



“Returning Home to Our Rightful Place”: The Nation of Islam and Muhammad Farms



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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how the Nation of Islam (NOI), a well known black nationalist organization, is utilizing notions of community to promote the activities and goals of its farm to other black people. The NOI owns Muhammad Farms in rural southern Georgia, USA. Its stated purpose is to feed all black people in the United States. Historically, the NOI has occupied a radical space in the black community by promoting black separatism. I argue that while its stance on separatism has not changed, discourse about Muhammad Farms appeals to more generalized notions of community uplift and self-determination, key components of black community nationalism. The NOI employs these discursive strategies to rally other black people around their message. I utilize archival and textual research along with critical discourse analysis to unpack this dialectical relationship between black racial identity and the farm. I claim that the NOI utilizes and creates black information networks in part to control knowledge disseminated about the farm. They are retelling black agrarian history in a way that mixes fact, fiction and shock value. Validation from others, mainly white people is antithetical to the NOI's black nationalist principles. Ultimately the organization seeks to recreate the farm as a landscape of liberation that includes tragedy, triumph and hope for the future. The NOI presents Muhammad Farms as a symbol and example of the possibilities if black people return to the farm. Muhammad Farms also serves as a living memorial to black agrarian history.

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The only revolution based on loving your enemy is the Negro revolution. That's no revolution. Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality (Malcolm X, 1965, 4).

1. Introduction

“The farm is the engine of our national life” (R. Muhammad, 2005, 1) is a slogan used often by the Nation of Islam (NOI), a slogan that reflects its commitment to black nation building through food and agriculture. The farm as a space of limitless possibilities is radical in the context of US black agrarian history, where farming is often synonymous with racial oppression and violence by virtue of slavery, sharecropping, and struggles to maintain landownership (Smith, 2007; Ficara, 2006; Gilbert et al., 2001; Dawson, 2001; Wood and Gilbert, 2000). The purpose of this article is to examine how the NOI, often characterized as a radical and fringe organization, attempts to use the farm for multiple purposes: as a place to grow safe and healthy food for black people, as a tool to remake the image of the farm in the black imagination, and ultimately as a path to progress. The NOI does so by presenting a communal narrative of the farm as a land-

scape of tragedy and triumph to inspire black people both inside of and outside of the organization to return to the land. Muhammad Farms, its rural South Georgia USA farm, serves as both a present-day example and an in-progress memorial to black agrarian history.

“Black matters are spatial matters” (McKittrick and Woods, 2007, xiv), intricately tied to ideology (McKittrick and Woods, 2007; McKittrick, 2006; Tyner, 2006; McCann, 2002). Black nationalists isolate race as the key factor affecting the life experiences of blacks, and believe that acquiring and owning land is key to black progress (Joseph, 2010; Tyner, 2006; Ogbar, 2004; Squires, 2002; Dawson, 2001; Delaney, 1999; Esseim-Udom, 1962). Black community nationalism, a widely accepted form of black nationalism advocates self-reliance as one of its primary principles (Harris-Lacewell, 2004; Dawson, 2001). It, like other forms of black nationalism manifests itself in black social sites and on the landscape, where black identities and political ideologies are formed and contested (Harris-Lacewell, 2004). Black social sites are made and transformed often discursively “through “geographing”¹ (Tyner, 2006,

¹ Tyner uses the term “geographing” to refer to the ways in which Malcolm X referenced space in his speeches. He notes that “the statements of Malcolm X were sweeping and general in an attempt to convey a sense of a particular racialized space” (Tyner, 2006, 77). Tyner references a speech where Malcolm X spoke about white ownership in black neighborhoods. The lack of economic control by blacks is an example of segregation. However through “geographing” or making space, Malcolm X proposes separation as a way for black people to gain political, economic and social control. Malcolm X labeled some racialized spaces as oppressive, and sought to create new racialized spaces of freedom and liberation.

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77), in which black people's experiences are reflected in prescriptions for future progress.

Muhammad Farms is the cornerstone of Minister Louis Farrakhan's renewed commitment to the NOI's "Three Year Economic Savings Program," (2005) originally created by Elijah Muhammad. The trademark of the program was the purchase of farmland in Bronwood, Georgia, a place chosen in part due to land availability but primarily because NOI leaders believe that southern rural land is the homeland for black Americans. Purchasing the land on which to establish Muhammad Farms further allows the NOI to renew its commitment to food production and increasing landownership. While NOI members operate urban gardens in cities like Houston Texas, Muhammad Farms is the largest agricultural project sanctioned by the organization's leadership. The NOI believes that Muhammad Farms will be a catalyst through which to develop a system of black owned farms that will feed 40 million black people (Three Year Economic Savings Program, 2005). For the NOI, food security and land acquisition is not only a means to alleviate hunger but also a way to build self-determination, unity and ultimately a self-sustaining black community (Farrakhan, 2005).

I rely on archival and textual research in this project to support my argument that the NOI is attempting to recreate the farm both materially and discursively. Key historical documents for the NOI include *Message to the Black Man in America* (1965) and *How to Eat How to Live* by Elijah Muhammad (1967), which were analyzed alongside non-NOI authored texts about the organization. For current information about the NOI's stance on food and agriculture, I drew heavily on extensive materials published on www.noi.org (NOI), www.muhammadfarms.com (Muhammad Farms) and www.noimoa.com (Minister of Agriculture). The vast majority of information came from the Muhammad Farms website. Data were coded by specific themes with the theme of community emerging often and in different forms including words and phrases like "we," "us," "black people," "black community" and "we are in this together," among others. There were other signs of community outreach in the NOI's inclusion of links to black farmers outside of the organization. I also took notice of information not included on the website, most notably the NOI's historic condemnation of blacks outside of the organization. I employed critical discourse analysis to gauge themes, intended audience, underlying statements, social realities, and power relations embedded in the texts (Foucault, 1972).

The NOI complicates understandings of what the farm means in the black geographical imagination, by contrasting the violence associated with the farm – slavery, racist sharecropping practices, and land loss – with triumph, historical black land ownership, optimism for the future, and Muhammad Farms as a present-day example. The NOI uses black community nationalism to ground its understanding of the farm in black people's everyday reality: the farm is the tool to combat racial oppression. The remainder of this article is divided into three sections. First, I detail the spatiality of black community nationalism. Second, I present the NOI's history and vision for Muhammad Farms. Third, I argue that in order to move one step closer to feeding 40 million black people, the NOI works through Muhammad Farms to weave together multiple meanings and histories of the farm into a community discourse to further what they believe should be the universal goal of growing safe and healthy food for all black people.

2. Spatiality of black community nationalism

Black nationalism is based on the contention that understanding the plight of blacks and achieving black salvation must be based on taking race and racial oppression as the central feature of modern world history (Dawson, 2001, 86).

Black nationalism is a well-known black political ideology² that "has been a resilient and enduring element of African-American Politics" (Brown and Shaw, 2002, 22). Dawson analyzes data from the 1993–1994 National Black Politics Study, finding that black nationalism has the largest role among black political ideologies in influencing black public opinion. Support waxes and wanes based on perceived and actual threat by blacks to white oppression (Ogbar, 2004; Robinson, 2001). Black community nationalism combines aspects of revolutionary nationalism and cultural nationalism.³ Black community nationalism is grounded in the quest for "self-determination, black control of political and economic institutions in the black community, and the building of autonomous black organizations" (Dawson, 2001, 101). Blacks who espouse community nationalism fundamentally believe the colloquial statement, "we are in this together." Common beliefs of unity and community uplift bridge boundaries among black people with divergent political ideologies (Dawson, 2001; Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967). Self-reliance, the belief that "one can only rely on one's own efforts to gain freedom and justice" (Dawson, 2001; 92) is a key tenet of black community nationalism (see Figs. 1 and 2).

Black community nationalism enjoys such widespread support in part because it does not overtly call for the creation of a separate black nation. However, Dawson (2001) notes that "black community nationalism leads directly and strongly to support for many of the more separatist policies that black nationalists have historically espoused" (128). The NOI is widely believed to be a black separatist organization, largely due to its goals of creating an autonomous nation in the southern portion of the United States. The NOI's moments of inclusion, understood as black community nationalism, should not be lost in their ultimate goals of creating a black nation.

Black nationalism is intricately tied to space.⁴ Lefebvre (1991) rhetorically asks, "what is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space to which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, whose code it embodies" (44)? In black nationalist thought, racism and oppression are geographies, so to are progress, freedom, liberation, and autonomy. Black nationalists aim to reclaim space once used to oppress black people and redefine these geographies as spaces of liberation in the black geographical imagination (Tyner, 2006). Tyner (2006) analyzes Malcolm X's critique of the exclusionary spaces operating in a racist and oppressive society. He argues that inherent in the fight for civil rights is a fight for space, noting "questions of belonging are thus as much personal and political as they are legal. But they are also spatial. To belong is to be of some place" (Tyner, 2006, 5). Many black nationalists preach that a separate black nation is needed for blacks to progress (Dawson, 2001; Robinson, 2001). Some advocate a literal or an "imaginative return" (Tyner, 2006, 125) to African ways of thought and action. Others believe that blacks constitute a nation within a nation (Dawson, 2001; Kelley, 1996); this nation, according to groups like the NOI is the rural southern portion of the US (Dawson, 2001). In black nationalist thought, land is a site of resistance.

Tyner's detailed analysis of Malcolm X's work reveals the mutually constitutive relationship between ideology/identity and space/place. Harris-Lacewell (2004, 7) finds that "even today, there are contemporary social sites carved out by African Americans in which

² Harris-Lacewell (2004) draws on Dawson's (2001) typology to identify four overlapping black political ideologies: Black Liberal Integrationism, Black Conservatism, Black Feminism, and Black Nationalism.

³ Revolutionary nationalists directly confront the racist structure of the United States, connecting it to larger forces of oppression worldwide. Two of its key features are black liberation and self-determination. Cultural nationalists believe that before the black community can be liberated, black people individually must liberate themselves through returning to their African roots (Dawson, 2001).

⁴ Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad (representations of space, representational spaces and spatial practices) allows me to negotiate the perceived, conceived and lived experiences of blacks with farming and agriculture.

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