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◆ When Dalilah Muhammad won a gold medal at the 2016 Olympics, the New York City native made history in more ways than one: She became the first-ever American woman to take home the gold in the 400-meter hurdles, the first Muslim woman to earn a gold medal in any sport on behalf of the United States, and one of two female Muslim athletes to compete on the U.S. team that year. The other, bronze medalist fencer and New Jersey native Ibtihaj Muhammad (no relation), had garnered a good deal more press leading up to the games, notably for being the first Olympian to represent the U.S. while wearing a hijab — the head covering worn by some Muslim women as a part of their religious practice.

In the background of the women's accomplishments is a lesser-known historical fact: Islam and Muslims have been an integral part of the American social fabric from the very beginnings of the nation. Islam is the third-largest religion in the U.S. after Christianity and Judaism. The U.S. Census does not include questions about religion, so estimates of the American Muslim population vary. A 2017 study by the Pew Foundation places the numbers of Muslims in the U.S. at 3.45 million and growing. According to some researchers, by the year 2040, Islam will surpass Judaism as the second-largest religion in America.

Muslims in the U.S. are also one of the most demographically diverse populations of Muslims anywhere in the world, and one of the most diverse religious communities in the country. While American Muslims share a faith designation, there are many significant internal differences along the lines of race, citizenship and national origin, educational background, class and sectarian affiliation, approaches to religious observance, political views, and those who were born into Muslim families versus converts. By some estimates, there are nearly eighty distinct nationalities that make up the American Muslim demographic.

For many non-Muslim Americans, information about Islam and Muslims often comes from headlines and political conversations around foreign and domestic policy. But there is significantly more to the narrative than that. Around the world and within the U.S., Islam is a lived religion that shapes the ways Muslim Americans organize their personal lives and engage with the broader communities in which they live. Islam continues to have a significant impact on the collective beliefs, culture, and social practices of both Muslim and non-Muslim Americans, through faith and worship, of course, but also through music, fashion, politics and civic engagement.

Muslims in America: A Brief Timeline

While there is much that we know for certain regarding the story of Islam in this part of the world, definitive answers to the question of exactly when Muslim American history began is still a matter of debate. Some researchers have suggested that West African explorers made their way to the Americas as early as the 14th century, prior to Columbus. Gaps in the available evidence mean that questions about the Muslim presence in this part of the world in the pre-Columbus era remain. There does exist, however, documentation of a Muslim presence during the era of initial European exploration of the Americas: A Moorish Muslim by the name of Estevanico was sold into slavery by the Portuguese in 1522. This enslaved African was himself an explorer, traveling through what eventually became Florida and west into what became New Mexico.

Brooklyn Historical Society recently purchased a rare 17th-century deed that underscores the long history of Muslims in Brooklyn. A land deed signed by the Director General of New Netherland in 1643 grants Anthony Jansen van Salee 100 morgens (approximately 200 acres) near present-day Coney Island. According to records, van Salee's father, a Dutch privateer, converted to Islam when he was captured along the Barbary Coast. Anthony, his fourth son, later set sail for the New World from Amsterdam, ultimately establishing his family as prosperous farmers, and himself as the first known person of Muslim faith to own land in America.

Other researchers have documented Muslim presence among those who fought in the Revolutionary War via Arabic names such as Muhammad and Ali found in military records. In 1805, Thomas Jefferson hosted an iftar dinner (the meal that Muslims enjoy at sundown in the month of Ramadan after a day's fast) at the White House for a Tunisian diplomat. Jefferson also owned a Qur'an, an artifact that is currently in the Library of Congress. Although it remains a matter of debate among historians and scholars how many African Muslims were forcibly captured and transported as chattel to the U.S. — estimates range from roughly 10 to 20 percent — written and oral documents tell the stories of their lives in bondage and attempts to maintain their faith in hostile circumstances. Some captives, literate in Arabic, left Qur'anic manuscripts reproduced from memory; some left autobiographical documents that detailed their lives on the African continent and their harrowing journey to and within the U.S. One such captive, Ibrahim Abdul Rahman, a prince from Fouta Djallon, Guinea, was captured and sold to slave traders in 1788; through a series of extraordinary events, he petitioned the sultan of Morocco to intercede on his behalf on the basis of their shared faith. Forty years later, he was freed by President John Quincy Adams. Bilali Muhammad and Salih Bilali were captives on the Golden Isles of Georgia of Sapelo and St. Simons, respectively, in the 19th century. In contrast to the restrictions on freedom of religious practice that most enslaved Africans experienced, these two men, and other Muslims who labored on the

plantations alongside them, were granted more leeway to worship — as a result, ample documentation of their practices remain. Oral testimony about the faith and practice of Phoebe, Bilali Mohammad’s wife, recorded by Works Progress Administration workers in the 1930s, provides us with a rare glimpse into the lives of Muslim women in the U.S. during this period.

In the 20th century, the U.S. Muslim population began to increase significantly through a combination of increased immigration from Muslim-majority countries and domestic conversion to Islam, predominantly, though not exclusively, among African Americans. In the beginning, migrants from the Ottoman Empire — a region that includes present-day Syria, Yemen, and Turkey — and Eastern Europe settled in various parts of the U.S. Muslims were among the migrants from various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Missionaries from the Ahmadiyya movement, founded in the Punjab region in 1889, who traveled to the U.S. were successful in attracting a racially diverse body of converts. During this era, smaller numbers of African Muslims were also among those who came to the U.S., this time as voluntary migrants, including a significant number of Sudanese sailors who had been specifically recruited by the U.S. military during World War II and the Korean War and later given the opportunity to migrate and settle in America. Internal migration within the U.S., particularly the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the industrial centers of the North and Midwest (New York City, Newark, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Chicago), had a significant impact on African American religious life. Interaction with migrants from Muslim lands in northern cities and exposure to the teachings of homegrown Islamic organizations such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam facilitated the growth and spread of the faith and the introduction of Islam and Muslims to the American public on a broad scale via the civil rights and Black Power movements, through the racial justice and human rights discourse of figures such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, and by the presence and participation of American Muslims in the jazz and hip-hop scenes.

As a result of the continued efforts of social justice activists across the country, a number of related, landmark acts of legislation were passed in the 1960s that would affect the trajectory of the nation and the makeup of the American Muslim population. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed by Congress, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, and national origin. In the following year, the Voting Rights Act was passed, as was the Immigration and Nationality Act. These laws ushered in many important social changes, including the elimination of quotas on the basis of national origin, that for so long limited the numbers of immigrants from Southern Europe, Africa, and Asia. While the ongoing struggle against racial inequality contributed

significantly to the growth of Islam among African Americans, the dismantling of quota-based immigration restrictions allowed Muslims from around the world to come to the U.S. in greater numbers. These patterns have continued into the new millennium, and have influenced the growth and evolution of Islam in the U.S. in recent years. Immigration, conversion, and the continued proliferation of Muslim institutions – mosques, Islamic schools, and social service organizations – have all contributed to the development of the American Muslim population.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Donna Auston is an anthropologist, writer, and public intellectual whose body of work focuses on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, protest and social movements, media representation, and Islam in America. When these essays were written in 2019, she was completing her dissertation, an ethnography of Black Muslim activism and spiritual protest in the Black Lives Matter era, at Rutgers University.