

## BOOK REVIEWS

## Single Book Reviews

## Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem

Zain Abdullah. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 294 pp.

Erin E. Stiles

University of Nevada, Reno

In *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem*, Zain Abdullah offers a compelling and readable ethnographic portrayal of Harlem's West African Muslims. Abdullah is a skilled writer, and the reader moves from one inviting chapter to the next as if wandering through the city with a close friend, stopping to chat with passersby. Despite the pleasantly peripatetic nature of his narrative, Abdullah presents a thoughtful analysis of how African Muslims have become a vital part of Harlem social life. The author's primary focus is on the way in which the construction of Muslim identity and commitment to leading a religiously informed life shapes the experiences of Africans in Harlem. Because of their resilience and flexibility in making lives in New York, Abdullah calls such immigrants a new "Blues People," using the term from the title of LeRoi Jones's 1963 book (reprinted in 1999), which explores music and the African American experience: "The blues chorus that the immigrants sing conveys their narratives of struggle, spiritual yearning, and redemption" (p. 13).

One of the greatest strengths of *Black Mecca* is the careful attention Abdullah pays to relationships between African Muslims and African Americans in Harlem—many of whom are also Muslim. In several chapters, Abdullah shows the complexity of relationships between the communities and perceptions they have of each other. His interviews show that while people recognize areas of common understanding the power of potential connections, there is also mistrust and sometimes hostility between the communities. Although Africans work to build relationships with the long-standing African American community, many are also careful to "avoid assimilation into a Black underclass" (p. 13). And for some African Americans, different historical experiences trump any potential for building a common identity. Abdullah explains that for one woman, although she takes pride in her African heritage, "labeling herself African American

fails to recognize the struggles that Black people endure daily . . . More important, her identity choice reinforces a boundary between the Africans whom she referred to as African American and herself as a Black woman" (p. 51).

Another key strength of the book is chapter 5, "Sacred City," in which Abdullah describes how African Muslims sacralize New York City. The chapter begins with a vivid description of a summer parade. Much of this chapter (and the book) focuses on the Murids, members of a Sufi order founded by the Senegalese saint Cheikh Amadou Bamba (d. 1927). The parade is a celebration of Cheikh Amadou Bamba Day (decreed as July 28 by mayor David Dinkins in 1988) and is the starting point for Abdullah's description of how African migrants indigenize elements of religious life and practice and thus create sacred space: "African Muslim activity creates a new tier of urban sacredness, a middle world where the vagaries of Harlem life are symbolically reworked as they struggle to navigate the complexities of New York City" (p. 108). A memorable example is the way in which a young Murid explains the possibility that Gandhi was influenced by the teachings of Bamba, who, therefore, may have been foundational to the thought of Martin Luther King and the U.S. civil rights movement (see p. 112). Abdullah argues that narratives like this that plant seeds of West African religious practice and identity in the U.S. context are "an attempt to retell and lay claim to a crucial part of Black history . . . what matters most is not its accuracy, but the way Murids employ it to explain a new Black presence in Harlem" (p. 112).

At times, the book leaves the reader wanting more, which suggests that there is rich ground for future research. For example, Abdullah suggests that Murid women in New York have more earning potential than men and that they have used this economic leverage to support and empower religious leaders who share their concerns (p. 120). Although Abdullah addresses migrant women's experiences in chapters 7 and 8, which focus on work and family, a thorough exploration of the mechanisms and ramifications of this support would be most welcome. Also, Abdullah occasionally

references the outwardly seamless “*masjid* life” (*masjid* is the Arabic term for mosque) and corresponding social network that organizes large celebrations and events like visits from prominent religious leaders (e.g., p. 122). Exploring this network would be a promising avenue for future work.

In sum, the book makes a noteworthy contribution to the academic study of Islam in the United States, contemporary urban life, and the experiences of African migrants. And because Abdullah is one of the rare academic writers who can

present a sophisticated analysis in a highly engaging manner, *Black Mecca* is likely to enjoy a wide readership beyond the academy.

#### REFERENCE CITED

- Jones, LeRoi (Amiri Baraka)  
1999[1963] *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: Perennial.

## Conjuring Crisis: Racism and Civil Rights in a Southern Military City

George Baca. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010. 196 pp.

Paulette G. Curtis

University of Notre Dame

*Conjuring Crisis* is an ambitious retelling of a social drama that unfolded in the town of Fayetteville, North Carolina, in 1997. Many readers who know Fayetteville as the home of the Army base Fort Bragg may expect the text’s social drama to concern the U.S. military. Those readers will be surprised to find a different Fayetteville rendered here. *Conjuring Crisis* is about the South; the machinations of actors connected to one another by race, urban politics, and ambition; and the failure of neoliberal agendas in the post–civil rights era. *Conjuring Crisis* also makes an important argument about the problems Fayetteville has encountered since the mid–20th century. As author George Baca states in his introduction, Fayetteville’s poverty, blight, and other social problems do not stem from the U.S. military’s presence, per se, but rather “from the collision of southern political forces with the vast expansion of federal power” (p. 18). Such a nuanced theory is one of the book’s strengths.

The other strength of *Conjuring Crisis* is its blow-by-blow dissection of the drama that became known in Fayetteville as the “Five-Four” Crisis—the lens through which Baca examines this complex city. In 1997, a local NAACP chapter publicly requested that the city council appoint an outside authority to investigate reports of racism and discrimination in the Fayetteville Police Department. City council members divided into the “Five” and the “Four.” The Five—three of whom were black and two who were white—believed the allegations merited investigation. The Four, all of whom were white, argued that an outside investigation would compromise the “formal principles of local government” (p. 31) by delegating power and authority to an external body. Baca sees many complex things afoot in the rhetoric and posturing of this dissenting minority. As he relates in chapter 1, the appeal to the principles of professional government masked deeper feelings about the shift of power from a white major-

ity to a biracial alliance that might ultimately give black council members the upper hand. White residents sensed a shift in power, which they, in turn, “conjured” into a crisis that compelled both black and white citizens to respond (p. 9).

The “white-washed” language used to describe the “Five-Four” split resulted in theories involving the two white members of the Five (the Mannings), who some white residents believed had conspired to use the black community to take control of the city. In chapter 2, Baca examines the “Five-Four” crisis and the Manning conspiracy against the backdrop of the antebellum and postmanumission South, where slaveholders’ and political leaders’ fears of blacks and their potential insurrection led them to “create a sense of crisis” to unify various white factions (p. 47). In chapter 3, Baca brings readers to the eve of the crisis by tracing the establishment of Fort (then Camp) Bragg and local Southern leaders’ careful sidestepping of federally mandated integration reforms. Chapter 3 also considers how NAACP and black political leaders became unwitting partners of the urban regime (i.e., business and middle-class interests and politicians). This partnership seems to inevitably lead to bureaucratic control over the black community (p. 76). The book’s remaining chapters are dedicated to the machinations of various actors, including outraged white residents who protest the “Five-Four,” black civil leaders, and military retirees. Although savvy readers may expect the end, it still reads like an elegy for what could have been. In the post–civil rights era, blacks and Fayetteville remain on the outskirts of the good life.

Baca’s compelling, soap opera–like iteration of the “Five-Four” and his argument about the ways that politically correct language masks underlying racism and racial anxiety make *Conjuring Crisis* worth reading, but those who do so should be prepared for a text with a number of issues, including overambition. Baca uses the “Five-Four” crisis to illuminate “urban politics, racism, and the military, and . . . the history of race and racism, in Fayetteville and beyond”