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Changing constructions of religious visibility: The case of an African American Muslim community in South Central LA

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Abstract

Through a case study of a mosque in Los Angeles, I examine how changing constructions of space affect the ways a religious community comes together to engage faith. I show how as the neighborhood was undergoing dramatic change, so too were the ways believers at the mosque interpreted Islam. I divide my analyses into three parts, following the major chronological shifts of religious praxis in this African American Muslim community: (1) early days as members of the Nation of Islam (1950–1975); (2) ‘transition’ from the Nation to Sunni Islam in the mid 1970s; (3) and the post-transition period of rebuilding that continues into the present day. Together they produce a historical interaction effect of economic, demographic (immigration) and internal religious changes that lead to current dilemmas mosque members must address.

Keywords

African Americans, Islam, mosque, religious visibility, space

Résumé

L'étude d'une mosquée à Los Angeles permet d'analyser comment les changements de construction spatiale influencent les modalités selon lesquelles une communauté religieuse appréhende sa foi. L'autrice a analysé comment l'évolution dramatique subie par

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le quartier a fini par modifier l'interprétation que les fidèles donnent de l'Islam. L'analyse chronologique de l'étude s'articule en trois étapes, épousant les transformations des pratiques religieuses au sein de cette communauté musulmane afro-américaine: (1) à l'origine, l'appartenance à The Nation of Islam (1950–1970); (2) la 'transition' vers l'islam sunnite des années 1970; (3) et, enfin, la période suivante de reconstruction jusqu'à nos jours. Ce parcours est le résultat d'une interaction entre bouleversements économiques, démographiques (immigration) et transformations religieuses internes, qui conduit les fidèles de la mosquée aux dilemmes actuels qu'ils doivent désormais affronter.

Mots-clés

afro-américains, espace, Islam, mosquée, visibilité religieuse

Introduction

Los Angeles has long been a place of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec, 2007). The city's demographic composition reflects not only a diversity of minorities but also 'differentiations in terms of migration histories, educational backgrounds, legal statuses, length of residence and economic backgrounds' (Wessendorf, 2013: 407). This characterizes people who come to LA from abroad as well as migrants from within the United States who relocate to the land of sunshine and Hollywood in search of a new beginning (Katz, 2010). People also regularly move out of or within LA, leaving their cultural footprints on the city.

Because migrants bring their religious beliefs and practices with them, their incorporation into local spaces opens opportunities for new religious modes of action to take shape. Innovations develop through the fusion of new ideas and rituals, which become woven into an existent religious tapestry enclosing more than 6,000 congregations (Flory et al., 2011). Religious communities already ensconced in the urban landscape may need to develop different modes of action to remain visible and relevant amidst such external change. At the same time, communities change internally, as the members comprising them encounter new life experiences. Consequently, the religious landscape in LA is always in motion. Yet, how such change affects the visibility of longer-standing communities has received less scholarly attention than what the influx of new migrants means for public space. In giving attention to how an existing community responds to changes in the spatial regime over time we uncover a deeper understanding of how material conditions, as well as symbolic forces, matter and what religious survival looks like in contested public spaces.

In this article, I examine in historical detail and via a sociological analysis how economic, demographic, and internal religious change interact in the ongoing construction of shared religious identity using a case study of a longstanding African American-led mosque in South Central LA. Islam is arguably the most stigmatized religious tradition in the US. Surveys suggest that Americans hold a more negative view of Muslims than any other religious population (Pew Research Center, 2017). Believers who identify with the faith are at once exposed to greater public scrutiny and rendered incomplete religious

subjects because, while disliked, their faith is often not understood. The nuances of their faith become lost amidst the dissonance that defines public discourses on Islam and its perceived incompatibility with Western traditions (Mahmood, 2005). Studying a stigmatized Muslim population thus presents a strategic site to unpack the very notion of religious visibility. When does a Muslim community seek to assert itself in public space – or retreat from it – and with what consequences? Giving attention to these modes of action offers insight into the contradictory nature of ‘visibility/invisibility’ that is at the heart of this special issue.

Religious visibility in South Central

‘South Central,’ as residents refer to it, is one of the poorest and most racially segregated areas of LA. It lies south and southwest of the downtown business district in a dense urban corridor shaped by uneven urban planning that has allowed industrial sites to develop next to single-family residences. South Central is undergoing noticeable demographic and social change, but some things have remained constant for decades. Almost 30% of South Central’s more than one quarter million residents live in poverty, and in the census tract where I concentrated my fieldwork, poverty rates for individuals and families continuously exceed 40% (US Census, 2016). Residents face higher rates of unemployment, greater dependence on government assistance, substandard housing, overcrowded and low-performing schools, and a greater chance of being victim to violent crime when compared to other parts of the city (Martinez, 2016; Ong et al., 2008; Sides, 2012). These problems have persisted for decades, but they have also been distorted by nearby film, television, and music industries. As a result, South Central occupies a fabled place in the global imagination, one associated with gangs, rap music, drugs, and urban decline (Bennett, 2010; Ong et al., 2008). As Contreras (2017) argues, even as crime has gone down in South Central, its negative reputation remains.

The area’s spatial stigma belies a vibrant social landscape, which includes countless minority-led religious communities packed into a dense urban space. As with the mosque I studied, some of these communities have been in place for more than half a century but keep a low profile. For those with less visibility, it may be harder not only to negotiate a place in the religious tapestry but also to gain legitimacy. In an area like South Central, where resources are thin, a lack of public authority may compound existing struggles. Vasquez and Knott (2014: 327) describe ‘spatial regimes’ as ‘relatively stable but always contested modes of spatial organization, which give rise to and regulate distinctions between the religious and the secular, the public and the private, the visible and the invisible, and the native and the stranger.’ Mapping the contestations that take place in such a context helps show how inequality matters in the negotiation of urban space and why some religious communities fail to gain greater legitimacy. Or, why some who have been able to maintain control of physical spaces still lack the type of visibility we associate with legitimacy. The contestations that take place in South Central also make visible the constructed nature of religiosity, including how religious communities must innovate in a changing urban landscape or risk extinction (Ammerman, 1997).

Data and methods

'Masjid al-Quran' (MAQ) is composed of approximately 100 regularly-attending members and greater numbers on large Islamic holidays.¹ The mosque sits at the intersection of two major roads, allowing one to watch flows of traffic and people day and night. Though small relative to certain black churches in the area, members of MAQ find strength in their long, rich history as a community rooted in South Central for nearly half a century. Most members live in greater South Central, with many regulars coming from within the immediate neighborhood.

From May 2008 to August 2013, I participated in and observed a variety of religious and social activities at MAQ. I also worked on several planning committees and logged hundreds of hours volunteering at community events. For 13 months of the study, I lived four blocks from the mosque. While a resident, I attended neighborhood meetings and volunteered at a youth center. In this article, I also draw heavily on independent historical research as well as informal oral histories gathered via *in situ* interviews and 'go-alongs' with members (Kusenbach, 2003). In these moments together, members shared their memories of past years in South Central as well as their thoughts on changes in urban space.

All data were analyzed using an abductive approach that builds off the work of philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Abductive analysis seeks to leverage surprising findings to generate novel theorizing by putting data in ongoing conversation with diverse literatures (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). In this case, I discovered a series of narratives around certain events that surfaced repeatedly in my coding and pointed to the community's struggle to continue to make sense of a past that occurred decades earlier. Once attuned to this unexpected finding, I then re-coded my data in light of two additional literatures: (1) previous cases of religious communities undergoing transformation (Ammerman, 1997; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000; Emerson, 2006), and historical research on South Central (for example, Sides, 2003). Together this inferential process helped me to contextualize changes to religious praxis in the community, sometimes in ways that contradict members' narratives but in so doing reveal new understandings about how exogenous social-spatial change can evoke endogenous religious transformation.

Findings

I divide my analyses into three parts, following the major chronological shifts of religious praxis in the mosque community: (1) the early days as members of the Nation of Islam (1950–1975); (2) the 'transition' from the Nation to Sunni Islam in the mid 1970s; (3) and the post-transition period of rebuilding that continues into the present day.

By tracing the arc of MAQ's long history, we see the influence that changing demographics in South Central can have on a religious community. The central aim of such an analysis is to demonstrate how the particulars of urbanism in Los Angeles affect the construction of religious identity at a concrete, localized level. Urban change results in changed religious expressions, though the latter may remain invisible to outside populations.

Rising visibility

The MAQ community began as an informal gathering among a small group of believers in South Central. During these early days, the community followed the teachings of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad. When in the mid-20th century the group grew too large to meet inside believers' homes, they sought a permanent place for worship and education. They had no choice but to stay within the area that had been the city's main hub for black life since the 1920s. Until the Housing Act of 1949, whites were legally allowed to confine black Angelenos to the crowded portion of the city south of downtown through a set of formal and informal practices (restrictive covenants, redlining, blockbusting, etc.) (Sides, 2003). Even after the federal Housing Act of 1949, black residents continued to live behind a visible color line of residential racial segregation. City officials blatantly ignored municipal problems in the area, allowing it to transform into one of the least desirable parts of the city for residential development. It was in this context that the Nation of Islam established Temple #15 and started to gain a new visibility among disenfranchised blacks in South Central.

For much of the twentieth century, the city diverted municipal funds (earmarked for traffic safety, sewage, street repairs, etc.) away from poor black areas to wealthier white neighborhoods. By relaxing zoning laws to allow commercial growth in residential areas, city officials made it possible for chemical companies and food processing plants to set up in the area (Sides, 2003). The industrial debris and hazardous waste these plants produced turned South Central into the 'dump-yard of the city of Los Angeles,' driving down property values and creating public health crises (Sides, 2003: 113). Along with its physical deterioration, South Central offered fewer employment, transportation, and retail options to residents.

Ironically, all of this helped Temple #15 to strengthen its foothold in South Central during the 1950s and 1960s, creating new jobs and retail for blacks trapped in a depressed urban environment. In his famed account of the Nation, sociologist C. Eric Lincoln wrote:

The Muslim leaders tend to live and to build their temples in the areas from which they draw their major support – the heart of the black ghetto. The ghetto houses the most dissident and disinherited, the people who wake up to society's kick in the teeth each morning and fall exhausted with a parting kick each night. These are the people who are ready for revolution . . . in the segregated black ghetto, the vision of a 'Black Nation' within a surrounding and hostile 'white nation' takes on a semblance of reality (1994 [1961]: 24).

Elijah Muhammad and his followers responded to their urban conditions by trying to build economic force, believing that they needed to create a separate black economy. This emphasis on economic separatism distinguished the Nation from other black political movements of the 1960s, and it contributed to a larger plan to transform the black community at-large via targeted urban spatial transformation.

For a while, it worked well. Under the leadership of local ministers, Temple #15 members established fish and soul food restaurants, grocery stores, and bakeries. These brick and mortar operations raised the profile of Muslims in Los Angeles. Fruit of Islam (FOI) 'soldiers' patrolled neighborhood streets in an explicit attempt to promote order.

New recruits heard that the black man would rise out of poverty through self-discipline and education, becoming a 'soldier' for a movement in which politics was 'a tool with which to achieve the race's destiny' (Dawson, 2001: 108). A similar story developed in other US cities where disenfranchised black urban populations were drawn to the race-specific teachings of Elijah Muhammad. The organization grew from ten temples in 1956 to more than 100 by 1975 (Turner, 2003).

The community's rising profile in South Central became a source of legend-making. However, as Werbner (1996: 332) points out, 'once people have marched openly in a place, they have crossed an ontological barrier. They have shown that they are willing to expose themselves and their bodies to possible outside ridicule for the sake of their faith.' In their efforts to strengthen the black community in direct opposition to whites, taking to the streets of South Central to do so, members garnered the unwanted attention of powerful whites in Southern California. Though believers say they were only trying to reach the 'hearts and minds' of fellow black residents through their outreach efforts in the neighborhood, local and national law enforcement agencies saw otherwise and worked in concert to suppress the movement. Temple #15 found itself facing a forceful, violent campaign of police intimidation and surveillance (Sides, 2003). In one raid, LAPD officers shot and killed a member and injured six more. No weapons were found on the men or in the building and by all published accounts the raid was an organized attack, but an all-white jury later ruled the shooting justifiable. By this point, the Nation of Islam had received considerable negative national attention (Khabeer, 2016). The dominant narrative in media accounts was one of a group of angry black men and women intent on causing disorder out of their 'hate that hate produced.'² The death of their beloved brother stands as one of the few moments in the community's long history that has made a way into history books about the city of LA, yet most Americans continue to associate the Nation of Islam with violence motivated from within rather than forced upon members.

The early days of the MAQ community reveal the contradictory nature of religious visibility. In an effort to establish a community and make a place in the urban spatial landscape, groups will often try to raise their profiles. Public religious performances become a way to make claims on public space (Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri, 2014). In the case of Temple #15 and the Nation of Islam, going into the streets to sell newspapers, running Muslim-owned businesses, and serving as an urban army to instill order in pockets of the city ignored by the municipality constituted the means by which believers sought to enact public performances of religious identity. While these may not look like rituals in the way that scholars have classically examined religion (Asad, 1993), they were expressions of piety to people within the Nation. For example, the head imam at MAQ explained that the newspapers they sold during the Nation were important for teaching people that Islam was a global religion – a form of *dawah* that helped legitimize the faith as something more than what was generally seen by outsiders as a 'protest' movement (cf. Lincoln, 1994). Religion provided members a means of affirming and regulating difference (Vasquez and Knott, 2014: 344). At the same time, religious place-making exercised in opposition to elite groups made members vulnerable to backlash and further oppression from above, and when the community faced a crisis in South Central in the coming decade they had nowhere to turn for help but inward.

Fractured visibility

By the start of 1975, the Nation of Islam was experiencing ‘unprecedented prosperity’ (Lincoln, 1994: 264). At the local level, the MAQ community controlled several prominent spaces in South Central, including a newly remodeled place of worship purchased on a prominent plot of land not far from the old Temple #15. The community added to its business holdings and, according to leaders, at one point employed more than 100 men and women. ‘We had a system and method going that was out of this world,’ the head imam of MAQ explained, adding the temple was ‘your employment office’ for South Central.

However, an unexpected chain of events started in 1975 that would permanently alter the religious identities of MAQ believers and the community’s visibility in LA. It started with the passing of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad. Plagued by lifelong respiratory problems, the 77-year-old died of congestive heart failure one day before 20,000 followers would gather in Chicago for the annual Savior Day’s celebration to commemorate founder WD Fard. These loyal women and men received the news of Muhammad’s passing and learned that his son, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed (formerly Wallace Deen Muhammad), would succeed as leader. ‘The Nation of Islam was at a crossroads,’ wrote Lincoln in the postscript to his book (1994: 263).

Imam Mohammed took the stage that February day and announced the beginning of a series of theological and organizational changes for NOI communities around the country. The head religious authority of MAQ, Imam Khalid, was among those in attendance and later became one of the first ministers to declare allegiance to the new leader. Like Khalid, many believers recounted 1975 as the year of their (second) new beginning, both in their personal relationships with Allah and in their understandings of religious community. Rejecting the term conversion, believers instead called this their ‘transition.’ Many adopted new Arabic surnames, replacing ‘X’ with names such as Muhammad, Hasan, and Abdullah. The temple turned into a masjid, chairs were removed to make it possible to prostrate one’s forehead to the floor, and believers started to fast during the holy month of Ramadan instead of December. Perhaps most controversially, Imam Mohammed directed believers to embrace a more racially-inclusive conception of membership (Gibson and Karim, 2014). In all, members began a religious and social transition from the race-specific, idiosyncratic teachings of Elijah Muhammad towards what his son and successor Imam WD Mohammed called ‘al-Islam.’

Imam Mohammad also told temple leaders to sell off local businesses. Officially, this was meant to signal a further commitment to traditional Islamic praxis. Mohammad wanted African American Muslims to be less focused on the problems unique to US blacks, choosing instead to identify with Muslims of all skin colors around the globe. But economic divestment turned out to be necessary because the Nation was deeply in debt (Gardell, 1996). Given the secrecy with which Nation headquarters operated, we may never know the full reasons why an organization that had amassed more than estimated \$100 million in wealth went bankrupt almost overnight. Scholars have attributed the financial decline to lavish spending by its founder as well as poor accounting practices that made the group’s wealth seem bigger than it was. Problems with the US tax system

also developed, and Mohammad had to work with the Internal Revenue Service to pay off back taxes.

Leaders in LA will say publicly that the transition from being a temple in the Nation to a masjid was immediate, in part to demonstrate their respect for the legacy of Imam Mohammed. Privately, believers explain that the transition took the better part of a decade. One brother told me that the community lost members along the way because they were not yet prepared to abandon the race-specific teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Some of these members left with Louis Farrakan to re-establish the Nation of Islam, and others left Islam to return to Christianity or no faith at all.

At the same time that the Nation was showing signs of collapse due to internal and external pressures, the area around MAQ started to undergo a series of macro social and economic changes. Large companies that once provided decent-paying jobs for low-skilled workers relocated their manufacturing facilities from the central city to satellite cities. Urban growth began to concentrate around those satellites, shifting political and economic power even further away from the already marginalized pockets of LA occupied by poorer minority populations (Dear, 2002). Residents of South Central without public and private transportation options found themselves unable to work in outer ring areas (Sides, 2003: 114). A growing number of residents (including lower-income MAQ believers) struggled to make ends meet in the constricted local labor market and found themselves increasingly dependent on government assistance programs to support their families (Abu-Lughod, 1999; Sides, 2003).

Job instability was compounded by changes in the informal economy. The emergence of the crack-cocaine trade in the early 1980s coupled with a related rise in gang violence contributed to nearly 20 years of historically high homicide rates in South Central (Costa Vargas, 2006; Davis, 1990). The MAQ community felt the threat of violence firsthand when it again lost a brother, this time from a stray bullet during a gunfight between warring gangs (Prickett, 2014). Some in the MAQ community responded by moving out of LA. Like other black residents, they relocated to the surrounding counties of San Bernardino and Riverside (Contreras, 2017; Costa Vargas, 2006). Better off members who wanted to stay in LA moved to wealthier neighborhoods on the western edge of South Central and formed mosques in newer black commercial corridors.

In LA, black outmigration occurred during decades of new immigration from Mexico and other parts of Central America. In the city as a whole, in only two decades the Latino population increased from 1,288,716 (18.3%) in 1970 to 3,359,526 (38%) in 1990 (Kun and Pullido, 2013). While the number of Blacks increased 175,730 in the same time period, their proportion of the city population declined from 10.7% to 10.46% (Kun and Pullido, 2013). It may not seem like much, but for a minority population the share of control in certain areas of the city became noticeably different. In South Central, the African American population went from over 80% to less than 20% during this same time. The growth of LA's Latino population then continued, such that now Latinos comprise nearly half (48.3%) of *all* city residents while the percentage of African Americans is in single digits (9.4%). Perhaps more telling, the number of African Americans in city limits has grown by just over 16,000 in nearly 40 years (Kun and Pullido, 2013).

The divergent demographic trends transformed the ethnic composition of the city in ways that make the LA story distinct from Chicago or Philadelphia, and the concomitant changes to the spatial regime greatly impact the urban religious experience. The restructuring of economic and social life in South Central made the MAQ community visible in an undesired way – turning members into an ethnic minority in the neighborhood and heightening their differences with neighbors. As I have explained elsewhere, the fish fry and soul food restaurants that members frequented closed down, and the streets around the mosque became home to businesses that catered to Spanish-speaking clients (Prickett, 2014). While the events that initiated religious change at MAQ originated 2,000 miles away at NOI headquarters in Chicago, the transition would not have occurred as it did in LA were it not for changes to the social-spatial regime in South Central. Believers might have been able to rebuild their businesses using the entrepreneurial acumen they cultivated in the Nation were the local consumer market still favoring African American cultural tastes.

Strength in (in)visibility?

When I started fieldwork in 2008 the community was still grappling with how to respond to the changes in South Central that started nearly three decades earlier. Walking the streets to recruit new members no longer worked as a growth strategy, nor did selling a newspaper focused on racial religious empowerment offer a viable method of fundraising. The days of ‘reaching hearts and minds’ of neighbors as members once understood it were over. Whereas standing out as religious outsiders was seen as empowering during the days when South Central was majority black, it became a challenge to stand out both religiously and racially. Said one longtime mosque member of their Latino neighbors, ‘They think we’re terrorists.’ She added, ‘Fine with me. They leave us alone cuz they’re afraid we’ll blow them up.’ Her words reflect another downside of visibility – it can heighten difference, contributing to a desire for greater social distance. This may lead to inter-ethnic tension that makes it harder to bridge cultural divides (Contreras, 2017).

At the same time the MAQ community was struggling to find an institutional place in the new spatial regime of South Central, its members were having to turn inward for greater social support amidst shrinking black spaces in the city. I observed believers compete with each other for limited mosque resources or quarrel over how best to distribute resources within an Islamic framework. Who gets *zakat* (charity) first – elderly members or women with children? Do you allow the brothers who have nowhere else to go a place to temporarily live? And just as they needed to adjudicate internal disagreements, mosque leaders found themselves needing to increase security to prevent unauthorized squatters from the streets using the mosque at night. This, combined with ongoing acts of violence in the neighborhood, served as a visceral reminder that in addition to Allah one needed physical protection when worshipping in South Central.

It seems reasonable to ask why the MAQ community remained intent on keeping this particular space. Why not move somewhere more welcoming? The property that MAQ owns is meaningful to believers not only because of their long history there but also

because it contains significant land value. While South Central has lower property values than elsewhere in the city, new development in the area means that the size and location of MAQ makes it a prime location for future commercial growth, at least that's the hope (Prickett, 2014). Maintaining a claim of ownership on a piece of iconic land in South Central – as tattered as the public image of that part of urban America may be – presents just enough hope to keep the community focused on the future.

Conclusion

Much of the public discussion around religious placemaking in the city centers on contestations over building construction. The recent 'Ground Zero Mosque' controversy is a prime example in the US (Mohamed and O'Brien, 2011), and in Europe ongoing debates point to a growing discomfort of a more visible Islam (Allievi, 2003; Cesari, 2005; McLoughlin, 2005; Oosterbaan, 2014; Saint-Blancat and Schmidt di Friedberg, 2005). Conflicts over mosque construction reveal 'the extent to which Muslims are seen as "legitimate" members of a public space' (Saint-Blancat and Schmidt di Friedberg, 2005: 1100). But even existing mosque communities face potential conflict (Allen, 2017). As Allen shows, established mosques in Britain face an increasing threat of physical attack, including vandalism, forced entry, arson, and even bombing. By contrast, the MAQ community now receives much less public and police attention than it did in the past and in this way their contemporary lack of visibility helps shield the community during times of heightened public anxiety around Islam. Many wished for nothing more than to engage Islam in peace, away from public scrutiny. Then again, we may ask if the absence of public attention also reveals the status of a community's perceived legitimacy. That is, even without forms of explicit conflict – as in the European cases or Ground Zero mosque – a religious community's (in)visibility tells us about who holds power in public debates.

Religious visibility is not merely a matter of having it or not. There is a contradictory texture to the phenomenon and only through an intersectional lens that considers religion, race, and place together, can we understand this texture. It is in examining the varied ways the MAQ community has struggled to maintain the same slice of urban space amidst ongoing changes in the surrounding spatial regime that this study offers a new glimpse on religious place-making. The outmigration of black residents from South Central and the simultaneous influx of immigrants from Central America altered the spatial regime of South Central so that a once black urban 'ghetto' became a Latino-dominated space (Kun and Pullido, 2013; Vasquez and Knott, 2014). As a consequence of these demographic shifts, there are fewer members and resources available to sustain black religious communities like the one I studied. This puts even the oldest religious forms in South Central in a state of flux and reveals how religious participation can become a new source of struggle for members, but one they feel compelled by faith to continue to experience (Prickett, 2018). At the same time, the faith that believers at MAQ identify with has gained considerable negative attention in recent decades. There is a new social visibility for Muslim populations throughout the United States and Europe as a result of global discourses about Islam and its perceived incompatibility with Western notions of liberal democracy (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mahmood, 2005). This makes attempts

to exert a Muslim identity in public spaces riskier, and it reinforces the point that visibility comes at a price. It can bring unwanted attention that, in the case of MAQ, can exacerbate feelings of difference with neighbors, whom believers perceive as thinking all Muslims to be violent or scary. Withdrawal seems a reasonable strategy to avoid conflict, but this in turn can stunt community growth.

For African American Muslims who came through the Nation of Islam, presence in the public sphere has always been marked by some degree of religious-racial outsidership, though the case of Masjid al-Quran in South Central shows how the extent of felt difference can vary as urban spaces change. The diversity of Los Angeles promises that the city will remain a vibrant place for religious innovation, especially as continued migration flows bring new populations of believers into the city. Diversity also suggests that established communities, like MAQ, will have to continue to adapt if they want to survive the changing urban landscape. Yet, the city's dynamism also gives believers reason to hope that a new future is always on the horizon.

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Notes

1. All names of specific places and people have been changed to protect participants' confidentiality.
2. This was the title of a television documentary about the Nation and Black Nationalism produced in 1959.

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