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The End of a Nation: Warithuddin Muhammad and Muslim Identity in the Nation of Islam

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Warithuddin Muhammad's tenure as the leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI) saw the attempted implementation of universalist doctrine that differed significantly from the particularism practiced by the movement's founding prophet, Elijah Muhammad. Despite an apparent desire to distance the movement from Elijah Muhammad's teachings of the intrinsic link between Blackness and Islam, race remained important for both Warithuddin and his followers. By partially embracing universalist interpretations that purported to view each race as inherently equal from an Islamic viewpoint, Warithuddin could easily be characterized as having tried to "deracialize" the Nation of Islam. With this shift, one would expect the importance of Blackness to significantly decrease within Warithuddin's followers in favor of strengthened identification with the global *umma* (Muslim community). Yet, Warithuddin and his followers refrained from abandoning the significance of Blackness within Islam. Instead, they began to rely on classical Islamic historical narratives—rather than the appropriation of traits linked with socioeconomic privilege as Elijah Muhammad had done—in order to maintain a distinct Black American Muslim identity. In this article, I explore three unique aspects of Warithuddin Muhammad's leadership within the American Muslim community in order to suggest both that race remained important for his movement and that his doctrinal shifts ultimately served to alter Black American Muslim identity by viewing the East—and specifically Arabia—as a powerful source of Islamic authority. After discussing his appropriation of Bilal ibn Rabah, a former Ethiopian slave who became a close companion to the Prophet Muhammad, I address the impact of heightened immigration from predominantly Muslim nation-states during the 1970s and its significance for Warithuddin Muhammad's Qu'ranic exegesis before closing with an examination of his decision to deemphasize the narrative of countercitizenship that was dominant in his father's movement by recognizing the legitimacy of the United States government.

1 Introduction

The Nation of Islam (NOI) was founded in 1932 when Elijah Poole began attracting followers based on his teachings of the intrinsic link between Blackness and Islam and the divine nature of W.D. Fard—a man he met in Detroit in 1931 and believed to be an Arab from Saudi Arabia (Grewal 2014, 101). By the time of Fard’s disappearance in 1934, Poole had become known as Elijah Muhammad, and he had amassed a following comprised of thousands of Black Muslims (Grewal 2014, 101-102). After more than four decades in power, Elijah Muhammad died in 1975. His youngest son, Wallace Muhammad (1933-2008), became the leader of a movement that now held economic power and wielded impressive influence within Black communities throughout the United States (Lee 1996, 68). Wallace Muhammad—who had been punished by his father on multiple occasions for drifting too close to orthodox Sunni Islam—worked to implement key doctrinal changes that shifted the movement from the particularist teachings of his father and toward universalist Sunni interpretations that ultimately culminated in the end of the original Nation of Islam (Curtis 2002, 110). After renaming the movement the World Community of al-Islam in the West (WCIW) in 1976, Wallace went on to rename his movement at least two more times before relinquishing official leadership responsibilities in 2003, five years before his death (Gardell 1996, 110; Martin 2008). Wallace—known also as Warith Deen Mohammed and later as Warithuddin Muhammad—continued to act as a leader within Black communities until his death.

His legacy is connected to his attempt to deemphasize race within the Nation of Islam, but this remains an oversimplification. This article looks specifically at three key aspects of Warithuddin Muhammad’s time as a leader in the American Muslim community in order to suggest that Muhammad’s stated desire to lead his followers toward a universalist, “color blind” Islam at times failed to neatly match his actions. To argue that Warithuddin Muhammad continued to emphasize Blackness as he simultaneously advocated a universalist doctrine that differed from that of his father, I highlight his appropriation of Bilal ibn Rabah—an Ethiopian slave who was freed by the Prophet Muhammad and became the first *muezzin* (prayer caller)—and move on to address the significance of increased Muslim immigration to the United States during the 1970s and its impact on Warithuddin Muhammad’s original Qur’anic exegesis before closing with an analysis of his decision to deemphasize the countercitizenship narrative that characterized his father’s movement.

2 The Appropriation of Bilal ibn Rabah by Warithuddin Muhammad

The figure of Bilal ibn Rabah (580-642), an Ethiopian slave who became a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, has frequently represented a source of pride for Blacks (Conrad 1985, 33). Bilal was among the first to follow the teachings of Islam; some have suggested he was only the second adult male convert—with only Abu Bakr (the first Caliph) preceding him (Ware 2014, 27). After being severely beaten and tortured for becoming Muslim, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have sent Abu Bakr to arrange for his freedom. In the following years, Bilal would be appointed by Muhammad as the first *muezzin* (prayer caller) (Ware 2014, 27). Bilal’s legacy became important for various movements and identities; Edward Blyden, often termed the “father of Pan-Africanism,” publicly praised Bilal’s courage, and records preserving Sunjata Keita’s legacy as the founder of the Mali Empire during the thirteenth century frequently claim an ancestral link to Bilal (Sterling 2015, 119; Curtis 2002, 36; Conrad 1985, 33-35). Even before Warithuddin Muhammad ascended to the head of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad—who was ultimately less concerned with Islamic historical narratives—invoked the figure of Bilal, screening an Egyptian film centered on his contributions in 1966 (Curtis 2006, 82). After Elijah Muhammad’s death and Warithuddin Muhammad’s subsequent rise in 1975, the prominence of this Islamic historical narrative increased substantially, with Warithuddin and many of his followers beginning to identify as “Bilalian” (Grewal 2014, 146). Throughout this period, Warithuddin began to alter what many of the Nation of Islam’s followers had previously viewed as the essence of being a Black American Muslim. Whereas being a Black American Muslim in the Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad had often meant wearing suits with bow-ties and maintaining a disciplined posture (customs that he appropriated from socioeco-

nomically privileged Whites), being a Black American Muslim now became closely linked with classical Islamic history and culture (Grewal 2014, 105). In this way, his stated desire to “deracialize” the movement through the implementation of universalist doctrine ultimately resembled a shift in identity more so than a substantive alteration of the movement’s original design. Rather than appropriating customs commonly associated with privilege in the United States and incorporating them into the very essence of Black American Muslim identity as his father had done, Warithuddin looked to the history of Islam and specifically to the figure of Bilal ibn Rabah. Blackness was integral to his father’s movement, and it continued to play an important role under Warithuddin’s leadership even as he simultaneously advocated a universalist interpretation of Islam that theoretically limited the inherent importance of Blackness in Islam.

Bilal’s legacy presented several opportunities for Black Muslims to closely identify. As a Black slave who refused to forego his dedication to Islam in the face of torture, his resilience was a powerful narrative for Black Americans whose lives were deeply impacted by slavery and the denial of civil rights (Grewal 2014, 146). For Elijah Muhammad, this aspect of his legacy—refusing to succumb to injustice—coincided well with Nation of Islam principles of discipline and strength and served to make him an attractive figure for the Nation of Islam to invoke. For Warithuddin Muhammad, Bilal’s status as the first *muezzin* and his close ties to the Prophet Muhammad and Abu Bakr (the first Caliph and Bilal’s ransomer) served as the most integral sources of his authority (Curtis 2002, 119; Gardell 1996, 36). As Gardell (1996) notes, Bilal’s role as the first *muezzin* was incredibly important to Black Muslims because it symbolically asserted that “it is the black man who leads humanity to God” (36). By putting a Black man in this role, the Prophet Muhammad displays the special significance some Black Muslims have interpreted Islam to hold. In one *hadith* (collected sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), he reportedly declared, “Emulate the blacks, for among them are three lords of the people of Paradise” (Ware 2014, 29). Bilal ibn Rabah has been seen as one of these three influential figures. By performing the *adhan* (call to prayer), Bilal played a pivotal role in the life of his fellow Muslims. As the *adhan* sounds, fundamental aspects of daily life are altered or halted altogether while Muslims perform prayer. In this way, the position is linked closely with respect and leadership—something members of the Nation of Islam long demanded. Warithuddin relied on Bilal’s piousness and importance in Islamic history to incorporate the Bilalian historical narrative into Black American Muslim identity.

The differing uses of the Islamic historical narrative of Bilal by Elijah Muhammad and Warithuddin Muhammad are directly related to the sources of Bilal’s authority. Elijah Muhammad shifted the Nation of Islam closer to orthodox Sunni Islam during the 1960s, but the reforms instituted by Warithuddin were significantly more drastic (Curtis 2006, 185). Because Elijah Muhammad often simply ignored challenges to his legitimacy as a Muslim leader by orthodox Sunnis, he was less concerned with Bilal’s ties to traditional sources of Islamic authority. Instead, he used Bilal’s Blackness to further advance particularist Islamic narratives typically rejected by orthodox Sunnis (Curtis 2006, 180). Strangely, as Curtis (2006) notes, Elijah Muhammad’s emphasis on Bilal’s Blackness undermines his core teaching that “all Muslims, based on their very ontology, are black” (82). This is an example of the complexity of Elijah Muhammad’s time as the leader of the Nation of Islam. While he still cultivated Black American Muslim identity in a unique way that differed from what his son would aspire toward, he remained open to new interpretations and potential evolution. Even before Warithuddin succeeded him, the Nation of Islam appeared to be altering the views of racial particularism that were a foundational aspect of its original doctrine.

Warithuddin’s appropriation of Bilal attempted to embrace the universalist interpretations advanced by immigrant Sunni Muslims while still emphasizing his importance as a Black African. Whereas Elijah Muhammad saw Bilal’s companionship with the Prophet Muhammad as evidence of the inherent connection between Black Americans and Islam (Curtis 2006, 180), Warithuddin’s invocation of Bilal was intended to “stake out a special place for [Blacks] within the history of Islam” (Curtis 2002, 119). Both approaches appreciate the importance of Bilal’s Blackness; the difference in the two is a distinction regarding the intrinsic link between Blackness and Islam advocated by Elijah Muhammad. Warithuddin recognized the ideals of racial equality in Islam that are advanced by Bilal’s legacy, but this was not used to explicitly embrace the notion that Islam is

more closely linked to Blackness than other races. This is indicative of Warithuddin's transition to orthodox Sunni Islam; Black Muslims—like all races—held no inherent claim to Islam. Thus, any connection between Blackness and Islam would need to be constructed, as Warithuddin did with the adoption of the term “Bilalian.” While Warithuddin sought to bring the Nation of Islam closer to Sunni orthodoxy, his reliance on the historical Islamic narrative of Bilal is evidence of his refusal to completely “deracialize” the movement.

In November of 1975, Warithuddin oversaw a significant name change regarding the Nation of Islam's popular publication, *Muhammad Speaks* (Ogbar 2004, 44). In further distancing himself from his father's legacy, Warithuddin opted to continue strengthening his community's ties to Bilal ibn Rabah by calling the publication the *Bilalian News* (Lee 1996, 67). The former title was named after Elijah Muhammad, and his writing was frequently featured within it. By replacing his father's name with that of Bilal, Warithuddin symbolically shifted leadership from a charismatic founding prophet in the movement to an influential figure in classical Islamic history—a shift that he later acknowledged detracted from the authority of what he saw as the *true* leader of the movement: the Prophet Muhammad (Curtis 2002, 121). Elijah Muhammad was seen by many within his movement as the ideal Black American Muslim, a concept echoed within orthodox Islam regarding the Prophet Muhammad. By elevating Bilal and the Prophet Muhammad to the role once filled by his father, Warithuddin impacted how his followers conceptualized what it meant to be Black and Muslim. While he continued to focus on Blackness within classical Islamic history—namely through the appropriation of Bilal—Warithuddin also shifted the movement toward the orthodox Sunni Islam practiced by Muslims throughout the world. This shift included a heightened emphasis on classical Islamic learning, with Muhammad encouraging his followers to learn from scholars who had received formal education abroad (Grewal 2014, 148). This serves an indication that Islamic authority no longer stemmed from the teachings and actions of the movement's founding prophet, Elijah Muhammad.

Warithuddin's significant reforms occurred so quickly following his father's death that the movement faced a heightened risk of desertion, with the use of the Islamic historical narrative of Bilal serving to preserve some of the remnants of a movement originally established based on particularist values relating directly to racial justice issues facing Black communities in the United States. Elijah Muhammad's movement may have been seen as heresy by immigrant Sunni Muslims, but he was nonetheless able to accrue a substantial following comprised of Black Americans. By shifting the movement's doctrine toward Sunni Islam, Warithuddin Muhammad began to utilize a form of Islam that held more authority in the eyes of the global *umma* (Muslim community). Despite this, the movement began to suffer from a lack of religious authority in a way that the original Nation of Islam managed to partially avoid (Jackson 2005, 70-71). As Warithuddin moved closer to Sunni orthodoxy, his followers were often viewed as poorly educated adherents to a superior ideology rather than seasoned adherents to a fundamentally different ideology (Jackson 2005, 76).

Warithuddin's shift initially allowed immigrant Muslims to serve as leading sources of authority, while his father had attempted to consolidate power for Black leaders (namely himself). This displays a pitfall of Warithuddin's reinvention of Black American Muslim identity within the movement. His father appropriated parts of the dominant White culture, but he did not seek the permission of White Americans or view them as sources of authority. This meant that Black Muslims in the Nation of Islam were not competing with Whites as to which group more effectively utilized shared practices. Conversely, Warithuddin's emphasis on classical Islamic historical narratives gave authority to those perceived to have the best understanding of them: Muslims from the romanticized East. Because these Muslims were seen as figures of authority, Warithuddin and his followers did compete with them regarding which group held primacy over their shared values. This competition was perhaps not conscious in the minds of each Black American Muslim. Yet, as speaking Arabic, growing beards, and embracing Middle Eastern fashion styles became common for Warithuddin's followers, it nonetheless seemed as if Black American Muslims were abandoning the customs of the Nation of Islam's history—a history closely linked to Elijah Muhammad—in order to appropriate cultural aspects of the Middle East (Jackson 2005, 72). This appropriation

played into the conceptualization of the inherent authority of immigrant Muslims.

When undergoing doctrinal changes, it was necessary for Warithuddin to preserve some aspect of the racially-based original movement in order to keep followers; the appropriation of Bilal, at least at this point, allowed Warithuddin to transition to Sunni orthodoxy while still demonstrating his loyalty to the Black community from which nearly all of his followers hailed. Warithuddin distanced himself and the movement from his father's teachings of the inherent connection between Blackness and Islam, but he continued his father's legacy of using Islam to confront the unique struggles of African Americans by altering the identities of African American Muslims to include the Islamic historical figure of Bilal ibn Rabah.

3 Immigrant Islam and Warithuddin Muhammad's Qur'anic Exegesis

In the 1960s and 1970s, orthodox Sunni Muslims—many of whom were professionally trained in secular fields—began to immigrate to the United States in large numbers (Grewal 2014, 137). The metropolitan areas where the Nation of Islam previously thrived now shared communities with Arabic-speaking immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia (Jackson 2005, 71). These immigrants were often equipped with superior financial resources, and with the founding of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) in 1963 a strong organizational structure began to form (Jackson 2005, 71). Elijah Muhammad was faced with challenges from the immigrant Muslim community toward the end of his tenure as the movement's leader, but the near entirety of Warithuddin Muhammad's leadership saw a struggle for religious authority in a way Elijah Muhammad was partially able to avert.

Beginning in 1978, immigrant Muslims began to voice concerns regarding Warithuddin's appropriation of Bilal ibn Rabah (Curtis 2002, 120). At first, he expressed opposition and continued to maintain that his use of Bilal was not prohibited by Islam. Later, in 1980, he opted to relinquish the name "Bilalian" and rename the group's publication the *World Muslim News* in an attempt to conform to Sunni orthodoxy (Curtis 2002, 121). During the mid 1980s, his attitude toward immigrant Islam made a marked shift. Grewal (2014) asserts that "Muhammad vigorously asserted his own authority to interpret the Quran despite being primarily self-taught" (148). Warithuddin Muhammad's complexity is clearly shown during this period. Despite his willingness to forego certain racial aspects of the movement, he continued to protect the ability of Black American Muslims to interpret Islamic sources without the aid of Sunni immigrants. His tenure as the leader of the movement had worked to explicitly link the identities of his followers with the Middle East. This, unsurprisingly, led to a heightened role of authority for immigrant Muslims. As a result, Warithuddin risked subjecting his followers to a status of perennial dependency on others to interpret Islamic sources—a fate his father had worked vigorously to avoid. This is an additional example of the issues that arise from casting Warithuddin as a leader who "deracialized" his movement. As I have previously argued, Warithuddin's appropriation of Bilal ibn Rabah worked to cultivate a unique Black Muslim identity within a movement that had shifted toward orthodox Sunni Islam. His reliance on the narrative of Bilal and refusal to cede his own authority to individually interpret Islamic sources worked to protect the legitimacy of Black Muslims, but his shift toward orthodox Sunni Islam did entail an increased significance for formal Islamic education—which his followers often lacked.

Jackson (2005) provides valuable insight into the political and religious climate faced by Warithuddin Muhammad in the 1970s:

The introduction of Immigrant Islam into the collective space of Black American Muslims resulted in the latter's loss of their interpretive voice as well as their monopoly over what had functioned as a bona fide, indigenous tradition of proto-Islamic and Islamic thought and exegesis (70).

Jackson's analysis is applicable to Black American Muslims as a whole, but it holds special significance for a group of Muslims he terms the "Old Guard." These Muslims were African American Sunnis that did not belong to the religious movement led by Elijah Muhammad. Even after Warithuddin's ascension and subsequent attempt to "Sunnify" the movement, this group continued to view

the Nation of Islam as doctrinally inferior (Jackson 2005, 68). They were unable to develop the powerful organizational structure of the Nation of Islam, and they later faced a crisis of authority when they accepted that their sources—the Qur’an and Sunna (actions of the Prophet Muhammad)—would be inherently stronger through interpretation by immigrant Muslims who “could only be assumed to have superior knowledge of these [sources]” (Jackson 2005, 69). While immigrant Muslims may have held authority merely based on their language and dress, this authority was not innate and unable to be achieved; some Black American Muslims—both Warithuddin’s followers and other Sunnis who did not identify with his movement—traveled abroad to utilize this dynamic in order to develop authority within their communities in the United States (Jackson 2005, 75). As Muslims from the East immigrated to the United States to pursue professional ambitions in medicine and engineering, Black Americans traveled to the Middle East in order to pursue classical Islamic knowledge.

In the early portion of his time as the leader of the movement, Warithuddin Muhammad also ascribed to this logic. In 1977, immigrant Muslims began to supplant African American Muslims as religious leaders in Warithuddin’s mosques (Grewal 2014, 147). This was a point in time when he and his followers were in danger of losing the religious authority and independence needed to sustain the movement. Even with this shift toward Sunni orthodoxy, he continued to call himself “Bilalian” and gave speeches pertaining to Black social and economic success. While he did cede authority to immigrant Islam in the late 1970s, the 1980s saw him work to prevent a similar fate to that of the “Old Guard” for his African American followers.

Warithuddin’s Qur’anic exegesis incorporated themes of American exceptionalism that ultimately differed dramatically from the countercitizenship narratives endorsed by his father (Grewal 2014, 149). The content of his exegesis, while important for the movement’s trajectory, becomes less important when one considers the circumstances in which it was crafted. Warithuddin Muhammad, like his father, continued to be a source of authority in Black communities throughout the United States. His earlier actions may have served to weaken the role of African American Muslims within the broader community of American Muslims, but he nonetheless remained a paramount leader for thousands. His father’s movement had hailed independence as a form of prosperity, and Warithuddin’s exegesis worked to reinforce what had previously been an integral part of Black American Muslim identity for many of his followers—namely that Black American Muslims would not accept subservient roles.

As a Black man and the son of the Nation of Islam’s founding prophet, Warithuddin’s refusal to limit or abandon his individual interpretations of Islamic sources worked in a way similar to the appropriation of Bilal ibn Rabah: to preserve religious authority for African Americans. Recalling Curtis’s (2002) characterization of this appropriation as an attempt to “stake out a special place for [blacks] within the history of Islam” (119), a similar argument can be made regarding Warithuddin’s exegesis. In this comparison, the “history of Islam” includes modern Islamic movements beyond those that comprise classical Islamic history. Elijah Muhammad led an Islamic movement for more than four decades, and his teachings resonated with thousands of African Americans throughout the United States. Warithuddin worked to distance himself from his father’s legacy, but he was also forced to deal with the credibility issues within Black communities that this shift brought forward. By actively engaging in Qur’anic interpretation, Warithuddin, in some ways, attempted to build on his father’s legacy to “stake out a special place” for African Americans as figures of authority within the United States. African American Muslims were not uniquely qualified to interpret sources as Elijah Muhammad had argued throughout his life, but they did face unique challenges and also had a unique history of their own that held relevance to modern Islam. Like his use of the Islamic historical narrative of Bilal, his fervent refusal to cede authority to interpret religious sources aimed to protect the power and independence of African Americans within the wider community of Sunni Muslims in the United States. Again, Warithuddin Muhammad struggled to neatly separate race from religion despite his apparent desires to implement universalist Sunni doctrine.

4 The End of the Countercitizenship Narrative

Under Elijah Muhammad, a fundamental principle of the Nation of Islam had been the concept of Black separatism. After Warithuddin rose to power, he altered this aspect of the movement's belief system (Lee 1996, 67). Like his refusal to cede his authority to personally interpret the Qur'an, Warithuddin also reserved the ability to interpret his father's legacy in a way that could have been construed as heretical by his father's original followers. Despite Elijah Muhammad's apparently clear calls for land to construct a separate state within American borders, Warithuddin argued in 1977 that his father never actually intended to create a separate area with Black autonomy (Gardell 1996, 112). This paved the way for a new form of identity for Warithuddin Muhammad's followers: American. As Grewal (2014) notes, "in speech after speech, Muhammad stressed that Islam was compatible with American values" (147). Interestingly, it was only after the Nation of Islam distanced itself from Elijah Muhammad's doctrine and began appropriating Middle Eastern culture that Warithuddin and his followers began to embrace American citizenship. A tradition established within the United States was ultimately less integrated into American citizenship than a movement that prioritized a classical Islam withdrawn from the United States by hundreds of miles and years. Black Muslims following Elijah Muhammad—a man who appropriated cultural aspects from middle class American Whites—considered themselves more foreign in America than did followers of a man who viewed the Islamic East as deeply authoritative.

This was no minor transition; for many of Elijah Muhammad's original followers, opposition to Whites and the evils of America was at the forefront of the Nation of Islam's doctrine. This shift was likely influenced by the political and economic circumstances surrounding each man's tenure as leader. As Jackson (2005) explains, Elijah Muhammad's time as leader saw an attempt to appropriate norms commonly associated with the privileged White class (68). The result was that African American Muslim identity within the Nation of Islam became closely linked with "proper diction, the pursuit of education, and sartorial neatness" (69). This was closely tied with Elijah Muhammad's promotion of economic independence for impoverished Blacks, which played a role in the rising socioeconomic status of many of the Nation of Islam's followers (Aidi 2014, 63). By the time Warithuddin took power, circumstances were generally more favorable for African Americans.

By abandoning the narrative of countercitizenship, Warithuddin Muhammad essentially accepted the authority and legitimacy of the American political system—something his father worked to avoid. This shift can be seen as an attempt to further incorporate universalist themes, but one should not overlook the fact that this evolution had important implications for Black American Muslim identity. By accepting the legitimacy of American citizenship, African Americans no longer had a strong doctrinal obligation to refuse participation in African American customs that had historically been separated from Islam and banned by Elijah Muhammad. As one example, southern "soul food" had previously been barred by Elijah Muhammad but was now commonly found at Warithuddin's events and those of his followers (Grewal 2014, 147).

Grewal (2014) has argued that Warithuddin Muhammad's principal aim after the passage of the Civil Rights Act was to combat "false consciousness" (150). His view was that structural racism had been largely corrected and that African Americans had the ability to achieve equal outcomes to Whites. This seems to further the argument that Warithuddin abandoned racial issues in favor of universalist Sunni orthodoxy. Certainly, his actions during this period indicated a much softer religious emphasis on race than his father had preached. His implementation of a more universalist interpretation of Islam is indicative of his ultimate aim to make the Nation of Islam a fundamentally religious—rather than political—movement. By separating goals of racial justice from Islam, Warithuddin embraced Sunni orthodoxy in a way his father never did. Still, it would be a mistake to characterize Warithuddin Muhammad as a leader who did not invest specifically in the success of Black communities. He did not view Islam as a religion reserved for Blacks, but he nonetheless recognized its power in seeking racial justice. As a result, he continued to advocate for Black communities as he simultaneously worked to more heavily incorporate orthodox Sunni doctrine.

Further, his decision to deemphasize the narrative of countercitizenship dominant in Elijah Muhammad's original movement allowed his followers more freedom to cultivate their own iden-

tities. Not all of his followers embraced soul food or began celebrating in Independence Day parades, but it became possible to explore identity in a way that his father had discouraged. Some continued to use the term “Bilalian” even after he opted to forgo the term himself. Others, missing the particularism of his father’s movement, joined Louis Farrakhan in forming a community that returned to Elijah Muhammad’s core teachings (this movement is currently called the Nation of Islam). Through his attempts to limit the role of race in his religion, he tacitly encouraged his followers to find other avenues to achieve their goals of racial unity and justice—goals he too continued to target throughout his life.

5 Conclusion

Warithuddin Muhammad’s reforms undoubtedly impacted the trajectory of the movement originally started by his father. By embracing orthodox Sunni Islam, he relegated the Islamically heterodox teachings of his father—teachings that had been fundamentally associated with American Islam. As the prevalence of suits and bow-ties within his movement declined, the Islamic East developed authority in a way that Elijah Muhammad had partially avoided. Nonetheless, Warithuddin’s appropriation of Bilal ibn Rabah, his Qur’anic exegesis, and his move to deemphasize the narrative of countercitizenship each bore a connection to race. Shifting the movement in a more classically Islamic direction did not inevitably entail a “color-blind” outlook; it allowed Warithuddin Muhammad and his followers to connect with new interpretations of the Islamic tradition—while simultaneously abandoning traditions associated with his father—and confront unique obstacles faced by Black Americans in a different way. Warithuddin may have challenged what constituted a Black American Muslim, but he did not sacrifice his ties to Black communities throughout the United States.

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