This anthology is about women who don’t remember a time when they weren’t both American and Muslim. We are the children of immigrants from Pakistan, Egypt, and Senegal. We are the distant descendants of African slaves brought to the Americas as well as the children of American men and women who accepted Islam in adulthood. Unlike us, our parents were raised largely in other countries or in other faith traditions. Our education was a colorful mix of home schooling, the local mosque, and Public School #9. We wore Undeeos and watched MTV. We know juz ‘amma (the final thirtieth of the Qur’an) and Michael Jackson’s Thriller by heart. We played Atari and Game Boy and competed in Qur’anic recitation competitions. As we enter our twenties, thirties, and forties we have settled into the American Muslim identity that we’ve pioneered.

Some of us were told that there was no need to craft an American Muslim identity—that we could simply apply the Qur’an and the sunnah (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) to our lives. That is simplistic and unrealistic. For example, I do not observe the rules of mahr (requiring a lone female to travel with a male guardian). Nor can I imagine marrying the way the contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad married (many women during the time of the Prophet married for political and business reasons, with none of the modern notions of love and marriage). In addition, much of the Islam we American Muslim women know was defined and interpreted abroad, in the larger Muslim
world. It is Islam fused with foreign culture. That's why Muslim women in Senegal dress differently from Muslim women in Morocco—each culture has its own interpretation, and we in the United States are creating a distinctly American Muslim culture. American Muslim women are choosing a path that honors our Islamic faith and our American heritage without apology.

The paradox of September 11, 2001, is that it firmly and forever established Islam and Muslims in the eyes of the West. Muslims have been in the West for centuries, and in ever-increasing numbers since the mid-twentieth century, but the tragic events of 9/11 created an unparalleled awareness of our presence. The result is that Islam has gone mainstream, and it is suddenly clear just how profoundly ignorant Americans have been about Islam and Muslims. "Go home... back where you came from!" passersby yelled at my friends. I laughed when I heard these stories, because I thought, "Just where would that be?" My family has been in the United States for centuries. My parents accepted Islam in their twenties and I was raised as a Muslim in northern New Jersey. Home for me is New Jersey and I have never felt as though I wasn't American. At the same time, I was saddened because I understood that for many Americans, Islam and Muslims had an alien face—a face that resided outside of the "normative" human family and relegated us to perpetual "otherness."

While there are 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide, U.S. Census data and a recent study by Cornell University place the American Muslim population at around 7 million. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, and in the United States, the American Muslim population has exploded almost overnight. In the United States, Muslims are fairly spread out, with major cities hosting the highest concentration. The American Muslim population encompasses eighty different nationalities, with African Americans being the largest single ethnic group; of the remainder, about a third are of South Asian descent and another third of Middle Eastern or North African descent. American Muslims range in the way we practice Islam and in our affiliation with any particular Muslim community. I have yet to find data detailing the exact number of American Muslim women; that said, what is significant about the American Muslim population is that the data demonstrate that American Muslims are younger, more educated, and more affluent than the average American.

There are many misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, including the notion that all Muslims are recent immigrants and that all African American Muslims are from the Nation of Islam or became Muslim in prison. Various interpretations of the role of Muslim women in sacred Islamic texts and in contemporary society give rise to the biggest misconceptions of all—that we are oppressed, relegated to secondary status, and often placed on a pedestal similar to the suppressed women of the Victorian era. Very rarely do we encounter empowering images of American Muslim women.

The truth is that some Muslim women, both in the United States and abroad, are in fact oppressed in many ways and do not live self-determined lives. The truth is also that many Muslim women live powerful lives sourced from the freedom granted to us by God. No longer can mainstream institutions and individuals continue to paint Islam with the broad brush of rigidity, chauvinism, and antiquated notions. At the same time, more Muslims are acknowledging what ails our communities so that we can step into an egalitarian and humanistic future. God speaks to us in the Qur'an saying that He will not change our condition until we change what is in our hearts and souls.

I believe that Islam is in the midst of global transformation. This transformation is being led largely by Muslims in the West because we have certain academic freedoms along with freedom of speech and freedom to worship. These civil liberties are largely unknown in Muslim-majority countries. Those of us leading this transformation are confident in claiming Islam for ourselves. We recognize the problems within the Muslim community even as we critique the mainstream's rush to stereotype us. Now more than ever, the world needs to hear our voices.

Most of the books written about Islam and Muslims that are widely accessible to the mainstream are by people of other faith
traditions. And many of the books written by American Muslims are about immigrants coping with assimilation, or else they offer conversion stories about why the grass is greener on the Muslim side. This book is about the first true generation of American Muslim women. That is, for the first time in history we have a critical mass of women under forty years old, raised as Muslims in the United States by parents who themselves struggled to reconcile their American and Muslim identities. We have never lived without Islam, nor did we grow up in Muslim-majority countries.

Over the past three years, I traveled around the nation and listened to the issues facing American Muslim women, which I have grouped as follows: intersecting identities, hijab, relationships, culture juxtaposed to Islam, sex and sexuality, activism, and spirituality. The essays in this anthology examine these issues through first-person accounts. Though it was not part of the plan, each contributor ended up discussing two of these issues no matter what else her piece was about: the juxtaposition of culture and Islam in general, and the question of hijab in particular. All of us have inherited cultural norms, which are embedded in our practice of Islam; no place is this more evident than in America, where there are so many ethnicities and nationalities represented among Muslims. Each culture comes with its own interpretation and manifestation of Islam. Similarly, each of the essays in this collection has a thread describing how ethnic culture is manifested in each author's practice of Islam and how our ethnic identity can supersede spirituality. In addition, each of us is individually creating an American Muslim identity, which in the aggregate form the beginnings of American Muslim culture.

Hijab is the other topic woven throughout these contributions. "Hijab" comes from an Arabic verb meaning "to veil, cover, screen, shelter, and/or seclude." In contemporary society it refers to the fabric some Muslim women use to cover their hair. For some it is a symbol of piety and modesty; for others it is a symbol of oppression and restriction. The Qur'an enjoins modesty in dress, speech, and actions for Islam's male and female adherents.

The topic of hijab has divided the Muslim community and is a lightning rod for debate and discussion—whether or not to do it and why, and what priority the topic should have among the issues facing Muslims.

There are many reasons a woman decides to wear hijab. Depending on whom you ask, some wear it because they believe it is mandated by God, others to demonstrate solidarity or resistance, and still others to follow familial and community mores. Conversely, there are many reasons a woman does not wear hijab. Some don't because they don't want to distinguish themselves in Western society; others don't believe that Islam requires hijab of its female followers, believing that modesty is required of all Muslims and in the broader sense regarding speech and actions as well as dress. Through our own personal narratives we reveal how we arrived at our choices about hijab. As you'll read, most of us are exhausted with the hijab debate and envision a future where we move beyond the judgments of women with and sans hijab.

The remaining topics—intersecting identities, relationships, sex and sexuality, activism, and spirituality—are discussed in specific chapters of the book. I am presenting my story first to frame this anthology and describe the experiences that shaped my life.

I chose the contributors to this anthology based on the following criteria: first, she must have been raised as a Muslim in America; second, she must be contributing to public life in an extraordinary way; and third, she must possess the will and courage to share honestly the experiences that shaped her life. Each of us is revealing parts of our lives—our challenges, triumphs, and innermost secrets—which, in many cases, neither our friends nor families know. And we have a great deal at stake. We risk judgment from our families, friends, the Muslim community, and the world. But we do it with the hope of creating a better future and because we know it's time for the world to hear our unfiltered voices.

We are Muslim women who have cleared our own paths and created ourselves both because and in spite of Islam and other
Muslims. Our American Muslim identity is not linear, nor can it be shed or separated. It just is. We are women who understand that following disempowering interpretations of sacred texts isn’t for us. We reflect the continuum of American Muslim women—some of us are still conflicted, while others are more secure with the choices we’ve made, but all of us are evolving as spiritual beings. Our group includes professionals and homemakers, Sunni and Shi’a, Democrats, Republicans, and independents. We hail from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and while we disagree on many counts, we agree on the need for our voices to be heard and on our sisterhood. This book reflects the diversity of American Muslim women in all our complexity.

My overall intention for this book is to humanize American Muslim women to our fellow citizens of the world. For Muslim readers in particular, my intention is twofold. First, I hope that in hearing our stories, the masses of women who fear judgment and condemnation will find permission to claim their own experiences and a self-determined future. Finally, I pray that Muslim girls here and abroad will read these stories and avoid the missteps we’ve made, know acceptance and solidarity, and be ultimately inspired to live Islam our loud.

I was born Nefertiti Omowale Daniels on April 6, 1974. My parents became Muslim in their early twenties after searching for greater meaning in their lives. They had visited mosques and met Muslims and liked what they saw. Shortly after my birth they changed our names legally, and I became Saleemah Abdul-Ghafr. Saleemah means “peaceful” and Abdul means “servant of.” Ghafr, one of God’s attributes, means “the most forgiving.”

Growing up, I always remembered that I was the peaceful one who was a servant of God, the most forgiving.

I grew up in a middle-class suburb in New Jersey and had a fairly happy and sheltered childhood. My parents were fiercely overprotective, though they worked hard to ensure that I received the best education our community had to offer. Even though I had access to the best of Western education, I was isolated socially, and coed activities were completely out of the question. I had a small circle of friends of whom my parents approved. When it was time to go to college, my parents refused to allow me to live on campus. They believed campus life was antithetical to raising a good Muslim woman. I remember how sad I was during high school graduation because my entire senior class marched off to college campuses across the nation while I stayed home and commuted to college. Though I’d worn hijab off and on over the years, when I started college, my mother declared that it was time for me to wear hijab permanently, and so I marched off to the train wearing hijab.
My mother made all of the decisions about my life, and my father allowed her to, rarely intervening. He was old-school in the sense that he believed she knew the best way to raise a daughter. I was not rebellious and largely obeyed my parents, not wanting to displease them, so I became silent, repressing the sadness and anger I felt during those years. As a result of my upbringing, I never learned how to interact with men in a social and platonic way, since males who were not family members were strictly off limits. I always felt uncomfortable when a man approached me or spoke to me. I became defensive around men and internalized a general distrust of men.

The reason my mother gave for limiting my social sphere was simply “Muslims don’t do that.” And so I believed that these limitations were prescribed by Islam, and as a good Muslim girl, I should comply. The reward would be a picture-perfect life, which meant good grades, getting into a great college, marrying a wonderful man, having a baby within two years, and then, pursuing graduate school. I lived that illusion for many years.

In 1998 my parents and I went on haji, the pilgrimage to Mecca. I turned twenty-four, praying with my family on the Mountain of Mercy in Arafat, Saudi Arabia. Our haji was extraordinary. It opened my eyes to the universality of Islam and to the vast continuum of Muslims. We were millions—from every corner of the world, nomad and city dweller, old and young, rich and poor, united for this sacred spiritual journey; yet each of us stood alone before God, cleansing our souls and remembering our Abrahamic ancestors through rituals. I returned to the United States buoyant and renewed. And within six months, I’d received everything I prayed for on haji, including a husband.

I met him in July, he proposed in October, and we were married in January. He was an American-born convert to Islam. He was handsome, charismatic, and matched my enthusiasm for adventure. He loved my outgoing, assertive personality and valued my accomplishments and ambitions. My family and friends embraced him easily and wholeheartedly. When we were married, I was a virgin; I had a bright career and grand notions of fulfilling my dreams. I was also as naive as a young bride could be. I believed I was a good catch and that we would enjoy a happy marriage because I had been a good Muslim girl. Many people in my community were anxiously awaiting my nuptials and turned out to witness the event. We had a huge wedding with all the stress and joy these milestones bring, and at the last moment, the New York Times asked to cover my wedding. They were interested in covering a Muslim wedding, and it certainly added some spice to the Sunday wedding section.

A few days into the honeymoon, on a cruise ship in the middle of the Caribbean, my husband stopped speaking to me. Shocked at the silent treatment, I coaxed the reason out of him, and he admitted frankly, “I don’t want my wife to run the dinner conversation.” My offense had been leading a discussion during our evening meal with our dinner partners. We talked it through but nothing was ever resolved. I thought this was just a bump along the way and that overall we’d be fine.

We returned home and the next few months demonstrated that I was not his idea of a proper Muslim wife. Somehow, I was always doing something inappropriate. Apparently, I even needed a lot of instruction on the correct way to do laundry and cut potatoes. We began to argue more frequently, and he would say that I didn’t know how to be a woman. Days would go by and he would refuse to speak to me or to acknowledge my presence. He would come in at night and sleep on the other side of the bed, making no body contact, and in the morning he would leave without a word. This silent treatment was torture for me, so I would plead with him to speak to me or touch me, and occasionally his response was some reference from the Quran or a hadith. One time he justified the silence by quoting a hadith saying a Muslim could be angry with another Muslim for up to three days. When he was ready to make up, we would, and that would be followed by a period of harmony. I remember him kissing me one day as a reward, saying, “You’ve been really good lately.” The
peace never lasted, and the marriage became a regular assault on my sensibilities, which screamed at me to fight back and to leave, but I ignored my intuition for fear of the consequences.

Few people outside of our immediate circle knew of our troubles because in public we seemed to lead a content and happy life. Privately, I often sought advice from our parents, family members, and imams, which usually enraged my husband even more. We went through counseling with our family and with two imams. Though my parents were wary and increasingly alarmed at the stories of what was transpiring in my marriage, the imams attributed our problems to first-year newlywed adjustments. Finally, one imam agreed that a professional marriage counselor would be advisable. After a few sessions my husband refused to continue, remarking that I was the one with the problem who needed to go to counseling.

Over this time our arguments had worsened, and soon he became violent. First there was a push, then he slapped the phone from my hand, and finally one morning, after I woke him for prayer, he hit me in the face and threw me across the room. As I looked at my face, bloody and swollen in the bathroom mirror, my instinct said call the police, but I called my parents instead. While I waited for them to arrive, my husband paced through our apartment. He told me to wash my face and sat down to watch the morning news. My father arrived and took me home. I went to work, attending a full day of meetings, not explaining my swollen face and covering my bruises.

Over the next few days I stayed with my parents, and I learned that my husband had confessed what happened to an imam. The imam was upset and began a series of conversations with my husband and me. The imam was distressed because he had been one of the people who had endorsed my husband’s character before our wedding, and now he felt a degree of responsibility. He noted that it is forbidden in Islam to hit someone in the face and instructed my husband to apologize immediately. He apologized to me, saying he didn’t know that he couldn’t hit someone in the face. Though I was outraged at the clinical nature of this discussion and the fact that anyone would need sacred texts to know that physical abuse was unacceptable, I did not voice my outrage. The voice within me marked how ridiculous and dehumanizing this marriage had become. It whispered that I was committing myself to someone who had violated every boundary I’d ever established for myself. Even so, I returned to our apartment against my parents’ wishes and my own better judgment.

That evening my husband apologized again and asked if I would forgive him. I replied “yes” and began to sob. My husband hugged me while I cried. I was crying because I wasn’t strong enough to leave. I was crying because I was staying, knowing it wouldn’t work out. I continued to cry, and his hugs turned to kisses and then to sex. I remember not wanting to have sex and lying there wanting to ask him never to hit me again, but again I was silent. In the back of my mind ran the hadith that I had heard during many Muslim wedding ceremonies. This hadith stated that if a man approached his wife for sexual intercourse and she denied him, the angels would leave her until she responded to her husband’s request. I thought if I said no to sex, that would give my husband more evidence that I couldn’t be a good wife. I hoped the act would win me his favor, but I found myself mired more deeply. A few days later we argued again and he told a family friend that although we had “made up,” I was still defiant and stubborn around the house. He had taken my words and my willingness to have sex as evidence that the beating incident was resolved.

I resigned myself to staying not so much out of love for my husband but because I could not bear the loss of the marriage. The thought of not being married meant major failure, and that was less bearable than being with a man who mistreated me. Because I had lived Islam as others defined it, when my husband used Islam to justify his actions I believed that something was indeed wrong with me. I couldn’t cope with the rejection or the demise of a dream that had meant lifelong security and validation. As re-
ality pierced my illusion and disappointment set in. I became angry and, as the therapist I was still seeing observed, borderline clinically depressed.

One short and intensely painful year later I was divorced and in the worst depression of my life. The last time I spoke with my husband, we argued, and he told me to “remember my place”—meaning my place as a woman. I had constructed my life around the ultimate goal of marriage, and thus I had nothing to anchor me. Though my parents, whom I lived with during this time, and my close friends supported me unconditionally, I felt intense shame and guilt about my marriage. I was humiliated and embarrassed. Each day I awoke, surprised that I was still alive. I suffered through my divorce because I believed that something was wrong with me. Somewhere along the way, long before I met my husband, I had internalized that those in authority defined my self-worth. If my intuition told me something to the contrary, it was to be ignored. In short, I had to subjugate my will because others knew best. “Others” could be my parents, my husband, or my community.

And one day I looked up, and Saleemah was gone. There was only a shadow of myself left behind. Gone was the outgoing, confident, and intelligent woman I had known. She was replaced with an angry, broken, not-good-enough-to-be-a-wife woman who was disillusioned because she’d lived as a good girl but didn’t get the happy ending. The crisis of my marriage called my entire life into question. It was the dark night of my soul in that nothing and no one could ease the pain. Everything I knew failed me in this regard, and I could only turn to God. Upon reflection, I am grateful for my marriage. The end of that relationship marked the beginning of my quest for self-awareness and for God, free from the interpretations of others.

After the divorce my mother said, “Now you have a chance.” It was a rich opportunity given to me by God to stop living through others. It was a spiritual depression designed to strip away my illusions and all that was false and to personalize my faith, relying only on God. While I understood this intellectually, it would take several years for the transformation to occur in my heart, and during that time I walked in fear and despair, still believing I was defective.

Shrouded in black, wounded but hopeful, I attended my first thikr (a session chanting remembrances of God) just before sunrise. The imam said “Welcome” as I joined the group. I introduced myself and his wife responded, “That’s a beautiful name; what does it mean?” I said, “It means peaceful,” and the imam said, “It actually means sound, as in without defect.” It was as though God spoke to me through the imam, sending a message affirming that I was okay just as I was. I remember that early morning being a major turning point in my life.

In order to save my life, I knew the first step was to get Saleemah back. Except for the thikr, I stayed away from mosques and many of the Muslims with whom I’d grown up. Formally, I had gone to mosques in search of spiritual nourishment and guidance and comfort. More often than not, I found myself distracted by the fire and brimstone sermons promising death and doom, or by someone disrupting my prayerful state to correct my dress or actions. Sitting in cold basement or behind opaque partitions with screaming children, pretending to ignore the whispers about me and my marriage, slowed my ability to heal. Though I’d grown up with this being the norm, I just couldn’t bear it any longer as I faced my new life. I stopped going places and interacting with people who left me feeling judged and empty. I surrounded myself with my parents and my inner circle of close friends. I thrust myself into prayer and isolation, turning to a variety of sacred texts, self-help books and tapes, and holistic healing.

During this time my mother presented me with a wonderful gift. One day, half joking, she said, “Whatever your father and I have done to mess you up, let’s discuss it and resolve it so you can move forward.” With that statement, she gave me permission to acknowledge the issues of my upbringing so that I could move
forward free from the burdens of my upbringing. I was fiercely loyal to my parents and found it hard to confront how they raised me. I didn’t want to hurt them by discussing the impact of my upbringing. My mother’s gift began a series of conversations through which I’ve come to understand my parents and appreciate their role in my life even more. Her gift freed my family to deepen our relationship.

In one of these conversations, my mother revealed to me that in her early twenties, prior to getting married, she had been assaulted at gunpoint. From the moment I was born, my mother was determined that I would be protected and that no man would abuse me as she’d been abused. The limits she placed on me were her way of protecting me from harm. Using Islam to support her methodology was a way of legitimizing it and making it beyond reproach. Unspoken for so many years, it became subconscious. Enlightened with this new understanding of the context of my mother’s actions, I was free to transform my relationship with God and Islam and myself.

I began to reevaluate my life and specifically the rituals I performed. I decided to stop doing things that didn’t make sense to me, so I stopped wearing hijab—not because I felt oppressed wearing it, but rather because I realized that I had never chosen hijab for myself. As I read the Qur’an and secondary texts on Islam and meditated on hijab, I realized that my spirituality had nothing to do with whether or not I wore hijab. My access to Islam was not located in my outer appearance.

During this time I worked with a pioneering magazine for American Muslim women entitled Azizah, which presents the accomplishments and perspectives of Muslim women in North America. After embracing this new consciousness of myself, I began to meet other Muslim women like myself. So few women of any tradition or tribe receive the necessary support when they go off to create themselves. I met extraordinary Muslim women who, like myself, strove to reclaim our God-given right to live self-determined lives, even if it meant being on the margins of the Muslim community. Through reading and prayer, I began to realize that by following others’ interpretation of Islam, I had constructed my own prison and relinquished the rights God granted to me. I now have a profound understanding of taqwa (God-consciousness). I understand that taqwa has always been within me. What that means practically is that now, after years of surrendering my own will and voice to follow another’s, if something doesn’t resonate within me, I don’t do it. I don’t need to find proof in sacred text, because I already know it. While I appreciate the need to delineate the proof, I’ll leave that to the growing number of American Muslim women studying Arabic, the Qur’an, and Islam so we can access the sacred texts and present a more gender-equitable and humanistic Islam.

Further, I learned that during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, women and men prayed in one common space, and that the Prophet allowed women to lead mixed-gender congregational prayer. The notion that women couldn’t lead mixed prayer and were undeserving of equal access to the mosque and to voice within the mosque had seeped into my consciousness over the years. I’d never protested being relegated to a separate and inferior space in the mosque, nor did I request to lead prayer. My silence was my acceptance of this way. But now I knew that freedom was mine, and in June 2004 I marched with a group of women to reclaim space and voice in a mosque where women had been banned from the main prayer hall and from leadership positions. In reality, I marched for myself to reclaim the voice I’d lost years before.

My path to God has been filled with doubts, difficulty, and ease. The more self-aware I become, the more I feel that I am aligned with God’s best plan for me. My faith grows stronger, no longer weakened by external forces. Islam for me is surrender to divine will, spiritual practice, and cleansing my soul of hatred, resentment, and jealousy. What I now know is that for me, Islam is fundamentally a way of life emanating from God’s mercy. I have been endowed with the nature to live my absolute best life, and
only I can determine what that means. The Prophet Muhammad taught us that “To know yourself is to know your Lord.” And I am closer to my true self than I have ever been.

On my journey, I learned of pioneering Muslim women worldwide. Muslim women in America can look here and abroad to know that the movement is global. Women in India and New Jersey are building their own mosques, and there are female imams in China. Our sisters in France, refusing to be labeled by those Muslims who would judge them with misguided notions of honor, have authored a book, Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores Nor Submissive), protesting the mistreatment of women in the name of Islam. In South Africa a Muslim woman gave the Friday sermon, and in Chicago a Muslim woman led the Eid prayer.

This anthology is a collection of the stories of some of the American Muslim women who are on the front lines here in the United States. It is an honor and a blessing for me to present these women, as each has inspired and encouraged me. We are the future faces of Islam.

The women in this book were all raised primarily in the United States as Muslims. For the most part, we don’t recall a time when we were not both American and Muslim. American Muslims can largely be divided into immigrants and American-born Muslims. In this first section we will see how these multiple identities intersect. What’s it like to grow up Muslim in the United States? What was our relationship with mainstream society and with the Muslim community? Who were our role models in crafting an American Muslim woman identity and in personalizing our faith?

The first stories frame separately an immigrant and an American-born Muslim experience in the United States. These stories, told by the first American Muslim novelist of Indian descent and by a Harvard-trained historian, reveal the complexities of growing up Muslim and how our various identities—American, Muslim, female—intersect.