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**“Nothing but the Son of a Black Woman”:  
Anti-Blackness, Gender Dynamics, and Muslim Communities of Memphis**

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Zari Muhammad

Senior Honors Thesis

African and African American Studies, 2022

Defended: April 5th, 2022

Committee: Tazeen Ali, Samba Diallo, and Jonathan Fenderson

## **Abstract**

The Nation of Islam (NOI) is largely responsible for the growth of Islam in America during the 20th century. However, they are often isolated from their Muslim counterparts, being framed as an “inauthentic” Islamic school of thought by Sunni Muslim communities. This is due in part to the different practices of Islam, but also a result of American systemic anti-Blackness. Furthermore, Black Muslim women face numerous problems in the NOI, as the internal gender dynamics are based on white nuclear family systems that lead to further gendered ostracization within these same communities. This is exemplified in Memphis, Tennessee, where the Sunni mosques are primarily ethnically integrated (unlike other major cities), but are still separated both geographically and socially from the NOI mosque in the city. Through the use of interviews and spatial analysis, this paper will highlight the disconnect between Black Muslims of the NOI and non-Black Arab Muslims of other Sunni schools of thought with respect to the history of anti-Blackness in these Arab Muslim communities, as well as anti-Blackness in America. As a case study into Muhammad’s Mosque 55 in Memphis, Tennessee, the project explores Black Muslim interactions with other non-Black Sunni Muslims, while also looking into the ways Black women of the NOI understand themselves in the context of feminism and women’s empowerment, more broadly.

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### **Introduction**

At 4:30 A.M on June 21st, 2000, 26 year old Brent Fong approached Masjid al-Noor and shot Najeh Abdel-Karim with a 20-gauge shotgun, then proceeded to fire into the doors of the mosque. This was not Fong's first encounter with members of this mosque, as several members cited previous altercations with him. After the shooting, the FBI claimed that they would open an investigation into this incident as a potential hate crime. Upon hearing of the hate crime committed against their fellow Muslims, members of the Nation of Islam Mosque #55 as well as Masjid al-Muminun (a mosque that follows the teachings of Warith Deen Muhammad) went over to Masjid al-Noor to offer their support and compassion. They told members of Masjid al-Noor not to hesitate in reaching out for anything that they would need from these other two Islamic mosques in the city. However, they were turned away with no thought, as they were told by members that they were not 'real Muslims'. This heartbreaking story was told to me through the lens of a prominent member of Nation of Islam in Memphis at the time of the shooting. He was also one of the individuals who showed up to offer support and resources. When he recalled this memory, he was visibly frustrated, exasperated, and confused by the way he was treated that day.

Minister Abdul Mutthakir Muhammad accepted--he prefers this term over converted, as he believes he has always been Muslim-- Islam in 1983, after many visits to different NOI mosques (referred to as 'Temples' at the time) where he came to "understand the only salvation for Black people in America was Islam." He says as he reminisces on his life before accepting Islam: "Islam cleaned me up and took me from the gutters of Washington DC and placed me before the world." When hearing this Brother of Mosque #55 recall his personal journey with Islam, it is unambiguous as to why being referred to as an inauthentic Muslim would be so

disheartening and upsetting. However, this is not an isolated incident of ignorance for Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam in Memphis. Islam as a religion serves to help in one's personal spiritual, mental, and political journey, especially in Black communities. However, people who consider themselves "original" Muslims, such as white Arabs, tend to invalidate practices that do not resemble typical Sunni or Shiite routines (ie. Nation of Islam, Warith Deen teachings etc.), leading Black Muslims to feel ostracized from their religious counterparts. Islam is often a symbol of hope for most Black Muslims in their daily struggles of oppression, so why is it that many non Black Muslims believe that the utilization of religious texts to aid in the battle against oppression is inherently forbidden?

"Nothing but the Son of a Black Woman" comes from a Hadith (saying/story) from the time of the Prophet Muhammad about a racist encounter. This Hadith is one of the few that focuses on race and racism. A man named Abu Dharr and several others were waiting one night for the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad. Among them was one of the earliest followers of Islam, Bilal, a dark skinned man from Abyssinia. A disagreement occurred, with Bilal and Abu Dharr on opposing sides. It prompted Abu Dhar to state "Even you, O son of a black woman, try to correct me?" Wounded by Abu Dharr's words, Bilal informed the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet, refusing to even look at Abu Dharr, tells him: "Allah, Most High, has not removed from you the pride of the pre-Islamic period and its boasting in ancestors". This Hadith is widely known and quoted within Muslim communities when the inevitable conversation of race occurs, with many Muslim scholars quick to praise Prophet Muhammad's response to the comment about Bilal. However, what tends to be overlooked is that the sentiment of Abu Dharr was not one he harbored in isolation, but rather was the result of a severely long period of anti-Blackness in the Middle East, one whose history could not be dissolved simply with the arrival of the

Prophet Muhammad. The Arabs brought this same colorism with them on their journey to North Africa, and later West Africa. It persisted in these areas until ‘Muslim’ became synonymous with ‘Arab’, and has since been repurposed and reinvented in North American Muslim societies, neglecting the importance of Islam in Black communities globally. This erasure and invalidation of Black Muslims creates an atmosphere of desolation, where people who identify as both Black and Muslim feel as though one aspect of themselves cannot exist in harmony with the other. Additionally, they endure multifaceted oppression due to anti-Blackness and Islamophobia.

While this project tells stories of different members of Mosque #55 in Memphis, Tennessee, it is also a subject that is extremely personal to me. I grew up in Memphis as a part of both the Black Muslim community of the Nation of Islam and the non Black Sunni Muslim community in the city. My parents were both members of the NOI, and this is the Mosque I attended weekly on Sundays. However, I also attended an Islamic school for all of my primary education (Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade), Pleasant View School (PVS). I witnessed first hand the ways my classmates and teachers would discuss the Nation of Islam, and how little they truly knew about the NOI in Memphis. Many of these people were not even aware that I had been born into the Nation . We were required to take Islamic Studies classes every year, but rarely ever studied anything in relation to the NOI or Islam in America. When we did occasionally discuss prominent Muslims in the United States (typically Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X), the conversations about the NOI were very limited. The NOI was treated as a prerequisite to discussing the important version of Islam in America, not as a religious organization that is very much present contemporarily, not as one that had a Mosque in the very city that we resided in. Teachers would constantly say that members of the Nation of Islam were

not *real* or *authentic* Muslims, and the contributions of the Nation of Islam to the acceptance and advancement of Islam in America were constantly minimized.

While I was hyper aware during the school week of the ways the Nation was not accepted in my school, I was also aware of the divide between Mosque #55 and other Sunni Masjids in the city. I could see that members of Mosque #55 had very few interactions with Muslims of other Mosques in the city (outside of Masjid al-Muminun). It was clear in the ways they would discuss certain concepts of Sunni Islam that seemed foundational to me, as someone, once again, who was required to take Islamic studies courses as a part of my academic curriculum. I, along with my three other siblings, was often questioned about Sunni Islam or Middle Eastern culture. It often confused me, as both groups seemed to exist in a bubble away from each other. It was not until later in my life that I was able to understand the ways systemic anti Blackness and class disparities have exacerbated this intra religious segregation. Additionally, I began to realize that while it was more difficult for members of Mosque #55 to interact with other non-Black Sunni Muslims or Mosques, many non-Black Sunni Muslims chose not to interact with the NOI or their members for two reasons: 1) non-Black Sunni Muslims did not believe in the sanctity or value of the way NOI members practiced Islam or 2) non-Black Sunni Muslims could not get past their own anti Blackness.

As a child, I experienced the ways members of the NOI would discuss the roles of women. The plight of Black women in America was not exactly mentioned in a negative context, but it felt almost as though women were an afterthought in many conversations. I typically heard of women in reference to domestic labor, but was rarely in reference to other aspects of the NOI. As a child who had little interest in cooking, cleaning, or sewing, I was often reminded (more than often, by other women) that I would need these skills in order to procure a husband. I

remember often feeling as though the aspiration of women in the Nation was to get married. As I got older, I understood why women interacted with their gender responsibilities in the ways that they did, and grew to understand that women of the NOI do not only aspire to marriage and homemaking. However, I still felt as though the overemphasis on domestic labor for women in the NOI made it easier for men of the NOI to treat women as an afterthought in Black liberation efforts. This may not align with the ideology of the Nation, but it does not mean that men of the NOI do not perpetuate and maintain misogyny in the same way non Muslim men and non-Black men can.

### **Methodology**

This project focuses primarily on personal narratives in respect to their experiences with the broader Muslim community of Memphis, as well as their specific experiences within the Black Memphis Muslim community of the NOI. I conducted multiple interviews with several active members of the Nation of Islam, varying in age and gender. I chose each interviewee carefully in order to highlight a diverse group of people within the Nation of Islam via age, gender, and status within the mosque. I asked general questions about their experiences, and allowed for everyone's individual unique experience to speak for itself without disruption or judgment. I then utilized these narratives in crafting my argument that deep rooted sentiments of anti-Blackness in Muslim communities of Memphis isolates Black Muslims from their religious counterparts. For the sake of anonymity, each member interviewed is given an alias.

Additionally, I am highlighting the gender hierarchy of the Nation of Islam and the ways in which they were shaped through an understanding of family dynamics that is often associated with whiteness. However, I am not arguing that the Nation of Islam oppresses women, as many interviewees speak highly of the Nation's gendered responsibilities. I am offering an

understanding as to why the gender roles of the Nation emerge in the time period they do, and providing space for those who feel as though the way these roles are interpreted have shaped their experiences as a Black MGT(Muslim Girls Training).

In analyzing the difference in the locations of three mosques in particular in Memphis, I looked into the history of each municipality and their demographics to highlight the disparities in income as well as racial makeup. Through this, it becomes apparent that class plays as integral of a role in the physical separation of these different Muslim groups as race does. This, ultimately, is a result of the long historical marriage of class and race through systemic racism in the United States at large, but more specifically in the American south. Additionally the architectural and aesthetic design of each mosque highlights how class disparities are not only apparent in reference to white and Black communities, but also between Black communities and non-Black communities of color in Memphis.

### **Terms and Definitions**

Before I begin analyzing the relationship between groups of Muslims in Memphis, Tennessee, it is important to clearly outline who I am referring to. I am utilizing terms such as ‘Arab’, ‘Sunni’, ‘Black Muslims’, ‘non-Black Arab’ and ‘Nation of Islam’, which can have a littany of definitions depending on the context as well as the scholar. For the scope of this paper, I am defining “Arab” as anyone of Middle Eastern or North African descent who identifies as such, and “non-Black Arab” as anyone of Middle Eastern or North African Arab descent that does not identify as racially Black. With this framing I am emphasizing heritage as a central racial marker, as opposed to skin color or physical characteristics. Although I do not personally agree with this categorization, it is important to note for the statistical information of my project that the United States Census Bureau includes Middle Eastern or North African people in the

racial category “white,” regardless of how they may appear. “Sunni” Islam refers to the Islamic school of thought that followed all four Caliphas after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, including the Caliph Othman. There is a notable difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, the Islamic school of thought that the Caliph Ali should have been the successor prior to Othman due to blood lineage. I use the term “Black Islam” in the broader sense, however my work will focus primarily on the Nation of Islam, an Islamic school of thought typically practiced by African Americans in the United States that believes in the divinity of Fard Muhammad and that Elijah Muhammad was sent to deliver his message to Black Americans. The Nation of Islam is also known for its leaders such as Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan, as well as being a religious organization that preaches Black Nationalism.

The Nation of Islam utilizes affectionate terms to refer to each other, such as “Brother” and “Sister” to symbolize their connection in Islam. It additionally is meant to link them as family. Throughout my thesis, this is how I refer to each individual I have interviewed, out of respect. It is capitalized to signify that the person who I am interviewing is a registered member of the NOI, as these are also seen as titles in the Nation (e.g. a man named Omar would be referred to in the mosque as “Brother Omar”).

### **Race, Gender, and Islam in the United States**

Racial formation in the United States is predicated on the oppression of Black people. Anti-Blackness is sewn into the fabric of the country, leaving Black people victim to long standing systemic oppression. Additionally, gender dynamics in the United States has furthered the marginalization of Black women. Both racial and gender dynamics in the United States significantly influence the Nation of Islam as well as non Black Sunni Muslim communities. Scholars in the field of African American religion, particularly those whose work centers the

Nation of Islam, often discuss the history of its creation. Scholars such as Ula Taylor and Michael Gomez specifically recognize the impact Islam has had on African American communities nationally.

### Race and the United States

In his book, *Race Without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla Silva defines race, racial structure, and racial ideology, and explains how this shapes American racial systems. He begins by noting that race is a social structure which is subject to change as human beings grow and evolve. However, race being a social structure does not negate the social reality it creates (8-9). This is important to remember when looking at racial hierarchies in the United States. Because the definition of racial categories such as “white” and “Black” is subject to expansion or contraction, it leaves many different people in racial limbo. For example, Middle Eastern people are considered white by the United States Census Bureau, even if they may not consider themselves white. However, due to phenotypic features, they do not fall into the racial category of Black, therefore they are able to distance themselves from Blackness. This racial distinction leaves them vulnerable to propaganda on Black Americans (and Black people in general), and ultimately as perpetrators of this propaganda in the United States. This is not to negate the violence and racism non Black Muslims face in the Americas, but it is to say it is not as embedded into the structures of America like anti Blackness is. Non Black Muslims are victims to racism as well as perpetrators of anti Blackness in America, partially due to the contemporary understandings of race and stereotypes of Black Americans.

Bonilla Silva adds more context to racial hierarchy with his definition of racial structure. He states: “I therefore conceive a society’s racial structures as the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege”(9). America reinforces white privilege through



harmful stereotypes, governmental policies that target Black communities, and anti Black media. While there is much to be said about how deeply white supremacy is ingrained into the American psyche, it also gives context as to why non Black Muslims are able to practice (intentionally or unintentionally) anti Blackness within their own communities. Reinforcing white privilege in Muslim communities connotes implicit anti Blackness. Non Black Muslims may not define themselves individually as white, but they also do not define themselves as Black. Therefore, in order to separate themselves from Black Americans and the oppression they face, non Black Sunni Muslims ally themselves closer to whiteness. If whiteness is what is needed to gain social status in America, then replicating whiteness in one's own communities is seen as a tool to subvert their own oppression. Whiteness in America comes with set privileges not afforded to other minorities. Because of this, some minority communities do not strive to eradicate oppression for all, but rather to gain the privileges that white supremacy affords. It is a survival tactic that consistently leaves Black Americans vulnerable to oppression from other minority communities.

Bonilla Silva goes on to define racial ideology and the ways it is utilized in order to maintain racism. He defines racial ideology as “racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo”(9). This is how white supremacy has been historically maintained throughout the origin and growth of America, and why it is almost synonymous with American nationalism. The justification for chattel slavery was religious, and eventually evolved deeper into a narrative about Black people being primitive and “uncivilized”. This coincides with Jim Crow laws and the rise of hate based organizations such as the Klu Klux Klan. This narrative was maintained in order to reinforce the racial structure of America, and bled through into how America as a nation

interacted with other countries. America (not unlike many other Western nations) utilized white supremacy in their imperialistic conquests. As a result, white superiority racial ideology has spread across the world, and has constructed narratives about other ethnogroups as well. It should be clear that white supremacy is not the product of America only, as it has been prevalent since before Europeans first colonized the lands of North America. However, America has been a great contributor in spreading the ideology and upholding it in global affairs.

When discussing racism in America, structural violence and institutional discrimination are often centered. This is not incorrect, as aforementioned, white Americans weaponized their racial ideology in order to maintain their privileged position. However, as racial categories expand or contract to include or exclude more people, the primary definition of racism must also be adjusted to fit a changing society. Racism is no longer a matter of white Americans advocating for segregation from Black Americans, but includes multiple different facets with multiple different people with other identities. In their book, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant pose a question that many presume to know the answer: what is racism? They argue that racism has no clear definition, as it can be rearticulated as society changes (71). They also state: “in order to identify a social project as racist, one must in our view demonstrate a link between essentialist representations of race and social domination”(72). For this paper, the social project in question is Muslim communities of Memphis. The argument of this paper is that non Black (specifically, Arab) Sunni Muslims place themselves as the essential race, due to their belief that Prophet Muhammad was the last Prophet and Messenger sent from Allah (God), and that he was sent to the Arabs. This, coupled with the fact that the Quran is originally written in Arabic, allows for them to place themselves above other Muslims (specifically Black Muslims) in their own communities. Therefore, these

communities uphold and create racist spaces that isolate Black Muslims. Additionally, this racism is able to thrive and is exacerbated in a country such as the United States, because the United States itself was founded on principles of racial hierarchy, specifically anti Blackness.

### Gender and the United States

Similar to racism, the United States has a substantial history of gender oppression that has been incorporated into its society. While a Black nationalist organization such as the Nation of Islam rejects heavily notions of white supremacy, they still maintain gender roles that are often attributed to mainstream white gender structures. In her book, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses how white nuclear family structures are replicated in Afrocentrist movements, and ultimately impact women and men differently. She states: “these differences stem in large part from Afrocentrism’s reliance on Black aesthetic notions of community, which in turn relies on mainstream views of family... Within this interpretive framework, strong African American women in Black families and Black civil societies were labeled deviant”(106-107). These ideas on family structure were integral in the development of the Nation of Islam and their gender roles. Hill Collins argues that these roles were harmful to Black women in the 20th century, and the same can be said about women contemporarily. While some women feel affirmed in their gender responsibilities outlined by the Nation of Islam in one of their primary texts, *The Surpeme Wisdom*, there are also women who feel unfairly criticized and scrutinized for how they interact with their gender role. The guidelines for women in the Nation of Islam was implemented during its emergence in the 20th century, during the same era where (as outlined by Hill Collins) several Black nationalist and Afrocentric organizations adopted mainstream gender ideology. However, being sole maintainers of a household is not conducive in a society that requires more than one income for a family to

maintain a comfortable lifestyle. Therefore, women have to adopt some of the stereotypical responsibilities of men, notably financial support. If this is the case, women are then being asked to carry more burden than men in their family dynamics. This is why imitating white family structures cannot be utilized in creating Black family structures, as white structures do not account for oppression.

### Islam, the Nation of Islam, and The United States

The emergence of a culture of people shaped by centuries of violent torture and oppression in the forms of chattel slavery and Jim Crow is unique to the Black Diaspora, and Islam has had an integral part in helping Black Americans cope with their contemporary and historical struggles. Gomez states in his book *Black Crescent: the Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*: “The black diasporic experience had become an ontological question of the first order, such that religion, ideology, political discourse, and cultural production were all called upon, sometimes singularly, often in combinative form, to achieve some degree of overarching, perhaps totalizing resolution”(214) to discuss how Islam helped Black Americans understand themselves and their situation in America. Michael Gomez’s entire book served as a fundamental historical analysis to the roots of Islam in America as well as an introduction to nonmartyred pioneers of mixing politics and religion in Black communities. The entirety of the book did well for highlighting Islam in the Black diaspora (something that is definitely not done enough). However, what Gomez fails to answer is how do Black American Muslims (of the NOI) understand themselves in reference to other nonBlack Arab Sunni Muslims in America? While Gomez contextualizes Black Muslims in white American society, my work aims to center Black Muslims in reference to their Muslim counterparts. While Gomez’s work is foundational in understanding why Islam resonates so deeply with many Black

Americans, he misses one central question: How does one aim to utilize their religion in their oppression nationally, without first understanding their oppression within their religion?

### Women in the Nation of Islam

Ula Taylor's book *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* centers the roles and impact of several women during the formation of the Nation of Islam (previously known as the Allah Temple of Islam). She emphatically argues that the Nation of Islam would not have been the organization it is known as today in the Black community without women such as Sister Clara Muhammad, Sister Pauline, and Sister Captain Burnsteen. Their involvement and leadership in times of crisis allowed for the Nation of Islam to grow and function in different Black communities nationally. Additionally, Taylor highlights the ways in which the women of the Nation of Islam viewed themselves as being protected through the teachings of Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad, which is something that is often skipped over in conversations about gendered roles, misogyny, and the Nation of Islam. Taylor discusses a conversation she had with a Muslim parent in regards to their children attending the University of Islam (now also known as Clara Muhammad schools or Muhammad's University of Islam). She writes, "...one Moslem parent explained that he preferred the University of Islam for "his children because they teach girls not to fight and to stay away from boys; they have separate teachers for boy's and girls; they teach brotherly love and how to stay out of trouble, detention houses, jails, etc." Here we see early support for gendered difference and thus the need for distinct lessons on how to be feminine and masculine." (37) As Taylor highlights, gendered differences were not viewed as something to avoid or inherently oppressive within the Nation of Islam. While this can obviously be complicated with new developments in gender theory, and

has become more complicated with new generations who vocally oppose stereotypical gendered roles, it is important to acknowledge the solace that women found in their roles within the NOI. While it is important to recognize the integral history of women in the NOI, it is also worth exploring how they view themselves contemporarily, and if their opinion on the gender dynamic within the NOI has changed as time has gone on. My work aims to vocalize the continuations, changes, and disagreements of gender politics within the NOI mosque of Memphis. While there are women who still are comforted by their gender role in the Nation, there are also women who are outspoken about their distaste for their expected role in this community. The goal of this project is not to position one as being better than the other, but rather to merely highlight the existence of multiple opinions/experiences on one of the most criticized elements of the NOI. Through this, I plan to display the ways that gender impacts experience within the Nation in various ways.

### **Sunni Islam in Memphis, Tennessee**

The first Sunni Muslim mosque founded in Memphis is Masjid al-Noor, located in the immediate off-campus area of the University of Memphis. Although it is unclear what year Masjid al-Noor was founded, the impact of the mosque on the city is undeniable. Masjid al-Noor not only provided a space for a growing community of Sunni Muslims in Memphis but it also paved the way for subsequent mosques, including the two Sunni mosques that are highlighted in this project: Masjid ar-Rahman and Memphis Islamic Center (MIC). Masjid ar-Rahman opened in 2014 in East Memphis, an area that is predominantly white and middle class. It is located right off a highway, Bill Morris Parkway, and surrounded by a local elementary school, a soccer complex, and the Southwind gated community. They have recently opened a second building on their land in order to accommodate a larger musallah (prayer room). MIC purchased their

building in 2010 in Cordova, TN, a municipality outside of Memphis. MIC expands across 55 acres of land, and includes a park with a pond, outdoor shelters, a bridge, and a large children's playground on the outside. Inside, their main building includes a main prayer room, a multi-purpose hall, offices, education facilities, and exercise and recreation areas. The area which MIC is located in is predominantly secluded with only Heartsong Church, a partner of theirs since the building was purchased, in its immediate vicinity. However there are several other churches near MIC. In addition to this, MIC is near two public schools, a chain grocery store, a golf center, and a halal -- foods that contain no pork or pork byproduct, and meat that is slaughtered in the name of Allah, or by people of Abrahamic religions-- bakery and restaurant.

### **The Nation of Islam in Memphis, Tennessee**

The Nation of Islam created a chapter in Memphis, TN in 1964, marking the 55th mosque of the organization. Muhammad's Mosque #55 was originally located on South Lauderdale street in South Memphis, a predominantly Black and poor area of the city. Currently, the same area is home to the infamous Stax Museum of American Soul Music, LeMoyne Owen College (a local HBCU), and The Soulsville Charter School (a charter school that focuses on the academic success of Black middle and high school children). The mosque went through a litany of different Ministers between 1964 through 1992, until Minister Adul Mutthakir Muhammad (the current Minister) was appointed as the Minister of Memphis by Louis Farrakhan Muhammad. One year prior to taking over leadership of the mosque, Minister Abdul Mutthakir orchestrated a fundraiser for a new building upon the request of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan. After receiving the money necessary, the mosque was then moved to its current location of 873 Vance Avenue, a foreclosed strip club closer to the downtown area of the city. Like Lauderdale, the

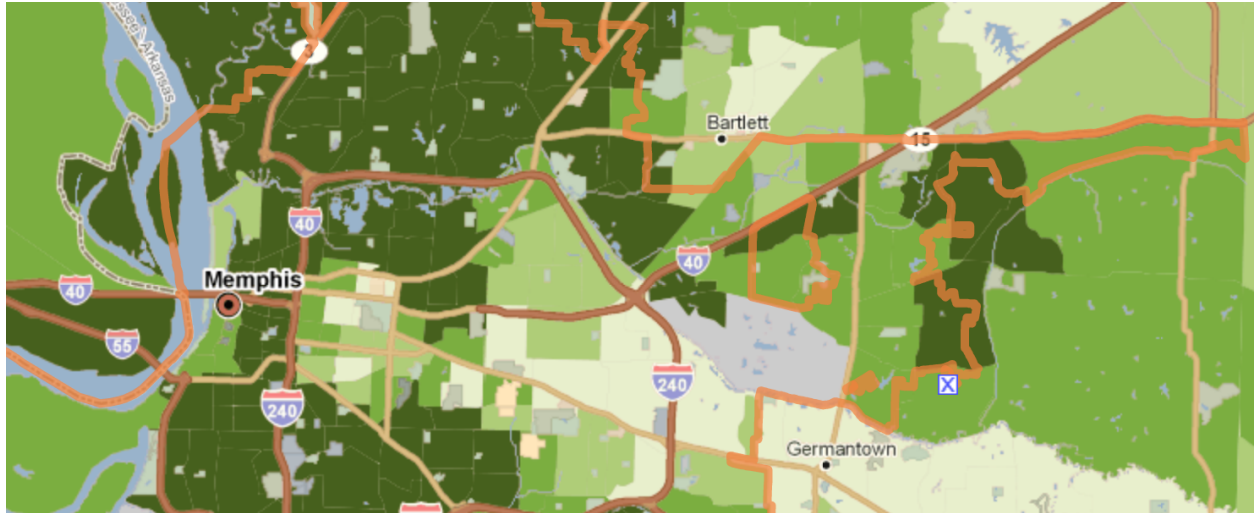
neighborhood of Vance is predominantly poor and Black, and is surrounded by various low income apartment complexes and other small businesses. When discussing the choice of the building, one interviewee notes that it was one of the few buildings that they could afford. He spoke highly of its location, however: “If you are a fisherman, you go to the lake that has the fish you are looking for. We try to move to where our people are, because those are the fish we are looking for...we typically try to find the poorest neighborhood, because that’s where our people are.” Muhammad’s Mosque #55 now owns the Vance building, although they have been fruitlessly looking for a new location for a few years.

My first chapter will examine experiences of Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam in Memphis in reference to their understanding of their religion as well as their relationship with non Black Sunni Muslims. It will also cover the ways in which anti-Blackness crafted in American society and structures has only exacerbated feelings of isolation and invalidation from members of the NOI. In doing so, I exemplify the disconnect between these two groups, both as a result of a religious superiority complex but also of anti-Blackness and American violent propaganda. The second chapter will cover issues pertaining to women of the NOI, with respect to the ways they understand themselves and their gender obligations. It looks into the different ways women view themselves and their perceived religious obligations, as well as how this may change due to generation. I highlight how the NOI relies on stereotypical nuclear family structures for their gender ideologies. While these gender roles are not innately harmful, they can leave space for members of the NOI to inflict violent misogyny on women.

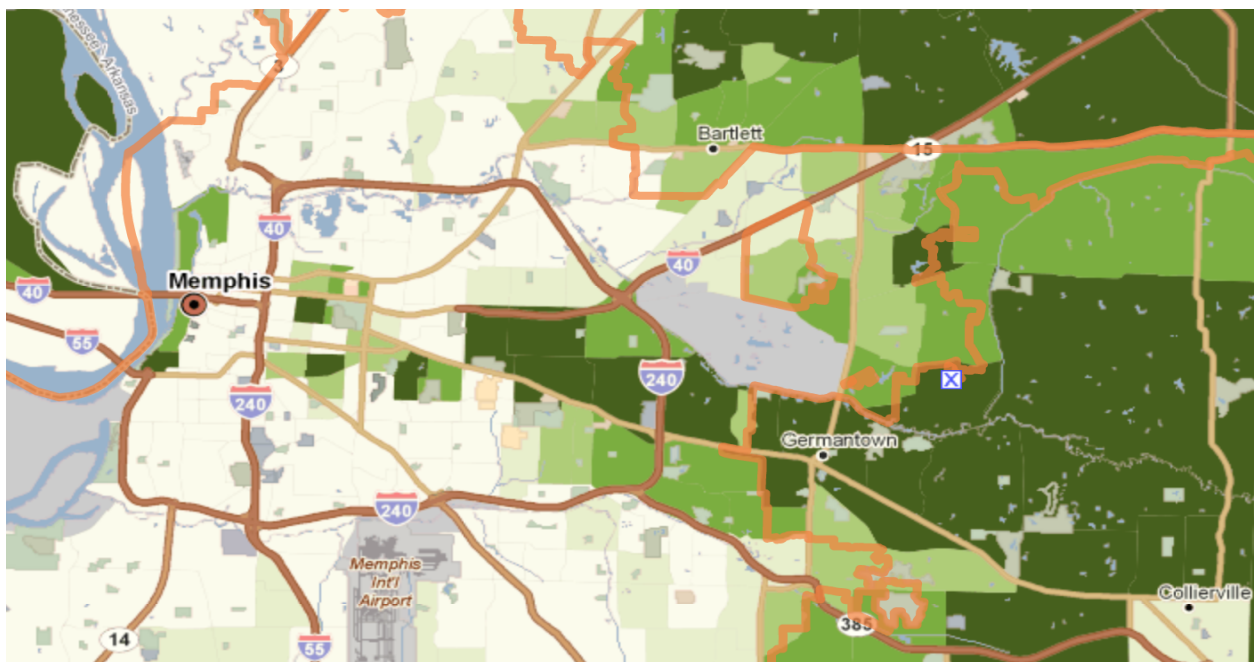


## *Chapter 1: Memphis, Islam, and Race*

### Neo Segregation of Memphis



*(Figure 1: Concentration of Race, taken from WUSTL PolicyMap)*



*(Figure 2: Concentration of Wealth, taken from WUSTL PolicyMap)*



*(Figure 3: Exterior of the Nation of Islam Mosque #55)*



*(Figure 4: Exterior of Memphis Islamic Center, taken from their website)*



*(Figure 5: Interior of Masjid Ar- Rahman, taken from their Facebook Page)*

Figures 1 and 2 above are taken from an online Geographic Information System (GIS) policy map of Memphis, Tennessee. They highlight the distribution for race and wealth in the city. In both figures, the darker green color indicates a larger concentration (e.g in figure 1 the darker green represents a higher concentration of African American people). Memphis, Tennessee is defined by three areas and the neighborhoods within them: North Memphis, South Memphis, and East Memphis. West Memphis is typically colloquially excluded from conversations about the city, as it is in Arkansas rather than Tennessee. According to the 2020 American Community Survey of the US Census Bureau, Memphis, Tennessee is 64.11% African American/Black, 29.23% white, 3.28% other race. In figure 1, the darkest green color indicates areas where the population is more than 50% Black/African American. As seen in figure 1, Black Memphians typically reside in North and South Memphis, with many non Black residents settling in East Memphis. The pale green color of East Memphis indicates that the area is 25%

Black/African American. The further east one travels, the number of Black residents declines dramatically, as these are typically suburban areas that Black people have historically been excluded from. Figure 1 highlights the parameters of Memphis in orange. Immediately east of the parameters of Memphis lies notable white townships and municipalities, such as Germantown, Collierville, Lakeland, and Cordova. Cordova is a community in Shelby County, Tennessee. Cordova lies east of Memphis, north of Germantown, south of Bartlett, and northwest of Collierville, and is home to MIC. According to the GIS Map, Cordova is 61.5% white, 29.2% Black, and 5% Asian. These areas also house large populations of non Black people in the greater Memphis area. Figure 2 highlights the wealth distribution in the City. The GIS Map indicates that the pale green in North and South Memphis refers to the fact that the median family income in these areas is below \$50,000 per year. The dark green seen in East Memphis shows that the median family income of the area is roughly \$104,000 per year.

Both figures highlight not only that Memphis is extremely segregated racially but also divided by class as well. The areas with the highest amounts of Black populations are also the areas with the lowest amount of money per family, which illustrates the ways that race and class are not only overlapping but also correlated in Memphis. This explains why it was important for the Nation of Islam to set up their mosque in South Memphis, where they could be assured that many Black Memphians would have access to the organization and their “teachings.” Additionally, because the members of the Nation of Islam are Black Americans themselves, they could not afford to move into areas such as East Memphis to establish themselves. However, Mosques such as Masjid ar-Rahman and MIC have the resources, and are able to reach their religious peers in East Memphis and Cordova.



In these ways, the previous racial segregation of Memphis (and largely, America) have exacerbated the physical separation between Black Muslims and other Muslims of color. In their journal article, “Defining America’s Racial Boundaries: Blacks, Mexicans, and European Immigrants”, Cybelle Fox and Thomas A. Guglielmo define social distance as a subjective state of nearness felt to certain individuals. In looking at the physical separation between Black Muslims of the NOI and other non Black Sunni Muslims, it is not impossible to imagine that there would be feelings of isolation from their religious counterparts. The wealth gap between these groups of people can also be seen in the aesthetics of each mosque. Figure 3 shows the exterior of Mosque #55; the building is visibly disheveled, older, and small. Structurally in terms of its size or aesthetic, it is not comparable to Mosques such as MIC and Masjid Ar-Rahman (highlighted in figures 4 and 5, respectively). The visible disparities between the three masjids exemplify the wealth distribution and inequality in Memphis, and could lead to feelings of social distance as defined by Fox and Guglielmo. These two groups do not relate on a financial and geographical level, thus making it harder to relate socially.

### **The Feeling of Social Distance**

When asked if they felt as though they were represented in the global Muslim community (or, even in the Muslim community of Memphis), the overwhelming answer from many Memphis Nation of Islam members was that they did not. Muslim Brother Abdullah stated:

Other Muslims feel as though the only Muslims who think like them... they think their the true Islam, they have always felt like we weren’t real Muslims. All over the world, Muslims are killing each other all because they think that Muslim is not a real Muslim. You can do that in the churches, you can go from one church to another but you can’t do that in Islam. They mistreat Black Muslims because they are dark skinned, y’all are just racist in your Islam. They lie when they say ‘Islam has no color’. How you gonna sell pork and alcohol to our people and then go to the masjid and say your prayers?... Some of them won’t even give you the *greetings*.

This NOI member speaks directly to his treatment in the Memphis Islamic context, and it is clear that he feels ostracized due to the way he practices as a member of the NOI. He quotes a common saying/phrase weaponized by many non Black Muslims, “Islam has no color”, whilst highlighting the hypocrisy of these same Muslims in Memphis. The isolation felt by this member does not stem from his individual treatment, but how non Black sunni Muslims can treat Black Americans at large. It is clear that this member despises the way that these other Muslims gatekeep Islam while simultaneously contributing to the downfall and condition of Black Americans (in his opinion). His remarks ultimately capture the ways some Black Muslims believe non Black Sunni Muslims view Islam as a religion for *them* rather than a religion for all. There is far more at play in the treatment of Black Muslims in Memphis by non Black Arab Muslims than mere ideological difference. When asked about what denomination or school of thought he followed, the same Brother originally answered “all of them”, because Islam is deeper to him than technical beliefs. He does not ascribe to the notion of telling someone which form or version of Islam is best, but rather getting them to accept Islam in any way they come across it. This is completely different from the ways in which non Black Arab Muslims handle their relationship with Islam, which causes the isolation and ostracization of other Muslims who do not look nor believe in the same way they do. Rather than relating or aiding Black Americans, many non Black Sunni Muslims begin to treat them in a similar manner that white Americans have historically treated them. This becomes possible in—and perhaps beyond—Memphis because non Black Sunni Muslims are able to ally themselves with white Memphians through monetary power in a way that many Black Americans cannot. While non Black Sunni Muslims do not hold the same power and threat that white Americans have through systemic power and racial ideology, it does not negate the fact that they are able to socially uplift themselves through

money. This is why mosques such as MIC and Masjid Ar-Rahman are able to thrive in areas that have historically alienated Black Memphians, and subsequently position themselves far enough away from the Black members of the Nation of Islam and Mosque #55.

### **Islam and Authenticity**

Arab Sunni Muslims are typically centered in conversations about Islam. Arabs often consider themselves the original Muslims because the Quran was written in Arabic and Prophet Muhammad was Arab. As a result, they also consider themselves authentic Muslims, as they believe Sunni Islam is the closest practice to Islam presented from Prophet Muhammad. In doing so, they invalidate other practices of Islam that does not align with their practice by referring to them as “inauthentic”. Brother Omar recalled his experience as a Black Muslim in non Black Muslim spaces, he stated:

As a member of the Nation of Islam, I have experienced micro-aggressions from other Muslims who have bought into the propaganda that the Nation of Islam is not real Muslims. So, sometimes they make condescending remarks or treat us with a “long-handled spoon.” I have also attended break-out sessions at the Black Muslim Psychology Conference. At this conference, the organizer created a safe space wherein she did not allow any non-Black or non African-American Muslims into that portion of the conference. The idea was to allow the Black members of the ummah [the community of people who practice Islam] to speak inside a safe space about their negative experiences inside of many immigrant masjids. I was shocked and saddened by much of what I heard. One very dark-skinned Muslim woman told of how her son was mocked and bullied by white and light skinned Muslim boys in the masjid about his dark skin complexion; so much so that he refused to ever come back to the masjid. She was in tears.

The notion that members of the Nation of Islam are not “real” or “authentic” Muslims stems from an ideological difference between them and Sunni Muslims over the interpretation of the *Shahada* (a statement or profession of one’s faith in Islam). The English translation of the *Shahada* is “I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger

of Allah.” The controversy comes from the second half, as Sunni Muslims interpret this to solely refer to Prophet Muhammad, born in Mecca in the 6th century. However, members of the Nation of Islam believe that the “Muhammad” in question is ambiguous. They interpret the “Muhammad” mentioned in the Shahada to mean multiple people. They believe that God has sent a Messenger to all people in need of one, and that God—who, in their interpretation, came in the form of Master Fard Muhammad—sent to them the Messenger, Elijah Muhammad. As a result, many Sunni Muslims believe this to be direct negation of Prophet Muhammad, whom they believe to be the last Prophet ever sent to mankind by God. In addition to this, they also negate the notion that Allah came in the person of Fard Muhammad. Like many religious ideologies, there is no empirical way of knowing if one, both, or neither of the interpretations of this are correct. However, the central issue is whether or not the differences in belief allow one the right to discredit the sanctity of Islam as a religion of one group of people solely for their different beliefs. As outlined by the Nation of Islam member above, this continuously happens. It plays into the ways people interact and communicate with members of the Nation of Islam, and furthers the sentiment that they are not a part of the global Islamic community.

The story told by this Brother about his experience at a Black Muslim Psychology Conference provided anecdotal evidence of the anti-Blackness in Islamic communities. Additionally, to hear him describe the conference as a safe space for Black Muslims was particularly indicative of how communities such as Masjids are represented as safe spaces within the Muslim community, but are not treated as such for Black Muslims. To hear about his interactions with other Black Muslims outside of the Nation highlighted how race in America transcends other boundaries or distinctions between people. In this conference, Black Muslims were more comfortable in their vulnerability around other Black Muslims that were no more than



strangers to them than their own religious counterparts. This best exemplifies the ways in which Black Muslims are consistently othered in their own religious community due to race. This highlights that although many non Black Sunni Muslims claim that the disconnect between themselves and members of the Nation of Islam is due to the difference in religious interpretation, there are still explicit or implicit elements of racism that fuel their interactions. The need for a separate safe space for Black Muslims when Mosques are meant to serve as safe spaces for all Muslims shows that racism remains a problem in the Muslim community.

The sentiment that members of the Nation of Islam are not “authentic” Muslims resurfaced in another interview conducted with a younger woman who is a part of the NOI. She recalled that there have been multiple instances where people online have told her she was not a “real Muslim” when she would post about Islam. The fact that Muslims who she does not know can try to discredit her understanding of Islam on the internet is reflective of the ways social media can embolden anyone to express their opinion, or, in cases, their bigotry. When asked if this bothered her, the Sister responded: “they’re not Allah and I don’t pray to them so they cannot hurt my feelings”. These kind of negations of the Islam the NOI practices are common, as many members view their relationships with Islam as personal, rather than collective. Because of this, it is somewhat easy for members to divorce themselves from the harmful language and actions of non Black Sunni Muslims. One consistent theme from all the interviewees was the ways they utilized Islam to better themselves and their individual relationship with God, rather than merely as a uniformed relationship. One Brother described his personal journey with Islam as being rewarding but challenging: “It has been peaks and valleys, ups and downs, difficulties and ease. But the Honorable Elijah Muhammad said ‘Getting acquainted with God is not like getting acquainted with a fool.’” This interpretation of Islam as the act of being personally

acquainted with God is exemplary of how Islam is often viewed as an individualized experience from members of the NOI. It can also explain why it is difficult or frustrating for these members to be continuously criticized for how they utilize Islam in their daily lives and personal growth. Their individual understanding of Islam may confuse non Black Sunni Muslims who may have grown up in an echo chamber of religion. However, it can be argued that the individual and independent conclusions one comes to about their religion may perhaps be more authentic or genuine than conventional practices that are often inherited through familial or communal traditions, as the latter can emanate from routine as opposed to personal choice and conviction. The problem several of these Memphis NOI members seem to have with their continuous marginalization is not that non Black Sunni Muslims tend to believe that the way they practice Islam is incorrect, it is that they do not give room for the Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam to interpret the religion the way they deem fit. This belief combined with the structural violence and oppression faced by Black Americans does not promote the healthy and beautiful way Islam is meant to permeate the lives of people in non Black Sunni Muslims.

Brother Malik was discussing the ways he has confronted microaggressions by non Black Sunni Muslims. He briefly mentioned why he thought this occurred to Black members of the NOI, stating “ [It is] because they don’t understand the inhumane conditioning of our people. Nor do they understand the unique divine prescription needed to remedy our people.” The description of his interactions with other Muslims is interesting, as he seems to associate some of the racism he has experienced with others not understanding the brutality of chattel slavery and the specific history of Black Americans. This exemplifies once again how Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam view Islam as the solution to the collective afflictions confronted by Black people that have suffered from systemic racism. Islam is never simply a

religious identity for these Muslims, but rather a more deep rooted spiritual journey that governs their daily lives. This also explains why there are so many Black Americans who are not organizationally associated with the NOI but still engage with their work and ideologies. Something unique about the interview with this member was his hope that there would be change in regards to sentiments and attitudes towards believers of the NOI and non Black Sunni Muslims. This Brother expressed that he has seen an increase in acceptance in the global Islamic community towards members of the Nation of Islam, which should not go unacknowledged. He sees the growth of acceptance as a sign of hope, which is inspiring for this project, as it shows that it is possible for these groups to come together and embrace their commonality rather than scrutinize their differences.

### **The Spiritual Journey of Converts/ Reverts of the Nation of Islam**

Several current members of the NOI are those who have converted from another religion to Islam. However, Most registered Nation members prefer the term “revert,” as they believe that their ancestors were originally Muslim before being forced to adopt Christianity during the times of chattel slavery. As a result, many members adopt Islamic names (or, at the very least, names derived from the Arabic language) after they accept Islam, and give them to their children after their birth. Additionally, after registering with the Nation of Islam, members typically exchange the surname they were given at birth for the symbolic letter ‘X’ (e.g. Malcolm Little’s transformation into Malcolm X). Surrendering their “slave name” is meant to establish themselves as a person of God, rather than one of this world. Furthermore, several members of the NOI have their last names legally changed with permission from Minister Farrakhan. Names such as Muhammad, Shabbazz, and Shareef are all extremely popular within the Nation, with

Muhammad being the most prominent of registered members. Brother Abdullah explained how this became popular within the NOI, as he had his last name changed by Minister Farrakhan:

Farrakhan was the Minister in Boston. One day, one of the Believers came to the Temple and announced her last name was Muhammad. Many of the Believers did not like that, but The Honorable Elijah Muhammad called Minister Farrakhan and told him that all of those who followed him could wear his name. So when he began to rebuild the Nation [after the disappearance of Elijah Muhammad], Farrakhan would give many people the last name Muhammad because they were followers of Elijah Muhammad. We don't belong to the Minister [Farrakhan], we are followers of Elijah Muhammad. God inspires Minister Farrakhan to give people the last name Muhammad, when he recognizes some work that they have done. Savior's Day [one of the holy holidays for the NOI] 1996, he gave everyone present the last name Muhammad, and he did it again in 1998.

Many of the NOI member interviewed had the last name Muhammad, either due to the mass renamings in 1996 and 1998 or because they were born into the Nation. It is not only a name, but rather a declaration of their faith as Muslims. It marks them all as followers of Elijah Muhammad, and also links them as family together outside of Mosque #55, as many NOI members refer to each other with familial terms (aunt, uncle, sister, brother, cousin, grandmother etc) to Black non Muslims. While Islam is a personal journey for NOI members, they also recognize the personal journeys and interpretations of Islam that other NOI members may have, and they choose to unify because of this. One of the Sisters, Sister Aisha, described her journey with Islam and the Nation to be eye opening, even though she was born into a household that was already extremely pro Black:

I love being a Muslim. It's such a life changing experience to know the truth and to not feel inferior. I came from a very pro Black household, so it was not much of a change to be a part of the NOI. I never walked into a room and felt inferior to anyone. It was like [a] revelation... eye opening was not a fair enough assessment. To have been excluded from history, and then learning that you were the Father of history was revelatory. I don't know how to describe it. It was like waking up from a dream. To learn the truth was like freedom. Mentally freeing, psychologically freeing. From the myth of white supremacy.

The Sister's experience captures an interesting facet of several of the members of the NOI; they do not divorce their race from their religion, as many non Black Sunni Muslims do. Islam, for

them, is inherently tied to their position as Black people descendant of enslaved African people in the United States. They view Islam as something that helps them understand their position in America, and a way to deal with the generational traumas and systemic oppression to which they have been subjugated. Islam, for them, is peace and freedom from America's oppression. This is what makes the anti Blackness they must endure from non Black Sunni Muslims so much more exhausting. Rather than accepting the ways Black Muslims of the NOI utilize Islam in their daily lives and struggles against oppression in America, non Black Sunni Muslims (implicitly or explicitly) add on to the overall stigmas and dismissal of Black Americans and the systemic violence they face within this country. Sister Aisha further explained why the NOI was comprised of predominantly African Americans:

The message of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad was universal and for humanity, but we [African Americans] were in the worst shape and needed to be resurrected first. To do that, we need to be re-educated ourselves... Anyone [racially] else who would come in, we would listen to them first over Black people. It's a side effect of slavery. We needed independence and self-reliance.

This statement is particularly impactful, as it exemplifies how during the early stages of the NOI, the intended goal was always to better the living and mental conditions of Black Americans. The goal was always for Black people to trust Black people, confront their own internalized racism, and understand their unique position in America. Islam is a part of their everyday lives; it is not merely a religion or a culture they were born into in the same way it is for some non Black Sunni Muslims.

Brother Adam, who was born to parents both in the Nation of Islam, explains how Islam was a journey and constant decision: "I have been a striving Muslim my entire life. Understanding what Muslim means, the entire submission to the Will of Allah... I submitted to His Will when I took my first breath". Although this Brother was born Muslim (in the ways that

many non Black Sunni Muslims are), he considers Islam to be a continuous aspect of his growth as a person. This same Brother was asked if he felt close to other non Nation Muslims, to which he responded: “Yes of course! The Quran states that all believers in God have a reward with their Lord. And the Quran states the friend of a Muslim is a Christian so I’m close to those who love God”. To hear this Brother emphatically accept all Muslims, regardless of the ways in which they practice was both beautiful and disheartening. He is more than willing to welcome other Muslims in a way that is inconsistent with how non Black Sunni Muslims have treated Nation Muslims in the past.

### **Representation in the Muslim Community**

While members of the Nation of Islam hold Islam highly in their lives and journeys, they feel as though their enthusiasm for the religion is not highlighted or shown in conversations about Islam universally. Many of the interviewees expressed that they did not feel represented in the global Muslim community, let alone in the Muslim community of Memphis. While the term “Muslim” is often associated now with people from the Middle East (along with several other stereotypes of terrorism, strict religious conducts, and primitivity), there was once a time where Muslim was associated with Black people in the United States. During the latter half of the 20th century, Islam was growing amongst Black people in America at the hands of prominent figures of the NOI such as Elijah Muhammad, Minister Farrkhan, Malcolm X, and Muhammad Ali. During this time period, the goal of these figures was not only to advance the movement for Black liberation, but also for Islam to be represented in America.

The perception of Islam and Muslims changed drastically in the media after the events of 9/11, a catastrophic terrorist attack on the World Trade Center that left thousands of people dead

and more injured. As a result, Islam became synonymous with terrorism, and subsequently synonymous with Middle Eastern folks. American media launched virtual campaigns against Middle Eastern Muslims in America, and propagandized everyday Americans into conflating Islam with Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern with terrorism. This harmful and violent rhetoric left Arab immigrants and Arab Americans (or anyone who looked even vaguely like they could be from the Middle East or South Asia) vulnerable to hate crimes and scared in their everyday lives. This one attack, conducted by a few individuals, harmfully impacted the lives of millions of people and their interactions with the West. It also altered the image of Islam in the minds of millions of people. While it placed Middle Eastern people at the forefront of Muslim identity (once again, harmfully and violently), it also erased Black Muslim identity in ways that are not often discussed. It contributes to the ways in which their Islam is invalidated, as they do not “appear” Muslim. Sister Aisha discussed the tangible ways Black Muslims of the NOI were erased from the Muslim community of Memphis:

Muslims in March was started by an African American Masjid, Masjid Muminun. It was made popular by the immigrant community. The majority immigrant masjids asked Masjid Muminun to exclude the Nation of Islam. But Masjid Muminun comes from the Nation. They refused to not have us included. So, Muslims in March split. The Nation does Muslims in March with Masjid Muminun and the bigger events are done by other immigrant Mosques.

Masjid Muminun is the only other Mosque in Memphis with an overwhelming African American following. They are followers of Warith Deen Muhammad, a son of Elijah Muhammad. Warith Deen’s Mosques serve as transition Mosques for Black Muslims. During the 20th century, he aimed to transition the Nation of Islam from an organization aimed at Black Nationalism to “Orthodox” Islam. As a result, members of Warith Deen Mosques typically have close relationships with members of the Nation of Islam and those Mosques in their respective cities.

This explains why the Imam of Masjid Muminun, Imam Rashaad Shareef, adamantly refused to exclude Mosque #55 from the celebration of Muslims in Memphis, even at the detriment of his own community. To actively exclude Mosque #55 from a month long celebration about Islam in Memphis exemplifies the overall alienation of NOI Muslims. Rather than work with other Muslims they do not ideologically agree with, non Black Sunni Muslims demand their isolation. From personal experience with both celebrations, the non Black Sunni Muslims in March is a large-scale event, as they typically rent out the Cook Convention Center for the occasion. It is an opportunity for Muslims and non Muslims alike to interact and engage with each other in an educational, comfortable, and celebratory manner. However, Black Muslims in March tends to be hosted by Masjid Muminun. It is still a beautiful celebration, and an opportunity for Nation Muslims and followers of Imam Warith Deen to interact and discuss their Islam, but there is no large convention center, no non Muslim attention, and no non Black Muslims. The segregation of Muslims in March, and how this segregation came about, best shows that Black Muslims have tried to do intrafaith events with non Black Sunni Muslims, but non Black Sunni Muslims do not care to interact with them. The Muslims in March celebrations by Sunni Mosques are not confined to only Muslims; they are also meant to educate non Muslims about Islam and Muslim culture. It is baffling and disrespectful to market an event as inclusive and educational while simultaneously being willfully ignorant and oppressive. Additionally, to go as far as to exclude Masjid Muminun for standing against this oppression enables the further marginalization of Black Muslims outside of the NOI.

Sister Aisha then relayed two personal anecdotes about her experiences with non Black Sunni Muslims in Memphis. She taught at Pleasant View School, an early childhood



development to 12th grade Islamic school and the largest Islamic school in Tennessee. Pleasant View School is predominantly Sunni Muslims, and the students who are Black are typically first generation American students with parents from East Africa. This Sister was the Pre-Kindergarten teacher there for around 20 years. She discussed one of her first interactions at this school:

One of my first experiences meeting someone who was Muslim but not Black was a white skinned Egyptian woman. She asked me how I became a Muslim in America and I told her about Elijah Muhammad. She continuously mispronounced his name and would say he could not have made you a Muslim because he was not a Messenger. I told her that God says that he sent a Messenger to everyone in their language, Elijah Muhammad is ours. I began to cry as we argued. Her husband intervened and told her that I was right, that the Quran did say that. She tried to tell me about Prophet Muhammad. I told her I had no doubt that Prophet Muhammad was a Messenger and brought Islam, but he could not speak my language.

The Sister goes on to explain that she later developed a long term friendship with this woman, but this particular conversation struck her as unique, as it was one of their first interactions together. The innate rejection of this Sister's Islam by someone who, at the time, did not know her, explains why many people may be hesitant to discuss their Islam with non Black Sunni Muslims. To negate her practice, even as she cried throughout the argument, is not conducive to creating a unified and beautiful safe space for Muslims in the way that Pleasant View School advocates for. The fact that the argument only stopped once the woman's husband intervened is saddening, as it should have stopped once she could see that the Sister was uncomfortable. Although both women developed a friendship later on in their careers, and the disrespect highlighted may have not been personal to the NOI Sister, it is overall disrespectful to the Nation and their practitioners. The mispronunciation of Elijah Muhammad's name shows that the woman did not respect what he did for Islam in America, nor how he changed the NOI Sister's life. The non Black Sunni Muslim woman is completely within her right to interpret Islam

differently, and to not believe in the divinity of Elijah Muhammad. However, to invalidate someone else's belief and interpretation of Islam in a space meant to educate and welcome Muslims in a country where Islam is marginalized seems counterintuitive.

Sister Aisha had several stories to tell about her experience at Pleasant View School, and many of them were genuine happy memories she recalled about her time as a teacher and the ways in which she would defend her interpretation of Islam in the space. She states: "I have worked closely with other Muslims. Some of them are as much my Brothers and Sisters as members of Mosque #55". The love that she has for other Muslims that she has interacted with is heartwarming, and it highlights that not all non Black Sunni Muslims shunned her for being a member of the Nation. It shows that the problem between non Black Sunni Muslims and Muslims of Mosque #55 is not one of ideological difference, but rather ignorance and American propaganda in regards to Black Americans. Once several non Black Sunni Muslims at PVS watched the way she practiced and discussed their differences, they were able to overcome them to develop meaningful relationships. She recalls one of these educational moments with another co-worker:

I met another woman who I took over for as a teacher. She asked me if I knew about a Mosque in the city that did not have Jummah, a place where they don't sit on the floor, they sit on chairs. I told her that is where I attend! She was very confused. I explained that The Honorable Elijah Muhammad was trying to integrate Black people into Islam... for Black people [Black Christians] the holy day is Sunday, and we don't sit on carpets. He had to get our attention, this is how he did it. He set up our meetings on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Instead of teaching Christianity, he would teach about Islam. One day, we would learn about prayers, Jummah, and Arabic. But for that time, he just wanted us to hear the message: Allah was the true God, Jesus was his servant, and we had been deceived. When I explained that to her, she told me that it made sense to her. She told me that she read that Black people in America were the fastest group to accept Islam. She believed that Black people would be who was used for God to call everyone back to Islam.

This interaction displays that once non Black Sunni Muslims understand that Islam can be taught in many forms and why it is taught in certain ways, it becomes easier to understand the different ways that different people utilize it. The Muslim woman that the NOI Sister was talking to did not practice in the way that she did nor agree with Elijah Muhammad's divinity, but she was able to accept that Black people utilized Islam in the ways they saw fit for their lives. The way that this non Black Muslim sister listened open-mindedly to the NOI Sister is exactly the way other non Black Sunni Muslims should approach other interpretations of Islam. There is no reason to segregate from NOI Muslims without understanding their creed. If one chooses to understand rather than judge, there can be communities created around Islam that serve as welcoming and joyous spaces for all Muslims.

## **Chapter 2: Gender and the Nation of Islam**

While anti Blackness is prevalent in the minds of non Black Sunni Muslims which, as explained in the previous chapter, comes partially from misinformation and bigotry partially due to American propaganda, the major gender dynamics of the Nation of Islam can also cause feelings of oppression within the Nation of Islam. While the gender dynamics of the NOI comfort some, they can also alienate others. Additionally, it is possible that the overall gender binary of the Nation of Islam may be considered “outdated” in a modern American society. Notably, the ways in which women are treated and taught to “behave” can be viewed as regressive. Many of these notions of the role of women come from white ideals on nuclear family dynamics. The domestic labor expected of women is not especially angering for many MGT/GCC, as many accept the responsibility and enjoy the work. However, the Nation of Islam does not exist inside of a vacuum, and its members are still subject to widespread anti woman rhetoric. Because of this, these roles can be misinterpreted as an imposed gender hierarchy that solely benefits men. While many women of the NOI do not dislike the domestic responsibilities they are assigned, these stereotypical roles leave room for men of the NOI to impose their own misogynistic ideologies on MGT.

The Nation of Islam splits their registered members into two categories based on biological sex: males are referred to as the “Fruit of Islam” (FOI) and females are referred to as “Muslim Girls in Training” (MGT) or “General Civilization Class” (GCC). Both FOI and MGT/GCC have specific classes they are encouraged to attend in order to teach them how to become better men and women. The lessons taught in these classes are typically taught through stereotypical gender roles in a nuclear family household. FOI classes are held on Monday evenings, and men discuss how to run their households, how to interact with their wives and

women in general, and how to manage their finances. MGT classes are held on Saturday mornings, and the women are taught based on the seven units of the *Supreme Wisdom*: How to keep house, how to rear children, how to take care of a husband, how to sew, how to cook, and how to act at home and abroad. These units are all based on the traditional role of women and men in their families. However, these units were created in a time period where traditional gender roles were aspirational. During the aftermath of chattel slavery, Black Americans were expected to develop their own communities and wealth while reconciling their generational traumas and new forms of oppression. Because of this, the only ways Black Americans knew how to survive was to emulate white society's structures: men work while the women stay home and take care of children and the house (women were not allowed to enter the workforce until 1920). White femininity was associated closely with domestic labor. However, Black women had been forced to work in the most extreme of ways during the centuries of slavery. As a result, Black women sought to reclaim their femininity through domestic labor. Establishing the nuclear family structure in Black households was the way Black Americans attempted to assimilate into American society. This is the period of history in which the Nation of Islam first emerges. In her book, *The Promise of Patriarchy*, Ula Taylor states: "Hierarchy and surveillance reinforced the potential for leadership to discipline and exert social control over the believers. This same apparatus, however, produced a NOI religious identity that, in theory, shielded women and their children, from Jim Crow violence and the harmful stereotypes that plagued black womanhood"(75). Therefore, it is not impossible to imagine that these seven units were constructed on the idea of reclamation of femininity for Black women. The standards of womanhood during this time period were that of white womanhood, and Black women were forced to assimilate into this in order to have their femininity recognized . However, the pay

discrepancies between Black men and white men was drastic, meaning that having one sole income would not be enough to support a family. As a result, Black women also must work in order to help support their families. Yet, women are still meant to maintain their households and raise children in the Nation of Islam. The expectation of Black women to maintain their specific gender roles while also managing the effects of capitalism and systemic oppression places ample amounts of stress on Black Muslim women. It can be argued that Black Muslim women are asked to carry more burden than their Black men counterparts due to societal standards. While this can be something that many Black Muslim women take pride in, it does allow them room for softness, vulnerability, and to vocalize their own issues.

### **Gender and Respectability**

The interviewees were all asked how their gender impacted their roles and relationships within Mosque #55. Many of them spoke highly of the ways the NOI dealt with gender dynamics. Brother Abdullah described how FOI class impacted him:

“FOI is like boyhood training. It’s like *Roots* where they sent the boys to a manhood class. It teaches me how to deal with my wife and my responsibilities as a man. Even though my wife worked and brought home money, I never lost sight of the fact that bills are my responsibility. It taught me how to respect other men, and how to take instructions from them. *Yes sir, no sir*. We drill, and it teaches me not to interpret instruction but to listen and obey it. It teaches me to give my people grace, how to be responsive to my people. I don’t blame them for their conditions, if they could get the same word I would, we’d be on equal footing. If I have a bowl of soup, half of it belongs to my Brother. We’re not perfect, but we are a hell of a lot better than we were.”

This description of FOI class and training of manhood best exemplifies the traditional notions of manhood defined in the United States in the 20th century. He feels as though being closer to God and his religion also means adhering to gender responsibilities outlined by the NOI. He mentions drilling, which is done primarily in the military as well as the Nation of Islam, as a way to adhere to the instructions of fellow men and to be patient with Black Americans who have not had the

same religious experience as he has had. All of these aspects define an FOI, or a respectable man. The term “respectability politics” was coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her book on the experiences of Black women in the Baptist Church, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church*. She states: “the politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy to reform an entire structural system of American race relations”(187). In the Nation of Islam, gender “reform” is utilized as a way to better the Black community. This is why this Brother states that he does not “blame” his people for their condition, as they have yet to be “reformed” in their gender performance. The NOI as an organization focuses on ideologies of Black nationalism, and they believe that gender reform can serve as a catalyst in the movement for Black liberation (or simply, bettering Black life). While traditional gender roles are not inherently immoral, they can place a strain on women (in this case, Black women) in a society that requires high monetary income in order to live a comfortable life.

### **Women and the Seven Units of the Supreme Wisdom**

The *Supreme Wisdom* is one of the primary texts of the Nation of Islam. It was given to Elijah Muhammad from Fard Muhammad, who NOI members believe to be God in the form of man. The *Supreme Wisdom* is comprised of six lessons for those who are in the process of reverting to Islam and Muslims in general. When “processing” to become a member of the Nation of Islam, one must recite Lesson No. 1 from memory in order to become a registered Muslim. One of the lessons of the *Supreme Wisdom* entails the guides of the responsibilities of the MGT (the registered women of the Nation of Islam). These responsibilities are called “The Seven Units”: how to keep house, how to rear their children, how to take care of their husband, how to sew, how to cook, and how to act at home and, how to act abroad. The MGT/GCC utilize

these units in their everyday lives, and spend their Saturday mornings learning exactly how to implement them into their own individual situations and scenarios. The way that these units have been implemented vary in the history of the Nation of Islam. All of the women interviewees spoke highly of their relationship with the seven units, Sister Maryam stated:

The way the 7 units are presented in MGT class has been amazing actually because we connect what we learn in class to our Relationship with Allah. It's known that the MGT sew and we connect the process of sewing to patterning our lives after Allah and having patience with ourselves and His will. However, Islam is perfect and people are not. Basically what I'm trying to say is people, including Women unfortunately misunderstand our MGT class, which is a class that teaches us to become the Women of Allah, and make it seem like it's just a home economics class which is not. The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan warns against that. Minister Farrakhan has implied "The M in MGT doesn't stand for maid." We are taught that yes in the holy Quran the man is one degree above us but that doesn't mean we were born solely to serve our husbands especially if they aren't serving us.

Referring to MGT Class and the seven units as a way to connect with God relates back to the spiritual journey and relationship with Islam outlined in the first chapter. It is important to note that this Sister utilizes the seven units for herself and her own personal improvement rather than for men, as she says is described by Farrakhan. To take something typically ascribed to women, such as sewing, and interpreting this as a way to connect oneself with God highlights the ways that gender responsibilities and expectations may not inherently oppress women. However, the Sister also emphasizes a critical facet of several religious groups and organizations: people tend to think of their religion as perfect, but still understand that people themselves have imperfections. She is directly discussing how MGT class and its connection with God is often misrepresented by both men and women of the NOI in a way that confirms their preconceived notions of gender relations. If racial ideology is "racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo"(Bonilla Silva 9) , then gender ideology is gender based frameworks utilized to explain and



justify (dominant gender) or challenge (subordinate gender) the gender status quo. In reference to the NOI, gender ideology is the way in which men (and in some cases, women) of the NOI can take the existing gender dynamics of the organization and weaponize them to further the oppression of women in their supposed safe space.

### **Black Women and Work**

The Nation of Islam considers domestic labor as the primary work for women, with all other responsibilities being secondary. Brother Abdullah states: “The home is the base for women, it does not mean that that is the only place they are, but it is the base.” Additionally, Sister Sarah explains: “In my religion, I feel empowered with the knowledge of knowing that I am the mother of civilization and the second self of God. I do not ever really feel minimized in my religion.” Many of the sisters interviewed felt as though having the home as their base was beneficial to them personally and their relationship with God and themselves. Sister Aisha explained why the NOI emphasizes these roles for women:

We focus on reacquiring the femininity that was lost on us during slavery. We work on enhancing our feminine side. The complaint that many people have about Black women is that we are aggressive, feisty, and not like other women. Black women did not have time to do that. We are really into education and self care, family care. We focus on creating a strong family unit.

Saying she is becoming reacquainted with her femininity through homemaking exemplifies how domestic labor has historically been associated with womanhood, and how Black women have also been historically been excluded from the connotations of femininity. Reclaiming femininity through domestic labor is precisely what Evelyn Higginbotham was referring to with her definition of “respectability politics”. This Sister directly calls on the harmful narrative of Black women, yet rather than challenging the notion altogether she believes that the best way to combat this is by assimilating into stereotypical femininity. She claims that Black women lost their

femininity during slavery, assumably due to the harsh and traumatic conditions Black women were forced to work in. It is accurate that enslaved women were forced into working and living conditions that they were not used to (no enslaved person was). However, the uniquely disturbing history of enslaved Black women in America did not separate Black women from femininity but instead reshaped notions of womanhood in the psyche of Black women. Gender designations for the division of labor is not inherently marginalizing, and women who are content in this should not be invalidated or ignored. It is not the position of this paper to argue that Black women of the NOI are oppressed due to the current gender responsibilities, but rather that the gender responsibilities coupled with rampant misogyny produces individual members who weaponize the gendered structures to harm women.

It is not inherently problematic for women to handle housework and child care, however this dynamic does not account for the ways in which Black women have historically had to work to support their families. While white women entered the workforce in the 20th century, Black women have been working since they had been forced to during the centuries of chattel slavery. Black women were tortured and exploited for labor during slavery the same way Black men were. Because of this, it is impossible to divorce Black women from nondomestic labor in the same way white women were before the 20th century. The Brother does note that women are not confined to the home, highlighting that the Nation of Islam does not prohibit women from working. However, if Black women are working outside of the home to help support themselves and their family, surely men should also be expected to help women with work inside of the home.

The majority of high earning jobs in the 21st century require upper level education (e.g Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral degrees). In 2016, the Education Trust reports that only 21.8%

of Black people have obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher. Several studies show that Black women are among the most educated groups of people in the United States. As a result, some Black women have more access to higher paying jobs than Black men, making it necessary for them to work in order to help support their families. Additionally, the Society for Human Resource Management reports that Black men only earn 87 cents to every dollar white men earn. As a result, it is virtually impossible for Black nuclear family households to survive on one paycheck. Consequently, Black women must also work to financially support their families. The Economic Policy Institute reports that as of 2017, 80% of Black women are their family's primary breadwinners. If Black women are expected to work in order to help their family survive as well as to be the sole caretakers and maintainers of their households (and the other units of the *Supreme Wisdom*), then that surely would mean that they are handling more familial burden than their husbands or partners. This is not to negate the effort men put into aiding their households financially, but if their sole duty is being split with their wives, then these roles are numerically unequal. As a result, Black women who work and are responsible for household chores are the primary workers in their families, not their husbands. Understanding Black women of the NOI as the primary workers alters the ways they are viewed in the context of the organization. They cannot be the primary workers while being simultaneously treated with misogyny by some members.

### **Women, Weight, and the Nation of Islam**

In her book, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam*, Ula Taylor discusses the intense ways that women in the NOI were subjected to weight discrimination. Women of the NOI were meant to adhere to a 120 pound weight limit and were often chastised when they exceeded it (48). While many people cite *How to Eat to Live*—a book written by Elijah

Muhammad that details ways to live longer through food intake—as why these weight requirements were implemented, it is hard to imagine that said requirements could be divorced from the societal notion of what the “ideal” woman should look like. Sister Maryam discusses weight and health as explained to her:

We follow *How to Eat to Live* and that book isn't gender specific. The Sister side of Mosques are mostly made up of Black Women and Black Women are shapely because that's how Allah made us but He also asked us to cover. Believers in general are held to a high standards when it comes to weight and the upkeep of health, even though men act like it doesn't apply to them because sexism is real and it's an impediment to self-improvement, so says The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan.

*How to Eat to Live* discusses numerous ways to maintain a healthy lifestyle through diet. The book also states that being overweight is the enemy to health: “When you begin eating once a day, certainly you will begin to lose weight until you are used to eating once a day. Then you will start gaining weight again. But fat is not wanted for health. It is an enemy of health”(41). The NOI is not the only community of people who associate weight with health, this is a more than common belief. To impose weight limitations on people was an extreme reaction, and it is not something that the NOI practices anymore. However, it is still encouraged to keep one's weight down, as instructed by Elijah Muhammad. Yet, once again, women are being targeted by these health and weight requirements in a way that men are not. While striving to be healthy is not something exclusive to the women of the NOI, the Sister mentions that men do not perceive themselves to be held to this same standard within the Mosque. A possible explanation for this is that Black men's bodies are not societally policed in the same way Black women's are. In her book, *Fearing the Black Body*, Sabrina Strings discusses the origins of body beauty standards for Black women during European colonialism as well as the transatlantic slave trade. She discusses how European explorer(?), Comte de Buffon, further sexualized the body of Black women in Africa: “Buffon appears to find inspiration from a generation of race theorists as he slid

seamlessly from the assertion that blacks were robust and well-made into a several-page dissertation on the beauty of shapely black women of select nations”(115). The oversexualization of the curvy Black women body imprinted itself into the psyche of both white and Black people until it became the primary body type associated with Black women. The shapely Black women body became synonymous with beauty for Black women, and they are still held to this standard contemporarily. This is why Black women with other figures, particularly bigger Black women, deal with higher levels of body policing than Black men. Black men and Black women interact with health concerns and fatphobia in completely different ways, which is a reason why some men of the NOI do not observe the instructions of *How to Eat to Live* in the same way some women of the NOI do. This is part of the sexism the Sister was referencing in her interview, and one of the ways in which women are forced to interact with the teachings of the NOI differently than men due to society at large.

### **Erasure of Women Issues inside of the Nation of Islam**

While it would be incorrect to characterize the Nation of Islam as a uniformly misogynistic organization, it would also be inaccurate to claim that male members of the NOI do not use their gendered advantage to silence women who would like to speak up on issues pertaining to Black women. Sister Maryam gives two stories of how she felt like she was being silenced on women's issues:

There was one time when someone (who is like a student under the student minister, he's not over the mosque, he just opens the meeting sometimes) said on the podium that he had an issue with the Women's march and then made a very weird comment about lesbians. Afterwards I talked to him about it and he said “I feel like Black Women shouldn't speak on Women's issues because that doesn't help the Black community as a whole.” ... He said that to me...a Black Woman. It was the most absurd thing I heard from an authority member of our Mosque. Only for Farrakhan to say that next month that he was proud of the Women's March, as he always does because Farrakhan loves Women and is an anti-misogynist.

This story from this Sister highlights how some male members of the NOI impose their own understanding of gender and womanhood onto the woman of the NOI. To claim that speaking up on Black women's issues is not conducive to Black liberation is not only outright false, but also indicative of how women are often treated as afterthoughts in The Nation of Islam. However, liberating the Black community in America does not simply translate to liberation from racism, but rather liberation from racism and racially gendered oppression as well. There is no Black liberation without Black women, and their issues should not be cast aside solely because the targeted group is women and not men. Additionally, the Sister noting that this is not something that Farrakhan teaches is extremely important to the overall thesis to this paper: oppression and exclusion are often not advocated for by religions or organizations themselves; however, due to the fact that religion does not exist in a vacuum, the people of said religions are still victim to propaganda, and can perpetuate oppression in their religious spaces. Misogyny and the erasure of women issues are not something the NOI advocates for. In fact, many interviewees, both men and women, cheerily highlighted how the National Spokesperson for the NOI is a woman, Sister Ava, and how the "Flagship" Mosque in Chicago is named after the mother of Jesus, Maryam. Yet these strategic attempts to elevate and empower women do not stop many men of the NOI from perpetuating their misogyny in NOI spaces.

This point is made evident in the Sister's second story, which focuses on her and some other Sisters of the NOI receiving backlash after discussing women empowerment on the internet. During the interview she recounted:

There was also a time where I and my Womanist friends were going to speak on feminism on the internet and we got called by "higher ups"--because someone reported us and said we were "taking on feminist values"--and the higher ups, who were women, tried to tell us that Farrakhan said that Womens liberation was bad and that men and

women aren't equal and a bunch of other twisted anti women rhetoric. But they took Farrakhan's words out of context, he was quoting someone in an interview about Women's liberation. Farrakhan also spoke on the Quranic verse about men being a degree above women and he said "what is 1 degree in 360 degrees" and he has also spoken on the Quranic verses where in it it says things like "the believing men AND the believing women". But because of the patriarchy people don't hear him say things like that which is hilarious because Islam is literally a woman empowering religion!

The fact that this Sister experienced misogynistic remarks from other women in the NOI explains how deeply rooted anti Women rhetoric is within both men and women. It is an important reminder that sexist and patriarchal ideas are not the sole property of men. Her online actions, outside of the NOI, were grounds to be criticized within her religion, for something that she believes was not even inconsistent with the teachings of Louis Farrakhan. Misquoting Farrakhan to invalidate issues on women's rights highlights exactly how members of the NOI can misinterpret and misrepresent their own religion in order to fit their pre-existing narratives on women and gender hierarchy. This Sister discusses how Islam is a women empowering religion, even with the gender dynamics within the NOI. She is not critical of learning the seven units, she is critical of the fact that it is often treated as a way to highlight that women are less than equal with men in their religion. She refers to herself as a "womanist" rather than a "feminist", an important distinction to be made. Womanism, defined by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, is a Black feminist or feminist of color as well as a woman who loves other women's culture, emotional vulnerability, and women's strength (Walker 4). Additionally, since slavery, Black women have been historically and frequently left out of American feminist circles due to racism. Audre Lorde states in her speech "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" how Black women are treated in circles of oppression: "Black women are expected to use our anger only in the service of other people's salvation or learning." Here, Lorde was directly discussing Black women in feminist circles, and how white women react to Black

women anger. However, the same sentiment could be applied in relation to Black men and Black women, as Black women are expected to speak on issues of racism that are perceived to impact Black men more while ignoring the ways in which these same violent events and oppression affects them. Topics such as police brutality, wealth inequality, and even slavery all seem to focus on the oppression and trauma of the Black men who endure them. While their trauma and experiences absolutely should be vocalized in conversations about Black liberation and healing, Black women should also have room for their own experiences and traumas. Their oppression is not limited to racism, so their vocalization should not be limited to their experiences only based on racism. Black liberation does not only mean salvation for Black men, but all Black people facing oppression and violence, including Black women.

During another moment in the interview, the Sister discussed problems of people who have committed sexual assault being comfortable enough to speak about this openly within the NOI. She stated plainly, “There’s also the age-old issue of people defending rapists to the point that an actual rapist felt comfortable enough to speak on how he molested a child on a podcast while promoting his children's book on child molestation.” The fact that this came up during our discussion on gender highlights how the experiences and trauma of women can sometimes be suppressed in the name of Black liberation. To give context, the person whom she is speaking about in this instance is not a part of Mosque #55, but is a member of the NOI. The podcast that had him on as a guest, regularly features men of the Nation of Islam who often discredit women’s movements. Additionally, there are several men in the NOI who have spoken in favor of known abusers and rapists (either locally or nationally, such as R Kelly and Bill Cosby). It is quite disturbing to hear that this disgusting and abusive behavior is being hidden under the guise of Islam and the NOI, considering that prominent figures of the NOI often condemn known



abusers. This is a problem at large within the Black community, not just the NOI. However, if NOI members are comfortable enough to speak about the abuse they have conducted and attempt to align it with their religion, that would mean that there is something in the underlying culture of the NOI that communicates that their violence will be sanctioned.

The problems with gender dynamics within the NOI is not that typical gender roles are implemented, but rather how they are interpreted by some men and women of the NOI to harm Black women. As highlighted above, there are members comfortable coming forth with their abuse, which in turn places people of the NOI at risk of further abuse. Some people of the NOI misrepresent the gender dynamics of the NOI as a hierarchy that places women as subordinates to men. The Nation of Islam allows for individualized experiences with Islam, which is why many people have several different interpretations of the organization and what their role is within it. All of the Sisters I interviewed interacted with their gender obligations differently, and, as a result, had different experiences within the mosque and with men. Part of the reason these Sisters' experiences differ is due to the era where they matured. The older the Sister interviewed was, the more likely she was to not challenge any of the gender relations in the NOI. However, the younger Sisters, who grew up in the age of social media and easy access to feminism and womanism texts, were far more likely to offer critique on the ways their gender has impacted their NOI experiences. Nonetheless, a commonality between all of the Sisters was that none of them disagreed fundamentally with gender roles. They all agreed that learning the seven units was something that allowed them to grow as human beings, regardless of if they felt as though this connected them to God or if they merely felt as though it was their duty as women. It would be unethical to call a group of people oppressed who do not view themselves in this manner, as imposing one's own ideals onto other people does not leave room for difference of opinion. Yet

the seven units and gender obligations in the NOI cannot be erased from the context of the time period it was founded in. Because of this, it is easy to conflate gender obligations with aspects of misogynoir common in the United States. Thus, it is harder for some members of the NOI (both men and women) to understand these binary distinctions without in some part deflecting back to misogyny.

### **Conclusion**

Islam lost its place in the lives of Black Americans after enslaved Black Muslims were forced to abandon their religion in favor of Christianity. However, the faith begins to resurface within Black American communities in the early 20th century due to the founding of The Nation of Islam. The rise of the NOI as not only a religious organization but also one of Black Nationalism is foundational in the (limited, but still present) normalization of Islam in America, and, more specifically, in the Black American community. Still, The NOI's contributions to the presence of Islam in North America is not recognized or celebrated by the global Islamic community of differing Islamic schools of thought. This is due to the fact that The NOI is not acknowledged as an "authentic" Islamic school of thought by these other Muslim communities. Islam as a religion advocates for personal and spiritual growth. . However, people who consider themselves "original" Muslims, such as non Black Arabs, tend to invalidate the growth of Black American Muslims when they do not resemble typical Sunni or Shiite routines, leading Black Muslims to feel ostracized from their religious counterparts. Islam itself does not advocate for this level of ostracization, yet many people conflate their own personal biases with the religion, resulting in bigotry.

American systemic anti-Blackness plays a crucial role in the ways in which non Black Sunni Arab Muslims and Black Muslims of the NOI interact with each other. The NOI is founded, in part, in response to systemic oppression, and is often viewed as a Black nationalist religion, consisting primarily of people who have reverted to Islam. Because of this, they interact and understand Islam in a different way than non Black Sunni Arab Muslims, who oftentimes are born Muslim. This causes a rippling disconnect between the two communities, as the ways in

which they have had to spiritually become Muslim differ drastically. Additionally, both Islamic groups are physically distanced as a result of long standing issues with housing discrimination and economic inequality for Black Americans. The Nation of Islam's target audience is Black Americans, so they place themselves in an accessible location for Black Americans. Conversely, many members of Masjid ar-Rahman and MIC are primarily located in East Memphis and Cordova, respectively. As a result, they place themselves in those locations. This physical distance exacerbates the isolation of Black Muslims of the NOI, as well as highlights wealth discrepancies between the two groups.

Thus, as important as it is for the NOI to stand on their principles of Black nationalism and liberation, it should be equally important to firmly condemn abusers of children and women within the NOI, and be critical in their association with the NOI. The NOI often utilizes the motto "Respect and Protect Black Women", as it is something that was said by Malcolm X echoed by Farrakhan more recently. However, like the Hadith that is the namesake of this project, it is not enough to claim a cause of equity without embedding it into one's daily actions. It is not enough to say "Respect and Protect Black Women" while sanctioning abusers, discrediting women, and attempting to silence their pain.

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## **Interview Appendix**

### **Name: Brother Abdullah**

#### **1. How Long Have you Been Muslim?**

- a. I originally had this worded as “converted” to Islam, however Minister Abdul Muthakkir informed me that he does not like this word, as he believes that he was always Muslim. He prefers the term ‘accepted’.
- b. “I accepted Islam in 1983 (38 yrs ago) **(a)** What went into my decision? As I began going to the mosque (called temple at that time) I could see that the only salvation for my people was Islam **(b)** Why Islam? Because it was the only faith religion that was ‘truly’ making a dramatic difference in my people. Islam cleaned men from drugs. Islam made men better husbands and women better wives. while the world was destroying the Black family, Islam was building families. (How has accepting Islam changed me and my daily life? Islam cleaned me up and took me from the gutters of Washington DC and placed me before the world. Islam. Islam allowed me to show what Allah had deposited in me. I am married with Muslim children now.Praise Be To Allah.”

#### **2. What Sect do you identify with?**

- a. “What ‘Sect’ do I identify with? all of them however, I am in the Nation of Islam under the Leadership of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan.”

**3. Do you have a specific role in the mosque?**

- a. “Yes. I am the Minister or ‘Imam’”

**4. What is your opinion of the racial makeup of your mosque?**

- a. “Over 90 percent of the people in the Nation of Islam are Black people. However there are Hispanics in the Nation as well. The Nation of Islam has Members in France, Spain, England, the Virgin Islands and Africa.”

**5. Do you have much interaction with Mosque of other ethnicities?**

- a. “Yes we have some. however, it is difficult as people of Islam have this strange belief that the only “True” Muslims are the ones who believe “Exactly” like them.”

**6. Have you experienced microaggressions from other Muslims?**

- a. “Yes. Again every Muslim sect believes that the only “True” Muslim is the one who believes “exactly” like them.”

**7. Do you feel represented in the Global Muslim community?**

- a. “No. Other Muslims feel as though the only Muslims who think like them... they think their the true Islam, they have always felt like we weren’t real Muslims. All over the world, Muslims are killing each other all because they think that Muslim is not a real Muslim. You can do that in the churches, you can go from one church to another but you can’t do that in Islam. They mistreat Black Muslims because they are dark skinned, y’all are just racist in your Islam. They lie when they say ‘Islam has no color’. How you gonna sell pork to our people and then go to the



masjid and say your prayers?... Some of them won't even give you the *greetings*.”[In Islam, it is required that you greet each Muslim with ‘As Salaamu Alaikum’ -- peace be upon you].. They have allowed their racist culture to take over Islam. They don't give dawa' (an invitation to islam, a means to conversion) in our communities... I'm not gonna subject myself to that, if you want to think of yourself as superior then so be it, but I'm not gonna stand there and take that from you.”

**8. How has your spiritual journey with Islam been?**

9. “ It has been very rewarding. It has been peaks and valleys, ups and downs, difficulties and ease. But the Honorable Elijah Muhammad said “Getting acquainted with God is not like getting acquainted with a fool. (a) Have you ever felt as though being a Muslim was becoming difficult? Yes and No. Allah says in Qur'an that He created man to face difficulty.”

**10. Why is everyone named Muhammad**

- a. “Farrakhan was the Minister in Boston. One day, one of the Believers came to the Temple and her last name was Muhammad. The Believers did not like that but THEM told him that all of his followers could wear his name. So when he began to rebuild the Nation, he would give many people the last name Muhammad because they were followers of Elijah Muhammad. We don't belong to the Minister, we are followers of Elijah Muhammad. God inspires Minister Farrakhan to give people the last name Muhammad, when he recognizes some work that they have done. Savior's Day 1996, he

gave everyone present the last name Muhammad, and he did it again in 1998.”

- b. “I got my name April 27 1990 in Philadelphia at the Spectrum, he named me in front of 17,000 people on stage”

### **11. How has FOI class affirmed your gender?**

- a. “FOI is like boyhood training. It’s like *Roots* where they sent the boy's to a manhood class. It teaches me how to deal with my wife and my responsibilities as a man. Even though my wife worked and brought home money, I never lost sight of the fact that bills are my responsibility. It taught me how to respect other men, and how to take instructions from them. *Yes sir; no sir*. We drill, and it teaches me not to interpret instruction but to listen and obey it. It teaches me to give my people grace, how to be responsive to my people. I don’t blame them for their conditions, if they could get the same word I would, we’d be on equal footing. If I have a bowl of soup, half of it belongs to my Brother. We’re not perfect, but we are a hell of a lot better than we were.”
12. “The home is the base for women, it does not mean that that is the only place they are, but it is the base.”

### **Name: Sister Maryam**

#### **1. How long have you been Muslim?**

- a. “I was born a Muslim, but I officially registered roughly when I was 15 years old.”
- 2. Which sect (or madhab) of Islam do you identify as? (If Sunni: Maliki, Hanifi etc.? Salafi? Nation of Islam? Warith Dean?)**
  - a. “I am a member of the Nation of Islam”
- 3. Do you attend a mosque?**
  - a. “I attend Mosque #55 in Memphis.”
- 4. Do you have a specific role in the mosque you attend? (Iman, Sheikh, Quran teacher, community organizer etc.)**
  - a. “I am a Vanguard in the Nation of Islam, so that means I do a lot of work with security of our Mosque.”
- 5. What, in your opinion, is the racial makeup of your mosque?**
  - a. “The Mosque I currently attend has mostly Black people. But where I was born in Oakland, California, there are some Asian and LatinX families.”
- 6. If your mosque is predominantly composed of one race, do you have much interaction with mosques of other races and ethnicities? Why or why not?**
  - a. “I personally don’t have many interactions with other mosques, but I think that is mostly because I am anti-social.”
- 7. Have you faced any microaggressions from other Muslims? If so, would you like to elaborate on any specific events?**

- a. “Non NOI muslims have told me on the internet that I’m not a real Muslim but they’re not Allah and I don’t pray to them so they didn’t hurt my feelings.”

**8. Do you feel represented in the global Muslim community? Or even in the Muslim community of Memphis?**

- a. “No and no because no one wanted to really venture out of the mosque and do things in the community. The one time it did happen, I do not feel like the Nation was represented well by the person that was meant to represent us.”

**9. How do you personally feel your gender has played into your experience as a Muslim?**

- a. “Absolutely. Gender has played a huge role in my experience in society and definitely in my interactions around 55”

**10. What are some situations in which you were ‘othered’ in your own mosque? (by gender, opinion, beliefs etc.) (you may provide specific stories, if you would like. However I am not allowed to use names of anyone who has not explicitly consented to being involved in this project.)**

- a. “There was one time when [REDACTED] (who is like a student student minister he's not over the mosque he just opens the meeting sometimes) said on the podium that he had an issue with the Women's march and then made a very weird comment about lesbians. Afterwards I talked to him about it and he said “I feel like Black Women shouldn’t speak on Women's

issues because that doesn't help the Black community as a whole." ... He said that to me...a Black Woman. It was the most absurd thing I heard from an authority member of our Mosque. Only for Farrakhan to say that next month that he was proud of the Women's March, as he always does because Farrakhan loves Women and is an anti-misogynist. There was also a time where I and my Womanist friends were going to speak on feminism on the internet and we got called by "higher ups" --because someone reported us and said we were "taking on feminist values"-- and the higher ups, who were Women, tried to tell us that Farrakhan said that Womens liberation was bad and that men and Women aren't equal and a bunch of other twisted anti women rhetoric. But they took Farrakhan's words out of context, he was quoting someone in an interview about Women's liberation. Farrakhan also spoke on the Quranic verse about men being a degree above Women and he said "what is 1 degree in 360 degrees" and he has also spoken on the Quranic verses where in it it says things like "the believing men AND the believing Women". But because of the patriarchy people don't hear him say things like that which is hilarious because Islam is literally a Woman empowering religion! C'mon. There's also the age-old issue of people defending rapists because "they're powerful Black men that represent masculinity on tv" or some shit.

**11. What are some problems that you face in your own mosque and religion?**

- a. “ Being surrounded by rape apologists, people generally not liking me because I’m “aggressive,”(IDK if me being aggressive has anything to do with me being at the mosque lmaoo). There was also a time where I was a fresh 18 yr old and another male Nation member was staring at me which he definitely wasn’t supposed to do because the Holy Quran says lower your gaze. And he was old too, it was really gross. In the religion as a whole we have 1 side where other muslims don’t think you’re a real muslim, another side where everybody is islamophobic, and then on the inside theres so many misogynists and people who claim to follow Farrakhan but don’t really listen to him.”

**Name: Sister Aisha**

**1. How long have you been Muslim?**

- a. Since she was 22, about 40 years
- b. “As a child, I was always fascinated with the teachings of THEM. When I was 12, my best friend joined the Temple.. I tried to tell my Mom and she didn’t want to let me go. I kept asking to go and visit with my friend but I needed my Mother’s permission. I was always exposed to his teachings through the people I met. In Philadelphia, everyone was a Black Muslim. I always ran into the men who sold Muhammad’s Speaks newspapers, they would always tell me about the teachings. They had restaurants and cleaners, they all named everything “your” because Black people needed to

take ownership, it was for us. I thought it was fascinating, very altruistic. The NOI had a very large presence in Philadelphia. My first cousin was not in the Temple but he would visit and bring back bean pie. It was so delicious. I was married very young but I was divorced. I then started to date this guy who I met as a teenager, he was a Muslim and he always wanted to talk to me about Islam. He asked me if I wanted to go to the Mosque to hear Minister Farrakhan. He showed me some tapes first and I was blown away. I always knew the teachings but I had never heard it presented this way. I listened to as many tapes as I could. I went to the Mosque with him. From that day on, I would go to the Mosque and then I wrote my letter. My life was changed. I still loved my Church and would go visit.”

**2. Do you have a specific role in the mosque you attend? (Iman, Sheikh, Quran teacher, community organizer etc.)**

- a. (Former) MGT Captain, Sunday school teacher, first lieutenant

**3. What, in your opinion, is the racial makeup of your mosque?**

- a. 100% Black
- b. THEM: “Message was universal and for humanity, but we were in the worst shape and needed to be resurrected first. To do that, we need to be re educated ourselves”

- c. “Anyone else who would come in, we would listen to them first over Black people. It’s a side effect of slavery. We needed independence and self reliance”

**4. If your mosque is predominantly composed of one race, do you have much interaction with mosques of other races and ethnicities? Why or why not?**

- a. Yes, so many.
- b. “One of my first experiences meeting someone who was Muslim but not Black was a white skinned Egyptian woman. She asked me how i became a Muslim in America and I told her about Elijah Muhammad. She continuously mispronounced his name and would say he could not have made you a Muslim because he was not a Messenger. I told her that God says that he sent a Messenger to everyone in their language, Elijah Muhammad is ours. I began to cry as we argued. Her husband intervened and told her that I was right, that the Quran did say that. She tried to tell me about Prophet Muhammad. I told her I had no doubt that Prophet Muhammad was a Messenger and brought Islam, but he could not speak my language.”
- c. “I met another woman who I took over for as a teacher. She asked me if I knew about a Mosque in the city that did not have Jummah, a place where they don’t sit on the floor, they sit on chairs. I told her that is where I attend! She was very confused. I explained that THEM was trying to integrate Black people into Islam... for Black people the holy day is



Sunday, and we don't sit on carpets. He had to get our attention, this is how he did it. He set up our meetings on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Instead of teaching Christianity, he would teach about Islam. One day, we would learn about prayers, Jummah, and Arabic. But for that time, he just wanted us to hear the message: Allah was the true God, Jesus was his servant, and we had been deceived. When I explained that to her, she told me that it made sense to her. She told me that she read that Black people in America were the fastest group to accept Islam. She believed that Black people would be who was used for God to call everyone back to Islam."

- d. "The reason why people are allowed to wear their jilbab and say Allahu Akbar is because of the MGT"

**5. How did you get your last name?**

- a. Minister Farrakhan gave the last name to my husband. I got mine after that, but we got married so it was easier.

**6. Do you recall any instances where you felt looked down upon because of your race from other Muslims? If so, would you like to elaborate on any specific events?**

- a. "I learned that the Black man was the original man, so even when people looked down upon me I never took it seriously. When I became a teacher, one of the Moms went to the Principal to say that I was not a real Muslim and that she did not want me to teach her child. The Vice Principal took up for me, she told her that I was more Muslim than anyone she knew."

**7. Do you feel represented in the global Muslim community?**

- a. “I guess it would depend on the venue.”
- b. “Muslims in March was started by an African American Masjid. It was made popular by the immigrant community. The majority immigrant masjids asked Masjid Muminoon to exclude the Nation of Islam. But Masjid Muminoon comes from the Nation. They refused to not have us included. So, Muslims in March split. The Nation does Muslims in March in Masjid Muminoon and the bigger events are done by other immigrant Mosques.”

**8. Do you feel close to other non Nation Muslims?**

- a. Yes, I have worked closely with other Muslims. Some of them are as much my Brothers and Sisters as members of Mosque #55.

**9. How has your spiritual journey with Islam been? Have you ever felt as though being a Muslim was becoming difficult?**

- a. “No. I love being a Muslim. It’s such a life changing experience to know the truth and to not feel inferior. I came from a very pro Black household, so it was not much of a change to be a part of the NOI. I never walked into a room and felt inferior to anyone. It was like revelation... eye opening was not a fair enough assessment. To have been excluded from history, and then learning that you were the Father of history was revelatory. I don’t know how to describe it. It was like waking up from a dream. To learn the truth

was like freedom. Mentally freeing, psychologically freeing. From the myth of white supremacy.”

- b. “Someone asked me why we were built this way (butts that protrude, big breasts etc)”

**10. How do you personally feel your gender has played into your experience as a Muslim?**

- a. “It was a wonderful experience. THEM’s first message to the Brothers was to respect and to protect the Black woman. There’s no limit to what a woman can do. We don’t look down on women speaking in Mosques (like the Church). We have a constitution that says there's no limit to the height women can go, she can go as high as her God given talents take her. There’s nothing a woman cannot do. Our Flagship Mosque is named after Maryam, the mother of Jesus. The spokesperson for the NOI currently is Minister Ava Muhammad, she is a woman.”

**11. In what ways does your gender impact your role in your mosque?**

- a. “We focus on reacquiring the femininity that was lost on us during slavery. We work on enhancing our feminine side. The complaint that many people have about Black women is that we are aggressive, feisty, and not like other women. Black women did not have time to do that. We are really into education and self care, family care. We focus on creating a strong family unit.”

- b. “There are seven training units (how to keep house...) for women. In slavery, we were not allowed to be married or read. The purpose of these units is to give us the education and training to create a wholesome and solid foundation of family so we could build upon to create a new world of leaders. We need a secure environment to raise children. The FOI was to fight and protect our community, our job is to be their cornermen with their diets, their lives, and family. So they can go educate our people.”
- c. “The erasure of the negro mind: irresponsibility, promiscuity.”

**12. How do you feel affirmed in your gender through your religion? How do you feel minimized?**

- a. **Answered above.**
- b. “I’ve never felt more protected in my gender. The noi honors its women. Black women were not largely respected and protected after slavery. When I joined the noi, I forgot my umbrella. Now no one is to touch or violate the MGT in any way. My Brother in Law was racing up the street to tap me on the shoulder to give me my umbrella. I was walking up to the Mosque and before I could see him reach out to touch me, Brothers snatched him up on each side to make sure he didn’t touch me. I had to tell them he was my brother in law before they would put him down”
- c. “At the school I taught at, I had to make one of my students sit by herself because she was hitting her friends. She began to cry, her Dad came up to me and asked me why she was crying and I told him, thinking he would be

reasonable. He told me that I was not to discipline his daughter, he said if she cried, I would cry.”

**13. What is America’s role in gender representation/oppression?**

**a. Answered above.**

14. Do you believe your experiences as Black women have been changed by being in the Nation?

a.

**15. How do you feel that MGT class shaped/affirmed your gender?**

a. “MGT class has made me feel confident in any venue or setting where professionalism, etiquette, culture, education is required. We practice culture, refinement, and etiquette. We practice cooking, sewing, and doing for self. Like eating off crystal china, we try to practice the highest forms of civilizations. I don’t think I am better than my people, I want that to be known. They came from the same conditions I did. I am just as comfortable in the soup kitchen as I am in the Ritz Carlton. The divine in me recognizes and solutes the divine in you, that’s what I take from MGT Class.”

**Name: Brother Omar**

**1. How long have you been Muslim?**

**a. If you converted to Islam, what went into that decision? Why Islam? How has converting/reverting changed you or your daily life?**

From a theological perspective, I have to say I have been a Muslim all my life because I subscribe to the truth that maintains that I was a Muslim from birth, even though my parents did

not necessarily practice the religion of Islam. I became a “registered Muslim” in 1990, approximately 31 years ago. I was initially influenced by my father’s study and participation within the local Nation of Islam study groups. His influence was always a strong influence on my life. Subsequent to that, I was exposed to the Nation of Islam’s message as it was reflected also within the music and culture of my teenage years. I was a teenager when I accepted to be a Muslim; I was 15 years old. And in those years, what historians define as “message rap” or “conscious hip-hop” was at the center of Black youth culture. Nowadays conscious hip-hop has been marginalized; in my teenage years it was at the center of hip-hop and in many ways “message rap” was inclusive of what Hip-Hop itself was defined as being made of.

I believe it was Hip-Hop historian Adisa Banjoko who stated that *“Islam is the unofficial religion of Hip-Hop.”* And I agree with him, because Hip-Hop helped me make the decision to become a Muslim. The fact that my favorite artists were saying the same things I heard Minister Farrakhan and his ministers say, helped me as a teenager to identify with Islam as something to desire and aspire for. I like to say it like this, in those days the rappers were *de facto* recruiters for Islam and specifically the Nation of Islam.

Islam has given me everything that I value and hold precious in life. However in terms of a contrast, I would say that my life “post-Islam proper” has changed my daily attitude and world view in the sense that I am always conscious of the dichotomy that exists between the world I live in and the Islamic beliefs and principles that I subscribe to. So, it has changed my mind state and attitude such that I feel that I am like what Jesus stated in the Bible, wherein he told his disciples to be *“in the world, but not of the world.”*

**Which sect (or madhab) of Islam do you identify as? (If Sunni: Maliki, Hanifi etc.? Salafi? Nation of Islam? Warith Dean?)**

I am a registered member of the Nation of Islam

**2. Do you attend a mosque?**

Yes

**3. Do you have a specific role in the mosque you attend? (Iman, Sheikh, Quran teacher, community organizer etc.)**

I am a student minister within the Nation of Islam. And I work professionally as an Islamic Chaplain, being in charge of the religious practice of all Islamic inmates within a correctional environment.

**4. If possible, could you potentially give a history of the beginnings/origin of Muhammad's Mosque #55 in Memphis (to your knowledge)?**

In October of 1962, Minister Nathaniel X Meadows was sent to Memphis from Birmingham, Alabama to establish a Mosque in Memphis for the Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad. He was a musician from a band called the Encores. He also was a former U.S. Air Force member. (see attachments)

**5. What, in your opinion, is the racial makeup of your mosque?**

Our mosque is 100% Black (i.e. African-American)

**6. If your mosque is predominantly composed of one race, do you have much interaction with mosques of other races and ethnicities? Why or why not?**

I don't think most members of the mosque have much interaction with other mosques, but we have interactions with other Muslims in non-sacred spaces that are for purposes of education, business and professional services.

**7. Have you faced any microaggressions from other Muslims? If so, would you like to elaborate on any specific events?**

In looking up the word “micro-aggression”, I find the following definition:

*“an indirect or subtle action or statement regarded as denigrating a minority group; indirect or subtle discrimination against a minority group”-Collins Dictionary of English.*

This is an intriguing concept, particularly because through subtlety many folks attempt to hide their true intentions. However, the Holy Qur’an maintains that “Allah is Knower of subtleties, Aware.

Based upon this definition I would say yes, I have. And I also have heard stories from other Muslims also about their experiences. Some immigrant Muslims who consider themselves to be ethnically or racially white look at Black and African Muslims as less than themselves. Once an Ethiopian Muslim brother who was a friend of mine told me about a theft that had happened at the masjid he attends. I believe that the zakat box had been broken into. He said that the masjid leadership only interviewed and questioned the African- American or Black members of the masjid about this incident. He also told me about a time when an imam who was of African descent had been elected to lead the masjid. He said many Arab members left the masjid, saying that the Africans were going to ruin the masjid.

As a member of the Nation of Islam, I have experienced micro-aggressions from other Muslims who have bought into the propaganda that the Nation of Islam is not real Muslims. So, sometimes they make condescending remarks or treat us with a “long-handled spoon.” I have also attended break-out sessions at the Black Muslim Psychology Conference. At this



conference, the organizer created a safe space wherein she did not allow any non-Black or African-American Muslims into that portion of the conference. The idea was to allow the Black members of the ummah to speak inside a safe space about their negative experiences inside of many immigrant masjids. I was shocked and saddened by much of what I heard. One very dark-skinned Muslim woman told of how her son was mocked and bullied by white and light skinned Muslim boys in the masjid about his dark skin complexion; so much so that he refused to ever come back to the masjid. She was in tears.

**8. Do you feel represented in the global Muslim community? Or even just the Muslim community in Memphis?**

I only feel represented by the leadership of the Nation of Islam. Outside of that, I don't think that most of what mainstream America dubs as Muslim or Islam, has me and my Islam in mind.

**9. How has your spiritual journey with Islam been? Have you ever felt as though being a Muslim was becoming difficult?**

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh/saw) has stated that 'the affair of the believer is a wondrous affair because when good befalls him or her, the believer says al-hamdulillah ( all praise belongs to Allah); and when evil afflicts they believer, the believer says al-hamdulillah.' Personally, I can attest to this. The journey of the believer contains ups and downs. It contains joy and suffering. What the Prophet is saying in this hadith and what I have lived to experience is the same as is written in the Bible in James 1:2-4 wherein it reads

*"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."*

Yes, it is difficult to be “in the world, but not of the world.” So, it is somewhat difficult to be a Muslim in a non-Muslim society. And it is somewhat difficult being a Muslim inside of a Muslim society. Because if you are in a Muslim society, you still have to overcome the personal character flaws that every human being has and the natural vicissitudes of life experienced by all human beings. In a non-Muslim society, you have that plus the hostility of the society that opposes the righteous standards a Muslims strives to uphold.

But as we mature, we come to realize that the key to success in life often involves the management of difficulty. This is best achieved in choosing the kind and nature of the difficulty we are willing to endure. As an example consider 2 people.

One woman is a “couch potato”; as a result she becomes obese; she can hardly walk to the store; she has pain in all of her joints and is prescribed many pills to take to manage the negative effects of being obese. She has a difficult life.

A different woman, exercises frequently; she eats right. She gets up early each day for prayer and meditation. Each morning after her work out, her muscles are sore. Her grocery bill is expensive, because she only eats organic and refuses to eat fast food. She is not on any prescription medication but takes nutritional supplements to help her in her work-outs. She also has a lot of difficulty in her life.

Both women have difficulty and are proof that “struggle is ordained” as Min. Farrakhan has taught. But the latter woman has chosen to endure a difficulty that will make her stronger and faster and in great physical condition, which will also positively affect her job performance as well as her interpersonal relationships. The first woman has chosen a difficulty that will

ultimately shorten her life span and negatively impact her job performance and her interpersonal relationships.

So, the difficulty of a being a Muslim is what the latter woman has chosen. It's hard but it is a constructive kind of difficulty, one that facilitates the path of personal growth, professional achievement and happiness in relationships.

**Name: Brother Malik**

1. How long have you been Muslim?
  - a. I've knowingly been a Muslim since I excepted Islam at the age of 18 in 1995. Although I believe we are born Muslims, it wasn't until then that I cognitively accepted to practice it. Islam has totally transformed every aspect of my life: diet, attire, social conduct, mental and spiritual insights and outlooks, and moral standards to govern my daily activities.
2. Which sect (or madhab) of Islam do you identify as? (If Sunni: Maliki, Hanifi etc.? Salafi? Nation of Islam? Warith Dean?)
  - a. I belong to the Nation of Islam (NOI) under the leadership of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and guidance of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan.
3. Do you have a specific role in the mosque you attend? (Iman, Sheikh, Quran teacher, community organizer etc.)
  - a. I serve as an assistant to the local Minister, but I also serve on our national Research Staff and Ministry of Education. In doing so, I conduct research,

publish books, and present our programs and positions on various panels and forums.

4. What, in your opinion, is the racial makeup of your mosque?
  - a. The racial makeup of our mosque consists primarily of Blacks/African-Americans with an emerging Latin X population.
5. If your mosque is predominantly composed of one race, do you have much interaction with mosques of other races and ethnicities? Why or why not?
  - a. While my mosque is composed of primarily one particular race, we do have numerous interactions with other races and religious affiliations. We understand that no other race or ethnic group has undergone the centuries of dehumanization that America's Black population continues to suffer. Hence, special attention is deserved to this unique population.
6. Have you faced any microaggressions from other Muslims? If so, would you like to elaborate on any specific events?
  - a. Yes, we've faced both micro aggressions and macro aggressions from other Muslim groups, mostly because they don't understand the inhumane conditioning of our people. Nor do they understand the unique divine prescription needed to remedy our people.
7. Do you feel represented in the global Muslim community? Or even in the Muslim Community of Memphis?

- a. While the Nation of Islam has historically been marginalized by main stream groups and Muslims, we are seeing a gradual realization that what the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and Minister Farrakhan provide are truthful and absolutely necessary. Hence, there is not only a growing acceptance of us, but many of those groups are looking to us to lead the way.
8. How has your spiritual journey with Islam been? Have you ever felt as though being a Muslim was becoming difficult?
- a. My journey in Islam is most rewarding and most challenging because hard trials are necessary to establish truth. It's challenging because world powers are aimed against this truth, but it's most rewarding because this truth is prevailing despite all opposition.

**Name: Brother Adam**

**How long have you been Muslim?**

I have been a striving Muslim my entire life. Understanding what Muslim means, the entire submission to the Will of Allah, I submitted to His Will when I took my first breathe.

**Do you attend a mosque?**

Yes I do attend a Mosque at Muhammad Mosque No.55

**Do you have a specific role in the mosque you attend? (Iman, Sheikh, Quran teacher,**

**community organizer etc.)**

No I don't have a specific role in the Mosque. I help out wherever I am needed.

**What, in your opinion, is the racial makeup of your mosque?**

For a lot of years the Mosque had represented the teaching in one prospective. As of late the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan has asked us to become more universal so we now see many multi racial people coming in

**If your mosque is predominantly composed of one race, do you have much interaction with mosques of other races and ethnicities? Why or why not?**

Yes our mosque is predominantly black in the city of Memphis. During the pandemic quarantine I went to experience other mosque and it was a culture shock of Islam that I am not accustom to.

**Do you recall any instances where you felt looked down upon because of your race from other Muslims? If so, would you like to elaborate on any specific events?**

Yes when I went to the mosque I was treat a different because I wasn't presenting myself as Arab Muslim. I was judge for not knowing Arabic and of course believe that God is a man.

**Do you feel represented in the global Muslim community?**

No my practice of Islam is more talked down upon than lifted up.

**Do you feel close to other non Nation Muslims?**

Yes of course! The Quran states that all believers in God have a reward with there Lord. And the

Quran states the friend of a Muslim is a Christian so I'm close to those who love God.

**How has your spiritual journey with Islam been? Have you ever felt as though being a Muslim was becoming difficult?**

I've enjoyed it tremendously. I have felt that becoming a Muslim was easier due to my studies of what and who a Muslim is.

**10. How do you personally feel your gender has played into your experience as a Muslim?**

It has given me a head start in life as a husband and father at my age.

**11. In what ways does your gender impact your role in your mosque?**

It has made me feel like I have to protect my mosque and the believers. Especially the women and children.

**12. Do you believe your experiences as a Black man have been changed by being in the Nation?**

No it has enhanced it, because it requires that I pass on my knowledge and deliver people to the mosque. I also have helped to change the lives of those around me.

**13. How do you feel that FOI class shaped/affirmed your gender?**

It has changed my entire life tremendously. I don't believe that if I was not an FOI I would be in the place I am now. Especially knowing where my parents were when they found the Nation of Islam. It has made me the family man I am today.

**Name: Sister Sarah**

1. **How long have you been Muslim?** All of my life!
2. **Do you attend a mosque?** Yes i do!
3. **Do you have a specific role in the mosque you attend? (Iman, Sheikh, Quran teacher, community organizer etc.)** Yes! All of the registered women of childbearing ages (16-36) make up the Vanguard of our mosque. As a Vanguard we help to secure our mosque meetings and are just the forefront of the MGT (Muslim Girls Training- women of the nation of Islam.
4. **What, in your opinion, is the racial makeup of your mosque?** Majority African American
5. **If your mosque is predominantly composed of one race, do you have much interaction with mosques of other races and ethnicities? Why or why not?** While I was in college, I did have a nursing school friend who was nigerian and also muslim.
6. **Do you recall any instances where you felt looked down upon because of your race from other Muslims? If so, would you like to elaborate on any specific events?** No I have not.
7. **Do you feel represented in the global Muslim community?** Yes I do, because I know that there are members of the Nation of Islam globally!
8. **Do you feel close to other non Nation Muslims?** Yes, i have two non-nation Muslims, and I never felt distant or looked down upon.



9. **How has your spiritual journey with Islam been? Have you ever felt as though being a Muslim was becoming difficult?** I have personally struggled taking on Islam for myself and not just due to the fact that my parents are muslims. Everyday I am renewing my Islam, and continuing to study the Quran and the teachings of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Yes! Especially while I was in college with the pull on the world. I continued to stay grounded in my faith by surrounding myself with my sisters of the faith. We lean on each other during hard times.
10. **How do you personally feel your gender has played into your experience as a Muslim?** One thing that comes to mind is the fact that covering your adornments is a huge aspect of the faith for women. I've personally struggled with covering my hair while in public, and I am still working on that.
11. **In what ways does your gender impact your role in your mosque?** As stated above, as a woman I am automatically a Vanguard in the mosque!
12. **How do you feel affirmed in your gender through your religion? How do you feel minimized?** In my religion, I feel empowered with the knowledge of knowing that I am the mother of civilization and the second self of God. I do not ever really feel minimized in my religion.
13. **What is America's role in gender representation/oppression?** I believe that when it comes to oppression, America has the power to use legislation to keep women from progressing.
14. **Do you believe your experiences as Black women have been changed by being in the Nation?** Yes, I do believe that my experiences as a Black women have been changed by being in the the Nation, because growing up I have always been taught to carry myself,

act, dress, and communicate in a certain way. This helped me to avoid various unfortunate situations that many of my friends have encountered.

15. **How do you feel that MGT class shaped/affirmed your gender?** Through my MGT class we are taught 7 units: How to keep house, how to rear your children, how to take care of your husband, how to sew, how to cook, and how to act at home and abroad. By learning these units throughout my life, it teaches me how to be a better sister, mother, wife and friend!





