Introduction

When you went into the Nation, the first thing they taught you was, your brothers and sisters are in the temple and no one else matters. You can’t have any other friends; you turn your back on everyone. Everything they want you to do, they got a place for you to do it.
—Sonji Clay, first wife of Muhammad Ali

The Nation gave me a place to develop the confidence that I needed. It was a womb that got me ready to come out into the world.
—Lynda, Sunni Muslim woman

Both popular media and scholarly accounts of the Nation of Islam (NOI) tend to focus on dominant male figures such as Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Louis Farrakhan. In the rarer cases in which literature on the Nation features women’s experiences, Nation women are often presented in relation to these dominant men, as in the case of Sonji Clay, whose comments at the start of this Introduction were included in a biography of Muhammad Ali.1 Or they tend to be accounts of ex-Nation women who describe the NOI as controlling and repressive, as also mentioned in Clay’s comments. Missing have been the accounts of everyday NOI women, many of whom, unlike Clay, consciously chose the Nation independent of their husbands or fathers. Also absent have been the voices of ex-Nation women who, like Lynda, also quoted at the start of this Introduction, have left the NOI for Sunni Islam but describe the Nation as an organization that bettered their lives.2 This book brings such voices to the center of analysis. It portrays women of the Nation of Islam from various perspectives, recognizing the group’s patriarchal dimensions and revealing how women have experienced and shaped the Nation.

This book explores how women have understood, experienced, and contributed to the Nation of Islam throughout its eighty-year history. It illuminates how women have interpreted and navigated the NOI’s
gender ideologies and practices in light of their multilayered identities as women of ethnic minorities in America. It portrays the diverse experiences of mostly African American and also Latinas and Native American women within the NOI and their changing roles in the group. Women of the Nation of Islam include those who joined the organization under Elijah Muhammad, its second leader; those who followed Elijah’s son W. D. Mohammed when he inherited leadership of the Nation of Islam and enacted a shift toward Sunni Islam; and those who have followed Louis Farrakhan after he resurrected the Nation of Islam for those dissatisfied with W. D. Mohammed’s transition to Sunni Islam.

Women’s accounts of the Nation of Islam vary, but generally they are far more positive than indicated by feminist critiques of the NOI and other scholarly and popular histories of the Nation. Misperceptions of the Nation of Islam can be attributed to two factors: (1) that women’s experiences have been presented and understood outside of historical context and (2) that a broad spectrum of women in the Nation of Islam have not been represented in their own voices. This book corrects this tendency, providing historical and ethnographic detail of women’s participation in and perspectives on the Nation of Islam from the 1930s to the present.

This book argues that the racial climate of the United States has made the Nation of Islam particularly appealing to African American women. In its early years, these women were primarily interested in its race-uplift and community-building messages, but they also embraced the Nation’s traditional gender roles given Black women’s generally lower socioeconomic status and American notions of respectability and economic advancement. As the Nation of Islam moved into its post–civil rights formations and toward Sunni Islam, women’s experiences generally became even more favorable. We attribute this in part to the ways in which the two leaders following Elijah Muhammad—W. D. Mohammed and Louis Farrakhan—incorporated ideals regarding women’s public leadership and racial diversity based in both American culture and Islam, albeit in varying degrees and from different directions. Moreover, women’s positive experiences relate also to how women themselves have interpreted and navigated expressions of their faith, including those of their leaders, in light of their social and personal concerns as African American women, and in a few cases, Latinas
and Native American women. In sum, we argue that the Nation of Islam experience for women has been characterized by an expression of Islam sensitive to American cultural messages about race and gender but also by gender and race ideals in the Islamic tradition. While this expression of Islam, which includes an honoring of traditional gender roles and prescribed female dress and decorum, is not always in harmony with popular notions of women's advancement in American society, it certainly speaks and appeals to the continuing concerns about race, family, and community among many African American women.

The NOI’s Beginnings

The NOI finds its origins in 1930s Detroit. Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, its founder, remains something of an enigma in the history of African American Islam. For decades, scholars have contested Fard’s origins, ethnicity, and the extent of his affiliations with Black nationalist and Islamic organizations in the United States. Fard was neither native to the United States nor of African descent. Recent research by journalist Karl Evanzz and historian Fatimah Fanusie suggests that he was of Pakistani origin. According to FBI surveillance, Fard entered the United States illegally in 1913. Fard’s light-skinned complexion set him apart from the plethora of small-scale peddlers and African American preachers in Detroit. According to sociologist Erdmann Beynon, Fard introduced himself to Detroit’s African American migrant community as a peddler. Soon after gaining the confidence of his customers, he began to censure Christianity and the Black church. Beynon notes that Fard taught his customers that Islam was their “true” and “natural” religion, that the “Asiatic Black man” was “the God of the universe,” and that Caucasians were “blue-eyed devils” created by an evil scientist, Yakub, on the island of Patmos. Fard’s audiences grew rapidly in size. Two factors in particular are important when considering Fard’s success. First, his exclusive African American following comprised predominantly working-class migrants from the American South who found their dreams of economic opportunity unfulfilled as a result of the economic depression of the 1930s. Thus, when they first encountered Fard, they were receptive to his message. Second, Fard’s followers proved unhappy with the existing religious landscape of Detroit as evidenced by the growth
of storefront churches in the city. Indeed, it is estimated that by 1930 storefronts accounted for 45 percent of African American churches in Detroit. Migrants were enthralled by Fard’s critique of the U.S. racial hierarchy and his rhetorical attacks on Caucasians, whom he described as the “natural enemy” of Blacks. Beynon comments that Fard’s customers collectively financed the hiring of small halls and basements in order to accommodate all of the migrants who proved eager to hear the peddler “teach” them about their “natural” religion. It was at this point that the NOI was born.

Fard’s theology and racial politics were the product of multiple competing influences. Fard was a contemporary of both Marcus Garvey and Noble Drew Ali. The Garvey movement, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), was an early-twentieth-century Black nationalist and separatist organization. Garvey’s organization proved hugely popular with the urban Black proletariat, but the UNIA collapsed following Garvey’s deportation on charges of mail fraud in 1927. Early historians and sociologists who studied the NOI noted that it also had commonalities with another group, the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA). The MSTA was founded and led by Noble Drew Ali in Newark, New Jersey, in 1913. The MSTA’s members were a discernible group within their larger communities. They were close-knit and entrepreneurial, and they identified themselves not as Negroes but as Moors—“a nation that emerged out of a more general group of Asiatic peoples.”

The MSTA was afflicted by power struggles, the most volatile of which was launched by MSTA member Sheik Claude Green. The struggle resulted in Green’s sudden death. Police arrested Ali on suspicion of murder but released him soon after. In the weeks that followed his release from police custody, Ali died under mysterious circumstances. The confusion surrounding Ali’s death allowed several individuals to launch succession bids that included controversial claims of reincarnation. It is thought by some historians that Fard Muhammad was one of these individuals.

Fard Muhammad’s theology was inspired primarily by UNIA and MSTA dogma. However, it also borrowed from the Bible and the writings of Joseph F. Rutherford, leader of the Jehovah Witnesses. Fard taught his followers that the Bible had been contaminated and distorted by the “blue-eyed devils” and that heaven and hell were nothing more
than realities to be faced while on earth. Fard referred to his followers
as Asiatics and as members of the original Lost-Found Tribe of Sha-
bazz. Fard’s following is estimated to have included thousands of mem-
ers. Fard marketed his message to migrants as being rooted in their
ancestral religion, Islam. However, Beynon’s observations, accounts by
early members, and police surveillance illustrate that Fard’s knowledge
of Islam was rudimentary. Moreover, his claim that Islam had been the
ancestral religion of his African American followers was fallacious.

African American studies scholar Alan D. Austin notes that approxi-
mately 10 percent of African slaves taken from the west coast of Africa
by European slave traders were Muslim. Muslim slaves made “genu-
ine and persistent” efforts to observe and fulfill the requirements of
their faith in the United States. Yet such efforts proved tenuous and
insufficient given the pressure on Muslim slaves to abandon their faith
for Christianity. Islam did not begin to thrive among African Ameri-
cans until the twentieth century, when Muslims increasingly migrated
to the United States from Asia and Africa. African Americans were
introduced to Islam in the 1920s by Muslim missionaries in the form
of the Islamic Mission of America, the Universal Islamic Society, and
the Ahmadiyya movement. The Ahmadiyya, an Islamic sect from the
Indian subcontinent, had the greatest impact. Islamic studies scholar
Aminah B. McCloud notes that the Ahmadiyya’s most important con-
tribution to the spread of Islam among African Americans was their
circulation of Islamic literature and English translations of the Qur’an. Although they gained African American adherents, all three mis-
sionary groups failed to address and provide a panacea for the unique
socioeconomic problems afflicting African Americans. It appears that
Fard Muhammad learned from their collective error, as his eclectic the-
ology addressed both the spiritual isolation and socioeconomic realities
of his followers.

Beynon’s research tells us little about why women may have been
attracted to the NOI. The emphasis Fard appears to have placed on
morality and asceticism, however, is likely to have been a characteristic
that women embraced in the hope that it would regulate their spouses’
behavior. Nation members formed their own close-knit community. Yet
they were a sizable group in Detroit and known for their work ethic and
refusal to be called by their anglicized surnames, which they replaced
with an X. The “X” was adopted by Nation members for two reasons. First, it represented their unknown ancestral names and, second, it implied “that the Muslim is no longer what he was.”10 A new member took a numbered X, as in Carla 3X, when others with her first name had already joined the group. Fard developed a number of internal organizations for his followers, including an independent school for Nation children, the Muhammad University of Islam (MUI). Fard’s female followers were educated in domestic science in what became known as Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class (MGT & GCC), which was generally shortened to Muslim Girls Training, or MGT. Male members of the organization likewise attended gender-segregated classes known as the Fruit of Islam (FOI), which operated as a paramilitary division of the organization. Members of both the MGT and the FOI were responsible for providing security during NOI meetings, which included searching individuals before they entered NOI temples.

Fard’s Early Followers, Clara and Elijah

Clara Poole was one of Fard’s earliest followers in Detroit. Her unexpected journey to the NOI began in 1923, when she and her husband, Elijah, left their native Georgia for Detroit with their two infant children, Emmanuel and Ethel. Elijah relocated to Detroit ahead of his wife and children to secure work in industry. The family shared the optimism, turmoil, and despair of the migrant experience. Their decision to relocate to the North was inspired by the promise of economic opportunity and the desire to raise their children in a more racially tolerant society.11 Elijah found work in numerous industries, including the Detroit Copper Company and later the Chevrolet Axle Company, while his young wife assumed the role of homemaker. In 1925 Clara gave birth to another daughter, Lottie, and a year later to another son, Nathaniel. Her fifth child, Herbert, was born in 1929. The family survived on Elijah’s stints of temporary employment until the late 1920s, when the city’s economy began to suffer the effects of a national economic downturn. Clara’s fears about the economic well-being of her family intensified when she discovered that she was pregnant with their sixth child, Elijah Jr., in 1931. Elijah’s inability to provide for his family quickly drove him from the family home and into the nearest gutter, where he was
often found drunk. Unable to secure full-time employment, Clara began to venture out of the home in search of day-to-day employment in domestic work. She later described this tumultuous time as the family’s “lowest ebb”:

> Once my family and I were at our lowest ebb—in a bad condition. With five children, there were times we didn't have a piece of bread in the house, nor heat, water or even sufficient wearing apparel. My husband would walk the streets looking for a job daily, but would come home with no job. I would go out and try to help him, but with five children I could not work steadily. However, I was successful when I went door to door, asking for work.

Keeping her family together required nothing short of a herculean effort, but Clara's plight was not unique. The proliferation of female-headed households among urban Black communities was a direct consequence of wider employment practices that favored the employment of Black women as cheap, noncontractual domestic servants. Black men, on the other hand, encountered a job market that was anything but a level playing field. Jobs that had been traditionally considered the preserve of the African American proletariat were increasingly pursued by whites as competition for work intensified. Indeed, the 1930 census report revealed that in the North unemployment rates were 80 percent higher for African Americans than whites.

Clara's work kept the family afloat, but nonetheless Elijah detested domestic service—an industry known to carry the very real potential for physical and sexual abuse. The plight of the Poole family improved in the spring of 1931, when Elijah's drinking eased after he confessed to his mother that he felt there was something “warning” him to be a “better man” and to “teach religion or preach.” The Poole family was steeped in the traditions of the southern Black church. Elijah's family was active in the surrounding Baptist churches in Cordele and Sandersville, Georgia, where his father preached. Clara was born into the Bethel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Cordele, where her father was heavily involved in the ministry. Clara appears to have cherished deeply her faith and her close-knit church family. Historian Claude Clegg observes that Clara's “piety” was an attribute Elijah found
particular attractive.\textsuperscript{18} The migration north disconnected the Poole family from the refuge the church had provided them. Elijah and his young wife struggled to find a spiritual home in Detroit, as did thousands of migrant families.

Clara was particularly unprepared for the realities of the urban North. Racial violence, discrimination, and disregard for the lives of Black Americans were evidenced in race riots and discriminatory employment practices. Her host city tested Clara’s faith. Religious studies scholar Debra Majeed comments, “Without the closeness of her immediate or church families, Clara found herself searching for a tangible anchor in an environment where many disillusioned Blacks hunger[ed] for a religion that spoke to their ‘material reality.’”\textsuperscript{19}

Womanist scholars Rosetta Ross and Debra Majeed contend that it was Clara who introduced her husband to the NOI’s founder, Fard Muhammad.\textsuperscript{20} Their contention, while disputed, is not without merit. Fard’s door-to-door activity as a peddler in Detroit’s African American neighborhoods lends credence to the revisionist theory offered by Majeed and Ross. Elijah’s frequent absences would likely have meant that when Fard did approach the home of the Poole family, it was Clara whom he encountered.

Clara cherished the Nation’s ideals of respectability and patriarchy. Elijah became devoted to Fard, which ensured a renewal of commitment to Clara and their children. More important, however, his new devotion liberated Clara from the need to rescue her husband from the vices to which circumstances had driven him. Clara became pregnant with her seventh child, Wallace, in 1933. Wallace was the only child Clara conceived during Fard’s stay in Detroit. NOI literature suggests that Wallace was predicted by and named after Fard.\textsuperscript{21}

Elijah’s commitment to the Nation was rewarded in a series of promotions, including to that of Supreme Minister. Supreme Ministers were responsible for relaying Fard’s instructions to NOI members and for overseeing the daily affairs of the organization. Supreme Ministers took on an increasingly important role in the NOI starting in 1932, when Fard began to withdraw from the organization. Fard’s activity in Detroit was monitored by the police department following allegations that Nation members were engaging in acts of sacrificial murder.\textsuperscript{22} The arrest of one of Fard’s alleged followers on charges of murder in
1932 prompted what became an all-encompassing effort on the part of the police department and later the Federal Bureau of Investigation to destroy the NOI. Fard disappeared mysteriously from Detroit in May 1933, following a threatening encounter with the local police department. His sudden and unannounced exit produced panic among his followers. Several ministers immediately launched succession bids, including Elijah. The intimidation Elijah faced from other Supreme Ministers, including his brother Kallat, forced him out of Detroit in 1934. He was to spend the next few years under a constant “shadow of persecution.” Clara remained in Detroit with her young children while Elijah sought refuge in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C., establishing NOI temples and starting the group’s newspaper *The Final Call to Islam*. Elijah later relocated with his family to Chicago, where they sought to establish the Nation’s central headquarters in 1940. However, their efforts were interrupted in 1942 when the police arrested eighty NOI members, including Elijah, for draft evasion. According to the testimonies of these men, NOI teachings prohibited them from carrying arms. Elijah was found guilty of encouraging draft evasion and sentenced to a five-year prison term to be served at the Milan, Michigan, Federal Correctional Institution. He refused parole in December 1943 and was released on August 24, 1946.

Elijah’s incarceration forced the burden of managing the NOI onto Clara, who became the organization’s Supreme Secretary during Elijah’s absence. Much of Clara’s efforts to manage the NOI during Elijah’s incarceration is undocumented. However, historian Ajile Rahman notes that Clara became a conduit through which her husband’s orders were relayed to ministers. Clara also visited other NOI members who had been incarcerated and covertly passed on correspondence to and from NOI members. It is arguable that without Clara’s leadership during this time, the Nation would have ceased to exist. Historian Manning Marable contends that the NOI’s membership had dwindled to around 400 members by 1946. The mass exodus of men and women from the NOI should not, however, be construed as evidence of ineffective leadership on the part of Clara. Rather, intimidation from police and the harassment of NOI members played a significant part in the demise of the NOI. Police records contained in Fard Muhammad’s and Elijah Muhammad’s respective FBI files reveal that dozens of NOI members
were routinely harassed and intimidated by local police departments solely because of their association with the NOI. In an article for the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper in 1964, for example, Beatrice X noted, “We suffered extreme hardships to help the Honorable Elijah Muhammad establish Islam here. I served twenty days in jail. My sons, James and Johnny, were taken away from me and placed in Blue Plains, D.C. . . . [F]or the slightest provocation—or for no reason at all—Muslims were arrested and thrown in jail.”

Elijah Muhammad worked diligently to establish the NOI in Chicago following his release from prison in 1946. According to his son Wallace, who took on the name Warith Deen Mohammed, Elijah Muhammad was eager to set an example for his followers by establishing his own businesses and enacting an economic policy that would ensure the Nation’s financial security:

> The Honorable Elijah Muhammad said, “We have to show the people something—we cannot progress by talk.” So, he changed from preaching this mysterious doctrine to doing something practical. He said, “We have to have businesses.” So he began to promote the opening of businesses. He said, “You have to produce jobs for yourself.” Soon the Honorable Elijah Muhammad had a restaurant on 31st Street and Wentworth in Chicago. He had a grocery store and he, himself, was the butcher. . . . He showed them how to butcher meat and how to sell groceries. He, himself, with his own apron, had his children in the business with him.

Elijah Muhammad also made important alterations to the NOI’s theology following his release from prison. Historians generally agree that Fard elevated himself to the position of a prophet in the NOI. However, it was Elijah Muhammad who propagated the idea among NOI members that Fard was a deity. Elijah Muhammad’s own writings on the issue illustrate that although Fard never claimed to be a deity, he did not correct Muhammad when he suggested it. In interviews with sociologist Hatim Sahib, for example, Elijah commented:

> I said that we should call him the “Almighty God” himself in person because according to what he has taught us, that must be the work of God and not of a human being. Then I took it with him, but, although
he did not tell me exactly, but he did mention that I will find out who he was. He was referring to himself as the one coming to save us and that he was the Messiah that we were looking for.\textsuperscript{33}

Elijah's efforts to rebuild the Nation paid dividends. In 1954 he purchased a headquarters for the NOI on Chicago's South Side. The NOI established at least a dozen temples throughout the United States between 1945 and 1955.\textsuperscript{32} NOI temples were opened in Harlem, Roxbury, San Diego, Atlanta, and Philadelphia prior to the Nation's mass exposure to the American public in 1959. Temples were assigned a number by Elijah Muhammad in the order that they were established.\textsuperscript{33} For example, Chicago's temple was designated as Temple No. 2. Muhammad recruited a significant number of young ministers, including Malcolm X and Louis X. In these ministers, Muhammad found the dynamism, eloquence, and charisma that he lacked. Muhammad targeted the NOI's recruiting efforts at those individuals most affected by the psychology of white supremacy or those he referred to as "blind, deaf and dumb" to the truth of their history and greatness.\textsuperscript{34} Muhammad described and promoted his message as "a practical religious teaching based on sound reasoning and common sense and void of the stupid emotionalism and imaginations that have influenced the religious thinking of our people in the past."\textsuperscript{35} Muhammad's "practical" teachings appealed to thousands of African Americans who had grown disillusioned with the slow pace at which legislation chipping away at segregation affected their realities as disenfranchised citizens.

Elijah Muhammad's Gender Ideology

While most women and men were attracted to the Nation by its racial message, they also found its gender ideology agreeable as it was based upon notions of race building. Elijah Muhammad held deeply conservative and contradictory beliefs about the nature of the roles and positions that women should occupy in society. His gender ideology was undoubtedly influenced by and symptomatic of a postwar mass culture that tied women to the domestic sphere. Religious studies scholar Herbert Berg notes that Muhammad's most "oft-repeated directive for women was the practice of modesty."\textsuperscript{36} This was apparent
in the conservative dress codes for women—for example, covering the hair and wearing long skirts—which eventually led to a strict uniform. Qur’an-based teachings had little role in shaping Muhammad’s ideas about gender spheres. Muhammad provided the rationale for his gender ideology in his 1965 publication *Message to the Blackman in America*, in which he wrote:

> Our women have been and are still being used by the devil white race, ever since we were first brought here to these States as slaves. They cannot go without being winked at, whistled at, yelled at, slapped, patted, kicked and driven around in the street by your devil enemies right under your nose. Yet you do nothing about it, nor do you protest [or] stop our women from trying to look like them.\(^{37}\)

It is important to note that, in this quotation, Muhammad is addressing men and not women. Indeed, Muhammad rarely addressed women directly in any of his public addresses or writings.\(^{38}\) His comments reveal a protectionary ethos, but more sinisterly they can also be read as sanctioning male control of women. African American women were often stereotyped as sexually loose and void of the qualities associated with the Victorian concept of “true womanhood.” Elijah Muhammad’s gender ideology resisted this stereotype by promoting the belief that Black women were “naturally beautiful.”\(^{39}\) At the same time, the NOI adhered to Victorian ideals of respectability and chastity. These ideals were taught and implemented within the Nation via MGT classes.

**Malcolm X**

According to Manning Marable, the NOI grew exponentially between 1953 and 1961. Scholars including C. Eric Lincoln and Marable have noted that the demographics of the NOI’s membership altered considerably during this period. During its formative years, Nation members were characterized as predominantly middle-aged and recent migrants. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, the most discernible characteristic of the Nation’s members was their youth. Indeed, Lincoln observed that up to 80 percent of NOI members during this period were between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five.\(^{40}\) The Nation’s
popularity with young African Americans led to a tenfold increase in membership between 1956 and 1961. Nation ministers played a leading role in popularizing the organization among young African Americans. No minister was more influential during this period than Minister Malcolm X.

Malcolm Little joined the NOI while incarcerated for larceny at the Norfolk County (Massachusetts) Prison. Malcolm was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925. His parents, Earl and Louise Little, were dedicated organizers for the Marcus Garvey movement. Indeed, in reflecting upon his father, Malcolm noted that “still the image of him that made me proudest was his crusading and militantly campaigning with the words of Marcus Garvey.” Malcolm's family was torn apart as a result of his father's death and the subsequent deterioration of his mother's mental health. Earl Little was killed when Malcolm was just six years old. Throughout his life, Malcolm believed that the Ku Klux Klan had been responsible for his death. Earl Little's death forced the burden of care for the family onto Louise, who struggled to secure the family's economic survival. According to Malcolm, his mother’s mental health deteriorated further when the state social agency began to visit the family home in Lansing, Michigan, to assess how Louise was coping with the children. Louise eventually suffered a breakdown and was institutionalized at the State Mental Hospital at Kalamazoo. Her children were separated and placed with foster parents. Malcolm excelled at school despite staunch racism from his white teachers. Indeed, he had aspirations to become a lawyer. Malcolm's formal education came to an abrupt end after a candid discussion with his teacher Mr. Ostrowski, who forever ended Malcolm's dream of pursuing a career in law:

He [Mr. Ostrowski] kind of half-smiled and said, “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be.”

Malcolm’s exodus from formal education led him eventually to Harlem, where he drifted into a life of crime and self-degradation. In
his autobiography Malcolm comments that his efforts to “conk” or straighten his hair marked his “first really big step toward self-degradation.” It was during his time in Harlem that he met and began dating a white woman, Sophia, with whom he had an ongoing affair. Malcolm’s descent into a life of crime, pimping, and drugs eventually caught up with him. In 1946 Malcolm, aged twenty-one, and his friend Shorty were arrested with two white women for robbery. It was in prison that Malcolm was to find the Nation of Islam. He was introduced to the NOI and the teachings of Elijah Muhammad via his brother Philbert, who had joined the organization. Malcolm’s life was transformed while he was in prison. He returned to his love of reading and adopted an ascetic lifestyle. On his release from prison Malcolm went straight to Detroit, where he was employed as an NOI minister in 1953. His dedication was rewarded in 1954 when Muhammad appointed him the minister of Temple No. 7 in Harlem. According to Malcolm’s autobiography, Temple No. 7 grew more rapidly than any other.

The Media

The NOI remained relatively unknown in the United States until the 1950s, when Elijah Muhammad established a Public Relations Committee under the direction of his son Herbert Muhammad. Muhammad’s early writings exhorting African Americans to “join their own” were featured regularly in numerous African American newspapers, including the Pittsburgh Courier, the Los Angeles Herald Dispatch, the Afro-American, and the New York Amsterdam News. In addition to propagating its teachings via the African American press, the NOI also published its own magazines, The Supreme Wisdom and The Messenger Magazine. The NOI’s frequent appearances in the media also received attention from the national press in the form of a 1959 documentary on the NOI, The Hate That Hate Produced. The five-part series was designed to shock moderate viewers and present the NOI as “hate mongers.” Remarkably, Elijah Muhammad was featured only briefly in the documentary. Muhammad’s oration was regarded as “inaudible” and subsequently the news cameras moved swiftly to the NOI’s regional minister in Harlem, Malcolm X. With the spotlight on Malcolm X, known for his talent to capture audiences, the documentary had a great impact on
popularizing the organization. Following the documentary, Malcolm X encouraged Elijah Muhammad to authorize the creation of the NOI’s own official newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks* (*MS*). The newspaper was to become an important source of information on the Nation and often the primary means by which potential members learned about it. The success of the paper, however, also came at a cost for NOI members. Muhammad instructed his male followers to buy a set quota of papers and resell them during their free time. This often placed an intolerable financial burden on Muhammad’s followers. Yet the quotas remained in place. Malcolm X rose through the ranks of the NOI more quickly than any other minister. In 1960 Muhammad created a new post for Malcolm: that of National Minister.

**Power Struggles**

Malcolm enjoyed what could be described as a father–son relationship with Muhammad. Indeed, Muhammad considered Malcolm his “most faithful” minister. Elijah Muhammad suffered from chronic health problems that were largely kept hidden from his followers. Muhammad’s increased health issues caused much speculation that Malcolm X would succeed him. Such speculation led to heightened power struggles within the Nation and eventually resulted in Malcolm’s exodus from the organization in March 1964. Malcolm was suspended from the NOI in 1963 following his decision to make unauthorized comments about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The suspension, however, became indefinite when Muhammad discovered that Malcolm had been informed of Muhammad’s affairs with several of his secretaries. In his autobiography Malcolm notes that he heard rumors of Muhammad’s affairs as early as 1955 and chose to ignore them. Malcolm's enemies in the Nation, however, persuaded Muhammad that Malcolm had been gossiping about him. Malcolm realized quickly that his prospects of reentering the Nation were slipping away, and he defected from the organization in March 1964. Upon his exit from the Nation, Malcolm established two organizations, Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. Both organizations were created between March and June 1964. Malcolm made the transition to Sunni Islam after performing the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). Malcolm’s exodus from the
Nation did not end his problems with the organization, however. When he informed the press of Muhammad’s affairs, Nation members, and the FOI in particular, reacted angrily. Indeed, on November 4, 1964, Louis X, whom Malcolm had recruited into the NOI, wrote in the MS paper:

Only those who wish to be led to hell, or to their doom, will follow Malcolm. The die is set, and Malcolm shall not escape. . . . Such a man as Malcolm is worthy of death, and would have met with death if it had not been for Muhammad’s confidence in Allah and victory over his enemies.50

Malcolm encountered constant threats on his life and his family’s safety. His assassination on February 25, 1965, marked a turning point in the NOI and Elijah Muhammad’s relationship with his ministers.51 Louis Farrakhan replaced Malcolm as the Nation’s National Minister and was appointed by Muhammad to oversee Temple No. 7.

Imam W. D. Mohammed and Minister Farrakhan Lead Two Nations

When Elijah Muhammad passed away in 1975, his son Wallace Mohammad (1933–2008) found himself leading the Nation the very next day. Many in the Nation were surprised by Wallace’s succession, about which there are at least three competing narratives.52 The first suggests that Wallace, who had been a minister under Elijah Muhammad, had been predestined to one day lead the Nation. The second contends that Elijah Muhammad had privately appointed Wallace to succeed him. The third narrative suggests that Wallace was unanimously elected to succeed his father by a six-man ruling committee composed of his close family members and world heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali. Wallace’s succession sounded the death knell for the Nation’s doctrine. Indeed, Wallace had earned a reputation for his proclivity toward Sunni Islam as early as 1958.53 Wallace’s constant questioning of his father’s particularistic appropriation of Islam resulted in his suspension from the Nation on more than one occasion.

Wallace’s succession was also somewhat of a surprise to many given that Muhammad had repeatedly suspended him from the NOI.
Elijah Muhammad and his future successor endured a tense and often strained relationship. There can be little doubt that Wallace revered his father. However, it is also true that he questioned his father’s teachings. Yet at some point in his ministerial career, Wallace did regard himself as the “Second Man” in the Nation. In an interview with political scientist E. U. Essien-Udom in 1960 he remarked:

I am sent by the Messenger wherever there is a need. I have to be in town when the Messenger is out because the Messenger relies on me. He has confidence that I can carry out the work. The followers have come to look upon me as the second man. Besides, I had four years of Koranic teachings. Many of the ministers are qualified but there are always people who seek information on Islam and if the Messenger is not around I am the next logical man [from] whom they can obtain most reliable information. People seek information continuously.54

Wallace was sworn in as his father’s successor in February 1975 at the Nation’s Saviour’s Day convention—an event held annually in honor of Fard Muhammad—where he pledged to “carry on in the tradition” of his father. Wallace’s inaugural address, however, also made explicitly clear that race baiting would be a thing of the past: “They named us Black Muslims . . . but I want you to know that we are not a people to harbor racism.”55

The NOI’s new leader quickly restructured the organization, introducing Sunni Islam at a speed that alarmed many. Wallace took on the title Imam W. D. Mohammed, the NOI was renamed the World Community of Al-Islam in the West (WCIW), and its business empire was liquidated in 1976. The changes that swept through the Nation left many disillusioned. High-profile figures defected from the WCIW and formed their own splinter groups, the most notorious of which was to become Louis Farrakhan’s “Resurrected NOI.”

The ideological split within the Nation ran deep throughout 1975 and 1976. It would be erroneous to suggest that NOI members in 1975 were unaware of the charge that their practices and teachings were far removed from those of their Sunni counterparts. Moreover, this awareness may have heightened after 1965, when the national media published Malcolm X’s critiques of Muhammad’s teachings. Elijah
Muhammad had surrounded himself with sycophants who vied not only for his approval but also for a share of the Nation’s spoils. Such corruption left Wallace deeply embittered. At one point, for example, he described a segment of the Nation’s leadership as “wearing pimp’s clothes and preaching nation building.” Thus, for some NOI members, Wallace’s introduction of Sunni Islam and efforts to domesticate Islam in the U.S. context came as a “mercy” to a community already deeply divided along theological lines. For others, however, the departure from NOI dogma had arrived too quickly. The rupture between W. D. Mohammed and Louis Farrakhan separated Sunni women in the WCIW from their former friends who now formed an integral and important part of Farrakhan’s newly created Nation in 1977.

Despite his popularity within the NOI prior to 1975, Louis Farrakhan was unable initially to attract a significant number of former Nation members to his Resurrected Nation. Moreover, he departed from the WCIW with neither the financial resources nor manpower necessary to market the group as effectively as he had done in the late 1960s when he replaced Malcolm X as the Nation’s National Minister. Farrakhan remained relatively true to his promise not to depart from Elijah Muhammad’s apolitical and theological teachings within the Resurrected NOI until 1984, when he announced publicly his support for Jesse Jackson’s bid for the U.S. presidency. Farrakhan’s anti-Semitic rhetoric during the campaign received national media attention, thus launching him and the Resurrected NOI into the national spotlight almost overnight. Farrakhan’s departure from Elijah Muhammad’s rule of non-engagement in the political process was censured by Imam Mohammed, who suggested that the relationship between Farrakhan and Jackson was “puzzling.”

Farrakhan’s NOI flourished in the 1980s for many of the same reasons that Elijah Muhammad’s Nation did. Deteriorating race relations, poverty, ghettoization, and government indifference coupled with the emergence of the prison industrial complex combined to create a fertile context in which the NOI and its leader could thrive. Such realities vindicated Farrakhan’s critique of the racial hierarchy in the United States and helped propel him to the apex of his career in 1995, when he led the Million Man March (MMM) in Washington, D.C. Farrakhan’s path to popularity in pockets of the United States was aided not only by
the context of Reaganomics but also by the advent of African American musical genres that voiced both the discontent and aspirations of African American youths. Farrakhan's ascent also owed much to the willingness of clergy and secular groups to work with the NOI.

Like its predecessor, Farrakhan's NOI earned a reputation for promoting and helping to enforce socioeconomic improvement in numerous African American communities. Such work earned Farrakhan a degree of prestige among young African Americans and particularly the hip-hop generation. Hip-hop and rap artists including Nas, The Fugees, and Notorious BIG paid homage to the “Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan” in their artistic work. Farrakhan's celebrity status in pockets of the United States throughout the early 1990s remained dependent upon his ability to secure a working relationship with the Black church and secular groups. Nowhere was his dependence on both groups more apparent than in the buildup to the Million Man March in 1995. Farrakhan's decision to exclude women from the March led to fervent charges that the NOI advocated “outdated models of male dominated approaches to rebuilding Black families and communities.” Such criticism, however, neglected the important leadership and administrative roles that women played in organizing and financing the March.

The flurry of censure that engulfed the NOI and its patriarchal structure in the buildup to and the aftermath of the March overshadowed the harsh socioeconomic realities that had made it a success. Perhaps more important, however, charges of misogyny masked the emergence of NOI women as ministers, managers, and administrators in the group. As early as 1998 Farrakhan appointed Ava Muhammad, a high-profile lawyer, as the Resurrected NOI's first female minister. Ava's appointment was quickly followed by the emergence of Tynetta Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad's former secretary; Claudette-Marie Muhammad; and Farrakhan's daughter Donna Farrakhan Muhammad as high-profile figures in the group.

African American women have steadily climbed the Nation's patriarchal structures. Their achievements have been matched by their Latina and Native American counterparts. Theresa X Torres, for example, serves on the NOI's Prison Reform Ministry and writes regularly for the Nation's paper, *The Final Call*. Similarly, YoNasDa Lonewolf Muhammad serves as the director for the Indigenous Nations Alliance and also
writes regularly for the paper. Farrakhan’s promotion of Latinas and Native American women within the NOI has been strategic and part of his overarching goal to make the Nation more inclusive. Contrary to popular belief, the NOI has never been a racially exclusive group. According to the organization’s National Latino Minister, Abel Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad invited Latino families to join the Nation in the early 1940s. Moreover, in his published work Elijah Muhammad exhorted Latinos and Native Americans to join and support the Nation. The presence of Latinos in the NOI grew steadily throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet fully integrating Latinos into the NOI remains problematic. In 2009, for example, at the annual Saviours’ Day convention, Latinos hosted a workshop titled “Bridging the Gap” to discuss prejudice directed toward them within the Nation. During panel discussions, Brian Muhammad noted that some within the Nation had been “hesitant to embrace members of the Latino family” despite the fact that they make up more than an estimated 20 percent of the group’s national membership. Native Americans also remain a minority within the NOI. Farrakhan has made efforts since the early 1980s to market the Nation to this ethnic group. In the early 1980s, for example, he employed Wauneta Muhammad, a young Native American woman who had married into the NOI, to help oversee the recruitment of Native Americans.

The NOI and the MGT have attempted to make the Nation more appealing to women by relaxing certain rules in recent years, particularly the dress code. That the strict dress code in the NOI has been a deterrent to women’s joining the group is well known. Under the watchful eye of the MGT, the dress code for women in the NOI has been gradually modernized. The NOI now annually hosts designer competitions and fashion shows to promote modest fashions for women. Project Modesty is one such show. Its focus is on stimulating the creation of designs from women in the group. The annual design contests are open to girls and women aged fourteen to twenty-four and carry a lucrative prize offer: “Project Modesty will clothe our girls with the garments that will reflect their beauty and culture without being tight, revealing or skimpy.” Alongside this initiative, the NOI no longer forbids the use of birth control or prevents interracial marriage. Interfaith marriage is also no longer prohibited.
Farrakhan’s travels abroad in the immediate years following the MMM placed him at odds with Sunni Muslims, including followers of Imam Mohammed. After much-publicized meetings with Muammar Gaddafi of Libya and Saddam Hussein of Iraq in 1996 and the censure that followed from the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sunni Muslims in Chicago became increasingly concerned that they would be mistaken for NOI converts and therefore be subject to the negative press coverage that Farrakhan’s tours abroad had received in the United States. Sunni Muslims were not alone in fearing association with Farrakhan on his return to the United States. Many who had reluctantly supported the MMM withdrew support for Farrakhan when he returned from Africa and the Middle East. During the first gathering of grassroots organizers of the MMM in February 1996, for example, only 50 of the nearly 350 local organizing committees attended. The absence of 300 local organizers was construed by the national media as evidence of disappointment with Farrakhan’s activities.63 The NOI’s relationship with its Sunni counterparts continued to sour until February 2000, when Farrakhan’s NOI publicly reconciled with Imam Mohammed’s community. The reconciliation saw Farrakhan bring the NOI relatively in line with its Sunni counterpart. Many observers remarked that the event marked a significant change in the NOI’s theological and racial trajectory.64

No less than a year after the 2000 Saviours’ Day address, Farrakhan sought to challenge reports that he was a shadow of his former self. In his 2001 Saviours’ Day address at Christ Universal Temple in Chicago, he refuted notions that illness had resulted in his apparent change. Farrakhan’s Nation made another push toward Sunni Islam in October 2008 at the re-dedication of its national center at Mosque Maryam in Chicago. The event was attended by representatives of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths. The re-dedication ceremony saw the NOI’s leader ask his followers to take on an “expanded” mission and accept a “New Beginning” for the NOI. The “expanded” mission that Farrakhan envisioned involved his followers’ serving all sectors of society, including whites.65 News coverage of reactions from NOI members to the “New Beginning” and “expanded mission” in The Final Call differed notably. Initial optimism over the Nation’s “New Beginning” proved fleeting as the NOI quickly retreated to its original doctrine.
The NOI, however, is no longer a replica of its predecessor. The NOI’s female demographic is diverse both in its ethnic makeup and in terms of the socioeconomic backgrounds from which its membership is drawn. Indeed, it appears that the only constant is the religious persuasion of women before they arrive at the NOI. According to Nisa Islam Muhammad, an NOI member, 99 percent of the women who end up in the arms of the NOI are nominal Christians. In the Chicago area, where the NOI is strongest, its female converts are drawn from many of the surrounding Christian churches, including President Barack Obama’s former church, Trinity United Church of Christ. In an interview, President Obama’s former pastor Dr. Jeremiah Wright recalled losing one of his strongest female members to the NOI. According to Wright, this loss was a result of her relationship with an NOI member:

One of the girls who grew up in the church, a strong womanist theologian, went away to college. She graduated and I didn’t see her so I asked her mom two years after she graduated, and she said, “She’s waiting on her X; she’s at the Nation.” I said, “Will she talk to me?” and she said, “Yeah,” and so she called and we made an appointment, and she showed up with two women from the Nation. . . . We went into my office and I said, “Explain to me what happened,” and she said, “Reverend, when it comes to a man who is only trying to get me into bed, who drinks, who does reefer . . . but who’s saying he’s sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost and hopping in bed with all the women as opposed to a man who does not drink, a man who does not do drugs, a man who’s working and supporting and respecting me and who’s a Muslim, I’ll take assalamu ‘alaykum [Muslim greeting] all day long.” I said, “But the theology . . . and the women are inferior,” and she said, “I don’t believe none of that. . . . I’ve got a good man.”

Nation Women’s Leadership

African American women made significant contributions to building and sustaining the NOI’s educational and economic structures throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Women’s roles in the NOI have changed dramatically since its inception in 1930. Yet rarely are these changes noted by scholars and outside observers of the Nation. Women exercised
leadership roles in various aspects of Elijah Muhammad’s NOI but particularly within the Muslim Girls Training and the NOI’s plethora of small business ventures, including its national newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*. Women now exercise powerful ministerial, management, editorial, and senior administrative roles within Louis Farrakhan’s NOI. A manifestation of this progression can be seen in the fact that women currently sit on the NOI’s exclusive Executive Board.

Early Nation women were rarely visible in the public sphere. Indeed, concerns about their safety and dictates about gender spheres resulted in their activism’s being confined to within the walls and boundaries of the NOI’s structures and communities. Early Nation women exercised both formal and informal leadership positions in the Nation. Nation women devoted their collective energies to the task of erecting, overseeing, and strengthening Nation businesses, temples, and schools. Popular discourse relating to gender spheres helped shape the roles and positions that women could occupy in the Nation. Unlike their counterparts in the civil rights movement and the Black church, Nation women exercised agency *within* their religious setting. African American women have historically constituted a majority in Black churches. Yet they often remained in the “background” of the church setting. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, for example, notes, “Male biased traditions and rules of decorum sought to mute women’s voices and accentuate their subordinate status vis-à-vis men. Thus tainted by the values of the larger American society, the Black church sought to provide men with full manhood rights, while offering women a separate and unequal status.”

Ministers dominated the upper echelons of the civil rights movement for pragmatic reasons. Their dominance of such positions resulted in women’s being excluded from executive positions in several civil rights organizations, including the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Women made invaluable contributions to the campaigns of these organizations, but they did so outside of their religious setting. Research by sociologists Belinda Robnett and Teresa Nance illustrates that women in the civil rights movement served as bridge leaders, field secretaries, and activists in local communities. Put simply, women’s formal and informal leadership in the civil rights movement occurred
largely outside of the realm of the Black church. Nation women had the opposite experience. They found themselves almost daily in the temple, where they led and attended MGT classes and created and worked for business enterprises.

Oral history narratives have captured the resentment that many women who engaged in the civil rights movement felt at being collectively excluded from the decision-making process. Perhaps the most vocal of such women was Ella Baker, who once remarked that her exclusion from executive positions was a result of both ageism and sexism:

In the first place, the combination of being a woman, and an older woman, presented some problems. Number one, I was old enough to be the mother of the leadership. The combination of this basic attitude of men, and especially ministers, as to what the role of women in the church setup is—that of taking orders, not providing leadership—and the ego that is involved—the ego involved in having to feel that here is someone who had the capacity for a certain amount of leadership and, certainly, had more information about a lot of things than they possessed at that time—this would never had lent itself to my being a leader in the movement there.69

Women who protested the patriarchal structures of civil rights groups often found that their grievances fell on deaf ears. Johnnie Carr, a former MIA member, remarked:

Well, it was not a stated thing but just an understanding thing. . . . Now of course when you spoke out against things like that, a lot of times you were even criticized by other women that felt like . . . this is not what we ought to be doing. I think we just accepted the servant role and done what we could because we felt like togetherness was the point.70

Belinda Robnett’s research on the gender dynamics of the civil rights movement reveals that many women relished seeing their male counterparts exercise authority in the regional and national leadership structure of the movement. Women’s support of their male counterparts’ dominance of such positions appears to have stemmed from the fact that they were acutely aware of and sensitive to the fact that Black
men had historically been denied such influential positions of power in the larger society.\textsuperscript{71}

The NOI’s structures did enable women to exercise leadership. Nation women’s opportunities for such leadership were found in the MGT, the Nation’s schools, and business enterprises. The Muslim Girls Training served three purposes within the overall structure of the NOI. It provided an arena in which NOI women could foster a greater sense of community, it educated women in all things relative to the domestic sphere, and it was a forum in which women could be disciplined for failing to adhere to either the Nation’s strict moral codes or the standards imposed by the MGT. The MGT’s emphasis on traditional gender roles has often led outside observers to conclude that female members of the group were prisoners of the domestic sphere. This conclusion indicates a poor understanding of the context in which the NOI operated. Elijah Muhammad’s NOI encouraged women, first and foremost, to fulfill their obligations to their families. Opportunities for working-class African American women to pursue employment were often restricted to domestic work for whites, as well as other unskilled jobs.\textsuperscript{72} In this context, the prospect of not having to pursue menial employment was seen by some women as a welcome and protectionary measure. Moreover, the Nation’s dress code would have made certain forms of menial labor more difficult for women to carry out.

The Muhammad University of Islam (MUI) was a space in which women could exercise considerable influence over the direction of the NOI’s educational program. The schools accepted both Muslim and non-Muslim children and educated them in the rudiments of NOI dogma and core subjects. The NOI’s school curriculum was drastically out of sync with the norms of U.S. public schools, but it nonetheless provided a refuge in which NOI children could enjoy a sense of protection from hostile forces. The NOI’s educational curriculum was designed with the aim of encouraging children’s individual talents and thus acted as a great leveler. Former MUI pupil Sonsyrea Tate remarks:

\begin{quote}
I think self-awareness and self-discipline are a huge part of education and I appreciate getting that in the NOI. Other aspects of our education, however, were questionable. For instance, the American history and
\end{quote}
world history we learned in the NOI didn’t square with the mainstream
American history. The difference left some of us at a disadvantage when
it was time to pass standardized tests. What I considered superior was
the focus on our individual talents.\footnote{73}

Women exercised a greater degree of influence in the NOI’s school
structure than their male counterparts. Charlene Johnson, for example,
served as the director of the MUI in Chicago in 1960, and numerous
women were employed as assistant directors, teachers, and secretaries
in regional NOI schools.

The NOI provided educators with an opportunity to contribute to the
management of the MUI on a number of levels. NOI schools stood as
a beacon of stability and discipline in African American communities.
Such attributes made the NOI’s schools appealing to African American
parents, especially in the midst of the chaos and confusion that school
desegregation created in the 1950s and 1960s. MUI schools were known
for their dedicated and disciplined teaching staff. Former MUI teacher
W. Muhsinah Abdullah notes:

I did teach in the school at one point and we did an excellent job. In
terms of educating we were really committed; we would get there at 8 am
and not leave until 7 pm working on lesson plans or developing extra-
curricular activities. . . . For me personally, it offered an opportunity to
contribute and to realize my potential as a teacher.\footnote{74}

Aside from fulfilling teaching and administrative roles in the MUI,
women took advantage of numerous opportunities to support the
NOI’s host of small businesses and to pursue their own entrepreneur-
ial enterprises. NOI women secured employment in various businesses,
including the Temple No. 2 clothing factory in Chicago and the Muslim
Thrift Shop. The NOI’s emphasis on “Buying Black” and fostering group
cohesion provided would-be entrepreneurs with an existing consumer
base. Women regularly advertised their businesses in Muhammad
Speaks. A “Shirt Hospital” that Ida 4X Gidas operated was advertised
regularly in the paper, as was “Sister Meda’s Sesame Seed Candy.” Such
businesses may have been rather small, but they nevertheless provided
women with an opportunity not only to seek out a livelihood from their
membership in the NOI but also to contribute actively to its overarch-
ing economic goal of self-sufficiency.

The Original NOI’s Gender Ideology in Context: Black Women and Slavery

Black feminist and womanist scholars have argued that Black feminist perspectives develop from the everyday struggles of African American women, represented by the intricate and overlapping power plays of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In other words, grasping what may have or have not been liberating for Black women requires careful consideration of the context of their lives. African Americans were only two generations out of slavery when the Nation’s teachings began attracting African Americans in Detroit and Chicago, destination cities of the Great Migration. The Nation spoke directly to the devastating impact of slavery on African Americans. Slavery “made us blind, deaf, and dumb to the knowledge of self or anyone else and it stands true today that the American so-called Negroes don’t know themselves or anyone else,” Elijah Muhammad asserted. The Nation promised to return to African Americans their true identity and original religion. In reality, it instilled many white American middle-class ideals. The NOI appropriated the mainstream essentialist construction of whites as “civilized” and African Americans as “savage,” but reversed it. In doing so, the NOI ascribed cultural conceptions of the white middle-class male to the “Black Muslim,” making him the hardworking provider in a suit.

As the Nation was determined to undo the physical and psychological brutality of slavery, it attracted women whose lives were still haunted by its violence on their bodies, their families, and their institutions. The cruelties of slavery left African American women bound to a number of stereotypes that marked them as undeserving of respect and honor. The NOI resisted such notions of Black women, again by borrowing from the dominant ideology’s existing constructions of white women. Claiming to protect white women from Black men’s “savagery,” white men constructed white women as the symbol of the white race’s honor and purity. The thought to “sanction a white woman enduring the embrace of a colored man” was an abomination to the “highest race,” preventing women from “no holier duty” than to “preserve the purity of the
type.” Woman as an embodiment of honor provided white men with the rationale to lynch African American men for the “protection” of white women and the white race.77

In an anonymous article in Muhammad Speaks, the category “woman” was also manipulated as a symbol of honor but for the purpose of exposing white men’s savagery: “Today the so-called Negro woman is living a jungle life.” The writer held the white man, who is “by nature an adulterer and a fornicator,” responsible for her condition. The white man “has seduced our women of Africa and Asia. . . . He was the crook who first put our women out on the streets that they may disgrace our morals and tear down the future of our nation.”78 Although the NOI borrowed from the dominant ideology as it used women as a symbol of honor and an object of protection to assault the white race, we cannot ignore the painful reality lying behind the NOI’s critique: the systematic raping of slave women by white slaveholders. This is an example of the NOI’s bold exposure of white men’s injustices, which has played an integral part in attracting women to the movement.

The construction of white women as preservers of the race’s honor was expanded with conceptions of “true womanhood.” Based on mid-nineteenth-century American popular literature, the four cardinal virtues that distinguished a “true woman” were “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”79 The ideology of “true womanhood” inherently excluded African American women as it was used to rationalize “opposing definitions of womanhood and motherhood” for white and Black women. Constructions of the two groups of women were mutually reinforcing, “each dependent on the other for its existence,” with the aim to legitimate the sexual exploitation of slave women. Slave women were vulnerable to sexual abuse because they did not possess “the assets of white womanhood: no masculine protector or home and family, the locus of the flowering of white womanhood.”80 Historian Deborah White argues that such skewed sexual myths were reinforced by various factors, including Europeans’ misconception of semi-nudity in parts of Africa as a sign of promiscuity, enslaved women’s bodies’ being displayed at auctions and whippings, the primary role of enslaved women to produce children, and boasts from masters that they were not required to exert force to secure the sexual compliance of their enslaved women.81
At the same time that enslaved women were raped and expected to bear children, they were not exempted from the demands of labor. “The grueling demands of fieldwork constrained slave women's experience of pregnancy and child-rearing.” In this way, African American women have always been working mothers. As slave women worked throughout the day, the care of their children was left to slaves who were “too weak, too old, or too young to join them in the fields.” Often children were left for hours without their mothers’ returning to nurse them. As a result of such conditions, “the infant mortality rate among slaves in 1850 was twice that of whites, with fewer than two out of three Black children surviving to age ten. Death from malnutrition and disease was more likely to snatch a mother’s children than sale to a new owner.”

Directly speaking to African American women's historical experience of having to produce and reproduce against their will, the NOI's focus on honoring and protecting women's roles as wives and mothers continues to attract African American women and other women of color. Alongside images of African American women as sexually loose, other stereotypes have emerged to simultaneously legitimize and mask the racism and sexism directed toward Black women. Feminist scholar Patricia Collins describes the most prominent of these stereotypes, calling them “controlling images.” They have their roots in slavery but have been used to blame African American women for the current ills in their communities caused, in reality, by the injustices of racism and capitalism. These images are mammy, matriarch, welfare recipient, and jezebel.

The mammy is “the faithful, obedient domestic servant,” an image created to “justify the economic exploitation” of Black women serving as domestics in white homes during and after slavery. With mammies, the nurturing of African American women is displaced from her children to white children. This image has been falsely portrayed as rewarding for African American women, who were depicted as submissively and merrily serving the white race. While the “mammy represents the ‘good’ Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the ‘bad’ Black mother.” The matriarch is blamed for the breakdown of Black families because she defies the traditional domestic role. Taking a job outside the home, she emasculates her man and takes attention away from the proper raising of her children. This image displaces responsibility for economic,
educational, and moral decline in African American homes. Instead of faulting the class dimensions of racism, it blames African American women.

The image of Black women as welfare mothers reduces African American women to child breeders. The welfare mother’s dependency on assistance enforces the notion that African Americans are lazy “by blaming Black welfare mothers for failing to pass on the work ethic.” Also, because welfare mothers are usually portrayed as unwed mothers, they lose any value owing to the “dominant gender ideology positing that a woman’s true worth” is claimed only through marriage. The fourth controlling image that Collins discusses is “the Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman.” As discussed above, this image has served as justification for the ongoing sexual assault against African American women.

The NOI’s ideology constructed the Black Muslim woman to defy these controlling images. By portraying the Muslim woman as the one who provides “proper spiritual guidance,” for “our children, the future generation,” the NOI rejected the mammy image. By portraying the Muslim woman as provided for and protected by her husband and not speaking “in a demanding voice to her husband,” the NOI defied the matriarch image. Because the Muslim woman seeks marriage, and her Muslim husband is not a lazy beggar, the welfare image was challenged. Finally, because the Muslim woman never wears “vulgar, immodest, or indecent attire,” the jezebel image was refuted. Ultimately, the NOI reversed the language of the dominant ideology, teaching that “Black women are the Mothers of Civilization, and by nature, they are the most beautiful women on earth.” In this way, Nation notions of the ideal woman were based on white middle-class American values, not Sunni Islam, and sought to present Black women as the symbol of the Black race’s purity and dignity, who therefore needed the protection of Black men.

Central Issues

This book’s focus on women’s contributions and experiences in the NOI centers on several core issues. The NOI’s gender ideology stipulated separate gender spheres for women and men, emphasizing women’s roles as homemaker and mother and men’s roles as breadwinner and
protector. The ways in which Nation women interpreted and negotiated their role as domestics will emerge across the following chapters. At the same time, complementing the analysis of separate gender spheres is an exploration of how women transcended their “ideal” roles within the home and worked alongside men in the educational and economic structures of the Nation. Here we find the Nation’s larger goals of Black protest and self-help providing women with opportunities to contribute to the building of the Nation and, later, to the development of their Sunni masjid (mosque) communities. Outlining women’s contributions to and work in the NOI is a central goal of the book.

Women’s reinterpretation and negotiation of the Nation’s gender ideology have developed into a larger tradition of Nation women defining and producing thought, voice, and image for themselves. Certainly their leaders have greatly influenced them, but women have also reinterpreted the guidance of their male teachers, applying it as they see fit. We will see how women have regularly negotiated voice and leadership in their religious communities, including a discussion of the controversial topic of women imams. Moreover, Nation women have assessed and claimed for themselves meanings of gender liberation against the backdrop of notions of gender liberation in the larger society. Like womanist and Black feminist thinkers who have proclaimed that mainstream white feminism does not speak to or for their experiences in the struggle for gender justice, African American Muslim women have proclaimed the same. Diverse conceptions of gender liberation therefore are a central focus of this book.

The NOI’s protest against white superiority, particularly the famous pronouncement “The original man is the Asiatic Black man, the maker, the owner, the cream of the planet earth, God of the universe,” was also articulated to apply in specific ways to women, most notably in NOI notions of Black women’s superior beauty and their worthiness of ultimate respect. Similarly, NOI policies and practices intended to both transform the second-class circumstances of African Americans and to defy inferior images of them were expressed in ways specifically meaningful to women. These practices include dress codes, as Nation women designed and donned various uniforms including ones resembling the attire of nuns, and diet, as women significantly contributed to the NOI legacy with the creation of the bean pie, a product of the
Nation's dietary rules that resisted the historical slave diet. As we consider what made the NOI appealing to women, constructions of beauty, respect due to women, dress, and diet emerge as ongoing topics.

The Nation of Islam is not only a Black nationalist movement but also a religious movement. Its references to and dialogue with Christianity have made it relevant to many who were once committed Christians. At the same time, the NOI introduced practices meant for Black uplift that are unmistakably embedded in the religion of Islam, so much so that some former Nation members believe that the creator of NOI doctrine intended for the movement to eventually lead African Americans to Sunni Islam. The religious nature of the Nation makes Black women's spirituality and religious protest, not unlike the “righteous discontent” of Black Baptist women in the South, an ongoing theme explored in the book.

Featuring women currently in the Nation and those who left the Nation for Sunni Islam—namely, those in Imam Mohammed's community—central topics of this book also include the ongoing relationship between the Nation and Sunni Islam and Nation women's journeys into Sunni Islam. We explore not only changes in the Nation's gender ideology brought by Imam Mohammed and the ways in which women responded but also current Nation women's conviction of the continuing relevance of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad as the best way to present Islam to African Americans today. This consideration of the NOI as “Islam for Black people” complements analysis of the revised Black consciousness in Imam Mohammed's community as articulated in the voice and work of Sunni women. Nation women, former and current, find themselves in the complex and fascinating places between Black protest and Sunni Islam.

Methodology

The research for this book is based primarily on the oral histories of women whose membership in the NOI spans the period 1950s to the present. We refer to women who joined the NOI before 1975 and followed Imam Mohammed into Sunni Islam as former Nation women, Sunni women, or, as below, women in the Warith Deen Mohammed (WDM) community. Preferring the simple label Muslim, these women
do not regularly use these terms to describe themselves; however, we appropriate them to distinguish between former and current women in the Nation. The term “Sunni” is likely the most problematic term for these women because it is often used in reference to the Sunni–Shi’ah divide; however, it is still appropriate as it is a term widely used among African Americans, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to distinguish between Sunni Islam and the Nation of Islam. During discussions of the World Community of Al-Islam in the West, female followers are referred to as women in the WCIW. However, that name was abandoned by the 1980s, and because the community went through several name changes over the years but has always been popularly described as the Warith Deen Mohammed community by various groups of Muslims, we have used the terminology “women in the WDM community” in discussing female followers after the transition from the Nation.89 We refer to women who are currently in the Nation of Islam as Nation women or women in the NOI. Many of these women also prefer the simple title Muslim but also refer to themselves as MGT or members of Muhammad Mosque.

We approach the oral testimonies of informants as authentic accounts of what membership in the Nation has meant to women. While these accounts are diverse, “there are no ‘false’ oral sources.” No matter the extent to which women’s views of the Nation differ from one another or from scholarly analysis of NOI gender ideology as documented in NOI literature, women’s oral accounts are “psychologically ‘true.’” Oral histories tell us how individual life experiences inform how women remember the past. Given their subjective nature, it is expected that women’s narratives will differ, providing a more comprehensive and, therefore, more accurate picture of the Nation than any one account.90

Our approach also pays attention to the fact that roughly half of our research participants left the Nation almost four decades ago and now practice Sunni Islam. We recognize that Sunni women’s changed religious position influences how they interpret and recall their Nation past. Oral histories “tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did.” As we portray and analyze the narratives of women in the WDM community, we especially keep in mind how they remember the NOI in terms of “what they now think they did.”91 We do not, however,
make any generalizations about how this new consciousness affects their recollection. Former Nation women often describe the NOI as their doorway into Sunni Islam, a recognition that engenders a positive view of the Nation. However, this view does not prevent women from describing what they disliked about the NOI. At the same time, some women favorably recall aspects of the Nation that they once found appealing, although these aspects now contradict their current theological position. In summary, while we recognize that the embrace of Sunni Islam affects women's oral histories, we find among women multiple possibilities for remembering the Nation.

Former Nation women appear generally more open to criticizing certain aspects of Elijah Muhammad's NOI. Contemporary Nation women, however, appear less willing to censure or complain about aspects of Minister Farrakhan's NOI. That is not to say, however, that their narratives are less authentic. Minister Farrakhan's Nation is a very different organization from its predecessor. Women have much more freedom to contribute to and hold positions of authority within Minister Farrakhan's NOI. Moreover, current Nation women are encouraged to pursue their educational and entrepreneurial aspirations in the NOI. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, we find that when women do speak about their involvement with the Nation, they are eager to deconstruct and challenge myths about their treatment and their work in the organization. Together we interviewed current Nation women located in several different cities. We found, however, that current Nation women were more willing to consent to interviews with the non-Muslim author than with the author in the WDM community. The reluctance of current Nation women to speak with the Muslim author we found to be largely a result of concerns about questions relating to NOI theology and Sunni Islam. Current NOI member Yasmin Otway, for example, explains that Nation women may have felt hesitant because “they feel they may be invalidated. . . . Even I have encountered some tension, even among Blacks [non-Muslim], which is crazy: [this attitude of] well who’s real and who’s not.”

Together we interviewed roughly one hundred women currently or formerly in the NOI. Our objective was less to achieve a specific quantitative goal than to acquire an abundance of perspectives. As scholars of ethnography note, more important than the number of research
participants is the range of participants’ experiences. This view complements our emphasis on the diversity of women’s experiences in the Nation. Moreover, we recognize that time and place have a major impact on women’s experiences and contributions. Ministers, captains, and lieutenants have varied on the extent to which they have implemented the Nation’s gender ideologies or other national NOI practices or mandates. With this in mind, we interviewed women who joined the Nation at different times and have highlighted these differences in this book, indicating the ways that we understand their shaping women’s individual experiences.

Place matters significantly in the diversity of Nation women’s contributions and experiences. In particular, there is a popular understanding among past and present Nation members that the NOI has differed by region or city based on various factors, including the size of the temple or mosque community and the larger socioeconomic and historical context. Together we interviewed past and present Nation women in several different cities, including Atlanta; Chicago; Philadelphia; New York; Jersey City; Detroit; Washington; San Francisco; Houston; Charlotte and Durham, North Carolina; and Tallahassee and Jacksonville, Florida. In addition to conducting interviews with past and present Nation women in these cities, we also interviewed Nation women who engage with the organization almost exclusively via its online forums.

Our research also employed the use of numerous archival sources, including the Nation’s papers, mainstream media coverage, and government surveillance. The primary archives we have surveyed include *Muhammad Speaks*, *Bilalian News*, *Muslim Journal*, and the Resurrected NOI’s national newspaper, *The Final Call*. These archives help shed light on not only the portrayal of women within the NOI and the WDM community but also the extent to which women served as regular editors and journalists for the papers. Our research has illustrated that NOI women have contributed significantly to the content and editorial production of *Muhammad Speaks*, *Bilalian News*, *Muslim Journal*, and *The Final Call*. Our use of the newspaper archives has served a number of purposes. They have helped shape our understanding of how women understood the NOI’s framework and purpose in the African American communities where it operated. Our survey of NOI women’s conversion testimonies in the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper, known as
“What Islam Has Done for Me,” has offered a contrast and complement to the oral history interviews we have conducted. These testimonies are a valuable source for understanding the NOI’s attraction to women. Nevertheless, our approach considers the fact that these testimonies were conducted and published as part of the NOI’s proselytizing efforts and thus are not entirely accurate accounts of how women’s lives had improved as a result of their membership in the Nation.

Our archival research has not been limited to the Nation’s papers. We have also consulted a number of African American and mainstream newspapers that have informed our critique of the multifaceted ways the NOI and its female following in particular have historically been presented in the national media. Our engagement with these publications has helped shape our analysis of various responses to the NOI and particularly African American women’s responses to the Million Man March.

A third archival source comes from the plethora of declassified governmental records on the NOI. We employed this archival source while keeping in mind the context, tactics, and purpose with which this data was collected. We have employed selective evidence from these files as it relates to the NOI’s history and the women within the group. We have found that very little of the FBI’s surveillance was devoted to the place of women in the NOI. Indeed, with the exception of references to Elijah Muhammad’s domestic quarrels with Clara Muhammad and his sexual exploits with several of his secretaries, it is apparent that investigative officers attached little importance to women in the Nation.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 explores women’s encounters with the Black Muslims, women’s experiences of life within the NOI, and their collective and individual contributions to building and sustaining the Nation’s structures. While this chapter is not focused on the inner power struggles and leadership abuses that engulfed the Chicago and New York branches of the movement, it does consider women’s responses to leadership crises within the group. The majority of the women highlighted in this chapter are former members of the Nation, currently in the WDM community, who joined the Nation in the 1960s and ’70s.
Chapter 2 focuses on Nation women who followed Imam Mohammed into Sunni Islam when he succeeded his father in 1975. The first part of the chapter describes women’s responses to the selection of Imam Mohammed to lead the Nation. It includes historical details of Imam Mohammed’s personal journey to Sunni Islam while still in the Nation and the strategy he later used to bring an entire community to Sunni Islam. The second part of the chapter contextualizes and analyzes Imam Mohammed’s new gender ideology. The third part focuses on changes in the structure of the Nation that supported his new gender outlook, including the transitioning out of Muslim Girls Training and the appointment of the first female minister of the Nation and the first female editor of *Muhammad Speaks*. It also features the ways in which women responded to some ministers, and later imams, who resisted the new gender philosophy. The final part of the chapter demonstrates the ways in which women adapted to the five pillars of practice in Sunni Islam as well as reading the Qur’an, learning about the Prophet Muhammad, and expectations of modest dress.

Chapter 3 examines the experiences and contributions women have made to Louis Farrakhan’s Resurrected NOI from 1977 to the present day. This chapter considers the Nation’s appeal to women and how they exercise agency and leadership in the group. The chapter examines the elevation of women to ministerial positions in the Nation and highlights the varied ways in which they are collectively revising the boundaries of the NOI’s gender norms. The chapter closes with a discussion of Nation women’s efforts to remake their image in the popular imagination.

Chapter 4 focuses on dialogue between Nation women and women in the WDM community. It begins with a rare exchange between Imam Mohammed and Minister Ava Muhammad that sets the stage for the main themes explored in this chapter: the two groups’ levels of engagement with mainstream Islam, engagement with concerns in the Black community, and conceptions of gender equality, especially as it relates to women’s leadership in mosques. Having found that encounters and conversations between women of the two groups are few and far between, the chapter next proposes what women of the two groups would want the other to know about their practice and understanding of Islam in light of mutual misconceptions. It then highlights women’s
voices as they might respond to these misconceptions, providing women's views on various topics, including the continued relevance of the Nation of Islam in a context in which Sunni Islam prevails as the version of Islam practiced by most African Americans and the controversial practices of female imams and polygyny.

The Conclusion summarizes the book's main argument and the key insights we expect readers to take away. Further, it highlights the way in which the NOI legacy makes Nation and Sunni women more alike than they might imagine, particularly through their commitment to traditional gender roles. It offers additional stories and insights into how attitudes toward whites have changed in the two communities. Last, it discusses the book's contribution to relevant academic fields, particularly the emergence of Muslim women's contributions to womanist thought.