American Islam X

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Abstract

Academic and public discourse on Islam and Muslims in America continuously represses the deep (hi)stories of Blackamerican or Afro-American Muslims – (hi)stories rooted in the very inception of American nations – to focus almost exclusively on the twentieth and twenty-first century (hi)stories of immigrant, Middle-Eastern, and brown Muslims. The brand of racism known as Islamophobia manifests and thrives on the same prejudice, centering images of the “brown Arab-Middle Eastern Muslim” as the biological and cultural archetype of the Muslim-Islamic other. Put differently, both Islamophobic racism and official discourse on ‘Islam in America’ hinge on alienating Blackness from Islam, and hence Islam from America.

As per its grasp of Islam and Muslims, American discourse on race, religion, culture, and politics remains captive to two fundamental and historically conditioned assumptions, namely that (1) the Islam of Blackamericans is not an authentic Islam, and that (2) true Islam is necessarily foreign, immigrant, and other to America. In tandem with debunking the myth of the demise of Islam among Afro-American slaves and their descendants, this essay argues that Islam, far from emigrating recently to American shores, has been indigenized to America by Afro-American Muslims, through centuries of their adaptive resilience to repression by America’s white-Protestant dominant order. As a tradition continuous with the history of American nations, American Islam demands that American Muslims, including foreign-born and immigrant American Muslims, bridge with the (hi)stories and living legacies of Afro-American Muslims, as well as with the perpetual struggle for liberation from human oppression that is central to the formation of American Islam. After sketching out the (hi)story of American Islam – principally via slave history and testimony, and the history of Black (both Christian and Muslim) religio-political discourse – this essay reads the Muslim life of Malcolm X as a significant moment in the ongoing tradition of American Islam. Where Malcolm’s biographers tend to separate his religious life from his politics, this essay reads his Autobiography, as well as his many speeches, interviews, correspondences, activist moments, and FBI records, in light of the tradition of American Islam, arguing fundamentally that Malcolm’s Muslim faith encompassed and guided his dedication to the politics of Black and human liberation.
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Prologue

Since the day he was murdered, Malcolm X has been eulogized, commemorated, studied – re-studied – and vilified by Americans from nearly every walk of life. Indeed, the man made famous for propagating revolution “by any means necessary” has been a means for a great many sides and sites of power and knowledge.

In 1999, the U.S Postal Service released a stamp bearing Malcolm’s name and portrait as part of its Black heritage series. In one cathartic gesture, an independent agency of the U.S government – the government Malcolm had been preparing to indict before the U.N when he was murdered – presumed to ‘legitimize’ Malcolm’s memory by admitting him into an officially sanctioned hall of Black heritage, enshrining him as a “civil rights leader” after the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman.\(^1\) Outside and beyond such state-sanctioned remembrance, hip-hop and the aesthetics of Black revolution have raised Malcolm’s image to the vanguard of Black counterculture.\(^2\) At the same time, all of us who admire Malcolm have been compelled to contend with the celebration of his allegedly deific Black masculinity. In the heavy eulogistic words of Ossie Davis: “Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood!”\(^3\)

Malcolm is rightly critiqued for his chauvinism – for his assimilation of the patriarchy of the Nation of Islam in particular – as well as lauded for his evolving feminism.\(^4\) Beyoncé’s recent sampling of Malcolm in her music and performances has highlighted the agency of women of colour when they identify with those they know have stood for them.\(^5\) As per his own ingenuity, Malcolm has been read as an exemplar of a liberatory textuality. Reading Malcolm through the text of the Autobiography,\(^i\) bell hooks writes “Only Malcolm X charts the decolonization of a black mind in a manner that far surpasses any experience described in slave narratives.”\(^6\)

Nationalist organizations – the Black Panthers, most notably – have adopted and raised Malcolm up as one of their chief symbols and ideologues. But Malcolm has also been heralded as a revolutionary socialist who was on the cusp of synthesising Black Nationalism and socialism in a unifying struggle against racism and capitalism when he was murdered. At least one prominent biographer has psychotherapized Malcolm as a sexually perverted neurotic. (Interestingly, the Manhattan military draft board Malcolm hustled in 1943 made the same assessment of him in a psychiatric review, fittingly rejecting him from military service thereafter). Malcolm has been denounced as Martin Luther King Jr’s violent counterpart, but also upheld as more real and radical than King and the civil rights movement. Malcolm has even been read as a producer and critic of geographic knowledge, an agent of Black radicalism engaged in the remaking of American space.

All this to say, all knowledge about the life and legacy of Malcolm X either challenges or serves, empowers or disempowers. There is no neutral ground. The meaning of Malcolm X remains an open and contested field.

For all its colourful insight, half a century’s conversation on Brother Malcolm has not advanced the discussion and representation of his Islam much farther than the polemics of his own time. In fact, our approach to Malcolm’s deen – his Muslim creed and way of life – has been little more than a relay between The Hate That Hate Produced (1959) and Malcolm’s infamous Hajj letter (1964). The former engrained a hallucinatory memory of the Nation of Islam as a Black racist-supremacist organization while the latter has become a veritable certificate of Malcolm X’s exemplary ‘conversion’ to Sunni Islam. Between the two, our narratives of Malcolm’s religious life have scarcely been more inventive than the story, elevated

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ii See below, ‘Illustration 1,’ p. 90.
iii Deen: A Quranic term for the all-encompassing creed and way of life of a Muslim.
ignorantly by Sunni-ists, and all-too perfectly in synch with global anti-Black racism as well as Islamophobia, of a Black man’s ‘conversion’ from pseudo (or crypto, quasi, and cultic) Islam to orthodox Islam.

Produced and presented as a five-part series by television journalists Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax, The Hate That Hate Produced brought the Nation of Islam to the attention of wide swathes of America that had never before heard of “the Black Muslims.” And it was largely by getting under America’s skin that Wallace and Lomax succeeded in generating a fierce publicity storm, around the Nation of Islam as well as their own purported ‘genius.’ As the host, Mike Wallace framed the Nation of Islam – or “the Black Muslims” as he referred to them throughout the program – as a Black supremacist (also, Black extremist, Black racist) movement leading the tide of Black hate across America. Reflecting his own liberal politics to the nth, Wallace set the story of the Nation of Islam into a metanarrative about the clash between hate and love in the United States. The film juxtaposes images of fiery tirades delivered at the meetings of the Nation of Islam and the United African Nationalist Movement with calm and seated prescriptions of equality, harmony, and love from America’s “civil rights leaders.” Wallace was cannily manipulative when he contrasted the followers of the Nation of Islam, and other so-called “Black supremacist” movements, with “more sober-minded Negroes” and the “orthodox followers of true Islam,” a religion he described as spurning every racist, supremacist doctrine for the doctrine of universal brotherhood. Merely to contrast Wallace’s rather convenient definition of ‘true Islam’ with the grisly depictions of what it means to be Muslim today, is to see that the dominant ‘powers that be’ have their own reasons for defining our faith for and against us.

In the Autobiography, Malcolm describes The Hate That Hate Produced as a “kaleidoscope of shocker images.” “In a way,” he writes, “I think the public reaction was like
what happened back in the 1930’s when Orson Welles frightened America with a radio program describing, as though it was actually happening, an invasion by ‘men from Mars.’” Wallace and Lomax got under America’s skin, setting off its outrage and its righteous indignation, at times merely by suggesting, as the title of their film does, that a hatred of whites seems a rational road to some Blackamericans: “Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, black and white, were exclaiming: ‘Did you hear it? Did you see it? Preaching hate of white people!’” The documentary gave Wallace and Lomax the break they needed to advance their careers, along with inspiring other media – including *U.S. News & World Report* and *Time* – to market their own accounts of unearthly ‘Black Muslims.’

In 1961, C. Eric Lincoln produced what would become a foundational text in the ‘Islam in America’ discourse, *The Black Muslims in America*, and thereby almost indelibly imprinted the moniker “Black Muslims” on the body of the Nation of Islam. Lincoln characterised the Nation as a fundamentally Black Nationalist organization whose religious elements were of only secondary importance to its basic appeal: a chance to one-up the white man. The third edition of Lincoln’s book was published in 1994, and remains standard reading on the Nation of Islam. Between *The Hate That Hate Produced* and *The Black Muslims in America*, the Nation of Islam has had little room to be anything other than either pseudo-religious or pseudo-Islamic.

Writing from Jedda, Saudi Arabia, on April 20, 1964, Malcolm described Mecca and the Hajj trail as a site of “true brotherhood,” where people of all colours – “from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans” – convened in “a spirit of unity” his experiences in America had led him to believe never could exist between whites and non-whites. Further, Malcolm idealized the Muslim world as a post-racial and anti-racist geography where a sincere understanding and practice of Islam had removed all notion of racial supremacy from human beings, even and
especially from those who would have been considered white in America. According to Malcolm, it was their conviction in the Islamic doctrine of the oneness of God that allowed those Muslims, “whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white,” to be just as sincere in word and deed as the Black African Muslims he had met in his travels. “We were truly all the same (brothers),” wrote Malcolm – “because their belief in one God had removed the ‘white’ from their minds, the ‘white’ from their behaviour, and the ‘white’ from their attitudes.” Based on this narrative about the Muslim world, Malcolm went on to prescribe an understanding of Islam, and an acceptance of the oneness of God and the oneness of humanity, as a “proven solution” to America’s own self-destructive racism. Malcolm expressed the hopeful belief that young white Americans will see that racism is suicide for their nation, and that they will “turn to the spiritual path of truth” – the only path left to America to save itself. Thus it was that Malcolm painted the Muslim world as a geography of liberation in contrast to the oppressive geography of America, ultimately encompassing both in a religio-political imaginary that spatialized the latter’s much-needed revolution as the former’s basic reality.

The experience of Islam Malcolm articulated in his letter from the Hajj trail was also a form of “self-witness.” For the first time since he had been cast out by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm explained his rupture with the Nation of Islam as a matter of transitioning into a new and different religious framework, that of Sunni Islam. “You may be shocked by these words coming from me,” he wrote: “But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to re-arrange much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions.” Truly, Malcolm idealized Mecca and the orthodox Muslim world as

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iv For more on Afro-American geographies of liberation, see: Alex Lubin, Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
a post-racial and anti-racist paradise on earth, but he did so to emphasise Islam’s relevance to America’s race-problem as well as to attest to his own revolution in faith. Indeed, the history of Malcolm’s political engagements after his so-called ‘conversion’ to Sunni Islam belies the notion that Malcolm was “duped ‘by the window dressing in Mecca.’”28 Moreover, the history of Malcolm’s religious life leading up to the Hajj illuminates his so-called ‘conversion’ as a further adaptation and evolution of his faith. The idealized religious landscape Malcolm witnessed in his letter was equally witness to his own renewed religio-political vision. But what should be read as a moment in which Malcolm recovered agency in his religious life and its representation has all-too often been read simplistically as the Sunnification and even domestication of Malcolm X.

In a way, the American public’s reaction to Malcolm’s Hajj letter was in obverse to the outrage and indignation sparked by The Hate That Hate Produced. On May 8, 1964, two weeks before Malcolm’s return to the United States, the New York Times published an article by M.S. Handler, titled “Malcolm X Pleased by Whites’ Attitude on Trip to Mecca.”29 Several weeks later, James Booker of Harlem’s Amsterdam News posed the question: “Has the visit of Malcolm X, now El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, to Mecca and with Muslim leaders in Africa changed him to become soft in his anti-white feeling and to become more religious?”30 It seems that in the U.S, Malcolm’s emphasis on the oneness of humanity was being caricatured and marketed as an amusingly ironic twist of fate: Malcolm, the champion of Black pride, and the embodiment of Black rage, was growing soft and lukewarm with his decadent new indulgence of whites. An angry Black man had been tamed, and that was worth at least a self-satisfied chuckle.

A May 18, 1964 article in the *Washington Post* credited Malcolm’s mentor in Sunni Islam, the Egyptian scholar Dr. Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi, with being the “man who tamed Malcolm.” The first line of another article from the *Post*, dated May 8, 1964, reads: “Malcolm X has found some white people he likes.” Soon after Malcolm’s return to New York, at a press conference held at Harlem’s Theresa Hotel, a reporter reminded the Hajji that he was back in America by immediately provoking him to comment upon the classic conflict of solutions to America’s race-problem: “Malcolm, on your trip abroad, you said you sense a feeling of brotherhood and that conceivably you would be working toward integration in this country now, at least this is what you’re reported to have said, do you have any comment on it?” Malcolm denied ever stating anything about working toward integration in his correspondences, and instead emphasised Islam’s potential to drive out racism from American society as it had from the Muslims he had met in his travels. Another reporter at the conference asked Malcolm whether he still stood by his “controversial” call for Black Americans to form rifle clubs in self-defence, and Malcolm denied that there was anything controversial about the proposition to begin with. He stated: “[Afro-Americans] can see that that having waited upon the government to protect them has been a wait that has been in vain. So, any of them who live in areas where the government is not able to do its job, then we do have to get together and do a job of protecting ourselves.” In the *Washington Post’s* May 18 article, Dr. Shawarbi defended the sincerity of Malcolm’s Islam with one hand – against the claim that Malcolm would only use religion and his pilgrimage for publicity – and with the other, gestured to what he believed an authentically Islamic politic should look like. He predicted that Malcolm would give up his call for Blackamericans to form rifle clubs, and that his movement would grow and become more significant “if he admits all people…and goes about things quietly and Islamically […].”  

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Where Dr. Shawarbi succeeded in helping Malcolm bridge with a global sense of Islamic belonging – by encouraging and paving the way for his Hajj, in particular – he, like his Sunni-ist inheritors, was mistaken to believe that Malcolm would surrender his militant devotion to his kin.35

Muslims and non-Muslims alike have imposed their expectations of Malcolm like a harness on the man and his movements, making little significant effort to go beyond a few simplistic narrative devices, in use since before Malcolm’s time, to understand his Islam and the meaning of his faith for all who value his legacies, and all who consider themselves Muslim. In his final interview – conducted via correspondence with the Geneva-based Islamic Centre’s Al-Muslimoon magazine – Malcolm was reproached by his interlocutor for maintaining “the Black color as a main base and dogma” of his philosophy.36 Malcolm had accepted Islam and, as brilliant as he was, he should have come to see that Islam confirms the “ethnological oneness and equality of all races, thus striking at the very root of the monstrosity of racial discrimination.”37 Malcolm did not differ with his interlocutor’s definition of Islam’s racial egalitarianism, but he did contend that his principal commitment was to “the twenty-two million fellow Black Americans who suffer the same indignities because of their colour as I do.”38 Malcolm went further and turned the reproach on its head, raising a critique of foreign and immigrant Muslims that still stands valid and necessary. Malcolm pointed out that “until now the Muslim world has seemed to ignore the problem of the Black American” and that most Muslims who come to America from the Muslim world “have concentrated more effort in trying to convert white Americans than Black Americans.”39 So it was that Malcolm identified the racial agnosia and ignorance of immigrant Muslims, their insensitivity to the real conditions of American Muslims, and their presumption of religious, if not racial, superiority.
The normative representatives of ‘Islam in America’ have not advanced the discussion of Malcolm’s religion any further since his own life and times. In 2010, the Islamic Circle of North America’s *da’wah* project Why-Islam published a brochure on Malcolm’s religious life, titled “Malcolm X: From Darkness to Light.” The Sunni-ist narrative encompassed in the brochure has the convenience of reflecting certain dominant paradigms. The narrative does not demonize the Nation of Islam, nor does it overtly credit Malcolm’s ‘true’ Islam to Arab sources. The narrative does, however, amputate Malcolm’s Islam. It separates his ‘this-worldly,’ ‘material’ focus on changing the unjust social conditions of his people, and addressing the racist structures of power that keep them there, from his more ‘spiritual’ attention to “those beliefs and practices commanded by God from the earliest times.” The narrative casts the former as Malcolm’s darkness, his lingering in “erroneous beliefs” as member and minister of the Nation, and the latter as the pure and true Islamic light that he came into after a dramatic “turnaround,” purportedly brought about by his rupture with Elijah Muhammad and his subsequent Hajj: “The change of his name from Malcolm X to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz symbolized his final step on the journey from the darkness of erroneous beliefs to the truth and the light of Islam.” The narrative centers Malcolm’s Hajj letter, quoting it extensively as capturing Malcolm’s “turnaround,” though it is historically evident that Malcolm’s ‘earthly’ focus did not diminish after his pilgrimage. Much like Shawarbi, the Islamic Circle emits an apologetic and racially agnostic, as opposed to racially liberating, definition of Islamic orthodoxy and its attendant politics, even as it celebrates Malcolm as a sincere ‘convert.’ According to the narrative:

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*Da’wah*: Literally, “invitation,” it refers in the Quranic sense to a Muslim’s responsibility, not to ‘convert,’ but to ‘invite’ people to Islam. See Quran 16:125.

*vii* Note, once again, the erroneous conception that Malcolm became Malik Al-Shabazz after his Hajj, this time in a context that more clearly reveals its ties to the dominant reading of religious ‘conversion’ as religious transformation, as a becoming-into something fundamentally other.
the Quran “sounded the death knell of racial discrimination” with a single verse,viii all the
world’s Muslim’s have fallen in line with a race-free, human society. Muslims have no race-
problem – Muslims have surmounted the race-problem. And because Islam offers a perfect
prescription for all our social and psychological ills, there is no need for Muslims to hazard the
stain of the world and the insecurity of a shattered status quo by turning political. We are told
that we are already cleansed.

But indeed bleached is more accurate. The narrative is a calculated fabrication. To believe
it is to be deceived. For all his idealizations of the Muslim world, Malcolm recognized that we
Muslims have not yet made it to the human shore.

The academy has not fared much better. Decades of scholarship have produced one full-
length treatment of Malcolm’s religious life, Louis A. DeCaro Jr’s On the Side of My People: A
Religious Life of Malcolm X. For all its merits – including its attention to the continuities of
Malcolm’s religious life and its respect for Malcolm’s sincerity as a believer – On the Side of My
People is not informed by a significant knowledge of Islam. In fact, it constitutes more of a
Christian, or at least Christocentric perspective on Malcolm’s faith, and relies too heavily on
historically European distinctions between cult and orthodoxy to describe Malcolm’s religious
journey. Nonetheless, On the Side of My People is a notable and worthy addition to the
discussion on Malcolm’s faith, and its author deserves recognition as much as a critique.

As for what follows: after some attention to its methodological underpinnings, and much to
the historical and theoretical contexts of American Islam, this essay charts Malcolm’s struggle,
from his prison prayer to the stage of his murder, to make Islam his own in a world that

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viii Chapter 49, Verse 13: “O mankind, indeed We have created you male and female and made you peoples and
tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of
you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (Quran 49:13) Sahih International Translation,
desperately needs, and demands, that Islam remain a certain way. The story of Malcolm’s faith is made legible by the history of American Islam, which itself must needs be approached via the histories of African and Blackamerican Muslims. The Muslim life of Malcolm X attests to both the depth of Blackamericans’ influence on American Islamic traditions, and the breadth of their participation in its continuity. Truly, liberation is a matter of the (hi)stories we tell.
Chapter 1 -- Introduction: Aims and Methodologies

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (Quran 49:13)

When it comes to Islam and Muslims in America, popular and academic discourse on American race, religion, culture and politics remains imprisoned in the haunt of two fundamental assumptions, developed and engrained over time and space, namely that (1) the Islam of Blackamericans is not an authentic Islam, and that (2) an authentic Islam is necessarily other, foreign, and immigrant to America. As we will see, these assumptions are tacit drivers in mainstream American and Sunni Muslim representations of Islam and American Muslims, as well as pivotal in the formations of Islamophobic racism. Understanding how and where these assumptions have taken hold, and strategizing for their undoing, will require analysis of the complex of relations between white, Christian Euro-American Empire, Islam, and Blackness in the context of the formation of colonial American nations. It is not my intent, however, given my prescribed extent, as well as my bid to centre American Islam in my work, to tell the (hi)story of the rise of American racism, nationhood, and empire. I aim, instead, by way of giving context for my study of Malcolm’s Islam, to sketch out the history and discourse that feed Islam’s adaptation to its American home and the universe of significations called American Islam. Malcolm’s religious life is the focal point of this essay, the tangible edge of its analysis. Ranging from about the time he was silenced by Elijah Muhammad to the day of his murder, Malcolm’s last year stands in particular as the most open and contested area of his otherwise richly contested legacy. It was in Malcolm’s last year that the humanist seed of Quran 49:13 began to flower into the vision that made him a more determined and dangerous revolutionary: the vision, that is, of
human difference grounding human equality, of a world that will not be divided and ruled by false gods and their false metrics.

There are three key matters of methodological concern to address before this essay proceeds with the (hi)story of American Islam and the religious life of Malcolm X. They are: (1) the matter of terminology; (2) the (non-) question of the authenticity of Blackamerican Islam in relation to 'orthodox' (also ‘Sunni,’ ‘global,’ and ‘universal’) Islam; and (3) the problem of objectivity in reading and writing the religious biography of Malcolm X.

I. The Matter of Terminology

As per its choice of signifiers, this essay takes its first cue from Brother Malcolm himself. While he still served the Nation of Islam, Malcolm expressed his distaste for the appellation ‘Black Muslims,’ as popularized by C. Eric Lincoln and The Hate That Hate Produced. Malcolm recognized that the signifier was used, anything but innocuously, to provincialize his people’s religion as cult or mere conceit. He perceived that the ‘Black’ in ‘Black Muslims’ is a qualifying descriptor, a specific take as it were, on an otherwise categorical object called ‘Muslim,’ rather than a designation for the human referent who happens to be Black and chooses to be Muslim. “‘No! We are black people here in America,’” Malcolm declared: “‘Our religion is Islam. We are properly called ‘Muslims’!” But that ‘Black Muslims’ name never got dislodged.”41 Whether within or without the Nation of Islam, Malcolm signified himself and his kin in faith as but Muslims, believers on a universal religion. In recognition of Blackamerican Islamic universalism, this essay uses ‘Blackamerican Muslims’ and ‘Afro-American Muslims’ – as opposed to ‘Black Muslims’ – to highlight the specific historical and political identity of a people who otherwise choose to signify themselves as merely Muslim.
In *Islam and the Blackamerican*, Abdul Hakim (a.k.a. Sherman) Jackson insists that “it is neither blood nor biology but history that makes ‘a people’ and it matters little whether that history is subjectively chosen or imposed by others from without.”\(^{42}\) Jackson is critical of the view of Blackamericans as displaced Africans rather than as a distinct and “genuine people whose ‘peopleness’ was fired in their centuries-long crucible in North America.”\(^{43}\) It is curious, as Jackson notes, that countless Europeans could become ‘Americans’ or even ‘white’ in less than a few centuries, whereas half a millennium of American history has not sufficed to indigenize “the sons and daughters of Africa.”\(^{44}\) In the American context, Black ‘indigenization’ refers to the process of common subjection, adaptation and resistance to common histories, whereby Africans and the African-descended in America have become Blackamericans. For Jackson, cutting into the myopia that marginalizes Black experience, and thus vital aspects of American history itself, is contiguous with the task of understanding the relationship between Islam and Blackamericans within the context of American realities. Jackson’s emphasis on the Americanness of Blackamericans need not, however, be read as a gainsaying of internationalist trends in Blackamerican thought, including Malcolm’s own substantial efforts to build global Black and Muslim solidarity. In fact, Jackson’s approach to Blackamerican history resonates with Malcolm’s insistence on the fundamental humanity of Afro-Americans. According to Jackson’s definition of what makes a people, the ‘fact’ of Blackness – like the ‘fact’ of whiteness – is a subjective matter of history and circumstance, rather than an objective matter of fate or biology, which means that a people’s identity is not a substitute for their humanity.

To study Blackamerican history and identity from the perspective of Black indigenization is really to pay heed to the depth of Blackamericans’ participation in the formation of American nations, as well as to their agency as a people under siege. To do so, however, does not change
the fact of diaspora or belie its consequences for Black survival and continuity, nor does it belie the possibility of multiple and overlapping political, cultural, and religious imaginaries that encompass multiple histories and geographies and betoken a multitude of potential solidarities – nor yet does it alter in the least the global and connected nature of colonial-imperial-patriarchal-capitalism, slave economies, and racism. The ambiguities and overlaps of signification in Blackamerican history, like those in Malcolm’s life and thought, are the meeting-places of multiple and competing (hi)stories, amenable joints in the matrices of power and knowledge that constitute America. They betoken the possibility of reconfiguration and even rupture. This essay uses Jackson’s ‘Blackamerican’ and, after Malcolm’s preference, ‘Afro-American,’ to refer to “the sons and daughters of Africa” subjected as Black in America – Black to America – as well as to (hi)stories, agencies, and experiences integral to the formation of the United States. It uses ‘African’ and ‘African-descended’ more so in the context of discussing the African diaspora and its legacies. It is vital, however, to recognize the ambiguity inherent in ‘Blackamerican Muslim’ and ‘Afro-American Muslim,’ for while the prefixes ‘Blackamerican’ and ‘Afro-American’ refer to the historically constructed identity of a human being who self-signifies as Muslim, they are also designations for a Muslim who has adapted the universal religion of Islam in specific ways to specific and situated realities. Call it the tension between the universal and the particular. Pervasive as it is in religious life, the tension must needs be approached in its concreteness, within particular lives and circumstances.

II. The (Non-) Question of Blackamerican Religious Authenticity

As the labour of a misfit Muslim, and a student of history and religion, this essay takes it to heart that the Islam of Blackamericans ought to be studied as Islam, in and through its overlapping contexts, without pre-emptive judgement on either its authenticity or its validity in
relation to an ‘orthodox’ or ‘global’ Islam. Over and beyond such judgement, attention ought to be paid to the ways in which Blackamericans have struggled to authenticate and validate themselves as Muslims, and their Islam as Islam, from within a subjecting universe of significations imposed on them by white and immigrant-Muslim centred discourse. This essay’s approach to Black religiosity is informed by certain critical elements in the ‘Islam in America’ scholarly literature, namely works by Edward E. Curtis IV,45 Richard Brent Turner,46 Abdul Hakim Jackson,47 and Samory Rashid.48

In Islam in Black America, Edward E. Curtis asserts foundationally that religious people, too often construed simplistically as but products of their religions, are in fact participants in their religious traditions, who define the meaning of their traditions by partaking of an ongoing, universal process of interpretation in particular times and places.49 No, the Islam of Blackamericans is not a particular spin on a universal Islam located elsewhere. Rather, “African-American Islam,” like “classical Islam,” is animated by both universalist and particularist impulses,50 meaning that an objectively true Islam belongs as much to every Muslim as it does to no one at all. As such, characterizations of certain Muslims as “cultists, heretics, and sectarians” – and certain Islams as pseudo or quasi – are entirely without meaning because they presume, “by their comparison to ‘orthodox’ Muslims, a normative Islam that in no time and place has ever existed.”51 Making it plain, Curtis insists that “wherever and whenever a person calls himself or herself Muslim, scholars should include this person’s voice in their understanding of what constitutes Islam.”52

In The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora, Curtis dedicates himself to the task of uncovering the role of Islam in the shaping of African diasporic consciousness and experience within and across particular regions (namely, North Africa, the Middle East, Britain, Latin
America, the Caribbean, and the United States). Curtis emphasises that the histories of these regions often influence and shape the forms of Islam practiced within them. He also notes, crucially, that even if “African-descended Muslims do not have one way of practicing Islam, they often live as Muslims in societies that are, to a greater or lesser degree, racist. This is, at the very minimum, one way in which all of the contemporary subjects of this study are linked.”

It is history, and the common conditions it produces – not the cosmos or biology, or even ‘deus vult’ – that makes a people a people. As a linchpin in global histories of racism, colonialism, and capitalist-slave economies, diaspora is a key to comprehending the overlapping, transversal, often transgressive nature of Blackamerican political and religious imaginaries.

Like Edward E. Curtis, Richard Brent Turner highlights the agency of Blackamericans when and where they signify themselves as Muslims. Turner focuses on the oppressive as well as liberatory potential of signification – the act of naming and re-naming – in its historical role for African and Blackamerican Muslims, with an emphasis on the history of twentieth century “African-American Islam.” Signification may be imposed as a tool and matrix of domination by one multitude over another: the white European designation of African peoples as inferior during slavery and the age of Enlightenment is exemplary. By contrast, self-signification can provide a “counter-conception to the hegemonic discourse of an oppressive majority community” and even enable communities to achieve independence from dominant cultures. Turner posits that, since slavery, Islam has “undercut” the imposed signification of Africans and Blackamericans as inferior by providing them with “the chance to signify themselves, giving them new names and new political and cultural identities.” As this essay reveals, the contrapuntal potential and appeal of Islam is one of the definitive legacies of Blackamerican Muslims, and a key element in the religious life and formulations of Malcolm X.
In Turner’s work, the agent and active participation of Blackamerican Muslims in the cultivation of “an African-American Islam” is able to take centre stage precisely because Turner takes the study of Islam “out of the realm of mythic racial harmony and positions it in a historical context of racial, ethnic, and political divisions that influenced the history of slavery in America.” At the same time, and digging deeper still, Turner also roots the twentieth-century history of “African-American Islam” in the history of global Islam in West Africa and the Middle East, where Blacks’ self-signification as Muslims – “as the people they wanted to be” – was the result “of the adaptation of the religion to local cultures that was integral to global Islam.” In other words, Islam is not global but for its adaptation to particular times and places, and the Islam of Blackamericans, or Turner’s “African-American Islam,” is no more and no less valid and authentic than any other element in Islam as a world religion.

Abdul Hakim Jackson, too, examines the encounter between Islam and Blackamericans in the twentieth century. Crucially, Jackson embeds his analysis in the context of Black indigeneity, as well as Blackamericans’ ongoing struggle to define themselves in enabling and authentic ways while contending with the power of white supremacy and a hegemonic immigrant-centred Islam. Admittedly, Jackson’s characterization of early twentieth century Blackamerican Muslim groups as “proto-Islamic black nationalist spin-off movements” betrays a fundamentally Sunni-ist and Arabocentric approach to Islam on his part, as well as his captivity to the anti-religious analysis of C. Eric Lincoln’s rather dated work, The Black Muslims in America. Nonetheless, the analytic vocabulary Jackson provides is generally a beneficial key to understanding how and why Blackamericans have made, and do make, Islam their own, from the early twentieth century through the rise of Sunni Islam in America.

ix See above, p. ix.
Jackson contends that the “past, present, and future of Islam among Blackamericans can only be understood in the context of the relationship between Islam and Black Religion.” Black Religion is made by American realities: it arises from Afro-Americans’ subjection to slavery and a consciously preserved ideology of white supremacy, which together have attempted to reduce Black consciousness to an inferiority complex bound by the propriety of servitude to whites. As the dominant and indigenous “religious orientation” of Blackamericans, Black Religion is centrally preoccupied with the annihilation, or at least subversion, of white supremacy and anti-Black racism. According to Jackson, it was a mobilized Black Religion that enabled early twentieth century “Islamizers” like Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad to successfully “appropriate” Islam for Blackamericans. To appropriate ideas and doctrines is to (re)claim them for one’s own use, and to assume the right to define and interpret them according to one’s own needs, for the sake of becoming a truer, “more authentic” self – without deference to the intentions of ‘original’ owners. In Jackson’s view, the emergence of Islam among Blackamericans as “a distinctly American phenomenon” has everything to do with Blackamericans’ successful appropriation of Islam in the early twentieth century. Jackson is hopeful that as more and more Blackamericans in the twenty-first century “master” Arabic and the sources of “historical Islam,” alongside “the critical Western tradition,” Blackamerican Muslims will return to a position of full partnership, if not leadership, in the amalgamated tradition of “American Islam,” thus upending immigrant Muslim hegemony and subverting whitewashed knowledges about American Muslims. Thus, while Jackson restricts himself to a mere one-hundred-year history of American Islam, and pursues his subject with a Sunni-ist and Arabocentric bent of mind, he does not concede the will to adapt Islam to distinctly American realities, or the desire to see Blackamerican Muslims as agent, active, and masterful in their
religious tradition. This essay defies Jackson’s ahistorical approach by digging into the deep history of American Islam, centuries of subjection, resistance, and survival that chart Blackamericans’ continuous struggle on the path of religious agency, partnership, and leadership.

Devoting his study to “black indigenous Muslims” in the United States,\textsuperscript{71} Samory Rashid is especially critical of the marginalization, exclusion, and omission of Blackamerican Muslims from the ‘Islam in America’ discourse, primarily, but not exclusively, from scholarly literature published between 1980 and 2010.\textsuperscript{72} He sets out not only to challenge the “the near-monopoly” of Middle Eastern immigrant Muslims in the U.S, but also to work past the “inaccurate, misleading, and overly simplistic” binary oppositions that still hamper scholarship on American Islam – oppositions like immigrant Muslims versus indigenous Muslims, Western versus non-Western, and Islam versus the West.\textsuperscript{73}

Rashid contends that a paper published by the Middle East Institute of Washington, DC, and circulated widely by the Islamic Society of North America in 1986, titled “A Century of Islam in America,” laid the foundations for what has become “the dominant paradigm” in scholarship on ‘Islam in America.’\textsuperscript{74} Critically evaluating and deconstructing normative representations of Muslims and Islam, even where those representations are produced by fellow Muslims, is one of the vital tasks of \textit{American Islam X}. According to Rashid, the Middle East Institute’s paper introduced certain discursive devices that have by now become standard fare in the ‘Islam in America’ literature. They include: (1) an ‘immigrant versus indigenous’ typology that severely underestimates the Blackamerican Muslim presence, while uncritically lumping Muslims from varying backgrounds into the single, inflated category of immigrant; (2) the notion that the Islam of enslaved Africans died out under severe persecution and Christianization long before the twentieth century; and (3) the closely related idea that Islam was established in
America, not by indigenous Blackamerican Muslims, but by waves of immigration, the most recent of which began in the mid-1960s. In Rashid’s view, the marginalization of Blackamerican Muslims from scholarship on ‘Islam in America’ is tied to an ahistorical approach that limits the focus of inquiry to the turn of the twentieth century, and thus effectively sidelines the experience of Muslims who are not brown and Middle Eastern immigrants and, as such, not the subject of the dominant paradigm’s focus of attention. How Islam and Muslims in America are read today, therefore, has everything to do with the legibility of their pasts in this land. *American Islam X* emphasises the survival and continuity of American Islam, as well as the continuity of Afro-American participation in its tradition.

Crucially, Rashid challenges “the myth of the demise of survival of Islam among blacks” with an application of the “hidden transcripts” theory, according to which, and in the words of its author, James C. Scott, “every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.” In a word, hidden transcripts are “the privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourse.” The hidden transcripts theory leads Rashid to examine the social sites – including jails, prisons, barrios, and ghettos – where “ideological resistance” is cultivated and preserved. Rashid posits that “for every official public reality involving dominant and subordinate groups lies an unofficial and well-defined hidden reality,” which means that the idea of Islam’s early demise among Blackamericans should be read as the discursive function of a dominant ideology, itself historically contingent, rather than as a potentially objective assessment of Islam in America. American Islam has lived at least as long as America itself – though it has often lived in the underground, to resist and to survive.
Armed with the hidden transcripts theory, Rashid sets out to demonstrate the survival of Islam (including “political Islam”) among Blackamericans, from the pre-twentieth century to the twenty-first, while refuting “the monopoly claims” of immigrant Islam as the sole legitimate path to understanding Islam in the United States. Like Rashid’s work, this essay reads Blackamerican ‘conversion’ to Islam contrapuntally to “the dominant paradigm,” as the effect not of immigrant Muslim influence but of Black religious agency.

As per the question, then, of the authenticity and validity of Blackamerican religiosity – it is a non-question, to be eclipsed by more serious inquiry into the kind of contexts in which Blackamerican Muslims have struggled to authenticate and validate themselves as Muslims, into the histories and geographies, both American and global, to which American Islam is connected, and into the complex of discursive relations that preserves America’s dominant paradigm on Islam and Muslims. Methodologically crucial to this essay, then, is (1) an emphasis on the religious and political agency of Blackamerican Muslims, including their self-signification as Muslim; (2) attention to both diaspora and indigeneity as ways of understanding the roots as well as ideological potentials of American Islam; and (3) an ongoing critique of discursive relations between white America, immigrant Muslims, and Blackamericans. American Islam X is, in part, a trial on the concept of a continuous American Islam. Its principal case study is the Muslim life of Malcolm X.

III. The Problem of Objectivity in Religious Biography

In line with the methodologies described above, the religious-biographical section of this essay focuses above all on the ways in which Malcolm self-signified, interpreted, and mobilized his Muslim *deen* (his creed and way of life) as he tangled with American, Islamic and global

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x Relations of power and knowledge, that is.
politics in the mid-twentieth century. It is probably true that readers of Malcolm’s religious life will never know his full intentions, or all the contents of his faith, but even living contemporaries may expect to never know each other quite so conclusively. Objectivity in any designated field of study is conditioned and defined by the kinds of relationships those entering a field have with its subjects, as well as by a field’s parameters. This essay stems from a discursive relationship with Malcolm X, assembled from several years of engagement with his legacies, and informed by both first and secondary knowledge of what it means to be Muslim in America. “The Muslim Life of Malcolm X” approaches the meaning of Malcolm’s faith in the context of the religious and political (hi)story of American Islam, and primarily through Malcolm’s religious self-interpretations, as recorded in the Autobiography and in his many speeches, interviews, articles, and correspondences. However, in order to highlight the other side of the discursive equation – the side of imposed and often dominating significations that hunt all wilful believers and rebels – “The Muslim Life” also investigates mainstream American and Sunni Muslim representations of Afro-American Muslims and Malcolm’s Islam, alongside what has been declassified of the FBI’s extensive files on Malcolm. While “The Muslim Life” relies on Malcolm’s extant biographies for contextual information about his religious and political engagements, it exceeds them by dissolving the line between his politics and his religion – by reading him as an American Muslim, a participant in the tradition of American Islam.

In 1996, New York University Press published what still stands as the only notable full-length treatment of Malcolm’s religious life, Louis A. DeCaro Jr’s On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X. As earnest and well-documented as it is, DeCaro’s work nonetheless presents three problems that mark points of departure for “The Muslim Life of Malcolm X.” For one, as DeCaro himself indicates when he looks forward to a future “Muslim
analysis” of Malcolm’s religious life, on the Side of My People is not informed by any substantial knowledge, either personal or academic, of Islam, and more specifically, of the adherents, authorities, histories, political struggle, and contemporary challenges of American Islam. The Euro-Christian theology DeCaro relies on instead produces the second problem, a reliance on the traditionalist religious terminology of “orthodoxy versus cult,” a model that imposes pre-emptive judgement on the (hi)story of Malcolm’s religious faith, obfuscating the field before the pursuit has even begun. As it is, DeCaro justifies his methodology by citing Malcolm’s own use of the ‘orthodoxy versus cult’ model to signify the faith he had in his last year in opposition to the kind of religion advanced by the Nation of Islam. However, the justification only shores up DeCaro’s ignorance of the ‘arts of resistance,’ the ways in which American Muslims – especially Blackamerican Muslims, and Malcolm in particular – have adapted discourse to the challenge of dominant narratives, in pursuit of authentic, and thus subversive, self-interpretations. “The Muslim Life” passes over the orthodoxy versus cult model, and instead pursues historically-situated analyses of what Islam and being Muslim meant to Malcolm, when and where he signified himself as Muslim and his faith as Islam.

As for the third problem, and the final point of departure: DeCaro builds his religious biography around certain defining “moments” in Malcolm’s religious life, which he highlights as moments of religious “conversion.” Crucially, the idea of conversion to Islam is inconsistent with the Quran, according to which Allah’s truth is written into the nature of Creation itself, and all the children of Adam and Eve are born having already testified to Allah’s Lordship.

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xi Chapter 4, Verse 119: “[Satan says:] And I will mislead them, and I will arouse in them [sinful] desires, and I will command them so they will slit the ears of cattle, and I will command them so they will change the creation of Allah.” And whoever takes Satan as an ally instead of Allah has certainly sustained a clear loss” (Quran 4:119). Sahih International Translation. https://quran.com/4/119.

xii Chapter 7, Verse 172: “And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes, we have
Against the marginalization and omission of Afro-American Muslims from the (hi)story of American Islam, “The Muslim Life” reads Malcolm’s purported conversions as moments in which he actively adapted and appropriated Islam, to his knowledge of America’s ground-level realities, his life, and his mission to his Afro-American kin.

The following chapter provides a historical and theoretical blueprint of American Islam, as assembled from centuries of primarily Black religious and political history and discourse. Its aim is to illustrate the embeddedness of Islam and Muslims in the American universe, to underscore Afro-Americans’ historically indigenous relationship with American Islam, to emphasise the vitality of Black knowledge, influence, and experience in American Islamic tradition, and to transcend the many bifurcations that obstruct the path to a deep and holistic reading of ‘Islam in America’ as American Islam.

Chapter 2 -- American Islam: Historical and Theoretical Contexts


The Arab, Muslim-led military conquest of North Africa in the seventh century did not immediately establish Islam as the normative religion of most indigenous peoples in the region. It took several centuries, in fact, for the majority of Berbers and other North African peoples to adapt and indigenize Islam – through religious syncretism and political mobilization, among other means – and thus to begin to profess their faith in Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. By the ninth century, Islam had begun to spread over the Sahara into West and Central Africa, a region that Arabs, and Arab slavers in particular, often contemptuously referred to as the Bilad al-

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xiv Including such illustrious ones as religious vs. political, indigenous Muslim vs. immigrant Muslim, orthodoxy vs. cult, American vs. Muslim, and Black vs. Muslim.

xv Peace be upon him.
Sudan, the ‘land of the Blacks,’ though Arab Muslims were not largely responsible for the spread. By the eleventh century, Berbers and West African merchants, especially Mande-speakers from Jolof in Senegambia – a region between and around the Senegal and Gambia rivers in West Africa – were traversing the Sahara establishing wider commercial networks between West, Central, and North Africa, simultaneously bringing Islam to new cities and markets. From along the Senegal River to Lake Chad (in modern-day Nigeria), Islam spread largely by the word of local and newly self-signified Muslims, whose blend of commercial and evangelistic activity gave rise by the sixteenth century to significant trading and scholastic centres across West Africa – centres like Jenne and Timbuktu, among others. In the process, Islam in West Africa came to be associated with trade, commercial networks, and the political elite, whose acceptance of Islam was often a vehicle for alliance-building and the expansion of trade. In other words, Islam spread and took hold in West and Central Africa by serving local and dynastic needs, rather than by foreign design. Starting in the fifteenth century, Islam in West Africa also came to be associated with Sufi orders, especially the Qadiriyyah order, founded by Qadir al Gilani of Baghdad (1078-1166). Vital to bear in mind is that Sufism and Islamic ‘orthodoxy’ were not always as other to each other as they are in (post) colonial modernity. Islamic practice in West Africa included dance and music, collective prayer, recitation, pilgrimage, and the use of prayer beads. As this chapter will explore, some of these practices endured among African Muslim slaves and their descendants in the Americas.

According to Allan D. Austin’s relatively low estimate, there were some thirty-thousand to forty-thousand Muslims among the nearly five-hundred-thousand Africans brought as slaves to the Thirteen Colonies and the United States in just the one century between 1711 and 1808. The figure, of course, does not account for the hundreds of thousands of Muslims coerced into
the colonial economy across the Americas from as early as the sixteenth century. Most enslaved African Muslims were noted by slave traders as being ‘Senegambians’ and ‘Sierra Leoneans,’ which were but generic terms for a variety of ethno-linguistic peoples from the region between and around the Senegal and Gambia rivers, and from the coastal ports to the south of the Gambia.⁹⁵ Prominent among these Senegambian Muslims were Mandingas, or Mande-speakers, and Fulas (also known as Fulbe and Fulani).⁹⁶ Alongside Arabs, Muslim Mandingas and Fulas were among the groups most active in Africa’s Transsaharan slave trade, which transported ‘Black Africans,’ mostly women and girls, from the ‘Bilad-al Sudan’ into North Africa, and thence across the strait to al-Andalus, for centuries before the rise of Christian Iberia.⁹⁷

In the fifteenth century, the Atlantic slave trade began to supplant the Transsaharan, bringing Europe into direct contact with West Africa.⁹⁸ In 1444, Portuguese adventurer-merchants with the Lagos Company returned to Portugal from the West African coast with two-hundred and thirty-five azenagues, or Tuareg Berbers, and ‘Blackmoors,’ the latter a Portuguese equivalent of ‘Black Muslims’ – Muslims who were remarkable for their unexpected colour.⁹⁹ Most of the West Africans sold by the Portuguese to the Spanish after 1444 were Negros de Jalof (or Gelofes), a designation for the many Senegambian peoples associated with the empire of Jolof, situated near the Senegal River, including many Mande-speakers.¹⁰⁰ With a boom in maritime innovation, and the initiation of colonial activity in Turtle Island, Seville and Lisbon became the premier slave entrepôts of the Atlantic-Mediterranean world.¹⁰¹ Like Iberian Jews, ‘Moors’ (Muslims) and Moriscoes (Christian Moors) in the wake of the Reconquista, West African Muslim slaves held in Iberia were subjected to forced conversion and an attendant surveillance of adherence to Christian norms.¹⁰² There is good reason to believe that, like their Andalusian counterparts, at least some African Muslims in Iberia underwent a “counter-
acculturative experience” that made them more trenchant and dangerous in their opposition to their Christian masters.103 West African slaves and fugitives in Spain did after all have decades of interaction with Moorish and Moriscoe slaves, in a context heated by Andalusian Muslims’ reputation for resistance.104

The capture and enslavement of ten West African Muslims by a Portuguese slave raid in 1442 was justified by one Gomes Eanes de Zurara, a slave raider, as being “‘in accordance with ancient custom which after the Deluge, Noah loaded on his son Cain [Canaan] cursing him in this way: that his race would be subject to all the other races of the world.’”105 Zurara’s Biblical justification for racism and slavery falls under the category of what race historians dub ‘Hamitic discourse,’ versions of which were also used by Arab and African Muslims engaged in the Transsaharan slave trade, and which came to serve Portuguese Christians when their trade in West Africans was mounting in the mid-fifteenth century.106 Hamitic discourse constitutes a theological justification for an anti-Blackness that is otherwise bioecologically determined. Zurara’s own defense, however, comes in the ambiguous era of what Moustafa Bayoumi calls the “racing” of religion in Iberia.107 The people condemned by the slave raider were, after all, considered by Iberians as being both Black and Moorish, the latter a Spanish racial signifier for the religious identity of Muslim.108

In fifteenth-century post-Reconquista Spain, far preceding the systematization of what is now known as modern or scientific racism, religious antipathies collided with the kind of bioecological (or ‘scientific’) justifications for racism that are today misleadingly conflated with racism in general.109 In the wake of the Reconquista, Muslims and Jews who had preferred forced conversion to Christianity over expulsion from their Andalusian homeland came to be suspected, along with their progeny, of being disingenuous Christians by their Iberian overlords.
The grounds of suspicion, however, were far vaster than any evidence of the converts’ continued fidelity to Islam or Judaism. The ‘fact’ was that Muslim and Jewish converts could never be true Christian believers, because Christianity, the Spaniards’ “old religion,” resided in the Spaniards’ blood.\textsuperscript{110} In other words, being a true Christian was less about having right belief and right practice (or religious orthodoxy) than it was about having the right bioecological ontology – a European ontology, that is. Within this new discursive context – a key historical root in the racing of religion – being, or being suspected of being, Muslim or Jewish meant being innately and naturally other to Spain and Christendom, much as being racially Black already meant in the theological justifications of Arab, North African, and Iberian slavers. Returning to Gomes Eanes de Zurara’s justification, it is fair to say that, for the premier Christian slaver-colonizers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Black was the colour of disbelief, as much as disbelief and otherness were the curses attendant on Blackness.

And yet, where modern colonial beginnings hinged on highlighting the ‘fact’ of Blackness for the sake of dehumanizing, subduing, and enslaving Africans, they also spiralled out from an alienation of Islam from Europe and Christendom through an erasure of Muslim-Islamic influence in Spain, its slave imports, and its shipments to the ‘New World.’ Forced conversion, ghettoization, surveillance, and expulsion were the tools of the Inquisition and the Reconquista. But in Spain, Islam and its memory survived with the Moriscoes well past its termination date. In 1588, a Sevillian official, one Alonso Guitierrez, claimed that the Moriscoes of his city “‘exercised the Christian religion only when forced and for purposes of subterfuge.’”\textsuperscript{111} In the same vein, a Jesuit stationed in Guadeloupe in 1658 remarked that, compared to their more pliant non-Muslim counterparts, African Muslim slaves from the Senegalese coast were too stubborn and dim witted to accept Christianity.\textsuperscript{112} When the colonizer’s effort and desire to subsume a
people into its chain of knowledge and power went awry upon resistance, those who resisted became anathema, unworthy of inclusion because of a natural defect, their disobedience itself becoming the hallmark of their inherent flaws. The Spanish preferred Senegambian West Africans as slaves above all, deeming them more dignified and intelligent, and indeed less Black, than their southern neighbours, but that many were Muslims or informed of Islam was never admitted by colonial writers and bureaucrats.\textsuperscript{113} Truly, Islam was scheduled for erasure from the colonially constructed nature of the African in America. ‘Muslim’ was an identity and a signifier that was meant to disappear from the colonizers’ ‘New World.’

In 1522, West African Muslims participated in and were held responsible by Spanish colonial authorities for the bloody Santo Domingo ‘slave revolt’ on the island of Hispaniola.\textsuperscript{114} In the fallout of Santo Domingo, and further violent rebellions in Puerto Rico and Colombia, King Charles V issued a royal decree in 1530 banning “‘Berber slaves of the caste of Moors, Jews, and mulattoes’” from entering the Americas.\textsuperscript{115} Still, any effort to cease or suspend the influx of the Moorish element failed, as slave traders, compelled by the economic disaster they perceived in the ‘Great Dying’ of America’s indigenous peoples, and seeking to circumvent import levies, continued to traffic West Africans into the Americas with no admitted knowledge or record of their Islamic heritage or their Muslim identities.\textsuperscript{116} Doubtless, Islam was still a perceived threat to the Christian colonial world and its imaginings. But another process was underway, and beginning to surpass the direct and hostile confrontations of the past – a process crucial to the colonial and then settler colonial enterprise of America. This was the process of alienation via assimilation or absorption, the formation of a colonial Blackness devoid of Islam, and the early becoming of the invisible Muslim enemy.
II. Continuities: From Islam in America to American Islam

The idea that “what Muslim faith African slaves brought with them to America was quickly absorbed into their new Christian milieu and disappeared” is a prevalent one in North America’s status quo discourses surrounding Islam, Blackness and what it means to belong.\textsuperscript{117} The idea, however, is a prejudice, which, especially since the events of September 11, 2001, has been manifested by scholars and institutions presuming to speak for the condition of all American Muslims, while uncritically conflating Muslims with immigrant (largely Arab and South Asian) Muslims. In 2007, the Council on American-Islamic Relations published a report entitled “The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States: The Presumption of Guilt,”\textsuperscript{118} which, though it invokes such figures as Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy in support of Muslim civil rights, makes no mention of Malcolm X or indeed any other Blackamerican Muslim from the civil rights era. More crucially, however, the report takes it as an implicit point of fact that Muslims are Muslims and Blackamericans are Black – and that never the twain shall meet. To quote from the report’s conclusion: “Just as anti-Semitic and anti-African American hate crimes and discrimination cases are vigorously investigated and prosecuted; it is also equally important for federal law enforcement agencies to continue protecting the civil rights of American Muslims, Arab and South Asian Americans.”\textsuperscript{119} Not only does the Council elide over the millions of Blackamerican Muslims who constitute the single largest segment of America’s Muslim population,\textsuperscript{120} but it also completely ignores and further obscures the deep seated connections between the formation of American Blackness and the racialization of Islam and Muslims. And yet, at the same time, the Council presumes to call its approach to American public concerns an “Islamic perspective,” and its work a service to all American Muslims.\textsuperscript{121} Beyond the obvious point that “nearly all sources for the early history of Islam in America were
written either by white, American Protestants who know little about Islam and West Africa or by Muslim ‘converts’ to Christianity who were writing for a European American Protestant audience,” the fact remains that the ongoing construction of America’s Muslims as essentially foreign and immigrant hinges on the exclusion and omission of Blackamerican Muslims. Indeed, as this chapter investigates, one of the key ideological fulcrums of Islamophobia, or anti-Muslim racism, is none other than the essentialization of American Muslims as immigrant Muslims, and the marginalization of Blackamerican Muslims from the (hi)story of American Islam.

The idea of the demise of Islam among African slaves and their Afro-American descendants is a myth, a fabrication, and an assumption. It is indeed remarkable that, although they outnumbered Jews and Catholics for centuries, Muslims in the Thirteen Colonies and the Unites States went largely unnoticed until the twentieth century, even by such prominent early advocates of Muslim civil rights as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Both men advocated the full, future citizenship of Muslims in the American nation, and their inclusion under the protection of American civil liberties, and yet neither made any note of the thousands of African Muslims living and working under their very abstractions. Washington even held two women, a mother and daughter, both named Fatima, as slaves, and never once admitted any knowledge of their Islamic heritage or their Muslim identities. But of course, when Jefferson and Washington set about defending the rights of future Muslim citizens, they did so not for the sake of real Muslims, but for abstract or imagined Muslims, “the promotion of whose theoretical citizenship would prove the true universality of American rights.” For all their seemingly radical notions, Jefferson and Washington did after all, and very much like their Euro-American peers, conflate Muslims with Euro-America’s foreign military rivals, namely Arabs, Turks, and North Africans. As the two Founding Fathers perceived, if America’s enemies could be
included in the American dream, then America would truly be a great and universal nation. In other words, the myth of the demise of Islam in America has historically served to conceal the presence of Afro-American Muslims, thus to shore up America’s identity as fundamentally other (and superior) to Islam. For the critically minded, abstraction must never suffice, for even a political love of Islam, or Islamophilia, is as easily amenable to alienating real Muslims as Islamophobia.\textsuperscript{127}

Given that the erasure of Islam was one of the chief preoccupations of the originators of the colonial ‘New World,’ and that Christian evangelism was at once a crucial justification as well as a means for colonization, conditions in colonial America were indeed ripe for the disappearance of Islam from enslaved Africans.\textsuperscript{128} As such, any evidence of the slaves’ and their descendants’ fidelity to, or memory of, Islamic sources, practices, and beliefs must be read within the context of an uneven balance of power and privilege, defined historically by an interplay between domination and the arts of resistance. Indeed, any such extant evidence should be read as but the tip of an underground America that still largely remains underground. Despite the fact that African slaves were considered beneath the Euro-American Enlightenment tradition of \textit{la pensée de libertinage erudit},\textsuperscript{xvi} and thus denied literacy, its attendant “reflective consciousness,” and an acknowledgment of their moral, ethical, and religious agency, they nonetheless struggled to think and write themselves into being using sources, knowledges, and memories that should, as per the will of their masters, have disappeared from America.\textsuperscript{129}

Interviewed by Theodore Dwight Jr. of the American Ethnological Society around 1835, one Lamen Kebe of the Kabba \textit{qabila}\textsuperscript{xvii} in Jalunka (in present-day Guinea) was a teacher and scholar in Futa Jallon before he was captured, enslaved, and transported to America.\textsuperscript{130} Most of

\textsuperscript{xvi} Roughly, “the intellectual tradition of an erudite (philosophical and enlightened) libertinism.”
\textsuperscript{xvii} Usually translated as “tribe.”
the books on Kebe’s extensive reading list – covering such areas as hadith studies, xviii ‘ilm ur-rijal, xix linguistics, rhetoric, Sufism, and jurisprudence – were composed originally in Arabic, representing an African-Arabic literacy that was both “widespread and deep.”131 Significantly, however, and in keeping with the idea that Arabic literacy and Islamic consciousness were necessarily foreign impositions on ‘Black Africans,’ Dwight claimed that most of the books on Kebe’s list were translations of Sereculeh language texts.132 By the same token, the African-Arabic manuscript of one Ben Ali (a.k.a. Bilali, d. 1859), who was captured in West Africa and sold into slavery on Sapelo Island, Georgia in the nineteenth century, has been treated simplistically as the diary of an “Arab slave,” whose translation would merely confirm its content.133 Quite tellingly, Benjamin Goulding, who inherited Ben Ali’s manuscript from his father, Francis Goulding (to whom Ali had gifted it before he died), claimed that Ali had been the son of an Arab prince, had converted to Christianity, and died a Baptist.134 A West African Fulah, after all, could not be quite as erudite and articulate as Ali was if he were not also the progeny of non-African Arab royalty – if he were not a ‘Black African’ at all, in other words.135 In fact, however, Ben Ali’s manuscript is nothing like what Benjamin Goulding and William Hodgson, xx among others, expected of a slave diary. The manuscript is actually a series of excerpts from a tenth-century Maliki legal treatise, al-Risala, composed in Qairawan (present-day Tunisia) by Abu Muhammad Abdullah ibn Abi Zaid al-Qairawani.136

As per interpretations of Ben Ali’s manuscript, at the other end from Goulding and Hodgson stands Joseph Greenberg’s twentieth century linguistic analysis, according to which Ben Ali’s deviations from the standard algorithms of an “authentic” literary Arabic signify his

xviii The hadith are the oral and embodied traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.
xix Literally, the “study (or knowledge) of the men,” ‘ilm ur-rijal refers to the science of biographically evaluating the transmitters of hadith, thus to determine if chains of transmission are sound or weak.
xx Of the American Philosophical Society.
incompetence in the language.\textsuperscript{137} Inasmuch, however, as Greenberg aimed to use Ben Ali’s manuscript to confirm an extant system and hierarchy of knowledge, his line of study was on the same misguided plane as the earlier analyses of Goulding and Hodgson. The real question that still hangs over Ben Ali’s manuscript is, as Ronald A. T. Judy notes, the ontological one: what is this thing, and what does it mean?\textsuperscript{138} Admittedly, the question is an open-ended one, and it is far easier to determine what Ali’s manuscript is not. It is not an obvious representation of slave life in antebellum America, nor is it a direct record of what it means to be Black in America or even Muslim in America. And yet, it is conditioned by all of these ‘facts,’ and that it was passed down, preserved, still exists, and is studied, attests not only to the survival of Islam under slavery but also to the continuity of an intention among African slaves and their descendants: a conscious intention to participate in the becoming of the ‘New World,’ and to be witnessed. Perhaps Ben Ali himself was consciously participating in a chain of transmission, whereby a tenth century scholar’s legal work would be passed on to a new millennium of scholarship in a ‘New World.’ If that was the case, then Ben Ali succeeded in being witnessed. After all, his manuscript still stands as an enigma for scholarship – for linguistics, philosophy, critical theory, history, religious studies, and even cultural studies.

In the early twentieth century, descendants of Ben Ali recounted that Ali’s family used to pray regularly in the direction of Mecca, that they used prayer beads, observed traditional West African Islamic holidays, and that women in the family donned headscarves.\textsuperscript{139} Truly, however, a detail such as the use of the headscarf does not necessarily imply Afro-Americans’ exclusive fidelity to Islam. As Edward E. Curtis notes, “One of the hallmarks of all religions, not just the religion of African American slaves, is that the meaning of material culture can change over time.”\textsuperscript{140} One white Southern preacher, a Reverend Charles Colcock Jones, even noted that some
enslaved Afro-Americans saw Christianity and Islam as manifestations of the same religious impulse, united by belief in the One God, and differing in signification only on account of geographical and cultural variance. The crucial point is not that the slaves and their descendants preserved and passed down Islam in any ‘pure’ or unaltered fashion, but rather that Islam survived in America precisely because Afro-American Muslims adapted to the cultural geographies of America, in part by syncretizing with other, both local and diasporic, religious influences, thus indigenizing Islam through the crucible of their subjection and resistance. Whereas some Afro-American Muslims syncretized with Christianity, others melded West African Islamic traditions with those of Orisha and what is often referred to as Conjure or Hoodoo. It was also not just individuals and single families that preserved Islam by adapting it to American landscapes. Cases of early Muslim and Islamically influenced communities, such as the Ishmaelite community of Indiana, Kentucky, and Illinois, require deeper study, especially in the context of the continuity of American Islam. From the beginning of the nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth, the Ishmaelites—a transracial, transcultural community that claimed descent from African, Native American, and “poor white” sources, and which rejected wage-labour and private property for alternative, often meagre economies—migrated annually between three curiously signified sites of importance: Morocco, Indiana; Mahomet, Illinois; and Mecca, Indiana. Like many self-signified and syncretic Afro-American Muslims, the Ishmaelites held beliefs that were deemed superstitious by white Christians as well as by some Afro-American Muslims. The Ishmaelites, however, were also known to be teetotallers, and, by at least one Ishmaelite’s own account, were among the first to join and swell the ranks of Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple in the early twentieth century. Whether or not the Ishmaelites were indeed early participants in Noble Drew Ali’s Islamic movement is not as important as the fact
that they, like Afro-American Muslims from their past, present, and future, were consciously engaged in bridging their identities and (hi)stories with the symbols, geographies, and heritages of Islam. The same conscious engagement came to be one of the hallmarks of the Blackamerican Muslim movements of the twentieth century.

In sum, American Islam is conditioned by the African diaspora as well as by Afro-Americans’ adaptation and indigenization to America, just as it is simultaneously conditioned by the reality of domination and the arts of resistance. The (hi)story of American Islam is, in large part, a (hi)story of the contest between Afro-American Muslims’ self-significations and the significations imposed on them by dominant racial and religious orders. The contest will necessarily abide as long as America does – for the idea that the cultural geography of the ‘New World’ is or should be uncontested is a tool of domination and a paradigm of empire that has been in use since the Reconquista and the advent of colonialism in America. In the twentieth century, Blackamerican Muslims came to test America’s economy of significations like never before, as new and powerful Black Islamic movements began to rally thousands around their own economies of signification, their own pervasive narratives, that is, on the relationship between Islam and Blackness. This was the age of the so-called ‘Black Muslims.’

**III. Black Prophets and the Black Messiah: Islam, Black Religion & Black Nationalism**

Black Religion emerged as a religious orientation among Blackamericans out of their experience of American slavery, American white supremacism, and, of course, a repressive, white American Protestant Christianity. Abdul Hakim Jackson argues that, alongside forced illiteracy, dehumanizing brutality under slavery, and an exclusion from African and Euro-American rationalist traditions, the alienation of Afro-American slaves from a sense of the sacred they could call their own left them “powerless, friendless, and, to all intents and purposes,
godless” in the ‘New World.’ In this dehumanized and alienated physical and metaphysical context, sheer endurance, or what Cornel West calls “revolutionary patience,” coupled with a fundamental belief in the inevitability of divine justice, became the cornerstone of Blackamerican religiosity. Jackson contends that, because it was white America’s prime religious orientation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and because it was so deeply repressive of African religious traditions, Protestantism functioned as the nexus through which African “slave religion” passed en route to a new Blackamerican religious identity, one grounded in the discursive landscape of Protestant America itself, as opposed to Africa or even solely the plantation. By the early nineteenth century, most Afro-Americans were native-born, their indigenization coinciding with the high tide of the first numerically significant Christianization of Black America. However, Blackamericans’ entry into Protestantism was not a straightforward matter of ‘conversion.’ In keeping with an already indigenous Black Religious orientation – moulded in the American crucible over centuries – Blackamericans appropriated Protestantism as a vehicle for a principled campaign against slavery, racism, and white supremacy. The fact of appropriation is evident in the two earliest Protestant proselytizers among Afro-Americans, the Baptists and the Methodists, both of which congregations were dissenters from European Christianity and emphasised belief in the equality of all believers.

Black Religion’s marriage to Protestantism in the early nineteenth century, and the subsequent rise of the Black Church, is best explained in terms of religious appropriation, not religious ‘conversion.’ Blackamericans in the nineteenth century were primed to appropriate Protestantism as their own through the labour of centuries in which they had kept their religious traditions, including Islam, alive and nourished through cultural-religious syncretism and adaption. In other words, the survival and resilience of Islam among Afro-Americans contributed
to the formation of Black Religion, which – as a religious orientation bent on the destruction of white supremacy and the vindication of Blackness – has historically enabled Blackamericans to appropriate Christianity and Islam, among other traditions, by centering their own liberation rather than the significations of any dominant racial or religious caste. There is, as such, a deeper, more primal relationship between Black Religion and American Islam than the one implied by Jackson’s restricted focus on the Black appropriation and politicisation of Islam in the twentieth century, and the rise of what he calls the “proto-Islamic” movements.

In 1863, Theodore Dwight Jr. published a magazine report on his meetings with a Fulah man enslaved in North Carolina, one ‘Umar ibn Said (b. 1780), also known as Uncle Moreau. Noting his education and tutelage in the Quran and the Arabic language, Dwight referred to Moreau as an “Arabic scholar,” although he rejected the popular story that cast ibn Said as the son of an Arab prince. Like the popular and scholastic circles that surrounded Ben Ali, ‘Umar ibn Said’s white contemporaries had a tendency to “romanticize about his origins” and to “deracinate his obvious ‘Africanness,’” thus to betray “the very proscription that his literacy places on slavery in the name of Enlightenment’s liberal humanism.” Translators of the Arabic manuscripts composed and handed down by ibn Said have also been prone to transmogrifying the author’s ‘Negro-ness’ into an ‘Arab-ness,’ in order to circumvent, as it were, the need to question fundamental assumptions about all the other ‘Negroes’ in the land. Remarking on Moreau’s “great facility” as an Arabic translator, and on the fineness of his Arabic pronunciation (pleasant to hear, as Dwight self-referentially put it, “even when the hearer is wholly ignorant of the words”), Dwight referred in his report to Moreau’s translation of the twenty-third psalm from Arabic to English. For Dwight, the old man’s imperfect English could not make his translation any less striking because of the “earnestness and fervour which shone in [his] countenance as he
read of the going down in the dark valley of the shadow of death, and, continued, ‘me no fear, master’s with me there.’”\textsuperscript{158} It seems likely that Dwight was moved because he thought he perceived ibn Said’s undying loyalty to his white masters and their Christian faith. After all, he certainly aimed to convince his readers that Moreau had ‘converted’ to Christianity after having been “a staunch Mohammedan” in his first year with his latest master, a General James Owen of Bladen County, North Carolina.\textsuperscript{159} The secretary of the American Colonization Society, Ralph R. Gurely, insisted on much the same when reporting on his meeting with ibn Said in 1837 – “as if to appropriate, via a metonymic gesture, ‘Umar’s literacy to a unilinear Western history of ideas.’”\textsuperscript{160}

The ‘conversion’ story told by ‘Umar ibn Said’s white contemporaries is a dominant text preserved through the erasure of Islamic influence. Where ‘Umar, reflecting autobiographically on his time in “Christian country,” proclaimed his heart open to Christianity, and noted formal and linguistic differences between his Muslim and Christian prayers, his white Christian biographers celebrated the old man’s discovery of and ‘conversion’ to “a better faith.”\textsuperscript{161} The Arabic manuscripts of ‘Umar ibn Said gesture to an interplay between Christianity and Islam, rather than a transmogrifying ‘conversion’ from one to the other. One such document, an Arabic transcription of the twenty-third psalm, is prefaced with the invocation that marks a Muslim’s commencement on life and the recitation of the Quran: “In the name of God, the merciful, the gracious” – or \textit{Bismillah al-Rahman al-Raheem}.\textsuperscript{162} Another document, a card bearing ‘Umar’s Arabic script, is titled in English as being “The Lord’s Prayer written by Uncle Moreau (Omar) a native African, now owned by General Owen of Wilmington, N.C. He is 88 years of age and a devoted Christian.”\textsuperscript{163} The Arabic text on the card, however, is not the Lord’s Prayer, but a
Despite his interlocutors, ‘Umar ibn Said was capable of bearing multiple textualities, Islamic as well as Christian. Refuting ‘Umar’s Christian becoming is pointless, even for one on the hunt for Christian repressions. More vital is that ‘Umar’s story highlights Afro-American Muslims’ original participation in the formation of the religious orientation called Black Religion, which itself adapts to and embodies multiple textualities to sustain its core intentions. This is to say that, Afro-American Muslims like ‘Umar ibn Said helped to create and consolidate Black religious difference, a will to adapt and survive, and a “will in opposition” that Jackson defines as the cornerstone of Black Religion, long before they were even legible as ‘Black Muslims.’ Finally, ‘Umar’s story illustrates that the conventional ‘conversion’ narrative is of limited use in understanding Blackamericans’ historical encounters with Christianity and Islam, quite simply because it tends to erase Black religious history, both personal and collective.

Before proceeding to the heydays of Black Christianity and the Black Church, it is beneficial to understand something of the traditions of Black Nationalism, whose interplay with Black Religion over two centuries produced such powerful expressions as Garveyism and the Nation of Islam. According to E.U. Essien-Udom, one of the commonalities of the various Black Nationalist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was their shared origin in the cultural alienation and social estrangement of urban Blackamericans from white society, as well as the absence of a unifying ethos among the Black “masses.” The animating intention of historical Black Nationalist movements was to bring new life and agency to the Black self and the Black collective, principally by instilling “‘pride and love of race’” against the moral,

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xi Quran, Chapter 110: “When the victory of Allah has come and the conquest; and you see the people entering into the religion of Allah in multitudes, then exalt [Him] with praise of your Lord and ask forgiveness of Him. Indeed, He is ever Accepting of repentance” (Quran 110: 1-3). Sahih International Translation https://quran.com/110.
material, cultural, and psychological degradation of racial subjection.\textsuperscript{167} Black Nationalist movements were characterized, moreover, by a distrust of existing status quo institutions – which by the late nineteenth century included the Black Church – as well as conventional modes of political action.\textsuperscript{168} Despite the malingering charge of violence and separatism, Black Nationalists have concerned themselves primarily with defining and establishing religious, political, cultural, and economic domains for independent Black participation.

A key matter of political as well as religious concern for Black Nationalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the redemption and liberation of “the Black race.”\textsuperscript{169} Historically speaking, Black Nationalists have understood racial redemption and liberation as, in part, being a matter of gravitating toward non-white centres of power, civilization, and signification, such as ‘Ethiopia,’ ‘Africa,’ or ‘Asia.’\textsuperscript{170} Significantly, the Black Nationalist impetus to anchor the Black self and collective in a Black centre of power was important to early Afro-American Christians as well, as evidenced by the names of the first independent Black churches, including Philadelphia’s African Methodist Episcopal Church (founded circa 1786).\textsuperscript{171} Another significant feature of the Black Nationalist concept of racial redemption and liberation has been the notion of messianic and prophetic leadership.\textsuperscript{172} In Black Nationalist discourse, the Black Messiah’s mission is defined by the historical and prevailing social conditions of his times\textsuperscript{173} – and they have almost always been his times, for a trenchant masculinism pervades most foundational Black Nationalist texts. Every element of Black Nationalism described here thus far is embedded in these prophetic words of Marcus Garvey: “The time has come for those of us who have the vision of the future to inspire our people to a closer kinship, to a closer love of self, because it is only through this appreciation of self will we be able to rise to that higher life that will make us not an extinct race in the future, but a race of men fit to survive.”\textsuperscript{174}
In the early nineteenth century, a Southern evangelist, Reverend Charles Colcock Jones, complained of certain “perversions of the gospel” among newly Christianized slaves on the plantations he served, namely their rejection of the Judeo-Christian morality taught by their masters, and their accommodations of Christianity to Islam, ‘Voodoo,’ and other West African traditions. For the slave masters, however, there were no greater sins than “rebelliousness, stealing, sabotage, and malingering,” and Jones’ own suspicion of the slaves’ antinomianism must be read in the context of their open rebellion against him. By his own account:

I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle of Philemon; and when I insisted on fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants, and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one-half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves; and those who remained looked anything but satisfied with the preacher or his doctrine.

To claim that the slaves and their descendants politicised Christianity, by infusing it with the project of Black racial redemption and liberation, would be to conceal the fact that the instruction of Christianity in the Americas was already a white, racial-nationalist, political project when Afro-Americans first began to call themselves Christian. If anything, Black appropriation of Christianity, including Blackamericans’ self-signification as Christian, provincialized the purportedly universal religion taught by the slave masters, and indeed most white Southern preachers, as a white Christianity, and its God as the “‘God of the white man.’” Out of the subjection and the resistance of the slaves and their heirs arose a new universal, a “Black theology,” for which theology itself can never be nonpartisan; for which theology must always

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xxii Whom we have already met. See above, p. 24-25.
xxiii In Christian theology, “antinomianism” is a pejorative term for the teaching that Christians are not obliged to obey the laws of Christian ethics or morality.

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serve either oppressors or their victims; and for which the One God is a Black God, “active in human history, taking sides with the oppressed of the land.”

In the early nineteenth century, and in the context of an emergent Black Christianity, a crucial factor inhibiting Blackamerican ‘conversion’ and assimilation into the white Church was the preservation of racial-religious segregation in the South. Despite the view (propounded later in the century by such prominent figures as the Pan-Africanist, Islamist, Presbyterian minister, Edward Wilmot Blyden) that Christianity had always been an “opiate,” lulling Afro-Americans into accepting subjugation, the early nineteenth century was in fact “a watershed of protest” and revolutionary activity for many Afro-American Christians. By dedicating their religion and their churches to the liberation struggle, the few white Christians who sympathised with and aided the slaves found themselves on the wrong side of American mores. In the wake of a violent rebellion, led by a Black Christian slave, Nat Turner, in Southampton County, Virginia (1831), governor John Floyd pinned the slaves’ spirit of insubordination and insurrection on “‘Yankee peddlers and traders’ teaching the immoral doctrine that ‘the black man was as good as the white.’” Floyd also blamed the slaves’ own reading of the Bible, and what he took to be the turning of Christian knowledge to conspiratorial purposes through the instigation of “‘black preachers.’” Turner’s revolt was preceded by the armed Black Christian rebellions of Denmark Vesey in South Carolina (1822) and Gabriel Prosser in Virginia (1802).

In 1829, an emancipated Afro-American in New York, one Robert Alexander Young, published a revolutionary pamphlet called The Ethiopian Manifesto Issued in Defense of the Blackman’s rights, in the Scale of Universal Freedom. Steeped in the (hi)stories and prophecies of the Old Testament, and identifying with the people and God of Israel, the pamphlet deploys a revolutionary hermeneutic, used by other Black prophets of the antebellum days, whereby the
God of the Bible is the God of the oppressed, and the oppressed are His people, their redemption and liberation being God’s own work of mercy and justice.186 Young spoke, thus, as a self-styled ‘prophet of God’:

[For we tell you of a surety, the decree hath already passed the judgement seat of an undeviating God, wherein he hath said, ‘surely hath the cries of the black, a most persecuted people, ascended to my throne and craved my mercy; now behold! I will stretch forth mine hand and gather them to the palm, that they become unto me a people, and I unto them their God.”187

Young presumed to speak on God’s behalf, to deliver a revelation, as it were. But the authority of his word could only be ratified by Blackamericans, for whom the word was given, and whom it elevated as the people of God. In Young’s vision, ‘Ethiopia’ stood for the Black Nation and the Black collective self, a distinctly Black body, with a Black history and geography, that had God “and the decrees of Infinity” on its side, against the merely self-certain slave master.188

Young’s Ethiopian Manifesto is best read as a study in both Black Religion and Black Nationalism, their shared axis being their approach to Blackamericans (and ‘Blacks’ worldwide) as a distinct and historically justified people – a people charged with the labour and the promise of an imminent redemption and liberation. Young’s prophetic vision included a Black messiah, one who would champion the cause of “‘the degraded of this earth,” who follows in the tradition of the Biblical saviour: “‘As came John the Baptist, of old, to spread word about the forthcoming of his master, so alike are intended these our words, to denote to the black African or Ethiopian people, that God has prepared for them a leader, who awaits but his season to proclaim to them his birthright.”189

Young’s Ethiopian Manifesto was published in the same year as the Afro-American abolitionist David Walker’s Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, a prophetic manifesto in its own right. Walker described white Americans as “‘our natural enemies,”’ diagnosed white
Christians with an innate devilishness, and promised God’s destruction of America if the nation failed to alter its doomed course, principally, by ending slavery. As this section will reveal in more detail, both Robert Alexander Young and David Walker were antecedents to Blackamerican Muslim movements of the twentieth century. Historically speaking, the traditions of Black Religion and Black Nationalism have been mobilized across religious and political differences, involving Christians, Muslims, and secularists, evangelists and revolutionaries, and leaders both diplomatic and militant, in a continuous (though not always united) struggle for Black redemption and liberation.

The Religious Nationalism of Young’s *Ethiopian Manifesto* was an early Pan-Africanist evocation, directed as it was to the Black world at large, in its global condition of oppression and struggle. The Pan-Africanist impulse was likewise pervasive in the Nationalist Religion of the Jamaican-born Black prophet, and Black messiah, Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), still known as ‘Our Saint’ and ‘Black Moses’ to those who preserve his legacies. After a stint in Central America, where he radicalized workers in the Panama Canal Zone, and then a sojourn in England, Garvey returned to Jamaica in 1914 with the race-redeeming vision of “‘uniting all the Negro peoples of the world into one great body to establish a country and Government absolutely their own.’” Garvey went on to establish the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), an organization he believed would “‘embrace the purpose of all black humanity.’” In 1920, Garvey and the UNIA convened the first ‘International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World’ in New York, calling upon delegates to work toward the “‘glorious end of a free, redeemed, and mighty nation’” – a nation called Africa. What Garvey and the UNIA stressed, above all, was the “spirit of pride and love” of self and race, the development of independent Black nation-states, economies, and cultures, and, of course, the
“pan-Negro” nation. It was on the ideological ground of the universal Black Nation that Garvey found conjunction with Noble Drew Ali, founder of the Moorish Science Temple. In the United States, Garvey and the UNIA manifested the Black Nationalist ideal of Black independence by combining political agitation with Black business enterprise. In addition to backing Black political campaigns – even going so far as to secure a Black Harlemit for Congress – Garvey and the UNIA established a newspaper in New York, the Negro World, as well as the Black Star Steamship Company and the Negro Factory Corporation. The Garveyites’ publications would one day come to serve as educational material in the childhood home of Malcolm X.

Crucial to note is that while Garveyism is almost synonymous with the ‘back to Africa’ movement, Garvey’s Black Nationalism was as much about cultivating global Black identification and solidarity as it was about securing Black economic, cultural, political, and philosophical independence within the nation-states where he laboured. Among other sites, branches of the UNIA were established in Harlem, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Washington D.C, Cincinnati, Jamaica, and Guatemala. A feeling central to Garvey and the UNIA, and shared by the Islamic movements of the early to mid-twentieth century, was that racism and racial segregation in America are entrenched realities, impossible to dissolve in the near future. Racial separation, Pan-Africanism, and racial pride were, as such, important themes for Garveyites. While the UNIA had both Christian and Muslim members, and even had important connections to the Ahmadiyya Muslim mission in America, its leadership was usually dominated by Black Christians, both laymen and clergy. Garvey did not reject Christianity, nor did he openly criticise the Black Church – he did, however, and very much in the tradition of Black religionists, distinguish his own religiosity from that of white Christianity, which he believed had
failed to live up to the universal teachings of Christ. Together, religion and militancy were powerful pedagogical and recruiting tools for the UNIA, which drew its substantial membership almost entirely from urban Blackamericans. While the gatherings of the UNIA were framed in Christian terms – modeled, as they were, on church congregations, including hymn signing, sermons, and the recitation of scripture and the Lord’s Prayer – the organization remained ideologically open and denominationally non-aligned. Because it gave precedence to the Black Nation over any particular church, and because it nonetheless made its Pan-African Nationalist appeal through the universal, Judeo-Christian language of the Bible, Garvey’s organization offered Blackamericans of divergent religious and theological persuasions an opportunity to unite for the universal improvement of the Black Nation. This meant that a dedicated member like Malcolm’s father, Earl Little, could draw on his Baptist education to teach and recruit for the UNIA, while Malcolm’s mother, Louise Little, who had permanently eschewed institutionalized religion, could use the organization as a basis for raising an economically self-sufficient, politically internationalist, and religiously eclectic household. Garveyism may, as such, be understood as a kind of Black Nationalist Religion, a turn from the Black Protestantism of the nineteenth century to a protestant Blackness in the twentieth

Writing on his encounter with West African Muslims in the 1870s, the Presbyterian minister and missionary, Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), contended that, whereas Christianity had fostered only servility among Africans, Islam enabled Black humanity to live a “natural and genuine” way of life, and to create an authentically Black civilization that would engender Black dignity and self-respect. Blyden’s critique of Christianity was grounded in Black Religious, Black Nationalist, Pan-Africanist, Pan-Islamist, and even colonial, Orientalist, and civilizationist discourses. As a member of the American Colonization Society, Blyden
sought not only to secure Afro-American emigration to Liberia, but also to create a Black settler colony in Africa that, like the European colony of North America, would restore a civilization worthy of a race fit to rule – the Black race, in other words.\textsuperscript{207} Blyden advocated Western imperial administration of Palestine, as well as a type of \textit{mission civilisatrice} aimed at what he took to be the more “primitive” Africans.\textsuperscript{208} But Blyden also challenged Western cultural assumptions about Blacks’ inability to modernize and self-govern, through a narrative contrapuntal to Hamitic discourse: a narrative about the pre-colonial indigeneity and originality of civilization in Africa; about Black participation in the formation of Western civilization; and about the civilizing potential of Black people’s original and natural religion, Islam. \textsuperscript{209}

Blyden was not opposed to colonialism, racialism, or hierarchy, as such, but rather to the imposed inhibition of the Black race’s own masterful nature, and its right to rule as a separate race-nation. Blyden’s philosophy revolved around a concept of Africa as a single race-nation that unites the world’s Black peoples in all their diversity.\textsuperscript{210} In Blyden’s religio-political imaginary, the Black race’s separation from the West, and its attainment to self-governance, would reclaim the universal humanist ideals abused by the West as authentically African and Black ideals. In other words, the Black race’s coming unto itself, and into its own, would pave the way for a renewed concept of a universal humanity. In 1880, Blyden claimed that the African continent was soon to become the site of humankind’s redemption, by the labour of its original people, and that he himself had received divine revelation in “‘the solitudes of the African forest.’”\textsuperscript{211}

Like Garvey and the UNIA, Blyden represents a divergence of Black Religious and Black Nationalist traditions from the Black Church, a divergence that occurred in the context of a significant upheaval in Blackamerican demographics. In the early twentieth century, thousands of rural Blackamericans left the South to find jobs in the metropoles of the North, where, forced
to become ‘urban’ almost overnight, they swelled the ranks and the spirit of the Black proletariat.\textsuperscript{212} In the midst of widespread urban Black agitation, the Black Church came to face a popular indictment for turning bourgeois and assimilationist – for losing touch with ‘the folk,’ and their true aims.\textsuperscript{213} The Black Church was no longer the vanguard of Black Religious and Black Nationalist expression.\textsuperscript{214} Its place among urban Blackamericans was soon to be taken by the many Muslim organizations of the twentieth century.

Scholars tend to date the foundation of Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple to 1913, although the organization’s first Temple was not established until 1925 in Chicago.\textsuperscript{215} Styling himself as a prophet from the East, Noble Drew Ali (1887-1929) offered a genealogy of Black identity that was meant to supplant status quo knowledge about the so-called ‘Negro.’\textsuperscript{216} The genealogy construed Blackamericans, not as Black or ‘Negro’ at all, but as Moors, descendants of an ancient Asiatic race, living in light of the “glorious, but fallen past” of their original homeland, Northwest Africa, whose natural and original creed was the true creed of all non-white Asiatics: Islam.\textsuperscript{217} In 1927, Ali recorded his views for posterity in his very own scriptural text, the \textit{Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple}, also called the \textit{Circle Seven Koran}.\textsuperscript{218} Rejecting the racial taxonomies of his day, Ali refused to call himself ‘Negro’ or ‘coloured,’ and proposed that the human race divide itself according to its “nations” (47:9 in Ali’s \textit{Holy Koran}), which were determined by common histories, creeds, and value systems.\textsuperscript{219} Where the historical construction of Islam as fundamentally other to Euro-America and the West had once underpinned the concealment and omission of Afro-American Muslims, it now served ‘prophets’ like Noble Drew Ali in their mobilization of Islam as a Black alternative to a white, Christian world, and as the rightful, universal tradition of a non-white humanity.
Ali taught that redemption for the Moors of America hinged, not on a single Black messiah, but on the Moorish nation collectively lifting up its “‘fallen humanity’” by reconnecting with the Asiatic peoples of the world, “‘the families of nations’” who still held the “‘key to civilization’” (48:11).\(^{220}\) Ali’s rallying cry, however, was not ‘back to Africa,’ either literally or figuratively, but rather ‘back to Islam.’\(^ {221}\) In the vein of Garvey, and Blyden before him, Ali advocated the separation of Afro-Americans from their white oppressors in the name of racial-national purity.\(^ {222}\) In addition to denouncing interracial relationships, Ali taught that the Moors “‘should not serve the gods of [the whites’] religion, because our forefathers are the true and divine founders of their first religious creed, for the redemption and salvation of mankind on earth’” (48:6).\(^ {223}\) While there seems to be some confusion in Ali’s use of both racial and national taxonomies, the fact is that the ‘racing’ of a people may be an element of their common history, and therefore their common nationhood. Ali’s idea was that the Moors should unite on the historical basis of their collective enslavement, scattering, and mis-signification as “‘negro, black and colored’” (47:16-17), thus to begin to remake their true nation, and their true identities, under their rightful creed.\(^ {224}\) For Ali, then, the Black self was an originally Muslim self, whose redemption and liberation lay in returning to the Islamic roots from which it had been sundered. Ali expressed his ends, thus: “‘Every nation shall and must worship under their own vine and fig tree, and return to their own and be with their Father God-Allah’” (48:3).\(^ {225}\)

Although the Ahmadiyya mission in America had already begun to expose urban Blackamericans to English translations of the Quran, it does not seem that Noble Drew Ali used the Quran itself in crafting his own composition, the *Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple*.\(^ {226}\) Ali’s choice to elide over the Quran was sensible, for one, because he styled himself as a prophet of Allah, who was privy to a new divine revelation, and, for another, because early
Islamizers like Ali needed, above all, to demonstrate a personal ownership and authority in Islam to their predominantly Afro-American followers. By reconfiguring the locus of Black belonging, Noble Drew Ali also redrew the conceptual geography of Islam – a largely brown and Arab geography in Euro-American and Sunni-ist imaginaries – by locating Islam as indigenous to the so-called ‘land of the Blacks,’ and indigenous indeed to all non-white, ‘Asiatic’ nations of the world. As his concern with separating Blackamericans from white centres of power included separating them from the self-conceptions they had formed under racial subjection, Ali deconstructed the imposed ‘Negro-ness’ of Blackamericans as an erasure of their original ‘Muslim-ness,’ thus mobilizing the very absence of Muslim-Islamic referents on the surface of American discourse as evidence of whitewashing. Ultimately, Noble Drew Ali offered Blackamericans an Islam that made sense in light of the repression of their history and their humanity, and their struggle to reclaim them – their collective lost-found condition, as it were.

Noble Drew Ali’s Islam, and his *Holy Koran*, were characterized by intertextuality and syncretism, which also underpinned the methods of W. D. Fard and the organization he founded in 1930, the Lost-Found Nation of Islam. Crucially, Ali located Jesus as a genealogical ancestor to the Moors, as a pan-Asiatic prophet of “‘the true blood of the ancient Canaanites and Moabites and the inhabitants of Africa,’” (46:2) whose teaching was “‘to the common people,’” for whose redemption he was sent (46:5), and who was ultimately betrayed by the church of Rome, (46:2-3), the church of white Christians. In his *Holy Koran*, Ali interpolated and interpreted, among other texts, the *Aquarian Gospel* of Levi H. Dowling (1908), including its complex Christology, and *The Infinite Wisdom*, a text re-published by the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis in 1925. The latter provided Ali’s scripture with a basis for his organization’s conservative moral and ethical code, inculcated as the Moors’ path to redemption and liberation on earth.
The Lost-Found Nation of Islam made its debut in 1930 under its enigmatic founder and leader, W. D. Fard. By all accounts, Fard was not Black, and indeed uncertainty about his origins, coupled with his radical racial sentiments, only heightened the aura of his mystique. Unlike Noble Drew Ali, Fard did not introduce a scriptural text of his own. Instead, he used the Bible to disrupt his largely Black Christian followers’ faith and trust therein, often through logical exposés designed to undermine the scripture’s purported infallibility. In the tradition of David Walker and Robert Alexander Young, and other prophets of the antebellum days, Fard coined the epithet ‘white devil,’ and also delivered his own oral apocrypha of the Bible, which he expected his followers to accept as authoritative divine revelation. In the vein of Christian Dispensationalism, Fard framed his interpretive approach to the Bible in the genre of ‘prophetic fulfilment,’ which meant that the Nation of Islam would use the Bible for the sake of interpreting its symbolism, while looking to the imminent fulfilment of its prophecies as they applied to a specific people. The ‘prophetic fulfilment’ method of Biblical explanation was already in use by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (the Jehovah’s Witnesses), whose prophetic calendar and teachings on the interpretation of Biblical prophecy found favour with the Lost-Found Nation’s leader. Fard eventually introduced an English interpretation of the Quran to his followers, although he promised that he had a book of his own that he had yet to reveal.

Police harassment and the Nation’s alleged connection to a cult murder in 1932 accelerated Fard’s decline and the dissolution of the first Nation of Islam. After his release from prison in 1934, Fard visited his followers in Chicago before disappearing entirely. Before he departed, Fard promised an apocalyptic return in which he would deliver his Black followers from the white man’s world. However, it was not Fard himself, but rather his most ardent follower, Elijah Muhammad, who ultimately transformed Fard into a saviour-God.
Born in Georgia, Elijah Poole (1897-1975) was a child of sharecroppers and Baptist preachers. Elijah’s early sense of prophetic calling was rooted as much in the adoration he received as a child from both priests and parishioners as in his witness to lynchings in the South, and the helplessness of his kin. In his youth, Elijah felt that the Bible was a “locked door,” waiting for its truths to be revealed. What this meant, of course, was that Elijah, who desired above all to teach and to preach, was not satisfied with the interpretations he had received from the Black Church. He was, as such, primed and ready to have a revelation of his own.

By his own account, when Elijah Poole first met W. D. Fard in 1931, he immediately recognised the Nation’s leader as “God himself.” It was Elijah who began referring to Fard as ‘Master’ and then ‘Prophet.’ Before he disappeared, Fard endowed Elijah Poole with a new name, Elijah Karriem, elevated him to the rank of supreme minister of the Nation of Islam, and named him his successor. Shortly after Fard’s departure, Elijah Karriem published The Final Call to Islam, claiming that Fard had renamed him once again, along with his family, to bear Fard’s last name as their own. Elijah Karriem was now Elijah Muhammad, and from 1935 to 1942, he led the Temple People, the group of Muslims who still loyally regarded Fard as their saviour. From 1943 to 1946, Muhammad served a sentence in the Federal Correctional Institution in Michigan. After he was released, and succeeded in bringing about the second birth of the Nation of Islam, Muhammad claimed to have heard Allah (Fard) during the years of trial and tribulation following Fard’s departure. Like Fard, Muhammad used the Bible to justify the Nation’s work, fashioning himself as the prophet whose coming was foretold in Deuteronomy 18.

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xxiv Deuteronomy 18:15 (God addresses the Levites): “The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken;” King James Version, BibleGateway https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+18&version=KJV.
pedestal of prophethood and messengership, as a veritable second to Allah.\textsuperscript{252} Although Muhammad continued to mine the Bible for proof texts, parables, and prophecies that could serve the Nation, he nonetheless maligned it as a poisoned, skewed, and distorted book, whose meanings were regularly “fixed” at the expense of Blackamericans.\textsuperscript{253} Muhammad also contested orthodox Christian (Nicaean) theology by arguing that the idea of a spiritual, transcendent God was unscientific and unnatural.\textsuperscript{254} In Muhammad’s theology, God was a man, not merely manifest in flesh but rather indistinct from it.\textsuperscript{255} Of course, Elijah Muhammad’s theology put the Nation outside the pale of Islamic orthodoxy as well, but it was more important and appealing to the Nation’s new leader to separate his followers from Christianity, the “white man’s religion,” than it was to align them with a ‘historical’ or ‘global’ Islam.

The Nation of Islam flourished in the 1950s, becoming the most prominent and popular Islamic movement among Blackamericans.\textsuperscript{256} The Nation’s doctrines, still considered controversial, were as appealing to some as they were divisive and unnerving to others. Crucially, the Nation advocated racial purity through racial separation; insisted on the devilishness of whites; publically maligned the corruptions of Christianity; proclaimed Islam as the authentic, original, and natural religion of the Black world; and heralded an imminent apocalypse that would destroy America and liberate the Blacks scattered in its wilderness. As Abdul Hakim Jackson contends, the Nation of Islam succeeded fundamentally in developing an “alternative modality of American blackness.”\textsuperscript{257} Along with its doctrines, the Nation endowed its members with a strict and binding conservative social ethos, including stark gender differentiation, specific dress codes, and a distinct demeanour, as part of its effort to remake the image of the Black self.\textsuperscript{xxv258} However, insofar as it was geared at the formation of a new Black

\textsuperscript{xxv} See below, ‘Illustration 2,’ p. 91.
identity, and the racial-nationalist project of Black redemption and liberation, the Nation of Islam could not easily align with either Islamic or Christian orthodoxy. In fact, it was not until Malcolm’s era that the Nation first began to apply the Quran to Black use, Malcolm’s participation in that turn being vital to its success among Afro-Americans.

IV. Encountering Immigrant Muslims

While Brother Malcolm was pivotal to the widespread appropriation of Islam by Afro-Americans in the 1950s and 60s, it seems that Malcolm’s kin were no strangers to Islam when they first began to take to the minister’s orations.\textsuperscript{259} Indeed, “several hundred to thousands” of Afro-Americans in New York City alone had already participated in Islamic groups before Malcolm’s arrival on the scene, and were thus primed to approach Islam as relevant to their own lives.\textsuperscript{260} In addition to being the era of Islamic Black Nationalism and Black Religion, the early to mid-twentieth century was also, for Blackamerican Muslims, an era of migration, encounters with Muslim immigrants, interethnic community building, and intense religious syncretism.\textsuperscript{261} This section on Blackamericans’ encounters with immigrant Muslims in the first half of the twentieth century investigates the place of immigrant Muslims among Blackamericans as both proselytizers and religious peers. Ultimately, it proposes that American Islam, as indigenous to Blackamericans, has historically proved to be adaptable enough to involve immigrant Muslim identity and participation.

In New York City, one of the earliest immigrant Muslim proselytizers to gain a following among Afro-Americans was Sheikh Al-Haj Daoud Ahmed Faisal, who began his da’wah (Islamic evangelistic) effort in 1925. In 1928, Faisal established the Islamic Propagation Centre of America in Harlem, and in 1935, the Islamic Mission of America (IMA) in Brooklyn.\textsuperscript{262} Sheikh Faisal was not trained in Arabic or the Islamic sciences. To compensate, he partnered
with other immigrant Muslims in New York, none of them trained religious teachers in their own right, from whom he and the IMA, a largely Afro-American Muslim community, adapted some of the ideas and practices of an international Islam. The teachings circulating the IMA were orally transmitted and, on the whole, not tangibly grounded in any standardized Islamic discourse. Interestingly, the IMA was one of the earliest Afro-American Muslim communities to signify itself as Sunni. To the Muslims of the IMA, however, ‘Sunni’ meant the Muslim world in general, rather than as in distinction from Shi’ite Islam. For the IMA, then, being Sunni did not disqualify the use of Ahmadiyya translations of the Quran, which is significant since the Ahmadiyya were persecuted by Sunni Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. It is indeed vital to note that the IMA signified itself as Sunni with much the same intent and presumption as Sunni Muslims anywhere, to identify, as it were, with an Islam that is historically sound and universally true, rather than provincial or separatist.

Founded in 1941 in New York, by a group of Somali Muslims connected to Sheikh Faisal and the IMA, the International Moslem Society (IMS) drew on Blackamerican as well as immigrant Muslim membership, and maintained a host of ties with a variety of Islamic groups throughout its career. In 1943, at an Eid al-Fitr celebration hosted by a New York-based immigrant Muslim organization, it was Abdul Wadud Bey, a.k.a. Noble Drew Ali, who spoke on behalf of the IMS as its official representative. In 1946, the IMS hosted a number of South Asian Muslim reformist scholars, including Maulana Azad Subhani and Dr. N.A. Baloch. And in 1949, the IMS began a three-year correspondence with the Ahmadiyya’s international magazine, the Islamic Review. In the midst of its diverse and eclectic influences, the IMS also

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xxvi “The Feast of the Breaking of the Fast,” Eid al-Fitr is the festival, often several days long in many Muslim-majority nations, that marks the end of Ramadan.
stood as one of only four mosques in 1952 to host a celebration for *Eid al-Adha*, xxvii a festival that, like *Eid al-Fitr*, belongs to the Muslim ummah as a whole. 271 As Patrick Bowen notes, having the sundry ties that connected the IMS to various types of Islam was not at all uncommon for Muslim groups in the first half of the twentieth century, “especially for those which had a membership composed of mostly African Americans.” 272 Decades before brown and Middle Eastern Sunni Muslims became the face of Islamic orthodoxy in America, Afro-American Muslims were proving themselves willing and able to adapt to the knowledges of immigrant Muslims, and to understand themselves as part of the Muslim ummah and the world religion called Islam. Characterizations of early Blackamerican Muslim organizations as proto-Islamic, or as simply *Jahil*, xxviii stem in large part from an abiding failure to recognize the syncretic abilities and universalist aspirations of America’s indigenous Muslims. Where Afro-American Muslims in the first half of the twentieth century often lacked access to formal Islamic training and authoritative texts, they often had the will to educate themselves, however they could, as well as a conviction in their right to Islamic knowledge and an intention to belong to the Muslim world.

New York City has not been the sole historic centre of interaction and exchange between Afro-American and immigrant Muslims. By the time the first Moorish Science Temple was established (c. 1925), the Ahmadiyya mission in America was proselytising successfully in both Afro-American and immigrant communities in Chicago. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community was established in India, during British colonial occupation of the subcontinent in the second half of the nineteenth century, by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who sought at first to vindicate the principles of Islamic orthodoxy in the face of Punjab’s Hindu majority and its colonial...

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xxvii “The Feast of the Sacrifice,” *Eid al-Adha* falls on the tenth day of Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month of the Islamic lunar calendar, marking the official end of the Hajj for pilgrims in Mecca.

xxviii *Jahil*: “Foolish” or “ignorant;” in Sunni Islamic discourse, *Jahiliyya* refers to the era of pre-Islamic ‘darkness’ in Arabia, but is also used more generally as a pejorative for non-Muslim or disagreeable Muslim states.
Christian missionaries. By 1891, however, Ahmad was proclaiming that he was the Mahdi, as well as a prophet of God and the promised Messiah of both Christianity and Islam. In colonial India, Ahmad’s efforts to preserve Islamic teachings, as well as his own religious authority, struck parallels with the work of Blackamerican Islamizers like Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad, both of whom claimed prophethood in their own right, and adapted a variety of religious textualities to form their message and appeal. By 1908, the year of Hazrat Ahmad’s death, the Ahmadiyya faction that was loyal to Ahmad, the Qadian, was embroiled in open conflict with India’s Muslims. The Qadian were persecuted and eventually excommunicated from India’s Muslim community. It was the Qadian who sent the Muslim missionary, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, to the U.S in 1920, to make ground for the Ahmadiyya mission in America.

Initially, Sadiq’s work in the United States was aimed at building a multi-racial model of Islam. From his headquarters in Chicago, Sadiq sought to attract both Blackamerican and immigrant Muslims from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Through the Ahmadiyya’s tri-monthly journal, The Moslem Sunrise, Sadiq waged a “‘jihad of words’” against misrepresentations of Islam, contending that Islam was fundamentally anti-racist and pro-equality. However, given mounting hostility from the press, white Protestants’ trenchant resistance to multi-racial cooperation, and Sadiq’s own mistreatment by immigration authorities, it was not long before the Ahmadiyya mission in America began to focus more exclusively on courting Blackamericans to the movement. Between 1921 and 1925, the Ahmadiyya recruited over a thousand new Muslims, many of them Blackamericans from Chicago and Detroit. The pages of The Moslem Sunrise were dominated in these years by stories of new Afro-American Muslims, many of whom became prominent proselytizers for the Ahmadiyya mission.

\[\text{xxix} \] Literally, the “guided one;” in Islamic eschatology, the Mahdi is a prophesied redeemer or renewer of Islam who will rule the believers for a (debated) period of time before the Day of Judgement.
Inviting Blackamericans to positions of leadership in its ranks made the Ahmadiyya mission that much more appealing to seasoned Black Religionists and Black Nationalists, especially Black Christians and the followers of Marcus Garvey. \(^{283}\) Sadiq was known to lecture at UNIA meetings, and even appointed a Garveyite Muslim, who was also a Protestant minister, to lead the Ahmadiyya’s Chicago congregation. \(^{284}\) It seems that, for at least the first few years of the Ahmadiyya mission in America, the Ahmadiyya’s Indian Nationalism worked with the Garveyites’ Pan-African Black Nationalism, in a synthesis of anti-white, anti-colonial, and anti-Christian ideas. \(^{285}\) In 1923, Sadiq used *The Moslem Sunrise* to declare that Christian profiteers had coerced Blackamericans into forsaking “‘the religion and language of [their] forefathers – which were Islam and Arabic.’” \(^{286}\) At the same time, Sadiq drew many Afro-Americans to the Ahmadiyya mission by representing Islam as a corrective to “‘all distinctions of race, color and creed,’” and as a vital bridge to solidarity with the global Muslim ummah. \(^{287}\) Under Sadiq’s leadership, the Ahmadiyya thus offered Blackamericans an international, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic model of Muslim belonging that simultaneously catered to the redemptive and liberatory visions of multiple racial-nationalist struggles, both in the United States and abroad.

One of the challenges faced by Blackamerican Ahmadiyya Muslims in the years after Sadiq’s ministry was remaining loyal to a movement that periodically left Black America behind to address its international agendas. \(^{288}\) For while the Ahmadiyya’s Afro-American recruits were part of a religious organization with recurring Indian political and cultural concerns, they were also many of them embroiled in historical, socio-political struggles of their own. \(^{289}\) Nevertheless, from 1930 to 1950, *The Moslem Sunrise* continued to highlight America’s race-problem, especially as it manifested in Protestant churches and America’s Christian missions in Africa. \(^{290}\) Although the Ahmadiyya in these years faced heated and ever-mounting competition from the
burgeoning Nation of Islam, their mission nonetheless remained steadily influential well into the 1950s, even drawing a number of notable and famous jazz musicians to its ranks.291

Richard Brent Turner contends that the Ahmadiyya mission in America ultimately emerged as the “most effective model of multi-racial community experience in American Islam” in the twentieth century.292 However, if the Ahmadiyya were even remotely successful in realizing a truly human community in the United States – in the spirit of Quran 49:13 – it was because the mission extended itself to Blackamerican participation and leadership, and expended its resources on highlighting ground-level American realities of race and racism. As foreign-born, immigrant Muslim organizers, who had been rejected by the Sunni status quo in their Indian homeland, as well as by the white dominant order in the U.S, the Ahmadiyya in America came to rely heavily on the identification, membership, and leadership of Afro-Americans, just as their religious authority came to be based on their identification as anti-Christian, anti-colonial, and anti-white. Historically speaking, then, even ‘immigrant Islam’ in America has never been based solely in Arabia and the orthodox Muslim world. Early encounters between indigenous, Blackamerican Muslims and immigrant Muslims reveal a mutuality of liberatory visions.

V. American Islam X

If it is true, as John L. Esposito observes, that “American Muslims struggle with the nature of their identity, [and] the relationship of faith to national identity and American culture,” then that struggle must needs be grounded in a (hi)story far deeper than just “the aftermath of September 11, 2001.”293 Esposito’s assessment that Muslims were well on their way to “mainstreaming in American society,” before their successes were challenged by the events of 9/11, reflects a wilful and widespread agnosia in American scholarship and public discourse regarding the deep history of American Islam and its indigenous, Afro-American participants.
More accurate than Esposito’s assessment is Samory Rashid’s contention that, if anything, the events and aftermath of 9/11 have “taught us how little most Americans know about Islam and Muslims.” But indeed, it is not only non-Muslims who must confront their ignorance of American Muslims, and a religious tradition that has been in America as long as the colonizer, but Muslims as well who must question their too-readily defined place in a whitewashed American public square.

American Islam is expansive, adaptive, indigenous to Blackamericans, and dedicated, in one form or another, to the cause of earthly liberation from oppression and injustice. In a discursive context, and a historical situation, wherein anti-Black racism and Islamophobia together hinge on the alienation of ‘Black’ from ‘Muslim,’ it is a disservice for the Council on American Islamic Relations to advocate the recognition of Muslim ‘civil rights’ while clearly and obviously separating Blackamericans from Muslims at large. Like Esposito’s assessment, the Council’s report represents a nostalgia for ‘the way things were,’ a supposedly utopic era for Muslims before Arabs and South Asians became visible and targeted. The normality envisioned by those preoccupied solely with the image of immigrant American Muslims does not include Afro-American Muslims, whose socioeconomic and psychospatial disparity with second- and third-generation immigrant Muslims has been a reality since long before 9/11 and the heightening of Arab and South Asian Muslim visibility. As it stands, American Muslim identity is restricted and painfully narrowed by ahistorical approaches to American Islam.

American Muslims are not obliged to settle for the convenient, whitewashed ontologies and repressive significations marketed by North America’s academies, media conglomerates, and normative Islamic institutions, although they may still suffer their imposition, and thus be forced to adapt. American Muslims may indeed have to struggle for the name of their belonging, for
American Islam is not a status quo Islam. Conditioned by centuries of subjection and resistance, and still engaged in the vital contest of signification – and the contest for America’s future – American Islam is a living tradition dedicated to redeeming and liberating life in the dystopic ‘New World,’ a tradition whose becoming has not yet ended, and whose last name is yet to be revealed, or reclaimed. It is, in short, American Islam X.

Chapter 3 -- The Muslim Life of Malcolm X

I. The Problem of ‘Conversion’

One of the key, largely unexplored features of Malcolm’s public speaking and Autobiography is Malcolm’s representation of the phenomenon of ‘conversion’ to Islam. Curiously, while the Autobiography is replete with references to Muslim ‘converts’ and Islamic ‘conversions,’ Malcolm never once uses ‘convert’ or ‘conversion’ to describe his own coming into Islam. As a “religious story,” the Autobiography represents Malcolm’s self-interpretation of his faith, as spelled out in the context of his changing religio-political philosophy, organizational loyalty, and ground-level strategy. Although it was ultimately delimited by Alex Haley, who edited and published it after Malcolm’s death, the Autobiography nonetheless honours the multivalence of Malcolm’s faith. The Autobiography animates more than one authorial impulse. While it manifestly preserves Malcolm’s original intention to relay the story of his spiritual transformation, as a way of edifying the world about the saviour, Elijah Muhammad, the Autobiography also attests to Malcolm’s disillusionment with Elijah Muhammad and his departure from the Nation of Islam, as well as his further discoveries in Islam. At the same time, the Autobiography features at least one authorial voice that runs through and connects the many layers and movements of Malcolm’s religious story. This is the voice of Malcolm’s interpretation of his relationship with the One God, Allah.
In his autobiographical description of the events leading up to when he “found” Islam in prison— the moment Louis A. DeCaro Jr. calls the “First Conversion”— Malcolm frames his pre-Islamic life as “mentally dead,” but as nonetheless under the protection and guidance of Allah. According to the Autobiography, it is Allah who kept the adolescent Malcolm from becoming too fond of boxing, Allah who brought Malcolm back to Boston and his half-sister Ella (thus preventing him from becoming a “brainwashed” Black Christian), and it is Allah who prevented Malcolm from shooting a detective when he was finally caught for his burglaries. It is probably true, as both Marable and DeCaro suggest, that the Autobiography heightens the depravity of Malcolm’s pre-Islamic life in order to express, that much more deeply, his illumination through the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. However, as per Malcolm’s relationship with Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, the Autobiography features Malcolm speaking from both within and without the Nation’s theology and his loyalty to its leader. For instance, Malcolm refers to a military draft board officer as a “middle-aged bored acting devil,” but elsewhere repudiates the Nation’s theology by criticising the “Muslims of the East” for allowing ignorance of true Islam to fester and produce a “religious faker” among Blackamericans. What remains consistent, however, through the midst of Malcolm’s autobiographical multiplicity, is Malcolm’s voice as an abiding servant and subject of Allah.

Reflecting on his life leading up to prison and his encounter with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm writes, “I had sunk to the very bottom of the American white man’s society when soon now, in prison, I found Allah and the religion of Islam and it completely transformed my life.” What is more, just as Allah watched over Malcolm on the streets when he was “mentally dead,” and guided him to Islam in prison, so too did He strengthen Malcolm’s resolve when he finally fractured with Elijah Muhammad: “And Allah blessed me to remain true, firm and strong in my
faith. And even when events produced a crisis between Elijah Muhammad and me, I told him at the beginning of the crisis, with all the sincerity I had in me, that I still believed in him more strongly than he believed in himself.” Like Malcolm’s religious life, the Autobiography is comprised of more than a single text. Malcolm’s devotion to Elijah Muhammad and the Nation comes across as real in the Autobiography, precisely because much of Malcolm’s dictation to Alex Haley before his rupture with Elijah Muhammad was preserved for publication. Apart from inserting later narrative voices here and there to repudiate Elijah Muhammad and the doctrines of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm held the texts of his life together with the thread of his continuity as a believer on Allah’s path. Malcolm’s Autobiography ends the final chapter of his glory days in the Nation with his reflection on that continuous path: “Standing there by that Harvard window, I silently vowed to Allah that I never would forget that any wings I wore had been put on by the religion of Islam. The fact I never have forgotten…not for one second.” Later, in the wake of what Malcolm deemed the Nation’s betrayal, and the death threats that issued from it, Malcolm found solace in the faith he shared with his wife, Betty: “I knew that she was as faithful a servant of Allah as I was, and I knew that whatever happened, she was with me.”

In short, the Autobiography interprets Malcolm’s life as having always been on the path of Islam. The unity and continuity of Malcolm’s faith in Allah in his self-interpretation is no less significant than the ambiguity of his loyalty, particularly during the period of his rupture with the Nation of Islam. Editing his Autobiography, and keeping up with his public speaking, in the midst of that era of departures, it was especially important for Malcolm to emphasise the continuity of his faith, even where he lacked a substantive definition of Islam’s role in his life’s work on the side of his people. Speaking from across autobiographical time, the voice of
Malcolm’s abiding faith in Allah seeks to realize his ruptures as transitions, thus to portray each and every step in his life’s journey, however heterodox, as a step on the path of Islam.

How Malcolm came into Islam speaks volumes about the nature of his lifelong religiosity, as well as the depth of his childhood and adolescent influences. In 1948, shortly after Malcolm was transferred to Concord Reformatory from Charlestown State Prison, his younger brother, Reginald, wrote him an enigmatic letter that, according to the Autobiography, sent Malcolm en route to his first “pre-Islamic submission” to Allah. Reginald’s first letter said nothing of religion or Islam. Instead, Reginald left his brother with a cryptic instruction and an irresistible challenge: “Malcolm, don’t eat any more pork, and don’t smoke any more cigarettes. I’ll show you how to get out of prison.” In a word, Malcolm took the bait. He bent his will on the chance of his release from prison and followed out his brother’s instructions. The other inmates’ widespread and obvious surprise at Malcolm’s refusal of pork at the lunch table stood out to Malcolm as a point of pride, as a negation of “one of the universal images of the Negro, in prison and out.” Malcolm writes: “Later I would learn, when I had read and studied Islam a good deal, that, unconsciously, my first pre-Islamic submission had been manifested. I had experienced, for the first time, the Muslim teaching, ‘if you will take one step toward Allah, Allah will take two steps toward you.’” But Malcolm did not set out on his path to Allah with a clearly defined love of God or religion. He set out with his will to liberation, which precisely was targeted by Reginald in his effort to ‘fish’ Malcolm for the Nation of Islam. Reginald succeeded with Malcolm where their younger brother, Philbert, had earlier failed. Philbert had written Malcolm twice: the first time, to tell him that he was being prayed for by the Holy Rollers of Detroit, and the second time, to inform him that he had found Elijah Muhammad’s Islam, “‘the natural religion of the black man.’” But whereas Malcolm took Philbert to be
merely “forever joining something,” he took Reginald’s words as a potential strategy for freedom. In this sense, Malcolm’s intention for taking the path of Islam was as serious as any so-called convert’s might be. In a word, it was the intention to live a liberated existence.

At the end of March 1948, Malcolm’s elder half-sister, Ella, succeeded in securing Malcolm’s transfer from Concord Reformatory to Norfolk Prison Colony, whose less restricted atmosphere, as well as extensively stocked library and educational rehabilitation programs, offered Malcolm an opportunity he seized for his self-education, and for the freedom he was already beginning to envision. In a 1948 letter to the official in charge of transfers to Norfolk, Malcolm wrote: “Since my confinement I’ve already received a diploma in Elementary English through the State Correspondence Courses. I’m very much dissatisfied, though. There are many things that I would like to learn that would be of use to me when I regain my freedom.”

Malcolm’s urgent will to educate himself, and thus to prepare himself for his freedom, played a vital role in his embrace of Islam. In particular, Malcolm’s studies in Black history (including the history of Black civilizations, the crimes of the Transatlantic slave trade, and the history of Afro-American ‘slave revolts’), as well as the history of European colonialism and global anticolonial struggles, helped to solidify the message Reginald delivered to him when he visited Norfolk in 1948. This was the message of a man known as Allah, and a devil known as the white man.

In the Autobiography, Malcolm recalls that Reginald knew how his “street-hustler mind” operated, and thus came to him with an effective approach, one devoid of religious rhetoric. When he visited Malcolm at Norfolk, Reginald spoke of a man known as Allah, who encompassed all three-hundred and sixty degrees of knowledge, and of the devil, who encompassed only thirty-three. Reginald also told his brother that the devil is a man, dropping Fard’s epithet like a bomb on Malcolm’s consciousness: “‘The white man is the devil.’"
Reginald’s words compelled Malcolm to survey the “entire spectrum of white people” he had ever known, including some whom both brothers knew through past hustles.327 “The white people I had known marched before my mind’s eye,” writes Malcolm:

From the start of my life. The state white people always in our house after the other whites I didn’t know had killed my father…the white people who kept calling my mother ‘crazy’ to her face and before me and my brothers and sisters, until she finally was taken off by white people to the Kalamazoo asylum…the white judge and others who had split up the children…the Swerlins, the other whites around Mason…white youngsters I was in school there with, and the teachers – the one who told me in the eighth grade to ‘be a carpenter’ because thinking of being a lawyer was foolish for a Negro…328 Malcolm’s list goes on, to the whites in Boston where he shined shoes at white-only dances, to white cops and criminals in New York city, to Sophia, his former lover, and her wealthy husband, to the whites he steered to “the black ‘speciality sex’ they wanted,” and to all the social workers, court officials, judges, prisoners, and guards he had known in his life.329 In effect, Reginald catalysed Malcolm’s process of self-(re)interpretation, whereby Malcolm began to make sense of his life from the perspective and authority of a Lost-Found Muslim.

According to the Autobiography, Reginald’s second visit to Norfolk left Malcolm “rocking” with thoughts of “the devil white man” and “the brainwashed black man.”330 Reginald brought Malcolm word of ancient Black civilizations and the repression of Blacks’ self-knowledge. Malcolm then began receiving regular letters from other newly self-signified Muslim family members, elucidating what they termed “the true knowledge of the black man,” as revealed by Allah (Fard) to the Honourable Elijah Muhammad, and thence to his followers.331 Malcolm’s refusal of pork, and his eventual – and by his own account, difficult – prostration in prayer were not the only acts of submission he manifested while still in prison.332 Alongside reading his family’s letters, and writing his own to Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm undertook a self-education that substantiated the Nation’s knowledge. Among others, the historical and
theoretical works of Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. DuBois, J. A. Rogers, and Arnold Toynbee, provided sustenance for Malcolm’s emerging world-narrative and self-narrative. As Malcolm writes: “Book after book showed me how the white man had brought upon the world’s black, brown, red, and yellow peoples every variety of the sufferings of exploitation […] I read, I saw, how the white man never has gone among the non-white peoples bearing the Cross in the true manner and spirit of Christ’s teachings.” With each step of his submission to a religion that offered him the praxis and knowledge to reinterpret, and thus remake, his existence, Malcolm effectively converted his life-(hi)story, along with his worldly knowledge, into a narrative that supported his growing sense of Islamic mission.

According to the Autobiography, when Malcolm finally knelt to pray, he was faced with the enormity of his past life’s guilt and the need to seek God’s forgiveness. Like his self-education and reflection, Malcolm’s prison prayer was an act of submission that converted the stuff of his life and knowledge into the substance of his Muslim deen. Malcolm’s Autobiography is a testament to his existential and epistemic (re)interpretations, including his conception of his pre-Islamic life as “the personification of evil.” Malcolm’s efforts to gain disciples for the Nation in prison, and thus to redeem the guilt of his past life, was yet another aspect of his submission, his sense of mission, and his religious education, and represents yet another conversion in his Muslim beginnings, that of his street-wise hustle and con into a vehicle for recruitment. As he stated in a letter to Reverend Samuel L. Laviscount of Roxbury, dated November 14, 1950, “[I] reversed my attitude toward my black brothers [and] in my guilt and shame I began to catch every chance I could to recruit for Mr. Muhammad.” To speak of Malcolm’s ‘conversion’ to Islam, then, is to speak of his multiple conversions, acts of interpretation that made his life, past, present, and future, sensible in the context of the religion
he received. At the same time, Malcolm’s interpretive acts signify that he was beginning to appropriate the religious knowledge and praxis he received, according to his own life experience as well as his growing sense of redemptive responsibility, to himself and to his kin. What is more, and perhaps to emphasise the Pauline quality of his ‘conversion’ and evangelical calling (‘from darkness to light’), the Autobiography conceals the extent of Malcolm’s adaptation to the knowledge he received in prison.xxx339

II. Religious Faith and Radical Politics: The Balance of Malcolm’s First Evangelism

In June 1950, the United States initiated military activities in Korea with the stated aim of suppressing communist insurgency. In the same month, Malcolm, who by then had been transferred back to Charlestown State Prison, wrote a contentious letter to President Truman, declaring his opposition to the U.S in its international conflict: “I have always been a Communist. I have tried to enlist in the Japanese Army, last war, now they will never draft or accept me in the U.S Army. Everyone has always said Malcolm is crazy so it isn’t hard to convince people that I am.”340 It was Malcolm’s letter to Truman that first brought him to the attention of the FBI, which thus opened its extensive (and still largely classified) investigation on Malcolm Little, a.k.a. Malcolm X, a.k.a. Malachi Shabazz.341 In the opening file that cites Malcolm’s letter to Truman (under the heading of “Communist Party Activities”), the FBI also notes Malcolm’s membership in what it calls the “Muslim Cult of Islam,” or the “Allah Temple of Islam,” whose members reportedly “disavow their allegiance to the United States and pledge

xxx Malcolm’s upbringing and childhood education were characterised by his Garveyite parents’ emphasis on economic self-sufficiency, Black internationalism, and religious, philosophical, and cultural eclecticism. Malcolm grew up attending UNIA meetings with his father, Earl Little, and studying the Bible, as well as Black publications like the Garveyites’ Negro World, and newspapers from the Caribbean, under the tutelage of his mother, Louise Little. In addition, Malcolm was early on impressed with the brutal weight of America’s racist violence. Like the other members of his family, Malcolm saw the arson of his family’s home in Lansing, and then his father’s murder in Detroit, through the prism of a racist, white supremacist world. In effect, through his parents’ influence and his childhood experiences, Malcolm inherited the race-thinking and religious eclecticism of both Black Nationalism and Black Religion. See Autobiography, 14-15; Marable, 21-31; DeCaro Jr., OTSMP, 42-53.
their allegiance only to Allah and do not consider it their duty to register for Selective Service or to serve in the United States Armed Forces […]”\textsuperscript{342} In substantiation of Malcolm’s membership in the Nation of Islam, and therefore his engagement in potentially “Un-American Activities,” the FBI file includes a number of evangelistic letters written by Malcolm to friends and colleagues on the outside, circa 1950 to 1952. The racial theology espoused by Malcolm in his letters reveals his understanding of Islam at the vital moment of his first evangelism as a Lost-Found Muslim. To a great degree, the style and content of Malcolm’s early ministry in the Nation of Islam evolved from the locus of his first evangelism.

In one of his evangelistic prison-letters, Malcolm described the Nation’s Islamic eschatology, including an eschatological geography that divided the world in a Manichaean stand-off between the “Dark Peoples” of the world – the people of “Truth” – and their enemies, the white devils on earth. “All over the World,” Malcolm wrote,

the Dark Peoples know that the devils’ time is up, and these Dark Peoples want to swoop down like a huge Tidal Wave and wash the devils from this planet…Allah Himself is holding them back, but only long enough to let all of \textit{us} hear the Truth that His Messenger is Teaching. When we all have \textit{heard} and had a chance to accept or reject it and have chosen which side we’ll be on…then Allah will allow His ‘Sea of Black Soldiers’ to swoop out of the East and make this entire hemisphere a ‘sea of blood’…but this sea will part and let those of \textit{us} pass who are for the Truth…\textsuperscript{343}

In the same letter, Malcolm proclaimed: “\textit{All Black People are Brothers.} Today our motto must be: \textit{Each One to each one!}” In another letter, Malcolm explained the nature of right and wrong for Muslims: “My brother, never stop fearing in Allah, for we are so near the Day of Total Destruction there is no time to take a chance on putting the time to stop sinning off. By sinning I mean trying to be white instead of trying to be ourselves.”\textsuperscript{344} Malcolm opened the same letter with a \textit{dhikr} of Allah\textsuperscript{xxxi} that also reinforced his theology: “In the Name of Allah, the Great God

\textsuperscript{xxxi} \textit{Dhikr}: The remembrance of Allah, manifested through both oral and embodied acts of devotion.
of All the Worlds who came all the way here to hell just to free His long lost people from the
clutches of the devil. And in the Name of His Messenger, who is teaching us that the white man
is the devil and that America is hell." In short, the religious philosophy of Malcolm’s first
evangelism not only identified the believer with the non-white, and sin with whiteness, but it also
called upon believers to separate themselves from the white (sinful) world, thus to join with their
own kind in preparation for the justice planned by Allah, the God of the oppressed – the God of
the ‘Dark Peoples’ of the world. Alongside what was to be his lifelong insistence on Blacks’
unity and independence as a people, Malcolm’s letters reflect a deep distrust of whites, as well as
a fierce conviction in the synonymy of ‘Black’ and ‘Islamic’ and their mutual difference from
the white world. Malcolm’s first public, evangelical representation of Islam, and of himself as
Muslim, underscores his conception of himself and his Afro-American kin as fundamentally
other to (white) America. At that early stage in his religious life and ministry, Malcolm
understood the world of Islam as contrapuntal to the white dominant world, just as he
experienced and described Blackness as otherness.

Through his in-prison evangelism, and by as early as 1950, Malcolm succeeded in bringing
several Black inmates, including his friend and former partner-in-crime, Shorty, into the Nation’s
Islamic fold. In 1950, Malcolm and the Muslims of Norfolk Prison Colony began to demand
concessions from prison administrators on the grounds of the exercise of their right to religious
freedom. They requested that Norfolk’s menu be changed, to better accommodate Muslim
diet, and refused to submit to inoculation. Norfolk’s officials viewed the Muslims’ requests as
disruptive, and informed Malcolm and Shorty that they, along with other ‘Black Muslims,’ were
to be transferred back to Charlestown State Prison. Elijah Muhammad disapproved of
Malcolm’s agitations, perhaps because he feared the outcome of negative publicity for the Nation
and the potential targeting of incarcerated Muslims by prison guards.\textsuperscript{350} The FBI files cite a revealing letter, written by Malcolm in January 1951, to someone whose name is redacted, although the timing and the humbled and deferential tone of the letter indicate that it was probably Elijah Muhammad.\textsuperscript{351} On one hand, Malcolm was chastened. The letter was his admission of guilt – “a humble apology for the unrest and misrepresentation of the Truth for which I was responsible for fomenting while under your jurisdiction.”\textsuperscript{352} On the other hand, Malcolm was emboldened. He defended his actions, and the religious sincerity behind them, making his letter an apology in the classical sense of a justification: “If my present sincerity is doubted, tell me of just one time that I have not always spoken from my heart just what I felt. You always spoke frankly to me, and treated me with squareness…so how could I ever be any other way except square and frank with you?”\textsuperscript{353} Malcolm thus already had an intention for his faith that was very much his own. Young in his evangelical and political career, he was already facing the need to justify his will to act, and to act radically at that, to a quiescent leader who owned his loyalty.

Together, radical action and evangelism were vital elements of Malcolm’s Islam. They defined Malcolm’s efforts in the years of his ministry, as well as the threat he ultimately came to pose, to both Elijah Muhammad and the U.S government.

\textbf{III. Evangelism as Radical Action: Early Years in the Nation of Islam}

Upon his release in August 1952, Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam’s chapter in Detroit, known as Temple No. 1. In the \textit{Autobiography}, Malcolm recalls that his first encounter with the Muslims of Detroit’s Temple No.1 left him disappointed in the Nation’s numbers as well as its efforts at expansion: “From what I could gather, the recruitment attitude at the temple seemed to me to amount to a self-defeating waiting view…an assumption that Allah would bring us more
Muslims. I felt that Allah would be more inclined to help those who helped themselves.\textsuperscript{354}

Malcolm’s approach to evangelism was a radical one, informed as it was by a self-help philosophy continuous with his Garveyite upbringing and self-education. In this sense, Malcolm continued, as a participant, in the appropriative traditions of Black Religion and Black Nationalism, whose first priority and point of interpretation is the Black self and collective.

In late 1952, Malcolm witnessed the ‘Messenger of Allah’ for the first time, at a gathering in Chicago’s Temple No. 2.\textsuperscript{355} Afterward, at dinner with Elijah Muhammad and his family, the Messenger expressed conviction in Malcolm’s post-prison fidelity to the Muslims, encouraging his young recruit to apply his evangelical zeal in service to the Nation.\textsuperscript{356} “‘Go after the young people,’” said Elijah Muhammad, advice that Malcolm would take far in his years of speaking engagements at college and university campuses.\textsuperscript{357} In 1953, Malcolm officially received his ‘X,’ which he describes in the \textit{Autobiography} as a symbolic placeholder for a Muslim’s true African family name: “For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slavemaster name of ‘Little’ […] The receipt of my ‘X’ meant that forever after in the Nation of Islam, I would be known as Malcolm X.”\textsuperscript{358}

In summer 1953, Malcolm was appointed to the post of assistant minister at Detroit’s Temple No. 1.\textsuperscript{359} In February 1954, at the Nation’s annual Saviour’s Day Convention (in memoriam of W. D. Fard), the young apprentice took the stage before a national audience, as a featured Nation speaker, for the first time.\textsuperscript{360} By late February, Malcolm’s recruitment efforts had congregated enough Muslims to start a new Temple in Boston – Temple No. 11.\textsuperscript{361} Malcolm was then tasked, as provisional minister, to restructure Philadelphia’s Temple No. 12.\textsuperscript{362} Finally, in June 1954, in honour of his rising lieutenant’s extensive labours, Elijah Muhammad appointed Malcolm full minister of Harlem’s Temple No. 7.\textsuperscript{363} Thus far, Malcolm’s will to act had served the Nation well, expanding its ranks and its influence across the U.S, while earning Malcolm a
reputation of his own. In late 1963, Elijah Muhammad publically appointed Malcolm first national minister of the Nation of Islam. But late 1963 also marked the beginning of the end for Malcolm’s ministry, his radical ambitions exceeding the heights he was permitted by the ‘Messenger of Allah.’

**IV. Transitions: From the Nation to Beyond**

In summer 1957, Malcolm received permission from Elijah Muhammad to deliver a four-week series of public lectures at Detroit’s Temple No. 1. Malcolm organized the lecture-series in the wake of NYPD patrolmen’s brutal beating of Johnson Hinton, a.k.a. Johnson X, a member of Harlem’s Temple No. 7. After the ‘Hinton Incident,’ the FBI’s investigation on Malcolm emphasised his powerful rank in the Nation of Islam. A 1958 report, for instance, cites Malcolm as a “key figure” in national security matters on account of his “increasing activities in the affairs of the NOI on a national level.” It was no coincidence that Malcolm became even more outspoken on social and political matters – going so far as to name names – after the Hinton Incident, which itself displayed the level of Malcolm’s threat to both the NYPD and the FBI.

In the aftermath of the Hinton Incident, the FBI noted that Malcolm holds “an extremely high position in the entire Nation of Islam.” In addition, an FBI informant inside the Nation reported that Malcolm is “the number two or number three man in the organization, today.”

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xxxii The story is well known. When he caught wind of Hinton’s beating, arrest, and detention by the police, Malcolm rallied a small group of Muslims and marched, at sundown, to the 28th Precinct to demand to see Brother Johnson X. The police denied that they were holding any Muslims – until the crowd swelled to five hundred Harlemites. Malcolm was allowed to see Hinton briefly. On Malcolm’s insistence, the police transported Hinton to Harlem Hospital. Once Malcolm saw to it that Hinton was treated for his injuries, he and a hundred Muslims marched down Lenox Avenue to the hospital, gathering hundreds more Harlemites along their way. The crowd outside Harlem Hospital swelled to two thousand. The police were overwhelmed and called for backup. Within an hour, the crowd swelled to four thousand. A confrontation appeared inevitable. Until Malcolm, stepping out from the hospital after being admitted to see Hinton again, made one silent gesture as a signal that dispersed the entire Muslim security detail – along with the crowd of several thousand Harlemites gathered around them. The shock and awe of Malcolm’s action has been well preserved. After the incident, an NYPD officer on duty at the blockade told a reporter from the New York Amsterdam News, “No one man should have that much power.” See Autobiography, 149-150; Marable, 127-128.
The FBI’s concerns about Malcolm were not limited to his outward displays of power. Malcolm’s recognized authority among Black Americans was beginning to threaten mass mobilization. His public lectures in Detroit after the Hinton Incident evidenced his greater willingness to speak out directly against anti-Black offenders in America’s political arena. In one of his Detroit lectures, Malcolm indicted President Eisenhower (“Ike”) and the Governor of Arkansas for being hypocritical allies to Blacks, and for having “no real love for the so-called Negro.” In contrast to Elijah Muhammad, who rarely, if ever, criticized the government, Malcolm was both direct and aggressive as a social critic and an emergent political rallying point. His public lectures in Detroit, open to all, were held before vast audiences – as vast as several thousands, according to a reporter covering one of Malcolm’s lectures. Malcolm’s influence was beginning to extend far beyond the basis of his Muslim followers in the Nation. At the same time, Malcolm’s evangelism – infused increasingly with social critique and political vision – was fast becoming a vehicle for mass Black mobilization. Neither of these two facts were lost on the FBI and the NYPD.

In May 1959, the President of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, invited Elijah Muhammad to visit ‘the Muslim world.’ Muhammad accepted the invitation, although he sent Malcolm first, as his advance man, in July 1959. As the New York Amsterdam News reported, on July 11, 1959, Malcolm planned to visit “several African-Asian countries, including the Holy City of Mecca and Medina in Arabia, and also Jerusalem.” Curiously, the Autobiography is silent on Malcolm’s 1959 trip to the Afro-Asian and Muslim world, perhaps because it seeks to amplify the religiously transformative effect of his 1964 trip, and its impact on his departure from the Nation of Islam. As it happens, Malcolm at the time of his first trip abroad already evidenced an understanding of Islam that, relative to the Nation’s orthodoxy, was avant-garde, to say the least.
Unlike Elijah Muhammad, who had never encouraged his followers to study the Quran, nor to travel to Muslim lands – nor, indeed, to bridge with the worlds of Islam in any way – Malcolm arrived in Egypt proclaiming himself a “fellow African coming back to his real home and a Moslem, eager to pray at the seat of the one true religion!”

For his part, Malcolm considered the 1959 trip an opportunity to build both racial and religious solidarity between Afro-American and Afro-Asian Muslims, as well as between Black America and Afro-Asia more generally. Throughout the course of his travels, Malcolm communicated his findings to the Blackamerican press. From Saudi Arabia, Malcolm wrote a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, stating: “The people of Arabia are just like our people in America in facial appearance. They are of many differing shades, ranging from regal black to rich brown, but none are white. It is a safe postulation to say that 99 per cent of them would be jim-crowed in the United States of America.” Malcolm’s insistence on the absence of whites from an otherwise multi-hued congregation is noteworthy. The vision of Malcolm’s first trip abroad was solidarity between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ Muslims, built from their mutual interests as others to the white dominant world, as well as on the basis of their unity in the one true religion that eliminated racism and prejudice. As Malcolm wrote further in his letter: “There is no colour prejudice among Moslems, for Islam teaches that all mortals are equal and brothers. Whereas the white Christians in the Western world teach this same thing without practicing it.” Insofar as he held that the Muslim ummah had eliminated race and racism, Malcolm was either deluded or merely idealistic. The latter is more likely, given that his letter was a form of da’wah, or invitation to Islam. Malcolm was inviting Blackamericans to join with a dark world, a dark humanity, and a way of life that separated ‘us’ from ‘them.’ Indeed, for Malcolm at the time of his first trip abroad, Islam belonged strictly to the world’s dark peoples, whose fulfilment of
the Islamic principles of humanity, equality, and brotherhood set them apart from the white Christian world, and would spare them its heinous fate.\textsuperscript{378} For Malcolm, then, Islam justified the cause of Black separation, redemption, and liberation, and the cause of the wretched of the earth.

At the same time, Malcolm sought to broaden the faith and identity of Blackamerican Muslims by signifying them as kin to Muslims worldwide, and the Muslims of Afro-Asia in particular, as per Malcolm’s travels. According to an FBI informant’s report, dated July 28, 1959, Malcolm stated on returning to the U.S that “he was well accepted by Muslims and that the Muslims in Egypt and Africa are blacker than he. He stated he was well entertained and squired around due to the fact that he was a Muslim.”\textsuperscript{379} In Malcolm’s vision, ‘Black’ and ‘Muslim’ hailed each other from across the lines of race and religion. Where once a Portuguese slave-raider named Zurara had justified himself by damning Blackness as a curse – and where Islam continues to be regarded as the business of Arabs and brown folk – Malcolm exalted darkness as the signifier of Islamic belief and brotherhood, in a humanity devoid of whiteness and racism.

On May 28, 1960, Malcolm took the stage at the Nation of Islam’s Harlem Freedom Rally, organized in conjunction with other local Black organizations and held outdoors at the corner of West 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. An estimated four-thousand people were in attendance.\textsuperscript{380} Malcolm’s appeal was consciously broad. He began his address with the greeting of believers, making it plain that he was not just speaking to Muslims:

\begin{quote}
As-Salaam-Alaikum beloved brothers and sisters, welcome to our Harlem Freedom Rally. When we say ‘our,’ we do not mean Muslim nor Christian, Catholic nor Protestant, Baptist not Methodist, Democrat nor Republican, Mason nor Elk. By ‘our’ Harlem Freedom Rally, we mean the black people of Harlem, the black people of America, and the black people all over this earth\textsuperscript{381}
\end{quote}

For Malcolm, the common necessity of freedom – as “freedom is essential to life itself”\textsuperscript{382} – trumped religious and political differences between Blackamericans: “As a collective mass of
black people we have been colonized, enslaved, lynched, exploited, deceived and abused. As a collective mass of black people we have been deprived, not only of civil rights, but even our human rights, the right to human dignity…the right to be a human being. The politic of Malcolm’s evangelism was a humanist one, inasmuch as his appeal was to all of dark humanity. Nonetheless, Malcolm’s perspective was still staunchly Manichaean. He believed that Islam offered salvation, and that salvation was life and world apart from the fate of the West. As he stated: “The Western World, filled with evil and wickedness, is groping and stumbling blindly through spiritual darkness toward its inevitable doom. Mr. Muhammad says we must qualify ourselves so that God’s spiritual light will guide us past the pitfalls of destruction.”

Malcolm was still fiercely loyal to Elijah Muhammad. At the Harlem Freedom Rally, he advocated the unity of Black leaders on a platform he claimed was arranged by Mr. Muhammad himself. As Malcolm declared: “If the black leaders must have differences of opinion, learn to go into the closet with each other, but when you come from behind closed doors, show a united front in the face of the one who is a common enemy to all of us. Mr. Muhammad has invited all of the leaders here today for that purpose.” But Malcolm’s tribute to Elijah Muhammad was also a potential service to his own convictions. Perhaps Malcolm believed that he could remain on the side of his people, without restriction, if he could also show, and perhaps even compel, the Nation to be part of the cause with other Black and Muslim affiliations. At the same time, Malcolm was vulnerable. He had built his evangelism and his politic on a platform bestowed by Elijah Muhammad and designated for the Nation’s use. While Malcolm’s religious faith and political vision were certainly not defined by the borders of the Nation, he nonetheless wished to remain within its ranks, as a valuable servant to Elijah Muhammad.
Throughout his evangelical and political career, Malcolm maintained Islam as the driving force of his public life and the basis of his authority. On October 11, 1963, Malcolm commenced his lecture at UC Berkeley by clarifying that the school’s administrators had barred him from speaking on ‘religious matters’:

So it’s not my intention to discuss the Muslim religious groups today, nor the Muslim religion, but I am a Muslim. But I intend to stick to secular problems. It’s like inviting a Catholic priest or bishop here to speak but forbidding him to mention Catholicism or the pope. Or inviting Billy Graham and telling him not to mention Christ. Or a member of the Kennedy family and expecting him not to mention politics. As far as Malcolm was concerned, his Muslim faith and identity were inseparable from his public vocation as both evangelist (like Billy Graham) and political persona (like a Kennedy), even in a context defined as strictly secular. As Malcolm put it, inviting a Muslim minister but denying him his religious point of view was “like telling a bird to fly without his wings. Or a race horse to run without his legs.” That his wings were given to him by Islam was a fact that Malcolm never did forget. His acknowledgement, however, was also his way of maintaining his Islamic evangelism in a context defined as secular. In effect, Malcolm used the interpretive act of self-witness, essentializing himself as a Muslim minister, to testify for Islam.

Malcolm’s loyalty to Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam did not keep him from attempting to connect with a spectrum of Black organizers and revolutionary leaders. To Elijah Muhammad’s great displeasure, Malcolm met with Fidel Castro in Harlem in September 1960, via a welcoming committee organized by leaders of the local Black left. At that time, Malcolm personally instructed the Fruit of Islam, the Nation’s paramilitary wing, to stand on alert while Castro remained in Harlem. Malcolm’s involvement in Black solidarity and civil initiatives was another case of his extra-Muslim activism. On June 29, 1963, Malcolm’s Mosque No. 7

xxxii On Malcolm’s insistence, the Temples of the Nation of Islam were rebranded as Mosques.
sponsored a major street rally in Harlem, in anticipation, as it were, of a prospective ‘March on Washington,’ a Black coalition’s project intended originally to put broad-based pressure on the Kennedy administration. For one, Malcolm and Mosque No. 7 held the rally despite the Nation’s ban on such visible and obviously politicized demonstrations. For another, despite the fact that the Nation’s press release targeted “Uncle-Tom Negro leaders” for failing to preserve “the very moral fiber of the Black Community,” Malcolm personally extended speaking invitations to a number of Black activists, including Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, James Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Powell alone responded, and none of Malcolm’s invitees attended. It seems that Malcolm was caught in the contradictions of his role, within and without the Nation, even as he sought to bridge differences between the Black leaders (predominantly masculine at this point) whom he considered allies in the cause.

In a letter to Whitney Young (of Harlem’s Urban League), Malcolm expressed his conviction in the necessity of a “United Front” that would involve “all Negro factions, elements and their leaders” in finding “a common solution to a common problem posed by a Common Enemy.” Malcolm also expressed an affinity with other Black leaders, Muslim and non-Muslim, who appreciated the magnitude of America’s race-problem as he did. As he wrote,

The present racial crisis in this country carries within it powerful destructive ingredients that may soon erupt into an uncontrollable explosion. The seriousness of this situation demands that immediate steps be taken to solve this crucial problem, by those who have genuine concern before the racial powder keg explodes

Malcolm further invited Young, along with a number of other Black activist leaders, to participate in another Harlem street rally, designed to reflect Black America’s “spirit of unity.”

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Despite the Nation of Islam’s officially stated detachment from Blackamerican civil and political struggle, and in the midst of his fierce loyalty to Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm did not consider his Muslim deen at odds with overt social-political participation, or with having non-Muslim allies in the struggle for redemption and liberation. Indeed, Malcolm was in his own right recognized by Black leaders as an ally in the cause. In August 1963, A. Philip Randolph appointed Malcolm to the Harlem-based Ad Hoc Working Committee of Unity for Action.\footnote{396} The Emergency Committee (as it was known at the time of its first public event, which Malcolm helped organize) consisted mainly of Black professionals, activist leaders, and members of the Negro American Labour Council.\footnote{397} Its goal, as Malcolm learned, was to establish a broad Black coalition to address socio-political problems in Harlem.\footnote{398} As evidenced by the texts of his evangelism and his religious self-interpretations, Malcolm took Black liberation to be the will and work of God Himself, and demanded that its proponents surmount their differences – including their religious differences – for the sake of freedom and unity. In this sense, Malcolm’s apparent contradictions as a Muslim evangelist on one hand, and a public intellectual and activist on the other, was also the hallmark of his balance as a believer and a man of the people. Where his vision of Black liberation was kept broad, and perpetually broadened, by his approach to a universal religious system, his Muslim faith and philosophy were kept grounded in the realities of his world with his perennial commitment to his kin. As Malcolm expressed to his supporters after his rupture with the Nation, “For the Muslims, I’m too worldly, for other groups I’m too religious.”\footnote{399} Nonetheless, Malcolm’s palpable contradictions were his saving grace. When he eventually lost favour with Elijah Muhammad, along with his platform as an esteemed minister of the Nation of Islam, he retained his popular role as an unmistakable public intellectual and activist among Afro-Americans and their allies abroad. In addition, Malcolm was not without
allies in his family and within the Nation, fellow Muslims who supported and followed him in his continued public endeavours. It was with their support, and the persistence of his faith, that Malcolm survived his rupture with the Nation, and began to produce the philosophic and organizational formations of his last year.

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On December 4, 1963, Malcolm presented the most sophisticated form of his Nation of Islam-based political eschatology, in a speech entitled “God’s Judgement of White America.” Known infamously as “The Chickens Come Home to Roost,” the speech was also to be Malcolm’s last on behalf of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation. In his address, Malcolm likened the imminent “downfall” of white America to the “destruction” of ancient Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and Rome (for their “evil sin of slavery”), as well as to the collapse of the “whitenations” of modern Europe (for their “evil sin of colonialism”). Malcolm thus combined history and eschatology in a unified vision framed by the Nation’s Islamic doctrines and centred on the fallout of slavery in America. At the same time, Malcolm represented the Nation’s Muslims as participants in the universal religion of Islam, which he described as continuous with (“monotheistic”) Judaism but repudiating of (“polytheistic”) Christianity:

We, the Muslims who follow The Honorable Elijah Muhammad [...] believe in the all-wise Supreme Being: the great God who is called ‘Jehovah’ by the monotheistic Hebrews. We do not believe in the Trinity (or ‘plurality of gods’) as advocated by the Polytheistic Christians. We who are Muslims call God by his true name: Allah, the great God of the Universe, the Lord of all the worlds, the Master of the Day of Judgement

On the cusp of his departure from the Nation, Malcolm grasped Islam as a universal system, familiar to all who practice “complete submission and obedience to God’s will.” However, Malcolm still associated the so-called West, abode of numerous Muslim diasporas, with unbelief and infidelity – with *kufr*, in a word. As Malcolm noted, “The true believers in Allah call

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*xxxv* *Kufr*: Denying or concealing (as opposed to being merely ignorant of) the ‘Truth’ that there is One God, and that the One alone is worthy of worship.
themselves Muslims, but the nonbelieving infidels refer to Muslims as Moslems or Muhammadans. In the vein of spelling out God’s Judgement, Malcolm in fact exceeded his rank as a representative of God’s ‘Messenger’ by taking up a prophetic style of his own. In Malcolm’s (rather presumptuous) articulation of divine Judgement, even immigrant Sunni Muslims were culpable for their compromises in signification with the ‘infidels’: “Many of the weak, backsliding Muslims who come to this country have also adopted some of these same pronunciations coined for them by the infidels. But we don’t condemn these ‘orthodox’ Muslims, because the reward of the believer, as well as the chastisement of the non-believer and the backslider, comes only from Allah.” Malcolm envisioned his contemporary moment as a time of “prophecy fulfilment,” the hour of “Doomsday” in which God would return to destroy the Western world, saving only those “who accept Allah as God, Islam as his only religion, and The Honorable Elijah Muhammad as his Messenger to the twenty-two million ex-slaves here in America, twenty-two million ‘Negroes’ who are referred to in the symbolism of the Scriptures as the Lost Sheep, the Lost Tribes, or the Lost People of God.” Malcolm’s representation of the Nation of Islam as belonging to a universal Islamic tradition, and as pivotal to a global-historical narrative, suggests that he had appropriated, and indeed, mastered the doctrines of the Nation. With a religiously diverse following, and a message aimed at the world-historical, cosmic, even Biblical significance of Islam and Blackness, Malcolm was in a position to redefine the human and metaphysical borders of Elijah Muhammad’s organization.

When Malcolm took the stage with “God’s Judgement of White America,” he knew that Elijah Muhammad had forbidden him and the other Nation ministers from commenting on the recent assassination of President Kennedy. Throughout his address, Malcolm was careful to

xxxvi One that resonates with the legacies of such Black prophets as Robert Alexander Young, David Walker, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Marcus Garvey, and, of course, Elijah Muhammad himself.
avoid mentioning the late president, even in the midst of his prophetic zeal. In the question and answer session afterward, however, Malcolm dropped his guard, and when asked for his opinion on the assassination, let judgement roll freely. Very much in the vein of his presentation, Malcolm characterized Kennedy’s assassination as a case of “the chickens coming home to roost,” violent comeuppance, as it were, for the U.S’s violence in Vietnam and across the globe.\textsuperscript{407} He added, too, that, “Being an old farm boy myself, chickens coming home to roost never did make me sad; they’ve always made me glad.”\textsuperscript{408} Almost immediately, Nation representatives attending the event contacted Elijah Muhammad and counseled him to publically distance himself and the Nation from Malcolm and the consequences of his statements. If anything, Malcolm’s comments gave Elijah Muhammad official grounds to suppress his lieutenant, thus to reassert his authority against his national minister’s rising prophetic charisma. Elijah Muhammad silenced Malcolm for ninety days, during which time Malcolm was stripped of his ministry, his public platform, and his livelihood, as well as his place as a trusted member in the ranks of the Nation’s Muslims.\textsuperscript{409}

\textbf{V. The Last Year: From becoming Sunni Muslim to critiquing Sunni Muslims}

It is only from within the context of developments already underway in Malcolm’s religious life that it is truly possible to understand his embrace of what he defined as Sunni and orthodox Islam. Malcolm was no stranger to the perspectives of self-signified orthodox Muslims. As national minister of the Nation of Islam, it had been his task to respond to streams of letters, written by Sunni Muslims, attacking the Nation on its core religious principles.\textsuperscript{410} Furthermore, where Malcolm’s mentor in Sunni Islam, the Egyptian scholar, Dr. Mahmoud Shawarbi, failed to rid Malcolm of his Black militancy,\textsuperscript{xxxvii} he did succeed in helping Malcolm bridge with the

\textsuperscript{xxxvii} See above, p. xii-xiv.
universally prescribed racial egalitarianism of the Quran by reinforcing what Malcolm already understood, albeit through the lens of ‘us vs. them’: that submission to Allah would make all human beings spiritual sisters and brothers to each other. Malcolm’s religious philosophy, and his ground-level struggle on the side of his people, were about to enter a renewed appreciation of the faith that defined them, one in which Islam no longer represented separation, and an otherworld, but rather a solution – a solution and a cure to the sickness of human oppression.

Malcolm embarked on his second trip to Afro-Asia and the Muslim world in April 1964, by which time his suspension from the Nation of Islam had been elevated to his full-scale removal, including the reacquisition of the car and residence lent to him by the Nation. Malcolm’s trip came in the wake of his “Declaration of Independence,” which was both his public proclamation of separation from the Nation and his proposal for a new Muslim movement, the Muslim Mosque Inc., organized around the social, political, and economic principles of Black Nationalism. In his opening to the “Declaration,” Malcolm reaffirmed his commitment to Islam, and the continuity of his faith, despite his rupture with the Nation. “I am and always will be a Muslim,” said Malcolm: “My religion is Islam.” Further, Malcolm proclaimed the Muslim Mosque open to the participation of all Afro-Americans, “despite their religious or non-religious beliefs.” He also stated, perhaps for the first time publically, that “whites can help us,” although they could not join the all-Black organization of the Muslim Mosque. As Malcolm declared, “There can be no black-white unity until there is first some black unity.” Malcolm was not turning lukewarm or settling down. Rather, he was beginning to publically recognize the layered and entangled, global nature of oppression, especially as it concerned his kin. As he stated in his presentation on the “The Ballot or the Bullet,” shortly before his second trip abroad, “I am not antiwhite…I am antiexploitation, antioppression.”
On April 12, 1964, a day before his flight to Cairo, Malcolm took the stage as a featured speaker at a rally in Detroit, held by the Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL). In his address, Malcolm presented a version of his philosophy on “The Ballot or the Bullet,” essentially urging Afro-Americans to unite, despite their religious differences, behind the politics of Black Nationalism. In addition to advocating an independent Black economy, and calling on his kin to consolidate their voting power as a bloc, Malcolm proposed that Afro-Americans “take their plight to the United Nations to show the world what a hypocrite nation America is.” In effect, Malcolm was asking Black America to stand as one, as a whole and independent nation of its own, capable of asserting its condition and its demands. At that time, Malcolm was without a religious-philosophical narrative in which to embed his politics, just as he also lacked the kind of organizational security belonging to the Nation had granted him. He nonetheless maintained his dedication to his Afro-American kin, as well as his identity as a Muslim.

On his second trip abroad, Malcolm visited several African nations, including Egypt, Nigeria, Ghana, and Mali, in addition to making the Hajj in Mecca. In his travels, Malcolm began to cultivate a renewed religious philosophy for his life and mission. In his Hajj letter, Malcolm prescribed Islam as a cure to racism, contending that “people of all colours and races who accept its religious principles and bow down to the one God, Allah, also automatically accept each other as brothers and sisters, regardless of differences in complexion.” Although Malcolm painted the Muslim world as an idealized geography of liberation, his essentialism was intended, not to prove the Muslim world’s triumph and superiority over so-called infidels, but to demonstrate the cleansing and unifying effect of Islam on all peoples. As he wrote, “Before America allows herself to be destroyed by the ‘cancer of racism,’ she should become better acquainted with the religious philosophy of Islam […] The whites as well as the non-whites who
accept true Islam become a changed people.”xxxviii In contrast to his former depiction of the Muslim world’s racial landscape, Malcolm’s Hajj letter included whites in the human “nation or brotherhood” of Islam: “I have eaten from the same plate with people whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white […] and I felt the same sincerity in the words and deeds of these ‘white’ Muslims that I felt among the African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana.”xxxviii In other words, Malcolm was coming into a truly universal Islamic humanism, a vision in which Islam liberates all peoples from the shackles of racism and prejudice, uniting them in one human nation with a common faith.

Malcolm believed that a knowledge of Sunni Islam, far from diluting the religious agency and participation of his kin, would allow Afro-Americans to more fully join with the global Muslim ummah as equals in the faith. As he contended in a letter to Alex Haley, “America’s Black Muslims would fit right into the best of the earth’s Muslims anywhere in the world if they would first be encouraged to learn the true prayer ritual and how to say their prayers in Arabic.”xxxviii In his last year, then, Malcolm was prescribing widespread Blackamerican appropriation of orthodox Islamic traditions. His belief in the universal, humanist applicability of Islam went hand in hand with his contention that Afro-American Muslims belong to the holistic world of Islam, and that Black America’s struggle is in fact a struggle for human rights. Malcolm continued to regard his Muslim kin in the United States, many of them members and ex-members of the Nation of Islam, as Muslims – albeit as Muslims in need of a deeper understanding of their tradition. Nowhere on the Hajj trail, nor anywhere else on the path of Sunni Islam, did Malcolm ever surrender either his own agent participation in Islam – as one

xxxviii See above, p. 66.
who is and always will be Muslim – or his dedication to the cause of his kin’s redemption and liberation.

In many ways, Malcolm’s travels in 1964 were the crucible of the evolutions of his last year. His efforts abroad stemmed from his fervent desire to realize a renewed role for Islam in his life’s work, as well as from his abiding vision of an international network of support for Afro-Americans. In Egypt, Malcolm met with Sheikh Abdel Rahman Tag, soon to be rector of Al-Azhar University, as well as with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who were engaged in their own efforts to ground real-world politics in Islam. In Nigeria, Malcolm delivered a triumphal lecture at Ibadan University, giving, as he later recalled in a letter from Accra, Ghana, “the true picture of our plight in America, and of the necessity of the independent African nations helping us bring our case before the United Nations.” At Ibadan, the Muslim Students’ Society of Nigeria bestowed upon Malcolm an honour he later recalled with certain pride: a membership card in their society bearing the name ‘Omowale’ – Yoruba for ‘the son (or child) who has returned.’ In Ghana, Malcolm found community with several expat Blackamerican artists, activists, and intellectuals, including Julian Mayfield, Alice Windom, and Maya Angelou. Malcolm delivered a lecture at the University of Ghana, organized by a Marxist colleague, Leslie Lacy, in which he sounded the call of a global revolution: “Only a concerted attack by the black, the yellow, the red and the brown races which outnumber the white race would end segregation in the U.S, and the world.” Alice Windom, who helped plan Malcolm’s itinerary in Ghana, and documented his visit as a photographer of the civil rights struggle, recalled that Malcolm’s name “was almost as familiar to Ghanaians as the Southern dogs, fire

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xxxix See below, ‘Illustration 3,’ p. 92.
hoses, cattle prods, people sticks and ugly hate-contorted white faces, and his decision to enter
the mainstream of the struggle was heralded as a hopeful sign."\textsuperscript{431}

The documents of Malcolm’s travels evidence an inextricable bond between his mission to
bring the Afro-American condition to global recognition and his quest for a deeper
understanding of Islam. In a letter from Lagos, Nigeria, Malcolm attested to his warm reception
in Africa as a sign of the mutual love between Africans and American Muslims, claiming that
“Africans in general and Muslims in particular love militancy.”\textsuperscript{432} In the same letter, Malcolm
described his Hajj as the hallmark of his, and the Muslim Mosque’s, renewed belonging to the
universal (and historical) Muslim world, from within whose jurisdiction he now called upon
Muslims to concern themselves with the fate of Black America: “The Muslim world is forced to
concern itself, from the moral point of view in its own religious concepts, with the fact that our
plight clearly involves the violation of our \textit{human rights}.”\textsuperscript{433} Malcolm thus took up his newfound
religious authority, as an internationally recognized Sunni Muslim, in service to the cause of his
kin’s humanity, a cause he never did surrender in his embrace of Sunni tradition. Malcolm
interpreted himself as one expression of the bond between Blackamericans, independent African
nations, and the Muslim ummah at large, foregrounding their solidarity in his effort to elevate
Black civil struggle to the level of human struggle on an international stage.

On May 21, 1964 – two days after quietly celebrating what was to be his last birthday on
earth – Malcolm returned to the U.S, where he immediately began preparing the domestic scene
for the international stage.\textsuperscript{434} By way of indicating some of the most radical changes in
Malcolm’s political philosophy: on May 29, 1964, Malcolm spoke at a public panel in New
York, sponsored by the Trotskyist Militant Labour Forum, in which he made, for the first time in
his public career, an overt connection between capitalism and racism.\textsuperscript{435} Where Malcolm had, for
years, preached the Garveyite virtues of entrepreneurial capitalism, he now observed that “all of the countries that are emerging today from under the shackles of colonialism are turning toward socialism. I don’t think it’s an accident.”436 Malcolm also contended that it is “impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. You can’t have capitalism without racism.”437 By the same token, Malcolm’s views on women had undergone a revolution of their own. His hostility to ‘intermarriage,’ and his fixation on women’s sexual mores, had given way to an appreciation of women’s role in the progress of nations.438 In a Paris news conference, at the end of his second trip abroad, Malcolm observed that, in every country you go to, usually the degree of progress can never be separated from the woman. If you’re in a country that’s progressive, the woman is progressive. If you’re in a country that reflects the consciousness toward the importance of education, it’s because the woman is aware of the importance of education. But in every backward country you’ll find the women are backward, and in every country where education is not stressed, it’s because the women don’t have education.439

Malcolm’s travels, both physical and philosophical, as well as his prescription of travel as a means of broadening the scope, are essential to any picture of his faith. It is significant that Malcolm did not see himself as ‘converted’ in any sense. Questioned about the meaning of his Hajj letter at the end of his May 29 address, Malcolm responded, “Travel broadens one’s scope. Any time you do any travel, your scope will be broadened. It doesn’t mean you change – you broaden. No religion will ever make me forget the condition of our people in this country.”440

On June 28, 1964, Malcolm introduced a “statement of basic aims and objectives” for a new sociopolitical movement called the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), which was modelled closely on the internationally based Organization of African Unity (OAU; established c. 1963).441 As designated chairman of the new organization, Malcolm was accepted as an observer at the OAU’s second annual conference in Cairo (July 17-21) and permitted to submit an eight-page memorandum to the delegates “urging their support of the Negro struggle
in the United States and their help in bringing the plight of the American Negro before the United Nations.”

Thus, on July 9, 1964, Malcolm once again departed the U.S for Africa and the Middle East. On July 17, he made his appeal to African heads of state gathered in Cairo:

“The Organization of Afro-American Unity has sent me to attend this historic African summit conference as an observer to represent the interests of 22 million African-Americans whose human rights are being violated daily by the racism of American imperialists.”

Throughout his address, Malcolm emphasised the mutuality of African and Afro-American concerns: “We, in America, are your long-lost brothers and sisters, and I am here only to remind you that our problems are your problems.”

In contrast to his blueprint for the Muslim Mosque, Malcolm did not present Islam as the basic framework for the OAAU’s program. For this reason, Malcolm’s biographers and editors deem the OAAU “non-religious” and “secular.”

Curiously enough, however, Malcolm interpreted Biblical parables in his appeal to the OAU, thus providing moral-cosmological ground for his message: “I must remind all of you that the good shepherd will leave ninety-nine sheep, who are safe at home, to go to the aid of the one who is lost and has fallen into the clutches of the imperialist wolf.”

And further: “As the African-Americans ‘awaken’ today, we find ourselves in a strange land that has rejected us, and, like the prodigal son, we are turning to our elder brothers for help. We pray our pleas will not fall upon deaf ears.”

On the basis of his Islamic conviction in the necessity of human unity despite religious difference, Malcolm switched to secular and Biblical idioms for the sake of a more inclusive communiqué. Moreover, it seems Malcolm was beginning to evidence a departure from the staunchly anti-Christian attitude of his heydays in the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm concluded his address at the Cairo Conference with a Muslim’s prayer, nay, the prayer of a fellow believer: “May Allah’s blessings of good health and wisdom be upon you all. Salaam Alaikum.”
Throughout the travels, engagements, and organizational efforts of his last year, Malcolm was closely monitored by the FBI, whose director, J. Edgar Hoover, deemed the Muslim Mosque and the Organization of Afro-American Unity a combined threat to national security. Detailed surveillance of Malcolm’s organizations only relented after Malcolm’s death. In an internal security memo, dated December 8, 1964, Hoover stated that, “With the return of Malcolm X Little from his African trip, the possibility exists that additional coverage of his activities is desirable particularly since he intends to have the Negro question brought before the United Nations.” Truly, Malcolm’s efforts to internationalize the cause of his kin’s humanity was earning him much attention from the wardens of the status quo in his last year. But Malcolm was not the first Muslim activist, and certainly would not be the last, to earn the dubious distinction of ‘national security concern.’

“I am now striving to live the life of a true Sunni Muslim” – thus wrote Malcolm, on August 25, 1964, in a letter to one of Egypt’s English-language dailies, the Egyptian Gazette. But what was Malcolm’s definition of a ‘true Sunni Muslim’? The answer lies in Malcolm’s distinction of his new outlook on race and human relations from his views as member and minister of the Nation of Islam: “Because of the spiritual enlightenment which I was blessed to receive as the result of my recent pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca, I no longer subscribe to sweeping indictments of any one race.” For Malcolm, ‘true Islam’ entailed “true brotherhood […] which encompasses all the races of mankind.” Malcolm’s self-signification as Sunni Muslim must, as such, be read in light of his experience of ‘true Islamic brotherhood’:

At Mecca I saw the spirit of unity and true brotherhood displayed by tens of thousands of people from all over the world, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. This served to convince me that perhaps some American whites can also be cured of the rampant racism which is consuming them and about to destroy the country. I am now striving to live the life of a true Sunni Muslim

\[x^1\] My emphasis in italics.
For Malcolm, then, becoming Sunni Muslim meant embracing Islam as a universal solution to the problems of the human condition, and all peoples as potential members of a global human community. But further, Malcolm’s faith entailed a balance between his vision of an ideal reality and his practical knowledge of the ground-level reality he actually inhabited. “I can state in all sincerity,” he wrote, “that I wish nothing but freedom, justice, and equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all people.” At the same time, Malcolm recognized that “the first law of nature is self-preservation, so my first concern is with the oppressed group of people to which I belong, the 22 million Afro-Americans, for we, more than any other people on earth today, are deprived of these inalienable human rights.” If anything, Malcolm’s renewed faith offered him a philosophical guide and an organizational identity to further his mission, rather than an escape from his sense of earthly responsibility through personal salvation.

On February 19, 1965, Malcolm delivered what was to be his last public address, at the Corn Hill Methodist Church in Rochester. In his speech, titled “Not Just an American Problem, But a World Problem,” Malcolm presented a religious philosophy both plain and profound. “I believe in God,” he declared,

the Supreme Being, the creator of the universe. This is a very simple form of religion, easy to understand. I believe in one God [...] and I believe that God had one religion, has one religion, always will have one religion. And that God taught all of the prophets the same religion, so there is no argument about who was greater or who was better: Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, or some of the others. All of them were prophets who came from one God. They had one doctrine, and that doctrine was designed to give clarification of humanity, so that all of humanity would see that it was one and have some kind of brotherhood that would be practiced here on this earth. I believe in that

If Malcolm’s faith truly was simple, as he claimed, it was because it was also universal and unopposed to any other brand of monotheism. For Malcolm, Islam no longer entailed a necessarily Manichaean view of the world, or a defensive approach to the so-called infidels. The
apex of Malcolm’s religious philosophy was an Islamic humanism, structured on his belief that Islamic knowledge and values are meant to improve the human condition, and also that a Muslim should seek human unity and brotherhood, despite and in the midst of racial and religious difference. While Malcolm’s faith may have been simple, its fulfillment nonetheless required his strategic engagement with ground-level realities. “I believe in the brotherhood of man,” he said: “But despite the fact that I believe in the brotherhood of man, I have to be a realist and realize that here in America we’re in a society that doesn’t practice brotherhood. It doesn’t practice what it preaches.”

The abiding hallmark of Malcolm’s militancy was not that he advised Blackamericans to form rifle clubs, or that he promised reprisals for violence against his kin. Rather, it was that he espoused the ideal of human unity, and the fundamental, common oneness of all peoples, even as he maintained his conviction that the prevailing order of things, especially in America, his first field of mission, is far less than ideal. What this entailed for Malcolm, as it entails for those who value his legacies, is that struggle against human injustice must needs be perpetual, as the right and responsibility of any and every believer.

In his final interview, conducted via correspondence with the Geneva based Al-Muslimoon magazine, Malcolm reaffirmed his commitment to his kin when confronted with the racially agnostic Sunni-ism of his interlocutor. “Is it true,” Malcolm was asked,

that even after your breakaway from Elijah Muhammad you still hold the Black color as a main base and dogma for your drive under the banner of liberation in the United States? How could a man of your spirit, intellect and worldwide outlook fail to see in Islam its main characteristic, from its earliest days, as a message that confirms beyond doubt the ethnological oneness and equality of all races, thus striking at the very root of the monstrosity of racial discrimination? The interlocutor’s insistence on Islam’s antagonism to racism was a reflection of Malcolm’s own views. However, where Malcolm differed with his questioner was in his practical knowledge, grounded in his experience of the subjecting reality of race and racism, that the ideals of Islam
have not yet been realized, especially for his own kin. Malcolm’s response to his questioner reveals that he did not consider his Muslim deen a matter of merely personal salvation: “As a Black American I do feel that my first responsibility is to my twenty-two million fellow Black Americans who suffer from the same indignities because of their color as I do. I don’t believe my own personal problem is ever solved until the problem is solved for all twenty-two million of us.” But Malcolm went further. He insisted on Blackamerican Muslims’ right to deeper knowledge of their faith, which, he contended, is withheld from them by immigrant Muslim proselytizers too often insensitive to the real conditions of America’s Muslims. As he wrote, “Much to my dismay, until now the Muslim world has seemed to ignore the problem of the Black American, and most Muslims who come here from the Muslim world have concentrated more effort in trying to convert white Americans than Black Americans.” In short, Malcolm’s contention was that the universal tradition of Islam – including its authorities, knowledges, praxes, and significations – belongs to Black America, as much as it belongs to the Muslim world at large. Far from averting his critical gaze, Malcolm’s identification as Sunni Muslim empowered him to launch a necessary critique of immigrant Sunnis’ racial and political agnosia. Where Malcolm’s interlocutor expressed frustration at his abiding dedication to “the Black color” – on the basis that such an affinity has no place in true, Sunni Islam – the same dedication should in fact be read as one of the key continuities of Malcolm’s Muslim life, as the hallmark of a mission to his kin that he never did forget.

On February 19, 1965, Malcolm took the stage at the Audubon Ballroom in Manhattan. As he was preparing to commence his address to the Organization of Afro-American Unity, there was a disturbance in the audience – a distraction that drew away his bodyguards. Three men pulled the triggers. A sawed-off shotgun and two semiautomatic pistols projected the bullets that
destroyed Malcolm’s chest. But many others, including the wardens of the two Nations, were responsible for the deed. Malcolm was pronounced dead shortly after arriving at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. He was thirty-nine years old when he was murdered.

_Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un._ From Allah we come, and to Allah we shall return.

**Conclusions: Finding Malcolm in American Islam**

The Muslim life of Malcolm X offers three crucial points of contention with what still prevails as the dominant paradigm on Islam in America. First, the story of Malcolm’s religious life suggests that his embrace of Islam, whether Elijah Muhammad’s Islam or that of the Sunni tradition, was not so much his religious transformation (or ‘conversion’) as it was his adaptation and appropriation of Islamic knowledge and praxis, in service to his life, his self-interpretation, and his mission to his kin. In a word, Malcolm highlights the agency of Blackamerican Muslims, and the agency at the heart of Black Religious tradition. Second, Malcolm’s self-interpretations attest to a mutuality between his faith and identity as Muslim and his political mission to Black America. Where scores of editors, biographers, evangelists, and politicians have only ever selectively commemorated either the ‘spiritual’ or the ‘material’ dimension of Malcolm’s legacy, the Muslim life of Malcolm X suggests that the line between the two may be an absurd one, a non sequitur or mere formality for a believer who sees it as his religious duty to improve the condition of his kin in this life. Finally, Malcolm’s story stands in contestation to the claim, stated or assumed, that true Islam necessarily belongs to foreign-born, immigrant, Arab, and brown Muslims. Crucial to Malcolm’s embrace of Islam was his appropriation of an interpretive authority that empowered him to read the sources of Islam according to the needs of his own life and mission. What is more, Malcolm’s renewed, and continued dedication to Black redemption and liberation in his last year, and his effort to bring Islamic training to Afro-Americans,
evidences his conviction that Islam belongs to Black America, as much as it belongs to Muslims in Islam’s political heartland.

In some ways, Malcolm is part of a critical evolution in Black Religious and American Islamic tradition. One of the legacies of his life is the concrete precedent he set for what Abdul Hakim Jackson idealizes as a hopeful future for Blackamerican Muslims, a future in which they have “mastered” Arabic and the sources of “historical Islam,” alongside the “critical Western tradition,” and thus become full partners, if not leaders, in the amalgamated tradition of American Islam.465 Truly, Malcolm never mastered Arabic, nor did he master the Quran, the Hadith, their centuries of interpretation, or the canons of the critical Western tradition. But whether or not Dr. Jackson would admit it, Malcolm was on a path to a masterful appropriation of Islamic knowledge and praxis when his life was ended – a path that had almost always been self-motivated. Throughout his Muslim life, Malcolm acted as an agent participant and partner in Islamic tradition, and as a leader among Blackamericans, Africans, and Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic. Malcolm may not have attained to what Jackson construed as mastery, although he was undoubtedly on the path of a religious knowledge very much “calibrated to the realities of the New World.”466

By the same token, Malcolm represents an adaptation of Black Nationalist tradition to a universal system, namely, the super-structure of an Islamic humanism. Malcolm’s belief in the necessity of Black solidarity and autonomy was firmly in place throughout his career. At the same time, Malcolm’s grasp of the universal, humanist applicability of Islam’s teachings gave him access to solidarities, alliances, and identifications not limited to the Black Nation. Malcolm attempted to universalize the faith and identity of Afro-Americans and Afro-American Muslims,
thus to be simply and wholly human and Muslim, without erasing the specific history and condition of his people.

To respect Malcolm, even to admire him, is to be critically mindful of his blindspots – including and especially his nearly lifelong masculinism and top-down leadership style – as well as to appreciate the depth of his becoming. To respect Malcolm, however, is also to appreciate the kind of faith that he had. For Muslims and those interested in Islam, Malcolm signifies the possibility of being sincere in faith while dedicating faith to the struggle for justice and freedom in this life. Malcolm tells us that it is not disingenuous to believe that Islam may be useful to people, especially to those pained and broken by human injustice. Malcolm also tells us that it is untrue to conceive of Islam as necessarily foreign and immigrant to America, and reminds us that Afro-Americans have historically shown the greatest level of participation in American Islamic tradition. Malcolm is not a token Muslim, or a jewel in the crown of Sunni Muslim ‘conversion.’ Taken seriously, his legacy asks American Muslims if we are willing to bridge with each other in the midst of our differences, and to find common cause in the struggle against human injustice, for the sake of human unity and freedom. Malcolm’s challenge to immigrant Muslims, in particular, is for us to bridge our religious, racial, and national identities with the history and ongoing struggle of America’s indigenous, Afro-American Muslims. Through one form of education or another, we must orient ourselves, as American Muslims, to the ground-level realities and struggles of the American world.

American Islam is not a status quo Islam. American Muslims and students of Islam must necessarily bridge with the history and living legacy of Blackamerican Muslims. In the spirit of Malcolm’s words, we Muslims will not be at peace and united with the world until we are at peace and united with ourselves. At the same time, students, scholars, and representatives of
Islam should understand that they will be better served by studying and highlighting the agency and self-signification of Muslims – what they intend, what they do, how they interpret and apply their faith, and what they say about themselves as Muslims in any given time and place – than by the attempt to determine a definitive Muslim ontology. As it happens, ontological stiffness in the face of the bizarre tide that faces us will be our undoing. Our challenge as American Muslims is to recognize each other by the quality of our habit, the nature of our outlook, and the spirit of our struggle, when that struggle is in the path of the One, and for the One’s creation.

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Illustrations

Illustration 3. Malcolm in Accra, Ghana, May 1964; he holds the Quran given to him by Alhaji Isa Wali, Nigerian High Commissioner to Ghana (right). Photo by Alice Windom.
Malcolm X and *Al-Muslimoon*, 252.

Malcolm X and *Al-Muslimoon*, 252.


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84 DeCaro Jr., *OTSMP*, 7.
85 DeCaro Jr., *OTSMP*, 6.
86 DeCaro Jr., *OTSMP*, 6.
87 DeCaro Jr., *OTSMP*, 5.
89 Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal*, 4; Austin, 25.
90 Austin, 25.
93 Diouf, 5; Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal*, 143.
94 Austin, 36; Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal*, 138.
95 Austin, 29.
96 Austin, 29; Gomez, 9.
97 Austin, 27; Gomez, 6; Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal*, 23-24.
98 Gomez, 7.
99 Gomez, 7.
100 Gomez, 8-9.
101 Gomez, 13.
102 Gomez, 13.
103 Gomez, 12.
104 Gomez, 13.
105 Gomez, 8.
106 Gomez, 8, 43-45.
108 Gomez, 5.
109 The rhetoric of Geert Wilders, founder and leader of the Dutch “Party for Freedom,” exemplifies the use of this conflation as a defense against the charge of bigotry. See Wilders in action in his lecture on “Islam and the freedom of speech” in four parts on YouTube, published June 14, 2009: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWOA5rIPzBY.
111 Gomez, 12.
112 Diouf, 51.
113 Austin, 29-30.
114 Gomez, 15-16.
115 Gomez, 18.
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