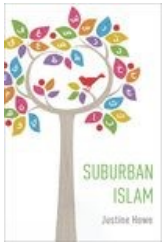

Suburban Islam

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CHAPTER

4 Honoring the Prophet, Performing American Islam: The Webb *Mawlid*

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Abstract

This chapter demonstrates the dynamic and improvisational character of ritual performance in third spaces, focusing on the performance of *mawlid*s in the Webb community in 2011 and 2014. These rituals highlight Webb's appeal to a broader network of Chicago's Muslims across multiple generations. Webb *mawlid*s build on traditions of female authority in domestic performance to elevate women's participation and leadership in a public space. Within the framework of Webb as a third space, the mawlid is among the most important rituals for the construction of female religious authority. Shifts in ritual elements, namely music, language, and texts, reflect the conscious efforts of Webb members to cultivate American Muslim "spirituality" and produce an authentic American Muslim culture. This chapter also explains the limits of such ritual experimentations, showing how debates over the mawlid are part of broader contemporary Muslim concerns over authority, authenticity, and the boundaries of the Islamic tradition.

Keywords: mawlid, Sufism, Hamza Yusuf, Naqshbandiyya, American Islam, Wahhabism, bidʿa, tradition

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THE *MAWLID* IS the Webb Foundation's most important public ritual. The celebration attracts large audiences and reflects Webb's growing confidence to promote American Islam beyond its core group of regular participants. The term "*mawlid*," also known as *milad* and *mawlud*, refers to a range of practices honoring the Prophet Muhammad, often conducted during the month Rabiʿa al-Awwal, the third month of the Islamic calendar and the month of the Prophet's birthday. Although historically connected to Sufi ritual and theology, *mawlid*s are often performed outside the auspices of formal Sufi organizations in the United States. *Mawlid*s in domestic spaces typically involve recitations of Urdu or Arabic hymns praising the Prophet Muhammad, recitations of the Qur'an, prayers and poems for God, and litanies recited in Arabic and Urdu.[1] Webb members grew up going to *mawlid*s on a variety of occasions, including during the month

of the Prophet's birth, as well as those conducted for other special events such as housewarmings and weddings. They remembered sitting on cushions in the company of family and friends, with recitations and songs stretching into the evening, punctuated by the sharing of copious food and animated conversation.[2] Many Webb members grew up performing *mawlid*s in their homes; now, they seek to transform this domestic practice into a public claiming of American Muslim space.

The first half of this chapter focuses on *mawlid*s performed at Webb in 2011 and 2014. These rituals highlight Webb's appeal to a broader network of Chicago's Muslims across multiple generations. Webb *mawlid*s build on traditions of female authority in domestic performance to elevate women's participation and leadership in a public space. Women at Webb have been at ↳ the forefront of making the *mawlid* one of Webb's signature events, by leading in all aspects of planning, such as selecting the performers, choosing the texts for recitation, serving as emcees, delivering sermons, and leading the audience in poetry and song.

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*Mawlid*s at Webb are dynamic and improvisational in other ways as well. From year to year, various elements change, combining devotional, pedagogical, and cultural elements to produce individual and communal connections with the Prophet Muhammad. Shifts in ritual elements, namely music, language, and texts, reflect the conscious efforts of Webb members to cultivate American Muslim "spirituality" and produce an authentic American Muslim culture. For example, the 2014 *mawlid* was notable for both its exclusive use of English and its incorporation of spoken word poetry.

I also attend to the limits of such ritual experimentations in this third space. Not every *mawlid* is perceived as successful or efficacious. But these contestations over what constitutes a successful *mawlid* shows how the construction of American Islam at Webb is a process rather than its culmination. These missteps produce less anxiety and consternation than one might expect for a practice invested with such significance. Rather, participants are confident in the *mawlid*'s import as an inclusive practice that brings disillusioned Muslims back to a communal devotional setting. This is precisely what makes Webb so appealing to its members, who have found religious and social experiences at other Muslim institutions to be too static.

The second part of the chapter examines the broader ideological implications of Webb's efforts to revive devotional practices like the *mawlid*, which its members believe have been unduly and unjustly marginalized by what they refer to as the "Wahhabi" influence in Chicago. In response to these efforts to stamp out *mawlid*s, Webb members present the ritual as an authentic, foundational Islamic practice that has been continuously legitimated by Sunni scholars. By engaging in these broader debates over *mawlid*'s permissibility, Webb members seek to carve out their community as an alternative for Chicago Muslims, filling a religious and social void that they have identified in mosques. Since 2008, Webb has hosted *mawlid*s with audiences of up to four hundred attendees, well in excess of its one hundred or so regular participants on Sunday mornings. Participants bring multiple concerns and motivations to the practice, as a way to facilitate their individual relationships to the Prophet Muhammad and to God, and to represent Islam as a "good" religious faith in the United States. In response to a political context that depicts Islam as monolithic and incapable of change, Webb offers up the *mawlid* as an adaptive practice fully consonant not only with centuries of authentic Muslim practice but also with American liberal democracy.

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The 2011 *Mawlid*: Performing Intergenerational Piety

The 2011 *mawlid* took place in a memorable location—remarkable not because of picturesque vistas, but rather because it blended itself so thoroughly into the suburban landscape of Chicago's ex-burbs. To get there, I drove to a large corporate park in Downers Grove, my Rav4 weaving through a maze of parking lots dotted with small shrubs and trees. I eventually reached my destination, a Doubletree hotel with a dark brown exterior and tinted windows, joining a stream of other attendees slamming car doors and calling on children to hurry up. I entered and joined the meandering crowd of several hundred already inside the lobby, all of us waiting for a signal to enter through the ballroom doors. I soon found Malika, who guided me to a table covered with a variety of objects. "If you want to know about what we are doing here, you should take a look at these things. We honor everything about the Prophet, including his favorite foods, such as dates, figs, olives, as well as things that he valued, such as a sword and a *miswak*, a brush used to clean teeth. Everything about his example is important."[3]

The ballroom doors opened, and members of the crowd took their seats around the small, elevated stage. I counted at least three hundred people in attendance, a crowd size Webb board members later attributed to Dr. Abd-Allah, who headlined the event along with a well-known *nasheed* act flown in from the United Kingdom. The emcee, Tahera Ahmad, chaplain at Northwestern University, began by instructing the audience on proper *adab* or etiquette. She told parents to keep their children quiet to allow for people to focus on the recitation and to ensure that everyone would receive *baraka*, or blessings, from the performance. As the main portion of the program began, Dr. Abd-Allah took the stage, leading the group in *dhikr*.

The musical group Shaam performed in three languages: Arabic, English, and Urdu. "We know all of you will be fine with English, some of you may struggle with Urdu, and that's OK because Malika told us there are a lot of Syrians here. But you have no excuse with Arabic."[4] The audience laughed, then followed along the trilingual lyrics printed on the programs, punctuated by the percussive beat of Shaam's performers and the sound of their poetic, soothing vocals. But singing was not the only sound coming from the crowd. Young children ran through the aisles, whispering to their parents, and calling to their friends. Adults carried on their own conversations as well, earning another rebuke from Ahmad, who again reminded them of the need for a quiet, reflective atmosphere to ensure the efficacy of the ritual performance. She encouraged
p. 104 parents to sit with their children in the front of the ↳ room. After repositioning themselves accordingly with children on their laps, the audience grew noticeably quieter, and Dr. Umar's voice seemed to float above the crowd. Participants began to close their eyes, swayed in their chairs, and began to recite, "*lā ilāha illā-llāh*." The event concluded with men and women going to separate rooms to conduct evening prayer.

The *mawlid* had brought together a large, multigenerational audience. Arabic and Urdu were the preferred languages, reflecting the repertoire of the performers, Shaam, who had made a name for themselves performing for a largely South Asian audience. Indeed, Webb members of South Asian descent grew up performing *mawlid*s in their homes, where *dhikr*, poetry, and song were recited and sung in multiple languages. *Dhikr* centers on the remembrance and invocation of God through recitation and chanting of litanies, names of God, poems, and songs. *Mawlid*s appear to be less common among Arab families, though I spoke to several Webb members of Arab descent who also performed *mawlid*s in their youth. Some Chicago families participate formally in Sufi networks, while others retain connections to particular saints who are based on the Indian subcontinent, Africa, or the Middle East. Sufism, which derives from the Arabic term "*tasawwuf*," refers to Islamic mystical practices. Carl Ernst defines Sufism as "a teaching of ethical and spiritual ideals, which has historically been embodied in the lineages of teachers who held prominent positions in Muslim societies."[5] Some families of Webb members followed particular liturgies that linked them explicitly to transnational networks of Sufi devotees. But for most Webb attendees, *mawlid*s were part

of a broader nexus of devotional practices centered on cultivating attentiveness to God and the emulation of the Prophet Muhammad.

Praising the Prophet

Webb's efforts to make the *mawlid* a foundational ritual for American Muslims is rooted in a particular theology of the Prophet Muhammad that celebrates him as an exemplary figure worthy of emulation. Indeed, following the Prophet's words and deeds has formed an important foundation for ethical action since the first decades of Islam, when early Muslims sought to follow the model for behavior established by Muhammad, his family, and his companions. For Muslims, the Prophet is the perfect human. As God's chosen vessel for revelation, preordained well before his birth, Mohammed was uniquely capable of bringing and enacting the final and complete revelation, the Qur'an. His wife Aisha is said to have referred
p. 105 to the Prophet as the "Walking Qur'an." Many Muslims also learn about the example of the Prophet ↳ through the corpus of hadith, or collection of prophetic words and actions. The table of his favorite foods and the objects he used demonstrates the material and embodied ways that the Prophet serves as an exemplary model. These objects signify the Prophet's humanity while also imbuing his daily acts of human existence (eating, dress, and hygiene) with devotional significance. Of course, Muslims disagree about the specific ways that they should emulate the prophetic example. At Webb *mawlid*s, for example, these objects are on "display," in a glass showcase that could be shown to the outside ethnographer and observed by the *mawlid* attendees. The material objects are intended to connect contemporary Muslims to Muhammad as both an exceptional and fully human being.[6]

The *mawlid* is also linked to Islamic conceptions of the Prophet's intercessory powers, which depend on important relationships of ritual exchange. For all of his humanity, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad holds divine significance, since many Muslims view the Prophet as an intercessor between humans and God. One of the most tangible benefits of this role is the production of *baraka*, which refers to the blessings that are created through proximity to the Prophet Muhammad and other exemplary religious figures (including *shaykh*s, scholars, and saints). *Baraka* can also inhabit devotional spaces and objects, such as shrines and tombs. Recitation, listening to pious poetry or hymns, and prayers generate and confer blessings on those who perform them. Premodern *mawlid* texts emphasize the importance of rejoicing in order to express gratitude for God's blessings and to cultivate love of the Prophet. Prayers and remembrance offered up during the *mawlid* are a means to both express and to engender love of the Prophet as well as to express gratitude toward God for sending the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad.

For participants, the *mawlid* affords an opportunity to connect with the Prophet in an embodied, experiential way. Rahma, who helped to organize the mawlid, put it this way:

> It's not about the frills. It's about expressing the hadith that you have to love the Prophet more than your own self. It's a physical manifestation to me. And that's what sometimes gets lost. I've been really interested in *sīra* literature in general. If I were to study something, that's what I would focus on. I've always loved it; I love hearing about it. I can study it over and over again. But I still never felt a connection to the Prophet. I have a connection to his story, to his life, but not to *him*. And that I feel like is a result of years and years that people said you can't venerate the Prophet; it's akin to worship. So to be able to go to a *mawlid*, it's experiencing the physical manifestation.[7]

p. 106 Rahma's description indexes the many benefits that she receives from the *mawlid*. For those Muslims who choose to perform it, the *mawlid* has its roots in the foundational traditions of the Prophet himself. Here, love is both the emotion that motivates Muslims to practice the *mawlid* and the emotion cultivated in the performance. An earnest student of *sīra* and other Islamic texts, Rahma knows the events of the prophet's

life and the ethical lessons to be drawn from them. Her knowledge of hadith and *sīra* taught her that she comes from a "rich tradition," which gives her the confidence to embrace her identity as a Muslim during a time it is much easier not to be a Muslim. From the *mawlid*, however, she seeks something different—a direct, experiential relationship with the Prophet Muhammad that complements her religious study of the prophetic example and legacy. Rahma was one of the few participants I spoke to whose family has maintained connections to formal Sufi brotherhoods. In this case, her Egyptian family members are part of the Shadhiliyya, a brotherhood that has branches across several continents.

Accordingly, Rahma had a very specific epistemological distinction she wanted me to understand between the *mawlid* as a ritual and the story of the Prophet Muhammad as told in the *sīra*. For her, the pursuit of Islamic knowledge in academic and devotional contexts cannot produce access to "him," that is, the Prophet, as an embodied presence in her life. In our interview, she differentiated between the realm of religious knowledge derived through reason, study, and intellect, and the realm of "physical manifestation," the one that has remained elusive in her religious practice. Rahma's delineation between the *sīra* suggests her desire for an experiential relationship to the Prophet, rather than a discursive one. Rahma and many at Webb believe that these kinds of relationships have been marginalized in their religious communities and need to be restored through the revival of the *mawlid*.[8]

Building Community Bonds

In addition to their relationships with the Prophet, Webb members also seek out and build relationships with each other, pointing to the ritual's potential to create community and belonging. Webb's first executive director, Fauzia, spent her childhood going to *mawlid*s in her parents' and relatives' homes. She recalled how her mother led family members and friends in reciting the *Qasīdat al-Burda* (The Ode of the Cloak), a poem honoring the miracles of the Prophet Muhammad composed by the Egyptian scholar al-Būsīrī (d. 1298). ↳ Like Rahma, Fauzia struggled to find the words to capture the *mawlid*'s profound individual and communal effects:

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> How do I explain it? I feel spiritually moved, rejuvenated, and refreshed. You can't just come together once a year and expect it to feel it because it's not just about what you are saying. It's the people you're with. We say, "The souls steal from each other." It's the energy in the room. It's the vibe. One of the places I felt it best was in 2005 at the University of Chicago. There was a woman who was a student and she had a beautiful voice. She could lead the *Burda Sharīf*. She would lead, and we would sing together. All the chapters have a different rhythm, and every other one you read. We did it once a month. I would go religiously once a month. I had done hajj this year, and it carried my spirituality for months afterwards.[9]

For Fauzia, the *Burda* embodies the depth of the connection to the blessings of the Prophet Muhammad, connecting her to childhood recitation practices led by her grandmother, to prior generations of Muslims, to her own hajj experience, and to the other female participants. Many Webb participants discussed all-female *mawlid*s, gathering women and girls from different generations. Webb members talk about *mawlid*s as one of the ways that their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts instilled Muslim piety in them as children, whether teaching them to recite the Qur'an, sharing *du'as* (supererogatory prayers) for various daily situations, instructing them on the mechanics and meaning of salat (daily ritual prayer), and serving as a model of *adab* (moral etiquette) through their hospitality and generosity to others. Malika described the "sisterhood" created by *mawlid*s:

> In Schaumberg, my family, we used to have a *mawlid an-nabī*, once a year, for women only, and get together and sing. It was a lot of sisterhood and felt good. I had that memory. I knew from what I

> learned that people all over the Muslim world did *mawlid*s, in different languages. There is a huge array of songs in languages praising the Prophet and talking about his characteristics and attributes. When did that become wrong?[10]

Other interviewees recalled *mawlid*s in which male relatives also participated, often to mark various occasions. Women frequently led these mixed-gender gatherings as well, with *mawlid*s being one example
p. 108 of "networks ↳ of connectedness among women and among men."[11] In this way, *mawlid*s counter expectations of gender separation, female seclusion, and assumed male dominance in Muslim homes.[12] These and other domestic rituals function as sites of female authority that are often overlooked when scholars focus on mosques as the locus of Muslim practice.

Cultivating Female Religious Authority

Webb seeks to make these domestic ritual roles into public ones, and in the process, promote women's authority through what they conceive of as a foundational Muslim practice. Although Webb offers an alternative devotional environment to mosques, its members rarely advocate for women to take on functions usually reserved for men in these spaces, such as leading congregational prayers and delivering sermons. In the context of the United States, Juliane Hammer has argued for the interdependence of space, leadership, and voice in the construction of female authority in the United States.[13] Like the *mawlid*, many opportunities for female religious authority in the United States occur outside the mosque.[14] For example, Ingrid Mattson, the first female director of the Islamic Society of North America, has encouraged women to become chaplains and teachers. Mattson has argued that in these capacities American Muslims are not claiming some "new" role but rather recovering the continuous "spirit" of the early community.[15] The Webb Foundation cultivates ritual and governance roles for women in this same vein, grounding its emphasis on female authority through the recovery of tradition and a particular understanding of early Muslim history.

Webb also constructs female authority by elevating women's voices, to use Hammer's term, through poetry, lectures, Qur'anic recitation, and song. Hammer calls our attention to debates that link woman's voice to her sexuality and her subsequent representation of sexual temptation and danger.[16] In this way, women leading men in prayer or reciting the Qur'an poses a potential problem for ritual efficacy. The *mawlid*, as historian Marion Katz has argued, "sidesteps issues of ritual purity and mosque access" and thus does not hold the same potential to disrupt models of authoritative practice.[17] In all aspects of the *mawlid*—performative and pedagogical—Webb women occupy a visible and central position, alongside various male leaders—scholars, performers, reciters, and chaplains.

At Webb, these links between gender, space, and ritual efficacy never came up explicitly. But participants implicitly acknowledge the ritual advantages of their third-space community, especially its flexibility. From
p. 109 his religious and ↳ cultural location, which affords the possibility of generative ritual practice (but always cast as a recovery of original Islam), Webb *mawlid* organizers represent the practice as not just acceptable or permissible, but as foundational for American Islam. In this context, women's voices augment the devotional practice rather than threaten or undermine its power. By carving out an alternative third space, Webb women contest the relegated position of the *mawlid*, seeking to move it from the margins to the center of American Muslim practice.

Many participants praise the event for incorporating and building leadership opportunities for women. Rahma told me that she gained valuable skills in proposing, planning, and executing a major event. For her, *mawlid* has other benefits beyond those that she recognizes as spiritual. Planning the *mawlid* gives female volunteers the opportunity to cultivate necessary leadership skills. She described the multiple logistical

tasks that she took on, from making the program, to setting up the stage, deciding where the potluck dinner should be held, advertising, and coordinating the various participants. All of these actions made it so that she was unable to participate in the singing and recitation portions of the evening. Rahma was proud of her contributions that made the event possible and that helped to facilitate participants' devotional practice.

Moreover, Webb women took on the responsibility of articulating the *mawlid*'s legitimacy and importance. Malika assumed this task, opening the 2014 event with this explanation of the practice's importance:

> The *mawlid* is a word that needs to enter the English language. We can have *mawlid*s any day, and we honor the Prophet daily. I want to emphasize two aspects of the *mawlid*, its continuity and its relevance. We perform the *mawlid* as an authentic, sound practice, and we do it in a way that is relevant to our neighbors, our community, and our time. If it was good enough for the *sahāba* [companions of the Prophet Muhammad], it is good enough for us.[18]

Her talk included many of the essential elements of Webb's overarching vision for American Islam: the call for culturally resonant practice, the need for spaces of religious belonging, and the continuity of American Muslims with other Muslims, past and present. Malika was one of many speakers and performers at that *mawlid*. Her talk laid out the legitimacy of the *mawlid* as an authentic, original Muslim practice that has particular relevance for American Muslims. As a public performance, it lays claim to the Islamic tradition
p. 110 while it is also invested with cultural forms recognizable to non-Muslims as ↳ American. Like other religious terms such kosher or karma, Malika envisions a time in which the word "*mawlid*" stands in not only for Islam's distinctiveness but also its acceptance as an American religion.

Permissibility and Authenticity in *Mawlid* Debates

Rahma's comments regarding the charge that the *mawlid* is worship, rather than veneration, underscores the contested climate in which the ritual is performed in contemporary Chicago. At Webb, practices of the *mawlid* revolve around connecting this localized performance to broader Muslim debates over worship, permissibility, and authority. For Rahma, American Muslims lack an essential connection to the Prophet because they have been discouraged or prohibited from performing *mawlid*s and similar devotional practices. As a result, *mawlid*s assume a special purpose, both to build a more robust devotional life and to contest theologies and legal perspective that condemn the ritual as un-Islamic.

*Mawlid*s have been variously practiced in Muslim communities since at least the eleventh century.[19] Scholars dispute the origins and dating of these celebrations, though there is evidence that large-scale celebrations took place in Fatimid Egypt starting in the eleventh century. These festivals were linked to the rich tradition of Imami Shiite devotional narratives and practices surrounding the Prophet and his family (*ahl al-bayt*). By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, large- and small-scale *mawlid*s in Sunni contexts were a regular feature of piety in a range of Muslim societies in North Africa and Asia. They were often multiple-day festivals, blending a variety of activities such as poetic and musical performances, *dhikr*, eating, commerce, pilgrimage, and socializing.[20] The festive atmosphere of *mawlid*s created opportunities for participants to build relationships among individuals, the Prophet, and God, as well as among the practitioners themselves. The *mawlid* thus served many collective and individual purposes, including the cultivation of the community, remembrance of God, giving thanks for divine gifts to humanity, and the attainment of *baraka*. As superogatory practices, *mawlid*s have never been required. Rather, their performance shows how premodern rituals were infused with Sufi piety, especially its emphasis on the cultivation of particular emotions such as joy, the acquisition of *baraka*, and the veneration of saints.

As a practice that emerged after the first generations of Muslims, the *mawlid* has always been understood as an innovation. As a result, it has occupied a somewhat ambivalent position in Muslim scholarly discourse

p. 111 and in various contexts has been subject to debates over its permissibility. Katz ↳ has usefully outlined the variety of positions taken by Sunni thinkers on the *mawlid*. For some scholars, it was a beneficial innovation, providing the ritual context to give thanks to God, as in other worship practices such as fasting and prayer.[21] *Mawlid* supporters argued that the practice enabled Muslims to thank God for his greatest gift to humanity—the Prophet Muhammad. In this way, the *mawlid* constituted a nexus of practices rooted in exchange, reciprocity, and reward among Muslim communities, the Prophet Muhammad, and God. The Prophet-as-gift further linked *mawlid*s to other forms of reciprocal exchange, such as charity.[22] The *mawlid* thus facilitated various kinds of social and pious relationships, which its intellectual supporters and practitioners saw as having benefits in this world and rewards in the next. Such relationships were embedded in "non-homogenous" and auspicious times that structured Islamic piety so that participants could most fully access divine blessings and rewards.[23] Within these interconnected relationships, scholars writing on the *mawlid* also focused on the cultivation of emotions, especially love and joy. These emotions were connected to the particular attributes and characteristics attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, as the perfect example of humanity, a patron and benefactor, and a potential intercessor with God.[24] Certain ritual elements, namely *qiyām*, or standing, at the moment when the Prophet's birth is spoken, embodied joy and reverence.[25]

Other Muslim scholars have seen the *mawlid* as a harmful practice. Such opponents worried that it crossed the line from the expression of joy and thanks into worship of the Prophet Muhammad. Others objected to specific elements they deemed excessive, such as banquets and music, and argued against the forms of reciprocity and conceptions of time described above. These scholars also reported ecstatic mystical practices in *mawlid* contexts, which they cited as dangerous and outside of the scope of the sharia. Scholars such as Ahmed ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) (to whom we will return later in this chapter) saw the *mawlid* as one among many inauthentic Sufi rituals that ought to be eliminated in order to purify Islam. Despite ongoing scholarly debates concerning their permissibility and efficacy, these views represented a small slice of Sunni assessments of the practice. Although the *mawlid* has always had its detractors, the majority of Sunni scholars supported the practice for having immense spiritual benefits for participants so long as it stayed within the limits of the sharia.

With the onset of modernity, new opponents launched critiques against *mawlid*s. Among them was Muhammad ibn ʻAbd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), who argued that *mawlid*s infringed on *tawhīd* (monotheism). In an effort to purify the faith, al-Wahhab wanted to eliminate all practices that fell under the rubric of *bidʿa*.[26]
p. 112 Other scholars objected to specific elements of the *mawlid*, such as ↳ the *qiyām*. Critics often pointed to the practice as a sign of moral decay and decadence, particularly the festival-like atmosphere of some *mawlid*s. From this standpoint, Muslim practice ought to be purified of elements that deviated from the original practices of the Salaf, especially those surrounding the veneration of saints, visitations to their tombs, forms of ecstatic practice, and various forms of recitation.

Modern Critiques of the *Mawlid*

Modern scholars also came out against the *mawlid*, casting doubt on the legitimacy of practices that developed after the time of the Salaf and questioning their compatibility with the cultural, religious, and political demands of modernity. Among them were the jurist Muhammad ʻAbduh (d. 1905) and his protégé Rashid Rida (d. 1935). ʻAbduh saw the practice as antithetical to modernization and its concomitant requirement to purge society of backward, "superstitious," and primitive practices. ʻAbduh believed that *mawlid*s and similar devotional practices weakened Muslim societies' capacity to challenge European colonialism. Other critics argued that the ritual led to emotional, sensual excesses among the masses who became beholden to religious imposters. These appraisals separated "true" and "authentic" Islam from "false" or "backward" superstition in order to facilitate social progress in the face of the European colonial threat.[27] Unlike other rituals, such as salat or *wudu'*, which fit more easily into recognizably "modern" values of order and cleanliness, respectively, the *mawlid* lacked such obvious functionality. Instead, the practice was relegated to the dustbin of "culture" or "folklore" as antithetical to rational and civilized religion. For his part, Rida sought to reframe the *mawlid* as an opportunity for pedagogical advancement, rather than a celebration of the cosmic importance of the Prophet's birth. In a *mawlid* text published in his journal *al-Manar* in 1916, Rida tried to eliminate all forms of *bidʻa* from the ritual by crafting a *mawlid risāla* (expository essay), designed to teach lessons from the Prophet's life. By 1931, Rida had participated in efforts to recast the *mawlid* as an educational practice, and in the process, to distance it from its festival-like practices.[28] But he also maintained certain recognizable prayers and standard ritual elements of established *mawlid* texts.[29]

These critiques of *mawlid*s as regressive or backward drew on similar categories as late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European scholarship, which also characterized the ritual as "popular" (as opposed to "orthodox") forms of religious practice that deviated from what these scholars took to be the essential
p. 113 characteristics of Islam, namely its rigid legalism. As we have ↳ already seen, *mawlid*s also have important gendered dimensions centered on female participation and authority in Muslim ritual life. This connection has contributed to their designation (and denigration) as "folk" or "popular" practice, a scheme that differentiated between "true" religion (that is, practices centered on belief and inward individual religious experience) and "folk" or "cultural" or "popular" rituals often designated as female.[30]

These classification schemes obviate the historical evidence that suggests the *mawlid* had broad social appeal. Wealthy patrons, Sufi shaykhs, religious scholars, and laypeople all participated in these events. Professional chanters and reciters came from across the socioeconomic spectrum.[31] As opportunities for more "open-ended" expressions of mystical piety, the *mawlid*s became contexts for practitioners to sometimes exceed the constraints of conventional morality and worship. But this does not mean they were part of a devalued embodied "lay" practice that only appealed to Muslims on the margins of "orthodoxy." On the contrary, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *mawlid*s ranged from state-sponsored affairs to performances hosted by Sufi brotherhoods to domestic practices.[32] In Egypt, for example, Samuli Schielke points to the close ties between legal scholars of al-Azhar and Sufi brotherhoods, suggesting the inadequacy of the popular/official binary for analyzing contemporary *mawlid* practices.[33] In parts of South and Southeast Asia, the term refers to large-scale festivals honoring saints or other holy figures, which can last for many days and involve a variety of activities including *dhikr*, dancing, socializing, and eating.[34] That is, *mawlid*s often appeal to a range of religious and social actors who participate for different reasons. At Webb, too, *mawlid* performance reflects the multiple concerns of its organizers and participants, who similarly hail from broad social groups.

Improvisation and Experimentation

Webb's eighth-annual *mawlid* was held at the suburban community center where many of the community's classes and events take place. The atmosphere was more intimate than the *mawlid*s held in large hotels. I recognized most of the participants as Webb regulars who attended with their extended families. The table displaying the objects associated with the Prophet was in its usual spot next to the registration desk. Participants milled around waiting for the event to begin. We entered the community room, its familiar cinderblock walls adorned with colorful tapestries. A small stage with large pillows, candles, and a couple of microphones sat ready for the performers and speakers to take their places.

p. 114 This *mawlid* clearly had a different purpose and tenor than in years past. The emcee, Tasleem Jamila, an African American poet, musical performer, and producer, led the ceremony and read her poems honoring the Prophet Muhammad. Webb's intention to try out new forms, while remaining true to historical continuity, was then reiterated by the next speaker, Aria Razfar, a professor of linguistics at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Razfar noted that the idea for an English-only *mawlid* came to him and other Webb members while watching the Super Bowl. They observed that all-English celebrations were uncommon and wondered why that would be the case. Razfar went on to say that God sent the Qur'an in the "*lisān* [tongue] of the people," and by performing the *mawlid* in English, they too could access this original miracle of language.

The speeches ended so that the performance could begin, led this time by two Chicago-based musicians, Zain Lodhia and Aasim Chowdhry, known as the Green Conservatory. The two musicians played guitar while singing original compositions:

> *I'm racing around in all this clutter*
> *Trying to prove I believe what you've said.*
> *Sometimes the darkness in my soul feels so much better*
> *Than any of the hope left in my head.*
> *So tell me why, why should I believe in you?*
> *Why, why should I believe?*
> *Sometimes I close my eyes and wonder why.*
> *Sometimes I just don't care.*
> *But I know that we were born to rise before we fall, but I*
> *Can't seem to figure out why I'm here.*[35]

Following the poetic and musical performances, the program concluded with a talk, "The Remedy That Is the Messenger of God," delivered by Ustadh Usama Canon, a well-known scholar affiliated with Zaytuna College. Canon had recently relocated to Chicago and at the time was teaching at the Ta'leef Collective, an educational foundation that caters to converts. He began by naming the ways that this particular *mawlid* departed from the "expected" forms of worship:

> We feel unease about calling this a *mawlid*, but it is a productive unease. We have a female emcee. Performers are playing guitars. We are honoring the Prophet in English. We have a profound love
> p. 115 of Arabic because the Prophet was connected to the context of the Arabian Peninsula and ↳ revealed the Arabic Qur'an. But I want to tell you a hadith from Umar ibn Talib, who heard the Prophet speak to different tribes in a dialogue not spoken by the Quraysh. The Prophet used that dialogue to respond to tribes regarding a dispensation from fasting during travel. This was the *adab* of the prophet. . . . Similarly, English doesn't work for all portions of our society, and there are many distinctions within English, many tongues. The Prophet embraced this complexity.[36]

Canon's remarks anticipated the mixed responses of many participants who remained unsure about some of the ritual elements in the 2014 event. Is it a *mawlid* if it is only performed in English? The linguistic choice produced ambivalence for Canon. Punctuated by multiple Arabic recitations of the Qur'an and hadith, his talk suggested that Arabic retain its prominent place in ritual life. Deployed in this way, the multiple Arabic references reinforce the ongoing authenticity and authority of Arabic, marking the doubts that Canon expressed with the music and language of the *mawlid.* As an authoritative figure who is part of the network of male scholars who inspired Webb to revitalize the *mawlid*, Canon's mention of the female emcee potentially unsettled and perhaps even undermined the organizers' intent to uplift female voices, incorporate musical forms usually associated with African Americans, and promote the use of instruments recognizable to other Americans, such as the guitar.

Noting the change in language and musical elements, planners of the *mawlid* were also not entirely sure the ritual had achieved its goals. Sharing Canon's conviction that the *mawlid* was "productive" nonetheless, Rahma put it this way:

> A few people were weirded out, and the crowd was not prepared. The linguist did not end up conveying the message that we wanted about why its important. . . . That message didn't really get across at the end of the day. This was a first effort. This is going to take time. Just to tell people that there is an American Islam or to be American and Muslim. Still a lot of people can't accept that.[37]

The all-English *mawlid* highlights the significance of Webb as a third-space community in which experimentation emerges, but to unpredictable effects. *Mawlid* practices are highly contingent on the particular motivations and resources of the members who plan them. In the case of the 2014 event, the idea came to a group of friends during a football game, and they worked to make the all-English *mawlid*,
p. 116 centered on spoken word poetry and guitar ↳ performance, a reality. They had no established ritual text on which to base their program, as with previous *mawlid*s; rather, they drew together the artists and scholars with whom they were familiar and knew would support such an endeavor. They envisioned a more expansive conception of *dhikr*, in which remembrance and reverence could be expressed in language and genres outside of known songs, poems, and litanies. The program celebrated the contributions of African American culture to American Islam, gave ample space for female participation, and made English the language of ritual performance. These changes raise questions about what exactly connects individual Muslims to the Prophet. For example, is the connection forged through historically established recitations in Arabic, or through a culturally resonant expression that is familiar to the audience? The two are not mutually exclusive, but at Webb such tensions endure.

After the event, many of my conversation partners remarked that the event did not "feel" like a *mawlid. Mawlid* planners did not see ritual missteps as a problem for their community. In fact, participants described these changes part of a "process" of enacting American Islam. The only inevitability of this process is that new disagreements will emerge. These lived religious practices create new uncertainties (what makes a *mawlid*?). But participants saw all of them as essential opportunities for them to work out what it means to be an American Muslim. From this perspective, *mawlid* performance requires a pedagogical element. Its efficacy cannot be taken for granted.

Language and Belonging

The Webb *mawlid* points to the insufficiency of teleological frameworks that assume a linear process of assimilation. The absence of familiar Arabic and Urdu songs and the inclusion of unfamiliar forms of poetry and song in English made the event less resonant. Moreover, the organizers' inclusion of "American" poetry and song were not immediately compelling or moving to the audience as such. In other words, Rahma argued that it was less the inclusion of these elements and more that the audience lacked a framework to understand why these elements had been included. These efforts underscore the challenges of selecting "indigenous" American cultural forms for a diverse audience with different expectations of what this entails.

These internal debates reflect broader linguistic shifts around the use of English in Muslim spaces. Recently, scholars have observed the increased use of English in mosques. Mucahit Bilici has argued that American Muslims are undergoing a sea change with respect to English, from "diasporic suspicion" to "appropriative
p. 117 embrace."[38] This embrace is bound up in changing ↳ foundations of leadership and authority that recall the experiences of other American immigrants such as those in Catholic parishes. Whereas imams were once expected to preserve the languages, social customs, and ritual forms of their homelands, they are now increasingly expected to be fluent in English and possess facility in American culture more broadly. According to Bilici, American Muslims have retained Arabic as the "language of ritual," while they have made English into the "language of communication" and "communal unity."[39] Indeed, English has become the everyday mode of communication and has facilitated, among other effects, a common language for American Muslims. In the case of its immigrant members, the Webb Foundation is an outgrowth of these transitional linguistic and spatial processes that for immigrants help to transform America from a diasporic stopping point to a permanent home.[40] The overarching goal of making the American Muslim identity "seamless" reflects this sense of permanence, of the wholeness that many second- and third-generation immigrants want for their children.

As an organization that appeals to an ethnically diverse membership of mostly native English speakers and a sizeable group of converts, the diasporic framework only partially explains internal contestations over language at Webb. Moreover, we must be cautious about equating the category of "ritual" to mosque practices. This conflation ignores the rich devotional life of Muslims outside the mosque and the multiple languages that have always been a part of these practices. In Webb *mawlid*s, Arabic, Urdu, and English are used differently and variously. And as their childhood experiences have borne out, *mawlid*s have been performed in many languages over the course of generations.

Indeed, the use of the vernacular in *mawlid*s or other devotional practices is not a new phenomenon nor unique to the generational struggles of second- or third-generation and convert American Muslims. Fauzia told me about the time she invited her Pakistani grandmother to a Webb *mawlid*. Her grandmother asked if the ritual would be conducted in Urdu, her native tongue. Fauzia responded that they would be using mostly Arabic and some English *mawlid* texts. Her grandmother asked, "If the *mawlid* was in Urdu, I would go, but why would you go if you don't understand?" She had grown up leading others in Urdu translations of the *Burda* and celebrated *mawlid*s during life-stage occasions in her home. But in the absence of such familiar texts, the *mawlid* lost its appeal.

Agreeing with her grandmother that vernacular languages promote connectedness to the Prophet and to her Webb community, Fauzia told me that she would like *mawlid*s to be conducted entirely in English. Yet she
p. 118 identified ↳ the practical obstacles to achieving this goal. Unlike Urdu poems and songs, which have been in widespread use for generations, English texts honoring the Prophet Muhammad lack this deeper history and links to the classical traditions of Islam in which Fauzia invests authority. They tap into a familiar language but fail to produce the emotional depth that Fauzia finds in the poems and songs she grew up

reciting in Arabic and Urdu. Fauzia could not really put a finger on why the singer at the University of Chicago moved her so much. But she did say that the power of the *Burda* is connected to al-Būsīrī classical Islamic knowledge, especially his expertise in hadith and *sīra*. Fauzia hopes that American artists can be similarly trained in these disciplines to ensure that their work reflects the wisdom of what Fauzia sees as the authentic Islamic tradition, the ultimate source of the *Burda*'s power. Although she sees English *mawlid*s as a laudable project, this effort must be invested in the recognition and recovery of classical scholarship.

Between 2011 and 2014, the Arabic language became a contested issue at Webb as parents debated whether knowledge of Arabic was essential to being a good American Muslim. On the one hand, many parents called for more rigorous Arabic instruction for children that would augment the various other aspects of the program. For these parents, Arabic was necessary to the formation of their children as Muslims, not just for the recitation of the Qur'an and the performance of salat, but also as a foundation in Islamic literacy and access. A certain level of Arabic fluency would facilitate their children's entrance into a wide variety of Muslim communities, even though their primary language was English. Arabic would make their children recognizable *as Muslims* in the global *ummah*, providing them with the ability to participate in Muslim institutions where English is not widely used. Arabic here was understood to unite Muslims, through the authoritative words of the Qur'an and other sacred texts, including the hadith collections. Other parents contested the necessity of Arabic for their children, arguing that it potentially undermined the mission of Webb to create a seamless American Islam resonant with the realities of everyday life, in which Arabic is not spoken. From their perspective, Arabic should be maintained in specific ritual contexts, such as salat, but beyond that, it served few other functions in social life. Moreover, these parents objected to the ongoing use of Arabic in occasional sermons at mosques, which they argued led to the exclusion of Muslims who could not understand, and therefore could not benefit, from its message. Such uses of Arabic reflected mosques' continuing disregard for the needs of its actual constituents. These parents did not want Webb to perpetuate
p. 119 these forms of exclusion. Whatever their outcome, these debates over language ideology and ↳ use demonstrate the dynamic and highly contingent conceptions of belonging on which the Webb community is based.

Claiming American Muslim Space

These debates over language, authenticity, and spirituality come together in Webb's justification of the *mawlid* as a vital expression of American Islam. The *mawlid*'s contested status in modern taxonomies of religion takes on distinct valences in the US context. Imaginings of Sufism and Islam within the US context have made the *mawlid* a prime candidate for Webb's project to inculcate an "indigenous" American Islam. Like many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century religious seekers, M. A. R. Webb was drawn to the poetry of the Persian Sufi masters, who appealed to his quest for a universal faith. Theosophists and other American spiritual nomads of this period devoured British Orientalist translations of poetry and other writings that unmoored Sufism from the Qur'an and sharia. Ernst explains how scholars such as Sir William Jones "discovered" Sufism as an ancient philosophical tradition of Persian and Indian origin that they believed had little or nothing to do with the Qur'an, ritual practice, or Muslim scholarship.[41] Indeed, M. A. R. Webb found spiritual inspiration and universal wisdom in the "pure and perfect esoteric dimension" of such writings.[42]

This detachment of Sufism from Islam continued in the twentieth-century United States. Many countercultural American Sufi movements in the 1960s and 1970s practiced Sufism as a universal, "Eastern" reservoir of universal religion.[43] These non-Muslim Sufi movements appealed to baby boomers seeking authentic religious experiences through dancing, music, and meditation.[44] Such Sufi movements promised its members a universal "spirituality" in the place of staid, formal offerings of institutional religion. Although some Sufi organizations remained entirely separate from Islam, Marcia Hermansen has

argued that throughout the twentieth century, Sufi organizations in the United States have created spaces of "hybridization" for "Islamic and American elements."[45] Some of the largest groups, such as the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen based in Philadelphia, include both Muslim and non-Muslim members. In these contexts, Sufism has created positive images of Islam for those Americans who were initially drawn to what they understood as its universal qualities, often unaware of its Muslim lineages. In the 1990s, Hermansen has argued that Sufi organizations' role in "Islamisizing Americans seems greater than its role in Americanizing Muslims."[46] Since 9/11, however, Sufism has taken on new significance in the American national project.

p. 120 Today, Sufism is frequently cited as a potential counterweight to Islamic extremism. This view relies on the persistent dissociation of Sufism from "real" Islam, especially the (inaccurate) view that Sufism is antithetically opposed to norms established in sharia.[47] G. A. Lipton calls this ideology "secular Sufism," a construct of the American security establishment, conservative think tanks, and the media, which have sought to remake Sufism into the paragon of moderation, tolerance, and political quietism, uniquely capable of being melded with "Christo-centric" religion based on belief, faith, and the separation of church and state.[48] This discursive configuration depends on its inaccurate portrayal as an inherently individualistic, mystical, universal orientation, and its opposition to the rigid, unchanging, and potentially violent dictates of the sharia. Among other things, these representations obviate numerous historical examples of Sufi political involvement, the long tradition of Sufi engagement with *fiqh* and other Islamic sciences, and the communal dimensions of Sufi practice, including the foundational role it has played in Muslim devotion.

Webb organizers implicitly replicate this idea by claiming that the *mawlid* can help to undermine Islamic extremism. They want to offer Chicago Muslims activities and rituals to express love, tolerance, and to cultivate a benign "spirituality."[49] Webb participants' use of the term "Wahhabi" reinforces the notion that certain forms of Islamic practice constitute an external, foreign threat that must be vigorously challenged from within the Muslim community. While a range of Muslim intellectuals and groups, encompassing a variety of theological and legal positions, have contested the efficacy and permissibility of the practice, Webb participants focus exclusively on Wahhabi opposition and its potential threats to "good" Muslims. The political context of the War on Terror provides additional urgency to the revival of the *mawlid*, as a ritual that not only promotes the practice of "real" faith, but that also contests a religious orientation that *mawlid* participants find both religiously and politically threatening. Like many other Americans, Webb members see "Wahhabism" as a problem that must be contained, and as Muslims, they have religious knowledge, financial resources, and cultural acumen to defend against it. Rather than being relegated to the dustbin of "backward" religion, in the context of Webb's third space, the *mawlid* is a flexible practice, adaptable to American culture (as well as many others), and consonant with the broader demands of American religious pluralism.

Although the *mawlid* is potentially amenable to the demands of secular Sufism, it also subverts the assumption that authentic religion ought to transcend the law, ritual, and community.[50] Instead, Webb
p. 121 members ground the *mawlid*'s efficacy and authenticity in the sharia and assert it as a foundational ↳ ritual specific to Islam. They affirm the *mawlid*'s power to create an embodied, direct relationship with the Prophet, attest to its continuity with premodern forms of practice built on ritual exchange, and seek the Prophet's intercession in their lives. The *mawlid* suggests the ongoing desire for a physical, material connection to the Prophet Muhammad through recitation and other embodied forms of ritual practice. All of these ritual goals indicate the ongoing relevance and importance of the presence of "special suprahuman beings" in modern religious life.[51] When Rahma and other Webb members seek *him* in a "physical manifestation," they do more than affirm the ritual's legality, its pedagogical benefits for children, or its commensurability with modern life.

However, as I explore below, the best way to bring this embodied relationship with the Prophet and with other *mawlid* participants into being is far from clear. These uncertainties point us toward other ways that the *mawlid* generates ambivalence about identity, language, and piety. The practice is not so easily subsumed into a familiar teleology toward a secular conception of religion defined by individual belief, private devotions, and text-based religion. In fact, Webb participants maintain key aspects of the *mawlid* that modernists and Western observers have found objectionable. As we have seen, participants understand themselves to be developing relationships to the Prophet, through embodied experience, not through the discursive knowledge gained through the study of texts. By emphasizing these dimensions of piety, Webb participants seek to maintain continuity with other generations of Muslims.

Contesting the Boundaries of Islam

As we have seen, Webb members observed a rise in Salafi and revivalist influences in their mosques during the 1980s, when they say that *mawlid*s "disappeared" or became "forbidden." That is, they witnessed the practice being relegated to domestic spaces, instead of being visible, public, and large-scale gatherings. Before the Webb *mawlid* in 2014, I spoke to Jamila, a Pakistani second-generation immigrant who grew up celebrating *mawlid*s in friends' and relatives' homes. She described how Chicago Muslims came to doubt the practice's legitimacy:

> *Mawlid*s were unheard of in the Chicago area before Webb started doing them. This is because Wahhabis made people afraid to perform them and so mosques never did them. But we know that Muslims throughout history did them, in all societies. This means we can and should perform them.[52]

p. 122 Here, Jamila articulated three overlapping narratives I frequently heard about *mawlid*s: one, that it has been performed throughout Muslim history; two, that Wahhabis are its main opponents; and three, that Wahhabis succeeded in practically eliminating the practice from Chicago.

This sense that *mawlid*s have recently come under attack stems from late twentieth-century legal and theological disputes, which were short-lived but intense debates. During the 1980s, Saudi-based scholars, such as the Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz Ibn Baz, issued a series of fatwas condemning its performance as a deviation from the prophetic Sunna. He argued that obedience to the Sunna took priority over the type of emotional cultivation that Muslims seek through the *mawlid*. His fatwa elicited a number of responses from prominent scholars, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the al-Azhar trained mufti with a large global following, and Shakyh Hisham al-Kabbani, the influential Naqshbandiyya-Haqqani Sufi leader based in the United States.[53] These fatwas then prompted further responses from a variety of institutions and thinkers, including Al-Azhar. Al-Azhar issued a fatwa in defense of the *mawlid* in 1993, which argued that songs, praise litanies, and serving food were all permissible.[54]

In an online fatwa published in 1998, Kabbani offered a lengthy defense of the practice, celebrating it as a legitimate expression of joy and gratitude for the birth of the Prophet Muhammad:

> His greatness reflects the Greatness of His Creator, and his purity outshone that of angels, mankind and spiritual beings. His advent on this earthly sphere was accompanied by extraordinary signs and miraculous occurrences, harbingers of the inestimable effect our perfect leader, the Prophet of Islam, the Guide of the believers, was to have on history.[55]

Kabbani presents *mawlid*s as opportunities to mark the "independence day of the Muslim nation," analogous to existing patriotic holidays honoring the founding of nations:

> Everywhere the birth of a nation is commemorated by means of dazzling displays, parades, lights, decorations, fireworks, and military processions, as in America on the 4th of July. *Subanallah*, no objections are made to the commemoration of Muslim national holidays. Therefore does it not behoove the Muslims to commemorate the one who brought us independence from other than Allah, who took us from unbelief to faith, from idolatry to monotheism, founded our Nation and gave us our identity as Muslims? He gave us more than a nation—he gave us an *ummah*![56]

p. 123 The *mawlid* thus serves a unifying function for Kabbani, strengthening communal bonds among Muslims and solidifying their common religious identity. Like similar large-scale celebrations, the *mawlid* commemorates a foundational event like the birth of a nation. He points out that states such as Saudi Arabia host similar events regularly, even though such events are technically *bidʿa*. He also compares the *mawlid* to national conferences organized by the Islamic Society of North America and the Islamic Circle of North America, which are "dedicated to reviving and supporting the spirit of Islam," but which have no obvious precedent in the practice of the Salaf. Kabbani called on Muslims to celebrate the *mawlid* of the Prophet as a national holiday, suggesting that participants call the *mawlid* "1472 Annual Global Conference for Commemorating the Birth of the Prophet."[57] Distancing the *mawlid* here from its cosmological significance, Kabbani portrays it as an occasion to reflect on Islam as a religion of progress and the locus of identity for contemporary Muslims.[58]

By comparing the *mawlid* to other religious and political gatherings of which the *mawlid*'s opponents take part, such as fundraising dinners and a week dedicated to Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab in Saudi Arabia, Kabbani probes what he saw as the hypocrisy of the ritual's detractors. For Kabbani, the commemoration of the birth of the Prophet binds contemporary Muslims together and connects them to prior generations of Muslims. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate the early origins of *mawlid* performances during the time of the Prophet, stressing the cosmic importance of Muhammad's birth and citing classical scholars to elucidate the benefits and rewards of honoring the Prophet's birth. Kabbani affirms the *mawlid* as a foundational Muslim ritual, confirmed in its practice by continuous generations who performed it.[59]

Webb narratives of the *mawlid*'s marginalization echo many of these themes, including al-Kabbani's observation of "extremist" influence in the 1990s. He made the controversial claim that this influence extended to organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America. At the time, these statements prompted direct rebuke from ISNA and many other Muslim leaders. Since 9/11, however, scholars such as Abd al-Hakim Murad, the British convert who frequently appears with Abd-Allah and Yusuf and shares their project of reviving classical scholarship as a counterpoint to Salafi influence, has stated that al-Kabbani was too easily dismissed. Such comments confirm what Webb members have observed about the marginalization of certain forms of piety in their mosques.

Moreover, Kabbani represents the *mawlid* as a practice entirely compatible with liberal democracy. Contrary to early twentieth-century modern portrayals of the *mawlid* as regressive, Kabbani argues that *mawlid*s are
p. 124 in fact ↳ commensurate with modern religion and politics. *Mawlid* opponents, with their dangerous anti-American (or anti-Western) ideologies, such as religious intolerance, violent jihad, and puritanical morality, represent false religion, retain attachments to arcane ideology, and constitute the real threat to contemporary society. Whereas the *mawlid* was once an example of Islam's incompatibility with modernity, for Kabbani it embodies the faith's progressive potential.

Alongside Kabbani's intellectual production, his Naqshbandiyya-Haqqani community became active in reviving large-scale *mawlid*s in Chicago during the 1990s. From 1994 to 2009, the Naqshbandi Foundation for Islamic Education also held regular, large-scale *mawlid*s. By the 1970s, the Naqshbandiyya had established a viable presence in the United Kingdom under the leadership of the Turkish shaykh Nazim ʿAdil al-Haqqani. The "Haqqani" branch expanded to North America, as well as many parts of Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, bolstered by its successful media campaigns, network of professional followers, educational

initiatives, and charitable activities. The shaykh's nephew, the aforementioned Kabbani, established a network of American branches in multiple states, including in the Midwest. In his historical examination of the Naqshbandiyya, Itzchak Weismann characterizes the western Naqshbandi branches as ideologically conservative but pragmatically accommodating to religious pluralism, eschatological universalism, and encouraging the growth of non-Islamic-based Sufi spirituality.[60]

The *mawlid* conferences displayed the Naqshbandis' organizational prowess and its appeal to a broad network of devotees. In its inaugural year, the event garnered 1,200 attendees, including notable participants such as Muhammad Ali. The event featured performances in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic by several Pakistani performers, and included participation from a variety of Chicago religious leaders from a variety of Sufi-related organizations, including the Islamic Cultural Center, which caters primarily to Bosnian immigrants, Tijani shaykhs, and various Naqshbandi leaders. Unlike the silent *dhikr* typical of most Naqshabandi performances, these festivals included vocalized performance that appear to be linked to this branch's particular conception of the *mawlid*. Called "*mawlid* conferences," the *mawlid*s also included talks by prominent American and British scholars of Islam, including Marcia Hermansen, Alan Godlas, and Abdul Hakim Murad. In addition to their ritual functions, then, these *mawlid*s also served pedagogical aims and were designed to educate Chicago's Muslims about the aspects of Islamic theology, law, and ritual practice. That is, these events featured not just the expected ritual elements, but also lectures and reflections on the history and importance of these events for the audience. That is, they combined ritual performance and pedagogy, a structure that the Webb Foundation also follows.

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In interviews, Webb members made no mention of these *mawlid*s. Instead, their narratives focused on the rarity of *mawlid*s throughout the early 2000s. This claim is understandable when we consider that *mawlid*s largely did not take place in ethnically oriented, suburban mosques, which as we have seen were the locus of their religious practice as children and young adults. One notable exception is the Islamic Center of Chicago, a mosque in the northern suburbs that has historically catered to Bosnian immigrants and that hosted regular *mawlid*s during this period.[61] The Webb social and familial networks, which by and large did not include Sufi associations, perhaps prevented them from becoming aware of these large-scale *mawlid*s.

Fulfilling Spiritual Needs

The *mawlid* is part of Webb's broader mission to challenge forms of religious and racial exclusion by creating a welcoming and inclusive community. In the case of the *mawlid*, Webb members want to meet what they see as the pressing needs of affluent, second-, and third-generation immigrants and converts who have found their spiritual lives wanting because practices such as the *mawlid* and *dhikr* have been marginalized. Webb measures its success in part by citing examples of the *mawlid*'s increased performances, some of them sponsored by mosques, usually held in hotels or community centers. Its members credit their community with transforming what was once a marginal practice and restoring it as a legitimate, rewarding Islamic practice. They cite numerous examples of this growing influence, from mosques sponsoring them in suburban banquet halls to informal groups who perform monthly in their members' homes.

Like Kabbani, Webb participants seek to place the *mawlid* in a continuous, authentic Muslim tradition. Whereas *mawlid* detractors have sought to exclude the practice as beyond the pale of normative Islam, Webb organizers insist on its legitimacy as a matter of historical fact (that Muslims have performed *mawlid*s in a variety of times and places) and as a matter of normative intent (that the Prophet Muhammad found *mawlid*s praiseworthy and rewarding).[62] Although the ritual performance of the *mawlid* varies at Webb depending on the year, its organizers persistently articulate this common theme: up until the contemporary period, the *mawlid* was a uninterrupted, rewarding performance, encouraged by the Prophet himself and

p. 126 sanctioned by prior generations of Muslim scholars, including the Prophet's companions. Their ↳ physical proximity to the Prophet Muhammad and the emulation of his example in everyday life mirror the association that the Webb community strives to achieve through the *mawlid*. But most importantly, the reference to the origins of Islam provides an important mechanism through which to sanction this performance. The companions or successors of the Prophet need not have performed the specific ritual components of the *mawlid* that Webb follows. Rather, Malika invests the veneration and celebration of the Prophet as a foundational and original form of Islamic piety, even as the particulars of that veneration have shifted over time.

This is an essential distinction in the context of American Muslim debates over the practices of the original Muslim community, its authoritative influence over future generations, and the parameters of the Islamic tradition. Webb leaders unequivocally assert that *mawlid*s are not only permissible but also meritorious. Indeed, participants eagerly discuss the fact that *mawlid*s have become an object of contestation between Salafis and their opponents. They revive the practice against the theological orientation of other Muslims seeking to impose their own (and in their eyes, deficient) normative conceptions of piety.

To justify this view of the *mawlid*, Webb members draw inspiration from a group of American Muslim intellectuals who have called for its revival alongside a nexus of devotional practices. These scholars—Hamza Yusuf, Abdul Hakim Murad, and most importantly for our purposes, Abd-Allah—sustain transnational networks of followers outside of the historical *tariqa* orders and activities, and they promote such practices as part of a return to "traditional" or "classical" Islam. Despite these intellectuals' formal and informal connections with Sufi scholars and networks, they do not mention or emphasize them frequently. Whatever Abd-Allah's private affiliations with Sufi orders and shaykhs, he does not usually make them known in interviews or lectures. Like Hamza Yusuf, he draws upon what Zareena Grewal calls a "vague, unspecified sufi spirituality" alongside "traditional" markers of authority that appeal to a broader Muslim audience who are largely not members of formal Sufi organizations or networks.[63]

Historically, *mawlid* and *dhikr* are tied to Sufi devotional practice, but they were never wholly subsumed within Sufism's institutional frameworks.[64] Even as *mawlid*s have mystical components that derive from and resonate within a Sufi context, such as saint veneration, they have wider devotional appeal. Abd-Allah promotes the *mawlid* as an essential practice of the authoritative classical Sunni thought that lends the practice essential legitimacy and merit. Instead, Abd-Allah steeps the practice in Sunni traditionalism and
p. 127 broader Muslim ideals. *Mawlid* performance as promoted by Abd-Allah and ↳ Yusuf professes love, mercy, tolerance, and authentic experiential knowledge over and against what they view as the narrow-minded, shallow, and ignorant Safafi ideologies. In a recent talk, Abd-Allah reiterates many of the themes in Kabbani's defense, focusing on its continuous practice, legal permissibility, and locus of consensus among Muslims:

> The celebration of the birth of the Prophet, this is a festival, this is a festive occasion, that Sunni Muslims have celebrated for thousands of years in the world, in India, Pakistan, in Egypt, in Mecca, everywhere. And no scholar ever said that it was haram. None whatsoever. Even Ibn Taymiyya, who is a Hanbali and one of the strictest of the Hanbalis, and one of the greatest of the Hanbalis, even he, in volume 23 of his fatwas talks about the *mawlid* as a very good thing to do and as a means to approaching God. . . . No Hanafi scholar, no Maliki scholar, no Shafi'i scholar, no Hanbali scholar in a thousand years ever said anything about the *mawlid*, but that it is one of the greatest things that we do. But you should not do it only once a year. You should not limit it to twelfth day of Rabi'a al-Awwal, but that you should do it all the time. All of creation takes joy in the birthday of the Prophet. . . . So where are these teachings coming from? Who is saying this? These are not Sunnis. I know this will offend them deeply but it is the truth and it has to be said. They have an innovation. They are the people of the innovation.[65]

Abd-Allah reinforces the cosmological significance of the *mawlid*, bringing contemporary Muslims not just closer to God and the Prophet, but helping to unify all of creation in remembrance and gratitude for the gift of revelation. Similar to Kabbani, Abd-Allah inverts the usual charge of *bidʿa*, accusing the *mawlid*'s opponents of unlawful innovation because they reject the authority of the classical Sunni schools of law. Invoking the principle of scholarly consensus (*ijmāʿ*), he aims to establish the *mawlid* as a fundamental practice, originating with the Prophet, linked to divine creation, and endorsed over the centuries.

Abd-Allah claims Ibn Taymiyya to make his case for the *mawlid*'s legitimacy, taking him out of the genealogy of Salafism with which he has become associated in the contemporary world.[66] As we have seen, *mawlid*s have historically produced no small degree of scholarly ambivalence. Both supporters and detractors of the *mawlid* have appropriated Ibn Taymiyya to back their positions. Ibn Taymiyya conceived of *bidʿa* as a reprehensible innovation, and the *mawlid*, as a practice originating after the time of the Prophet,
p. 128 falls into that category. At the same time, he elucidated the different intentions behind ↳ performing different religious festivals, constructing a hierarchy that took into account the pious or impious aims. He conceded that the *mawlid* and other festivals included good (*khayr*) and evil (*sharr)* components.[67] Raquel Ukeles has argued that Ibn Taymiyya's concession that the *mawlid* produced rewards for some practitioners ultimately served his greater goal: to redirect Muslims from innovative rituals to those that he considered orthodox, such that Muslims' "spiritual needs" mirror "devotional norms." Ibn Taymiyya's work has been read in multiple, often competing ways by later interpreters in order to serve the particular needs of their specific audiences.[68] Here, Abd-Allah downplays Ibn Taymiyya's efforts to purify Islam and instead highlights his place within an authoritative, authentic line of madhab-based Sunni scholars.

For Abd-Allah, the *mawlid* functions as a boundary marker to delineate between the people of "innovation" and the people of the continuous tradition of Islam. Against the charge that the *mawlid* represents a deviation from the practice of the Prophet, Webb members rely on the notion of consensus of the Muslim community. According to this narrative, even if the companions did not perform *mawlid*s, they agreed that honoring the Prophet Muhammad and conferring blessings on him were valid and obligatory things to do. But more importantly, all of my conversation partners stress that the *mawlid* has been performed across Muslim societies for centuries. The continuous weight of that practice gives them the confidence that the practice has tangible benefits and rewards for those who perform them. By emphasizing a very short but effective period of intense opposition on the part of Salafis, Webb members maintain that their viewpoint represents historical Muslim consensus.

Abd-Allah has also facilitated other devotional practices since his return to the United States in the early 2000s, which have increased interest in reviving different forms of Sufi piety. He began leading *dhikr* sessions in his followers' homes, including those of Webb members. Once a week, several dozen participants gathered on their living room floor, with children on their laps, to perform *dhikr*. Over time, these sessions attracted many middle-class, professional devotees of varying ethnic and racial backgrounds from broad swaths of the Chicagoland community. Much like his Nawawi classes, many interviewees described the long hours they put in to attend these sessions, rushing home from work, packing up their kids in the car, and braving over an hour or more of traffic to make the sessions. Eventually, these sessions were broadcast online to accommodate those who could not make it but who wanted to participate virtually.

Other American Muslim intellectuals see the *mawlid* as promoting forms of piety that are difficult to access
p. 129 in contemporary Europe and the United ↳ States. Hamza Yusuf acknowledges that scholars disagree about the practice's legitimacy, but he argues that the practice's benefits for American Muslims outweigh lingering concerns about its permissibility. In particular, Yusuf says that the *mawlid* provides American Muslim children with exemplars of "real" faith:

> The majority of scholars felt that it was a good thing. If you have an alarm clock that gets you up for *fajr*, that's a *bidʿa*, that's an innovation. But if that's what you need, then that's what you do to

> get up for *fajr*. If you're living a life in which the qualities of the life of the Prophet Muhammad are absent, which is the case for the Islamic *ummah*. We don't have even have exemplars anymore. . . . We don't even have '*ulema* who remind us of the practice of the prophet Muhammad. You have to teach them to love the Prophet. . . . The *ṣaḥāba* [companions of the Prophet Muhammad] on the day of Uhud, they were jumping up and trying to stop the arrows from hitting the Prophet. So that level of love, you know, that's what you want people to have. You can't teach that. . . . He [The Prophet] was more precious to them than their own selves. And he said you have not tasted the sweetness of faith until Allah and his messenger are more beloved to him than his own self. That's the sweetness of faith. And that's when faith is real. Other than that, it's just, it's not real. We can have faith, but it's more like a just lip service. That's why teaching our children, especially in these lands, like in Europe and America. . . . When do they see the beauties of Islam? To deny the importance of these things is really insane. That's my opinion.[69]

For Yusuf, the *mawlid* has specific connotations and benefits in the United States. Because they live outside of the times and places with access to these authorities, American Muslims lack models for authentic faith and practice.[70] Yusuf views contemporary American society as devoid of profound spirituality; the *mawlid* offers the possibility of cultivating a faith through embodied connections with traditional exemplars who lived this kind of faith. The *mawlid* provides access to these models of self-denial and self-sacrifice. Here Yusuf implies that a scholar appropriately trained in classical Islamic knowledge must guide American Muslims in their devotions by sharing his wisdom of a life devoted to the Prophet. But crucially, he offers the ritual as an accessible act of piety, available to everyone who cultivates an embodied, selfless relationship to the Prophet, exemplary companions, scholars, and ultimately God. This is what Rahma meant when she said it is about "loving the Prophet more than yourself."[71]

p. 130 Yusuf, Abd-Allah, and Kabbani use a series of inversions to challenge arguments made against the *mawlid*'s permissibility and efficacy. If its opponents have railed against it as "backward," Kabbani asserts its potential as a modern festival and celebration. Others have called it an innovation, beyond the pale of Islam; Abd-Allah argues not just for its legality, but for its centrality—as a continuous, legitimate ritual sanctioned by the Prophet himself. Critics have charged that it plays into base emotions; Yusuf celebrates the *mawlid* as a reservoir of a more pure and authentic Islam. Webb members share with Yusuf the perception that American Muslims need to build what he calls the "sweetness of faith" or "real" faith. This "real" faith is what many Webb members feel is lacking in their spiritual lives, and thus it must be actively and explicitly rebuilt in their American context. For many of them, Webb is the only place where they can be their "real" religious selves. But Webb participants do not express similar concerns about the lack of pious examples in contemporary America. Instead, *mawlid* practices represent a ritual opportunity to remake American Islam as an "indigenous" faith, interweaving Sunni traditionalism, Sufi piety, and American culture, and reconfiguring gendered authority. For Webb participants, there is every reason to believe that the United States can become the site of authentic, if not ideal, Islamic practice.

Conclusion

As the organization's paradigmatic American Muslim ritual, Webb members see the *mawlid* as fulfilling its mission of bringing a wider swath of Chicago's Muslims back into devotional practice and into the fold of a Muslim religious and social community. Like leisure practices, the *mawlid* produces belonging and community in a number of ways: by facilitating the participants' connections to the Prophet Muhammad and God, including women in ritual and leadership roles, incorporating experimental cultural forms, such as spoken word poetry, and facilitating friendships among *mawlid* participants.

Recovered from its marginalization, the *mawlid* showcases what Webb members see as the exceptional aspects of American culture, which have facilitated their recovery of the *mawlid* and reinfused the Chicago Muslim community with a renewed "spirituality." In this way, the *mawlid* offers an alternative narrative of Islam as a flexible, uplifting, and celebratory faith.

At the same time, the *mawlid* generates no small amount of ambivalence among its participants. Much of this ambivalence stems from the contingent and dynamic aspects of ritual performance that takes place in
p. 131 the third space ↳ at Webb. Even as Webb members celebrate the success of the *mawlid*, they return to foundational questions: *What does the* mawlid *do? Which communities are we trying to reach? How should one relate to the Prophet? To God?* Rooted in enduring notions of ritual exchange, oral performance, and the transmission of *baraka*, the *mawlid* unsettles modern, secular conceptions of religiosity. Although the Webb community seeks to make American Islam align with many of these conceptions, the *mawlid* also challenges paradigms of religion as individual, private faith.

This ambivalence also mirrors global debates over the practice's legitimacy and authenticity in contemporary Islam. A focal point in enduring conversations over the role of innovation and authenticity in the Islamic tradition, the *mawlid* brings practices of exclusion back to the fore. The Webb community seeks to bring the *mawlid* out of the margins into the center of Sunni Islam. In doing so, Webb members, supported in their assertions by scholars such as Abd-Allah and Kabbani, relegate other Muslims to the margins of Islam, or, as Abd-Allah refers to them, as the "people of innovation." The *mawlid*, then, enables the Webb community to lay claim to an authentic Sunni spirituality, one that is itself invested in marking the boundaries of the Islamic tradition.

Notes

1. Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, "Transcending Space: Recitation and Community among South Asian Muslims in Canada," in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 53–56. Qureshi's descriptions focus on South Asian immigrants, but they correspond to my informants' narratives of *mawlid*s from their childhoods.
2. Despite the ritual's popularity, the scholarly literature on *mawlid*s remains sparse. For historical accounts of *mawlid*s, see N. J. G. Kaptein, "Materials for the History of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Celebration in Mecca," *Der Islam* 69 (1992): 193–246; *Muhammad's Birthday Festival: Early History in the Central Muslim Lands and Development in the Muslim West until the 10th/16th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Marion Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007). For ethnographic accounts of the *mawlid*, see Marion Katz, "Women's 'Mawlid' Performances in Sanaa and the Construction of 'Popular Islam,'" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 3 (August 2008): 467–84; Samuli Schielke, "Hegemonic Encounters: Criticism of Saints-Day Festivals and the Formation of Modern Islam in Late 19th and Early 20th-Century Egypt," *Die Welt des Islams* 47, nos. 3–4 (2007): 319–55; *The Perils of Joy: Contesting Mulid Festivals in Contemporary Egypt* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012); Nancy Tapper and Richard Tapper, "The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam," *Man* 22, no. 1 (March 1987): 69–92. For an Orientalist account of *mawlid* performances, see C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century*, trans. J. H. Monahan (Leiden: Brill, 1970).
3. Fieldnotes, March 20, 2011.
4. Fieldnotes, March 20, 2011.
5. For this definition, see William Rory Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America: Between Tradition and Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York, 2015), 39; Carl W. Ernst, "Sufism, Islam, and Globalization in the Contemporary World: Methodological Reflections on a Changing Field of Study," in *In Memoriam: The 4th Victor Danner Memorial Lecture* (Bloomington, IN: Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, 2009).
6. For an account of Muhammad's cosmological and theological significance, see Omid Safi, *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009). On constructions and contestations over Muhammad, see Jonathan C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenges and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (New York: Oneworld, 2014).
7. Fieldnotes, October 11, 2014.

8. For a discussion of embodiment and knowledge in Islam, see Rudolph Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
9. Interview with the author, October 17, 2014, Oak Brook, IL.
10. Interview with the author, October 13, 2011, Darien, IL.
11. Qureshi, "Transcending Space," 56.
12. Ibid.
13. Juliane Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More than a Prayer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).
14. For an excellent volume on female religious authority within mosques, focusing especially on contexts outside of the United States, see Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, eds., *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).
15. Ingrid Mattson, "Can a Woman Be an Imam? Debating Form and Function in Muslim Women's Leadership," ingridmattson.org/article/can-a-woman-be-an-imam/. Last updated June 20, 2005.
16. Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism,* 144–46.
17. Katz, "Women's 'Mawlid' Performances in Sanaa," 468.
18. Fieldnotes, February 8, 2014.
19. Katz, *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 63–102.
20. Schielke, "Hegemonic Encounters," 324.
21. Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 1–5, 169–201.
22. Katz, *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 67. Katz uses the *mawlid* to dispute A. Kevin Reinhart's claim in *Before Revelation* that thanking God became "categorically different from thanking another human being." Katz argues that *mawlid* practices demonstrate the persistence of the transactional model. See A. Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
23. Katz, *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 198.
24. Ibid., 123.
25. Ibid., 130–31. Katz discusses how scholars differed on the question of whether standing was a spontaneous outpouring of emotion or a recognized social act of reverence and respect.
26. Ibid., 170–74. Katz pays less attention to new defenses of the *mawlid*, though she mentions some anti-Wahhabi polemics that claim the legitimacy of *mawlid* performances.
27. Schielke, "Hegemonic Encounters," 345.
28. Katz, *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 174–82.
29. Ibid., 177.
30. Katz, "Women's 'Mawlid' Performances," 467–70. Katz shows how *mawlid* participants and scholars in Yemen describe the *mawlid* as a form of "popular Islam" distinct from that of scholarly practices. See Katz, "Women's 'Mawlid' Performances," 467. The term can be used to uphold certain forms of *mawlid* practice as legitimate and normative within the Islamic tradition while delegitimating other forms of practice.
31. Ibid., 470.
32. Katz, *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 169.
33. Schielke, "Hegemonic Encounters," 327–28.
34. Schielke, *The Perils of Joy*, 53–80.
35. Event Program, Webb Foundation Grand Mawlid, February 8, 2014.
36. Fieldnotes, February 8, 2014.
37. Fieldnotes, February 8, 2014.
38. Mucahit Bilici, *Finding Mecca in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 88.
39. Ibid., 83.
40. Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*, 150.
41. Carl Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 8–18.
42. Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 67.
43. Marcia Hermansen, "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements," *Muslim World* 90, nos. 1–2 (Spring 2000): 158–97.
44. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boomer Generation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994).
45. Hermansen, "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America," 187.
46. Hermansen, "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America," 189. See also Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America*, 7.
47. G. A. Lipton, "Secular Sufism: Neoliberalism, Ethnoracism, and the Reformation of the Muslim Other," *The Muslim World* 101, no. 3 (2011): 427–40.

48. Ibid., 434.
49. Ibid., 438.
50. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
51. Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.
52. Interview with the author, February 8, 2014, Darien, IL.
53. For further reading on Kabbani's advocacy on behalf of Sufism in the United States, see Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America*, 121–24.
54. Katz, *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 188.
55. For the full text of Kabbani's and al-Qaradawi's fatwas, see "Mawlid," As-Sunna Foundation of America, http://www.sunnah.org/ibadaat/mawlid.htm.
56. Kabbani, "Mawlid."
57. Katz, *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 191. Katz notes that Kabbani's suggestion was likely tongue-in-cheek.
58. Katz calls this move a "homogenization" of time, such that the *mawlid*'s timing is incidental to its pedagogical import. See Katz, *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 153–63. Such a view of time is shared by both *mawlid* proponents and opponents. For a discussion of reconfigurations of time and modernity in colonial and postcolonial contexts, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
59. Katz argues that Kabbani's fatwa represents a "secularization" of *mawlid* performances. See Katz, *Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 191. This secularization seems to be connected to Kabbani's lack of emphasis on the cosmological significance of the *mawlid* and his comparison of the *mawlid* to patriotic celebrations. Here, though secular signals the privileging of the nation-state as the highest moral good, Katz does not use "secular" to separate economic from religious activity. Monetary exchange, festive elements, eating, and socializing in premodern *mawlid* performances are all part of the nexus of devotional practices that she explains.
60. Itzchak Weismann, *The Naqshbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007), 166–70.
61. Personal correspondence, Jawad Qureshi, August 7, 2014.
62. Many of these ongoing debates over *mawlid* legitimacy take place online. See Jonas Svensson, "ITZ BIDAH BRO!!!!! GT ME??—YouTube Mawlid and Voices of Praise and Blame," in *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies: Notes from an Emerging and Infinite Field*, ed. Thomas Hoffmann and Göran Larsson (New York: Springer, 2013), 89–111.
63. Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*, 163.
64. Schielke, *Perils of Joy*, 13.
65. Dr. Abd-Allah's talk was uploaded on August 26, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Jb5GYkJxaY.
66. See Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community: The Taymiyyan Moment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Yosef Rapaport and Shahab Ahmed,eds. *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
67. Raquel M. Ukeles, "The Sensitive Puritan? Revisiting Ibn Taymiyya's Approach to Law and Spirituality in Light of 20th-Century Debates on the Prophet's Birthday (mawlid al-nabī)," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yosef Rapaport and Shahab Ahmed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 319–27.
68. Ibid., 319–27.
69. Hamza Yusuf, "What is *Mawlid*?" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x14RQLgB9s. Uploaded October 6, 2011.
70. Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*, 160–69.
71. Interview with the author, October 17, 2014, Oak Brook, IL.