SOUND UNBOUND

SAMPLING DIGITAL MUSIC AND CULTURE

edited by

paul d. miller aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid

foreword by CORY DOCTOROW

introduction by STEVE REICH

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Fear of a Muslim Planet: Hip-Hop's Hidden History

Naeem Mohaiemen

(Amin) Pray Allah keep my soul and heart clean

(Amin) Pray the same thing again for all my team

—Mos Def, "Love" (*Black on Both Sides*, 1999)

Camoflouged Torahs, Bibles and glorious Qurans

The books that take you to heaven and let you meet the Lord there

Have become misinterpreted, reasons for warfare

We read 'em with blind eyes I guarantee you there's more there

The rich must be blind because they didnt see the poor there

-- Lupe Fiasco, "American Terrorist" (*Food & Liquor*, 2006)

Journalist Harry Allen once called Islam "hip-hop's unofficial religion." This theme is echoed by Adisa Banjoko, unofficial ambassador of Muslim hip-hop, who says, "Muslim influence was at the ground floor of hip hop. Hip hop came from the streets, from the toughest neighborhoods, and that's always where the Muslims were."[1]Hip-hop's Muslim connection came initially via the 5 Percenter sect, and later expanded to embrace Nation of Islam (NOI), Sufi, and Sunni Islam. Since the 1980s, there have also been shifts where 5 Percenters have moved to NOI or Sunni beliefs. The same artists' back catalog may reflect both his 5 Percenter beliefs and his later NOI faith. Islamic iconography, philosophy,

and phrases are in fact so widespread in hip-hop, they show up regularly even in the works of non-Muslim rappers.

In spite of this pioneering and continuing role, Islam as a cultural force in hip-hop is severely under-documented. In the most recent oversight, Jeff Chang's exhaustive hip-hop history *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* (Picador, 2005) pays only fleeting attention to the Muslim connection. Elsewhere in mainstream media, the Muslim connection is never spoken aloud, even in the middle of thorough analysis and journalism. Ted Swedenburg calls this "almost willful avoidance." In this, there are parallels to the larger invisibility of black Muslims, who have been shut out of many conversations around the role of Islam in America.

This deliberate invisibility mirrors America's continuing unease with Islam. Black Muslims and hip-hop are frozen out of the larger debate over Islam because they would problematize the entire conversation. If we acknowledge that the largest segment of American Muslims are blackamericans, it makes it more difficult to stereotype Muslims as "immigrants" or "outsiders." Furthermore, if we look at Muslim anger and see within it a portion that is African-American, we are forced to confront an indictment of American society. This is a viewpoint that the music press has assiduously avoided. Finally, the idea of Islam as a obscurantist force rubs against its positive influence within hip-hop. Hip-hop scholars have not been able to absorb or observe the Muslim role in creating unique rhyme flows and politically conscious hip-hop. Safer perhaps to avoid the topic.

Born Muslim, Born Black?[2]

A dominant discourse links American Islam to Arabs and South Asians, considered new arrivals to America's shore. But statistics tell a contradictory story. According to research presented by the American Muslim Council (AMC), in 1992, between 5 to 8 million Americans followed some variation of the Islamic faith.[3] AMC calculated the largest bloc of Muslims to be African Americans at 42 percent. If African immigrants are included, the number goes up to 46 percent. South Asians are the next highest at 24 percent. Only 12 percent of American Muslims are of Arab descent (majority of Arab Americans are Christian). Looking at subsections within the black population, we find the proportions even higher: 30 percent of African Americans in the prison system are Muslim, many of whom convert after incarceration—following the trajectory of Malcolm X and Imam Jamil Al-Amin (formerly H. Rap Brown).

There are many reasons why Islam has been popular among African Americans from the beginning. Scholars point to the roots of Islam within the original slave populations. Silviane Diouf calculated that "up to 40 percent" of the Atlantic slave trade was Muslim.[4] Although much of the original belief systems were wiped out in the period leading up to the Civil War, residues have transmitted themselves through the black experience and the popular imagination. An example of this emerges in Michael Muhammad Knight's punk Muslim novel *The Taqwacores* (Autonomedia, 2005), when one character says, "There's an old jail in the Carolinas where they used to bring slaves right off the ships . . . It's still there, it's like a tourist spot now. But anyway, there's ayats from the Quran on the wall, like two hundred years old, still right there." All of this helped create a perception within the black community that Islam was not an

alien religion. Rather it was seen as something that was "lost–found." James Baldwin diagnosed this accurately in *The Fire Next Time*:

> God had come a long way from the desert—but then so had Allah, though in a very different direction. God, going north, and rising on the wings of power, had become white, and Allah, out of power, had become—for all practical purposes anyway—black.[5]

When Muslim preachers first started making inroads into the black community, they were helped by a prevailing sentiment of Afro-Asian solidarity and internationalism. Some of the earliest Muslim preachers to arrive in America in the 1900s were missionaries sent by the Ahmadiya Muslim sect, itself facing persecution in British India. The pioneering missionaries were Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, who came from the region that became Pakistan, and Mutiur Rahman Bengalee, who came from the region that later became Bangladesh. Barred from preaching in white areas and churches, they focused their energies on the black ghettos. Hardened by their own experiences of American racism (Sadiq was initially detained for months by immigration officers fearful he would "preach polygamy"), their message shifted to one of multiracial solidarity. As Sohail Daulatzai has charted in his forthcoming *Darker Than Blue,*[6] the Muslim missionaries found their work easier because of major forces in black radicalism that were pushing for Afro-Asian and pan-Islamic solidarity.

One of the early calls for alliances between pan-Africanism and globalized Islam came from West-Indian born Edward Blyden, in his *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* (Whittingham, 1887). This was echoed by Sudanese-Egyptian

scholar Duse Muhammad Ali, who launched *The African Times and Orient Review* and called for solidarity among global populations of color. Duse later mentored Marcus Garvey, whose mission as founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association "to reclaim the fallen of the race" was adopted by many black Islamic movements. Besides influencing Garvey, Duse also went on to found Detroit's Universal Islamic Society. This inspired the formation of two separate religious movements, both precursors to the Nation of Islam (NOI)—Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple and Fard Muhammad's Temple of Islam.

Up until the 1950s, the Ahmadiya message of multiracial solidarity was growing. According to Richard Brent Turner, until the arrival of Nation of Islam, "the Ahmadiya was arguably the most influential community in African-American Islam."[7] But with the rise of Fard Muhammad's NOI, buoyed by the charisma of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, a message of black nationalism eclipsed that of Ahmadiya Islam. Sohail Daulatzai also points to the Afro-Asian solidarity politics surrounding the Bandung era as a key factor behind NOI's success. In a time when Malcolm challenged American imperialism, the black church was fundamentally committed to assimilating within the American nation: "As the struggles around racism and the politics of race began to escalate during this period, Islam came to be seen as an alternative form of radical Black consciousness that was quite distinct from the integrationist goals of African-American Christianity."[8]

The next stages in the rise of American Islam are well documented—the meteoric rise of Malcolm X, Bandung-influenced messages of global revolution, Malcolm's split with NOI, his post-Hajj rejection of racial separatism and embracing of Sunni Islam, Elijah's son Warith Muhammad's renouncing of race

theology, NOI's conversion to Sunni Islam, and finally Minister Farrakhan's project to rebuild a splinter group in NOI's old image. In more recent times, after a sizable portion of the NOI converts shifted to Sunni Islam (or "al-Islam" as it is often called), there has been a convergence with the growing immigrant population from South Asia and the Arab world. In the 1980s and '90s, multiracial mosque gatherings became more common, as black Muslims prayed and communed with immigrant Muslims. What was missing, and continues to be missing today, is a multi-ethnic political leadership for American Muslims.

The manner in which Islam spread and regenerated in black America prefigures the style in which Islam influenced hip-hop—myriad strands and theories entered the conversation separately and converged, battled, and complemented each other. As Muslim sects overlapped, new offshoots were born. Shape-shifting is a key aspect of the theological spread, as is the case with Muslim influence on hip-hop. Adisa Banjoko explains it by saying, "Look, when people ask how many people are in NOI, they hear: those who tell don't know, and those who know don't tell. But this obscures the fact that NOI always has high turnover. It's often the passing-through point for people on their way to Sunni Islam. And the same is true of the rappers. You want to know if they are 5 Percenters, NOI or Sunni—well, many of them have very fluid positions."[9]

It is these fluid positions that characterize the Muslim influence on hip-hop.

How Islam Birthed Hip-Hop

Although the usual answer to "who invented rap" is the trio of DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaata, and Grandmaster Flash, the roots extend further back to black

Muslim artists experimenting with rhyme structure and spoken word delivery in the 1960s. One of the earliest influences was the group the Last Poets, whose founding members included Abiodun Oyewole, Umar Bin Hassan, Jalal Nurridin, and Suliman El Hadi. The Poets were black radicals, detonating their lyrics on an America already on fire:

> When the revolution comes
> some of us will catch it on TV
> with chicken hanging from our mouths
> you'll know it's revolution
> because there won't be no commercials
> when the revolution comes

In their most famous spoken-word piece "Niggers are scared of revolution," they pioneered the staccato speeded-up delivery that came to characterize rap rhythms. Simultaneously, this work began the reappropriation of the "N" word, a process now done to death by modern hip-hop:

> Niggers are scared of revolution but niggers shouldn't be scared of revolution because revolution is nothing but change, and all niggers do is change. Niggers come in from work and change into pimping clothes to hit the street and make some quick change. Niggers change their hair from black to red to blond and hope like hell their looks will change.

The Last Poets were the original activist–artists, combining their music and poetry with direct action—including alliances with the SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), and the Black Panthers. Their records were released during a period of violent confrontation, including the murder of two black students and the wounding of twelve others by police at Jackson State University, a daisy-chain of ghetto rebellions in 1970, and the FBI's national campaign to arrest Angela Davis. With their lyrics feeding into the fervor of the times, the Poets were heavily monitored by the FBI and police, and were arrested for trying to rob the Klu Klux Klan. Decades later, these same trends were repeated as the NYPD began surveillance of hip-hop groups, especially those with outspoken politics.

Talking about the explosive effect of the Poets' early work, Darius James called it "a bomb on black Amerikkka's turntables. Muthafuckas ran f'cover. Nobody was ready. Had em scared o' revolution. Scared o' the whyte man's god complex. Scared o' subways. Scared o' each other. Scared o' themselves. And scared o' that totem of onanistic worship—the eagle-clawed Amerikkkan greenback! The rhetoric made you mad. The drums made you pop your fingers."[10] Amiri Baraka in turn identified them as rap's root source: "The Last Poets are the prototype Rappers." Baraka himself had converted to NOI, and influenced by that ideology and fever-pitch race tensions, wrote the blueprint gangsta lyric:

> All the stores will open if you say the magic
> words. The magic words are: Up against
> the wall motherfucker this is a stick up.

(Amiri Baraka, “Black People”)

Similarly influential, though in a different vein, was the newly converted Muhammad Ali. By dropping his “slave name” of Cassius Clay for Muhammad Ali (“I don’t have to be what you want me to be; I’m free to be what I want”), and replacing his cry of “I am the Greatest” to “Allah is the Greatest,” Ali became the most visible Muslim in America and a hero of the Afro-Asian and Islamic world. He was in the mold of the defiant black men—Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, Jack Johnson, and Paul Robeson. The difference was that his Muslim faith was a key aspect of his righteous rage and political defiance. Ali’s refusal to fight in Vietnam, coupled with incendiary comment “No Viet cong never called me a nigger,” enshrined his rebellion in the black psyche. Ali’s rebellious spirit was also in his poetry, which led George Plimpton to conclude that “his ability to compose rhymes on the run could very well qualify him as the first rapper.”[11] Recognizing Ali’s singular contribution to both Islam and the black male image, Ali’s artistic descendants later sang,

The man’s got a God complex
But take the text and change the picture
Watch Muhammad play the messenger like Holy Muslim scriptures
Take orders from only God
Only war when it’s Jihad
(Tribe Called Quest, Fugees, et al., “Rumble in the Jungle,” *When We Were Kings*)

As the ’60s gave way to the ’70s, the heady energy created by the Last Poets, Baraka, and others slowly dissipated. The connection between music and Islam then reemerged through the influence of the 5 Percenter Muslim sect. Although the 5 Percenters were never a significant portion of American Islam, their influence has been felt through their singular impact on music. The 5 Percent Nation (or the Nation of Gods and Earths) is a Nation of Islam breakaway sect founded in 1964 by Clarence 13X. In his refashioned version of Islam, Clarence taught that the black man was “Allah.” The focus of the 5 Percenters’ belief system includes numerology, cryptic scientific theory, and a more extreme race theory. In this theology, 85 percent of the masses are ignorant, 10 percent are “bloodsuckers of the poor,” and only 5 percent know the truth. This numeric structure has been used in rap songs, including those of Wu-Tang Clan, who use whole aspects of 5 Percenter theology:

> And then you got the 5 percent
> Who are the poor righteous teachers
> who do not believe in the teachings of the ten percent
> Who is all wise and know who the true and living god is
> And teach that the true and living god IS
> supreme being black man from asia
> Otherwise known as civilized people
> Also Muslims, and Muslims sons
> (Wu-Tang Clan, “Wu-Revolution,” *Forever*, 1999)

The practices of 5 Percenters included a big focus on rhetorical skills. Clarence 13X's was also called "Pudding" because of his smooth oratory. Yusuf Nureddine has highlighted the "eloquent and spell-binding usage of African American inner-city slang. Using the potency and vitality of the black dialect they open up new avenues of logic and thinking, or original ways of perceiving the world."[12] When music was added to this fast wordplay and verbal skills, an explosive cocktail came out of the other end. One of the first projects that connected the two was Afrika Bambaata's Zulu Nation, a collective of DJs, graffiti artists, and breakdancers, which was founded in 1974 in New York. Zulu Nation focused on urban survival through cultural empowerment—making up the core of this new vision were the 7 Infinity Lessons, which combined the dietary restrictions held up by Elijah Mohammed with the racial interpretations of Dr. Malachi York (Imam Isa) of biblical theology and the 5 Percenter "question and answer" and "keyword glossary" format.[13]

Zulu Nation's links to Islam were followed by pioneering rapper and devoted 5 Percenter Rakim. In Rakim's raps, we see the focus on breaking words down into components, a key 5 Percenter practice:

> Living on shaky grounds too close to the edge
> Let's see if I know the ledge.
> (Eric B & Rakim, "Juice (Know the Ledge)," *Don't Sweat the Technique*, 1992)

Elsewhere he broke with the Black Man as Allah concept and praised a deity directly, riding a fluid relation with Islam:

I'm the intelligent wise on the mic I will rise

Right in front of your eyes cuz I am a surprise

So I'ma let my knowledge be born to a perfection

All praise due to Allah and that's a blessing

(Eric B & Rakim, "Move the Crowd," *Paid in Full*, 1987)

As socially conscious rap began to be come out in the 1980s, NOI's politics also spread into songs. In 1983, Keith Leblanc released "No Sell-Out," dubbing a Malcolm X speech into the mix. This was the beginning of political rap's obsession with Malcolm, sampling him hundreds of times throughout the 1980s and '90s. Setting the gold standard for politically conscious rap was the group Public Enemy. In this, band member Professor Griff's strong NOI beliefs played a key role. When they appeared in battle fatigues, a cocktail of Fruit of Islam and Black Panther, White America was terrified by the specter of revived race riots. The media promptly dubbed PE the "most dangerous band alive," which they scornfully attacked in lyrics:

The follower of Farrakhan

Don't tell me that you understand

Until you hear the man

The book of the new school rap game

Writers treat me like Coltrane,[14] insane

(Public Enemy, "Don't Believe the Hype," *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, 1988)

Public Enemy's path was followed by KRS-One, who preached politics and black self-empowerment through Boogie Down Productions. Unlike later 5 Percenters like Wu-Tang, KRS-One stayed clear of numeric theory in favor of more conscious politics:

> But last but not least racial prejudice
> Is the black man speakin' out of ignorance
> Whitey this and Ching-Chow that
> Is not how the intelligent man acts
> You can't blame the whole white race
> For slavery, cos this ain't the case
> (Boogie Down Productions, "The Racist," *Edutainment*, 1990)

Kevin Powell has described the 1987–1992 era as the "golden age of hip hop."[15] In this period of restless activity, Sunni Muslims also began to enter the scene. Most notable was Tribe Called Quest (with Sunni followers Q-Tip and Ali Shaheed Muhammad) preaching Afrocentric awareness, collective love, and peace. On the other side of peace was the raw defiance of Paris. His work reflected a mixture of Sunni Islam and Panther ideology, as in his famous song:

> Revolution ain't never been simple
> Following the path from Allah for know just
> Build your brain and we'll soon make progress
> Paid your dues, don't snooze or lose

That came with the masterplan that got you
So know who's opposed to the dominant dark skin
Food for thought as a law for the brother man
(Paris, "The Devil Made Me Do It," *The Devil Made Me Do It*, 1990)

While the Afrocentric messages of Tribe were celebrated, the aggressive music of Paris scared tastemakers. *The Devil Made Me Do It* carried the iconic photo of a Black boy in a chokehold by riot police. Record stores refused to carry the album, citing its cover art. Paris' 1992 album, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, carried a photo of him holding a machine gun, hiding behind a tree on the White House lawn. Shareholder pressure over the song "Bush Killa" forced Time Warner subsidiary Tommy Boy to drop the record. After a five-year hiatus, his follow-up album *Sonic Jihad* (with the infamous image of a plane flying into the White House) was released on his own label. Reflecting ruefully on the commercial price of radical politics, Paris' website notes, "his uncompromising stance on political issues and biting social commentary have both aided and hindered his quest to bring solid music and messages to the masses"[16].

While Paris is a casualty in the battle over lyrics, many other Muslim artists have risen to become giants of the scene. These include 5 Percenter–influenced Busta Rhymes, Wu-Tang Clan, Big Daddy Kane, Brand Nubian, Nas, Gang Starr, Mobb Deep, Poor Righteous Teachers, Queen Latifah and Ladybug Mecca (Digable Planets); Sunni artists Jurassic 5, Mos Def, Roots (who also have 5 Percenters as members), Kool Moe Dee, and Everlast; NOI-influenced MC Ren, Da Lench Mob, Ice Cube, Kam, and K-Solo; and other artists with more fluid affiliations, such as Eve, Common, Brother Ali, Intelligent

Hoodlum, Afrika Islam, Daddy O (Stetsasonic), and Jeru the Damaja. Coming up fast are the next generation of Muslim rappers, who are tipped toward the Sunni scale and include some South Asian and Arab rappers.

The dominance of Muslims in hip-hop came about because of the linkages between 5 Percenters, NOI followers, and music. Islam's success in this area was also aided by the black church's antagonistic relationship with hip-hop. Describing the clergy's ham-handed approach to the music, Banjoko told me, "Reverend Calvin Butts used to ride over CDs with a steamroller. Whereas the Nation, and Minister Farrakhan especially, was having dinner with Ice Cube, Ice T, Sister Souljah, and Chuck D. He was engaging these effective black minds that were connected to young minds. But the Christians really hurt themselves by trying to demonize hip hop. Because they were attacking the most impoverished, and most socially, politically and economically denied people. So the youth heart hardened against the churches."[17]

The Nation of Islam under Minister Farrakhan took a very different approach, embracing the power of music. Farrakhan was a totem for many first- and second-generation rappers. Public mis-steps removed him from national screens, but his presence is still strong in the hip-hop nation. During a major "beef" between 50 Cent and Jah Rule, it was Farrakhan who sat with them on live radio to bring a truce. Talking about this approach, Manning Marable said, "The Nation of Islam has understood for decades that black culture is directly related to black politics. To transform an oppressed community's political behavior, one must first begin with the reconstruction of both cultural and civic imagination. . . . The reluctance of the black bourgeoisie to come to terms with the music its own children listen to compromises its ability to advance a

meaningful political agenda reflecting what the masses of our people see and feel in their daily lives."[18]

Sounding a note of the true believer, Banjoko added, "What would Jesus Do? Would Jesus try to ban Ice Cube? I don't think so. I know Prophet Muhammed would embrace Ice Cube and help him be a better man. That's the prophetic tradition!"[19]

Deep in the Flow

The initial link between Islam and hip-hop came via 5 Percent. This came through its focus on wordplay, numerology, and race theory. This trajectory was paralleled by the Nation of Islam, which embraced rap as a preaching tool at a time when the black Christian churches rejected it. Conscious rappers also gravitated toward NOI because its confrontational politics fit with their fierce rhymes. Beyond these initial connections, there were other reasons why Islamic thought influenced rappers. H. Samy Alim has researched the structural and symbolic similarities between hip-hop rhymes and Quranic text.[20] Through interviews with Muslim rappers, he has uncovered a key parallel. The Quran was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed through an oral tradition, using melodic prose. In this, there are parallels to hip-hop's birth as a means of empowering inner-city griots to transmit stories of urban blight and chaos via rhyme and flow. In conversation with Alim, Mos Def carries the parallel into direct analysis of the Quran: "The reason people are able to be *hafiz* is because the entire Quran rhymes. *Bismillah Al-Rahman Al-Rahim. Al-hamdulillahi Rabb Al-Alameen* . . . I mean it's any *surah* that I could name. *Qul huwa Allahu ahad, Allahu samad. Lam yalid wa lam yulad wa lam yakun lahu kufwan ahad* . . . Like there's a

rhyme scheme in all of it. And then you start to have a deeper relationship with it on recitation. . . Hip hop has the ability to do that—on a poetic level."[21]

Taking the analogy further, Common anoints hip-hop as the new vehicle for reaching people with Allah's message. Although orthodox preachers would dismiss this as *shirk* (blasphemy), Minister Farrakhan's embrace of hip-hop is clearly inspired by sentiments such as

> The perseverance of a rebel I drop heavier levels
> It's unseen or heard, a king with words
> Can't knock the hustle, but I've seen street dreams deferred
> Dark spots in my mind where the scene occurred
> Some say I'm too deep, I'm in too deep to sleep
> Through me, Muhammed will forever speak
> (Common, "The 6th Sense," *Like Water for Chocolate*, 2000)

Speaking of the use of metaphor in hip-hop, Bay area rapper JT the Bigga Figga draws an analogy between the creation of black street argot and the creative use of language in the Quran to reach believers. Describing the inventive wordplay of fellow rapper E-40, JT says, "It's almost like with Allah how he'll describe his prophets as moonlight. He'll describe his word that he speaks in a metaphoric phrasing. Where he'll say the clouds and when they swell up heavy and the water goes back to the earth, distilling back to earth. The water's heavier than gravity so it distills back to the earth on dry land, producing vegetation and herbs comin' up out the ground, you feel me? . . . And that's kinda like what E-40 do when he take something and take a word and apply it."[22]

Although many rappers focus on street life, Muslims have also uses their knowledge of Quranic scriptures to write less worldly musings:

From a lifeless ball of clay, empty as a hollow reed
Until Allah breathed life into my physical frame
From a state of nothingness instead of existing I became
By God, the true and living given insight
Certain colors manifesting physical light
But still earthbound, held down by the physical elements
Spiritual development gives me a higher intelligence
Beyond these concrete streets and the green pastures
(Akbar, "Those Who Say," *Big Bang Boogie*, 2001)

Animated by the convert's sense of righteousness, Everlast also raps against inter-religious strife:

This is for the ones who war over whose God is the right one
Can it be the Asian one, the black one or the white one?
The answer to the question really isn't controversial
There is only one God and his love is universal
If you sin and crave redemption, all you need to do is ask him
Then you will be fully prepared for a life that's everlasting
So take heed to the words I say, grab a good book and get hip to
The teachings of the holy Q'uran or the Bible's holy scripture
(Everlast, "What Is This?," *Forever Everlasting*, 1990)

Of course, not all strands of Islam accept parallels between hip-hop and Quranic recitations. To more orthodox sects, the Quran, the Surah, and the Azaan are all meant to be chanted (*tilawa)* which can be argued to be different from singing (*ghanniya*). These rigid structures break down across generational lines, with yoounger people embracing hip-hop as a boost to their understanding of Islam. Eman Tai, member of the Calligraphy of Thought spoken-word collective, connects hip-hop to Islam's history: "It's part of our history and culture in Islam. The traditional books of law and philosophy in Islam were written in poetry, and students memorize them with drums, basically singing out the poetry. And if you 'beat' that up, it sounds just like rapping.''[23]

Beyond a focus on scripture and philosophy, Muslim beliefs guide rappers in very specific ways toward community renewal and progressive politics. NOI focuses on self-sufficiency of the community and this has come to influence the lyrics of rap's Muslim generation. When NOI first moves into a blighted area, they get people dress well, stop drinking, and clean up crack houses. Then come related programs, such as the push to buy black and boycott racist merchants. All of these programs influenced rap lyrics that sought to uplift the race. But here the contradictions of the music also come bubbling to the surface. When Wu-Tang began their *Forever* double album, the lyrics embraced their Muslim listeners:

These things just took over me
Just took over my whole body
So I can't even see no more

> I’m calling my black woman a bitch
> I’m calling my peoples all kinds of thing that they not
> I’m lost brother, can you help me
> Can you help me brother, please
> (Wu-Tang Clan, “Wu-Revolution,” *Forever*, 1999)

But within the space of one song, the listeners face the contradiction of a “smoking, drinking, fornicating” life:

> Bitch ass niggaz counterfeit the funk
> I smoke the bead and the skunk, tree top of the trunk
> Moonshine drunken monk, Ya HEAD, get shrunk
> The touch of skunk, I be fuckin bitches by the chunk
> (Wu-Tang Clan, “Reunited,” *Forever*, 1999)

Wu-Tang Clan is a constellation of artists, and some members (like the late Ol’ Dirty Bastard who sang the second set of lyrics) were either not Muslim, or “struggling to find the path.” Typically when talking about "misguided" Muslim rappers, the critics focus on 5 Percenter belief as a source for some of these mistakes. This creates new intra-sect tensions between Muslim rappers.

As Muslim as They Want to Be

From the very beginning, the 5 Percenter sect was particularly skilled at creating iconography that appealed to inner-city youth. The school established in Harlem in 1967 was the “Allah School in Mecca,” and the five points of the constellation

were “Mecca” (Harlem), “Medina” (Brooklyn), “the Desert” (Queens), “Pelan” (Bronx), and “New Jerusalem” (New Jersey). Tracts of 5 Percent concepts were initially circulated as Xeroxed pamphlet “lessons” that passed from hand to hand. But as early hip-hop artists started incorporating 5 Percenter theology into freestyle rhymes, pamphlets were superseded by the more powerful oral tradition. Rappers, beatboxers, and DJs, became preachers, spreading the theology at the speed of music. Key portions of their theories spread through rap lyrics, including black man as Allah (“Praises are due to Allah, that’s me”—Poor Righteous Teachers), the Chosen 5 Percent (“Why? That’s most asked by 85”—Ladybug Mecca/Digable Planets), supreme mathematics and the supreme alphabet (“Now I’m rolling with the seven[24] and the crescent”—Digable Planets), racial separatism (“No blue eyes and blonde hair is over here”—Poor Righteous Teachers), and the breaking of words into components (“U-n-i-verse—you and I verse”—Roots). In addition, 5 Percenters were the innovators behind early hip-hop slang, including “’sup, G?” (originally “G” meant God, not gangsta), “Word is bond,” “Break it down,” “Peace,” “droppin’ science,” and “represent.”

Five Percent is in many ways a “gateway” theology, which many African-Americans passed through to come in contact with other sects of Islam. In this process, the pioneering 5 Percent rappers helped bring large masses to Islam. Yet, because of the unorthodox nature of 5 Percenter beliefs, Sunni Muslims refuse to give credit or recognition. In turn, 5 Percenters call Sunni Muslims “Soon to be Muslim,” and refer to the orthodox Muslim teaching “that the almighty true and living god is a spook in the sky” (Wu-Tang Clan). Some of these tensions were expressed by Banjoko, himself a Sunni, in early interviews given in 2001:

> No other Islamic sect in the world accepts drinking alcohol. Yet Brand Nubian are known to smoke weed by the pound and drink like fish. Poor Righteous Teachers seem to be the only group from the 5 Percent that shuns drugs, alcohol and foul lifestyles. All the talk about spaceships doesn't help either. The 5 Percent Nation really hurt al-Islam because of their inability to hold on to any theological concept consistently—not to mention their violence and misogyny, which hurts all true believers.[25]

The split between Sunni and Shiite has created schisms that affect world politics. Smaller sects such as the Ismailis, Druze, Sufis, Ahle-Hadis, and Ahmadiyas have been branded as heretics. The Prophet Mohammed is said[26] to have warned that there would be 72 sects of Islam after his death and that only one would be the true Islam. Although Islam has no centralized clergy, the battle to create a centralized theological leadership has been waged for centuries. In the current era, some of the main contenders for Islam's leadership are the Saudi Wahhabis, Iranian theocrats, Turkish modernizers, Western philosophers such as Tariq Ramadan, and Asian leaders such as Mahathir Mohammed. Leadership struggles have manifested themselves in voting blocs, as in the recent struggle over the OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries). The volatile Saudi-Iranian rivalry has even descended to violent clashes during Hajj. Most important, as Muslim blocs struggle to assert dominance, minority sects within Islam have become a political target. By waging a battle of fatwas and violence against smaller Muslim sects, the more radical Islamist groups have sought to establish their leadership in the *ummah*.

One of the most prominent targets of these anti-heresy campaigns have been the Ahmadiyas. It was precisely because of the hostile environment in their native Pakistan (then British India) that the Ahmadiyas focused heavily on preaching to the outside world. In this journey, the early Ahmadiya preachers arrived in America and became the first major source for the reinsertion of Islam into black communities. While Ahmadiyas preached to African Americans, back home they were increasingly targets of persecution. A key aspect of the anti-Ahmadiya campaigns was the allegation that they called their leader Mirza Ghulam Ahmed a prophet (in this, there are parallels to the claims of prophethood made by the antecedents of Nation of Islam). Fueled by Saudi funds, the anti-Ahmadiya movement succeeded in banning the Ahmadiyas in Pakistan and banning their books in Bangladesh.[27]

As with Islam globally, so in America. Although there are many pressing problems for American Muslims, a lot of energy has recently been focused on the 5 Percenters in hip-hop. In a 2001 essay, Banjoko accused 5 Percenters of bringing ignorant elements to Islam: "Unless we rid Hip Hop of the *jahiliyyah* elements, we can only expect more of your sharp minded but misguided youth to perish over territorialism, materialism and pursuit of the sensual path.""[28] In an interview, 5 Percenter Ibn Dajjal responded to Banjoko: "No amount of fatwas or censorship will ever silence the sounds of the NOI and 5 Percent nations. The group will continue to rise in fame with customers coming from all walks of life: black, white and Bedouin."[29]

Sohail Daulatzai points to another reason for hostility toward 5 Percenters, which is the elitism and sense of ownership some immigrant Muslims feel toward Islam. "They feel that African Americans should be understanding Islam

from the immigrant. And that superiority complex does exist because there's a lack of understanding of race. I think the opposite should happen. Immigrants should understand from black people what Islam means in America, because African Americans have been doing it for 400 years." Connecting this elitism with the debate over 5 Percenter influence on hip-hop, Daulatzai says, "It's not just that they are being dismissed based on doctrinal difference. African Americans have a different understanding of Islam. They hybridize it, they mix it with lot of ideas based on the black experience. Immigrant Muslims don't always see all those differences, whether in the mosque or in hip-hop."[30]

As this debate unfolds within hip-hop, Daulatzai's more nuanced understanding of race, class, and music is reflected among other American Muslims as well. There are now hip-hop fans willing to engage in *ijtihad* (debate) about 5 Percenters. Even Banjoko seems to have softened his stance toward 5 Percenters in recent years. He told me recently, "I still disagree with their beliefs. These guys piecemeal their theology to the *n*th degree. You'll have these pseudo Wu-Tang affiliates who talk absolute berserk madness. But in spite of theological flaws, they have still been a positive force and I can't deny that. One benefit of the 5 Percenters is that through them, inner-city kids are at least becoming familiar with Islamic terms."[31]

Generation M

One of the most overused phrases is "after 9/11." Yet we can at least say that the new realities have brought a change to Muslim hip-hop. For Muslim youth, there were two new forces in their lives. First, there is the crackdown on Muslim civil liberties, expressed through the Patriot Act, INS deportations, "special

registrations," "extraordinary renditions," no-fly lists, and torture memos. Second, there are the continuing U.S. wars of occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq. All this has inspired the rise of new Muslim-identified hip-hop bands. Many of these are now Sunni affiliated and some are led by children of Muslim immigrants. Hip-hop remains the singular voice of black America, but that core is now made larger by Arab, Asian, African, French, and British Muslims. The center for these new networks is the Internet, especially through websites like MuslimHipHop.com and Muslimac.com (Muslim Artists Central). Among the many they host, the up-and-coming names include Capital D, Sons of Hagar, After Hijrah 11:59, Arab Legion, Divine Styler, Halal Styles, Iron Crescent, Jamil Mustafa, Kenny Muhammad, Mujahideen Team, Native Deen, the Hammer Bros., the Iron Triangle, and Young Messengerrzz.

Taking on a more assertive Muslim identity, many of these new artists identify as "Generation M." Unlike the 5 Percenters' fluid definitions, they adhere to a more traditional Islamic view and multiracial identity. In their lyrics, many of the concerns are about being Muslim in the West and the current civil liberties environment. Sons of Hagar, one of the rising stars, asserts a strident Arab identity:

> My own country is trying to get rid of me
> Got no shoulder to lean on and I ain't crying neither
> It's the Arab hunting season
> And I ain't leavin
> (Sons of Hagar, "INSurrection," *A Change*, 2004)

Just as Islamophobia is now a global trend, the critiques of that force come from all corners of the world. Sons of Hagar are joined by Paris, who raps:

> See me blame it on a foreigner and non-white men
>
> Celebrate my gestapo with a positive spin
>
> Then manipulate the media—it's U.S. first
>
> Get the stupid-ass public to agree with my words
>
> (Paris, "Evil," *Sonic Jihad*, 2003)

Paris is echoed by the Asian Dub Foundations' British-Bangladeshi vocalist, who links blowback to U.S.–Taliban alliances:

> Babylon is really burning this time
>
> coming home to roost on a Soviet landmine
>
> Climbing out the subway burning eyes spinning head
>
> Walking through the station breaking into a cold sweat
>
> Is the ticking time bomb in my head or your bag
>
> Have you been snorting white lines with President Gas
>
> Crawling from the wreckage of my tumblin' tower block
>
> Someone else had to finish the job
>
> It was the enemy of the enemy
>
> The enemy of the enemy
>
> He's a friend
>
> Til he's the enemy again
>
> (Asian Dub Foundation, "Enemy of the Enemy," *Enemy of the Enemy*, 2003)

In the 1990s, Public Enemy surveyed a landscape of police brutality, a crack epidemic, and hostile Reaganomics, and unleashed their rage on the mic. Public Enemy's grand project to channel "Black CNN" into a united political movement foundered on Professor Griff's anti-Semitism. Ten years later, "Driving While Black" has been switched for "Flying While Brown" and the fight back is also in rhymes. The media played a crucial role in PE's downfall, paving the way for the apolitical bling stylings of gangsta rap and an eternal cycle of Hot 97–generated "beefs." With Generation M, some will be equally ready to seize on any missteps and derail the political mission. Guarding against the media glare, while building a deep-rooted Muslim hip-hop movement, where the black experience is core, is the next project for activist–academics like Daulatzai and Banjoko.

Last/Lost Words

In the ongoing debates over Islam, the same South Asian and Arab faces are always brought out. It is always Fareed Zakaria, Fouad Ajami, Imam Feisal, et al. African American Muslims remain the invisible minority in the public eye. Part of this can be attributed to the continuing phobia against Nation of Islam.[32] But the sidelining of black Muslims is also part of the larger project to render Muslims as permanent "outsiders." African Americans complicate the narrative because they are not immigrants. Nor do they have an origin country where they can be deported in times of crisis.

Embedded within the African-American experience is a direct critique of the American nation-state. When we talk about the black experience, we confront

the uses of racism and power. In analyzing this, we can start to make sense of the current world crisis by discovering the parallels and overlaps between black and Muslim experiences. The collapse of the black working class can be traced at least partially to the failure to resolve racism and poverty. Similarly, a global pandemic of radical Islam is a blowback from a foreign policy that embraced dictators and destroyed indigenous political movements. In our recent past, theories of "black rage," "bell curves," and images of hypersexual black males have been deployed to explain all crises and absolve the power structure. Similarly, visions of fanatic hordes and neo-orientalist fantasies of rescuing veiled women propel anti-immigrant policies and continuous oil wars.

When a black Muslim musician critiques foreign policy or xenophobia, it is still an "angry Muslim voice," but not one that can be easily stereotyped. Hip-hop and the visibility of Muslim artists offers a way to turn racist paradigms on their head. When rappers rhyme over the *azaan* or Quranic *ayaats*, mainstream society's perceptions of an "alien" religion are flipped. Enhanced visibility through music can create a dynamic that moves America from hyper-Islamophobia to a dialogue among equals.

Appendix: Who's Who in Muslim Hip-Hop

A very incomplete, always evolving, list of artists who profess Muslim faith (Five Percenter, Nation of Islam, Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, etc.) or have been influenced by Muslim beliefs:

Afrika Bambaataa
Afrika Islam
After Hijrah
Akbar
Ali Shaheed Muhammad, formerly of A Tribe Called Quest
An Nasr
Arab Legion
Azeem
Big Daddy Kane
Brand Nubian
The Brothahood
Brother Ali
Busta Rhymes
Capital D
Common
Daddy O (Stetsasonic)
DAM
Divine Styler
11:59
Encore
Erykah Badu
Eve
Everlast
Frontline
Generation M
Guru (Gang Starr)
Halal Styles
The Hammer Bros.
Ice Cube
Intelligent Hoodlum
Iron Crescent
The Iron Triangle
Jeru the Damaja
Jurassic 5
Kam
Kenny Muhammad
Kool Moe Dee
KRS-One
K-Solo
Ladybug Mecca (Digable Planets)
Lakim Shabazz

The Last Poets
Lupe Fiasco
MC Ren
Mecca 2 Medina
Mobb Deep
Mos Def
Mujahideen Team
Napoleon (Tupac's Outlawz)
Nas
Native Deen
Old School
Paris
Poor Righteous Teachers
Prince Akeem
Professor Griff (Public Enemy)
Q-Tip (Fareed Kamal), formerly of A Tribe Called Quest
Queen Latifah
Rakim
Roots
Shorty (Da Lench Mob)
Sister Souljah
Sons of Hagar
Tyson
World Famous Supreme Team
Wu-Tang Clan
Young Messengerrzz

Notes

1. Author interview, March 23, 2005.

2. A play on Suheir Hammad's *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (Writers and Readers Publishing, 1996).

3. These statistics were calculated before a new wave of immigration from Muslim countries probably boosted these numbers. To take one example, according to a 2005 census report, the fastest-growing New York migrant group between 1990–2000 were Bangladeshis. Therefore, it is safe to say these numbers have gone up. At the same time, post-9/11 immigration crackdown and worsening of Muslim civil liberties would dampen these numbers.

4. Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York University Press, 1998).

5. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Dell Publishing, 1977), 46.

6. Sohail Daulatzai, *Darker Than Blue: A Cultural History of Black Radicalism and Afro-Asian Solidarity*, forthcoming.

7. Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Indiana University Press, 1997).

8. Sohail Daulatzai, "War At 33 1/3: Culture and Politics Across the Afro-Asian Atlantic," in *The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip-Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture*, ed. Dipannita Basu and Sid Lemelle (eds.) (Pluto Press, 2006).

9. Author Interview, March 21, 2005.

10. Darius James, *That's Blaxploitation!* (St. Martin's Griffin, 1995).

11. *Time* Magazine, "Time 100: The Most Important People of the Century," http://www.time.com/time/time100/index_2000_time100.html/.

12. Yusuf Nureddine, quoted in Hisham Aidi, "Hip Hop of the Gods," Africana.com, April 27, 2001.

13. Known as the "Lost-Found Muslim Lessons," which are arranged in question-and-answer format (and may have been modeled on the catechism of the Masons). See http://www.thenationofislam.org/lostfoundlesson.html/.

14. Here PE may also be linked to John Coltrane's Muslim connection, via Ahmadiya Muslims such as Yusuf Lateef.

15. Kevin Powell, quoted in Manning Marable, "The Politics of Hip Hop," *Along the Color Line*, March 2002.

[16] http://www.guerrillafunk.com/paris/bio/

[17]17. Author interview, March 22, 2005.

18. Manning Marable, "The Politics of Hip Hop," *Along the Color Line*, March 2002.

19. Author interview, March 22, 2005.

20. H. Samy Alim, "Exploring the Transglobal Hip Hop Umma," in *Muslim Networks: From Hajj to Hip Hop*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence (University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

21. H. Samy Alim, "Three X Black: Mos Def, Mr. Nigga (Nigga, Nigga) and Big Black Afrika X-amine Hip Hop's Cultural Consciousness," *Black Arts Quarterly* 6, no. 2.

22. H. Samy Alim, "Exploring the Transglobal Hip Hop Umma," in *Muslim Networks.*

23. Marian Liu, "Hip-Hop's Islamic Influence," *SJ Mercury News* (see http://www.daveyd.com/commentaryhiphopislam.html).

24. A focus on numerology can also be found in Islam—such as the belief that some elements in the Quran are divisible by seven, in a manner impossible to produce without divine intervention.

25. Hisham Aidi, "Hip Hop of the Gods," Africana.com, April 27, 2001.

26. The prophets' sayings are collected in Hadith, with notations about provenance and reliability

27. Naeem Mohaiemen, *Muslims or Heretics* (documentary), 2005, www.shobak.org

28. Adisa Banjoko, "Hip-Hop and the New Age of Ignorance," *FNV Newsletter* (June 2001).

29. Hisham Aidi, “Jihadis in the Hood: Race, Urban Islam, and the War on Terror,” *Middle East Report* 224, fall 2002.

30. Author interview, March 23, 2005.

31. Author interview, March 23, 2005.

32. On a Long Island TV show called *The God Squad*, I was asked by a worried host, “Now when you say black Muslims, I just want to make sure you’re not talking about Nation of Islam.”