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"I Do Feel the Fire!": The Transformations of Prison-Based Black Male Converts to Islam in South Central, Malcolm X, and Oz

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Abstract

Historically, imprisoned Black male converts to Islam have been known for their narratives of redemption and struggles for religious freedom behind bars. While Islam possesses a strong visible presence throughout predominately Black areas of inner cities, it has become a natural feature of Black popular culture in mediums such as hip-hop, film, and literature. By the 1990s, the portrayal of Islamic conversions yielding Malcolm X-style transformations among young Black men, who formerly embodied self-destructiveness, were visible in films featuring Black male protagonists. The prison-based transformations typically involved highly influential Black Muslim leaders improving the social conditions of the inmate, the development of a linkage between religion and racial identity, and the observance of gradual Islamic self-restraint. The prison-based narrative among young Black men is most popularly seen in 1990s films such as *South Central* (1992) and *Malcolm X* (1992), as well as the one-hour HBO television drama *Oz* (1997-2003), in which writers pay tribute to the legacy and impact of imprisoned Black Muslims.

Author Notes

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Introduction

> I had sunk to the very bottom of the American white man's society when—soon now, in prison—I found Allah and the religion of Islam and it completely transformed my life.
> —Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

> Clearing a man of his past and putting him on the right road—this is a wonderful thing.
> —Elijah Muhammad, *Savior's Day 1974*

Since the early twentieth century, Islam has served as a highly influential subculture among Black male prison inmates.[1] The popular narratives of downtrodden and oppressed Black men from urban environments converting to Islam in prison is often accompanied by a lifestyle transformation, typically centered on transforming one's conduct and outlook.[2] The social reform message of Islam in the Black male prison experience has its early roots in the establishment of Islam amongst prisoners by proto-Islamic movements, such as the Nation of Islam and Moorish Science Temple of America.[3] The teachings of these early movements typically consisted of a hodgepodge of Qur'anic principles and biblical teachings combined with a unique sense of Black Nationalist independence and separatism that was once espoused by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association.[4] Despite the fact that Islam had a significant presence among enslaved Africans that diminished by the start Civil War, it ultimately began a process of resurgence with Noble Drew Ali's 1913

founding of the Moorish Science Temple of America and W.D. Fard's launching of the Nation of Islam in 1930.[5]

In addition to the profound legacies of the Nation of Islam and Moorish Science Temple of America among Black male inmates throughout the early to mid-1900s, various Black orthodox Muslim organizations began to visibly impact the Black male prison experience in the 1950s.[6] This sudden rise in orthodox Islam throughout Black communities occurred prior to Malcolm X's 1964 pilgrimage to Mecca that culminated in his conversion to Sunni Islam. Despite the large size and visibility of the original pre-1975 Nation of Islam, Black orthodox Muslims often clashed with the Nation of Islam's religious doctrine's concept of race and understanding of *Tawheed* (the Islamic concept of monotheism), occasionally leading up to the denunciation of Elijah Muhammad and his teachings on the behalf of major orthodox organizations.[7] The largest group of Black orthodox Muslims throughout the 1960s and early 1970s was the Dar ul-Islam Movement, which established thirty masjids and Islamic centers throughout the United States, becoming one of the most prominent Islamic philosophies throughout the Black community.[8] While orthodox practices based on the Qur'an, Hadith, and studies of the Arabic language were implemented, the Dar ul-Islam Movement also possessed strong Black Nationalist undertones, thus attracting the conversions of various former militants of the Black Power Movement who had been influenced by the philosophy of Malcolm X.[9]

By the 1960s, the Islamic scene in American prisons was characterized by the presence of various groups, including orthodox groups such as the Dar ul-Islam Movement, Hanafi Madhhab Movement, and Islamic Revivalist Movement, as well as the Nation of Islam.[10] The large presence of Islamic groups behind bars ultimately led up to open worship behind bars and the introduction of prison masjids, such as Masjid Sankore, a mosque developed in New York's Green Haven Correctional Facility in the 1960s.[11] Established by the Dar ul-Islam Movement's Prison Committee and named after the African Islamic educational center in Mali, Masjid Sankore was a major achievement for prison-based Black Sunni Muslims throughout the country, as it incorporated cultural heritage into religious practice, earning the title of the "Medina" of the prison system.[12] The legacy of Black men converting to Islam in prison and abandoning their formerly destructive lifestyles was once made popular by Malcolm X's conversion to the Islam via the Nation of Islam.[13] These types of conversions would become increasingly popular over time, throughout the Nation of Islam and orthodox Muslim groups, thus causing Black Muslims to become the most active ethnic group among Muslims in the United States to seek equal legal and constitutional protection typically afforded to majority religious groups.[14] This great desire to worship behind bars, on behalf of Black Muslims, has made them primarily responsible for the modern acknowledgement of prisoners' constitutional rights to fully practice their religions behind bars.[15] In addition to internal and external

activism for the application of religious constitutional rights amongst Black males involved in the prison system, prison initiatives in Black Muslim organizations are typically characterized by their strong drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, ethical codes of hard work and discipline, and rule-abiding demeanor that has earned them the respect of prisoners, guards, and administrators.[16] As a result of this success, various prison-based Black orthodox Muslim leaders have been afforded prestigious positions as mediators in the midst of institutional emergencies.[17]

Throughout the 1950s, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, began to expose his large audience to a few orthodox principles of Islam in his weekly column in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.[18] While this column contained elaborate descriptions of Mecca, the holiest city in Islam, Muhammad became slightly disillusioned with Islamic orthodoxy during his first pilgrimage in 1959, in which he observed poverty and injustice along his journey.[19] This caused him to reinforce the Nation of Islam's traditional doctrine of strict Black separatism, allegiance to W.D. Fard's teachings, and Black economic independence.[20] Nevertheless, upon Muhammad's death in 1975, his son, Wārithuddīn Mohammed (formerly known as Wallace D. Muhammad), transformed the group into an organization adopting racially inclusive principles of Orthodox Islam.[21] Coincidentally, Wārithuddīn Mohammed had previously served a three-year prison term for refusing to be drafted into the military in 1960,

in accordance with the Nation of Islam's anti-war policy.[22] While Wārithuddīn possessed fluency in Arabic and Islamic law, he became an orthodox Muslim during his prison sentence.[23] The quick shift from the traditional teachings of the Nation of Islam to the universal principles of Orthodox Islam led up to an immediate presence of over two hundred masjids and Islamic centers, thus causing Wārithuddīn's reformed Nation of Islam, subsequently named the World Community of Al-Islam in the West (WCIW), to effortlessly dwarf the Dar ul-Islam Movement.[24] Despite the WCIW's seeming overshadowing of the Dar ul-Islam Movement, Wārithuddīn Mohammed instructed his prison-based followers to unite with members of the Dar ul-Islam Movement for the purpose of learning and strengthening brotherhood, thus making the Movement instrumental in helping Wārithuddīn Mohammed's inmate followers transition into Islamic orthodoxy.[25] According to religious theologian Patrick D. Bowen, the Nation of Islam's transition into Islamic orthodoxy was "but a culmination of a trend that had been slowly developing"[26] throughout urban Black communities.

According to Sherman Jackson, a scholar of Islamic Studies, Islam has reached its greatest height among Black Americans.[27] A great sense of familiarity with Islam exists throughout urban Black youth culture due to firsthand exposure and its incorporation into forms of popular apparel, contemporary rap music, and film, as well as the adoption of Arabic names by Black Muslims and non-Muslims.[28] Due to the efforts of the Nation of Islam, the Dar ul-Islam Movement,

the Moorish Science Temple of America, the WCIW, and other movements, Islam has become a highly influential and well-established force in the Black community.[29] Nonetheless, acceptance of the faith has been most popular among Black men, who make up large portions of American Muslim congregations and have crossed through the faith by the millions, while greater numbers of Black women remain intact with the Christian faith.[30] Throughout the 1990s, Blacks made up approximately 40 percent of the American Muslim community, rendering a following of approximately 2.5 million among Black Americans.[31]

In the midst of its popularity among young Black men from urban and disadvantaged backgrounds, Islam gained a significant level of depiction in the New Black Realism film genre of the 1990s. New Black Realism films, which were influenced by 1970s Blaxploitation films, are characterized by young Black male protagonists in urban environments, with themes unique to the Black Power Movement and the dress, style, language, and philosophical basis of hip-hop culture.[32] Moreover, this genre of films featured an association of Black manhood with rites of passage fixed within the goal of building a sense of community responsibility in these unique narratives created by Black men to tell their own stories.[33] New Black Realism narratives contained Black male-centered storylines and themes rooted in fatherhood, self-identity, empowerment, self-discovery, and community improvement that also featured specific worldviews toward women, society, and the police.[34] These concepts were embedded in films such as

Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), Anderson's *South Central* (1992), the Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society*, Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992) and *Get on the Bus* (1996), Pollack's *Above the Rim* (1994), Yakin's *Fresh* (1995), and other similar films.[35]

As a natural feature of urban Black communities, Islamic themes had a strong presence in some New Black Realism films.[36] Films such as Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) incorporated Islam into the natural urban environment, assuming an active position in defining the norms of Black culture. For example, film theorist Paula Massood notes that Furious, the father of the young Black male protagonist, possesses a strong Black Nationalist ideology that influences his abstinence from pork and lectures on Black economic independence in a manner that echoes Black Muslim leaders such as Minister Louis Farrakhan and Malcolm X.[37] Moreover, films such as the Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993) feature young Black men who convert to Islam and actively influence the mindsets of their peers upon transforming their formerly counterproductive lifestyles. While films such as *Menace II Society* and *Boyz n the Hood* contain transformations within the realm of society, Anderson's *South Central* (1992) and Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992) feature Black men who transform their lives upon converting to Islam in prison. Of course, this is a common narrative that has been seen in popular pieces of literature, such as Malcolm X and Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Nathan McCall's bestselling autobiography,

Makes Me Wanna Holler, in which he acknowledges, "No African American spends much time in prison without being exposed to the doctrines of black Muslims."[38]

When the genre of New Black Realism gradually began to diminish throughout the late 1990s, the onscreen legacy of the lifestyle transformation of Black male converts to Islam in prison continued in the HBO television series *Oz* (1997-2003). *Oz,* a six-season hour-long drama chronicling the experiences of inmates and staff at the fictional maximum security Oswald State Penitentiary, featured a group of Black Muslims who greatly resembled those in *Malcolm X* and *South Central*.[39] According to Tom Fontana, the show's creator, Islam was virtually impossible to ignore, due to its status as a "very compelling part of prison life," as the modern impact of Black Muslims, regardless of whether they are in prison or society, is often neglected, sometimes causing national counts of Muslim Americans to be exceedingly lower than actuality.[40] In their strong presence throughout the American prison system, this study focuses on the transformations of Black male prison-based converts to Islam in Anderson's *South Central* (1992), Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992), and Fontana's *Oz* (1997-2003). The transformations are typically characterized by the influences of an era of Islam in which Islamic orthodoxy grew tremendously in urban Black communities throughout the 1960s and 1970s and gained prominence among young Black men in the prison system. These three works served as monumental representations of

Black Islam behind bars, as it transcended boundaries to "resonate with the lives of many young black men who desperately need to reconstruct their masculinity during and after incarceration."[41] The portrayals of Black Muslim men in prison throughout these works are reflective of this movement's combination of religious identity with ethnic history, as well as the social reform methodology implemented by the early organizations. As a result, *South Central*, *Malcolm X*, and *Oz* are branded by a "savior" methodology rooted in rescuing Black men from being negatively impacted by harsh environments, combining racial identity with Islamic traditions, and portraying the tenets of Islamic gradualism and self-restraint as the keys to their success.

The Extinguishment of the Fire

> Verily, never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls).
>
> —Qur'an 13:11

In conjunction with a trend established by New Black Realism films, many films featuring imprisoned Black male converts to Islam portray the convert as a formerly deviant and deprived individual whose life was once cluttered with violence and illicit drugs.[42] The depiction of these young men as individuals attempting to improve the conditions of their chaotic lives and communities studs them with a greater sense of humanity through clearing up the absence of solutions to their problems.[43] The type of rage triggered by harsh conditions is

shown during the opening credits of Spike Lee's 1992 biopic *Malcolm X*, in which an image of an American flag gradually burning into the shape of an "X" is edited alongside footage of the assaulting of Rodney King. According to film scholar Ed Guerrero, this sequence struck intense feelings throughout the Black community.[44] The tone of marginalization in the powerful visual is complemented by Malcolm X reciting a speech entitled *The Trial,* written by Louis Farrakhan in the late 1950s, documenting the hostility White society had committed against Blacks.[45] Throughout the film, these hostilities serve as the fire that shapes Malcolm X into an imprisoned criminal, thus creating the environment for him to be saved by the Nation of Islam. As a result of his traumatizing experiences as a young, poor Black man during the first half of the twentieth century, Malcolm's criminal past is reminiscent of his eventual "hatred for the white social order he saw forcing African Americans into lives of crime and drug abuse" that was manifested after his awakening.[46]

The fire that Islam extinguishes through Malcolm X's prison cell is also directly indicated in the first season of Fontana's *Oz* (1997-2003). When Jefferson Keane, a young Black man serving a life sentence for murder, becomes frustrated due to his horrid life experiences, he cries to the Imam, "I do feel the fire! Save me!"[47] The references to fire, featured in *Malcolm X* and *Oz,* are reflective of the theological concept of the hereafter in Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam prior to the introduction of Islamic orthodoxy after his death. This particular feature of

the doctrine classifies heaven as the social and material conditions of life on Earth, complemented by a "peace of mind and contentment"[48] that is possessed by White society.[49] Conversely, the doctrine represents hell as a non-eternal deprivation of such conditions.[50] As a result of the embracing of such a concept, many prison-based converts to Islam throughout the 1960s and 1970s, regardless of their doctrinal comprehension, viewed Islam as "…the divine answer to suffering peoples' problems." [51] Despite the fact that Black orthodox Muslims view the hereafter as a condition succeeding physical death, affiliations with prison-based Muslim congregations offered prison believers relief from the negative features of prison life through providing them with a sense of brotherhood and discipline to assist in overcoming such obstacles.[52]

Throughout *South Central*, *Malcolm X*, and *Oz,* the prison-based Muslims stick together with a strong sense of brotherhood, abstaining from *mischief-making,*[53] violence, drugs, and alcohol, thus enabling them to achieve parole for their orderly conduct. This strict ethical code is enforced by their respective leaders who also function as the saviors of Black men whom they assist in transitioning into mental states of comfort. The enforcing of this strict code is seen in Anderson's *South Central* (1992), when Bobby, a young Black gang member, enters jail and is threatened by the Aryan Nation upon being kidnapped into a closet. Ali, the leader of the prison-based Black Muslims, enters the closet with a group of several other Muslims and negotiates with Buddha, the Aryan

leader. When Bobby attempts to interrupt their negotiation, Ali demandingly tells him, "Be quiet!"[54] Upon saving him from serving as a slave for the Aryan Nation, he insists that Bobby read the works of various influential Black men including W.E.B. Dubois, Elijah Muhammad, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gradually transforming his mindset through training him to become well-disciplined with a desire to prevent his son from succumbing to gang violence. In a similar fashion to the references to fire and burning in *Malcolm X* and *Oz*, *South Central* features a scene in which a teardrop tattoo, signifying Bobby's status as a gangster, is removed by Ali via a burning process. This process reinforces the struggle undergone by prison-based Black Muslim converts to transform their destinies.

The strong sense of brotherhood and discipline Bobby gains is reflective of the structure of several Black Muslim organizations throughout the twentieth century. For example, the male members of the Nation of Islam and the Dar ul-Islam Movement were members of highly organized internal disciplinary structures that were responsible for maintaining order.[55] Perhaps the most visible model of collective Black Muslim male disciplinary structures are seen in the Fruit of Islam (FOI), the male parliamentary force of the Nation of Islam, a highly disciplined elite unit of men responsible for maintaining order upon taking rigorous courses in the martial arts, drilling, and Nation of Islam theology in its militaristic structure.[56] This structure most likely had an impact on the men of the Dar ul-Islam Movement who desired to emulate the attributes of Malcolm X,

which became a common desire among Black men in prison throughout the 1960s who desired to desert criminal lifestyles.[57] As a result, a similar organizational structure was developed to offer a sense of brotherhood, community protection, and organizational discipline to members, upon recognizing the respect earned by the FOI in various areas.[58] The discipline within these institutions have led to the portrayal of organized groups of Black Muslims as possessing much respect from guards, inmates, and others throughout the prison population. In *South Central*, *Malcolm X*, and *Oz*, Islam is characterized as offering safety to believers and morphing negative situations into positive outcomes, which commonly occurs throughout the annals of the prison-industrial complex.[59]

While well-disciplined collective groups of Black Muslim men have been beneficial in cases such as the scenario when Ali rescues Bobby from the White supremacists, Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992) presents a situation in which such a group is initially absent. Throughout the beginning of Malcolm's prison sentence, he comes into contact with one Muslim, named Brother Baines, who is a fictional character.[60] Despite the fact that Brother Baines appears to be the only Muslim in the prison prior to Malcolm's conversion, he still manages to carry the weight of the highly disciplined intellectual force brought by the Muslims in *South Central*. As an individual, he convinces Malcolm X to study Islam, stop perming his hair, read various books in the library, and transition into the inquisitive, well-disciplined Black Muslim leader he became throughout the next hour of the film.

The type of collective unity exhibited by the Muslims in *South Central*, as well as Malcolm X and Brother Baines in *Malcolm X,* is also seen in *Oz*. When Huseni Mershah, a conceited Muslim, enters prison and upstages the leader of the prison-based Muslims, the well-disciplined Muslims collectively avoid him. Moreover, as the most stable group in Oswald State Penitentiary, the Muslims are trusted by the inmates to serve as mediators during riots. In addition, they garner much trust and confidence from the administration as Kareem Said, the leader of the Muslims, is appointed as a mentor to a victim of substance abuse. Nevertheless, the brotherhood is demonstrated when the Muslims defend Said from an attack on behalf of the Aryan Brotherhood, despite the fact that he is estranged from them at that point in time.

In addition to representing a highly disciplined, well-structured sense of brotherhood, each of the works contain highly influential Muslim leaders. There is usually a single leader whose knowledge and passion is responsible for saving a lost Black man who has fallen victim to societal conditions. Throughout American prisons, several groups of Muslims have been marked by their abilities to help inmates rehabilitate themselves from criminal, violent, or drug-ridden lifestyles through motivating them to enforce a sense of upright cleanliness, behave properly, and ultimately embark upon a path of social mobility.[61] As a result, while some leaders have been banned for allegedly teaching messages labeled as extremist, others have been welcomed and gained much respect on

administrative and inmate levels.[62] For example, the former inmate Imam at Green Haven Correctional Facility's Masjid Sankore garnered a powerful prison position that enabled him to gain a telephone and travel with organizational security.[63] However, during the same era, which is reflective of the era of Islam represented in *South Central, Malcolm X,* and *Oz,* Muhammad Abdullah, a Black Nationalist orthodox Muslim, was banned from a prison system due to his revolutionary ideology rooted in "inciting jailhouse *jihad.*"[64] In his autobiographical recollection on gang members transforming as a result of hearing Abdullah's message, Sanyika Shakur, a Black man who converted to Islam in prison, states,

> Islam is a way of life, just like [gang] banging. We could relate to what Muhammad was saying, especially when he spoke about jihad—struggle. Of course we heard what we wanted to hear. We knew that Islam or revolution was not a threat to us as warriors. Muhammad didn't seek to make us passive or weak. On the contrary, he encouraged us to "stand firm" "stay armed," and "stay black." He encouraged us not to shoot one another, if possible, but to never hesitate to "correct a pig who transgressed against the people."[65]

Throughout *South Central* and *Oz,* Muslims who gain respect from the administration and other inmates epitomize great leadership skills and yield the extinguishment of the fire of the imprisoned. Nevertheless, in *Malcolm X*, Malcolm possesses the same type of revolutionary threat as Muhammad Abdullah once embodied.

In Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992), the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is the leader of the two prison-based Muslims at the beginning of Malcolm's entrance into the Nation of Islam. Despite the fact that he is not present inside the prison, his influence reaches beyond the boundaries of the prison cell, as indicated in Malcolm's vision-like experience with him. While Malcolm was previously opposed to kneeling and praying, he was able to overcome such feelings upon reading a letter that caused him to experience a vision in which Elijah Muhammad spoke to him in his prison cell. He becomes enthused, upon being shocked by the fact that Muhammad wrote to "…a nobody, a junkie, a pimp, and a convict."[66] As a result of this experience, Elijah Muhammad subconsciously gives Malcolm X the motivation to pray, which showcases the effectiveness of his leadership that *saved* Malcolm from becoming a product of his life's circumstances.

The moment in which Malcolm completely overcomes his insecurity is represented by a sequence resembling the scene in which Bobby's teardrop tattoo is burned off his eye in *South Central*. In *Malcolm X*, the peak of his transformation is observed when he gets a haircut and stops perming his hair in conjunction with Elijah Muhammad's teachings. Upon the brief prison barbershop sequence, Malcolm emerges as a leader among the prison inmates in the next scene. Although he is only featured as a leader in one prison scene, he continuously expresses his newfound faith, consisting of Islamic principles and Black Nationalism, during a religious session in which he challenges the White

chaplain on his depiction of Jesus as a White man. This impresses his fellow inmates, who seem to have a greater sense of respect for him that differs from previous times in which he embodied the disposition of a criminal. In essence, Malcolm X rejects the White Jesus as his savior in preference of Elijah Muhammad, who serves as his savior during his initial metamorphosis. After the scene in which Malcolm repudiates the White image of Jesus, he meets Elijah Muhammad in the next scene. Tears roll down Malcolm's cheeks as Elijah Muhammad embraces him and says,

> My son…you have been a thief, a drug dealer and a hustler and the world is still full of temptation. When God spoke to the devil about how faithful Job was, the devil argued that it was only God's protective hedge around him that kept him pure. In fact about it, the devil said, "Remove that hedge and he will curse his Maker." Well, Malcolm—your hedge has been removed and I believe you will remain faithful.[67]

In his speech to Malcolm X, he informs him that, despite his unpleasant past, he has been saved from his life of temptation and is able to start anew upon his release from prison. Despite criticisms that Spike Lee's script seemed to deemphasize Malcolm's prison experience in comparison to James Baldwin's initial screenplay on the life of Malcolm X, Lee managed to clearly showcase the manner in which Malcolm was vulnerable in the midst of his conversion as a result of being "broken by the emotional and physical stress" of his trials.[68] This sequence in which he finally meets Elijah Muhammad face-to-face serves as a climactic point in his transformation that causes him to gain a unique taste of

physical and personal liberation from crime and prison. However, beyond the walls of the prison, his dependency on Elijah Muhammad eventually appears to serve as one of his downfalls, causing him to undergo a phase of depressive disappointment when Elijah Muhammad falls short of his expectations; this occurs when Malcolm is suspended by Muhammad from speaking for stating that President John F. Kennedy's death was a result of "the chickens coming home to roost."[69]

Despite the fact that Malcolm's comprehension of Islam behind bars differs from Wārithuddīn's teachings due to its unorthodox basis, *Malcolm X,* which was produced in 1992, is influenced by the tenets of this transformative era in Black Islam. Although Malcolm X was in jail more than two and a half decades prior to Wārithuddīn Mohammed's transition of the Nation of Islam to Islamic orthodoxy, this era of Islam was expressed in the film *Malcolm X*. There is a great possibility that the 1990s film was inspired by the popular institution of orthodox Islam in urban environments outside of the world of the film, but the militant force of the FOI was overall absent from prison. The militancy was greater once Malcolm escaped prison, as seen in a hospital scene in which several members of the FOI calm a protesting crowd through performing a militaristic drill routine under Malcolm's direction, ensuring that the doctors provide a wounded Black patient with proper medical care. While the lack of prison-based militancy caused the type of Islam to resemble the result of Wārithuddīn Mohammed's orthodox

teachings, the beginning of his leadership was also a transitioning phase for the Nation of Islam, in which some of the components of nationalism were still present along their route to full Islamic orthodoxy. The link between racial identity and religious tradition were clearly made in the film.

Upon his departure from the Nation of Islam, well after Malcolm has completed his prison term, he makes *hajj* in the film. When he returns to the United States, he adopts a more orthodox view of Islam. According to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the book on which the film is based, Malcolm X possessed a great deal of respect for Wārithuddīn Mohammed, who had been an orthodox Muslim since the 1960s and told Malcolm "…the only salvation for the Nation of Islam would be its accepting and projecting a better understanding of Orthodox Islam"[70] in their shared critique of the Nation of Islam.[71] Perhaps Malcolm's acceptance of Islamic orthodoxy would qualify him as being one of the earlier "transitioned" Muslims of the Nation of Islam, because of the influence of Wārithuddīn, whom he desired to lead his new organization, Muslim Mosque Inc. due to his advanced knowledge of Sunni Islam.[72]

Like Elijah Muhammad in *Malcolm X*, *Oz* featured a Black leader whose influence extended far beyond the boundaries of the prison. Kareem Said, who is an orthodox Muslim prior to his entrance to prison, has authored several books, served as an Imam, and participated in civil rights activism. His connections afford him several opportunities inside and outside of the prison, as recognized by

the warden. This allows him to gain clemency during Ramadan; however, he sacrifices his freedom due to the poor treatment of other prisoners behind bars. Nonetheless, Said entered prison for bombing a White-owned factory in prison, an action that links his ideological foundation to the type once expressed by Muhammad Abdullah. Throughout *Oz*, the Muslims are orthodox, with an obvious influence from the disciplinary units of the Dar ul-Islam Movement and the Nation of Islam, as there is a clear fusion of Islamic orthodoxy and Black culture. Furthermore, Amir Hussain notes that Said represents "traditional family values" in his opposition to profanity, drugs, alcohol, homosexuality, and nonviolence.[73] His demeanor is somewhat similar to that of Imam Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, an imprisoned former civil rights activist and Black Nationalist convicted of shooting two sheriff's deputies in March 2000, who is presently in isolation due to his significant organizing ability.[74] Said's ability to organize assists him in serving as a powerful force in the midst of a prison riot. He is also a well-respected inmate whom the administration occasionally asks for advice, as he favors political activism, anti-drug initiatives, education, consciousness, and meaningful actions.[75] Despite his dedication to education and activism, critics note that Said rejects the prison unit manager's desire to reform the prison system due to his own belief that the greater necessity is to reform society in general and its power structure.[76] Although he possesses a strong sense of cultural pride, he remains strong in his opposition to corruption regardless of whether it is being

executed by Black inmates and wardens or White politicians, as his belief that the system is broken sometimes causes him to hope it will fail.[77] At the moment Said first enters the general population, the other Muslims begin to follow him due to their familiarity with his works and reputation.

Like Elijah Muhammad in *Malcolm X*, Kareem Said serves as a savior to young Black converts, thus enabling him to extinguish the fire of their negative experiences. Once the young men convert to Islam in Oswald State Penitentiary, they gain a support system and a sense of safety. The brotherhood is very supportive, even when Muslims are not in positive standing. Under Said's leadership, he also fights for the rights of Muslims and non-Muslims, indicated by his protest when the administration forbids the Muslims from wearing *dhikr* beads and kufis and attempts to prohibit fasting during Ramadan.[78] In the tradition of prison-based Black Muslims in the outside world, he fights to save his followers from religious persecution in the prison system. His activism causes young Black men to respect him, as seen in his attempt to help Kenny, a sixteen year old who possesses much admiration for him. However, Kenny's desire to "fit in" with the rest of the general population and his lack of readiness to conform to the strict Islamic disciplinary code quickly causes him to desert Said's following and become an active participant in the drug trade which leads to his death.

In a similar manner to Malcolm X, who converted several other inmates during his prison term, Said is successful at exposing several of his

contemporaries to Islam.[79] The most prominent situation is when Jefferson Keane, a convicted murder, converts to Islam. In their first encounter, Keane, who sold drugs in prison and killed another prisoner, attempts to threaten Said for his efforts to stop Keane's constituents from selling drugs. Instead of becoming intimidated, Said insists one of his Muslim brothers continuously punch him in the face, thus proving his strength to Keane and his friends. Despite this awkward encounter, Said ultimately convinces prison officials to allow Keane to marry his girlfriend upon discovering his devastation due to a previous decision disallowing him to marry behind bars. The observance of Said's demonstration of his toughness and his assistance in arranging his marriage ceremony causes Jefferson Keane to respect Said. Said's charismatic, persuasive demeanor leads Jefferson Keane along a gradual path towards Islam under his leadership. Keane's newfound respect for Said's conservative values is seen when he embarrassingly ceases engaging in phone sex with his wife upon Said's entrance into the phone area.

Keane's tremendous respect for Said ultimately develops into a desire to convert to Islam. In many works depicting Black Muslim men in prison, respect for influential, authoritative Muslim figures serves a key role in inspiring converts to Islam. This is also seen in *Malcolm X*, as his observance of Brother Baines's positive conduct and inquisitiveness motivates him to inquire about Islam. Nevertheless, Jefferson Keane converts to Islam at a time in which he is down, as

he has recently discovered that his new wife is cheating on him with another man. In addition, he has built a desire to escape from the drug-infested environment attached with his former group of friends. Perhaps noticing Kareem Said's strength, contentment, and discipline caused him to become motivated that there was a possibility he could transform his own life. When Kareem Said confronts Keane for allowing Kenny to sniff heroin in his presence, he notices Keane's despair right after he tells him to "feel the fire."[80] Helplessly falling out of the desk, Keane cries, "I do feel the fire! Save me." Like a savior, Said catches him, removing the kufi from his own head, placing it on Keane's head in acceptance of him as a brother.

Like the typical inmate convert to Islam, Jefferson Keane immediately abandons the drug lifestyle and begins to regret the horrible crimes he has committed in the past. In the spirit of most prison-based converts to Islam, his Islamic identity prepares him with a "fresh start," as he dresses differently and assumes the name Tizi Ouzou.[81] This fresh start is similar to Elijah Muhammad's revival of Malcolm's *hedge,* as Tizi begins to forgive others and apologize for the crimes he committed in the past. However, this eventually leads up to one of his former acquaintances plotting his death in collaboration with corrupt prison guards, who lock him in a gymnasium with two rivals who attempt to kill him. Desperately desiring not to fight, he kills the two men in self-defense, leading him to face the death penalty via lethal injection. Initially horror-stricken, he accepts

his death with the cooperation of Kareem Said, admitting he actually feels as if he may make it to heaven. While his conversion is viewed as sincere by the prison unit manager, Muslims, and other inmates, it also manages to help him recognize he is a human being. As also seen in *Malcolm X*, the Black Muslim prisoner gains a clear conscience upon being *saved* from horrible societal conditions through converting to Islam, and recognizes his own humanity. In the midst of Imam Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin's incarceration, he admitted to the same type of realization in his letter stating, "I am no monster. I am a human being created by Allah and am an instrument of his purpose. I am entitled to every right and every consideration as every other human being including fairness, a fair trial, and the presumption of innocence."[82]

Beyond triggering the transformation in Jefferson Keane and serving as a savior figure, Kareem Said's effectiveness is also noticed when Leroy Tidd, a young Black man imprisoned for driving a getaway car, plots to kill him. Tidd builds a strong dislike for Said, due to his killing of Adebisi, a drug dealer, addict, and murderer who created a plan to take over his unit of Oz. Although Said killed him in self-defense and to "save" him from self-destruction, he experiences guilt and depression. On the other hand, Tidd attempts to possess an interest in becoming Muslim for the purpose of killing Said for the Aryans. However, in posing as a Muslim, he becomes genuinely interested in the faith as portrayed by Said, apologizes to him for a plan of which he was previously unaware, and

becomes a Muslim. This angers the Aryans and causes them to attempt to kill Said; however, Salah Udeen (Leroy Tidd's new Arabic name) quickly gets in the way of the knife aimed at Said, immediately dying to protect the man who *saved* him from falling victim to his circumstances.

In addition to saving converts and potential converts to Islam, Said works to gain freedom for a young, talented non-Muslim poet. He gains freedom for the poet through contacting his own publisher to publish his work, thus inspiring literary admirers of the poet's work to become engaged in a successful campaign to release him from prison. Said's in-prison activities are very similar to those of Malcolm X, whose in-prison activism attracted the attention of various major figures, including Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.[83] In spite of the success of his efforts, the poet returns to prison as a repeat offender.

Like many popular Black Muslim leaders, Kareem Said placed an emphasis on literacy in extinguishing the fire. For example, he helped the poet get published, published a popular book on the riots, and built a prison-based publishing business to publish the journal of a deceased inmate. Historically, publications have always been a part of Black Muslim history. For example, under Elijah Muhammad's leadership, the Nation of Islam began the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper, founded by a group of ministers including Malcolm X, which became the largest circulating Black newspaper with an international audience.[84] In 1975, it turned into the *Bilalian News*, and later became *The Muslim Journal*,

featuring stories on the Muslim and Black communities.[85] Louis Farrakhan, leader of a reformed Nation of Islam, began publishing *The Final Call* newspaper in 1979.[86] Additionally, the Dar ul-Islam Movement also published a journal entitled *Al-Jihadul Akbar* for the Orthodox Islamic organization.[87] In addition to the publications released by mainstream Black Muslim organizations, prison-based Muslims ultimately began to publish a highly acclaimed newsletter at Masjid Sankore entitled *Al-Mujaddid* (The Reformer), which was distributed internationally.[88]

In Anderson's *South Central*, Ali, the leader of the prison-based Muslims serves as a savior toward Bobby, who is a gangbanger. Upon saving him from the Aryan Brotherhood, he gradually helps to prevent him from becoming a product of his environment. This is accomplished through turning Bobby's rage into a sense of motivation for him to save his son from the gang-related trouble in which he was involved. While the absence of Black fathers usually leads up to negative results in films depicting sons of single Black mothers, Bobby's son Jimmie has become involved in gang activity, resulting in him being shot in the back.[89] In essence, the recurring theme of Black men being successful when they have involved fathers, which is a feature of most New Black Realism films, is echoed by the voice of Ali.[90] In addition to conforming to the expectations of New Black Realism films, Ali also conforms to the general concerns of Muslim parents, whom McCloud describes as being "concerned with the violence"[91] occurring in

American schools. Unlike *Malcolm X* and *Oz*, Ali's focus in dealing with Bobby is to save him for the purpose of motivating him to ensure a better future for his son. His power essentially reaches beyond the realm of the prison, as it involves Bobby repairing his relationship with his son upon exiting. Like many redemption narratives in New Black Realism films, Ali has provided Bobby with an opportunity to "reclaim his manhood by renouncing his gang affiliation and assuming his responsibility as a strong father to help his young son," thus presenting fatherhood and paternity as the key manner of restoring Black communities with hope and direction.[92]

Even though Jefferson Keane did not have any children, Ali's demanding that Bobby take responsibility for his child is very similar to Kareem Said's anger-ridden tirade against Jefferson for allowing Kenny to sniff heroin. Kenny was a young Black man who could have very easily been Jefferson's son. Ali is also very similar to Kareem Said and Malcolm X in his charisma and passion for helping young Black men in prison. While speaking, they are all very passionate, simultaneously supplementing their advanced oratorical skills with fearless actions. In confronting Bobby's carelessness for his son's condition, Ali slams down a kufi he is crocheting to deliver a fiery lecture to Bobby in a similar fashion to Said's lecture to Keane. Additionally, there is also a strong emphasis on education, as seen in *Oz* and *Malcolm X*, which is evident in the leaders taking their converts to the library to read and become knowledgeable. The literature is

usually not Islamic literature. In *Oz*, Kareem Said is seen carrying a biography of W.E.B. Dubois, while Malcolm reads the dictionary in *Malcolm X*, as prison literacy served as a key component that stimulated Malcolm's transformation into a cultural nationalist.[93] In the library scene of *South Central*, Ali instructs Bobby to read the works of various figures, such as Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and W.E.B. Dubois.

Based on their kufis and beards, the Muslims in *South Central* are most likely orthodox. In a similar fashion to Kareem Said in *Oz*, Ali takes the kufi off his head and gives it to Bobby as he leaves the prison upon being granted parole. Bobby subsequently thanks Ali for helping him gain parole and moves on to transform his son's life in a similar fashion to Ali's transformation of his life. In other words, Bobby embarks upon a mission to become the savior of his own son, for the purpose of extinguishing his fire. Like *Oz*, *South Central* is characterized by the orthodox Muslim movements that rose in popularity during the 1960s and 1970s, due to its fusion of racial identity with Islamic orthodoxy. Donald Bakeer, the writer of the novel *Crips* on which the movie is based, was an active follower of Wārithuddīn Mohammed since the beginning of his leadership and served as an executive producer for a 2002 documentary film entitled *Bilalian*.[94]

Throughout *South Central*, *Malcolm X*, and *Oz*, there is a strong focus on extinguishing the fire of rage in young, imprisoned Black men. This fire is usually extinguished with the help of highly influential Black Muslim leaders with access

to great resources and wisdom that is responsible for transforming human life. Hope and determination are two key essentials that assist in preventing young Black men from falling victim to their circumstances. Upon converting to Islam, they feel as if they have a sense of brotherhood and gain a previously unforeseen level of discipline, support, and education that humanizes their self-image, giving them a sense of confidence and hope, as observed in Jefferson Keane when he finally felt as if he was worthy of reaching paradise upon his death.

"I Wasn't Taught to Be a Little Negro Follower": The Fusion of Ethnic and Religious Tradition

> O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other).
> —Qur'an, 49:13

Historically, the assumption of Black Islamic identities in the Americas has served as a form of resistance to racism since the eighteenth century.[95] Early forms of resistance constituted the application of violent opposition to slavery and resisted conversion to Christianity, as well as utilizing intellectual skills (e.g., literacy and professional abilities) to resist oppression from White Americans.[96] In spite of the diminishing of Black Islam after the Civil War, the revival of Islam among Blacks in the United States throughout the earlier twentieth century also revived the themes of intellectual resistance and the fusion of racial struggles with religious doctrines. Seymour notes that prior to 9/11, the media's views of Islam

in prisons were characterized by militant Black Nationalism, rather than foreign extremism.[97] This was most likely influenced by Elijah Muhammad's application of a "reverse psychology" to alter Black self-identification throughout the mid-twentieth century, through likening Blacks to Gods and Whites to devils.[98] Muhammad also predicted that the present type of Islam would ultimately morph into a "new Islam…led by Black Muslims only."[99]

In more contemporary times, such as the 1990s and 2000s, when *South Central*, *Malcolm X*, and *Oz* were released, themes of resistance have been maintained and portrayed in the works. Jamil Al-Amin notes that race is very important in recognizing the offerings of Islam; however, he also states that a successful struggle supersedes the concept of nationalism.[100] In addition to strong racial identities, multiracial concepts among prison-based Black Muslims still exist. One of the key groups in Black Islamic revival throughout North America was the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, a progressive Islamic revival movement founded in mid-nineteenth century India, which taught a multiracial philosophy and gained a significant amount of Black adherents.[101] Additionally, despite strong acknowledgments of the struggles of the Black community, the components of "color-blindedness"[102] in regards to Islamic universalism[103] were partially embraced by Malcolm X, the Dar ul-Islam Movement, and Wārithuddīn Mohammed's racial integration of the Nation of Islam in 1975.[104] Nevertheless, some Black Islamic groups continue to have Black Nationalist undertones,

regardless of their identities as orthodox Muslims or members of proto-Islamic movements.[105] Sieving, for example, notes that Malcolm X most popularly fused "black power rhetoric with a distinctly pro-integration message" upon his pilgrimage to Mecca.[106] This has caused some Islamic groups to become pioneers in creating terms to describe Americans. For example, the Nation of Islam served as a pioneer in the term "Black," as Lincoln and Mamiya also observed that *The Muslim Journal* served as "one of the pioneers in using the term African American in reference to Black Americans."[107]

In addition to the doctrinal changes introduced by Wārithuddīn Mohammed, he actively participated in the struggle amongst Black leadership to define an ethnic name for their community through coining the term *Bilalian*.[108] *Bilalian* derives from the name of Bilal ibn Rabah, one of the first Muslims in written history, who was a Black Abyssinian slave freed by Abu Bakr, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, becoming the first *muezzin* (announcer of the Islamic call to prayer, or *adhan*).[109] In a study on narratives of Black Islamic history, Imam Samuel Ansari of St. Louis, Missouri describes Bilal as an individual who

> …obeyed his master up until he heard the call to Islam and the message of what Islam offered, and then, after that, he could no longer accept it. See, and that's the way most of the people, the African Americans who truly convert or revert back to Islam…they can no longer be willing subjects of the Caucasians or people who want to employ or put them in subjected situations....[110]

The historical parallels between the experiences of Black enslavement in the United States and within the life of Bilal ibn Rabah served as a key influence in Wārithuddīn's choice of ethnic terminology that transcended the boundaries of religion.[111] The name gained massive exposure when the name of the renowned *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper was named *The Bilalian News* in November 1975 as Bilalian Student Alliances appeared on a few American college campuses.[112] The adoption of this new name ultimately led up to his own adoption of the name Wārithuddīn Mohammed (also transliterated as Warith Deen Mohammed) in 1980.[113] The struggle of Bilal is highly relevant to the realities of Black male prisoners, in that it presents an early hopeful Islamic redemption narrative in which a formerly confined man was able to attain freedom.

The strong focus on racial identity not only serves as resistance to White anti-Black racism, but it also serves as a manner of confronting anti-Black racism among Muslims, rendering the faith attractive among Black inmates.[114] Minister Louis Farrakhan recounts a meeting with officials at the World Muslim League in Mecca, in which he felt as if he was

> ...the little negro from America in Mecca. And I believe I'm the first that ever represented Master Fard Muhammad and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad with love for them…See, I wasn't taught to be a little negro follower…I ain't made that way. And you're not going to put nothing on me that I don't catch you, because you don't look like Allah to me. And I ain't bowing down to nothing—no one but God! And anytime a man will say *la ilaha illallah*—there is no God but God. There is no force, no power that

has power over but he who created me then I'm a free man…I'm a free Black man.[115]

The triggers of these types of feelings from some Muslims of other nationalities have led up to the creation of race-specific Islamic identities in attempts to fuse racial concepts with religion among Black Muslims. Among Black Muslims in prison, it has been especially important, due to the marginalization and harsh realities faced prior to entering prison. In his narrative, Farrakhan also places a great emphasis on the respect he has for his predecessors, thus also acknowledging his discontentment for the disrespecting of the extinguishers of his own fire who were instrumental in developing his concept of religion and racial identity.

In *Oz*, religious and ethnic identities are woven together. From the beginning of the first season, Kareem Said has a strongly pro-Black message rooted in connecting the Islamic faith to his followers' ancestral roots in Africa. He also portrays strict educational and disciplinary values as forms of resistance toward White oppression in a speech in the first episode entitled "The Routine," in which he states:

> Now, my brothers—we must dedicate ourselves to a whole different set of principles, to a whole new set of priorities. We must rekindle our natural sense of *purity*. The heart and the mind must be cleansed and set free. That means no drugs, no alcohol, and no cigarettes…no foul language and no abnormal sex. You see these temptations? They must be replaced by a strict discipline and a channeled focus. And not only will our lives here in Satan's house be improved, but our spirits will be renewed. We are not a

gang of hoodlums—we are a group of men rooted in Africa and living in America. We are strong and proud. We are an entity, a presence. We are a force and we must be dealt with. We are voices and we must be heard! Now there's a white man. He may have enslaved us with his laws and he may have enslaved us in his jail, but he has not, cannot, will not, enslave the very essence of our immortal soul.[116]

In a similar manner to Farrakhan, Kareem Said uses the condition of Blacks in America, in his speech to his followers, to frame Islam as a manner to resist the "temptations"[117] created by the "Satan"[118] whose laws have imprisoned them. Two key components of Islam, "strict discipline"[119] and "channeled focus,"[120] are viewed as the solutions for the men proudly "rooted in Africa and living in America"[121] to escape the mental slavery of the oppressors. Although Said and his Muslims are orthodox Muslims, their message is similar to Elijah Muhammad's introduction of the "mental resurrection"[122] as a form of resistance from White society. This is seen in his focus on improving the lives of his followers "in Satan's house."[123] Like Farrakhan, he also connects racial experiences to religious expression.

During the first season of *Oz*, it is implied that Whites are unable to join the Muslims, based on the assumption of a troubled White inmate who is in search of protection and comfort. However, over time, this is proven incorrect when Kareem Said begins teaching Tobias Beecher, an imprisoned White ivy league-educated attorney, principles of the faith. Perhaps this is reminiscent of Wārithuddīn's transition, in which Whites were gradually accepted into the

Nation of Islam. Although Kareem Said epitomizes a sense of open-mindedness, he still combines his faith with principles of resistance to racial oppression.

As also seen in *Malcolm X* and *South Central*, Said associates education with Black masculinity in his voyage to help imprisoned Black men "reconstruct their masculinity through conversion to Islam."[124] He humanizes Black men through masculinizing concepts of education, which is rarely seen in a popular media that commonly contradicts Islamic concepts of modesty and anti-dating regulations via the mainstream portrayal of Black male sexual deviance and hypermasculinity. Nonetheless, this educational methodology is noted in Akom's study on the Nation of Islam's creation of a Black achievement ideology, in which he observes a group of high school female converts to Islam become more outspoken, studious, academically successful, and gain a more positive concept of Blackness, associating it with being academically successful since joining a cohesive group of young women in Farrakhan's organization.[125]

The educational resistance not only involves Akom's observation of opposition towards forms of white oppression; it also involves confronting oppressive views.[126] This is best seen in *Malcolm X*, during the scene in which he tells the prison chaplain, "Jesus…was not a pale face."[127] In this debate, Malcolm X, a prisoner, incorporates historical information and the Bible to argue his position, through utilizing Revelation 1:14-15, which compares the hair on Jesus's head to wool and likens his feet to "fine brass…burned in a furnace."[128]

Coincidentally, a Muslim from *Oz* argues the same point, quoting the same verse from the Bible, thus indicating the influence *Malcolm X* and other New Black Realism films may have had in depicting Islamic orthodoxy among Black Muslims in prison. In Malcolm X's argument, he is applauded by several Black inmates who are seated separately from the few White inmates in the prison chapel. Like *Malcolm X*, the Muslims in *Oz* face opposition from some Whites in their beliefs, as Vernon Schillinger, a White supremacist, laughs and objects to their view of Jesus as a Black man.

In *South Central* and *Oz*, the prison-based Muslims reject the White supremacists. For example, Ali saves Bobby from White supremacists in *South Central*, while Kareem Said despises the members of the Aryan Brotherhood. Neither one of the groups of Muslims in the two aforementioned works are able to agree or work with the White supremacists, most likely due to the concept of Islamic universalism. While Malcolm X does not encounter any members of White supremacist organizations in his prison in Lee's film, most likely due to racial segregation, he and officials of the Nation of Islam once met with members of White separatist organizations due to their goals of separatism, in a similar fashion to Marcus Garvey.[129] Therefore, it can be concluded that representations of imprisoned Black Muslims in New Black Realism era film and television, as well as subsequent portrayals, were represented as gradually transitioning into the embracing of a concept of Islamic universalism.

Although the various groups existing in prison in *Oz* seem to be racially oriented, there does not seem to be an extreme unmentioned race-related institutional problem beyond specific isolated incidents or the external world of society that occasionally determines the fate of the prisoners. Conversely, in *Malcolm X* and *South Central*, there are obvious institutional issues. *Malcolm X* takes place during a time of segregation within and outside of the prison system. Although *South Central* does not take place during this time period, Covington takes note of the "racial hierarchies" in prison, in which Black men are gangbangers, while White men are prison guards who place Bobby into solitary confinement upon his submission to their authority.[130] Structural oppression in *Malcolm X* and *Oz* sets the stage for a narrative of young Black men in search of freedom from racial oppression. Covington also characterizes Ali as a "race man" who changes Bobby with his racial conscience, succeeding at converting him, thus causing him to desire to fulfill an "individualistic agenda" of saving his son.[131] The characteristics of the race man serving as an opportunity for a Black male to convert to Islam is not only seen in *South Central*, but Brother Baines and Kareem Said both possess components of the race man in their associations of Islam with Black identity.

In other New Black Realism films, the race man is not always successful at transforming the identities of "ghetto action thugs" into a more Islamic identity.[132] This is seen in *Menace II Society*, in which Sharif, whom the main

character dismisses as an "ex-knucklehead turned Muslim," is viewed as lame, due to his condemnation of alcohol and belief that "…Allah can save Black people."[133] However, in most instances in which a young Black male is confined to the interior of a prison, the ideological backbone of the race man, combined with Islamic principles serve as key components that motivate prison-based Islamic conversions upon the undergoing of a gradual thought process. In *Malcolm X*, *South Central*, and *Oz*, the conclusion of this gradual thought process produces outspoken, confident Black men with Islamic lifestyles and racial consciences.

The Tenets of Self-Restraint and Gradualism

> O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed
> to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint.
> —Qur'an, 2:183

As noted in the Qur'an, "self-restraint"[134] is an important feature of Islam, as it is significantly mentioned in regards to the essential pillar of *sawm* (fasting). This important facet is evident in Dannin's comprehensive study of a Black orthodox Muslim community, in which he observes that converts to Islam in prison restrain from consuming pork and *haram* (impermissible) foods, avoid collecting photographs or naked pictures of women, condemn smoking cigarettes, and improve their hygiene.[135] However, exposure to such restraint-based discipline and religious tenets has been historically implemented in a gradual manner among

Black Muslims. For example, Elijah Muhammad taught that the Qur'an would gradually replace the Bible, thus causing him to gradually transition his followers' minds into a position in which Islamic orthodoxy could be accepted, according to Wārithuddīn Mohammed.[136] In an article in *The Final Call,* Minister Louis Farrakhan explained that gradualism was seen in the Prophet Muhammad's initial principle of allowing the early Muslims to consume alcohol outside of prayer prior to the revelation of an *ayat* (verse) completely forbidding its consumption, in his implication that Elijah Muhammad was gradually bringing his followers "…into the Way of Allah as taught by the Holy Qur'an and exemplified by Prophet Muhammad."[137] This principle is also observed in the Dar ul-Islam Movement, as members were required to take an intensive level of mosque-offered coursework prior to proclaiming their *shahada* (declaration of faith).[138]

Gradualism is observed in the first season of *Oz*, when Jefferson Keane converts to Islam. Upon converting, he quickly begins to practice self-restraint, as his conduct improves and he begins to criticize his former drug-selling contemporaries in an attempt to convert them to Islam. Since he has not mastered the methodology like Kareem Said, his former constituents view him in a manner similar to the perceptions of the friends of *Menace II Society's* "ex-knucklehead turned Muslim."[139] Kareem Said notices his change in behavior and the manner in which he attempts to impose his values on others, typically causing him to break up relationships. This is best seen when he verbally attacks his younger brother,

who is gay, informing him that he cannot be his brother if he remains gay. Said quickly stops the confrontation, informing him to lead by example, as he once did for him. He gives him a brief speech, as Elijah Muhammad had done in *Malcolm X* and Ali in *South Central.* Since Jefferson trusts Kareem Said, whom he once asked to save him from the fire, he takes Said's advice, as he has given him the benefit of the doubt, telling him, "Nobody expects you to change overnight,"[140] implying that change is a gradual process in Islam. In addition to apologizing to people he negatively impacted in the past, Keane begins to socialize with his brother, who serves as a support system prior to his execution.

Self-restraint is also very important to Kareem Said, as he is very contented by Jefferson Keane's ability to become motivated to correct the wrong he previously committed. He also teaches the Muslims to restrain from any type of violent action, as seen in his objection to Huseni Mershah when he enters prison and attempts to violently confront those who dislike the Muslims. In order to be amongst the Muslims in *Oz*, there is an expectation that one strictly adheres to the tenets of self-restraint to avoid excommunication. This is best seen with Supreme Allah, who is a Five Percenter, or member of the Nation of Gods and Earths, which is a proto-Islamic organization that believes Black men are Gods and five percent of humanity is enlightened with self-knowledge and willing to teach it to others.[141] Due to their beliefs that Black men are Gods and Black women are Earths, Five Percenters often refrain from some generally accepted

Islamic practices such as prayer, thus causing them to frequently experience rejection from both orthodox Muslims and Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam.[142] While Said was selected to sponsor him, he clearly informs Supreme Allah that he is responsible for corrupting his religion, despite the fact that he identifies as a Muslim. This is not only due to the theological differences, but it is due to the fact that Supreme Allah does not practice self-restraint since he sells drugs. Additionally, Kareem Said experiences difficult times that seem to humanize his character through interrupting his seeming flawlessness in the series' depiction of him, becoming traumatized by the stress of prison life and briefly adopting "qualities of violence, anger and intimidation that test his faith and his sense of identity."[143]

Ali also teaches Bobby how to self-restrain and gradually discipline himself in *South Central*. Like *Oz*, he does not approach him with the expectation of immediate change. He also recognizes it is a process. This is best seen in a scene in which a White supremacist demands that he shine a pair of shoes well after his mental and spiritual transformation. Bobby quickly stands up in anger, prepared to confront the man. Ali looks at Bobby, whom he is training to gradually calm down in recognition of the principles he learned. In this scene, Bobby's growing patience is observed; however, it is clear that he has not yet fully arrived at his destination of complete self-restraint. Nevertheless the process is completed when Bobby prepares to leave prison and is given a kufi by Ali,

upon being granted parole. As a result, he takes the lessons he learned from Ali to his son, for the purpose of preventing him from being woven into the lifestyle of the Deuces, which was the gang to which Bobby belonged prior to imprisonment. The conclusion of his gradual transformation is also marked by his recitation of a principle he learned from Ali, as he tells his son,

> …if you hit a man in his face, in time, his wounds will heal. And later on, you can apologize to that man. If you steal his goods, later on, you can return those goods, or you can repay him equal value. But if you kill…there is no later on. There is no way to repair it with that man. There's no way to make it right with him or his family. His life is gone forever. You never come back from that.[144]

In *Malcolm X*, gradualism is observed during the process of Malcolm's transformation, as he is initially unable to kneel and pray. In a similar fashion to Farrakhan's explanation of the steps it took for the Islamic prohibition on alcohol to occur, Malcolm X underwent a series of steps prior to praying. These steps included communicating with Elijah Muhammad, reading Islamic literature, and having a vision that motivates him to pray. Once he overcomes such a major hurdle, he is able to effortlessly self-restrain, as he restrains from straightening his hair and consuming haram substances.

Throughout *Oz*, *Malcolm X*, and *South Central*, the principles of gradualism and self-restraint also lead up to the changing of one's dress and attire. In *Oz* and *Malcolm X*, the Muslims tucked in their collared prison shirts in a similar fashion to Bobby in *South Central*. Additionally, the Muslims wore kufis

in *South Central* and *Oz*, which seemingly signified their piety, peacefulness, and understanding of their Islamic faith and Black identity. According to *Malcolm X*, *South Central*, and *Oz*, the only way to gain the benefits of the Muslims' offerings is to be in full compliance with the concepts of Islamic gradualism and self-restraint.

Conclusion

> Islam acts as a savior to many African-Americans. It gives you a sense of belonging and it's just something awesome about that type of community involvement that really rejuvenates the spirit.
> —Fareed El-Amin in *Planet Islam* (1997)

Throughout the twentieth century, several imprisoned Black men joined organizations such as the Dar ul-Islam Movement and the Nation of Islam to gain a sense of direction and discipline. While these organizations initially appealed to lower class inner city Blacks, they ultimately attracted people of various economic backgrounds.[145] Therefore, the visibility of Islam in predominately Black areas of American inner cities has caused Islam to serve as a countercultural complement to Black culture, thus generally causing the community to "tend not to share white America's open hostility toward Islam,"[146] despite the fact that most are Christians.[147] The influence of America's Black Muslim community became increasingly woven into popular culture through New Black Realism films, which delineated the transformative legacy of Islam among

young, urban Black men who had been portrayed as "deviant"[148] by the mainstream American media.[149] This has caused Black men to gain a humanized depiction through Black directors, in their glamorization of Black fatherhood, liberation, and conservative ideas on self-help and accountability.[150]

In *South Central*, *Malcolm X*, and *Oz*, Islam serves as a form of resistance to the oppressive environment inhabited by Black inmates. Dannin notes that Islam among prisoners has the ability to create a transformation-stimulating discipline for people to gain a greater sense of economic and social stability, thus enabling them to resist the types of activities that led up to their incarcerations.[151] Throughout the various transformations in the aforementioned works, Black Muslim inmates are able to extinguish the troubles of their past, gain a more in-depth understanding of their racial identity via their religious principles, and gain a productive concept of gradual self-restraint. According to Covington, the hostile environment of the 1965 Watts Riots and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots caused an extreme presence of drugs and gangs, in addition to an enhanced sense of marginalization, thus leading to their depiction in popular films succeeding these eras.[152] The increasingly popular narrative of Black Islamic redemption in prisons has managed to create a higher level of awareness and respect for Islamic culture in the Western world.

Black Muslim inmates in film and television have a strong focus on improving conditions of life on Earth, in conjunction with a key emphasis in

Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, despite their orthodox theological understanding. Perhaps this is due to the remnants of Muhammad's extensive prison-based recruit efforts, which were evident in a column entitled "What Do the Muslims Want" on the back of every edition of the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper, stating, "We want freedom for all Believers of Islam now held in federal prisons. We want freedom for all black men and women now under death sentence in innumerable prisons in the North as well as the South."[153] Therefore, it can be inferred that their social reform philosophy is rooted in the basic teachings of various proto-Islamic movements that arose during the resurgence of Black Islam in the early 20th century. As a result, in the portrayal of prison-based Black male converts to Islam, there is an outright objection to the glamorization of criminal lifestyles through redefining Black masculinity by masculinizing educational inquisitiveness and shunning blatant disregards for humanity.

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[1] Jane Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 164.

[2] C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 109; Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166; Smith, *Islam in America*, 164; Mattias Gardell, "The Sun of Islam Will Rise in the West: Minister Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam in the Latter Days," in *Muslim Communities in North America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Smith (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 42.

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[4] Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam,* 266; Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 9.

[5] Michael Kőszegi and J. Gordon Melton, *Islam in North America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 184.

[6] Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, 174; Patrick D. Bowen, "The Search for 'Islam': African-American Islamic Groups in NYC, 1904- 1954," *The Muslim World* 102, no. 2 (2012): 264–83.

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