



MARYAM KASHANI

MEDINA

BY THE BAY

Scenes of Muslim Study and Survival

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MEDINA

B Y T H E B A Y

Scenes *of* Muslim Study
and Survival

MARYAM KASHANI

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To all the seekers
and
Hajjah Dhameera Ahmad (1950–2017)

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For the truths are obscure, the ends hidden, the doubts manifold, the minds turbid, the reasonings various; the premises are gleaned from the senses, and the senses (which are our tools) are not immune from error. The path of investigation is therefore obliterated and the inquirer, however diligent, is not infallible. Consequently, when inquiry concerns subtle matters, perplexity grows, views diverge, opinions vary, conclusions differ and certainty becomes difficult to obtain.

ABU 'ALI AL-HASAN IBN AL-HASAN IBN AL-HAYTHAM
(d. 1040), *The Optics of Ibn Al-Haytham*

In my writing and filmmaking, it has always been important for me to carry out critical work in such a way that there is room for people to reflect on their own struggle and to use the tools offered so as to further it on their own terms. Such a work is radically incapable of prescription. Hence, these tools are sometimes also appropriated and turned against the very filmmaker or writer, which is a risk I am willing to take. I have, indeed, put myself in a situation where I cannot criticize without taking away the secure ground on which I stand.

TRINH T. MINH-HA, “‘Speaking Nearby’: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha” Nancy N. Chen and Trinh T. Minh-Ha

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A NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION, TRANSLATION, AND BLESSINGS

I use a modified version of the transcription system outlined in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES) for transcribing words and phrases from the Arabic language into English. For ease of reading, I have omitted the use of diacritical marks, with the exception of the Arabic letters ‘ayn (‘) and hamza (‘). Most translations from Arabic to English are mine with references made to Hans Wehr’s *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, Edward William Lane and Stanley Lane-Poole’s *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, and other cited texts. For Qur’anic translations, I predominantly referred to Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, Sahih International (www.tanzil.net), Muhammad Asad’s *Message of the Qur’an*, and Marmaduke William Pickthall’s *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an*, relying upon a particular translation in each instance, but substituting another translation or phrasing as necessary.

In quoted text, I convey the spoken transliteration and the live translation from English to Arabic of my interlocutors as this translation is what is heard by their audiences or students. I italicize the first time (and sometimes the second if it has been awhile) that an Arabic word or phrase makes an appearance in the text. I discontinue italicization to convey how it operates with/as English as part of a global Muslim lexicon. Similarly, for proper names and Islamic concepts and phrases commonly used with/as English, I often use spellings that are common in the English language, rather than

xii following the IJMES system (e.g., “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz” instead of “al-Hajj Malik al-Shabazz,” “Kameelah” instead of “Kamila,” “deen” instead of “din,” or “Alhamdulillah” instead of “al-hamdu li-llah”).

In Medina by the Bay as elsewhere, many Muslims follow the mention of the Prophet Muhammad with *salla Allahu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*, “blessings of God be upon him and grant him peace.” I do not include the greeting in the text (unless it is spoken in a direct quote), but feel free to take a breath and extend this blessing with every reference to him, as some Muslims do. One may also extend these blessings to his family, *salla Allahu ‘alayhi wa-alibi wa-sallam*. *Radi Allahu ‘anhum*, “may Allah be pleased with them,” as this blessing is similarly uttered after mention of the *Sahaba* (Companions of the Prophet) and other prophets, and appropriate conjugations are used for an individual man (‘*anhu*), woman (‘*anha*), two people (‘*anhum*), or a group of women (‘*anhunna*). Similarly, one may say “may Allah have mercy on her/him/them” for ancestors. Such verbal expressions and gestures invoke an ethical and embodied crafting of Muslim consciousness, pace, and discipline toward cosmic recognition and spiritual genealogies. Respect.

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Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim. In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Poet and Zaytuna College graduate Rasheeda Plenty writes in her poem “Book” about the seeds of knowledge that are planted and cultivated within us, how we become “bewildered when a soft rain begins to fall inside of us . . . we stand gazing at our chests to see what will come from our bodies/this strange planting, here.” As I write these acknowledgments in the midst of a decades-long inquiry into questions of knowledge, I find it impossible to account for all the “strange plantings” that contributed in one way or another to “the ink and bark with all the green pressed out” of this book. And yet. . .

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The creative work and generosity of Kameelah Janan Rasheed graces the cover of this text. Thinking, learning, and creating with her has been humbling and profoundly pleasurable. Working with the talented and visionary Sarah Elawad has likewise been a beautiful endeavor.

The Kashani family across the North, West, East, and South Bays made coming home sweet and time too short. My parents Kimiko and Mansour, my sister Marjon, my Rana family (in Texas, the Bay, and Pakistan), and Junaid have endured this process as much as I have, if not more so. Thank you all for everything you make possible. The poets best express what it means to have Junaid Rana as my companion in spiritual, intellectual, and political life and struggle: as Mahmoud Darwish says, "I am who I am, as/ you are who you are: you live in me/ and I live in you, to and for you/I love the necessary clarity of our mutual puzzle."

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(those who appear in more than one chapter, in order of appearance)

BROTHER MASOUD calls the blues adhan and is a convert to Islam who was raised in the Pacific Northwest and relocated to the Bay Area during his time working on ships. His family migrated north during the Great Migration from Mississippi and Louisiana.

SABA is a white Muslim woman originally from the Midwest who lives in Oakland who participates in hearings to prevent the expansion of surveillance in Oakland.

FATEMEH is a Zaytuna College student raised in Southern California by her North African and white parents.

NUR is my DSLR (digital single lens reflex) camera; *Nur* means light in Arabic.

THE UMMA is the community of believers.

ZAHRAH is a Zaytuna College student born to Black Caribbean parents and raised in Brooklyn.

IMAM ZAID SHAKIR is an African American Islamic scholar, co founder of Zaytuna College and founder of Al-Ansar Mosque (pseudonym) in Oakland.

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD (d. 632) Muhammad ibn Abdullah was born in the year 570 in Mecca and was orphaned at the age of six. Raised by his uncle to become a merchant-trader, he received revelation from Allah at the age of forty, becoming the Messenger of Allah, the final prophet in a monotheistic lineage that includes Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa), and Jesus (Isa). He would go on to spiritually and politically lead a diverse religious community that would eventually become the world's second-largest and fastest-growing religion.

SHAYKH HAMZA YUSUF HANSON is a white American Muslim scholar, co-founder of Zaytuna Institute and Zaytuna College.

DR. HATEM BAZIAN is a Palestinian activist and scholar, co founder of Zaytuna College and advanced lecturer in Asian American Studies, UC Berkeley.

MALCOLM X, EL-HAJJ MALIK EL-SHABAZZ (1925–1965) is a Black Muslim scholar, community organizer, and ancestor.

ABU HAMED AL-GHAZALI (d. 1111) is an Islamic scholar born in Tus, Khorasan, (now Iran) whose contemporarily read work, including *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din (Revival of the Islamic Sciences)*, focuses on the spiritual or inward dimensions of Islamic thought and practice.

HAJAR is a Black Muslim woman raised in the Bay Area who was a part of the As-Sabiqun movement at Masjid Al-Islam in East Oakland. She is currently a university professor in Northern California.

IMAM ABDUL ALEEM MUSA AND AS-SABIQUN MOVEMENT Oakland-raised Imam Abdul Alim Musa converted to Islam while in prison and established Masjid Al-Islam in East Oakland in 1981. The As-Sabiqun movement was established as a national movement in 1995 by Imam Musa.

HAJJA RASHEEDA (ROSA) was born in San Francisco in 1950 to a Black Catholic family with roots in Louisiana and Oklahoma. She became a member of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in 1967 and participated in the Third World Strike at San Francisco State University. She converted to Islam in the 1970s and was an educator and principal in Oakland public schools, while also raising four children (and grandchildren) with her husband in Oakland.

OSCAR was born and raised in Oakland in the 1970s–1980s. Having been a student activist and a Black nationalist in high school, he converted to Islam in the 1990s.

SHAYKH MUHAMMAD SHAREEF is a Black US-born Muslim who returned to the United States in 1990 after studying Islam in East and West Africa as a representative of the Jama'at of Shehu Dan Fodio. He established the Sankora Institute (SIASI) in 1986 to further learning and to preserve African Islamic manuscripts and texts. He lived and taught in Northern California for many years and currently lives in exile from the United States after experiencing FBI surveillance and infiltration in his communities.

HAROON is the audiovisual technician and coordinator at Zaytuna College. He moved to the Bay Area from the East Coast in the 1990s to be a part of spreading the message of Islam at Zaytuna Institute. He is an African American convert to Islam, husband, and father in his forties.

AMINAH is an Arab student at Zaytuna College from the Midwest.

STEVE is a Black student at Zaytuna College in his mid-twenties who had converted to Islam shortly before joining Zaytuna. He is originally from the South and graduated from a prestigious university on the East Coast. He commuted to Zaytuna from San Francisco where he lived and worked full time in addition to being a student.

IMAM BENJAMIN PEREZ (1933–2009) was a Latino and Indigenous (Seminole/Yaqui) man from Central California who moved to Oakland in 1955 where he joined the Nation of Islam. He was dedicated to connecting Latinx and Native peoples to Islam through *da'wa* and served as a prison chaplain from the 1960s onward.

MARIO was born to a white mother and an African American father in Berkeley. He converted to Islam and attended Masjid Al-Islam in East Oakland as a teenager. He moved to Syria in his early twenties and later migrated to Tarim, Yemen, to study and teach at Dar al-Mustafa Seminary.

HABIB 'UMAR BIN HAFIZ is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and highly influential Yemeni scholar of the Hadrami diaspora. He established Dar al-Mustafa Seminary in Yemen in 1996 and Dar al-Zahraa Seminary for women a year later. He is consistently ranked highly on a list of the “500 Most Influential Muslims” in the world.

MATTHEW is a white convert to Islam who served as one of the first student life coordinators at Zaytuna College.

MARY is a Latina Muslim from the East Bay who converted to Islam as a teenager. She is married to Michael, a Filipino convert.

RUQAYYA is a third-generation Black Muslim student at Zaytuna who was born and raised on the East Coast.

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INTRODUCTION

SCENE 1—HEAR THE CALL OF THE BLUES ADHAN

OVER BLACK

We hear shuffling steps, distant birds chirping, a rumbling hum of traffic from the freeway, murmurs, and whispers as PEOPLE enter a large room. Above the hushed sounds, a voice sails; it wails; it twangs; it rides.

BROTHER MASOUD

Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar. Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah. Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah. Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasul Allah. Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasul Allah. . . .

FADE IN

INTERIOR. STOREFRONT MOSQUE, NORTH OAKLAND, MIDDAY.

We see the anthropologist's POV (point of view) from the women's section. Sunlight streams in through an open door. Bookshelves full of shoes line the far wall. A few elder MUSLIM MEN and WOMEN sit on metal folding chairs, MEN toward "the front" of the room, WOMEN arranged in loose rows behind them. CHILDREN bounce around receiving hugs and joyful exclamations. Some MEN and WOMEN stand in prayer or are seated in their respective sections. Pitched and pitchy, BROTHER MASOUD continues to call the *adhan* (the Muslim call to prayer), holding his hands to his ears as he rotates back and forth to his right and left sides.¹

The camera PANS to a back wall with a Chinese calligraphic print of Arabic text hanging above three preteen and teenage BROTHERS sitting on the floor below it.

... Hayya 'ala as-salah, hayya 'ala as-salah. Hayya 'ala al-falah, hayya 'ala al-falah. Allahu akbar Allahu akbar. La ilaha illa Allah.²

FADE OUT

The adhan is always called in Arabic and though the words are always the same, this call is particular to this place. Brother Masoud was a sailor living in the Bay Area after growing up in the Pacific Northwest. His family migrated there from Mississippi and Louisiana after World War II during the Great Migration north and west by African Americans. Brother Masoud's adhan, in its modal tonality and timing, calls Muslims in harmony with the blues rhythms and inflections carried by African Americans, predominantly from Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, to the Bay Area in the Great Migration throughout the twentieth century (Murch 2010; Self 2003; Woods 2017). Those blues rhythms and modalities convey inheritances from West African Islam carried by captive Muslims shipped to the Americas throughout the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries (Diouf 1998; El Shibli 2007). Masoud's blues adhan also carries a refugee rhythm from Southeast Asia, as Masoud learned how to call the adhan from a Cham imam in Seattle.³ This call traveled across Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and the Atlantic, and through the South and up to the North, down the West Coast, to a storefront mosque in Oakland. I heard Masoud and others call blues adhans in mosques and industrial park community centers in Oakland, Fremont, and San Francisco, California. As it emerges from western lands and histories, via eastern lands and refugee migrations, this Arabic, its tonality and cadence, is uncanny to Arabic speakers who come from where these words were revealed. Nevertheless, this blues adhan signifies and beckons: *What do you hear?*⁴

CUT TO:

INTERIOR. BOARD OF SUPERVISORS MEETING, DOWNTOWN
OAKLAND, EVENING.

We see the young woman approach the podium, taking a deep breath before beginning her statement. A subtle tremor in her breath accompanies a firm stance as she folds her arms behind her back and begins to speak.

SABA

You can pave over the blood of the martyrs, but you can't fossilize the spirit of resistance. Terrorist, gang member, provocateur—these are all codewords for a person that's in the way of profit and power, both in Oakland and internationally. (*Pause.*) As a Muslim I demand that you cancel plans for your monitoring center. We are not stupid. We know that the purpose is to monitor Muslims, Black and brown communities, and protestors. This will have a deep impact on our Muslim communities. These communities are all monitored in different ways, but all of these ways overlap in our Muslim community.

CUT TO BLACK

Saba was one of many Muslims who attended and spoke at hours-long city council meetings in Oakland's City Hall in the winter of 2013–2014.⁵ Given a minute and a half, with an additional two minutes ceded by other speakers, Saba proceeded to explain why she was opposed to the council's potential approval of Phase II of the Domain Awareness Center, a city and portwide surveillance system that would integrate visual surveillance data into a centralized network connecting private and public systems, the Oakland Police and Fire Departments, and the Coast Guard. Saba connects how the figuring of "terrorist, gang member, provocateur" within languages of securitization, policing, and governance racialize and mark "Muslims, black and brown communities, and protestors" as problem populations that "get in the way" of capital. Her concern for monitoring and the threat of her obscurity inhered in the camera's inability to register her facial features (she wore a veil on her head and across her lower face) except for her light skin and eyes. The camera registers her nervousness, though—the tremble in her voice and the way she held the cuffs of her sweater sleeves, her preparation to speak—indexed by the notes she made

4 in her notebook and the names of others who ceded their time; and her historical ties to the Bay Area in recognition of all the times the port was used by demonstrators to protest war, capitalist extraction, colonial dispossession, and extrajudicial police violence. *What do you see?*

CUT TO:

SCENE 3—REFUSALS AND OFFERINGS

EXTERIOR. COURTYARD OF SMALL COLLEGE CAMPUS,
BERKELEY, NIGHT.

We PAN ACROSS a large green hedge with red blooms lit by a single flood light. FATEMEH standing still, reads from OFF SCREEN and slowly comes into view.

FATEMEH

O well for him who lives at ease/ With garnered gold in wide domain/
Nor heeds the splashing of the rain / The crashing down of forest trees/
O well for him who ne'er hath known/ The travail of the hungry years/
A father gray with grief and tears/ A mother weeping all alone.

CLOSE UP of FATEMEH'S hands holding a book. Camera PANS UP to FATEMEH'S face.

FATEMEH (CONT'D)

But well for him whose foot hath trod/ The weary road of toil and strife/
Yet from the sorrows of his life/ Builds ladders to be nearer God.

FADE OUT

Fatemeh's disposition was quiet and thoughtful, both in the classroom and in social settings.⁶ A first-year student at Zaytuna College, an emergent Muslim liberal arts college in Berkeley, California, she was cautious with her words and conscious of the spaces she occupied. She had declined to participate in one-on-one interviews for my ethnographic research, but when I approached her about doing a film portrait, she surprised me with her willingness and enthusiasm. I had previously associated her disinterest

in interviews as a shyness and reticence about her own self-representation.⁷ Yet, she also had a playfulness that emerged in her everyday self-expression and performance, as in class projects. Fatemeh chose the terms of her self-representation, distinguishing between conducting an interview and performing a recitation of someone else's words. An expansive self-image emerges in her choice to perform "Tristitiae" by Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), a particularly witty and flamboyant nineteenth-century Irish writer and poet, in a garden in the middle of the night. There was aspiration and pleasure, a thrill and playfulness. *What is being refused, what is being offered?*

The above scenes introduce a worlding, an attunement and a tuning in, that I, as ethnographer, filmmaker, so-called expert, have coproduced and assembled to address the struggles and strategies of everyday (Muslim and non-Muslim) life in the San Francisco Bay Area in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Throughout *Medina by the Bay*, ethnographic, historical, and anecdotal scenes, written in the screenplay genre, perform multiple tasks. Within the scenes are audiovisual cues—landscapes, words, gestures, and characters—that inform the substance of this ethnography. The three scenes above reference the hailing of "Muslims," from being called to pray and hear the blues to being marked as populations, whether by the "terror industrial complex" (Rana 2017b), which includes the prison and military industrial complexes, or by the ethnographer/filmmaker. While the first scene is a documentary recording of something that happened in real "ethnographic time and place" at a mosque in North Oakland in 2011, the second is "found footage" culled together from public recordings on the internet. The third scene is an edit of a staged performance that I (and my camera Nur) produced in collaboration with Fatemeh and her classmates in the Zaytuna College courtyard on a winter night.⁸

To hear the blues adhan, to see connections and refuse to be seen, to make an offering of ethnographic truth through a staging, these *ethnocinematic* gestures have different aesthetic qualities and functions, yet all constitute something of the dynamics of the "Medina by the Bay" as a geography and project. They are brought together in montage to introduce the form and content of this text: the ethical, spiritual, and political stakes of knowledge practices—how we narrate, represent, transmit, dispute, and enact collective survival in this life and the next. The stakes, of course, are high—flourishing life and premature death; salvation and the next-life geography of souls; mobility and displacement; and accumulation, dispossession, and exploitation of social, cultural, and material resources. This is much-examined academic and movement-based terrain, but what this

6 study offers, humbly, is an analysis of such stakes from the perspective of the lives and deaths, refusals and offerings of a multiracial and multiethnic *umma* (community of believers), in order to make a more comprehensive argument about how knowledge, power, and ethics happen under specific sociocultural and material conditions and how an attention to such conditions may enable us to make different choices with and for one another.

By looking at one diverse religious community as a microcosm for the Bay Area, *Medina by the Bay* thinks through these issues on a microscale in ways that have relevance to a larger geography of relations of power and constellations of belief and accountability. It is a call to balance ethics and politics on more than a telos of individual—and at times communal—liberation, survival, and “happiness” (Sara Ahmed 2010); it is a reminder to ask, “in what way do I contribute to the subjugation of any part of those who I define as my people?” (Lorde 1984, 139). It is about how we are implicated in one another’s lives and deaths (from other human beings to the natural world and the objects we create) and how we must call ourselves to account.

Medina by the Bay is an argument for taking Islam and Muslim ways of knowing and being seriously. While Muslims are often absorbed into sociopolitical struggles as victims (e.g., Muslim Ban, refugees, victims of war, colonial occupation, and heteropatriarchy), they are actively ignored or willfully neglected by scholars and activists as sources of knowledge and models of practice, largely due to overriding (Islamophobic) concerns about patriarchy, jihadism, homophobia, being spread by the sword aka colonization, and not being fun/free (lots of rules about food, drink, clothes, prayer, sex, etc.). Following the lead of Muslims themselves, I show another moral and ethical vision and embodied framework that offers one way out of a liberal humanist hegemony built upon centuries of racial capitalist and imperialist exploitation, destruction, and disavowal. Muslims are a billion strong; emerge fiercely from the carceral geographies of prisons, jails, and camps (Malcolm X 1965; Bukhari 2010; Daulatzai 2012; Slahi 2017; Felber 2020); endure under the most stringent and dehumanizing of sanctions and occupation (Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Black Muslims); and continue to produce thousands if not millions of people who have memorized and embodied the entire Qur’an across fourteen centuries (Ware 2014).⁹

Medina by the Bay runs with multiple projects of study and struggle toward getting at what is at stake, “no less than the truth about the world,” while acknowledging “that something about the perspective, experience, and knowledge of the oppressed is not making its way into existing dis-

courses” (Alcoff 2011, 71; Kelley 2016). I invite my readers into “complex communication,” which “thrives on recognition of opacity and on reading opacity, not through assimilating the text of others to our own” (Lugones 2006, 84) but rather, engaging in creative and transformative processes in which we decipher our respective “resistant codes” and logics (Lugones 2006, 79; see also Glissant 1997).¹⁰ To readers who know little of Islam, you will pick up and get lost at times, and I ask you to be my accomplices toward taking seriously the possibility that Muslim ways of knowing and being have something to offer you. For those who know something of Islam, whether through study or practice, I likewise ask for you to be my companions (as in the *Sahaba*) as I bring other ways of knowing and being to bear on what it means for Islam and Muslims to survive on Turtle Island, in what we call North America.¹¹

FROM MECCA TO MEDINA

“This is like, kind of, our Medina, you know?” Zahrah was sitting with her classmates in a wide circle on the green grass of their campus courtyard, a shared space that held a UC Berkeley extension program, the American Baptist Seminary of the West (now Berkeley College of Theology), and the nascent Zaytuna College (est. 2009). It was the last day of their first year, and their professor Imam Zaid Shakir was asking them to relate what they had studied over a yearlong Islamic history course to their contemporary context. For Zahrah, the daughter of Caribbean immigrants who had grown up in Brooklyn, coming to Zaytuna College was like the earliest Muslims migrating to Medina. Having grown up Muslim in a post-9/11 New York, Zahrah had been featured in a published collection of writings by Muslim youth, and by the time she graduated from Zaytuna, she would receive multiple invitations to the Obama White House and be interviewed for many articles and news stories. At Zaytuna, she and her classmates reenacted the migration toward freedom that the original seventh-century *hijra* (migration) to Medina entailed: they could (as her classmates said) “be free” as Muslims, to explore what that meant to them on their own terms. She recounted, “We can be more at home here and really make something of our own and really establish ourselves, and then go back out, you know, when we’ve decided who we are.”

In the Islamic tradition, Medina as a place and idea is connected to the 622 CE/1 AH *hijra* of the Prophet Muhammad and the first community of

8 Muslims in the Hejaz (modern-day Saudi Arabia).¹² The Prophet Muhammad was forty years old and living in the city of his birth, Mecca, which was a center of religious pilgrimage and trade when he began to receive the revelations of the Qur'an in 610 CE. Many of the first to hear the message of Islam and convert to this new way were women, youth, the enslaved, and tribeless people. As more and more people converted to Islam, traditional relations of power, lineage, and hierarchy were disrupted; the agitated leaders of Mecca started targeting the new Muslims. In order to preserve their safety and survival, the community migrated physically and spiritually, leaving their beloved Mecca.

The Prophet Muhammad initially sent a small group of Muslims to Abyssinia (Ethiopia), where the Negus, a Christian king, offered them asylum. A few years later, the rest of the community left Mecca for Yathrib, a northern oasis populated by Jewish and pagan tribes, where many were converting to Islam and where the Prophet was invited to mediate between these conflicted tribes (the Prophet Muhammad's grandfather Abd al-Muttalib was also born in Yathrib to Salmá, who had been an influential woman in the matriarchal traditions there) (Lings 1983). As he left Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad turned back to it and stated, "You are the most beloved of the cities of Allah to me, if the *mushrikeen* (polytheists, those who acted against the Muslims and Islam) did not force me out, I would have never left you" (*Zaytuna College* 2020; Ibn Kathir 2003, 9:96).

The small, beleaguered community was welcomed by the *Ansar* (the Helpers) into Yathrib, which would be called Medina al-Nabi, "city of the Prophet," and they entered into protective covenants with the different tribes.¹³ Free to practice Islam openly, the Prophet took on a new role as political leader and arbiter within this diverse community of new Muslims, Jews, and pagans, and a new society came into being. The documented sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, or *hadith*, are understood as the "tradition" or *Sunna* (way or practice) of the Prophet. The root letters, h-d-th, refer to something happening, yet "hadith" is also translated as "modern" and "new," connoting the transformative impact and newness of the revolutionary social, economic, and political changes the Prophet implemented.¹⁴

The multiple meanings of "hadith" speak to how we understand the "generative rather than prefigurative" characters of traditions (Kelley 2021). With the emergence of new forms of relations and social structures came the frictions of letting former customs, beliefs, and hierarchies go. The conflicts that arose and were resolved in Medina—betrayal and expulsion, war and peace, hypocrisy and forgiveness, property relations and

mutual aid—continue to inform contemporary Muslims in terms of what it means to live in relation at multiple scales: as a servant of Allah (God) and as a member of a socioeconomic, spiritual, and political community.

In one of our first conversations, Zahrah spoke to me about why she came to the not-yet-accredited Zaytuna College when she was offered scholarships to prestigious universities: “I need to develop myself spiritually. And . . . it’s my responsibility to gain Islamic knowledge because it’s the most important knowledge that you can have. . . . I remember my sister said, ‘It’s poor *adab* (manners) to not walk through a door when Allah has opened it for you, especially if it’s something that will only bring you benefit.’¹⁵ And so, that’s one reason why I wanted to come. You know, I felt like if I didn’t come, then it was possibly a poor reflection on my character, as in why would I choose not to come here, and postpone my Islamic knowledge or potentially not do it at all?” Zahrah also had a secondary reason for choosing Zaytuna, and this was the influence of her father, who had converted to Islam as a teenager: “I kind of always felt like, ‘Well, what am I going to do . . . that is as comparable to what he did?’ And so, I thought this was the best way to carry on that transition in his life, you know, because becoming Muslim is the biggest blessing that Allah can give to your family, and so I felt like this was a continuation of that for me and for my family.” At eighteen years old, Zahrah already carried a sense of spiritual, ethical, and political responsibility that she associated with being and becoming Muslim. Moving to Berkeley and attending Zaytuna was a commitment to personal development, which would benefit herself, her family, and her communities.

Zaytuna College, like the larger Bay Area, is a unique site of Islamic knowledge production and Muslim encounter, where racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, class, and sectarian differences come into contact. It seemed like the ideal site to consider what epistemological and ontological alternatives, ways of knowing and being, Muslims in the United States could offer in a highly contentious landscape of Muslim representation and politics post-9/11. Part of the college’s uniqueness was that it was cofounded by three “American Muslims,” Shaykh Hamza Yusuf (Mark Hanson), who is white; Imam Zaid Shakir (Ricky Mitchell), who is Black; and Hatem Bazian, who is Palestinian.¹⁶ While their racial and ethnic differences were significant, within the context of Muslim institution-building, what was more striking was the diversity of their intellectual genealogies, spiritual dispositions, and political commitments. Yusuf studied with individual teachers for decades, most notably in Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, and later received his doctorate in Islamic Studies

from the Graduate Theological Union in California in 2020; Shakir studied Islam at Abu Nour University and privately in Damascus, Syria, and has a master's degree in political science from Rutgers University; and Bazian earned his doctorate in Near Eastern Studies at UC Berkeley in 2002. Bazian is also a senior lecturer in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley and runs an Islamophobia research center.¹⁷

While Zahrah and the other students at Zaytuna had grown up watching YouTube videos and listening to audio recordings of the college's Muslim scholars, I had first heard of Zaytuna in 2006 when it was still an institute based in Hayward, a small East Bay city south of Oakland where the San Mateo Bridge connects the West and East Bays. In a *New York Times* article, Zahrah's and Fatemeh's future teacher, Imam Zaid Shakir, was described by students as "the next Malcolm X," and Zaytuna Institute was described as a thriving center of Islamic learning (Goodstein 2006). The institute became Zaytuna College in 2009 and welcomed its inaugural class of students in fall 2010.¹⁸ At the time they were supported by a fluctuating staff of about ten people, who were mostly Pakistani, although there were also Afghan, Latinx, African American, (east) Asian American, and white Americans (not everyone was Muslim). Zaytuna's inaugural cohorts consisted of recently converted Black, Asian, Latinx, and white Muslims; second- and third-generation Black Muslims; Muslim students from African, Arab, Asian, Caribbean, Latinx, and South Asian families; and Indigenous converts.¹⁹ A few were from the Bay Area, but most of the students came from other regions of the country—Southern California, the Pacific Northwest, the South, the Midwest, and the East Coast—and grew up in other cities and suburbs. Like the historical Medina, Muslims migrated to the Bay Area to participate in the envisioning of a new or renewed society, another Medina, by the Bay. In this encounter with other tribes, beliefs, and peoples—both Muslim and non-Muslim—they would be called upon to respond and submit to a revelation that invited them to reevaluate the world and their place in it.

Zahrah's classmates and teachers believe that Islam and Muslims have something to offer the world, that Islam as a way of being and knowing can address the ills of society at local, national, and global scales. In their lineages, they cite Muslim figures ranging from scholar al-Ghazali (d. 1111) to the founder of the world's oldest university, al-Qarawiyyin (in contemporary Morocco), Fatima al-Fihri (d. 880); more locally, they reference figures like El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, also known as Malcolm X (d. 1965) and sports icon al-Hajj Muhammad Ali (d. 2016).²⁰ This text subsists with El-Shabazz as Muslim ancestor and *wali* (one with a standing with Allah);