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RESEARCH ARTICLE

West African Sufism and the matter of Black life

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Abstract

In this article, I consider how migration practices around the Black Atlantic and discourses of repatriation mobilize Black African diasporic Muslim identities in present-day Senegal and in a mosque in South Carolina that is situated on land that was formerly a slave plantation. I use the term 'reversion' as a vocabulary of 'diasporic becoming' to signal how notions of Islamic piety are coupled with a politics of Black Atlantic Muslimness in the context of a West African Sufi *tariqa* – or 'Black Atlantic Sufism'. Moreover, I consider how identity formation and African Muslim ancestry are impacted by discourses of geographic return and repatriation that are linked to spiritual tourism.

Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur étudie la manière dont les pratiques de migration autour de l'Atlantique noir et les discours de rapatriement mobilisent les identités musulmanes diasporiques africaines noires dans l'actuel Sénégal et dans une mosquée de Caroline du Sud située sur une ancienne plantation d'esclaves. Il utilise le terme « réversion » comme un vocabulaire de « devenir diasporique » pour indiquer comment les notions de piété islamique sont conjuguées à une politique de musulmanité atlantique noire dans le contexte d'une *tariqa* soufie ouest-africaine, ou « soufisme atlantique noir ». De plus, l'auteur étudie la manière dont la formation de l'identité et l'ascendance musulmane africaine sont impactées par des discours de retour géographique et de rapatriement qui sont liés au tourisme spirituel.

Resumo

Neste artigo, considero como as práticas migratórias em torno do Atlântico Negro e os discursos de repatriação mobilizam identidades muçulmanas negras africanas diásporas no Senegal actual e numa mesquita na Carolina do Sul (South Carolina) que se situa numa terra que foi anteriormente uma plantação de escravos. Utilizo o termo 'reversão' como um vocabulário de 'tornar-se da diáspora' para assinalar como noções de piedade islâmica estão associadas a uma política de muçulmanidade negra atlântica no contexto de um sufi *tariqa* da África Ocidental – ou 'Sufismo do Atlântico Negro'. Além disso, considero como a formação da identidade e a ascendência muçulmana africana são influenciadas pelos discursos de retorno geográfico e repatriação que estão ligados ao turismo espiritual.

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Rasheed P., originally from Philadelphia, felt like his long-awaited trip to Senegal in early 2015 was an opportunity to reconnect with family. It seemed as though his entire journey had been made complete with his visit to the gravesite of the founder of the Mustafawiyya Sufi order of which he had been a member for so many years. Going to Senegal for the first time allowed him to reconnect with American friends such as Mikhail A. whom he had not seen in a long time, and to finally connect with his Muslim brothers and sisters in Senegal whom he had heard about through his shaykh. He explained that, even though he was meeting some people for the first time, there was an uncanny feeling that they had met before. During an interview conducted after we both returned to the USA, Rasheed compared his experience of visiting Turkey with his experience in Senegal, while also remarking on the qualitative difference between the two: everyday Muslims in the West African country seemed, to him, to be more devout.[1] For him, this was indicative of how a higher percentage of Senegalese Muslims being affiliated with Sufi traditions (*tassawuf*: the Islamic science of spirituality) had a positive impact on the religious landscape. Furthermore, he explained how hospitality (*teranga* in Wolof) seemed more thoroughly stitched into the social-religious fabric as a result of Sufism's presence in Senegal. While this fact about adherence to Sufism in West Africa may or may not be accurate, I read Rasheed's impression as meaningful in terms of the logic behind his positive view of Senegal. Additionally, this was part of a broader justification for having visited the country to which he imagined he might relocate some day, which surely began with his interaction with Senegambian Muslims in South Carolina at the *zawiyah* (Sufi lodge) of Moncks Corner. It was evident that this trip to Senegal was particularly meaningful for Rasheed – his pilgrimage was an embodied practice of diasporic envisioning.

I understand Rasheed's expressed desire to visit Senegal, and potentially repatriate, as exemplary of a broader concern for Black futurity via mobility; this concern is shared among African-descended Muslims throughout the transatlantic Mustafawiyya network. Not only do notions of ontological displacement continue to unfold among African-descended Muslims, but those feelings also accompany persistent forms of disinheritance and coloniality as they shape corporeal resistances in the Black Muslim Atlantic. Here, I consider how migration practices across the Atlantic and discourses of repatriation mobilize Black African diasporic Muslim identities in present-day Senegal and in a mosque in South Carolina that is situated on land that was formerly a slave plantation, about thirty-five minutes' drive north-west of Charleston. Charleston was a major point of entry for African Muslims who were enslaved throughout the South; these included Omar Ibn Said, who was taken from his homeland in the Senegal region, forcibly migrated into the USA through Charleston, and made to labour in North Carolina. I use the term 'reversion' as a vocabulary of 'diasporic becoming' to signal how notions of Islamic piety are coupled with a politics of being Muslim in the 'Black Atlantic' (Gilroy 1993) in the context of the Mustafawiyya *tariqa* – or what I call 'Black Atlantic Sufism'. Drawing on Jemima Pierre's intervention (2013), which seeks to correct the epistemic blindness that

[1] Interview, Rasheed P., 18 February 2015. None of the informants who participated in this research wished to be anonymized and I have therefore decided to use their actual names in this publication as I have in other writings.

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disconnects the histories and memory of slavery from the legacy of colonialism on the African continent, this article considers how a religious movement conceived in post-colonial Senegal is deployed as a strategy for addressing and understanding racial identities on the part of African-American Muslims as they look to potentially 'return' to Africa. Further, I consider how questions of temporal imagination and African Muslim ancestry are currently fused onto discourses of geographic return and repatriation that are linked to a concern with spiritual or religious empowerment and necessitate re-envisioning the past.[2] I argue that, where travel takes place among African-descended Mustafawiyya Muslims, over the years it has been rooted in conversations regarding African cultural heritage and repatriation or homegoing while also being aligned with spiritual tourism. These conversations are closely connected to the cultivation of Black Muslim identities that take shape in the Mustafawiyya Sufi community.

The analysis that I share here arises out of years of sustained ethnographic research both in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, and in Senegal. This multisite research has allowed me to trace the movements of Muslims back and forth across the Atlantic, while I am also attentive to the manner in which such travel shapes religious identities and understand how religious discourses motivate travel. My research approach included standard methods such as participant observation during religious events in spaces of worship, formal interviews, and informal notes of conversations among community members.

The Mustafawiyya order

The Mustafawiyya *tariqa*[3] is a transnational Sufi order that was initiated in 1966 by Shaykh Muhammad Mustafa Gueye Haydara (d. 1989) in Thiès, Senegal. However, it was his protégé, Shaykh Arona Rashid Faye al-Faqir, who relocated to South Carolina in 1994 from West Africa and invited American Muslims – many of whom are converts – onto the growing Mustafawiyya Sufi path.[4] Currently, the Mustafawiyya *tariqa* maintains small and moderately sized groups of students (each of some 20 to 150 adherents) along the eastern coast of the USA, as well as members in Senegal, Gambia, Morocco, Mauritania, Spain and Indonesia. In the USA, the majority of students who have entered the *tariqa* and have declared an allegiance (*bayah*) to Shaykh Faye have been African-Americans who have inserted themselves religiously,

[2] There are certainly Senegambian Muslims living in Moncks Corner, South Carolina who now negotiate the legacies of race and Islamophobia; however, a fuller analysis lies beyond the scope of this article and will be addressed in my forthcoming monograph.

[3] *Tariqa* is an Arabic word that means 'path' and implies a regimen of spiritual training as determined by participation in an established Sufi order. Generally, membership involves some formal or informal initiation in a specific *tariqa* and the acceptance of a teacher (*shaykh*, *pir*, *murshid*) who will personally manage and guide the initiate's (*murid*, *talib*) spiritual growth and religious education.

[4] '*Al-Faqir*' is an Arabic term that connotes extreme poverty and dependency on the part of the human being, particularly in contrast to the vastness of the wealth that God possesses, which he mercifully bestows on the human being. Conceptually, it is sourced from the Qur'an and is used by Shaykh Arona Faye to express an utter and complete dependence on God. For example, the Qur'an states: 'If they are poor, God will provide for them from his bounty: God's bounty is infinite and he is all knowing' (24:32). Shaykh Faye has taken this as a name to recognize his own dependency; similarly, he has named his students/followers as 'the *fuqara*' (plural of '*faqir*') to signify their dependence on God.

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culturally and pedagogically into a West African Sufi tradition that emphasizes religious study and the practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God). As in other Sufi traditions, Shaykh Faye has named his community the '*fuqara*'; this not only connotes dependency on God but also functions to mark those who identify as spiritual companions regardless of their location. As he explained in an interview, Shaykh Faye moved to South Carolina from West Africa in order to reconnect with his lost kin. At the same time, many African-American members of the tradition either have travelled to Senegal themselves to strengthen transatlantic ties with West African compatriots and to visit the small city of Thiès, or have sent their children to study the Qur'an for a number of months or years at the now defunct Fuqara International Islamic Academy in Dakar, Senegal.[5]

Two locations – Thiès, Senegal and Moncks Corner, South Carolina – act as centres of pilgrimage for the Mustafawiyya Muslims. The North American centre of the *tariqa* is located in Moncks Corner, a small southern town that has fewer than 9,000 residents and is about 7.5 square miles in size. All religious holidays, celebrations and significant events among the Mustafawiyya Muslims in America are celebrated at the mosque in Moncks Corner and most American members travel there from throughout the eastern USA at least once a year.[6] Its main draw is the charismatic Shaykh Faye, whose religious expertise provides a foundation on which his students build spiritually. It is through Shaykh Faye that they access the spiritual poetry of Shaykh Mustafa. Also, Mustafawiyya Muslims who do not permanently reside in Moncks Corner visit in order to take advantage of the *zawiyah*'s famed hospitality.

While the majority of Muslims who live in Moncks Corner are South Carolina natives, a good portion of the community has specifically relocated to this small town, from larger urban centres (or from across the Atlantic), in order to take advantage of the intimacy that students can share with their beloved teacher. As such, the *zawiyah* operates as a proper site of pilgrimage for the Mustafawiyya Muslims. Some frequently visit from other places during special times of the year, while others relocate to Moncks Corner with their families to become part of the community and have continual access to Shaykh Faye. Moncks Corner functions as a practical space for communal care and for consistent, directed religious study. The *zawiyah* also offers a refuge from the trials and distractions of urban life. In addition, every Friday for the past twenty years, the community has hosted potlucks whereby each family contributes to a cache of food designated to feed community members and guests alike.

[5] Shaykh Arona Faye is currently leading plans to erect a fully functioning Qur'anic school and mosque in the Gambia, which, according to him, will be named Masjid Mansur. It is perhaps well known that African-American Muslims have been travelling to Senegal and the surrounding region to study the Qur'an for many decades now: for example, the African-American Islamic Institute in Medina Baye, Senegal has been a popular location for Qur'anic education for African-American Muslims since its inception in 1983. A thorough, historical examination of this institution, co-founded by Shaykh Hassan Cisse (d. 2008) of the *tariqa* Tijaniyya and one of his African-American disciples, Hajjah Kareemah Abdul-Kareem, has yet to be published. To fill this gap, Samiha Rahman has studied the African-American Islamic Institute in Medina Baye.

[6] In order to transition to non-profit status, Shaykh Arona Faye has decided to rename the mosque in Moncks Corner 'Masjid Moustapha' to honour his teacher and the founder of the *tariqa* (the mosque had been called 'Masjidul Muhajjirun was Ansar' since 1996). Such renaming also signals to visitors and members the spiritual direction of the community and its religious function as a North American centre in a broader transatlantic spiritual network.

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As a result, more traditional Senegalese dishes are combined with southern American comfort foods to provide a substantial collection to satiate the traveller's appetite. Among those who have moved to Moncks Corner are some of Shaykh Arona Faye's own children, who have relocated from Senegal to South Carolina in order to take advantage of their father's tutelage and to care for him. Ndey Faye, Shaykh Faye's eldest daughter, is married to Mikhail A., an African-American disciple who is entrusted with leading the community as its imam and with handling its finances. During interviews, Ndey Faye discussed with me how her move to Moncks Corner exposed her to the twofold minoritization of being both Black and Muslim in the American South. She intimated that she noticed how fellow shoppers always seemed to treat her differently or stared at her when she frequented nearby stores; she contrasted this hypervisibility with being in Senegal, where being Black and Muslim is not novel.

Thiès, the third largest city in Senegal, lies about seventy kilometres east of Dakar and has a population of fewer than 500,000 residents. The city, which is considered a transport hub and a gateway to Dakar and other neighbouring cities, is the point of origin and West African centre of the Mustafawiyya network. This is also where Shaykh Arona Faye and other prominent leaders in the *tariqa* were born. Additionally, the founding leader and uncle (Shaykh Mustafa Gueye), Faye's mother (Umm Khadijatou Gueye) and his beloved grandfather (Shaykh Samba Gueye) are all buried there in the same mausoleum. Thus, American Mustafawiyya Muslims visit Senegal in order to pay homage to Shaykh Mustafa by visiting his gravesite, as well as to participate in the annual Shaykh Mustafa Day, the purpose of which is to commemorate his spiritual encounter with the Prophet Muhammad through a waking vision in which he was given the *Salaatul Samawiyyah* (Arabic: Heavenly Salutation), a special prayer that sends salutations on the Prophet.[7]

Notions of 'home' abound in conversations with other Muslims in Moncks Corner who have visited Senegal with Shaykh Arona Faye, who speak of leaving home to 'go home'. Abdur-Rasheed Watson, for example, frequently shared with me his memories of having visited Senegal and Gambia for the first time, staying for about three months in 2008. Our numerous conversations while sitting in the mosque during downtime or when running errands around Moncks Corner revealed that, as he travelled to the home of his teacher, he quickly became quite comfortable in his skin, venturing out to wander the streets even early on during his trip. Abdur-Rasheed's most cherished recollections, however, seem to be of travelling to Thiès to visit the grave and ancestral house of Shaykh Mustafa Gueye Haydar (d. 1989), founder of the Mustafawiyya *tariqa*. It was here that his ideation of African descent was impacted heavily via travel and became cemented as he was able to move beyond the space of imagination. Abdur-Rasheed confessed that he felt out of place in the USA

[7] In English, the prayer is: 'O Allah, send blessings upon our master Muhammad, the one who precedes all others, the one whose brilliant lights radiate and fill the heavens. May Allah bless him and his family and companions in the amount of every grain of sand and every star in the sky' (taken from 'The Mustafawiyya Wird', printed in Indonesia, March 2007/Rabi'al-awwal 1428, page 17). This prayer is recited by most *fuqara* throughout the network after each of the five daily prayers (*salaah*). It is believed that the prayer was given specifically to Shaykh Mustafa Gueye Haydara (1926–89) both as a symbolic gesture that recognizes his station as a man of righteousness and also to confirm his status as worthy of being among the *awliyyah* (Arabic: friends of God; connotes sainthood, piety and proximity to the divine).

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and yearned to return to the Senegambia, and that he imagined being able to live there permanently. Thus, for Abdur-Rasheed, not only does the region operate as a location that he views as a 'home' due to his identification as a man of African descent living in the diaspora; also, his particular relationship to Senegal is one that is mediated via Shaykh Arona Faye.

It is noticeable that Shaykh Faye himself seems to move differently and more enthusiastically when in Senegal. He busies himself with taking care of family members, receiving guests, printing religious materials, repairing the mausoleum in Thiès, supervising mosque construction in the Gambia, and visiting old friends. Repeatedly, Shaykh Faye has discussed openly the antipathy that comes with residing in the USA as a Muslim of African descent. Each year, Shaykh Faye travels to West Africa from South Carolina, where he teaches and attends to the needs of his students. He spends several months at a time on either side of the Atlantic, engaging in the work of assisting his students in learning how to embody the religion of Islam. And it is his commitment to teaching that necessitates his trips back and forth across the ocean.

Rasheed visits Senegal

While sitting in the foyer of the *zawiyah* in Dakar – a rental house in the neighbourhood of HLM Grand Yoff – Rasheed mentioned to me that it was his intention, emboldened by his trip and further convinced by what he witnessed, to send his children to Senegal in order to study the Qur'an. I understand the desire for his children to learn the Qur'an in Senegal as significant not merely because of the religious implications, but also because of the cultural-diasporic association. There was the assumption that his children would be tutored by those who are learned within the *tariqa* and who are West African, and thus part of this imagined lost kin to whom he feels connected. Throughout our trip, and especially during car rides between Dakar and Thiès, it was evident that Rasheed had been greatly affected by what he witnessed. Rasheed, whose initial engagement with Islam was through the Nation of Islam (NOI) after having moved away from Christianity, had met Shaykh Arona Faye in 1998. After having been a congregant at Temple No. 12 in North Philadelphia for a while, he studied the life example of Malcolm X more closely and realized that he belonged on another road. Rasheed then transitioned to the Warith Deen Muhammad community and formally took his *shahada* at the age of seventeen. When he moved to South Carolina, he finally met Shaykh Faye and was able to learn more about the religion of Islam through him in a way that he had not experienced before. Since he made the decision to align himself with the Mustafawi, Rasheed has kept Shaykh Faye in his heart and travel to West Africa on his mind.

Rasheed did not have the time or the funds to see Senegal for himself until 2015. During his stay in West Africa, which lasted for about three weeks, he and I visited a number of historically meaningful sites at the suggestion of Shaykh Arona Faye. Since I had prior experience of navigating Dakar and was able to speak some Wolof, Shaykh Faye encouraged me to escort Rasheed and other African-American guests to visit Gorée Island, while he attended to other matters. During that trip, we were able to tour La Maison des Esclaves (the House of Slaves), a holding place for captured Africans during the transatlantic slave trade. Of course, Rasheed had some knowledge of the slave trade before travelling to Senegal. However, his engagement with the

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history up until that point – like for many Americans – had mainly been mediated through a local, academic perspective. While we were inside La Maison, it was evident that Rasheed was deeply impacted by physically seeing the dungeons where men, women and children were held in bondage before being taken away on slave ships. I watched him walk through the halls and crevices of La Maison in a thoughtful silence, and as he viewed its 'Door of No Return' where captured Africans were led onto ships to be enslaved in the Americas. Witnessing Rasheed and other African-American Muslims peer out at the wide expanse of the Atlantic and trace the steps of imagined ancestors was moving. It was a powerful and sobering moment to see him experience what I had felt on my first trip to Dakar. With this trip, Rasheed was able to visualize more concretely the suffering out of which prayers for return were surely uttered on the lips of stolen people. Rasheed's 'homegoing' voyage across the Atlantic and then to Gorée Island was an important leg of his journey. His trip to Senegal had now been even more reflective of the idea that he was a vessel through which those prayers would be answered. But his voyage was not finished: Rasheed had yet to visit Shaykh Mustafa.

In order to add a capstone onto his trip, Rasheed needed to travel with Shaykh Faye to the point of origin for the Mustafawiyya tradition. He needed to visit the final resting place of the person from whom Shaykh Faye inherited his knowledge. Rasheed's journey did not begin when he boarded his plane to go to Senegal; it had begun more than two decades earlier when he first met his teacher in South Carolina. This journey was a gradual one that began in Philadelphia with his entry into Islam and included his initiation onto the Mustafawiyya Sufi path while in the American South. When he first met Shaykh Arona Faye, a slight Senegalese marabout with a reputation for a snazzy dress sense, he was sceptical that someone could be as generous as he was with his time and money. His shrewdness meant that he did not automatically or completely trust someone who seemed too good to be true. As the years passed, Rasheed watched Shaykh Faye closely – he included himself in the activities of the Mustafawi but found it difficult to push himself to take *bayah* (the oath of spiritual allegiance) with Shaykh Faye and formally enter the ranks of the Mustafawi. Little by little, the walls he had erected broke down, and, after a while, he realized that this man was genuine. His heart softened. He submitted fully to the tutelage and spiritual pedagogy of the tradition. Rasheed spent years sitting at the feet of his teacher and took the opportunity to grow spiritually and expand his knowledge of Islam. During that time, he watched many of his peers travel with Shaykh Faye to Senegal in order to visit the tomb of Shaykh Mustafa and connect with his many students and relatives. He watched them embed themselves more deeply within a broader Atlantic network of Sufi adherents. In 2015, it was Rasheed's turn. He had prayed for this moment and finally he could afford the trip, thanks to an unexpected pay cheque. During all these years, it was Shaykh Faye who had encouraged his pilgrimage to Thiès, and the long process of watching and learning had transformed Rasheed into someone who now more fully saw the value in visiting Senegal for himself.

At the same time, travel to Senegal is not only motivated by the desire to visit the tomb of Shaykh Mustafa. For African-Americans more generally, a visit to Senegal also necessitates taking time out to visit Le Monument de la Renaissance Africaine and La

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Maison des Esclaves on Gorée Island.[8] Shaykh Faye encourages his African-American students who are visiting Senegal for the first time to visit La Maison des Esclaves, and he has taken his students himself to the historic site during time spent in Dakar in past years. Back home, he has repeatedly suggested to his African-American students to consider relocating to Senegal due to the ease of living in a predominantly Muslim country, a country that would welcome the children of its stolen family members. Spiritual tourism to Thiès is merged with heritage tourism in such a way that religious pilgrimage and discourses of African ancestry are combined. In this manner, religious and cultural institutions work in tandem to cultivate Black Muslim diasporic identities.

This focus on the impact of spiritual and heritage tourism on Africana identities has much to contribute to scholarship on race and Islam in Africa. Although scholars such as Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori (1990) have traced the ways in which Muslim travel is considered vital as a tool for learning and for configuring religious identities, this cultivation of Muslim learners operates within quite different parameters (insofar as there exist different political concerns that should not be ignored). Bayo Holsey (2004) and Paula Ebron (1999) have also shown us the role that heritage tourism plays in the development of Africana identities. And J. Lorand Matory (2005), Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2015) and Fadeke Castor (2017) have extended our understanding of Black Atlantic religious communities and their relationship to travel as a tool for empowerment. However, I seek to push that understanding even further by addressing the lack of focus on Black Africana Muslim travel and by moving the narrative of Black Muslim histories and politics beyond the urban American North.

Reversion through pilgrimage

I understand the migratory practices of these African-descended Sufis as performances of '*reversion*' through which their religious identities, and the resulting processes of diasporic becoming, are revealed. Unlike 'conversion', which describes a fundamental transition from one religious tradition to another or the adoption of beliefs and attitudes that inform devotional practices, 'reversion' connotes the regaining of a religious heritage that was previously forgotten or lost by the religious practitioner or by their ancestors. 'Reversion', therefore, includes the rediscovery of a prior religious worldview or the reclaiming of a tradition imagined to be somehow lost by the adherent. Harold Morales, who has studied reversion in the context of Latino Muslims in the USA, finds articulations of conversion among Latino Muslims as 'return' to be an example of a 'mediated aesthetics' whereby conversion narratives express ideations of self and imagined community rather than mapping actual instances of regaining lost religious traditions (Morales 2018). Whereas Latino Muslims might situate narratives of return in Islamic Spain (*Andalusia*), African-American Muslims situate their own reversion narratives in Islamic West Africa (Abdul Khabeer 2017). The scope of my study is not so much to analyse reversion narratives as they occur in the

[8] While historians have debated the historical significance of La Maison des Esclaves as a portal for the exportation of enslaved Africans (Curtin 1969; Austen 2001; Mack 2011), the site itself, with its doorway that opens onto the Atlantic and functions as a 'Door of No Return', remains a significant destination for heritage tourism and a site of remembrance for African-Americans and other diasporic Africans (Davis 1997; Ebron 1999; Hartman 2002).

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Mustafawiyya network per se, but rather to view the notion of reversion as a lens through which African-American Sufi Muslims craft religious identities and find meaning in their international travel.

Much work has been done to track and interpret the meanings of pilgrimage in terms that have understood this particular kind of movement as diasporic insofar as it has provided a vehicle for the construction and maintenance of 'homegoing' discourses (Graburn 1983; Skrbiš 2007; Kelner 2010). These processes of identity formation for African-Americans in particular have included heritage tourism to sites such as Ghana and Senegal (Ebron 1999; Holsey 2004). As Edward Bruner (1996) argued in his foundational article, one of the major motives for African-American tourism to Africa that involves visits to historic sites such as Elmina Castle on the Ghanaian Coast and La Maison des Esclaves on Gorée Island of Senegal is a preoccupation with root-seeking. Looking beyond tourism as 'superficial' and 'temporary' forms of travel, Bruner suggested that the kind of diasporic mobility that results in pilgrimages to historic sites must be read as a process of meaning-making that allows diasporic communities to assemble routes back to an imagined homeland. In the minds of African-American tourists, this process necessitates a commemorative observance and an embodied practice of participation in the enslavement narrative by tracking the path backwards. By gazing upon the 'Door of No Return' as they envision possible ancestors shuffling through dungeons and onto slave ships, this portal becomes infused with meaning that accentuates the relationship between a dispersed population and an imagined home – a location for return. Diasporans must therefore often confront complex notions of belonging that collide with local understandings of selfhood, history and ownership. Also, a specific difference exists here between tourism to these historic sites, nineteenth-century migration efforts and twentieth-century repatriation movements such as Garveyism (Tillet 2009; Reed 2014). As Salamishah Tillet (2009) explains, the overwhelming motive for this kind of travel, which began in the 1970s and rose in popularity in the 1990s, is the desire to reconcile the formation of African diasporic identities created partly through the history of forced migration and enslavement with a past that is mis-recognized in public American historical discourse.

Of course, scholars have also studied how travel (especially pilgrimage) is often wrapped in meaning and has informed the development of Muslim diasporas (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990; Mandaville 2003; Ho 2006; Timothy and Iverson 2006; Moghissi 2007). Johara Berriane (2015), for example, has shown how spiritual tourism within the context of a Sufi tradition provides a mode of belonging for West African Tijanis who travel to Fez, Morocco, in order to commemorate the eighteenth-century Tijaniyya founder Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani. She found that the *zawiyah* in Fez operates as a 'pole' for a larger Senegalese/Tijani diaspora, so that, whether they reside in West Africa or Europe, they can participate in the construction and maintenance of a larger imagined community. In spite of the growing literature on African-American Muslim histories and movements, and in light of an established scholarly focus on migratory networks among West African Muslims beyond the continent, there remains an opportunity to bring these two frames of inquiry together. Islamic Studies still seems overwhelmingly concerned with North Africa and the Middle East, while Africanists, until recently, seemed uninterested in Islam. Studies of the African-American Muslim experience has been, understandably, quite

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domestic in its orientation, with less emphasis on the manner in which international travel has played a part in the development of Muslim epistemologies in the USA, with the exception of a few meaningful works (for example, see Curtis 2014). In fact, the very term 'Black Muslim' has historically been used to derisively categorize those who were affiliated with the NOI as a means of suggesting their heterodoxy (Felber 2020). The implication, by extension, was that 'Black Muslim' also included African-American Sunni Muslims who had no affiliation with the NOI. Furthermore, the term did not include all those who might rightfully identify as 'Black' – migrant African and Caribbean-American Muslims, for example. There remains an assumption – even if unintended – that the African-American relationship to Islam begins in the twentieth century and is a lesser version of their Arab co-religionists' relationship.

Studies of Black Atlantic religions have also given less emphasis to the role of Islam in the cultivation of diasporic identities, among African-Americans in particular, despite its historical and contemporary significance in the emergence of trans-local Africana religious identities (Reis 1995; Gomez 1998; Diouf 2013). While it is true that most of the circulation within the Mustafawiyya network takes place around the Atlantic, mainly due to the location of network nodes such as Moncks Corner and Dakar/Thiès, and while it is true that the notion of a 'Black Atlantic' has provided a rich tool for understanding emergent diasporic affinities and regional identities, it is also the case that the Atlantic itself has provided a means for understanding the *routes* of Black religious communities (Gilroy 1993; Matory 2005; Routon 2006; Sarró and Blanes 2009). I therefore situate the religion of Islam, particularly in its West African configuration, as central to my own usage of the Black Atlantic in describing the circuits of exchange and transmission that take place between Muslims of African descent on either side of the ocean. In doing so, both Paul Gilroy's and J. Lorand Matory's works are instructive in that they lead us to consider how both African-American practices within a Senegalese Sufi tradition and the Senegalese institutions in which African-Americans participate are shifted reciprocally by their combined presence (Gilroy 1993; Matory 2005). Thus, while African-American Muslims in Moncks Corner are profoundly transformed by the processes of religious learning transmitted within a specific West African Islamic pedagogical approach, those processes and Senegalese Muslims themselves are also profoundly impacted by the cultural expectations, innovations and spiritual needs of the African-American Muslims in the *tariqa*.

Diasporas have as much to do with identity and imagination as they do with actual dispersal and mobilities – perhaps even more so (Harney 1996; Oguibe 2001; Williams 2003; Benesch and Fabre 2004; Sun 2005; Irele 2005; Rai and Reeves 2008). Yet, there exists an opportunity to further illuminate the ways in which inclusion in religious networks has deepened and complicated Black religious identities of African-American Muslims in particular through travel. As Edward Curtis (2014) asserts, a rigorous study of the religious dimensions of the African diaspora is vital to extend our collective understanding of the diasporic concept. Much like scholars who have studied how African-descended people have included themselves in diasporic networks via religion (Clarke 2004; Matory 2005; Griffith and Savage 2006; Garbin 2013), the purpose of this discussion is to ground this inclusion by way of specific trans-local activities, discourses of mobility, and the cultivation of Black Muslim diasporic

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identities via religious observances that animate pilgrimage. Moreover, as many have argued, it is necessary to distinguish diasporas from mere dispersals (Butler 2001). The aim, then, is to analyse how the transatlantic mobilities of Muslims of African descent living in the USA or in Senegal affect the emergence of specific cross-border solidarities and diasporic subjectivities in the context of a religious network. In fact, the very notion of *reversion* – that is, an alteration of the term 'conversion', which is often used in Muslim communities to signify a return to our original spiritual nature, and which is also popular in African-American Muslim communities (Nieuwkerk 2006; Roy 2004) – provides an interesting vocabulary that might be used to describe the intersections between shifts in religious belief and diasporic identities. However, when discussing *reversion*, renewed and re-packaged here as a vocabulary of (Black Muslim) diaspora (i.e. a religious lens applied to the notion of 'return'), we should not take for granted that African-American Muslims identify in a way that assumes a positive relationship between themselves and their West African ancestry. Historically, this relationship has not been automatic (Curtis 2006; Abdullah 2009).

On the other hand, African-American Muslims also have a history of positive relations with West African Sufism, and thus have a positive association with their sub-Saharan ancestry. While there is a lack of work on African-American Sufism specifically, scholars have pointed to the ways in which increased migration by West African Muslims after 1965 and their multiple approaches to religious observance have had a profound influence on African-American Muslim practices and identities (Babou 2002; Kane 2011). Certainly, much has been written on the emergence of Senegalese migrants in the USA by specifically analysing the ways in which the transnational networks of Sufi brotherhoods have paved the way for increased wealth and mobility for West African adherents (Cruise O'Brien 1971; Brenner 1984; Launay 1990; Ebin 1995; Diouf 2000; Buggenhagen 2001; Babou 2002; Stoller 2002; Salzbrunn 2004; Kane 2011). And while there has been some analysis on the interactions between African-Americans and West African Muslims (Stoller 2003; Abdullah 2010; Kane 2011), the inclusion of African-Americans in West African Sufi networks remains understudied.

With this in mind, I have observed how African and African-American Muslims in the Mustafawiyya *tariqa* construct diasporic identities via participation in pilgrimages to two primary locations: Moncks Corner in South Carolina and Thiès in Senegal. These locations operate differently in the *tariqa*. The main pull towards Moncks Corner for students from around the Atlantic is Shaykh Arona Faye. Visits to the community are motivated by the desire for proximity to their teacher. On the other hand, visits to Thiès are motivated by a different order of pilgrimage. In Islamic tradition, practitioners visit the shrines and tombs of venerated saints (*ziyara*) to access perceived blessings and pay homage to the recognized spiritual authority in a given tradition. For African-American Muslims, I argue that these visits are coupled with the desire to experience a kind of heritage tourism that works along lines of ancestry – both genealogical and spiritual.

Conclusion

The transition to Islam for African-Americans has often implied a sustained relationship with African ancestry – whether real or imagined (Abdul Khabeer 2017). In many

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cases, Black Muslim identities have relied on, and have been built on, a meaningful relationship with West Africa. This tendency has been especially true of African-American Muslims who have resisted understanding true Muslimness from within an Arab cultural framework. Insofar as Islamic conversions become coupled with narratives of return, this type of transition has been popularly described as *reversion*, in which there exists a religious psychology that claims that every human being is born Muslim and loses their relationship to the faith due to their environment. Conversion, therefore, results in the Muslim relocating the self in Islam. Yet narratives of return seen among African-American Muslims in particular suggest that the vocabulary of *reversion* also entails some significant relation – whether subtle or explicit – with the historicity of West African Muslim presence in the antebellum USA.

In examining the local and transatlantic journeys that Mustafawiyya Muslims – and African-American Mustafawiyya Muslims in particular – take in order to learn directly from their spiritual guide, Shaykh Arona Faye, and to pay homage to Shaykh Muhammad Mustafa Gueye Haydara (d. 1989), I have more meaningfully understood the significance of religious performance in the quest to renew the Black Muslim self. Participating in Shaykh Mustafa Day in Senegal allows African-American Muslims to literally move closer to an adopted cultural and religious heritage (*reversion*) as they move further away from the impact of being a religious and racialized minority in the USA. This transition in identity and perspective is made possible through the architecture of the Mustafawiyya network – the *zawiyah* and the *tariqa*. Desire and discourses of travel mobilize certain possibilities regarding transatlantic solidarity. While the *zawiyah* provides an anchor and impetus for local mobility, the *tariqa* provides a broader network in which regional (transatlantic) travel is aided by the existence of numerous points of entry and exit.

Movement of the body is not a prerequisite for movement of the soul – but it helps. By deploying the term *reversion*, traditionally used in the African-American Muslim lexicon to describe Islamic conversion as a process of return, I map the migrations and related practices (physical and cultural) of Mustafawiyya Muslims to the two sites as artefacts of reversion. Insofar as the imagined homeland for African-American Muslims is located in sub-Saharan Africa, travel to Senegal becomes simultaneously an act of spiritual migration and a form of cultural tourism. Mustafawiyya Muslims who visit from Moncks Corner, or who desire to visit but have yet to do so, find meaning in their participation in heritage tourism, visiting Gorée Island, for example, as they embark on their quest to visit the grave of Shaykh Mustafa. In reconsidering *reversion* as a vocabulary of diaspora, I de-emphasize the concept's connotations of religious conversion to make way for its political resonances in the (re)configuring of religious identities in the Africana context. In so doing, I make space for considering the transition into a West African Islamic pedagogical tradition as an ongoing practice that involves constant training and the application of Islamic virtues. *Reversion* does not end when one reaches African soil; it merely confirms the need to continue the journey. If initiation and inclusion into the 'Tribe of the Middle Passage' (Hartman 2007) might be considered a state of being that is ongoing, then feeling at home in a land made strange by the violence of forced migration takes time. Like the expansion and contraction of diaspora communities, *reversion* is processual insofar as the maintenance of religious identities requires vigilance and consistent

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performance. Islamic piety necessitates constant observance. And the transitioning from 'strangerhood' into being at home in the world requires movement.

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