## Gaining research access into the lives of Muslim girls: researchers negotiating muslimness, modesty, inshallah, and haram

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# Gaining research access into the lives of Muslim girls: researchers negotiating *muslimness*, modesty, *inshallah*, and *haram*

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This paper explores the process of gaining research access into the lives of Muslim girls in the southwest USA. We discuss four emerging 'entry markers' that challenged the process of gaining and sustaining access over a period of 14 months. These included being Muslim enough, being modest enough, *inshallah* (*Allah* or God willing), and *haram* (forbidden). Additionally, we reflect on (1) how one researcher identified the four 'entry markers'; (2) how she negotiated these markers by using her cultural and linguistic literacies and her fluid insiderness/outsiderness; and (3) how building and maintaining relationships with key members of the local Muslim community was central to this study and was directly reliant on negotiating the positions of difference on the embodiments of a specific and prevailing body discourse – the *hijab* discourse. This negotiation was only possible by the researchers' practice and maintenance of critical reflexivity throughout the study.

**Keywords:** research access; informed consent; insider/outsider; critical reflexivity; Muslim girls; veil; hijab

What do you mean by wanting to understand how our girls experience their bodies … we cannot allow you to conduct your research in the mosque unless you guarantee that you will not be talking about sex or sexual behavior with the girls. (The head of the local mosque counsel)

This paper is part of a larger critical feminist research project grounded in practices committed to understanding the multiple subjectivities of Muslim girls, as well as their practices of agency in which they negotiate normative body discourses limiting their learning opportunities (Fine 2007; Leavey 2007). Purposely, this paper explores the process of gaining research access, which became central to the larger research project.

Drawing on feminist, poststructural, postcolonial, and critical theories, this article explores the process of gaining research access into the lives of Muslim girls. While feminist poststructural theories directed the focus of the research on the multiple subjectivities and fluid positionalities of the participants (Weedon 1999), the methodology was informed by the work of feminist critical theorists like Fine (2007) and Lather (1986). Critical theories allowed us to foreground how relations of power,

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authority, and difference were negotiated between researchers and participants including the Muslim girls themselves and the Muslim adults in their communities (Fine 2007; Reay 2007). Moreover, postcolonial feminist scholars like Sarah Ahmed (2000) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) guided us to engage with the 'stranger' and inspired us to look for possibilities of collaborations in hope to change inequities.

Specifically, we discuss four 'entry markers' that challenged the process of gaining and sustaining access. These included being Muslim enough, being modest enough, *inshallah*, and *haram*. We also reflect on (1) how one researcher identified the four 'entry markers'; (2) how she negotiated these markers by using her cultural and linguistic literacies and her fluid insiderness/outsiderness; and (3) how building and maintaining relationships with key members of the local Muslim community was central to this study and was directly reliant on negotiating the positions of difference on the embodiments of a specific and prevailing body discourse – the hijab discourse. This negotiation was only possible by the researchers' practice and maintenance of critical reflexivity throughout the study.

### Entry in feminist research

For years, 'entry' was a research event thought to be a one-time requirement accomplished by the participants' signing the consent form at the beginning of the study (Denzin, Lincoln, and Giardina 2006). Critical feminist scholars who were committed to a collaborative and reflexive research approach, called for a change in conceptualizing entry (Denzin and Giardina 2007; Lather 1986). They urged researchers to work with entry as a process that stretches throughout the study's duration (Denzin and Giardina 2007). As such, the participants do not grant researchers entry only at the initiation, but they constantly negotiate it at every junction along the way (Leavey 2007, Subedi 2007).

Given that, entry is not a one-time event; researchers need not only initiate, but also maintain relationships with their participants (Lather 1986). Particularly in relation-focused feminist critical research, these relationships depend, in part, on attending to and negotiating differences of positionalities (Fine 2007; Leavey 2007). Thus, access becomes a challenging process throughout the course of any research and depends, to some extent, on the emerging tensions of difference. For example, Diane Reay (2007), doing research with working-class women, argues, 'research foregrounds differences of values and attitudes and illuminates how these more "individual" differences, despite being frequently overlooked in research accounts, are just as salient as categorical differences for feminist research' (608).

Arguably, feminist scholars who hope to do work with Muslim girls also need to attend to differences of perceptions about any normative discourse circulating in these girls' lives. Weedon (1999) explains that discourse is 'more than linguistic meanings. It is material in the sense that it is located in institutions and practices which…shape the material world, including bodies' (103). Thus, if these scholars hope to maintain access into the lives of Muslim girls, they need to be able to negotiate tensions arising from differences with the Muslim girls and work to maintain relationships by negotiating these differences.

In this paper, we explore a specific body discourse that is circulating in the lives of Muslim females. We are calling this body discourse from now on the hijab discourse. In the most recent studies related to Muslim girls (Elnour and Bashir-Ali 2003; Keaton 2006; Sarroub 2001), we think the hijab discourse was overlooked. For

example, Keaton (2006) focused on the headscarf as an isolated non-discursive embodiments of the hijab, which limited schooling opportunities of French-Muslim girls. That is, for scholars attempting to access the lives of Muslim girls, it is important to recognize the multiple embodiments of the hijab as a central discourse in the lives of Muslim girls as well as a site of difference between the researchers and all the participants involved in the girls' lives.

### The embodiments of the hijab: a normative discourse

The term hijab is a commonly and erroneously used representation of the veil in Muslim cultures (Ahmed 1992; Badran 1985). Thus, before laying out the multiple embodiments of the *hijab* as a discourse in the lives of Muslim women, we need to clarify its linguistic meanings. The Arabic noun, hijab (veil), derived from the verb *hjb* means to cover, to hide, to shelter, to protect, and to establish a barrier, screen, curtain, border, or threshold.[1] That is, hijab does not only mean a visual barrier between a body and the sight of the other, but it also means a spatial divider between places, and/or an ethical protector from forbidden practices (Mernissi 1991).

In her groundbreaking work, *The veil, and the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam*, Mernissi (1991), contextualized and historicized the hijab using the major hermeneutics sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah.[2] In this, she asserted that the concept of the hijab 'is three dimensional, and the three dimensions often blend into one another' (93). Thus, for the purposes of this paper, we are interested in demonstrating how Mernissi's deconstruction of the hijab opened a space for researchers as well as educators to reread the embodiments of the hijab as a complex system of practices circulating and shaping (Weedon 1999) the lives of Muslim women and girls.

In exposing the multiplicity of the hijab in the lives of Muslim women, Mernissi (1991) troubled the fixed interpretation of the hijab and stretched its most common meaning, the headscarf, to other embodiments. That is, she challenged the normative embodiments of the hijab, which for centuries disciplined Muslim women's lives (Badran 1985; Mernissi 1991). As such, the hijab continued to be a hegemonic discourse that guarded patriarchal interests, and controlled Muslim women's bodies and bodily experiences. Arguably, the universalized meaning of the hijab acted for too long as a grand narrative that forbade Muslim females from making their own meanings of the hijab, and thus, limited the opportunities of exploring the possibilities for change (Weedon 1999). However, with Mernissi's (1991) work exposing the multiplicity and the fluidity of the hijab, a possibility was created for researchers working with Muslim girls. That is, by acknowledging how this unchallenged discourse influences their participants' lives, researchers may begin to open possibilities of collaborations in hope of changing inequities.

Drawing on both Mernissi's (1991) and Ahmed's (1992) work on gender in Islam, we argue for the need to rethink the hijab in ways that decolonize their subtractive, reductive, and deterministic representations of Muslim girls so that we might better expose what is at stake in not accessing, and consequently not understanding or misunderstanding Muslim females. We argue that research that highlights only one of the three embodiments of the hijab may not be able to directly access the lives of Muslim girls. Thus, this kind of research offers a limited insight into how to challenge injustices that arise from Muslim girls living within the hijab discourse, a normative body discourse.

Given that the main purpose of the study from which this article emerged was to understand how four Muslim girls expressed and negotiated the meanings of their bodies, the exploration of the process of gaining access to the lives of these girls became central to the whole study. This paper explores the process of gaining research access into the lives of Muslim girls.

## Methods

In this study, we utilize flexible methods that attend to the challenges of heterogeneous locations and subjectivities, as well as to contradictory positions in relationships emerging in this study. We attempt to move toward research practices that travel transversely across cultural borders, and, thus, access the lives of marginalized girls in hope to change inequities. In Lather's (2007) words, we utilize a methodology that 'disciplines us with its possibilities, limits, pleasure, and dangers' (viii).

### Setting and participants

This paper is part of a 14-month study in which we worked with four Muslim girls to understand how they expressed and negotiated the meanings of their bodies. These girls were members of a Muslim community located in the southwest of the USA. Most of the activities for this study took place in the activity center of the local state university including the gym, pool, exercise rooms, and other public places in town – the mall, cafés, etc.

Manal, one of the two contributors to this paper, worked with four Muslim girls – Layla, Dojua, Abby, and Amy[3] – (ages 15–17) who considered themselves believers of *Allah,* considered English their first language, and attended the local mosque occasionally. At the time of the study, Layla was 17 and a junior in high school. She identified as Arabian-American. Layla was born in the US. Her mother is a White American and her father is Saudi-Arabian. Layla has been wearing the headscarf in public since she was 11. Dojua was a 17-year-old senior in high school. She identified as Algerian. She was born in Algeria and immigrated to the US with her family when she was eight. Her parents are Algerian-American, born in Algeria. Dojua did not wear the headscarf while her mother and older sister did. Abby was a 16-year-old junior in high school. She identified as Algerian-American. Abby was born in the US. Her parents are Algerian-American, born in Algeria. Abby and her mother did not wear the headscarf. Amy was a 14-year-old freshman in high school. She identified as American-Pakistani/Asian-Pakistani. Amy was born in Lahore, Pakistan. She immigrated to the US with her family when she was a baby. Amy did not wear the headscarf and her mother wore one 'loosely.'

In an earlier pilot study in the town's mosque, Manal worked with three Muslim girls, two of whom were interested in continuing to work with us in this study – Layla and Amy. Dojua and Abby participated because Layla was their friend and she invited them to join because she thought they would all have fun together. While not primary participants, three of the girls' fathers and all of the girls' mothers also collaborated with us. We obtained informed consents from the girls and their parents.

Two researchers contributed to this paper – Manal and Kim. At the time of the study, Manal was a doctoral student in curriculum and instruction and Kim was the chair of her dissertation committee. Manal, the main investigator, was identified as a

cross-class, *arabyyah-muslimah* queer (not in a heterosexual marriage). She is multi-lingual, and proficient in English and Arabic. Arabic is her *home* language and Islam is her religion by birth. For more than two-thirds of her life, Manal lived in majority Muslim contexts in which she was constantly negotiating the hijab discourse. While Manal's cultural experiences and linguistic proficiency positioned her as an insider/ in-betweener (Anzaldúa 1987; Mohanty 2003; Villenas 2006) to the hijab discourse, her sexuality, non-embodiment of the hijab, and academic status positioned her as an outsider (Hill-Collins 1990).

Kim, a consultant to the study, is a university professor in physical education teacher education. She identifies as White, middle class, and the mother of a girl. She is fluent only in English and had some experience with Muslim cultures prior to this study. While Kim's race, social class, language, cultural experiences, and career positioned her as an outsider (Hill-Collins 1990), her long scholarly experience with young girls positioned her as an in-betweener (Anzaldúa 1987).

### Data collection and analysis

We collected data over a period of 14 months. The first seven months (October 2005 to April 2006) was a pilot study in which Manal met with two of the girls 10 times for approximately two hours each time. At the time, Manal could only meet the girls at the women's quarter of the local mosque. During the seven months (June 2006 to December 2006) of the formal study, Manal met with the four girls 17 times for approximately nine to 11 hours each time. While the girls formally met at the local university's activity center for one or two hours each session, they also spent time together with Manal driving to and from the center, frequenting the mall, cafés, and other places the girls wanted to go.

Data sources included: (a) 17 task sheets designed by the primary researcher; (b) 17 transcripts of audio recordings of group meetings in the activity center (22 hours); (c) 35 emails Manal exchanged with the girls; (d) 35 pages of private journal entries by the girls; (e) over 300 digital photos that Manal or the girls took; (f) a poster of a body collage and individual scrap books the girls created; (g) lists of the words and quotes pasted on the collage and scrap books; (h) 15 audio recordings in cafés and in the car (18 hours); and (i) 210 pages of field notes, Manal's reflection journal, and emails exchanged between Manal and Kim.

Data analysis was threefold. First, Manal collected and transcribed data simultaneously as well as listened to every audio recording with the girls. Coding the transcripts and highlighting repeated concepts, she identified the first two emerging themes, inshallah and haram, that influenced the entry process. Then she grouped the concepts in clusters that fit within the purpose of the project. Second, once the study was completed Manal compiled textual data sources into one document and did another thematical analysis. Accordingly, she identified two more connected themes, being Muslim enough and being modest enough, which also influenced the entry process. Then, she grouped and compared all of the emerging thematic pieces of conversations in different documents as they informed each of the research questions (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Third, Manal rewrote the thematic pieces into plots, which consequently generated the interpretations and the claims of this study (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

In weekly conversations and emails, Manal worked with Kim to maintain critical self-reflexivity throughout the study (Lather 1986). Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) wrote:

> Reflexivity, at one level, is a self-critical action [that] can help researchers explore how their theoretical positions and biographies [and] how the structural, political, and cultural environments of the researcher, the participants, and the nature of the study affect the research process and product. (496)

Manal practiced critical reflexivity as a methodological tool to negotiate entry and maintain access. In doing so, Manal interrogated and negotiated her positionality as an insider–outsider throughout the study (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2007). In other words, by using self-reflexivity Manal recognized the tension emerging out of the difference between her positionalities and that of the girls' parents.

Manal's audio and textual field notes, emails to Kim, and in the moment conversations, before and after every meeting with the girls, exemplified what Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) called 'reflexivity sampling' (496). For example, every Sunday Manal wrote Kim a detailed email of her raw impressions, concerns, and questions about the previous meeting with the girls. Particularly, Manal became frustrated and fearful of risking the entry and/or maintaining access every time she encountered any difference between her and the parents' position about/in relation to the embodiments of the hijab. For example, right before the start of the study, Manal wrote:

> I am afraid to suggest to mothers that I would like to work with the girls outside the mosque this summer. They may deny the girls the opportunity of spending time in the university's activity center simply because of the presence of boys (the possibility of crossing any or all of the hijabs).

Kim, as an experienced researcher with young girls, assured Manal that getting the consent of the parents is essential in any research process. However, because the study had not started yet and it felt to Manal that it would be jeopardized altogether, Kim strongly suggested that Manal persist and use creative and flexible ways to obtain the parents consent. For example, rather than expect the mothers to read the consent form and refuse to sign it because they are unfamiliar with the new site, Kim suggested inviting the mothers for a tour at the activity center. Kim hoped that by having the mothers physically visit the activity center where their daughters would be spending time would eliminate any of their misconceptions. With this flexibility in using more time and doing extra steps, the mothers had an opportunity to see for themselves if their daughters would experience crossing the hijab or not and give their consent accordingly.

Moreover, briefing Kim consistently throughout the study became the major tool of practicing self-reflexivity. Every time Manal expressed her frustrations in obtaining timely permissions from the parents on every activity in the study, Kim assured her that she is already gaining crucial data on access and that she should make use of every encounter with the girls as if it is the last one. This almost systematic communication with Kim helped Manal to acknowledge her differences with the parents' positions on all of the embodiments of the hijab that challenged the study. By the end of the study, it became apparent that this weekly exchange between Manal and Kim was a major methodological tool that sustained access. Thus, maintaining reflexivity allowed Manal to spend more than 170 hours of unsupervised time with Layla, Dojua, Abby, and Amy and as a result gain some insight into the girls' lives.

## Interpretations

We present our interpretations by tracing four emerging entry markers that challenged the process of access into the lives of these four Muslim girls: (a) being Muslim

enough; (b) being modest enough; (c) inshallah (*Allah* or God willing); and (d) haram (forbidden). Through out the next section, we will discuss how we identified and negotiated each of these markers and how within each marker the relational dynamics and spatial contexts shaped the process access in this study.

### Being Muslim enough

There are five pillars to Islam: (1) faith or belief in the Oneness of God, Allah, and the finality of the prophethood of Mohammed; (2) establishment of the five daily prayers; (3) self-purification through fasting during the month of Ramadan; (4) charity giving to the needy; and (5) the pilgrimage to Mecca[4] for those who are able. However, in this study, being Muslim enough meant how much Manal observed and practiced only the first three pillars of Islam. Depending on Manal's adherence to these pillars determined how much of an insider she was, and thus whether she was Muslim enough to be trusted with the girls.

In the context of this study, being Muslim enough emerged as the first challenge to Manal's eligibility to gain entry. At the time of the study, Manal was identified as a secular Muslim. However, she did not explicitly confirm to the adult participants her faith in the Oneness of God, Allah, or the finality of the prophethood of Mohammed. Rather, she began by speaking in Arabic as she introduced herself, 'I am Manal Hamzeh[5] from Jordan, … a doctoral student in the local university …. I am interested in learning about Muslim girls in this town.' Manal repeated this same statement when she first met the head of the mosque council, the teachers at the mosque, and some of the parents. Manal's Muslim name, her country of birth,[6] her use of Arabic as her *home* language, and her interest in Muslims all may have been reasons that the parents took it for granted that she was Muslim or Muslim enough, to be given permission to start the study.

The parents scrutinized Manal on the second pillar of Islam during the study. Though Manal does not practice the five daily prayers, she is knowledgeable of the rituals, rules, and traditional texts associated with this pillar. At the beginning of the pilot study, Manal was very conscious of the fact that being present in a mosque for long hours would present a higher possibility for a call for prayer by the *muezzin*.[7] Usually Manal went to meet the girls at the mosque between 12 pm and 4 pm –the time that coincided with the *Dhuhor* (noon) and/or *Asser* (afternoon) prayers. Manal feared getting invited to join the women for a group prayer, thus being obliged to pray. At this point, Manal could not have faked the rituals by mimicking others around her, nor could she have refused the invitation by revealing that she was a *muslimah* who does not pray. Faking the prayer or not praying at all would have exposed Manal as not practicing the second pillar of Islam, hence revealing she was not Muslim enough. In other words, had Manal been forced to show her observance of the daily prayers she may have jeopardized the possibility of gaining entry right from the beginning.

During the holy month of Ramadan, which overlapped with the last month of this study, Manal had to negotiate and maintain entry in response to the third pillar of Islam. Again, the girls' parents assumed that Manal followed the usual rituals and religious demands of Ramadan. On a couple of occasions, they invited her into their community by asking her to join them for *ifttar*,[8] the main meal of the day in which they break the fasting at sunset. Given that Manal did not practice the Muslims' rituals of Ramadan, she was once more at risk of facing the parents' judgment for not being Muslim enough. For example, on the second day of Ramadan, Manal was visiting Dojua's father at his restaurant. They were comparing Ramadan food between Algeria

and Jordan. Suddenly he asked Manal, 'Do you pray every day at home and fast Ramadan?' Manal felt trapped so she said, 'No, I do not pray five times a day.' Manal tried to escape this direct scrutiny on being Muslim enough by immediately elaborating, 'I interpret Islam differently and faith is a private matter in my life.' Dojua's father argued that there is only one way of interpreting the pillars of Islam and right away asked her to join his wife and the other women for the special evening Ramadan prayers at the mosque. His insistence to bring her closer to his way of perceiving and practicing Islam made her feel more uncomfortable and fearful of losing entry. If Manal continued to argue or tried to excuse herself from his request, she would be revealing more of how she did not pray daily, did not pursue Ramadan evening group prayers, and did not fast Ramadan. Manal feared Dojua's father would decide that she was not Muslim enough to work with his daughter and pull her out in the middle of the study. Given the closeness of the local Muslim community, such an incident would surely jeopardize Manal's access to the other girls as well.

In hope of finding a way out, Manal explained that she had a non-religious upbringing and that she never entered a mosque except in Jerusalem and only out of her interest in Islamic history and architecture. At this point, Dojua's father gently pulled his request but insisted upon inviting her for *ifttar* with his family every sundown at his restaurant or at his home. Rather than decline his gracious request, Manal used night classes as an excuse for not being able to join them. Manal hoped that she might have left Dojua's father thinking she was observing Ramadan's rituals of fasting but in her own privacy. At that point, at least with this particular father, Manal qualified as Muslim enough thus maintaining her entry and ability to continue work with Dojua and the other girls.

Through all of the above examples, Manal's cultural literacy was crucial to her ability to negotiate her position within the pillars of Islam. She was able to counter any doubt on whether she was Muslim enough to gain and maintain entry to the Muslim community. Her literacies of the Muslim cultural values and practices, then her responsiveness to them (Knight et al. 2004) made it more likely that the girls' parents would allow her to work with their daughters.

### Being modest enough

In Islam, *al-ihtisham*, modesty is the virtue by which a Muslim maintains her/his moderation, humility, and respect (Mernissi 1991). Specifically, women express their modesty, or decency, by wearing the headscarf, not socializing with men in public, and by behaving respectfully in their lives (El Guindi 1999). Arguably, modesty is a normalizing outcome of the dominant discourse which disciplines Muslim women's lives and gauges their submission to Islam (Badran 1985). That is, a Muslim woman practices modesty abiding by all of the embodiments of the hijab, that is, those that *cover* her body, seclude her to private spaces, and protect her from forbidden behavior (Mernissi 1991).

Wearing the headscarf is the most elaborate and explicit representation of modesty, which a Muslim woman must embody in public (Ahmed 1992). The headscarf is modesty's dress code by which a Muslim woman covers and protects her sexualized body. Her body is a haram, a site that brings *aa'r* (shame) if uncovered (Mernissi 1991). More subtle interpretations of modesty inscribed on women's behavior in public spaces are: (a) lowering her gaze in a man's presence; (b) refraining from shaking hands with men; (c) refraining from having any physical contact with any man

outside her direct family; and (d) working and socializing in gender-segregated public and private domains (Badran 1985).

Throughout the study, being modest enough meant how Manal dressed and how she demonstrated her modesty in public while interacting with the girls' parents, especially with their fathers. For the parents to perceive Manal being modest enough, she had to walk a fine line to balance what her modesty weighed in moral standing with what her cultural knowledge weighed in respectability. That is, if Manal was not modest enough in her dress or behavior, she needed to counter her inadequacy with something of value to the parents, such as her ability to speak Arabic, to recite verbatim Qur'anic verses, or to reiterate Mohammed's teachings when an opportunity rose. The following are a few stories that illustrate how being modest enough shaped continual access throughout the study.

To clarify and to put negotiating the challenge of maintaining modesty in context, we explain the diverse ways in which the parents themselves adhered to modesty in contrast to Manal. First, the girls' mothers varied in their practice of Muslim modesty in clothing. Two of the mothers wore the tight headscarf, one wore the loose thin scarf showing a lot of hair, and one did not wear a headscarf. Second, their practice to modesty in behavior and gender-segregated spaces also varied. Three of the mothers worked in non-segregated gendered public jobs while one worked in the privacy of her home. However, outside of work, all four mothers lived gender-segregated social lives. That is, they did not socialize with men unless their husbands were present. In contrast, Manal never wore the headscarf and never lived a gender-segregated social or public/professional life.

From the first moment of meeting the mothers and the female teachers in the mosque early in the pilot study, to meeting two of the fathers in their homes and one in his restaurant, Manal was anxiously conscious of how *unveiled* she looked. Her concerns stemmed from whether the parents would consider her modest enough and thus, would allow her to enter their daughters' lives. Before going into the mosque for the first time, Manal was apprehensive about having to put on at least a loose headscarf. In order to gain initial entry, Manal wanted to show her acknowledgment to the mothers' expectations of her modesty. Even though the first day she met the girls and their mothers in the mosque's women's quarter, where all the women had taken off their headscarves, Manal was still very aware of herself going in without one. From then on when encountering the girls' parents, Manal consistently wore *reserved* clothes that were loose fitting and covered her upper arms and chest.

Manal's willingness to embody a *degree* of the visual hijab was one way she tried to balance her modesty with the modesty of the mother and teachers. In this, she put them at ease to grant her permission to work with their daughters. In other words, by *somewhat* embodying modesty in the mosque, Manal was given permission to work with the girls in the women's quarter. In the settings outside the mosque, Manal also had to mediate the difference between her *ways* of embodying modesty with that of the parents. For example, during a discussion about the headscarf with one of the fathers, Manal explained her position stating that the headscarf is not one of the pillars of Islam and that it has been misinterpreted and misused. She explained, 'The headscarf in its modern form was introduced by the Ottomans … and men use it to control women.' The father argued to prove her wrong and quickly called the *imam* (one who lead a group prayer) of the local mosque. Suddenly, he handed Manal his cell phone. She heard the imam shouting, 'Two hundred percent, yes, it is a must on Muslim women to wear the headscarf.' Despite Manal's fear of revealing her

contradictory position on the headscarf, she proceeded to stand her ground even though the potential of not being modest enough was at risk. However, had Manal needed to quote the most reiterated hijab verse in the Quran (33: 59), she would have been able to contextualize it and thus demonstrate how it is misinterpreted (Mernissi 1991). Contextualizing Qur'anic verses, that is exploring the circumstances that lead to the revelation – *asbab al nuzool* – is an interpretation and validation tool used by Muslim scholars throughout the centuries (Mernissi 1991, 88).

In the above moments, Manal not only used her cultural literacy, to open a conversation about the difference between her stand on modesty and that of the parents, but she also engaged with these differences in order to mediate alternatives meanings of modesty. In this approach, Manal brought about more chances of gaining access to the lives of the four Muslim girls in this project.

### Inshallah

Muslims commonly and frequently use the Arabic term *inshallah*, which means in Arabic God willing. Inshallah is a central principle in the Muslim's faith of obedience to one God, Allah (The Qur'an, 18: 23 and 24). As such, inshallah means the Muslim's peaceful submission to Allah's will. In other words, when a Muslim utters the word inshallah he/she submits to Allah, and therefore is a Muslim. If inshallah translated literally it means that life events are not in the hands of the Muslim but rather are in God's hands – Allah's will. This means that a Muslim may not confirm plans and will deal with them as uncertainties until they actually happen.

In this study, every time the parents uttered inshallah they made a vague commitment to the continuation of the study. This persistent tentative commitment meant that the study was always provisional. For example, at the beginning of the study after having explained the consent forms to the mothers and the girls, they all took copies home to get the father's signatures. Several times, Manal had to remind the girls' mothers to return the consent form signed. They would say to her 'inshallah next time.' In this instant, inshallah kept the access for the first planned meeting very unsure. It took Manal meeting with the fathers on three different occasions and locations to get their signatures on the consent forms.

Throughout the study, inshallah became prominent every time Manal dropped the girls at home. Each Saturday, Manal would stop to greet the mothers and to tell them what the plan was for the next week. When she said, 'I will pick them up next week,' the mothers automatically would respond 'inshallah.' This response did not mean the girls would automatically join the next meeting. A couple of hours before every Saturday meeting, Manal had to place several calls to the mothers to assure the girls' attendance and thus, guarantee continual entry.

In the above examples, Manal used her ability to recognize that the parents' use of inshallah merely reflected their submission to the will of Allah, and not necessarily their unwillingness to have Manal continue working with the girls. Such cultural literacy allowed again Manal to accept the resulting uncertainty and to know better than to rush the parents into a commitment they were not comfortable making.

### Haram

In Arabic, haram is a commonly used term derived from the verb *hrm*, which means made sacred and forbidden (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1991). In the Qur'an and

Mohammed's traditional teaching, haram means that certain practices such as eating pork, drinking alcohol, using drugs, socializing in co-ed spaces, and pursuing sexual or intimate encounters outside marriage are prohibited to men and women (Badran 1985). Staying away from the harams embodied in dress, mobility, and social interactions are essentials to assuring the hijab discourse (Badran 1985; Mernissi 1991).

In the lives of Layla, Dojua, Abby, and Amy, the more obvious harams, forbidden practices included: (a) exercising and swimming in public with the presence of boys; (b) wearing clothes of their choice; (c) dating boys; (d) talking about sex or watching movies with sex scenes; (e) going to parties that included dancing; (f) visiting their non-Muslim friends; (g) traveling with the school sports teams; (h) driving a car alone; (j) staying out after dark; (k) attending football games; and (h) shopping at the mall without their mothers. In relation to the study, before Manal could spend time with the girls, the parents had to approve every new activity or place to make sure it was not haram. The parents wanted to ensure that none of the study's activities and sites presented a chance for their daughters to commit a haram. Their approval was conditional to one activity or one place at a time and it only stood valid until that activity was over.

Occasionally, Manal had to cancel some of the study's activities in order to demonstrate to the parents that she respected their request that their girls not participate in any haram practice. Thus, Manal constantly had to design new tasks or modify the planned tasks of the study in response to the parents' last minute approval or denial of a potentially haram activity. Manal's early recognition of the harams and her quick responsiveness to change the activities of the study assured the participation of the girls, and thus, maintained her continual access.

For example, on behalf of the other mothers, one mother came to the activity center in order to check out the physical activities planned for the study. The mother wanted to guarantee that none of the physical activities violated the harams. Initially, this mother did not approve wall-climbing classes with male instructors or the girls' hanging out in swimsuits at the university pool in the presence of males. In response, Manal worked with the activity center personnel to provide the girls with a female wall-climbing instructor and to allow the girls to override the dress code at the university pool, that is, to swim with long pants instead of a swimsuit and/or while keeping on the headscarf.

Layla, who wore the scarf, had the most difficulty with her father 'policing' every move she wanted to make outside their home or school. Thus, on the third Saturday we met, Layla invited me visit their house and meet her father in order to facilitate his consent on the particulars of the study, and thus, assure her weekly participation with the group. At this point though presented with an opportunity, Manal apologized knowing that she needed to clear her way first with the mother and make sure she would be present too. That week, Manal arranged with Layla's mother to visit them at home the next Saturday morning when she picked Layla up. Once more, Manal knew that being present with a man alone in one space, private or public, is haram (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1991).

In the above examples, Manal recognized and acted upon even the subtle harams that blocked entry or kept access conditional. Again, Manal's cultural literacy of how the harams permeate implicitly in Muslims' everyday activities and her flexible ways of responding to them not only assured the signing of consent forms by the parents at the beginning but also kept her from losing access into the lives of these girls.

## Discussion

Throughout this study, we began to understand the process of gaining access into the lives of Muslim girls. We learned how four entry markers challenged gaining and sustaining access: (1) being Muslim enough, (2) being modest enough, (3) inshallah, and (4) haram. These four entry markers emerged as tensions of difference between the researcher and the adult participants, and they were interlocked with the hijab discourse. The three embodiments of the hijab – dress; mobility to/in public spaces; and physical activities in public – all acted as the sites of tensions, which in turn shaped the process of negotiating difference between the researcher and the adult participants in the study.

During the study, the four markers that challenged entry proved that negotiating relationships across differences was not easy (Subedi 2007) but possible. First, this process involved complex negotiations with the three secondary adult participants – first with the head of the local mosque's counsel, and two teachers, then with six mothers, and three fathers. At different times in the study, each of these relationships was crucial in allowing her to maintain access to the lives of Layla, Dojua, Abby, and Amy. However, in order to maintain the four major parental relationships in the last six months of the study, Manal had to go to a number of parents' homes and work places beyond the formal sites of the study. She also had to spend time socializing separately with four of the mothers and two fathers almost every week. This was beyond the 170 hours she spent with the four girls. Each time Manal encountered one of the parents, she had to negotiate her difference on one or more of the embodiments hijab – whether it related directly to the study or to Manal's own embodiments of the hijab. The adults in the girls' lives were not only their guardians, but were also the protectors and enforcers of the hijab discourse, with whom Manal had to constantly negotiate difference. Thus, Manal's commitment to maintaining strong relationships with the girls' parents became central to the success of access in this study.

Additionally, maintaining access into the lives of the girls in this study took Manal to negotiate difference on the spatial hijab and thus to have to select other sites than the mosque – the original site of the pilot study. Manal selected the sites that were more suitable to the purpose of the study, or those in which the hijab discourse was not unquestionable but possible to negotiate. To maintain the main purpose of this study, Manal needed to assure the conditions in which she was able to work directly with these girls – the main participants in the study. Thus, Manal recognized the need to move to a site that not only brings the girls alternative possibilities of bodily experiences but also a site located away from the direct enforcement of the embodiments of the hijab, and thus, less likely to bring out tensions of difference between Manal and the girls' parents.

In late March 2006, Manal consulted Kim on this need. Immediately, Kim suggested the university activity center – her department's base. That meant that moving the study site to the university's activity center would potentially minimize the parents and the mosque teachers from directly interrupting Manal's work with the girls or questioning the appropriateness of the girls' and Manal's embodiments of the hijab; and thus, maximize the range of activities these girls could practice as well as extend the time Manal could spend with the girls. However, to make this move to a new site, Manal needed to guarantee the approval of the mothers especially that at this point, she was still very uncertain about their commitment to the study and their approval of the girls being away from them or the teachers' direct supervision.

With Kim's suggestion, Manal saw an opportunity to invite the mothers to meet Kim and to visit the activity center. In this, she wanted to introduce them to the premise and the activities it would provide for the girls during their summer break – the time Manal was planning to collect data for the study. At the time, Kim was eight months pregnant. Kim's physical presence at the activity center, her position as a university professor, and her pregnant body all may have given the study credibility and thus partially, may have contributed to the mothers' decision to commit to the study. Additionally, the mothers were impressed with the possibilities of activities that would be available not only to teach their daughters new physical activities but also to 'fill their time' with something beneficial and entertaining during their summer vacation.

Manal gained entry and maintained access to the four girls' lives by indentifying and responding to four entry markers – being Muslim enough, being modest enough, inshallah, and haram. First, Manal's insiderness exemplified in her Qur'anic literacy, proficiency in Arabic, knowledge of the history of Islam, and competency in conversing about the history and politics of the parents' countries of birth, helped her in recognizing these entry markers – especially when they were subtle – and negotiating them with reasonable success. Second, the two researchers' outsiderness exemplified in Kim's long experience in working with girls and activist research, helped Manal to be reflexive about mediating the differences in her positionality with the parents when challenged with the four entry markers. Third, the practice of critical reflexivity through a number of tools helped Manal to stay flexible in carefully selecting the sites, timing and types of tasks throughout the study. Manal used every opportunity to hang out with the girls outside the activity center and socialize with their parents. She used these times not only to listen to the spontaneous conversations the girls' had among themselves but also to consult with them on how to negotiate their parents' permission for the next week's activity. Additionally, Manal engaged with each of the parents in their homes or at the doorsteps every week she picked up or dropped off their daughters. These were moments, Manal used 'reflexive interplay' when she became more aware of the emerging tension of difference with the parents, and thus, took the opportunity to mediate these differences and making 'meaning of questions that are asked and how those questions are answered and interpreted' (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2007, 500). That is Manal tried to find a common ground around the parents' concerns on any of the study's activities.

In this process, we learned that entry to the lives of Muslim girls is directly reliant on building and maintaining relationships with the adults in their lives, in which understanding and negotiating the positions of difference on the embodiments of the hijab discourse in their lives was inevitable. These adults at home or in the mosque represented the major 'disciplinary mechanisms' (Weedon 1999, 125) of the hijab discourse with whom any researcher hoping to work with Muslim girls need to seriously consider.

Given that, this study was drawing on feminist, poststructural, postcolonial, and critical theories we practiced critical reflexivity, in order to mainly acknowledge and mediate difference of positionalities with the girls' parents, and eventually approaching an understanding of the lived experiences of Muslim girls. Throughout, we were committed to working directly with Layla, Dojua, Abby, and Amy who had limited chances to use their critical language or cultural literacies in order to express their alternative meanings of their hijabs experiences (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2007). In this, we were compelled to find ways and open opportunities to begin to understand and maintain the process of access.

Though in this study, we only began to understand how gaining research access into the lives of Muslim girls was not a seamless process (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), we still need to do more. We need to understand how, in different transnational localities (Rhee and Subreenduth 2006) this process shapes Muslim girls lives, and eventually make more time to learn with the girls themselves. That is, we need to be more cognizant in practicing our ethical responsibilities towards the *other,* Muslim girls and their local communities (Ahmed 2000; Mohanty 2003). Thus, we suggest that in future work with Muslim girls, we find ways not only to acknowledge but also to critically engage with the difference about/in relation to the embodiments of the hijab between the researchers and the adults in the lives of these girls as openings and fertile moments to change inequities (Ahmed 2000). In other words, we need to particularly confront the emerging tensions and mediate positionalities of differences about/in relation to the multiple embodiments of the hijab that are permeating in these Muslim girls' lives as a normative discourse (Weedon 1999).

Finally, in this paper, we are only beginning the conversation on understanding the process of access into the lives of Muslim girls. Such understanding might open possibilities of doing research *with* the Muslim girls themselves that brings more insight to how Muslim girls negotiate the hijab discourse with their parents, with the larger Muslim community, as well as with other people in their lives. For those of us, educators and/or scholars, committed to understanding the fluid and multiple subjectivities of marginalized girls, as well as their practices of agency in which they negotiate normative body discourses shaping their learning opportunities (Fine 2007; Oliver, Hamzeh, and McCaughtry 2009), we think this is a beginning.

Given the above would be a challenge, we suggest that we too attend to what Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) describe as 'reflexive relationships' (503) when we are working with the Muslim girls themselves and their families. Further, we need to attend to the fluidity of positions in the collective process of 'crossing borders and boundaries and creating a common space for building knowledge' (503). In other words, as feminist critical researchers, we need to stay reflexive about 'the relationship and the social [discursive] conditions that affect the conversation … we must problematize all positions whether shared or not to create a nonhierarchical environment conductive to sharing' (503). In order to find these ways of research that validate and legitimize 'the knowledge that emerges from the everyday experiences of *outsiders within* and moving subjugated knowledge *from the margin to the center* of social inquiry' (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2007, 503), we need to broaden the theorizing of reflexivity. This is Hesse-Biber and Piatelli's (2007) call on researchers to maximize their practice of critical reflexivity in order to 'bring alternative forms of knowledge into public discourse' (496). That is, eventually we need to be able to stay aware and respond to what Abby and Layla called for:

> Because not everybody understands how much time it takes to get to know us. They just need to listen more … so they would know who we are … so they appreciate us more and make more activities for girls like us … so that they know what and who we are so they teach us better.

## Notes

1. *Lisan Al Arab*-dictionary.
2. The *Sunnah* represents the precedents and customs illustrated in the Qur'an but mostly connected to the ideal virtues and practices of Muhammad. Both the Qur'an and the Sunnah constitute the main sources of Islamic law (Ali 2006).

3. All participants' names in this paper were pseudonyms the girls selected themselves.
4. Mecca, the city, is valued by Muslims for having the holiest site of Islam, Al Masjid Al-Haram.
5. The name of the Prophet's uncle.
6. Jordan's majority population is Muslim.
7. *Muezzin* (Arabic, *noun*): the person designated with the responsibility of calling for prayer from the minaret of a mosque.
8. *Ifttar* is the after-sunset meal in which a Muslim breaks his/her daylong fast.

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