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[Interview by] Ken Chitwood

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Envisioning an “Atlantic Crescent” with Historian Alaina Morgan

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How do you imagine different worlds? According to historian Alaina Morgan, for African descended – or Black – people in the twentieth-century Atlantic sphere, it meant drawing on anti-colonial and anti-imperial discourses from within and beyond the worlds of Islam to “unify oppressed populations, remedy social ills, and achieve racial and political freedom.” (3)

But what about those who study such intellectual, political, and religious histories? How might we imagine the political, social, economic, and religious worlds of entangled Muslim lives in the Americas, Europe, Africa, South Asia, as well as in between and beyond? And how might we better write about such worlds?

In her premier monograph (The University of North Carolina Press, July 2025), Morgan envisions the “Atlantic Crescent” as a geography within which to understand the significance of Black Muslim geographies of resistance, occurring “at the intersection of, and influenced by” (9) three overlapping diaspora phenomena: Black American migrant laborers who moved to the United States Northeast and Midwest in the years during and after World War I, Afro-Caribbean intellectuals and immigrants who relocated to the US in the early twentieth century, and newcomers from the Indian subcontinent who arrived in the same period.

Colliding with each other in the years between the two world wars, Morgan argues these diasporas merged continents, inscribed populations miles apart into the same histories, and brought communities divided by distance into intimate contact with one another through shared political visions, religious beliefs, and everyday interactions. Theorizing the space of these overlapping diasporas and their resulting discourses through the imagery of an “Atlantic Crescent,” Morgan “represents the fluid ways that Black and Muslim people intellectualized, understood, and acted on their religio-racial identities” both in transnational ways that linked “local Muslim communities to the ummah” and locally, wherein they made “sense of the unique...racial implications of colonialism and imperialism” in the contexts and their everyday, lived experiences. (9)

Moving, and balancing, between particularist practices and universalist visions, “visible elites and rank-and-file practitioners” (10), the US and the Anglophone Caribbean, Morgan examines several conjunctures in the book, including: the influence and confluence of the Moorish Science Temple of America and the Ahmadiyya Movement (Chapter One); the role of immigrant Muslims – in particular Abdul Basit Naeem – and global decolonization movements in shaping Black American visions of their place within the *ummah* (Chapter Two); the ways Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Muslim Brotherhood USA imam Talib Dawud outlined an anti-imperial geography through print media (Chapter Three); how Muslims translated these discourses into practical action in Bermuda (Chapters Four and Five); as well as how members of the Nation of Islam applied and adapted Louis Farrakhan’s critique of American neo-imperialism in the Caribbean and Middle East into action on the streets of US urban centers in the 1980s (Chapter Six).

Altogether, Morgan’s expansive history provides a compelling conceptualization of how we might study the Muslim Atlantic and better apperceive its relevance to wider discussions of global Islam, Black intellectual history, the Muslim Caribbean, and American religious history.

As Editor-in-Chief of the LACISA Newsletter, I interviewed Morgan about her new book, the process of writing, and potential futures for the study of Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the wider Americas.

KC: Academic projects take many forms along the way, but why did you set out to write this story in the first place? In other words, what prompted the journey? And how did that vision change over time?

AM: I think a lot of academics are trying to figure out the answer to questions and issues we’ve dealt with in our own lives – things that have affected us for years. I’m from Brooklyn, which is a very diverse place. But when I was about 10, we moved to central New Jersey, which is not very diverse place. I went from having a very diverse community to being in a very monoracial community in which I was an outlier racially.

I also grew up in a Catholic household, which is pretty rare. And as a Black Catholic family in New Jersey, we were always going to be the minority.

Later, as I began to question my relationship to faith, I started to explore other religious traditions – not in terms of personal practice, but academically and in the context of my own relationship to race and religion. In university, I was a religion major and wrote a thesis on Black women in Wicca. While topically different than what I do now, it dealt with issues about identity and what it is that religion does for people in terms of their racial identity, their rights, their freedom, their liberation, their political action.

I practiced law for a while and then in 2011, I went back to graduate school. Originally, I planned to do a project about Black Muslims in the wake of 9/11 and to continue researching this reality of being a minority amidst other minorities. I applied to a bunch of different programs – in history, anthropology, Africana studies, Black Studies – but the person I connected with and whose work resonated the most with me, was Michael Gomez (author of *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*). Though my topic was fairly contemporary, he helped me think about the dynamics that were kind of behind what I've discovered and what my book is about – and that is this very longstanding affinity between Black people in the United States, the Caribbean, and the wider African diaspora to Islam. That's where I started, writing a research paper on the subject of *Muhammad Speaks*, a Black Muslim newspaper published by the Nation of Islam from 1961-1975, finding rich themes in the way they were engaging with what was happening internationally.

My research then grew to incorporate numerous archives all over the US, the Caribbean, the UK, and Europe. It took a long time to turn it into a book – more than 10 years from seminar paper to printed page – but that's academic research and publishing, you know? Life happens and you get busy. You move all over the place, for a postdoc, for a job, you get destabilized. You deal with relationships, kids, parents, aging, all of this stuff, right?

KC: To help connect the entangled, overlapping narratives of the Black American communities, Afro-Caribbean intellectuals, and Indian immigrants you write about, you coined a creative and elegant term to visualize the geographic space of the Muslim Atlantic, what you call an “Atlantic Crescent.” How does this help us view Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere differently?

AM: The title and the term are really echoes of, and call backs to, Michael Gomez’s book (see above). It’s one of those academic genealogy things. But beyond drawing on his book’s imagery and title, the crescent has been a pretty ubiquitous symbol of Islam since the Ottoman Empire. So, I operated with that image in my mind. I didn’t actually come up with the particular cover (pictured above), however. The graphic designers came up with it. I had a different idea that was conceptually similar imagining how to visually and discursively connect all of these different nodes and interactions in the Atlantic world. I originally had this idea of an anaconda almost squeezing the Atlantic basin into a crescent shape. But the designers couldn’t do that. So, they asked, “What if we put a crescent that spans across the Atlantic basin and unites, or connects, all of these different places?” I think that it came out really beautifully. Both conceptually and geographically, it shows how people were connecting and thinking about Islam in a way that could unite people and movements into a global majority that could take power back in some way.

In the book, I also talk about the convex and concave shape of the crescent, the push and pull of it. Moons have waxing shapes and waning shapes – they grow over time and contract over time – and the way we see the moon, our perspective of it, changes as well. We see it in different ways, at different times. For me, that crescent shape expands to encapsulate a lot of different places and times in the book, but it also helps people delineate themselves as part of a specific community. It shows, in a pretty evocative way, how people are thinking about and shaping this world.

KC: You do well to look at both elite discourses and rank-and-file practices in your religious and cultural history of the “Atlantic Crescent.” But did you find the visual and spatial construction of the Atlantic Crescent elastic enough to encompass the sometimes fluid, messy, and overlapping nature of this geographic, racial, and religious space?

AM: [LAUGHING] No, actually! As I was writing, anything that fell outside of the “Atlantic Crescent” wasn't something that made it into the book. As I always tell my students, there are times when, despite the fact that you really want something to work, or you really want to include something, it just doesn't fit the model. We can't make the evidence fit the model. The model has to match the evidence. For example, there was a conference of Guyanese immigrant communists in London deploying Malcolm X's theology in their struggles against fascism in the 1980s. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't make it fit into the book.

At the same time, each “Atlantic crescent” is not the same. Like moon phases, it depends on where you are and the timeline you are on. One person's Atlantic crescent looks different than somebody else's Atlantic crescent. It's relational, right? So, one of the things I try to do is show how people are shaping their own Atlantic crescent in a dynamic process that is relationally made and remade. That's why I think the metaphor works really well and I don't have to try and shoehorn anything into it that does not fit.

KC: To that point, you do well to integrate the anticolonial voices and anti-imperial actions of Black Muslims in Bermuda into the story. Why is it important to include such sites and experiences in our wider conceptions of global Islam and Muslim worlds?

AM: I was in the National Archives in Maryland and that's where I first noted that there was even a Nation of Islam in Bermuda. It was one mention in one piece of correspondence between the State Department and the UK's foreign colonial office. I made a footnote and moved on, hoping to dig in more later on.

When I went to the UK, I found an entire file on what they called “Black power” in Bermuda, which was heavily about the Nation of Islam. I thought, “Bingo! There hasn’t been very much written about this in a more transnational context.” There’s room for me to explore where others have only slightly mentioned something.

That’s the thing, right? For students and young scholars or people thinking about how to get started, just go to the archive and then have the gumption to take a mention or a footnote and see where it leads.

I think including Bermuda in the Caribbean has to do with self-definition and people’s imaginaries. For some, Bermuda is just out there in the middle of the ocean. But Bermudians think of themselves as Caribbean people – as West Indian people. They include themselves in that geography. I want to respect those self-definitions. It also happens to do with the political geography of the time. In the minds of the British colonial office as well, and in the mind of the United States, Bermuda is also part of the Caribbean. Thus, it fits into those same types of histories, the same types of colonial administrations, the same types of security concerns, especially with what is happening in like the 60s, 70s, right, in relationship to instability on the island and what that means for the spread of communism.

At the same time, because it’s such a small island, and because the population of Muslims on that island is actually really small, it serves as a really interesting example. Why, on such a tiny island with such a small population, were people engaged in this type of belief for political action? And why did they receive so much attention – three or four files’ worth – from the colonial authorities? The Nation in Bermuda starts with a couple of dozen people and grows to between 300 and 500 depending on the source you use. That’s not a very large population of people. But it says something about the function of Islam that and its ability to fuel liberation movements -- and gain recognition by governments and other authorities trying to stop them.

Furthermore, in regard to the history of Islam, Bermudians were able to do things with the Nation of Islam that others were not. They actively involved in their island’s fight for independence. That’s not something that could happen among the Nation in the United

States. But out there, in the middle of the ocean, you have this small community that has an opportunity to shape the religion and the practice to what makes sense to them.

Maybe it's not the same as normative Sunni Islams – from the Middle East or South Asia – and not even the same as the Nation of Islam elsewhere. But that's exactly the point. Islam has been adapted to circumstances all over the world, fit to local situations, made to work in a way that is beneficial for people in particular places. The transnational *ummah* may be the ideal, but *asabiyyah* is lived practice. One is imagined. One is applied. There is no consensus and there is always tension between the two.

KC: Is there anything else you'd like to share about your research you think might be relevant for readers of the LACISA Newsletter?

AM: Well, another tension that I want to emphasize is between the elite and “rank and file.” With a lot of these movements, it can be difficult to get a sense of what it is that people think. Like, real people. Sure, we can study Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan who are trying to create a particular type of discourse, but what do normal people do?

One important aspect of this approach is being able to highlight the histories of women in the Nation of Islam. Despite its patriarchal structure, there were women writing columns in *Muhammad Speaks* and holding the Nation up with, and in the absence of men, like Clara Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad's wife.

So, I tried to focus on regular people in the book and draw out the biographical details of each person. What was life really like for them? What was their home life like? What did their families, neighbors, and friends think?

In particular, I think about Abdul Basit Naeem. Before I revised the final manuscript, I got in touch with his son, who is a professor at Columbia University. People have complicated relationships to their parents, and I always wondered about his relationship

to his family given how focused he seemed on his work. He helped me see and understand things I could not glean from the archive.

It's important to remember that the people we are writing about are *real* people. Even though I'm writing an intellectual history, those ideas came from, and affected, *real* people. Writing about these people and writing about people's families and writing about people's histories really matters to them. For Naeem's son, for instance, he had a complicated relationship with his father, and one of the things that he said to me was that he was very interested in the scholarly reception of his dad, because he was able to see a different person than he experienced growing up.

Likewise, the Bermuda chapters were partly based on oral histories. I had a lot of people that came to seek me out to tell me their stories. They found it very cathartic. They wanted to tell somebody their story and its place in Bermuda's history and its legacy in their community. These two guys took me on a five-hour tour through the neighborhoods they grew up in, telling me stories about this mosque and that mosque. It was important for them to show me these things. So, I think it is important for us as scholars to share those stories as well and help them see and understand the significance of their lives, their actions, their protests. Helping people recognize the value of their life's work is rewarding.