

Finding My Grandmother, Finding Myself: NOI Pioneer, Mabel Cary Foreman, 1908–1982

Baiyina W. Muhammad

Associate Professor
Women's & Gender Studies Program
Department of History
Room 208-C, Edmonds Classroom Building
North Carolina Central University
Durham, North Carolina, 27707, USA

Abstract

In 2008, on the centennial of Mabel Carey Foreman's birth, a rare photograph emerged, capturing her in traditional Nation of Islam (NOI) attire in her North Carolina home. Born in 1908 and widowed at 49, Mabel raised six children as a single mother while enduring the harsh realities of the Jim Crow South. She worked as a domestic laborer and in agricultural fields, ultimately finding spiritual and political refuge in the NOI—a rare path for Black women in the rural South. At 53, she joined the Nation and remained a devoted member until her death in 1982. This essay seeks to reclaim Mabel's overlooked legacy as a pioneering Black Muslim woman, mother, and community builder. Through scarce archives, oral histories, and family photographs, it challenges the dominant narratives that marginalize Black Muslim women, asserting their vital role in shaping the NOI and redefining the contours of "Nation" building from a woman-centered perspective.

Keywords: Nation of Islam, Black Muslim women, Black Nationalism, community feminism, oral history

"We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is our duty as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children. If necessary, bone by bone." (Alice Walker)

Introduction

In 2008, just months before my maternal grandmother, Mabel Cary Foreman, would have been 100 years old, I found a rare photograph of her inside a book that I own. She was dressed in the traditional white garb of the original Nation of Islam (NOI) and stood in front of her sacred prayer space in her home in Bertie County, North Carolina. I had never seen this photo, and I believe the reason for her unexpected "appearance" was to beckon me to explore her history and experiences as a Black Muslim woman who dared to practice her religion in the South. Mabel C. Foreman was born 28 May 1908 in rural North Hampton County, North Carolina. She was widowed at age 49 and raised six of her seven children as a single mother. Mabel spent her early life functioning within the confines of the Jim Crow South. She earned a living working as a domestic in the home of a neighboring white family and laboring in local cotton and peanut fields. Unlike many Black women coming of age in the rural South in the early twentieth century, Mabel chose the "Nation" and not the "Church" to help her find lasting solace and purpose. The NOI's message of God's concern for the liberation of Black people appealed to her.

Thus, at the age of 53, when most women of her generation were anchored in a Cristian spiritual practice, Mabel Foreman joined the NOI and was a proud Black Muslim woman until her death in 1982.

Mabel is a pioneer of the Original NOI. Her name, like so many Nation women, has fallen outside of the archives and this essay is an effort to place her within the center of a movement that we know little about from the perspective of a woman, a mother, a grandmother, and a community builder. By utilizing historical records, carefully analyzing oral testimonies, and family photographs, this essay serves not only to unmute and rescue my grandmothers' voice; but also, to disrupt the discourse that renders Black Muslim women as monolithic. In so doing, I am laying claim to her place within this larger historical narrative and illuminating the range of participatory roles Muslim women played which gave shape to the NOI and the concept of "Nation" building (Karim and Gibson, 2014; Rolinson, 2012; Taylor, 2017).

Mabel was a devout member of the NOI in rural, eastern North Carolina, where an overwhelming percentage of her Black counterparts were Baptist. Despite religious differences and dominant negative stereotypes of Black Muslims held by many in the mid-twentieth-century rural south, Mabel, guided by her religious convictions, forged and sustained relationships with her entire community. There were no other Muslim families in her town, which meant that Mabel had to travel nearly eighty miles to Norfolk, Virginia, to worship.

Finding a Spiritual Home: Grandma's Passing

Grandma Mabel- as we affectionately called her- was a soft-spoken woman. She was short of stature, with beautiful smooth dark brown skin. Her hair was silver-gray and shoulder length. She often wore a simple three strand braid hairstyle that was usually parted down the middle of her head. Her hands looked worn, but her skin was soft. I remember her annual summer visits to our home in New Jersey. Grandma Mabel was an early riser. Every morning, I would hear grandma make her way to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. She wore a full-length, mint-green satin robe with a zipper down the front and an attached hood. She carefully draped the hood over her head, similar to the way some women wore their traditional headscarf —just enough to cover some of the hair, but not all of it. I can still imagine her walking into the kitchen, filling the pot with water, and placing it on the gas burner until the steam whispered. She prepared her coffee without cream and with very little sugar. She always cleared her throat before taking her first sip. She sat at the table, stirring and quietly drinking until she finished her one cup for the day. Although her morning ritual was not linked to any religious practice, the set time and routine are symbolic of the prayer time ritual carried out in the NOI.

Watching Grandma Mabel perform her morning ritual was both exciting and calming for me. The excitement came from being the only child among six children to wake up early enough to be alone in the kitchen with grandma. Like everyone else in my family, I respected Grandma, and the thought of being the first one to have her all to myself caused my adrenaline to rush from the time I heard her foot meet the wooden floors until I met her at the kitchen table. I went to bed anticipating the moments that I would have alone time with my grandma. The calming aspect came from her quiet demeanor and loving nature. Her movements were purposeful—but never rushed. The steady cadence of her voice, the motions of her hands, and the depth of her eyes settled my anxious mind and body nearly instantaneously. Then, we could talk.

Our conversation ranged from how that scrape on my knee was obtained, doing what "city kids do" was healing, to discussing what I wanted to be in the future. The consistency of her routine, her warm smile, and genuine concern for how I was feeling, what I was thinking, and why assured me that I was her only concern during our morning meetings at the kitchen table. These moments with Grandma introduced me to meditative practices that are now part of my daily routine and inform my interpersonal interactions.

Sometimes our family traveled to Bertie County, NC, to visit Grandma Mabel. These trips were equally memorable. I do not think that I will ever forget what happened during our summer visit in 1978. Grandma loved to bake bean pies (a traditional dessert created by women of NOI) for people in her local community, but she especially enjoyed preparing them for her family. To maintain peace between my five siblings and me, she would always make small individual pies for each of us. That way, "you won't fight over who got the biggest piece," grandma would say. One morning, Grandma asked us to go out and play together while she prepared pies for us. As a young child, I was always more interested in playing with my brothers than my younger sister, so I chose to follow my brothers into the woods behind my grandmother's house rather than stay and make mud pies with my baby sister.

While attempting to keep up with my brothers, I fell on a large piece of broken glass and badly gashed the space between two fingers. My brothers quickly carried me back to Grandma's house to get help. Grandma was a natural healer. She quickly stopped the bleeding, wrapped my hand, and settled my nerves before turning her attention to my brothers. She told them that they were partly responsible for my injury because they didn't pay close enough attention to me. Since they neglected to watch out for me on the outside, she insisted they watch over me inside for the rest of the day. That is one day I'll never forget. Mainly because I still carry the scar between my two fingers. Secondly, my brothers' attention and concern for my safety and well-being shifted from that moment forward. They became some of the most vigilant and protective brothers. Grandma used that moment to teach us all about the importance of loving and caring for one another as members of the same family.

Grandma's passing in 1982 was the first significant loss I had experienced up to that point. I was only ten years old and learning for the first time the permanence of death. Grandma's health seemed to decline rapidly. I recall my mother and her siblings traveling to North Carolina to visit grandma. Within weeks of their initial visit, we were on the road to North Carolina for Grandma's funeral. I remember feeling deeply saddened and confused about her sudden death. After our return to New Jersey, I began to feel a profound spiritual connection to my grandmother. Nights were peaceful for me. I would lie in bed, watching and listening for Grandma Mabel. Every night, for months, she appeared in my dreams, right there in my bedroom. She stood over my bed, and she talked to me—just like she did at our kitchen table meetings--and comforted me until I fell asleep. I never shared my nighttime encounters with anyone because I believed they might deny my experience or try to stop me from connecting with Grandma.

After some time, nighttime with Grandma came to an end, and I no longer felt her presence in the same way, not until years later.

In 2008, Grandma re-emerged as a more conscious central figure in my life, though she had planted seeds that I did not always attribute to her. Finding my grandmother's photograph, tucked between the pages of a book, has helped me see the interconnectedness of our lives. In a way, finding my grandmother brings me closer to myself. No other message came to me except the desire to make sense of the photograph. By the fall of 2008, I registered for a workshop on photographs as memory, led by historian Germa Jackson at UNC-Chapel Hill. The exercises proved to be revelatory because that one photograph evoked memories that I did not know I possessed, as well as a narrative about Southern Black Muslim women that is seldom recognized or lauded.



Figure 1 Mable Carey Foreman standing in front of her sacred prayer space, dressed in the traditional white Nation of Islam (NOI) garb. Bertie County, North Carolina, 1963. (Photo by Robert L. Foreman: Family Archive)

Black Nationalist Traditions and the Nation of Islam

The tradition of Black Nationalism was based on an ideology that advocated the unification of Black people to revolt against oppression. It expressed an interest in emigration, racial uplift, and institution building through economic and political investments between displaced African American communities and the homeland, Africa. Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) is a notable example of a Black Nationalist leader. Garvey, a successful newspaperman and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), successfully carried forward into the twentieth century the Black Nationalist tradition, mobilizing the most significant mass movement in the United States. Garvey's Pan-Africanist, evangelical, and emigration rhetoric resonated and ignited a renewed Black consciousness among African Americans in the U.S. who later became members of Black nationalist organizations like the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Black Panther Party (Moses, 1996; Vincent, 1970, 2006; Essien-Udom, 1971).

The NOI nationalist tenor sought to integrate both religious and secular traditions found in Garveyism and the Moorish Science Temple. Moreover, the NOI promoted a strong sense of identity among its members, all in the interest of building a comprehensive reform agenda that encompassed spiritual, moral, social, and economic aspects within urban and rural Black communities. Many scholars highlight the success of Garvey's Movement among Black communities located in Northern Urban cities like Harlem, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Detroit, Michigan, and Chicago, Illinois. Less is known about the success of Garveyism across Southern rural and urban cities, such as Norfolk, Newport News, Virginia; Raleigh, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and Charleston, South Carolina. Even less is known about the NOI in these farming communities, including Aulander and Rich Square, North Carolina. This is why documentation of Mabel Foreman's experiences is necessary to flesh out the discussion of the ways NOI women from varied geographic locations, influenced by their religious beliefs and institutional training, transformed entire communities. Mary Rolinson's work, *Grassroots Garveyism: The UNIA in the Rural South, 1920-1927*, effectively argues that Black southerners, along with Black people in Northern communities, joined the movement because of its call to challenge and dismantle racial attitudes and treatment that hindered Black progress. The UNIA also provided visionary solutions for a crisis period that seemed riddled with problems (Essien-Udom, 1971; Rolinson, 2012).

Rural southern Garveyites challenged notions of who constituted, held up, and maintained early twentieth-century Black Nationalist traditions. Early Garveyites from rural southern communities were often married men and women, literate, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers with male and female children in their households. They are rarely viewed as historical figures; however, their contributions and experiences defy the notion that only certain individuals are considered true intellectual thinkers. Seldom were poor people with limited formal education seen as autonomous, self-determining agents for change or as authentic intellectuals. This mis-conception warrants correction, and Mabel's life story serves as a corrective to the myth (Rolinson, 2012).

Garveyism as a movement, and Black Nationalism as an ongoing principle, are linked to the NOI and its early pioneer members. Garvey's framing of a Black Nationalist agenda envisioned the attainment of Black economic independence from white control, and an emphasis on the development of a strong race consciousness among Black people was two central tenets that held in the NOI formulations of Black Nationalism. In Garveyite theology, Blacks were God's chosen people. In the NOI, God was declared to be Black. While this declaration was a departure from Garvey's position, the UNIA influenced Black Muslims and other Black Nationalists toward the more radical position- direct rejection of white supremacy, which appealed to many members who became rank and file members of the NOI. Furthermore, many members who were in the southern region of the U.S. shared a similar profile with early southern Garveyite members (Vincent, 2006).

Mabel Cary Foreman's Early Life before the NOI:

At the dawn of the twentieth century, African Americans made up one-third of North Carolina's population. Like Blacks in other southern states, they faced attacks on their civil rights and an unyielding commitment to white supremacy through the denial of voting rights and segregation in all areas of public accommodation (Crow, 2011). Mabel Cary was born against the backdrop of poverty, segregation, and white supremacy on 28 May 1908 in the town of Rich Square, North Carolina, located in North Hampton County. Her parents were Robert Cary (1876-1939) and Mary Brewer Cary (1878-1960). Robert was born in 1876 in South Hampton County, Virginia, seventy-five years after Nat Turner gave his life for the cause of eliminating slavery. By 1900, Robert Cary migrated to North Hampton County. He married Mary Brewer on 25 November 1900. Mabel was the third of Robert and Mary B. Cary's four children (According to U.S. Federal Census 1900, Rich Square, North Hampton County, North Carolina).

Mabel spent her early years living and working alongside her parents as tenant farmers in North Hampton County. At the age of 18, she married George Foreman on August 14, 1926. According to oral testimony, Mabel had six miscarriages between the birth of her first child, James, in 1928 and the arrival of her second child, George, in 1934. In 1930, Mabel and George Sr. lived with their young child, James, in a rented house in Rich Square, and George worked as a tenant farmer. In sum, Mabel and George parented seven children- James A. Foreman (born in 1928) George W. Foreman (born in 1934) Emma J. Foreman (born in 1939) Dorthoria Foreman (born in 1941) Robert L. Foreman (born in 1945) Mary K. Foreman (born in 1947) and Eula D. Foreman (born in 1948).

Mabel and George were married for 29 years until his death in 1955. According to census data, they primarily lived in North Hampton County but moved to Bertie County several years before George's passing. Census records show that both Mabel and George were able to read and write, but they do not specify their level of education. The documents only indicate that Mabel's occupation was a homemaker. However, oral testimony from her children suggests that she, like her husband, worked in the cotton and peanut fields and also served as a domestic worker for a local white family. This aligns with the employment patterns of Black individuals in North Carolina.

Black women faced significant vulnerabilities, particularly due to their childcare responsibilities. Fifty percent of Black women over the age of fourteen held full or part-time jobs, whereas only between 20 and 30 percent of white women did. Like many Black women coming of age in the rural South during the early twentieth century, Mabel chose the "Nation" over the "Church" to help her find lasting solace and purpose. The NOI's message of God's concern for the liberation of Black people appealed to her. Mabel chose to join the NOI for fulfillment that neither membership at Chapel Hill nor Sandy Branch Baptist Churches provided her. Thus, at the age of 53, when most women of her generation were anchored in a Christian spiritual practice, Mabel Foreman joined the NOI and was a proud Black Muslim woman until she died in 1982.

Mabel as a Member of NOI, 1961-1982:

Five years passed between the death of Mabel's husband and her introduction to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the Black Nationalist leader of the NOI. The challenging times prompted Mabel to seek spiritual guidance and find relief from the hardships she and her younger children faced. Not surprisingly, when her oldest daughter, Emma, introduced Mabel to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, Mabel was receptive to his message about the divine goodness of God's liberation for Black people. Like former Southern Garveyites, Mabel found the message of race pride and Black liberation appealing. She also recognized, like other converts, that Elijah's message represented a blending of Christianity, orthodox Islam, and Black nationalist ideology. This new religion addressed many of the significant questions she grappled with regarding her place in society. Soon after attending her first meeting in 1961 while visiting her daughter in Paterson, New Jersey, Mabel affirmed her belief that Elijah was indeed the savior and that she wanted to join the NOI. It was the "Nation" that helped Mabel find lasting solace, for the messages that Elijah emphasized dealt with God's concern for the earthly liberation of Black people rather than heavenly rewards. Thus, Mabel and several women became the female support system for this leader who made them feel worthy and capable of empowering their communities. By 1962, Mabel followed her children and became a member of the Original Nation of Islam.

Clearly, Black religious institutions and Black people with a religious self-understanding played an essential role in social movements in the United States. The literature recognizes the moral importance of the movements' achievements but fails to explore the relationships between religious motivations, community engagement, and the subsequent moral and social changes that occurred. Moreover, the predominant aim of many scholars who discuss the role of religion in social movements and change is to place male elites at the center of the narrative and to discuss how the particular religious institution shaped their identity and self-understanding. Studies on women as activists have only recently begun to appear in representative numbers. However, further exploration into how Black women's activism is influenced by their religious self-understanding, their definition of community activism, and mothering practices is worthy of exploration.

I utilize Debra Majeed's concept of female social activism which posits that, "the spiritually directed agency of Black Muslim women serves as a centerpiece of their religious identity, and reflects their construction and/or reconstruction of participatory roles through which they contribute to the uplift of their communities, the betterment of society, and the appreciation of women's autonomy and power." Majeed's work does not include an analysis of mothering practices performed by Black Muslim women as an extension of their activism. However, mothering is an essential element employed in this theoretical framework. In addition, the narrative related to Black women's involvement in the NOI is not overwhelmed with independent, autonomous action that led to prominent female leadership at the highest levels of Islam. Contrarily, stories about women like Mabel Cary Foreman and other pioneer women become compelling in the historical narrative because they were unveiled within patriarchal structures and were experienced by women who conscientiously chose to reconstruct for themselves an ideology of 'women's proper space' against cultural norms that stood in their way. Mabel's intellectual thought and nationalist philosophy manifested in her everyday life through her actions.

In some ways, she was similar to traditional NOI women who supported male leadership and held traditional values (Majeed, 2016; Mubashir, 2001).

In Elijah's Nation, women were encouraged to accept the role of mother and as the first teacher to their children. Women learned their roles through the Muslim Girls Training (MGT) and General Civilization Class (GCC) that taught girls and women self-defense, modesty, diet, health, hygiene, domestic skills, business skills, and conduct. The MGT class primarily emphasized to girls and women the importance of the Black woman's role as a supportive partner in her husband's success. It was within the NOI that some women adapted the traditional patriarchal structure and others like Mabel would carve out space to direct their activist consciousness and respond to their marginalization in the larger society (Karim, 2009; Naples, 1992).

Nation Building as Mothering & Other Mothering

Mabel is an obscure yet interesting historical figure to examine in that she does not fit neatly within the traditional framework of a pioneer female figure within the original NOI. The 1960s and 1970s contained a series of events that demonstrate Mabel's sense of personal autonomy and agency within the Nation of Islam. Mabel had the responsibility to care for her children without a husband. She served as their nurturer, disciplinarian, and teacher, responsible for their positive identity formation and education. With the weight of her own personal circumstances and a genuine desire to build the larger "Nation" community, 49-year-old Mabel assumed the role of head of household and community builder, simultaneously defining, representing, and modeling budding Islamic womanhood more visibly. She joined the NOI as a single mother living in the Jim Crow South, she never remarried; while marriage was heavily promoted within the NOI, she shared a love relationship but rejected marriage with Leroy Junior, a man who never joined the NOI; she worked as a live-out domestic and field worker in cotton and peanut fields, and voluntarily committed to labor within and for her community through baking and selling bean pies, cooking for teachers and community members, serving as a lay midwife, practicing principles of other-mothering and activist mothering. I regard Mabel's day-to-day administration as a concrete example of her understanding of the central tenet of Black Nationalism, self-determination, as well as an example of how she exhibited personal agency. She functioned as an exemplar of practical nation-building from the ground up. Mabel regarded her effort as contributing to nation-building for the expressed benefit of building a proper community life (Karim, 2009; Naples 1992).

By the late 1960s, Mabel's role as mother was extended to include community othermother, fiscal crusader, and organizer. Community members relied on Mabel's leadership skills, her intuition, and her ability to be, as an early pioneer member, Anna Mae Shabazz noted,

"The glue that kept us [the movement] together. Sister Mabel traveled to Maryland and to New Jersey to live with me for short periods of time to help me take care of my children. "She had the courage to be different with great dignity."

It was in the spirit of community activism and envisioning women's work as an extension of "home" that Mabel took charge of helping to build the Nation community (Collins, 2000).

Ultimately, Mabel earned the respect of women in her community as well as NOI leaders. According to her son, Robert Foreman:

"She was a loving and devoted mother. She taught us to have a strong work ethic. One way was to encourage us to try to pick 100 pounds of cotton. I did not like picking cotton, but I enjoyed shaking peanuts. Mama wanted us to develop a strong work ethic so that we could one day be self-sufficient and take care of ourselves without relying on anyone else. She was strict but not in an abusive way. She just wanted us to get the lessons early so that they wouldn't have to be repeated. I remember how disciplined they [sisters in the NOI] were and I remember seeing them cook and sell food and pies to raise money for the Temple. Mama liked being able to put her cooking and baking skills to use in the Temple and she sold a lot of pies that way."

Robert shared the numerous conversations and lessons he received from his mother. He described how she frequently emphasized the importance of unity, race pride, and serving others, while also being mindful of God:

“Mama stressed all of those things. She believed in unity and that was another reason she was attracted to the NOI. She also liked the message about having pride in one’s race. She didn’t necessarily talk about the importance of service to others, but she lived it. She always reminded us about the oneness of God. Islam gave her that and she never wanted us to forget it.”

Black Muslim women realized their critical roles in the total development of their community children. Whether men with leadership titles or not acknowledged this, these women were wholly committed to building a model “Nation.”

For Mabel’s youngest daughter, Eula, now named Waheedah, the experiences dealing with racism were elevated because in her early life, she lived within the confines of the Jim Crow system in Bertie County, North Carolina. She, along with her mother and other siblings still in the home, was confronted with the physical barriers that were created under a Jim Crow system. She recounted several stories about negative interactions she had with the white family who employed her mother. In her discussion of racist encounters, she recalls from childhood, Waheedah noted:

“I remember like it was yesterday when I went to see mama at Elizabeth Jacobs’ house and she [mama] was standing in the middle of the living room floor where I could see her from the front door of their house and I went to ring the front doorbell and you were not supposed to ring the front door and a little child my age at the time answered and said Mabel is in here but you cannot come in this way...go around the back...and my mama was standing right there and I said but my mama is right there and I’m going through this door and I walked right in... This encounter occurred after Mabel joined the NOI. For Waheedah, the lesson her mother emphasized was race pride and a rejection of accepting a subservient position, all taught by the NOI. Her mother taught her that God prearranged equality, which could not be taken away by anyone; this is what she credits with giving her the courage to transgress Jim Crow lines. Mabel already had an understanding of the absurdity of white supremacy, and aligning with the teachings of the NOI reinforced the beliefs she held about the necessity of resistance and self-determination. Waheedah’s discussion of the lesson she learned from her mother parallels Patricia Hill Collins’ emphasis on concrete experiences as a criterion of meaning in U.S. Black women’s epistemology. Her mother’s wisdom and teaching helped her to confront her white female peer who did not recognize her personhood or value. The practice of using concrete experience as a criterion of meaning is relevant and meaningful for Black Muslim women just as it is for Black women of varying faith traditions (Collins, 2000).

Mabel’s feminist understanding

Waheedah and her sister Dorthoria also discussed their experiences with sexism. They attributed their beliefs about their roles to the practices they observed as members of the original NOI and as Mabel’s daughters. It is evident from their personal narratives that their perceptions significantly impacted their dedication to community work. Waheedah and Dorthoria recounted that:

“We didn’t see our mother or other Muslim women out in the forefront speaking as spokespersons on behalf of the organization back then, but we saw our mother as a leader and the women from our community who tried to do good work...they were our models.” In the Nation, we had Muslim Girls Training (MGT) and General Civilization Classes (GCC) and there we dealt with issues related to our children, husbands and home life. We could [also] gain rank as Lieutenant and Captain.”

Dorthoria and her brother Robert discussed the reasons why their mother chose never to remarry after their father, George, died. Robert quickly replied:

“That’s easy! She always said, everyone should marry once in their lifetime and that is the only requirement. If you do it more than once, it should be by choice.”

While Mabel shared a love relationship with a man after her husband’s death, she chose never to marry him or anyone else. She maintained this relationship while being an active member of the NOI. She appeared to be a self-made woman and only adhered to the teachings that aligned with her personal convictions and her relationship with God. Her daughter, Dorthoria, recounted a conversation she had with her mother about why she chose to end her intimate relationship with Mr. Junior:

“Mama told me she asked God to reveal him to her. She said that God allowed her to see Mr. Junior. She saw that he would not love and respect her the way she deserved to be loved and she decided to end the relationship.”

Mabel exhibited personal agency and autonomy in her intimate relationship. While the NOI's encouragement and support for marriage were acknowledged, Mabel chose to make her decision about selecting a partner based on her spiritual connection and seeking God's guidance regarding whether to marry. Mabel may have considered the rules of the NOI but relied on her personal relationship with God to assist her in the decision-making process. Rather than solely rely on the rules and judgment of the Nation and its male leaders to dictate what was best for her, she acted on her own accord and decided not to remarry. Although not a self-defined feminist, Mabel Foreman refused to let conventions of gender and accepted male supremacy dictate decisions she deemed important. Mabel's actions demonstrate a strong sense of autonomy and self-determination.

The definition of community feminism provided by scholar Ula Taylor adds greater context for examining Black Muslim women. Taylor's article, "Negro Women Are Great Thinkers as well as Doers": Amy Jacques Garvey and Community Feminism in the United States, 1924-1927," states that community feminism allowed Black women to function within their communities as helpmates and leaders. Moreover, community feminism includes a critique of Black men, but also serves as a linchpin to unite all Black women in reaching their full potential for the imagined Black nation. It contains support for both nationalism (a doctrine that advocates the right to freedom and self-determination) and feminism (a doctrine that supports equal rights for women and challenges women's oppression). While many of the life choices of Black women during the early twentieth century may have kept them from being recognized as important community feminists, their roles within their respective communities make them a part of the feminist group. These women may or may not come from male-centered households, but their activism focuses on supporting both men and women in their lives, as well as initiating and participating in community uplift activities. Taylor aptly points out that the concept of community feminism is an effort to expand the historical meaning of feminism. It challenges the notion that helpmate and leadership roles exist in contradiction. This interplay between roles can be seen in the life and times of the early pioneer women in the original Nation of Islam as well as among their descendants who would emerge in the late 1950s and early 1960s. (Taylor, 2000).

Like Amy Jacques Garvey, Mabel Cary Foreman played a central role in legitimizing the social activism of women in male-centered organized movements. Mabel lived, worked, and worshipped in a community where, for some men, including her former husband and later love interest, women had not proven their right and ability to contribute to the progress of the nation beyond the domestic sphere. Mabel, along with other NOI women, challenged the boundaries of home to include all aspects of community life. As a result, they created space through which their contribution to the success of the organization would be legitimized and made necessary for group survival (Mubashir, 2001; Taylor, 2000).

Mabel's role in the original Nation of Islam (NOI) demonstrates a community feminist and social activist belief existed among women who have been made invisible and silent in much of the historical narrative. Their community feminist and social activist perspective can be identified through their work, educational involvement, community organizing, and leadership roles (Mubashir, 2001)

To her children, grandchildren, and some members of the African American Muslim community, Mabel Cary Foreman is a legible woman and an important pioneer of the original NOI. Her service to the organization and the Muslim community for more than two decades, until she died in 1982, warrants her position as a Nation builder. Although she fails to be recognized as a seminal figure among popular Black Nationalists like Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X (El-Hajj Shabazz), she was indeed one of many women situated at the center of one of America's most significant and longest-lasting Black Nationalist movements.

Mabel's leadership as a pioneer of the NOI and her role as a mother, grandmother, and community builder for the NOI are often missing from the historical narrative on African American Muslims. The activism of Mabel Foreman and other women pioneers in the original NOI challenges conventional claims about marginalized religious worldview and the gendered experience of its female followers (Mubashir, 2001).

Conclusion

In sum, Mabel Cary Foreman is my example of a Black Muslim woman claiming feminism. As such, she saw herself as part of a movement that she believed helped Black people, men, and women help themselves. Whether they were on the former forced labor plantations of rural North Carolina, in the classrooms of Muhammad University of Islam, and later the Clara Muhammad Schools, in traditional public schools, or in their homes, they shared a common mission: to contribute to improving the living conditions of African Americans in their community.

Whether her work required individual effort or group cooperation, her messages were clear: we can do for ourselves, we must work in tandem with one another, we must educate our children, and we must take ownership of our own. Mabel C. Foreman, a mother and grandmother, embraced the concept of nation building, negotiating her spiritual self and manifesting the core practices of a Black Nationalist philosophy, with self-determination as its main tenet. In her everyday actions, Mabel actualized the key principle of self-determination. She fed her community, she used caretaking as a practice of bolstering her community, provided guidance and wisdom to the young, and she, alongside other Black Muslim women, collectively used their work and their belief in the ideals of the NOI and its programs to effect change in their community. As such, they were change agents much like the Southern civil rights activists, black Baptist women, domestic laborers, and their enslaved foremothers, who worked to create a better future for generations to come.

The women in my family continue to uphold the core values that Mabel represented. These values include supporting education, fostering community, cultivating self-discipline, promoting personal autonomy, and ensuring the right to self-determination. I am a third-generation Muslim and part of what I consider the third wave of Black Muslim women. This group of women differs from the pioneers and second-wave women in that we do not share the lived experiences of our predecessors, but rather benefit from their memories of the Nation. This is one of the most compelling ways in which third, fourth, and fifth-wave Muslim women will visualize their past, which includes a long legacy of feminist consciousness and activism.

My identity and feminist consciousness have undoubtedly been shaped by my grandmother, mother, and aunts. In finding my grandmother, I have found myself.



Figure 2 The photo of the author was taken in the family home, East Orange, New Jersey, 1976. (Photo by Robert L. Foreman: Family Archive)

References

Records

- N.C. Death Index, 1908–2004. Ancestry.com. <http://www.ancestry.com> (accessed October 25, 2014)
NC Marriage Index, 1741–2004. Ancestry.com. <http://www.ancestry.com> (accessed October 25, 2014)
U.S. Federal Census 1900, Rich Square, North Hampton County, North Carolina. Ancestry.com. <http://www.ancestry.com> (accessed October 25, 2014)

Oral Interviews

- Robert Foreman, personal communication, March 5, 2020
Anna Shabazz, personal communication, July 12, 2010
Dorthoria Foreman and Waheedah, personal communication, August 10, 2010

Secondary Sources

- Collins, P. H. (2000). **Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment**. Routledge.
- Crow, J. J., Escott, P. D., & Hatley, F. J. (2011). Black life in the age of Jim Crow. In **A history of African Americans in North Carolina** (pp. 121–122). Office of Archives and History: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.
- Essien-Udom, E. U. (1971). **Black nationalism: A search for identity in America**. University of Chicago Press.
- Gibson, D. M., & Karim, J. (2014). **Women of the Nation: Between Black protest and Sunni Islam**. New York University Press.
- Karim, J. (2009). Through Sunni women's eyes: Black feminism and the Nation of Islam. In M. T. Karim & B. H. Jackson (Eds.), **Black routes to Islam** (pp. 163–177). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Majeed, D. (2016). **Polygyny: What it means when African American Muslim women share their husbands**. University Press of Florida.
- Moses, W. J. (1996). **Classical Black nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey**. New York University Press.
- Mubashir, D. W. (2001). **A fruitful labor: African American formulations of Islam, 1928–1942** (Doctoral dissertation). Northwestern University.
- Naples, N. A. (1992). Activist mothering: Cross-generational continuity in the community work of women from low income neighborhoods. **Gender and Society**, 6*(3), 441–463.
- Rolinson, M. (2012). **Grassroots Garveyism: The U.N.I.A. in the rural South, 1920–1927**. University of North Carolina Press.
- Taylor, U. (2017). **The promise of patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam**. University of North Carolina Press.
- Taylor, U. Y. (2000). “Negro women are great thinkers as well as doers”: Amy Jacques Garvey and community feminism in the United States, 1924–1927. **Journal of Women's History**, 12*(2), 105–126.
- Vincent, T. G. (2006). **Black Power and the Garvey Movement** (Original work published 1970). Black Classic Press.