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“Activism as Embodied Tafsir: American Muslim Women’s
Discourses on Authority, Leadership and Space”

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In the last two decades, American Muslim women have begun to claim the right to advance their own gendered interpretations of Islamic foundational texts, especially the Qur’an. Many of these reinterpretations challenge traditional models of religious authority and advocate different forms of gender justice or gender equality. In this paper, these American Muslim women’s exegetical projects are connected to a series of events in 2003 – 2005, in which American Muslim women (and men) translated *tafsir* of gender justice and equality into activist projects. These events include Asra Nomani’s march on her mosque in Morgantown, WV, the Muslim Women’s Freedom Tour, and the mixed-gender congregation Friday prayer, led by Amina Wadud in March 2005. Based on texts and visuals produced by and about these events, I argue that women’s discourses on gender equality as derived from the Qur’an are a form of embodied *tafsir*. In the specific context of American Muslim communities with their particular histories and institutions, women have challenged traditional forms of exegetical authority and practice, and, where they have found no support for their projects, have taken ritual and social practices outside of the walls of American mosques. This move has opened up debates in Muslim communities, domestically and worldwide, on gender roles and women’s status in society. It has also had a direct impact on the representation and self-representation of Muslims in American media.