

**DONNA AUSTON***Project Advisor, Brooklyn Historical Society Muslims in Brooklyn*

◆ From its origins as a religious tradition practiced by enslaved Africans who were brought as captives to the land that eventually became the United States to the emergence of unique expressions of Muslim belief and worship centuries later to the interaction with Muslim communities around the globe (including increased immigration to the U.S. from African countries with significant Muslim populations in recent decades), Black American Islam continues to evolve.

The front page of *The New York Times* on February 21, 1965, featured a graphic photograph of the lifeless body of a man being wheeled away on a medical stretcher flanked by police officers and Black men in two-piece suits. The headline declared: “Malcolm X Shot to Death at Rally Here.” In many ways, the assassination of the human rights activist and outspoken icon whose incisive rhetoric and philosophies served as key inspirations for the Black Power movement was a sign of the turbulent times; the 1960s was a decade characterized by some of the most significant mass movements against racism, sexism, colonialism, and imperialism, along with some of the most tragic assassinations of the 20th century. In other, less commonly analyzed ways, Malcolm X’s death represented a key turning point for the evolution of Islam in the United States and, in particular, the trajectory of Black American Islam.

Malcolm X converted to Islam while incarcerated in a Massachusetts prison in the early 1950s, under the guidance and tutelage of Elijah Muhammad, then the leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI). The NOI had been founded in 1930, in Great Migration-era Detroit, by a mysterious figure known as Master Fard Muhammad who shared his religious views as he sold fabrics and other miscellaneous goods door-to-door in the city’s African American neighborhoods. At the time of Malcolm X’s conversion, the NOI had established a presence in several cities, including Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and New York. The movement was still fairly small, though, and had not yet gained widespread national attention. The NOI’s central message — religious devotion filtered through the lens of strident critiques of racism in the U.S. alongside emphasis on communal uplift — appealed to many African Americans who converted, as well as many more who stopped short of joining but supported NOI’s message and platform in other ways.

In large part due to the prominence of Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam grew to become one of the most influential movements in the history of Islam in the U.S., directly and indirectly contributing to the spread of Islam among Black Americans. Although there is significant common religious ground shared by the NOI and other variations of Islamic practice, the movement originated in the U.S. and was fundamentally shaped by the relationship of its adherents to the history of North American slavery, Jim Crow, and the continuing legacy

of systemic racial discrimination faced by African Americans. As a result, aspects of the NOI's doctrine and practice have historically differed in matters of theology and practice from other sectarian expressions of the faith found among other Muslims in the U.S. and in other parts of the world.

In addition to Malcolm X, other influential personalities associated with the movement bolstered its substantial grassroots influence, including heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, whose long, contentious court battle over his refusal to be drafted into the U.S. military during the Vietnam War was directly linked to the religious anti-imperialism that was a crucial tenet of the Nation of Islam's philosophy. Other famous members of the organization included R & B singer Joe Tex and poet and key figure in the Black Arts Movement Sonia Sanchez. As a result, the NOI is perhaps the best-known African American Islamic organization, though it is but one of many that form a diverse, yet interconnected web of historical and contemporary Black Muslim movements.

Less than a year before he was gunned down in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom, Malcolm X had parted ways with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam when conflicts within the movement finally came to a head. The rift made headlines and was interpreted by many as an extraordinary event because of the notoriety of the personalities involved. Less well known is the fact that Malcolm X's departure was representative of a larger trend of religious conversion and re-conversion among other, less familiar iterations of African American Islam, some of which came into existence in the immediate and long-term aftermath of the fracture between Malcolm X and his former spiritual mentor. While a significant exodus from the NOI took place in that critical, tumultuous period between 1964 and 1965, the spiritual migrations and their social, religious, and cultural impacts continued into the following decades.

In 1975, Elijah Muhammad died, after four decades as the movement's leader. His death left the Nation of Islam at a crossroads. He was succeeded as the NOI's spiritual guide by his son Wallace, who had been close to Malcolm X and who also had a series of public philosophical disagreements with his father. After he assumed leadership of the NOI, Wallace began to redirect the nation's membership with regard to its spiritual teachings and organizational structure—actions that would have lasting impacts on the landscape of Islam in Black America for generations to come. These shifts are collectively referred to by those who were NOI members at the time as “The Transition,” a designation that captures the magnitude of the change. Wallace gradually implemented a series of religious changes that brought the largest body of the NOI's membership into closer theological alignment with Sunni Islam, whose members comprise the majority of Muslims around the world, and articulated amended positions on politics and race that maintained the Nation's characteristic critiques of racism, but also relaxed its position on interfaith and interracial relations.

A series of name changes also ensued, for the Nation of Islam and for its leader. Wallace changed his name to Warith Deen Mohammed, and the Nation of Islam was officially dismantled and renamed the World Community of Al-Islam in the West, in 1976, then the American Muslim Mission, in 1978, and finally the Muslim American Society. The University of Islam (UOI), the NOI's nationwide network of independent K-12 schools (the first of its kind for African Americans), was renamed the Clara Muhammad Schools, after Wallace's mother, whose efforts were instrumental in establishing the UOI. In 1978, the NOI, with its traditional belief structure and internal organization, was revived under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, who had been a protégé of Malcolm X. Wallace died in 2008, leaving behind a nationwide association of affiliated mosques and schools. Farrakhan remains at the helm of the NOI.

Beyond this conglomeration of Muslim organizations directly descended from the original Nation of Islam, a number of other African American Muslim movements have emerged that have been indirectly influenced by the NOI, particularly in the blending of critiques of anti-Black racism with Islamic ritual and scripture. The Ansaar Allah Movement (also known as the Nubian Islamic Hebrews), which originated in Brooklyn, is one such organization. Its founder, Imam Isa (born Dwight York), established a community of predominantly African American Muslims beginning in the late 1960s that incorporated elements of U.S.-based Islamic organizations such as the NOI with teachings from Sunni and Shi'a Islam, freemasonry, and Pan-African and Black nationalist philosophy. Similar to the Nation of Islam, the teachings of the Ansaar Allah Movement emphasized self-sufficiency and economic uplift for African American communities. Isa eventually located the headquarters of his community in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, where members lived communally, operating bookstores, a recording studio, and other affiliated businesses through most of the 1980s. (Isa's carried out his music production activities under the name Dr. York.) During this period, members of the movement were generally identifiable by their distinctive dress: long, flowing white robes for men and women, with khimars (head coverings) and face veils as additional features of female members' uniforms. By 1990, smaller communities of Ansaars were found in Black, urban cities such as Newark, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. In the last decade of the 20th century, the movement adopted a series of changes, moving away from Islamic nomenclature to a more strictly Hebrew-based identity, and then again to an Egyptology approach. By the early 1990s, most members had relocated from Brooklyn and other Northern cities to a shared compound near Eatonton, Georgia, under the group's new name, the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors. The movement has not been without controversy, from doctrinal disputes with other Islamic groups to more serious allegations of sexual misconduct and psychological abuse of members by movement leaders. In 2004, York was convicted of more than 100 counts of sexual abuse, racketeering, and financial reporting charges, and sentenced to 135 years in prison. Many of York's followers have since moved on, though a few still remain in Brooklyn and elsewhere.

Although the Ansaar Allah movement and the various Nation of Islam–related organizations have been central to the story of Islam and African Americans, especially in New York City, they represent only part of the story. Black American Islam has roots in the founding of the United States, and its evolution has continued into the present. According to existing estimates, Muslims of African descent in the U.S. comprise between twenty to thirty percent of the total American Muslim demographic, and have been widely influential in politics, human rights and social justice movements, music, arts, sports, and education.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** Donna Auston is an anthropologist, writer, and public intellectual whose body of work focuses on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, protest and social movements, media representation, and Islam in America. When these essays were written in 2019, she was completing her dissertation, an ethnography of Black Muslim activism and spiritual protest in the Black Lives Matter era, at Rutgers University.