The Nation of Islam's Cautious Return to Americanity in the 2010s

The Nation of Islam's Cautious Return to Americanity in the 2010s:

A Cultural Studies Inquiry

By

Sadok Damak

The Nation of Islam's Cautious Return to Americanity in the 2010s:
A Cultural Studies Inquiry

By Sadok Damak

This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

To Wafa, a patient wife
To Neila, an inspiring daughter
To Taieb, a devoted son

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part Three – References to the Coded Corpus: Analytical Exploration

Part Four – Theoretical Considerations and Interpretation

LIST OF TABLES

INTRODUCTION

The present volume proposes an inquiry into a group of African American converts to the Islamic religion. These people had for a long claimed separatism with a view to establishing their own "Nation of Islam". In the current decade, nonetheless, their public declarations started showing signs of renunciation. They have seemed, indeed, prone to de-radicalizing their discourse in favor of more integrative stances in order to regain their American identity.

It is, thus, the purpose of this volume to understand how this unexpected change materializes and what motivates its initiation. It should be noted that the 2010s witnessed the advent of Barack Obama in the highest office in the US administration. That alone could have provided a propitious atmosphere for an ideological change to occur among the followers of the Nation of Islam.

The inquiry forming the object of the volume is also intended to make the assertion that conducting a piece of research in the academic discipline of cultural studies is within reach if we abide by a recognized scientific protocol.

Over the fifty years or so of institutional rootedness, cultural studies has constantly been a subject of criticism by opponents of the field on account of the lack of both methodological rigor and epistemological integrity. This is probably due to the fact that it was once thought among cultural studies scholars that theoretical consistency was not necessary in the discipline and that methodological procedures should not bother researchers in the field either, at least as long as the interpretative process involving the object of study is well structured (Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg 1992, 2). In 1980, the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, one of the founding figures and early influential authorities in the field, even went as far as warning against the establishment of a final paradigm for cultural studies (qtd. in Smith 2011, 2).

However, even though in the beginning the field was marked by a "libertarian approach", to use the formulation of Paul Smith (2011, 1), cultural studies practitioners have reoriented their perspectives ever since to make them fall in line with neighboring disciplines of shared concerns. The new orientation was taken as a necessary move in redirecting cultural

studies toward a more critical and self-critical disciplinary practice (Cohn, Mitcho, and Woolsey 2011, 30).

Actually, cultural studies relies heavily on other, more elaborate disciplines; it does represent one itself too, but one in constant need of field as well as methodological delineation. Indeed, even available books on the question, although all of them recommend methodological rigor, still reflect the disparate, heterogeneous character of the discipline. They mostly offer eclectic methods corresponding to the academic needs of— the many that there are—contributors to these books (Barker 2002; Saukko 2003; Smith 2011). As the author of *Doing Research in Cultural Studies* puts it herself, "there are quite a few methods books around that are suitable for cultural studies" (Saukko 2003, 8), including her own book. Therein, she accordingly focuses on "methodology" as a system of ways of doing research, including the ideological commitment that accompanies any approach, leaving the particular "methods" to the discretion of researchers to adapt to their surveys' requirements or to adopt howsoever suits their purposes (Saukko 2003, 12).

The problem in cultural studies is a matter of how to allow the discipline to improve its scientific contribution. Indeed, like any other academic discipline, the challenge of cultural studies is to pave its specific methodological path not only for securing the basis of its own growth, but also for maintaining its advancement and for allowing its renewal. To this end, fruitful contact and collaboration with established disciplines are more than recommended, without which the achievement of such a task would become almost impossible in the current situation of methodological shortcomings in cultural studies.

In this perspective, this volume advocates that in the absence of a commonplace, well-determined method in cultural studies, researchers in the discipline ought first to define the object of their study in association with a specific social science field, be it within sociological, philosophical, historical, anthropological, psychological, or media studies, or even human geography or political science, and then to abide closely by the methodological requirements generally demanded in the expressly selected discipline. It is precisely tantamount to determining a suitable research method from among those available to social scientists, like survey, experimental, ethnographic, or case study methods, in addition to historical and documentary methods, or any combination of these. In other words, all cultural studies researchers need to do is match the standard methodological tools and canons of required theories pertaining to a given discipline outside cultural studies with the corresponding problem being investigated in their particular area(s) of interest, so as to give shape to

their own work and serve their research objectives in the best and most likely ways.

As a qualitative research method, ethnographic fieldwork, inter alia, offers a case in point whereby cultural studies often explores cultural phenomena. As a practical method of the collection of empirical data either in relation to theory, in general, or in support of a hypothesis, in particular, ethnography constitutes a common ground of shared interests with anthropology, another social science ally to cultural studies. Some scholars warn against the repercussions of the recourse to ethnography in cultural studies, though. It is the partial use of such a method under a deracinated form that can "easily diminish the authority and credibility of cultural studies as a genuine field of knowledge production" (Breglia 2011, 126). To elide such a shortcoming, it is recommended that a viable practice of ethnography treat the social process of representing the culture of a given community in a holistic manner, with genuine, in-depth analysis and, if need be, a historicizing examination of contexts (Breglia 2011, 130). To this effect, the latter is not historicizing in the sense of exploring archival records to construct historical narratives as historians do—far from it—but rather in the sense of interpreting such a process as a product of historical development or as having importance in history, so as to gain further insight into the cultural phenomenon being studied.

In other instances, cultural studies combines observation surveys (questionnaires, interviews, etc.) and discourse analysis to investigate the cultures of social groups, like minorities of all kinds. To this end, too, in yet other instances, cultural studies simply relies on available primary source documents, such as autobiographical accounts, lectures, speeches, and the like, in order to probe people and cultural phenomena either in the past or the present. But in all instances, once again, cultural studies does not conceal its predilection for qualitative content analysis.

In this respect, the author of the present volume postulates that primary narrative constructions and written materials, whatever the source or the form, can well reflect ideological mindsets and reveal enough information and significant clues for the identification of the meaning patterns.

In the same vein, the author also postulates that, among these categories, public statements often involve speakers who are quite representative of the communities or groups on behalf of whom they generally make public declarations. Be they politicians, religious leaders, trade union spokesmen, or any other type of spokesperson, they express in a publicized discourse the opinion of masses of people from quite various walks of life.

In accordance with the above, public discourse constitutes ready-made primary data akin in significance and implications to any other information

from fieldwork records or questionnaires. Made public, its content thus becomes reflective of collective attitudes and indicative of responses bespeaking the most prominent responses to social interaction.

That said, though cultural studies appropriates the tools of well-established traditional disciplines, it "has consistently identified the examination of culture, power, and politics as unique to itself", so as to distinguish itself from other academic disciplines (Barker 2002, 176). It often does so, in addition, by manifesting a specific concern for subordinated groups. As a matter of fact, questions about power and politics, and resistance to either of them, along with questions about social justice and economic inequalities, all constitute issues of predilection to cultural studies—ones that it has traditionally dealt with. Besides, for cultural studies to produce its own theories, it is posed that knowledge is never a neutral or detached phenomenon but rather a matter of "positionality", i.e. of the place from which one speaks, to whom, and for what purpose(s) (Barker 2002, 176), quite faithfully reflecting the point of view of the subject of the study. Furthermore, as an investigative enterprise, research in cultural studies tends to give preference to contemporary events, sometimes while they are unfolding (Marcus 2011, 120), without disconnecting them from their historical backgrounds, if any.

This is not to deny the interdisciplinary character of cultural studies. The interdisciplinary perspective is not a novelty and has always been recognized as part of the academic traditions in the humanities and social sciences, after all. It rather emerges, so to speak, as the only reasonable approach, not just offering outstanding possibilities to deal with research questions in cultural studies, but even paving the way for the acknowledgment of researchers in the field of culture by the scientific community to which they are supposed to belong. This will come, above all, if they successfully manage to reconcile the major academic concerns of their own with corresponding research outcomes that are well-founded on rigorous methodologies while adopting such an interdisciplinary perspective.

Even so, the interdisciplinary character of cultural studies systematically promotes multidisciplinary perspectives, should the need arise, namely through the occasional recourse to linguistics and stylistics and the analytical toolkits they both offer when it comes to the exploration of discourse under its various forms. Sometimes, such rhetorical reinforcement intervenes in corroboration, support or, even, rectification of the theories or explanations that cultural studies helps bring to light (Damak 2017b; 2019). The multidisciplinary perspective does not exclude recourse to new literary critical theories about discourse either, mainly those that grant to

power, and to resistance to power, capital importance in the process of the interpretation of discourse under all its forms and types, including political and legal ones (Foucault 1980; 1981).

In line with that, cultural studies shares with new literary criticism such themes as post-colonialism (Bahri 2011, 65), feminism (Stabile 2011, 20-21), and ethnic discrimination, all of which, too, are sometimes in the center of its concerns, mainly to problematize the responses of—and the corresponding stances as to—the marginalized.

Likewise, to succeed in the interpretative task is also the greatest challenge in cultural studies. Researchers in the field take it for granted that their discipline encompasses the postmodernist speculations about the foundations of objectivity in scientific production and knowledge. As their counterparts in the humanities and social sciences no longer pretend to hold tight to the notion of objectivity but continue, nonetheless, to provide findings they never claim to be permanent or final, so too do researchers in cultural studies (Novick 1988, 512-21, 570-75).

Aware of the methodological shortcomings and hesitance of research in cultural studies, the author of this volume poses the problem of the epistemological legitimacy of "Cultural Studies" as an academic discipline and argues in favor of it definitely being one, in its own right, provided a methodological protocol is deftly devised and clearly announced that rigorously suits the object of inquiry.

In accordance with that, the objective of the present volume remains basically to proffer an illustration as to how a piece of research in the discipline ought to be conducted thoroughly. To this end, it recommends that any research in cultural studies should infallibly rely on a predetermined corpus of information collected either from fieldwork or primary documentation, or a combination of both, about the cultural event or phenomenon constituting the object of study. Besides, any research in cultural studies should then inevitably draw on a sound methodology and adopt a genuine approach, all of which should be completed with an objective—yet not necessarily altogether neutral—analytical process and perspective, so as to reach plausible, scientifically-constructed findings and theories that are in all instances likely to be academically accepted and epistemologically recognized as such.

In illustration of that, the volume offers a study examining the identification of Black Muslims as an example of a research process in cultural studies. It deals with a social group that has been apprehended through its complex, discursively mounted identity construct; an identity

negotiated amidst a social context of the culture of power, wherein this group is dominated politically and culturally.

To this end, Part One provides a historical background to the study. It introduces the Nation of Islam, a sect of African American converts that emerged in the 1930s as a direct emanation of Black Nationalism. The latter ideology grew throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an attempt to promote pride in ancestral African identity and culture. As for the sect under study, it formed accordingly in order to call for separate political institutions for African Americans. This separatist stance urged some individuals belonging to the latter minority not only to demarcate themselves religiously by exhibiting a conversion to Islam, but also to claim an autonomous political status, formulated in the guise of a sovereign state, albeit on American soil. In obvious contradiction, Black Muslims did so utterly obliviously to the effects of Americanization on the African American population, i.e. of the well-advanced acculturation in various areas of life that had indisputably been reached by individuals enrolled by the sect. Part One is brought to a close with some suggestions about what is currently transpiring, in terms of identification and social integration, from the declarations of the mouthpiece of the sect.

Part Two departs from this state of the question to wonder about the current state of mind of Black Muslims in terms of religious and political separatism. In other words, Part Two formulates the objectives of the study, mainly by questioning what is becoming of the separatist stance in these early decades of the twenty-first century and then by seeking to understand how the Nation of Islam comes to terms with conversion, cultural differentiation, and ethnicity, all at once, after more than three generations of effectively existing as a sect living in sheer denial of its Americanity or, simply, its American identity,[1] as the term is plainly conceived in the present study. To this end, the study relies on primary sources for data collection, which primarily consist of a series of recent public lectures delivered by Louis Farrakhan, the incumbent spiritual leader and spokesman of the Nation of Islam. Part Two, then, describes the corpus retained for the study and also details the methodological process followed either in the elaboration of the research statement to formulate the hypothesis that guides the study or in the implementation of the latter to the end. It speculates that, in an evident contradiction, the sect still clings to ethnic separatism and religious differentiation, but just as a façade to cope with social adversity, while there emerges a novel emphatic claim for American identity among its disciples.

---

[1] In this study, the term 'Americanity' denotes either the character of being American or the attitude of claiming entitlement to the American identity, or both.

In Part Three, an analytical exploration of the corroborative qualitative data collected from the studied corpus is made. It first foregrounds interactional adversity as the obvious reason behind the specific Islamic identification exhibited by the followers of the sect. Then it examines each of the four variables—namely separatism, religious differentiation, social integration, and Americanity—that stem from the corpus and combine in such a way as to provide a rather complex, paradoxical form of identification, in which all of the ethnic, spiritual, and national identities intertwine.

Part Four closes the volume, and, relying on a social psychological theoretical framework, it accounts for the complex, paradoxical ethnic identification process that transpires from the corpus, or from the preaching words of Louis Farrakhan addressing the disciples of the Nation of Islam. Then, through operational hypotheses supportive of the leading one, it is explained that such a process of identification is rather strategic, revealing a new identity orientation that consists of substituting the hard-line separatist ideology for an attenuated, moderate stance aimed instead at gaining acceptance as an integral part and parcel of the American multicultural social fabric; this shift in attitudes turns out in the discussion, at the end of Part Four, to be a clear signal indicative of an obvious, smooth passage from an excessive, extremist form of ethnicity to a more accommodative, rather compromising, conciliating, one instead. The findings, in the final analysis, confirm this outcome on account of the undeniably well-advanced Americanization of the followers of the sect.

PART ONE –

GENESIS OF THE BLACK MUSLIM MOVEMENT:
BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

CHAPTER ONE

BLACK NATIONALISM

In the mid-nineteenth century, Martin Delany argued that "Blacks had no future in the United States" (Moses 1996, 3). He suggested that they leave the country and found a nation of their own elsewhere, for instance in South America. Delany, an African American abolitionist who had been dismissed from Harvard Medical School on account of skin color considerations, was the first to promote Black Nationalism, an ideology that mounted in resistance to the hegemony of the dominant and overwhelmingly white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority, resistance that emerged in force on the American political scene during the nineteenth century. Self-determination, i.e. political separation and independence for Americans of African origins, represented and, in some instances, continues to represent the most prominent tenet of this ideology. Though Delany is considered to have been the grandfather of Black Nationalism, the latter, as a movement, had started much earlier with the repatriation of American freed slaves to Liberia.

Indeed, long before the constitutional abolition of slavery in 1865, the western coastal region of the African continent in what is now the Republic of Liberia had been seized by the American Colonization Society with a view to sending free African American volunteers to establish a colony there. The American Colonization Society was a private organization supported by eminent American political figures, like Abraham Lincoln and James Monroe, who believed that former slaves had greater opportunities in their land of origin and that their repatriation was preferable to the large-scale emancipation of persons of color in the United States (Montesinos 1997, 264). Accordingly, the Society began relocating African Americans among the freedmen as early as 1822. In 1847, these settlers proclaimed themselves an independent country named the Republic of Liberia. Between 1822 and 1865, the date of the end of the American Civil War, 15,000 ex-slaves from the United States established themselves in this new African settlement (History.com 2010). The American-Liberian colonists and their descendants ruled the newly established nation as a dominant minority to the detriment of the indigenous African-Liberian majority.

Yet, modern Black Nationalism only began to thrive seriously in the United States during the post-Reconstruction era (1877-1920), first thanks to Garveyism—considered as the most powerful Black Nationalist movement to date, for it then claimed a membership of eleven million— and later it was perpetuated by Black Muslim sects such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam. In either a secular or religious form, the phenomenon led to the birth of a widespread movement that focused on the need to separate from white society and to build autonomous black communities capable of promoting ethnic pride and collective wealth (Moses 1996, 6).

After the Reconstruction—in reference to the reunification of the United States after the war of secession—African Americans, overwhelmingly Southerners, felt abandoned by the Republican North as the federal troops left the South (Danner 2005). At that time, most ex-confederate seceded states remained reluctant to accept equality for the African American ex-slaves. As expected, although the new Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments, respectively recognizing the citizenship of the freedmen and granting them franchise and civil rights, had all been ratified by the seceded states as sine qua non conditions to be restored to the federal Union, the latter states returned to discriminatory practices by means of the so-called Jim Crow laws denying African Americans social, economic, and political rights. Unsurprisingly, the Jim Crow laws spread throughout the country within a short time after the last federal troops, still supportive of the former slave population, withdrew from the South in 1877 (Jones 1983, 268-69).

Thereupon, backed by the Supreme Court that encouraged the enactment of the Jim Crow laws without interruption until 1954, segregation became public policy, mainly in the southern regions of the United States. It involved almost every area of life, including schooling, worshiping, transportation, leisure activities, and so forth. The Jim Crow laws remained in effect in most Southern states until the 1964 Civil Rights Act repealed all of their aspects by barring discrimination in all public accommodations and mandating that public facilities be open to all.

In the interim, Black Nationalism emerged as a potentially attractive outlet from such a predicament, most importantly as African Americans' protests against their ignored political and civil rights and the ensuing miserable living conditions gained them ghettoes in the largest northern cities of the country, especially when African Americans grew disillusioned about the share of democracy their country had reserved for them—above all, after they had been brought to serve in the First World War in a struggle, they were told, that was waged precisely for the sake of

democracy, only to go back home to find all forms of injustice, racism, and discrimination awaiting them again.

At the beginning, the Black Nationalist ideology envisaged a solution in the return-to-Africa movement. Then, on account of the advanced acculturation among most African Americans, it advocated a different vision of independence, requesting the erection of a state within the United States' geopolitical space, i.e. a nation within the American nation, a vision essentially based on a religious, separatist ideology instead.

No doubt, one of the most prominent aspects of Black Nationalism was Garveyism, named after Marcus Garvey, who launched the separatist ideology under its well-known tangible political form (Ertel, Fabre, and Marienstras 1971, 25). In the early 1920s, Garvey led a short-lived mass movement that stressed the necessity of self-determination and unity for black people. He founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Harlem and endowed it with a widely-distributed print medium, the *Negro World*. The newspaper addressed the communities of African backgrounds in both the Caribbean and the United States, in particular, and around the globe, in general. Garveyism held the idea that African people, wherever their place, formed the same community and should accordingly give up their cultural differences and political disagreements if they aimed to achieve any advancement. The objective of the Garveyist message was unequivocal: instilling both an admiration of African heritage and pride in their ancestral identity by urging his people to trade exclusively among themselves.

To this pan-Africanist end, Garvey also promoted the Black Star Line, a shipping company with a fleet destined to link people of African descent with their counterparts throughout the world.

> We are the descendants of a suffering people; we are the descendants of a people determined to suffer no longer. … We shall now organize the Negroes of the world into a vast organization to plant the banner of freedom on the great continent of Africa. (Qtd. in Lincoln 1973, 61)

Thus Garvey promised his people improvement, growth, and development, along with Africa—both Liberia and Sierra Leone, precisely—as a land of final return. It should yet be noted that, two generations after the abolition of slavery, Garveyism still proved necessary to provide African Americans with a sense of belonging and unity in the face of their inability to get rid of subordination and failure to enjoy full citizenship in American society. By suggesting economic cooperation, political solidarity, and cultural awareness, completed by a Back-to-Africa plan as an ultimate solution, not only did the ideology fill African

Americans with self-esteem, it also stimulated their political and social consciousness.

As a good pan-Africanist, Marcus Garvey promised marvels. Regrettably, he would never achieve such goals, not only due to his troubles with the American justice system on tax evasion charges but, basically, because the Back-to-Africa ideal revealed itself impossible. Separatism would survive Garveyism, however, recuperated by Black Muslims who have instead conceived of separation from white society on the grounds of religious differentiation. Actually, after the decline of the movement in 1925, former Garveyites deserted the UNIA, seeking refuge in the Moorish Science Temple, a sect initiated by Timothy Drew Ali, a firm believer in the separatist ideology. His sect, since 1913, had functioned on Black Nationalist principles (Lincoln 1973, 57).

CHAPTER TWO

THE MOORISH SCIENCE TEMPLE

The story of the conversion of African Americans to the Islamic religion is a long narrative whose components, like those of Black Nationalism, reach back to the nineteenth century. At that time, some African American religious leaders, like Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, disillusioned with Christianity, began to wonder whether it was the most suitable religion for the African American community (Turner 2003, 59-61). Uncertainty and pending questionings combined with the Black Nationalist ideology to plant the seeds of religious separatism among African Americans. Islam was then regarded as a possible alternative for a community with a growing awareness of the necessity to rebuild its identity.

In 1913, in Newark, New Jersey, an African American named Timothy Drew Ali founded what would become referred to as the Black Muslim movement, whose initial name was the Moorish Science Temple of America (hereafter, MST). Drew Ali's message was a mixture of Christian ideals, some Islamic rules, and Black Nationalism. In reality, Drew Ali, who gave himself out to his followers as a "prophet", preached a message combining some elements borrowed from the Bible and others from what Drew Ali called his "Holy Koran", which had nothing to do with the real Koranic Book—neither a translation thereof nor a volume of injunctions about mainstream Islam, but a compilation of principles invented by Drew Ali himself. They were mostly appropriated from the Garveyist separatist agenda and were based on myths and legends, such as the belief that Black Muslims were the descendants of a Moor called Yacub who had reached the Americas before Columbus (Nuriddin 2000, 218). Yet, his message, which sought to bring hope and words of relief to an oppressed community, soon gained momentum as it spread in the north of the United States, from New Jersey to Detroit, Harlem, and Chicago, as well as in many other American cities and places throughout the south of the country (Lincoln 1973, 55).

In an obvious effort at ethnic differentiation, Drew Ali called his followers the "Moors", a sectarian name evocative of Arab culture in the Maghreb, the western region of North Africa. Unsurprisingly, yet unlike

Marcus Garvey, Drew Ali promised them Morocco as a land of return and made them wear red fezzes in public, too. The disciples of the MST also had to hold membership identity cards underlining that they belonged to the Islamic faith (Lincoln 1973, 54). With their peculiar attire, so different in appearance, they distinguished themselves not only from white people, but even from their fellow African Americans. Seemingly, the identity question was also of great importance to them so as to discard their assigned identities and dispel the effect of Christian domination.

In any case, the MST's religious separatist doctrine did not rest only on eccentricities, but also on paradoxes. In obvious contradiction with the sect's name, indeed, Drew Ali grew obsessed with the belief that salvation for his people depended on refusing to be called "Negroes". Instead, "they must henceforth call themselves Asiatics", which represented the designation reflecting their real national origin, according to him. Similarly, though they were Moors, or Moroccans, nay Asiatics, the disciples of the MST were assured that they still belonged to the American nation, as the membership cards issued for them by the sect specifically stated that they were citizens of the United States, inscribed in obvious letters, just beside the specification of their new religious identity (Lincoln 1973, 53).

On the other hand, the sect provided both a sense of security and feelings of self-importance, as the MST's doctrine relied on icons with Islamic connotations, such as the "star and the crescent", together with references to the sect's chosen god being "Allah" (Lincoln 1973, 53). Yet, at the same time, and all in total contradiction with Oriental Islam, the sect recognized Buddhism as being on an equal footing with the Abrahamic religions. Likewise, the leader of the sect, who became known as Noble Drew Ali, was identified as an Islamic messenger, probably on account of the allegation that he had freed his people from "the curse of European white domination" (Turner 2003, 99). In the same vein, while Christianity was dismissed by the sect as so inferior a religion, Jesus Christ was glorified as one of the forebears of the Moorish Americans. They, indeed, did not hesitate to evoke Jesus in their daily prayers and incantations (Mamiya 1996, 149).

Most obviously, the rationale behind the religious separatist doctrine of the MST was no doubt to bring about an adequate response to all forms of segregation witnessed by African Americans. The conversion to an imaginary, invented religion that looked like Islam allowed Moorish Americans to acquire a new religious identity that made them feel like "somebody", with a conspicuous cultural experience of their own initiation that might compensate for the lack of consideration, originality, and

experience that had long been given to African Americans by the dominant culture.

Though the message brought about by the MST was based on a nationalist philosophy involving goodwill, hope, and mutual help, the religious doctrine it sought to instill in its disciples was, to a large extent, paradoxical and eccentric in many respects. This paradoxical and eccentric version of Black Nationalism tainted with fake religious tenets conferred a phony aspect on the sect's response, which damaged its chances of credibility. The influence of the MST lasted only a few years; after the assassination of Drew Ali in 1929, the sect subdivided into smaller groups of Black Muslims, many of whom in the early 1930s would gather in another cult of converts called the Nation of Islam, which held similar religious separatist ideas and largely relied on Black Nationalism, too (Kepel 1994, 30-31).

CHAPTER THREE

BIRTH OF THE NATION OF ISLAM

In actual fact, African American converts to Islam had carried various names, such as "the Moorish Americans", the first known community of such converts to appear in the United States, "the Temple People", "the Muhammadans", or even "the Voodoo Cult", until 1956, when historian Eric Charles Lincoln coined the generic descriptive phrase of "Black Muslims".

However, the most prominent (and still extant) sect of Black Muslims, with a remarkable longevity of over fourscore years, is incontestably the Nation of Islam, which was born in the African American ghetto of Detroit, Michigan, in the early 1930s. It was around the years 1930 and 1931 when one Wallace D. Fard, allegedly a silk peddler from Syria, pretended he had come directly from the holy city of Mecca to convert what he first designated as the "Lost-Found Nation of al-Islam in the Wilderness of North America" to its original ancestral faith, precisely to the Islamic religion. The initial name of the sect would later be shortened to simply the "Nation of Islam" (NOI, hereafter). The sect gained momentum quickly, as the task of this preacher was facilitated by the conditions in which he had found African Americans during the hard years of the early thirties, which were marked by large-scale unemployment and the ensuing poverty and miserable living conditions, caused by the ravaging Great Depression (Lincoln 1973, 12-14).

But in 1934, Fard disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared (Gibson 2012, 22). In the interim, he had appointed Elijah Poole as his lieutenant, an African American who had migrated northward to flee from the misery of the South. The latter would become known as Elijah Muhammad and was the leader of the Nation of Islam for the following forty years. Elijah Muhammad's religious doctrine fundamentally rested both on his own prophet-hood and on the divinity of the initiator of the sect who was introduced to the disciples as the incarnation of God and who visited his people on the earth, appearing to them as the Savior in the person of Wallace D. Fard (Gibson 2012, 29).

Simultaneously, the doctrine also rested on the political principle of separatism embedded in Garveyism—itself an inheritance from Black Nationalism—the most prominent ideal of which was none other than the promise of an imminent and inevitable foundation of an autonomous African American nation (Kepel 1994, 24; Lincoln 1973, 61). Indeed, as the name of the sect indicates, Elijah Muhammad proposed a religious *nation*, one that cut all ties with the immediate Christian environment. The major deviation from early Black Nationalism was that the Nation of Islam required no return to any African country. Given the well-advanced stage of Americanization among African Americans, the spiritual leader of the sect relinquished the departure project for a no less realistic separatist philosophy. Nonetheless, he envisaged a separation from American society in terms of independence with the prompt settlement of a small state on the very soil of the United States of America (Muhammad 1973, 99-101; 150). Such a state would be set up on a piece of land that would allegedly be granted by the federal government. In his book, *Message to the Blackman in America*, Elijah Muhammad gives a glimpse of what he considers as an autonomous nation as follows:

> We must have some of this earth to produce our people's needs. … It is the right time that we seek separation and independence for our nation from the evils of our open enemies, and not the foolish things [that some of us are] doing. … [Our people] seek that (recognition) which demands better qualifications: education, the knowledge of self and others, manners and self-respect and the respect of others. (1973, 203-04)

In the 1950s, looking forward to revitalizing the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad appointed Malcolm X as his nationwide representative. Malcolm provisionally assumed the letter "X" as a surname instead of "Little", his actual family name, which was rejected on the grounds of its close connection with the oppressor, until he received a new one as a replacement that might match with his new identity. Meanwhile, he proved to be an eloquent orator and spent twelve years, from 1952 to 1963, loyally preaching the teachings of the Nation of Islam's spiritual leader, especially religious separatism, without discarding the possibility of recourse to weapons, if need be, and, secondly, the reversed, anti-white racist discourse demonizing whosoever opposed the sect's religious and political projects. It was virulent rhetoric, diametrically in contradiction with that about pacifist integration from Malcolm X's contemporary, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the eminent civil rights figure (Damak 2016, 24).