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*International Journal of Latin American Religions*

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# The Study of Islam and Muslim Communities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Americas: the State of the Field

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Received: 31 March 2017 / Accepted: 25 April 2017  
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**Abstract** This essay offers a brief review of existent literature in the field of Islamic studies in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Americas focusing on its main themes and suggesting some areas for further consideration and research. The essay makes theoretical suggestions for where scholars could inject their energy and efforts to advance this unfolding field of study. These theoretical considerations suggest that more work could be done in expanding the field in its engagement with prevalent theories in the field of global Islamic studies *and* those that treat the Americas as a geography of dynamic hemispheric engagement and encounter. Essentially, the paper argues that there is still a necessity to explore the tensions, interactions, frictions, and collaborations across and at the boundaries between the global *umma* and the American *assabiya*, between the global and the local, and between immigrant communities and the growing number of regional converts. Finally, the author suggests some practical considerations that may prove beneficial to the field's advancement.

**Keywords** Islam · Global Islam · Islam in the Americas · Islam in Latin America · Islam in the Caribbean · Muslim communities · Muslim world · Global Islamic studies

## Introduction

Over the course of 2015–2016, I worked as the section editor for “Islam and Judaism in Latin America” as part of a Springer project entitled, *Encyclopaedia of Latin American Religion*. (Gooren 2016) As I was connected with scholars via conferences, associations, working groups, and list-servs, I soon found a plethora of resources and scholarship on Judaism in Latin America. Served well by the Latin American Jewish

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Studies Association (LAJSA), which was founded by Judith L. Elkin in the USA in 1982. Formed as an international research organization, its membership consists largely of academics at universities and institutions throughout the Americas, Europe, and Israel. Members work in a variety of disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, education, literature, arts, and cultural studies within the broader focus of Jewish studies. LAJSA is a conduit for a biennial research conference, smaller regional conferences, the online publication *Latin American Jewish Studies*, and the production of other resources such as a dissertation databank, course syllabi, a bibliography of current and past scholarly publications, and other resources that have proved critical in the study of Judaism and Jews in Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America over the last 35 years (Lockhart 2016).

When it came to scholarship on Islam in Latin America, the materials and network were not nearly as plentiful. However, that is not to say that there was not valuable research and perspectives to be found. I was pleased to meet, talk with, and receive priceless perspectives from researchers across the American hemisphere on a variety of topics as diverse as African-American Islam, *conversos*, the Revolta dos Malês of 1835 in Bahia, Brazil, the Murabitun World Movement's presence in southern Chiapas, Mexico, the Hosay Festival in Trinidad, Sufism in Mexico, and articles on Islam and Muslim communities in Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Suriname, and other localities across the hemisphere. Beyond these contributions, I have been pleased to encounter, and present on panels with, budding scholars conducting important investigations in places such as the Bahamas, Jamaica, Cuba, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere at the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) conferences, and other professional gatherings. (Chitwood 2016b) Indeed, combining these projects, papers, and present research agendas with the existing literature in the field, it is a promising time to be engaged in the field of study concerned with Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Latina/o USA.

At the same time, there is a pertinent need to expand the field both theoretically and practically. It is my contention that there is more work to be done in simultaneously expanding the field in its engagement with prevalent theories in the field of global Islamic studies *and* those that treat the Americas as a hemisphere in dynamic encounter, interaction, and exchange. Essentially, there is still a necessity to explore the tensions, interactions, frictions, and collaborations across and at the boundaries between the global *umma* and the American *assabiya*, the global and the local and immigrant communities, and the growing number of regional converts. While there are certainly concerted efforts, and serious studies, that are illustrating these dynamics already, there needs to be more of a concerted, interdisciplinary, and associated effort in order to properly follow the trajectories of this emerging field to their promising ends and to chart new territory in our research. Hence, my practical argument of the need is to establish an association *a la* the LAJSA that could lead to future conferences, gatherings, publications, and advanced research.

In order to make this argument, my aim in this essay is to offer a brief review of existent literature in the field, focusing on its main themes and suggesting some areas for further consideration and research. The essay will then turn to make some theoretical suggestions for where scholars could inject their energy and efforts to advance this

unfolding field of study. Finally, the final section will review some practical considerations and suggestions that may prove beneficial to the field's advancement.

## A Review of Present Literature

Research on Muslim communities in the Americas is on the rise. There are now entire books and numerous journal articles, encyclopedia entries, and conference presentations on the topic. But why? Are the numbers appreciating? Indeed, demographic research serves as an invitation to whet the researcher's appetite concerning understudied Muslim populations throughout the Americas and provide nuanced representation of them.<sup>1</sup>(Chitwood, 2016c) It is reported that, "[w]hile experiencing steady growth in both Africa and Asia, [Islam] has grown significantly faster than the general population in Latin America, Northern America, and Oceania" between 1970 and 2000.<sup>2</sup> In Latin America, the growth rate was 4.14% and in Northern America 5.41%. The hard numbers are 1.4 million Muslims in Latin America and four million in Northern America. Breaking this down by region, the *WRD* estimates 107,000 in the Caribbean, 133,000 in Central America, and 1.2 million in South America (Johnson & Scroggins 2005: 56–60). I posit that the most significant—not just in terms of sheer size, but also cultural impact and visibility—Muslim populations in the Americas are found in Argentina (784,000), Brazil (191,000),<sup>3</sup> Canada (940,000), Colombia (94,600), Mexico (110,000), Panama (24,000), Suriname (84,000 and the highest proportion of Muslims per capita than any other South American nation), Trinidad and Tobago (72,400), the USA (2,000,000), and Venezuela (100,000).<sup>4</sup>(Pew Research Center 2011; Galvan 2008) Furthermore, according to Juan Galvan, there are 35 organizations that “attend the annual meeting of the heads of Islamic associations and cultural centers in Latin America and the Caribbean to discuss fostering Islamic values and education in Latin America along with other common interests.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, there are growing communities of converts across the Americas both joining existing Muslim communities and creating their own.

Concomitant with this growth in numbers and awareness of them, there have been an increasing number of studies over the last 20 years focusing on the historical continuities, contemporary communities, and multi-directional dynamics of Islam and Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean. What follows is a brief review of several works that typify the three key foci of this research: history, the story of particular geographies, and the networks and flows that exist between them. Focusing on these three themes helps draw out the historical presence and contemporary relevance of Islam and Muslim communities in the region and also point to possible ways that the

<sup>1</sup> This section relies on previously published work: (Chitwood 2016c)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 60

<sup>3</sup> Galvan estimates that Brazil is home to over one million Muslims (Galvan, 27), but this number is so different than those found in the *World Religion Database*, and lacks corroboration or proper source information, that it is not treated seriously here.

<sup>4</sup> These population numbers come from (Pew Research Center 2011)

<sup>5</sup> Galvan, 28. Including the Islamic Charity Center of Bogotá, Columbia (1979), the Muslim Community Educational Center in Anzuces, Mexico City, Mexico (post-1994), and the Círculo Islámico (CIRD) in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic (1994).

field might continue to grow and propose questions for further research and consideration. Specifically, this review will illustrate how there is still a gap in historical knowledge concerning continuities between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, more in-depth narratives to be explored concerning Moriscos and Muslims in American imaginations, politics, and communities, and also critical themes of connection and cosmopolitanism that require further research and consideration by scholars entering into the field. While significant in blazing the trail for research on Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean, the following works suffer from unavoidable fissures in available data, interconnected theories between fields of study, a lack of interdisciplinary interaction, and the absence of an overall narrative or backbone to the story of Islam and Muslim communities in the region. This is not to say that the works themselves suffer from any innate deficiency, but that the field itself is still struggling to establish itself. These scholars are part of the process of both giving birth to the field and provoking future scholars to see to its maturation and growth in both quantity and quality. Before embarking on their own study, emerging scholars in this field must first explore the following works and seek to situate themselves as building upon their solid foundations.

### **Iberian Influences and West African Slaves**

The history of the presences and influences of Islam and Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean could perhaps be broken down into four parts: Iberian influences, West African slaves, eighteenth–twentieth century immigrations and indentured servitude, and contemporary conversions and connections. In this first section, I will turn to three principle works that help scholars appreciate the first two parts: the influence of Iberian memories and migration *and* West African Muslim slaves in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Americas as a whole.

By turning to the historical connection between the discovery of the so-called “New World” and the declared completion of the *Reconquista* (Catlos 2015)—the fall of the last Islamic state in Iberia at Granada to the expanding Christian kingdoms—in 1492, allows researches to explore the ways in which Andalusian Spain came to loom large in shaping colonial Latin America. Specifically, scholars have begun to explore how individual Muslims came over as conquistadors, servants, interpreters, and colonists, but also the extent to which the specter of the Muslim “monster” was brought over from Europe and influenced language, ideas of citizenship, material culture, religious practice, and the representations and constructions of indigenous peoples. Thus, these Iberian influences include not only the ways in which Islam and Muslims physically traveled across the Atlantic from Spain to the Americas, but also how the memory of Andalusian Spain came to shape Latin America and the Caribbean in the realms of law, culture, art, architecture, and religion.

Emigrants from the Atlantic world came to the Americas for various reasons, with many motives, and precipitated by myriad circumstances. Some were forced, some came to escape an old society or to build a new one; others came to acquire riches or set-up shop. It is within this transatlantic imperial nexus that Karoline P. Cook situates her refreshing work in *Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America*. (Cook 2016) By examining “Morisco” (former, or secret, Muslims who converted to, or were coerced into accepting, Christianity during Spain’s

reconquest of the Iberian peninsula) as a legal category transplanted from Spain to the Americas, Cook is able to focus on how individuals labeled as such negotiated their lives in the Spanish empire of the Americas, relying on archival research of legal documents and attitudes toward Muslims and Moriscos. Furthermore, she is able to pay attention to not only how Muslims and Moriscos came to the Americas, but also some of the ways in which the image of “Islam” and “Muslims” was also transplanted to the “New World.”<sup>6</sup> The result is an attentive exploration of citizenship, identification, and social belonging in the sixteenth and seventeenth century transatlantic Spanish world.<sup>7</sup>

As Cook explains, “by studying the often-overlooked references to Muslims and Moriscos in colonial documents, we can better understand how sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century inhabitants of Spanish America conceived of their relationships to each other and of their own location within the empire” (4). Cook’s perusal of legislation and attitudes surrounding the presence of Moriscos in Spanish America confronts categories such as “Spaniard” or “Muslim” in the colonial world. Her work expands upon previous research on identity and empire in the eighteenth century Americas and a growing corpus of work on Muslims, Moriscos, and conversos in the Americas.

To trace this transatlantic narrative, Cook takes pains to explain multiple facets of the presence of Moriscos and attitudes toward them from the Iberian peninsula to the Spanish Americas and in between. In the rapidly changing sixteenth century world of the Spanish empire, the term “Morisco” came to prominence as a conflation of religious, ethnic, and political identities and as a marker of “otherness” in the emerging definition of what it meant to be “Spanish.” Using the term in its broadest sense, Cook looks at the transatlantic lives and legal status of Muslims, and also of “Moors” who converted to Christianity in the wake of the Reconquista. Cook starts in Spain, outlining the increasing crackdown on Moriscos who continued to practice Islam and the trials they faced before the Inquisitions. She then follows Moriscos and Muslims across the seas to the Americas, where they had to navigate, duck, and transgress restrictions on the overseas emigration of “new Christians.” These laws were put in place as a bulwark to protect the Christianization project underway in the Spanish Americas and as part of emerging Spanish categories concerning race. These same laws overrode desires to bring Moriscos to the Americas as slaves, interpreters, or artisans. However, Moriscos arrived anyway. Spanish authorities were aware of these forbidden crossings. Knowledge of Moriscos’ presence upset notions of Spanish concerns over title, dominion, and access to indigenous peoples, and elicited anxiety within Spanish colonial society.

<sup>6</sup> For example, scholars such as Carolyn Dean and Sophia Rose Arjana have pointed out how Both Dean & Rose-Arjana help us to see how the *Reconquista* and its attendant imaginations concerning Muslims traveled to the Americas with Spanish colonizers. The conquerors and settlers transferred existing fears from Spain to the “New World” impacting how they conceived of things such as *limpieza de sangre*, spurring demonized fantasies, and influencing the practice of festivals such as Corpus Christi in Lima, Peru or the Festival of Santiago de Matamoros in places such as Loíza Aldea outside of San Juan, Puerto Rico. Essentially, colonizers and settlers saw indigenous Americans as monsters/Muslims. Combined with a sense of Christian destiny and divine agency, this resulted in the creation and confluence of multiple enemies to the faith of the empire—American Indians, Mexicans, Africans, Muslims. This invariably impacted the way the “New World” and the Spanish American colonies were founded and constructed. Cf. (Arjana 2015), (Dean 1999).

<sup>7</sup> This section relies on previously published work: Ken Chitwood, “Review: *Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America*,” *Reading Religion: A Publication of the American Academy of Religion*, August 26, 2016: <http://readingreligion.org/books/forbidden-passages>.

As Moriscos came to the Americas, they brought a variety of personal religious beliefs, practices, and material cultures influenced by class and ethnicity in their places of origin (Granada, Spain, North Africa, etc.). However, in the Spanish Americas, public devotion was observed as an outward expression of fidelity not only to the Church, but also to the state. “Public displays of heterodoxy in communal devotional spaces” could undermine one’s status in the Spanish imperial project just as “a public reputation of piety” could account for honor even without the “requisite ‘purity of blood’” expected of Spanish citizens (101). As Cook shows, Christians, Muslims, and Moriscos in the “New World” crossed religious, social, geographic, and political boundaries in order to exchange remedies for emotional, spiritual, and physical ills. These everyday interactions were cast within a constellation of legal prescriptions, debates over colonial authority, attitudes concerning citizenship, and public images and imaginaries of Moriscos in the Spanish empire. These everyday realities and contingent features of Moriscos’ experience in the Spanish Americas occupy the bulk of the book, from chapters 4 through 8.

In this carefully researched and nuanced study, Cook situates Muslims and Moriscos into the larger narrative of Spanish empire and colonial society. Cook frames this discussion within the larger lattice of the Spanish imperial project. By doing so, she expands opportunities for discussing colonial American identities and the study of empire in the early-modern Iberian world. Furthermore, she adds archival texture to the narrative of Muslims in the Americas prior to the twentieth century and highlights how the imagination of Islam and Muslims was a significant aspect of the American project. Thus, it was not only Muslim bodies, but also the specter of them in the minds of Spanish-Christian colonial powers, that cast its influence in the region. As such, this study sits squarely within an “Americas approach” even as it extends into the field of global Islamic studies. A more explicit comparison to global Muslim histories, discourses, and practices, particularly in North Africa following the Reconquista, would be a welcome addendum to Cook’s already valuable volume.<sup>8</sup>

Staying in the African context, but moving to West Africa, a significant aspect of the historical narrative of Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean includes the “black Atlantic world” and the transatlantic slave trade. Most importantly, Sylviane Diouf and Michael Gomez have drawn attention to the experiences of African Muslim slaves and other Muslim labor communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Focusing on Muslim slaves from West Africa and indentured servants from Asia, this section seeks to examine the importation of Muslim slaves and servants to the Americas to discuss the ways in which the region came to shape their religion and culture and how they shaped history in the new lands they were forced to come to.

In *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*, Sylviane Diouf performed ground-breaking research to show how Islam has deep roots across the Americas (Diouf 2013). Attempting to show continuity across the hemisphere and over time Diouf situates Islam as a significant aspect of African-Atlantic heritage by tracing stories across the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas and the difficulties of capture, enslavement, transport, sale, and Muslims’ various survival tactics, literacies, insubordination, religious traditions, and artifacts, all while is connecting these to various

<sup>8</sup> Much of the above commentary on Cook’s work comes from my published review: “*Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America*,” *Reading Religion*, (American Academy of Religion [AAR]), (August 26, 2016).

networks both within, and outside, the slave community itself. This text is seminal in the development of the field as it not only brought together multiple narratives that had been mentioned here and there in scholarly works, but in that it opened up new avenues for investigation and exploration. Its greatest interjection into the field is that it brought to light the role of Islam and Muslims in the region and illustrated how the religion left its mark on certain cultural, political, and religious traditions and institutions in the Americas, even though the religion did not survive in a concrete form. What it started to hint at, as well, was that “Islam” and “Muslims” in Latin America and the Caribbean could not be understood as a monolithic block, but must be understood according to their own historical, cultural, and geographical contexts in Africa as well.

Michael Gomez, another pioneering researcher in this field, chose to emphasize these tribe-based singularities and cultural traditions that came across the Atlantic.(Gomez 1998, 1999) Specifically, Gomez argued that responses to enslavement were conditioned by particular African cultural, social, and religious antecedents. Furthermore, slaveholders made decisions about labor assignments and material treatment based on their assessment of “cultural traits”—one such example would be the tendency for Muslims who were literate to be promoted in plantation slave hierarchies or be given more responsibility than their peers. Building on his previous work, Gomez expanded his research to focus on African Muslims’ presence, histories, and legacy in the American hemisphere in *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*.(Gomez 2005) Beginning with Latin American Muslims in the fifteenth century and continuing with a social history of African Muslims and their descendants throughout the Americas, including the Caribbean, Gomez contends that African Muslims’ experiences varied due to “old world” context and the vagaries of different Atlantic empires (Spanish/British, etc.). Gomez’s analysis ranges from covering Muslim slave revolts (see below) in the Americas to the emergence of African descended groups in the USA in the twentieth century and major figures and institutions thereof (e.g., Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X).

However, it is his two chapters entitled, “Caribbean Crescent” and “Brazilian Sambas,” that are particularly important for the development of the field of research regarding Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the former chapter, Gomez overviews the historical presence, and influence, of Muslims in the Caribbean, specifically the Anglophone Caribbean, in which he argued there was more extant data.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, he looks at Jamaica, Trinidad, and Saint Domingue overviews how they help scholars “determine the quality and implications of an Islamic presence in the Antilles.”<sup>10</sup> Gomez emphasized how Muslims not only had to fight to maintain their faith in the grip of religious competition, but also in contestation with overarching social and political stresses in the colonial pressure-cooker that was the Caribbean. While helpful in drawing these themes to light, which would be influential to later scholarship in the region, this chapter obviously suffers from a lack of comprehensiveness or any research into Caribbean geographies such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, or other nations and polities. This left critical openings for later scholars to fill walking in Gomez’s footsteps.

<sup>9</sup> Gomez, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



In “Brazilian Sambas,” Gomez makes a twofold case. First, that slavery was critical to the formation of Brazilian society and the influence of Africans cannot be overlooked in seeking to understand this Latin American country. Second, although numerically inferior, North African, Moors, and specifically West African Muslim slaves had an impact on the early trajectory of Brazil through sedition, influence, and the alteration of African cultural patterns in the new Brazilian context. In other words, out of proportion to their numbers, African slaves in Brazil left an “undeniable legacy in the New World.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Gomez does well to explore, part of the Muslim legacy in “the New World” included their role in African slave resistance.

Beginning with a revolt of Senegambians in 1522, part of the history of Muslims’ presence in the Americas is one of resistance to the slave trade in West Africa *and* the Americas. While the “Muslim element” in these revolts was important, it was far from the only factor in resistance in Latin America or elsewhere (e.g. Bahia, Puerto Rico, or Haiti). One text that makes this evident is João José Reis’s *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*. (Reis 1995) On January 25, 1835—during the month of Ramadan, a period of ritual fasting and prayer for Muslims—a group of almost 600 African slaves and former slaves gathered together in the streets of Salvador, Bahia to fight and perhaps overtake a number of colonial and municipal buildings. The leaders of the revolt were African-born Muslims and thus some historians have equated revolt with jihad. There are others who eschew religious explanations and instead emphasize ethnic plurality in the area as a principle cause of the struggle.

João José Reis does well to instead argue for maintaining the tension between these alternative explanations and instead argues that it was the networks that existed across, and between, African ethnic and religious communities that allowed for Africans of various ethnicities and religious affiliations took part in the revolt. Principally, he contends that limiting the rebellion’s causes to solely religious *or* ethnic factors does little to show the myriad forces at work that helped these slaves form communities of social solidarity across religious, ethnic, and even class lines in the Bahian slave society. Unpacking, and analyzing, eyewitness accounts from Brazilian, French, and English sources, Reis produces the most complete picture of that night of rebellion, its aftermath, and effect to date. As such, Reis’s work is a critical historical analysis that serves as an interpretive interlude that shifts the historiography of Latin American and Brazilian slavery on the one hand and Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and Brazil on the other. By placing emphasis on both slave agency and the Bahian social setting—specifically the importance of a plurality of African ethnic identities in interaction with Muslim identities—Reis inspires future scholars in two directions: first, to bore down into particular histories, narratives, and geographies and second, to view Islam and Muslim lives as set within a constellation of cultural, social, and political factors. Indeed, his work invites further exploration of other slave rebellions and the overlapping roles of religion, society, and culture in other places and spaces throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and the American hemisphere.

What can we glean from these works? Not only do they help scholars recognize the long-term historical presence, significance, and influence of Islam and Muslims in

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Americas, but they also blazed critical pathways by exploring the particular ways that Iberian ideas, Moriscos' presences, and West African Muslim communities shaped, and were shaped by, the region.

And yet, Moriscos and West African Muslim slaves were not the only Muslims to come to the continent and help to form its character. There were also indentured servants who came in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the wake of the abolition of slavery. Furthermore, Arab immigrants would begin to come during the same time period and come to exert their own influence on Latin America, the Caribbean, and the American hemisphere. Not only that, but these two communities—as opposed to the earlier Iberian and West African Muslims—would help give shape to contemporary communities that exist across the region. Just as the above works highlighted the interrelation of communities, cultures, and religion in the region the relationship between communities—specifically between African and South Asian Muslim on the one hand, and Arab and Latina/or converts on the other, continues to be a complicated one featuring tensions and conflicts along with shared practices and celebrations. As we shift to works that focus on more recent history and contemporary communities, these themes of connections, conflict, and collaborations will come even more to the fore.

### **Later Immigrations, Indentured Servants, and Contemporary Communities/Connections**

As mentioned above, the story of contemporary communities is necessarily related to four themes: the arrival of indentured laborers from South Asia to places such as Suriname and Trinidad; the arrival of Arab immigrants throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the conversion of locals throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Americas; and the interrelation, connections, and tensions betwixt and between these communities in various localities, across the hemisphere, and within the networks of the global Muslim community. The following works typify these themes in their edited collections and serve as recent, and valuable, injections of new thought and research into the field.

First, Aisha Khan's *Islam and the Americas*, (Khan 2015a) which focuses on local values, practices, traditions, and tensions placing these within larger questions about what kinds of histories, social dynamics, and meaning production, makes Islam significant, or how its significance is denied, in a part of the world that has not recognized its history here or its contemporary configurations or impact. It is divided into three parts/themes: (1) histories, presence, absence, remaking; (2) circulation of identities, politics of belonging; and (3) spatial practices and the Trinidadian landscape. Khan's principal aim with this collection is "to foster a better appreciation of the ways in which Islam becomes as well as is" in the Americas in a transnational context. Thus, she presents chapters that investigate Islam's myriad manifestations in the region: its localized discourse, materiality, and embodiment in the lives of Americans (hemispherically speaking), and its *longue durée* in various locales.<sup>12</sup>

Through historical research and ethnographic accounts, this book focuses on the agency of American Muslims in shaping the hemisphere's story and how they are now creatively fashioning their own distinct communities and influencing contemporary contexts (economic, political, and religious) in which they play vital roles (regionally,

<sup>12</sup> This section relies on previously published commentary from Ken Chitwood, "Review: ISLAM AND THE AMERICAS. Edited by Aisha Khan," *Religious Studies Review* 41, No. 4 (October 2015): 206.

nationally, and transnationally). Gender analysis is a central component, and authors recruit a wide range of scholarship converging on the seemingly antithetical ways in which feminism and Islam intersect and interact. Yet, despite including the term “Americas” in the title, which summons to mind a distinguishable field of study with its own terminology, foci, and approach (see above), the relevant themes this discipline demands are not adequately engaged—notably considerations of borderlands, hemispheric migration flows, and the indigenous voice. Despite this, the work is commendable and gives prominence to a field in desperate need of more academic attention. Furthermore, it lays the groundwork to interlock the study of Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas with broader trends in globalization and gender studies.

Not only is this work to be praised for its appropriate awareness raising for the field, but also for its critical contributions. First, Khan and her authors, both through historical research and ethnographic accounts, focus on the agency of American Muslims as they have shaped the Americas’ story and how they are, today, creatively fashioning their own distinct communities and how they are influencing the contemporary communities (economic, political, and religious) of which they are vital parts (regionally, nationally, and transnationally). Building on the works of the likes of Diouf<sup>13</sup> and Gomez,<sup>14</sup> the authors in this volume each touch on the historical development of Islam in the Americas, reaching back to the transatlantic slave trade and ruminating on the possibilities of Moriscos and Muslims arriving on American shores even earlier. Yet, the historical perspective is enriched beyond these already intimated entrées into the study of Islam and the Americas by the contributions highlighting the ritual and political tensions among the Javanese diasporic community in Suriname (Hoeft 2015) and the conflation of pan-Islamism, new-Orientalist thought, and Black Nationalism in the USA in the “Tribal Twenties.” (Deutsch 2015) Strikingly different in their approach, and their topics, these historical entries bear particular relevance for contemporary studies in providing a historical (if only the twentieth century is in view) perspective on relevant themes such as diaspora studies, Muslim migration, pan-Islamism, African-American Islam, and new-orientalist perspectives within academia and in popular discourse. More than anything, these sections re-situate Muslims as an integral part of Americas’ past *and* present.

Concerning recent ethnographic work among Muslim communities in the Americas, two chapters deserve particular attention as they not only shine light on the dynamics of little known, but fascinating, communities, but also converge with an emerging literature on their areas of research. The first is Sandra Cañas Cuevas’ contribution, “The Politics of Conversion to Islam in Southern Mexico.” (Cuevas 2015) Cuevas introduces readers to the significant Muslim community among Mayas in southern Mexico and its contextual religious, political, transnational, and economic circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Not only detailing the confluence of Zapatista sentiment, missionaries from a global da’wah

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Diouf.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gomez, *Black Crescent*.

<sup>15</sup> This chapter emerged from her extended fieldwork in the region since 1997. A fuller account, from which this chapter was derived, is published as Sandra Cañas Cuevas, “Koliyal Allah Tsotsunkotic, Gracias a Allah sue solos mis Fuertes: Identidades étnicas y relations de genera entre los sunnies en San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas.” Master’s thesis, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiors en Antropologia Social (CIESAS), México, D.F. Other significant research on this topic in Spanish is available from (Escamilla 1992, 2004).

organization (the Murabitun World Movement), the crisis of the Latin American Catholic Church, and Maya cultural agency in conversion, Cuevas also focuses on gender dynamics, and relations, in the mosque and the wider community surrounding San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas. Her conclusions call attention to the tension between global Muslim actors and local interlocutors and the contradictions, limitations, and opportunities presented to, and exploited by, women who convert to Islam. Concomitantly, this perspective calls into question misconceptions about Islam as inherently patriarchal, as a homogenizing force, and incompatible with modernity. Similarly, Omar Ramadan-Santiago's chapter accents the creative cultural agency of Puerto Rican Muslims who (re)imagine their social and religious identities through Islam and Hip Hop. In his thoughtful ethnographic reflection, Ramadan-Santiago expands the conceptualizations of "Muslim" and "Boricua" and engages with scholarship on the role of the imagination in creative agency in a globalized world. While he misses the opportunity to elaborate on the distinct transnational and postcolonial elements of Puerto Rican Islamic imagination, he succeeds in weaving together theory, history, and interviews with various interlocutors to present a picture of the visionary force of the Puerto Rican Hip Hop *umma*. Both of these chapters are valuable as multiple scholars are now turning their attention to Islam in Mexico and Latina/or Islam in the USA, respectively, and producing valuable ethnographic works concerning both constituencies.

As intimated above in the comments concerning Cuevas' chapter, gender analysis of Islam and the Americas is a central component of this work. Intermeshing the works of Khan, Mahmood, Mohammad, Nageeb, and others, several of the book's chapters feature considerations of gender and four conform their analysis around the contours of Muslimah experience in the Americas. As noted above, this emphasis engages a wide-range of scholarship on women and Islam globally and converges on the seemingly antithetical ways in which feminism and Islam intersect and interact. While the book may have benefitted from more gender analysis from the other end (although two chapters do include reflection on Muslim men's experiences), (Dorman 2015.; Baptiste 2015), the priority placed on Islamic women's studies makes this a standout contribution to not only the study of Islam and the Americas, but the "politics of piety" and contemporary Islam in general.

Even so, the book has its shortcomings. As the editor noted, notwithstanding "the relative paucity that continues to characterize scholarly research on Islam in this hemisphere, there is nevertheless far too much material for one volume."<sup>16</sup> Still, one wonders why, then, an entire third of the work is dedicated to the study of Islam in one locality—Trinidad. Though the case of Trinidad is apropos to the historic study of Islam and the Americas and germane because of its colonial social (read: racial) formation and relatively high percentage of Muslims, both African and Indian (6–7% of the total population, higher than anywhere else in the Americas), this particular focus on a single site bars consideration of other significant locales that could, and should, have been included (specifically contemporary, or historical, Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Peru, and Columbia to name the most noteworthy loci). Relatedly, in spite of the fact that the title includes the term "Americas," which summons to mind a distinguishable field of study with its own terminology, foci, and approach, it does not engage with

<sup>16</sup> Khan, 4.

many of the relevant themes this discipline demands. Notably missing from this analysis were considerations of borderlands, hemispheric migration flows, and the indigenous voice. Coupled with this critique is the appraisal that some terminology should be re-considered in light of the American hemispheric perspective. In mind specifically are the terms “indigenous,” which should only be applied to those people(s) claiming “First Nations” or “Native” status in the Americas and not to individuals or communities who convert to Islam juxtaposed against those who immigrate as Muslim, and “syncretism,” which could be substituted with the designation “hybridity” that draws on an emerging literature concerning globalization, religion, and culture and work done on the topic on Latin America in particular (Anzaldua 2007; Anzaldua 2007; Bhabha 1994; Canclini 1995; Pieterse 2009).

In the same year, another work was published that provided further theoretical and case-study weight to the Americas’ approach in the field of global Islamic studies. With the stated goal of “placing Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA within a broader Islamic world and by locating Muslims of varied genealogies within this hemisphere over the *longue durée*” del Mar Logroño Narbona et al. (2015), the edited volume *Crescent Over Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA* took the study of Islam and Muslim communities in the region a step further. The authors in this volume not only offered both theoretical and practical cases to establish “the long-standing past and present of Islam”<sup>17</sup> in the American hemisphere and connect it to current discussions about global Islam and religion in the Americas, but also picked up Khan’s volumes emphasis on Muslim histories in the region—including Moriscos, African Muslim slaves, and Asian indentured labor—and contemporary cartographies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and the Muslims’ presence and effect on Arab identity politics mind plural Islamic community configurations. They explored these via cases that included Moorish passages to the Americas during the colonial period, Salafism in Brazil, issues concerning Islam in the public sphere, the minority voice of Islam in the West, Orientalism, and Islamic feminism.

At the same time, the authors in this text went a step further than Khan’s work, which chose to focus on the Trinidadian landscape given the editor’s familiarity there, and addressed Latina/or Islam from a hemispheric perspective including transnational linkages and connections between North and Latin America and the Caribbean. By exploring these transnational connections between communities in the USA and Latin America, the borderlands of the Miami Muslim landscape, the hybridity of Muslim practices in Mexico, and digital religious community formation among Trinidadian Muslims, this volume helped move the field forward in considering the ways in which Islam and Muslim lives in Latin America and the Caribbean cannot be imagined, or analyzed, outside of a vast network of connections with Muslims, and non-Muslims, in the American hemisphere and around the globe.

In my opinion, this approach mirrors the best of how the field should proceed. Not only would scholars in the field do well to continue to mine the various histories of Islam and Muslim presence in the region and study the story of Muslims in particular places and geographies, but also endeavor to situate these narratives within a broader network of Muslims across the globe. Furthermore, studies will also need to engage the

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 7.

American hemispherical connections that exist between Muslims across the region. By exploring significant themes in both the field of American religious studies *and* global Islamic studies, these future works might better integrate the story of Islam and Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean within the narrative of the broader Muslim world and, simultaneously, situate the story of the Muslim world in an area that hitherto has largely been ignored.<sup>18</sup>

#### A Focus on Islam in Brazil and Latina/or Muslims in the USA<sup>19</sup>

There have been several recent works by scholars that have typified this approach. Many of them deserve mention and thorough review, but I would like to focus on two particular areas of research that have proven promising: that of Islam in Brazil and the Latina/or Muslim community in the USA, which has a significant impact on Islam and Muslim communities throughout the Americas. First, beginning in the early 1990s, news began to appear about an emerging Latina/or Muslim population in the USA. Over the next two decades, articles chronicled the stories of Latina/or Muslims (Aidi 1999, Naili 2013) and their “reversion.”<sup>20</sup> According to Harold Morales, some 130 publications were written by non-Latina/or Muslims via public media outlets (newspapers, online blogs, magazines, radio shows, TV programs, etc.) between 2001 and 2011. (Morales 2013a) Although this sizable minority within the USA, Muslim population is still nominal when compared to the Latina/or presence in the general public, the media coverage of this Islamic sub-group has been substantial. Furthermore, there has been increased academic attention on the topic and rightly so.

In order to make sense of the global religious landscape in general, and Islam and Muslim communities across the Americas in particular, it is progressively consequential that scholars continue exploring the Latina/or Muslim population in the USA alongside their connections with Asian, Middle Eastern, North African, Latin American, and other communities across the Muslim world. As Lara Dotson-Renta wrote, “The convergence of these trends, as well as the current political realities for Muslims in post-9/11 America, make Latino Muslims a prime example of the tensions and opportunities created by new transnational identities that arise from the ever-increasing cross-cultural encounters that mark the twenty-first century world (Dotson-Renta 2013).”

With no comprehensive survey or coverage of the overall Latina/or Muslim population, it is hard to pinpoint just how Latina/or Muslims there are in the USA.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, some demographic particulars can be provided. It has been observed by Galvan, Martínez-Vásquez, Morales, Bowen and others that the Latina/or Muslim population is diverse, largely urban, living in diverse contexts, convert relatively young, are married, and tend to have families. Overwhelmingly, Latina/or Muslim converts to Islam were practicing some form of Christianity before their reversion, mostly Roman Catholic. Even so, many report having explored various religions and

<sup>18</sup> Much of this critical review of Khan’s work came from published review: (Khan 2015b)

<sup>19</sup> Much of the first part of this section was previously published as (Chitwood 2015).

<sup>20</sup> The preferred term (as opposed to “conversion”) for Latina/or Muslims who view conversion as a remembrance of their *fitra*—original submissive nature to Allah—and also a return to their *authentic* Latina/or roots (see below on “Andalusia”).

<sup>21</sup> This does not mean there have not been serious attempts. Juan Galvan, Harold D. Morales, Hjamil A. Martínez-Vásquez, and myself have attempted large-scale surveys of US mosques and the Latina/or Muslim population, but results have been deplorably mixed.

spiritual postures before converting to Islam. Furthermore, Morales claims that nearly three out of four Latina/or Muslims live in just eight states, listed here in order of population rank: California, New York, Illinois, Texas, New Jersey, Florida, Virginia, and Georgia. (Morales 2013b) The Latina/or Muslim community also appears highly mobile, not only involved in transnational immigration, but inter-state movement as well and upon reversion often return to their countries of heritage or origin to spread their religion through *da'wah*.

In dealing with the ethnic and cultural diversity of North America's mosques and Islamic centers, and the professionalization of the imam in light of cultural and political realities in the USA, many "'paramosque' organizations" have sprung up among Muslims in the USA in order to engage in *da'wah*. (Martínez-Vásquez 2010) This adaptation to the "particular circumstances of American culture" means that a multitude of "paramosque" organizations and their *da'is* use a multiplicity of methods including direct and indirect proclamation, social services, confrontational witness, presence, proliferation of literature, interfaith activity, architectural programs, and community hospitality in order to bring others to Islam.<sup>22</sup> Several generations of Latina/or Muslim organizations have arisen in the last four decades. Initially, these organizations came together in order to provide community for isolated Latina/or Muslims spread throughout Islamic communities across the USA. They also endeavored to educate Latina/or Muslims in the basics of Islamic doctrine. However, as their knowledge grew, camaraderie intensified, "Muslim immigration increased and more and more Latina/os embraced the religion, a handful of Muslim immigrants began to take seriously the possibility of converting Latina/os and organized proselytization efforts."<sup>23</sup> Starting with *Allianza Islámica* in the 1970s and later with the *Latino American Da'wah Organization* (LADO), which published the magazine *The Latino Muslim Voice*, Latina/or Muslim specific organizations have been integral in shaping what Bowen calls, "a transcript of an imagined community" of Latina/or Muslims.<sup>24</sup> Since *Allianza Islámica* and LADO paved the way,<sup>25</sup> myriad other organizations came forth across the USA and, in some cases, in Latin American and Caribbean countries.

These Latina/or Muslim organizations are now refocusing their efforts on reaching Latina/os both in the USA, and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, with targeted outreach efforts. As alluded to earlier, "in a postcolonial world [...] Muslim missionary efforts are being recast in a global, multicultural, and multilingual context." (Johnson and Scroggins 2005) Not only are *da'is* finding it necessary to engage in more "soft-sell" forms of *da'wah* in North America, but they are seeing the need to tailor fit Islam for particular cultural realities and languages. While Arabic language and culture are still central to being Muslim in the modern world, *da'is* reaching out to Latina/os in the USA and in Latin American countries have realized that Islamic doctrine and practice need are to be translated into the Spanish language and culture in order for Latina/os to come into contact with Islam. They follow in the footsteps of Rishad Rida

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 115–143.

<sup>23</sup> Bowen, "The Latino American Da'wah Organization and the 'Latina/or Muslim' Identity in the United States," 2.

<sup>24</sup> Bowen, 8–13.

<sup>25</sup> *Allianza Islámica* no longer exists and LADO is not nearly as active as it once was since many of its leaders have gone on to be part of other organizations, work on independent projects (i.e., Juan Galvan's book *Hispanic Muslims*) or retire from active participation in *da'wah* efforts.

who, while accepting “Arabic should remain the authoritative language of the Qur’an,” advocated “multilingual *da’wah* that would enable Muslims to match the skills of Christian missionaries, ‘who learn the languages of the peoples.’” (Kerr 2000) These Latina/or Muslim *da’is* are engaging in this not only in the metro-areas of the USA where there are large Latina/o populations (Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, San Antonio, Chicago, New York, etc.), but also in Latin American nations such as Puerto Rico, Columbia, and Mexico.<sup>26</sup> To reach these Latina/os, they are engaging in targeted outreach efforts that are tailor made for their culture (Chitwood 2014).

Not only does *da’wah* bring new converts into the fold of Latina/or Islam in the USA, but it helps shape the community. Kerr commented that *da’wah* brings about “a new Muslim self-definition,” and allows Muslims, “to integrate different ethnic and social as well as religious groups under the aegis of the central institution, and to produce the ideological and theological prerequisite for the unity of Muslims and for Islamic brotherhood, the *umma*.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, Latina/o specific *da’wah* efforts are not only transforming the Muslim *umma* by introducing more Latina/os into the mix, but are reshaping and reforming the *umma* from the outside-in. Shaikh alluded to this situation in his own presentation about Latina/or Muslims in Los Angeles (Shaikh 2010). Through their missionary efforts, Latina/or Muslim organizations and individuals are giving Islam a decidedly Spanish accent and producing new ideological and theological realities as they incorporate their ethnic identity into what it means to be Muslim.

Added to this focus on Latina/or Muslims in the USA as a key stream of current research is Cristina Maria de Castro’s *The Construction of Muslim Identities in Contemporary Brazil*, which not only focuses on that community’s connections with the broader Muslim world, but also includes a comparison with Islam in the Netherlands. Overall, Maria de Castro argued that despite an increasing number of converts, Islam in Brazil continues to be a religion with special links to an ethnic group recognized as “Arab.”<sup>28</sup> (Al Alcheik 1989; Cavalcante 2008; Chagas 2006; Dupret et al. 2013; Mohammad Ali Kalandar 2001; Maria and Oliveira 2006; Marques 2000, 2009; Montenegro 2000, 2002; Pinto 2011a, b; da Silva Filho 2012) As such, her work analyzes the construction of Muslim identities in two communities in São Paulo to see to what point ethnic and occupational heterogeneity can influence practices and discourses in Brazil alongside the influence of the global *umma* (and the global war on terror, for that matter). Maria de Castro present two key foci: (1) the pressures of broader Brazilian society, including broadening religious competition from Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, and Afro-Brazilian religions; (2) the impact of globalization and a worldwide Muslim network and its interstices with the likewise global “War on

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Abdullah Hernandez and Mujahid Fletcher shared with me the fact that they regularly engage in outreach to Latina/os in foreign countries. Each imam spends 2–4 weeks a year on short-term mission trips to support *masjids* in these countries, to train *da’is* there, or to preach in “revival-style” meetings that call Latina/os to Islam. Hernandez also raises funds and support for an Islamic learning center he helped launch in Moca, Puerto Rico.

<sup>27</sup> Kerr, 160.

<sup>28</sup> This book is drawn from her doctoral thesis in the Social Sciences Graduate Program of the Universidade Federal de São Carlos, which represents a significant recent work written in Portuguese and now made available in English. Her research emerges out of a long history of Portuguese and English language publications on Islam in Brazil and throughout the region, including: Alcheik 1989; Cavalcante 2008; Chagas 2006, 2013; Kalandar 2001; Maria and Oliveira 2006; Marques 2000, 2009; Montenegro 2000, 2002; Pinto 2011a, b; da Silva Filho 2012.



Terror;” (3) the internal negotiations between immigrants and converts, men and women; and (4) the possible appearance of new practices and spatial distributions among Brazilian Muslims and mosques. Maria de Castro’s work also featured a comparison of the Muslim experience in Brazil with that of the Netherlands. This transnational juxtaposition could be critiqued for being more about convenience than critical comparison, but it intimates ways in which other scholars might endeavor to think beyond Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Americas in general to compare the experiences of Muslims in this hemisphere with those in other regions such as Europe, South East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, North Africa, or elsewhere. Likewise, it invites scholars working in these areas to also reflect on Latin America, the Caribbean, and their environs for critical contrast and consideration as well.

### Some Broader Theoretical Considerations

This last matter brings us to consider the field of global Islamic studies as a whole and how the study of Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean might serve as a critical sub-field in pushing beyond current impediments in the discipline as a whole. Even with the rise of the study of global Islam, and various attempts at problematizing the global/local divide, the scope of the field has failed to fully incorporate other geographies and the study of Islam beyond the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia is still underrepresented. Thus, there is still a pertinent need to globalize the study of “global Islam.” Thus, the exploration of Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean serves as a prime opportunity to better comprehend currents in global Islam in accordance with theories concerning religion and globalization broadly. This focus would highlight Islam’s interaction with globalization and the processes associated with it such as historical globalizations, contemporary migration, transnationalism, diaspora, media and communication technologies, global economic flows, and cultural hybridity (Chitwood 2016a).

Too often, the study of these so-called “peripheral” Muslim constituencies—such as those in Latin America and the Caribbean—becomes the purview of anthropological monographs and cultural reports rather than as central to understanding “Islam” as it is today. As such, researchers studying Islam in Latin America and the Caribbean (and the Americas in general) are still fighting for their space. Stuck between global Islamic studies on the one side and Americanists on the other, scholars find that both sides seem to not know what to do with Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas as of yet. To counteract this situation, scholars can, and should, explore the ways in which Islam and Muslim communities have been part of the diachronic narrative of the region, how they have shaped the material culture of specific countries and cities, and also explore intellectual connections between Muslim communities in the area with those elsewhere. Along these lines, scholars might explore currents of quietist Salafism, non-state Islamism, issues of authority surrounding the supposed democratization of power in Islam, etc. (Green 2015; Hoesteray 2015; Salomon 2016; Spiegel 2015; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Zaman 2002; Ernst and Martin 2010) Such avenues of research will better help integrate Latin America and the Caribbean into wider discussions of the so-called, “Islamic” or “Muslim world.”

The point is that we must understand every dimension of Islamic life as entangled in other histories, narratives, contexts, environments, and material cultures. (Bender 2002) Other stories, narratives in places such as the Americas are implicated in Islamic civilization. Likewise, the “Muslim world” is implicated in other stories, geographies, and networks beyond the “MENA complex” or even Shahab Ahmed’s recently proposed “Balkans-to-Bengal complex.” (Ahmed 2015) Further de-provincializing global Islamic studies, (Kurien 2017) and building on the efforts of scholars studying sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Europe—requires displacing the focus on origins and allowing a greater spatialization of historical narrative and contemporary communities. This will mean emphasizing structure, transformation, and relationships (temporal and spatial, material and ecological, socio-cultural and religious) and exploring the interactions of Muslims, and non-Muslims, at varying scales. Recognizing that space is pluralized, scholars must follow transnational flows to various places and when appropriate engage in multi-local fieldwork in order to properly work the connections, flows, encounters between spaces and places, people, and the networks that bind them together (or drive them apart). This will better illustrate how Muslims and Americans are taking part in globalized world, informed by multiple discourses, histories, and living in a state of simultaneity in various places at once.

This is not a plea for a post-Islamic frame of study. Instead, the idea is to “thicken” global Islamic studies by making it both more complex and comprehensive and truer to the lived experience of Muslims today. The story of global Islam is a complex weaving together of all coexisting constituencies spread across vast geographic spaces. Their overall narrative is a series of stories sharing space, relating to one another, often with causal consequences, but not totally assimilated into an overarching “Islamic” civilization. Our task as students of global Islam is to look for the ties that bind a multiplicity of Muslim narratives to one another under the canopy of “Islam” even as we explore ways that these narratives connect Islam to stories usually outside of its bounds—in this case Latin America and the Caribbean. Islam then becomes a partially bounded entity imbricated in structures and processes that connect it to hitherto under-considered parts of the world. By defamiliarizing ourselves with the common narratives about Islam, its origins, and its importance, and instead refine our analysis to better approach the field’s major themes and questions in new places, we might better take notice, and record evidence of, transnational stories within global Islam that were previously filtered out or overlooked. At the same time, we do not want to provincialize too much or globalize the narrative too much. The *umma* still matters, so does its history and trajectory, but we must destabilize it with alternative local narratives and to thicken the layers of its interpretive contexts.

## Conclusion and Considerations for the Future

In conclusion, I would like to suggest some practical considerations that might help disconnected researchers doing work in Mexico, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere to connect and find more opportunity for scholars to collaborate, exchange, and learn from one another and propose new comparative projects.

I have five practical dreams/hopes/suggestions for scholars in the field, or perhaps considering joining in, to think about and perhaps take action on with me in the near

future: (1) Perhaps scholars already working in the field might seek to form a dedicated working group connected to an established university center or under the umbrella of an academic association such as the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), Caribbean Studies Association (CSA), the American Academy of Religion, or some other relevant academic group. In time, this working group might prove the seedbed for a full-fledged association of Islamic studies in the region somewhat along the lines of the aforementioned LAJSA, which has proved a significant boon for the study of Judaism in Latin America and the Caribbean. Such an organization could put scholars from various backgrounds, disciplines, and working in various contexts and languages into contact and conversation leading to increased collaboration; (2) In time, this might also lead to the publication of a journal that focuses on Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Americas as a whole. A publication such as this would provide a critical publishing platform for scholars to present their work and not feel the need to justify the existence of their research in the first place; (3) There would also be some benefit to crafting an overall narrative of the history, presence, and contemporary communities of Islam and Muslims in the region. (la Judith 2014) I am already working on such a text, which might provide a textbook or introductory work for scholars entering the field or a wider public interested in the topic; (4) With that said, there is still a need for more published dissertations, articles, research, and monographs being published with established journals and publishers in Spanish, Portuguese, English, and other languages in order to raise awareness of our field and to contribute to a wider body of scholarship in consequential ways. These works will need to do more than fill in gaps, but also critique the ways in which we fill these gaps; and (Von Stuckrad 2015) (5) Finally, the field needs more dedicated scholars. Too often, I see individual academics show a passing interest in the topic or who address it as a tangent to their main research. What this field needs more than anything else are dedicated scholars who devote their academic efforts and life to a critical field of study that will simultaneously allow us to understand and appreciate a region of the world too often ignored in the study of global Islam while at the same time situating an aspect of the story of the Muslim world in a region hitherto marginalized and often overlooked.

These are my humble, if not critical, thoughts on the state of the field. I respectfully submit them for your consideration and hope that they, in some way, might lead to furthering our knowledge and understanding of an all-too-important field of study that is quickly emerging as a critical area of research at the intersection of multiple disciplines.

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