Raza Islámica: Prisons, Hip Hop & Converting Converts

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The interface of prisons, hip hop music, and Islam is a complicated subject. At close examination, however, patterns begin to emerge. Among the most prevalent is how scores of African-Americans, as well as increasing numbers of Latinos, arrive at mainstream Islam. The journey is a familiar script: it begins with a marginal, often racist understanding of “Islam” that transforms into a universal, colorblind conception, as exemplified in the lives of many high-profile Muslims, perhaps most symbolically, Malcolm X. This colorblind vision of the world is where the Raza Islamica is born, a world where Islam is the key ingredient of identity—nothing matters more than the shared belief in Allah and his prophet Muhammad—not even the color of one’s skin. This Article theorizes this “double conversion,” whereby converts abandon the marginal for the mainstream, but they never abandon Islam. The criminal justice system is a major player in this process, a unique space that plays home to tens of thousands of conversions a year. In turn, Islam has impacted the criminal justice system by helping to lower recidivism rates and drug and alcohol addiction, ultimately resulting in a system of rehabilitation that may be more successful than officially sanctioned prison programs.

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A lot of rules, some locked in solitude
Curse the day of they birth confused, who’s to be praised? The mighty dolla or almighty Allah?¹

I. INTRODUCTION

Hip hop culture’s very birth in the United States coincided with an incarceration explosion in the 1970s that persists to the present. The rebirth of the prison would become an ever-present menace to the hip hop generation, which would feel the first-hand effects of losing someone to the prisons. This trend in growth would go on to make the U.S. prison population the largest in the globe—a multi-billion dollar industry with two million inmates and counting—at roughly the same time hip hop grew into a multi-billion dollar industry of its own. The growth of prisons and hip hop culture was both coterminous and coextensive.

In the current era of mass imprisonment, minorities bear the burden of this dramatic increase in penal trends. Prison demographics across the country have become darker and darker, to the point that the majority in prison today are either African-American or are designated “Latino” or “Hispanic,” both of whom are a minority in society at large.² In prison, Islam draws these minorities, perhaps unlike any other religion, as the history of Islam can represent to them a reclaiming of historical roots and access to a glorious past and resurrection from the stigma of being a criminal. For example, many Latinos draw on Spain’s connections with Islam through the Moors, whose presence in Spain lasted several centuries. They create historical links between popular expressions like ole and ojala (may God will) as derivations of allah. Likewise for African-Americans, history teaches that Muslims captured from West Africa were among the African slaves brought to America, as seen in characters like Kunta Kinte depicted in the TV series Roots. For these captive minority groups, the inspiration of Islam, along with the influence of Malcolm X’s cultural legacy, can be significant.

The lengthy history shared by American Muslim movements and U.S. prisons was notable by the 1920s, when prison outreach efforts were well underway. Malcolm X’s prison conversion took place in the 1950s, however, before him Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam (NOI), had spent time incarcerated. Muhammad’s spiritual predecessor W. D. Fard also had a case file with the FBI and was arrested several times. Similarly, Five Percent Nation of Islam founder, Clarence 13X, was incarcerated for two years. Thus, the study of Islam in the United States will likely simultaneously lead to the examination of the country’s jails, prisons, and other institutions of confinement. One cannot examine Islam in America without examining the interconnectivity and self-discovery of oppressed and confined people, and Islam’s unique historical significance in both pan-African and Latino

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¹ NAS, Ghetto Prisoners, on I AM . . . (Columbia Records 1999).
² These racial categories, though hopelessly inadequate, are used by default since this is how prison administrators, researchers, and the U.S. Census categorize. For this article’s purposes, the term “Latino” will be used as merely a heuristic for consistency. For more on the limits of racial language see Spearl, Why Obama is Black: Language, Law & Structures of Power, COLUMBIA J. OF RACE & L. (forthcoming).
contexts.

For many, the path to Islam's more traditional forms begins with a step that mirrors Malcolm X's membership in the NOI. Ironically enough, the first turn to the faith begins with hip hop or behind bars with a marginal strain of Islam, such as the Moorish Science Temple or NOI, and eventually leads to the ideal ummah. As Malcolm X models, the convert can shed his racist views for a new understanding. The concept Raza Islamica, literally "Islamic race," attempts to theorize this revolution in consciousness; it describes a state in which color and nationalism are relegated to merely mundane concepts. The term derives from Jose Vasconcelos' La Raza Cosmica, a work that prophesized of a new utopia, one where humanity moves beyond color and nationality. This race-less future will be the by-product of racism itself as the forces of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism work to undermine white superiority, as biological miscegenation inevitably flows from these forms of exploitation. The biological mixing blurs racial characteristics and ethnic features, leaving all people merely shades of brown. In Vasconcelos' scheme, color is literally removed from the social equation; it is a colorblind consciousness—a cosmic consciousness where the meaning of "race" evolves beyond the materialistic question of color or geographical origin, and onto the spiritual plane. Raza Islamica develops a dialectical approach to this state of colorblindness, but the result is not that people look alike in shade and appearance, as Vasconcelos has it, the impetus to colorblind consciousness is ideological—it is about thinking alike. Here, color of skin takes a backseat to allegiance to Islam, the primary factor of identification. Raza Islamica is a postmodern term for the vision of the Prophet Muhammad—a society in which Islam, not tribe, color, nor clan, is the mark of one's identity.

This Article begins with Origin Stories, which traces the presence of Islam in American history. Beginning with African slaves brought over during the slave trade, this part outlines the two major strands of Islamic development, indigenous and immigrant movements. In The Greening of America, the Article describes general trends in the growth of Islam and specifically how prisons and popular music have become perhaps the most important factors for conversion to Islam among minority groups. Part IV, Faith in Prisons, Music, examines the dynamics among Islamic and prison culture and hip hop music. It includes exegesis of lyrics, musical poetics, and commercial packaging that shows prisons and Islam as inextricable to hip hop. Islam Incarcerated: Religion as Rehabilitation focuses on conversion in prison and describes how religion has proved more effective than prison programming in rehabilitating inmates. Finally, Conclusions: Facing a New Direction demonstrates that conversion to Islam is often followed by a second conversion, a trend that carries broad implications for Muslims in America.

3. The ummah, as defined in Islam, is the "community of faith," which refers to the global diaspora of Muslims. Typically, the role of the Imam is significant as leader of the ummah.
4. See JOSE VASCONCELOS, LA RAZA COSMICA (1925).
II. ORIGIN STORIES

We’re bringin' 'em to a Christian land. It’s got to be better for them than that heathen Allah they got with them now.

—From the television miniseries Roots

A. Early Developments

The first Muslims to arrive to America en masse were African slaves who landed during the colonial period. Of their Sunni traditions, these old-world Africans lost nearly all customs, including for some their Arabic literacy. Jane I. Smith notes the fate of Muslims forced into the slave trade of colonial and post-colonial America: “[u]nfortunately, for those who would have wished to practice their Muslim faith during the harsh circumstances of slavery in America, their Christian overlords rarely permitted it... so American slaves were required to become Christian.” The inability of enslaved Muslims to maintain and institutionalize their religion helped bring about the end of Islam as it was then known.

Despite the demise of transplanted Islam, the origins of two major developments appear in early twentieth century America: the Black Muslim movements and missionary movements from abroad. Islam’s present flourishing in the United States owes its success in part to domestic efforts of groups typically considered “unorthodox” by mainstream standards. The earliest of these groups traces to the rise of Noble Drew Ali’s Moorish Science Temple of America in 1913. Ali’s religion and scripture, The Circle Seven Koran, was a cultural mash-up that adopted a number of different scriptures and racial ideas, including identification with Islam and with the Moors of Northern Africa. Despite the Moorish Science Temple’s lack of theological commitment to Islam as a whole, this group nonetheless captured the imagination of some who saw Islam as black America’s hope: regardless of Noble Drew Ali’s deviations from traditional Islamic beliefs, he was able to create “both space and respectability for Islam among African-Americans.” W.D. Fard Muhammad built on the Moorish Science foundation to help found the NOI in 1930. The immigrant strand includes Sufi missionaries like the India-based Ahmadiyya Movement, which was contemporary of the Black Muslim movements. Other early groups include the Islamic Mission Society in New York founded by Shaykyh Daud Faysal in 1934, and mosques founded in the 1920s and 1930s.

9. Id. at 375.
10. Id. at 251.
In Islam’s infancy in the United States, groups like the Moorish Science Temple, the NOI, and the Ahmadiyya Movement were the only face of Islam, that is, when sects like the Moorish Science Temple, the NOI, and the Ahmadiyya Movement surfaced in the 1900s, they were practically the only “Islam” available at large to Americans. The 1965 Immigration Act increased Muslim immigration by opening the doors to significant numbers from various parts of the world. According to Robert Dannin, this immigration trend signaled a further shift toward mainstream forms:

In the decades following the end of World War II, new orthodox sects arose to address the changing social order. Inspired by ideas blown overseas by the winds of change, the Dar ul-Islam (DAR), The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood (MIB), and the Islamic Party of North America (IPNA) embraced the religious and political thought of Islamic revivalism. Their origins can be traced to militant Islamic movements in Egypt and Pakistan, the Ikwăn al-Muslimum and Jamaat-e-Islami, respectively. The African-American Islamic landscape in the United States was complicated by the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, which catalyzed schism in the NOI. After taking power, Muhammad’s son, Warith Deen (W.D.) Muhammad, immediately changed the group’s name to the American Bilalian Community and began to move the flock away from race-based religious nationalism toward Sunni Islam. Eventually, the new leader’s controversial decisions would prove too much for veteran leader of the Harlem Temple, Louis Farrakhan, who broke away from the organization in 1978 and refounded the NOI, dedicated to the racial and nationalistic teachings of Elijah Muhammad. While the NOI suffered from the schism of W.D. Muhammad and Farrakhan, one of the earlier splinter groups, The Five Percent Nation of Islam, began attracting widespread followers. Founded in the early 1960s by NOI defector Clarence 13X, the Five Percent reworked the NOI’s black-god doctrine to even more radical ends.

The Five Percent movement became a powerful force in hip hop and prison culture. The rise of this movement coincided with the rise of hip hop culture and subsequently became closely linked to the prison culture by 1965, when the group appeared on the FBI’s radar as a street gang. Five Percenters first spread into New York City jails and then into state prisons. The movement’s post-1970s explosion

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14. ISLAM IN AMERICA, supra note 7, at 51.
15. ROBERT DANNIN, BLACK PILGRIMAGE TO ISLAM 57 (2002) [hereinafter BLACK PILGRIMAGE TO ISLAM].
has been credited to members in prison, who continued to teach the philosophy even though "some believed that the group no longer existed on the outside." As hip hop was forming in New York City neighborhoods during that period, "Five Percenters quickly became part of the new culture...[and] the pairing of rap and the Five Percent Nation was perhaps inevitable." These developments would later distinguish the movement as the "single greatest influence" on Islamic nationalism.

The Five Percent are self-proclaimed Muslims whose ideology is far from the universal outlook of more traditional Islamic thought. Instead, their worldview is particular and exclusive as the term “five percent” implies. The five percent calculation derives from “Supreme Mathematics,” a numerological theology. In this worldview, women identify as “Earths” and men self-identify as “God” or “Allah” as the Five Percent acronym for ALLAH suggests: “Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head”—the Black man is God. To understand this practical and theological bent, the universal/particular distinction is helpful:

“Universalism” tends to move in the direction of a larger, more inclusive sense of human life and society, toward open-endedness, a constant breaking of barriers and boundaries. “Particularism” moves in the opposite direction, towards exclusion, rigidly holding to boundaries, a particular sense of peoplehood.

The Five Percent Nation represents a highly particular sect. Adherents sometimes refer to Sunni Muslims as “soon-to-be” Muslims, indicating that the Sunnis have not yet reached a ripe understanding of Islam. Five Percenters also jokingly refer to themselves as the five percent of Muslims who “smoke and drink.” Demonstrating this theological and practical divide, Malcolm X was shocked to find himself on hajj, the holy pilgrimage to Mecca, not knowing how to do even the basic ablutions to ready himself for prayer—despite being a minister in the NOI for over a decade. He recounts in wonder, “[i]magine, being a Muslim minister, a leader in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam, and not knowing the prayer ritual.”

Today, America features a flourishing Muslim community that represents at least eighty countries. Aside from a sizeable African-American population, which was projected to make up 40% of the Muslim community a decade ago, other major groups in the Muslim community are from South Asian, Arabic, and African countries.

19. Id.
20. MIYAKAWA, supra note 17, at 21.
23. MIYAKAWA, supra note 17, at 31.
26. ISLAM IN AMERICA, supra note 7, at xiii.
B. Lasting Influences of Indigenous Islam: Who Is “Muslim?”

The above survey of American history only hints at the complexity of Islam’s various influences, forms, and appropriations. More importantly, this short examination demonstrates how Islam’s initial growth in the United States is the product of both indigenous organization and the organization of immigrant Muslims. Together, these strands have grown into the various Islamic denominations that are still present in the United States today. Yet with the later arrival of Middle Eastern forms of Islam, the question of who is “Muslim” is not straightforward in light of the many denominations and their competing and conflicting ideological agendas. The same holds true in prison, where it is not uncommon to see serious preaching efforts on behalf of the NOI, Sunni, and Sufi groups within the same institution. In prison, “prison Islam” or “prislam” groups are known for appropriating select elements of Islam and the Quran, which are adapted to a gang lifestyle. According to one researcher, “as tensions have grown between the various factions, Prison Islam groups have increasingly become known for encompassing gang values and fierce intra-group loyalties.” Individuals of such groups may adopt Muslim names or idioms while simultaneously dealing drugs, exploiting other prisoners sexually, or engaging in prison gang activity. Although these proclivities are not limited to the followers of Islam and may be properly viewed as a feature of religion in prison generally, including groups which adopt Christianity, it does provide a context for understanding the diversity of Islam in prisons, mutations, and permutations.

The last century, in particular, reveals the complex nature of Islam in the United States, while also presenting a literal paradox, since Islam’s lasting influence begins with groups considered unorthodox by mainstream standards. Commenting on the range of ideology, Sherman A. Jackson has argued that Islamic authenticity can be analyzed in terms of whether Islam has been “interpreted” or “appropriated.” According to Jackson, “[the early] indigenous Islamizers were not so much interpreting Islam as they were appropriating it.” The idea is that since there is little evidence that Noble Drew Ali or Elijah Muhammad practiced or preached orthodox doctrine, they cannot be affiliated with or be seen as evolving from any recognized schools of thought. Those who were viewed as appropriating Islamic ideas, names, and symbols did so in a manner that hardly linked to doctrine and praxis. Unfamiliar with any of the defining elements of African Islam, Islamic law, or any of the main African religious leaders, their use of Islam is best viewed as an appropriation that is mixed with an amalgamation of other allegiances, including to race, nationalism, and other religious ideas.

Although the appropriate/interpret approach is a useful analytical tool, it also has drawbacks. Foremost, it assumes that doctrinal concerns dominate the religious imagination of believers, as opposed to how Islam is practiced or applied.

27. In the United States there are Sunni, Shia, Sufi, and black national groups that have birthed groups like the Moorish Science Temple, NOI, Nation of Gods and Earths, and Nuwaubians, among others, who self-identify as “Muslim.”
Moreover, such a neatly packaged way of trying to understand differences between Islamic strains undermines the cultural connection between Islam and American minority groups. Meta-analysis of the state of research in American Islam has described how new research may further the understanding of culture and American Islam: “both Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad were born during a time when Islam might still have been practiced by African-born Muslims. Such linkages, when discovered, can be theorized in different ways depending on a scholar’s field, from religious studies to literature on social movements, immigrant adaptation or transnationalism.”31 Such a bright-line approach to determining Islamic authenticity also sits in tension with recent history in the United States:

A clash between the immigrant and African-American Muslims was bound to happen. African-Americans saw immigrant Muslims as hijackers of a faith in which they themselves had established roots more than two hundred years earlier. The newly arrived Muslims raised a question that has come to dominate Islamic history in the United States: who is a real Muslim?32

Yet despite the theological divide between the groups, “[t]he single-minded commitment to the black cause, together with the legacy of the NOI’s success in reforming America’s unwanted, had earned Islam a place of respect in the collective Blackamerican psyche.”33 This wedding has produced a lasting union, which Jackson warns is crucial:

Any permanent estrangement between Islam and Blackamericans would be nothing short of disastrous for Muslims... blacks remain the only Americans whose conversion to Islam connotes neither cultural nor ethnic apostasy. As such, it is almost uniquely through Blackamerican conversion that Islam enjoys whatever status it does as a bona fide American religion. In this context, without Blackamerican Muslims, Islam would be orphaned in the United States, with no indigenous roots to complicate attempts to relegate it to the status of an alien, hostile intrusion.34

The very existence of heretical groups thus paved the way for the arrival of the Arabic forms. By the time these traditions arrived to American shores in significant numbers, marginal groups had already carved a space for Islam in the American mind. Accordingly, “[h]owever much its theology deviated from traditional Islamic teachings... the NOI became recognized as a formal religion.”35

As the above suggests, “who” is Muslim is a complex question, and the answer is difficult to ascertain in the American context.36 By mainstream standards, one who studies the Quran, who is born to Muslim parents, or who prays five times a

32. ABDO, supra note 25, at 9.
33. JACKSON, supra note 30, at 2.
34. Id. at 131.
35. PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, FROM BLACK POWER TO HIP HOP: RACISM, NATIONALISM, AND FEMINISM 83 (2006).
36. ISLAM IN AMERICA, supra note 7, at 78.
day facing east is likely to be deemed a “Muslim.” However, there are many self-proclaimed Muslims who fit none of those scripts. For example, since their inception, groups like the Moorish Science Temple, NOI, and their splinters have long been viewed as non-Muslim, heretical, or even blasphemous by mainstream Muslims from both the U.S. and abroad—indeed referring to oneself as “Allah” may be grounds for beheading in some countries. Who is Muslim, then, is perhaps not a determination appropriate for an outsider to make—it is for believers themselves—the ones laying claim to the title who have to live with the consequences of doing so. The idea of recognizing as Muslims all those who “self identify as Muslims” is not a new concept. Edward Curtis has followed this line of reasoning, stressing that,

[T]he student of Islam should not even insist on using a person’s identification with the Qur’an as a kind of minimal definition of what it means to be a Muslim. Instead, wherever and whenever a person calls himself or herself Muslim, scholars should include this person’s voice in their understanding of what constitutes Islam.

III. THE GREENING OF AMERICA

The hip-hop movement’s role in popularizing the message of Islam cannot be overestimated. What reggae was to the expansion of the Rastafarian movement in the 1970s, so hip-hop is to the spread of Black Islam in the 1980s and 1990s.

— Mattias Gardell, In the Name of Elijah Muhammad

A. General Trends in Growth

Prisons and hip hop music are conduits for the spread of Islam in the United States. Demographic research on this topic is limited, and with many people and groups competing for and contesting the title of “Muslim,” it might come as little surprise that reports on the number of Muslims in the United States conflict widely. In 1980, the World Christian Encyclopedia calculated the American Muslim population to be 1,883,000. In 1988, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) estimated that there were 4.6 million Muslims in the United States. In 1990, estimates ranged from 1.2 million to 4.6 million, and in 1992, the American Muslim Council estimates ranged between five and eight million. In 1994, another researcher reported the figure to be five million. Today, the typical estimates

37. LEONARD, supra note 31, at xii.
39. Although there are many estimates regarding the Muslim population, there are hardly any undisputed counts. Some counts have omitted groups like the NOI, Moorish Science Temple, and other groups; other counts have overestimated the figures; still others have underestimated. For a brief summary see Daniel Pipes, How Many U.S. Muslims? N.Y. POST, Oct. 29, 2001, available at http://www.danielpipes.org/76/how-many-us-muslims.
40. DAVID BARRETT, WORLD CHRISTIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA 711 (1982).
suggest that there are six to seven million Muslims in the United States.\textsuperscript{43}

Other research, however, challenges these figures as inflated. For example, the \textit{American Religious Identification Survey 2001} carried out by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York polled more than 50,000 people and determined the total American Muslim population to be some 1.8 million.\textsuperscript{44} University of Chicago researcher Tom Smith reviewed prior national surveys and determined that the best estimate puts the Muslim population in 2000 at 1,886,000.\textsuperscript{45} GhaneaBassiri puts the estimate at three million, a figure he derives from adopting the Pew figure and rounding up to the nearest million since “many Muslims in the United States may be reluctant to discuss their religious affiliation” over the phone via survey, the Pew’s primary mode of data collection.\textsuperscript{46} As these figures suggest, there is nothing close to a consensus on the census of American Muslims. The lack of reliable data has proved vexing for scholars and policymakers alike, yet politics engulfs the issue—including Muslims with a stake in demonstrating a larger religious community, but who simultaneously are not willing to recognize others as Muslim.

Despite the varying numbers, scholars, chaplains, and some prison officials claim that Islam is the fastest growing religion behind bars. Although there are no reliable statistics compiled for the number of Muslim prisoners in all American institutions of imprisonment, it has been estimated that nationwide, fifteen-percent of the U.S. prison population is Muslim.\textsuperscript{47} Elsewhere, this estimate has been quantified to be as roughly as 300,000\textsuperscript{48} and 350,000.\textsuperscript{49} At the federal level, the Office of the Inspector General reports that approximately six percent of the 150,000 federal inmates seek Islamic services.\textsuperscript{50} Hasan in 1991 estimated that 35,000 prisoners annually converted to Islam,\textsuperscript{51} and more recent estimates put conversions to Islam in all city, state, and federal institutions annually at 30,000\textsuperscript{52} or 40,000.\textsuperscript{53} These figures suggest that there have been some 300,000 conversions in prison within the last

\begin{thebibliography}{53}
\bibitem{43} PHILIPPA STRUM & DANIELLE TARANTOLO, \textit{Muslims in the United States: Demography, Beliefs, Institutions 1} (2003).
\bibitem{44} BARRY A. KOSMIN, EGN MAYER, & ARIELA KEYESAR, \textit{American Religious Identification Survey 2001} (2001).
\bibitem{46} KAMBIZ GHANEABASSIRI, \textit{A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order 2} (2010).
\bibitem{47} Muslims in American Prisons Face Battles to Practice Religion: Courts Offer Insight for Peaceful Facilities, \textit{10 Corrections Professional}, June 24, 2005.
\bibitem{48} ISLAM IN AMERICA, supra note 7, at 165.
\bibitem{53} Waller, supra note 49.
\end{thebibliography}
decade, the majority of which are by African-Americans.

The prisoner-turned-convert to Islam is common in African-American history. Malcolm X’s conversion story has helped make this narrative a staple of African-Americans. In his autobiography, Malcolm X describes the transformation:

I was the nearest thing to a hermit in the Norfolk Prison Colony. I never have been more busy in my life. I still marvel at how swiftly my previous life’s thinking pattern slid away from me, like snow off a roof. It is as though someone else I knew of had lived by hustling and crime. I would be startled to catch myself thinking in a remote way of my earlier self as another person.\(^{54}\)

Malcolm X demonstrates the power of Islam in prison and the African-American Muslim community’s “first-hand experience with the prison setting.”\(^{55}\) Since Malcolm X’s days, prison converts have been a staple both in popular discourse and the prison environment. In Claude Brown’s 1965 autobiography, the question is raised rather seriously: “[d]amn, Alley, what the hell is going on in the jails here? It seems that everybody who comes out is a Muslim.”\(^{56}\) Eldridge Cleaver also described the influence of Islam in prison in the late 1960s: “[e]very black inmate was exposed to the Black Muslims teachings . . . [as] it was not a rare sight to see several Muslims walking around the yard, each with a potential convert.”\(^{57}\) Some three decades later, Nathan McCall’s autobiography similarly notes how Islam and prisons are as strongly linked as ever:

No African-American spends much time in prison without being exposed to the doctrines of Black Muslims . . . . The Muslims commanded as much respect as any group . . . . Brothers respected the Muslims for being disciplined, religious people, and at the same time, warriors. The Muslims didn’t believe in that stuff about turning the other cheek. Nobody messed with them, because many of them were hard-nosed cats who were eager to throw down for a righteous cause.\(^{58}\)

Although the estimates of Muslims in prison underscore Islam’s attraction in prison, it is necessary to note that what is considered “conversion” is a theoretical proposition and, depending on how the term is defined, it may inflate numbers. In cases where motives other than religion drive the “conversion,” the outward appearance might not justify the statistical volume. Although conversions are generally sincere and genuine, study on the matter must recognize that any theory of conversion in prison must distinguish between this and the adoption of Islam for perks, protections, and other benefits offered by the Islamic community.

The recent figures that put the U.S. Muslim population at just under two million proclaim the prevalence of Islam in prison. When weighted against Waller’s

\(^{54}\) HALEY, supra note 24, at 173.  
\(^{55}\) HASAN, supra note 51, at 76.  
\(^{57}\) ELDRIDGE CLEAVER, SOUL ON ICE 101 (Dell Publ’g 1999) (1968).  
\(^{58}\) NATHAN MCCALL, MAKES ME WANNA HOLLER: A YOUNG BLACK MAN IN AMERICA 217 (1994).
estimate of 350,000 Muslim prisoners in the United States, the prison sits a primary locus for American Islam and conversion. At the extreme level, these figures suggest that some fifteen percent of American Muslims are incarcerated. Such a startling proposition demands an accurate count of Muslims inside and outside of prison.

Reports and studies also show that since the 1970s, Latinos are turning steadily to Islam. The numbers are small, with estimates ranging from 25,000 to 70,000.60 Islam first appeared in the barrios of the American Northeast in the early 1970s with converts entering Islam by affiliating with African-American mosques.60 Others had African-American neighbors who are familiar with NOI and have entered the fold through this connection.61 Abdo writes, "[o]nce American-Latinos discover the historic connection to Islam, for many becoming Muslim has an even greater appeal. The Latino experience thus bears some similarities to Islam's attraction among African-Americans, who feel connected to the faith's long history in Africa."62 Similarly, Aidi explains that Islamic Spain has emerged as an anchor for their identity: "Moorish Spain was a place where Islam was in and of the West and inhabited a golden age before the rise of the genocidal, imperial West, a historical period in history that disenchanted Westerners can share with Muslims."63

Since Islam's initial appearance in this community, Latinos have struggled to establish an Islamic presence. The early organizing of Alianza Islamica, founded in 1975 in East Harlem as one of the oldest Latino Muslim organizations in the country,64 demonstrates how Latinos faced issues similar to those of their African-American counterparts. Initially, the attraction to Islam was particularly strong for Latinos who suffered oppression, as they typically entered the religion "through the streets, through the inner city, the ghetto, the prisons."65 In addition to using Islam as a force to mitigate neighborhood violence, members of the Alianza Islamica used Islam as a foil to abandon past affiliations to Christianity.66 Like African-American converts, Latino-Muslims have had to contend with a growing immigrant Muslim community who deem them inauthentic because they either lack Arabic language skills or they do not adhere to certain religious practices.67 These problems suggest that it was likely a more natural fit for Latinos to connect to Islam through African-Americans because of the Five Percent Nation's influence on hip hop music, as evidenced by the Five Percent Nation's success in recruiting African-American, and, increasingly, Latino youth.68 Furthermore, research shows that well over a decade

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60. ISLAM IN AMERICA, supra note 7, at 66.
61. ABDU, supra note 25, at 172.
62. Id.
63. MANNING MARABLE & HISHAAM D. AIDI, BLACK ROUTES TO ISLAM 136 (2009).
64. Wakin, supra note 59.
65. Id.
66. Id.
67. Id.
ago, Puerto Rican converts to the Five Percent Nation created a version of the Lessons in Spanish. The connections between Islam and the Latino culture have appealed to Latinos, just like Islam's connections to the African-American culture have appealed to African-Americans.

B. Fertile Fields: Mass Incarceration & Hip Hop Culture

Islam's success in prison is matched only by its influence on hip hop culture, and there are complex mappings among all three cultures. Muslim rap artists have helped spawn the "raptivist," or the rapper who is also an activist, and for many young Americans, "Islamic hip-hop leads to their first encounter with Islam, and often leads them to struggle with issues of race, identity, and Western imperialism." Although some listeners may not be aware of or interested in the religious underpinnings of the music, rap is an outlet that has brought Islamic artists, themes, and symbols to mainstream America.

Rap's influence among ethnic minorities has "special appeal" that pertains to prisoners. In the way Islam is dubbed the "official religion" of hip hop, one might describe rap as the "official music" of the penitentiary. In turn, rap's discursive focus on the prison may have much to do with the NOI, which has "greatly impacted the [hip hop nation]." Rap's influence on prison culture goes hand-in-hand with prisons possessing gang populations. For some who turn to Islam in prison, a foundation for conversion was likely set long before they entered the prison gates, given the closeness and brotherhood found in gangs, which Islam further fosters. As Dannin explains, "[d]octrinally correct or not, the gangstas have been 'dropping' Islamic symbols for decades and setting the table for genuine conversion once the adolescent's moratorium becomes a serious quest for meaning and values." Even if this religious orientation is not evident to the listener at the time, Walker explains that "motifs from Islam have increasingly tinged general African-American rap culture with which new generations of non-Muslim teenagers are growing up—setting up a context for later conversion . . . ."

Most of the prisoners who cycle through juvenile detention centers, jails, and United States prisons have had some exposure to rap music. As urban youth gangs are fodder for prisons and rap is fodder for gang members, prisons by default have become infused with hip hop culture. From documentary reports like MSNBC's Lockup series to popular shows like OZ, the prison is portrayed as a place inundated with inmates listening to or performing rap in some way or other. Simultaneously, in rap lyrics one does not have to dig much to find some story about the penitentiary.

1994).

69. Id.
70. ISLAM IN AMERICA, supra note 7, at 51.
73. NELSON GEORGE, HIP HOP AMERICA 43 (1998).
75. BLACK PILGRIMAGE TO ISLAM, supra note 15, at 269.
76. WALKER, supra note 6, at 32.
The social effects of mass imprisonment were felt most by the hip hop generation and its offspring: "[w]hether blacks or Latinos, young men or women, hip hop's youth found themselves—or someone close—chained to a correctional system and culture determined to mete out severe punishment." The sociological sequence was simple: as African-Americans and Latinos started creating and consuming hip hop music, the prisons started consuming great numbers of African-Americans and Latinos, marking a new era:

[t]he rise of a new prison/industrial complex eventually jailed nearly one third of all African-American men in their twenties. Drawing on subjects such as racial profiling . . . rap music became the primary medium for documenting and protesting the hardness of life for black youth in the "hood." The music, poetry, rhythms, style, clothing, language, and life experiences of hip hop artists reflected black peoples' encounters with Islam, Christianity, prison life, death, violence, drugs, love, sex, hope, and despair in their urban communities.\(^7\)

Today, Islamic rap artists attract the ears of popular culture, and current trends reveal that their music has "firmly implanted itself at the center of US mass culture." For example, the 1990 release of Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* reached platinum status and was nominated for a Grammy award, putting the group "at the artistic center of hip-hop's pro-black revolution and, subsequently, the political reawakening of black America." Decades later in 2005, MTV announced the "Best Hip Hop Album Ever," ranking Eric B. & Rakim's *Paid in Full* as number one, marking another milestone for Muslim rappers.

The widespread popularity of this music is partially due to how Muslims have marketed themselves. Perkins has noted that rappers have taken Islam and repackaged it for a disenfranchised audience:

Islamic rappers bring to hip hop a powerful sense of recovering and reinventing history, packaging it as 'science' for the visual generation. Invoking much of the eclectic and popular science of the NOI, its various facets, and the resurgence led by Minister Louis Farrakhan, they represent a submerged voice of the black rap underground.\(^8\)

For these artists, the music is not about sport or some scheme to get rich, as it is a way of reconnecting the individual with the self and with history. It is not about profits, but prophets. Music plays a role in expanding Islam's audience,


creating what Alim calls a "Transglobal Hip Hop Umma," a worldwide community of believers who bond through music. In this religiosity, music plays a central role in a believer's sense of community—the embodiment of sound as sacred space or sonic theology. These trends expose the need to examine hip hop closer "with a seriousness of purpose and a methodology that considers the networked nature of Islam in order to reveal the hidden aspects of this highly misunderstood transglobal phenomenon, a cultural movement whose practitioners represent, arguably, some of the most cutting-edge conveyors of contemporary Islam." One scholar has noted the lacunae in the research, and that despite "all the Grammy Awards, the tens of millions of units sold, and the ... high profile references to Farrakhan / Ramadan / Quran, this Islamic infiltration of the cultural mainstream has, surprisingly, gone virtually without comment, whether from the popular media or the academy." Putting the question rather forcefully he inquires, "[w]hat are we to make of this almost willed silence?"

IV. FAITH IN PRISONS, MUSIC

_Rap has brought the children of the world to you_

—Minister Louis Farrakhan, Hip Hop Summit 2001

Although rock music has played a role in the expression and perpetuation of Islam, the role of hip hop culture is monumental. When examining hip hop music in general, the rap lyrics and poetics might best be understood as "strategies of resistance." Rap is not hip hop per se, rather, it is an important element of the musical style that encompasses hip hop music. The new beats and raps started as a style of party music, engineered in partial response to gang violence in New York City. It was the "radicalized" Afrika Bambaataa who was among the original pioneers of hip hop who "redirected his life away from gangs and organized the components of this burgeoning cultural movement (breaking, graffiti, rapping, and DJing) under the banner of the Zulu Nation, envisioning this new street movement as a 'revolutionary youth culture.'" The Zulu Nation was hip hop's first organization, and it borrowed from the Five Percent philosophy. Bambaataa was influenced by the NOI as a child; and he candidly expressed admiration for the teachings of Louis Farrakhan. On album covers he unfailingly gives special thanks to "The Creator Allah." The cover art of his third release in 1983, _Renegades of Funk_, shows Bambaataa and his crew crashing through a brick wall with Bambaataa wearing a cape emblazoned with the symbolic Star and Crescent and armed with a sword. In

82. ROC THE MIC RIGHT, supra note 74, at 33.
84. Swedenburg, supra note 79.
85. Id.
88. Reeves, supra note 80, at 17.
90. ROC THE MIC RIGHT, supra note 74, at 78, 25.
this artwork the message is clear—these renegades are breaking down walls with the might of music and Islam.

But more than merely offering a form of resistance culture, hip hop “is also a powerful medium through which students search for the answers to the ultimate spiritual and political concerns of their lives and identities as paradigms for global Muslim youth.”91 Thus, as an approach to considering these cultural products, the notion of “theomusicology” is a helpful analytical tool. Theomusicology supports interpretation of the music, lyrics, and packaging within a religious or philosophical framework. From the choice of samples and scratches to which rappers to quote, there is much to discern from the music by examining it foremost as a phenomenology of the religious that can “name and further define the dimension of which we speak by the symbol of God.”

Rap’s first major reference to the prison system came in the 1982 release of Grand Master Flash’s The Message, which in achieving critical acclaim, reached a milestone for rap music.93 The title track has been described as “one of the most important songs in hip hop history,”94 and its scathing critique on American society forever linked the brutal realities of prison life with the hip hop generation:

... Turned stickup kid, look what you done did
Got sent up for a eight year bid
Now your manhood is took and you’re a may tag
Spend the next two years as an undercover fag
Being used and abused and served like hell
Till one day you was found hung dead in a cell
It was plain to see that your life was lost
You was cold as your body swung back and forth
But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song
Of how you lived so fast and died so young, so don’t push me...

Yet, this unblinking commentary on life in the ghetto did not develop in a vacuum: the Furious Five were certainly influenced by Islamic teachings and at the very least, one member, “Rahiem,” was a member of the Five Percent Nation. This orientation jibes with a flyer from 1980 that advertised “The Grandmaster Flash Show” starring “Allah Sounds” while others in the hip hop scene mixed in Islamic themes, including “DJ Islam,”96 whose namesake would be joined by the up-and-coming producer Afrika Islam and rapper T.C. Islam. From its seedling days, hip hop culture began to represent itself with Islamic names, themes, and symbols.

Like their poetical predecessors Public Enemy, the self-styled “prophets of rage,” later generations of rap artists see themselves as messiahs or ones chosen to

91. MARABLE & AIDI, supra, note 63, at 151.
95. GRANDMASTER FLASH & THE FURIOUS FIVE, The Message, on THE MESSAGE (Sugarhill Records 1982).
lead the people. Brother Ali’s “Picket Fence” describes how, at an early age, he discovered his special relationship with God:

You look the way you do because you’re special  
Not the short bus way, I mean that God’s gonna test you  
And all of this pain is training for the day when you will have to lead with the gift God gave to you  
Grown folks don’t see it but the babies do  
And there’s a chance that you can save a few.

Like Brother Ali, some rappers view themselves as divinely elected to carry out the mission, or as Jedi Mind Trix attests, “I’m with Allah because he chose me,” a tone that resonates in other artists’ work, such as in Immortal Technique’s “God sent me to strike.” Some of these rappers call their musical style “godcore” or “god hop,” which is subsumed under different labels including “radical” or “political” rap, “message rap,” and “conscious rap.”

Others have used starker terms to denote the music. For example, “militant rap” has been used as shorthand for “the apocalyptic noise of racial crisis in America [that] shatters a mythic past of the nation.” Gardell describes the music as a militant call for justice or destruction, stating that “rap is the patience that has finally expired.”

As a cultural phenomenon, rap music has been greatly influenced by Black Nationalism, and in the area of religious imagery, Perry notes, the Five Percent “hold the most apparent influence in explicitly religio-political lyrics.” The most dissident of militant rap’s voices have been described as “jihadi rap” or “verbal mujahidin,” or those who “engage in jihad of the hand and fight in the way of Allah (jihad fi sabil Allah) to help improve their local communities through nation-building practices and activities.” Another scholar has used the term “combative spirituality” to denote the longstanding pedigree of rap’s black musico-religious tradition.

Regardless of how the music has evolved or is styled, the prison has remained a consistent locus of resistance for Muslim rappers. Illustrating the point is the album cover of Public Enemy’s 1988 release, It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back, depicts rappers Chuck D. and Flavor Flav imprisoned, an image
described "as an extension of repression of revolutionary and militant politics." Rap lyrics also show how artists resent prisons, as in DJ Krush & Company Flow's "Vision of Art":

Unsheath the jihad blade and become animalistic Authority walks the plank, that's implicit The shambles of the gifted, dismantled and imprisoned

In other songs, there are shout-outs to incarcerated Muslims and words of encouragement. Sometimes the prison is used as a passing reference, as in Brother Ali's "Shadow on the Sun":

Tell my man Hasim in prison keep grinnin' because he's innocent And tell him that the tests we get are heaven-sent

At other times, an entire song or album can revolve around prison themes, as in No More Prisons, which features a roster of Muslim rappers. Steeped in a cosmic worldview of war and revolution, these lyricists have an overt agenda backed by the will of God: "Like their slave forefathers and mothers, raptivists envision their God as a warrior God who both exacts and sanctions vengeance upon white America for their sins against His Chosen Ones." For many of these rappers, religion offers justification for violence, or as Jedi Mind Trix admonishes, "Your physical mass is converted into ash—Allah's wrath is engraven on your epitaph."

In the songs the prison is clearly visible, and "narratives referencing prisons have become common among rappers of all persuasions—gangstas as well as radical progressives." The activism is unmistakable:

In the thirty years of hip hop's development, the art has spanned the spectrum of social commentary. At the close of the twentieth century, songs attacking the plague of drugs and black-on-black violence have given way to criticism of the prison industrial complex and criminal justice system in general. In an era of unprecedented black affluence, prisons remained an arena of stark exception to the improved quality of black life. It also became the focal point of a new activism among members of the hip-hop generation.

108. OGBAR, supra note 89, at 149.
109. DJ KRUSH, Vision of Art, on ZEN (Red Ink Records 2001).
110. BROTHER ALI, Shadows on the Sun, on SHADOWS ON THE SUN (Rhymesayers 2003).
111. Cheney, supra note 94, at 7.
112. JEDI MIND TRICKS, The Executioner's Dream, on VIOLENT BY DESIGN (Superegular Records 2000).
113. OGBAR, supra note 89, at 139.
114. Id. at 140.
V. ISLAM INCARCERATED: RELIGION AS REHABILITATION

Collect calls to the till, sayin’ how ya changed
Oh you a Muslim now, no more dope game
Heard you might be comin’ home, just got bail
Wanna go to the Mosque, don’t wanna chase tail
It seems I lost my little homie he’s a changed man
Hit the pen and now no sinnin’ is the game plan
—2Pac, “I Ain’t Mad at Cha”

Penal trends in the United States depict a system that has largely given up on the idea of inmate rehabilitation. Despite this revised political posture, religion certain has not given up on inmate rehabilitation. One study noted that the practice of religion “in prison can be very extensive with about 50% of inmates attending religious services an average of six times per month.” Moreover, large and supermax prison inmates see the coming and going of priests, imams, and other clerical figures who contribute to the wide array of religious services held by, among others, members of Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and Native-American faiths. As houses of penitence, penitentiaries have historically provided the space for spiritual transformation, including the famous “born-again” Christian. Today is no different, and conversion is alive and thriving, except that nowadays Islam is the religion of choice, making prisons “a major recruiting ground for Islam.” Prisons are “major centers of Muslim reflection and identity,” and the Muslim prison ministry uses these centers to penetrate nominal Christians. The Encyclopedia of Prisons and Correctional Facilities (2005) notes that ninety percent of more than one hundred African-American masjids are actively involved in prison ministries and ministries to ex-offenders, while some provide temporary shelter for those released from prison.

In general, religion is associated with positive effects on offenders, and research indicates that high levels of participation in religious activities can reduce juvenile delinquency. In adult prisons, religious involvement can reduce prisoner misconduct and is reported as a viable correctional intervention. In a study on

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117. LEONARD, supra note 31, at xii.
the attributes of those who escaped recidivism, religious transformation is one of the primary themes. The Department of Human Health and Services reports that the existing "body of literature is consistent with criminological theories, supporting the claim that religious beliefs are inversely related to delinquency, crime, and recidivism."

Islam's success in reforming inmates may relate structurally to the original intent of the penitentiary, or as D.C. Corrections chaplain Imam Mikal Huda Ba'th explains, "[a] cursory review of the acknowledged intentions of Islam and the Quaker reformists shows that it is apparent the objective of both religious ideologies is to instill penitence in the criminal." Furthermore, Dannin notes that "low recidivism rates and success in the rehabilitation of drug and alcohol addiction win tolerance, even approval, for Muslims," a point that echoes Lincoln's pioneering study that notes how recovering alcoholics and addicts were able to cope more effectively after converting to Islam. These indications support the Department of Human Health's positive assessment of "how religious programming may be uniquely suited to both facilitate and augment the ongoing process of prisoner reentry."

But why do inmates convert to Islam specifically? To begin, many Muslims believe that conversion to Islam is really a "reversion," since every human being is born a Muslim already. Others subscribe to the reversion ideology due to Islamic history in Africa, which offers an opportunity to embrace a long lost identity. In the prison environment, it is a complicated topic, yet there are certain characteristics of religious conversion. The term "conversion" comes from the Latin con + vertere, which refers to the act of "turning around," "turning away," "revolving," or any such kind of revolutionary tendency. In religious intent, this connotes a turning away from one's previous worldview. The early pioneer in the psychology of religion, William James, likened the speed at which this can happen to "sparks that run through burnt-up paper."

Although Malcolm X described his own experience with an appositional metaphor, the point was the same, namely, how his previous life's thinking pattern slid away from him quickly, "like snow off a roof." Sometimes a catalyzing moment, like a profound religious experience, a hierophany, can set the believer on a new path. As Malcolm X's case illustrates, the opportunity to study and reflect on life was a much needed break in the world of a criminal, and in such cases, prison can represent a place that supports conversion. However, when conditions are severe, conversion can also occur rapidly, but for a different reason: oppression from guards and punishment—not the benevolence of a nurturing rehabilitative

124. JOHNSON, supra note 121, at 49.
126. Id. at 3.
127. BLACK PILGRIMAGE TO ISLAM, supra note 15, at 182.
129. Id.
130. WILLIAM JAMES, THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: A STUDY IN HUMAN NATURE 196 (1902).
131. HALEY, supra note 24, at 173.
environment.

In James’ analysis, conversion often attends sudden events or trying circumstances, a point that may connect to conversion’s prevalence in the penitentiary. Malcolm X, likewise, typifies this notion when he writes of the traumas of solitary confinement that precluded his conversion. Recent accounts of conditions in federal prisons,[::-132] Abu-Ghraib,[::-133] and Guantanamo Bay[::-134] seemingly attest that such brutal and terrifying conditions of imprisonment persist. The traumatizing episodes of the prison experience may help set the conditions that make inmates ripe for religious conversion. The crisis of solitary confinement alone can catalyze a quest for meaning that moves beyond the bars. This view of conversion is akin to a deprivation perspective, where loss of liberty, goods, services, sexual relations, and security inspire the quest for meaning in the correctional environment.[::-135] The stress of prison life is a major factor and, “for some inmates religion is one of their methods of coping because it offers them a variety of ways to help endure the stressors often associated with the prison environment.”[::-136] Writing on the motivations of radical conversion, Pargeter identifies “acute personal crisis and in some cases mental breakdowns” as motivating factors for conversion.[::-137]

Conversion to mainstream Islam typically involves taking shahada, which broadly represents the mission and principle of Islam.[::-138] The holy proclamation, “there is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger,” facilitates in the relinquishing of beliefs and values of old. Conversion proceeds as a double act; as new beliefs and practices are adopted, former beliefs are orphaned. The forfeiture of ideology accompanies the discovery or creation of new rituals and sacred spaces, and as a convert picks up new beliefs and habits, old ones are abandoned.[::-139] Aidi asserts, “[b]y embracing Islam, previously invisible, inaudible and disaffected individuals gain a sense of identity and belonging to what they perceive as an organized, militant, and glorious civilization that the West takes very seriously.”[::-140] Conversion may “best [be] understood as a process of identity change, potentially a total change of identity. It is a kind of rebirth. Conversion also changes the way one looks at the world. It is more than and different from alternation, for it involves a radical break

133. See Jabez L. Van Cleef, The Song of the Captives: A Verse Adaptation of Testimony Taken from the Detainees at Abu Ghraib Prison (2008).
140. Aidi, supra note 72, at 109.
In African-American and Latino contexts, conversion promises "a new identity, a feeling of somebodiness denied by the dominant culture, a liberation from Christian domination and from relegation to insignificance. The new adherents shed Christianity, which they perceived as the root of their oppression in its glorification of suffering and promise of redemption in the hereafter."\(^{141}\)

Converts may express rebirth by embracing cultural habits of the tradition. These might include adopting Mecca and Medina as new spiritual motherlands or adopting new namesakes, in the way Malcolm Little became "Malcolm X" after converting to the NOI, or changing one’s name to an Arabic name and adopting Arabic-style clothing, again exemplified by the transformation of Malcolm X to "El-hajj Malik El Shabazz."

In Latino conversion to Islam, the religion’s historical legacy plays a role similar to that in the African-American context. As the term "Moor" was embraced by various African-American leaders to unite the poor and disenfranchised with the glory of Islam, the connection to Moorish Spain provides a powerful tool to re-imagine Latino identity. Converts learn that popular Latin American terms like *ojala* ("may God will") derive from the Arabic *allah* and that their African ancestors used to chant "Allah, Allah, Allah," which in Spain became "Ole, Ole, Ole." Such connections offer evidence of Islam's influence on Spanish pedigree. Like some African-Americans, Latino converts reject the label "conversion" altogether and instead embrace the notion of "reversion" to denote not merely a turn to the faith, but a *return*. The importance of Moorish Spain, then, is of special relevance to both Latinos and African-Americans for reclaiming their lost Muslim and African heritage. Islam provides African-American and Latino converts a way to reject the long history of Christian church associations with the missionary ventures in Africa and Latin America that were anything but holy.

Among African-Americans, the prison towers are a locus of conversion, including for the most famous convert Malcolm X, who described prison as the place where he learned to be "free."\(^{142}\) In such circumstances, Islam captivates the captive and forces him to reevaluate the beliefs of past. For sincere believers, the penal place of "corrections" transforms into *dar ul islam*, or the territory guided by Islamic scripture and eschatology. By "staking out an Islamic space and filling it with a universe of alternative sensations, names, and even a different alphabet, the prison jama’a establishes the conditions of the most dreaded aspect of detention—the duration of one’s sentence, the ‘terror of time.’"\(^{143}\) In such circumstances, conversion can offer the inmate "a framework of religious resistance."\(^{144}\)

This "radical break" with the past evinces Islamic conversion. According to Dannin, the break is religiously oriented and can be viewed as a "symbolic challenge

\(^{141}\) ROBERT S. ELLWOOD & HARRY B. PARTIN, RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL GROUPS IN MODERN AMERICA 268 (2d ed.1987).


\(^{143}\) HALEY, supra note 24, at 176.


to Christian hegemony, which is an increasingly attractive alternative to minority groups who historically have fallen victim to Christian oppression, and who are looking for a counter-discourse. As was observed,

The prison becomes the crucible for a rejection of that imposed master narrative of nonbeing and the subjection of Blackness upon which—through chattel slavery, disenfranchisement, and social death—American ultimately rests. For if prison is about disappearance, and erasure, silence, and violence, then epiphany, conversion, and politicization are a kind of ontological resurrection against social and civic death—redefining one’s existence and challenging the panoptic power of the state.

Today, the impetus for conversion resembles what it was in the early days of American Islam, only today’s harsh sentences and prison conditions may provide even more compelling reasons than existed in the 18th century. Dannin explains that, “Islam’s attraction for prisoners lies in its power to transcend the material and often brutally inhumane conditions of prison. Although it may seem to some just another jailhouse mirage, the Muslim prisoner sees entry into that space as a miracle of rebirth and one that may even spread from the prison to the street.” Malcolm X earned his prison nickname, “Satan,” by acting out the aggression he felt inside, and today’s youth are no different. Yet for Malcolm X and such inmates who convert to Islam, the religion provides a narrative perfectly tailored to their imprisonment, giving greater meaning to a life society has thrown away:

Through the prism of Islam, the African-American Muslim invokes a new hermeneutic of power: historically captured, enslaved, and transported to the New World, then miseducated and forced to live an inferior existence . . . his conversion to Islam adds new dimensions to that history, particularly as it emphasizes the presence of African Muslims and nonslave populations, evidence of resistance to Christianity.

VI. CONCLUSIONS: FACING A NEW DIRECTION

The color-blindness of the Muslim world’s religious society and the color-blindness of the Muslim world’s human society: these two influences have each day been making a greater impact, and an increasing persuasion against my previous way of thinking.


The available research on conversion to Islam in America features a significant and repetitive story: how quickly each individual makes it on the path will vary, but the steps are generally the same. The initial turn to Islam often starts with

146. BLACK PILGRIMAGE TO ISLAM, supra note 15, at 267.
147. MARABLE & AIDI, supra note 63, at 218.
148. BLACK PILGRIMAGE TO ISLAM, supra note 15, at 187.
149. Id. at 13.
groups which many Muslims would deny as authentic. It is a journey that begins with movements and organizations that are considered at least unorthodox, if not fully heretical from the mainstream point of view. In due time, however, the convert engages in another bout of soul-searching and moves beyond the racial trappings to embrace every Muslim, no matter the skin color. In the transition to mainstream Islam, just how many adopt Sunni, Shia, or Sufi forms, in particular, awaits further study.

For Sunni Muslims, Malcolm X set the paradigm by changing his religious views after returning from Mecca, forever recanting his previous racism and asserting that all men could be peaceful under the one true god, Allah. As he put it, “America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases for its society the race problem.” Accordingly, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X’ is actually a story of two conversions. Just as it bears Malcolm’s Nation [of Islam] self-portrayal, it suddenly breaks into the story of Malcolm’s conversion to traditional Islam.” It is from this final step that the Raza Islamica comes into being. When the rage of youth that brings minorities to marginal Islam wears off, they begin to see more spiritual allies waiting in the wings. For many who tread the path, Malcolm X towers as the trailblazer, whose “eventual embrace of orthodoxy in the form of Sunni Islam paved the way for many to follow.”

The gravitation toward orthodoxy has also been felt by other high-profile Muslims. Malcolm X once preached to the boxer Muhammad Ali, a follower of Elijah Muhammad, who later embraced Sunni Islam. Elijah Muhammad’s own son W.D. Muhammad, like Malcolm X, has helped pave the way for many of the NOI’s followers to convert to Sunni Islam. The popular Imam Zaid Shakir’s life has taken a similar trajectory:

Imam Zaid pulled himself out of the ghetto, but his past influenced his future. When he looked for religious guidance, he discovered Malcolm X, an influential member of the NOI. Imam Zaid moved beyond viewing Islam through the prism of black oppression. He didn’t share the resentment felt by some African-American Muslims who believe that immigrant Muslims from the Islamic world have stolen the identity “Muslim American” from them, the first Muslims in America. Sheikh Hamza described him once as an imam who has transcended his blackness to a colorless Islam. The African-American imam, Siraj Wahhaj, is another high-profile Muslim who is described as “a star in American Islam. He travels the country extolling the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad, a rare crossover luminary, an African-American

150. HALEY, supra note 24, at 347.
152. GOMEZ, supra note 8, at x.
153. HALEY, supra note 24, at 364.
154. ABDO, supra note 25, at 34.
popular among immigrant Muslims."\(^{155}\) Born Jeffrey Kearse, his initial plunge into the NOI transformed him into Jeffrey 10X and a minister for the Brooklyn temple. Eventually, however, Wahhaj’s enthusiasm for NOI doctrine faded, and appropriately enough, “with the encouragement of Elijah Muhammad’s son Warith Deen Muhammad, Jeffrey and others groped their way toward the traditions and beliefs of Sunni Islam.”\(^{156}\) Equally compelling is the story of Warith Deen Umar, one of the first Muslim clerics hired in the New York prison system. Although Umar started his career in Islam in the NOI as “Wallace 10X,” trips to Saudi Arabia led him to adopt a shift in ideology and he converted to the Sunni fold. Later, the Imam received much critical attention for his speeches to inmates and was removed from his post as Administrative Chaplain for the state and banned from entering any New York prison.

Another prime example is Imam Muhammad Abdullah, a legendary prison-preacher, with whom this author has had personal contact for nearly a decade. “Brother Muhammad,” as he is affectionately known, is a firebrand preacher whom prison officials barred from prisons for his radical sermons. As a Los Angeles TV evangelist, Brother Muhammad’s scathing attacks on the American and Israeli governments aired weekly on public access television. Prison officials in Texas confiscated tapes of his program called *A Message to the Oppressed* for their inflammatory content and potential to incite jailhouse jihad.\(^{158}\) Monster Kody Scott describes Muhammad Abdullah’s prison-style ministry in his autobiography, recounting how men who had killed with impunity converted to Islam under Brother Muhammad’s watch.\(^{159}\) Although today, the Imam has moved to the mainstream, he initially was a motivated member of the NOI.

One can see the pattern of double conversion in other academic studies. In Mark Hamm’s study of radical recruitment in prisons, examples of the *Raza Islámica* thesis lace the ethnographies, including individuals who find their way both to Shia and Sunni Islam.\(^{160}\) Perhaps none of the cases is as dramatic as that of would-be terrorist Kevin Lamar James. James arrived in California’s Tehachapi prison late in his teens as a gang member and came under the influence of the NOI. James eventually became dissatisfied with the NOI and turned to Sunni Islam, adopting the name JIS (Jam’iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh). James’ inner cohort included a Pakistani national, and their goals included attacks on military recruitment centers, synagogues, and the Israeli consulate. Like many models of this theory, the prison was instrumental in James’ transition from a particular vision of Islam to embrace orthodoxy, if not fundamentallism. Dannin describes numerous cases of similar

156. Id. at 109.
testimony about how this double conversion occurs. One subject recounts how the heterodox rap of the Five Percent first drew him into Islam. He first became a Five Percenter and Malcolm X devotee who called himself “Allah God Walik Supreme.” Later, however, he would abandon these beliefs and join a Sunni mosque. After officially taking his vows, he remembers being deeply satisfied with his decision, proclaiming, “[t]his is where I belong. This is what I’ve been looking for. This is what I wanted to do.” Abdo offers a similarly candid look at this phenomenon. In one profile she describes an African-American woman who is ready to move beyond what she claims is “watered-down Islam,” “I asked her why she came to the madrassa. She is much older than many of the students, and had once been a member of the NOI... I realize she must be pretty determined to reach a new understanding of Islam.”

Such testimony points to a process by which the marginal movements of Islam are hard at work in the service of the mainstream, priming their converts for the second conversion to Islam. That is, many who join these groups eventually seek to become a part of the broader Islamic world, which causes them to abandon an ideology, but they never abandon Islam. Instead, orthodox African-American Muslims often go through two conversions in their Muslim spiritual lives. Thus, as the Muslim population continues to grow in the United States, it must be recognized that this is partially due to organizations like the NOI and the Five Percent, groups which have brought many to Islam, even if to a “watered-down” version, eventually leading these believers to join the ranks of Raza Islamica.

Alongside the individuals who experience a double conversion to Islam, the NOI parallels the transition on an institutional level. The movement has come a long way from the days of the “White devil” and “Black God” philosophy of the past. Today, the NOI of Louis Farrakhan is “ready to embark on a reconversion of Black Muslims to Islamic orthodoxy.” Members today share more beliefs and practices with the wider Islamic community than ever before, and by all likelihood the movement will continue adopting more traditional practices, integrating them through African forms of orthodoxy. Although there is always the chance that a newcomer could do as Farrakhan did and reestablish Elijah Muhammad’s racialist doctrines, under Farrakhan, himself an example of the Raza Islamica thesis, the institution is likely to continue reflecting a movement that is in the process of conversion.

In tracing this unique phenomenon, this article makes a case for the study of marginal groups in American Islam. These groups are relevant to more traditional belief and practice, despite that the two sides have had little in common, save for mutual dislike. Although animosity between Sunni Muslims and Five Percenters is legendary, the Raza Islamica thesis points to a process that augments the mainstream population; in other words, Sunnis may view the NOI as something other than “true” Islam. The truth is, however, that many converts eventually become Sunni by virtue of such marginal groups—they are responsible for arousing interest in Islam, which later leads to adoption of more traditional forms. At the very least, available data

161. BLACK PILGRIMAGE TO ISLAM, supra note 15, at 153.
162. Id. at 163.
163. ABDO, supra note 25, at 26.
164. BLACK PILGRIMAGE TO ISLAM, supra note 15, at 187.
point to marginal groups as gateways to mainstream Islam, a reality that may afford intra-faith grounds to groups which are otherwise antagonistic to one another.