

The Limits of Black Nationalism: The Nation of Islam (1930-75) as a Case Study

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Black Nationalist Thought and Misogyny: Past and Present

Malcolm X remains one of the most prominent figures within the Nation of Islam (NOI). He, along with others such as Elijah Muhammed and F. D. Fard influenced the central beliefs of the organization. One central tenet designated women as being secondary to men. Malcolm X's influence in the nation came from his sermons, speeches, and his autobiography, a book published in 1965. It was written with the permission of the Nation leaders to function as a conversion tool. In his book he firmly reiterates Nation messaging about women stating "the true nature of man is to be strong, and a woman's true nature is to be weak, and while a man must at all times respect his woman, at the same time he needs to understand that he must control her if he expects to get her respect" (Haley, X 239). Thus, a Black woman's position in the Nation was subordinate as its leaders believed women to be incapable of having agency and protecting themselves. This also conveys that Nation ideology frames heterosexual relationships as inherently authoritarian and unable to function if a man cannot get a woman to obey his commands. Like Malcolm X, there are still people who carry on new but familiar ideas of what Black women should be. These thoughts are expressed online loudly and often. One such example comes from a post on Twitter (X) discussing dating and Black women, user Obsevant3nigma writes sixty years after X "Black women are better double agents for white supremacy than they are mothers." (Obsevant3nigma, X). Black women are considered fully

realized people, but simply a tool utilized by men, Black or white. These statements demonstrate the belief that without the control of their bodies and actions by Black men, that Black women are living a life in sin by following white ways. Thus, Black men must function as a benevolent patriarch, while Black women are dependent on the good will of the men around them.

A woman's only value comes from if she is aligned with respectability and is controlled so that she can reap the benefits of what Ula Taylor calls the "Promise of Patriarchy." Taylor is a researcher and professor at UC Berkeley who focuses on Black women in American history. In her book of the same name (2018) she conveys that women in the Nation who do not embody respectable traits are subject to being insulted and blamed for holding Black men back from succeeding. In her submission a woman gains "protection" from relying on being exploited as a domestic worker/laborer. Ula argues that NOI beliefs about domesticity of Black women is necessary to prove the masculinity and power of Black men. With the creation of chattel slavery, the black family structure was called deviant to further dehumanize the enslaved. Under enslavement Black men could not uphold patriarchal norms how white men did as they were often emasculated. Thus, Black women were the head of households more often. The Nation believed that the way to right this perceived wrong caused by slavery, was to restore the Black woman to her place in the domestic sphere.

Throughout its existence, the Nation's leaders used the imagery of Black women as submissive to be a litmus test to show white America that Black Nationalism had validity and by extension proving that Black Americans were "civilized" (Gibson 84). Nationhood strength and health under the influence of European constructions of the Nation-State, is often messaging

accompanied by the imagery of women confined to the domestic sphere. This serves two functions, one: women's job in the Nation-State is to give birth to children and two: to educate loyal citizens "correctly" (E. Muhammed 52). As European power began to control a majority of the world, Nation-states became the civilized norm while those who lived under different political structures were considered primitive and deviant.

In the book *Gendering Nationalism*, researcher Dilar Dirik in her paper "Overcoming the Nation-State: Women's Autonomy and Radical Democracy in Kurdistan" contends with this belief. Dirik argues that Kurdish people have not encountered a "post-war backlash of women"(qtd Dirik 144). This post-war backlash references that in times of war or nationalistic struggles that once normalcy returns, women who were engaged in more masculine gendered tasks, are socially and politically pressured to return to the domestic sphere. For instance post World War II, American women who engaged in factory work were pushed to go back to domestic life. This pressure emerged alongside the imagery of the 1950s nuclear family. (). However, Dirik points to the Kurds as an exception to this. Rather than continuing to strive for Nationhood members of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) began to question seeking political organization through identity instead of nationhood. In the PKK Manifesto, the Kurdish articulate that "Not having achieved the level of adequate nationhood is seen as the main reason for the "backward" status of the Kurds. Civilization was understood...as a gradual linear chain of developments, which necessitates the state as a signifier of modernity and progress...according to this modernist assumption, to be a proper Kurdish nation then requires an own state. Even though it is acknowledged as the "strongest vehicle for the realization of exploitation" (qtd Dirik 146). The Kurdish are able to articulate the flaws of nationalism well, it is oppressive and needs

hierarchy to function. However, as their manifesto articulates, nationalism is the civilized and accepted language of power. As nationalism is a convenient language of power and pathway to humanize a group it makes sense that marginalized groups like the NOI desire to achieve it.

In the Nation of Islam, like many nationalist projects before and after them, Black women's restricted autonomy and bodies are representative of the legitimacy of its nationhood. It allows for Black Americans to reach the same civilized standard and power as white Americans. Despite being used to demonstrate the vitality of its nation; women within the Nation of Islam had their labor devalued even when they conformed. In this paper I will explain how women in the NOI sought to maintain agency while functioning within its strict patriarchal structure. I will also explore race, gender and nationalism using a Black feminist lens to critique the limits of Black Nationalist politics. Therefore demonstrating that Black Nationalism, while radical in opposition to White Supremacy, is regressive in how women are treated.

The Beginnings of the Nation of Islam

Since its founding in the 1930s, like most Black political groups in America, the Nation of Islam has sparked great controversy. The group started with a mysterious figure named W. D. Fard, who claimed to be of Arab descent and went by a myriad of aliases. Little is known about his life, thus his origin, name, whereabouts, etc are unknown¹. More mystery of who he is stems from the fact that he “disappears” around 1934. He would go door to door selling wares to Black households and proselytized at the same time². Through this he cultivated a following of people

¹ See Berg, Herbert. *Elijah Muhammad and Islam*. New York University Press, 2009. To learn more about Fard.

² See pages 18-20 of Amatullah Ajile Rahman, *She stood by his side and at times in his stead: The life and legacy of sister Clara Muhammad, first lady of the Nation of Islam*. Clark Atlanta University. To learn more about the conflicting accounts of Fard's first appearance

who called themselves the Allah Temple of Islam and later became the Nation of Islam. (Amatullah 18). Eventually, he and his followers founded and maintained a religious space and school on 3408 Hastings Street (Taylor 11, 23). Fard, in establishing his unorthodox version of Islam, borrowed from many different sources already familiar to Black Americans. His ideology took from the economic improvement strategy of Marcus Garvey³ and Booker T. Washington. In addition, he copied the teachings of the Noble Drew Ali, the leader of the Moorish Science Temple⁴ (Amatullah 18-20). Most importantly his beliefs utilized biblical foundations that empowered Black Americans by pointing out the sins committed against them by white supremacy (Taylor 18).

Fard's message fully enamoured African Americans of the 1930s in Detroit. The gap left by the decline of Garvey's UNIA organization and elite Black circles exclusivity made the NOI especially attractive to the overlooked Black working class (Cornell 26-8). Black Americans in the post-antebellum south were living under the harsh realities of life after slavery.⁵ The thirteenth amendment, while providing emancipation, made slavery still legal under the condition of incarceration. With this exception clause, many southern states established new Black codes that made it difficult for Black Americans to avoid the carceral system (Du Bois 163-4). All former confederate states created laws that made it illegal to be vagrant, to leave

³ See Garvey, Marcus. *Selected Writings and Speeches of Marcus Garvey*. Edited by PAUL NEGRI et al., Dover Publications, 2004, <https://ayanetwork.com.pdf>. To read more about Garvey's ideology and his organization, Universal Negro Improvement Association

⁴ See Wilms, Stephanie A. "Shadow and substance: Photography, Freemasonry, and the Moorish Science Temple of America." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 101, no. 1-2, 1 Jan. 2016, pp. 49-68, <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.101.1-2.0049>. To learn more about his organization. It is included here because it emerged around the same time as the NOI and is similar in nature.

⁵ To understand more background about the Reconstruction era read Du Bois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY, INC., 1935, *Internet Archive*, Archive <https://archive.org>, Accessed 2026.

home without employer permission, to gather in groups, or end contracts with white employers. If you were believed to have stopped working, the employer could report it to the police and have you arrested (Du Bois 144). In addition, extrajudicial violence was commonplace and police were complicit. Lynchings were a popular method utilized by the Klu Klux Klan in particular to maintain the social hierarchy. The rape of Black women in specific by white men was also a common occurrence⁶ (Dubois 569). To escape these conditions, many Black Americans choose to go to northern urban centers. It was believed that jobs were widely available with better pay than sharecropping and that less racism was present. What they encountered in Northern cities was similar challenges with new ones added. Things like poor living conditions, high unemployment, continued police brutality, and race riots meant that the conditions for many Black Americans in the North remained very similar to the places they left. In this position, it's no wonder W. D. Fard's message was so attractive. It released them from some of the psychological chains institutional racism had placed on them.

Unlike the story America forced upon them, in the Nation's worldview, they weren't the inferior beings White society claimed. Instead as Ula Taylor, author of the *Promise of Patriarchy* writes "Fard explained in a captivating revisionist narrative, teaching that "the black men in North America were not Negroes, but members of the lost tribe of Shabazz, stolen by traders from the holy city of Mecca 379 years ago" (Taylor 12). In addition, he advocated for the reversal of the racial hierarchy with Black men at the top. This posed as an attractive idea for

⁶ To learn more about the lynching, and rape of Black Americans, consider looking at Narnolia, Nitesh, and Naresh Kumar. "'Crusade' for African American Civil Rights: Female Rhetoric and Autobiography of Ida B. Wells." *Journal of African American Studies* (New Brunswick, N.J.) [New York], vol. 26, no. 1, March 2022, pp. 53–62, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-022-09576-4>. To understand political thought

many Black Americans as this soothed the hundreds of years of pain experienced through chattel slavery and its aftermath. Fard's ideology made sense of the extrajudicial violence, the erosion of culture, the inferiority they lived through, the suffering. Fard's pseudo historical narrative offered a reasoning for why Black Americans were targeted. It wasn't for their inferiority but, instead, that they were the superior beings whose legacy had been erased by an evil, jealous, and inferior group i.e white people. It gave them empowerment using the logic of Whiteness, by buying into binaries. This meant that although the Nation is a Black group, that they used the similar hierarchical structure as white society. When Whiteness began to construct the realities of those who were considered others during the age of exploration (exploitation), it eroded the sense of nuance and changed how hierarchies function across the world. Now power and beauty could only be defined by European norms of nation states (Strings 70). Thus, buying into Whiteness's logic meant that their cultures or races could only be primitive or advanced. For Black Americans to be the advanced culture was revolutionary as a concept.

As the group that would later be known as the Nation of Islam grew it began to be considered a cult by the Detroit government and other community leaders who stirred trouble. The Detroit city government specifically came to see them as a nuisance because they removed their children from school, and without the majority Black student body, the public schools would experience funding cuts. In fact in 1935, a social worker was sent into the Nation of Islam community to undermine its legitimacy so Black children would return to school. (Taylor 35) The Nation believed that by keeping their children out of school, they protected them from the ills of racism. They also believed that white institutions taught Black children false histories regarding where they came from. With the risk of funding on the line, the Detroit Board of

Education urged the police and Board of Health to shut down the University of Islam. The University was established within the building on Hastings Street and students included school aged children and older members from the community who had dropped out from school. In 1934, police raided the university, took all their records for evidence, arrested instructors (male and female) and Elijah Muhammed was also arrested for “contributing to the delinquency of minors” (Taylor 27-8). The officials found that their teachings were disruptive to the racial hierarchy in place, therefore white institutions sought to punish the Nation using the carceral system. Since Fard had “disappeared” two months previously, Elijah Mohammed became the de facto leader at the time and was punished with a jail sentence. Despite this, students young and old continued to be taught in member’s homes still under the threat of carceral punishment. In one instance recounted by her son Elijah Muhammed Jr., Clara, Elijah Muhammed Sr’s wife “responded to an officer who came to the home with the express purpose of forcing her children back into the public school system. She put her “foot in the door...and told the officer, “over [her] dead body.” (Taylor 32). She was also responsible for organizing the education of Nation children within her own home. Even with her husband in jail, Sister Clara Muhammed stood up to the Detroit Board of Education just as the men in their community would. This is despite Nation doctrines that say men should be the protectors not women. Clearly Black women felt inclined to defend themselves and others to sustain the Nation of Islam

The institution of the Black Church including denominations like AME Zion also viewed the Nation as being divisive. The Black Church valued gradual progression to equality and they aspired for this through respectability politics and economic bootstrapping. Largely influenced by Booker T. Washington’s economic and moral uplift, the Black Church believed the NOI’s

messaging was a threat to gaining more rights as it would make white audiences unsympathetic to their efforts.

The backlash from white institutions culminated in a courtroom in 1935 in which sixteen men and twenty four women were arrested. Members of the NOI filled the courtroom to initially support a member who was on trial, Sister Rosetta Hassan. Her son got into a fight with a child who was not a Nation member. The mother of the child filed a warrant citing that Sister Rosetta broke her glasses (Taylor 51). The NOI packed 40 members, most of them women, in the courtroom to support Sister Rosetta. The members were charged with contempt of court when a fight broke out between Nation members and the court bailiffs over directives to leave the courtroom. In the fight women as well as men took to beating the bailiffs ultimately leading to prison sentences for all involved. (Taylor 52). The women were given a thirty day sentence and the men received a six month sentence. The women's jail quarters were overcrowded and unsanitary. Additionally, the food given did not cater to the strict diet they were instructed to follow. The members would at times refuse to eat the food. The women were also targeted by the staff, often being inappropriately groped by male guards under the guise of patdowns (Taylor 55). Furthermore the women made to stay in their small and filthy cells for hours on end. These abuses in prison presented a difficult environment to practice NOI teachings. The white power structure sought to in that moment reprimand and scare the Nation and its members using the judicial system. While intended to break them, this move made the faith of the women particularly stronger.



Clara Muhammed, *Mother of the Nation: Clara Evans Muhammad:*
Wife of Elijah Muhammad, Mother of Imam W. Deen Mohammed
The Formative Years: 1899-1930

Shaping Women's Roles and Bodies in the Nation

Within the Nation, two central figures were responsible for shaping the ideal body type that was linked to the morality of the individual. They were Clara Muhammed and Sister Burnsteen, known as “The Reformer”. Members within the Nation were typically encouraged to eat one meal a day between four and six pm. (Amatullah 24). Though this was a directive for all, the pressure to restrict yourself from food was targeted at women especially. At just 18 years old, in 1934 Sister Burnsteen worked as Fard’s secretary. Together, they travelled and fished for new followers. She was also responsible for enforcing behavioral standards for women. In the nation members are separated by sex into two groups: the Fruit of Islam (FOI) for men and the Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Course (MGT-GCC). The MGT-GCC is intended to teach women how to be good moral mothers and wives (Chan 83). While the FOI men are trained to be masculine providers and learn how to fight. These groups came with weight requirements, enforced especially under Sister Burnsteen’s watch.

Though she was a prominent figure in the Nation, only one article of hers is available to modern scholars. In *The Final Call to Islam*, a newspaper released under Fard, Sister Burnsteen wrote a piece titled “Reduce and Be Cured of Your Ailments”. Burnsteen writes “MGT-GCC... was ‘set up by Master Fard Mohammed, for women and girls only.’” Women in the MGT-GCC were required to maintain a “standard weight of 120 lbs. and not over.” (qtd. in Taylor 47). This is in contrast to expectations of 150 lbs and lower for men. In her article, Sister Burnsteen asserts that being overweight was the cause of many illnesses and even more damning that it was immoral. To her and Fard “obesity “was caused by the devil (white man),” who encouraged excessive weight and consciously “disfigured us from our original selves in every way imaginable.” (qtd. in Taylor 47). This was likely also influenced by Western societies at the time demonizing fatness as well. Fatness for Black Americans was linked to the figure of the mammy, a jolly, fat, undesirable, motherly figure first developed in the antebellum era (Strings 68). This further plays into the respectability politics that Fard outlined for the Nation to counter the negative betrayals of Black women. To be respectable meant that Black women would no longer carry the chains of inferiority.

Thus, degree of fatness was linked to how moral and good of an adherent you were to Nation principles. The unsanitary diseased conditions and inadequate food meant that many of the members likely came back thinner. Their thinness could have potentially signaled their confirmation of their commitment to Nation ideals that were enforced within Sister Burnsteen and the MGT & GCC. Though the prison sentence was meant to deter members it clearly had the opposite effect as they already believed themselves to be persecuted. The jail’s condition could have been interpreted by the women as the necessary suffering to prove their loyalty to Elijah

Muhammed and the Nation. Those women who came back were likely praised for their bodies. Their weight signaled their confirmation of their commitment to Nation ideals that were enforced within the MGT & GCC.



Sister Burnsteen Sharrief, 1932
From *Promise of Patriarchy* by Ula Taylor
Provided by Nur and Median Mohammed

In 1935, the Nation of Islam changed under the self appointed Elijah Muhammad, coinciding with the release of the women from prison. Whereas under Fard, women were also responsible for proselytizing as “Sisters of the Mission” (Taylor 53), Muhammad deigned that women should only exist in the domestic sphere. In conceiving of his own vision of the Nation, he built further on Fard's beliefs, creating an organization that valued hierarchy and obedience similar to white hetero-patriarchy. It offered Black women the same system white women lived under with a similar promise of protection under patriarchy.

The Allure of Patriarchy

Under this promise, Black women's protection is the responsibility of Black men. This is seen in the Nation of Islam's seminal book, *Message to the Blackman in America* produced in 1965 by Elijah Muhammed. It became popular as the Civil Rights Movement lost momentum and even continues to be sold to this day on websites like Amazon. He writes that the Black man:

“lifts up the Negro woman and removes them from the status of being prostitutes for white men... Muhammed relieves them of all disgrace and gives them a new life based on purity and self respect... he makes it mandatory that his male followers honor their own women as individual examples of virtue.” (E. Muhammed 9).

The leader of the Nation of Islam framed Black men as responsible for the betterment of Black women. To accomplish this means that Black men must control Black women. Without that control they could be weaponized against Black men. He goes further to say:

“Our women are allowed to walk or ride the streets all night long, with any strange man they desire. They are allowed to frequent any tavern or dance hall that they like. They are allowed to fill our homes with children other than our own...children that are often fathered by the very devil himself.” (E. Muhammed 52-3).

Independent women are painted as immoral and selfish. This follows a similar pattern to how women are viewed in Christianity via the Madonna-whore complex⁷. The whore being the impure woman that does not follow Nation teachings and the Madonna or mother who is a desexualized nurturer despite having children. Women can inhabit one of these two roles, thus allowing for no complexity to them. This lack of nuance strips Black women of their humanity. Elijah Muhammed in his book goes on to write that to create a nation the “first step is control and protection of our own women. There is no nation on earth that has less respect for and little control of their women as we so-called Negroes” (E. Muhammed 52). For the Nation women are representative of the health and strength of their society. It isn’t simply the birthing of children that is required of women, they are responsible for teaching their children Muslim ways of life, maintaining a modest clean appearance and caring for their home and husband. In the late 1950s, the Nation created *The Messenger* to convey their nationhood to American society utilizing imagery of Black women in the domestic realm.

The Messenger, a magazine was created in response to the 1959 TV documentary, *The Hate that Hate Produced*⁸, made by Mike Wallace, a prominent broadcaster and Black journalist Louis Lomax, on WNTA-TV (Now PBS-13). Within this program the Nation of Islam and their ways of life are discussed. The program also pointed out that Black American Islam was an untraditional version (Wallace and Lomax 00:03:19). This became the first time that the Nation of Islam is seen by a mainstream white American audience as it was previously something primarily known about in Black communities. The film scandalized white America specifically

⁷See Chapter 6 of Weldon, Estela V.. *Mother, Madonna, Whore : The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*, Taylor & Francis Group, 1992. *ProQuest Ebook Central*. To learn more about the madonna-whore complex

⁸ To gain more context for the documentary watch Wallace, Mike, and Louis Lomax. “The Hate That Hate Produced.” *News Beat*, WNTA-TV, 1959, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsYWD2EqavQ>. Accessed 2026.

as many figures of the Nation were shown in the film angrily denouncing white people. Many white had little to no knowledge of the more radical alternative to the Civil Rights Movement.⁹ It worked to fearmonger the public by depicting several Black men in the film such as Malcolm X as aggressive, playing into the post-antebellum era fear of the black brute (Verney 118). This concept came to be during the era of reconstruction in which many Black Americans were making strides towards civically engaging; in response, white fear began to associate Black bodies with inherent violence. This imagery since has been used to justify the targeting of Black men specifically using smear campaigns or extrajudicial violence (Markovitz). The intention of the documentary remains unclear but, the framing used made the Nation of Islam out to be a hateful organization akin to the Klu Klux Klan. To have more control of their image and convey strength to America specifically the Nation intentionally depicted women in the same light as white women.

The Nation believes that in order to be respected by other nations including America that their women must be under control and portray a respectable image. Since the NOI was a Black separatist organization they sought to assert themselves as a nation separate from America. Included in *The Message to the Black Man in America*, was a demand that the U.S. government cede the land of the southern states to create their own Black nation (E. Muhammed 120). As the ability to hold land was less possible, the strategy employed was to create their own insular communities. Thus, women instead of men being representatives of the Nation aids in creating positive imagery for them. The images present Black women and girls as mothers, wives, and

⁹ To learn more about reactions to the NOI becoming mainstream read Verney, Kevern. "Malcolm X and Black Power, 1960-1980." *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, England, 2006, pp. 115–134, https://books.google.com/books?id=q7ObJIHvR9wC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_vpt_read#v=onepage&q&f=false. Accessed 2026.

students who were educated. These were images that countered the societal messaging that Black women were wild, sexually promiscuous, and unintelligent. In fact these images conveyed positive imagery that tapped into something that researcher Sylvia Malik-Chan refers to as insurgent domesticity. This concept meant the reversal of imagery associated with Black and white women. These depictions triggered “a crisis of masculinity...Black Muslim women triggered anxieties for white Americans against the evolving racial and gender politics of the Cold War era by asserting the moral and spiritual superiority of the Black patriarchal family” (Chan 77). After World War II there was concern that white men returning from war were contending with a shift in gender norms and threats of being emasculated. During the war women of all races were encouraged to take up factory work for the war effort (Office of War Manpower 2-3). Post World War II, many women especially white upper class women whose goal was now centered on empowerment and on being in the workplace were stepping outside of traditional norms. Therefore, Black women now seemed to be above white women as white men were seemingly losing control over them. This made the U.S. white nuclear family look weak in comparison to Black Americans and their Cold War enemies.

However, women of color and those who are working class had long been in the workplace. In fact these women often worked for upper-class women. White upper class women beginning to question and upset the hierarchy created fear in white society that white women would stop having children thus, not having enough of a majority to hold on to power. (Chan 86-7). Thus, the images depicting Black women as fit for being mothers and fertile was threatening because they were propped up in the same manner as white women. Now instead of being deviant Black families were being conveyed as nuclear, much like white middle-class

homes. To other Black women requires them being framed as the opposite of the fragility of white women. Without that dichotomy, racial patriarchy is threatened because there is no other for juxtaposition (Chan 84). This reflects how Black women's domesticity was used politically by the NOI to establish nationhood strength to the outside world.

The Consequences of Patriarchal Logics

The promise of patriarchy is tempting for Black women but there is a price to be paid for that protection. The intersectional nature of Black women's identity meant that they were the victims of abuses from white society and Black men. To hear rhetoric that calls women who have been undervalued, Queens and Mothers of the Earth must have been a euphoric experience. Although the words being uttered to Black women were well received, they belied a double-edged sword. This contradiction is well demonstrated in Reverend Eboni Turman-Marshall's piece, "*The Greatest Tool of the Devil': Mamie, Malcolm X, and PolitiX of the Black Madonna in Black Churches and the Nation of Islam in the United States,*" where she notes how the rhetoric of the Nation dehumanizes women through deification. By holding them to a supernatural standard, it allows for women who don't fit it to be thought of as used by the devil against the Black man specifically. Turman writes "this gendered paradox confines Black women of faith to a bad/beautiful dialectic that... paradoxically casts Black women as lying "tools of the devil" and as "beautiful black... sisters" worthy of respect, love, admiration, and protection"(Turman 131). Malcolm X in many of his speeches articulates that exact point. On many occasions he laments on the fact that Black women don't fish for converts as much as the men, specifically at Temple No. 7 in Harlem. Under Malcolm X's leadership Temple No.7 recruited many women. Thus, "he believed that the NOI's 'moral code and discipline was what repelled' black women the most... woman has led man into evil and the one she was created to

serve became her slave. She rules him entirely with her sexual appeal, her clothes designed by man to accentuate those portions of her body related to sex, and when he fully dresses she undresses” (Taylor 91). Within this text he parodies the story of Adam and Eve in the bible, presenting women as weak to sin like Eve. He invokes the Madonna Whore complex that cannot view women as multifaceted but as only wholly good or wholly bad. Instead of reflecting on how harsh his words were towards women, he blames them. Thus, demonstrating that when things in the Nation like women’s rates of membership are not rising as expected, they are blamed.

Domestic violence in the Nation is considered a crime that warranted a trial for anyone accused. On the surface, this seems like a good practice, but the punishment given did not prevent violence from occurring. It is not known how prevalent domestic violence within the Nation of Islam was, although there are certain instances that have been recorded. For example, FOI Captain Joseph of Temple No. 7, also known as Yusuf Shah, admitted to guilt he was told by Macolm X: “You know, as well as I, and better than perhaps most brothers here, that any brother that puts his hand on his wife . . . if it comes to my knowledge, automatically has ninety days out of the Temple of Islam.” (Taylor 97). Though there is a consequence for his actions, another example of a trial for a different crime contextualizes how severely domestic violence was handled by Nation leadership. Sister Eunice, another member of Temple No. 7, was accused of cheating on her husband. In her trial when she admitted to guilt, her punishment was much harsher. She was told by X: “I have no alternative other than to give you five years out of the Nation of Islam, during which I would advise you to fast and pray to Allah, ask him for forgiveness, ask your husband for forgiveness”(Taylor 97). Clearly, the crime of domestic violence was taken less seriously than cheating on a spouse. Domestic violence arguably

engenders more harm long term than cheating. Further, to suspend the abuser from the Temple meant he was likely to spend more time at his home with more proximity to his victim(s). It's possible that the man even retaliated against his wife as he was now banned from the Temple for 90 days. This pattern of how abuse is handled in the Nation is also present in Elijah Muhammed's relationships with his secretaries, some of whom were teenagers. The pattern also underscores how women in the Nation were not protected from harm under patriarchy.

Given the strict gender separation practiced by the Nation "single young women who worked for him [Elijah Muhammed] theoretically would have had no fears of being abused or taken advantage of by men in the folds of the NOI." (Taylor 128). This however is far from the truth. The Nation functions on a strict hierarchy, thus disobedience or refusal to do what is asked can get you in trouble. This can range from a few days suspension to being expelled. This means that if your whole life and family are inside the Nation, you are incentivized to obey so you do not lose community. As such Muhammed took advantage of his position to have sexual relationships with his secretaries between 1954-1963 (Taylor 129). It had been reported that "As early as 1954, members were astonished when a young woman who had served as his secretary in Chicago became pregnant. In 1956, another unmarried young secretary in Chicago became pregnant." (Taylor 129). As time went on more of his secretaries were continuously becoming pregnant. Initially members believed these women had a child with a non-muslim man, but it was soon uncovered that the father was Elijah Muhammed himself. By 1975, it was suspected that he had thirteen children out of wedlock (Taylor 134). Infidelity within the Nation warrants a heavy sentence as earlier discussed. However, instead of Muhammed being held accountable to the same standard he put his followers under, he remained in power. The women he impregnated

took the blame rather than him (Taylor 129). This shows the pattern of how men utilize patriarchal systems to avoid accountability for harm. The women and girls who worked under him almost had little choice to deny Muhammed. In addition, not only is he a man but he is also a prophet. Based on this, it's possible that he presented his abuse as ordained by God and not obeying could be seen as blasphemy. The patriarchal structure of the Nation sets up women to be sacrificed in the name of Nationhood. This means that women are disposable when they break rules or disobey men that want women to outsource their agency to them.

When the first secretary was impregnated in 1954 “Muhammad judged her as unfit and isolated her from the Nation... In 1960, four of his secretaries were brought before the Chicago temple and placed on trial because they were unwed and pregnant.” (Taylor 129). In fact to further protect the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm X suggested that he “present his actions to the membership as the fulfillment of a divine prophecy. Minister Malcolm linked the Messenger’s actions to “David’s adultery with Bathsheba” and “Moses’ adultery with Ethiopian women.” (Taylor 130). Malcolm’s suggestion gives Muhammed a way to avoid accountability for his actions. This statement infers that he was asked by Allah to impregnate these women using the biblical examples that Malcolm X provided and thus not up to Muhammed as he had to obey. His cheating marked his masculinity and power, thus was different from adultery. This represents how women and children’s safety and wellbeing are disposable to patriarchal systems. He often treated the unwedded women who had his children poorly. As mentioned some were kicked out and denied them community as being outside the Nation meant you were shunned by members. Having a child alone is stressful, not to mention

these women were cut off from support networks through the Nation. Some women experienced threats if the paternity of their children was revealed.

Evelyn Williams and Lucille Rosary, women who filed paternity suits against Muhammed, were threatened that if they told anyone that they would be murdered (Taylor 132). Lucille and Evelyn confirmed in court that Elijahh Muhammed had even paid child support like payments to her. In Lucille's case he did not deny that he fathered her children (Taylor 133). It is unclear to scholars what became of many of the women he impregnated, but what occurred exposed how women were not protected within the Nation. When this news reached followers, Muhammed's daughter (Clara and Elijah's child) claimed that Malcolm X brought the two women to seduce and ruin her fathers reputation. The Nation took the coverup attempt further by claiming the children were actually Malcolm's in *The Messenger* (Taylor133). This further demonstrates the lengths that Muhammed and those around him sought to keep his image in high esteem and maintain power, at the cost of women and girls who he impregnated and then abandoned. This contradicts Muhammed's edicts stated within his book. Muhammed himself, "made it a cardinal sin to disrespect or leave unprotected one's wife or any female member of one's family" (Amatullah 87). It is evident that though the Nation claimed themselves to be the protectors of Black women that they upheld the same systems that harmed them outside the Nation. The patriarchal logic used to justify Muhammed's actions further corroborates this. Within the Nation there is only the appearance of protection, but the moment men need to be held accountable for how they treat women the patriarchal system protects the men and leaves women and girls disposable.

With the parts of the ideology within the Nation it is no surprise that abuses of women can be downplayed. Note that, the Nation leadership actively advocated for men having complete control over women with obedience. This establishes a rigid hierarchy which revered men especially its leadership, ironically it was reminiscent of “the same charismatic aura of powerful men and authority that has so often led Christian women to a romantic interest in their pastors—which NOI teachings so condemned” (Taylor 94). It is also to be noted that women were often villainized as temptresses who could lead Black men astray. Thus, the promise of protection could very quickly become a cage. Within this cage of patriarchy women and children would not be safe. Since patriarchy only values men and defers to masculinity as being at the top, anyone who is not is subject to harm or disposability.

How Women Carved Out Their Own Agency

Though to the outside world, the women within the Nation seemed docile and cloistered this was far from the truth. From the very beginning of the Nation, women were instrumental to its success. In fact it is Clara, Elijah Muhammed’s wife, who introduced him to Fard Muhammed. Ula Taylor in the *Promise of Patriarchy* posits that “Clara became the vessel for the remaking of her husband when she transmitted Fard’s permission to “teach Islam.” (Taylor 15). Prior to their conversion, the family struggled financially. Elijah could barely hold a job and became an alcoholic amidst the challenges of living in what they initially believed to be a “promised land.” The success of Elijah was ostensibly due to the intervention of Clara. Initially due to her having completed more schooling than Elijah, she would consult with and transcribe many of his earlier writings. When Elijah was arrested several times over the course of the 1930-40s, she became the figurehead of the Nation. Prior to this she was known as the Supreme

Secretary of the Nation of Islam. She was also responsible for teaching students in her home when the Nation refused to send their children to Detroit schools. With Elijah in jail, she was tasked with conveying Elijah's "orders to the leadership outside the prison" (Amatullah 69). She held meetings in her home, directed the focus of the group and often made decisions on her own accord. In addition, she spearheaded the effort to recruit new members and was responsible for training them, both male and female.

When her husband was released from jail, Clara's position shifted, but her power and influence remained. In that time period of leadership she "moved from a woman who was influenced and shaped by the traditional mores and values of her husband and community, to one who now helped shape and define what was Islamic, what was female, and what constituted true womanhood" (Amatullah 71). She is responsible for much of the teachings within the MGT &GCC based on what Fard once taught her. Arguably her marriage to Elijah, is the ideal standard of what women within the Nation were to aspire to. Thus, her continued loyalty to her husband and the Nation were imperative.

This pedestal and Elijah were shaken by his inappropriate sexual relationships with his young secretaries, even resulting in some pregnancies. This news strongly contrasted with the image that both Clara and Elijah established. If he had truly transgressed in this way it meant that according to laws in the Nation that he should have been punished. However, these allegations were largely dismissed by claims that the rumor was spread by the FBI. Eventually, Clara "confronted her husband about his "inappropriate behavior," which he vigorously, and understandably, denied; continued to act in the capacity of First Lady and role model for the

Muslim woman, and at the same time, tried to understand and contain the rebellion of her children and grandchildren against their father and Leader” (Amatullah 76). Although Clara found the news of her husband's alleged abuses to be devastating, she still remained in the Nation. As Amatullah suggests, leaving Muhammed would have deeply fractured the Nation's image. She sacrificed her own feelings about the events as she had done many times before for the ideal of a black nation. This is in step with Nation ideology which glorifies those, especially women for sacrificing their needs or desires for the sake of a Black Nation. This is the standard for women in the Nation as Madonna. In this role women are sacrificial of their needs and even their own safety if it means the advancement of Black people.

Other prominent female figures come to light through the Nation’s newspaper *Muhammed Speaks* first published in the 1960. From the start of the newspaper, “Nation women contributed to and featured in every issue of the MS newspaper from its founding up until its transformation under the guidance of Imam W. D. Mohammed. Indeed, former MS columnist Anna Karriem became the paper’s editor-in-chief” (Gibson 2). Women were encouraged to share their thoughts in the newspaper, especially in the “*What has Islam done for me?*” section. In the early 1960s a column called “*For and About You*” managed by Sister Henrietta Muhammad became very popular. Furthermore, Elijah Muhammed sought out the opinion of Nation women in his own writing including Tynetta Denear, Herietta Muhammad, and Anna Karriem, all women he is related to or has relationships with. (Gibson 3). Tynetta Denear in particular, would write articles that researcher Mari Dawn Gibson believes can be viewed from a pro-womanist lens. In a contribution to the paper titled “Muslim Woman Is Model Personality” she describes Black women as “by nature creative, always seeking the unusual, the unique, the original,

whether in domestic affairs, social, intellectual, educational or professional” (Gibson 7). There is clearly a high reverence for Black women to be noted here, that does lend itself to viewing her writing as pro-womanist¹⁰, of which the Nation is not. The Nation exists for the uplift of men specifically in practice. Thus, in her logic, Denear highlights the structures within the Nation that she believes values women, illustrating the empowerment she and others likely felt being “protected and cherished”. She reflects the feelings of many women within the nation, one of feeling liberated from horrors of white supremacy. This logic allows Black women to acknowledge their Blackness and womanhood at the same time, which they were historically denied.

It is also important to note what on the surface seems to be another contradiction to nation logic. Though they were often discouraged from working under an employer, women were encouraged to open their own businesses. From Nation logic, this job would be preferable as women would not be working under a white boss and instead for themselves. These businesses such as Hettie's Shoe Store and Sister Sarah's Restaurant were often promoted in the Muhammad Speaks newspaper (Gibson 17). Women worked for the Nation in other more unnoticed ways as well, “women toiled as secretaries for the NOI, sewed clothes in the Nation factories, baked pies and bread for Nation bakeries, cooked at the Nation restaurants, served as cashiers at the Nation department and grocery stores, taught school at the University of Islam” (Taylor 113). Despite this, women were paid on an alternate schedule often being paid less than they would make in a minimum wage job outside the NOI. The pay women received demonstrates how women's work was not seen as important and visible. This would ensure

¹⁰ Read Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Amistad, 2023. To learn more womanism

women's dependency on men's salaries. All of these jobs are extensions of domestic work that women performed in the home in the first place. It was a given that these domestic adjacent tasks were done by women and thus because of their secondary status, the work is undervalued. This ensures that the nature of women's work was exploitative because of how much free labor was provided.

Some women exercised more agency in the Nation than others due to the rank of the men around them. Sister Gwendolyn 2X for instance was married to Brother Micheal Simmons, whose brother was the National secretary of the NOI. This allowed her to encounter less pushback when she broke rules. She rarely wore the "MGT- GCC uniform, headscarf" (Taylor 115) and her work took her outside the Nation. As mentioned earlier, women did run businesses within the NOI. However, these businesses were typically expected to be an extension of the domestic sphere like a bakery or dress shop. Sister Gwendolyn 2X encountered much resistance because she worked for the National Council for Negro Women (NCNW). This organization was established to create community based efforts to uplift Black women economically and politically. This group was outside the limit of what would be an acceptable job for a Nation woman to have, especially as it contradicted the patriarchal structure the NOI upheld. Beyond her family connections, one of the main ways she secured her agency to do work in and out of the Nation was through birth control. By controlling her reproduction she was able to give herself more time to pursue her interests and desires.

Other women also exercised agency within the Nation through family planning. On paper the Nation of Islam forbids the use of birth control or abortions. To create a nation "believers

were...charged with producing children for its black nation...the Nation asked women to be fruitful and multiply.” (Taylor 178). The unsavory origins of Planned Parenthood and the intentional acts to control Black Americans fertility by the U.S. government makes wariness of birth control amongst the Nation understandable. Malcolm X was the person who bridged the gap by meeting with the Harlem directors of Planned Parenthood. Believing that nothing in NOI teachings banned family planning, he connected Sister Captain at Mosque No. 7 with Planned Parenthood introducing contraceptives to NOI women in culturally competent ways (Taylor 116). While women in the NOI did their best to use natural methods many found relief with family planning methods. One member, Sister Beatrice Muhammed from Durham, North Carolina stated that “She believed that it was a woman’s decision and that one had to consider her own health history to know her birthing “limit.”... Insightfully reasoning that “a lot of these rules were written by men, and they are not the ones having all of these babies,” gave her the wisdom to know that three children were her limit” ” (Taylor 117). Black women utilized family planning for their health, sanity and to exercise control over their financial stability.

In the 1970s, Elijah Muhammed became more adamant that his followers do not work “white man jobs.” This meant that many men left well paying jobs to sell The Muhammed Speaks newspaper. The new income source was highly un lucrative leaving women who did not work in financial instability. On top of this the daily tithes, dues and fundraising proceeds were paid to the organization causing already poor families to further struggle (Taylor 167). For many of these women, it was the complete opposite of why they joined the Nation and although welfare was not allowed, many signed up to keep their households taken care of.

Welfare has been a contentious topic in the U.S. since its founding and race profoundly complicates this. Black families were always pathologized as early as the institution of slavery due to their perceived inability to meet middle class white norms. One of the most lasting reports that defined pathologizing Black families was the Moynihan report.¹¹ Black women in particular were blamed for why their men felt emasculated and their children became deviants. The Nation of Islam's beliefs worked to "correct" this belief utilizing patriarchy and putting the man at the head of the household. However, even with the men at the head of the household women were still struggling financially. Many women in secret would seek welfare just to keep their families afloat and from being homeless. One woman, Sister Doris 9X stated that "A lot of NOI women were "leaning on the mother Nation [federal government]," said Sister Doris 9X, getting food stamps, having babies on Medicaid, and living in low-income housing (Taylor 120). Clearly, even though the Nation of Islam promised to deliver women from a life of poverty in reality they were still exercising agency as heads of household. Women acted out agency in many ways negotiating through the patriarchal structures of the Nation. Some women used their connections to do so, others used their writing, and many more had no choice when their husbands could not keep up with the needs of their family.

Reframing how we view Women in Nation States: Should Nation States Exist at all?

According to Patricia Hill Collins, a nation state is "a collection of people who have come to believe that they have been shaped by a common past and are destined to share a common future" (Collins 229). Members of a nation will participate in nationalism which helps "to foster beliefs and practices which permit a people or nation to control its own destiny"

¹¹ Read Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. "Moynihan Report 1965." *Milestone Documents in African American History*, 1 Jan. 2010, <https://doi.org/10.3735/9781935306153.book-part-099>. To understand how the Black family became considered deviant

(Collins 229). Its destiny can entail control over land (i.e. borders), access to resources and power over other groups or nations. This is the exact logic utilized by European countries to enact domination over the world. The Nation of Islam follows in the footsteps of European nationalistic efforts because in our current world that conveys power. As a result, The Nation does not have a traditional sovereignty over land, they rely more on the optics of a Black separatist nation. Like in many nation building projects before and after the NOI, women were seen as a necessary tool used to display the strength of Nations, thus meaning they are a resource to be controlled. Women are paramount to nation building “because women are capable of becoming mothers, women are central to three elements in nationalist thinking, namely, issues of sexuality and fertility, of motherhood, and of being symbols of the nation” (Collins 230). Due to the control exerted over women’s reproduction, bodies, and image for the sake of a nation, rigid hierarchy works to maintain this power.

Black Americans present a unique case for what it means to build a nation. In comparison to other diasporic groups, Black Americans do not have a land in which they are the majority which is part of the formula for nation-states. Thus, in the absence of land the Nation of Islam constructed the aesthetics of Nationhood through women instead. In American history the Black family and by extension the Black woman has been pathologized and represented the opposite of the white nuclear family norm. The Nation of Islam flipped the U.S. hegemonic power structure by placing Black women on the same pedestal reserved for white women. To this end they prominently displayed Black modest and feminine women through *The Messenger* and *Muhammed Speaks*. The women depicted were shown with children, in the home and as wives, situating them in domestic contexts. These images elevated Black women to the same level of

white womanhood. This depiction makes Black women dainty and pure thus worthy of protection. However, as mentioned earlier to have a standard there must be another. This implies that there must be women who were not pure or worthy of protection. Though the Nation was touted to Black Americans as a path forward to hope and an end to subjugation through the vessel of a Nation, it didn't always hold up to scrutiny. In truth, like most Nation states, they have "the authority to obscure its own power and to redefine its own special interests as being national interests." (Collins 230). As discussed in the section titled *The Beginnings of the Nation of Islam* the extreme violence and denial of resources to African Americans was present even in the absence of slavery. This feeling of powerlessness at the hands of racism made many believe Black Americans would never have peace in their country.

Following in the footsteps of European Nationalist projects, Black Americans took up the idea of nationhood to prove their humanity. Author Keisha Blaines in quoting historian E. Frances White argument, aptly defines black nationalism as "radical and progressive in relation to white racism and conservative and repressive in relation to the internal organization of the black community" (qtd. Blaine 203). This is evident in the writings of the *New Negro World* Newspaper that emerged alongside the Nation of Islam in the 1940s. In 1927, after Marcus Garvey's deportation, the U.S. base of the Universal Improvement Negro Association (UNIA) was managed by longtime member, James R. Stewart. Amidst Garvey's deportation, the UNIA lost large numbers of members. To increase momentum and membership for Black Nationalism, Stewart started *The New Negro* Newspaper. Though this newspaper did not focus on religion specifically, there is no doubt that Nation members of the era likely encountered and agreed with its Black nationalist ideas.

Many writers in the newspaper use a similar masculine language to discuss what it means to develop a Nation. For instance “activist Ethel Collins asserted, “The Pilgrim and colonists did it for America, and the New Negro can do it for Africa.” (qtd. Blaine 203). This is familiar language to Americans as it parodies the historical mythology surrounding how America’s birth. In addition the phrasing erases the harm and exploitation caused by colonists on the enslaved and the communities of indigenous people already in the Americas. The statement belies Black Americans aspirations to not simply exercise autonomy but to enact colonization on others. When writing about indigenous Africans, paternalistic logic was used, similar to the language of colonists that justified chattel slavery and assimilating indigenous people. It is clear here that the line between oppressor and oppressed becomes blurred. Especially as the newspaper indicates that Black Americans should learn from Zionists in their efforts to establish a Jewish nation state.

A comparable parallel can also be drawn between the language used in *The New Negro* paper and the Nation of Islam about women. In 1942, Stewart wrote “[t]he women of Africa must not be exposed as our women in America, under the pretense of total war and Democracy.” (qtd. Blaine, 200). Here he articulates a necessity of women to be modest and cloistered for the sake of their protection. Like the women in the Nation of Islam, the women who contributed to the New Negro World were engaged in “ “community feminism,” a “territory that allowed [women] to join feminism and nationalism into a single coherent, consistent framework.” “(qtd. Blaine 199). Community feminism allowed for women to enact agency, while not fully challenging patriarchy. Nation women like Clara Muhamed, Tynetta Deneer, and Gwendolyn 2X,

all negotiated their agency in different circumstances while ultimately accepting some patriarchal notions.

It is evident that nationalism encourages devaluing of life as human beings. While imperialism and nationalism exist as separate concepts, they are interconnected and often function together. Amongst these intertwined ideas, the world around us and the people in it become categorized within shades of resource or disposability. It begs the question, how can the marginalized gain power without falling into colonialist structures? The lives of many women in the Nation are evidence that patriarchy of a different color is still not safe. Those women became the disposable victims of patriarchy much like how Black Americans were disposable to the capitalist system that enslaved them for profits.

In efforts of liberating Black people from oppressive structures relying on the theory of intersectionality¹² would serve us well. There is nothing lost when we consider both being a woman and Blackness at the same time. When we try to ignore these intersections we risk devaluing the contributions of Black women much like the Nation once did. And at worse it leaves Black women susceptible to harm from abuse in their home or the Mosque. This despite the rhetoric that Black women would be safe from abuse because they were in relationships with Black men. All of this ultimately entails the dehumanization of Black women as they cannot possibly live up to the standards of pedestalizing the Nation has set forth. In trying to rid

¹² To understand more of the theory of intersectionality read Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, July 1991, pp. 1241–1299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

ourselves of oppressive structures we must be careful not draw similar artificial boundaries as our oppressors.

To this end I want my readers to explore alternatives to nationalism a bit to understand if we can move beyond its conception. Nationalism encourages binary thinking, thus it can be hard to hold two truths at once. This is what intersectionality and transversal politics¹³ implores us to consider. Transversal politics like intersectionality asks us to get clear about our own positionality in society. In Collins book, “Black women are poor either because they are Black or because they are women. One is either a racist or antiracist individual, a sexist person or not, an oppressor group or oppressed one.” (Collins 245-6). In looking to our past maybe we can find an answer. Before European colonialism, West African societies differed in gendered power dynamics. There are accounts that “a North African traveller on his trip to Mali in 1352 recorded that West African women enjoyed unprecedented freedom unlike their counterparts in North Africa (Diop 1978). This was because pre-colonial societies in West Africa provided avenues for women to exercise political power.” (Amoah-Boampong and Agyeiwaa 1103). Women in West African societies held political high positions and were revered. This is not the case in all West African societies as some follow patriarchal structures, but the non-hierarchical societies can serve as inspiration for what other kinds of life are possible. Though the strategy of nationalism could be useful in the short term, we have discussed above nationalism foments hierarchy. Hierarchy means that someone in a society has to take the short end of the stick. In summary to avoid having to subject anyone in our community to being disposable we need the imagination possible to seek it out.

¹³ To understand Transversal politics moreread Hill-Collins, Patricia. “The Politics of Black Feminist Thought.” *Black Feminist Thought*, 1 June 2002, pp. 17–36, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203900055-8>.

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