

TAKE THREE: THE MODERN AMERICAN BODY

Embodying the Nation of Islam

Edward E. Curtis IV

The black body looms large as a symbol of the struggle for black liberation.¹ The desire to protect black bodies from both state-sponsored violence and vigilante terrorism led in the past to the calls of activists from Ida B. Wells to Malcolm X to respond in kind; as Wells put it, “The Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every home.”² But African Americans have pursued a number of other strategies to protect the black body as well. In the midst of assaults on African Americans’ health, safety, and welfare—both individual and collective—in the 1960s, the Nation of Islam (NOI) and its members paid particular attention to the care and strengthening of the black body. Their efforts at corporeal reform proved deeply paradoxical. Simultaneously conservative and subversive, NOI practices promoted strict forms of patriarchy and religious morality while at the same time appearing so disturbingly radical that they became a focus of FBI counterintelligence operations.

Adapting a politics of respectability, Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, whom followers addressed as the “Messenger of Allah,” argued that a “civilized” body would engender self-respect among African Americans and thereby lead them to resist the black self-hatred that was promulgated in a white supremacist society. Associating civilized behavior with the values of thrift, sexual propriety, industriousness, and temperance, which they found sorely lacking in many of their black contemporaries, Muhammad and his cadre of male and female leaders focused on the moral decline of black men, who were said to be emasculated, impure, and lazy. Trafficking in racist images of the black body, some NOI members also caricatured black women as deviant, promiscuous, and neglectful caretakers of black children. Both leaders and followers in the movement argued that Islam could cure the black body of such physical and social diseases.³

For instance, members of the Nation of Islam devoted a great deal of energy to their diet. Elijah Muhammad urged NOI Muslims not only to avoid all pork and liquor—like other Muslims—but also the foods that had come to be associated with the legacy of slavery such as “lima beans, butter beans, black-eyed peas, green cabbage, collard greens, pinto beans, kidney beans, brown field beans, cornbread, carp, catfish, crustaceans, mollusks, rabbit, possum, squirrel, [and] coon.” Other beans were fine, and indeed the movement became known for selling bean pies, which were often made from navy beans. Red meat should be limited, and the Messenger exhorted followers to give up refined sugar, which, he said, was increasing diabetes among African Americans. He also asked followers to limit their overall caloric intake and eat only one meal a day. Members of the movement practiced Ramadan, but during Advent rather than during the Islamic (lunar) month of Ramadan. Elijah Muhammad explained that a Yuletide practice of Ramadan would help focus his followers’ attention on Islam rather than Christianity during the holiday season. Eventually, all of the Messenger’s teachings on diet were compiled into a monograph entitled *How to Eat to Live* (1972) (Figure 1). Various

¹To understand how much of urban African American rumor and folklore is dominated by “metaphors linking the fate of the black race to the fates of black bodies,” see Patricia Turner, *I Heard It through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley, CA, 1993).

²Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984), 17–30.

³Edward E. Curtis IV, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), 96–8.

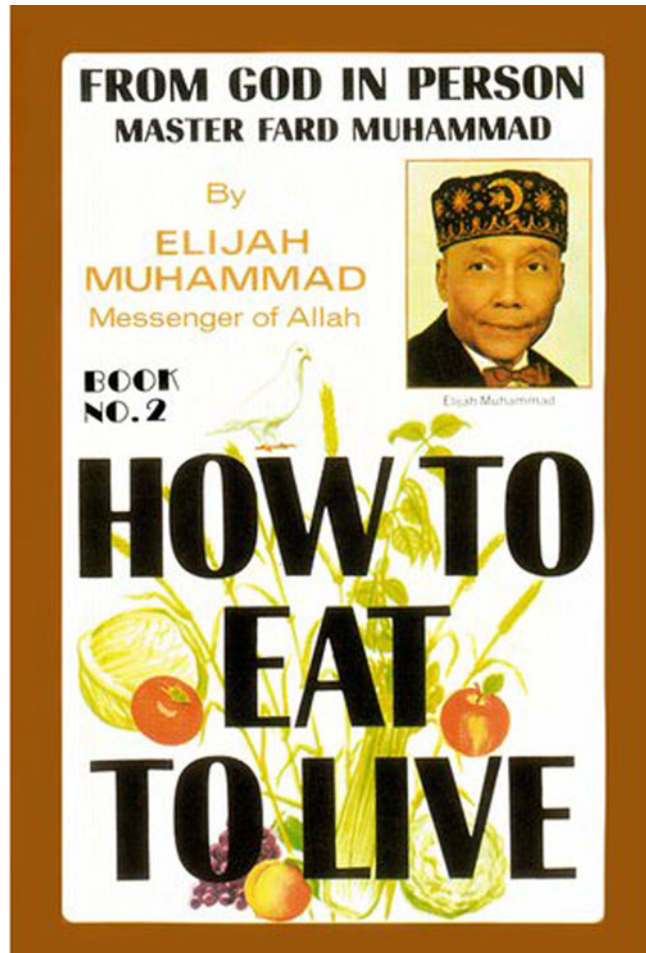


Figure 1. Book cover of *How to Eat to Live* (1972). Photo credit: Edward Curtis.

columns and letters in the movement newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, outlined the health advantages of following this diet, and many believers testified to how following a strict diet could cure various bodily ailments.⁴

In addition to providing guidelines on how to eat, the movement became an incubator of food businesses that focused on providing healthy and wholesome food to the black community overall. Elijah Muhammad himself owned several farms, a dairy, a meat processing plant, and by the 1970s, a multi-million-dollar fish import business called Whiting H & G. NOI followers were not only employed in these businesses but also established their own restaurants, bakeries, and groceries. Women in the Nation of Islam became known for selling homemade goods, especially the bean pie, around NOI places of worship, during NOI events, and in their homes and neighborhoods.⁵

The Nation of Islam's focus on the ethics of morally and physically reforming the black body also carried over into prescriptions for dress, fashion, and adornment. Unlike movement teachings on food, however, the ethics of dress emphasized the movement's central focus on the properly gendered nature of male and female black bodies. Many female writers in the *Muhammad Speaks* beckoned women to stop imitating what they regarded as white fashions. They proclaimed that wearing cosmetics and short skirts, bleaching skin, and dying hair

⁴Ibid., 98–109.

⁵Ibid., 105–9.

obscured the natural beauty of black women. Eschewing conventional fashion was a religious issue, as Sister Beverly 3X wrote in a poem: “Years ago, hemlines were not too short, but the clothes fit tight / I thought I was really all right. / A stone fox? No! An ignorant fool, following the devil’s evil rule.”⁶ Elijah Muhammad went even further when more and more African American women began to wear Afros. He banned them from the movement, and one of his female columnists claimed that African people did not actually wear their hair in this manner. To be naturally black, it was said, was to be more civilized than wearing “savage” styles like the Afro.

As much as dress and fashion focused on the female black body, the Nation of Islam’s program of moral reform concerning sexuality and reproduction did so even more. The official teaching of the movement stressed that men and women were equally responsible for sexual morality, which was defined as heterosexual married monogamy. Men in the movement were shamed and punished for sex outside wedlock and for adultery, especially with white women (Figure 2). But once again women’s bodies most often emerged as the focus of official NOI teachings about sexuality. *Muhammad Speaks* discussed women’s bodies as the field in which the seeds of the black nation must be planted. Elijah Muhammad talked about birth control as a form of black genocide. Women were told to have large families in order to repopulate the race. Not all women in the movement followed the teachings about birth control, but it is also clear that the version of patriarchy that the Nation of Islam advanced was attractive to many of its female members. In the 1960s and 1970s, African American women remained extremely vulnerable to sexual violence from both white and African American men.⁷ The promise of physical protection, which sometimes included escorts from the home to the mosque, made some NOI women feel safe. Moreover, black women’s safety was under threat from the state. One primary example of state violence against African American women was forced sterilization, especially of poor African American women. This is one of the key contexts in which to understand why, even as second-wave feminism and the movement for the Equal Rights Amendment gained ground, tens of thousands of African American women would choose to support a sexually conservative movement like the Nation of Islam.⁸

Just as the material culture and ethical commandments of the Nation of Islam focused on reforming black bodies, the hierarchical, ritualized nature of movement activities disciplined the bodies of members, the way they used time, and the spaces that they inhabited. Physical spaces and the rituals that took place inside of them were gendered. Men participated in the Fruit of Islam, a fraternal organization that policed members’ moral behaviors and provided security for NOI events. The Fruit of Islam was organized in military fashion: men inside the group possessed various military ranks and they were taught military salutes and protocols. The Fruit, as they were sometimes called, also provided a male space for the teaching of NOI religious texts and catechisms and as well as other educational activities. Even selling *Muhammad Speaks* newspapers became a religious obligation for members of the Fruit, who might be criticized or punished for failing to meet sales quotas. NOI women were enrolled in Muslim Girls Training-General Civilization, which taught cooking, sewing, spelling, penmanship, hygiene, child-rearing, and other subjects thought to be essential to being a wife and mother. Women also sometimes learned to march in military fashion and maintained various military ranks. Like the Fruit, Muslim Girls Training enforced the ethical commandments of Elijah Muhammad, punishing those who wore the wrong clothes or had sex out of wedlock. There is ample evidence that women often resisted the authority or simply ignored them, but Sister Captains, as they were called, could be known to be harsh toward those under their authority.⁹

⁶Ibid., 114.

⁷Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York, 2011).

⁸Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion*, 118–30.

⁹Ibid., 132–53.

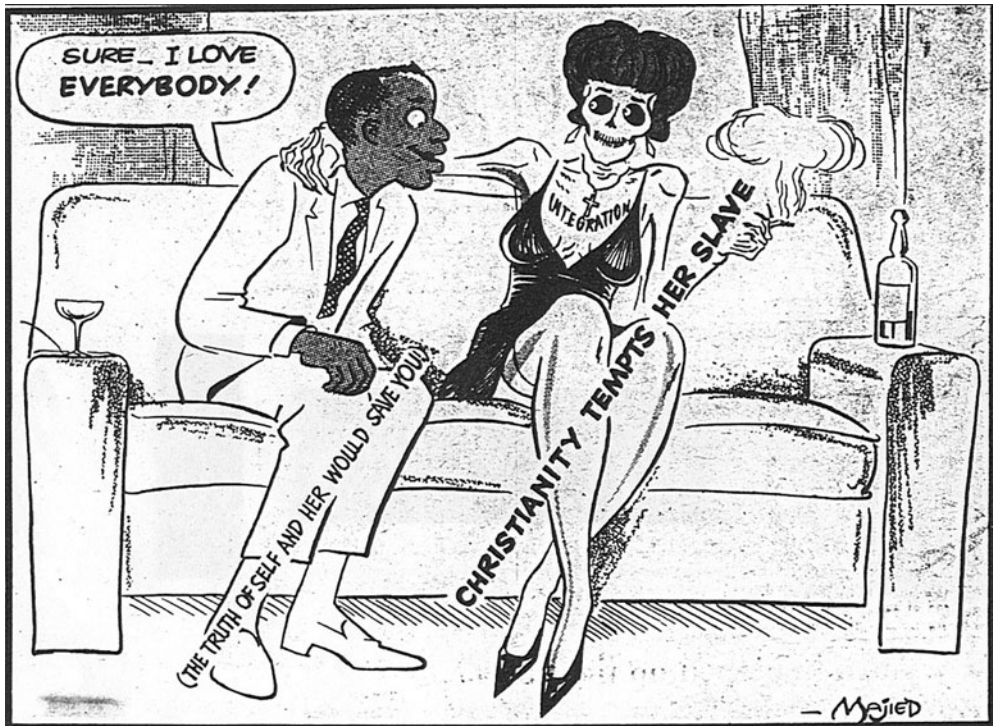


Figure 2. Cartoon by Eugene Majied in *Muhammad Speaks*, November 12, 1965, 6.

Ironically, the ways in which the Nation of Islam sought to reform and purify the black body strongly echoed the bodily values of white middle-class, typically Protestant, social conservatives. Why then was the movement seen as so dangerous, subversive, and worthy of massive government surveillance and repression? One answer is that promoting patriarchy and conservative behaviors was but one part of a larger religious and political complex of speech and activities that challenged the primacy of Christianity during an era of uncertainty for the Protestant establishment.¹⁰ Though the behaviors of black Muslims may have seemed downright puritanical, they were all done in the name of Islam and Elijah Muhammad's prophecies. Elijah Muhammad was no Protestant—he was no Sunni Muslim either. He was a prophet who predicted the end of white America. Wearing the clothes of the movement and following its strict diet signified a revolutionary rejection of mainstream American cultural identities.

Second, and more importantly for the FBI, the Nation of Islam achieved enormous success as a Cold War and Vietnam-era countercultural movement that rejected the American consensus. In the words of Penny Von Eschen, the Nation of Islam “permitted a space—for the most part unthinkable in the Cold War era—for an anti-American critique of the Cold War.”¹¹ Part of this critique was explicitly political, and Malcolm X's advocacy for African American solidarity with the struggle for Afro-Asian independence and the non-aligned countries had a political appeal beyond the membership of the movement.¹² But for members of the Nation of Islam, the movement offered *simultaneously* religious and political solutions to the problems posed by domestic racism and interventionist U.S. foreign policy. Their black Muslim bodies signified moral discipline, and at the same time they stood out as embodied rejections of the

¹⁰See further Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955–1993* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 55–94.

¹¹Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), 174.

¹²See Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York, 2011).

state's claims of moral superiority in its struggle against communism. Both inside and outside the FBI, the government denied that the movement was a religious one in any legitimate sense. It ignored the movement's advocacy of respectable religion, and even criticized the movement's emphasis on cleanliness as spiritually vacuous. "Members of the Cult are frequently urged to keep themselves and their belongings in perfect order," the FBI's internal monograph on the Nation of Islam stated. "However, there appears to be no spiritual motivation present."¹³ The monograph made a similar claim about the fasting of members: "It is doubted that many of the members of the Cult, including most of the leaders, have any clear perception of the significance of Ramadan, much less the reason for fasting."¹⁴ Even as members explicitly performed and named these practices as a type of spiritual discipline, the FBI clung doggedly to its view that whatever the NOI was doing, it was a threat to national security.

The claim that the Nation of Islam was not religious despite its focus on the ethical and ritual reformation of the black body had serious repercussions for some NOI members. When Muhammad Ali refused to be inducted into the U.S. armed services during the Vietnam War, he claimed that it was for both religious and political reasons; his religion, he said, opposed war, and he was not going to fight other people of color when he had not yet achieved freedom in the United States. The government denied his claim for conscientious objector status and convicted him of draft evasion in 1967. His principled stand against the war resulted in the forfeiture of his world heavyweight boxing crown. Though Ali became a hero to many people of color and leftists around the world, to many inside the United States he was seen as a fifth column—the enemy inside the walls.¹⁵

In the end, the Nation of Islam's focus on the black body had simultaneously conservative and radical political implications. On the one hand, its patriarchy and ethics of respectability pointed to general persistence in the United States of what many scholars have identified as dominant and public middle-class Protestant traditions of American culture, including an emphasis on proper diet, proper dress, and the control of sexuality.¹⁶ On the other hand, there was no denying the political implications of a group that challenged many of the ideological underpinnings of U.S. national identity during the 1960s. The government, the press, and some scholars created a fearful, sometimes irrational, public image of thousands of men in bow-ties and women in head scarves who nonviolently undermined U.S. imperialism, Christian superiority, and white supremacy.

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¹³Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Nation of Islam," Central Research Section, Federal Bureau of Investigation, October 1960, 61–2, in "Nation of Islam Part 1 of 3," FBI Records: The Vault, <https://vault.fbi.gov/Nation%20of%20Islam/Nation%20of%20Islam%20Part%201%20of%203/view> (accessed Dec. 18, 2017).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵Edward E. Curtis IV, "The Black Muslim Scare of the Twentieth Century: The History of State Islamophobia and Post-9/11 Variations," in *Islamophobia in America: The Anatomy of Intolerance*, ed. Carl W. Ernst, (New York, 2013), 75–106.

¹⁶A useful introduction to the dominance of public Protestantism can be found in Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA, 1999), 396–431. See also Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1984); Martin E. Marty, *Protestantism in the United States: Righteous Empire*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1986); and Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago, 1968).