



## “Money, Good Homes, and Friendship”

### Thrift and Salvation in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam

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#### Abstract

A study of thrift in the Nation of Islam refines our understanding of the frugality discourse by focusing on eschatology rather than personal piety. Thrift for Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation from 1934 until 1975, constituted the means not to reform society but to overthrow it and usher in the end of history. Muhammad and his followers employed thrift both to promote personal spiritual health and achieve certain social aims. However, Muhammad looked forward to a time when thrift would both catalyze the apocalypse and simultaneously cease as a moral imperative.

Keywords: Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, thrift, eschatology, diet

#### Introduction

“Babylon was rich and very proud, and her riches increased her corruption,” wrote Elijah Muhammad (2008, 2:33), leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI) from 1934 until his death in 1975. “America’s wickedness (sins) is the same as the history shows of Ancient Babylon,” although in his opinion “America is modern and much worse” because as “the richest of all countries” it “pays the highest wages” and “must therefore charge a high price for her merchandise” (2008, 2:33). He warned that Allah would consequently inflict “PLAGUE AFTER PLAGUE upon her until the wicked are completely destroyed” (2008, 2:85). Muhammad therefore commanded “so-called Negroes” to shun integration and separate from Whites, lest they too face judgment. “Forsake [America] and fly to your own,” he called, “before it is too late” (1965, 275).

Muhammad’s call to “fly to your own” and escape the impending judgment Allah would at any moment unleash on White America summarizes his religious and social program. “Christianity,” he explained “is a religion organized and backed by the devils for the purpose of making slaves of mankind” (2008, 1:13). “Devils” for Muhammad were all White people. Black Americans, whom Muhammad most frequently referred to as “Original Men” or “so-called Negroes,” are superior to Whites and the natural followers of true religion because they were the first of Allah’s creation, the originator of all other races and the natural owners of Earth. Whites in Muhammad’s cosmology are a derivative race that came about as the result of the machinations of a wicked Black scientist. They are therefore inherently evil and so constitutionally unable to accept Islam (1965, 103–22). Unlike Christianity, which keeps “so-called Negroes” beholden to Whites, “Islam alone can unite” Black Americans and show them the way to peace and happiness (2008, 1:33). Islam alone encourages them to look to their own interests rather than seek fellowship with and favor from White oppressors.

Members of the Nation of Islam seek Heaven on Earth, which Muhammad described as consisting of “Freedom, Justice, Equality” and “money, good homes and friendship in all walks of life” (2008, 1:15). Although Christianity teaches that “the Hereafter is a life of spirits (spooks) up somewhere in the sky,” Heaven is in fact “only a continuation of the present life” (2008, 1:26). “Hell and heaven,” he taught, “are not two places but *two conditions of life*” (2008, 1:35). The righteous look forward to a resurrection “of the principles of Islam, but not the physically dead in the graveyards.” It is the “the mentally dead, the ignorant whom the devils’ falsehood has killed” who must learn the nature of true religion and enjoy a better life on earth (2008, 1:36). Because physical existence in the here and now is the totality of an individual’s conscious existence, then improving quality of life in the present world by breaking the yoke of the White oppressors becomes the ultimate goal for members of the Nation.

Although orthodox Muslims saw Elijah Muhammad’s doctrines on the creation of the world, the nature and person of God, and the nature of man as idiosyncratic, he nevertheless drew on some traditional Muslim themes and practices in his identification of strict personal discipline and moral virtue as the true path to Heaven. This paper explores the role of thrift in cultivating this discipline and virtue. Thrift in turn relates closely to the Nation’s teachings on diet, self-reliance, and middle-class respectability. Understanding the relationship between thrift and these core teachings helps illuminate the heart of the Nation’s doctrines and highlights the uniqueness of Muhammad’s spiritual and economic program. Muhammad invested mundane questions about what kind of bread to eat, the morality of playing cards, and the need to develop habits of thrift with existential and even eschatological significance. More than tips for living a good and healthy life, they were nothing less than the means of fleeing the devils’ traps and entering the blessed state.

This emphasis on the personal, spiritual benefits of thrift as well as the benefits of thrift for Black Americans follows closely the frugality discourse—the call for “consumers [to] show more discipline and resourcefulness in their product and service acquisition, use, and reuse” although not necessarily to reject the surrounding material culture entirely (Witkowski 2010, 237). Muhammad’s own frugality discourse demonstrates that he understood consumption as an inherently moral activity (Wilk 2001). Muhammad therefore stands to some extent in continuity with those nineteenth and twentieth century intellectuals and social scientists who called for restraint in spending both to cultivate upright living and to promote self-reflection

and authenticity (Horowitz 1984, xxxi). Muhammad’s thoughts on thrift fit well within the work of Shi who traces the quest for simplicity from the Puritans to Jimmy Carter and complements his overall argument that, despite the difficulty of defining the nature of or means to the simple life, the call to escape the market “has repeatedly proven its worth to the moral health of the nation and the spiritual health of its practitioners” (1985, 281). Glickman’s (2009) more granular study focuses on the practice of thrift as it relates to defined social causes championed by consumer activists and boycotters, many of whom focused their efforts on remediating racial injustices or oppression.

A study of thrift in the Nation of Islam contributes to our understanding of the frugality discourse by focusing on eschatology rather than personal piety, and revolution rather than social activism. Unlike the examples Glickman provides, thrift for Elijah Muhammad constituted the means not to reform society but overthrow it and usher in the end of history. To be sure, Muhammad and his followers employed thrift both to promote personal spiritual health and achieve certain social aims. On the other hand, Muhammad looked forward to a time when thrift would both catalyze the apocalypse and simultaneously cease as a moral imperative. In the blessed state—a Heaven on Earth, a definitively materialistic state in Muhammad’s theology—his followers could consume all they wanted. Consumption and participation in the market were not inherently wicked and were in fact the highest possible good when aimed at the proper goals. As a prophet, then, Muhammad highlighted consumption as both a sign of moral decline and a sign of agency. The difference was not only what to consume but when to consume it—present thrift followed by eschatological consumption. The practice of thrift for members of the Nation not only inculcated the righteousness required for passing through the final judgment, but also prepared them for their ultimate enjoyment of earthly abundance.

## Background

Although the Nation of Islam both fascinated and frightened White America in the 1960s, this later notoriety belies its obscure beginnings and slow growth. A peddler named Wallace Fard, who also used several other names and curiously enough appears to have been a White man, founded the NOI in 1930 in Detroit. Fard’s origin and life after 1934 remain a mystery even today. There is some evidence that Fard participated in Black Nationalist groups such as Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple of America and Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association before he founded the NOI. In the wake Garvey’s deportation and Ali’s death, Fard had an opening for his own brand of Black Nationalism, one that like the Moorish Science Temple focused on Islam rather than Christianity but like the Universal Negro Improvement Association adopted an adversarial stance towards the American government (Evanzz 1999; Gibson 2012; Lincoln 1994).

A series of sensational news stories in the Black press about ritual murder among one of his alleged followers led to Fard’s flight to Chicago. He soon disappeared from the historical record, with his ultimate destiny unknown. A migrant from Sandersville, Georgia named Elijah Poole, who soon took the name Elijah Muhammad, emerged as the leader of the NOI after Fard’s disappearance. Muhammad began teaching that Fard was in fact Allah incarnate, a doctrine that would later constitute the primary barrier to the Nation’s acceptance into the worldwide Muslim community. After Muhammad went to prison in 1942 for refusing to serve

in the military, the Nation dwindled to perhaps just a few hundred members. Upon his release in 1946, though, he worked zealously to expand NOI membership. By 1960, the Nation counted thousands of members, although no firm membership statistics for any time in the Nation’s history exist (Gibson 2012, 13–49; Lincoln 1994, 2).

Fard and Muhammad left several texts that expound their doctrines. These texts form the basis of this study. Fard presented his early teachings in the form of two oral catechisms – *The Secret Ritual of the Nation of Islam* and *Teaching for the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in a Mathematical Way*. The former consists of two lessons, with Lesson 1 containing fourteen questions and answers and Lesson 2 containing forty. The *Teaching for the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in a Mathematical Way* consists of thirty-four enigmatic and sometimes nonsensical word problems designed to teach the Nation’s doctrine. Although Fard did not intend for his followers to share these teachings with those outside the NOI (Beynon 1938, 901), today they are readily available on many NOI-affiliated groups’ websites as well as in a single-volume reprint edition known as *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons*, published under the name Master Fard Muhammad (2009). Adding to the confusion, both texts now have different names within *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons* volume. *The Secret Ritual* is now identified as two documents: “Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No.1” and “Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 2.” Fard’s *Teaching for the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in a Mathematical Way* is now “The Problem Book.” Because page numbers are not uniform and the text not confined to a single format, references to both “Lost-Found Muslim Lessons” and “The Problem Book” directly cite the relevant problem or question rather than specific page numbers.

The NOI canon includes traditional scriptures as well. The Bible and Ahmadiyya Muhammad Ali’s translation of the Qur’an join with Fard’s works to form the basis of Elijah Muhammad’s theology, although he gave primacy to the Qur’an because “[f]rom the first day that the White race received the Divine Scripture they started tampering with its truth to make it to suit themselves and blind the black man.” God therefore declared the Bible to be “the *poison book*” (E. Muhammad 2008, 1:12). According to Saunders, “Muhammad nevertheless cited the Bible far more than the Qur’an in presenting and explaining his doctrines, perhaps because as the son of a Baptist preacher he was more familiar with its contents, at least initially” (2017, 237). Berg also notes that many of Muhammad’s sociological teachings “drew on no scriptural support—neither biblical nor quranic” (2009, 102). Indeed, “Muhammad’s claim to act as the sole representative of Allah on earth meant that his followers relied not so much on sacred scriptures as on Muhammad’s writings about the sacred scriptures” (Saunders 2017, 237). Curtis relates that his informants believed that they did not need to read the Qur’an because “Elijah Muhammad did all of our reading and interpreting for us” (2006, 46).

Elijah Muhammad disseminated his readings and interpretations through several channels, including a weekly column in the *Pittsburgh Courier* during the 1950s and the Nation’s newspaper that began publication in 1960. Muhammad compiled many of these writings into several books, the most important of which are two volumes published in 1957 and entitled *The Supreme Wisdom* (not to be confused with the more recent printing of Fard’s catechisms) and a 1965 book entitled *Message to the Blackman in America*. This study explores Muhammad’s teaching on thrift primarily through a close reading of both *Supreme Wisdom* volumes and *Message to the Blackman in America*, but also references Fard’s earlier work and some of Muhammad’s other writings as well.

## Food

Thrift for the Nation of Islam begins with diet, a topic that especially interested Fard and Muhammad. Like Muslims from other parts of the world, members of the NOI refrain from eating pork products. The Nation’s abstention, though, stems not only from a sense that the animals are unclean, but also from a belief that Whites developed the pig as a tool to oppress Blacks. In Problem 9 of “The Problem Book,” Fard taught that eating “poison animal,” by which he always meant pigs, reduces brain mass at the rate of “one sixtieth of an ounce per every ten ounces of poison animal.” Devils know that they can successfully rob Original Men when the latter have eaten enough pork so that they suffer from “one-third of unsound brain.” Fard directed his students to use this information to calculate how much pork an original man must eat before he is susceptible to robbery by Whites.

Muhammad expounded upon his teacher’s admonitions and warned Blacks not to “let the Caucasians attract you” to eat pork (2008, 1:23). “The hog,” Muhammad (2008, 1:22) claimed, “is the cause, the root of most of our sickness.” This animal “is one of Allah’s most hated and never intended to be eaten.” Muhammad would later claim that the pig “was made for the white race and for medical purposes only” (2008, 1:42), which is apparently why Whites can eat pork and still retain enough brain power to rob Blacks. Muhammad even went so far as to group those who eat pork with adulterers, thieves, murders, and liars, none of whom will “be recognized as Servants of Allah” (2008, 1:22).

As terrible as pork consumption is, eating bacon and ham is only a symptom of the overarching problem for Black Americans. According to Fard and Muhammad, Black Americans were “living other than” themselves, going about their days in a manner contrary to both their essential nature and to the purposes for which Allah created them. Fard prefaced Problem 5 of the “The Problem Book” with the statement that the “uncle of Mr. W. D. Fard lives in the wilderness of North America” and “because he is living other than himself . . . his weight is greater than his height and his blood pressure registers greater than thirty-two.” Whatever Fard’s statement regarding blood pressure might mean, he clearly taught that obesity contributed to the untimely death of his “uncle” at “the age of forty-four years.” Problem 6 features another uncle who “lived other than himself” and consequently suffered from “fever, headaches, chills, grippe, hay fever, regular fever, rheumatism,” not to mention “pain in all his joints” along with “foot ailments and toothaches.”

“Living other than” themselves resulted in large part from lack of self-control with respect to pork and other food. In addition to “the uncle of Mr. W. D. Fard” whose “weight is greater than his height” mentioned in Problem 5, Fard described in Problem 1 the “wife of Mr. W. D. Fard’s uncle” who “weighs other than herself” and consequently suffers from “rheumatism, headaches,” and “pain in all joints.” Fard identified not only pork, but also bread, rice, and “other meal helper” as also causing these health problems. Allah forbids alcohol, Muhammad explained, but Black Americans still drink it. In addition to pork, Muhammad also listed cornbread as another cause of “death to my people in the southern parts of this country” (2008, 1:42). He even asked his followers to refrain from eating “field peas such as brown or black-eyed peas and collard greens.” They should instead eat “beef, lamb, chicken, and fish,” but only if fresh. Milk, cheese, and whole-wheat bread are also acceptable (2008, 1:30).

These foods are however more expensive. Muhammad recognized that “most poor people like us eat the inexpensive food because we do not have the money to buy expensive foods that rich millionaires eat” (1997, 79). Members of the NOI faced a dilemma: how to eat the right foods while not having enough money to purchase them. Muhammad consequently called his followers to “[s]top eating yourselves to death by eating three meals a day.” “Eat once a day,” he continued, “and eat the best food, which when eaten correctly keeps you in the best of health” (2008, 1:30) Eating the best food, in moderation, was therefore one key to experiencing Heaven on Earth.

Valuing quality over quantity had spiritual and psychological benefits as well. Eating the right food constituted a rebellion against White power. Potorti (2017, 70) writes that by “learning what to eat and when . . . black Americans would develop the ability to be masters of their own bodies and, thus, their own fates.” It was after all, according to Muhammad, “the slavemasters” who taught Black Americans “to eat the wrong food” (2008, 1:11). Fear of not having enough to eat led Black Americans to cower before the White man (1965, 45). Cutting expenses on food reduces dependence on White people and encourages dependence on God who is the ultimate sources of all sustenance. Muhammad pointed out that “it was the want of bread and meat that first of all gave Moses and Aaron much trouble trying to lead the people into spiritual knowledge of Jehovah” and that the Israelites’ “longing for the food of their slave-masters” caused them to turn away from the truths they had learned so recently during the Exodus. Self-mastery, not reliance on the sustenance the slave masters provided, was the first step toward the same “knowledge of Jehovah” that Moses and Aaron wanted to give the Israelites, knowledge that the Israelites forfeited by giving in to their base appetites (1965, 155).

Fard’s earliest discussions of health matters struck a chord with southern migrants in Detroit. Elijah Muhammad himself had migrated from Georgia in 1923. As Beynon (1938, 895, 899) reported in what is probably the first scholarly study of the Nation, many newcomers to Detroit experienced chronic sickness because they had never experienced cold weather and they lived in crowded, poorly ventilated apartments and houses. Data on death rates in Detroit in 1930 support Beynon’s more anecdotal evidence. African Americans in Detroit died at a rate of 15.6 per one thousand, while the rate for Whites was 8.6 per one thousand. In Detroit in 1925, tuberculosis caused an astounding 300.2 deaths per 1,000 among Black residents compared to only 59.5 per one thousand for Whites (Thomas 1992, 104). Detroit’s African American citizens were certainly aware of this problem. Health organizations sponsored student essay contests on tuberculosis prevention, and some of Detroit’s leading Black physicians started special programs to thwart the illness (*Chicago Defender* 1930; 1934a). In 1934, Detroit’s White physicians charged Black doctors with being “solicitous of the welfare of their people in matters of health,” largely because of the conditions observed in tuberculosis treatment wards (*Chicago Defender* 1934c). Tuberculosis was not the only disease that took large numbers of Blacks in Detroit, however. Heart problems caused the second most deaths in Detroit in 1929. In that same year, Detroit also had the highest rate of diphtheria of any large city in America (U.S. Department of Commerce 1932, 403, 20).

The study of historical racial health disparities is an important subfield in the discipline of public health that presents many challenges due to the nature of archival materials related to the subject and the multiplying compounding variables that come into play when assessing

correlation across time without the benefit of a controlled longitudinal study. The few studies that have appeared, though, support the perception that throughout the twentieth century Black Americans of all socioeconomic levels had shorter lifespans than Whites (Logan and Palmer 2014). Elijah Muhammad not only offered one explanation as to why this was so but also provided concrete steps that they at least believed could bring personal wellbeing.

Muhammad however aimed beyond personal wellbeing to achieving the blessed state. He wants the “so-called Negroes” to understand “that not one of my poor people will go to Heaven (see the hereafter) who eats this POISON HOG after being given the knowledge” (2008, 1:21–22). The decision to abstain from swine and other foods marks followers of the truth. Muhammad goes so far as to affirm “that people eating swine flesh, committing acts of adultery, robbing, murdering and lying shall not be recognized as servants of God and they won’t see the hereafter” (2008, 1:22). Thus, the denial of a dual human nature and a personal spiritual existence after physical death combined with a stark recognition of the conditions under which Blacks in the urban north lived to give an eschatological bent to Muhammad’s teachings on material reality, and especially his teachings on food and diet.

### Dignity

The poverty and discrimination southern Blacks faced in Detroit provides an important backdrop for understanding the appeal of Elijah Muhammad’s program. A philosophy that focused on self-respect and opposition to the White power structure resonated with those recent arrivals whose hope for a better life met the harsh reality of poor living conditions, employment discrimination, and racial animosity. Elijah Muhammad was just one of hundreds of thousands of southerners who both witnessed and helped cause profound changes in the urban North before World War II. Muhammad left the South in part because he witnessed and at times personally experienced White brutality against those Black residents who did not seem to know, or want to acknowledge, their place in society. In Detroit, however, he suffered through a series of unstable, low paying, monotonous jobs that left him emotionally broken and beholden to alcohol for relief (Clegg 1997, 3–17).

In the early days of the Great Migration, the outlook for Blacks from the South was at least a little more hopeful than Muhammad’s story might indicate. The Black sociologist and clergyman George Edmund Haynes wrote a report for the Detroit Urban League in 1918 detailing challenges and opportunities for southern transplants. He was guardedly optimistic. Blacks arriving from the South “were for the most part unskilled and with little education but were seeking better things” (1969, 9) Fortunately, according to Haynes, “Detroit ha[d] removed the barriers from the employment of Negroes in many lines” (1969, 12). Southern migrants were earning almost one hundred dollars a month on average, much better than they would have earned had they stayed in the South. Furthermore, Haynes (1969, 16) believed that Detroit’s status as an open-shop city would allow the overwhelmingly unskilled southern Black labor force access to valuable training. Haynes concluded that if Black migrants did “the work open to them with such efficiency and satisfaction that when the present need of the War inflated industry is past their labor will be wanted along with that of other labor groups” (1969, 12).

Despite his optimism, Haynes was not blind to the challenges Black migrants faced. He identified poor housing as one primary concern. He reported that 12,000–15,000 people lived

in the Black district of the city whereas only half that number had lived there before the Great Migration (1969, 21). High rents and a scarcity of Black housing combined to bring about “the lodger evil” by which two thirds of Detroit’s Black families had to take in boarders (1969, 22). Haynes believed that lodgers put undue stress on family life and worried about the social ills that came along with overcrowded conditions. The situation only worsened as Detroit’s Black population tripled from approximately forty thousand in 1920 to 120,000 in 1930 (Geschwender 1977, 59). In Black neighborhoods he counted three times as many saloons, pool halls, and gambling parlors as churches (Haynes 1969, 35).

Both structural changes in Detroit’s economy and racism among Detroit’s employers bore out Haynes’s fears. With respect to Black males, Detroit was the most industrialized city in the nation, with 79 percent working in manufacturing (Peterson 1979, 177). The vast majority of these workers came from rural areas and like Muhammad had never worked in factories before arriving in the city. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, when most Black migrants arrived, fewer than 10 percent of auto industry jobs required skilled labor (Peterson 1979, 179). The average Black worker had little hope of gaining the skills necessary to attain one of these relatively few stable, higher paying jobs. Although Ford employed large numbers of Black workers and even placed some in supervisory roles, most found themselves working those jobs Whites viewed as dangerous or menial (Meier and Rudwick 2007, 8). Black migrants from the South fared even worse than those Black residents born in the North. The Great Depression hit these southern migrant communities especially hard, bringing high unemployment and what Beynon described as Southerners’ “first experience of urban destitution” (1938, 899). Some White employers heaped insult upon injury when during the New Deal they laid off Black workers because they did not want to pay them the federally mandated wages (Thomas 1992, 149). Although they would eventually catch up, in the 1930s southern-born Blacks were less likely to own homes and more likely to work in difficult or dangerous jobs. Moreover, southerners earned less than northerners at all education levels (Gregory 2005, 344–45, 350). Detroit was not the Promised Land of southern migrants’ imagination after all (Gregory 2005, 49–54). Elijah Muhammad was not the only migrant to fall into despair and alcoholism.

Economic hardship and frustrated hopes were harder to bear without the social and economic safety net that characterized rural southern life. Mutual aid societies, and especially those cooperative groups that the pioneering Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1963, 36) called “sickness and burial societies,” flourished in the South after the Civil War. These societies were however largely absent in the North. Frazier goes so far as to claim that “in the crowded slums of northern cities, neighborliness and friendship no longer had any meaning” (1963, 48). Although perhaps hyperbolic, his statement does seem accurate to the extent that, at least in Detroit, Black life insurance companies and credit unions did not begin operating in earnest until the late 1920s (Thomas 1992, 184–6). As in the South, churches were the center of social services for the Black community, but even here, northern churches did not always dignify southerners with the firm right hand of fellowship. The trade unions that provided support for White workers were also not open to Blacks due to both their lack of skill and their race (Thomas 1992, 278). Unions not surprisingly drew Fard’s ire from the Nation’s earliest days. Beynon reported that the NOI talked “violently of the war of the C.I.O. against Allah, and the need of removing from the Planet Earth all Union organizers” (1938, 904–5).



A sense of personal dignity and feelings of self-respect would be difficult to maintain amid such overwhelming social forces. In such a situation, simply maintaining a respectable house or apartment, dressing neatly, and possessing a few of the goods offered by modern consumer society might all serve as powerful weapons against oppression and challenges to the tropes of White supremacy (Higginbotham 1993). In her study of Black women in 1930s Detroit, Walcott (2001, 6-8) describes the convergence of bourgeois respectability, embodied in various moral reform movements, and a working-class respectability that focused more on dignity and self-determination than on middle-class manners. Members of the NOI embodied this convergence. Beynon reported that Fard’s followers bought “more expensive furniture, automobiles, and clothes than do their neighbors even in these areas of higher-class residence” (1938, 904–5). This apparent middle-class consumerism that Beynon witnessed functioned as a type of object lesson. Islam provided a path to social respectability in the face discrimination and economic uncertainty. At the same time, and perhaps speaking from his own experience, Muhammad taught his followers that unemployment and low wages did not have to lead them into “[g]luttony, drunkenness, idleness, and extra-marital sex relations” (Beynon 1938, 901–2). Frequent baths, meticulous housekeeping, and avoidance of social vices were just some of the ways Muslims could demonstrate their dignity as the devils did all in their power to strip them of it.

Black Muslims did not however embrace a purely individualistic consumerism. All followers of Allah should reap the fruits of hard labor together. Fard taught in the eighth question of “Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 1” that Muslims are to “advocate a society of men or groups of men for one common cause” and that the ultimate goal is “equality,” a term that he defines as being “equal in everything.” This equality also entailed some relief for the individual worker, however. In Problem 32 of “The Problem Book,” Fard described a Black worker who “works sixteen hours out of twenty-four for a very little pay” only to have “a Cave man” bilk him out of his money by selling him a cheap used car. The same hard worker meets with further misfortune in Problem 34 when “a Satan” comes to his door and sells “him Life insurance,” a product that Fard apparently viewed with deep suspicion. As Walcott (2001, 6–8) notes, Fard’s practice of proselytizing while peddling textiles connected spirituality and wise consumption from the very beginning, a connection that remained in the teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

Muhammad elaborated on Fard’s earlier teachings and applied principles of wise, restrained consumption to all areas of life. Even if members of the NOI purchased more expensive consumer goods, they did not necessarily live in luxury. Just as he taught his followers to eat good food once daily, he also discouraged extravagance. The “general conception of the Negro leader,” a figure for which Muhammad has nothing but contempt, is known in part for his “expensive clothes” and “by the make of automobile he drives” (1965, xxi). Muslims, contrary to Beynon’s observations, were not even to strive to purchase a car, and when they did, they were to shun “riding in luxury” and instead buy a car they could afford (E. Muhammad 1965, 198). One of the greatest benefits of Islam was that it brought an end to striving after vanities and engendered “peace of mind and contentment” (E. Muhammad 2008, 2:77).

The NOI also presented the possibility of economic support without sacrificing personal dignity. Even had Detroit’s churches been able to meet the tremendous need during the Great

Depression, southern migrants like Muhammad might not have accepted their help. Prominent church leaders served on the board of the Urban League, a group that occupied an ambiguous place in Detroit’s Black society. Ostensibly an organization whose goal was to equip Black residents for and then place them in good jobs, it was almost entirely beholden to the Detroit Employer’s Association for funding. The League also received substantial funding from Detroit’s Associated Charities, a group whose board consisted of wealthy White citizens including several Ford executives. Even though the group aimed at empowering Blacks with good paying jobs, it did not support organized labor, nor did it push especially hard for the hiring of Blacks. In the words of Dillard (2007, 100), the Urban League, the established churches, and the charities “refused to forget the ‘debt’ that African Americans supposedly owed (Uncle) Henry Ford” and consequently were less than encouraging towards any brand of worker militancy.

Detroit Urban League official Forrester B. Washington’s address before the Dress Well Club, a group that the prominent Second Baptist Church helped form, did nothing to challenge migrants’ perception of the organization as a paternalistic collaborator with big business. Washington told his audience that segregation in Detroit was increasing “[p]artly on account of southern whites” but “chiefly on account of” southern migrants’ obnoxious behavior (Levine 1976: 88). Washington chided new arrivals for “sitting around during the summer months barefoot” and “talking loudly in public places” (Levine, 1976: 87). He also criticized “the loud, noisy, almost nude women in ‘Mother Hubbards’ standing around on the public thoroughfares” (Levine, 1976: 88) Washington advised his listeners not “to fool with patent medicines” or “do your children’s hair up in knots, alleys, or canals” (Levine 1976, 89, 90). Washington was perhaps attempting to protect his own position as a middle-class Black leader in Detroit society by separating himself from those whom he felt brought segregation on themselves through their unseemly behavior. Southern migrants almost certainly saw things differently.

Muhammad echoed many of these same criticisms, but respected his followers’ dignity in that he encouraged respectable behavior as a means of individual betterment rather than a means to win the approval of Whites. Muhammad blamed the idea that Blacks are “to look for salvation after death” on the unscrupulous “preachers and politician, who live off the ignorance of the people” (2008, 1:41). Putting off ultimate salvation until after physical death encouraged Black Americans “to eat the wrong food, to drink, to indulge in games of chance (gambling),” and “to go half-dressed” (2008, 1:41). Recognizing the importance of the here-and-now would also help women stop “bleaching, powdering, ironing and coloring their hair, painting their lips, cheeks, eyebrows, wearing shorts, going half-nude in public, and going swimming on beaches with men” (2008, 2:57–8). Women were to likewise stop using foul language, “going into barns and taverns and sitting and drinking with men and strangers,” and “smoking” (2008, 2:58). Like the ancient Babylonians, Americans love “gambling and sports of every evil,” and so Black Americans must abstain from them as well (2008, 2:33). Men in particular were to look to the Prodigal Son and learn the dangers of following “the loose life of strange women, drinking, gambling, and adultery” (1965, 25). The contemptible, integrationist “Negro leader” mentioned above “is typed by the costly liquors he orders” (1965, xxi). His own behavior discredited him.

As with the love of much food, falling into the temptations of a profligate life has adverse effects on health, but also leads to economic subservience. “Let us see how much we spend unnecessarily,” Muhammad began. If an average Black American in an average year spends a quarter a week on cigarettes, another quarter on beer, and another on sporting pursuits, then Muhammad estimated that collectively Original Men in America spend \$65 million each year in those three areas. He added on another \$65 million spent on gambling, which brought the total to around \$260 million spent annually on vices that dishonor Allah and keep His people subservient to the devils. The figure jumped higher when Muhammad considered the amount wasted on the “extravagant buying of clothes, furniture and cars” (1965, 195–96).

Status came not from mimicking the extravagance of the “Negro leader” nor consumer habits of Whites, but from a sense of personal dignity and self-respect. Unlike Christianity, which espouses continued spiritual life after physical death along with an earthly heavenly state after the resurrection, Islam engendered a desire “to be clean, internally and externally, and to have for the first time a sense of dignity” (Muhammad 2008, 1:34). Muhammad in short worked to build “a well-educated, cultured courteous people” who display the “good manners” characteristic of “the civilised man,” and “who doesn’t fail to perform his duty” (2008, 1:39) Politeness, contentment, and culture cannot help but create good citizens. Muhammad (2008, 2:78) therefore answered the argument that his people are “subversive” because such people could never do “wrong to anyone.” If they cultivated personal righteousness, Allah would fight the final battle for them.

## Land

Dignity and self-respect in Muhammad’s writings correlate closely to the idea of hard work, and for him, hard work ultimately brings independence from those who try to control others’ labor. Muhammad believed that “the religion of Islam makes one think in terms of one’s own kind,” and this thinking in turn “produces an industrious people who are self-independent” (2008, 1:33). Unfortunately, many of the “the so-called Negroes” had grown “so lazy that [they] are willing to suffer anything rather than go to work” (2008, 1:19). Followers of Allah must rather choose a profession or trade and “do something for [themselves] and [their] kind” (2008, 2:71). “You can’t depend on the white race to care for you forever,” he admonished, so Original Men must bring about the end of their “dependence on them” (2008, 1:33).

Christianity’s focus on a spiritual afterlife enervated Black Americans’ work ethic and further ingrained the slave mentality into their daily habits. Jesus’ statement to his disciples that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven only serves to keep Black Americans content with their poverty, Muhammad reasoned. He reiterated this point through an innovative interpretation of Jesus’ parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. In the parable, the Rich Man feasts while Lazarus begs at the gate, with dogs licking the sores that covered his body. The Rich Man has no concern for Lazarus. When the two men die, Lazarus goes to Heaven and the Rich Man to hell. The gospels present the parable as an admonition to care for the poor. In Muhammad’s reading, however, it becomes an object lesson on the dangers of envy (2008, 2:75). Lazarus, according to Muhammad, “was so charmed by the wealth and food of the Rich Man that he couldn’t leave his gate to seek same for himself” (2008, 1:17). The slave mentality had so ensnared

Lazarus that he even wanted to give water to the Rich Man as he suffered eternal torment. Again, the Gospels present Lazarus as compassionate, while Muhammad viewed him as weak.

The ultimate answer was for Black Americans to find their own homeland, “a country to ourselves where we can live in unity, harmony and peace, away from our enemies” and where “highly trained men and women can be benefitted” (E. Muhammad 2008, 2:72). Exploring the familiar Exodus theme, Muhammad wrote that Whites do not want to see their slaves leave “any more than Pharaoh wanted to see his slaves leave Egypt” (2008, 2:77), but Allah is working on his people’s behalf to create for them a place of their own. Leaving White America behind and going to a true homeland would “prove to be a great boon for us,” Muhammad taught, because it would “help raise the so-called Negroes of America up to their proper place in civilization” (2008, 2:39)

Elijah Muhammad’s bold plan for creating this homeland combined all his former teachings about the relationship between thrift, healthy eating, self-respect, and self-determination into one economic program. In *Message to the Blackman in America*, he called for “our people in America whose parents or grandparents were descendants from slaves to be allowed, to establish a separate state or territory of their own—either on this continent or elsewhere” (1965, 161). He demanded that Whites “supply our needs in this separate territory for the next 20 or 25 years until we are able to produce and supply our own needs,” not because he wanted White charity, but because Whites owed Blacks as much (1965, 161). Black Americans’ “sweat and blood has helped to build the greatest country and government on the earth” (1965, 165). If Whites were “truthful about their professed friendship toward the so-called Negro, they can prove it by dividing America up with their slaves” (1965, 164).

Muhammad’s teaching on geographic separation from Whites differs from that of his teacher. Fard taught in the first question of “Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 1” that the Original Man’s home was not in Africa but rather the Holy City of Mecca. The way back to Mecca, according to the tenth question of the same catechism was for Fard’s followers to murder Whites. Whites are “One Hundred Percent wicked and will not keep and obey the laws of Islam.” Should Fard’s followers allow Whites to live, they “would sting someone else.” If a Muslim did his duty and killed four devils, he would in turn receive “a free transportation in the Holy City (Mecca) to see Brother Muhammad.” Whatever Fard may have meant by this teaching, it appears that only one of his thousands of followers in Detroit, not to mention subsequent generations who continue to venerate him as Allah incarnate, may have taken him seriously.

By the 1960s, the NOI teaching on geographic separation had become more explicit and definite. Muhammad called his followers to “pool your resources, education and qualifications for independence” and to “spend your money among yourselves” (1965, 171). He envisioned a completely Black economic system. “If there are six or eight Muslims with knowledge and experience of the grocery business,” he wrote, “pool your knowledge, open a grocery store—and you work collectively and harmoniously.” The same method applies to “dressmaking, merchandising, trades, maintenance.” Black consumers must then follow the example of Whites, Chinese, and Japanese who patronise one another’s businesses and hire from within their own group” (1965, 1741).

The first step in implementing this economic program is to stop “wasteful spending” and instead spend in an “economical way.” The \$260 million alone saved when Black Americans stop buying alcohol, tobacco, and poison food and cease their gambling would place them on a far better economic footing. With these savings, Black Americans could then purchase real estate to grow their own food, harvest their own timber, produce their own bricks, gin and mill their own cotton, and raise their own cattle. Muhammed estimated that by following this method, clothing costs alone would be cut “by about 30 per cent.” Combined with savings from other sources, Black Americans could care for themselves without recourse to White resources (1965, 196).

Muhammad’s followers could purchase their own homeland, he believed, if the “entire nation” would “sacrifice for three years.” In addition to refraining from buying “whiskey, beer, wine, cigarettes, tobacco and drugs,” members of the NOI should also “buy not more than three suits of clothes a year, never exceeding \$65 in cost.” They should likewise never pay “over \$16 a pair” for shoes. If they followed this thrift plan—eating one meal a day, refraining from extravagant purchases of clothes and furnishings, abstaining from gambling, drugs, and alcohol, and setting a side one quarter a week—then the Nation would soon “have enough money in our banks to purchase lands sufficient to feed the 22 million black people” (1965, 193).

For Elijah Muhammad, thrift was a means of both personal and collective salvation. He likened the NOI program to the five-year plans of Russia and Pakistan because they moved whole nations toward economic self-sufficiency. Muhammad’s eschatology freighted his savings plan with even greater significance than these national economic programs. If his followers would only follow his prescription for saving and send a little each month for safe keeping to NOI headquarters on South Greenwood Avenue in Chicago, then they could finally obey his call to separate themselves from Whites completely—fly to their own—so that none of them would be caught up in His wrath against the devils (E. Muhammad 1965, 193).

## Conclusion

Muhammad therefore tapped into a discourse of frugality and respectability while fitting it to his own ends. His teachings were perhaps even more revolutionary considering the decades during which he led the Nation. Brissett argues that in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century several “anti-thrift” institutions arose that worked against “the practice of thrift among low-income groups”—institutions such as lotteries and unregulated banks and lenders catering to the poor (Brissett 2011, 493). Glickman furthermore identifies the post-World War II years as a time in which Americans repudiated the “ideology of thrift” (2011, 266). Not only did the New Deal and Keynesian economics disavow thrift as a national imperative, but individual groups highlighted selective consumption as a virtuous undertaking. The idea of virtuous selective consumption of course appears in Muhammad’s discourse especially as it relates to the question of land. At the same time, as noted above, the materiality of Muhammad’s blessed state makes the land, and consequently the Black-oriented consumption that brings about the Black homeland, eschatological endeavors.

Elijah Muhammad’s thrift program obviously becomes unnecessary once God judges the wicked, which according to his calculations could take place any time after 1955. Believers in Islam will in the Hereafter “be clothed in silk, interwoven with gold, and eat the best food that

[they] desire” (2008, 1:26). Muhammad did not identify the difference between the present and future states as stemming from physical versus spiritual existence or from the opposition between an earthly and a heavenly home. Both states for Muhammad were decidedly earthly and material. The differences instead stemmed from his followers’ relationship to the market and independence from the White economic establishment. Followers of Allah could enjoy the blessed state before the final judgment by turning to the Truth and taking positive steps to free themselves from the power of the market. They would then enjoy material pleasures fully only after “the destruction of the unrighteous” (E. Muhammad 2008, 2:40). When Muhammad discussed the Hereafter, then, he described both the present mental resurrection of those living behind the White man’s veil of deceit as well as the future indulgence that can only take place after the immanent destruction of the oppressors.

With the White devils destroyed and Heaven fully realized, the need for thrift will have past and Original Men can enjoy the sumptuous feasts and beautiful clothes they were meant to enjoy all along. Muhammad intuitively understood the extent to which choices to buy and not buy had the power to “establish new personal identities and to break with old ones” to alter “concepts of the past and future” and bring forth new “social solidarities and opportunities for participation” (Cross 2000, 2). Muhammad’s message on consumption indeed constituted more than self-help or even social action. It was the key to Supreme Wisdom, and the key to heaven, for his followers.

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