

Screaming a Silent Scream

By Sonsyrea Tate

If I tell you what I really think of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, his most vocal supporters, no doubt, would dismiss me as a traitor - me, having been raised in the Nation of Islam, a third-generation "X", my grandparents having joined in the 1950s. If I tell you why I don't like the guy, why I consider him a pimp of the least of us, exploiter of the most vulnerable among us, manipulator of our deepest fears and oldest anxieties, I might get in trouble.

Last week I listened as a long-time friend, a Muslim woman I respect, raved about the potential success for the Millions More Movement. She loves Louis Farrakhan, circulated fliers for his march, told me how he personally reached out to her and other women in a group she helped form.

"You were never in the Nation of Islam were you?" I said, having met this woman in an Orthodox Muslim community, not within the Nation of Islam community - which is different.

Even those who know better than to join or remain in the Nation of Islam, knowing the costs and demands are too high, knowing the exploitation is extreme, knowing the gulf between the haves and have-nots, between the powerful and the rank-and-file within that nation is vast, even they would rather not hear public criticism of the man who exemplifies their dignity, courage, resilience, power, and potential.

So, I'll scream out my silent scream.

I won't talk too loudly about why I was incensed after the first Million Man March, seeing that the NOI was promoting a Sister Tynetta Muhammad as Elijah Muhammad's widow, when we, who were in the Nation in the 1970s and before, knew the only woman deserving such honor was Sister Clara Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad's lawfully wedded wife. I will not talk too loudly about how Farrakhan got away with it, why no one stepped forward to set the record straight. My guess is some feared speaking truth to Farrakhan's power, some figured it wasn't worth fussing about, and most simply did not know.

I will not ask why nobody has looked into Farrakhan's own nation to check its levels of democracy, and fairness in opportunities, to check the level of support this mini all-Black nation offers its members falling on hard times. I remember families within the Nation of Islam left as helpless and hapless as the victims of Hurricane Katrina after the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975. Members who fell victim to their own personal or family storms were left to fend for themselves, as well.

It would take many years for an imam to reach me longer still for me to recover spiritually. And it wasn't Louis Farrakhan or any of his grand-standing NOI ministers who reached out. I met in a very humble imam in a least likely place - an amusement park. Sensing my distress even through my laughter, he offered comfort by way of explaining the fallout of the Nation I had known and loved growing up - a nation that once seemed unified, holy, industrious, and sure.

Being forced into the real world after the collapse of the NOI's community for many of us was as severe as being washed out by 20-foot waves.

But this is my silent scream. I'll scream out my silent scream in little articles in community newspapers and in book readings attended by two.

In these places, I will ask why a man who mobilized a million men ten years ago in the nation's capitol could not mobilize half a million men to go to New Orleans' Ward Nine to rebuild a community completely destroyed. In these places, I will ask why he could not mobilize 1,000 men in cities across the country to keep urban streets clean and provide after-school activities to children whose parents are busy working two jobs or double shifts.

Thanks to the Honorable Malcolm X, I do not have to scream out to save a nation. The warning was issued before I was born – enter at your own risk. Malcolm X exposed the corruption of Elijah Muhammad who sired children by his young secretaries, and exposed the fallacies of nationalist rhetoric.

The NOI businesses did not offer equal employment or fair business practices. Brothers worked long hours for next to nothing selling frozen fish, bean pies and newspapers, working in the Nation of Islam's restaurants and bakeries, rewarded mostly by acquired culinary skills. In many cases, women holding down government jobs kept their families going and maintained the temples.

In small groups, with people who know, we discuss the daddies, uncles and brothers who ended up on drugs and or landed in jail after the Nation of Islam's teachings and moral support systems failed them. So many of the nationalists teachings were false – the Mother Ship was not coming back to rescue us righteous Black folk; Whites were not the result of an evil experiment by a Black scientist named Nemrod; and Muslims were not divinely obliged to kill four White devils to earn a lapel pin.

This is my silent scream.

I do not stand with Rev. Jesse Petterson and Shelby Steele, who held a counter-march press conference earlier this week, denouncing the movement even as they defended racist remarks made by Former Education Secretary William Bennett. Nor have I sought to galvanize other former Nation of Islam members who share my sentiments.

(Truth be known, recent years have found me ambivalent about Louis Farrakhan – part of me inclined to seek his endorsement for my book, "Little X: Growing Up in the Nation of Islam" for guaranteed sales; the better part of me settling for simply having my account on file in the libraries.)

This is my silent scream.

In my heart of hearts, recent years have found me weighing the benefits of my Nation of Islam training against some of the harsh realities of broken families, dispirited and disheartened offspring, yes, from the Nation of Islam. Some of us succeeded, yes, became responsible parents, entrepreneurs, even corporate leaders. But my scream is for those who did not, for those who were left bewildered and disoriented after our "savior" died.

And now comes Louis Farrakhan with his Millions More Movement, having what many consider little to show for the first one ten years ago. Many have lined up to follow him – to where, who knows? Leaders from the Congressional Black Caucus and churches and community groups will gather round. The crowd may be swelled by spectators, and no doubt, also swelled by the many who did not stop to think about the a minister's masterful exploitation of the Hurricane Katrina rescue failures.

My Muslim friend believes the mainstream media is attempting to ignore the march, to deny it ink, to deny it legitimacy, attention and attendance. She is sure the turn-out will be tremendous, still.

“Oh yeah. I must’ve handed out 5,000 fliers, and most of the people I talked to are going,” she said.

I would not be surprised if many show up. I would be less surprised if few show up and Farrakhan declare it a success anyhow. Of course he would spin it a success simply by virtue of bringing together African American leaders from across the spectrum – conservative Civil Rights leaders and Hip-Hop moguls, entertainers and intellectuals, grassroots organizers and the Ivy League elite – but he did that ten years ago, didn’t he?

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