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Reterritorializing via Cultural Memory: Identity Politics in Elijah Muhammad's 1959 Speech

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Abstract. Elijah Muhammad, prominent leader of the Nation of Islam in the 1950s and 1960s, offers a controversial response to the challenges of American white social space of the first half in the 20th century: by extreme negation, he positions himself in opposition to it, however, at the same time, rendering it a battleground not only for contestation, but also for reclamation of space. The Black Muslim counterspace established in this way is based, in the first place, on an alternative sacred space, which proves not only a mere outcome of Black Muslim carving out sacred ground, but much rather of reterritorializing the sacred in a meaningful way to nourish the Black Muslim cultural self. The paper examines thus the construction of Black Muslim sacred space in Muhammad's 1959 speech, using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of reterritorialization as a basis for arguing for the contested nature of sacred space – a feature characteristic of Black Muslim identity politics.

Keywords: Black Muslims, sacred space, deterritorialization, reterritorialization

1. De/Reterritorialization of Sacred Space

Much as the speeches of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad may appear controversial, they present important milestones in African American religious history. As the leading ideologist of the Nation of Islam, he managed to revitalise Black identity in a radical fashion through rewriting cultural memory and thereby reclaiming the sacred as the place of nurturing intracommunal ties. The 1959 speech

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that he delivered in Washington, DC shows tactics of reterritorrialization that later becomes a more elaborate politicocultural means of reclamation of social space.

An understanding of the sacred requires rethinking of its rigid, a priori conceptualisation. Traditionally understood as of universal and homogenous nature, it presents absolute and transparent space (see Lefebvre) and it is often regarded as "an uncanny, awesome, or powerful manifestation of reality, full of ultimate significance" (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 5). As opposed to the "substantial" approach (1995: 5) to the sacred, the "situational" approach, mainly heralded by anthropologists, places the sacred "at the nexus of human practices and social projects" (1995: 5). In this way, one can indeed differentiate between the "poetics and the politics of space" (1995: 6).

A juxtaposition of sacred spaces posits, however, that overlapping spaces must be taken into account and that allows for dynamic movements of sacred space. Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia reiterates that space can be multifaceted as it can host different spaces at the same time. As he insists, "singular spaces [are] to be found in some given social spaces" (1993: 168), which are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1986: 24). Foucault's definition negates Henri Lefebvre's, who foresees the collapse of opposing spaces: "Sooner or later, however, the existing center and the forces of homogenization must seek to absorb all such differences" (1991: 373). Foucault renders a function to heterotopia when he says that "[heterotopias] have a function in relation to all the space that remains" (1986: 27) and thereby he gives way to a contested understanding to space.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of reterritorialization can help understand heterotopical movements as it embeds them in a wider framework of societal relevance. Reterritorialization pertains to "ancillary apparatuses" (1983: 35) to counterbalance the deterritorializing processes of the "capitalist machine" (1983: 35), which may nevertheless "control[] reterritorializations" (1983: 247), thus establishing an ongoing process, in which the two phenomena prove "relative, always connected, caught up in one another" (1987: 10).

In Deleuze and Guattari's sense, the sacred is also caught up in the process of deterritorialization and reterritorrialization. Traditional approaches to the sacred present it as ultimate; however, it is inherently capable to exceed the territorial location, thus to multiply or grow as "the territory itself… [can be] taken as an object, as a material to stratify" (1987: 433). The nature of the sacred changes at least along the geographical stratum. In a twist of Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the two interconnected processes, deterritorialization can be seen as change or loss of territorial identity not necessarily by the move away from territory, but by the vanishing of territory through the change or loss of territorial identity. Reterritorializations, as a response, refer back to "desiring-machines" (1983: 35) for place and present a search for (territorial) identity, and present reclamation of place.

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Any form of sacralization is simultaneously desecration. For David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal desecration takes the form of either defilement or dispossession (1995: 2). However, an act of desecration can also incorporate (re)territorialization of the sacred other than the one it appears in or along since it requires different conditions of establishment – especially as anchorage of the sacred, at least in Eliadean terms, proposes permanence. Sacralization as an act of desecration disregards any other sacred spatiality other than itself and, in this way, violates the "pure space of the sacred" or effects alienation (1995: 2). Even though pilgrimage studies have shown that different sacred spatialities can be juxtaposed (see Eade and Sallnow 2000), the manner of juxtaposition happens constrained in time and space (alternating spatialities with each other at limited places). Consequently, exceeding limits effects infringement on territorial fixities.

Even if sacred space can be considered absolute in itself, it does not exclude communication with other spatialites and it presents inner stratification. Eliade also places sacred space in relation to profane space, positing that sacred space renders space not homogeneous, at least as it stands apart from other spatialities through its difference: "Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different" (1987: 26). However, John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow have shown, for example, that the sacred can yield space to other, otherwise opposing sacred spatialities, and thus constant negotiation of/for the sacred ground evolves. Conversely, the sacred is a cultural entity and therefore it can be generated, appropriated, or negated by other sacred spatialities. In this sense, one can identify a cultural dialogue between them, which ultimately, does not necessarily involve the reconciliation or harmonization of sacred contents, but much rather the negotiation of social, political, gender, or racial strata. Mutually excluding contents, especially which are born in response to particular strata in the other sacred space, render the spaces in communication with each other contested.

The necessarily intercultural encounter of such sacred spaces is an issue of "interconnected spaces" (1992: 8), which is why any interpretation of sacred space can only be conducted through the consideration of the elements involved in corresponding space(s). As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson claim, "the identity of a place emerges by the intersection of its specific involvement in a system of hierarchically organized spaces with its cultural construction as a community or locality" (1992: 9). In Eade and Sallnow's sense, it may be appropriate to allow for juxtaposition of (systems of) spaces and not so much for hierarchically rendered spaces only. Nevertheless, Gupta and Ferguson disclose the manifold and multifaceted signification of places and that even sacred spaces and place are subject to contestation as they are socially/culturally constructed; in addition, that reterritorialization entails not only negation but also reliance on and involvement of elements of the sacred space contested. Involvement of elements may mean

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appropriation of space as in the case of syncretic religions, while also negation, however with the knowledge of the opposed, or transmutation into some accepted category.

2. Muhammad's Black Muslim Sacred Space

As the case of the Nation of Islam proves, the establishment of sacred space can indeed be seen as a direct response to the subverting mechanism of another (not necessarily sacred) space, proving – even if apparently negating – transpatial ties. The segments ascribed to the Christian cultural space, which Black Muslims attack, do not, however, relate to questions of theology, but to social and racial matters in the first place. Eric C. Lincoln points out that "All black nationalist movements have in common three characteristics: a disparagement of the white man and his culture, a repudiation of Negro identity and an appropriation of 'Asiatic' culture symbols" (1961: 50). By establishing Black Muslim sacred space, Muhammad makes use of these segments. Muhammad does not rely, in the first place, on the Qur'an, the Hadith, or Muslim theologians, but the Christian central text, the Bible. In *The Supreme Wisdom* he repeatedly argues for the reassertion of Islam in the Bible: "It is Islam, the Religion of Peace, and none other, that God offers us in the Bible" (1997: 49), at the same time attacking Christian or Jewish understandings of God, identifying God as Allah and the biblical prophets as Muslim ones (1997: 13). Relying on the Bible, but, at the same time, dispatching it as "poison book" (1997: 79), he excuses himself for the extensive use of the Bible by insisting that "it had been tampered with by whites and [...] dedicated to a monarch rather than to God" (Baer 2003: 97). Muhammad does not simply oppose Christianity through sheer negation, but attacks it from within, reclaiming its truths as his.

Muhammad identifies Christianity as the core of African American displacement and thus as the cause of African American cultural trauma. In his 1959 speech he launches attacks against Christianity and the Black church:

> First, Christianity has failed you because it was the religion which first placed you in slavery. Secondly, Christianity has failed you because through its doctrine of turning the other cheek it has rendered you incapable of defending yourself in the hour of peril. Thirdly, Christianity has failed you because it has caused you to forsake the pursuit of justice in this world in the pursuit of an illusory and nonexistent justice beyond the grave. (1973: par. 17)

The reference to the biblical dogma taken as the demand for docility shows that it is not only the peculiar institution in the first place Muhammad attacks but the naturalization of slavery in the African American mind through Christian ideology. He also launches attack against the Black church in his last statement,

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which was often stigmatized as otherwordly and incapable of defending and promoting African American (constitutional) rights in contemporary American society. However, his severe critique of Christianity anticipates a different spatiality, aggressively negating Christian sacred space. His position reveals that he does not tolerate "cultural differences *within* a locality" (1992: 7), but offering "Oppositional images of place" (1992: 12) – much as by definition transpatial ties between the cultural spaces remain a fact.

In the first place, sacralizing is effected through calling on segments of collective memory which undergird the identity of the Nation of Islam: "We have accepted Islam to be our religion – an old religion, as old as God, Himself; a religion of the prophets, of all the righteous; a religion of freedom, justice and equality; a religion of universal brotherhood: a religion that a brother will fight and die for his brother; a religion that believes in the law that was given to Moses" (1973: par. 11). Importantly, it is not Muslim theology that Muhammad elaborates on, but a sacred category taken as a priori, which is contrasted with Christianity. Thus the critique of Christian sacred space negated is stated, which, in this case, indirectly refers back to Black Muslim teleology. Especially so, since the attributes of Black Muslim sacred space are thus established through indirect comparison by contrast: through criticizing American core values codified in the founding documents, Muhammad claims them as theirs. The incorporation of social habitus establishes a common framework, which triggers a quest for an alternative past, thus validating Black Muslim genealogy. Muhammad's teachings concerning history are based on dichotomous thinking: the space he carves out for Black Muslims is constructed through constant contrasting with the white race and Christianity. For example, he establishes the primacy of African Americans on a temporal scale as when he claims in *The Supreme Wisdom* that "The Original Man, Allah has declared, is none other than the black man" (14) and that "Islam is the original religion of *all* black mankind" (1997: 48); and spatially as when he states that "We, the tribe of Shabazz, says Allah (God), were the first to discover the best part of our planet (earth) to live on, which is the rich Nile Valley of Egypt and the present seat of the Holy City, Mecca, Arabia" (1997: 15).

Reflections on the social ills experienced in the contemporary world are further given emphasis by "historically rooted collective memory [...] to create social solidarity in the present." (2001: 6) In an attempt to draw a span of past events, Muhammad asserts, "Here we are, upwards of twenty million Black Americans who have given their blood, sweat, and service for four hundred years in the vain hope that one day justice would be ours. When the bugle call of war sounded, the Black soldier stood erect. The plains of Europe, Asia, Africa and America have been fertilized by his blood" (1973: par. 7). Besides emphasizing African American proof of supporting the establishment of American society, building out intragroup ties heavily relies on "negative identification" that evokes

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African American cultural trauma. Muhammad exhorts his audience to rise from "mental death" (1973: par. 23), which he explicates going back in history to Lincoln and even Washington. Identification of slavery as a traumatic cause resonates in African American consciousness and proves an effective means to unite blacks. Ron Eyerman reveals the importance of the indirect experience of slavery by contemporary African Americans:

> It was slavery, whether or not one had experienced it, that defined one's identity as an African American, it was why you, an African, were here, in America. It was within this identity that direct experience, the identification "former slave" or "daughter of slaves" became functionalized and made generally available as a collective and common memory to unite all blacks in the United States. This was a self-imposed categorization, as opposed to, and meant to counter, those of the dominant white society. (2001: 16-17)

Muhammad's cultural reworking of African American trauma in a theologizing framework represents a means of cultural reterritoralization. In fact, as Alexander claims, "For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises" (2004: 10), which does not only suggest the perception of the impact of a crisis on a particular group – in this case, African Americans – but it also posits the cultural reworking of the trauma as well as its cultural treatment and a strategy to effect group cohesion. The theologizing framework provides the space as a container on meta level, where trauma reworked, rewarding identity for African Americans, and agenda for future action can be negotiated. Most importantly, group cohesion can be effected through the sacred, allowing for the foregoing and purporting political action. As Timothy Kubal insists, "Groups strategically construct collective memory through negotiation and conflict; competing groups seek to institutionalize their partisan memory of the past, and the outcome of that competition is collective memory – particular partisan stories about the past that are shared across space and time" (2008: 3). Collective memory is thus embalmed in the Black Muslim sacred cosmos.

The Black Muslim sacred space established bears familiarity not only for members of the Nation of Islam thus, but for the wider African American context. Embeddedness grants the means of effective communication. As Kubal claims in connection with national myths, "Communication is successful when frames align with the expectations of the audience/environment (an issue of reproducing resonant frames) and when frames meet the core tasks of framing (an issue of producing collective action frames)" (2008: 8). Muhammad echoes hurts of, in the first place, lower-class blacks when he says, "The Black man in America is in a terrible condition. He is emasculated, blinded, confused, and wandering about at high noon on judgment day" (1973: par. 6). Black Muslim ideology addresses thus

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core African American issues to negotiate cultural valence for the organization, thereby substantiating in Eric Lincoln's coinage, "*consciousness of kind*" (1961: 34). Adherence to the general African American cultural framework enables maximal coupling to it as it incites accepting response from cultural subjects: "Resonant frames are strategically produced when activists borrow from and reuse accepted ideas from their audience and environment" (Kubal 2008: 8).

Elijah Muhammad exploits a mold embracing past, present, and future, whereby coherence, contextualization, and cultural valence are secured. The latter is achieved by the introduction of an autonomous Muslim cultural space, which, as a direct negation of the Christian one, seeks autonomous signification – especially if one takes the Nation of Islam as an offshoot of world Islam. Herbert Berg allows for a wide interpretation of the Nation of Islam as a version of Islam, resulting from members having "brought their own background, culture, or agenda to their understanding of Islam" (2005: 700). However, his definition also reveals the Nation's particular positioning in America: Muslim framework proves the carrier of cultural, social, and political reterritorialization, not primarily one of the sacred. Berg elaborately identifies the inconsistencies in Muhammad's Muslim argumentation including "his obliviousness to the Islamic exegetical tradition, his focus on the Bible, and his unfamiliarity with Arabic" but before all the non-Muslim "doctrines of the incarnation of Allah in the person of Wali Fard Muhammad" (1999: 42) that prove that his religious universe is primarily based on opposition to Christian America and his enthusiastic embracement of the Qur'an does not represent merging with world Islam. Mike Taylor listing details of non-compliance with orthodox Islam strengthens further this view:

> All of this deviates from orthodox Islam, which teaches that God is the supreme and invisible Being, Creator of all things, and that his only prophet is Muhammad of the Qureish tribe (570-632). It also teaches the existence of a world of spirits and that people will be judged by God after a physical resurrection. Islam also maintains that people should be obedient to the teachings of the *Qur'an* and certain *Hadith* (or "traditions"). The non-Islamic nature of the Nation is evident also in its approach to Islamic practices, such as the dress code, fasting, prayer, observance days, and Temple conduct. (1998: 195)

Strive for cultural valence explains the establishment of sacred space, which resembles orthodox Islam but deviates from it extensively. Providing a mold expressing cohesion and difference, the Muslim veil grants authenticity. In his *Elijah Muhammad and Islam* Berg identifies several reasons that contributed to Muhammad's devotion to the Qur'an:

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> It was a non-Christian scripture that his Christian religious competition could not invoke, and so it left him with a remarkably independent and unique message. It was also the source of unique and non-Christian rituals. And, its moral teachings were remarkably appropriate for addressing the social ills affecting his followers. However, just as important, the Qur'an already came with a presumed religious "authority," and Elijah Muhammad could make that authority his. (2009: 71)

Uniqueness as a need for authentication and Islam's status as an equal match express Muhammad's motivation well to alter Islam to his own liking and to establish Black Muslim sacred space. As he claims in *The Supreme Wisdom*, "My teachings constitute God's own (Supreme) Wisdom" (1997: 79). This rhetoric maneuver allows him to cover up inconsistencies and loops in reasoning, as well as it effects not only authority for himself, but also homogeneity of space as it incorporates all African Americans: "Divine Purpose: that Almighty Allah (God) might make Himself known through us to our enemies" (1997: 15). In this way, Berg is right in stating that "mythmaking can describe any rhetorical act whose goal is to create, renew, sustain, or radically reenvision a group identity" (2005: 688) – an operation characteristic of Muhammad's 1959 speech also and an inherent building block in establishing the discourse of the sacred, especially as it purports "the idea that Islam is a religious faith that has affirmed their African heritage" (Taylor 1998: 191).

Temporal continuity underlies cultural continuity and contextualization – important segments in establishing a parallel cultural universe with the dominant Christian/white one. Michael M. J. Fischer emphasizes the relevance of temporal continuity, "Whereas the search for coherence is grounded in a connection to the past, an important part of coherence, is an ethic workable for the future" (1986: 196). Importantly, the present reality is situated in the function of past and future, whereby it is validated and grants a position to negotiate identity from. Connection to the past is granted through the experience of slavery in African American collective memory. Much as slavery is not a direct experience, it is burnt into African American consciousness as an arch metaphor of African American collectivity. Muhammad exploits the self image of blacks: "Is it not true that John Hawkins, the slave trader of our people, brought you and me here for just the purpose of working for the white man? He didn't bring you here to make you the white mans [sic] equal. It is certainly evident by now that it was never intended that you be a full citizen, owner or a significant office holder in America. Your role was that of a slave" (1973: par. 14). Muhammad's words express "a dramatic loss of identity and meaning" (2001: 2), which has become a "self-imposed categorization" (2001: 17) suitable to embody African Americans as a whole.

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The identification of African Americans as sacred subjects and as the people of Allah represents a general notion in Muhammad's theology. As he intends to raise consciousness, for example, in *The Supreme Wisdom*, "America has poured wine into these sacred vessels of the Temple of God (the so-called Negroes). Let no man fool you concerning yourselves, my people. You are sacred in the eyes of Allah (God) today" (1997: 15). The act of conscientization evokes a feeling of commonness – a necessary step to mobilize them, but also to underline his argument about African American subjects: "Although we are the chosen of God, when it comes to justice, the so-called American Negroes are the most deprived people on the planet earth" (1973: par. 4). Uniting African Americans by sacred cords and evoking common feelings about themselves, he moves on to associate Christianity with social ills: "Now, I ask you, what good is Christianity to you and to me if that religion and the God of that religion will not defend us against lynching and rape?" (1973: par. 6). Addressing contemporary African American audiences, Muhammad therefore recalls recent and direct experiences of grievances: he refers to rape issues when he reminds of "the screams of a Negro co-ed in Tallahassee" or of those of "a Milwaukee Black mother" (1973: 21). Reflecting on the paralized condition of the community, he illuminates "a tear in the social fabric" (2001: 2) with the intention to conscientize fellow Blacks of social pains and through that to suture them in the texture of the sacred.

The understanding of African Americans as sacred and the chosen people of Allah triggers Muhammad's "orchestrating sacred space" (2003: 11) and his offering a program that envisions a future radically different from contemporary African American experience. Without any intention to debunk the social constructedness of his sacred space here, as Adrian Ivakhiv urges to consider in connection with any sacred spaces, it becomes obvious that enactment of Black Muslim sacred space – a term Ivakhiv employs – is heavily "shaped through [human] interaction" (2003: 14). Establishing rituals pertaining to food, dress, or female conduct, Muhammad shapes Black Muslim community. In the first place, the 1959 speech addresses female conduct: "Much of the defection among our women stems from the fact that they have been cajoled into following the oppressors' style when it comes to hair, dress and clothing. [...] If you study the customs and traditions of Islamic countries you will see the proper manner of dress" (1973: par. 22). Rituals prove important in maintaining sacred space, also since they become the means of stabilization and visualization – a token of physical reclamation of space.

The outcome of the triad of temporal interconnection is a "new master narrative" (2004: 12) through which "storied" (2008: 25) reterritorialization can become complete and homogenous. The alternative cultural universe expressed in Muhammad's narrative bears the characteristic of such narratives in which "the causality is symbolic and aesthetic, not sequential or developmental" (2004: 12).

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Symbolic and aesthetic representations substitute and cover up loops in reasoning, which also prove that reworking and reclaiming space is not a "*reconstruction*[] of actual places, but [...] construction[] based on contemporary interpretations of the past" (1999: 2). In this way, Black Muslims' sacred/cultural space is strategically constructed through collective cultural memory but also "to institutionalize their partisan memory of the past" (Kubal 2008: 3). Black Muslim reterritorialization of cultural space is reminiscent of Bhabha's third space in that it seeks to hybridize space to express newly reconstructed cultural subjectivity. Beyond reinventing a rewarding cultural self for the African American community, it also presents a counterspace or as Chidester and Linenthal put it, a "potent counter-site[] of political resistance" (1995: 5).

Muhammad works in two main directions to strengthen intragroup ties and to foster intragroup dynamics. On the one hand, he strives to build up a radical Black Muslim self through rewarding cultural memory; and, on the other hand, he politicizes the Black Muslim subject in contrast to the white community. Muhammad's strategy is similar to Black Christian maneuver to present the organization and the African American collectivity in general as a moral community. It involves building up reputation of Blacks before themselves. For Gary Alan Fine reputation refers to "an organizing principle by which the actions of a person (or an organization that is thought of as a person) can be linked together" (2001: 2); this involves a "moral gestalt" (2001: 2) and ultimately expresses "collective representations enacted in relationship" (2001: 3). For Muhammad it means that he offers (Islamic) brotherhood, claiming that "I am your brother. Your hurt is my hurt. It doesn't make any difference with me what religion you are as long as you are a Black man or a member of the darker people. You and I are brothers" (1973: par. 14); as well as he places the community directly in the sacred: "we are the chosen of God" (1973: par. 4) and again "We, the Black men are of God" (1973: par. 23). His approach shows that he denies "a pluralist, multidimensional, or multifaceted concept of self" (Fischer 1986: 196), which postmodern anthropology would insist on, but presents overt simplification – a per definition realization of reputation as a "result of the socio-political motives of groups that gain resources, power, or prestige by the establishment of reputations" (Fine 2001: 8). Muhammad not only challenges negative reputations assigned to African Americans in general, but places them in the *axis mundi* – a means of validation through direct connection to the divine. Lincoln reasserts this view of Black Muslim ideology, "At some point, therefore, he will inevitably be tempted to glorify that form which he cannot escape. He may repudiate the white man's stereotype, turn his eyes from the painful reality and substitute for them an idealized self-image" (1961: 43).

The idealized image of the Black Muslim self stands in sharp contrast to conceptualizations of whites in Muhammad's speeches. When he calls whites

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devilish, saying that "[they] are of the devil! Their nature is evil! They are incapable of doing good!" (1973: par. 23); in fact, presenting them in negative light as sinful and wicked is not only a political tactics of liberation and self-justification, but also part of the identificatory mechanism: Muhammad as a "reputational entrepreneur" (Fine 2001: 21) establishes marked difference between the two cultural/racial groups in order to identify Black Muslims by contrast. By stigmatizing whites (and, in fact, displacing them as when he claims in *The Supreme Wisdom* that "Allah is proving to the world of black man that the white race actually doesn't own any part of our planet" [1997: 15]), he is able to indirectly refer back to the Black Muslim as a sacred subject and position him/her elsewhere. Identity formation involves for him othering of the self, which makes use of distancing and comparison by contrast.

3. Conclusion

In this 1959 speech intragroup identification is pulled through on the level of distancing and contrasting in the first place. Emphasis is laid on separation, when he, for example, asserts that "To integrate with evil is to be destroyed with evil" (1973: par. 22). Much as the Black Muslim universe unfolds in later speeches of his to present integrated intragoup networking pointing to an understanding of a cultural self embedded in an Islamic sacred cosmos, here the 1959 speech lays emphasis on carving out space and reterritorializing the self in/through the sacred by erasing white subversive images and radicalizing the Black (Muslim) self.

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