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Islamizing the Black Body: Ritual and Power in Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam

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Ever since C. Eric Lincoln published *The Black Muslims in America*, in 1961, many observers of the Nation of Islam (NOI) have seemed convinced by his claim that the movement was neither very "religious" nor "Islamic" in nature.[1] In that classic study, currently in its third edition, Lincoln conceded that "the Black Muslim movement constitutes a legitimate religion within the definition of the sociology of religion" but also maintained that "religious values have a secondary importance."[2] For Lincoln, the success of the movement stemmed not from the particular nature of its religious activities but from its ability to provide a sense of "group solidarity" to the dispossessed black working class. According to Lincoln, this sense of community was produced through the group's embrace of black nationalism, which he understood to be "first a defensive response to external forces—hostile forces that threaten their creative existence."[3] The actual content of this black nationalist ideology, however, was less important than the role it played in responding to the ill feelings of working class blacks toward their oppressors. "It matters little," wrote Lincoln, "whether the homeland of the dispersal Black Nation is said to be Asia or Africa. For the black nationalist, the black Zion is wherever whites are absent."[4] Moreover, he said, the Islamic tenor of the movement was entirely epiphenomenal. "So long as the movement keeps its color identity with the rising black peoples of Africa, it could discard all its Islamic attributes—its name, its prayers to Allah, its citations from the Qur'an, everything 'Muslim,' without substantial risk to the appeal to the black masses."[5] Like black nationalism, argued Lincoln, Islam functioned to veil black resentment in religious garb. NOI members, he said, "are grateful for a mystique, especially a dignified religious mystique that rationalizes their resentments and their hatreds, rendering them spiritual virtues in a cosmic war of good against evil."[6]

In this article, I challenge Lincoln's view of the movement by arguing that the NOI was both highly religious and political at the

same time. Adopting some helpful methodological tools proposed by Catherine Bell in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, I use ritual as a vantage point from which to analyze the structure and function of religious and political activities within the movement. In Bell's well-known book, she argues that the process of ritualization "involves the differentiation and privileging of particular activities," including the deliberate manipulation of time and space; "restricted codes of communication; distinct and specialized personnel"; special objects, texts, and dress; particular physical or mental states; and the "involvement of a particular constituency."[7] In addition, Bell understands ritualization "first and foremost [as] a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations."[8] In studying ritualization as a strategy, she suggests that four "artificial, but useful" questions be raised: "(1) how ritualization empowers those who more or less control the rite; (2) how their power is also limited and constrained; (3) how ritualization dominates those involved as participants; and (4) how this domination involves a negotiated participation and resistance that also empowers them."[9] Finally, she points to the human body as a key social site of ritualization. Following Michel Foucault, she asserts that the "body is 'the place where the most minute and local social practices are linked up with the large scale organization of power.'" Moreover, she says, "the body is a political field: 'Power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.' . . . Ritualization, Foucault appears to imply, is a central way that power operates; it constitutes a political technology of the body."[10]

My study of ritual within the Nation of Islam from the 1950s to the 1970s confirms the usefulness of Bell's insights but also suggests the need, in this case, to view the construction of power through ritualization not only from the vantage point of "particular social organizations" but also within multiple and often overlapping social contexts. The semantic difference between these terms is small, but important, since Bell's discussion of power and ritualization sometimes seems to define the construction of ritualized power in terms of the relationship between human individuals and a single organization or entity, like a tribe, a society, or the church.[11] In explaining ritual within an African American religious context, however, it is necessary to discuss the plural social contexts in which the ritual participants operate and to which they respond. Only then can one account for the "multiple consciousness" of those dominated, empowered, and constrained through ritualization.[12] Perhaps this is also true more generally for modern multicultural societies in which power is formulated

along ethnic or racial lines. Whatever the case, the ritual activities of NOI leaders and members occurred within multiple social contexts, including urban black working-class culture, black politics, North American Islam, and, most obviously, the culture of a separatist movement headed by a prophetic authority. Ritualization became an arena in which NOI leaders and members subverted, resisted, accepted, and accommodated various elements of these cultures.

Specifically, I argue, members of the NOI adopted many turn-of-the-century black middle-class "uplift" themes like thrift, sexual propriety, industriousness, and temperance by recasting them in an Islamic mold; this use of Islam, in turn, allowed members to reject what they viewed as the ideological burdens of African American Christianity, which had functioned as the religious source or container of these norms. These new African American Islamic rituals focused on the reformation of the black body, which was depicted as a main battleground for the souls of black folk. The black body was constructed as a gendered vessel, a symbol for the fate of the black race, where black folk could be saved from white Christian violation, poison, and, in the case of men, emasculation. But this process, as Bell's theoretical formulation quoted above suggests, also constrained the power of those who controlled the rite. Having utilized Islam to name and define his ritual activity, Elijah Muhammad laid claims to a religious identity shared by millions of other people. When immigrant, foreign, and other African American Muslims began to question his religious legitimacy, he responded by entrenching himself in his own prophetic authority, which resulted in his isolation from much of the American and global Muslim community.

Linking the Black Body to the Fate of the Race

From slave times unto the present day, the care and protection of the black body has been a central concern in the formation of African American culture.[13] For most of American history, persons of African descent have been denied the most basic right to protect themselves and their families from bodily harm and humiliation.[14] Even today, events such as the 1998 lynching of James Byrd in Texas or the sexual assault of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima by New York City police, in 1997, continue to make bodily safety a key concern of African American life. As a result, the black body has been and continues to be an important symbol of the struggle for black liberation more generally. As Patricia Turner shows in *I Heard It through the Grapevine*, much of contemporary urban African American rumor and folklore is dominated by "metaphors linking the fate of the black race

to the fates of black bodies." Anxieties over black male sterility, for example, appear constantly in urban narratives, embedded in fears that "Church's [fast food chicken franchise] is owned by the Ku Klux Klan [KKK], and that they put something in it to make black men sterile" or that "Tropical Fantasy [a fruit-flavored soft drink] is made by the KKK. There is a special ingredient in it that makes black men sterile."[15] Turner also notes conspiracy theories that address women's bodies. For instance, she hears that Norplant, an implanted birth control device, is part of a plot to promote black genocide.[16]

Similar anxieties about the control and abuse of black bodies are also readily detectable in several aspects of NOI discourse, including the words of Elijah Muhammad, cartoons appearing in the popular movement newspaper *Muhammad Speaks*, and NOI symbols and banners. For example, E. U. Essien-Udom reported in his early 1960s ethnographic account of the movement that a prominent banner in the Chicago temple featured an "American flag . . . in the upper left corner of the white backboard and directly below it, painted against a white background, a tree with a black man hanging from a branch. . . . Opposite the tree is the cross, another symbol of oppression, shame, suffering, and death. Below the cross appears the word 'Christianity.'"[17] The "black man hanging from a branch" was linked in the mind of at least one of Essien-Udom's informants to Christianity and its role in the oppression of African Americans in the United States. "That flag and the cross," Minister James told Essien-Udom, "have been symbols of the misfortune and slavery for black people. The sign of the cross represents murder and wickedness since its inception, Christ the Prophet was lynched on that cross and ever since the so-called Negroes started bearing it they have been catching hell on it."[18] In interpreting these symbols of American nationalism and Christian religion, this NOI minister constructed a painful historical narrative that invoked the whipped and broken black body as the mirror image of a helpless Christ crucified.

Bodily oppression that was viewed not only as violent but also redemptive in nature appeared in the discussion and valorization of boxer Muhammad Ali, who became another symbol for the entire black race. In a 1968 edition of *Muhammad Speaks*, for example, a reprinted political cartoon depicted the Christ-like suffering of Ali, who had been stripped of his world heavyweight title in 1967 for refusing to serve in the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. Ali is seen hung on the cross, arms outstretched, hands covered by boxing gloves. Several pairs of white hands rip off Ali's clothes, which are imprinted with the caption "World Champion." One pair of white hands throws dice. Below the cartoon, the newspaper's editorial captions states:

"Christian Cross, which is responsible for so much oppression of Black people, was depicted recently . . . as the instrument by which Muhammad Ali was 'crucified' at hands of white America."[19] But Ali, who was offered as a model for the rest of the Nation of Islam, was not simply a suffering servant. Picture after picture in *Muhammad Speaks* depicted him as physically strong, pious, and devoted to Elijah Muhammad. There are pictures of the "Muslim champ" training for matches; of the famous "blow heard around the world" when Ali defeated Sonny Liston; of Ali performing the *salat*, or Islamic prayer; of the grateful champ studying with his teacher Elijah Muhammad; and of "Minister Muhammad Ali teaching principles of Islam" at a Houston mosque.[20]

The emphasis on Ali's strong and dignified physicality points to yet another major theme of NOI discourse on the black body—namely, the idea that blacks had been poisoned by foods, liquor, and tobacco given to them long ago by white American Christian slaveholders. A December 31, 1965, cartoon in *Muhammad Speaks*, for example, depicted a Christmas celebration in which Sambo-like blacks gamble, eat pork, and drink liquor in the name of Mary and Jesus.[21] Another shows an overweight black couple whose dinner table is graced with whiskey and every variety of pork, including the pig's head. The woman smokes cigarettes, while her child sits out of sight eating the scraps off her parents' table. The caption above warns: "Eating the wrong food. . . . It forms your features, and your characteristics." [22] In many of these cartoons, women who wear make-up are also objects of scorn. In one cartoon, for example, a scantily dressed, high-heeled, and overweight woman wearing a fur mocks a Muslim sister by crying, "What happened to *you*? No Make-Up!!!"[23] Below the scene, the caption reads, "The so-called Negro must clean up!" The cartoon thus associates the wearing of heels and make-up with impurity and a loss of dignity. Powerlessness, impurity, hopelessness, and eventually hell—all would be the result of eating the slavemaster's food, according to Elijah Muhammad.[24] By adopting the worst aspects of white culture, the messenger taught, blacks had contributed to their own oppression. They had substituted the culture of the white devil for their own divine heritage.[25]

Finally, NOI discourse also expressed incredible anxiety over the emasculation of the black male, which was often seen as a result of an inability to defend black women against white male sexual assault or as a result of interracial sex between black men and white women. Malcolm X, for example, reported in his *Autobiography* that he "would become so choked up" over this issue that he would "walk in the streets until late into the night." Working as an assistant minister at

Detroit Temple No. 1 in the 1950s, Malcolm lamented the "rapist slavemaster who emasculated the black man." Using memories of slavery in an archetypical way, he confronted his male audience members at the temple by beckoning them to "*think* of hearing wives, mothers, daughters, being *raped*! And you were too filled with *fear* of the rapist to do anything about it!"[26] The result, Malcolm said, was a black race "polluted" with white blood. As for black men who chose to have sex with white women, both Malcolm and other NOI leaders were clear: such behavior would lead to the death of black manhood. In another political cartoon published in *Muhammad Speaks*, for instance, this lesson is taught through the example of an obsequious black man leaning toward a cross-wearing, cigarette-smoking, whiskey-drinking, white female skeleton. The word "integration" is tattooed across her chest; "Christianity tempts her slave" is written across her legs. The black man smiles as he says, "Sure—I love everybody."[27] The loss of black manhood is thus linked not only to a love of white women but to bodily impurity, integration, and Christianity, as well.

Islamic Ritualization and Black Working-Class Resistance

Elijah Muhammad offered Islamic ritual as a means by which black men and women could save their bodies from emasculation, violation, and contamination. For example, in his 1957 work, *The Supreme Wisdom*, Muhammad argued that Islam "dignifies the black man. It gives him the desire to be clean, internally and externally. . . . It heals both the physical and spiritual by teaching what to eat, when to eat, and what to think, and how to act."[28] In this pamphlet, the messenger also reminded his followers that God, whom Muhammad understood to have come in the person of W. D. Fard, set specific guidelines for ritual purity. The eating of pork, for example, is identified as one of the worst possible offenses. Quoting Qur'an 2:168, Muhammad commanded his followers to "eat the lawful and good things out of what is in the earth, and do not follow in the footsteps of the devil." Muhammad offered an exegesis of these verses that situated them within his own mythology, explaining that "the [blue-eyed] devils referred to are not other than the white people who eat the hog and other things forbidden by Allah."[29] This link between the messenger's mythology and a ritualized diet was no passing fad: by 1972, Muhammad had published an entire book on the relationship between diet and NOI mythology entitled *How to Eat to Live.*

Essien-Udom's ethnography showed that Elijah Muhammad's words were not simply ritual theory; his followers turned them into ritual practice. His description of temple meetings in Chicago, for

example, reveals one concrete form of ritualization within the NOI. Ironically, Essien-Udom himself did not view these activities as "religious ceremony or ritual." For him, the only observable rituals were "the prayers said at the opening and closing of meetings and perhaps a verse or two read by the minister from the Koran or from the Bible."[30] If ritual is defined using Bell's approach, however, there is no doubt about its ubiquity in this context. In fact, temple meetings incorporated every constitutive element of Bell's ritualization: the deliberate manipulation of time and space; the "restricted codes of communication"; the "distinct and specialized personnel"; special objects, texts, and dress; particular physical or mental states; and the "involvement of a particular constituency."[31]

"Meetings," wrote Essien-Udom, "begin promptly. Members must be punctual, and unless they have good excuses for being late, they may be suspended from the Temple for repeated offenses." Visitors underwent a search conducted by members of the all-male Fruit of Islam (FOI)—often smartly dressed in bow ties and suits—and members of the Muslim Girl's Training (MGT), who wore white gowns. "At first," one visitor told Essien-Udom, "I felt that the search was ridiculous. But when I discovered that it was taken so seriously and done so thoroughly, I was frightened. For the first hour at the temple, I was exceedingly uneasy and afraid. The members looked at visitors with curiosity, if not utter suspicion." The search was supposed to produce this particular mental state, Essien-Udom argued: an "important aspect of the initiation process, this invasion of the privacy of the individual person humiliates him and makes the visitor feel guilty about his previous way of life. Initiates are thereby readied for submission and obedience to the will of Allah and Muhammad, and to the many exacting demands of personal obedience and loyalty."[32]

In conducting the search, FOI and MGT members looked not only for objects like firearms and knives but also for cosmetics, cigarettes, matches, and nail files—anything associated with the exploitation of the black body. "In the Old World," Minister Lucius told Essien-Udom, "the so-called Negroes had been used to carry knives, guns, cigarettes, liquor, etc., with them. In coming to the New World they must leave these things behind." Once the search was completed, FOI members, who maintained a complex protocol of military-like salutes in executing their duties, then showed visitors to their seats. During the meetings, which were quiet and sober in tone, members avoided what Elijah Muhammad had deemed "slave" behaviors— especially the get-happy ecstaticism of the slave religious meeting. "Shouting and wailing," reported Essien-Udom, "is considered char-

acteristic of Negro Christian preachers who want to arouse the emo-
tions of the congregations in order to get money 'which is tied up in
churches and Cadillacs.'" Most members exercised what Essien-
Udom saw as remarkable self-constraint throughout the long temple
lectures, given by one of the NOI ministers. Occasionally, he reported,
one could hear a subdued form of the call-and-response so famous in the
black church, including comments like "preach it, brother Minister."[33]

        The gendered nature of this particular ritual activity and
others like it can be observed in the roles played by members of the
FOI and MGT. Trained in military protocol, boxing, judo, and wres-
tling, the members of the FOI modeled proper male behavior for
other members and blacks outside the Nation. This elite force, a unit
of which existed in many NOI temples throughout the country, was
"expected to follow all 'Islamic laws' more strictly than other follow-
ers," including directives to keep themselves clean and to show "Love
of our Leader and Teacher, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad." The
FOI was also charged with the protection of the temple and, accord-
ing to one member in Chicago, with the "duty" of defending "the life
of a Muslim Sister with his own life." Just as the FOI ritualized proper
male behavior within the movement, so did Muslim Girls' Training
and General Civilization Class seek to discipline, train, and cleanse
the bodies of women. The MGT was "concerned with the training of
good Muslim women" and watched "over the conduct and behavior
of female members." Women were taught "how to keep house, how
to rear children, how to take care of husband, sew, cook, and in gen-
eral, how to act at home and abroad." Hygiene, personal cleanliness,
reading, writing, and maintaining the proper body weight were
also stressed.[34]

        But temple meetings and the activities of the FOI and MGT
did not constitute the only forms of ritual within the movement. More
profane activities like the selling of the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper
were also religious activities that can be viewed fruitfully as ritualiza-
tion. By the late 1960s, *Muhammad Speaks* had become a significant
source of news on the streets of black America. While the newspaper
itself estimated its weekly circulation to be in the hundreds of thou-
sands, former editor Leon Forrest claimed that a more accurate esti-
mate was 70,000 weekly.[35] Well-dressed, bow-tied black men peddled
the paper (or bean pies) at major intersections or even door-to-door
throughout many areas in urban black America. "Every able brother
sold the paper," reported Abdul Shabazz, a member of Temple No. 28
in St. Louis, Missouri. "If you couldn't deal with *Muhammad Speaks*
newspaper, you were kind of frowned upon. I think my quota was
150 papers a week. I couldn't tell you how many papers we sold, but

when the shipment of papers came in . . . the brothers would go down . . . and unload bundles."[36] NOI members also used the selling of the paper as an opportunity to espouse the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. "These hawkers of *Muhammad Speaks*," wrote Leon Forrest, "would indeed get all up in your face, with the good news, concerning their new faith; they were a blast, with the zeal of the old-time religion pitched to a tune loud enough to awaken the dead—or to chase the Negro out of any Blackman, as the saying goes."[37]

Such economic activities reflected the totalizing effects of ritualization in which the disciplining of the black body was linked to Elijah Muhammad's religious mission to save the black race. This ritualization was meant to encompass every part of a follower's life, so that nearly every waking moment of his or her life would be spent in the performance of ritualized duties. The testimony of one NOI member, as reported by Essien-Udom, illustrates this idea:

> Before I joined the Nation I went out Friday nights and all weekend night-clubbing and drinking. . . . I began having sex life at eleven and my first girl friend was about fifteen. . . . Now, instead of chasing women and nursing liquor bottles, I spend my spare time at the Temple of Islam. Mondays: 7 to 11 p.m. studying Arabic, English, writing, social science, arithmetic, and *The Supreme Wisdom* at the F.O.I. meetings. After that I go home to bed. On Tuesday nights, I am at the Unity Party. Wednesdays, I attend the regular Temple meeting. Thursdays, I am on M.G.T.'s Guard Duty. This means that I along with the other members of the F.O.I. [go] to guard the doorways to the Temple and to the University of Islam in order to protect the Sisters. . . . Friday nights are regular meeting nights. I work eight hours a day. On Saturdays, I work at my laboratory—a mechanical shop. Sunday afternoon is regular meeting. There is no time for visiting friends except on Saturdays and Sundays.[38]

Such testimony was not unusual. As St. Louis member Abdul Shabazz explained, "We were like a vanguard. I was about fifteen, sixteen years old, and at that time about fifteen to twenty brothers would stay above the mosque. It was like a dormitory."[39] Even those who were not part of the "vanguard" in St. Louis participated in similar processes of ritualization. Believers met in each other's homes to create their own sense of community away from what they saw as the temptations of mainstream black culture. "We couldn't smoke. We didn't drink," said Abdul Shakir, a former captain of the Fruit of Islam. "We were pretty puritanical in our beliefs. We couldn't go the movies, couldn't go to nightclubs, so we had to socialize at somebody's house. The sisters would cook pastries and dinner; the brothers would listen

to tapes and study their lessons. It brought strong cohesiveness among the Muslims."⁴⁰ Such ritualization could also seem intimidating. Lorene Ghani, a female member in St. Louis who joined the movement in the 1970s, said that, because she viewed Islam as such "a strict religion," she wondered whether she was "good enough to become a member."⁴¹

It should be said, however, that not every member of the movement during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s lived up to this ideal, participated in these ritual activities, or even accepted most of Muhammad's teachings. For example, Washington University professor and essayist Gerald Early reports that he "almost joined the Black Muslims" when he was eighteen and living in San Francisco. Dubbing Muhammad's followers in San Francisco a "wonderful community of saints," Early writes that NOI members had helped him find a job, given him a suit jacket, and taken him to temple meetings. These same brothers, however, would also "take me to their apartment where, after the Muslim service, they would dump their paid-for copies of *Muhammad Speaks* in a closet, break out some marijuana and play jazz records all night." To be sure, smoking pot was not part of Muhammad's program for the ritualization of the black body. Importantly, however, Early also reports that these followers, in denouncing Malcolm X for leaving the NOI, still acknowledged the authority of the "Messenger who gave him [Malcolm] a message. . . . It was the Messenger who gave Malcolm morals when he didn't have any."⁴² These NOI members, in other words, may not have followed all of Muhammad's commandments regarding their personal behavior, but they did recognize his prophetic status.

How many members of the NOI did or did not follow Muhammad's directives is, however, a misleading question. No matter what the precise number was, a sufficient group of persons have left ample evidence that they created a religious community in which rituals focused on the black body were at the center of their communal life. *To what degree* individual members participated in this communal life is a similarly problematic issue. After all, different adherents of a religious faith can have different motivations and expectations at different times and in different places. What I am describing is not uniform behavior among NOI members but a religious process of ritualization in which persons participated to a greater or lesser degree.

Moreover, the success and significance of this ritualization should be understood not as some isolated response to black urban anxieties over the black body but as a religious process connected to—rather than determined by—these anxieties and even more directly to the contexts of social powerlessness and oppression in which

they emerged. Ironically, the clean living and market-oriented behav-
iors of many NOI members constituted an achievement of goals long
espoused by middle-class African American "uplift" organizations,
including elements of the black church like the National Baptist Con-
ventions, the Women's Club movement, and black fraternal orders.[43]
Wilson J. Moses has labeled many of these groups "civilizationist,"
taking his cue in part from the words of African American missionary
Alexander Crummell, who famously outlined his views at the 1895
Atlanta and Cotton States Exhibition. On that occasion, Crummell
defined civilization as:

> The clarity of the mind from the dominion of false heathen
> ideas, . . . the conscious impress of individualism and personal
> responsibility, . . . the recognition of the *body*, with its desires
> and appetites and passions as a sacred gift, and as under the
> law of divine obligation, . . . the honor and freedom of woman-
> hood, allied with the duty of family development, . . . the sense
> of social progress in society, . . . the entrance of new impulses in
> the actions and policy of the tribe or nation, . . . an elevated use
> of material things and a higher range of common industrial ac-
> tivities, . . . [and] the earliest possible introduction of letter, and
> books, and reading, and intelligence to the man, his family, and
> his social circles.[44]

Elijah Muhammad's program of black uplift incorporated every ele-
ment of Crummell's civilizationism. Even more remarkable is how
many of these aspirations were achieved by working-class members
of NOI during 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

　　In fact, it might be tempting to view the NOI and its rituals as
a capitulation to black middle-class norms. Was not all this clean liv-
ing and industriousness just the guilty reaction of newly religious
working-class folks who now regretted their old devotion to a more
hedonistic, less market-oriented lifestyle? Historian Robin Kelley sug-
gests that such dichotomous thinking ignores the historical continuity
between the riddle of the zoot suit (that is, postwar black American
working-class culture) and the culture of black nationalist Islam. Ex-
amining Malcolm X's "participation in the underground subculture
of the black working-class youth," Kelley argues that such activity "was
not a detour on the road to political consciousness but rather an essen-
tial element of his radicalization." Malcolm and the zoot suiters, he ex-
plains, rejected typical symbols of patriotism, the folkways of rural
blacks, and the "class-conscious, integrationist attitudes of middle-class
blacks." Instead, Kelley says, they developed a language and style all
their own: "The zoot suiters and hipsters who sought alternatives to
wage work and found pleasure in new music, clothes, and dance styles

of the period were race rebels of sorts, challenging middle-class ethics and expectations, carving out a distinct generation and ethnic identity."[45]

This kind of resistance centered on making the body look and act in ways consciously different from what the white mainstream and the black middle-class expected. The collective manipulation of the body, as Kelley suggests, often resulted in a powerful communitarian spirit: "The sights of hundreds moving in unison on a hardwood dance floor unmistakably reinforced a sense of collectivity as well as individuality, as dancers improvised on the standard lindy hop moves in friendly competition."[46] Kelley challenges the notion that the only historical forms of resistance in black culture are those that engage in "mainstream" politics. "Political motivations," he argues, "[do not always] exist separately from issues of economic well-being, safety, pleasure, cultural expression, sexuality, freedom of mobility, and other facets of daily life."[47] Rebellion, he claims, includes cultural acts of resistance that reject the values and expectations of the powerful. His question for further study is: How did various movements or organizations offer this kind of resistance, and why were black working-class folk drawn to them?

In the case of the Nation of Islam, working-class African Americans created a religious culture that, like the black working-class youth culture of the postwar era, identified the black body as a locus of social protest. But rather than negating traditional black Christian middle-class ideals, members appropriated them within a new Islamic matrix. That is, NOI members recast civilizationism in a way that rejected its associations with black middle-class Christian ideology while preserving some of its most fundamental norms. Put in terms of a simple semiotic exercise: The ritualized body was a sign. NOI members separated the signifier—here the ritualizing of the body—from what was normally signified—a capitulation to the values, norms, and beliefs of the oppressor. In so doing, the old signifier now pointed toward a new signified: the islamized black body. Islam, then, provided an essential element of NOI ritualization because it was used to rename old strategies for black uplift and to differentiate them from other behaviors and other movements. Islam was not as superstructural to the movement as C. Eric Lincoln had claimed, as can be seen further by examining the changing nature of prophetic power within the movement.

The Prophetic Power of Elijah Muhammad and Its Limits

So far, the focus of this article has been on how ritualization within the NOI, a process that I have called the islamization of the

black body, dominated the lives of its members while also empowering them. But these rituals, to reiterate the useful formulation of Catherine Bell, also empowered *and* constrained those who were in control of the rite.[48] Indeed, these practices effectively constructed and perpetuated the prophetic authority of Elijah Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah—a man elected by God to spread Islam, the natural religion of the black man, across the United States and the black world. Muhammad believed that Fard had chosen him to "mentally resurrect" the black man, which meant to disabuse black people of what Muhammad deemed to be pie-in-the-sky Christian ideas that freedom, justice, and equality would only be achieved in the hereafter. The white devil, Muhammad said, had taught that the "hereafter is a life of spirits (spooks) up somewhere in the sky, while it is only on the earth."[49] By following his teachings, Muhammad argued, salvation could be achieved in the present, if only black people would "come unto their own kind" and no longer seek integration with their oppressors. Muhammad's vision for black salvation included several different components: first and foremost, the recommitment of black folk to the confession and practice of their original and natural religion, Islam; second, the creation of black economic self-sufficiency separate from the white-dominated market; and, finally, the establishment of a separate black "state or territory."[50]

Both Essien-Udom and Lincoln understood these teachings primarily as a type of black nationalism. In the most generic sense, these scholars used that term to place Muhammad in a long line of black leaders who have called for some sort of unified African American response to racial oppression. What is also clear, however, is that these students of the movement employed the label of black nationalism to refer to a number of different social, political, economic, and cultural patterns of behavior in the African American experience, including everything from simple pride in black history to the demand for political separation from whites.[51] In my view, such liberal use of the term "black nationalism" threatens to render it meaningless as a category of analysis since, as Orlando Patterson pointed out in the 1970s, "almost every form of group behavior or expression of group sentiment" can then be "referred to as nationalism."[52] My own preference is to define black nationalism in a much more limited and precise way, as Wilson Jeremiah Moses does more recently in his anthology of classical black nationalists. There, Moses argues that the "essential feature of classical black nationalism is its goal of creating a black nation-state or empire with absolute control over a specific geographical territory, and sufficient economic and military power to defend it."[53] Using this definition, it becomes clear

that, while Elijah Muhammad incorporated nationalist elements into his teachings, he was not first and foremost a black nationalist. In fact, Muhammad devoted few of his spoken or written words to this topic. Of the 341 pages in Muhammad's magnum opus, *Message to the Blackman in America*, fewer than one hundred covered explicitly political and economic themes—and there were very few specifics about the establishment of a black nation-state.[54] The rest of the book explained Muhammad's views on theology, mythology, eschatology, biblical and Qur'anic exegesis, and Islamic prayer and showed that Muhammad saw himself as a prophet, not a politician.[55]

Moreover, there is ample evidence to suggest that Muhammad's followers understood him primarily as a prophet, constructed his prophetic authority through ritualization, and viewed their religious, political, and economic activities as responses to his prophetic commandments. "People don't understand," boxing promoter Murad Muhammad later explained to journalist and author Stephen Barboza, "the Honorable Elijah Muhammad had an unbelievable power in America—more than any other black man, ever."[56] NOI members followed this man's dietary rules, sold his newspaper, and honored him annually on February 26 during the celebration of Savior's Day. Even more, they boarded buses and created caravans so that they could travel to mass religious rallies where he would be the featured speaker. These rallies could have a powerful religious effect on his followers, as Malcolm X described in his autobiography:

> The audience would begin a rustling of turning. . . . Mr. Muhammad would be rapidly moving along up a center aisle from the rear—as once he had entered our humble little mosques— this man whom we regarded as Islam's gentle, meek, brown- skinned Lamb. Stalwart, striding, close-cropped handpicked Fruit of Islam guards were a circle surrounding him. He carried his Holy Bible, his Holy Qur'an. The small, dark pillbox atop his head was gold-embroidered with Islam's flag, the sun, moon, and stars. The Muslims were crying out their adoration and their welcome. "Little Lamb!" "As-Salaikum-Salaam!" "Praise be to Allah!" Tears would be in more eyes than mine. He had rescued me when I was a convict. . . . I think that my life's peaks of emotion, until recently, at least, were when, sudden- ly, the Fruit of Islam guards would stop stiffly at attention, and the platform's several steps would be mounted alone by Mr. Muhammad.[57]

Certainly, other kinds of charismatic leaders have been received in similar ways, but they are seldom understood to be the Lamb of God and the savior of black humankind. This passage also shows that Mal-

colm X linked the prophetic authority of Elijah Muhammad to redemption from his life as a convicted criminal. Malcolm was not alone. Large numbers of NOI members were recruited from prisons, where they heard "the teachings of Elijah Muhammad" from NOI missionaries like Isaiah Karriem. According to his comments and those of other NOI ministers in *Muhammad Speaks*, their "progress" was entirely the result of Muhammad's teachings.[58] In speeches, statements, even poems, NOI members testified again and again to the power of Muhammad and the success of his programs in rehabilitating even the most hardened criminal.

Such devotion to the messenger had a darker side, as well. As is well known, followers of Elijah Muhammad were convicted for the assassination of Malcolm X. In addition, Gerald Early echoes the charges of many by writing that, in Philadelphia at least, "mosques were shaking down black businesses, distributing drugs in the community, murdering apostates and drug rivals, and generally instituting a reign of terror."[59] Some of this violent and antisocial behavior can be attributed to internecine feuds among black Muslims themselves. In 1966, for example, Minister Clyde, the leader of the NOI in St. Louis, was shot while standing outside of Little Egypt, an area of the city where Muslims successfully operated a mosque, school, restaurant, and a grocery store. After the assailant went free on bond, and Minister Clyde's home was mysteriously fire bombed, the assailant was killed, along with his wife, at their home.[60] Such acts, however grim, can also be seen within a religious context. That certain members of the movement were willing to intimidate, harm, and even murder others in the name of their messenger should come as no surprise given their level of devotion.

But no matter how powerful Muhammad became to his followers, the very means by which he constructed his own prophetic authority simultaneously constrained him. Muhammad, after all, had defined his religious legitimacy in terms of Islam, the Qur'an,[61] and his personal relationship to a bodily Allah. As long as the movement existed in isolation from the rest of the Muslim community and out of view of the mainstream press, little notice was given to the fact that Muhammad's unique version of Islam contradicted many of the foundations of both Sunni and Shi`i Islamic traditions. By the late 1950s, however, Muhammad's movement came to the attention of the national press after New York's WNTA-TV showed a five-part series produced by Mike Wallace entitled "The Hate That Hate Produced." Articles about the NOI then appeared in national magazines like *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report.* These publications usually denounced the movement as a black supremacist or anti-American

group. Black civil rights leaders, including the NAACP's Roy Wilkins, also criticized the NOI as a hate group. Wilkins identified the absence of strong civil rights legislation as one of the main factors behind the success of Muhammad's group. The NOI, it was said, existed only because of racism and the lack of equal opportunity for blacks.[62] The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also recapitulated these themes in his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The Nation of Islam, according to King, was an expression of "bitterness" and "hatred" that was "nourished by the contemporary frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination." King offered to stand between the forces of complacency in the black community and "the hatred and despair of the black nationalist." If it were not for the nonviolent civil rights struggle, King said, southern streets might be "flowing with floods of blood," and all of America might be heading for a "frightening racial nightmare."[63] King did not want or could not afford to recognize the NOI as legitimately religious because doing so would have left him vulnerable to charges of extremism, thus diminishing his ability to cast himself as a man trying to prevent a race war.

As negative portrayals in the mainstream press and criticism from black leaders increased, more and more Muslims in the United States joined in the public condemnation of Muhammad and the NOI. Seeking to make a distinction between the "real Islam" and what he depicted as Muhammad's corrupted version, one Muslim wrote to the *Pittsburgh Courier* to ask readers not to "confuse the sect of Muhammad with that of true Islam. Islam does not preach hate," he asserted, "it does not preach racism, it only calls for love, peace, and understanding." Similarly, another letter to the *Courier*, which was a newspaper for which Muhammad had written numerous religious articles, asserted that Elijah Muhammad "twists the Koran around to fit his hate teachings."[64] One African American Muslim leader in Chicago also launched a full-scale information campaign against Muhammad. Talib Ahmad Dawud, who agreed with Muhammad's antiintegrationist and anti-Christian views, criticized Muhammad's beliefs in Fard's divinity and his prophetic statements. The movement, he said, was an illegitimate Islamic sect. Specifically, Dawud charged, Muhammad had violated the fundamental tenets of Islam in his "denial of a future, bodily resurrection, and his follower's failure to adhere to the proper Muslim prayer rituals." He also claimed that Muhammad could not perform the pilgrimage to Mecca because the Saudi Arabian government and its pilgrimage committee had banned him from Mecca. Finally, he said that W. D. Fard, the founder of the "cult," was white—an accusation that was meant to cast doubts on the NOI's authenticity as a black movement. Other immigrant and for-

eign Muslims took similar action. For instance, the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., actively disassociated itself with Muhammad, denying any claim of Islamic legitimacy for the group.[65]

At first, Muhammad responded by attempting to bolster his authenticity as a Muslim leader. For example, in late 1959, he accompanied his sons Herbert and Akbar on an `umra`, or lesser pilgrimage, to Mecca—an act that was supposed to signal acceptance of Muhammad's Islamic legitimacy by Saudi religious authorities.[66] Soon after this trip, however, Muhammad seemed to answer his critics not by making use of universally accepted Islamic symbols but by relying more and more on his own authority as the Messenger of Allah. Though there seems to be little direct evidence to explain the shift, it is worth pointing out that Muhammad was reportedly disappointed by his trip to Mecca. While the March 1962 edition of *Muhammad Speaks* included only shining reports about the sojourn, his son Wallace D. Muhammad later stated that his father's hopes to see "streets of gold" in the holy city had been unfulfilled.[67] After his return, Muhammad seemed to care little whether or not Muslims outside of the movement accepted him, leaning instead on his own prophetic authority as the primary source of his religious legitimacy.

Such entrenchment into his prophetic status can be observed by examining the changes in Muhammad's teachings regarding Islamic prayer. During the late 1950s, Muhammad published a prayer manual that detailed the elements common to the Islamic *salat*, the ritual prayer performed five times daily by most pious Muslims. The only major difference between the version practiced by most Muslims and that advocated by Muhammad was that he instructed his followers to offer the prayers in English, rather than in Arabic, which would be introduced to them "some day in the near future."[68] The manual included descriptions of the proper prayer times,[69] ritual cleansing or ablutions,[70] the call to prayer,[71] and the components of prayer.[72] Besides a very brief introduction, Muhammad added very few words of his own to the manual. In fact, the manual contained no reference to Muhammad's unique mythology or to the themes of bodily purification so central to ritual practice within the movement.[73]

But by 1962, well after Muhammad had returned from his trip to Mecca, *Muhammad Speaks* featured edited versions of "The Prayer Service in Islam" that explained the meaning of the *salat* in terms of Muhammad's ritual theory regarding the black body. In these articles, Muhammad offered original and novel interpretations of many aspects of the traditional ritual prayer. For example, he claimed that the practice of facing Mecca during prayer has a special meaning for "the lost and found people of Islam," or the members of his orga-

nization. For them, facing Mecca symbolized the beginning of a jour-
ney toward the restoration of black greatness; but cleanliness of both
mind and body, he taught, were necessary preconditions to the suc-
cessful completion of the venture. "Before their return," he wrote,
"they must turn in the direction [toward Mecca] with clean hands and
hearts, bow in submission to the Will of Allah alone with the righ-
teousness that they may be welcomed to take their place again among
their own people."[74] He also instructed his followers to pray for free-
dom from worldly desires, which he likened to a desire for food. Para-
phrasing part of Exodus 16, Muhammad claimed that "the want of
bread and meat . . . gave Moses and Aaron much trouble trying to lead
the people into spiritual knowledge of Jehovah and self-independence."
In fact, he said, the ancient Israelites became so hungry that they had
lamented their freedom from bondage in Egypt. Muhammad argued
that this sentiment paralleled the attachment of black Americans to
aspects of slave culture: it is the black American "want of the slave-
masters' bread, meat and luxuries [that] is depriving the so-called Ne-
groes today of their independence," he asserted.[75] But one could rid
oneself of this hunger, according to Muhammad, by praying to God
for help. Paraphrasing Qur'an 1:6–7, Muhammad claimed that "the
Muslims pray in their oft-repeated prayer to seek Allah's help in
guiding them on the right path, the path of those whom God has fa-
vored and not on the path of those who have caused His anger to de-
scend upon them (the Jews and Christians)." Moreover, he said, be-
lievers could also ask God to relieve them of other undesirable
behavior traits. Introducing an innovation to the *salat*, Muhammad
told his followers to add these sentences to the *fatiha*, or the first *sura*
of the Qur'an:

> O Allah! I seek refuge from anxiety and grief, and I seek Thy ref-
> uge from lack of strength and laziness, and I seek Thy refuge
> from cowardice and niggardliness, and I seek Thy refuge from
> being overpowered by dept [*sic*] and the oppression of men; O
> Allah! suffice Thou me with what is lawful to keep me away
> from what is prohibited, and with Thy grace make me free from
> want of what is besides Thee.[76]

Such words indicate the extent to which Muhammad had re-
configured some of the most basic aspects of Old World Islam to fit
into his own ritual theory about the importance of disciplining the
black body.

These innovations also suggested that, by the first half of the
1960s, Muhammad no longer expected to be accepted as a legitimate
Muslim by believers outside of the movement. Instead, he legitimated

his authority exclusively in terms of his role as the Messenger of Al-
lah, whom he continued to identify throughout the 1960s and 1970s as
W. D. Fard. To be sure, this emphasis on his own prophetic authority
showed that Muhammad had a sense of his own limitations. He knew
only a few words in Arabic, lacked a formal education in Islamic
studies, and had little direct connection to the traditions of Old World
Islam. By ignoring the criticism of Muslims outside the movement, he
could also avoid debates about his Islamic authenticity that he surely
would have lost. Moreover, as the portrait of religious life within the
NOI offered above shows, many of his followers seemed unbothered
by the attacks against their leader by other Muslims. It was, after all,
his version of Islam, and not that of immigrant and foreign Muslims,
that many followers identified as their path to liberation. Muhammad
had provided the religious program that helped them change their
lives for the better.

But the attacks on his legitimacy had also constrained his
power in that he could no longer simultaneously claim worldwide
Islamic legitimacy *and* defend his own prophetic authority. To choose
the former would have meant a complete abandonment of the myth-
ological view supporting his prophecy. Choosing the latter posed a
different kind of problem. No longer able to claim the imprimatur of
foreign and immigrant Muslims, Muhammad made himself vulnera-
ble to charges of illegitimacy not only outside his movement but
within it as well. For those believers, like Malcolm X, who held dear
their identification with the rest of the Muslim world, the isolation
produced by Muhammad's entrenchment helped lead to doubt and
finally outright rebellion.[77] Similarly, Wallace D. Muhammad, Mu-
hammad's son and eventual heir, had come under the influence of
Sunni Muslims during the 1950s and had attempted to convince his
father to become more "orthodox" in his practice during the final
years of that decade. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Wallace
Muhammad publicly rebelled against his father, leaving the move-
ment several times. But he also continued returning to the fold during
those years. After Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, he emerged as
the new leader of the movement and guided the NOI toward a more
Sunni interpretation of Islam.[78]

Conclusion

I have argued that an examination of ritual within the NOI
forces us to reconsider C. Eric Lincoln's claim that the NOI was nei-
ther terribly religious nor Islamic in nature.[79] My approach suggests
that one can appreciate the significantly religious character of the

movement while also taking seriously its political and social implica-
tions. In fact, my essay implies that it is impossible to see religious
and political activity within the NOI as separate categories of human
behavior. To the contrary, any comprehensive understanding of the
NOI should pay attention to the *intersection* of religious, political, so-
cial, and economic behaviors among movement members. Further-
more, these activities should be analyzed from a number of vantage
points, including that of a particular religious organization and those
more generally of black working-class culture, American race rela-
tions, and modern Islam. When examined in this light, it also becomes
clear that many of the NOI's activities focused on the ritualization of
the black body, which was seen in the movement as a symbol for the
entire black race. Linking the liberation of black people to the purifica-
tion, strengthening, and protection of the black body, Elijah Muham-
mad incorporated many black middle-class Protestant values into a
new Islamic framework that empowered and constrained both him
and his followers.

      Viewing the NOI through the lens of its ritual practices also
highlights the importance of Islam to the activities of the movement.
To be sure, Elijah Muhammad's syncretistic Islam was not a main-
stream Sunni or Shi`i tradition. Rather, traditional Islamic elements,
like the Qur'an, the *salat*, and the pilgrimage, among others, were
synthesized with black messianism, themes of middle-class black up-
lift, and Elijah Muhammad's mythology to create a unique African
American Islamic tradition. The fact that many of the religious activi-
ties of the Nation of Islam did not have Old World Islamic roots, how-
ever, does not mean that the movement was un-Islamic. In fact, Islam
played a vital role in providing a new religious framework for the
creation of an African American religious protest movement that
adopted certain elements and simultaneously rejected the control of
the dominant culture in which the movement existed. In this sense,
examining what Islam *does* is as important to an understanding of rit-
ual within the NOI as what Islam *is.* For members of the movement,
Islam differentiated and privileged certain activities that led to funda-
mental life changes. To change one's life through participating in
these activities was what it meant to be a Muslim to these persons.

      This case study also has some broader implications for the
study of American religious history in general. For example, the inter-
action of Elijah Muhammad with immigrant and foreign Muslims
alerts us to the importance of situating American religious history
after World War II within more international and global contexts. Cer-
tainly, Diana Eck has already shown how religious life in the United
States changed as a result of the 1965 immigration bill, which allowed

greater numbers of non-Europeans immigrants to enter the United States.[80] But this essay also indicates that, even before the 1960s, religious "others" had an important impact upon at least some Americans' religious lives. Specifically, it has been argued that Sunni Muslim criticism forced Elijah Muhammad to respond to questions of Islamic legitimacy by relying mainly on his own prophetic authority. This series of events hints that, in order to understand fully Muhammad's actions, the motivations of his Sunni Muslim critics should also be explored. Such exploration, however, would require that this seemingly small American religious group be seen in the larger context of modern Islamic history and subaltern politics as well.

My work has also pointed to the important persistence in the United States of what many scholars have identified as the dominant and public middle-class Protestant traditions of American culture, including millennialism, revivalism, and an ethos of hard work, thrift, and clean living.[81] At the same time, however, it raises the question of whether or not the practice of these behaviors by oppressed persons should be viewed as capitulations to the political and economic status quo—a view shared by many students of American religion and one famously stated by Sacvan Bercovitch in *The American Jeremiad*.[82] Like Bercovitch, some students of African American religion have claimed that new religious groups like the Nation of Islam, though appearing at first to look like manifestations of dissent, have actually functioned in U.S. history as vehicles of social control, since their teachings have not attacked the root causes of oppression. Baer and Singer, for instance, conclude the following about African American messianic-nationalist sects, of which the Nation of Islam is a prime example: "Ultimately, in their acceptance of the Protestant work ethic and emphasis on a form of Black Puritanism, messianic-nationalists sects unwittingly serve as hegemonic agencies of the white-dominated status quo."[83]

This essay indicates, however, that the NOI might equally be viewed as a sign of what Amanda Porterfield recently described as "the remarkable decline [since the 1960s] in the authority Protestant people and institutions claim in the larger culture . . . [and] the success of many external challenges to their hegemony." Porterfield agrees with scholars who assert that contemporary American religion continues to be marked by the "endurance of Protestant attitudes, ideas, and principles," but she insists that Protestant *authority* has waned due to several factors, including the universalizing nature of evangelical religion in the United States, the transformation of American Catholicism, the religious effects of the anti-Vietnam War movement, the influence of Buddhism, greater "gender self-consciousness and body awareness," and the "impact of the academic study of religion."[84] My

essay suggests that the growth of Islam among black Americans and changing race relations in general should also be added to any list of historical factors that seek to explain the decline of Protestant authority during the latter half of the 1900s.[85]

Finally, this portrait of ritualization within the NOI indicates that, while certain Protestant ideals were adopted into a new Islamic framework, the end result was anything but a capitulation to power from the point of view of NOI members themselves. In fact, the NOI may have been problematic for many Americans, especially middle-class black Protestants, precisely because it challenged the implied social meaning of Protestant ideals. Of course, revolutionary reinterpretation of American Protestantism is nothing new in African American history; many have argued that the refashioning of white Christianity into a tradition of black liberation was central to the development of African American religion from its very beginnings.[86] But the NOI can be seen as especially radical due to its success as a Cold War-era countercultural movement that rejected the notion of any American consensus. For many members of the movement, it simply did not matter that they were dismissed as the angry and misguided followers of a cult leader or understood ultimately as contributing to their own oppression—as far as they knew, in both mind and body, they had been made free.

Notes

1. See C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994). The other classic scholarly work on the movement is E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). More recent overviews of African American Islam include Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). Other books that examine closely related topics include Louis A. DeCaro, *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); and Claude A. Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

2. Lincoln, *Black Muslims in America*, 26, 215.

3. Ibid., 43.

4. Ibid., 63.

5. Ibid., 210.

6. Ibid., 46.

7. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 204–5.

8. Ibid., 197.

9. Ibid., 211.

10. Ibid., 202.

11. See ibid., 209, 213–14.

12. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham uses the term "multiple consciousness" in her history of the black Baptist women's movement from 1880 to 1920 to insist that the "church, like the black community, cannot be viewed solely through the lens of race." Employing gender analysis in her work, Higginbotham shows how her subjects craft their identities and develop their consciousness in response not only to issues of race but to those of class and gender as well. I adopt her useful phrase here to emphasize the "multiple positioning" of the subjects of my own study and to suggest that such positioning is quite common in the history of African American religious life. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 13–15.

13. Manifestations of this theme in African-American history are enormously diverse. Examples range from the practice of freedwomen joyfully donning fine clothes (as a way of celebrating their dignity) to the famous antilynching campaign of Ida B. Wells, who advised that a "Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every home." See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 17–30. For more recent scholarship, see also Robert F. Reid-Farr, *Conjugal Union: The Body, the House, and the Black American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Shane White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Katherine Fishburn, *The Problem of Embodiment in Early African American Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997).

14. Arguably, bodily abuse was as prevalent after slavery as before. For examples, see Sarah E. Chinn, *Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence* (London: Continuum, 2000); Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*

(New York: Pantheon, 1997); and James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

15. Patricia Turner, *I Heard It through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2–3.

16. Ibid., 221.

17. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 217.

18. *Ibid.*, 221.

19. *Muhammad Speaks*, April 5, 1968, 4.

20. See, respectively, *Muhammad Speaks*, April 2, 1965, 6; October 15, 1965, 9; June 4, 1965, 6; April 10, 1964, 5; and February 17, 1967, 12.

21. *Muhammad Speaks*, December 31, 1965, 14.

22. *Muhammad Speaks*, July 9, 1965, 3.

23. *Muhammad Speaks*, April 16, 1965, 8.

24. Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live* (1972; repr., Newport News, Va.: National Newport News and Commentator, n.d.), 19–20. The NOI was not the only African American religious movement to shun the consumption of pork. Black Jews, like the Commandment Keepers of the Living God, also avoided pork as part of their observance of kosher rules. See Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Black Sects and Cults* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1973), 134. Even more, the NOI was only one of many African American new religious groups to ban behaviors like the polishing of nails, straightening of hair, gambling, and the wearing of short dresses. See Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (New York: Octagon, 1974), 73–75. But to understand the importance of these practices to NOI members, it is important to situate them within the specific context of NOI religious activity and not simply the more general context of other African American new religious movements.

25. As explained in the leader's *Message to the Blackman in America*, among other places, Elijah Muhammad's doctrine of black chosenness, or the myth of Yacub, argued that the black man was the "original" man. Blacks, he taught, existed in a state of Eden until a mad scientist named Yacub genetically engineered an inferior being, the white man. The white man, a cave-dweller, was brutish and violent and eventually overcame the more civilized black man by enslaving him. The black man lived thus oppressed, without knowledge of his true self, until God himself appeared in bodily form to elect a messenger who would mentally resurrect his chosen people. This man's ministry, however, was mere precursor to the real jubilee, an eschaton in which God would dispense with genetically inferior whites and restore blacks to their original greatness. See Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*

(1965; repr., Newport News, Va.: United Brothers Communications Systems, 1992), 1–11, 31, 110–22, and 265–91.

26. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine, 1987), 201–2.

27. *Muhammad Speaks*, November 12, 1965, 6.

28. Elijah Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom* (1957; repr., Newport News, Va.: National Newport News and Commentator, n.d.), 34.

29. Ibid., 23.

30. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 211.

31. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 204–5.

32. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 213–16.

33. Ibid., 215–19.

34. Ibid., 149, 154–58.

35. Leon Forrest, *Relocations of the Spirit* (Wakefield, R.I.: Asphodel Press, 1994), 100.

36. Abdul Shabazz, a carpenter, was born in 1948. I interviewed him on February 27, 1994, as part of a larger oral history project conducted among African American Muslims in St. Louis. More excerpts from my interviews can be found in Edward Curtis, "Islam in Black St. Louis: Strategies for Liberation in Two Local Religious Communities," *Gateway Heritage* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1997).

37. Forrest, *Relocations of the Spirit*, 74.

38. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 225–26.

39. Shabazz, interview with author, tape recording, February 27, 1994, St. Louis, Missouri.

40. Abdul Shakir, interview with author, tape recording, February 25, 1994, St. Louis, Missouri.

41. Lorene Ghani, interview with author, tape recording, March 3, 1994, St. Louis, Missouri.

42. Gerald L. Early, *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1994), 250.

43. On "uplift" efforts by and among black Baptist and African American club women, see further Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, esp. 185–229, and Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 95–117. On the NOI's appropriation of rituals and symbols from the black fraternal orders, including the

Shriners and Masons, see Ernest Allen, Jr., "Identity and Destiny: The Formative Views of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam," in *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*, ed. Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 180–82.

44. Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 61. Another of Moses' works situates the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X within the literary and philosophic tradition of black messianism. See Wilson J. Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 183–95 and 207–25.

45. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 163–65.

46. Ibid., 169.

47. Ibid., 10.

48. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 211.

49. Muhammad, *Supreme Wisdom*, 26.

50. Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 15–18, 26–32, 161, 230.

51. See Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 6–7; Lincoln, *Black Muslims in America*, 41–46; and cf. Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 111–46. Baer and Singer label the Nation of Islam a "messianic-nationalist sect," grouping the NOI with other "separatist," "militant," and "counter-hegemonic" movements that have offered a "fundamental critique of the place and treatment of people of African heritage in American society" (111–12).

52. See Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 67.

53. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, ed., *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 2.

54. The sections entitled "Program and Position," "Economic Program," and "Land of Our Own and Qualifications" focus on political and economic issues. See Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 161–205, 220–47.

55. These sections of the book feature the following titles: "Allah Is God," "Original Man," "Islam," "The Bible and the Qur'an," "The Devil," "Prayer Service," "The Persecution of the Righteous," "Hypocrites, Disbelievers, and Obedience," "The Judgment," and "Answer to Critics." See Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 1–160, 206–19, 248–341.

56. Steven Barboza, *American Jihad: Islam after Malcolm X* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 151.

57. Malcolm X and Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 252. Once again, all of the elements of ritualization can be observed: the deliberate manipulation of time and space; the "restricted codes of communication"; the "distinct and specialized personnel"; special objects, texts, and dress; particular physical or mental states; and the "involvement of a particular constituency." See Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 204–5.

58. *Muhammad Speaks*, March 11, 1967, 25.

59. Early, *Culture of Bruising*, 251.

60. Curtis, "Islam in Black St. Louis," 37.

61. Muhammad also quoted frequently from the Bible. But, like other Muslims throughout history, he asserted that the Old and New Testaments, while sacred, had been corrupted over time. The Qur'an, he said, was the only Holy Scripture directly from God. Unlike most Muslims, Muhammad also claimed that he alone understood the real meaning of both the Bible and the Qur'an. See Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 86–98.

62. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 73–74. The similarity between C. Eric Lincoln's analysis of the NOI, which was written in the second half of the 1950s, and that of Wilkins was not coincidental; both views seemed to be influenced by black middle-class hopes for progress on civil rights. The more these leaders could point to phenomena like the NOI, the better they could argue for a stronger civil rights bill.

63. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Black Writers in America*, ed. Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 867–68.

64. DeCaro, *On the Side of My People*, 146.

65. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 313–19. For a more detailed analysis of the criticism of Muhammad and its effects on his religious thought, see "Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975) and the Absolutism of Black Particularistic Islam," in Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

66. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 136–42.

67. Imam Wallace D. Muhammad, address at Washington University in St. Louis, October 8, 1996. Cf. *Muhammad Speaks*, March 1962, 1, 4.

68. Elijah Muhammad, *Muslim Daily Prayers* (Chicago: University of Islam, 1957), 4.

69. Ibid., 8–9. According to the manual, these include the dawn prayer or *fajr*, the early afternoon prayer or *zuhr*, the late afternoon prayer or `*asr*, the sunset or evening prayer called *maghrib*, and the late evening or nightfall prayer called `*isha.* Cf. Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 105–11.

70. Muhammad, *Muslim Daily Prayers*, 10–11. Ablutions, according to the manual, require "washing the hands to the wrists; rinsing the mouth three times; cleansing the inside of the nose with water three times; washing the face three times, washing the arms to the elbows three times (the right arm should be washed first); wiping over the head with wet hands; wiping the ears with wet fingers; wiping around the neck with wet hands; and washing the feet (the right one first) to the ankles." The manual also instructs the believer to seek information from their ministers about a "complete bath" (Ar. *ghusl*).

71. Ibid., 12–13. The person designated as prayer-caller is directed to stand "erect on the prayer rug or sheet, facing the Holy City of Mecca (East), with your hands upright touching the ears, and [to] recite: Allah is the Greatest (Four times) / I bear witness that there is non [*sic*] worshippable other than Allah (Twice) / I bear witness that Muhammad is Allah's Messenger (Twice) / Come to Prayer (Twice) / Come to Success (Twice) / There is non [*sic*] worshippable but Allah (Once)." Included is a reminder to add the line "prayer is better than sleep" in the call for the *fajr* prayer.

72. Ibid., 14–20. The manual outlines the difference between the obligatory or *fard* elements and the traditional or *sunni* elements of prayer and teaches believers how to perform a *rak`ah*, a series of "standing, bending, rising, and prostrating" that comprises the "basic unit" of prayer. It also includes an admonition to announce one's intention to perform the prayer (Ar. *niyya*) and the words to be recited (once again translated into English). The manual does not discuss what one does with one's hands during the prayer cycle nor does it outline which bodily position accompanies the various spoken parts of the prayers.

73. While congregational prayer was performed in the Philadelphia temple sometime during the 1960s, when the independent-minded Wallace D. Muhammad was minister, and though some individuals took it upon themselves to pray, there is no evidence to suggest that *salat* was ever performed on a wide-scale basis in the NOI. Samuel Ansari, interview with author, October 29, 1995, St. Louis, Missouri. Imam Ansari, leader of St. Louis' Masjid al-Mu'minun, reports that he began to pray in the early 1970s.

74. *Muhammad Speaks*, October 15, 1962, 8.

75. Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 155.

76. *Muhammad Speaks*, January 31, 1963, 8.

77. While the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* did not emphasize this factor in explaining Malcolm's 1963 break with the NOI, other accounts make it clear that Malcolm X had been influenced by Sunni Muslim criticisms of the movement well before his departure. This omission in the autobiography can be understood partly as a literary device that allowed Malcolm X and Alex Haley to dramatize more fully the importance of Malcolm's 1964 pilgrimage to his development as a Sunni Muslim. See DeCaro, *On the Side of My People*, 4–8, 159–170; "Islamic Universalism, Black Particularism, and the Dual Identity of Malcolm X (1925–1965)," in Curtis, *Islam in Black America*; and cf. Malcolm X and Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 288–342.

78. See Zafar Ishaq Ansari, "W. D. Muhammad: The Making of a 'Black Muslim' Leader (1933–1961)," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (1985): 248–62; Clegg, *An Original Man*, 245, 333 n. 15; and see further "Wallace D. Muhammad (b. 1933): Sunni Islamic Reform and the Continuing Problem of Particularism," in Curtis, *Islam in Black America.*

79. Lincoln, *Black Muslims in America*, 210–15.

80. See Diana L. Eck, "The Multireligious Public Square," in *One Nation Under God?: Religion and American Culture*, ed. Marjorie Garber and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3–20; and Diana L. Eck, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). The latter is a CD-Rom.

81. A useful introduction to the dominance of public Protestantism can be found in Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 3d ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1999), 396–431. See also Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Martin E. Marty, *Protestantism in the United States: Righteous Empire*, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1986); and Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

82. See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

83. Baer and Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century,* 143.

84. Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late-Twentieth-Century Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

85. Robert Wuthnow has identified the civil rights movement as a key context for the "restructuring" of American religion. See Robert Wuth-

now, "Old Fissures and New Fractures in American Religious Life," in *Religion and American Culture: A Reader*, ed. David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 1995), 378; and see further Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

      86. For two useful general introductions to this argument, see Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 3d ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998).