

AWP Event Outline

Title: Being Black and Muslim in Literature

Description: At a time when the many facets of blackness are gaining recognition, the stories and language of black American Muslims are also coming to the fore. This multi-genre reading by black Muslim authors showcases a variety of such perspectives. Listen to stories about love, family, magic, mystery, faith, and community as readers share fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Nearly sixty years after *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, hear what it means to be a black American Muslim author now.

Category: Multiple Literary Genres Reading

Organizer: Sufiya Abdur-Rahman

Moderator: Sufiya Abdur-Rahman

Participants:

Yasin Abdul-Muqit – Yasin Abdul-Muqit received a Master of Fine Arts Degree for Creative Writing from the University of Michigan in 2017.

Sufiya Abdur-Rahman – Sufiya Abdur-Rahman is author of the memoir *Heir to the Crescent Moon*, winner of the Iowa Prize for Literary Nonfiction. She is creative nonfiction editor for *Cherry Tree*, a literary journal at Washington College, where she teaches creative writing and journalism.

Aaliyah Bilal – Aaliyah Bilal is a fiction and nonfiction writer focusing on the Afro-Chinese and the Black American Muslim experience. A graduate of the University of London (SOAS), she was a recipient of the Shansi Memorial Fellowship at Yunnan University, where she conducted research among HuiZu Muslims.

Kaaronica Evans-Ware – Kaaronica Evans-Ware is the author of the novel *Fire & Clay: Book One*. She lives in Santa Barbara, where she is a doctoral student in the English Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Kaaronica is also the Regional Director of Zawiyah Foundation California.

Aisha Sharif – Aisha Sharif is the author of *To Keep from Undressing*, a collection of poems addressing her life as an African American Muslim woman. Aisha's poetry has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes and published

in *Crab Orchard Review* and *Rattle*. She holds an MFA in poetry and is a Cave Canem fellow.

Run of Show:

- Announce reminders
- The moderator will open the reading by posing a question to the readers and the audience about what it means to be a black American Muslim writer. The moderator will give some background on African-American Islam, noting that it came to this country with the enslaved centuries ago. Even though it was largely suppressed by slave owners who imposed Christianity, African-American Islam experienced a resurgence in the 20th century primarily through the Nation of Islam, which popularized some of its practices when blacks were looking to reclaim their dignity and independence, and, as a result as well as at the same time, through blacks who adopted orthodox or Sunni Islam as a declaration of faith. This story of self-transformation is memorably rendered in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, published months after the black Muslim leader's assassination in 1965. Since this most popular account of African-American Islam, black Muslims have published many books, from children's picture books by Jamila Thompkins-Bigelow, to poetry by Safia Ehlillo, to romance by Lyndell Williams.

Yet, our stories and the authors who produce them largely remain hidden, shrouded by a lack of visibility in traditional publishing and mainstream literary circles. As Thompkins-Bigelow wrote in "The Disappearance of the Black Muslim Author" for *We Need Diverse Books* in 2020, black Muslim authors are often told that "Black Muslims are too small, too niche." We are told that in order to be published, we should consider changing the race of a "Muslim protagonist. Consider writing a Muslim identity that is more palatable to people who aren't Muslim. Consider erasing Blackness. Consider killing some part of you."

We're here to say no.

- Each of the five participants, including the moderator, will then introduce themselves, explain their inspirations, and read for seven to eight minutes as a way of answering the question of what it means to be a black American Muslim writer.
- Aaliyah will read from the short story "Woman in Niqab."
Aisha will read poems from her book *To Keep From Undressing*.
Kaaronica will read from her novel *Fire & Clay*.

Sufiya will read from her memoir *Heir to the Crescent Moon*.

Yasin will read an excerpt from his unpublished novel.

- The event will end with a fifteen-minute audience Q&A.
- The moderator will thank everyone for coming and inform audience members about how to get the authors' work and follow them on social media.