



Photograph of the Letters to the Nation Research Guide

After the passing of my grandmother Lena Gillespie in 2016, I became newly acquainted with a well-spring of information regarding her life in the Nation of Islam. As a part of the grieving process as personal political academic work, I chose to embark upon a digital research project, that might amplify the voices of women in the Nation of Islam.

The Letters to the Nation research guide is a collection of newspaper articles from the 1960-70s in the Nation of Islam that aims to contextualize my grandmother's letters and explore the ways that women in the Nation of Islam shaped theological and political discourse historically and in a contemporary setting. So far, the letters written by my grandmother are the only ones of its kind that I have had the privilege of reading.

However, women in the Nation of Islam wrote extensively in the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper about myriad aspects of Black women's lives, everything from advice on how to keep a home to the perils of taking birth control for sustaining the Black home and growing the Black community. As a Master of Divinity student at the University of Chicago, I am interested in questions of religious place-making and marginalized narratives in Black religious traditions; these interests intersect with my work in digital storytelling and archives. The primary function of this project is to provide a space where scholars of or lay persons in the Nation of Islam can find historical newspapers, related archives, and relevant books in order to expand their knowledge about women in the Nation of Islam. This project is also meant to address a very shallow American cultural understanding of the Nation of Islam, that is often characterized by an imaginary of the past tied to

Malcolm X or present day discourses around the controversial language and arguments of Louis Farrakhan. What does this religious tradition look like and feel like from the perspective of Black women and even young Black women? What is the appeal of this religious tradition for them?

At the beginning of this project the goals were to 1) create a digital platform where both archival materials and present-day oral histories from women in the Nation of Islam could be presented and accessed; and 2) reflect the multimodal communication through with women in the Nation of Islam shape a culturally relevant feminism. Given the difficulties and ethical barriers present in collecting oral histories, this project has morphed into primarily a research guide with archival materials, to give form and visibility to the Black feminism that women in the Nation of Islam have constructed for generations.

The research guide is currently broken up into three sections, *The Nation of Islam in 1979*, *Black Feminism*, and *Black Womanhood in the 1960s-70s*. Each of these sections does the work of contextualizing my grandmothers letter while also providing research sources for those interested in women in the Nation of Islam from the 1960s-70s and the present day. *Black Womanhood in the 1960s-70s* is currently the most robust section of the research guide. This section in the research guide features articles in *Muhammad Speaks* Newspaper written by Black women in the Nation of Islam in the 1960-70s. The articles from this time period are significant because it reflects the Black woman's voice during the historical period regarded as The Black Freedom and Civil Rights Movements. This period in *Muhammad Speaks* is particularly interesting because of the ever present voices of Black women in authoring columns during the Civil Rights Movement and the distinct perspective they had to offer for Black Muslim women in the period, when Black Christian voices were often heard loudest and in mainstream culture. What we learn from the words of Tynetta Denear, Margary Hassain, and others is how and why Black women chose to be in the Nation of Islam. And more importantly how they constructed a culturally relevant feminism, despite the misogyny and patriarchal ideologies embedded in the Nation of Islam's religious teachings and theological claims. These columns detail why women chose to be in the NOI, how they are to go about housekeeping, and to speak out against social injustice.

One such piece is written by a woman named Sister Shirley X in 1966. In it she provides a testimony for what the NOI teachings have done for her "Now I have a place in the world and I can stand with dignity. I am proud and happy just to be black." I'd like to point out that not only does this personal account illuminate why a Black woman would choose to be a part of the Nation of Islam in spite of the misogyny that one might endure, but it highlights that one's Blackness takes priority above and beyond one's gender, moreover that one's Blackness will support a political expression of gender. Within this testimony lie tensions which are meant to be explored and felt throughout the research guide. The goal of this project is not to provide answers but to ask more questions, and illuminate a discourse about feminism, Blackness, and womanhood in the Nation of Islam.

Anyone who is interested in women in the Nation of Islam may engage with this project and can use it for both academic and non-academic research purposes. Navigating the project is simple by following the prompts or toggling over particular sections of the letter my grandmother wrote, footnotes will appear that lead to complementary resources. It is important to note that no-such digital project is ever fully finished, opportunities to add, edit, and redact are always present in the creative and iterative process that is research. Finally, this project would have not come to fruition without the support and expertise of Stacie Williams, the Director of the University of Chicago's Center for Digital Scholarship, support from the UChicago Library's Hannah Holborn Gray Graduate Fellowship program, and the Saint Louis University Lived Religion in the Digital Age project.