“All America Is a Prison”: The Nation of Islam and the Politicization of African American Prisoners, 1955–1965

ZOE COLLEY

This article examines the rise of the Nation of Islam (NOI) within America’s penal system during the late 1950s and the 1960s. In doing so, it explores the reasons for the NOI’s appeal among African American prisoners, its contribution to the politicization of those prisoners, the responses of penal, state and federal authorities to the proliferation of prison mosques, and the way in which imprisoned Black Muslims’ campaign for freedom of religious expression established the legal groundwork for the prisoners’ rights movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s. This research presents the prison as a locus of black protest and the African American prisoner as an important, but largely overlooked, actor within the black freedom struggle. It calls upon historians to recognize the importance of the prison as both a site and a symbol of black resistance during the post-World War II period.

That’s why black prisoners become Muslims so fast when Elijah Muhammad’s teachings filter into their cages by way of other Muslim convicts. “The white man is the devil” is a perfect echo of that black convict’s lifelong experience.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X.*

Malcolm X’s conversion to the Nation of Islam (NOI) while incarcerated in Leavenworth Prison, Kansas is part of the well-established narrative of his life. A number of biographies and studies of the man detail the awakening of his political consciousness while incarcerated and the importance of that experience in drawing him into the NOI. What is less often recognized is that

Department of History, School of Humanities, University of Dundee. Email: z.a.colley@dundee.ac.uk.

1 Malcolm X’s prison conversion was part of a much longer process of politicization. His father, Earl Little, had been a member of Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The NOI was heavily influenced by the UNIA’s brand of urban, anti-Christian black nationalism and religious zeal. The UNIA provided the cultural bedrock for the NOI. It is clear that Malcolm X was heavily influenced by his father’s involvement with the UNIA, as well as his father’s death in 1911. While an inquest ruled that his death had been accidental, Earl Little’s family believed he had been murdered by a white vigilante group, the Black Legion. On the impact of Malcolm X’s childhood upon his later life see Manning Marable, *Malcolm X:*
Malcolm X’s conversion story could have been told by countless prisoners during the 1950s and 1960s. Over the course of those two decades, the Nation of Islam appeared in correctional institutions across the nation, creating the first black protest movement within the American prison system. The prison branch of the NOI attracted only small numbers of convicts during the early to mid-1950s, while the threat of repression from authorities meant that the group often operated underground; however, as the overall membership of the Nation of Islam increased during 1959 and 1960, so its prison membership came into view.2 Ascertaining the size of the NOI’s prison membership during this period is difficult, to say the least. In 1958, a Nation of Islam representative reported that the group had recruited four hundred prisoners in the last twelve months; this represented about 5 percent of the total number of registered members.3 Three years later, prison wardens and government officials in New York, New Jersey, California, Washington, DC, and Illinois issued warnings that the group was undermining the “racial harmony” and order of their correctional institutions. Sociologists’ reports and court records support their view that the Nation of Islam had continued to spread through these states’ penal systems.4 A conservative estimate would place the Nation’s


1 In 1959, the NOI experienced a rapid increase in membership, much of it due to the publicity received from the documentary The Hate That Hate Produced, which was broadcast in July 1959. For example, Essien-Udom reported that between March 1959 and December 1959 the NOI increased the number of temples from 30 in 15 states to 50 in 22 states. A year later, the group had doubled in size, reaching a membership that was estimated as somewhere between 30,000 and 100,000. The year 1959 also marked the beginning of reports from prison officials on the problems caused by imprisoned Muslims, as well as petitions to courts by imprisoned Black Muslims challenging their treatment, thereby suggesting that the organization was simultaneously becoming more popular among black prisoners and more visible to prison authorities. See William Strickland, Malcolm X: Make It Plain (New York: Viking, 1994), 84–85; Essien Udosen Essien-Udom, Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 70–72; Marable, 155–64

2 Estimates for the NOI’s membership in 1958 varied between 3,000 and 12,000; the figure of 5 percent is based on a membership of 7,500. Clearly, the Nation of Islam was recruiting prisoners before 1958, as reflected by the conversion of Malcolm X. Essien-Udom, 171, 192.

prison membership in the early 1960s at around 1,500, or 5 percent of an overall membership believed to have been 30,000 at the very least, with the majority of its support concentrated in the states mentioned above. While the NOI had a female prison service, it is not clear how many female prisoners converted to the NOI; the available evidence certainly speaks in terms of this being an exclusively male phenomenon.

Over the last five years, historians’ interest in the Nation of Islam has grown: the product of a new and vibrant debate on black radicalism and the black power movement that has been dubbed “new black power studies.” For example, in his study of the NOI, Jeffry Ogbar has argued that the organization was the “chief inspiration” for the black power movement and that we cannot understand the radicalism of the post-1965 era without a full understanding of the Nation’s work during the 1950s and early 1960s. Despite this growing body of literature on the NOI, its work inside America’s penal system remains obscured from view. Historians dutifully acknowledge the group’s strong appeal to prisoners, often doing so via a discussion of Malcolm X’s conversion, but they rarely deviate from this standard narrative to consider the wider significance of this phenomenon. This article seeks to fill
that historiographical gap. It offers a new perspective on the Nation of Islam, one which looks beyond the direct influence of Malcolm X to reveal the full extent of its appeal within the nation’s prisons. It considers the significance of prisoners within the Nation of Islam’s ideology, how the prison temples recruited members, what motivated prisoners to join the Nation of Islam, what impact they had upon the prison system, and how authorities both inside and outside the penal system responded to the proliferation of prison temples. In doing so, it also highlights two broader themes within the Nation of Islam’s history. First, it contributes to an existing body of literature on the responses of white authorities to the growing popularity of the Nation of Islam. Official investigations into the prison temples reveal the wider fear that the organization was covertly planning a violent assault upon white America. Second, and most importantly, the prison temples help us to understand the strength of the NOI’s appeal within the very poorest black neighborhoods. Racked by terrible poverty, police brutality, and high levels of crime, these working-class communities experienced the highest levels of male incarceration. Arrest and imprisonment was an experience shared by a large part of the NOI’s membership; for example, Ogbar estimates that 90 percent of the members of Harlem Temple Number Seven had criminal records. Thus the influence of imprisoned Muslims stretched across the prison walls to help shape the Nation of Islam’s critique of white privilege and its ideological appeal within the ghettos. This article presents prisons as a locus of black protest and the

movement in the country and provided some of the most influential prison leaders, but it was certainly not exceptional. Furthermore, The Rise and Fall closely focusses upon the Black Muslims’ impact upon prison administration. We do not get a sense of how the prison temples fitted into the NOI as a whole, nor the impact they had upon the black freedom struggle. Legal scholars have paid more attention to imprisoned Muslims, although this research is overwhelmingly focussed upon the significance of the prisoners’ claims for freedom of religious expression. “Comment,” 1488–1504; Brown, 1124–40; Christopher Smith, “Black Muslims and the Development of Prisoners’ Rights,” Journal of Black Studies, 24, 2 (1993), 751–76, 136–37.


10 Ogbar, 22.

11 Ogbar, 22.
African American prisoner as a “demonized, dismissed, and overlooked” actor within the black freedom struggle, and thereby offers a unique perspective on the rising politicization of some black prisoners during the later 1950s and the 1960s.\textsuperscript{12} The inclusion of prisoners in the historiography of the black freedom struggle not only recognizes their agency in challenging their treatment, it also explains how this form of black radicalism fitted into the wider movement for political and social power during the postwar period.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1930, W. D. Fard arrived in Detroit’s black community. Travelling from house to house, he peddled silks while spreading the message that he was a prophet sent by Allah to teach African Americans their true heritage. Those who listened were instructed that blacks were the original race and descendants of “the lost–found tribe of Shabazz.” Six thousand years ago, an evil scientist named Mr. Yacub had created a race of “white, blue eyed devils.” God had given the white race six thousand years to rule the earth, during which time they had enslaved blacks and separated them from the language and culture of their African–Asiatic ancestors. However, their reign was due to end; God would soon return to destroy the evil white race and restore the noble black race to its rightful position as ruler of the world. Fard soon gained a following within Detroit’s black community. It was claimed that by 1932 there were eight thousand members in the city alone.\textsuperscript{14} The following year, police forced Fard to leave Detroit; the reason for his mysterious disappearance the following year confounds historians.\textsuperscript{15} Shortly before his disappearance, Fard

\textsuperscript{12} Joseph, “The Black Power Movement,” 752.
\textsuperscript{13} One of the greatest challenges in researching the Nation of Islam is the paucity of material on its work, especially during its early days; this challenge is made even greater when combined with the test of investigating the lives of black prisoners. Fortunately, there are some ways of penetrating this tightly closed group. Sociologists and psychologists were intrigued by the changing nature of prison society during the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these scholars were drawn to the increasingly volatile nature of prison race relations during this time; thus their work offers insights into the lives of black convicts, as well as some specific information on the Nation of Islam. Along with newspaper reports and the work of sociologists, FBI reports can help us to gauge which parts of the country had the greatest concentration of convict support and the nature of their activities. In addition, prison rights advocates working during the late 1960s and the 1970s were interested in uncovering the history of prison race relations; this has provided a resource of essays and interviews by individuals who lived within the prison system during the 1950s and 1960s. Most significantly, we have the writings of black activist Eldridge Cleaver, who started his career as a high-ranking member of California’s most active NOI prison temple in Soledad.
\textsuperscript{14} Erdmann D. Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit,” \textit{American Journal of Sociology}, 43 (1938), 894–907, 897. Most historians follow Beynon’s estimate, although the FBI claimed that there were more than 35,000 members by 1934. See Gardell, 54.
\textsuperscript{15} From its earliest days under W. D. Fard, the Nation of Islam was the target of law-enforcement agencies and FBI surveillance. The group first came to the attention of Detroit authorities in late 1932, after police arrested Robert Harris for the ritual murder of James Smith. Harris claimed that it had been predestined that a sacrifice would be made on that day
had appointed Elijah Poole his Messenger and given him the name Elijah Muhammad. This was not enough, however, to prevent the group descending into internal turmoil in the wake of Fard’s disappearance. During the 1930s, the group splintered into competing factions, each claiming to be Fard’s rightful successor. It would not be until after World War II that Muhammad was able to consolidate his hold on power and begin the process of rebuilding the organization. Under Muhammad’s control, the NOI grew in size and influence. After a period of retrenchment during the late 1930s and the 1940s, the group enjoyed an era of rapid growth during the late 1950s and early 1960s. During this period, white flight to the suburbs and deindustrialization brought the hardening of residential segregation and with it the continued decline of urban black communities. Meanwhile, the civil rights movement in the South inspired some northern African Americans, while also highlighting their alienation from white society. The Nation of Islam, with Malcolm X as its chief orator, drew upon these developments to expand its presence within these communities; the organization attacked the hypocrisy of white liberals and vehemently criticized the civil rights movement’s emphasis upon integration. By 1960, its membership was estimated at somewhere between 30,000 and 100,000 and it owned a business empire worth millions.

To understand the rapid expansion of the Nation of Islam, one must look to the communities in which it thrived. Detroit, like other northern and mid-western cities, had experienced a rapid influx of African Americans from the rural South; they were drawn northward in search of new economic opportunities and an escape from lynching and segregation. Starting in the 1920s, the process reached a height during the boom years of World War II. These migrants quickly learnt that the “sweet land of liberty” was anything but; while they had escaped the extremes of southern racism, they nevertheless

and that his “volunteer” would become a “Saviour.” Ten days later, police raided the NOI headquarters and arrested Fard and two other members. They were subsequently released, but the Detroit press dubbed the NOI a “voodoo cult” and it would continue to draw the attention of law-enforcement officers. Beynon, 894–907. The FBI surveillance on Fard is available at http://vault.fbi.gov/Wallace%20Fard%20Muhammad, accessed 20 July 2012. On W. D. Fard and the early years of the Nation of Islam see Clegg; Karl Evanzz, The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad (New York: Random House, 1999); Gibson.

16 See Gardell, 57–58; Lincoln, 15–16.


18 See Essien-Udom, 67–74.
lived in a society where black inferiority was deeply ingrained within the mainstream culture. Living in the slums of northern cities, these migrants endured overcrowded and dilapidated housing and faced a constant struggle to provide for their families. Such problems were particularly acute during the Great Depression, when hope gave way to bitterness at the virulent discrimination in employment and welfare provision. As living conditions within the nation’s black communities declined ever further, so the Nation’s criticism of white America appeared to correspond with African Americans’ plight. The attraction of the NOI to prisoners was partly a natural extension of the group’s strong appeal within these poor black neighborhoods, where the discriminatory nature of law enforcement was felt most keenly, and – as already noted – high numbers of residents had a history of criminal activity. Police brutality and arbitrary arrest, which was a common experience in these communities, meant that the police were often the focus of African American hostility and suspicion. When combined with residential segregation, employment discrimination, and underfunded schools, the racist criminal-justice system sustained a northern version of racial apartheid that kept black residents trapped in a cycle of poverty and crime.

19 Lincoln, 13.

20 Gail O’Brien’s study of policing in Tennessee reveals how the police “operated as the frontline guardians of an arbitrary criminal justice system and a social order that controlled black [communities].” O’Brien, The Color of the Law. Leonard Moore’s work on the policing of blacks in New Orleans shows how these victims of police brutality were overwhelmingly working-class: the same areas where the Nation of Islam found its greatest amount of support. Moore, 3–4.

The group’s theological discourse has been the subject of a number of studies; they have emphasized the way in which the NOI’s doctrine blended Islamic, Christian, and Judaic traditions. A prominent theme within this scholarship is the way in which supporters assumed a new identity upon their conversion: one which signified racial pride and self-respect, and rejected the dominant racial ideology of black inferiority. The first step in this process of rebirth was the shedding of one’s surname, which was viewed as a product of their slave ancestry, and the granting of a new Islamic name. Given the importance of Christianity to African American identity and culture, Fard’s teachings inevitably engaged with this aspect of black life. He made extensive use of the Bible, as the religious text with which African Americans were most familiar, to portray Christianity as the white man’s religion and a tool of racial control. In doing so, he sought to break the bond between African American identity and Christian values. However, at the same time as castigating Christianity as the product of white malevolence, Fard also appropriated elements of biblical discourse to produce a doctrine that, as Zafar Ansari has shown, bore “a greater degree of resemblance with Judaism and ... especially Christianity than Islam.” Thus the NOI’s doctrine combined religious influences with African American history and heritage to produce a philosophy that spoke directly to African Americans’ experiences with white privilege.

While Muslims awaited God’s arrival and their redemption, the NOI developed an interim program of racial separatism, education, and self-transformation that would prepare its supporters for life after the fall of white America. Upon conversion, members were instructed to follow a strict moral code that included abstention from alcohol, smoking, and drug use. They were required to pray five times a day, attend two temple meetings per week, and partake in the recruitment of (or “fishing” for) new members. They were also taught to respect constituted authority, dress smartly, work hard, live frugally,

23 This discussion draws upon Richard Turner’s focus upon the importance of signification within the African American Islamic tradition. See Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*.
24 For example, Ansari observes that Muhammad’s concept of God-as-man was far closer to Christian beliefs than to Islamic. He points to the NOI’s idea that God’s concerns were focussed exclusively upon blacks as resembling the Jewish concept of Yahweh. Orthodox Muslims rejected the NOI’s doctrine; however, as Lincoln argues, the NOI was part of a pan-Islamic movement that was based on antiwhite sentiment. See Ansari, 146, 167–68; Lincoln, 26–27.
25 The earlier history of the Moorish Science Temple of America, which was founded in the 1920s and similarly combined Islamic theology with an outright rejection of black inferiority, is an example of a larger Islamic tradition within African American culture. On the Moorish Science Temple and its influence upon the NOI see Essien-Udom, 45–47; Gardell, 37–45; Gibson, *A History of the Nation of Islam*, 6–10; Lincoln, 48–52.
and avoid eating the meat of “poison animals,” which included hogs, duck, geese, and catfish. Alongside this demand for moral and psychological transformation, the NOI also called for political, economic, and social separation from white America. The NOI’s demand that they be “allowed to establish a separate state or territory” was often made; however, it appears that other aspects of its program of racial separatism were both more popular and achievable. Starting in Detroit in the early 1930s, the NOI formed its own educational institutions, which offered children from poor black neighborhoods an alternative to the poorly funded public schools in the ghetto. The importance of economic self-sufficiency had been an aspect of Fard’s teaching, but under Elijah Muhammad this goal gained increased prominence. In 1945, the NOI purchased a 140-acre farm in Michigan. Muhammad subsequently created an economic empire worth millions and included a restaurant, bakery, and grocery stores.

Starting in the 1940s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation conducted surveillance on NOI leaders and sought to discredit the organization and its leadership, while police raids of temples and harassment of supporters were common complaints. It was the Black Muslims’ refusal to register for the draft during World War II that first inspired a large-scale FBI investigation of the group; fear that the group’s disavowal of allegiance to the United States posed a threat to the nation’s domestic order and international security was intensified by informants’ reports of pro-Japanese sentiment at NOI meetings.

In 1942, Elijah Muhammad was convicted on eight counts of sedition and three counts of draft evasion, and given a sentence of from between one and five years. In total, around one hundred Black Muslims were incarcerated for draft resistance. During his four-year-long imprisonment, Muhammad and his fellow Muslim inmates continued their proselytizing and succeeded in converting a number of other prisoners. Muhammad was released in 1946 to find his organization in tatters. The continued and determined campaign of legal harassment against NOI members had driven away large numbers of supporters; in 1942, Detroit’s Temple No. 1 had just thirty-five active members.

Claude Clegg’s study of Muhammad highlights his incarceration as a turning point in the history of the organization. Having faced numerous challenges to his leadership, his persecution by federal and prison authorities helped to project an image of Muhammad as a martyr in the battle against

---

26 On the NOI’s moral code see Essien-Udom, 83–114, 195–205; Lincoln, 63–93.
27 On the importance of the NOI’s economic power see Clegg, An Unoriginal Man, 99–100; Essien-Udom, 154–58; Gibson, 39–42; Lincoln, 85–90.
28 See Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult,” 894–927; Gibson, 19–22. Mattias Gardell, 71–76, 85–92, provides one of the best accounts of the FBI’s campaign against the NOI.
29 Clegg, 97.
30 Ibid., 97.
white tyranny; his suffering at the hands of his oppressors not only earned him “a permanent place in Muslim hagiography,” it also enabled him to consolidate his hold on power and unite the group behind his leadership. Just as importantly, Muhammad’s time in prison personalized the plight of African American inmates and convinced him of the need to spread his message within the penal system. He would continue to play a personal role in the conversion of prisoners by responding to their letters with a personal reply and enclosing five dollars. His experience convinced him that the conversion of the “living dead” inside America’s penal system was of paramount importance to the overall aim of liberating African Americans from their white oppressors.

The desire to recruit prisoners was part of a larger campaign to challenge the high rate of black criminality within the ghettos. Muhammad offered a conservative view of black criminality, preferring to explain such behavior in pathological terms. Black criminals were rebuked for emulating the sinful behavior of whites and especially for praying upon members of their own race. Such people had apparently lost their way, having been drawn towards the ways of the “white devil.” He called upon them to abandon their wicked behavior and undergo a spiritual and moral rebirth by following the word of Allah. Once they discovered their identity as members of the supreme race, they would naturally desist from criminal activity.

For African American prisoners, the crucial element of this philosophy was the promise of redemption. While the NOI’s moral code reflected a decidedly conservative interpretation of black criminality, it also recognized the innate goodness within every prisoner and offered them hope for the future. As well as promising salvation, the NOI provided practical solutions to the challenge of escaping the cycle of poverty and prison by providing newly released converts with employment and housing. The NOI claimed a high level of success in preventing recidivism among African American ex-convicts. Thus the African American prisoner took on a symbolic value within the NOI’s philosophy of racial uplift and moral transformation: its ability to turn a hardened criminal into an upstanding member of the black community was the ultimate demonstration of Islam’s power to destroy the cancer of white immorality.

Malcolm X held particular significance for African American prisoners. Eldridge Cleaver, an ex-convict and leader of the temple in California’s

---

31 Ibid., 93.
32 One of the most detailed accounts of Muhammad’s incarceration and its impact upon both his leadership style and the NOI as a whole can be found in ibid., 82–108.
33 Elijah Muhammad, Message to the Black Man in America (Phoenix: Secretarius, 1965), 322. Muhammad appealed to the courts to “turn over such criminals to be executed under the real Islamic law,” and explained, “It is our desire to put a stop once and for all to such crimes being committed among our people.”
34 Lincoln, 109.
San Quentin prison, explained: “A former prisoner himself, he had risen from the lowest depths to great heights. For this reason he was a symbol of hope, a model for thousands of black convicts who found themselves trapped in the vicious PPP cycle: prison–parole–prison.”

Malcolm X often reiterated Elijah Muhammad’s contemptuous attitude towards black criminals; for example, reflecting upon his life as a hustler in Detroit, he described himself as the “personification of evil.” However, there are also examples, and particularly towards the end of his involvement with the NOI, of how he set himself apart from Muhammad by presenting black criminality as the product of a racist social structure and African American prisoners as victims of that racism. “Usually the convict comes from among those bottom-of-the-pile Negroes,” he explained in his autobiography, “the “Negroes who through their entire lives have been kicked about, treated like children – Negroes who never have met one white man who didn’t either take something from them or do something to them.”

This more political, and less judgmental, view of black criminality was apparently shared by other converts. In an interview with historian Eric Lincoln, one member addressed the plight of African American prisoners by highlighting the hypocrisy of the white-controlled criminal-justice system. “Did you kill? If you killed a white man, they murder us at will. They decorate their trees with the bodies of our people. Or they kill us by ‘law,’ but they cannot enforce the same ‘law’ to protect us or let us vote.”

Echoing this belief that no African American could ever secure justice at the hands of whites, Malcolm X argued in a 1963 interview not only that white racism created the conditions under which black criminality flourished, but that the white power structure actively cultivated black criminality as a way of deflecting challenges to its authority:

I firmly believe that it was . . . the Judaic–Christian society . . . that created all of the factors that send so many so-called Negroes to prison . . . [A]fter a so-called Negro in prison tries [sic] to reform and become a better man, the prison authorities are more against that man than they were against him when he was completely criminally inclined, so this is again hypocrisy.

The importance of Elijah Muhammad’s interpretation of black criminality is undeniable; however, it is also evident that other interpretations of such behavior circulated among the membership. Malcolm X’s criminal past and his
prison conversion clearly made him a powerful influence upon incarcerated supporters; if we take Cleaver’s point as evidence of such influence, it appears likely that, at the very least, his pronouncements on the plight of the African American prisoner and black criminality competed with those of Elijah Muhammad.

In a number of speeches, Malcolm X continued to create a metaphorical association between the treatment of African Americans and incarceration, a point best summed up in his claim that “all America is a prison.” Looking beyond the NOI’s immediate membership to encompass all African Americans, he appealed to them to realize, “You’re still in prison. That’s what America means: prison. I think that what you should realize, is that in America there are twenty million black people, all of whom are in prison.” His description of America as one colossal penitentiary made incarceration a shared experience that spanned across the prison walls.

While the Nation’s interpretation of black criminality circulated among prisoners, official censorship, which banned the distribution of Muhammad Speaks and other NOI literature, left them somewhat isolated from this dialogue. Efforts to prevent the spread of “inflammatory” literature were part of a much larger campaign to prevent Muslims from practicing their religion; this centered upon preventing NOI supporters from meeting as a group, isolating leadership figures in solitary confinement, and breaking up temples by transferring members to different institutions. As early as 1955, Muslims in Washington, DC’s Lorton Reformatory complained that prison authorities were preventing them from practicing their religion. Eldridge Cleaver recalled returning to San Quentin prison in 1958 after a parole violation. In his absence, a small coterie of Black Muslims had emerged in

---

40 Ibid., 24.
41 This argument was also being made by incarcerated civil rights activists in the South. Malcolm X’s insistence that black Americans were trapped within a “political, economic and mental prison” was echoed in the civil rights movement’s belief that confronting the fear of imprisonment by accepting jail was the route to psychological liberation. Both acknowledged the centrality of the criminal-justice system in oppressing black Americans, as well as the politicizing effect of imprisonment. On this comparison see Zoe A. Colley, Ain’t Scared of Your Jail: Arrest, Imprisonment, and the Civil Rights Movement (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).
42 Conflict over NOI literature centered on access to Muhammad Speaks, which commenced production in 1960. However, prisoners also sought access to other material, including Muhammad’s writing. Despite official censorship, some literature, especially Malcolm X’s Autobiography, made its way into the prisons and was circulated within underground networks. In 1971 Autobiography rented at the considerable cost of one pack of cigarettes. See “Prisons Feel a Mood of Protest,” New York Times, 19 Sept. 1971, 1.
the prison, headed by Cleaver’s friend Butterfly. It was Butterfly who converted Cleaver to the Nation of Islam. Writing in *Soul on Ice*, he explained:

In those days if you walked into any prison set aside for solitary confinement, there was absolutely no doubt that you’d find ten or fifteen Black Muslims who were being “disciplined” for staunchly confronting prison officials with implacable demands that Muslims be allowed to practice their religion with the same freedom and privileges as the Catholics, Jews, and Protestants.

Sociologist James Jacobs reported that Black Muslims in Illinois’s Stateville Penitentiary “surfaced as a problem for prison officials” during 1960, although the NOI’s presence in the prison dated back to 1957. Jacobs estimated that during the early 1960s, between 33 and 50 percent of all prisoners in solitary confinement were Muslims. In Texas, authorities took an alternative approach. Having decided in 1961 that the number of Muslim inmates was threatening to destabilize race relations within Texan prisons, the Department of Corrections ordered that supporters be distributed throughout the penal system in an attempt to limit their influence upon other African American prisoners.

The rising conflict between Muslim prisoners and prison authorities posed a dilemma for Elijah Muhammad. While Muhammad expected inmates to practice their religion and recruit new converts, he was also reluctant to see his organization become embroiled in a fight against prison racism and was eager for his convict supporters to join the struggle on the streets. Furthermore, the expectation that members always respect authority and conform to existing laws evidently placed the prison temples in an awkward position. They faced the stark choice of challenging their treatment, and thereby disobeying the NOI’s moral code, or being forced to take their organization underground. It is entirely possible – if not probable – that some prisoners decided to keep their support hidden from prison authorities. However, as we can see from the proliferation of legal cases brought by imprisoned supporters and occasional instances of direct confrontation with prison staff, many others chose the

---

44 Cleaver, 22.
47 The NOI’s “Muslim Program” – a statement of its philosophy – included the demand that all “Believers of Islam” be freed from the nation’s prisons. On the NOI’s belief that prison converts should do everything they could to secure release see “Muhammad’s People Belong in Paradise, Not Prisons,” MS, 25 April 1965, 9.
While they shared the same structure and ideology, the prison environment created different priorities and forced prison supporters to engage in a far more open campaign against white authority.

The media, government reports, and sociologists’ research suggest that there was rarely more than a handful of Black Muslims inside individual prisons in 1955. The same evidence reflects the growing popularity of the organization among prisoners from 1957, while the 1960–61 period marked a rapid increase in membership. Sociologists observed at the time that this phenomenon was the product of two factors: the growing numerical dominance of African Americans within the general prison population and the impact of the civil rights movement. As African Americans accounted for a growing percentage of the prison population, and were influenced by black protest outside the penal system, so some inmates resolved to challenge their own treatment; the Nation of Islam was the main beneficiary of these changes. Sociologist Leo Carroll described the early 1960s as a period of increasing racial solidarity between African American inmates and of a “dramatic change” to their political outlook. “The primary axis of life for most black inmates is racial identification,” he observed. “Brotherhood is based upon the recognition of a shared fate at the hands of a common oppressor, and the essence of the relationship is mutual aid in the face of oppression.” By adopting this outlook black prisoners were “able to integrate their role as a prisoner with their role as a black man in a way which places them in the vanguard of a . . . movement against . . . oppression.” Such developments created the conditions for, and acted as a backdrop to, the increasing militancy and visibility of the prison temples.

---


50. For example, James Jacobs concluded that the combined effect of “black numerical superiority . . . and the example of black civil rights activity on the streets . . . facilitate[ed] the rise of . . . the Black Muslims’ inside Stateville. Jacobs, Stateville, 58–59; Carroll, 102, 112.

51. This process of politicization was bolstered by prison desegregation, which started in some states during the early 1960s, although the penal system in many southern states remained segregated until after the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The removal of racial barriers intensified racial conflict as white prisoners battled to retain territorial control. The process of desegregation remains a relatively understudied area of penal history. On desegregation in California see Cummins, 71–84. For studies by nonhistorians see Chad R. Trulson and James W. Marquart, “The Caged Melting Pot: Toward an Understanding of the Consequences of
As the only African American protest organization to have a presence inside the penal system before the late 1960s, the Nation of Islam acted as a mouthpiece for a small body of black prisoners who were being politicized by civil rights activism outside the prison; it allowed them to situate their own struggles against white privilege within a wider analysis of American race relations. In a wider sense, it enabled prisoners to express their frustration and anger at the white power structure, and especially their treatment by white police officers and prison guards, while also offering a positive message of economic self-help and psychological transformation.\textsuperscript{52} Despite the NOI’s pejorative attitude toward black criminality, it offered prisoners acceptance, redemption, and an alternative identity that stretched beyond that of a criminal – a factor that was reflected in their choice to physically separate from the rest of the convicts.

The Nation of Islam reached the height of its influence inside prisons between 1961 and 1963. Research produced by prison psychologists and sociologists during this time provides intriguing insights into the daily life of those prisoners. As Ellen Herman has shown, this was a period when psychologists, in particular, assumed a “central place in debates about the . . . state . . . of American society.” This “romance of American psychology” certainly infiltrated the penal system, where psychologists sought to assess the mental status of prisoners and advise on the likelihood that they could be rehabilitated.\textsuperscript{53} Black Muslim prisoners inevitably became the focus of such assessment; thus the work of psychologist Henri Yaker in New Jersey State Penitentiary is particularly interesting. Yaker spent two years researching NOI supporters within the prison and published his report on the group in 1962. His research indicated that the typical convert was around twenty-five years of age and had a long history of criminal activity. They distinguished themselves from other African American prisoners by shaving their heads and marking the “seal of Islam on their foreheads with either cigarettes or caustic soap.” In addition to following daily prayer rituals, members were expected to spend their time studying the Qur’an and spreading the word of Elijah Muhammad.\textsuperscript{54} Eldridge Cleaver offered further information on the activities of prison temples, explaining that they adopted the same organizational structure as those outside the prison walls: each had a minister, a captain, and its own military force, the Fruit of Islam (FOI). Relatively little is known

---

\textsuperscript{52} Lincoln, The Black Muslims, 46.


\textsuperscript{54} “Muslims A Problem in Prison”; Testimony of Dr. Henri Yaker; “Muslims Studied in Jersey Prison.”
about the highly secretive FOI, either inside or outside the prisons. Eric Lincoln’s 1961 study described the Fruit of Islam as a “protective unit,” comprising “carefully chosen, rigorously trained” men, whose job it was to provide protection to members from white attack. He also suggested that the elite group may have acted as an internal “police force,” which disciplined members who failed to fulfill their duties. Just how the FOI operated inside the prison temples can only ever be the subject of conjecture, but given the intensity of racial hostility within the prisons and the constant threat of repression, it is conceivable that this defensive force was of particular importance to the prison temples.

In his 1962 report, Yaker reasoned that the organization appealed to those with a need “to act aggressively to compensate for the feelings of psychosexual inadequacy and feelings of loss of masculine identity.” The psychologist reflected the mainstream view that Black Muslim prisoners were a pathologically violent group; he went so far as to liken them to the “strong-armed men” who were drawn to support Hitler in his earliest days. While deliberately provocative, his description hinted at an important factor in the group’s appeal: in a world where African American men felt emasculated by poverty and white racism, conversion to the Nation of Islam offered prisoners a renewed sense of masculinity. Although Elijah Muhammad emphasized

---

55 Cleaver, “Prisons: The Muslims’ Decline.”
56 Lincoln, 101–2. Also see Essien-Udom, Black Nationalism, 149–57.
58 Yaker quoted in “Muslims a Problem In Prison.” Also see Testimony of Dr. Henri Yaker; “Muslims Studied in Jersey Prison.”
59 Ogbar, Black Power, 29. As Steve Estes has observed, the expectation that black men respect and protect women from white attack “directly challenged the defeminization and denigration of black womanhood in mainstream white culture.” Revelations in 1963 that Muhammad had long engaged in extramarital affairs threw the sincerity of these teachings into account. The FBI had long been aware of Muhammad’s indiscretions and had, largely unsuccessfully, used them in their attempt to discredit him. Steve Estes, I Am A Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 91. On the role of women in the Nation of Islam see Farah Griffin, “Ironies of the Saint: Malcolm X, Black Women and the Price of Protection,” in Bettye Thomas-Collier and Vincent P. Franklin, eds., Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement (Palo Alto: Ebrary, 2005). Conventional analyses of NOI gender relations have tended to focus upon how Muhammad’s emphasis upon protecting black women from white men was more about protecting black men’s “proprietary rights” over black women than about honoring women. Feminist historians have argued that this overlooks the way in which black women often viewed their membership of the NOI and
the need to protect and respect black women at all times, he also conformed to
the patriarchal outlook of mainstream society and censored women for being
“the greatest tool of the devil.” Women were expected to follow traditional
gender roles by looking after the home and children, although they were per-
mitted to work if the family’s economic circumstances required it, while men
were to be the main wage earners. Such gendered roles presented poor African
American men with an opportunity to reclaim their manhood and sense of
pride. This was clearly attractive to those from the ghettos, where intense
poverty robbed them of their ability to provide for their families. In the super-
masculine environment of the prison, this aspect of the Nation of Islam carried
particular importance. Taken away from their families, African American men
lived in an environment where physical prowess was the key to securing
respect and physical protection. Eldridge Cleaver explained his conversion to
the Nation of Islam in terms of a psychological escape route that helped him
to assert his manhood. Cleaver explained: “If I had followed the path laid down
for me by officials, I’d have undoubtedly long since been out of prison – but,”
he continued, “I’d be less of a man.” For Cleaver, submission to white authority
represented the loss of manhood; open and direct confrontation with prison
officials and white inmates was the only way to protect his masculinity.

The expansion of the Nation’s presence inside the penal system, combined
with prisoners’ more overt challenges to the racial order, evidently concerned
those in charge. From 1960, prison and government officials offered increas-
ingly shrill warnings about the growing strength of the NOI inside their
correctional institutions. This corresponded with an increase in alarm over the
growing popularity of the group outside the prison walls. The copious records
detailing the FBI’s investigations into the NOI and Elijah Muhammad reveal
the extent of the government’s fears that Black Muslims would amass sufficient
support to launch a violent attack upon white authority. In 1960, the FBI
produced its first investigative report on the Nation of Islam, a section of
which was dedicated to the prison branch. It reported that the NOI had taken
hold within the penal system in several states, and that Muslim prisoners in
Washington, DC, California, New Jersey, Illinois, and New York were en-
gaged in legal suits against prison authorities. Interestingly, it made a distinc-
tion between imprisoned black supporters and those working in the general

how it provided them with opportunities to challenge the prevailing gender stereotypes. Jamillah Karim provides the example of the NOI’s Muslim Girls Training and Civilization Class. She argues that, while teaching in the class was intended to educate girls on how to fulfill their roles of wife and mother, NOI women actually transformed it to a “space for broadening the scope of motherhood to community activism.” See Jamillah Karim, “Through Sunni Women’s Eyes: Black Feminism and the Nation of Islam,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*, 8 (2006), 19–30, 20, 26.

Ogbar, 29.

Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 29.
population: incarcerated members were apparently even more troublesome than those outside the prison walls. Supporters were characterized as opportunistic troublemakers, who had little interest in the religious aspects of the NOI but were “primarily interested” in using membership as a cover for their challenges to prison authorities and in fomenting racial discontent among black inmates. To support this view, it included details of a failed plot by twenty Muslim inmates to spearhead a racial uprising in a Pennsylvania state penitentiary. At the same time as viewing the prison temples as a danger to the stability of the penal system, the report also noted that news of their activities was being used outside the prisons “as a propaganda weapon to stir up its members.”

Apart from news of the failed Pennsylvania plot, the report offered no evidence to support its view that prisoners posed a greater threat to the racial order than mainstream supporters, but it perhaps derived from a belief that black criminals were both more inclined to engage in violent behavior and had a very clear reason to seek vengeance against white authorities. This also fed into a fear that prison converts might contribute to a radicalization of the NOI upon their release.

The FBI was not alone in its concerns about the prison temples; its belief that the NOI posed a grave danger to the stability of the penal system was recounted in the mass media and in official reports during the early 1960s. In March 1961, the New York Times reported alleged instances of Muslim-organized violence in California, Alabama, New York, and Maryland’s prisons. New York and District of Columbia authorities reported incidences of Muslims forcibly preventing staff from breaking up their meetings. In Lorton Reformatory, the prison temple was suspected of provoking African Americans to protest against poor living conditions. The Times related the fears of New York state officials that they were facing a potentially “explosive state” inside their prisons. Two months later, James V. Bennett, director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, testified before the House Appropriations Committee that over the last twelve months federal prisons had experienced “a great deal of difficulty... [with] aggressive and race-conscious groups, including a considerable number of so-called Black Muslims.” The greatest problems had come in Atlanta’s Federal Penitentiary, where “several gangs” of Black Muslims had caused “a lot of trouble.” He continued: “I have been in the business a long time and I have never met a more aggressive hostile group. They refuse to... accept any kind of leadership from our officers.”

62 “Muslim Negroes Suing the State”; “Muslims a Problem in Prison.” The most radical prison branches of the NOI were found in California’s Soledad, San Quentin, and Folsom prisons. Eric Cummins, The Rise and Fall, 69–74, refers to instances of Muslim-organized protests.
63 “Muslim Negroes Suing the State.”
Henri Yaker’s report on New Jersey State Prison reflected these concerns, but he went much further in explaining why the prison temples were a clear and present danger to the nation’s penal system. Not only did he believe that the NOI was responsible for provoking black discontent inside the prisons, he also believed that this was part of a larger plot within the NOI to use African American prisoners as foot soldiers in a “holy war” against white America. The prison minister, who he reported was a “sophisticated . . . and persuasive” man, had been planted inside correctional institutions in order for them to “sow [their] spiritual seed in a fertile field.” He concluded with a chimerical vision of black inmates bursting out of the prison walls, intent on revenge against white America. “If this happens,” he warned, “then the demonic forces shall break loose.”

White officials’ fear that the Nation of Islam was steering African American prisoners towards a violent assault against their captors was mostly a product of their own neuroses. While some prison temples extended their protests to include direct protest against prison racism, the majority of imprisoned NOI members focussed upon the right to practice their religion and continued to believe that the courts offered the best chance of redress against official repression.

The first case of legal action was launched by Muslims in Lorton Reformatory in 1959 after the prison’s superintendent placed fifty-eight of them in solitary confinement. *Muhammad Speaks* reported that the inmates were refused medical attention, and forced to survive on slices of dry bread and to drink water from the urinals. Over the course of the next five years, Muslims across the country followed the Lorton prisoners’ example and filed hundreds of legal challenges to their treatment. The scale of this legal assault is truly impressive. For example, the FBI reported in June 1963 that 183 legal petitions and forty-two appeals by Black Muslim prisoners were pending in the federal courts of Washington, DC and Virginia alone. While prisoners sometimes received moral support from outside the prison walls, the NOI leadership generally refused to provide legal or financial assistance. For the most part, prisoners prepared these legal cases without support and relied upon prison libraries to educate themselves in case law and prepare briefs. There are

---

65 Yaker quoted in “Muslims a Problem in Prison.”
66 “Muslim Negroes Suing the State”; “Muslims a Problem in Prison.”
a number of reasons why support for the prisoners was not forthcoming. Most obviously, these challenges to prison authorities, and especially instances of direct confrontation with guards and white inmates, contravened Elijah Muhammad’s expectation that followers respect authority and follow rules. Their appeals to state and federal courts implicitly acknowledged the authority of the US government and thereby placed the prison temples in further conflict with Muhammad’s teachings. However, there were other forces at work. Claude Clegg has described how Elijah Muhammad’s 1942 incarceration meant that he “dreaded exposing himself to further persecution and detention.” Over the years, this desire to avoid legal repression increasingly pushed him away from “activist tendencies,” meaning that “protest rallies at police stations, and extremely vocal draft resistance were largely things of the past.” Instead, Muhammad focussed upon building up the group’s economic base as a less confrontational activity. Despite these efforts, the FBI intensified its campaign against Elijah Muhammad in the early 1960s, while police harassment and brutality grew in its severity; the effect upon Muhammad was to push him towards an ever more conservative stance, which necessarily demanded that he withhold support from his prison followers. At the same time that Muhammad was adopting a more conservative leadership style, the prison temples were becoming more militant in their protests. The increasingly political outlook of prisoners was particularly noticeable after 1962 and within California’s correctional institutions. Muhammad’s refusal to provide support only compounded this trend as prison supporters became increasingly disillusioned with and isolated from the NOI leadership.

Prison officials certainly viewed these legal challenges as part of a larger protest movement among African American prisoners against the penal system. They responded with an equally vigorous defense in which they argued that recognizing the NOI as a genuine religion would also legitimize its antiwhite ideology. The FBI went so far as to deny the sincerity of the legal cases, arguing that they were part of a “cult of harassment” that was designed to create extra work for prison officials. In dismissing a series of claims brought by Black

69 On the impact of Muhammad’s incarceration see Clegg, An Unoriginal Man, 97–99.
70 On the divergence between NOI strategy inside and outside prisons, and especially the increasingly political outlook of California’s prisoners, see Cummins, 65.
71 The 1962 police raid of the Los Angeles temple, during which Ronald T. Stokes was killed and six other members were injured, exemplified the impact of legal harassment upon the organization. Four Muslims were subsequently charged with assault upon a law-enforcement officer and sentenced to long prison sentences. Elijah Muhammad’s refusal to provide these men with legal assistance angered both prisoners and mainstream members. See Cleaver, Soul on Ice; Clegg, 170–73; Frederick Knight, “Justifiable Homicide, Police Brutality, or Governmental Repression? The 1962 Los Angeles Police Shooting of Seven Members of the Nation of Islam,” Journal of Negro History, 79 (1994), 182–96.
Muslims in New York’s Clinton Prison, the presiding judge argued, “The similarity of the complaints, prepared while the plaintiffs were not supposed to be in communication with each other . . . indicates that these applications are part of a movement, which . . . lack the spontaneity of a genuinely wronged person.” At stake was nothing less than the “very survival of the authoritarian [prison] regime.” The prison temples faced a difficult situation: ever since 1871, the Ruffin v. Commonwealth definition of inmates as “slaves of the state” had been used to justify the denial of prisoners’ constitutional rights.

Black Muslims battled against an almost century-long tradition of court acquiescence to prison authorities on matters relating to institutional management. The ensuing legal battle consumed state and federal courts for over a decade and drained resources as authorities resisted even the smallest of Muslims’ demands.

While the majority of legal challenges failed, the early 1960s brought some victories that slowly chipped away at prison wardens’ defense. Black Muslims secured freedom from punishment on account of one’s religion, the opportunity to hold religious service, and the right to wear religious medals.

In 1965, they finally made a breakthrough when, in Cooper v. Pate, it was ruled that the 1871 Civil Rights Act applied to prisoners and could be used by Black Muslims to demand recognition of their religion inside prisons. Thomas Cooper had originally filed his pro se suit in 1962, alleging that in refusing prisoners access to NOI literature, Stateville prison’s warden was depriving him of his right to religious worship. In 1964, the US Supreme Court reversed earlier decisions denying Cooper’s claim and ordered the case be returned to the Federal District Court. The following year, the Court ruled in Cooper’s favor. Although it was narrowly focussed upon freedom of religious expression, the ruling held significance for all inmates. It can be likened to the impact of Brown v. Board of Education, which ruled against segregated schools, upon the civil rights movement as a whole. Just as Brown provided the legal groundwork for further challenges to racial segregation, so Cooper provided a constitutional basis upon which later campaigns for prisoners’ rights to religious expression and worship could be advanced.

---

72 Cummins, 88; “Muslim Negroes Suing the State.”
75 On judges’ reluctance to intervene in the penal system see Brown, 1124–25; “Comment,” 1488–89.
76 The 1961 case of Sewell v. Pegelow, upheld the right of prisoners not to be punished on account of their religious faith; in 1962, Fulwood v. Clemmer upheld a limited right to proselytize; in 1964, Banks v. Havener guaranteed the right to hold religious services. The 1964 case of Coleman v. District of Columbia Commissioners upheld the right to wear religious medals. See Smith, 131–46.
was founded. According to James Jacobs, *Cooper* was subsequently cited in at least 230 Supreme Court cases challenging the treatment of prisoners. The ruling ended the policy of nonintervention in penal institutions and confirmed that prisoners had constitutional rights that the Supreme Court was obliged to protect. Over the following decade, federal oversight of the nation’s penitentiaries helped to bring some of the most brutal and discriminatory policies to an end.

*Cooper* marked the high-point of the NOI’s work inside prisons. From 1964, the organization experienced a decline in popularity among African American inmates. Elijah Muhammad’s split with Malcolm X was an important factor in this shift in black prisoners’ support; this was particularly noticeable in California. While the Nation of Islam continued to be an influential force among African American prisoners, after 1967 many were drawn toward the Black Panther Party. The group followed the NOI’s example by forming branches of the party inside correctional institutions and by celebrating the black prisoner as a crucial figure in the fight against white supremacy. After 1968, African American prisoners formed the nucleus of a radical interracial prison rights movement. Building upon the Nation of Islam’s concept of collective oppression, it drew upon anticapitalist, anti-colonial, and internationalist ideologies of the new left to articulate a class-based analysis of the criminal-justice system and its role in oppressing the poor and racial minorities.

---

77 Brown, 1124–40; Jacobs, “The Prisoners’ Rights Movement”; Jacobs, *Stateville*, 64–65; Smith, 131–46. The Cooper case was an exception to Elijah Muhammad’s refusal to provide support to prisoners’ legal challenges; he hired an attorney on behalf of Cooper. In a 1967 Illinois case, Muslims were granted the right to have ministers visit them inside prison. In Pennsylvania a year later prison authorities were ordered to lift their ban on *Muhammad Speaks*. In 1970 a federal judge ruled that Black Muslims in California belonged to a legally recognized religion, and were therefore due the same rights as members of other religious groups. See Butler, “The Muslims Are No Longer an Unknown Quantity,” 57; Cummins, 72–73; Gordon Hawkins, *The Prison: Policy and Practice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 138–39; John Pallas and Robert Barber, “From Riot to Revolution,” in Erik Olin Wright, *The Politics of Punishment: A Critical Analysis of Prisons in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 8. 78 Jacobs, *Stateville*, 139–44.

79 Cleaver, “Prisons: The Muslims’ Decline,” 103; Cummins, 95–96. Malcolm X’s departure from the NOI, and his subsequent death, also had a destructive impact upon the NOI as a whole. As Dawn-Marie Gibson observes, 1964–65 was a watershed period in the Nation of Islam’s history. Alongside the split with Malcolm X, revelations about Elijah Muhammad’s sexual indiscretions and abuses of power further undermined his authority. See Gibson, *A History of the Nation of Islam*, 65.

80 Many politicized prisoners during the late 1960s were keen to distance themselves from the earlier work of the Nation of Islam. They argued that the group’s emphasis upon black separatism had promoted division between prisoners, when they actually needed to unite across racial barriers to challenge prison authorities. See, for example, “George Jackson Speaks from Prison,” *Black Panther Party Newspaper*, 17 Oct. 1970, 6.
Despite their relatively small numbers, incarcerated Black Muslims had an impact upon both the American penal system and the course of the black freedom struggle. The prison temples merged the separatist ideology of the Nation of Islam with their own distinctive attack upon white privilege and discrimination. In doing so, they offered a message of racial pride and unity to African American inmates at a time when they were subjected to racial segregation, hostility, and violence from both correctional officers and white inmates on a daily basis. They established the philosophical basis upon which the more overtly political action of African American prisoners during the post-1965 era was founded and carried the “torch of black protest” into the black power era. Most importantly, in challenging the 1871 definition of inmates as “slaves of the state,” the NOI forced the nation’s courts to scrutinize the treatment of its prisoners. Their victory before the Supreme Court brought increased constitutional protection for all prisoners, and acted as a springboard for prison reform during the late 1960s and the 1970s.

---
