Representin' God: Rap, Religion and the Politics of a Culture

Charise Cheney, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Digable Planets' 1994 single "Dial 7 (Axioms of Creamy Spies)," Sara Webb, a featured vocalist and apparent cultural critic, demystifies white power and dismisses social constructions of white supremacy with one line: "The Man ain't shit." In this critique, Webb takes her cultural cues from the Black and urban working class community and denounces the representative of white domination – "The Man" – thus expelling him from his center of power. According to this verse, he is a devil ("your tongue is forked we know") whose days of deception ("your double-dealin' is scoped") and conspiring ("The Man's game is peeped") against the disempowered Black masses are over. ("It's Nation Time, Nation Time"). Racially-conscious brothers and sisters, the "creamy spies," inspired and informed by the teachings of Elijah Muhammad ("we are sun, moon and star"), have revealed white folks' true nature and the righteous legacy of Blacks: "We are God's sequel." Armed with knowledge and an arsenal ("we all got pieces"), they are "ready to put in work" – to mobilize and organize – Black folks at the "ghetto-level" to take control over their lives through a nationalist agenda and a Black united front: "We can make life phatter/together/not divided."[1]

The perspective expressed by Sara Webb is an archetypal example of the kinds of cultural critiques advanced by rap politicos in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Among those artists who use rap music as a forum for politicking, Black nationalism shapes their political position and, with few exceptions, the teachings of Elijah Muhammad informs their nationalist perspective.[2] For example, in his controversial 1989 release *The Devil Made Me Do It*

militant Oakland-based raptivist Paris traces his Black nationalist roots to the 1940s and the founding of the Temple of Islam, which would later become known as the Nation of Islam. In "Brutal" Paris, who at the time was a self-proclaimed member of the Nation, describes the legacy of Black nationalism as beginning with W.D. Fard, the founder of the Nation of Islam, and being preserved by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, who in turn inspired the Black Panther Party.[3] According to Paris, this tradition of "intelligent Black men" continues today with the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan and through men like himself, rap artists who are dedicated to producing music "to spark a revolutionary mind-set" in the Black nation.[4] And as he declares in "Brutal" his mission is both sacred and secular: "Best believe I won't stop/teachin' science in step with Farrakhan/drop a dope bomb, word to Islam/peace my brothers up on it 'cause I'm/Black and now you know I'm brutal."[5]

Paris's outline of the his(s)tory of Black nationalism is characteristic of the androcentric historical narratives put forth by raptivists in the Hip Hop Movement. From East Coast groups such as Public Enemy, KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions, and X-Clan to West Coast artists like Ice Cube, Paris and Kam, rap nationalists intentionally conjure a tradition of model, and militant, Black manhood. They idolize the words and works of political personalities – men like Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan – whose uncompromising public personae and urban poor/working-class roots stand as an example to those young Black men whose masculine status has been

threatened by modern racial ideologies and a post-industrial, capitalist economy. However, this type of gendered invocation is not an isolated phenomenon, but an inherited one. For instance, Marcus Garvey admired Booker T. Washington while Malcolm X and Farrakhan revere(d) their spiritual father, Elijah Muhammad. In turn, during the Black Power era self-proclaimed "sons of Malcolm" – be they revolutionary nationalists like the Black Panthers or cultural nationalists like the US Organization – cultivated a masculinist memory of (the Nation of Islam) Malcolm X. Twenty years later as the focus of Black nationalist politics shifted from the emasculated Black man to the Black man as an "endangered species," the children of the Civil Rights/Black Power generation are proving once again that the "production of exemplary masculinity,"[6] or hero-worship, is a necessary tool in the attempt to rehabilitate Black manhood.

As these examples illustrate, rap nationalists are the latest in a long line of Black Americans to participate in a "liberatory" praxis dedicated to the preservation of race/gender hierarchies. Black nationalist-masculinist discourse is a political tradition that extends as far back as to the post-Revolutionary era and petitions for manumission and "manhood rights" made by slaves and former slaves. Like their nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors, raptivists use an embodied-social politics to impart meaning and significance to past and present racial terrorism in American social, political, economic and cultural arenas. That is to say, these artists interpret the effects of postmodern, post-industrial, post-Civil Rights social, economic and political transformations with a language of masculine dispossession and, thus, forward a masculinist agenda for empowerment.

Until recently, scholars of U.S. Black nationalism have mistakenly assumed that its significance as a political theory is based solely in its positioning as a racial politics. However, to truly understand the style and substance of its theory and praxis, Black nationalism must be recognized as a race *and* gender politics. This essay is an explication of the race/gender politicking of Black nationalists, focusing particularly on the ways in which politicized rap artists have claimed the Black nationalist tradition by using the Bible as a (re)source of power and knowledge. But before I engage in a discussion of hip hop gnosticism, it is necessary to provide a working definition of Black nationalism. Therefore the next section of this essay outlines the historical and ideological origins of Black nationalism in order to forground the desciption and critique its postmodern manifestations in rap music.

Black Nationalism Defined: The Rationale and Rationality of Black Nationalist Thought

Generally recognized as part of a Pan-African movement, Black nationalist theory asserts the conviction that Black people in the Diaspora, by virtue of African ancestry and a common historical experience of slavery, share a cultural identity and therefore constitute a nationality separate and distinct from other (white) Americans. Contrary to the assessments of scholars like Wilson Moses, Victor Ullman and Theodore Draper, Black nationalism is not restricted to territorial nationalism (or the struggle for a separate Black nation-state), but rooted in revolutionary nationalism, a struggle for the transcendence of all Black peoples over white social, political, economic and cultural domination. And since the inception of the literary tradition of Black nationalism in 1829, with the the publication of Robert Alexander Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto* in February of that year and David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* that September, the use of biblical allusion has been critical to Black nationalist thought.

According to E.U. Essien-Udom in his groundbreaking work *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in Black America* (1962), Black nationalist theorists employ symbols of race and religion and utilize the legacy of exploitation and devaluation integral to the Black experience in America in order to explain and validate collective feelings of cultural alienation and social isolation.[7] The nationalist interpretation of the history and

ancestry of Black people in America reorients, and at times, manipulates knowledge in order to inspire and develop a sense of self-esteem and cultural pride in Black folk that is constantly put in jeopardy by white cultural hegemony in mass media, popular culture and formal educational systems. Rejecting the internalization of dehumanizing representations in these arenas is a constant and lifelong struggle of members of the "despised" race, the alternative of which can be psychologically debilitating. Black nationalist mythologies offer a vehicle through which believers can overcome the burden of inferiority and feelings of personal inadequacy. Their use of history (or what Henry Louis Gates called an "imaginative reconstruction" of the past[8] is a purposeful search for elements of the past that can be used to structure a progressive consciousness of Self and Community. When understood in this context, Black nationalism ought to be recognized as a very rational response to the irrational social experiences of attitudinal and structural racism.

Yet it is the rationale, not the rationality, of Black nationalist theology and mythology that is most important to understanding its appeal for Black Americans. The alternative state of Being that Black nationalist ideologies impart to the believer or supporter – a sense of privileged identity and a new outlook on life – remains essential to its survival as a political phenomenon. Therefore Black nationalist mythology and theology function as mechanisms for empowerment: its purpose to produce a positive and constructive sense of identity for Black Americans.

Since the early nineteenth century, Black nationalist theorists have understood and exploited this dynamic, using mythological constructions and theological interpretations to explain current Black circumstance. Through reframing the past, they intend to explain the present in a way that reaffirms and reserves the sense of Self they hope to develop among the Black population. The nationalist construction of a Black identity has been dependant upon their ability to draw a real or imagined connection between contemporary Black Americans and what Essien-Udom called a "power center." This power center may be sacred or

secular, but always represents a non-white civilization or ancestry that is generally recognized as a celebrated and/or power ancient nation. For instance, Black nationalists tend to link their African ancestry to the great civilizations of Ethiopia and Egypt, but historically avoid associations with sub-Saharan Africa – despite the fact that it was home to the majority of slaves brought to the New World – for the most part because it has been maligned by Western scholars as being uncivilized and culturally backward. This distinction is problematic and speaks to the motivation driving Black nationalist search for a "power center" and, thus, a self-affirming identity; for the Western construction of knowledge concerning African peoples, their cultures and civilizations, has been appropriated by Black nationalist theorists.

In "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation" Stuart Hall noted that cultural identities have histories; and in fact, he wrote, they are "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past."[9] According to Hall's description, both internal and external forces shape the development of self-conception. Identity formation is a process: a struggle for self-definition and against the internalization of hegemonic representations of a collective. And as the manifestations of racism become more complex and multidimensional, contemporary nationalists have turned more toward religious and theological solutions for postmodern problems. Ironically, gains made by the modern Civil Rights Movement have obscured the racial dynamics of Black deprivation; therefore as the Million Man March demonstrated, the "Negro dilemma" has become increasingly difficult to define, making it increasingly challenging to construct a program around which to build a consensus. In lieu of a political platform, religious appeals, as well as appeals for the reclamation of Black manhood, provide the stimulus needed to inspire a sense of self-determination in Black communities.

The next section of this essay, then, is an assessment of the interface between rap, religion, and the politics of a culture. It is an inquiry into which issues rap

music's organic intellectuals deem critical to the struggle for Black liberation, and how these issues determine their strategies for liberation.

If Your Slavemaster Wasn't a Christian…": Rap Nationalism and the Rejection of Christianity

In his 1992 song "The Real Holy Place" KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions issues an indictment of Christianity. He characterizes its practitioners as hypocrites, labels its testament a "dead book," and, perhaps most importantly, declares its mission the subjugation of people of color – particularly Americans of African descent. "If your slavemaster wasn't a Christian you wouldn't be a Christian/your whole culture is missin'," he informs the postmodern descendants of slaves.[10]

This judgment of Christianity as the "slavemaster's religion" represents a consensus of sort among raptivists. According to most rap nationalists, the postmodern incarnation of the so-called "slave mentality" – an emasculated Black identity marked by subordinating, self-sacrificing behavior – is most readily recognized among Black Christians. Yet this aversion to Christians and Christianity is the result of misconceptions and misinformation influenced by the ideologies of the Nation of Islam. It is a position raptivists adopted from their heroes, their model(s) of strong and militant Black manhood, the Ministers Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan; and, therefore, indirectly inherited from the teachings of their spiritual (grand)father, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

Throughout his career as the leader of the most successful non-Christian Black religious movement in the history of the United States, the Nation of Islam's "Messenger of Allah" made his opinion on Christianity quite clear. Elijah Muhammad held white Christians directly responsible for the trials and tribulations of the Black nation in America, tracing Black degradation from the Northern ghettos of contemporary America to the Southern plantations of antebellum America. "Christianity is a religion organized and backed by the devils [whites] for the

purpose of making slaves of Black mankind," he stated in 1957.[11] Therefore Muhammad insisted that only through Islam, the true religion of the Blackman in America, could the ex-slave reclaim his manhood and the "so-called Negro" gain knowledge of self as the Original Man, or the "first and last, maker and owner of the universe."[12]

Like the ministers of the Nation of Islam, rap nationalists maintain that throughout American history white men have manipulated Christianity to justify the horrific institution of slavery and its consequent Black subjugation. In fact, the primary misconception that prejudices the Hip Hop Nation's critique of Black Christianity is the belief that it is the "slavemaster's religion." Among raptivists, Black folks' adoption of Christianity is interpreted as a sign of Black accommodation and submission to white power, not only in the religious sphere, but in the political sphere as well. It is a reading of Christianity that has been appealing to a generation of Black youth who are disillusioned with what they feel has been the Black church's abandonment of a social agenda.[13] Growing up in the post-Civil Rights era marked by a return to political conservatism by most mainstream independent African-American denominations, most rap nationalists argue that the Black church lacks relevancy – that it is unable (or unwilling) to confront the white power structure – and that the practice of Black Christian theology is incapable of inspiring Black liberatory thought among its believers.

However, until the foundation of the Moorish-American Science Temple in 1913 and the formation of the Temple of Islam in the 1930s, Black nationalist theology was rooted exclusively in the gospel of Christianity. And despite their Nation-inspired rhetorics, the ideations of rap nationalists are reminiscent of those expressed in slave spirituals and nationalist publications of the nineteenth century (a fact that, in and of itself, counters the assumptions of rap nationalists about the relative radicalism of Christianity). Three common themes that characterize Black nationalist theology, regardless of time and space, free/slave status or

religious background, are 1) the belief in moral superiority (and the characterization of Blacks as "gods" and whites as "devils"), 2) the belief that God is a god of the oppressed and that Black folks are God's Chosen Ones, and 3) the belief in divine retribution.

One of the more obvious explanations for this continuity is that it is due to the perduring influence of Scripture in African-American culture. Therefore what follows is both an explanation of how biblical typology functions within the Black nationalist tradition, as well as an exploration of the ways in which rap nationalists engage the Bible in their pursuit of a higher level of consciousness.

"White Man's Got a God Complex": Deities, Devils and the Identity Politics of Black Nationalism[14]

In his 1991 song "The Eye Opener" the Blastmaster KRS-One tells the tale of a Black person attempting to come into (political/spiritual) consciousness and the barriers he/she faces on the road to discovery, in particular, the church and the Bible. According to KRS the church has served to rationalize the capitalist exploitation of people of color, while the Bible has been used as a tool of white supremacy, rewritten with the express purpose of disempowering Black folks. Like his raptivist peers, KRS-One is particularly concerned with representations of biblical figures, men like Jesus, Abraham and Noah, pivotal characters in the Christian story, who he claims are Black according to modern-day (American) racial standards. "Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ was BLACK/read and study and know thyself because this too is a fact/Abraham, Noah and King Solomon and John the Baptist was BLACK/The Europeans rewrote the Bible and they use it as a fact."[15]

The focus of hip-hop dialectics on the white-washing of biblical history typically centers on the (Christian) Son of God, Jesus Christ. The depiction of Jesus as racially white in icons, portraits and popular culture antagonizes rap nationalists most, because for

Christians – the majority of Black and white religious practitioners in the United States – he is the physical manifestation of God, his life and teachings the essence of Christianity. In light of this fact, rap nationalists insist that white supremacist indoctrination through visual representations of the Son of God leave negative psychological impression that retard Black spirituality and facilitate a mass inferiority complex among Blacks. KRS-One confronts this issue in "The Eye Opener," assessing the damage that contemporary biblical imagery wreaks on Black consciousness by tracing its logic: "Ya pick [the Bible] up and learn it and try to see the light/but everyone you read about happens to be white/so when Jesus is white and his father is Jah/then Jah must be white the white man is better." KRS deduces that if Jesus, the Son of God is white, then God Himself must be white; therefore "the white man is better" and deserves to maintain his position of dominance in the world – white power is, thus, divinely ordained. However, KRS-One challenges this "truth," identifies it as a manifestation of white cultural hegemony and labels those responsible for this imaging as agents of the Anti-Christ: "This is the work of Satan, egotistical/and negatively psychological."[16]

That white folks would manipulate the word of God in their attempts to justify the economic exploitation and social subordination of Black people ("You know, it was the church that made every man see/the Black man's supposed to be in slavery") suggests to KRS-One their irredeemability. And after exposing white participation in Black subjugation through the interrelated structures of race, class and religion, KRS-One dismisses half-hearted repentance over historical discrimination in the religious sphere and extended a final warning to the white public. According to Scripture, he states, it is divine revelation that God will return – "an when He comes back He'll come Blacker than Black/Blacker than Blacker than Blacker than Black…"[17]

KRS-One's "The Eye Opener" is an efficacious example of the presence of moral superiority in the Black nationalist-masculinist tradition, for it shows

how rap nationalists situate representations of "white" as the Antichrist in opposition to the characterization of "Black" as godhead. Among Black nationalists this redefinition of socially-constructed oppositional dichotomies of race continues to be considered essential to the psychological liberation of Black people from the cultural domination of white supremacy, or Negro/Nigga-to-Black conversion of consciousness. As previously stated, rap nationalists strive to de-colonize the minds of Black Americans from overwhelming representations of Black people as intellectually, morally and culturally inferior. And part of their (perhaps unconscious) strategy is to use the logic of white power by inverting it, to assume and transpose one of the conceptual categories characteristic of Western thought – i.e. White/Black – and its inherent value judgment of Good and Evil. The most obvious manifestation of this dogma can be recognized in the demonization of whites and the deification of Blacks in the work of Black nationalist theorists and artist/activists – and is a theme that is probably most associated in the popular imagination with the writings and rhetoric of the Nation of Islam.

When Malcolm X entered the public realm of Black politics as the national spokesman for the Nation of Islam in 1963, his presence and ensuing popularity marked the beginning of a shift in Black political consciousness in the midst of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Working within the framework of Elijah Muhammad's teachings, his expose of the white man as "the devil" and the Black Man, the "Original Man," as a "god" was culturally revolutionary and gained him tremendous respect among many urban Blacks who considered him a fearless Black leader. While the power of this revelation should not be underestimated, contrary to popular belief, neither the demonization of whites nor the deification of Blacks originated with Malcolm X and the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. This ideology of Black moral supremacy fit squarely within a tradition of Black nationalism that had begun more than 100 years before the founding of the Nation of Islam with the publication of the premier work of Black nationalist ideology, the *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*.

In 1829 David Walker wrote that white people were the "natural enemies" of people of color and that their history has been one of continual perpetuations of evil. "The whites have always been an unjust, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority," he observes in the *Appeal*. "In fine, we view them all over Europe, together with what were scattered about in Asia and Africa, as heathens, and we see them acting more like devils than accountable men."[18]

As emphatic as Walker's indictment of Europeans and European-Americans was, most early Black nationalists' tended to identify whites as devils through their actions and environment, suggesting that a shift in consciousness could lead to a spiritual rebirth. Twentieth-century Black nationalists, however, are more inclined to attribute white behavior to nature. For instance, in "Freedom or Death" Wise Intelligent of Poor Righteous Teachers assessed the physical and spiritual deprivation experienced by Blacks and executed by whites in a manner similar to Walker's condemnation of the historic activities of Europeans. Yet Wise Intelligent imputed white people's demeanor with biological difference, regarding the "Caucazoid" race as inherently evil: "I believe that your nature is that of the devil/and very wicked."[19] This essentialist view is the equivalent of damnation and necessitates violence as the solution to the "Negro problem," for as Minister Louis Farrakhan declared: "You cannot reform a devil. All the prophets tried and failed. You have to kill the devil."[20]

The last section of this essay will explicate this mortal proposition by highlighting the use of the eschaton in Black nationalist theology, for it represents is the final battle in the war between god(s) and the devil(s). The race/gender politicking of Black nationalism necessitates not only a dramatic solution to the historic dispossession of the nation's manhood, but it necessitates a violent solution to the historic dispossession of the nation's manhood. For in an embodied-social politics, the boundaries between good and evil are naturalized just as the boundaries

between Black and white are simultaneously historicized and essentialized. Farrakhan's solution -- "You cannot reform a devil…You have to kill the devil" – becomes virtually inevitable, perhaps even logical. Hence, it is not surprising that the concept of divine retribution is a prevalent theme in the writings and oratory of pre-modern, modern and postmodern Black nationalists. In a Black nationalist-masculinist discourse, it is a rhetoric that represents the ultimate transcendence of white (male) power. Or in the words of Wise Intelligent: "The future is like the Bible states…the dark races will regain power once and for all. That's the bottom line."[21]

"Every dog must have its day": Divine Retribution and Redemption for God's Chosen Ones

Many Black nationalist jeremiads interpret the latter part of Psalms 68:31 – "Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God" – as a pre-figuration of the apocalypse story of the New Testament.[22] Although usually presented as a warning rather than a certainty, as Theophus Smith explains in *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, Black eschatology can be conciliatory, like Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, or catastrophic like the writings of Black nationalist Ethiopianists. "[The] catastrophic view of the eschaton has a long history," he writes, "spanning biblical apocalypticism and slave religion and extending into the twentieth century in various forms and permutations – some religious or mystical; some political, revolutionary, or ideological, and some romantic, fashionable or popularist."[23]

The presence of an apocalyptic vision within slave religion is probably the most convincing historical evidence that betrays the hidden transcript of slaves' "conjuring culture" and contradicts Black nationalists' presumption of a so-called "slave mentality." As fugitive slave Charles Ball testified in 1837, the belief in divine retribution is at the core of slave theology: "The idea of revolution in the conditions of whites and Blacks, is the corner-stone

of the religion of the latter…Heaven will be no heaven to him if he is not avenged of his enemies."[24] In 1860 William Craft, another ex-slave, also verified the existence of prophetic incantation within the religious expression of the enslaved, "there is…great consolation in knowing that God is just, and will not let the oppressor of the weak, and the spoiler of the virtuous escape unpunished here and hereafter. I believe a similar retribution to that which destroyed Sodom is hanging over the slaveholders."[25]

Like many slaves, past and present Black nationalist theorists take psychic comfort in their belief in divine retribution, making it one of the more prevalent themes in the writings of Black nationalists. For instance, the nineteenth century witnessed two of the most fiery doomsayers in the history of Black nationalism with the pioneering publications of David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet. In his controversial *Address*, which advocated slave insurrection as a strategy of abolitionism, ex-slave Garnet justified his position on violent resistance to enslavement by asserting that "(t)he slave masters should be told, 'in a language which they cannot misunderstand,' of a future judgment for the sin of slavery, of the retribution 'of an indignant God.'"[26] Or as David Walker aptly stated in the Appeal, a document that was devoted almost completely to the idea of divine retribution: "'Every dog has its day,' the American's is coming to an end."[27]

Raptivists have both adopted and transformed the apocalyptic vision characteristic among classical Black nationalists. Finding no contradiction between violence and the gospel of Christ, these artists advocate freedom "by all means necessary." Like their slave forefathers and mothers, raptivists envision their God as a warrior God who both exacts and sanctions vengeance upon white America for their sins against His Chosen Ones. For instance, in "When I Get to Heaven" Ice Cube embraced the Old Testament revelation "an eye for an eye": "The same white man that threw me in the slammer/he bombed a church in Alabama/so if I cocked the hammer God won't mind/if I have to kill the human swine/'cause God is a killer from the start/why you think Noah had

to build his Ark."[28] And like Ice Cube, Poor Righteous Teachers subscribe to the characterization of God as a persecutor of those who defy and exploit His word. In "Each One, Teach One" Wise Intelligent sardonically warned whites: "Bear witness to He/the builder and destroyer/and all you negatives snakes/I hate it for ya."[29]

The belief in the potential of God and His prophets toward violence apparent in the cultural production of slaves and the literary work of nineteenth-century Ethiopianists has proved appealing to a post-Civil Rights generation angered by the widespread denial of racial justice in a period of intense economic polarization between the "haves" of a white minority and the "have-nots" of a Black majority. As problems of destitution and deprivation, unemployment and underemployment, and substandard and nonexistent housing plague Blacks in the inner-cities of major metropolitan areas, many among the Black working poor hold the white power structure and its collaborators responsible for their impoverished living conditions. Therefore the New Testament prophecy of "the last shall be the first, and the first shall be the last" is attractive to rap music's neo-nationalists because of its promise of Black redemption and divine retribution for the crimes of white America. "When it comes to Armageddon, me I'm gettin' mine," promises Chuck D of Public Enemy: "Here I am, turn it over [Uncle] Sam."[30]

As the above statements by Ice Cube, Wise Intelligent and Chuck D demonstrate, the apocalyptic vision that characterizes Black nationalist theology is seductive, frankly, because it fulfills revenge fantasies for many Black Americans. But as E.U. Essien-Udom betrays in his 1962 publication *Black Nationalism: A Search for Black Identity in America*, the lure of Black eschatology can be entrapping because the desire for vengeance has the tendency to create tunnel vision. "The nationalists tend to become preoccupied with the means of overcoming their sense of powerlessness," he states, "but in their preoccupation with the means, the end of building up black power appears to become less important because it seems either unattainable or utopian. Hence, they call upon

superhuman or divine intervention for its realization."[31]

It is important to take note of Essien-Udom's suggestion that although Black nationalist eschatology may impart a temporary sense of empowerment to its believers, it can also be disempowering. Black nationalists' obsession with the process of empowerment causes them to overemphasize – or overestimate – white power in Black lives. For instance, Black nationalist calls for divine intervention inadvertently bestow white (men) with an aura of invincibility; by investing white men with supranatural powers, many Black nationalists then conclude that only the omnipotence of God can destroy white domination. Yet while this reliance upon divine intervention may appear pacifist, it is not a sign of total resignation to the will of God. For in the conjunctive tradition of Black folk culture, the apocalyptic vision of Black nationalists also facilitates empowerment because it legitimizes Black rage. Nationalist theology functions as a medium through which to inspire believers to take control over their lives: God, not "The Man," is the Supreme Being, and through God's will Black Americans, his Chosen People, are to fulfill biblical prophecy by destroying white civilization and its bastardized form of Christianity.

Conclusion: Critically (Re)thinking the White Man's Religion

While rap nationalists do not recognize the rich tradition of Black liberatory Christianity that began in the early-nineteenth century with the development of a distinct, protonationalist gnosticism in Southern slave communities and in the conception of Black nationalist thought in Northern free communities, it is clear that Christian theology is not incompatible with radical political philosophies. In *Going Through the Storm* Sterling Stuckey invalidated this common and totalizing misconception by pointing to the revolutionary transformation of Christianity by free and enslaved Black leaders during the nineteenth century.

> The introduction of Denmark Vesey, a class
> leader in the A.M.E. Church, and Nat
> Turner, a slave preacher, serves to remind
> that some slaves and ex-slaves were violent
> as well as humble, patient as well as
> impatient…It is also well to recall that the
> religious David Walker, who had lived close
> to slavery in North Carolina, and Henry
> Highland Garnet, ex-slave and Presbyterian
> minister, produced two of the most
> inflammatory, vitriolic and
> doom-bespeaking polemics America has yet
> seen.[32]

The three common themes that characterize Black
nationalist theology, regardless of historical period or
religious doctrine – the belief in Black moral
superiority, the belief that God is a god of the
oppressed and that Black folks are God's Chosen
Ones, and the belief in divine retribution – bear
witness to the fact that the philosophy of
late-twentieth century rap nationalists is not far
removed from that put forth by early-nineteenth
century free Black and slave nationalists. Even
allowing for changes in historical context and its
impact on content, the only truly significant factor
separating the former from the latter is a
contemporary lack of knowledge about the theory and
practice of classical Black nationalism. The
fundamental principles have not changed. This is
probably due to the fact that racism (and racial
terrorism) continues to be a constant in American
social, economic and political life: although its
dynamics change, the structure remains.

Notes:

1. Digable Planets, "Dial 7 (Axioms of Creamy Spies)," *Blowout Comb* (Pendulum Records, 1994). Sara Webb's statement "We are sun, moon and star" is a direct reference to the symbols of the Nation of Islam's flag. According to E.U. Essien-Udom in *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in Black America*, the sun represents freedom, the moon symbolizes equality and the five-point star stands for freedom. E.U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 221. While no member of Digable Planets is a member of the Nation of Islam, one artist, Doodlebug, claimed to be in the Five Percent Nation of Islam.

2. There are three religious sects/organizations that are derived from the teachings of Elijah Muhammad: the Nation of Islam led by Louis Farrakhan, the Lost Found Nation of Islam led by Silas Muhammad and the Five Percent Nation of Islam founded by Clarence 13X. Two of these groups are significant to the study of rap nationalism – the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation. The Five Percent Nation of Islam was founded in 1963 after Father Allah (born Clarence Smith and also known as Clarence 13X) was kicked out of (or left, according to whose version one believes) New York's Temple #7. While the origins of both the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation of Islam are rooted in the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, they have developed somewhat different ideologies, which will be discussed briefly later in this essay. Despite the pervasive influence of the Nation on the politics of the Hip Hop Movement, there are more rappers who claim to be Five Percenters than members of the Nation of Islam. East Coast artists such as Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, Rakim, King Sun and Doodlebug of Digable Planets are (or were) self-proclaimed members of the Five Percent Nation, while West Coast artists Paris, Kam and MC Ren (formerly of the group N.W.A.) are among the few rap nationalists who are, or at one time were, in the Nation of Islam. The disproportionate number of artists who represent the Five Percent Nation as compared to those of the Nation of Islam among rap nationalists can be attributed to the strict code of conduct the Nation demands of its membership – who must adhere to a one-meal-a-day restricted diet and are not allowed to drink, smoke or fornicate. So while many young Black men and women are attracted to the Nation of Islam's political and religious philosophies, most are not prepared to assume the extremely disciplined lifestyle that the Nation demands of its membership. The Five Percent Nation offers believers the doctrines without the forbidding restrictions.

3. Paris's his(s)tory of the origins of Black nationalism reads as follows: "In 1940 it all began with a movement comprised of intelligent Black men/led by Allah in the form of Farad/but later by the last true prophet of God/Elijah Muhammad a dominant Black leader/of the lost-found Asiatic pack/and later by Malcolm whose point was straight/he was laying a Black nationalist state/of self-sufficiency on a mission he/stressed thrift and pride and good sense/killed in cold blood but the shit ain't done with/switch to Oaktown '66/see Huey Newton and Cleaver and Seale/sons of Malcolm with intent to kill/and end the brutality inflicted on by cops…" Paris, "Brutal," *The Devil Made Me Do It* (Tommy Boy Records, Inc., 1989/90).

4. James Bernard, "Rap Panther," *Mother Jones* (May/June 1991), 9.

5. Paris, "Brutal," *The Devil Made Me Do It*.

6. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 214.

7. E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in Black America*, 7.

---

8. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Black Man's Burden," *Black Popular Culture*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 77. The conceptualization of this term was not in reference to Black nationalist theory, but is applicable. In his discussion of the constructed nature of identities and histories, Gates wrote: "...our social identities represent the way we participate in an historical narrative. Our histories may be irretrievable, but they invite imaginative reconstruction."

9. Gates, 77.

10. Boogie Down Productions, "The Real Holy Place," *Sex and Violence* (Zomba Recording Corporation, 1992).

11. Elijah Muhammad, *Supreme Wisdom: Solution to the So-Called Negroes' Problems* (Chicago: Muhammad Mosque of Islam No. 2, 1957), 28.

12. Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America* (Chicago: Muhammad's Temple No. 2, 1965), 53.

13. Like many social scientists, ministers in the Nation of Islam and their rap proteges are negligent in their simplified designation of the "Black church," a term used to refer to mainstream churches within Black communities, in particular Black Baptists and African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) churches.

14. The Last Poets, "White Man's Got a God Complex," *This is Madness* (Metrotone Records, Ltd., 1971).

15. The identity politicking of raptivists does not end at claiming an affinity to the race of Jesus, but some, like KRS-One and Wise Intelligent of Poor Righteous Teachers, claim his class identity as well. In "Rappin' Black" Wise Intelligent related to Jesus who, as a peasant, was poor like the Black majority of contemporary America. And like Jesus, a visionary for the working class who rose up to challenge the imperial Roman empire, Poor Righteous Teachers believe they have a mission to liberate the oppressed Black classes in imperial America: "P.R.T., them teach righteousness/from poor family just like Jesus/so come follow your teachers/while they exercise fact/This is what the ghetto calls rappin' Black." Poor Righteous Teachers, "Rappin' Black," *Pure Poverty* (Profile Records, 1991).

16. Boogie Down Productions, "The Eye Opener," *Live Hardcore Worldwide* (BMG Music, 1991).

17. *Ibid*.

18. David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of The United States of America* (NY: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1965), 17.

19. Poor Righteous Teachers, "Freedom or Death," *Pure Poverty*.

20. Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 151. Yet as Farrakhan's reign as the leader of the Nation of Islam progresses, even his position on "the devil" has become a little less condemning. Even this quote concludes by suggesting the potential for change in white behavior: "It is not the color of the white man that is the problem, it is the mind of the white man that is the problem. The mind of white supremacy has to be destroyed."

21. Joseph Eure and James G. Spady, *Nation Conscious Rap* (Brooklyn: PC International Press, 1991), 74.

22. From slave spirituals to rap music, Black nationalist expression has employed a number of biblical themes but none is as significant as the figural prophecy of Ethiopianism, a tradition based on Psalms 68:31 "Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God." The Ethiopia configuration traces the Black legacy from enslavement to liberation, and for some, to a destiny of Black supremacy.

23. Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 224.

24. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 34.

25. V.P. Franklin, *Black Self-Determination: A Cultural History of African-American Resistance* (Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984), 60.

26. Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 158.

27. Walker, 15. This belief in divine retribution, however, co-existed with a belief that slavers could repent their ultimate sin against humanity. According to Sterling Stuckey, slaves' extended an "offer of forgiveness and ultimate reconciliation to white America." Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 30-31.

28. Ice Cube, "When I Get to Heaven," *The Predator*.

29. Poor Righteous Teachers, "Each One, Teach One" *Pure Poverty*.

30. Public Enemy, "Can't Truss It," *Apocalypse 91…The Enemy Strikes Back* (Sony Music Entertainment, 1991).

31. Essien-Udom, 55.

32. Sterling Stuckey, *Going through the Storm: The Influence of African-American Art in History* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11.

Religion and culture seem like complex ideas to study from the perspective of International Relations. After all, scholars and philosophers have long debated the meaning of these terms and the impact they have had on our comprehension of the social world around us. For some religions, however, time itself is an illusion and the main focus is living in the now according to sacred ideas rather than the connection of past–present–future. These elements – interpreting the past, projecting the future, living now – are basic to the development of political ideologies also. Clubs can equally represent a locality rather than a particular group. For example, the Smithfield Stallions of Sydney might have individual players from Greek, Ethiopian, British and Turkish background. While religion represents an old way of life, globalization challenges traditional meaning systems and is often perceived as a threat to religion. For instance, Marx and Weber both asserted that modernization was incompatible with tradition. But, in contrast, globalization could facilitate religious freedom by spreading the idea of freedom worldwide. However, this approach to communication undermines the function of a religion as a culture and also does not consider the possible differences between religious cultures. For example, religious cultures differ in their levels of individualism and collectivism. There are also differences in how religious cultures interact to compete for more followers and territory (Klock, Novoa, & Mogaddam, 2010).