

## **Immigrant Latinas and their Shahadah in Miami**

**Stephanie Londono**

### **Introduction**

Within the collective western<sup>i</sup>-imagination, Islam is perceived as a religion that is oppressive and violent toward women. Since the “War on Terror” the mainstream media has presented the “Muslim woman” as a victim behind a veil, one who has not yet seen the salvation that an enlightened western world offers her. This victim-in-need-of-salvation temperament is dangerous and problematic not only because of the implied superiority of Westerners (Abu-Lughod 783-789), but also because it portrays the female convert as a gender traitor, that is, a woman who complies with the male hegemony of Islam and who is held within walls of ignorance and submission. Perpetuating the “Us versus them” binary, Islam has been located as a foreign religion, in opposition to the spirit and values of the West. To be sure, with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, this polarity has been accentuated and “Orientalist tendencies” make it very difficult for the western world to welcome the “Muslim woman” as part of its many identities. It is in our very time that pertinent questions are at hand: What if some of the “Us” begin joining “Them”? Indeed, what if the “saved” western woman makes a seemingly self-sacrificial decision and embraces what is believed to be a misogynistic and retrograde religion? Even more intriguing, what if these female converts are Catholic immigrant Latinas, a group that is expected to assimilate instead of joining “The Other”? To be sure, these are immediate and relevant questions that few academics and many media outlets have formulated.

The aforementioned questions are rooted in a growing awareness of the feminization of Islamic conversion, which has been a growing phenomenon in recent history. According to Margo Bradran, “The spread of conversions to Islam, especially in the West, is a phenomenon of the late twentieth century continuing its rapid growth into the present century, with women constituting the largest numbers of these new Muslims” (192). Furthermore, gender is an important aspect to emphasize when dealing with Islamic conversion, not only because of the infamous reputation mentioned above, but also because women embody powerful symbols. In the words of Karin van Nieuwkerk, “Female conversion may raise even stronger reactions because traditions have often constructed women as symbols of ethnic and religious boundaries” (1). By the same token, Roxanne Marcotte has proposed that Muslim women are “the most powerful symbol of what constitutes an ‘Islamic’ identity” (qtd. in Maslim and Bjork). Ultimately, the conversion of women to Islam is seen with suspicion, as the popular conception is that they convert due to external influences such as marriage and not as the result of their own agency. As Moghissi states, the ‘Muslim woman’ is “far more Oriental than the man” (14).

It must be said that there are a minority of scholars who have placed the topic of women’s conversion to Islam on the academic radar, even if dimly blinking. Thanks to scholars such as Karin van Nieuwkerk,<sup>ii</sup> Audrey A. Maslim and Jeffrey P. Bjork,<sup>iii</sup> this neglected topic is gaining more and more attention;<sup>iv</sup> however, there is still a glaring lacuna in the available sources.<sup>v</sup> What is more, No investigation has yet localized the phenomenon among the experience of immigrant Latinas in Miami. Women from Latin America, especially immigrant Latinas, tend to be hidden within the forgotten geography

of the lands of “Macondoamérica.” Latinas, for example, were not included in Neuwkerk’s book, even though they also reside in the West and constitute the majority of converts in the US Latina/o Muslim community. Samantha Sanchez, a founder of LADO<sup>vi</sup> and graduate alumni of Cultural Anthropology at New School University, revealed that “most [Latino] converts are college-educated, between the ages of 20 and 30, and female.”<sup>vii</sup> This observation is supported by various sources. The deputy Imam at the Islamic Cultural Center in Manhattan, Shamsia Ali, said that 75 percent of the 153 people who converted at the center in 2012 are young Latinas (Samniather). Juan Galvan, president of LADO also noted that women are more attracted to conversion to Islam than men. “There are more Latino Muslim women than Latino Muslim men... I revealed that of all Latino Muslims who have completed the survey, 60% of those have been women.” WhyIslam’s 2012 annual report, also highlights that 55 percent of the Latina/os converts are women. In South Florida, Imam Wilfredo Ruiz stated in an interview that “More women than men convert, both in AMANA offices and in the mosques in Southern Florida” (Diaz).

With this knowledge in mind, the topic begs more attention and questions multiply. Why are Latinas, a group that is already a victim of threefold discrimination: immigrant, Latina, female (and if black even more so), joining a religion that would only further marginalize them? How would this conversion affect their identity as Latinas in the United States? Moreover, echoing some of Nieuwkerk’s questions, how do they come to Islam? To what branch of Islam are they converting? To what messages are they attracted? How do they embody and re-create their new identity? (2) How does their new religious membership encourage or obstruct their civic engagement and assimilation?

How does their experience as immigrants inform their conversion to a “foreign religion”? Rooted in three months of fieldwork, this paper seeks to directly address these interrogations.<sup>viii</sup>

Conversion is a complex concept with a plethora of possible meanings. In this paper it will be presented as a process, “a wholesale transformation that is now and forever,” with consequences not only for the individual who is embracing the change, but also for society-(Rambo 1).<sup>ix</sup> The *Shahâdah* then becomes a central part of this process, the decisive declaration before and after that informs the new connection with the divine.<sup>x</sup> Like conversion, immigration is a topic that is perceived as a male or genderless enterprise (Bonifacio and Angeles 8), which allows for new layers of meaning for the study of religion. Also, the City of Miami, where the fieldwork took place, adds more significance to this study since it has been relegated as a mere touristy haven, where beaches are transformed into the temples of vacationers decorated with ubiquitous bikinis, and shopping the praxis of their devotion. This deep-seated stereotype by no means reflects the rich religious landscape that Miami has to offer, in part thanks to its large and fluid immigrant population. This paper will therefore, intrepidly dive into this unexplored space equipped with the perspectives from a number of disciplines, chiefly religious studies, sociology, psychology, immigration, gender studies, also Census data and ethnography.

### **Latinos Muslim in the US**

Though the number of Latina/o Muslims in the US is not very high, the study of their conversion is justified for various reasons. From a general perspective, Latinos constitute the biggest minority in the United States with a population of 53 million. Of

this minority, over 1.5 million reside in Miami Dade County (FL), where the fieldwork was conducted. This number establishes Miami Dade as having the third largest Hispanic population behind Los Angeles County (CA) and Harris County (TX).<sup>xi</sup> On the other hand, while the proportion of Muslims in the U.S. is modest, oscillating between four and seven million (Smith, vii) — less than 1% of the population, Islam is projected to become the second largest religion in the country by 2015<sup>xii</sup> (qtd. in Maslim and Bjorck 99). Also, 90 percent of US Latina/o Muslims are converts according to LADO’S Survey on Latino Muslims (SLM) project. These are powerful statistics, especially if placed in the same equation. Why are Latinos converting to Islam? Why would a group that is already marginalized join a marginalized religion?

US Latina/os already have a history with Islam. In fact, as Bowen affirmed, they “Converted through joining African-American majority Islamic groups prior to 1975”<sup>xiii</sup> (Bowen 390). There are about 25,000 to 75,000 Latina/o Muslims in the U.S. according to different Latino Muslim Organizations such as Latino American Dawah Organization (LADO), the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). However, a recent estimate proposed by Ali Khan, the national director of the American Muslim Council in Chicago in 2006, found that the actual number could be as high as 200,0000 Latina/o Muslims in the country (qtd. in Barzegar).<sup>xiv</sup>

Other sources, such as local newspapers, have traced this same phenomenon in Miami. In a recent publication, The Miami Herald estimated that are 100,000 Muslims in South Florida, with a growth of 30,000 over the past decade, 3,000 of which are Latina/os (Wright). Major cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles are also witnessing a

growth in the Latina/o Muslim population. Apparently, the conversion rate was triggered after the tragic event of September 11, 2001, in what scholar Hisma Aidi calls “The other September 11 Effect.” In his special report for the *International Justice, Local Injustices Journal*, Aidi notes that in the US, “Usually 25,000 people a year become Muslim, but by several accounts that number has quadrupled since September 11.”<sup>xv</sup>

Just how many of these converts are Latina/o? According to Ishan Bagby in *Report Number I from the US Mosque Study 2011*, published in 2012, “The ethnicity of new converts remained the same except for an increase among Latinos from 6% of all converts in 2000 to 12% of all converts in 2001, and a slight decrease of white American converts.” The impact of this change in the conversion demographics is already visible in Miami where the printing of the Qur’an in Spanish is almost as high as the English version.<sup>xvi</sup>

## **SETTING, ENTRY AND ACCESS**

The thirteen women participating in this investigation present themselves as post 9-11 immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. All of them, except one, are converts of Islam from their former Catholic faith. Their ages mostly ranging from early 20s to early 30s, the majority has attended college to earn diplomas, mainly from medical fields. Relationships were formed through attending two mosques in Miami Dade: The Masjid Shamsuddin in North Miami Beach and Masjid Al-Ihsaand in South Miami, both of which are Sunni. Initial access to the interviewees came through a Pakistani woman who I met after a Friday prayer in a local Sunni mosque, the Shamsuddin.<sup>xvii</sup> Through her, a connection was made with Aisha, a Cuban convert who would function as the gatekeeper into the community.<sup>xviii</sup> Most participants were eager to participate, however

taking notes, recording or filming the interviews was prohibited.<sup>xix</sup> Another difficulty just as Larry Poston reports was the “Suspicion... and lack of confidence in the ability of non-Muslims to properly understand and portray those who adhere to the Islamic faith” (161).<sup>xx</sup>

### Interviewees Profile<sup>xxi</sup>

Name	Age	Nationality/ Previous Religion	Education	Years as a “Convert”	Branch of Islam	Medium of “Conversion”
Aisha	35	Cuban/ Catholic	Degree: Computer Science	6	Sunni	Coworkers and social media.
Ana	30	Colombian/ Catholic	Degree: Nurse	10	Sunni	Classmate
Maria	60+	Cuba/ Catholic	Some College	30	Sunni	Friend
Claudia	24	Cuba/ Catholic	Some College: Pharmacist	5	Sunni	Husband
Melisa	24	Honduran/ Catholic	B.A. Finance and Accounting	2 ½	Sunni	Husband
Lina	28	Cuban/ Catholic	Degree: Nurse	6	Sunni	Colleagues and Internet
Paula	40+	Nicaraguan/ Catholic	Degree: Nurse	6	Sunni	Internet, colleagues and friends.
Magda	28	Venezuelan/ Catholic	Studying English	2	Sunni	Coworker and Husband
Sara	32	Colombian/ Pakistani	Degree: Associate in Arts.	15	Sunni	Mother
Leyla	60	Cuban/Catholic	Degree: Dentist	20+	Sunni	Classmate
Laura	17	Cuba/Moroccan	High School	Second generation of a convert mother.	Sunni	Mother
Fatima	22	Cuban/ Jehovah Witness	English Classes.	> 1 month	Sunni	Colleagues and Internet.
Lorena	32	Peru/Catholic	Degree: Music and Education	2	Sunni	Friend

### Immigration, Gender and religion: Facing Mecca without turning their backs to Latin America

Contrary to the traditional understanding of migration, women now account for nearly half of all international immigration —approximately 95 million women (Morrison, Schiff and Sjöblom x). According to the database of the United Nations on the stock of immigrants, between 1960 and 2005, the immigrant proportion of women from Latin American and the Caribbean increased from 45 to 50 percent (Morrison, Schiff and Sjöblom 2). These statistics alone should prove the relevance of the study of gender within immigration. Even though there are some similitudes in the experience of men and women when they migrate, there are certainly some stark differences. For example, gender roles get altered or reinforced in the process of incorporation into the receiving society. Regardless of class and race, which are key variants, women seem to benefit more from the process of immigration.<sup>xxii</sup> As Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo state:

The status of immigrant women improves vis-à-vis immigrant men due to women's increased access to resources through employment and protective institutions. Even women in very exploitative jobs are exposed to different patterns of gender relations and might adapt their own expectations to the more egalitarian —or less patriarchal— relationships that they perceive among American couples. Moreover, in the United States, immigrant women may have access to institutional protections — ranging from social security and unemployment compensation to protections for abused women — that are independent from their family status and increase the resources at their disposal. (897)

On the other hand, men may feel a “loss of status and a threat to their gender identity” (Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 897), which drastically weakens the traditional gender roles. The man enjoys no public recognition, and when returning home he may have to perform “female duties” such as cleaning and childcare. Thus, many scholars agree that women “adapt faster than men to the norms and values of the receiving country” (Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 897). If women experience the immigration process as an indirect booster of their independence and agency, it could be said that their



newfound advances somehow contribute to their deliberate decision to join a new religion. There is a quote from Juan Galvan that states that “Yes, a Latina is more willing to convert than a Latino male. Many Latino men want to become Muslim but do not have the bravery of Latinas. Too many Latino men are too afraid to change.” Yet Galvan recognizes that he does not entirely comprehend the gender disparity when it comes to conversion. “I still seek to understand why large numbers of women including Latinas come to Islam.” Key words in Galvan’s observation are Latino’s *fear* to change versus the *bravery* of Latinas. Parting from the premise that the majority of Latina/o Muslims are first generation immigrant converts or second generation according to LADO’s SLM project, the probability that the immigrant man becomes a potential Muslim convert is less than that of a female convert. Indeed, the difficulty that immigrant men experience during their assimilation prevents him from seeking new changes. Even if perceived as positive, the risk is too high. Yet, the immigrant woman, aware of the aforementioned institutional protections, is more willing to explore, exercise her agency and even go against her family’s will.

### **Transnationalism, Liminality and Religion**

Whereas women may adapt faster and better in the receiving society, this does not imply that they are more easily detached from their connections abroad. Important migration literature shows that first-generation immigrants strive to recreate ties with their countries of origin, living a transnational life to cope with the difficulties of incorporation. While Steigenge, Palma and Solórzano define transnationalism as “Activities, organizations, ideas, identities, and social and economic relations that frequently cross or even transcend national boundaries” (152), Levitt, and Schiller argue

that the idea of transnationalism is focused on the reformulation of the concept of society. It challenges the understanding of basic social institutions such as the family, citizenship, and nation states (3). They also indicate, that transnationalism should not be seen as a linear process. Rather, it should be recognized that migrants “simultaneously live aspects of their lives in their sending countries at the same time that they are incorporated into the countries that receive them” (3). In other words, migrants can experience all of their transnational identities at the same time and reinforce each other. From a religious perspective, it must be recognized that “religious communities are among the oldest of the transnationals” (qtd. in Vasquez 14) serving as “a good source for identity because it is a socio-cultural instrument available for everyone, with endless supply” (Martinez-Vazquez, 116).

In other words, it is common to see migrants develop an extra layer of religiosity as a manifestation of their need of cultural continuity, which can be achieved through membership to the religious institution (Stepick, Rey and Mahler 6). This prevailing religious attitude of migrants is what led Alex Stepick to bluntly defy Nietzsche’s famous declaration that “God is dead.” He states, that if Nietzsche was “still alive and visited various immigrant communities, he would observe that among immigrants, at least, God is very much alive” (13).

But not all religious institutions provide a bridge to the native countries of the immigrant congregant, and not all immigrant congregants are seeking to reconstruct their homeland identity within the religious institutions they join. Rather, these immigrants, without ignoring their national identities, give more priority to their religious persona. This behavior seems to go against the historical pattern of the Catholic Church in the US,

which demonstrates that immigrants prefer to attend institutions that resemble their culture and represents their ethnicity (Badillo).<sup>xxiii</sup> As part of the religious transnational experience, the Church has clearly served as a nourishing umbilical cord between the immigrant and their country of origin.

However, this is not the case with every congregation that serves immigrant devotees. In the case of these Latina Muslim converts who are immigrants from Cuba, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, Colombia and Venezuela, they experience their religious transnationalism in a different manner. Instead of motivating them to become more connected with their native Church, their migration process drove them away to other horizons creating an ambiguous conception of home and their collective identity. In their fieldwork, Steingenga, Palma and Giron in their field work study “Lived Religions and a Sense of Home,” present a case similar to the Latina Muslim phenomenon. Here, the members of a Mayan immigrant community in Juniper, Florida, joined an Evangelical church, leaving behind the Catholic Church along with elements of their tradition and even their families. “While Evangelicals also send remittances, their adoption of a new home in their churches in Jupiter, along with the notion that some of the traditional elements of their previous lives are now forbidden, leaves less room for the formation of a transnational Jacaltect identity than among Catholics” (165). Moreover, an Evangelical lay-pastor echoed what this immigrant Latinas say about their past and present kin. “He sees himself as part of a new community of brothers and sisters in the church. Where they come from is less important than who they are now” (165).

Immigrant Latinas who have converted to Islam also divorced themselves from their previous communities and adopted a different focus. They emphasize that they are

all equal under Islam regardless of where they come from. Aware of their isolated and ambiguous position by not belonging under the normative categories of “Catholic Latinos,” “Arab Muslims” or “US American Citizen,” they turn to Islam as a source of identity construction (Martínez-Vázquez 116-7). Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez, author of *Latina/o y Musulmán: The Construction of Latina/o Identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States*,<sup>xxiv</sup> describes this social ambiguity as being in a liminal state. He comments, “U.S. Latina/o Muslims are situated as Others within the larger U.S. Latina/o community, in-between the cracks of the social stricture, not at the margins of it” (67). Argentine singer and philosopher Facundo Cabral translated this feeling in his song: “No soy de aquí, ni soy de allá” (“I’m not from here, nor from there”).

The mosque provides for them a familiar setting where they rear their children, and meet every Friday to socialize and discuss their day-to-day difficulties. After this “departure” from their previous connections, according to the theory of Steingenga, Palma and Girón, it would be unlikely for these women to return to their communities of origin (168). Moreover, their spouses (all except two are married: Laura, and Fatima) are migrants from Islamic countries.<sup>xxv</sup> This marital bond does in fact reinforce their transnational priorities. Ana, for example, is more concern about the Syrian war than the political situation in her native Colombia. Every Friday she collects donations to send to her husband’s country. Another convert from Venezuela, is more interested in labor discrimination against Muslims than against Latinos. However, they still reserve a corner in the mosque only for Latinas, where they speak Spanish and enjoy their familiar company and jokes.

Their priority in religion was not a connection with Latin America; rather they found other benefits in the religion that enhanced their identity but not by reinforcing their homeland ties. Some of them claimed to be on “a spiritual journey” or a “Quest” to find “meaning and the truth.” These Latinas added an extra layer to their transnational life by choosing to convert to a different tradition. While they place their religious identity first, pray five times a day facing Mecca (the holiest city of Islam) and sacralize their sentences with “*alhumdillah*,” (“Praise God”), they do not turn their backs on their homelands in Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **Taking the Shahada**

#### **Another step toward Embracing Islam (or Returning) to Islam**

“*Unto God shall ye return*” (Qur’an 5:48)

Conversion is a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the experience of the individual. Certainly, it alters the fabric of society, just as Islam is changing the religious make up of the West. Etymologically, Rambo states that in “The Judeo-Christian Scriptures, the Hebrew and Greek words generally equated with conversion are words that literally mean *to turn or return*” (Rambo 3). In Rambo’s book *Understanding Religious Conversion*, he interprets it as “turning from and to new religious groups”(3). This is different from the Islamic understanding of conversion, which would make emphasis on the *return* translation, since it teaches that everyone is born Muslim. As Maria from Cuba asserted, “We are all born Muslim. Some may wonder off the right path, be born to Catholic or Jewish parents, but they are still Muslims.” Maria interpreted her *shahadah* as the affirmation of this inherited identity. Interestingly, there is no such word as conversion in the Arab language; rather the emphasis is on the idea of

“Submitting to God.”<sup>xxvi</sup> However, these Latinas still used the word conversion along with reversion to describe the moment when they acknowledged their true identity as Muslims. Samsel speaks directly to this point, “In a sense, forgetfulness and heedlessness represent a failure of thought; in this sense also, the inculcation of the Shahadah and its concomitant ramifications represent thought brought to its proper consummation” (2). The *Shahadah* then in the words of Aisha, was only the first step in her path as a conscious Muslim, and her definite moment of salvation. “In a way converts have an advantage... When you decide to convert and you say the Shahadah, all your sins are erased and you are saved.”

As mentioned in the introduction, Rambo’s preferred approach to conversion is a “*process over event*” (1). This preconception informs a common pattern in all the conversion narratives collected. Embracing Islam was a gradual process of learning. It was part of a “quest” ignited by what Wholrab-Shar describes as an “experiential crisis” a generic dissatisfaction with life as it is.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Overall, immigration left them no choice but to re-create their identity and seek a source of stability amid the seemingly endless chaos of the US American market. This dissatisfaction or “crisis” drove most of them from Catholicism to Protestantism before finally exploring the Mosque. Many of the converts justified the period of searching and studying by underscoring Islam’s emphasis on knowledge. “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave,” and “Seek knowledge even though it be in China” are some of the most common quotes from the traditions of the Prophet. Lorena, for example, “prepared herself and her family” for three years before converting. Other participants waited an average of six months to a year before they felt ready. Contrary to the popular belief, the

majority of these Latinas came to Islam through coworkers, classmates, friends and the Internet<sup>xxviii</sup> — through, interestingly enough, not through conjugal influence.<sup>xxix</sup> Only Melisa and Claudia were introduced to Islam through their future spouses; however, even they emphasized that it was their deliberate decision and not because of their husband's demands.<sup>xxx</sup> But even after the encounter and the commitment, the participants visited the mosque until after they felt they had learned the basics, mainly how to dress and how to pray. Echoing a joint concern among the Latina sisters before coming to the mosque, Marissa said “I was really nervous, I thought I was going to be the only Latina in the mosque... what am I saying, in Miami!” None of them knew each other before converting to Islam, but now they treat each other like family. They are sisters in the religion.<sup>xxxi</sup>

### **Findings: Motives of Conversion**

From a functional perspective, the data collected from the personal and group interviews reveal four consistent motives of conversion among immigrant Latinas in Miami.<sup>xxxii</sup> Though Islam represents for them the “only way,” the “right path,” “the true and only religion,” the ensuing factors were important incentives in their return to Islam.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

#### **I. Islamic vision of gender roles**

In an NPR (National Public Radio) interview titled “Latinas Choosing Islam over Catholicism,” scholar Ivonne Haddad said that immigrant Latinas were attracted to Islam because “it reflects the values of the patriarchal conservative societies of Latin America that have been diluted in modern America.” This observation resonated with the participants who expressed disapproval and confusion with the blurred distinction of

male and female roles in US America. Maria complained that “Women act like men and men like women...In my house my mother was always around taking care of us not working in an office all day.” Standing in a society that is constantly challenging and recreating the image of ‘modern families,’ they seek for a clearly defined role of womanhood, welcoming the gender distinctions and roles of Islam.

These Latinas stressed their appreciation of the qur’anic verse that states that the man must maintain the household while the woman focuses on childrearing.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Aisha speaks to openly, “Thanks to Islam I get to stay home and care for my children. I mean I don't have to work... my husband is in charge of that.” Moreover, as Haddad indicated, “their idea of women’s rights does not coincide with the western feminist movement, characterized by empowerment through independence and academic/economical success.” Instead their idea of women's rights rests on valuing and honoring the inherent biological role of the woman as a mother, while at the same time recognizing her as a *khalifah*<sup>xxxv</sup> or moral agent before Allah. In other words, “separate but equal.” Thus, in their view, Islam requires discipline but promotes women’s rights and grants them honor and respect. As Haddad states, “Whereas American culture gives them freedom but no respect, Islam may restrict their freedom, but gives them more respect.” This restriction is seen in a positive light, positioning them upon a safe path that keeps them from transgressing divine instructions. Smith describes Islam as a distinctive guidebook:

Compared with other religions, Islam spells out the way of life it proposes; it pinpoints it, nailing it down through clear injunctions. Every major type of action is classified on a sliding scale from the “forbidden: through the “indifferent” to the “obligatory.” This gives the religion a flavor of definiteness that its quite is own. Muslims know where they stand. (48)



The chaotic and pluralistic setting of Miami can now be safely navigated upon this divine grid of *halal* and *haram* (Allievi 120), one that not only informs them as to the “right path” but also (and ultimately) leads them toward salvation.

## **II. Dissatisfaction with Former faith<sup>xxxvi</sup>**

All of the participants, except for one, insisted that what ignited their interest in Islam was their discontent with their upbringing in the Catholic Church. Catholic concepts such as the trinity, the divinity of Jesus, and the presence of a priest as mediator between God and the devotee were key motivators for their transition to Islam. Aisha and Ana, for example, left the Catholic Church for a Protestant congregation before they joined Islam, but the ambiguities involved in the trinitarian doctrine eventually made them leave the protestant Church. Commenting on Islam’s “uncorrupted monotheism,” Ana asserted that, “In Islam, there is only one God... We also believe in Jesus, but he is a prophet not the Son of God.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> In their native countries, especially Latin America, the Church’s direct connection with the national culture blurred the divine to the point that from their view, as Magda from Venezuela said, “everyone is a Catholic, but no body is a ‘real’ Catholic... Nobody knows anything about the religion, not even the priest knew how to answer my questions.” None of them recognized being an ardent Catholic, which also explains the many doctrinal lacunas they found in their domestic faith. Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology, evaluates this connection between religion and secularism: “In the modern bureaucratic age there is hardly any space left to lead a meaningful life according to any principles other than utilitarian ones” (qtd in Riesebröt and Konieczny 148). Also, Weber sees “a certain dignity in religious attempts to transcend the narrow boundaries of utilitarian interest through the dramatization of

ultimate values and the principles shaping one's life according to them" (qtd in Riesebrodt and Konieczny, 148).

Elaborating upon this theory, the immigration process of these Latina converts caused the disconnection between "the sacred" and Catholicism to be even more pervasive along with the American Calvinistic influence, which demands individualism and a work ethic that is far from their definition of religion. For example, they believe that sex should not be just a personal choice but also controlled by the religious institution. Consequently, when they learned about Islam, they confessed feeling attracted to its system of beliefs because they were clearly independent from the "American secular life" and it gave them clear religious guidelines.

### **III. Enhanced sense of Identity**

*"Before I came to Islam, I was always trying to look pretty, buying so much clothes trying to look like a model... do you think I was happy? Of course not!" -Aisha.*

Before converting to Islam, Aisha's name was Patricia. As she stated, "I changed my name because my life changed, I'm someone else." In group conversations, these Latinas remembered their past lives (before their *shahadah*) as memories of degradation and emptiness.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Juxtaposing the images of a "Muslim woman" vs. a "western woman" they see an objectified and over-sexualized woman, who is primarily valued because of her looks, as opposed to the "Muslim woman" who claims ownership of her body and whose voice and intellect supersede her curves. They view their Islamic identity as significant because of the sense of control they gain from it. The labels imposed on them as immigrant Latinas no longer dictate their self-image or behavior. The following argument by Ketner, Buitelar, and Bosma demonstrate the empowerment these Latinas derive from their Islamic identity:

“[M]igrant identity is an *assigned* identity ... but the Muslim identity can be an *asserted* identity, an identity that is chosen. Because it is a matter of personal choice, the Islamic identity can be very meaningful. Stressing Islamic identity in a non-Muslim context can give minorities the feeling that .. in some ways they can be in command of their own lives. (qtd. in Maslim and Bjork 2004, italics in the original)

As Allievi positively states, “Many women converts find Islam interesting: not in spite of its ‘Otherness,’ but precisely *because* of its ‘Otherness’” (146). In fact, they long to become leaders or representatives of the religion and give more credibility to Islam through their status as immigrant Latina converts. When asked if any of them would prefer to live in a Muslim country, they all answered in the negative. Aisha asserted “Here I get to be different; in Saudi Arabia I’d just be another Muslim...I’m here for a reason ...I like that I’m different even though it’s difficult sometimes to be a Muslim in Miami.” Indeed, Aisha is unusual. Tacitly she has positioned herself as the leader of the Latina Muslim group merited by her reputation as “the-learned-one.” She was often approached with practical or theological questions not only from Latinas but even from Muslim-born women. But what gives her more credibility is her superior standard of modesty. All the women from Al-Ihsaan and the Shamsudding wear the *hijab*; however, Aisha is the only one who wears the *niqab*.<sup>xxxix</sup>

### **Motivations to Wear the Hijab<sup>xl</sup>: The transformation after the *Shahadah***

Turning their backs to the hostile western mainstream media after 9-11 and oblivious of what the veil meant for the Egyptians during the women’s liberationist movement in the 1920s, or what it represented for the nationalist women during the Islamic revival, these Latinas are weaving a new sense and purpose to the *hijab*, one that reinforces their identity as Muslims. It is important to comment here on the divisive nature of the *hijab*, especially within the families of these Latina converts.<sup>xli</sup> While

familial reactions to their conversion were negative, nothing quite compared to the repudiation expressed against the *hijab*. Many of their parents expressed that they were willing to accept them as Muslims as long as they did not wear the “veil.” The *hijab* then, was the turning point for the families just as the *shahadah* was for the converts.<sup>xlii</sup>

According to the model of Gabriel and Hannan, there are at least four main reasons why the *hijab* is an essential element in the transformation of women converts (14-15).

1. **A symbol of Muslim Women’s identity:** By donning the *hijab*, these immigrant Latinas not only interrupt the secular public landscape of Miami with “spiritually ordained apparel” (Badran 204), but most importantly, they visually reinforce and formalize their identity as Muslims. This grants them a sense of membership and belonging to a larger Muslim community or *umma* that heals the perceived isolation of the liminal, or “in-between” space they occupy.<sup>xliii</sup>
2. **Achieve Distinctiveness:** As mentioned above, these Latinas want to stand out and be noticed as active representatives of Islam. This may sound paradoxical given the traditional understanding of the veil as a symbol that is supposed to promote modesty by “making women invisible” in the public sphere. In fact, some Muslim women living in the United States choose not to wear the *hijab* precisely to avoid the unwanted attention that this religious apparel attracts. Allievi notes, for example, how “to wear a veil” merits “a certain dose of exhibitionism” (132). Three years ago, NPR featured the story of Muslim women who were “Lifting the Veil.”<sup>xliiv</sup> One woman even claimed that the veil made her more “noticeable” even to the point of visually persecution—quite the opposite of modesty. She reinforced the immense

responsibility that wearing the *hijab* entails because it transforms the woman into a representative of a community. In her words to NPR, “When you put the scarf on, you have to understand that you are representing a community...And that is huge. That's a huge responsibility. And I don't know if it's for everyone” (Khalid). Latinas gladly take on this responsibility. Being “Musulmanas” is their prime identity, and at the same time it helps them defy the fixed identity of the US definition of a “Latina.” “Oh what a pride” Aisha exclaimed, “To be able to be recognized as a Muslim and be able to speak for my religion, and teach people if they want to know.”

3. **Symbol of Piety:** The *hijab* like the mosque “becomes a source of pride, a refuge, and a means to social status in the community, especially when the psychological aspects that build self-esteem are not available in the...larger society” (qtd. in Maslim and Bjork 98). Latinas understand that by covering they are obeying God’s explicit words and therefore acquiring merits for salvation (Gabriel and Hannan 15). Aisha, who only two years ago began wearing the *niqab* explained that she went through a “a mental and religious preparation” before deciding to wear the extra layer of modesty. “I go an extra mile to gain extra deeds for salvation.” In the words of Katherine Bullock, wearing the *hijab* assumes such a sacred status that it is “almost a form of sacrament” that requires moral preparation (15). A popularly known rule as Aisha would explain, was that “once you put it on you leave it on.” There was harsh criticism toward women who “lifted their veils” after choosing to wear it. Particularly for Latina converts, it is important to cultivate credibility and the *hijab* allows them to tangibly prove their true commitment to the religion.<sup>xlv</sup>

**4. A symbol of Class hierarchy:** Modesty comes to be understood as a synonym of “religiosity.” Visually, the veil translates as “the more you cover, the more religious you are.” To be sure, this has a historical precedent when women of higher class would cover more;<sup>xlvi</sup> accordingly, these Latinas strive for the strictest mode of modesty. Some of them like Lina, for example, have even tried to wear the *burka*, but said she was going to wait for her baby to get older because it was very encumbering to care for him while wearing the long garment.

#### **Civic Engagement: The Hijab in Action**

Before assessing whether Islam encourages or obstructs the civic engagement of these Latina converts, there is another matter that needs to be revised first. Because these converts have to go beyond the *shahadah* by reinforcing their belonging to the new community and by adopting their cultural qualities, their civic engagement is more limited. As Martínez-Vázquez argues, these U.S. Latina/o Muslims go through a period of liminality before they fully enter the community (66). “They are not culturally ignorant about U.S. Latina/os as they are members of the larger structure, but their decision to convert puts them at odds with the dominant conventional constructions (or centre) of U.S. Latina/o culture and identities” (67). On the other hand, this ambiguous position is also experienced within the Muslim community, given that they are seen as outsiders. While my interviewees may uphold the tolerance and egalitarianism that they have encountered in the mosque, it is clear that their immediate circle is held together by other Latinas.

It is within their liminality that U.S. Latina/o Muslims are forced to develop connections among themselves and thus, create a community. This community helps

them address their isolation and as Rambo articulates, it offers a better understanding of their conversion.

Magda explains the “natural” division within the sister’s room in the Masjid Shamsuddin: “Latinas sit on this corner, the Arabs and others from the Middle East sit on the other side, and in the middle the rest of the women who are from other places... Like Africa, India, Asia, you know.” When they interact with the other members, the language is a clear barrier since English is not their mother tongue. Therefore, these women internalize most of their energy focusing on becoming better Muslims. Some are taking Arabic classes at the Mosque and all wear the *hijab* even to go to work and to school. Aisha sends daily qur’anic tex-messages, and Melisa is planning on earning her master’s degree on Islamic studies after she graduates from accounting this Spring.

Departing from their effort to transition from liminality to community, there are other factors that obstruct their civic engagement. Using Stepick, Rey and Mahler’s theory of civic engagement, it can be argued that their denomination and context of reception play a vital role in their deliberate isolation from society. On the one hand, as the aforementioned authors have argued,

“fundamentalists discourage believers from broader social interaction and from building a bridging social capital with those who are ‘sinners’... As a result, they prefer to interact primarily with people like them, with those with whom they have bonding social capital” (8).

While it would be a fallacy to state that all of the Latina converts that were encountered were “fundamentalist,” they considered themselves to be very conservative. Their views on the religion echoed the androcentric perspective of Islamic scholars from the middle ages, upholding the validity of polygamy, gender roles, modesty and segregation. Therefore, these women only maintain ties within their religious community.

Also, the fear of being corrupted by the secular “Outsiders,” keeps them civically restrained. Aisha synthesizes this fear of civic engagement by homeschooling her children. She states, “I would rather have a daughter who is illiterate, than a daughter that steers away from the right path.” On the other hand, the negative context of reception,<sup>xlvi</sup> also keeps them from civic involvement. In this case they resent the hostility that their husbands have to go through by being immigrant Muslims.<sup>xlviii</sup> However, for the interviewees, this hostility that led some Muslims to hide their identities, is really a benign force that reinforces their religiosity and keeps them united. In other words, these Latinas transform this hostility into a challenge where they have a protagonist role. They want to stand out, be different, be representatives of Islam. It is difficult not to realize their enthusiasm and eagerness regarding proselytism and apologetics. Such efforts function as their “indirect or subconscious” civic engagement. Ironically, the *hijab*, that symbol that positioned them on the margins of society in the first place, is what brings them back. They describe the veil as a diploma that allows them to vindicate Islam. Acting as graduates who have authority and voice, they explain how by covering their bodies they are not complying with the western “oppressive sexualization of the female body,” but rather empowering their own voices. In Leyla’s words: “They [Outsiders] want to hear what we have to say.”

### **Conclusion**

**“The problem of precarious belonging is turned against the system that makes belonging problematic” (Wohlrab-Sahr 87).**

The conversion of Latinas to Islam may be seen as a paradox for the Western perspective, which has categorized them in the ambiguous position of, one might



say, “the proud and oppressed.” On the one hand, they have embraced traditional gender roles and transformed them into empowerment. On the other, they have echoed long-standing patriarchal discourses, while subversively demanding equality and tolerance in the name of Islam. Borrowing from the model of identity construction of Martínez-Vázquez, these stimulating insights find explanation.

**1. Recovering Cultural Memory:** Islam and Latin America are not foreign to each other. The Spanish colonizers were themselves under Muslim rule for over 700 years. During an interview, Imam Wilfredo Ruiz made a parallel with the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. “If in one hundred years of being a US territory we have already become ‘Americanized,’ imagine over 700 hundred years!” Some scholars have highlighted this influence through the “fatalistic attitudes toward life” found in “Latin” sayings such as “Si Dios quiere” (“If God wills”) or “Ojalá” (“God grant that”). It was Maria, who during a group interview, casually and proudly realized the linguistic similarities between *Ojalá* and *Inshalla*.

**2. Re-interpreting the past:** Immigrant Latinas are not migrating to a new religion, they are returning home. Their lives are now filtered through the lens of Islam in what Wohlrab-Sahr calls the “linguistic turn” (41), where their biography begins from the conversion moment and then works backwards, not vice versa. Aisha’s view of her migration to Miami took on a different meaning. As she stated, “I never heard of Islam in Cuba... Allah brought me to Miami to find Islam.”

**3. Breaking normative Colonial Representation/Stereotypes:** After they convert, “US Latina/o Muslims are forced to re-construct their identities which become inadequate to them after their conversion” (Martínez-Vázquez 3). The Miami Latina

Muslims recognize that they are different and they embrace this difference as a counter-narrative of what it means to be Latino. Maria asserted, “We [Latina/os] are not all Mexican and Catholic like they show on TV.” Magda, who lives in El Doral, reports that she has never experienced discrimination, though she often hears people talking about her assuming that she is “Arab.” According to her, “They say things like ‘pobrecita’ (poor thing) or ‘que calor con esa cosa en la cabeza’ (She must be hot with that thing on her head).” But she immediately knows what to do. “I like it when I catch people speaking about me in Spanish, and then to see their faces when they realize I speak Spanish too.” Magda is not the only one who is often breaking this stereotype by just speaking Spanish in front of other curious Latinos. As Melisa candidly asserted, “Sometimes I pretend I’m speaking on the phone.”

These Immigrant Latina Muslims living in Miami, recognize that they may have become “arabizadas” (“arabized”) imitating ethnic-cultural traditions from their husband’s native countries after their *shahadah*.<sup>xlix</sup> However, unlike the prevailing trends of the western mainstream media, they do not feel the need to be “saved,” nor do they see this hybrid state as problematic. Rather, they envision all of their identities as reinforcing one another in a religion that validates the experiences and voices of women, and as Maslim and Bjork state, “promotes positive cultural gender roles and ethnic diversity”(98). In the words of Maria, “There is no contradiction, Muslim first, Latina second, then the rest.”

## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> The term western includes Europe, Southern/North America and the Caribbean.
- <sup>ii</sup> Author and editor of *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (2006), a compilation of essays, exploring a wide range of topics from the conversion process, feminism, and the Hijab to the creation of a female Muslim identity.
- <sup>iii</sup> Authors of “Reasons for Conversion to Islam Among Women in the United States” (2009).
- <sup>iv</sup> Sources on women and conversion to Islam: Oliveira and Cecilia L. Mariz (2006), Anway (1995), Wohlrab-Sahr (1999), Dirks and Parlove (2003), Mansson McGinty (2006), Haleem (2003), Shatzmiller (1996), Sultán (1999), Madonia (2012), Hofmann (1997).
- <sup>v</sup> The literature concerning Latina/o Muslims in the US has been growing, and authors such as Patrick D. Bowen, Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez and Hisham Aidi among others must be recognized. Indeed the early stage of this community demanded a first general overview before diving into specifics. Thus, the topic of Latinas taking the shahada until now is gaining more momentum.
- <sup>vi</sup> The Latino American Da’wah Organization. They describe themselves as “ a grassroots, nonprofit organization geared toward promoting Islam among Latinos and provides support to Latino Muslims. LADO distributes and makes available information about Islam in Spanish, Portuguese, and English. “¡Puro Latino! ¡Puro Islam! ¡A su LADO!” “About LADO.” About LADO. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Feb. 2014.
- <sup>vii</sup> Galvan, “Who are Latino Muslims.”
- <sup>viii</sup> To be clear, I am in no way pretending to homogenize the identity of immigrant Latina converts in the Muslim community in Miami. Without a doubt, every one of their stories includes complex patterns and particularities. This paper is, to be sure, just a part of a larger project.
- <sup>ix</sup> In Islam the belief is that the person ‘reverts’ as opposed to convert because everyone is born Muslim. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will maintain the word convert to follow the popular understanding. The concept of reversion will be developed in a later section of the paper.
- <sup>x</sup> From the Arabic testimony or evidence, in the religious sense is to declare that “There is no god but God” (lâ ilâha illâ’Llâh) and that “Muhammad is the messenger of God” (Muhammadun rasûlu ’Llâh). It is the “Islamic profession of faith and first pillar of Islam” (Gimaret).
- <sup>xi</sup> “U.S. Hispanic Population by County, 1980-2011.” *Pew Research Centers Hispanic Trends Project RSS*. Pew Research Center, 29 Aug. 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2014.
- <sup>xii</sup> In fact, the Muslim population is forecasted to grow about twice the rate of the non-Muslim population in the world over the next two decades. “The Future of the Global Muslim Population.” *Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS*. Pew Research Center, 27 Jan. 2011. Web. 09 Jan. 2014.
- <sup>xiii</sup> This is the year of the formation of perhaps the first U.S. Latina/o Muslim organization, Alianza Islamica (Bowen 390).
- <sup>xiv</sup> The U.S. Census does not collect religious data, which explains the wide gap in the Latino Muslim membership status.

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<sup>xv</sup> Haifaa Jawad notes how the rate of “conversion to Islam surges at times when there are strong anti-Muslim feelings such as those following the Bosnian conflict, the Gulf War, and the Rushdie affair (Jawad 2006, 169). After September 11, 2001, “the number of conversions has risen in the UK, US and across Europe. A Dutch Islamic center claims a tenfold increase, whilst a steady stream of converts are reported at the new Muslim project in Leicester” (qtd. in Jawad, 2006, 169).

<sup>xvi</sup> Zakkout, Sofian. "The Conversion of Latinas to Islam in Miami." Personal interview. 18 Mar. 2013.

<sup>xvii</sup> Both of these mosques are known for their diversity. Online, the profile descriptions for the Shamsuddin and the Al-Ihsaan state respectively: “Muslims who are involved in the mosque come from many backgrounds, such as Middle Easterners, Africans, Africa-Americans, Latin-Americans, Indonesians, Native Americans and so forth.” And, “Muslims from various ethnic, professional, or national backgrounds participate in the mosque’s activities.” These demographics are also confirmed by my empirical data.

<sup>xviii</sup> Through email, Aisha invited me to the Masjid Shamsuddin or to Masjid Al-Ihsaan. I would attend both mosques, the Shamsuddin on Mondays and the Al-Ihsaan on Fridays every week for three months. In addition to this, I attended other community activities as well.

<sup>xix</sup> Given that note taking, recording and filming was not allowed by participants, the data collected was introduced into a fieldwork journal as soon as I left the mosques. All conversations were in Spanish, except when other non-Spanish speakers joined the table.

<sup>xx</sup> I was even advised by Aisha to convert so that I could myself respond to my own questions. By asking open-ended questions and prioritizing the topics they chose to talk about, I allowed them to guide the course of the conversation. Many times they voiced concern about being spied on by government agents and about the negative obsession of the media with Islam. As a high school student asserted during my first conversation with the “Latina sisters” (the compound noun they use to refer to themselves within the larger community of Muslim women), “If a Christian robs a store, you never hear about his religion on the news, but if a Muslim robs a store, Islam is to blame!”

<sup>xxi</sup> The names of the informants have been changed to preserve anonymity. All of these women, except for Lorena, were met through Aisha, the gatekeeper.

<sup>xxii</sup> Immigration does not end when the physical relocation is done. The process continues as the immigrant strives to assimilate and overcome the daily obstacles.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Vatican II theological reforms provide evidence of just how important familiarity is for the survival and efficacy of the Church and the immigrant parishioner. In response to the “Vatican Council II (1962-65), Badillo states that “many Chicago-area clergy have learned Spanish and sought to identify with the life and struggles of Mexicano parishioners in the areas of liturgy, popular piety and devotion, and even civic activism” (Badillo, 135). In Miami, this resulted in the Cubanization of the Church, with Sunday Mass schedules available in both Spanish and English, and the inclusion of the image of Our Lady of Charity into the repertoire of saints (Badillo, 108).

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Latina/o y Musulman: The Construction of Latina/o Identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States* is the only book dedicated to Latina/o Muslims in the US.

<sup>xxv</sup> When asked if they deliberately chose a mate who was born into a religion, or if they had considered marrying converted Latino men, their answers varied from “I just wanted a man who was a good Muslim” to “There are no Latino Muslim in this mosque that I know of.” The most popular response however was, “It is better to marry a Muslim who was born into the religion because then I, as a convert, can learn more about the religion from him.”

<sup>xxvi</sup> “The word *Islam* means explicitly ‘surrender,’ but it is related to the Arabic word *salam*, meaning ‘peace’” (Smith, ix).

<sup>xxvii</sup> For example, Claudia was disappointed with her classes at the university. She said she wanted to fill her life with “something beyond education.” Ana was “spiritually curious” and tired of the “superficial and materialistic life in Miami.” “I was a bad girl...All I did was party and I was tired of it.”

<sup>xxviii</sup> The internet has proved to be an ideal platform for Latina/o Muslims as well as other converts. Most of my participants for example, explained how the internet reinforced their conversion process. They not only had access to basic information such as how to put on the *hijab*, how to pray or how to wash, but also gave them access to a larger community or *Umma* that provided support and a sense of belonging. For an in-depth approach of the impact of the internet and women’s conversion see Karin Van Nieuwkerk’s “Gender, Conversion, and Islam: A Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives” (2006).

<sup>xxix</sup> The participants speak of Islam as “One Islam,” and do not linger among the differences between Sunni and Shi’ite Islam, the two main sects within the religion. They understand they are Sunni because it was the branch of Islam followed by those who introduced them to Islam. Given that Sunnis will continue to make up an overwhelming majority of Muslims in 2030 according to the Pew Research Center, it was to be expected. “Sunnis are expected to make up 87-90% of the world’s Muslims in 20 years, roughly the same percentage as today... while Shia Muslims are expected to make up 10-13% of the world’s Muslims, roughly the same percentage today” (Pew Research Center “Sunni and Shia Muslims”).

<sup>xxx</sup> In fact, one Latina from Nicaragua who was visiting the Shamsuddin with a Muslim friend from Venezuela, confessed that she was not a Muslim even though he had been married to her Muslim husband for eight years (her interest and consequent visit was due to her new friendship).

<sup>xxxi</sup> When Fatima converted, Aisha claimed that now that Fatima was a Muslim, “She is now part of my soul, of my body, of my flesh.”

<sup>xxxii</sup> There are multiple more complex factors for conversion beyond the mentioned four. The tendency to read the female conversion from a lineal perspective simplifies what is a fluid and heterogeneous. With these reduced motivations, I pretend to contribute and complicate the conversation for richer future studies. See Madonia (2012) for a post-colonial interpretation of female conversion to Islam.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Other female converts from different studies also reported similar findings, which demands further study and inquiry. See: Audrey A. Maslim and Jeffrey P. Bjorck (2009), Victoria Peres de Oliveira and Cecilia L. Mariz (2006), Karin van Nieuwkerk (2006).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because of what Allah has preferred one with over the other and because of what they spend to support them from their wealth.” [Qur’an 4: 34]. There are many interpretations of this verse. Some read it as a hurtful declaration placing women as inferior to men, while others emphasize the sociological roles of men and women. Feminist Muslim Scholar Amina Wadud argues that within the context of seventh century Arabia, the Qur’an intended to liberate women from financial burden to allow her focus on her biological responsibility of childrearing (73).

<sup>xxxv</sup> Khalifah (pl. khulafah) also means: “Trustee, vice regent, moral agent, one endowed with moral responsibility” (Wadud xxv).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> In the study mentioned above, Maslim ad Bjork reported that “dissatisfaction with the former faith” was endorsed by 79.3% of the surveyed Muslim women.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> It should be noted here, however, that their monolithic and verbatim testimonies against the Catholic Church seemed to belong to an indoctrinated metanarrative that oversimplifies their original motivations. Yet, somehow in the middle of their repetitive justifications, there was also a clear connection made between Catholicism and secularism that triggered their initial disillusion.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> For a future paper the theme of “degradation and emptiness” related to their past lives could be paralleled with the pre-Islamic period before the *Hijra* in 622, known as *Jahiliyyah* (period of ignorance).

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<sup>xxxix</sup> Aisha welcomes and instructs any new possible member (Like me), introduces them to the group and equips them with Islamic literature for converts. She also sends daily text messages with qur'anic verses to reinforce the conversion process of new members but also to anyone interested. Even Muslim-born women approach her to receive the qur'anic verses and for updates on activities at the Mosque. Aisha has earned the status of a leader not only for her constant community service at the mosque, but also because of her superior standards of modesty. She is the only one who wears the *nigab* (a cloth that covers the face in addition to the *hijab*, which only leaves an opening for the eyes).

<sup>xl</sup> In English the word veil is used loosely to refer to a variety of head and face covering. The most "modest" is the *burqua*, which covers the whole body from head to feet. Other popular veils are the *hijab*, which covers the head and the neck, and the *nigab*, which covers the whole face leaving a small opening for the eyes.

<sup>xli</sup> The topic of the "veil" could no doubt be expanded to speak volumes. But for the purpose of this paper, I will reduce the discussion of the *hijab* to the more immediate significance it has for these Latina converts.

<sup>xlii</sup> Ana, a 30 year-old nurse native from Colombia, migrated to Miami when she was 17 and converted to Islam when she was 20. When she became Muslim, her Catholic family rejected her decision, but it was not until she wore the veil that her father ultimately kicked her out of the house. Ana's story represents the general hostile reaction that families have. Some were ridiculed for their new dress code, others were challenged for worshipping "a guy named Allah," and one was even physically assaulted by her brother who forcefully pulled off the hijab from her heads. Interestingly, this pattern of conduct shows that all of these women, with one exception, experience animosity not so much toward their conversion but when they adopt the veil. "When I put on the veil, my father though I was going to drop out of nursing school, get married to a Muslim man, who was going to trap me in a house, and have many children" said Ana. Clearly it is the antagonism toward the hijab that makes the process of becoming Muslim more difficult for these Latina converts. Magda, the 28 year-old Venezuelan had to wait for her parents to return to Venezuela for her to don the hijab. "I knew they were going to freak out, so I waited until they left and didn't have to see me." Even beyond the family, these female converts are seen by other women as "gender traitors." Lina gave the most graphic example, by describing how her female classmates at the nursing school look at her with pity and disappointment. Puerto Rican Imam Wilfredo Ruiz, notes that, in fact, because of this visual transformation that Latina women have to go through, it is more difficult to make the transition from their Catholic homes to the Mosque than for Latino men. Thus, for Ana, as for the rest of the interviewees, the mosque represents her new family. A family that helps her raise her children, that prays with her, and overall understands and shares her religious worldview.

<sup>xliii</sup> The concept of liminality was developed in an earlier section of the paper.

<sup>xliv</sup> Khalid, Asma. "Lifting The Veil: Muslim Women Explain Their Choice." *NPR*. NPR, 21 Apr. 2011. Web. 19 Jan. 2014.

<sup>xlv</sup> Some Latina converts tried wearing the *hijab* before taking the *shahadah*, so that by the time they joined the community at the mosque they would be seen as sincere converts. These Latinas also veil their daughters at a young age (before the normative period) so that they would feel comfortable by the time it is required.

<sup>xlvi</sup> For more on the relationship between class hierarchy and female covering see Lerner (86).

<sup>xlvii</sup> Meaning "Immigrant's treatment by American institutions and society" (Stepick, Rey and Mahler 8).

<sup>xlviii</sup> In a personal interview, Imam Wilfredo Ruiz explained why for immigrant Latinas, the fear of discrimination does not prevent them from converting: "They are already accustomed to being discriminated. They are experts in seeking help and dealing with it! This is not going to stop them from converting... to the contrary because they are so well-versed with how to defend themselves they help denounce this discrimination that Muslims face in this country."

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<sup>xlix</sup> All of the participants are married, except for Leila who is still in highschool, they married within a year or even as soon as two weeks or three months. The husbands were mainly from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Pakistan and Palestine.

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