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Taylor, Ula Yvette. 2017. *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 288 pp. \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4696-3393-0

Reviewed by Olivia Hagedorn

Ula Yvette Taylor's *The Promise of Patriarchy* examines the complex, and at times contradictory, ways Black women pursued freedom and dignity within the fiercely patriarchal Nation of Islam (NOI) from 1930 to 1975. At the heart of Taylor's book is the question of how "freedom and prosperity come together around patriarchy" within the NOI (p. 5). According to Taylor, the NOI appealed to Black women through its "promise of patriarchy," that is, the promise of protection, financial stability, and supportive husbands in the context of a violent Jim Crow nation. Patriarchy's promise held sway precisely because it confronted the devaluation of Black womanhood and inverted the racist belief that Black women were immoral, and therefore unworthy of protection. Simply put, the NOI "provided a space for women who had been disrespected, abused, and who had struggled to find a 'home' in racial America" (p. 5).

Using archival sources, Federal Bureau of Investigation and police files, newspapers, and oral histories, Taylor reveals the centrality of women to the development and sustenance of the NOI. Here, Taylor upends prevailing scholarly narratives, which foreground high-profile male NOI leaders such as W. D. Fard, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X. Instead, Taylor illustrates how women such as Clara (Poole) Muhammad, Bursteen Sharieff, Sister Belinda Ali, and Ethel Sharieff worked to advance

the NOI's goals of an autonomous Black nation. Indeed, as Taylor writes, "what became the Nation of Islam was driven by a woman" (p. 15). Clara Muhammad, known as Sister Clara within the NOI, introduced her husband, Elijah Muhammad, to the teachings of Fard, the mysterious founder of the NOI, after becoming frustrated with her husband's alcoholism and unemployment in Great Depression-era Detroit. In fact, Sister Clara attended her first NOI meetings without him. Moreover, Clara encouraged Elijah Muhammad to accept Fard's call to teach and then tutored him on Fard's teachings. At the grassroots level, early NOI women canvassed door to door spreading Fard's message; organized the Muslim Girls' Training and General Civilization Classes to train NOI women on diet, dress, domestic responsibilities, and motherhood; penned articles for the organization's two publications, *The Final Call to Islam* and *Muhammad Speaks*; and helped establish and run University of Islam schools. Women, Taylor shows, were indispensable to the NOI's daily functioning, even if they could not serve as ministers or leaders.

Throughout the book, Taylor convincingly demonstrates how patriarchy and gender hierarchy infused every part of the NOI and shaped all aspects of NOI members' lives. NOI members were expected to uphold a moral lifestyle rooted in traditional upper- and middle-class gender roles, with husbands financially supporting their wives and protecting them from the racial and sexual violence of white supremacy. Women, conversely, were taught to embrace modesty, marriage, and motherhood. Here, Taylor teases out the tensions between the oppressive and liberatory aspects of NOI membership for Black women. The NOI's strict gender norms threatened to reinforce harmful elements of patriarchy—namely, domestic violence and male domination. At the same time, male leaders' sexual indiscretions and vocal denunciations of Black women's alleged immorality belied the NOI's affectionate rhetoric of love and respect for Black womanhood. Yet Taylor does not rely on a narrow binary of freedom versus oppression to analyze NOI women's lives. Instead, she carefully situates her subjects' actions within the context of low-wage service employment, the 1965 Moynihan

Report, and failed civil rights reforms in northern industrial centers. In one of the most interesting and nuanced sections of the book, Taylor reveals how NOI women defied NOI doctrine by “trumping” patriarchy. That is, NOI wives went against NOI doctrine and worked outside of the home, practiced family planning, and divorced absentee husbands.

Taylor’s *The Promise of Patriarchy* offers the first in-depth, book-length analysis of women within the Nation of Islam. Scholars of African American women’s history, Black Nationalism, and Black religion will find her astute reading of archival sources and deft use of oral histories fruitful. Like Taylor’s first book, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (2002), *The Promise of Patriarchy* complicates simple narratives of gender domination and resistance, revealing the multidimensionality of Black women’s inner lives and struggles. *The Promise of Patriarchy* not only succeeds in answering the question of why Black women would join a highly patriarchal organization; it also succeeds in complicating narratives of Black women’s oppression, resistance, and agency.

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