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Agency and Authority in Polygyny

Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households.

Demosthenes, "Against Neaera"

I knew the blessings in polygamy.

Sawdah, thirty-something, from Michigan

At fifty, Karimah stands tall, her walk fluid, graceful. Her eyes glisten as if they possessed drilling power. She and her husband of fifteen years are models of style and the Protestant work ethic. They own a comfortably furnished home in the suburbs of a metropolis, drive his and her Mercedes, run a successful business. Although weight never found a place of refuge on her 5'8" frame, these days Karimah seems much thinner than the runway models for whom she is often mistaken. Publicly, this mother of two, grandmother of two, is resourceful, a highly sought organizer who is a pillar in her local mosque. Yet few of the women and men with whom she prays, converses, and works are aware of her private pain. Though no major local or national Islamic event in this African American Muslim community is held without her visible leadership, privately she is anxious and lives in fear.

Karimah, a divorcee and former Christian, and Abdul Aziz, a Muslim, met in 1988. She describes the first encounter with her soon-to-be third husband this way:

I was leaving work and walking through the corridor leaving the building, and he was walking through the building going in the opposite direction and he said, "Are you going to the south side?" And I looked like, "You must be crazy. I'm headed west. I'm not going to the south side." So he said could he walk with me. And I said, "No, you can't walk with me." He walked with me anyway.¹

Their fortuitous meeting compelled Karimah to reconsider Islam, a faith she had only known through the daily living of a former husband, likewise a Muslim.

So, after that relationship was over, you know, I decided, I don't want to be bothered with Muslims, period. I didn't even want to look at the religion. Didn't want to consider it. Didn't have, you know, any desire whatsoever to even ask what it was about. And then . . . I met Abdul Aziz.²

Although friendship evolved and Karimah became more attracted to Abdul Aziz, her teenage daughter remained a skeptic. Still, the more Karimah was able to observe Abdul Aziz, the more something deep within her persuaded Karimah to disregard her daughter's concern:

Originally, he was just a sweetheart. Anything he could do . . . He would come over, mow my lawn for me. He would be the only guy out there with a towel mowing the lawn, you know. Anything he could do to accommodate me, you know, he was willing to do that. So I was very impressed with that when it's at a time when you have to beg a man to do something for you, you know, I needed. I had the locks changed, and he was Johnny on the spot and never, never one time approached me sexually. So, I was really impressed with that. I said, "Hmmm. Maybe we've got a gentleman here. Maybe we ought to check into this and see what's to this man." My daughter, on the other hand, she said, "Ma, we better wait and see if he takes his mask off."³

If he possessed or wore a mask, Abdul Aziz did not reveal it during the first decade of his fifteen-year marriage to Karimah. But when he informed Karimah that he was taking a second wife, any agency—capacity for action—she thought she had to influence his personal decisions departed with her marital security. In her view, her husband's approach was both heavy-handed and subtle. Though speaking more from the perspective of personal and immediate angst than quantitative research, she also claimed that material, economic, and emotional hardships are common aspects of the polygynous marriage system in African American and other communities that feature them.

In this chapter I consider the concept of womanist action as performance and authority in the lived reality of African American Muslim women married to polygynous men. I begin by describing my use of the terms "agency," "power," and "authority." I then move to explain the performance of polygyny in the form of dialogue. In setting up the created drama, I introduce three

categories of multiple-wife marriage and my rationale for assigning the twelve participants to them. I conclude with a conceptualization of authority in terms of gendered experience by building upon the theoretical and activist vision of Amina Wadud.⁴ My intent is to situate multiple-wife marriage in two interlocking contexts that demonstrate the potential of my subjects to become both actors and authors.

Agency, Power, and Authority

I deconstruct three significant themes, fully cognizant of the fluidity among them. With womanist action, I point to what African American Muslim women do and say to preserve their civil and religious rights as autonomous agents. Conversely, I raise questions about what they do not say and do not do. I show how the cultural experience and religious understandings of African American Muslim women frame their agency that is both structurally and situationally constrained. Otherwise put, agency does not always equate with resistance but may be compliant, unintended, and the result of conscious planning.⁵ With regards to polygyny specifically, agency can encompass unanticipated and innovative action that may hinder, reinforce, or serve as a catalyst for social change.⁶ It also reflects the multiple positionalities of women who share their husbands.

My use of “power” imagines the extent to which women living polygyny make decisions in their public and private spheres and govern the organization of their households.⁷ Gendered power, as Norton explains it, refers to the unequal application of power to men and women in household arrangements. In relations to polygyny as traditionally understood, gendered power represents the way a husband is situated to determine when and how many women he takes as wives and for whom he assumes responsibility. As the subjects of this book confirm, gendered power is reflected as well in the proactive efforts and negotiations women married to polygynous men choose to engage. As it resides in the private sphere of Muslim homes, “power” means to act on the ability to help determine how one’s household is arranged.

By “authority” I refer to the use of the female experience of living polygyny as a legitimate source of knowledge about the practice and as a lens to interpret and understand the Qur’an’s teaching on the subject. While the men in their lives reside on the margins of this work, African American Muslim women are not rendered invisible. Their presence enables me to more fully understand the attitudes of women as the primary subjects of this work.⁸

To most outside observers of Islam and to many Muslims, women living polygyny occupy an uncomfortable, submissive place, especially within a Muslim-minority society. They pursue and/or engage a form of marriage embedded within their understandings of their religion that suggest that polygyny is antiwoman, antichildren: an institution of oppression and exploitation that should be condemned. Drawing from scholarly conversations about “the nature of harm,” in chapter 6 I explore some of the harmful aspects of multiple-wife marriage.⁹

Here, I limit consideration to one core finding: that the assumptions enunciated above are true for many African American Muslim women who share their husbands but not for all. I focus on the ways in which discourses about Muslim women, African American family life, and gendered power in Islam complicate and have complicated understandings of Muslim female agency and gender justice, particularly since 2001. To fully recognize the complexity of marriage decisions for some Muslim women, it is essential to demystify constructions of polygyny that erase female agency. Specifically, we must grasp thoughtfully the multiple levels on which women who share their husbands can and sometimes do wield authority in their marriages. It is helpful to note that such women are subjects with agency, though they may be unaware of it or may have ignored or resisted their options. Their lived experiences as a central authority merits closer scrutiny in any discussion of multiple-wife marriage.

There is no singular identity for women who share their husbands, just as the experiences of women in traditional monogamous marriages take different forms. The experience of living polygyny does not shape the realities of all African American Muslim women in the same way. That is, for my informants, multiple-wife marriage cannot be summed up in a single portrait. Women living polygyny can be and should be represented as actors who epitomize a force that shapes perceptions about and practices of the family structures they inhabit. Understanding these variations requires further exploration.

Dialogical Performance as Ethnography

My approach here¹⁰—as distinguished from approaches elsewhere in the book—is the inclusion of a staged, performance text with which I create fuller portraits of my informants and multiple-wife marriage.¹¹ Dialogical performance brings together twelve people living polygyny in an attempt to illustrate an imagined interplay among them.¹² “Performance” means gathering together different voices so they may be in conversation—talk—with each other or, as

Conquergood notes, “a way of deeply sensing the other.”¹³ The social drama I present is fictive and real at the same time. It is fictive in that my informants and I never encountered each other as a group and at the same time. This performance is real in that it is based on interview transcripts and secondary research data. In the end, dialogical performance draws expressions of self- and communal identity from my subjects themselves and illustrates one of the three positions of qualitative research articulated by Fine:

The positionality of voices is where the subjects themselves are the focus, and their voices carry forward indigenous meanings and experiences that are in opposition to dominant discourses and practices.¹⁴

I was drawn to performance particularly because dialogue permits the creation of space through which the researcher and her subjects may question, debate, and challenge one another. I recognize the possibility that my subjects would not communicate the same words they told me to each other face to face. Even so, I situate the utility of dialogical performance as a tool in one of its aims. As Madison puts it, “The performance strives to communicate a sense of subjects’ worlds in their own words; it hopes to amplify their meanings and intentions to a larger group of listeners and observers.”¹⁵

Performance as a Womanist Act

Using dialogical performance connects with womanist approaches in its acknowledgement of my ethical responsibility to address injustice, in its reliance on the lived experiences of my subjects as its primary source, and in its recognition of the distinctive angle of vision possessed by women living polygyny.¹⁶ It pays homage to the broad appeal of Walker’s definition and the self-naming sensibility woven into the souls of all African American women.¹⁷ I submit that I am asking readers to suspend real-time expectations of the social drama I lay out. Time spent with my informants—some on multiple occasions, by different means, and ranging from sixty minutes to more than four hours—enabled me to make note of their gestures and deportment and to imagine the dialogical process that they might have with each other in an everyday conversation. As with the rest of this book, I use pseudonyms and slightly alter other recognizable markers to shield their identity.¹⁸

Finally, dialogical performance offers two central benefits for this study. One, it affords my informants the opportunity to speak to each other rather than to me alone. Hall has argued that Muslim women are represented and

constructed by others along contrasting binaries both within and outside of Muslim contexts.¹⁹ Even so, women living polygyny are comparable to other ethnographic subjects in that they, too, possess a “constitutive voice.”²⁰ Removing myself from the discussion—even as I help construct it—and aiming for conversation among my informants furthers this idea. In the ethos of womanism, the participants in this performance can establish the meaning and articulate the existence of their experiences for themselves, even if they do not appear to be fully conscious of the consequences. They can do this alone, and as evidenced in the conversation, they can speak for themselves with/in the presence of men. In the words Hill Collins, they can “talk back,” giving their experiences and perceptions a visibility rarely seen.²¹ Like other aspects of womanist thought, the performance constitutes a self-disclosing discourse, reaffirming my insistence on the lived realities of women as the central source of any study of polygyny.

The dialogical stance promises a reward for readers as well. Though the terrains for our ethnographic works differ, I agree with Rosen that interview transcripts can lend themselves well to storytelling on multiple levels.²² Staging the performance in this manner draws comparisons to the development of methods used to examine other marginalized groups in which research subjects are invited to pose questions and teach the audience.²³ Moreover, what Isasi-Diaz writes about Hispanic women can be contextualized to include African American Muslim women living polygyny:

What they have shared in their narratives they understand as relating not just to themselves. They understand who they are and what they go through as something that goes beyond them, as something that has to do with the Hispanic [and in this context, African American] community at large and with the whole of society.²⁴

I concede that the actors in my social drama were not aware that their oral scripts would contribute to a fictive performance.²⁵ Frankly, neither was I. But as I began to outline the book and review the ethnographic data collected, I became convinced that the shift from representation to performance could “unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions.”²⁶ I believe I have stayed true to what was said to me and what I discovered about this form of marriage. In the end, dialogical performance is designed to extend its heuristic hand and draw us into the discursive world of African American Muslims living polygyny with more depth and, I hope, particularize our engagement with their motives, expectations, and experiences.