

## Multiple Lives of Black Islam in Hip-hop

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### Introduction

Rap music follows a long line of musical forms that have emerged from the margins of 'black popular culture' in America to become a global sonic force. The growth of rap music (and hip-hop culture) from its origins in de-industrializing South Bronx to its various incarnations in the global media flows have put into question many assumptions that were first used to describe hip-hop culture as an organic art form that communicates the 'hidden transcripts' and the ground realities of inner city youth (Rose 1994). Paul Gilroy has recently spent much energy decrying hip-hop as being an overly commercialized genre that mines 'black popular culture' to create intense (aural-visual imagery) racial fantasies based on ecstatic physicality, a trend he calls 'infrahumanity' (2003). In 'Against Race', Gilroy offers the most trenchant critique of the reigning cash-money ethos of hip-hop culture. He concludes that hip-hop culture is a symptom of a decaying black public sphere (especially American but increasingly global) that is increasingly organized around racial biopolitics; as in the making and selling of overly masculinized and hyper-sexualized images of black bodies for mass consumption. For him the 'bling bling' turn in hip-hop is the capitulation of 'black popular culture' to corporate America.

The debate over the cultural logic of hip-hop runs between the axis of corruption and authenticity of black expressive cultures. In the face of such devastating critique, sympathetic observers like Eric Dyson, Greg Tate, and others acknowledge the perverse commercialization of hip-hop, yet they hold on to the transformative potential of hip-hop as a medium of the oppressed urban working classes. For ageing old school fans, hip-hop remains a vernacular art form par excellence that personifying the aspirations and the raw realities of inner city youth as much as it highlights the racial fantasies and the desire for such experiences in suburban America.<sup>1</sup> Gilroy doesn't share such empathic understanding of hip-hop as a subaltern art form but rather he

argues that the digital techno-musical innovations ushered in by hip-hop have de-skilled the craft of soul and R&B music that sustained the promise of real freedom and uplift throughout the Black Atlantic since the slave era.

This article seeks to raise questions with prevailing assessments of hip-hop that offer very essentialist readings of the genre. Too often there is a ready willingness to conflate aesthetics with ‘reality’, the tendency to confuse form with content, and the insistence by both critics and practitioners to fuse behavior with spectacle. This article questions the ease with which the art-form of hip-hop is interpreted with an impoverished script of race; where rap music is only reactive, a natural response or stirring of the streets. There is a lack of credit given to the creativity, adoption of technology and the ingenuity of immaterial labor, that is the production of radical signifying practices that have transformed popular culture. As Robin Kelley points out that when it comes to hip-hop; “(f)ew scholars acknowledge that what might be at stake here are aesthetics, style and visceral pleasures that have little to do with racism, poverty, and oppression. Nor do they recognize black urban culture’s hybridity and internal differences” (Kelley, p 9).<sup>2</sup>

Locating myself within the hip-hop universe I will trace the shadowy figure of Black-Atlantic Islam to see how multiple cultural meanings and political significations are emergent in the social life of hip-hop. The multiverse of Black Islam is less visible in the conventional discussions about hip-hop and black musical traditions’. Recent scholarship has begun to articulate the influence of Islam as a floating signifier in the formation of black popular culture; i.e. the Ahmediyya influence on 50’s Jazz musicians, Black Nationalism associated with Nation of Islam, and the street surrealism of 5- Percenter slang of the Nation of Gods and Earths (Aidi 2002, Alim 2005, Bayoumi 2001). These diverse notions of Islam meld with more orthodox professions of faith that can be heard in Mos-Def’s opening prayer in ‘Black on Both Sides’, Lupe Fiasco’s lyrics and going back to the spoken word precursors of hip-hop in Black Arts Movement with performers like Umar Bin Hasan of Last Poets.<sup>3</sup> In giving these examples my aim here is not to make the case for the influence of Islam in the making of hip-hop culture but rather to draw attention to the kind of discourses, feelings, attachments, that exist in concrete performed utterances of Islam (Stewart 1998). Here, I want to examine the creative use and appropriation of the trope of Islam to examine the articulation of race, racism and anti-racism in contemporary Euro-America.

It is important to note that we are talking about a multivalent and non-essentialist idea of black Atlantic Islam where Islam as a signifier ranges from orthodox professions of faith to Free Mason-esque eschatology of Nation of Islam, the streetwise theology of the Nations of Gods and Earths, and several other derivations. This exercise will also foreground the cosmopolitan (or what Kelley calls the poly-cultural) history of black cultural expression of a ‘universal’ (and at times particularistic) ethos of community which stands

outside of the black/white binaries that continue to view blackness as a problem (Dubois 1903). Within this experience, Islam has served as a signifier of another symbolic world, for fashioning a self-defined identity. The aim of this article is not to posit Islam as ‘a solution’ for transcending racial violence in the West but rather to discuss the historicity of its creative appropriation, and multiple meanings in the musical expression of hip-hop. Certainly, Islam is not the only medium for such radical imagining. Robin Kelley has offered a variety of ways in which African American intellectuals, artists and activists like Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Scratch “Lee” Perry have invoked the exotic, the marvelous, the primitive, the mythic and even the intergalactic to create new horizons of ‘being’ that displace the black/white binaries which continue to view blackness with pity if not contempt in Liberal political imagination. The cotemporary role of Islam in black Atlantic (as well as in Euro-American racial economy) has gotten more complicated as we move from the civil rights era to these Post-9/11 times, clash of civilizations anyone, where we witness the racial margins moving from biology to beliefs, from phenotype to culture.<sup>4</sup>

### Black Atlantic Islam

Despite its contemporary musical and political provenance, Black Atlantic Islam has a uniquely diasporic history in that it goes back centuries when African Muslims, estimated to be 20 % of the total enslaved Africans, crossed the Middle Passage onto the shores of South Carolina, Bahia, Haiti and other hubs of Atlantic slave trade and labor (Diouf 1998). The story of Islam in the Black Atlantic that goes back five centuries when slave ships brought captured West Africans many of whom were Muslims into the Western Hemisphere to work as bonded labor. The history of Islam in the Black Atlantic is occluded by the tendency of seeing Islam as a singular, spatially bounded religion that is located in the Middle East. Whereas, the traces of early Muslim cultures in Black Atlantic can be found in the Arabic diary entries of Omar Ben Said, in the names of wanted runaway slaves like Mahomet and in the field interviews given to WPA folklorists in the 1930’s that give a glimpse into active Muslim communities of late 19th century coastal Georgia and South Carolina.

The multiple expressions of Black-Atlantic Islam (as in the Nation of Islam) are a uniquely *western* phenomenon tied to the creative self-fashioning in the black and migrant communities against racial subjugation and interpellation (Bayoumi 2001). As Malcolm X (El Malik El Shahbazz) notes in his autobiography, his faith in Islam served “as a religion as well as a weapon of protest and a means of self-definition.” Black Atlantic articulation of Islam as we know it today does not go back directly to the slave ships but rather it takes hold in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century when large sections of African-American population were immigrating from rural South to the urban ghettos of Detroit, Chicago, and New York.<sup>5</sup> These spatially dense new urban

communities lend themselves to a heightened sense of communal identity and a critical re-examination of the problems of racism and exclusion. New belief systems were surfacing to articulate new self-defined ideas about race, history and identity.

The alliance between Islam and nascent forms of Black Nationalism was being forged through interactions of African-Americans with new Muslim immigrant communities (especially in the case Ahmidya community in Philadelphia), and internationalist colonial solidarity movements like Marcus Garvey's pan-Africanist UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) movement (Bayoumi 2001). Two influential figures in UNIA, West Indian born Christian missionary Wilmot Edward Blyden and Sudanese-Egyptian intellectual Duse Muhammad Ali, were the early proponents of Islam for African American communities as a way of attaining greater equality, "universal brotherhood", "human rights" and literacy" (Aidi 2003).<sup>6</sup> Duse, who was a mentor to Garvey, started 'The Universal Islamic Society' in Detroit in 1926. It has been speculated that Garvey's UNIC and Duse's Universal Islamic Society were both influential in the rise of Nobel Ali Drew's *Moorish Science Temple* and Elijah Muhammad's *The Lost Found Nation of Islam*. Although both unorthodox movements commit the ultimate heresy in Islam or *shirk* by challenging the oneness of god or finality of prophethood of Muhammad, both movements use Islam to invoke a specific independent subjectivity and solidarity with 'Asiatic' people. For NOI this meant a Black Nationalist Theology that recovers the 'true knowledge of the black man' which had been erased by the tricknology of the white race through exploitation, slavery and racial subjugations. Islam is seen as a way of restoring the achievements of African race by strict disciplinary codes for dressing, for dietary laws, abstention from alcohol, materialism, and following the teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

This version of Islam enters 'American' mass culture through a sensational televised documentary aired in 1959 titled *The Hate that Hate Produced*. As Malcolm notes in his autobiography, the documentary "was edited tightly into a kaleidoscope of "shocker images...Mr. Muhammad, me and others speaking...strong looking, set-faced black men, our Fruit of Islam...white-scarved, white-gowned Muslim sisters of all ages...Muslims in our restaurants, and other businesses...Muslim and other black people entering leaving our mosque...In a way, the public reaction was like what happened back in the 1930's when Orson Wells frightened America with a radio program describing, as though it was actually happening, an invasion by "men from Mars."(AMX, P238) The controversy from this broadcasts brought the Nation, and Malcolm as its spokesman, into the media limelight. Malcolm relished at every opportunity to answer accusation of anti-white racism by framing racial oppression in the history of slavery, spelling out the racial subjugation and violence experienced by people of color and speaking

against the black elite who he saw as too soft and complacent with white supremacy.

However, it is with Malcolm that hip-hop generation gets its iconic figure of Black Nationalism, and Islam. As Robin Kelley notes, Malcolm “struck a deep chord among his working-class and lumpen followers who were sick and tired of being shut out and looked down upon by the “better class Negroes”. Malcolm “invoked his experiences as an urban kid, former criminal, man of the streets, to show his audience that he knows where they come from and never forgot where he came from.”<sup>7</sup> Throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century Islam has been the key symbol of anti-colonial solidarity and critical resistance in the Black Atlantic. One can get a glimpse of this social history in the biographies of Malcolm X (Malik El Shabbazz), Mohammad Ali the world champion of boxing, Jamil Al-Amin (formerly H Rap Brown) and other black Muslims who identified closely with the experiences of ordinary working class blacks, while criticizing those elite elements in the civil rights movement that were willing to exchange autonomy for assimilation.

In his autobiography, Malcolm draws on his poverty, his experiences as a hustler, his conversion and his international perspective to criticize the black national elite that viewed itself as spokesmen for the community. Malcolm rejected the self-entitlement of the black bourgeoisie to speak for the masses, just as he rejected the attempts to silence discussion of historical oppression in favor of easy assimilation. Malcolm’s invocations of Islam as well as his support of anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia stood awkwardly with the integrationist elements African-American Christian clergy. For example, the civil rights icon and first black supreme court Justice Thurgood Marshall once publicly stated that he believed the Nation of Islam was “run by a bunch of thugs organized from prisons and jails, and financed, I am sure, by Nasser or some Arab group” (Bayoumi 2001). Similarly, there was great condemnation of Boxing World Champion Mohammad Ali’s unpatriotic outspokenness. Ali was stripped of his world boxing title and his license to fight professionally for refusing to be drafted to Vietnam as conscientious objector citing religious grounds which forbid waging war unless one’s attacked, his retort was simple, “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet–cong... they never called me a nigger”. He was barred from boxing and he turned to his rhetorical skills to support himself and his family by lecturing and touring college campuses.

In recent years the marginal attention given to hip-hop and Islam has to do with the arrest of former “black nationalist” hip-hop fan turned “American Taliban” John Walker Lindh and the alleged connection between the Washington snipers Jonathan Muhammad and John Lee Malvo with unorthodox 5 Percent Nation which is very influential in the hip-hop community. These events have created a stir in some right wing circles about the presence of Islam(s) in hip-hop community and the potential for terrorist recruitment

through hip-hop [or as Hisham Aidi puts it; ‘Jihadis in the Hood’]. Here, Islam is once again portrayed as a foreign, violent, and anti-Western religion. Thus, Islamic connections to hip-hop have been covered as threats of marginal or (WHAT? EDIT)

### **From Color-line to Culture-line**

I want to cursorily situate the ‘culture concept’ as it continues to fuse and confuse the terms of debate through which we understand race in contemporary America. Certainly, race and racism is not the same throughout history, for racism assumes new forms and articulates new antagonisms in different situations (Gilroy). For example hip-hop culture took root in the Bronx at a time when the cosmology of race, class and gender relations was in great flux in the aftermath of civil rights struggle. The initial successes of the civil rights movement were confronted with the rising urban unrest, severe budget cutbacks, overcrowded schools, police brutality, the rapid flight of industry, which resulted in high unemployment and increasing isolation of black and minority urban communities. The ‘moral panic’ that came with race riots and urban blight created a boon for sociological and anthropological theories about the pathologies of poverty in inner cities. The primary explanation for the continued impoverishment of the black underclass, as well as Puerto Rican migrants, and impoverished urban dwellers was attributed to cultural deficiencies of the underclass.

Anthropologists like Oscar Lewis moved their site of fieldwork from rural peasant communities to marginal communities within American inner cities. Lewis studied multiple life histories of Puerto Rican immigrants in East Harlem. He popularized a culture of poverty theory that placed much of the blame for persistent trans-generational poverty of minority communities on their own cultural values. The history of Jim Crow in US south, the colonial expansion of agricultural conglomerates in Puerto Rico, the flight of factory jobs and the permanent unemployment in the urban ghettos was not blamed on structural conditions but on the cultural failings. Hence, minority culture more than the phenotype became the dominant explanation if not justification for racial hierarchy and disparity. This problem was accentuated with the rise of new selective migration policies that brought highly educated and professional Asians who soon became object example of ideal model minorities. The rise of new conservatism, under Ronald Reagan’s administration devastated the most vulnerable communities which relied most on public parks, youth employment schemes and social investments. It was this rapidly de-industrialized and pathologized place, namely the South Bronx, that became the center of creative energies of DJ’s who were inventing new ways of getting paid through making music by reusing old records and mixing sounds in ways that were unheard of in the reigning soundscapes of Disco, Motown, and even Funk. MC’s, toasters, crowd motivators, and storytellers

followed the beats with puns, put downs, wordplay and poetic flow. Break dancers gave cyborg forms to electronic beats and graffiti artists transformed the landscape of most urban centers by the early 80's. Rap music has not undermined black cultural integrity, nor is it fundamentally the authentic, unmediated voice of ghetto youth but rather it is a creative expression as well as a new kind of cultural product, immaterial labor par excellence, that transformed the postindustrial urban terrain into a stage for creative expression. The disappearance of factory jobs, the underwhelming service sector opportunities are surpassed by the lure of stardom and getting paid through clever rhymes, puns and wordplay.

Like basketball, hip-hop became a ticket for economic mobility in inner cities (Kelley: 36-37). As Kelley has noted there is something peculiar about racially marked class relations in contemporary America where it is a lot easier for young inner city black youth to imagine themselves as basketball stars, or hip-hop stars rather than a teacher, plumber, lawyer or doctor. The linking of hip-hop with the ghetto, in the remarkable set of advertisements for Nike, Reebok, Gatorade in the 1980's and 1990's that used the devastated, graffiti strewn urban playgrounds to sell sneakers and soft drinks tended to reinforce the picture of the ghetto as place of play and pleasure, while leaving out the grim realities of racism, shrinking opportunities and military style policing.

### **Historical Fragments and the Worlding of Hip-hop**

The incredible success of hip-hop signals the partial success of the civil rights era in helping mainstream what was essentially a black vernacular tradition into an anthem for American globalization. Certainly, hip-hop has gone from its more improvised and grass roots origins to a much more sophisticated multi-billion dollar industry in a relatively short time. Cornel West points out that the 'worlding' of black popular culture in the post-war era is linked to three factors. First, is the displacement of European inspired models of high culture, "of Europe as the universal subject of culture, and of culture itself in its old Arnoldian reading as the last refuge ... against barbarians" (West 1999). Secondly, it was the emergence of the United States at the center of the global cultural production and circulation; i.e. mass culture, movies, etc. And third factor was the decolonization of Africa and the third world and emergence of brief but inspiring decolonizing sensibility. The culture industry has shifted from the denial of difference (in taste, aesthetics, etc) to an almost uncontested celebration of difference, or margins (West cited by Hall, 465). However, this does not preclude other forms of value, meaning, associations or 'structures of feelings' that are imbued within popular culture. So as Black popular culture has become global it has had many different effects, it generates many different kinds of ideas of belonging, freedom, hybrid mixture of race and culture that are formative in black expressive cultures and the pleasures of this music for many different communities:

...we continue to see, in the figures and the repertoires on which popular culture draws, the experiences that stand behind them. In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections towards the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counter-narratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different - other forms of life, other traditions of representation. (Stuart Hall<sup>8</sup>)

Islam was injected early into this eclectic mix with the involvement of pioneers like Afrika Bambaataa, Afrika Islam and Kool-Moe-Dee who were drawn to the call of self-definition and self-determinism in the messages of Malcolm and NOI a message. Yet the definition of Islam remains plural as it is used to refer to over 32 different sects which vary in great range from the extremely orthodox like the followers of Siraj Wahaj in Bed Stuy Brooklyn. Unorthodox 5 Percent Nation of Gods and Earth, who have a center called the house of Allah on 125<sup>th</sup> St in Harlem. Similarly many Jazz artists were attracted to Islam in an earlier era and many Jazz musicians like Yusef Lateef, Art Blakey (Abdullah Ibn Buhaina), and Charlie Parker (Abdul Karim) converted to variant sects like Sunni, Ahmidyya and later NOI in large numbers during the 40's, 50's and 60's. However, Islamic inclinations were more explicit in hip-hop than Jazz. Perhaps the first explicit reference to Islam in a rap song was in former Sugarhill Gang drummer Keith LeBlanc sampled segments of Malcolm X speeches in his 1983 hit "No Sell Out". And, by the '90s, Public Enemy was openly praising Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, and references to the 5 Percent Nation of Islam (a spin-off of the Nation of Islam) were showing up on albums by artists like the Wu Tang Clan. Consider the following rhymes from 'Sunshowers' from the breakthrough genre defining album 36 Chambers. Notice how the geography of New York is mapped in Black Muslim cartography:

I was dead broke, now I will use key notes to make G-notes  
 So it's always hope  
 See subway train run through the city like blood through the veins  
 To the heart of Medina, but Shaolin is the brain  
 So take heed to these words  
 And feel the power of the Sunshower  
 Approachin the final hour  
 Power equality, Allah sees everything  
 Let's come together under the wings  
 And take flight, Wu-Tang, the saga, Ryzarecta  
 In your sector'

Most of the references to Islam in hip-hop today come from rappers who belong to 5 Percent Nation or The Nation of Gods & Earths (NGE). The NGE

is an offshoot of the Nation of Islam and it was founded in 1964 by charismatic preacher, Clarence 13x, who broke away from teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Clarence later renamed himself Allah, he broke away from NOI and created a new theology that drew its strength from inner-city slang. The Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE) teaches that the “Original Blackman” is God and that his proper name is “Allah” and the “Original Blackwoman” is the planet Earth. The NGE theology states that 85 percent of the masses are ignorant and will never know the truth, that 10 percent of the people know the truth but use it to exploit and manipulate the 85 percent, and that only 5 percent of humanity understand A-l-l-a-h. Allah is transmogrified into body-Arm Leg Leg Arm Head- while Islam is broken down to mean I, Self, Am, Master. Some of the most prominent rappers like members of the Wu-Tang Clan, Rakim, and Busta Rhymes express 5 Percent beliefs in their verses and interviews. Five Percenter street theology remaps the geography of New York City, where Manhattan (particularly Harlem) is known as Mecca, Brooklyn is Medina, Queens is the Desert, the Bronx is Pelan and New Jersey is the New Jerusalem. Five Percenter beliefs have exerted on street slang, even if most people are not aware of the origins of expressions like “word is bond,” “break it down,” “whassup G” (meaning God, not gangsta) and “represent” all come from Five Percenter ideology.

Like Malcolm’s’ biography, the multiple and sometimes contradictory (Orthodox Sunni, Shi’a, NOI, 5 Percent Nation and many more) articulations of Islam in African American communities show it as a generative and elastic phenomenon that allows for imagining diverse ideas of self, community and solidarities that have little to do with dominant national culture but rather represent another way of being and belonging.<sup>9</sup> The line between heterodox ‘Islamic’ beliefs and orthodox practices are constantly blurred in rap lyrics where Rakim invokes Khoemeini to show anti-imperialist strength, while he invokes the creation stories of NOI and the slang of NGE with allusions to anti-imperialist politics. As Ted Swedenberg has discussed in an prescient article on the influence of 5 percent theology on hip-hop, “... the Middle East and Islam function as powerful images of non-Western civilization with which Five Percenters, like NOI members, can identify. The Islamic Middle East also serves as a location in which to root an Afro-American narrative of civilized origin that antedates the civilized West” (Swedenberg 1997). Swedenberg notes that the allusions to Middle East politics are more driven by an abstract image rather than solidarity with actual social movements. However, there instances like the track ‘P.L.O Style’ by Method Man, that he cites as an “example of a militant approach to everyday survival in the ghetto that suggests parallels to Palestinian political struggles, and includes the line, “Iranian thoughts and cover like an Arabian”. At the same time, these Islamo-Arab references are mixed (in the same song) with talk of drinking and lookin’ for ‘hos’ (ibid)

A more prescient example of Middle Eastern politics and the reality back home can be found in the lyrics to *Casualties of War* by Rakim, (who is widely held by hip-hop critics as one of the most skillful narrators) where he narrates the experience of a black Muslim soldier in Desert Storm circa 1991. The rhymes draw a picture about the growing doubts of an ambivalent soldier waiting with his platoon to invade Iraq. A range of feelings goes through the young man as he thinks about the purpose for the mission. He thinks about the meaning of fighting for a country where his ancestors were bought enslaved, he thinks about the meaning of being black in a part of the world that has some kinship with his ancestors. These conflicting feelings well up when he thinks about the ‘monopoly’ game that drives the war and the solidarity he as a Muslim soldier shares with Saddam. Here, Rakim charts the stealth rebellion in the following verses:

Rakim: Casualties of War

Day divides the night and night divides the day  
 It’s all hard work and no play  
 More than combat, it’s far beyond that  
 Cause I got a kill or be killed kind of attack  
 Area’s mapped out, there’ll be no, Stratego  
 Me and my platoon make a boom wherever we go  
 But what are we here for? Who’s on the other side of the wall?  
 But what are we here for? Who’s on the other side of the wall?  
 Somebody give the President a call  
 But I hear warfare scream through the air  
 Back to the battlegrounds, it’s war they declare  
 A Desert Storm: let’s see who reigns supreme  
 Something like Monopoly: a government scheme  
 Go to the Army, be all you can be  
 Another dead soldier? Hell no, not me  
 So I start letting off ammunition in every direction  
 Allah is my only protection  
 But wait a minute, Saddam Hussein prays the same  
 and this is Asia, from where I came  
 I’m on the wrong side, so change the target  
 Shooting at the general; and where’s the sergeant?  
 Blame it on John Hardy Hawkins for bringing me to America  
 Now it’s mass hysteria.<sup>10</sup>

This song was released at a time of patriotic fervor in the aftermath of the Desert Storm campaign in 1992. The lyrics locate the soldier protagonist both inside and outside of America in a way that shows the multiple ways Islam is

invoked in the hip-hop. The lyrics culminate in a prophetic warning about the coming attacks on New York in the following lines (emphasis mine):

Now I'm home on reserves and you can bet  
 when THEY call, I'm going AWOL  
 Cause it ain't no way I'm going back to war  
 when I don't know who or what I'm fighting for  
**So I wait for terrorists to attack**  
**Every time a truck backfires I fire back**  
**I look for shelter when a plane is over me**  
**Remember Pearl Harbor? New York could be over, G**  
**Kamikaze, strapped with bombs**  
**No peace in the East, they want revenge for Saddam**  
**Did I hear gunshots, or thunder?**  
**No time to wonder, somebody's going under**  
 Put on my fatigues and my camouflage  
 Take control, cause I'm in charge  
 When I snapped out of it, it was blood, dead bodies on the floor  
 CASUALTIES OF WAR!

The prophetic warning about the coming attacks on World Trade Center come from a subject position that doesn't see the spatial distance between Iraq and New York as consequential, or not as significant as the dire consequences of wars abroad. Rakim's last album in partnership with his longtime collaborator, Eric B, represents a threshold in the transformation of hop hop from its roots in inner cities to the growing market in predominantly middle class and white suburbia.

### **John Walker Lindh's Jihad**

The 'worlding' of hip-hop has been complete ever since rap music crossed the tracks from inner cities into American suburbs. The era from 1988-1992 marked a crucial turn for both transforming the art form by turning hip-hop from street focused subculture into a lucrative industry. The crossover appeal of hip-hop in American suburbs is multifaceted in that it represents certain transgression of racial barriers of taste, fashions, and potentiality of solidarity across class and racial lines. However, the popularity of hip-hop can also be articulated in voyeuristic terms in the tradition of minstrelsy, jazz vaudeville and white mimicry of black expressive cultures. Today, there is nostalgic hunger for a time when, as Chuk D's put it, rap music was the "CNN for black people," it realistically portrayed the crisis-laden reality of the urban black community, before rap music became a venue for hyper-individualistic nihilism. The commercialization of the genre is certainly linked to the crossover into predominantly white suburbs. However, it is simply incorrect to say that

earlier forms of hip-hop were simply street reportage. The allusions to street violence, the exaggerations of street battles, the flashy gold chains that were part and parcel of the genre from early days have always incorporated a rich symbolic language of style, aesthetics and code words like the allusions to Black Islam as discussed in the article. For example Ted Swedenberg has noted that Black Islamic euphemisms have remained illegible to most rap fans and critics:

...the tradition of Black Islamic rap's lyrical illegibility is not just a question of signifyin(g), of rappers playing Black word games that white outsiders cannot comprehend (see Potter 1995:81-85). For although Five Percenters are a familiar presence in Black urban communities, most African-Americans do not fully understand Five Percent messages either (see d to tha j 1992:10; James 1992:16). Full comprehension is only possible for the initiate, and many allusions appear to be aimed specifically at insiders.

Some far reaching decoding of hip-hop allusions of Black Nationalism and Islam can be seen in the web entries of John Walker Lindh, who as a teenager, grew up in the early 90's Northern California (Best 2003). Lindh was "born in Chocolate City" and raised in its "vanilla suburbs" of Takoma Park, Maryland. Growing up in the early 90's Lindh became engrossed in hip-hop and his first serious encounter with Black Islam occurred when he went to see Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* at age of 12.

Lindh's admiration for Malcolm was channeled into an exploration of the black nationalism and quasi-Islam that saturated much of hip-hop of the late '80s and early '90s. His posts on the online message boards of the Usenet -- particularly the newsgroups rec.music.hip-hop and alt.religion.Islam -- are a strange and public window into a young man's discontent. At school he may have been invisible, but the anonymity of the Web gave him the space to visibly and coherently remake himself as "an intelligent MC smashing empty-minded pimps (ibid).

Lindh's forays into different chat groups to discuss racial politics of hip-hop are still available online. In most of sessions Lindh would take up the persona of Black Muslim and use this forum to vent his anger at the kinds of race denigrating, commercial rappers like Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and others.

Over the course of the two years that Lindh posted online, between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, he used a dizzying array of names and personas. He was John Doe, the pro-black rapper. He was the "Disciple of the Englobber," the hip-hop critic. He was alternately Br. Mujahid and Mr. Mujahid, the Muslim "holy warrior." In one instance, he signed off, "A Famous MC Who Shall Remain Anonymous Due to Dickriders." And, finally, he was Prof. J., the Koranic scholar and anti-Zionist. The one identity he never used was his given name -- although his mother's name was visible in the e-mail address of some of his earliest posts. "John Doe" -- a combina-

tion of his first name and the generic “Doe” -- was as close to truth as Lindh ever got (Ibid).

As Lindh’s cousin Musa Abdum Nur (a fellow convert) describes, “We both nurtured a fledgling interest in Islam that chiefly centered on the pseudo-Muslim murmurs within hip-hop music,” he wrote. “While my interest in Islam stalled around issues of social freedom and self-gratification, John exhibited a glowing innocence that propelled him to openly investigate the truth of Islam.”<sup>11</sup> Lindh pursuit of ideal Muslim community lead him to several different Muslim groups who all proved to be a bit too secular, or unorthodox to his liking. In the end he linked up with Tablighi Jama’at, a missionary Islamic group that is organized around the idea of inviting people within the Muslim world back in the fold of a true Muslim community based around praying and proselytizing. The Tablighi Jama’at are an offshoot of ‘reformist’ Deobandi school of Islam jurisprudence that emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century India under British occupation to re-orient the Muslim towards the doctrine of religion through legalistic language of piety and self improvement. John, an eager convert, decided to go to Yemen to learn Koranic Arabic but he eventually got dismayed by secular nature of the language school he was attending. Eventually he decided to go to Pakistan and in Pakistan he was slowly lured into Afghanistan with the assurance that a pan-Islamic State was being formed under the rule of the Taliban. Lindh was captured with hundred of other Afghan fighters in Mazar-e-Sharif in 2002. Lindh figured prominently in the news after his capture. Tabloids had a field day with bold declarative headlines screaming ‘traitor’ or ‘rat (NY Post). However, it was never established that John had participated in any attack. Currently, Lindh is serving a 20 year sentence after pleading guilty of being a enemy combatant.

### **Multiple Lives of Hip-hop in Diaspora**

The growing immigrant communities in Europe were early consumers and creators of hip-hop culture as they played a crucial role in the introduction in hip-hop in Europe; Turks in Germany, Algerian & Francophone African/Antillean community in France, Commonwealth immigrants in UK. The attraction to hip-hop culture in many migrant communities had to do with shared experience with African-Americans with racism, criminal justice system and other forms of organized discrimination. The musical form resonated strongly with young people in these communities. South Asian groups like Asian Dub Foundation use sampling techniques to sample Punjabi, Okinawan, and Bangla rhythms that are layered with heavy 808 drum beats, a hybrid form MC’ing that blends elements from Rap, Reggae and Punk Rock to talk about . The French Ministry has targeted the Francophone rappers from West Africa and Maghrib for inciting racial tensions and riots in 2005. Rap groups like IAM, have created a new French vernacular speech, verlan, that features

inversion of syllables to create slang words. Verlan includes word play that twists the linguistic rules in French for example and introduces more words from Arabic.

It is here that the role of music, art, and other forms cultural expressions serve as a liminal site for emerging communities to create their own sense of identity, or re-imagine themselves by incorporating different styles that are unique or inherited with other sights and sounds that fully capture their experiences, influences, etc. This process of negotiation creates a newer subjectivity, which breaks out of convenient dichotomies of understanding. Paul Gilroy describes this process as an attempt to transcend binaries (in this case one of western/ oriental) to recognize the exercise of power involved in the contingent processes of identity formation:

Black Identity... is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often thought to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily signification, and desires.<sup>12</sup>

Music is especially relevant in this process because in many ways popular music is so much identified with symbolic order of race, ethnicity and culture. Musical technology of recording, repetition, layering and sampling enables a more expansive dialogue, which lends itself more easily to imbuing multiple meanings, disseminating complex ideas and identities.

## Conclusion

The prolific use of Islamic idioms in hip-hop have been largely ignored in cultural studies, and hip-hop criticism even as these references have proliferated since the 1990's. The invocations of Islam in hip-hop have gained a new significance in post 9/11 era. Today, Muslim youth in Europe in America embody W.E.B Dubois century old question: How does it feel to be a problem? The double consciousness of race in Muslim and black diasporas has emerged with the rhetoric of cultural wars, clash of civilization that prefigure the contemporary wars Iraq and Afghanistan as they did so in the war on drugs, wars on terrorism, and homeland security. The mass criminalization and racial profiling that targeted inner city youth has been deployed against the new suspected threat, the illegal immigrants, the FBI's registration of Muslim males. The anxieties about race and religion came to a full head during the 2008 election where the biggest smear campaign against Barak Obama was not the color of his skin but his proximity to Islam. Thus, the new cultural logic of racism that has in part shifted from phenotype to target cultural values that are deemed alien to Euro-American liberal status-quo.

The irony here is that the presence of Islam in the West goes back to the slave ships and through the last four centuries Islamic idioms have continued to generate an important element of autonomy in the Black Atlantic. This history of struggle is now an object lesson for Arab, Muslim youth, as well as

new immigrants who are struggle for recognition as rights bearing subjects. The articulation of Islam in the black and immigrant diasporas of Europe and America was first heard on wax, cassettes and mp3 players before it makes its way to academic journals and documentaries.

## NOTES

- 1 Dyson is featured as commentator in an excellent documentary on Misogyny and Masculinity in Hip-hop. Hip-hop- Beyond Beats and Rhyme directed by Byron Hurt.
- 2 Lets take one of the earliest breakthrough records by Afrika Bambaata that reincarnates the soul catalogue with the decidedly non-soul machine instrumentation of Kraftwerk – which created the otherworldly yet highly danceable sounds of ‘Planet Rock’.
- 3 I thank Prof. Moustafa Bayoumi for pointing out this relationship in his own work on Black Atlantic Islam.
- 4 This new racial dynamic was glaringly visible in 2008 elections where the gravest doubts about Barack Obama’s candidacy arose from the allegations that he was a Muslim or the popular discomfort with his proximity to Islam. Obama’s campaign in return was careful to keep his Muslim-American supporters at Arm’s length going as far as to removing two hijab wearing supporters out of the background during a speech in Minneapolis.
- 5 The story of Islam in the Black Atlantic that goes back five centuries when slave ships brought captured West Africans many of whom were Muslims into the Western Hemisphere to work as bonded labor. The history of Black Atlantic Islam is occluded by the tendency of seeing Islam as a singular, spatially bounded phenomenon that takes place in the Middle East. The traces of early Muslim cultures in Black Atlantic can be found in the Arabic diary entries of Omar Ben Said, in the names of wanted runaway slaves like Mahomet and in the field interviews given to WPA folklorists in the 1930’s that give a glimpse into active Muslim communities of late 19<sup>th</sup> century coastal Georgia.
- 6 Robert A. Hill, ed. *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 3 cited in Hisham Aidi, pp 3.
- 7 Robin D.G. Kelley, pp 420 *House Negroes on the Loose: Malcolm X and the Black Bourgeoisie*. Callaloo 21.2 (1998-435)
- 8 Stuart Hall. What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture? *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent, Seattle: Bay Press, Bay Press, 1992.
- 9 Bayoumi
- 10 Eric B. & Rakim, *Casualties of War*
- 11 *ibid*
- 12 Gilroy, P. *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Pp 103.

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