

CHAPTER FOUR

“Who Controls the Present Controls the Past. Who Controls the Past Controls the Future”¹: Washing Islam from the Media Narratives of Hip-Hop

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The emergence of hip-hop in the early 1980s was informed by the convergence of Black Nationalism and American Islam with the relationships between Islam and hip-hop so deeply entrenched that journalist Harry Allen once described it as “hip hop’s unofficial religion” (Mohaiemen 2008: 313). Islam was an influential presence from hip-hop’s formative period, and retained a high profile for many years through its associations with black separatist Islamic sects, such as the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Five Percent Nation (5percenters), as well as the non-separatist teachings of Sufi and Sunni Islam. The language and philosophy of hip-hop are thus infused with Islamic iconography and ideologies. Indeed, many of the words and phrases associated with hip-hop, which have become genre signposts in frequent use by non-Muslims, are drawn directly from the teaching of groups associated with Islam.

¹ Afrika Bambaataa introduced live performances of “Planet Rock” with this quote, as depicted in the BBC documentary *Beat This: A hip hop history* (1984).

The presence of Islam at the core of an American music genre and lifestyle posed problems for a media preoccupied with the notion of Muslims as an incoming immigrant population. Muslims and Islam are continually at the crux of censure and debate within US media and political discussions, with perceptions of Islam as anti-democratic, and a menace to the West, having persisted since the late 1970s (Esposito 1995; Said 1997). The relationship between Western nations and Muslims has been interpreted as a divide between the Christian West and the world of traditional Islam (Ibrahim 2010), with heightened divisions in the US in the post-9/11 world. Orientalist discourse has presented as a Western media antagonism towards Muslims and Islam, predominantly focused on economic and terrorist threats. The generalizing lens of the media defines “the West” and “Islam” as opposites, which in turn propagates the idea of confrontation (Poole 2002). Edward Said argues that the mainstream Western media portrays Islam as populated by “an undifferentiated mob of scimitar-waving oil suppliers” (Said 1980: 19), or as a religion of irrational violence that subordinates its women. A number of geopolitical issues further amplified the tone and volume of the East versus West discourse. These included: the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict (known as the Six-Day War), in which the US supported Israel; the 1973 OPEC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil embargo (a protest against US support of Israel); and perhaps most significantly, the 1979 Iranian Revolution—a populist uprising led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, which overthrew the US-backed Shah of Iran and led to the creation of a Shia Islamic theocratic regime. The periodic crises over Libya and the Middle East in the 1980s, the gulf war in Kuwait and Iraq in the 1990s, and the consequent events of 9/11 in 2001 further cemented the discourse (Ahmed 2012).

In this chapter, I begin by exploring the history of Islam in the US, and the symbiotic relationship between aspects of American Islam and Black Nationalism, and the subsequent role that Islam played in the origin story and ideological structures of hip-hop. I then

investigate the washing of both Islam and Black Nationalism from mainstream media histories of hip-hop as depicted in documentary films released prior to the 9/11 attacks, and those following them.

Islam in the United States

One of the dominant discourses surrounding American Muslims is that Islam is the religion of an incoming immigrant population of Arabs and South Asians. However, the Pew Research Center reports that of the estimated 3.45 million Muslims living in the United States in 2017, at least 50 percent had been born in the United States (PRC 2018). American Muslims are one of the most racially diverse religious groups in the United States (Younis, 2009) with no dominant racial background, though 25 per cent of the total native born American Muslim population is also African American. Such statistics present a contradictory narrative that places Islam as a significant domestic religion in America.

Islam's roots in the United States extend as far back as the founding fathers, who looked to the inclusion of Islam when establishing the principles of religious liberty. Thomas Jefferson's ideological position was inspired by John Locke's "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (1689), which argued that "neither Pagan nor Mahometan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth because of his religion." Jefferson drew on Locke in proposing his Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in 1786, noting in his autobiography that "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan" were to be included under its protection (Hutson, 2002). Moreover, historian Timothy Marr (2006) notes that a "larger-than-life representation of the Prophet Muhammad" can be viewed as part of a bas-relief on the north wall of the US Supreme Court. The Prophet Muhammad is situated "between Charlemagne and Justinian as one of eighteen great law givers of history."

In the early years of America's founding, up to 40 percent of the Atlantic slave trade followed the Muslim faith (Mohaiemen 2008: 31). By the time of the Industrial Revolution these numbers had grown significantly due to immigration from Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Eastern Europe (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 228). Among the incoming population of Muslims were missionaries sent by the Ahmadiya Muslim sect. They immediately faced a bar on preaching in white areas and churches and instead looked to the black ghettos (Mohaiemen 2008: 315). Muslim immigrant communities in America subsequently established small, local organizations across the country and especially within inner city ghettos.

Islam's role in the Civil Rights Movement, and in Black Nationalism Post-World War II, saw considerable overlap as both African Americans and Muslim Americans demanded equal rights in recognition of their war time contributions. Post-WWII African American and Muslim communities experienced the huge chasm between America's self-identified democratic ideals and the realities of racial and religious discrimination. GhaneaBassiri notes that the critique of Christianity as a "white man's religion" by Black Nationalist Muslim movements, and their appropriation of Islam as a religion of liberation that offered a national religion of African America proved very appealing to many who were subsequently "Islamicised" (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 228).

Particularly significant was Noble Drew Ali's establishment of the Moorish Science Temple of America in the mid-1920s. Felicia Miyakawa notes that central to Ali's teachings was the claim that "modern blacks are the descendants of the Biblical prophetess Ruth, whose progeny settled the area known as Moab... [T]he Moorish civilization at its height (around 1500 BC) extended from the area today known as Morocco to North, South and Central America, encompassing even mythical Atlantis" (2005: 11). This was significant because it places Black people in the Americas in pre-Columbian days, giving them primacy over later

colonists and slaveholders and justifying their demands for full civil rights in American society. These teachings subsequently became a focal point of the Nation of Islam, established by Wallace Fard Muhammad in 1930 in reaction to Ali's tolerance of Christianity. Fard taught that "Christianity [and other "white religions"] is a tool in the hands of the White slave masters to control the minds of black people", and also "introduced the doctrine that whites are devils" (Miyakawa 2005: 13, 14). Under Fard's leadership, black American Islam moved towards a position of black supremacy.

The NOI moved closer to orthodox Islamic teachings following the induction of Elijah Muhammad as its leader in 1934, yet it retained a militant approach to separatism that became exemplified by NOI National Representative Malcolm X's most famous quote that its aims should be achieved "by any means necessary." Among the NOI's core beliefs was that "the Creator is a Blackman" and that white (pale) people are devils. These ideologies lay at the core of the NOI splinter group Five Percent Nation which was founded in 1965 by Clarence 13X. 5percenter theology is a mix of "black nationalist rhetoric, Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) symbolism, Gnosticism, Masonic mysticism, and esoteric numerology" (Miyakawa 2005: 23). At the core of their beliefs was the NOI doctrine presented in their "Lost-Found Muslim Lesson N. 2" that ten per cent of the people in the world are the white, rich "slave makers of the poor" who know the truth of existence but choose to keep eighty-five per cent of the world suppressed in a state of compliant ignorance. The remaining five per cent are those Black men who are the "poor, righteous teachers" that know the truth and have determined to enlighten the eighty-five per cent. The 5percenters believe that their "faith" is not a religion but a science, or way of life, with the core concept of Black men as Allah incarnate being provable through their "Supreme Mathematics" and their "Supreme Alphabet." Using these tools to "show and prove," the 5percenters claim that the word "Man" is an acronym for My Almighty Name (placing God in mortal form), the word "Islam" means "I Self Lord Am

Master” (placing God within the individual), and the word Allah means “Arm Leg Leg Arm Head” (thus providing Allah with human form). This position presents a clear separation with orthodox Islam. In Arabic, “Islam” literally means “submission,” (Miyakawa 2005: 30) but for the 5percenters submission to Allah has no meaning because each Black man is Allah incarnate. Hence, Islam is not regarded “as a set of practices intended to give reverence to a Supreme Being... [but, for the Five Percenters] ... as a flexible way of life, a mode of encountering the world in their own self-deified orbit” (Miyakawa 2005: 30).

Both Nation of Islam and 5percenters helped to lay the groundwork for the emergence of Islam as an influential element of the Black Power movement in the 1950s and 1960s. These links also resonated powerfully with many of the estimated 1.1 million Muslims who arrived in the United States following the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act (Curtis 2006: 35–65). The experiences of the new Muslim communities chimed closely with those of domestic Muslims as they faced increased levels of media prejudice through negative representations of those nations mediated as Islamic. Furthermore, throughout this period African American and incoming Muslim communities in the inner city areas of Detroit, Chicago, and New York faced increased levels of deprivation through unemployment, poverty, and slum housing, often at the hands of city developers. For example, the New York, Harlem area of the Bronx underwent disastrous structural change, thanks initially to the creation of the Cross-Bronx Expressway that left up to 60,000 residents destitute, forcibly removed, or left in condemned buildings without power, water or sanitation (Chang 2005: 12). As work continued on the Expressway, white business-owning American families in Harlem relocated to the safer, cleaner suburbs that the Expressway served, taking much of the Bronx’s means of employment and their churches with them. This fuelled significant distrust of the Christian church, and created space for the NOI and the 5percenters.

Hip-hop and Islam

By the early 1970s the alliance between Black Nationalist organizations like the Black Panthers and both NOI and 5percenters had presented a defiant focus for many African Americans suffering high levels of depravation. It was in the midst of urban deprivation that the social and cultural expressions of inner-city youth shifted, and hip-hop was born as a source of alternative identity formation and social status for young people. Hodge (2013) argues that hip-hop's emergence was within a "theological vacuum"; however, as has been noted, the departure of mainstream Christian churches from urban areas populated by African Americans enabled space for Black Nationalist Islamist sects to fill the "theological vacuum" with a message that spoke of the "realities of life within the 'hood and within a system that had abandoned them" (Rose 1994: 32). As hip-hop emerged, it was the 5percenters' version of Black Nationalist Islam that was embraced.

The hip-hop generation is defined as "those young African Americans born between 1965 and 1984 who came of age in the eighties and nineties and ... share a specific set of values and attitudes" (Kitwana 2004: 4). In mainstream media, these attitudes are often presented as a hybrid cultural expression, bringing together a range of crafts through the typology of "hip-hop tenets." These include breakdancing, graffiti, DJing, and MCing, which collectively inform the fifth tenet of Knowledge. This final tenet is embodied by a cultural knowing, historical awareness, and self-growth as offered through the teachings of Black separatist Islamic groups. Through Black Nationalist rhetoric, the tenets of hip-hop link directly to their own ideologies and doctrines. Breakdancing is the fight of slaves; graffiti, a form that originated among the often north African enslaved people of the Roman empire, is the writing of slaves; rapping is the oratory of the enslaved passing on heritage knowledge through slang undecipherable by the white slaver; and DJing is the misuse of the technology

of the enslaver to create a black form of music consumption that excludes white people. Together these four tenets speak of subversion of white dominance and subsequent black empowerment, the reclamation of written and oral language, and a celebration of African heritage. Each is informed by the fifth tenet of “knowledge,” provided primarily by the 5percenters.

The central role of Islam—as an identity marker—in the birth and subsequent global growth of hip-hop is relatively undocumented in the media. Indeed, the media representation of Islam in early hip-hop was largely one of passive intrigue, with the roles played by Islamic teachings largely hidden. Media reference to Islam in hip-hop was, instead, subsumed by the concepts of Black Nationalism and the superseding ideologies of Afrocentric rap. The problematic aspects of Islam as an identity marker for the hip-hop generation were thus sidestepped in favor of the more easily framed domestic racial conflict.

Saeed (2009) has noted that although orthodox Muslims may not have been able to see the links between Islam and hip-hop, the hip-hop generation placed them at the core of their lyrical delivery. As Saeed notes: “The Holy Koran (which many scholars see as a collection of poems) was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) orally in large sections through almost rhymed prose” (Saeed 2009: 399). Connections can be made here to the Muslim spoken word collectives of the late 1960s, such as The Last Poets and the Watts Prophets, who commentators point to as antecedents of hip-hop (see Chang 2005; Toop 2000). The spoken word movement provided a platform for these artists and activists to fuse Islamic teachings with Black Nationalist rhetoric.

Perhaps more significant to the popularization of Islam in the United States and of huge impact to the ferment from which hip hop would emerge was world champion boxer Muhammad Ali. He embraced Islam in 1961 and, following his association with the NOI, renounced his “slave name” Cassius Clay in 1964. Public Enemy’s Chuck D argues:

Of course the great Muhammad Ali influenced hip-hop. He had that from the rhyming aspect that everyone heard immediately. Kids was doing Ali rhymes in the schoolyards. But he was more than rhymes. He'd be using them to challenge, to predict what was going to go down ... That was the battle right there. Backing it up. That was totally hip-hop (unpublished interview with author, 1999).

Although NOI dominated the narrative of African American Muslims in the 1960s and early 1970s the early hip-hop generation more closely aligned themselves to the 5percenters through a “focus on wordplay, numerology, and race theory” (Mohaiemen 2008: 321). The use of rhetoric and wordplay was especially significant, with Clarence 13X noted for his “eloquent and spell-binding usage of African American inner-city slang” (Mohaiemen 2008: 319). When hip-hop’s earlier block parties took place there was a strong 5percenter presence with its followers acting as the “peace guards” maintaining a peaceful space for the events while providing protection to the DJ and martialling the different gangs that were present. These self-proclaimed peacekeepers also used the parties to share 5percenter doctrines, and their membership grew in line with the spread of hip-hop. As a result the earliest block parties were a marriage of youth creativity informed by links to both black separatism and Islam.

Washing Islam from American hip-hop

The historical significance of music-makers and genres in the creation of “popular” histories can be defined through the use of four criteria: media coverage, biographical interest, critical acclaim, and sales figures (Thornton 1990). All four approaches to the construction of histories create simple timelines of events with a selection of key moments and personalities

deemed to drive change. Each of these criteria has led to popular histories that initially sought to reduce hip-hop's meaning to a one-dimensional interpretation with a heroic and celebratory master narrative. The ideas and representations of the earliest moments are inevitably presented through a teleological progression from great creative visionaries (DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, etc) to great events (block parties, etc.). This progression was represented in a hip-hop narrative that quickly became a modernist meta-narrative in which gestation, birth, death and after were asserted. Between these key moments the complex chronologies of hip-hop are reduced to a clear line associated with the biographies of key DJs and rappers presented as engineering a heroic style via the centralized cultural and geographical location of the Bronx in New York. The official timeline has subsequently become refined as a series of master narratives of key moments for the interconnected rap, DJ, graffiti, and breakdancing elements of hip-hop, framed by conditions of poverty, and of defiance against urban regeneration programs and disinterested police and politicians. It becomes a simple margins-to-mainstream story, emphasizing a narrative of creativity from poverty and deprivation; one that develops from hip-hop as a secret society to hip-hop as a global success. In this simplified narrative any uncomfortable cultural edges become smoothed down in order to emphasize the rags to riches trajectory.

Studies have found that Islam is represented in the media as a monolithic, homogenized, or sexist religion (Korteweg 2008; Mishra 2007), with Muslims framed as heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatics and militants and terrorists (Shaheen 2009; Ibrahim 2010; Powell 2011). Islam is presented from the perspective of a "white man's world" with Muslims categorized as "them" and presented as a threat to "us" (Osuri and Banerjee 2004: 167). In many ways hip-hop has undergone similar processes of representation, with mainstream media "othering" it through an overt emphasis on narratives of poverty and deprivation, black on black gang violence, lawlessness, militant behavior,

sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. That hip-hop's emergence as a youth culture brought together diverse influences from Arab, Islamic, African American, and Hispanic cultures, both local and diasporic, is rarely represented (Saeed 2009: 395).

As was noted earlier, media representation of hip-hop subsumed any links to Islam within narratives of Black Nationalism. When gangsta rap arrived in 1988 with N.W.A.s *Straight Outta Compton*, the US media was able shift its attention to well-used narratives of lawlessness, drug culture, gang warfare, and black on black violence, as well as sexism, homophobia, and commoditized misogyny. Thus, African American youth were increasingly depicted through the frames of suspicion and hysteria that echoed tropes used in the framing of Muslims.

Rather than emphasizing the similarities however, this framing had the effect of washing Islam from the popular history of hip-hop with mainstream television documentaries making no attempt to acknowledge either Black Nationalism, NOI, 5percenter, or political rap, even though many of the biggest artists in hip-hop continued to follow one of the Islamic sects (especially the 5percenters), and rap lyrics continued to be informed by Islamic word play. These documentaries chose instead to skip the era of KRS1, Public Enemy and other notable Islamic crews. For example, *The Hip Hop Years* (1999) produced in the UK by Channel 4, scripted hip-hop's history within a mainstreamed white pop lineage that ignores all reference to the difficult ideas of Black Nationalism and American Islam by jumping directly from Blondie's celebration of the early days of hip-hop in "Rapture" (1981) to the commercially successful genre of gangsta rap in the late 1980s. An accompanying book makes some attempt to address the era in more detail, but without discussion of the foundational role of Islam (Ogg and Upshal 1999).

US documentary *Rap: Looking for the Perfect Beat* (1994) was a rarity among early hip-hop films as it noted the roles of figures from the Black Nationalist and Civil

Rights movements and opened with Malcolm X's "This is a white man's country" speech before cutting to footage of his funeral clearly depicting Muslims praying for the former NOI spokesman.² Direct links between hip hop and Malcolm X are further shown through specific reference to the cover of Boogie Down Productions' *By All Means Necessary* (1988) in which KRS1 is depicted in homage to an iconic Malcolm X photo, peering through a window while holding a gun. The album title itself echoed Malcolm X's demand that NOI's civil rights aims should be achieved "by any means necessary." There is no direct reference to NOI, or indeed to 5percenters, in the documentary; yet, while the role of religious doctrine in hip-hop's formation may not be overt, there are still clear connotations within the narrative. Christianity is, however, foregrounded through the insertion of controversial anti-gangsta rap activist Pastor Calvin Butts of the Harlem based Abyssinian Baptist Church in the City of New York who had fashioned himself as a spokesperson for inner city black neighborhoods and was used in the documentary as a key commentator.³

In an act of narrative subversion that would become commonplace in mainstream hip-hop documentaries Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation is referred to in the documentary as being "almost like a religion." More dominant however is the story of the Zulu Nation's

² Malcolm X had turned to Sunni Islam before his assassination in 1965.

³ Although a self-proclaimed fan of hip-hop, Butts used his position to attack gangsta rap in public campaigns. On one occasion, he brought together a few hundred of his followers in an attempt to steamroll over boxes of offending gangsta rap cassettes and CDs, but found himself blocked by hip-hop fans. Instead, he and his followers boarded a bus to midtown Manhattan where they dumped the boxes outside the Madison Avenue headquarters of the Sony Corporation.

emergence from a youth in gangs. This would become narrativized as a process of enlightenment, or epiphany. Bambaataa (*et al.*) thus become depicted as reaching beyond the constraints of gang culture towards a more meaningful, or spiritual life.

Despite being loosely arranged around the hip-hop biography of Bambaataa, BBC Television documentary *Beat This: A hip-hop history* (1984) similarly focuses on his enlightenment from gangs and violence, rather than covering the theological guidance that inspired the formation of the Zulu Nation. Despite an establishing shot of Bambaataa's call for black people to reclaim their histories through the opening lyrics to his track "Planet Rock", and a short snippet of Malcolm X giving his "by any means necessary" speech (sampled on the Keith LaBlanc track "No Sell Out"), no context for this inclusion was offered. Instead, a 'road to Damascus' narrative was employed, thus aligning hip-hop with Christian theological rhetoric over any Islamic influences.

Yet Bambaataa's creation of Zulu Nation was largely informed by non-Christian ideologies and, in an act of strategic cohesion, it was formed from the New York gang the Black Spades alongside members of rival gangs Savage Nomads, Seven Immortals and Savage Skulls. Together they focused on urban survival through cultural empowerment (Mohaiemen 2008: 320) via a doctrine that fused 5percenter theology with orthodox Sunni teachings, and the Afrocentric Nubianism of Dr. Malachi York (Imam Isa), founder and leader of the Brooklyn based 1960s Black separatist group United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors (or Nuwabians). York drew clear lines between Black American Islam, and white (pale) Christianity. By the 1980s this division was exploited by the NOI who, under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, adopted highly visible support for hip-hop at a time when Christian churches took an antagonistic approach to the youth movement. As Mohaiemen (2008) notes, while Reverend Calvin Butts was driving steamrollers over gangsta rap

cassettes and CDs, Farrakhan could be seen engaging with some of the leading rappers of the time, and in turn connecting with hip-hop youth (Mohaiemen 2008: 322).

Although it should be noted that both *Beat This: A hip-hop history* (1984) and *The Hip-Hop Years* (1999) were British productions and therefore aimed at a market that would be less concerned with issues of American civil rights—while also pointing to a media blindness to Islam in the UK—their approaches typified how the mainstream media had dealt with hip-hop prior to the Taliban’s September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre Towers in New York, and the Pentagon in Washington.

Hip-hop documentaries post-9/11

Post 9/11, the media adopted an acute focus on anti-Islamic rhetoric through President Bush’s “War on Terror.” Muslim religious leaders and organizations in the US and around the world denounced the attacks as un-Islamic, yet the US saw a huge rise in Islamophobic activities, with the FBI reporting a 1,600 percent increase in Muslim hate crime in the period following the attacks (Ser 2016).

It is useful to briefly explore how, in December 2001, a post 9/11, anti-Islamic media narrative became closely linked to hip-hop after American intelligence officers captured Jonathan Walker Lindh, who was fighting with the Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Lindh was an American youth who had converted to Islam as a teenager. An initial narrative of “us” the USA versus “them,” “the Muslim terrorists,” became re-interrogated through a narrative of “the enemy within.” Media outlets in the United States started to investigate why Lindh might have turned his back on his own country and joined forces with a terrorist group fighting against US forces. A cursory investigation into Lindh’s formative years revealed him to be a fan of hip-hop, and this proved enough for *Newsweek* to run the headline: “How did John

Walker Lindh go from hip hop to holy war?” The article revealed that he had been introduced to Islam through hip-hop lyrics, especially those by 5percent rapper Nas.

Hip-hop’s associations with Islam came under an overtly negative media spotlight with NOI and 5percenters gaining close attention. That spotlight intensified in October 2002, when the suburbs of Washington DC became terrorized by the “Beltway Sniper,” who killed ten people and wounded a further three. Messages left by the sniper drew on phrases associated with 5percenter theology. US news outlets such as *USA Today* started to make explicit links between the sniper and both the NOI and the 5percenters. Artists such as Busta Rhymes, the Wu-Tang Clan, Rakim Allah (of Eric B and Rakim), and Brand Nubian were drawn into the spotlight as forces who represented Islam through their lyrics. The narrative shifted from “the enemy within” to “the enemy that talks directly to our teenagers.”

When the Beltway Sniper was discovered to be two people—John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo—much was made of Muhammad’s links to the NOI, and a media war began to be waged against hip-hop’s supposedly destructive influence. This raised two key problems for both US government agenda-setting and the industry of hip-hop. First of all, it shifted attention from the image of the terrorist that was then being promoted by the Bush administration: of middle-eastern Muslims, rather than white American or African American youth lacking in unifying religious associations. The “War on Terror” required a clearly defined “foreign” target, and in this model American kids could not be implicated. Secondly, from a business perspective, the negative focus on hip-hop had the potential to cause irreparable damage to an industry which, by this stage, barely recognized its Muslim roots, and increasingly denied any alignment with Black Nationalism. This was thanks to the domination and success of gangsta rap, which had already shifted focus from the tropes of Black Nationalism and African American Islam, and instead offered up the spectacle of Black

youth and a Black underclass ensnared in a world of immanent and self-destructive violence. This could be argued to be a position that opposed Black Nationalist intentions to move beyond the economic and social constraints of inner city deprivation and to teach across the borders of ghetto and suburb. Gangsta rap exemplified what Cornel West has defined as the “new cultural politics of difference” (West 1993): one which places emphasis on class and space rather than political ideology. It was a shift that had proved immensely popular with global youth markets, with hip-hop becoming the best-selling form of music at the turn of the millennium. Gangsta rap was at the vanguard of these sales, and had subsequently become a powerful industry that stood to lose its market share should its product become associated with terrorism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, British TV documentary makers exemplified this post-9/11 narrative of hip-hop. For example, in *Grab the Mic: 20 Years of Hip-Hop on MTV* (2001) it is possible to see the machinations of the hip-hop industry prioritizing a popular history that avoided all reference to politics or religion, inevitably focusing on hip-hop’s consumer identity. The gold chains that were once rejected following NOI leader Louis Farrakhan’s claim that they represented the chains of slavery returned with a vengeance as rappers adopted them as an outward display of wealth. Using the talking head format, a host of well-known rappers spoke initially about the power of the entertainer, and about the music video as a celebration of the performance aspects of the tenets of hip-hop. This focus enabled MTV to place itself as the primary delivery platform for the message of hip-hop. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the documentary is the validation of MTV News as an authentic, unbiased news source for hip-hop. Detail in the documentary was reduced to sentiment, with interviewees placing MTV as a “friend” of hop-hop due to its highly supportive representation of the controversial aspects of rap’s gangland associations, such as NOI rapper Snoop Dogg’s trial for first and second-degree murder in 1996. A common trope was the

declaration that MTV was “brave” in the way it reflected the emotional response of the hip-hop community without the use of sensationalism. However, MTV was also celebrated for delivering its own sense of sensationalism through its coverage of Biggie Smalls’s funeral. The film cuts from the MTV reporter in the middle of a huge crowd as the funeral procession of cars passes, to Sean “Puffy” Combs explaining that although being in that procession was emotional, MTV’s coverage with aerial cameras was even more moving. The spectacle of the event thus became imbued with the authenticity of emotion.

Grab the Mic: 20 Years of Hip-Hop on MTV (2001) reflected the hip-hop industry attempting to remove itself from issues that might damage further commercial success by presenting the history of hip-hop as a series of televisual events—from high budget live performances to iconic videos and on to courtroom drama—while sidestepping any foundational links to Black Nationalist rhetoric or the teachings of Islamic sects. The inclusion of renowned 5percenters Busta Rhymes, Eve and Rza (from Wu Tang Clan) discussing hip-hop through ground-breaking videos and MTV events emphasized the sublimation of hip-hop’s militant beginnings. In the documentary hip-hop became a simulacrum of itself.

The mediation of hip-hop post-9/11 however, had huge political and economic implications. The “war on terror” required a continuation of the notion of the externalized enemy while the business needed distance from the popular media representation of the Islamic terrorist. Inevitably, the difficult issues of religion and Black Nationalism became side stepped in favor of highly marketable public battles. Among the story telling hooks popularized by the media is the simplistic oppositional “battle” narrative that has been employed throughout the history of popular music as a marker of authenticity (Wiseman-Trowse 2008). The 2003 documentary *Beef*, which takes a chronological look at the culture of the rap battle dating back to the early 1980s, explores the notion of gang war as self-

aggrandizement without indicating its ideological links to 5percenter rap's doctrine of "selfhood," or of the Black man as Allah incarnate as outlined earlier.

Perhaps more surprising for its lack of direct reference to NOI is the Public Enemy documentary *Architects of Rap* (2001) in which Chuck D., band leader and once very public supporter of NOI leader Louis Farrakhan, takes the viewer on a tour of the key spaces of Public Enemy's Long Island foundations. Furthermore, the film avoids any investigation into issues of Black Nationalism, or the many controversies that surrounded the band's support for Farrakhan's anti-Semitic views. These would not be dealt with in documentary form until the *Public Enemy: Prophets of Rage* (2011) film on BBC television in which Chuck D. blamed original member Professor Griff for being the band's only advocate for the anti-Semitic teaching of the NOI.

Despite the 5percenter claim that theirs was not a religion but "a way of life," the common themes of the majority of post-9/11 hip-hop documentaries are located in the concept of the gang life. It was seemingly devoid of the teachings of the 5percenters, or indeed of the NOI. If their message had been about the pursuit of freedom through the acquisition of knowledge, then the post-9/11 hip-hop message was centered on the acquisition of power through consumer wealth. It would, however, be far too simplistic to claim that the documentaries of this era were simply responding to the increased materialism of gangsta hip-hop. Indeed, as discussed earlier, many artists associated with this era of hip-hop still followed the teachings of Islam, but the media chose to ignore that aspect of the lyrics and instead focus on the more marketable aspects of the guns, drugs, women, and the *beef*.

Conclusion – the hidden hip-hop ummah

Islam has been a substantial aspect of American identity since the days of the founding

fathers, but with the expression of Black Nationalism through Islamic sects Nation of Islam and Five Percent Nation, Islamism and Black separatism became deeply conflated. Hip-hop emerged as a reflection of the faiths of inner city African American populations while also representing the political demands of the era. The Orientalist narrative of East versus West that the mainstream media used to frame the global conflicts between America and Muslim nations posed a problem for the representation of hip-hop as it recognized the Muslim “enemy within.” The mainstream media initially exploited the practice of hiding Islam behind the political activities of Black separatism, but quickly embraced the narratives of gangsta rap’s black on black violence, gang activities, misogyny, drugs, and consumerism.

As shown through the small selection of documentaries investigated, Islam has remained deeply hidden from mainstream media representation and yet Islam has remained a significant aspect of hip-hop culture. Indeed, as with those documentaries focusing on Afrika Bambaataa, the featured artist’s personal religious beliefs are removed in favor of the more simplistic narratives of Christian epiphany from gang life. Similarly, artists such as Public Enemy who have been open in their religious and political beliefs have become silenced in favor of a “road to success” story. In the period since 9/11, Muslims have been highly visible in events such as the Arab Spring, as well as through open condemnation and subsequent retaliations to anti-Islamic media events such as the *Charlie Hebdo* caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. These events, coupled with growing fear of immigration, have sparked a worldwide backlash against young Muslims in particular who find themselves increasingly depicted as armed and dangerous (Nasir 2015). Islamic hip-hop has continued to grow in media darkness, following what Samy Alim has called the “transglobal hip hop Ummah” (2005: 254).

Dedicated to the memory of friend and colleague Dr. Amir Saeed

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