Re-imagining race and representation: The black body in the Nation of Islam

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Abstract
As a project located in the academic field of the study of African American religion, this dissertation examines the black body in four critical moments of the Nation of Islam (NOI), represented by the ministries of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan. Defined as the material locus of the self and the site of the symbolization of a given collective culture and cosmology, the project argues that the body was the central concern in all four moments in their religious efforts to re-imagine, reform, and re-present bodies that they perceived had been distorted, disfigured, and devalued by racist violence, discourses, and oppression in America. The research contends that the NOI was only partially “successful” in its reformative efforts to reconstitute and valorize black bodies. Utilizing the hermeneutical frameworks of critical social theory, which includes psychoanalysis, philosophy of embodiment (phenomenology) and race, and a theory and method based approach to the study of religion in its analysis and interpretation, the project suggests that the NOI may have internalized many of the dynamics and values of white supremacy and, as a consequence, re-produced and re-deployed its own system of intra-“race” marginalization and hierarchical classification within the NOI and in the greater African American community. Such discrimination was predicated upon an ideal black bodily economy that ranked bodies based on indicators such as gender, sexuality, and skin complexion. As a result of having co-opted middle-class American and African American values and practices, the research concludes that the NOI converted problematic issues of “race” into an ambiguous and indeterminate class system in their response to the exigencies of the conditions of existence for African Americans. The research suggests both the need for greater attention to the body in African American religious studies, analyses of the co-constitutive elements of class, gender, race, and sexuality, and for reflexive consideration of the ways in which systems of domination may be socially reproduced and/or disrupted by marginalized collectivities.

Keyword
African American studies; Black studies; Islamic studies; Religion; Sociology; More...

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Discursively this black male body brings together the dominant institutions of (white) masculine power and authority—criminal justice system, the police, and the news media—to protect (white) Americans from harm. 402. In the first instance, the OG as an emblem of black heterosexual male youth culture threatens and challenges middle-class male (liberal and conservative) conceptions of public civility, private morality, and individual responsibility. CALLALOO. Media representations of black masculinity operate within the cultural politics of blackness on yet another important (and for some) oppositional front. This figure of black masculinity marks the racial and cultural boundaries of a counter-hegemonic blackness which stands for the black nation, the black family.