young. I grew up in, you know, the projects of South Philadelphia down on fifth and Washington. I’m gonna show you I’m not who you think I am”

– Interview with Umm Kareem

So who is Umm Kareem? Who are the women at Baabun Nasr? How do they identify themselves, and how does how their identify inform their life experience? Umm Kareem’s statement is a strong proclamation that she knows who she is. She has made a conscious choice of how she identifies herself, which sometimes contradicts how others view her. So how do the women at Baabun Nasr choose to outwardly portray their chosen identities? In order to investigate these questions I turn to Stuart Hall to inform theoretical conceptions of individual cultural identity.

Defining Identity

In his work, “Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies”, Hall examines how definitions of identity inform the production of an individual. He critiques the enlightenment’s perception of the individual as a “unified and stable identity” (Hall 1996:598). Rather, the individual in late modernity is “composed, not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities” (Hall 1996:598). In my own research, I chose to view the women at BN as subjects whose overall identities are multi-faceted and informed by different socializers like race and religion. These women seemed to primarily identify themselves through religion. Their choice to identify as Muslims was emphasized through ritual practice, outward appearance and language. In this part of my ethnography I will analyze different aspects of these women’s identities to better understand how their identities inform their lives and how they are perceived by the community around them.
As Hall stated, identity in enlightenment thought has been viewed as a singular, absolute entity. However, this essentialized view ignores how diverse aspects of identity are tied to, and based on, social structures. Richard Jenkins, a sociologist, states that at its most basic level, “identity is the human capacity – rooted in language – to know ‘who’s who’ (and hence ‘what’s what’). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on” (Jenkins 2008:5). Identity is not only a means of defining the individual, but it is also a means of distinguishing an individual from others, or distinguishing groups from each other. Such differentiations are often created by those in power, who themselves are often the majority of a community, through a binary of similarity versus difference that seems unquestionable and unchanging. In creating these classifications, the majority often describes themselves as the norm and defines anyone else as the other, creating a standard for how identity should be defined. In American history, the dominant definition of identity depends on race and religion. White, Christian individuals are the norm, and hold power by being the norm. However, looking at identity through this binary ignores other aspects of identity, as well as resistance to dominant identities, which cannot be included through this model. As a result, understanding identity through such binaries is not a productive means of understanding the individual, especially in a diverse regions of the United States, where White, Christian individuals may no longer represent the majority and therefore the norm. Furthermore, the use of hybrid identities as a model challenges normative identities and breaks down binaries. However, in times of tension, like after 9/11, the use of binaries in American media has resurfaced such that they are powerfully manipulated to incite nationalism and a fear of the other.²¹

²¹ Peek elaborates on how this sentiment was exploited through the production of media. Muslims were cast in an unfavorable light in the wake of 9/11 as a result of a rise nationalism (Peek 2011:13).
By understanding cultural identity as multifaceted rather than essential and absolute, individuals can occupy different spheres, which provide their life experiences with meaning. Our capacity to belong to “distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, and, above all, national cultures” (Hall 1996:1) encourages us to embrace how these different facets of identity manifest to form complex, hybrid identities. As I show in my ethnography, the women at BN pay heed to race, religion, language, and outward appearance in their presentation of their own identities to the greater world.

The Place of Race

The majority of people converting to Islam today within the United States are African Americans (Smith 2010:119). Urban Philadelphia hosts a large number of African American Muslims22, and in my ethnography I delve further and show how the women of BN’s religious experiences are tied to a rich history of Islam in the African American community. I explore the question of race in my chapter about identity since it is a facet of identity that many of the women at BN experience regardless of whether or not they choose to identify with it.

The racial composition of the local community surrounding the charity’s location in North Philadelphia influences who frequents the charity, and how the charity is viewed. Based on the statistics of the region in which BN is situated, area code 19121, (American Fact Finder 2010, and Pew Charitable Trust: State of the City 2013) the majority of the local community is African American. The demographic statistics of the region show that eighty percent of people in this region identify as African American and/or Black (Pew Charitable Trust: State of the City 2013). As a result, the racial composition of BN is representative of the charity’s specific location. This corresponds to my own observations, as every person at BN save for one has been

22 Though an exact number is hard to determine because the U.S. Census does not collect information on religion

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African American. The one woman I saw who was not African American was a white Italian American (Umm Kareem) who had converted to Islam. Because the charity was specifically moved to an area where it could reach people in need, I find it pertinent to also discuss the relative poverty of the region. Fifty four percent of people in area are living below the poverty line making it one of the poorest regions of Philadelphia (Pew Charitable Trust: State of the City 2013)\textsuperscript{23}. These statistics show that African Americans live in some of the poorest regions of Philadelphia, providing further reason why the majority of people who come to BN are African American.

The charity is fairly welcome in North Philadelphia because the need for BN’s services are so high, but also because of the historic African American Muslim population within Philadelphia. I argue that because of this history, African American individuals in North Philadelphia, regardless of whether or not they are Muslim, are less fearful of an Islamic charity than their suburban, non African American counterparts. During a conversation about BN’s location, Umm Kareem described how most of their clientele, who are African American, have been exposed to Islam before in a way that the white community may not have been, and are comfortable being in an Islamic charity because of this exposure. She stated:

Islam is so much a part of so many peoples [patrons of Baabun Nasr] households. Even if its ‘oh my great-uncle he was Muslim, but I think he followed the Nation of Islam. But yea, he learned about your type’. They know what [the volunteers at Baabun Nasr] are, not so much of the ‘oh its one of them’. (Interview with Umm Kareem)

Umm Kareem touches on a couple of important points through this statement. First, she describes how the NOI is remembered in the local community as a Muslim group. Because the area is highly African American, it makes sense the NOI, a Black Nationalist group would be present in the area. Because have been exposed to Islam through the NOI they are comfortable

\textsuperscript{23} For a visual representation please see Appendix I: Figure A
seeking Islamic charity at BN because of the history Islam in the area. By stating that Islam is part of the experiences of locals, and by expressing how these individuals are not fearful of Islam, she separates the patrons of BN from a larger community. The last sentiment, about the “oh its one of them” is Umm Kareem’s allusion to those who fear Islam, and are fearful of BN because it is an Islamic charity. Those individuals seem to be primarily outsiders to the local community, so based on the context of our conversation; I suspected that Umm Kareem was alluding to suburban, white individuals who do not have the historic and racial connectedness to Islam.

Khadija’s sentiments echo Umm Kareem’s when she states how Islam is well known in the area. She states, “everybody here knows someone who was a Muslim. Most people got someone in their family. My uncle was Muslim, I grew up with it around me” (field notes). This sentiment echoes that of Umm Kareem, who describes how many people in the community who visit the charity are aware of Islam, and are not afraid to come to BN for help as result, even with Islamaphobia present in mainstream media.

**Intersections between Race and Religion**

Though the women’s racial identities visually apparent, race does not seem to be an identity that the women refer to often, nor is it their primary means of identification. However, religion is. In their interactions the women consistently referred to their religious identity, and outwardly embodied this religious identity through their dress. However, they hardly referred to their race, with the exception of Umm Kareem, whose experiences I will share below. I argue that religion is a means to fashion an identity for these women, in a way that is never possible to do with race. The women’s choice to shed their own racial identities, and not dwell on race, perhaps speaks to the fact that they do not want to be perceived solely as African American.
women, an identity imbued with often negative stereotypes, as I will show below. However, such a view is problematic because Islam is subject to stereotypes as well. Yet, the fact remains that the women had a choice in defining themselves through an Islamic identity, whereas they were born into a racial identity, which was not chosen.

Though the majority of the women insinuated that they did not want to discuss race with me, Umm Kareem chose to speak frankly about her own religio-racial experiences. Perhaps, she was more comfortable speaking about race as her whiteness so clearly marked her as an anomaly at BN. In my interview with her, Umm Kareem stated:

“For Philadelphia Muslims, […] you have those who see you as a threat and a terrorist, and then you have those who see you as Black militantist, like Nation of Islam. So when my white face walks into those, in between those two, you have those on the left saying, ‘oh she’s one of those, is she an Arab, is she not an Arab, ‘cause, she’s light24, but, only Arabs are Muslim, so she’s a terrorist’. And then you have the other side, ‘why is that white girl Muslim?’ So it’s been an interesting road.” (Interview with Umm Kareem)

I chose to include this quote by Umm Kareem, because she articulates how her race and religion intersect when other people are trying to define her identity. As I have mentioned, Umm Kareem is the only person I have met at the charity who is not African American. Her anxiety of not being accepted by both the Muslim and the non-Muslim communities show how race is tied to religion. Her quote is telling because she makes explicit reference to her light skin, which when contrasted against her black, abaya incorrectly marks her as Arab, rather than her true ethnicity which is Italian. The Philadelphia immigrant Arab Muslim population does not accept her because she is not Arab, nor is she an immigrant. However, the other predominant Muslim community, the historic African American Muslim population also does not accept her because she is not Black. Her struggle to be accepted by the Muslim community is reflected in her sentiment that she “walks in between”. Ironically, as someone who had not earlier faced much

24 Emphasis mine

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racial or religious discrimination (field notes) she now faces twofold discrimination. She is not accepted by the racially or ethnically based Muslim groups, like the African American Muslim community and the immigrant Arab Muslim population. However, she also faces discrimination by the non-Muslim population, who tell her that she has “betrayed her identity” as a white, Christian (field notes). She insinuates how her white skin makes others think she is Arab, and therefore a terrorist because the identity of Arab and terrorist has come to be synonymous after 9/11 in the United States. Umm Kareem’s incorrectly perceived racial identity coupled with her correctly perceived religious identity informs how others incorrectly identify her as an Arab.

Though I think it would be stretch to say that these women cover themselves to cover the color of their skin, I do believe that the responsibility put forth by Salafi Islam to cover facilitates a masking of racial identity. This means of regulating the body religiously enables the shedding of an imposed racial identity while actively promoting a self-chosen religious identity, and will be a point that I address further.

**The Role of Religion**

Religion is the primary way in which the women at BN identify themselves. The charity was founded specifically on Islamic principles, and the women mention the charity as a form of their Islamic responsibility every week I go in. The women include the Islamic nature of BN in its mission statement:

*Baabun Nasr is a charity that is founded upon Islamic morals and correct Islamic teachings therefore we believe in serving and fulfilling the basic necessities to all who are in need that comes to us regardless of their race, gender, age, nationality, disability, ethnicity or religion.* (BN website)
Umm Iman established the charity through a framework of *sadaqa* to help those in need in the community, starting from the basement of her own house. Umm Iman believes that in order to be a good Muslim one must help those in need through *sadaqa*, because all humans are Allah’s children (Interview with Umm Iman) and deserve to be treated equally.

Religion is incredibly important for both the identity of the organization of BN itself, and the women who run it. The women at BN are influenced by Islamic principles, which are shown through outward appearances and behaviors. They abide by a Salafī interpretation of Islam, which tends to be a more conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam. An interesting aspect of the women’s practice habits was that they did not attend a particular *masjid*, and spoke of *masjids* only in discussions about donation pickups. Because their religious identity encompasses a variety of aspects, I now delve further into theses relying on my fieldwork.

*Conversion*

Stuart Hall argues that an important tenet of creating a national identity is that people have an origin story that ties to their cultural identity, which in turn informs their sense of belonging to the national community. Hall’s discussion of the creation of a national identity is analogous to the identity formed by converts to Islam. Like the creation of a national identity, the search for religious identity encountered by the women at BN involves the adoption of new traditions and an origin story (Hall 1996:614). The women at BN have adopted traditions such as covering, praying, use of an Islamic vernacular and practicing *sadaqa*, as ways in which they demonstrate and embody their Muslim identity. As Hall might suggest, these women also have unique conversion narratives, which act as individual origin stories, recollecting how they came to identify as Muslims.
The personal conversion narratives of the women at BN demonstrated national trends of why African Americans convert to Islam over other religions. The women I interviewed described how conversion to Islam was not a choice but rather it was an inevitable experience. This narrative of reclaiming Islam ties back to how African American viewed their conversion to the NOI as a reversion to their original identities. By reclaiming their identities as Muslims, they situate their choice to convert as a means of finding their true selves.

Umm Iman highlights this narrative when she states that she was always Muslim but she had strayed from the straight path before her reverting back to Islam. By this she does not mean that she was a practicing Muslim who stopped practicing, she means that she found Islam, and began practicing but never truly converted because internally she was always Muslim. Islam for her was away back to go to being a person who behaved in a specific moral way, with specific beliefs. Though she didn’t go into detail about her life before Islam, she stated that it was filled with behaviors that she was not proud of. Her belief that she was always Muslim, she just was not always practicing, is a common theme among converts because of the idea within Islamic teachings that states that all humans are born Muslim, but not all follow (Wilgoren 2001). Khadija’s description of her own conversion mirrors that of Umm Iman, and she told me one day as we were folding clothes, “Yea, before I was kafir²⁵ but now I’m a Salafi, like the Prophet (Muhammad)”. Khadija’s last comment highlights how she believes that she has always been Muslim; she was just unknowing earlier on in her life. This situates coverts as individuals who are finding themselves and their true identities as Muslim, rather than individuals who are creating a new identity.

²⁵ kafir – a nonbeliever, in Khadija’s case she alludes to how individuals who are kafir can find Islam and become Muslims (believers)
Khadija’s understanding of Salafism as the form of Islam, which most closely follows the behavior of the Prophet Muhammad, brings up issues of authenticity, and what a “pure” interpretation of Islam looks like. Salafism is an orthodoxy interpretation of Islam, and is the form that the women of BN chose to covert to. Salafi literally means to follow the way of the ancestors, that is to say the companions of the Prophet. In the modern context, however, Salafi has become a label with a different connotation, which is tied to the Wahhabi perspective, an ultra-orthodox, conservative interpretation of Islam. Furthermore, Salafism has recently been tied to terrorism, and has become synonymous with militant Islamism (Heffelfinger 2011:2)

I argue that there is no such thing as an “authentic” form of Islam because religion is so rooted within its local context. Individuals may ascribe to universal aspects of Salafism, such as covering fully, or praying five times a day. However, they are still rooted within a local context that informs their practice and contributes to their identities as hybrid individuals.

Local context plays a large part in why African Americans turn to Islam over other religions. The presence of Islam within the African American community, as well as the themes of equality present in Islam make it appealing to this specific population, which has often been oppressed and disenfranchised. Umm Kareem expressed how people covert as a means of overcoming difficulties, either those situated in personal struggles or those which are the result of systematic, structural oppression. Jamillah Karim, the author of American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class and Gender within the Ummah, describes how Islam offers relief from the consequences of disenfranchisement through its emphasis on personal discipline when she states:

African American Muslims manifest a unique expression of American Muslim experience. Islam signifies liberation from racism, from poverty, from self-hatred, from (white) images of the divine, from alcohol and drug addiction, from bad housing and from losing their Muslim children to these lingering ills (Karim 2008: 86)
Karim’s observation cites many of the reasons that Umm Iman, Khadija and Umm Kareem gave me for why individuals, including themselves, convert to Islam. Islam provides an opportunity for African Americans to rise above urban plight and other issues plaguing their communities today. African Americans are disproportionately affected by issues such as poverty, drug use and sexual promiscuity because of embedded, structural racism within the United States. By casting off their identities as African Americans, these women distance themselves from such behaviors which some view as stereotypical of the African American community. Islam offers a productive means to address these social issues and improve the community through discipline and structure. Umm Iman herself acknowledged how “[Islam] was a way to clean up [my] act, alhamdullilah”. Umm Kareem mirrored this sentiment when she states that individuals see Islam as a path that can lead them out of behaviors such as alcoholism, drugs and abusive relationships. Indeed, as Victoria Lee argues, Islam, through its strict regulation can be a way out of these behaviors, which are particularly present in urban environments, where regulation of daily life can be more challenging, especially when faced with poverty (Lee 2010:153). Umm Iman, Umm Kareem and Victoria Lee’s comments reflect a need for internal structure where there is no external structure, which is mediated through the regulation of the body.

Regulation of the body
Khadija: Ms. Wilma, you see this over here (a denim mini-skirt) this has got to be Aliyah’s. You gotta wear this.
Ms. Wilma: There ain’t no way I’m wearing that! I ain’t no hoochie! And you think that’s Aliyah’s? You think Umm Iman would let her wear that?
Khadija: I’m just sayin… you in this, get it…get it.

This interaction occurred on my first day of fieldwork between Ms. Wilma and Khadija, two of the volunteers who I presume are well into their middle age years. Khadija, who covers in
an *abaya* and *niqab* was jokingly trying to convince Ms. Wilma to wear a denim mini-skirt so she could “get some”. The interaction was pretty funny, and went on for quite a bit longer. They were joking about a denim, mini-skirt which is something that certainly wouldn’t appeal to Khadija as someone who wears conservative, Islamic dress, and based on her reaction, seemed not appeal to Ms. Wilma either. This was an interesting conversation to overhear early on because it marked what the women constituted as culturally appropriate behavior, at least in the eyes of those who share the same cultural identity (*Salafi* Muslim). Furthermore, it emphasized how identity is “contradictory or unresolved” (Hall 1996:598) because it demonstrated how Aliyah’s ownership of this skirt, as a *Salafi* Muslim woman, was problematic in the eyes of her community members.

It was interesting to hear Khadija allude to Aliyah and what I presume was her more risqué behavior, because it introduced a baseline for what she thought was morally appropriate behavior. Aliyah is Umm Iman’s second oldest daughter, who is about eighteen and unmarried with two children. She also has a Marilyn piercing\(^{26}\), which seems like a bold mood, considering that her mother wears a *niqaub* and tries not to draw attention to her face. Her piercing, and her role as a teen mother demonstrate how hybrid, contradictory identities are manifested. The piercing is a choice made in her local, American, urban context, whereas her embrace of Islamic dress represents her religious identity. Furthermore, the fact that she is unmarried and has two children is completely contradictory to the conservative form of Islam she practices, which emphasizes abstinence before marriage. However, the sexual behaviors of teenagers in North Philadelphia, and the United States at large, are at odds with the conservative Islamic expectation of abstinence. The different aspects of her identity contradict one another yet, they manifest within her to form one hybrid individual.

\(^{26}\) A piercing on the upper lip reminiscent of Marilyn Munroe’s piercing

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The women at BN embody their religion through the regulation of their bodies. By covering their body with conservative Islamic dress (abayas, hijabs and niqabs) they project their identity as Muslims through outward appearance. In her work, *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood argues, “bodily behavior is at the core of the proper realization of the norm” (Mahmood 2005:24). Though Mahmood is referring to Egyptian women involved in the Islamic revival mosque movement, her argument applies to the women at BN. Embodying religion is a means of integrating religion into every aspect of life, until piety becomes the norm. Mahmood references veiling when she says, “the act of veiling, to some [Egyptian women], is a way to actively display their piety and it is the physical act of veiling which works upon the body to connect the outer self to the inner self, locating agency of piety within the self (Mahmood 2005:32). By externally wearing conservative Islamic dress, the women at BN publicly present their faith, which in turn internalizes their identity as Muslims.

Embodiment of religion becomes a means of projecting Islamic behavior and ethics onto the community. The women negotiate themselves, as bodies that have faced adversity, within the reality of poverty in North Philadelphia through strict bodily regulation. By wearing Islamic dress as suggested by Salafi teachings, the women ground themselves into the Islamic teachings that they believe facilitated their own self-sufficiency. The women at BN’s bodies are frontiers of struggle that recount the daily life of the area, but their regulation through Salafism provides self-sufficiency that enables mobility out of poverty. By instituting a charity regulated by their personal self-regulation they transpose structure onto the local community. Furthermore, by regulating their bodies through Islamic teachings the women are agents who determine how their bodies are perceived.
Based on the choice to cover by other African American Muslim women (Lee 2010), I suggest that the ability for BN women to regulate what goes on their bodies is a powerful way of resisting the sexualization of their bodies, enabling them to transcend out of stereotypes about African American women as sexually promiscuous. Victoria Lee, articulates this phenomenon when she states how “dressing conservatively as instructed by the Koran, [enables] black women in the inner city to find an opportunity to desexualize their bodies and regain control over how they are perceived” (Lee 2010:153). Khadija’s disgust at the miniskirt might represent her attitudes towards sexual promiscuity. However, her choice to cover defines herself as a Muslim to outsiders, which in turn prevents her from being seen as sexual object. This dual affect of covering one’s body is interesting because Muslim women’s covered bodies are respected within communities with an urban Muslim population. This suggests that Islam would be enticing to women living in areas where their bodies are blatantly objectified. By regulating their bodies through clothing, their bodies are transformed into places of piety rather than places of sexualization. However, through regulating their bodies through clothing like the abayas and niqabs they have experienced backlash, endured hate crimes and been seen as a “frightening other”.

Umm Kareem describes some of the struggles they have faced in the community, because they identify as Muslims, and can be regarded as Muslims through their outward appearances. She recounted a story in which she was assumed Iraqi, and was treated as though she were against the United States. She stated:

I’ve always bought meat from this meat market. They know my family. I was covered, I had just come back from Yemen and I went in and the owner, he didn’t know who I was, he pointed to a picture he had of his son holding the head of a camel in the picture. And he said, ‘you see this’, now I didn’t speak yet because I didn’t want him to know who I was. I saw the look when I came in. He said, ‘you see this’ and I shook my head, ‘your people did this to my son’s camel while he’s over there fighting for our country while
you walk around like that, covered from head to toe. They’re trying to kill my son like they killed his camel, and you got the nerve to walk into my store like that?” And I pulled my niqab up and I said to him, ‘You know who I am now?’ And his mouth dropped. (Interview with Umm Kareem)

Umm Kareem’s recollection of this story highlights how her identity as a Muslim becomes tied to a politicized, Middle Eastern identity. The butcher assumed she was Middle Eastern because of her conservative, Islamic dress and fair skin, treated her poorly as a result. Not only did he presume she was Arab, but he held her responsible for the actions of other Arab individuals. Her identity as an “Arab” was seen as incongruous with “American” identity because of the politics surrounding the Iraq War. When wearing Islamic dress, others associate her with a community that is not her own. Furthermore, Umm Kareem’s identity as an American Muslim shows how her identity is comprised of what are seen as unresolved identities. From our conversation it seemed as though the butcher viewed her identities as in conflict, because it would be impossible for an Arab to be a true American patriot. This interaction demonstrates her own experiences dealing with ignorance about Islam, and Islamophobia in her neighborhood.

Umm Kareem went on to discuss how wearing Islamic dress initially hindered ties between BN and local Christian ministries in the community. She recalled how the other organizations were fearful and suspicious of BN and its staff, because they were covered. Umm Kareem explained:

We reached out to a couple of the other [Christian] ministries in the area to see if they would want to collaborate with us. They weren’t too excited about us. Once they got to see what we did I think it abolished some of their misconceptions. As you see Umm Iman covers very completely, face, hair, gloves, everything. So their impression when they see her was either one of confusion or fear normally. I’m a little less at that point so we’ll say *laughs*. So they feel more comfortable speaking to me (Umm Kareem)

Here, Umm Kareem describes the fear of a covered woman as something completely foreign and confusing. She is acutely aware of how the slight shift in dress between her and Umm Iman
makes her more approachable and less threatening. Umm Kareem also alludes to the popularization of misconceptions about Islam, and general stereotypes that perpetuate Islamophobia in general. However, though these women are committed to a religious identity, I believe that their identities are composed of many facets, which may not always seem to align with their religious identity, as I show below.

Though the women heavily regulate their bodies based on dress, what they put into their body seems to be informed by local experience. The women, in their conversion narratives often allude to days when they used to engage in what they see as “bad behaviors”27, which I have surmised includes drinking, possible drug use for some, and pre-marital sex. They sometimes describe how it is hard not slip into old patterns, especially when the Islamic practices seem so foreign (field notes). But one thing I found particularly interesting, especially considering their desire to find an authentic form of Islam through Salafism, was how Umm Iman and her family eat pork, which is usually forbidden in Islam. Eating pork is an example of how these women’s identities are composed of facets that are unresolvable contradictories (Hall 1996:598). There were a couple of incidences in which I began to notice that Umm Iman and her family eat pork. Farah told me her favorite type of pizza was pepperoni, Fahimah told me she likes these specific little sausages, and one morning, Umm Iman, who had brought in breakfast for her and her kids, offered me some bacon. I believe that their eating pork is a testament to how religions are understood and practiced on a local level. Umm Iman’s husband is Puerto Rican and he cooks for the family. However, as a Salafi Muslim woman, Umm Iman she herself eats pork, even when her husband is not present. Puerto Rican cooking has a lot of pork in it, so perhaps the family has chosen to continue eating pork. However, I found it fascinating that Umm Iman and

27 I felt uncomfortable asking them outright what they meant by “bad behaviors because they did not want to talk their past lives and behaviors

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her family regulate how they dress very closely but seem not to adhere to the avoidance of pork products, which emphasizes the complexities of hybrid identities.

Language and Naming

Religion finds its way into the identities of the women who work at BN through how they greet patrons. Whether or not people have any Arabic or Islamic context, guests to the charity are always welcomed with “salam alaikum” (peace be upon you) as the guest walks into the building. To say “peace be upon you” is a common greeting both used by Muslims, and Middle Easterners, and whether or not their client responds in the traditional response “wa alaikum salam” they have still been greeted with what is part of an Islamic vernacular. These women are proud to identify as Muslim and demonstrate their “muslimess” through their outward appearance and through their use of what they conceive of as Islamic language.

These women regularly use what I will call the Urban Muslim vernacular, which is a created tradition that enables them to identify as Muslim. The dialect is an interesting mix of English and Arabic used predominately by African American Muslims. I first experienced this dialect when ushering at a premiere of the digital media project “Muslim Voices of Philadelphia” (Scribe 2010). I had been taking Arabic at the time and while casually listening to the conversations around me, I overheard snippets of Arabic. However, it took me about fifteen minutes to realize that what one African American man, who was wearing traditional Islamic dress, was saying as “ackee” was the equivalent of “akhi” which translates to brother in Arabic. He was pronouncing the world in a completely different, Americanized way, but was using it to mean the same thing, and calling on what he saw as the Islamic principle of calling each other

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28 I will address how certain Arabic phrases and names are used as Islamic, which is problematic but very interesting.
brothers and sisters. Similarly, the women at BN frequently use Arabic/Islamic phrases like \textit{mashallah, inshallah and subhanallah} (praise be to God, God willing and glory be to God), though the most commonly used phrase is easily \textit{alhamdullilah} (thanks be to God). These phrases are interspersed naturally into the English conversations the women are having, in the same way that these phrases would fit into an Arabic conversation. These women use Arabic to tie themselves to Islam, and the greater \textit{ummah}, because Arabic is the language of the Qur’an and these phrases are commonly found in prayer. However, though the use of Arabic as a universal language respected by all Muslims, facilitates the their formation of a Muslim identity, some of these phrases, like \textit{salam alaikum}, are shared by all Arabs, regardless of religion. By using this Arabic language to create an Islamic vernacular, the women tie themselves to what they see as the authentic place of Islamic practice, the Middle East. This may reflect the connectedness between the Middle East and Islam that is often presented by the media, and has historical relevance.

As converts, this desire of Umm Iman and Umm Kareem to find an authentic interpretation of Islam represents a desire to deepen their identities as Muslims. Umm Kareem and Umm Iman both emphasized that they chose to live in the Middle East\textsuperscript{29} in order to gain authentic insights into Islam. Their decision to live in the Middle East depicts how they see the Middle East as the place to learn about Islam, rather than through the local, historic Black Muslim community. Jamillah Karim, a scholar on African American Islam, explains how it is common for new Muslims to seek out immigrant or foreign Muslim communities in a search for what they believe is a “true” form of Islam. By exposing themselves to different interpretations

\textsuperscript{29}Umm Kareem lived in Yemen for six months and Umm Iman has lived in Cairo for six months as well as visited Saudi Arabia

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of Islam, new Muslims can shape their personal practices in what they see as the most authentic way.

Through their search for “authentic” interpretations of Islam in the Middle East, the women at BN interacted with different Islamic identities. I find it interesting that the women choose to ignore the historic, African American Muslim interpretations of Islam, and chose instead to learn about Islam from Middle Eastern interpretations. Umm Kareem told me how she chose to travel Yemen in order to learn more about Islam from a mainstream Sunni community. This sentiment was mirrored in a conversation with Iman, who told me about a trip to Egypt that her Mom had planned about five years ago. Umm Iman’s family stayed in a village outside of Cairo for a year, so that they could learn Arabic and learn about Islam. Iman herself had hoped to spend time at al-Azhar, an Egyptian University, renowned for its school of Islamic thought, but had to return to the United States with her family earlier than expected. Iman’s personal desire to learn more about Islam shows how both generations of the family seek to further their own understandings of Islam. However, their decision to seek authentic forms of Islam in the Middle East further distances themselves from a racially informed understanding of Islamic identity. By seeking out what they view as authentic Islam by travelling to the Middle East, they contradict the authenticity of Islamic movements rooted in their communities like the NOI and the American Society of Muslims.

Adopting an Arabic name is a means of adhering to an imagined form of authentic Islam. By changing their names after converting, the women at BN assert new Muslim identities for themselves. Through my fieldwork I have seen how the women at BN rename themselves using what they see as an Islamic naming practice. They refer to themselves using Umm (mother) and then the name of their first child, and refer to their husbands as Abu (father) and then the name of

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30 The community led by W.D. Muhammad
their first child. This method of naming demonstrates their desire to identify themselves in a traditionally Middle Eastern way, which they perceive as a Muslim way, further blurring lines between what constitutes a Middle Eastern/Arabic speaking identity versus a Muslim identity. In my interview with Umm Iman, she described how “it felt right” to take what she saw as a Muslim name. During our conversation, she whispered her born name and said that those at BN are unaware of it because it is irrelevant to her identity today.

For some in the African American community, this adoption of Arabic names is a means of reclaiming of Muslim identity that was lost through the consequences of the slave trade. Famous leaders, like Malcolm X and Drew Ali, and ordinary people, like Umm Iman and Umm Kareem, change their name after conversion to Islam, and adopt an Arabic name, which they view as a Muslim name. While this practice of changing names as a result of conversion is not unique to the African American Muslim community, it is significant because the new name symbolizes an inner reawakening which is projected outwards and expresses the claimed new identity.

Community Activism

These women demonstrate their identities as Muslims through their work at BN, which facilitates public piety and community activism. In her work, An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’i Lebanon, Lara Deeb explores the performance of public piety through charitable giving. Her ethnographic research was conducted in a community of Shi’a Lebanese women in the al-Dahiyya region. Deeb highlights the importance of community service within this group, and explains how it enables women volunteers to publicly demonstrate their own piety (Deeb 2006:26). Similarly, the women at BN demonstrate their identities as Muslim through a commitment to Allah via their charitable work (field notes). Both groups of women
address issues within their community such as poverty and lack of education, through the framework of charity, which in turn facilitates their development as community activists.

The women in al-Dahiyya, like the women at BN live in a materially marginalized area (Deeb 2006:173). Both al-Dahiyya and North Philadelphia face high rates of poverty compared to surrounding neighborhoods, and lack government sponsored social services (Deeb 2006:173-4, Census 2010, field notes). The presence of both in marginalized areas speaks to the recognition of one’s role as a member of the community. The women at BN chose the location on North 19th street over West Philadelphia for their ability to reach the individuals, and more importantly (in their eyes) the families who need them most (field notes). Umm Iman recounted how BN has moved multiple times because the number of people they serve is constantly increasing. By being in North Philadelphia, they are able to reach a seriously impoverished population that lacks access to basic necessities like food, clothing and social services.

The women at BN are no strangers to poverty themselves, nor are they strangers to the area. Umm Kareem recounted how she grew up in the South Philly projects, but was able to pull herself out with the grace of God (field notes). By having this insight into poverty, she is able to better connect to community members and assess how much BN can do for the area and what its focuses should be. In this next section, I explore how BN serves the needs of its local population through food and clothing distributions, youth development programs and education initiatives.

Food Security:
When I first became interested in pursuing ethnographic research at BN, I was viewing their website and noticed that it featured an interactive seminar on hunger in America. I was surprised that such a small charity would have this feature, but it demonstrates the potency of hunger in the area, and how BN interacts with hungry individuals and families everyday. The initial food pantry at BN was supported solely by “whatever [Umm Iman and Umm Kareem] had
in [their] cupboards” (field notes) and local donations form community members. However, as the need became greater, it became clear to the BN staff that their program needed to expand. Currently, on every third Sunday of the month, BN opens its food pantry to the public for grocery give-away days. On this day, families and individuals can pick up a box of non-perishable food that has been compiled by BN volunteers. BN’s food pantry is available everyday as an emergency food pantry, so that individuals who are in need of emergent food supplies have access to at least a three-day. Because local families are often patrons of BN, the food pantry stocks baby food, formula and diapers. Furthermore, BN partners with Philabundance and SHARE Philadephia, which are both large, non-profits targeted at food access in the Philadelphia area. The partnership with SHARE also provides produce, so that individuals can have access to nutritional foods. Furthermore, Umm Iman makes home visits to patrons of BN, dropping off food and checking in with families to ensure that they are doing well. This personalized focus of BN highlights how the staff truly sees BN as a community resource center. During my fieldwork, Umm Kareem mentioned how BN hopee to renovate part of the current building into a soup kitchen that would be available for the community.

Clothing:
The bulk of donations that BN receives and provides as *sadaqa* are clothing. The clothing is donated by community members from local *masjids* (field notes) and is distributed at the Baab Thrift store, which is located in the main room of BN. The store provides Western clothing as well as Islamic dress. According to Umm Iman, BN is the only charity in the region that provides subsidized Islamic clothing, which provides modest dress for both men and women. Having subsidized Islamic dress is particularly important for BN because they believe most *Salafis* in Philadelphia are living in poverty (interview with Umm Kareem). On a regular day, all non-Islamic clothing in the store is one dollar, so that procuring clothing is not a burden to an
individual’s or family’s budget. Furthermore, Umm Iman told me that she started a BN voucher program, where individuals and families can present vouchers for clothing which substitute for money. These vouchers have no monetary value, but the vouchers as a physical object seem empowering because people can still give Umm Iman a physical object, like cash, when they take their clothing.

BN also hosts give-away days for clothing, when all clothing is free. My second day of fieldwork was during the winter-coat give-away day, and on this day I experienced the need of the community firsthand. The twelve thousand square foot building was packed with families who had come to pick up free winter coats for themselves and their children. Each family was awarded two children’s coats and one adult coat for free, as well as hats, gloves, and warm boots. The give-away was supposed to run from 10AM until 2PM but we ended up running out of coats by 12:30PM, which demonstrates the need for these items in the community.

The Baab Thrift store and donations are the major source of income for BN. Yet, because the prices of clothing in the store are so low, and because the only other source of income for the charity is donations, BN struggles to be financially sustainable. Luckily, the store receives huge amounts of clothing donations from the local Muslim and now non-Muslim population. My job most days was to sift through trash bags filled with clothing, and find a spot for them out on the store’s floor. Baby clothes sold particularly quickly, demonstrating the need of mothers in the area. Because of the high numbers of mothers and children who come to BN, the staff has started youth programs, which strive to improve the outcomes of these children, who are born in impoverished conditions.

Youth Development:

BN is expanding their role as a community resource center and is now partnering with youth development programs like Cradles to Crayons, which is a large, local non-profit. Through
this partnership BN distributes essentials like blankets and clothes to low-income and homeless children. BN makes bags for Cradles to Crayons, which are then distributed to areas of need across the region. Furthermore, BN hosts a book-bag give away, where the volunteers and staff fill donated backpacks with much needed school supplies for local children.

BN has started youth development initiatives targeted specifically at girls who live nearby, or are part of the Salafi community. One program targeted towards girls and young women was a self-defense workshop, which was taught by a local Muslim woman karate instructor. The poster for the event (Appendix I – Figure B) depicts a fully covered woman performing karate. The poster is bright pink, which I believe represents how the event is specifically geared towards teenage girls. This image of a fighting Muslim female demonstrates how BN strives to produce individuals who possess the skills needed in their environment. The workshop therefore, beyond being a fun event for girls, is a means through which BN can address the reality of violence of against women in the community.

Education:
When we were discussing the upstairs area of the BN building, Umm Kareem mentioned a desire to expand BN’s services from being focused on providing basic necessities, to providing skill training like, computer training and job readiness. She said, “We wanna start educational services again. Tutoring, GED training, computer classes, job readiness, because this area needs it” (field notes). Though they have not yet started these programs, the desire to address issues like education show how BN is committed to addressing inequality from a long-term perspective. The food and clothing programs ensure that people have basic necessities, but the education initiatives are different. These programs target the pervasiveness of structural inequality. Individuals who come into BN often do not have high levels of education (field notes) so
providing opportunities to help these individuals procure employment ensures that they will be more likely to be self-sufficient in the future.

Community development is a major focus of BN’s work, and the women’s involvement in addressing the needs of the community marks them as community advocates. Through an ethic of *sadaqa*, the women strive to bring hope and stability into this community by offering social services that go beyond just the basic necessities. By working with larger non-profits, like Philabundance, SHARE and Cradles to Crayons, they raise awareness about their cause and become advocates for the people they serve in the 19121 region. Their choice to focus on *sadaqa* as a means of community development shows that they have taken to heart an element of Islam that is meaningful to their own lives, especially considering how the women seemed to have grown up in poverty themselves. Umm Iman said she was drawn towards Islam by the ethic of *sadaqa* because throughout her life she has desired to help others. I think the women at BN express their faith through *sadaqa*, but their choice to practice *sadaqa* in North Philadelphia, and the ways in which they practice it, demonstrates how their identities as Muslims are informed by local context.

**Gender:**

The women at BN are community activists and agents of change, while being confronted with stereotypes about Muslim women. Though we did not discuss gender during interviews, the fact that it was mostly women who attended and staffed BN paints it as a female dominated space. This suggests that gender is either consciously or unconsciously embedded in BN. Using Deeb, I argue that, “the moral imperative of community commitment - and indeed that of public piety more generally - is in many ways particular to women” (Deeb 2006:31). Women are
traditionally seen as nurturers and as providers (Deeb 2006:208), and have had a long history of being providers of basic needs. This is true within the African American community where women often are the primary providers, especially when men are not always present (Smith 2010:150). The pressure of women to be providers increases when the state is unable to or does not fully offer social services, as is the case in North Philadelphia. Through a framework of sadaqa, they facilitate community development as well as challenge Western and Islamic conceptions of Muslim women as non-agents.

Stereotypes of women as “backward” and “oppressed”31 populated mainstream American media after 9/11, and became a rallying point for those who viewed feminism solely through the binary of agency/subordination. Viewing feminism through a binary of agency/subordination that Saba Mahmood describes as typical of Western Feminism (Mahmood 2005) ignores the complexities of hybrid identities that are demonstrated by the women at BN. I argue that the women at BN express agency through their conversion as well as through their roles as community activists. However, their identity as agents is not in opposition to subordination. Rather, as individuals composed of hybrid identities, they possess agency but express it in a framework that they define for themselves. By concentrating their efforts towards self-representation through religion, they use sadaqa as a framework to best articulate why they choose to be community activists. Though my fieldwork shows how BN as a space is gendered, the women at BN were more interested in discussing their work and their faith as compared to their experiences as women. This ambivalence towards discussing gendered identities perhaps shows that they see themselves as Muslims engaged with sadaqa rather than Muslim Women engaged with sadaqa. I realize that this section on gender leaves much to be addressed,

31 These stereotypes are usually part of a broader representation of Islam as “violent” and “repressive” (Bullock 2005:xvi)
especially given the popularity of the subject of Muslim women, but was informed by my fieldwork in which the women discussed race, religion and their work more than gender.

**My background**

As I mentioned in Chapter One, I believe my own identity and background as a Muslim woman facilitated my research. My initial interest in working with in the African American Muslim population of Philadelphia was sparked when I began working with Maris Gilette on a project called “Muslim voices of Philadelphia” that was produced by Scribe Media in 2010. I researched the history of Islam in Philadelphia, and its roots through the slave trade. It was my first semester freshmen year, and I was very unsure of what I was doing, but the topic stayed with me, and ultimately guided my thesis research.

The Muslims at Baabun Nasr are self-described *Salafis* and follow a conservative vision of Islam, but in doing this ethnography I was curious to see how the women would describe themselves as Muslims, and how that identity was related (if related) to the history of African American Muslims in the United States. Though their narratives show that they are aware of the historical African American Muslim population, they do not tie themselves directly to the population, except to say that family members or members of the community were Muslim prior to their conversion.

Writing about the identities of these women in my ethnography challenged me to think of my own identity in doing this fieldwork. I never explicitly stated to anyone that I was raised Muslim, but was assumed to be Muslim, presumably by my name and by using a certain vernacular when engaging with the staff. When I first met them I said my *salaam alaikums* because I thought it was polite and culturally respectful. I found it interesting that the community
automatically assumed I was Muslim, and then put an expectation on me to understand their own interpretation of Islam by assuming that mine would enable me to understand theirs.

In my time studying anthropology, I have often heard that it is a way to study other cultures so that we may find commonalities and understanding. The fact that the women saw our cultures as similar surprised me because I was trying to have a more traditional, distanced view through which I could “study” these people. But in the same way that the community was assuming a certain amount of knowledge from me being Muslim, I relied on our shared connection as a way to instill trust into our relationship. I used my identity as a Muslim to try and gain trust so they would feel comfortable talking to me about their personal experiences. My identity as Muslim helped when talking to these women about what it felt like to be “othered” after 9/11. It was a painful experience for these women, especially considering that they completely cover and are easily marked as conservative Muslims. As someone who has experienced, thankfully not a lot, but some of the same discrimination, they felt more comfortable sharing these experiences.

In order to make sense of this feeling of being able to identify with these women and feeling very separate from them at the same time, I called upon reflexive anthropology. These women and I may all be Muslim, but we come from completely different backgrounds. I was born and raised in a middle-class, suburban area, and was raised Shi’a unlike these women who do not seem to be extraordinarily well off, live in Philadelphia and are Sunni. However, I still feel the responsibility to represent them accurately so that they are not misunderstood as many other Muslims are today. Lila Abu-Lughod’s piece, “Writing against Culture” discusses what she calls halfie ethnography and articulates the feeling of responsibility in providing an accurate ethnography of an “other” that is inextricably bound up in the identity and/or experience of the

Dhanani
anthropologist. She states, “when [halfie] anthropologists present the Other they are presenting themselves, they speak with a complex awareness of and investment in reception” (Abu-Lughod 1991:142). When I started this ethnography I didn’t realize the impact that my own background would have in my own fieldwork. I thought it might help me be accepted and trusted by the women, as well as provide background information on Islam and Islamic behavior. However, I did not expect to feel such a deep connection to these women, which now propels me to share this population, which has been underrepresented in scholarship. Furthermore, the women at this charity break stereotypes of Muslim women, through their active participation in positions of power and involvement outside of the home, which has important consequences towards how conservative Muslim women are represented in American media.

The distance I had initially anticipated when studying these women has been compressed because of their acceptance of me. Lughod states that “culture is the essential tool for studying the other” (Abu-Lughod 1991:143), and anthropology by studying different cultures, perpetuates the idea of culture as a means of othering. It has been hard to draw the line of othering in my fieldwork because there are overlaps between the culture of the people volunteering at Baabun Nasr and my own culture. In fact it is hard to even define what our cultures are because I now see how the very idea of culture is comprised of multiple spheres. We both share the greater culture of living in Pennsylvania, but our cultures differ on a smaller level based on where in PA we live, what is available near us and who else we live with and around. We share a culture of Islam but understand certain aspects of the religion differently. I for one do not cover, and made a conscious choice not to do so when I started volunteering. It clearly marks me as an outsider, I am the only uncovered woman, but I think that helps me distance myself a little, which in turn cuts me some slack for not understanding so Islamic concepts as well.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

“I had nowhere to live. I had my children. I was pregnant. My husband was away. So I needed assistance”

(Interview with Umm Kareem)

Umm Kareem’s story is one that represents many of the patrons at BN. She needed public assistance and was referred to Umm Iman by a friend. When she went to Umm Iman’s home to receive clothes and household goods she was struck by Umm Iman’s warmth and compassion, as well as her relative stability. Umm Kareem and Umm Iman ultimately became close friends and decided to start BN as a registered charity, so that they could more fully address the high need in the community. Umm Kareem’s personal experiences with poverty in the Philadelphia area inform BN as a community resource center. She knows the reality of the lack of resources in the area, and how difficult it is to get out of poverty. The initiatives at BN therefore, are directed towards helping people achieve self-sustainability, which promotes long term movement out of poverty. I chose to focus on BN because of their ability to connect with the community and promote change internally. The women at BN’s work is informed by their religious ethic, but rather than being critical of BN as a faith-based organization, I focus on the experiences of the women themselves and how religion can facilitate the distribution of much needed services.

My argument shows how the women of BN use sadaqa as a religious motivator that promotes community development. Their use of sadaqa as a means of facilitating community development is important because it shows how Islam and the American community are intertwined. In an era of decreasing access to social services, particularly in the Philadelphia area, and increasing Islamophobia, BN demonstrates that charitable work enables Muslim communities to combat Islamophobia and the poverty affecting their community simultaneously.

Umm Kareem articulated the struggles BN has faced as an Islamic charity when she says, “Ignorance, its pure ignorance...Its not easy being Muslim here in America, at times” (Interview
with Umm Kareem). Little is known about Islam in America, and even littler is known about the historic roots of Islam in America. Islam is a powerful motivator for social change within the African American community because it offers internal structure that becomes mapped onto local communities. By understanding the horizontal, internal infrastructure created by Islam through the example of BN, I argue that sustainable social change can occur.

The women at BN are positive examples of Muslims, African Americans and women that need to be represented in mainstream America today. By promoting such positive representations of Islam, we can hopefully find solutions towards issues of Islamophobia, which not only marginalize Muslims, but also universalize them. The women of BN demonstrate how agency comes from within. They represent themselves as strong examples of Muslim American women who are agents of change by ascribing to their own chosen practice of *sadaqa*.

Though the women at BN strive to promote community improvement, they work within limited means that can prevent them from achieving their goal. Recently, in mid-April, nearly five months after I had completed my fieldwork, I discovered that BN is moving from their current location. Though the charity is not closing, the fact that it is moving suggests that the women at BN could no longer afford the rent in the area, and will be unable to provide services to North Philadelphia. Their decision to move is a reality of their role as a charitable institution. While I am certain that the local community will surely feel the loss of BN, I am also confident that BN and its staff will find a way to help the lives of others in its own distinctive way for many years to come.
Appendix I: Graphics

Figure A – Poverty in Philadelphia

Figure B – Self-defense workshop poster

Sunday - January 6, 2013 (12-5pm)
1841 N. 19th St. Phila. PA 19121

req. Fee: $35.00

First 15 people to register will receive a $5 discount.

To register online please visit www.baabumnasr.org

Modest Dress Required:
Loose fitting pants or jeans, management with side splits, undershirt (no tank top), and/or long shirt, sneakers or gym shoes. Please bring a towel and also an exercise mat if you have one available.

For more info, please contact Instructor Zaynah 267-475-5006 or Umm Taleh 215-605-4233

Figure C – Baabun Nasr Storefronts
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