

Black Muslims: Race, Religion, Culture
AMES 295S / AAAS 295 / ICS 212 / GSF 296S / REL 295S
Archival Expeditions: Working with primary sources

RECOVERING BLACK MUSLIM EXPERINCES

Part one: Reading Against the Grain

Historians who are interested in researching the histories of subaltern groups are often faced with the task of constructing their narratives from hostile sources. In many cases, subaltern subjects only appear in the historical record when they fall afoul of the law. They are therefore often construed as criminal, uncivilized, or an enemy of the nation.

Using primary source materials, such as newspaper accounts and counter-intelligence documents, you will be asked to piece together narratives of black Muslim experience in the 20th century. Given the hostile nature of the sources, how can we piece together a neutral or even sympathetic account of the historical figure or group under discussion?

Begin your engagement with the texts by reviewing all the documents in your collection as a whole. Take note of each document's over-all format, including stamps, letter-heads, and other bureaucratic markings. What insights does this offer you into the material life of the document?

List some of those insights here:

After examining the documents' formal qualities, begin to review the textual content. Use the following questions to guide your investigation:

1. What agency or organization created this document? Why: what is the document's purpose?
2. How does the category of race appear in this collection? What explicit terms of race are used? How is race identified or "known" (i.e. physical characteristics, genealogical descent, clothing, etc.)? Do you see any evidence of overlap between categories of race, nationality, and religion?
3. What kind of transnational connections do you see emerging for the personality or organization in question? Why do these connections become a source of anxiety for those who created the document? What specifically is the fear being expressed?
4. What can we deduce about the quality of citizenship or national belonging for black Muslims based on these documents?

QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

5. Imagine that you are an historian trying to reconstruct a narrative on the basis of these sources. What story do these documents allow you to tell? Would it be possible to use these sources to tell a different story about the organization or personality at the center of your collection? What steps would you take to control for bias and read your collection against the grain?
6. What gaps remain in the narrative that emerges from your collection? What other kinds of information would you need to flesh out your narrative? What steps might you take in order to obtain that information?

3. Is the lesson primarily moral / spiritual? Does it engage the body or the mind? Or, does the lesson propose an intimate connection between the spirit and the body? How is that relationship expressed?

4. What role might this document have played in fashioning a new identity for black people in the United States? How does it mobilize / interpret religious narratives or symbols in order to combat negative racialized stereotypes and assert a righteous black subject?