

“Ain't No Spook God”:
Religiosity in the Nation of Gods and Earths

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Abstract

The Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE) are a demographically small, primarily urban-based offshoot of the Nation of Islam who have had a disproportionate influence over hip-hop music and culture. Group members eschew organized religion, referring to the tradition instead as a “culture” or “way of life”. This thesis uses socio-cultural and historical critical theory to describe and analyze the history of the community, the complicated understandings of gender and race relations within the NGE, and the ways in which NGE culture has impacted the global hip-hop movement. Many theorists place the NGE within an Islamic framework, however, this thesis argues that understanding the culture within the context of New Religious Movements is more productive. Using Religious Studies scholar Catherine Albanese's “four C's” model of religion, this thesis illustrates some ways in which the Nation of Gods and Earths can be understood as a religious community.

Acknowledgments

"Ben Zoma would say:

Who is a wise man? He who learns from every man. As is stated (Psalms 119:99) 'From all my teachers I have grown wise'". ~Pirkei Avot, Chapter 4a

"It always seems impossible until it's done." ~Nelson Mandela

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Introduction

There are spaces that are in between; the limins. This is where the interesting stuff happens. The borders are where culture is born. Culture gestates at the limins before moving into the open field of the mainstream. Victor Turner argues that liminality is “full of potency and potentiality. It may also be full of experiment and play. There may be a play of ideas, a play of words, a play of symbols, a play of metaphors. In it, play's the thing” (1979, 466). The Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE) occupy one of these spaces. Their adherence to a dynamic kind of verbal play has led to the NGE having a disproportionate influence over the development of hip hop culture, and, in turn over American popular culture as a whole (Swedenburg 1997; George 1999; Miyakawa 2005; Nuruddin 2006; Knight 2007, 2011). As hip-hop culture expands, the NGE's influence becomes increasingly global, though the organization itself remains obscure. Spanish kids in South America greet each other with “Peace!”; Inuit kids in Nunavut ask each other “what's up, G?”; white kids in Minnesota refer to the circle they dance in as a “cipher” and insist that their “word is bond”. These terms have been disseminated globally to the point of becoming simulacra, with few users realizing that they originate directly from the theology of the Nation of Gods and Earths.

ALBANESE'S MODEL OF RELIGION

The NGE stands at the intersection of mythology and science; belief and disbelief; culture and religion. But what exactly is religion? This question is the bane of Religious Studies scholars as it entails endless discussions and circlings

and wonderings but never quite final definitions. Catherine Albanese, Professor of American religious history at the University of California at Santa Barbara, echos this conundrum and notes that the task of definition is not concretely possible. "Religion", Albanese argues, "cannot be defined very easily because it thrives both within and outside of boundaries.... So it is difficult if not impossible to define" (1999, 3). What is possible, however, is to create a model of religion which can be applied to organizations, institutions, and social structures in order to compare them qualitatively to traditional religious structure. In this way we can arrive, if not at a concrete definition of religion, then at a working definition. In her book, *America: Religions and Religion*, Albanese develops a model of religion which she describes as "the four C's: creed, code, cultus and community" (1999, 8). Within this model, Albanese insists that religion "can be understood as a system of symbols (creed, code, cultus) by means of which people (a community) orient themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meaning, and values" (1999, 11). Albanese defines *creeds* as "explanations about the meanings of human life. Such creeds may take various forms, from highly developed theologies and sacred stories of origin to informal oral traditions and unconscious affirmations that surface in casual conversation" (1999, 9). The Nation of Gods and Earths exhibit a number of elements that conform to this definition, including but not limited to the Yakub origin story, the theory of the Asiatic origins of the black race, and the hagiography of the founder of the movement, Father Allah. Albanese's *codes* "are rules that govern everyday behavior. These may take the form of articulated moral and ethical systems, but they may also be the customs that have become acceptable in a society" (1999, 9).

The NGE's racial understandings and gender relationships outline social structures that, when understood in combination with the ramifications of coming to knowledge of self, describe a code. Albanese defines *cultus* as “rituals to act out the insights and understandings that are expressed in creeds and codes” (1999, 10). The practice of “building” and “breaking down”, as well as larger monthly Parliament gatherings constitutes such ritual for the NGE. This thesis will also discuss a number of prayers and hymns which have become ingrained in the NGE's cultic practices. Finally, Albanese describes *communities* as “groups of people either informally or formally bound together by the creed, code, and cultus they share” (1999, 10). There are myriad phenomena which bind the members of the Five Percent Nation together into a community. Though this community might not always be cohesive in its structure or beliefs, it is undoubtedly unique and distinct from other groups. They share a historical connection to the black liberation movement, as well as an adherence to the teachings of the Supreme 120 Lessons. The NGE's creeds, codes and cultus serve to delineate the boundaries of Five Percenter community. Throughout this thesis I will make reference to Albanese's “four C's” model in order to situate the NGE within the larger context of religious studies by illuminating the similarities between the culture and traditional religious structures. I will argue that despite the open hostility of the members of the NGE to organized religion, the NGE's practices, literature, social structure and belief system constitutes a religious worldview according to Albanese's definition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature surrounding the legacy of Father Allah, founder of the NGE, is

divided along two lines: popular and academic. Though the Five Percent Nation is almost universally acknowledged as seminal among the hip hop community, the academic literature on the subject is scattered and sparse. There are fewer than a dozen articles directly related to the Nation in current academic publications. Ted Swedenburg, Felicia Miyakawa, Ahmon Keiler-Bradshaw, and Yusuf Nuruddin appear to be the primary academic sources for information on the Nation of Gods and Earths. Swedenburg teaches anthropology at the University of Arkansas and edits the periodical *Middle East Research and Information Project*. His work concentrates on popular music in the Islamic world. He was one of the first academics to undertake a study of the Nation of Gods and Earths and has given numerous talks to law enforcement on the subject of the Five Percenters. Dr. Felicia Miyakawa is Associate Professor of Musicology at Middle Tennessee University. Her book, *Five Percenter Rap* (2005), an adaptation of her PhD thesis at Indiana University, is the only academic book published entirely on the subject of the Nation of Gods and Earths. Miyakawa's account is thorough and illuminating, concentrating on lyrical poetics and the pedagogical standpoint of the artists with whom she engages. Her focus on the literary aspect of Five Percent music is in keeping with the larger body of Hip-Hop Studies literature, which tends to focus on the poetics of the DJ. Ahmon Keiler-Bradshaw, a native of Atlanta, Georgia, is the only person to date to undertake a phenomenological study of women in the Nation of Gods and Earths. Keiler-Bradshaw's study comprises his Master's thesis in African-American Studies for Georgia State University. The study includes interviews with female participants in the Nation and will serve to illustrate both the theological position of the NGE in relation to

gender, and the ways in which women negotiate their own positions within the culture. Yusuf Nuruddin is a lecturer in African Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, and is a current PhD candidate at Harvard University. Nuruddin's work concentrates on African diaspora, black intellectual history and social movements. His essay *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads* (1997) serves, in this thesis, to situate the Nation of Gods and Earths within the organization's cultural context and to illustrate the pervasiveness of Five Percenter thought in the urban milieu. It is important to note that both Keiler-Bradshaw's and Nuruddin's work are informed by the author's own direct experience with the culture in question. That is, although neither Nuruddin nor Keiler-Bradshaw self-identify as participants in the culture, both of these authors grew up surrounded by Five Percenters.

Michael Muhammad Knight has recently emerged as the dominant voice in commentary on the Five Percent. Knight is a blue eyed American convert to Islam who has studied at a traditional masjid in Islamabad, and at both Harvard and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where he is currently working toward a PhD in Islamic Studies. Though his two volumes on the subject, *The Five Percenters* (2007) and *Why I am a Five Percenter* (2011), are published by Oneworld Press, a self publishing house, and Penguin, the mass market publisher, Knight's scholarship is solid. Knight occupies an interesting, liminal position in the world of Islam. He attends both Sunni Mosque services and Five Percenter "builds". His work on the subject is illuminating, and though Knight questions some of the teachings of the Five Percent, particularly their convoluted relationship with women, his work borders on apology and paints a picture of a

righteous, inclusive community whose efforts to create a positive environment for urban youth have been largely successful. Knights work is engaging but his personal relationship with the organization and his adherence to Islam, albeit a non traditional Islam, must be remembered when situating his material in the literature.

Of the many Five Percenter sources consulted for this thesis, three authors emerge of primary significance: Abdul Noor, Supreme Understanding Allah, and Wakeel Allah. All three of these authors use their work to set themselves up as authorities on the Nation of Gods and Earths. Abdul Noor's book, *The Supreme Understanding* (2002), purports to be a history of the teachings of Islam in North America. The book is ostensibly a collection of "plus lessons" and essays from various participants in the culture, with an introduction to each section by Noor. The book is problematic in that it does not attribute authorship to any of the included writings. The editorial choices Noor makes circumscribe a distinct theological position within the tradition and contribute to the process of reification which is occurring within the culture. Supreme Understanding Allah's book, *Knowledge of Self* (2009), is co-edited by fellow Five Percenter C'Bs Alife Allah and Sunez Allah. Unlike Noor's book, the articles in *Knowledge of Self* give a brief biography of each author. This volume appears to be true to the egalitarian and pluralistic spirit of the Nation of Gods and Earths, though the final essays again work to prescribe a kind of orthodox position in relation to the culture (see chapter 2 for further discussion). Finally, Wakeel Allah's two volume *In The Name of Allah* (2009) is a comprehensive history from an emic perspective. Though Michael Muhammad Knight is critical of Wakeel Allah's

work, the books are referenced repeatedly in online Five Percenter sources.

In undertaking a study of the Nation of Gods and Earths, I must be cautious about situating the discussion in relation to the available sources. I must also be honest about my own position in relation to the culture. I am a white woman with feminist and anti-authoritarian leanings who is entirely extraneous to the culture being discussed. I have never met a God face to face, and thus my analysis is limited to external observation and literary analysis. This position is problematic because of the insistence within the culture of the importance of having an initiator to the knowledge. I approach the study of the Five Percent from an ideocultural perspective. This approach, suggested by Gerhard Kubic (1996), necessitates an observer projecting their own culturally specific concepts and categories onto a culture that is outside of their own purview. I use etic approaches, including feminist theory, race theory, anthropology, ethnology and religious studies, to analyze emic sources. I use emic terminology in my description and analysis, referring to male participants as Gods and female participants as Earths, and discussing ideas such as knowledge of self.

Throughout this thesis, the terms God and Allah are used interchangeably, as are the terms Five Percent, Nation of Gods and Earths, and NGE. Furthermore, it is common among Five Percenters to refer to NGE philosophy and practice as “the culture”. Although the NGE is not a bounded, single way of living and acting, the term “the culture” will be used throughout this thesis to encapsulate the diverse beliefs and practices of the participants in the Nation of Gods and Earths.

This thesis is divided into five chapters, each of which will address an aspect of NGE culture. The first chapter places the Five Percenters in socio-

historical context. The chapter provides a brief introduction to the NGE and illustrates a history of intellectual inheritance that begins in the 19th century with Marcus Garvey, proceeds through the Moorish Science Temple and Rastafari tradition to the Nation of Islam, and on to the founding of Five Percenter culture by Clarence 13X. Chapter 2 places the culture within the larger context of religious studies. While some scholars prefer to describe the Nation of Gods and Earths as an Islamic movement, this chapter will argue that placing the NGE in the context of the study of New Religious Movements (NRMs) is more fruitful, and will proceed to enumerate six elements of NRMs to which the NGE conforms. The third chapter of this thesis comprises a discussion of race and illustrates how members of the NGE approach race relations and the unique definition of blackness that functions within the culture. Chapter 4 will discuss gender relations within the Nation and will illustrate how ideas about gender and sexuality serve to delineate the boundaries of community within the culture. Finally, chapter 5 will discuss the Nation of Gods and Earths' participation in hip-hop culture. This chapter will illustrate the profound connections between the NGE and hip-hop music and culture, and how these connections have facilitated the global dissemination of Five Percenter language and culture. Catherine Albanese's model will be referenced throughout this thesis and the discussion will illustrate how shared creeds, codes and cultic practices bind Five Percenters together in a distinct community which can be functionally described as religious.

Chapter 1

“We Were Beginners In The Hood”:

The Context and History of The Nation of Gods and Earths

Members of the Nation of Gods and Earths refer to themselves as “Five Percenters”. This sobriquet is derived from a teaching which the NGE inherited from the Nation of Islam. Specifically,

the 85% are those *without* the knowledge, the mentally blind, deaf and dumb who are bent on self-destruction. The 10% are the bloodsuckers of the poor, those who have knowledge and power but who use it to mystify and abuse the 85%.... The 5% are the poor righteous teachers who preach the divinity of (black) man, the god who is "manifest" (not a spook, not a mystery god) and who will save the 85% from destruction.

(Swedenborg, 1997)

The NGE consider themselves members of the Five Percent, whose mandate it is to teach “knowledge of self” to the rest of the black race, so that they may be free of the bonds of slavery engendered by both white colonial power structures, and hierarchical religious organizations. Knowledge of self is attained through study of the Supreme 120 Lessons, the catechism of the NGE. Most noteworthy among these teachings are the innate divinity of the black man, the inability of the black woman to attain divinity, and the idea that the white man is a devil who was created through a process of genetic grafting by a mad scientist named Yakub 6000 years ago. The Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths was founded in Brooklyn, New York, in 1964. The organization is an offshoot of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, and was heavily influenced both by that group, and

by the teachings of its most famous acolyte, Malcolm X. Members of the organization deny that it is a religion, instead referring to it as a way of life.

Many NGE teachings appear completely anomalous to those outside of the NGE's cultural catchment area. Michael Muhammad Knight, the loudest voice in the discussion on the NGE, notes that in his observations, outsiders often see an

image of Five Percenters as half-gangster, half-revolutionary, quasi-Muslim cultists... It was said to be a convicts' religion or a rappers' religion or not even a religion, but they had their own wild mythology of mad scientists blasting the moon from Earth and believed that they were all gods and spoke in a secret language that somehow incorporated numbers.

(Knight 2011, 1)

Anomalous though the Five Percent may appear, nothing arises from a vacuum. A survey of the Black Liberation Movement and some religious organizations that arose out of that milieu will dispel the idea of the NGE as entirely unique. By tracing the history of American black resistance from Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, through the Moorish Science Temple, the Rastafari movement, and the Nation of Islam, this chapter will outline a history of North American black thought that provides context for the teachings of the NGE. Furthermore, a social and political history of the New York area in the 1960's will illustrate how the zeitgeist of New York made space for the development of such a radical organization.

MARCUS GARVEY AND THE UNIVERSAL NEGRO IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

Marcus Garvey was born in Jamaica in 1887 and died in London in 1940.

During his lifetime, he worked toward promoting the independence and liberation of the black race. To this end, he founded The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA) in Jamaica in 1914. One of the objectives of UNIA was to see diasporic blacks repatriated to Africa.

Martha Lee observes that

the Garveyites, as they were known, invested their money and energy into amassing a large commercial empire, the goal of which was to see Africa become the homeland of all Blacks. Like the Nation of Islam (which later developed from it), the U.N.I.A. stressed Black independence through self-sufficiency.

(Lee 1996, 21)

Garvey emphasized the separate identity of Blacks, and disallowed Whites from taking office in the UNIA. Garvey inspired a global movement, a shift in consciousness among black people that became the basis for black resistance. Garvey's "impact on consciousness, accompanied by a parallel organizational initiative, represented the platforms by which Garveyism became the ideology of a global movement" (Lewis 2011, 478). Ultimately, the momentum of Garvey's movement led him to draft a monumental declaration of black liberation entitled the "Declaration of Rights of The Negro Peoples of The World", which asserts the rights of black peoples to equal legal and governmental representation, health care, movement and freedom. The document encourages black people to resist oppression and colonialism on all fronts, and to move toward repatriation to Africa (Garvey 2012).

Garvey's movement was both political and spiritual. In addition to his organizational efforts, Garvey wrote a number of theological tracts. Garvey's

controversial theology “accused the deity of being negro” (Knight 2007, 16), a declaration which both endeared him to black listeners and resulted in suspicion and sanctions from authoritative colonialist agencies (Lewis 2011). His ideas were developed into what is now known as Black Liberation Theology (Lewis 2011). Black Liberation Theology would gain popularity in the United States during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, and continues to be a guiding force in the American Black Church. Garvey's theology emphasized the role of Africans in the Bible, effectively reinterpreting Christian thought for black people. He also acknowledged the importance of Islam in Africa, and emphasized the plurality of black religious history. Organizationally, “the UNIA took the position that it was a secular organization open to a diversity of theological views and what brought its members together was the struggle for freedom against colonialism and racism” (Lewis 2011, 79).

RASTAFARI

Though Garveyism was not a religion in and of itself, the movement spawned a number of more overtly religious movements and organizations, not the least of which is the Rastafarian movement. Rastafari arose from the liberatory principles of Marcus Garvey. Jeff Chang notes that “Rastafarianism was an indigenous fusion of messianism and millenarianism, anticolonialism and Black nationalism, and it gave the cause of “Black supremacy” spiritual, political, and social dimensions” (2005, 24). Though the movement is often referred to as Rastafarianism, this term is considered offensive to many Rastas, who eschew any kind of “ism” as a relic of colonialism and racist “Babylon” culture (Semaj 1980; Glazier 2001). The name derives from the pre-regnal given name of the

Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia (formerly Ras Tafari) who believers recognize as the reincarnated Christ and the embodiment of the Christian God, or Jah (Tafari 1980; Glazier 2001; Buckser 2003). Rastas further this belief by insisting that black people of the diaspora, particularly those in the Western hemisphere, are both “the re-incarnation and descendants of the original Hebrew Israelites” (Tafari 1980, 2). Rastafari follows Garveyism in its promotion of African repatriation. It prefigures the Nation of Gods and Earths in many of its adherents' insistence that it is not a religion, but rather a “way of life”, and in the emphasis on the practices and principles of the movement as a unique culture (Buckser 2003). Many early Five Percent acolytes came from a background steeped in Rastafari tradition.

THE MOORISH SCIENCE TEMPLE

The Moorish Science Temple was founded at approximately the same time as Garvey's movement, and their combined teachings “form the core of contemporary nationalist ideologies” (Essien-Udom 1962, 33). The Moorish Science Temple was founded in 1913 by Timothy Drew, a mystical figure who would adopt the name Noble Drew Ali. Along with U.N.I.A, the Moorish Science Temple would be one of the first groups to arise from the Black Consciousness Movement (Lee 1996, Nance 2002) and would become “one of the most well-known alternative black religious groups in the United States” (Nance 2002, 123). The religion is a synthesis of Western Gnostic beliefs, Spiritualism, and the ritual and practice of Freemasonry (Turner 1997; Nance 2002; Knight 2007). Though the Moorish Science Temple is often included in histories of Islam in America, “Moorish Science in no way resembled scriptural Islam or the

beliefs and practices of Muslims” (Nance 2002, 125). This is also true for the Nation of Gods and Earths, who inherited Moorish Science's use of Muslim imagery and language from Masonic symbolism, as a means of signifying perceived authenticity, rather than in a direct line of transmission from Islamic tradition.

Noble Drew Ali penned a holy book to accompany the teachings of his church. The document compares the relationship between Ali and Garvey to that of Jesus and John the Baptist (Berg 2005). *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple* bears no resemblance to the Muslim Qur'an. The book is almost entirely plagiarized from earlier Spiritualist works (Turner 1997; Nance 2002). Much like the equally indigenously American religious tome *The Book of Mormon*, the Moorish Koran purports to describe the experiences of Jesus extraneous to the account in the Christian gospels. Where the Mormons have Jesus travel to the New World, Moorish Science sees him visiting Egypt, India and Tibet, learning esoteric secrets from the masters in these ancient and mysterious places. For Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple, “true Islamism included not only Semitic prophets but figures such as Buddha and Confucius, and could not be contained within ritual or laws. Man and Allah were one, and all men were priests unto themselves” (Knight 2007, 16). In 1964, Clarence 13X would take this teaching one step further, declaring the Asiatic Blackman to be Allah, eliminating the need for priests or intermediaries of any kind and founding what would come to be known as the Nation of Gods and Earths.

Moors often dressed elaborately, wearing Fez's after the manner of

Freemasonry and in deference to their perceived Moroccan heritage (Essien-Udom 1962; Turner 1997). The religious practice, however, was conservative in terms of ideas of social assimilation. Ali's teachings "stressed obedience and loyalty to the American flag, believed divine intervention would bring about the end of white rule, and therefore cultivated an apolitical, peaceful adherence to the status quo" (Lee 1996, 20). The Moorish Koran presents a set of values and behaviors which admonished "Moors to stay employed, support their families, live clean lives, stay unified against mutual enemies, and not challenge the basic structure of American society and government" (Nance 2002, 134). Like Marcus Garvey's liberation theology, Ali's "retelling of world history stresses the unity of nonwhites, or "Asiatics," and places all their ancestors in the ancient Holy Land independent of whites centuries ago", thus reclaiming Christian theology for Moorish peoples (Nance 2002, 134). Turner notes that Moorish Science "claimed that they were not Negroes, blacks, or colored people, but instead an olive-skinned Asiatic people who were the descendants of Moroccans" (1997, 92). The NGE continue to promote this understanding of all nonwhite peoples as a unified race originating in Asia, teaching that the Asiatic Blackman is the original and superior race.

One of the most significant connections between Noble Drew Ali's teachings and the future NGE is the understanding of the nature of science. Science is privileged in NGE theology, and much of the catechism, (which is taught in a simple question and answer format in the same way as Moorish Science catechism is taught) concerns scientific data. The Supreme Wisdom Lessons, designed by Elijah Muhammad for the Nation of Islam and adopted by

the NGE include a section entitled “Actual Facts” which teaches geographical information, including the circumference of the earth, the distance from earth to the moon and to the sun, and the relationship of land to water. Noble Drew Ali's organization prefigured this emphasis on scientific fact. For Ali

to have named his movement the Moorish Science Temple of America clearly linked it to all the students of New Thought and Christian Science, the Gnostic Freemasons and African American Spiritualists, who likewise favored the term 'science' for their wisdom as a sign that the truth behind the workings of the universe could be rationally observed and documented by drawing on the divine wisdom within.

(Nance 2002, 146)

Like the future NGE, Moorish Science was spoken of as a science, not a religion. Later Moorish leaders would declare that the organization was “not a faith-based sect but a *Cultural-National Club*” (Knight 2007, 29). The NGE inherited this orientation toward the concept of science.

Ali's emphasis on the idea of nationhood would trickle down to the Nation of Gods and Earths. Knight notes that Ali “declared his Moors a sovereign people” (2007, 20). He wanted to instill in his followers a consciousness of their own identity. In addition to emphasizing their joint Asiatic heritage, renaming became a part of this process of national identity making. “For Moors, the suffixing of El or Bey to one's 'slave name' reclaimed his or her lost nationality” (Knight 2007, 18). Changing names to signify important milestones, particularly conversion, is nothing new in the history of religion. Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter. Muhammad changed his wife's name from Barrah to Zaynab. The Nation of Islam would also engage in a process of renaming, eliminating so-

called slave names and replacing them with X, to symbolize the unknown name stolen from them by the slave trade. Five Percenters would adopt a similar process of renaming, initially choosing Islamic sounding names in line with the Nation of Islam, but eventually moving toward names more specific to both the catechism of the NGE and to the individual. An example of this dynamic naming scheme is that of cousins RZA and GZA, founding members of the Wu Tang Clan. Both of these names are derived directly from the Supreme Alphabet (Appendix A). RZA's name means "Ruler Zig Zag Zig Allah", where R means Ruler, Z means zig zag zig (symbolizing the progression from knowledge to wisdom to understanding), and A means Allah, or the black man. GZA stands for "Genius Zig Zag Zig Allah". Here we see the Five Percenter emphasis on play, as the meaning of G in GZA's name diverges from the teaching of the Supreme Alphabet, where G is seen to represent "God". Five Percenters often adopt the surname Allah, not just as a manifestation of the Supreme Alphabet as seen above, but also both in deference to the Father (Clarence 13X), and in acknowledgment of their own divinity.

THE NATION OF ISLAM

The Nation of Islam emerged from the conflation of Moorish Science and Garveyism at the same time as the Rastafari movement, but diverged from that tradition in a number of key ways. Though the NOI would champion a far more visibly conservative approach to Garvey's liberation theology, both movements "seek to empower Blacks by providing them with a positive self-identity: one that purges the minds of its members of notions of White superiority and Black inferiority and that addresses the vicious cycle of false identity and self-hatred"

(Barnett 2006, 874). Additionally,

the Nation of Islam owes its origin to the religious tradition represented by Noble Drew Ali's Moorish-American Science Temple. However it embodies elements of both the religious and secular traditions in its ideology and practices, since Muhammad also acknowledges Marcus Garvey as a forerunner of his movement.

(Essien-Udom 1962, 63)

The NOI is more directly indebted to Moorish Science, and “both Noble Drew Ali and W. D. Fard aspired to create an identity for African-Americans greater than that offered under the United States flag” (Knight 2007, 23).

The Nation of Islam was founded by Wallace D. Fard, a man about whose early life little is known. His official biographies read more like hagiographies, but what is known is that Fard at one point declared himself Jesus. Interestingly, though the NOI denies his involvement with the Moorish Science Temple and official biographies of W.D. Fard tend to obfuscate his early history, there appears to be some evidence that Fard was in fact a member of the Moorish Science Temple, and that he unsuccessfully challenged Ali's leadership years before founding the Nation of Islam (Essien-Udom 1962; Turner 1997). If this is true, the NOI can be seen as direct inheritors of the traditions of Moorish Science. Regardless of his connection to Ali, Fard realized a brief but intense career as founder of the NOI. He then promptly disappeared from public view and was last seen or heard from in Chicago in 1934 (Lee 1996; Turner 1997). The official platform of the NOI states that at this time Fard boarded the mother plane, a spaceship which Fard understood as the manifestation of Ezekiel's vision and the NOI believes is hovering in orbit just outside of earth's atmosphere. Fard is now

believed to be in a kind of occultation (Turner 1997). Fard's disciple, Elijah Muhammad, carried on Fard's legacy and built the Nation of Islam into a powerful force. Elijah taught that Fard was, in fact, Allah incarnate, come in the form of a man to save black Americans from themselves by teaching them their actual history and helping them take control of their own destiny. To this end, "economic self-sufficiency was implicitly tied to the Muslims' religious faith" (Lee 1996, 31). If Fard was Allah, then Elijah Muhammad, being Fard's voice to the Lost-Found Muslims in the Wilderness of North America, was the Prophet of Allah.

Fard's teachings were controversial for their advocacy of racial separatism from whites. Berg observes that

Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad are indebted...to Drew Ali.... They took the race consciousness of Drew Ali to the next level, race supremacy, and transformed the return to the homeland to a demand for the separation of blacks and whites and a separate nation within the continental United States.

(Berg 2005, 697)

Fard pursued the separatist cause to its ultimate ends by teaching that the murder of four white people would guarantee a free journey to Mecca (Lee 1996; Knight 2007). These early radical teachings would be tempered by Elijah Muhammad and the process of time.

The Nation of Islam is a syncretic religion, and despite its name, relies more heavily on Christian than Muslim religious texts. In fact, Fard's writings contain more than double the number of references to the Bible than to the Qur'an (Berg 2005). This significant disparity between title and content may be due to

the backgrounds of the founders of the NOI. Certainly W.D Fard and Elijah Muhammad were steeped in both the Garveyite movement's liberation theology, and the same Spiritualism and Masonic lore that inspired Noble Drew Ali (Essien-Udom 1962; Lee 1996; Turner 1997; Barnett, 2006). Fard taught that Islam was the original religion of the black man. The NOI's adoption of Islamic symbology was Fard's attempt to "reclaim a perceived Islamic heritage for African Americans" but was not connected to Qur'an based Islamic traditions (Berg 2005, 686). Fard's Biblical exegesis was a radical departure from mainstream Christian sources. In the figures of Adam and Eve, Fard saw the first white people, created by a mad scientist to serve the black race. In Ezekiel's vision, Fard saw a mothership whose purpose is to destroy the white man's world (Turner 1997). Berg notes that this radical reinterpretation of traditional scripture allowed Fard to "continue to appeal to the one scripture with which African Americans were familiar - The Bible - and in a way that left them utterly dependent on him for its interpretation" (Berg 2005, 695). Furthermore, Fard's claim to divinity allowed the NOI to preach a doctrine which undermines the ontology of both Christianity and Islam by negating any kind of transcendental deity. The NOI deny the existence of a "spook" God. God is not spirit, but is incarnate in the body of W.D. Fard. Knight notes that "in the absence of creator gods, the NOI developed a cosmology going back trillions of years in which the universe and all that it contained stemmed from the divine Black Intellect. The son of man had created himself" (Knight 2007, 27). In fact, Knight argues that early NOI teachings derived directly from W.D. Fard "advocated a sort of pragmatic atheism" (2007, 27). This radical departure from traditional ideas of

divine transcendence would be furthered by the NGE, who moved the definition of Allah from a specific black man in the body of W.D. Fard, to the universal black man.

Perhaps the most famous member of the NOI was born Malcolm Little, but changed his name to Malcolm X on his conversion. He was the son of a Baptist preacher and his parents were active in Marcus Garvey's movement (Lee 1996, Lewis 2011). Malcolm campaigned tirelessly for the NOI's racist cause until he visited Mecca, where his experience of the unifying spirit of Hajj led him to change his name again, From X to Shabazz, and to convert to a more traditional Sunni Islam. The Nation of Islam would eventually follow suit. Lee notes that

one of the most important issues for the Muslims today is the degree to which Elijah Muhammad tempered his hatred of Whites and moved closer to Orthodox Islam during the last years of his life.... Not only did he tone down his anti-White rhetoric, but his vision of the Fall of America was de-eschatologized.

(Lee 1996, 54)

From that point on, "while still vehemently anti-White, he no longer envisioned the demise of the White civilization as imminent" (Lee 1996, 52). Wallace Muhammad, Elijah's son and successor, continued to move the NOI closer to traditional Sunni views, even declaring white people fully human for the first time in NOI history (Lee 1996; Knight 2007). However, to say that the Nation of Islam is an orthodox Muslim sect would be an elaborate conceit. Fard's exegeses posit a radically different mythology than that of traditional Islamic beliefs. Berg notes of the NOI:

although their version of Islam is certainly more recognizable than Ali's as related to 'orthodox' Islam, their emphasis on race...and doctrines of the incarnation of Allah in Fard Muhammad, the prophethood of Elijah Muhammad, the denial of the resurrection, and the denigration of Christianity are very atypical.

(2005, 686)

The Nation of Islam is strict in terms of conformity to the physical observance of codes of conduct. The most obvious outward sign of this conservatism is observable in the NOI dress code, which demands conservative attire. Women cover their hair and do not wear makeup, and men wear dark suits and bow ties. The organization also observes a strict conservative gender relationship. Women are expected to be completely subservient to men and men are expected to financially support the family (Lee 1996; Barnett 2006; Knight 2007). In fact, despite the radicalism of the NOI platform, many of the teachings maintain the social and political conservatism of Moorish Science. Lee observes that

the original doctrine of the Nation of Islam encouraged hard work, thrift, and a strict morality in preparation for the fall of white society; and despite their more radical political goals, the Muslims also required that members submit to the temporary authority of the American legal system. Removed from the context of millenarianism, these guidelines for behavior were identical to those of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Ironically, becoming a good Muslim necessitated that one adopt the behavior of the White majority.

(Lee 1996, 93)

This underlying rigidity in the NOI provided space for the emergence of a more socially radical, anarchistic movement like the Nation of Gods and Earths. In the early 1960s the Civil Rights movement embodied the secular inheritance of

Marcus Garvey's movement. Space opened for a more radicalized religious practice that conformed to Garvey's racially liberating philosophy while allowing for more freedom and individuality than that suggested by the NOI. The pressure to fill this gap was exacerbated by the socio-economic situation in New York City at the time.

NEW YORK CITY

In the 1960's and 1970's, New York City experienced a period of urban decay that was previously unrivaled. It was during this period that both the Nation of Gods and Earths and hip hop culture were born and would begin to grow. After the post war so called "white flight" to the suburbs, the inner city became what some observers argue was a racialized ghetto (Chang 2005; Knight 2007). Politicized hip-hop historian Jeff Chang has strong views about the situation in New York City during this period. His views reflect the opinions of many black observers and are echoed in the work of Nelson George (1999). His political sensibilities led Chan to describe New York's boroughs as "a spectacular set of ruins, a mythical wasteland, an infectious disease, and , as Robert Jensen observed, 'a condition of poverty and social collapse, more than a geographical place'" (2005, 17). Unemployment skyrocketed, leading Chang to observe that "if blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work" (2005, 13).

Unemployment, poverty, violence and racial tension became endemic in New York. Chang notes that

sociologists, following William Julius Wilson, now spoke of an 'underclass', a segment of communities of color permanently locked into poverty and

joblessness.... Young whites remained the most segregated group of all. The average white student attended schools that were well over 80 percent white.

(2005, 223)

This trend continued for several decades, so that, by the 1990's, "while the civil rights and Black power movements had expanded the Black middle-class, that middle-class was now just as segregated as its 'underclass' counterparts were" (Chang 2005, 233).

The economic consequences of this segregation were far reaching and impacted such daily realities as grocery shopping. Liquor stores outnumbered supermarkets in the urban core, and politicians were either unaware of or ignored the problem. Chang notes that "study after study found...supermarkets (in black neighborhoods) with grocery prices up to 20 to 30 percent higher than those in the suburbs and exurbs" (Chang 2005, 339). These factors led inner city blacks to the point of desperation. In response, an intense youth gang culture developed in the five boroughs that comprise New York City (Swedenborg 1997). The mounting tension between youth and authority would be one of the defining storylines of the hip hop generation. This tension both facilitated and was exacerbated by the creation of the Nation of Gods and Earths. In the absence of strong civic leaders, youth looked for alternative authority. The NGE taught black youth that they were the authority. It took power out of the hands of civil institutions and rigid religious leaders like Elijah Muhammad, and placed it in the hands of black youth themselves. Berg notes of the NOI that "a history that reversed the traditional account of the European and African contributions to civilization was a source of

pride, inspiration, and revolutionary ideas to African Americans” (2005, 694).

Clarence 13X took this history one step further, removing the group think element from the equation and empowering black youth on an individual level. The power was no longer located in the community, but in the self. The Gods were in the streets.

THE BIRTH OF A NATION

By the early 1960's, the conflation of the civil rights movement, economic recession, and ghettoisation were resulting in both civil and spiritual unrest in the black communities of New York City. Knight observes that “a new black Islam was forming on the streets, inspired by both Malcolm and Elijah but owned by neither” (Knight 2007, 44). Clarence Edward Smith would emerge to fill this space. Smith was a Korean War army veteran, small time gambler, philanderer and member of the NOI's militant Fruit Of Islam security wing. He is better known by his assumed names, Clarence 13X, and later Allah. Clarence was a compatriot of Malcolm X, whose militancy and unorthodox approach to NOI teachings inspired him. He left the NOI around the same time as Malcolm X's departure. Malcolm, however, would go on to convert to Sunni Islam, moving toward a more orthodox Islamic religious position, whereas Clarence moved in the opposite direction. As Knight observes,

by 1964, Clarence 13X's intense study of Nation of Islam doctrine had led him to a breakthrough: not only was he a god, but he had every right to claim the name Allah for himself. The man that Elijah called Allah had disappeared without a trace exactly thirty years ago; at that point, Fard himself was only a mystery god, a ghost used to place Elijah on the throne.

(Knight 2011, 5)

Clarence maintained the NOI suspicion of any kind of “spook” god, and took to the streets to teach the doctrine that the Asiatic black man is god incarnate. He retained respect for Elijah Muhammad's Supreme Wisdom Lessons, but whereas “the Nation guarded these lessons, allowing access only gradually to new converts, Clarence shared them with non-Muslims, the young hustlers and dropouts who might appreciate the main gist of Elijah's religion but weren't likely to wear bow ties and abstain from music or girls” (Knight 2011, 6). He shared his understanding of the Lessons, and his personal revelation about the nature of divinity with all who would listen. For the most part, those who listened were the disaffected black youth of the inner city. Clarence took his message to the street and the street embraced him.

In 1963 Clarence left the Nation of Islam. Over the next year he founded what would become known as the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths. To mark his conversion, Clarence changed his name as he had when he converted to the Nation of Islam, dropping his slave name in favour of the surname 13X (according to NOI naming protocol, he was the thirteenth man named Clarence to adopt the X). With this incarnation, he let go of all pretense and called himself what he felt himself to be: Allah. To his followers he would also be known as Father. For his efforts, Allah was persecuted by the establishment. His “own claim of divinity stuck him with a diagnosis of schizophrenic reaction, paranoid type, with delusions of religious grandeur and persecution” (Knight 2007, 81). Subsequently he served five months in the psychiatric wing of Bellevue Hospital, and twenty months in Mattewan State Prison, a psychiatric facility for the criminally insane (Knight 2007, 2011; SU Allah 2009; W Allah 2009a).

This period of incarceration would foreshadow a long relationship between the NGE and prison culture. To this day the organization has a strong showing in prisons around the United States (Todorovic 1996; Walker 1999; FBI 2010). Knight reports that “according to a State Senate subcommittee, Five Percenters were the ones who ran things during the 1971 Attica prison rebellion” (2011, 1). During the early days of the Five Percent “it remained unclear to corrections officers whether Five Percenters were even real or just a story that white guards told to scare each other” (Knight 2007, 161). Even outside of the prison industrial complex, authority figures viewed the Five Percent less as a religious or cultural organization and more as another manifestation of the youth gang culture that had taken over New York City. This view of the Five Percent as a purely criminal element resulted in a number of correctional institutions making “efforts to prevent the spread of Five Percenter doctrine in its state prisons, placing gods in solitary confinement until they renounced their affiliation” (Knight 2011, 58; also Walker 1999). Still, the movement would not be destroyed by the efforts of state power to eradicate it. The NGE continued to flourish despite being singled out and surveiled by the FBI, and by New York City's Youth Investigation Unit, who expended much effort in monitoring the Five Percent (Swedenborg 1997; Knight 2007). Affiliation with the NGE became a symbol of resistance. As one observer notes, “in an environment where a bowel movement is a public event and every request a power struggle, adherence to a haughty ideology that deifies the collective Black Man is a political act, a manner in which to register protest against the institution” (Todorovic 1996).

In 1969, Father Allah was shot to death under questionable circumstances.

The mystery surrounding his death would add weight to the hagiographic stories of his life. Some say he was shot over a gambling debt, while others champion a larger conspiracy that saw the government attempting to rid itself of a powerful and dangerous cultural leader (Knight 2007; W Allah 2009a). Whatever the truth behind it, Allah's death left the NGE without its charismatic leadership just five years into its collective existence. For many organizations this tragedy would have spelled the end, but the power of the movement overshadowed any single member and allowed the NGE to continue in an ostensibly anarchistic manner. No new single authority figure arose to take Allah's place. Knight notes that “at the time of Allah's assassination, the Five Percenters were nearly all teenagers. Members that stayed with the movement and continued to teach on the streets or in prison, having walked with the Father in person, functioned as heirs to his authority” (2007, 187). These young men, known as the “First Born”, became something of a caliphate, providing a level of authority by virtue of having been given knowledge of self directly from Allah.

Like all lived traditions, the NGE is dynamic and has changed over time. The years after Allah's death would see “the Five Percenters' developing self-awareness as a culture with its own tradition and historical figures” (Knight 2007, 195). For those who joined the organization after the Father's death, the Five Percent would become “an intellectual and political force” (Knight 2007, 132). The NGE saw a movement away from the streets and into community solidarity and positive social action. Adherents place a strong emphasis on community involvement and leadership. This transition was not without its hiccups. One of the most problematic aspects of the post-Allah period centres around the lack of

leadership, for although Allah had broken from organized Islam years before his death, he also advocated a kind of Unitarian Universalist approach to knowledge that engendered respect for all paths toward that goal. Therefore while “some Gods read the Qur'an and speak of Islam as a 'science',... others study Eastern philosophy and practice meditation. One is not more 'Five Percent' than the other” (Knight 2007, 10). This egalitarian approach makes the Five Percent attractive to anti-authoritarian oriented youth, but complicates the study of the organization. Knight argues that

the NGE's emphasis on all black men being their own Gods, which prevents a 'Ten Percent' ruling class from taking form within the community, also prevents the development of an organization that could govern Five Percenter media.... The obvious difficulty with this democratic spirit is that Five Percenters have no control over what is presented as 'Five Percenter' material.

(2007, 197)

As history has progressed into the digital age, the NGE has developed a large online presence. The 120 Lessons are readily accessible on the internet and new acolytes are able to learn the teachings without any connection to established communities. Because there is no centralized authority, the internet has effectively usurped the First Born authority for newborns who have joined the movement after the advent of the internet. This kind of decentralization is shared by the Rastafari movement, but is counter to the NOI and the Moorish Science Temple. Unlike Noble Drew Ali and W.D. Fard, Father Allah did not leave a canonical volume to serve as the basis for future proclamations of belief. However, unifying elements can be found in the NGE's Supreme 120 Lessons.

These lessons consist of eight sets of catechisms, six of which were adopted directly from Elijah Muhammad's NOI teachings (The Student Enrollment, The Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 1, The Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 2, English Lesson C-1, Actual Facts, and Solar Facts). These lessons are augmented by the Supreme Alphabet and the Supreme Mathematics (Appendix A), which assign a meaning to each of the letters of the alphabet and the numbers from 0 to 9. Five Percenters use the Supreme Alphabet and Supreme Mathematics to perform a type of gematria through which acolytes “break down” words and numbers to discover their esoteric meanings. This process is referred to as “doing science” and provides the basis for the Five Percenter practice of “building”, a theological discussion which is the main source of public meaning making within the Five Percent. Periodically, a large gathering called variously “Parliament” or “Show and Prove” is held to allow acolytes to build in public, providing a platform for individuals to express their ideas, but also serving as a means of creating cohesion within the community.

Though the Nation of Gods and Earths may initially appear anomalous and obscure, this chapter has indicated that neither the impetus toward the creation of an organization that privileges black people, nor the specific teachings of the Five Percenters arose in a vacuum. The movement's foundations began in the 19th century. The core ideas of the Nation of Gods and Earths progressed from Marcus Garvey's UNIA, through the Moorish Science Temple and Rastafari, to the Nation of Islam. Father Allah took these longstanding traditions and tweaked them to fit his specific socio-cultural milieu. The process did not stop with Allah, and the NGE has spawned several offshoots of its own throughout the years, and

continues to expand outside of New York City (Knight 2007). As of this writing there are Five Percent communities on six continents. Apparently Allah's teachings have a universal appeal outside of the isolated environment in which they were born. The process by which cultural outsiders subvert the hegemonic paradigm by transvaluing values allows the outsider to become a cultural insider (Knight 2007). Throughout this thesis will see how the NGE has become part of the fabric of mainstream popular culture. This desire for community is an intrinsic part of the nature of humanity. The Nation of Gods and Earths is only one in a line of organizations that have provided this comfort to people in the African diaspora.

Chapter 2

“Not a Religion, But a Way of Life”:

Religion in The Nation of Gods And Earths

Members of the Nation of Gods and Earths deny emphatically that their movement is a religion, characterizing their practice rather as a culture or way of life. They repudiate all organized religious structures. Despite this fact, Five Percenters in the prison system have invoked religious freedom as a means of preserving their right to practice the culture (Walker 1999). They have argued that their organization deserves protection under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as a God-based culture (Levin 2003). Knight encountered one God who stated emphatically “We're not a religion. We deal in facts, not beliefs.” Contrary to the God's assertion, Knight observes that “a statement like 'We deal in facts, not beliefs' goes beyond mere religion; it's the language of religious fundamentalists” (Knight 2011, 18). This chapter will discuss the Nation of Gods and Earths in relation to both orthodox Islam, and to New Religious Movements. It will then enumerate several elements of New Religious Movements to which the NGE conforms, while illuminating some ways in which Religious Studies scholar Catherine Albanese's “four c's” model of religion can be seen to apply to Five Percenter culture.

Albanese sees religion as a means of defining boundaries in the struggle for the creation of identity. “The clearer the boundaries,” she argues, “the tighter and more cohesive the religious group becomes” (1999, 14). For the Nation of Gods and Earths, the nature of these boundaries are still amorphous, making

cohesion difficult and resulting in a fractured, pluralistic approach to practice. While this loose association provides a sense of liberty for many participants, it also makes the academic study of the NGE complex and difficult. Many observers approach the NGE from the perspective of Islamic studies, classifying the group as an indigenous American Islamic sect (McCloud 1995; Turner 1997; Glazier 2001; Noor 2002; Simmons 2006, McMurray 2007). However the relationship between the NGE and Islam is ambiguous, and it may be equally prudent to approach the group from the perspective of the study of New Religious Movements (NRMs).

THE NGE AS AN AMERICAN ISLAM

For McMurray, “Islam is a boundary object that is shaped by its particular contexts” (McMurray 2007, 90). Situated firmly in the American milieu, where Moorish Science and the Nation of Islam defined Islamic tradition for generations, McMurray’s understanding of Islam is fluid and inclusive. Traditional Sunni or Shi’a Muslims view the NOI and Moorish Science as heretical, although Austin notes that many other scholars consider the NOI “a sect of Islam, albeit a highly unorthodox sect” (Austin 2003, 59). Regardless of the plurality of scholarly interpretation of the tradition, the fact remains that “the Nation of Islam always saw itself as part of the Islamic world” (Austin 2003, 59) and its uniquely American interpretation of Islam has influenced the popular perception of the tradition, particularly among American inner city populations (Nuruddin 2002).

Regarding Moorish Science, Curtis notes that “scholars examine the MST as a 'convergence' of Islam, Freemasonry, New Thought, Rosicrucianism, black political thought, Garveyism, American Orientalism, Hoodoo, and Christian

Science, among other traditions” (Curtis 2009, 72). While the NOI is often included in discussions of Islam in America, Moorish Science is just as often excluded from that discussion, regardless of its position as predecessor to the NOI. Curtis questions this attitude. He asks “why must one dismiss the Islamicness of the group just because their Islam came from the Shriners? Such criticisms construct a mythical authentic Islam against which the false Shriner's Islam of the MST can be measured” (Curtis 2009, 83). Curtis's critique addresses the issue of authenticity in religion, in particular in Islam, and raises the question: what exactly constitutes authentic Islam? Can Five Percenters be considered authentically Muslim when they themselves often deny that they are Muslims?

The discourse of “authenticity” is invoked by both scholars and believers to strengthen the boundaries that cohesed communities. In Religious Studies, a discipline where the very definition of the topic at hand is debated, labeling a certain group “authentic” allows scholars to more easily navigate their subject. For believers, tighter boundaries allow smoother negotiations of identity, while for scholars, tighter boundaries allow greater ease in studying a particular community. McCutcheon observes that “the discourse on authenticity...is an all too common, socio-rhetorical technique used to construct a facade of homogenous group identity in the face of unpredictable, competing, and inevitably changeable historical situations and social interests” (2001, 229). That is, the label “authentic” allows both observers and participants to identify insiders and outsiders. Nance addresses this issue in specific relation to African American Islam. She argues that

grounded in a romantic perception of Islam as

somehow more authentic or spiritually legitimate than indigenous American new religions, the anthropological antimodernist streak in African American Islamic studies has surfaced here as a sort of Islamocentric analysis that credits all innovation and knowledge to “Islam”- a term these authors never define but to which they nonetheless ascribe agency independent of human action or interpretation.

(Nance 2002, 125)

That is to say, Islam becomes what Kant describes as Ding an sich, a thing in itself. It becomes a monolith, easily identified and described. Khabeer sees this kind of essentialist argument as highly problematic. He is specifically concerned with non-normative Islamic practice in America, where historically the majority of self-defined Muslims were black or Latino. He argues that Islamic studies scholars traditionally participated in certain

agendas and prejudices (which) held that the cultural mores and practices of *immigrant* Muslims were authentically Islamic, whereas those of blacks and Latinos were necessarily un-Islamic. As a result, in order to *be* Muslim, blacks and Latino Muslims would have to reject their own inherited cultural norms and practices and adopt those of what Sherman Jackson terms “*Immigrant Islam*”.

(2007, 131)

Who determines, then, what “authenticity” really means in relation to American Islam? For Nuruddin, “race and class factors above all seem to determine which narratives are labeled as mythology and which are labeled as absurd or outlandish cult beliefs” (2006, 130). African American Islam, to which the NGE can be viewed as belonging, is never authentic for advocates of “textbook” definitions of Islam. Such scholars need to maintain caution when

utilizing a simplistic model of Islam because such a model not only debases African American Islam, but also “generally ignores the contested and diverse meanings of being Muslim and often excludes...[heterodox practices such as] antinomian Islam, and women's Islam” (Curtis 2009, 78). Textbook models of Islam essentialize the tradition into a simplistic insider-outsider debate which neglects liminal traditions.

It is undeniable that Five Percenter practice is, at best, heterodox in relation to traditional understandings of Islam. In mainstream Islamic culture, likening any man or beast to Allah is the worst blaspheme. This is why Islamic art tends to (though does not exclusively) eliminate figural depictions in favor of repetitive geometric patterns. In the context of mainstream Islam, the NGEs entire oeuvre is deeply heretical. Furthermore, the requirement to maintain the Five Jewels, in particular the Shahada, which is considered essential to mainstream Islam, is antithetical to Five Percenter practice. Islam, which Five Percenters understand not merely as the name of a religion but as an acronym for 'I Self Lord And Master', is “described variously as the culture (way of life) or the nature (righteous disposition) of the Original Man, or the order of the universe” (Nuruddin 2006, 155). Whatever Islam is to Five Percenters, they continuously reinforce throughout their literature and their oral testimony that it is emphatically not a religion. Knight contends that the Five Percent's “apparent atheism amounts to an Islamic apophysis” , but I would argue that this understanding is informed by Knight's own biases (2011, 99). As a practicing Muslim and a participant in Five Percent culture, he often tries to fit certain NGE practices into his own worldview. Knight says of the NGE's 120 Lessons that “like any worthwhile

scripture, the 120 rewards the reader's faith; whatever you're looking for in those degrees, you find it" (2011, 157). In this case, what Knight finds is a connection to traditional Islam. He wants to see the NGE as an indigenous American Sufism and this desire becomes self-fulfilling.

Middle-East scholar Yusri Hazran makes some cogent observations about heterodox Islam. He uses the example of the Druze as a case study and his analysis sheds light on the situation of the Nation of Gods and Earths. The Druze are a syncretic offshoot of the Ismaili school of Shi'a Islam who are considered heretical by mainstream Shi'a and whose name, interestingly enough, derives from a historical figure whom the Druze themselves consider heretical. With the Druze in mind, Hazran argues for an inclusive approach to the study of Islam. He maintains that this kind of approach

considers the Druzes and other heterodox communities to be offshoots of Islam on the basis of cultural and historical factors. Authors who adopt this broad perspective seek to emphasize the elements these heterodox sects hold in common with orthodox Islam and to downplay the theological differences.... In this view, each community has the right to maintain its own tenets and to hold the belief in its supremacy and superiority.

(Hazran 2012, 226)

Hazran invokes historicity as a guideline for defining Islam. "From the historical point of view," he argues, "the Druze doctrine developed within Islam and therefore it should be seen as an Islamic sect." (Hazran 2012, 228). This definition is problematic because, by this logic, Christianity should be viewed as a Jewish sect. Extending Hazran's model to the Nation of Gods and Earths proves

difficult. The NGE developed within, and in reaction to, the unique tradition of African American Islam. African American Islam itself developed outside of the purview of Qur'an-based Islamic traditions. Therefore, ultimately even Michael Muhammad Knight must admit that "while investigating the Five Percent is certainly relevant for the study of Islam in America, there are too many other things going on within the community for someone to frame the Five Percenters as an 'Islamic' movement" (2011, 168). In fact, as Gallagher notes, "in a recent essay, one member of the group, I Majestic Allah, claimed that 'to place the NGE in an Islamic scope does a disservice to both groups'" (2004, 143). I Majestic Allah and other Five Percenters acknowledge that "Islam simply gives the Nation of Gods and Earths a set of metaphors for describing a value system, a view of history..., and a focus on positive African identity that has as much in common with other religious movements as it does with mainstream Islam" (Gallagher 2004, 144). Therefore it may be fruitful to approach the Nation of Gods and Earths not as an Islamic movement, but in the context of the study of New Religious Movements.

THE NGE AS A NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

The study of NRMs again raises the question of boundaries. Robbins notes that "the conceptual boundary of the study area of "nrms" has never been terribly clear. What is a new religious movement? Or a "new religion"?" (2011, 518) The near impossibility of defining religion in and of itself further complicates Robbins' questions. How can we define a New Religious Movement if we cannot define religion? Furthermore, continuing the discussion of authenticity, can we define religion as a strictly bounded, authentic "thing"? The

answer, inevitably, is no, but what we can do is to move toward an understanding of religion that is fluid, yet nonetheless partially framed by useful analytic and conceptual categories. Therefore in discussing Robbins' questions, we must conclude that a definitive answer can never be reached, and that the subject needs to be approached through an attempt at understanding specific aspects of NRMs. This difficulty is addressed by using theoretical models, such as Albanese's Four C's, to describe the attributes of religion in order to move toward, if not a final definition, then at least a working definition.

In discussing the NGE in relation to New Religious Movements, I will focus on six attributes that seem to be common to many NRMs: 1) charismatic leadership, 2) new revelation, 3) the dominance of laity in the movement, 4) the redefinition of vocabulary, 5) violence, and 6) the rejection of orthodoxy. These characteristics have been identified based on an extensive survey of the academic literature on New Religious Movements. Though some theorists identify more characteristics, and some fewer characteristics, this list includes the characteristics that are common to a number of the theorists consulted (Puttick 1997; Saliba 2003a,b; Gallagher 2004; Lewis and Petersen 2005; Dawson 2006; Robbins 2011; Wessinger 2012). The NGE exhibits elements of each of these defining characteristics, and this chapter will proceed to discuss each of these points in turn.

1) CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

One significant feature of New Religious Movements is the influence of a charismatic leader. The Branch Davidians had David Koresh; Raelians have Claude Vorhilon, also known as Rael. Catherine Wessinger notes that “although

charismatic leadership is often associated with new and unconventional movements, charismatic religious leadership and charismatic political leadership go back to the origins of human religious creativity”(2012, 85). Christians had Christ, whose charisma has allowed the religion to prosper for over two millenia. These leaders tend to exhibit inordinate amounts of power over their followers. Father Allah was by all accounts a charismatic character, and although his direct influence only lasted from 1964, when he founded the movement, until his death in 1969, his name and image continue to be invoked by Five Percenters. His influence is visible in the NGE's creeds, and much NGE writing pays homage to the Father specifically. Abdul Noor's book codifies the reverence for the Father. *The Pledge Of The Nation of Gods and Earths* states “From our Father, who brought the knowledge of ourselves from heaven and to the hells of Earth! Those who don't know should know his name...” (Noor 2002, 243), and the catechism lesson *Islam In The Wilderness of North America* enumerates the history of Islamic leadership in North America, culminating with a discussion of Clarence 13X. The lesson discusses Clarence's expulsion from the Nation of Islam and states that “according to the Nation of Gods and Earths it was because he had no more to learn and realized that he was Allah and had come to save the children in the streets” (Noor 2002, 278). Every participant in the Nation of Gods and Earths is aware of the Father's story and his role in the creation of the culture. Though some Five Percenters have advocated the development of an elected leadership, no such body has emerged in the almost half century since the Father's death. Additionally, many adherents of the culture cite the Father's oral teachings as the primary reason for their participation in the Nation of Gods and Earths (see

chapter 4 for a discussion of women's relationship to the Father). The Father had an undeniable influence over the Nation of Gods and Earths despite the fact that much of the culture's practice and much of the culture's secondary theological literature has, much like the theology of both Christianity and Islam, developed after the founder's death.

2) NEW REVELATION

Scholar of New Religious Movements John Saliba argues that many “new religions rely on the writings and lectures of their leaders for providing the best guidance for teaching the goals proposed by the movement”, that is the theology of NRMs relies on the new revelations of the charismatic leader (2003, 16). The genesis of the Nation of Gods and Earths is rooted in Father Allah's new revelation regarding the divine nature of the black man. Knight notes that the Father “Allah made black men their own Gods and did away with religion altogether.... Allah taught only one prayer, in which each worshipper affirmed himself as the only object of worship: 'Allah is the God, and He cannot die’” (Knight 2007, 91). There is some debate among scholars as to the historical reason for Allah's split from the NOI. Some believe he was evicted from the movement for drinking and gambling, while others maintain that he left because of a fundamental disagreement with the NOI hierarchy about the true nature of the black man (Noor 2002; Knight 2007, 2011; W Allah 2009a). Regardless of the original impetus, Five Percenters for the most part have come to believe that, through careful and intense study of the NOI scriptures, Father Allah discovered a new interpretation, prompting him to begin street ministry.

Some NOI critics argue that Father Allah's revelation that the Asiatic black

man is God was not in fact a new idea, and that Elijah Muhammad had been teaching this doctrine long before Allah took it to the streets. While it is true that Elijah Muhammad taught that the Asiatic Blackman is the Original Man, Father Allah's revelation lay in the particular interpretation of Muhammad's teachings (Muhammad 1965). Allah was not the person of Fard Muhammad, as Elijah taught, but was rather a physical description of each individual black man: Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head. Gallagher notes that

what the Nation of Gods and Earths retains from the Nation of Islam is a symbolic language whose primary assertion is that 'Allah is the Blackman, who after gaining an acute awareness of his positive qualities, history, and the world around him, actualizes these positive qualities in order to be the creator of his own destiny and a positive enriching influence in his family and community'.

(Gallagher 2004, 143)

Nuruddin likens the relationship between the NOI and the NGE to that of competing ancient Egyptian philosophical systems. Father Allah's interpretation of Elijah Muhammad's teachings did not entirely discount the older tradition, but enhanced it "in much the same way that the rival Memphite Theology of Egypt did not supplant the Heliopolitan Cosmogony but reconfigured it and coexisted with the original" (Nuruddin 2006, 158).

The NGE's new revelations are not limited to those initially proposed by Father Allah. As the culture has developed, Gods have created a complex cosmology that distinguishes them from their predecessors. For Five Percenters, "God is not a mystery and...everything in the universe can be explained mathematically", including the metaphysical realm (McMurray 2008, 78).

Nuruddin explains the predominant understanding of the nature of the cosmos and of mind:

First of all, the Triple Darkness of Space is also referred to as the Essence. When Five Percenter speak of death they talk about (the spirit of) the dead person returning to the Essence. There is the notion that all things come from the Essence and all things return to it. Metaphysically, the Essence is an impersonal imperishable Absolute, an infinite inexhaustible Ground of Being. While this Essence or triply dark space is a Void, it is not formless; the Triple Darkness of Space is actually composed of three separate dimensional planes. Second, the self-manifested god who arises from this Essence, while anthropomorphic, is decidedly cerebral, i.e. the Cosmic Man is essentially a Cosmic Mind....

(2006, 152)

These kind of intricate metaphysical understandings comprise a complicated origin story, which Albanese argues constitutes a creed by which participants in religions structure their understanding of their shared history.

3) DOMINANCE OF LAITY

Following Catholic Cardinal Arinze, John Saliba argues that “sects or NRMs flourish more where effective priestly activity is absent or sporadic”, and this is certainly true of the Nation of Gods and Earths (1992, 30). The absence of a priesthood places increased importance on the role of individual members, those who are known in priestly traditions as the laity. Among members of the NGE, this characteristic is structured in the relationship between the new revelations and the process of oral transmission of the lessons. The traditional process of initiation involves a kind of guru relationship whereby “a new entrant into the knowledge would ideally have a committed personal guide (“enlightener”) who

exposed him/her to the texts piece by piece; after memorizing an item and working through its interpretation, the student could move on to the next” (Knight 2011, 168). Though the NOI practice a similar catechism, the NGE transmission process is decentralized and independent from the Temple or Mosque of the NOI, and is a consequence of the fact that Father Allah left no written records. Whereas NOI members are able to access Elijah Muhammad's teachings, members of the NGE must rely on oral histories that amount to hearsay and conjecture evidence for the Father's teachings.

More significant than the process of transmission is the scripture itself. The practice of hermeneutics, or “building” in Five Percent parlance, is widespread. Knight notes that though “Five Percenters dislike words such as 'religion' and even 'belief,'...attempting to dig into the 120 and recover its hidden meaning remains an act of deep faith” (Knight 2011, 157). The NGE's innovation lies in adding the Supreme Alphabet and Supreme Mathematics to the NOI's original lessons. The Supreme Math and Alphabet manifest a kind of gematria through which Five Percenters approach the Lessons. Gematria has a long history:

Gematria, the interpretation of words through the numerical value of their letters, was used by the Assyrian king Sargon II (reigned 722-705 BCE), who built the wall of Khorsabad 16,283 cubits long because it matched the numerical value of his name. The Greeks used gematria for dream interpretation, and Pythagoras equated mathematics with the ultimate reality of the cosmos. Pythagorean ideas of numbers influenced Neoplatonism, which in turn influenced the Jewish number mysticism of the Kabbalah. Neoplatonism would also find its way into Islamic thought, while rabbinical gematria would inform the treatment of letters for Hebrew's

cousin Arabic.

(Knight 2011, 161)

When Five Percenters “do the science” by applying the Supreme Math and Alphabet they are participating in an ancient tradition of hermeneutical practice. Systems of gematria allow endless scriptural interpretations. In the Nation of Gods and Earths, the gematria of the “Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabet act as agents of intertextuality, the process by which texts obtain their meaning through relations to other texts” (Knight 2011, 160). The Supreme Math and Alphabet are a code that allow Five Percenters access to hidden knowledge. Thus Five Percenters are able to derive deep meaning not just from the basic scriptures, but by applying the code to other writings. Often Five Percenters “do the science” to the sacred texts of other traditions. This practice is reflected by C'BS Alife Allah when he states in his blog that “those that have any type of familiarity with the Bible know that Moses is the Knowledge and Aaron was the Wisdom” (March 22, 2011). C'BS uses the Supreme Math to uncover unique teachings in ancient Abrahamic texts. Other Five Percenters apply the Math to the Qur'an or the Abhidharma. Knight talks about his own experience of uncovering profound meaning by applying the Supreme Math to the work of medieval Islamic scholar Ibn al-'Arabi (2011).

Five Percenters are not all textual scholars, however. Much of their building is done through observing the nature of existence and applying the Supreme Math to their everyday personal experiences. Keiler-Bradshaw's participant, Jewel, describes how the Supreme Math works to structure her own life:

Lets just take knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. 1,2,3 respectively. Just these three concepts allow me to put my life in order. It's the order of the universe. Mathematics is always right and exact, you know? When you knowledge something, you look, listen, and observe the situation. Once you have done the knowledge, then you can enter the wisdom. Wisdom is action. Motion. This is one's wise ways words and actions based on someone's knowledge, understand? Now, 1 always comes before 2. Always. If you do the wisdom. If you act before you do the knowledge you are putting 2 before 1 which is against the rules of the universe. Whenever you act or open your big mouth before you have a thorough knowledge of a thing, you mess up...Destruction!...Nine times outta ten, we put the wisdom before the knowledge. And you wonder why things don't add up in this effed up world.... Oh, and 3 is the understanding! Once you get the knowledge and apply it, which is wisdom, life, God! How can I lead a Nation if I don't know the order to make moves?

(Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 94)

Doing the science is the most profound and important element of the NGE cultus.

The practice of building both contributes to and solidifies Five Percenter creeds.

It allows participants to negotiate and create codes, which in turn results in a more cohesive community. Keiler-Bradshaw's participant, Infinite, sees the Lessons as

something that speaks to the disenfranchised; people who are lower on the socio-economic scale. Because they don't always necessarily understand how they came to be that way. They don't understand what social forces are affecting their life and so becoming exposed to The Nation of Gods and Earths and the sociology of it is one aspect of becoming aware of these obstacles.

(Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 103)

The 120 Lessons, and particularly the Supreme Math and Alphabet, provide a mechanism by which Five Percenters negotiate meaning and identity in their own

lives. They do this independently of any organizational hierarchy. In the Nation of Gods and Earths, participants work in consultation with each other through the process of building to uncover meaning in the Lessons.

Lee argues that for the NOI and other religious structures, “belief in God provides answers to the questions of origin and meaning, and the church a community in which to experience their truth” (Lee 1996, 2). For the Five Percent, the belief is directed inward at themselves, and the community is created through an understanding and application of the Supreme Math and Alphabet. The belief structure is not systematized within a church as such, but is worked out through individual builds, where two or more participants come together to discuss and apply the lessons, and at monthly Parliaments. Parliament is the ultimate testing zone for new acolytes. God Sundo Allah describes Parliament as a place where

you can get greeted or treated, meaning if you are right and exact then the Gods will recognize that, if you are not then a parliament can turn into a bombing ground and you will be the target. When I go to parliament I learn a lot of things that help me navigate through obstacles that I face in everyday life.

(“The Significance of Parliament” Nov 26 2008)

Building at Parliament is a right of passage for a young God. He must prove himself at Parliament if he wishes to be considered Right and Exact by the wider community. It is through Parliamentary builds that Gods become accepted members of the NGE community. The doctrines espoused at these Parliaments retain the pluralistic tendencies of the culture at large. There is no right subject on which to build, and no universally correct conclusions to be reached. One God

may enter the cipher to build on the idea that drugs are a legitimate way of expanding consciousness. The next God in the cipher may decry the drug culture as a blight on the black community. As long as the arguments are backed up with science from the lessons, neither perspective is more or less legitimately Five Percent than the other. God Sundo Allah's commentary confirms that Parliament is one of the cultic acts which facilitates the coalescence of Five Percenter creed and code into a strong, though pluralistic, community. For Knight, Parliament is the place where one is able to see how "the Five Percent's speed-of-thought scripture lives and moves, always transforming, always reinventing itself and reinventing its reader/creator, showing God's knowledge...to be a shoreless ocean, because *we* are shoreless" (Knight 2011, 160).

4) REDEFINITION OF VOCABULARY

Political Scientist James C Scott argues that "it is a rare colonial enterprise that does not attempt to rename the landscape as a means of asserting its ownership and making it both familiar and legible to the colonizers" (2012, 30). The Nation of Gods and Earths, in their attempt to decolonize European America and recolonize it for the Asiatic black man, participate in this kind of redefinition of vocabulary, which is a feature of New Religious Movements in general (Lewis and Petersen 2005; Dawson 2006). At the very crucible of Five Percenter development, "Allah told Five Percenters to invent new names for themselves" (Knight 2007, 90). He subsequently "endorsed the taking of his name; all black men had to be the Allahs of their own lives" (Knight 2007, 90). This renaming engenders a decolonization of the Asiatic black body, wherein Five Percenters shed their "slave" names and adopt monikers generally derived from the Supreme

Alphabet which represent their personal spiritual journey within the Nation of Gods and Earths. Gods choose names like Justice Born Infinite and Divine Thought, while Earths adopt appellations like Mecca Refined and Beautiful SeeAsia. Knight notes that

Five Percenters that undo American white supremacy by adopting names like Majestic and Divine are taking part in an unwritten and largely unacknowledged American tradition. In the time of slavery, Africans and their descendents – having been stripped of their original names and branded with those of their masters – sometimes gave each other titles denoting pride and power.

(2007, 10)

The process of renaming within the culture has been characterized by law enforcement as adopting aliases (Swedenborg 1997), but the tradition of taking a new name on conversion is common in many non-Western traditions, particularly in some indigenous African traditions, as well as in mainstream Islam, where marriage, the birth of a child, or the completion of the sacred Hajj can mark the occasion of a name change. For Five Percenters, their “Righteous” name is an external symbol of their full integration into the community and is a cultic practice which serves to identify members of the community as well as to distinguish them from those outside of the community.

As has been discussed previously, the NGE has adopted a vocabulary from Islamic tradition which has been redefined to conform to Five Percenter understandings. Islam no longer means to surrender to a transcendent deity, but is transformed into the acronym I Self Lord And Master. It is not a religion, but the true nature of the Asiatic black man. Nuruddin observes that Islam is also

understood as “the law of harmony, balance, order, truth, righteousness, and justice that governed nature personal conduct and social relations” (2006, 155).

The term “Muslim” within the Five Percent is understood to apply only to women (see Chapter 4), and the term “Muslim son” delineates a non-Original person who undertakes to learn NGE culture.

Five Percenters have renamed many cities in the United States. New Jersey has become New Jerusalem, Atlanta is Atlantis. Harlem has become Mecca and Brooklyn, Medina. Early in the movement, one of the First Born traveled from Harlem to Brooklyn to teach his friends. This event has become known in Five Percent mythology as the *hijra* and mirrors the journey of the Prophet Muhammed and his followers (Knight 2011), and has become part of the Five Percent's shared origin story, which Albanese characterizes as an aspect of creed. Some Five Percenters also consider visiting the Allah School in Mecca in Harlem, New York, to be the equivalent of the Islamic Hajj. This journey is not as rigidly codified as the Saudi Arabian Islamic Hajj, but is a distinct aspect of the Five Percenter cultus nonetheless.

5) VIOLENCE

Discussions of NRMs often focus on violence (Gallagher 2004; Lewis 2005; Dawson 2006; Robbins 2011). Observers tend to concentrate on incidents like the 1978 Jonestown massacre involving Jim Jones' People's Temple, or the horrific 1993 Waco incident involving David Koresh's Branch Davidian sect. As a result, NRMs have been characterized as having a propensity toward violence that is exacerbated by the perception within the culture of persecution from external authorities (Dawson 2006). The Nation of Gods and Earths is not

exempt from this accusation. Much of the popular media attention paid to the Five Percent focuses on their involvement with gang violence. Five Percenters have a strong showing in the prison population. This fact is reflected in popular culture. The television series *Oz* follows the exploits of prisoners in a maximum security facility and highlights the violence in this kind of environment. The show features one of the only Five Percenter characters ever included in a major television production, a character called Supreme Allah, played by Lord Jamar, founding member of the seminal rap group Brand Nubian. The character is seen disseminating Five Percent teachings while simultaneously dealing drugs and shanking fellow inmates. Robert Walker, an expert on gang identification, has given numerous presentations on the NGE and believes that “much of the problem with the group lies with the incarcerated members of the group whose propensity towards violence is well documented”(1999). He also reports that “the threat posed by members to the security of the institutions, the staff and other inmates has caused a number of departments of corrections to consider the group a Security Threat Group” (Walker 1999).

In October 2002, John Allen Muhammad and his seventeen year old accomplice Lee Boyd Melvo carried out the Beltway sniper attacks, killing ten people over a period of three weeks. The shooters left messages incorporating Five Percenter phrases including “I am God” and “Word is Bond”, and some Five Percenter rap cassettes were allegedly found in the suspect's vehicle (Swedenburg 2002). Some media outlets interpreted these messages as evidence of Muhammad's affiliation with the Nation of Gods and Earths. The Nation and the hip-hop musicians associated with it were demonized by the popular media as

“ultraviolent criminals”, pimps, and purveyors of genocide (Stix 2013).

Eventually the facts of the case were revealed. Neither Muhammad nor Melvo had any significant connection to the culture of the Nation of Gods and Earths except through their consumption of popular hip-hop music, and “there is no indication that religious beliefs played any part in motivating the crimes that Muhammad and Malvo are alleged to have committed” (Swedenberg 2002). Muhammad had been a member of the Nation of Islam, but NOI spokesmen denounced his crimes and revoked his membership in the organization (Swedenberg 2002).

The violent image of the Nation of Gods and Earths is not dispelled by the existence of the Supreme Team, a well documented street gang. Throughout the 1980's, the Supreme Team controlled the East coast crack cocaine trade from their headquarters in Queens, New York. The Team, who were associated with the larger Blood gang, used the Supreme Math and Supreme Alphabet as a gang code in order to obfuscate their activities from law enforcement (Ferranti 2012). The very real association of this group of violent gangsters with the larger Nation of Gods and Earths culture has tainted the image of the Five Percent among law enforcement and the judicial system. Many Five Percenters have denounced the Supreme Team and attempted to disassociate the NGE from its violent history. Undoubtedly some Five Percenters have gang affiliation, but characterizing the group as a whole as a gang is short sighted. Even Walker must concede that we must “assume that the majority of the followers are honest, law-abiding people who have deep beliefs in the teachings of the culture” (1999). Most Five Percenters actively work to strengthen their communities through non-violent,

law-abiding means. To describe the culture as a whole as a violent gang is to ignore the reality of the existence of the vast majority of those associated with the Nation of Gods and Earths.

6) REJECTION OF ORTHODOXY
(AND BUILDING OF NEW ORTHODOXY)

NRM's tend to begin life by breaking away from larger movements, and, in doing so, set themselves up in opposition to the orthodox framework of those movements. For example, Mormonism diverged from mainstream Protestant Christianity, and the Hare Krishna movement broke off from Vaishnava Hinduism. Lorne Dawson insists that NRMs “tend to be splinter groups from mainstream traditions that are seeking to revive what they think to be the original or pure spirit of the religious tradition they are rebelling against” (2006, 26). Father Allah followed this trend by breaking away from the Nation of Islam, which, despite its heterodoxy in relation to mainstream Islam, maintained an orthodox framework of its own. The Nation of Gods and Earths eschews many elements of NOI orthodoxy, including the rigid dress code by which members of the NOI are recognized, as well as the NOI's strict moral imperative. Some observers have characterized Five Percenters as “the five percent of Muslims who drink and smoke” and it is well known that even Father Allah participated in gambling and drug culture (FBI 2010; also W Allah 2009a). There is no central temple where Five Percenters gather to worship. Though the Nation of Gods and Earths inherited much of their mythology and teachings from the NOI, Five Percenters tend to interpret these teachings in a more fluid way. The rigid hierarchy of the NOI, including a structured priesthood, an appointed leader, and

both an administrative and security body are entirely absent from the NGE. Without these boundary enforcing structural elements, the NGE appears anarchistic. However, hierarchy and structures tend to seep into ostensibly anarchistic organizations in subtle and subversive ways, and in this regard the Nation of Gods and Earths is no different.

In the almost fifty years since its inception, the practical nature of the NGE has changed. Building on the work of comparative religion scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Knight argues that the movement is undergoing the process of reification, “the process 'of crystallization, of communalization, of systematization' by which a master teacher's message takes shape as a distinct religion – even if this appears to betray the spirit of the teacher's original mission” (2011, 184). The reification process requires a solidification of creeds, codes and cultus, which serve to define the boundaries of a newly distinct community. In any organization there is a movement over time from fluidity to rigidity. Initially the Five Percent were a loose association. After his death, “Allah left behind no book or barely any record of his teachings, apart from whatever Gods you could find at Mount Morris Park or the street academy.... With Allah's death came a lack of formalized tenets beyond the NOI lessons and his numerology” (Knight 2007, 192). In these early years, the creeds, codes, and cultus of the Five Percent community were ill defined. The years immediately after Allah's death saw a period of chaos during which many Gods fell away from the fold. This period was followed by a renewed interest and participation in the tradition which heralded the reification process. Knight observes that in 1976 “a Five Percenter known as Malik Al Hadi reportedly called for the movement to become more

structured and organized, with a chosen leader” (Knight 2011, 180). Al Hadi wanted to strengthen the boundaries that define the community by codifying the creedal and cultic elements of the culture. The process was furthered in 1987 when the NGE publication The WORD published *The Bomb: the Greatest Story Never Told*, which Knight characterizes as “the first hagiography of Allah” (2011, 182). This publication elevated Father Allah's life story to the position of mythology. It solidified Father Allah's personal story into a shared origin story around which Five Percenter community is now viewed as developing. Reification is the process by which orthodoxy is produced, and as the process continues the Five Percent are, slowly but surely, developing their own kind of orthodoxy. Their creeds, codes and cultus are becoming fixed.

Factions have emerged within the NGE who claim authority on the interpretation of scriptures and put forth truth claims about the nature of the organization. Knight observes that the essay collection “*Knowledge of Self*, perhaps most explicitly in its final pages, takes part in the construction of an orthodoxy, a community's setting of its limits” (Knight 2011, 187). In this anthology, Supreme Understanding Allah positions himself and his associates as NGE authorities. In an appeal to readers, Supreme Understanding Allah writes: “if you don't know any True and Living Gods or Earths in your area who are qualified to introduce you to this culture correctly, reach out to us...and we will direct you to someone who can” (SU Allah 2009, 250). With this statement, Supreme Understanding Allah implies that his group are the “True and Living Gods and Earths” and that they are both qualified and correctly informed. Though theoretically there is no orthopraxy in the Five Percent, Supreme

Understanding's emphasis on "correct" methods moves toward more rigid understandings of practice within the community. That is, the creeds and cultus of the Five Percent are being solidified.

Abdul Noor's anthology of teachings also moves to establish universal cultic practices among the Five Percent. Noor's book is divided into chapters and lessons that illustrate a clear intention. The book includes three sections: one with selected teachings of the Moorish Science Temple; one with selected teachings of the Nation of Islam; and a final section concerning the Nation of Gods and Earths. The book is clearly an effort to situate the NGE in a historical context, and Noor has chosen Moorish Science and NOI teachings that specifically prefigure and augment the Five Percent teachings in the final section. Noor's agenda is evidenced in the editorial content of the book. One entry in the NOI section, entitled *The Messengers Prayer* is followed by an editor's note which states that the prayer "was to be memorized by members and said at least once a day for the Minister" (2002, 85). By using the past tense, Noor implies that this practice is no longer required. Members of the NGE should view the prayer as part of their history, not part of their present cultus, which is outlined in the next section of the book. The section on the NGE is bookended by articles entitled *Nation of Gods and Earths History*, which briefly describes Father Allah's ministry, and *Islam in the Wilderness of North America*, which uses a call and response catechism to trace the history of the NGE from the Moorish Science Temple, through the NOI, and finally to the Nation of Gods and Earths. The NGE is here set up as the ultimate manifestation of Islam in North America.

Noor's anthology moves to solidify the codes and cultus of the NGE. With

his editorial choices, he makes a strong statement about his position in relation to the culture. The bulk of the section on the NGE is comprised of “plus lessons”. Plus lessons are additional teachings that add on to the core theology. The 120 Lessons are the NGE's Old Testament, and the plus lessons are the New Testament. The situation with these lessons is similar to that in Christianity before the Counsel of Nicea: the 120 are set texts, whereas the plus lessons have yet to be formalized into a canon. Anyone can write a plus lesson. The value in the lessons is determined by the court of public opinion, with some lessons being widely regarded as important and others being valued only by a small minority. Noor's anthology works toward the canonization of the plus lessons it includes. The book presents *The Pledge of The Nation of Gods and Earths* (Appendix C) whose language is an amalgam of the American Pledge of Allegiance and the Christian Pater Noster. In this same section he includes the *Gods Morning Meditation* (Appendix C), which he editorializes “should be recited 5 times a day” (2002, 243). He immediately follows this entry with the *Five Percenter Enlightenment Song* (Appendix D). Though Noor does not explicitly acknowledge it, the *Pledge* and the *Meditation* function as prayers and the *Song* is a hymn. These are clearly part of the NGE cultus, and the words are intended to strengthen the Five Percenter's relationship with his god, himself, through ritual repetition. The three works are meant to solidify the NGE cultus into an orthodox performance which Noor's book serves to proscribe. Noor also includes the lesson *What We Teach* (Appendix F), which is the most commonly disseminated plus lesson in the NGE and is a creedal statement equivalent to the Apostles Creed in Christianity.

In addition to Noor's work, other Five Percenters have written prayers and hymns which have been introduced to the larger community. Knight notes that “while in prison, Born Allah and Kihiem U Allah co-authored 'A Prayer of Reality' which at first glance positions the Father as a mystery god” (2007, 200). This prayer (Appendix E) attempts to mimic traditional Biblical language by using the archaic pronouns “thee”, “thy”, and “thou”. The familiar language adds legitimacy to the prayer. Instead of being simply poetry or rap, the archaic language immediately identifies the words as prayer to the audience. While many Gods reject the idea of prayer, Knight notes that some advocates teach that when a God prays, he prays to himself (2007). Prayer is a cultic practice that reinforces Albanese's model and undermines the NGE claim that it is not a religion but a way of life. Indeed the culture does structure a way of life, but as it moves more toward what Knight calls “an intellectualization of the culture” (2007, 267) and the development of a codified orthodoxy, it begins to look more and more like a religious practice.

The syncretic and pluralistic nature of the Nation of Gods and Earths virtually necessitates the existence of factionalism among its adherents. Wakeel Allah observes that “since the Five Percenters pride themselves on being free and independent thinkers, the different schools of thought within the movement sometimes can be as numerous as its members” (Allah 2009, 290). The Lessons are an oral tradition, passed on from one God to the next. Because of this process, “rather than a single definitive vision, there are as many histories as there are Five Percenters; each time an elder shares his recollections with a young God, he in fact creates a new history” (Knight 2007, 188). These myriad histories lead

to myriad interpretations of the culture, which inevitably manifest in members debating the nature of “right and exact” in relation to the teachings and to the culture as a whole.

There appears to be two distinct Five Percent divisions, or denominations, that have emerged within the culture. These divisions are based on the orientation of the participants toward what Wakeel Allah calls “their organizational ancestry or 'the Root'”(2009a, 291). One faction “see themselves as an extension of the NOI [and] tend to embrace the fundamental concepts of NOI theology. These Five Percenters believe that Allah's original intent and purpose... were to spread the teachings of Islam (as taught in the NOI lessons) to the 'babies' in the street who didn't attend the Mosque” (W Allah 2009a, 291). Wakeel Allah is one of the most visible proponents of this faction. Though his two volume history, *In The Name of Allah*, is often cited on Five Percent websites, Knight insists that “Wakeel Allah's work has been widely rejected by NGE Five Percenters as little more than NOI propaganda” (Knight 2011, 186). Whether this attitude toward Wakeel Allah is a widespread reality or a consequence of the company that Knight keeps is unclear. What is clear is that Wakeel Allah's intention is to establish a new orthodoxy within the Nation of Gods and Earths which privileges his own understanding of the culture.

The other faction sees themselves more as a division of the NOI, believing that Father Allah left the NOI because of a fundamental difference of opinion regarding theological doctrine. These “divisional Five Percenters” generally cite the NOI worship of Fard Muhammad as the impetus for Allah's departure and distance themselves from any association with the NOI (W Allah 2009a).

Interestingly, Prince A Cuba argues that “the 'Nation of Gods and Earths' was itself an offshoot of the Five Percenters, founded in the 1980's, that somehow took over the movement” (Knight 2007, 200). This attitude is not widely accepted and the general understanding is that the term “Five Percenter” was originally an appellation for Allah's followers which evolved, through time, into the title Nation of Gods and Earths, but that these terms are interchangeable.

Previous to his death, Father Allah “declared an end to the ordaining of ministers and warned to avoid leaders whose teachings were not 'right and exact” (Knight 2007, 89). Since the Father left no written exegesis and there is no universally accepted understanding of the nature of “right and exact”, no officially sanctioned leaders have emerged in the organization. Those who wish to further codify Five Percenter practice must navigate within this framework. Though no structured leadership emerged from Malik Al Hadi's efforts to establish a prescribed hierarchy within the tradition, the reification process has created a mythological chain of authority stretching back to the first followers of Allah, who have become known as the First Nine Born (Nuruddin 2006; Knight 2007, 2011; W Allah 2009a). Like Jesus' Apostles, the First Born are considered to have authoritative understanding of the teachings by virtue of their proximity to the Father. Prince A Cuba, a vocal critic of the reification process within the Five Percent, describes this phenomenon:

Jesus 'Apostles,' like Allah's 'First Born' went on to produce a mythology surrounding his person, while essentially developing their own privileged priesthood, with their own status highlighted by the sanctity attached to the absent deity, and their association with him...As Jesus' own “first-born to knowledge' had him walking on water and changing

water into wine, we have had our own 'apostles'
claiming miracles on 125th Street.

(Knight 2007, 198)

Knight notes that “one Five Percenter text even refers to Clarence as Christ” (Knight 2007, 10). This is ironic as Father Allah taught that every black man is his own God, and equating Allah with Christ is essentially transforming him into the mystery God against whom Father Allah himself railed. Prince A Cuba sees “the First Born as part of the Five Percent's reification into an organized religion, providing the basis for a 'priesthood' and thus antithetical to Five Percenter egalitarianism” (Knight 2011, 189). This kind of mythologizing further undermines the Five Percenter assertion that their practice is not a religion, and serves to support Albanese's model. The First Born and the mythology surrounding both them and Father Allah become part of a shared origin story, the foundation of the Nation of Gods and Earths creed.

The lack of a priesthood or organized hierarchy in the organization has resulted in the development of a system of prostheletization. It is incumbent on participants to bring new Gods into the fold, with every new convert pledging to teach ten others younger than himself and this element of the culture is codified in the plus lesson *What We Teach* (Appendix F). This practice is one of the reasons why the Five Percent is able to maintain such a strong influence over the urban black population, but also why it is largely unable to transcend that milieu in any meaningful way. By relying on oral transmission and individually sponsored conversion, the Five Percent limit their audience to the community to which they already belong. The lack of a written scripture means that they have been unable

to fully disseminate the teachings beyond their associates and friends of friends. With the advent of the internet and the efforts of authors like Abdul Noor these limits are being expanded, but there is a backlash within the culture against the written codification of the lessons. Again, this backlash is fueled by the lack of hierarchical authority within the group. There is no central body deciding what is right and exact, therefore it is difficult for those who are outside of the geographical range of a Parliament meeting to know whether their understanding conforms to what might be considered NGE orthodoxy.

The Nation of Gods and Earths presents a unique case study for the discussion of religion. The culture does not adhere to textbook definitions of Islam, but exhibits many attributes of New Religious Movements. The organization was founded by and continues to be influenced by a charismatic leader who unveiled a new revelation which structures the theology of the culture. The organization of participants in the culture is executed by the laity and there is no administrative body or priesthood. Participants use repurposed Islamic language but do not consider themselves Muslim. The culture is often characterized as violent by outside observers. The theology of the Nation of Gods and Earths rejects the orthodoxy of the Nation of Islam and is in the process of reification, which entails a codification of creeds, codes, and cultus and the development of a uniquely Five Percenter orthodoxy. This orthodoxy conforms to Albanese's "four c's" model of religion. They have a distinctive creed which includes a complicated origin story. Their scripture prescribes a code by which participants govern their everyday lives. The practice of building, the act of attending Parliament, and the various prayers and hymns that have evolved within

the culture present a unique cultus. All of these factors combine to describe a vibrant Five Percenter community which, despite the protestations of group members, can be characterized as religious according to Albanese's model.

Chapter 3

“Neither Pro-Black Nor Anti-White”:

Understandings of Race In the Nation Of Gods And Earths

Discussions of race are difficult in any context. Many sociologists and anthropologists argue that race is a social rather than a biological construct (Cox 1948; Austin 2003). Within this understanding, “beliefs and practices create race... therefore there is no objective race outside of the operative beliefs and practices within a social context” (Austin 2003, 53). However, increasingly biological factors, particularly improved understandings of DNA haplotypes, are causing theorists to reconsider the social constructionist position. Numerous articles have been written in opposition to social constructionism, arguing either for a biological basis for racial construction, or for a non-essentialist concept of race that includes both biological and social construction (Smaje 1997; Gabard and Cooper 1998; Morning 2007). Contemporary biologically based arguments tend to include tacit acceptance of the idea that race relations do, in practice, include elements of social construction. Austin suggests that “races are socially constructed when people believe that different categories of people have essential, heritable differences.... For example, the idea of the Curse of Ham for understanding blackness is as essentialist as any biological theory” (2003, 54). Regardless of which side of this debate one adheres to, the idea of race remains in dialogue. Michael Muhammad Knight argues that the essentialized social constructionist view of race is a consequence of unseen privilege. For Knight, “to deny race is actually a prime example of white privilege; it's a choice that only

white people get to make, because American culture already treats whiteness as generic humanity. If a white person chooses to no longer 'identify' as white, nothing changes in his or her life or the privileges that s/he receives" (2011, 70). For the purposes of this discussion it is important to think of race as having some kind of biological construction, but of racism as entirely socially constructed. That is, though race itself may be a biological reality, a sociological construct, or a combination of both, the superiority or inferiority of any given race is entirely a societal construction.

For the Nation of Gods and Earths, "'race' functions as a resource to make allies in constituting sameness while also relationally marking difference" (Ndlovu 2012, 146). Race is essential in the construction of Albanese's "community". Racial theory unites members of the NGE. It is the foundation of the theology which forms the body of NGE creed. In practice, Five Percenters are pluralistic, but particular understandings of race and race relations are essential to the construction of Godhood in the tradition. Five Percenters are free to incorporate Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, or New Age beliefs into their practice, but they must keep in mind that the concept of the black man as God supersedes all of these teachings (Knight 2007). Furthermore, racial understandings enforce boundaries on the codes of conduct by which Five Percenters structure their lives, delineating rules for marriage and economic participation and association. Race figures prominently in Five Percenter origin stories, providing a basis for NGE creeds. Racial understandings also inform the cultic practices of NGE participants.

The manner in which the NGE privileges black people essentially

juxtaposes dominant constructions of race in America. In a very real sense, in a country where the memory of slavery has not faded from the imaginations of the people, the NGE is transvaluing the slave-master relationship (Nietzsche 1967). Nietzsche talks about transvaluation in relation to Jews and Romans but the idea can easily be applied to black nationalists and white society. Essentially, transvaluation occurs when a suppressed group refigures its values to privilege its own attributes and demonize those of the oppressive group. Five Percenter believe that white culture sees blacks as inferior, uneducated, and uncultured. The construction of race in Five Percenter culture allows black people to upend this perception and to see themselves as superior to their white counterparts. The seed of this racial construction was present in the lineage long before the Father broke from the Nation of Islam in 1964. Decades previously, Noble Drew Ali taught both that “racial purity was necessary to black redemption” (Curtis 2009, 74), and that “being a good Moor meant keeping both foreign blood and foreign creeds out of the 'nation'” (Curtis 2009, 73). Though the Father relaxed restrictions on foreign creed, allowing a pluralistic approach to practice, the emphasis on maintaining racial purity has continued through the lineage and has been codified in teachings that eschew intermarriage and race mixing (Noor 2002, Knight 2007; SU Allah 2009; W Allah 2009a). These proscriptions against racial mingling constitute a lived code, which supports Albanese's model of religion.

Understandings of race within the Nation of Gods and Earths hinge on two particular teachings: the Yakub origin story, and the idea of the Asiatic black man. This chapter will explore these two aspects of NGE theology in detail, and will then discuss some problematic elements of the teachings, specifically the

underlying orientalist and implicitly racist elements of both the Yakub story and the Asiatic black race theory. Finally, this chapter will discuss the NGE's relationship with white people and how the lived tradition reinforces or differs from the theological tradition.

THE YAKUB ORIGIN STORY

The Nation of Gods and Earths have an elaborate and detailed origin story which they inherited from the Nation of Islam. Five Percenters believe that the black man has existed on earth for 66 trillion years (Muhammad 1965). The “original humans were black people and they founded the city of Mecca. Among them was a group of twenty-four scientists, one of whom created the 'especially strong black tribe of Shabazz” (Gallagher 2004, 139). The Tribe of Shabazz settled in the regions of the Nile Valley in Egypt, and in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. This mythology originated before the Nation of Islam, in the teachings of Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple. Ali located Mecca in the land of Canaan, and taught that the ancestors of African Americans were granted permission by the Egyptian Pharaoh “to settle in the northwest, where they founded a Moorish or Moroccan empire which comprised the rest of Africa and Atlantis” (Deutsch 2001, 197). The historical trajectory of the Five Percent, in combination with Five Percenters' pluralistic approach to practice, has resulted in this understanding permeating Five Percent thought, and being disseminated into what Nuruddin calls “urban mythology” (2006, 127).

The NGE origin story concerns a “big headed” mad scientist named Yakub. Yakub lived 6000 years ago at a time when black people were the only race on earth and lived in a technological utopia that is often associated with the

lost continent of Atlantis. Buck describes Yakub's ascent:

Born in the year 8400, Yacub discovered the law of magnetism at the age of six. As polar opposites attract, magnetism inspired Yacub to create a race that was the polar opposite of Blacks. By so doing, he would create a human magnetic force field... When the book of Genesis says, 'Let us make man,' these were Yacub's words, not God's. Yacub accomplished this by means of a nefarious birth control law designed to favor light-skinned offspring over black-skinned infants. Yacub forbade Black couples to marry. But if one partner was brown in color, they could. If they gave birth to a black child, doctors were to 'put a needle in its brain and feed it to a wild animal or give it to the cremator.' Within 200 years no more Black babies were born. After Yacub's death at age 150, this process of favoring lighter-skinned offspring continued.

(Buck 2009, 126)

After 600 years this process resulted in the creation of the white race. Ultimately, Yacub's experiment went awry. White people became aggressive and tried to overtake their creators. They were then banished from the lands of the Original man, escaping to live for 2000 years in caves in "the hills of West Asia, the place they now call Europe" (Muhammad 1965, 117). Malcolm X taught that during this period of time, white people were so uncivilized and morally bankrupt that their women mated with dogs (Buck 2009). Eventually, according to Nation of Islam theology, Allah "sent Moses to civilize the white race and it was prophesied that they would rule the earth for six thousand years, up until the present time" (Gallagher 2004, 139). Though Five Percenters have rejected the idea of the transcendent nature of Allah, the basic outline of the story is still taught. The Yakub origin story permeates all aspects of NGE racial understanding. It is the

basis for the understanding of black people as the original race and for the teaching that the white man is the devil, both fundamental tenets of the theology of the Five Percent and perhaps the clearest indicator that the NGE demonstrate the presence of religious creed as defined by Albanese.

THE ASIATIC BLACK RACE

The Nation of Islam taught that African Americans were lost members of the Tribe of Shabazz, the original black nation of Asia (Essian-Udom 1964; Muhammad 1965; Deutsch 2001). The Nation of Gods and Earths maintain these beliefs. There are two questions that arise from this teaching. Firstly, what is meant by the term “black”? Secondly, why are black people associated not with Africa, but with Asia?

Algernon Austin argues that in approaching the foundational teachings of the Nation of Islam, “we see that its religious teachings did not put forward a black identity as it is conventionally understood” (2003, 53). Throughout the literature on the NGE one finds the assertion that Five Percenters are neither pro-black nor anti-white. However, Austin asserts that “The Nation (of Islam) was clearly anti-white, but it was not pro-black in the sense that these characterizations would imply” (2003, 52). “Black” in NGE parlance takes on a more nuanced and broader definition than popular understanding upholds. Furthermore, “Black” is connected to Asiatic nationality. This complicated understanding necessitates a reformation of terms. As we have seen in chapter two of this thesis, this kind of reformative linguistic play is a feature of New Religious Movements. Interestingly, NGE teachings decry the practice of language manipulation by the dominant culture while simultaneously using the

same techniques to privilege themselves. Noor's anthology states that "...it is a common practice of the Europeans to decimate and destroy nations. Part of that destruction comes from the robbing of the aboriginal peoples name, language and culture. They deliberately change names to fit their desires that create identity crises in the victims of this cruel oppression" (Noor 2002, 199). The Nation of Gods and Earths participates in essentializing race and negating other cultures by including all non-white peoples in the definition of who is black. The group disseminates an understanding of black racial superiority that juxtaposes perceived dominant constructions of race relations while upholding the position that one race is better than the other. This understanding conforms with the historical trajectory of the NGE, having been inherited from the teachings of the Moorish Science Temple. Curtis notes that "Drew Ali's use of national and ethnic categories represented a reframing of the derogatory terms often associated with black people in the 1920's" (2009, 73), but that Ali furthered his argument and "seemed to support notions of Asiatic superiority and chosenness. The Asiatics were of a 'Divine origin,' he said" (2009, 75). The NGE assertion that the Asiatic black man is god and the white man is the devil seems to continue Ali's racist teachings. Moorish Science thus set the stage for the NGE's approach to race. Curtis explains: "Synthesizing and rewriting various parts of ancient history Noble Drew Ali explained the African Americans were the Moorish descendants of an ancient Asiatic race; their creed was Islam" (2009, 73). Moorish Science was the first creed to teach that all dark skinned people are Asiatic. According to Deutsche,

Noble Drew Ali asserted that African Americans were actually 'olive skinned' and 'Asiatic,' or to be more specific, they belonged to the 'Asiatic Nation of North America.' As such, they were members of a pan-Asiatic group of peoples which includes Egyptians, Arabians, Japanese, Chinese, Indians, the inhabitants of South and Central America, Turks and Persians.

(2001, 196)

This teaching illustrates that, in opposition to Afrocentric understandings that locate the genesis of black culture among African populations, the racial concepts inherited by the NGE conflate all non-white culture into a single, pan-Asiatic race.

The superiority of one race over another is in keeping with the larger Afrocentrist position, which often cites the highly advanced state of the Egyptian culture as one support for the teaching that black people have a rich cultural inheritance. Harris notes that “the Afrocentrist point, however, is not simply that the Egyptians were as inventive and intelligent as Europeans. Rather the point is that they were more inventive and intelligent than Europeans and that Europe owes its own belated advances toward civilization to black Africans” (1999, 118). Unlike Afrocentric understandings of racial origins, however, the Nation of Gods and Earths, like the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam before them, locate the nucleus of the black race in Asia. “Instead of reifying Africa as their cultural, geographic, and discursive center,” Deutsch argues, the NGE “transform Africa into a part of Asia” (2001, 203). Furthermore, the definition of black was broadened and served to “unite all nonwhite peoples under the 'Asiatic' umbrella” (Knight 2007, 28). More particularly, the NGE teaches that “Arabic is the

Original tongue of the Blackman who originated in Asia” (*NGE Proclamation of Intent* in Noor 2002, 171). Thus within the Nation of Gods and Earths, the Asiatic black person is understood as any non-white person and, whether or not they speak it or are aware of it, their ancestral language was Arabic. From the perspective of the academic discipline of linguistics, this teaching is not supported. According to linguistic theory, the proto-Semitic language that would develop into Arabic had its origins in the late bronze age, which contrasts with the NGE's assertion that the Asiatic black race has existed for 66 trillion years (Rendsburg et al 2008).

The Asiatic black race theory was adopted from Moorish Science by the Nation of Islam. Elijah Muhammad denied the existence of the “negro” race. Instead he informed his followers: “...you are not a Negro. You are members of the Asiatic Nation, from the Tribe of Shabazz. There is no such thing as a race of Negroes” (Austin 2003, 56). Austin notes that for Elijah Muhammad, “the Asiatic Black Nation referred to all the peoples to the south and east of Western Europe and all people who were believed to have ancestry among these peoples” (Austin 2003, 56). The Asiatic black nation is thus a conflation of all non-white cultures originating outside of Western Europe. For Austin,

the concept of Asiatic not only presents Northern Africa as part of the same racial and cultural unit as sub-Saharan Africa but all of Africa as part of the 'Orient' or Asiatic Nation. The ultimate rationale for this view is that all the peoples in the Asiatic Black Nation are descendants of the Tribe of Shabazz from Mecca.

(2003, 56)

This concept is expressed in the article *Black is Beautiful* by the Five Percenter

Supreme Understanding Allah. Allah stresses “the global diversity of Blackness” and illustrates his point with pictures of people from of East Asian (South Indian, Bangladeshi), Middle Eastern, Mexican, Australian Aborigine, Native American and Southeast Asian (Japanese, Indonesian, Chinese) descent (SU Allah 2009, 27). It becomes obvious throughout the literature that “black” is being used in two ways. Austin notes that for those in the lineage in discussion, “Black’ could refer to all non-whites, Asiatics, or it could refer specifically to a black race, in the more conventional American sense” (2003, 57). Blackness is both revered and problematized by the Nation of Gods and Earths.

Despite its ostensible inclusivity, the Asiatic black nationalist tradition exhibits some ellipses. Essian-Udom found that “despite teachings of commonality, Middle Easterners and Asians were not generally allowed into the Nation's mosques” (Essian-Udom 1963, 185). Additionally, the tradition shows a strong preference for Arabic speaking nations over those of Sub-Saharan Africa (Essian-Udom 1963; Deutsch 2001). This tendency may stem from the belief that “the 'culture' of the Asiatic Black Nation was mainly Islam. All people of colour were said to be Muslims by nature”, and therefore non-Muslim Sub-Saharan Africa is thought to have strayed from the true nature of its origins (Austin 2003, 58). Within this understanding, therefore, the Asiatic tradition sees “culture as a racial essence” (Austin 2003, 58). These ideas are often conflated in the imaginations of the practitioners, to the degree that Essian-Udom encountered a member who “listed “Asiatic” for his race and “Muslim” for his nationality on a college application” (1963, 264).

Though the Five Percent inherited the theory of the Asiatic black race

from Moorish Science and the Nation of Islam, the movement did not adopt the concept wholeheartedly. Elijah Muhammad taught that W.D. Fard Muhammad was a member of the Asiatic black race. Fard Muhammad's biography is complex and difficult to decipher, but he was variously reported to be of Afghan, Spanish, New Zealander, and Saudi Arabian origin, among others (Essian-Udom 1963; Lee 1996; Knight 2007). Fard Muhammad was visibly light skinned, and regardless of the reality of his origin, "his official biography would depict him as the son of a black man named Alphonso and Baby Gee, a white woman of the Caucus Mountains, who gave birth to him in Mecca" (Knight 2007, 21). Father Allah took umbrage with the categorization of Fard as a black man. The mythology of the origins of the Five Percent insists that one of the main reasons that Father Allah broke with the Nation of Islam was his inability to rationalize the disparity between the teaching that the black man is God, and the fact that the NOI were worshipping a half original man (Knight 2007; SU Allah 2009; W Allah 2009a). Seemingly this story indicates that Father Allah founded the Five Percent in part as a means to enforce an even stricter policy of race relations than that of the original Nation of Islam. This strict racial position now serves to proscribe the boundaries of community as defined in Albanese's model. It delineates who can and who cannot belong to the community.

Though there appears to be some disparity between the inclusivity of the definition of Asiatic and the practice of inclusion among the population, many Five Percenters understand the teaching as one that "empowers people of all ethnic groups" (SU Allah 2009, 29). Sha-King Cehum Allah, a Latino Five Percenter, explains his understanding of the NGE's racial teachings: "'Black' is

typically seen as just a 'color' and most often associated with 'skin' color, but it isn't a stagnant or fixed idea. It is dynamic. What is 'Black' in social standards varies with countries and cultures....” (SU Allah 2009, 34). Sha-King goes on to argue that

The word 'black' has more of a political connotation for us as human beings, especially nowadays, so someone who is referred to as 'Black' isn't literally 'black'. And within the Nation of Gods and Earths we use it to define all people of color, regardless of their shade, as a term of solidarity and reverence for our common origin, whether cosmic or in terms of civilizations.

(SU Allah 2009, 35)

Here Sha-King illustrates how ideas of blackness define the nature of community in NGE culture, again reinforcing the applicability of Albanese's model of religion to the Nation of Gods and Earths. Sha-King finds a feeling of inclusion in the lessons and stresses that “it has been the traditional perspective, of the Nation of Gods and Earths, of Latinos as being 'Native American' and the Original owners of the Americas” (SU Allah 2009, 35). Though this teaching gives Sha-King a sense of belonging, I wonder what the people who inhabited North America before European colonization might think of it. For Native Americans, the Spanish were a colonizing force whose oppressive regime mirrors the perceived relationship between white oppressors and black citizens that the NGE propagates, destroying their language and culture and forcing them into ghetto communities. One NGE lesson asks: “Why have the names African and Africa been labeled to Blacks?” The answer is: “So that the oppressors can isolate and detach Original people from the much larger context of Original

people across the whole planet” (Noor 2002, 200). The NGE attempts to redress this perceived problem by essentializing and conflating race in a way that negates the individual cultures and traditions of those peoples whom they consider Original. If Latino's are Native Americans, what place does that leave for Native Americans themselves? Furthermore, if Native Americans are part of the Asiatic race, the true language of Asiatics is Arabic, and the true culture of Asiatics is Islam, what becomes of Native American languages, cultures, and religious practices?

The racial teachings of the Nation of Gods and Earth are not entirely cohesive and contain many elements of both Orientalism, and of internalized racism. Deutsch observes that proponents of the Asiatic ideology “on the one hand...resemble those colonized individuals who appropriated Orientalist discourse for their own individual and cultural empowerment, while on the other, they resemble scholarly European Orientalists who never set foot in the East” (2001, 200). The Nation of Gods and Earths evokes an Asia that never was, one with a unified culture and language that neglects the reality of Asian diversity. This aspect of the Asiatic race theory may be a consequence of the tradition's history. Moorish Science and the Nation of Islam have strong historical connections to both Freemasonry and Theosophy. Both of these organizations have demonstrably Orientalist leanings (Nance 2002; Berg 2005; Nuruddin 2006). The problem as White sees it is that “African American nationalist contestation over the image of Africa often unconsciously accepts many of the terms of dominant discursive strategies, even when it attempts to move beyond the limits set by racist ideology” (2001, 480). Both the Yakub myth and the concept of the

Asiatic black race present a world where one race is superior to another. They invert the dominant paradigm, but in doing so they uphold ideas of racial supremacy and reinforce hierarchical structures rather than breaking down the fundamental elements of oppression that the NGE purports to challenge.

INTERNALIZED RACISM

Five Percenters teach that all Asiatics are descendents of the biblical Ham. Ham was one of Noah's sons who, because of his bad behavior, was cursed to "be a slave unto his brothers" (Genesis 9:25). This is the same biblical passage that was used by proponents of slavery to justify the oppression of black people as both natural and divinely ordained. This teaching follows Noble Drew Ali's assertion that slavery was a result of "moral and national decline among the Moors themselves....By not being true to their heritage and its obligations, said Drew Ali, blacks had suffered the worst of fates: They did not know who they were and instead accepted the labels of their oppressors" (Curtis 2009, 74). The teaching that the Asiatic black race is descendent from Ham reinforces the idea that black people are somehow implicitly guilty for their own enslavement.

The Five Percent also embrace teachings that denigrate African-American's physical characteristics. Nuruddin explains that "the Tribe of Shabazz adapted to the climate and environment of the African wilds, but their phenotypes changed as a result. The Tribe's straight hair was turned coarse and kinky, and its fine features were deformed into thick lips and broad noses" (2006, 156). African-American physical traits are seen as an aberration. Malcolm X, whose teachings continue to influence the Five Percent and whose name is constantly evoked throughout Five Percent literature, taught that

before the Original People 'wandered down into the jungles of Africa', their 'hair [was] like silk, and originally all our people had that kind of hair'. He explained that after living in the jungles of Africa, 'our hair became stiff, like it is now', and 'we undertook new features that we have now' This move to sub-Saharan Africa also led to a decline in the Original People's level of civilization.

(Austin 2003, 57)

Additionally, "Master Fard Muhammad saw Africans as a people who had 'strayed away from civilization and are living a jungle life'" (Austin 2003, 57).

Within this understanding Africa becomes a place of denigration and shame rather than the crucible of civilization. The revisionist Asiatic perspectives serve to reinforce both orientalist beliefs about an idealized Asia, as well as traditionally racist understandings of Africa as uncivilized. Through the teaching of the Yakub story, Five Percenters internalize their own oppression. Nuruddin argues that "the tale of Yakub is one which seeks to explain the origin of racial oppression, and which reduces the status or mystique of the oppressor by revealing his less than noble beginnings" (Nuruddin 2006, 150). While this is true, the tale also furthers a kind of implicit guilt by placing blame for the creation of the white race of oppressors on a black man.

Five Percenters are not uniform in their discomfort with "black" physical features, however, as indicated by the tendency of some Five Percenters to elevate black skin to an ideal state. Some Five Percenters reinforce the concept of black supremacy by promoting a belief that has come to be known as Melanin theory.

Harris summarizes this theory:

Melanin in the skin and muscles acts like a semiconductor. It traps free energy from the

environment and thus accounts for the extra speed and agility of black athletes. Neuromelanin stimulates the immune system, expands memory and consciousness, and gives rise to higher forms of spirituality that we call 'soul'.... It is no exaggeration to say that the development of all life was dependent on melanin and that possession of melanin defines the very essence of humanity: to be human is to be black.

(1999, 123-124)

This theory places authority for black racial supremacy firmly in a biological framework. For adherents of Melanin theory, “the pigment melanin not only controls skin color and protects against solar radiation, but bestows special powers that are proportionate to the density of an individual's melanin supply” (Harris 1999, 123). Wise Intelligent of the rap group Poor Righteous Teachers reflects the belief in Melanin theory when he states that “the potency of the melanin in the black man makes him naturally rhythmic” (Alim 2007, 50). This theory is propagated both by factions of the Nation of Gods and Earths and by other black nationalist organizations, but the theory lacks scientific validation. Biologically, “melanin...cannot be responsible for athletic prowess because it does not occur in muscle tissue.... while melanin does occur in the human brain as neuromelanin, it forms as a byproduct in the biosynthesis of adrenaline and has no known function” (Harris 1999, 124). Much like the teaching that Arabic is the original language, melanin theory has no support in academic frameworks.

These teachings are extremely problematic. For Pan-African scholar Melina Abdullah, “the problem with most feminist and race-based movements has been the desire to achieve the status of the oppressor.” She insists that “in essence, such movements are largely reformist rather than revolutionary” (Keiler-

Bradshaw 2010, 34). Nuruddin makes a similar observation. He argues that

the NOI, for all their bold proclamations of blackness, exhibited certain aspects of internalized racism in their doctrine. There was a level of psychic discomfort with, or even hatred for, Africa and African ancestry because of all the Western pejorative stereotypes of the continent and its peoples. Hence the Lessons of the NOI speak of the Asiatic Black Man rather than the African Black Man, and African hair texture and facial features were denigrated.

(2006, footnote 58, 156)

These inherited teachings permeate the Nation of Gods and Earths and result in many Five Percenters unconsciously internalizing negative racial imagery.

RELATIONSHIP TO WHITES

Five Percenters often talk about the oppressive practices of the white hegemony as “pins and needles”, referring to the method that was used to put black babies to death during Yakub's grafting process. For Five Percenters, “white supremacy plants its pins and needles deep into a child's head, writing every script for how that child will deal with the world” (Knight 2011, 45).

Despite this entrenched mistrust of white society it is widely believed that Father Allah radically departed from Nation of Islam racist teachings by stating that he was “‘neither pro-black nor anti-white’ and even allowed whites to become Five Percenters” (Knight 2007, xiii). Knight insists that Allah taught that “anybody can be a Five Percenter...white, I don't care what they are, could be a Five Percenter, 'cus a Five Percenter is one that is civilized [sic]” (Knight 2007, 112). Knight insists that his experience with the Nation of Gods and Earths is consistent with this teaching. “Five Percenters never mistreated me,” he states. “I was

welcomed with hospitality and even friendship, and more than one god told me that I was not the devil at all” (Knight 2011, 12). Knight encountered some factions of the NGE who taught that “white Five Percenters had the potential to be gods. Some black gods do allow for white gods, but this remains a fringe position that will get bombed quick at most parliaments; an even smaller number suggest that white gods can also use the name Allah” (2011, 64). Knight also encountered “Five Percenters in Milwaukee who taught a nonracial interpretation of the lessons, in which ancestry had no bearing on divinity. In their interpretation, the treatment of race as a genuine means of dividing people kept everyone, black and white, 'trapped in 6' and unable to reach 7(God)” (2011, 65). Knight's experience is evidence that some elements of the Five Percent recognize the inconsistency in the dualistic insistence that Father Allah taught both that whites are devils, and that whites can become Five Percenters.

Keiler-Bradshaw's experience with Earths illustrates the disparate positions that are held by individual Five Percenters. One of Keiler-Bradshaw's participants, Jewel, states: “I think white people can be civilized and taught. We have a white guy here getting knowledge... There is an opportunity for them to change, so I acknowledge they should be taught” (2010, 101). Natural, however, believes that white people “are part of the human family but they are like my sickly babies... they are Earths diseased children” (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 101). Natural's position upholds a sense of racial superiority that undermines both Jewel's understanding and Allah's teaching, though within the anarchistic, pluralistic framework of the NGE, neither woman's opinion can be considered more or less valid.

Noor's collection of teachings also contains seemingly oppositional assertions. The teachings insist that Five Percenters must avoid race mixing. The definition of race mixing is never stated, but it is implied that Original people are not to intermarry with whites. This teaching is complicated by the understanding that a person of biracial origin, though carrying Caucasian DNA, still qualifies as a member of the Asiatic race. Thus race mixing is forbidden but the product of race mixing is acceptable. Noor's lessons go on to pose the question: who can become a Five Percenter? The answer is stated:

Anyone, 5%er is a sociological term that is applied to that percentage of people who are striving to achieve the 12 jewels of Islam and base their life on the foundation of the supreme mathematics. God, Muslims, civilized persons and Muslim sons. Yes, there are even members of the Caucasian race who are recognized as members of the 5%. We are neither pro-black, nor anti-white, but we are pro-truth and advocate unity for peace.

(Noor 2002, 172)

This seemingly inclusive statement is undermined by the very next teaching, which states:

If a white person can become a 5%er does this make them righteous? Emphatically no! It has been taught by the wise scientist of the east and Allah's Messenger the Hon. Elijah Muhammad that even though the Caucasian race can study our culture, he is still devil and therefore there can be no righteousness found within him. But under our guidance and study we would let him come amongst us and do trading.

(Noor 2002, 172)

Again, these teachings appear to present a schizophrenic blueprint for race relations. The NGE is neither pro-black, nor anti-white, but they clearly argue for

a social hierarchy based on race. The highest echelons of this hierarchy exclude white people, no matter how sympathetic those white people may be to the teachings of the Nation of Gods and Earths.

The racial teachings of the Nation of Gods and Earth serve to further illuminate the syncretic and pluralistic nature of Five Percenter belief and practice. White notes that Five Percenters and other “African-American nationalists attempt to protect themselves from negative images at the same time that they try to set the terms of appropriate behavior within the black community” (2001, 481). The question is whether the racist teachings of the NGE manage to achieve this. Certainly they outline a prescription for both racial understanding and race relations. However, the disparity between the underlying racism entrenched in both the Yakub myth and the Asiatic identity theory, and the teaching of black supremacy reinforces traditional hierarchical structures and prevents Five Percent theology from being truly revolutionary. Despite this, individual Five Percenters are able in some cases to transcend the limitations of the wider body of teachings. Both within the Five Percent, and in society in general, “individual identities are not only complex, but are always in a state of becoming” (Maylor 2012, 157). Anaya McMurray expresses this nuanced understanding of identity in her music. Commenting on her work, she argues that “I call attention to my views of race when I say, 'my double consciousness is multiplied exponential'. This is a way of acknowledging an intersectional consciousness that gives credence to gender, class, and other identities...as opposed to just racial consciousness” (McMurray 2007, 84). McMurray's work illustrates the fact that, though the teachings may be essentialist, individuals

negotiate them in a pluralistic manner.

Though the nuances of NGE theology are both complicated and controversial, White argues that “African-Americans...construct and reconstruct collective political memories of African culture to build a cohesive group that can shield them from racist ideology and oppression” (2001, 174). Deutsch furthers this argument by claiming that, at its core, the purpose of “the ideology of the Asiatic Black Man may be seen as an internal narrative within the African American community whose goal was to create an alternative national consciousness to the one promoted by racist mainstream society” (2001, 200). He states that

pan-African and pan-Asiatic identities should be seen as two powerful, if complicated, responses to the same phenomenon – racist efforts to erase the history, dignity, and even the very humanity of African Americans. By linking themselves to a place (whether it be Africa or Asia) and to a narrative beyond the confines of the American experience, the descendants of slaves were able to see themselves as kings and queens.

(Deutsch 2001, 204)

In their effort to redress the crasures perpetrated by white culture, however, Five Percenters subsequently erase the cultures of all of the individual nations that fall under the umbrella of the Asiatic black race. They reinforce notion of racial supremacy and participate in orientalist essentializing of Asia and Asiatic culture. Their claims are largely unsupported by academic research, and their efforts serve only to redirect rather than revolutionize societal structures of oppression. In terms of Albanese's model of religion, however, the NGE's racialist views serve as a code by which community is cohesed. Racialist views inform the world view of

Five Percent participants and serve to structure creedal elements of the culture like the Yakub story and the theory of the Asiatic origins of humanity.

Chapter 4:

“Secondary But Most Necessary”:

Gender Relations in The Nation of Gods and Earths

The role of heterosexism and patriarchy in the Nation of Gods and Earths confounds any singular understanding of how gender relations function amongst Five Percenter. Compounding this problem is the scarcity of literature on the NGE in general, making literature related to women in the NGE difficult to find (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010). As Keiler-Bradshaw observes, this dearth of information may, in part, be due to the Nation's own omission of the opinions of women “as the teachings of Allah did not encourage this” (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 16&18). Consequently, the voice of women in the Nation often goes unheard. This chapter will attempt to understand how women function in the NGE and will also address Five Percenter's attitude toward homosexuality. This chapter will also illustrate how the NGE's orientation toward women outline boundaries for community and serve to structure codes, creeds, and cultic activities within that community, therefore supporting the applicability of Catherine Albanese's model of religion in relation to the Nation of Gods and Earths.

EARTH'S HABITABLE PROPERTIES

The NGE's orientation toward women is in keeping with the historical trajectory of the Nation itself. Elijah Muhammad's Nation Of Islam had a problematic orientation toward women, which has been inherited by the NGE. NOI doctrine “taught that black women were both the mothers of civilization and “man's field to produce his nation”” (Simmons 2006, 186). The NGE carry this

concept to its logical end by transforming the idea of 'field' into the physical description of woman as 'Earth'.

Within the NGE, women are known as Earths or Moon. Nelson George notes that Earths “circled around their men and were intended as the soil in which black Gods planted their seed” (1999, 68). Women are the “habitable properties” in which the black man cultivates his progeny (SU Allah 2009, 200). Knight notes that “as Earth/Moon, the woman receives/reflects her man's light, but does not produce light of her own” (2011, 133). According to popular understanding within Five Percenter tradition, women are incapable of attaining knowledge of self on their own. Like the moon, they require the sun to enlighten them. One lesson, entitled *The Earth Degrees*, teaches:

The moon is often used in symbolic reference to a woman. The truth behind this connection is in the fact that the Moon is a dead planet, devoid of Islam, which is life....The Moon is, for the most part, deficient of water (Wisdom) and is therefore incapable of Understanding the true Power of God

(Noor 2002, 230)

This lesson, which informs the understanding of the members of the NGE, describes a kind of guru relationship between male Gods and female Earths. This relationship is apparently practically effective as “most Earths come in The Nation of Gods and Earths through male members” (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 91).

Women are represented by the number 6 in the Supreme Mathematics. The number 6 in the Supreme Math corresponds to “equality” (see Appendix A). The number 7 represents God. It is understood that women cannot progress past equality to reach godhood. Knight observes that “Equality is often seen as the

ceiling for both white people and black women, who are unable to pass 6 to reach 7 (God). A woman cannot transcend *her* Equality to take part in God's Equality” (Knight 2011, 135). It is understood that women cannot be God, they can only have knowledge of God. This is reflected in the greeting by an anonymous poster on the Five Percent website *Angelfire*: “Peace to the 7's and the 17's”. According to the Supreme Mathematics, this greeting translates as: Peace to the Gods and the Knowledge Gods. Women are conceived of as other than God, but complimentary. They are those who know God.

Five Percenters at times conflate black women and whites, particularly white men. There is a strain in Five Percenter thought that suggests that black women and white men conspire together to keep the black man down (Simmons 2006; Knight 2011). White women are, in theory, prohibited. Though there is an ongoing debate about whether white men can come to knowledge of self, there is a tacit understanding that there is no place in the Nation for white women. In practice, of course, there is some variation and there are definitely some Gods who carry on relationships with white women. Black women are treated with less suspicion than white women, but still, “the founder is said to have expressed his feelings that women have been put in a position of power over men. He cites his belief that women have been given the unlimited power to put men in prison” (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 65). Five Percenters often express a deep suspicion of women, and this suspicion is often associated with Father Allah and his teachings.

The attitude toward women in the Nation of Gods and Earths is couched in paternalistic language. Earths are expected to submit to their God, but they are also seen as “precious items to be *taken care of* and *protected*” (Knight 2007,

214). Keiler-Bradshaw notes that assertions of women's secondary nature are often followed by assertions that the black woman should be respected and loved, though she submits to the black man (2010). A phrase that is repeatedly found in Five Percenter literature expresses the idea that women are "secondary but most necessary" (SU Allah 2009; W Allah 2009a; Keiler-Bradshaw 2010; Knight 2011). Though the Five Percent posit this reciprocal relationship between the superior God and the subordinate Earth as privileging the black family, the idea has led Michael Muhammad Knight to remark that "the Five Percent family is a benevolent dictatorship in which the man rules until violating his social contract" (Knight 2007, 215). In fact, though the importance of the role of Earth as mother is repeatedly emphasized by Earths themselves, "it is common to hear the Gods say that they did not come from a woman, but through a woman, nearly discounting the role of the Earth in reproduction" (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 63).

The emphasis on the reproductive function of womanhood and her secondary nature is reinforced by the advocacy of polygamy for Gods. Marriage contracts are frowned upon, though Knight notes that "although Five Perceners did not marry under the government, marriage was not prohibited in the same sense as pork, heroin, or white women" (2007, 213). Father Allah himself split his time between the households of two women, one his legal wife, the other the mother of a number of his children. He also notoriously fathered a child by the girlfriend of one of his own sons (Knight 2007). For many in the Nation, "Allah's advocacy of polygamy has been intellectualized as part of a Darwinian struggle for racial survival" (Knight 2007, 212). However, there is more going on here than simple self preservation. Within Catherine Albanese's

model, polygamy can be seen as a code which structures the everyday lives of religious participants. Within the NGE, this codic element in turn informs NGE creeds, wherein women's sexuality and the dangers it engenders are highlighted. It is believed by many Gods that women use sexuality to gain power in relationships (Noor 2002). The lesson entitled "*The Four Devilish Mindsets of the Black Woman*" insists that "the Blackwoman has the tendency to desire everything in excess, money, poisonous food, men, sex, drugs and alcohol" and that she uses sex to attain these desires (Noor 2002, 226). The lesson "*The Earth Degrees*" furthers this by arguing that "the Blackwoman is taught to display her body as a form of attention getting and upon receiving that result, she falsely assumes this is her leverage for power in the relationship" (Noor 2002, 229). The NGE do not endorse birth control, as it is understood that a woman's primary duty is to bring forth the Gods' seed in order to build the nation. "*The Earth Degrees*" insists that "an Earth must not take in anything to her body that destroys her fertile soil (womb) such as birth control pills" (Noor 2002, 235). Her body, then, belongs not to herself, but to the Nation. One plus lesson directed at Earths gives specific instructions as to the mechanism of intercourse. Knight observes that the lesson

aims to regulate sexual relationships. The author taught that the missionary position caused an unfair exertion on men, resulting in a lowered life expectancy than that of females. Proper intercourse was achieved by man and woman both lying on their sides, the man's legs between those of the woman. It was also required that a woman have sex at least once in twenty eight days; otherwise, she'd become "high-strung" because she could not "release" like a man. The lesson also blames this inability to release as the cause of female

homosexuality.

(2009, 209)

The imperative to control the dangerous and volatile woman is an oft repeated theme in the codes and creeds of the Nation of Gods and Earths.

Earths are expected to be morally upright and demure. The Earth known as Righteous By Choice sets out a proscription for women's activity. An Earth

is an example of Refined Womanhood and does not 'lose' herself when in the company of uncivilized people... The Earth is humble yet firm, flexible but not weak, and confident but not cocky. She is a student and a teacher, thus will do the knowledge before ever manifesting a thought.

(SU Allah 2009, 105)

Modesty is important both mentally and physically. Five Percenters teach that because three quarters of the earth is covered by water, women should keep three quarters of their bodies covered up at all times (Knight 2007; SU Allah 2009; W Allah 2009a; Keiler-Bradshaw 2010). In Islam this idea is understood as the principle of al-hijab. In the Nation of Gods and Earths it is called wearing "refinement". Number 5 in the Supreme Mathematics is "Power/Refinement". Number 6 is "Equality" and is associated with women. It is necessary for women to wear refinement in order to progress toward equality, their desired ultimate state. Thus, the idea of wearing refinement is associated with ideas of female power, and again constitutes a code as defined by Albanese's model of religion.

Many NGE teachings express a desire to counter the emphasis in popular culture on women's independence. The creedal teaching entitled *Earth Degrees* asserts that "when we speak about the Blackwoman submitting her Will to God,

we are speaking about the idea of countering all of these contaminating ideas that she currently lives by, to live righteously under her God” (Noor 2002, 229). The independent spirit of the modern woman, informed by the legacy of the feminist movement, is unwelcome in the NGE. Instead, women's actions are to be restricted. This restriction also applies to education. Historically, black women have, on average, had a higher level of formal education than black men (Nain 2001). NGE teachings caution against this phenomenon, characterizing black women's education as a means by which they support and propagate white culture. The “Earth Degrees” again teach that women's “'higher level of education' is indicative of them spending money to knowledge the devil's culture and excel in his shallow and twisted curriculum” (Noor 2002, 231). Higher education here becomes part of what Keiler-Bradshaw characterizes as “the idea that women are some sort of negative force meant to 'bring down' black men (that) has been perpetuated in the Nation” (2010, 106).

EARTH AS GODDESS

There is a movement among some Earths toward an understanding of women not just as complimentary, but as fully realized Godheads in and of themselves. However, “women's use of the term Goddess to refer to themselves has been shunned by most Gods, as it puts women on equal par with men” (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 107). Knight supports this assertion, reporting that in the NGE mainstream, “the notion of a female god has been often dismissed as reversing the natural order, placing Wisdom in front of Knowledge” (Knight 2011, 132). In contrast to Gods who claim authority for gender oppression in the words and actions of Father Allah, some Earths invoke Father Allah's

hagiographic teachings as authority for claiming Goddess as their identity. Keiler-Bradshaw's study participant, Infinite, describes "an Elder Earth that claims the Father told her that she was a Goddess...and she was the first Earth and the only Earth that I know of, besides his sisters, that was directly taught by him. She actually walked with him" (2010, 108). Infinite claims knowledge of true Five Percenter teachings, locating the authority for her belief within a historical framework and invoking the founder of the tradition as the source of her authority. Historical authority in this case is complicated by the hagiographical nature of Father Allah's biography. There is a line of thought within the Five Percent that perceives an increase in postures of masculinity since the founding of the movement. Knight notes that a vocal God, "Prince A Cuba claims that F originally means 'Freedom' but had been changed to 'Father' to reflect a growing emphasis on patriarchy" (2007, 207). Whether this increase in conservative ideas of gender relations reflects an accurate historical shift is beyond the scope of this thesis, but a segment of NGE adherents believe it to be true.

Regardless of the reality of historical schisms, the idea of Earth as Goddess is prevalent enough within the Five Percent that one of the authors in the collection *Knowledge of Self* claims the righteous name Goddess Supreme. Another participant in Keiler-Bradshaw's study, Natural, "has had encounters with Gods at group meetings in which she was told to be silent in voicing her opinions about certain undisclosed issues in the group.... While some Gods came to her privately and expressed their support of her thoughts, they would never show this support in a group setting" (2010, 105). Orthopraxy is not uncommon in religion, or in society in general. It is not uncommon for "a single system of cultural

thought (to) assign to woman completely polarized and apparently contradictory meanings, since extremes, as we say, meet” (Ortner 1974, 85). The Nation of Gods and Earths, then, is not unique in its complicated codification of gender relations.

The majority of Earths see the relationship between men and women in the nation as symbiotic rather than hierarchical, allowing them to realize some level of comfort with their position in the organization (SU Allah 2009; Keiler-Bradshaw 2010). This does not change the fact that female participation in the Nation of Gods and Earths is disproportionately small, and that “the adult male-female ratio at your average Mecca parliament easily runs ten to one” (Knight 2007, 209). Though Gods are the primary means by which women come to the NGE, they do not welcome many women into the fold. The demographics of gender participation in the Nation of Gods and Earths strongly indicates that codes and creeds relating to gender work to structure the nature of, and to define the boundaries of community as defined by Albanese by restricting female participation in the culture.

NATURE VS. CULTURE

The patriarchal gender hierarchy enforced by members of the Nation of Gods and Earths is often described in naturalistic terms. That is, the subjugation of women is viewed as the natural state of humanity. Men are both physically and emotionally stronger than women. This is seen as a natural fact. The nature defense is the same as that which was “once was used to justify racial oppression and colonialism” (Knight 2007, 215). This is ironic in the case of the Nation of Gods and Earths as both white supremacy, against which the NGE's entire

ontology is positioned, and patriarchy work to create the impression that inequality is natural (Knight 2007).

Gemma Nain draws a distinction between patriarchy and sexism. She argues that “patriarchy is operationalized through the gendered division of labour in social production in both its vertical and horizontal manifestations. Sexism, on the other hand, refers to an ideology which assumes women's inferiority, and which legitimizes discrimination against them on the basis of their sex” (Nain 2001, 334). According to these definitions the NGE definitely participates in the reinforcement of patriarchal practices. Whether they also practice sexism requires a more nuanced analysis. As we have seen, doctrine and practice can differ quite radically across the group. Therefore it is most prudent to say that in practice there are Gods who are sexist and Gods who are not sexist. The experiential knowledge of the Earths in Keiler-Bradshaw’s study suggests a multiplicity of approaches. “Some were very forthright in their assertions of gender discrimination”, Keiler-Bradshaw reports. “Others recognized the issue, but attributed it to the reality of living in a patriarchal world, rather than specifically The Nation of Gods and Earths” (2010, 104). These Earths interpret patriarchy as universally pervasive and, therefore, secondary to the racial struggle. In a sense, the attitude that the patriarchy within the Nation of Gods and Earths is a natural part of human social structure is a tacit acknowledgment of its validity. It supports the idea that women's subservience is natural.

Nain's survey of black feminism cites a study that compares the income and education levels of white men, white women, black men, and black women. There is a “consensus that traditional feminism as defined by white women is

inappropriate in assessing the lived experiences of Black women” that informs Nain's work (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 28). The study found “greater homogeneity in employment along sex lines rather than along race lines...the income of black females actually surpassed that of white females, though all women lag behind black men who in turn lag behind white men” (Nain 2001, 341). The study found that gender disparity was more pronounced than racial differences. Based on these findings, Nain argues that “while racism is a significant factor in the differences between white and black men's earnings, it is sexism and the operationalization of patriarchy which crucially affects the earnings of all women in the USA” (Nain 2001, 341). Nain concludes that the privileging of racial issues over gender issues within the milieu of black feminism is part of a generalized “revisionist/pro-family backlash with feminism” as a whole (2001, 343).

Sherry Ortner's 1974 article *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* sheds some light on the nature of the gender disparity in the Nation of Gods and Earths. Ortner argues that

because of woman's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than man is. Yet in part because of her consciousness and participation in human social dialogue, she is recognized as a participant in culture. Thus she appears as something intermediate between culture and nature, lower on the scale of transcendence than man.

(1974, 76)

The NGE appears to reinforce this understanding. The idea of nature or the naturalness of women's subjugation is pervasive in NGE literature. The language

of nature surrounds Earths, to the point where one participant in Keiler-Bradshaw's study claims the righteous name "Natural". Righteous names are meant to reflect an ontological understanding of self, and it is important to note that no God has ever chosen the name "Natural" as this term is apparently reserved for Earths. Furthermore, one NGE lesson entitled *The Four Devilish Mindsets of the Black Woman* teaches that "the Black woman's true nature is that of submission and emotion, it is easy to see that outside of the light of her God her emotions are able to take over and become illogical" (Noor 2002, 224). Thus the binaries of nature verses culture are furthered by the association of emotion with nature and logic with culture. This discourse underscores almost all discussions of gender relationships in the NGE, where "the Earth is looked at as being 'emotional' rather than 'logical'" and is codified in NGE creeds (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 97).

Within the nature/culture discourse it is understood that "woman creates naturally from within her own being, whereas man is free to, or forced to, create artificially, that is, through cultural means, and in such a way as to sustain culture" (Ortner 1974, 77). In the NGE, this understanding is reflected both in the emphasis on women's role as mother, and in the belief that women cannot give knowledge of self to others, but must be taught by a God. The Earth's entire purpose is to be the fertile soil for the God's seed, which she then raises to be receptive to the culture, though she is unable to pass on knowledge of self, even to her own seeds. This separation of nature and culture is problematic, however, as women are in fact the first point of cultural contact for children. Women translate their own culture to their children and create in them an affinity for

specific beliefs and types of understandings (Ortner 1974). This role is often ignored in NGE teachings but becomes particularly salient when one takes into consideration the fact that Earths are often left to raise their seeds largely on their own, as Gods are free to (and often do) choose multiple partners, and to leave the relationship whenever they choose without legal consequences, as government marriage is neither required nor encouraged (Knight 2007; W Allah 2009a). The NGE is not out of pace with the rest of society, however. Ortner points out that “in the area of socialization – women perform lower-level conversions from nature to culture, but when the culture distinguishes a higher level of the same functions, the higher level is restricted to men” (1974, 80). This is true of the NGE, where the Earth is seen as maintaining the household in a manner that acclimatizes the seed to the culture, which is then cemented by the God, who fully integrates the seed into the cultural community by disseminating knowledge of self.

Ortner teases her conclusions out to their logical end. Not only are women “identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture (but) since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it “natural” to subordinate, not to say oppress, them” (Ortner 1974, 73). Within this discourse, then, the oppression of women is viewed as natural. Indeed, this understanding is prevalent in the Nation of Gods and Earths, where the Earths are treated as second class citizens. Again, I must invoke the common assertion that Earths are “secondary but most necessary” to illustrate my point.

THE NATURE OF PATRIARCHY

The manifestations of patriarchy within the Five Percent are in keeping with the oeuvre of the larger black power movement. Simmons notes the similarity between gender disparities in the milieus of both American Islam and the racial equality movement. "In the NOI as in the Black Power movement," she argues, "black power most often did not extend to black women" (Simmons 2006, 189). There is also a disparity between the ideals of white feminists, and those feminists who adhere to the African womanist tradition. Keiler-Bradshaw describes the difference between the traditions:

The primary distinction between classical feminism, womanism, and Africana womanism, according to Hudson-Weems, is that though Africana womanism notes the importance of fighting gender oppression, "Africana women and men dismiss the primacy of gender issues in their reality, and thus dismiss the feminist movement as a viable framework for their chief concerns."

(2010, 28)

Racial oppression is seen as trumping issues of gender. This allows African womanists to understand gender inequality within a feminist context. White argues that African womanists "accept the ideology of complementarity as if it signified equal. They rely on a notion of African culture that is based on biased anthropological reports of a static, ahistorical Africa" (White 2001, 491). For White, hearkening back to an idealized African past is a mistake, but locating authority in historicity is prevalent among Earths. Keiler-Bradshaw's participant, Natural, reflects an African womanist understanding of societal constructions:

I definitely see elements of patriarchy in The Nations of Gods and Earths and it's not just because

of the Islamic influence. It's also a reflection of this society. It's a reflection of the cultural change in ideas that came about as a result of our introduction to world culture. Cuz if you look at some cultures prior to that on the continent of Africa, you'll see that women play a large leadership role [sic].

(2010, 106)

Natural's understanding falls squarely within the African womanist framework.

She expresses the belief that patriarchy is a universal phenomenon that is secondary to the struggle for racial equality, and places authority for her beliefs in an idealized African history. African womanist views are embedded in the teachings of the NGE. In the lesson entitled *The Blackwoman in Islam*, it is stated that “the practice of having more than one wife is rooted in our ancestral (CULTURAL) customs, until they fell victim to the rule of the grafted seeds of Yakub” (Knight 2007, 213). Again, authority for polygamous relationships is justified by invoking an idealized past, and that polygamous practice is understood as an exclusively male privilege. Gods are allowed to have multiple wives, but Earths are not allowed multiple husbands. In this way, polygamy is incorporated into the NGE's shared origin story and becomes part of the creedal framework which, as Albanese argues, structures the lives of participants in religious communities.

The NGE's attitude toward feminism is in keeping with that of the larger black nationalist movement, as “many nationalists, both male and female, remain openly hostile to any feminist agenda” (White 2001, 476). Feminism is seen as a distraction from the larger problem of racial inequality. The Earths in Keiler-Bradshaw's study reflect this attitude, where “the consensus of all eight

participants was that the state of living in “the devil's uncivilization” was the major oppression faced by the Nation and Black people as a whole” (2010, 102). Black nationalism, furthermore, “draws on the ideology of respectability to develop a cohesive political movement”. However, “the African American ideology of respectability does not always share the same moral code with western nationalism” (White 2001,477). In other words, White is arguing that black nationalists have completely different moral codes than normative white morality, and that these codes inform gender relationships within their ranks. This idea of an alternative morality is used as a justification for calls to polygamy within the black nationalist movement. This position is problematic, however, as

these nationalists have idealized polygamous and extended families in a way that stresses both cooperation among women and male support of wives but ignores cross-generational conflict and intrafamily rivalry also common in extended, polygamous families. They have invented an African past to suit their conservative agenda on gender and sexuality.

(White 2001, 477)

Keiler-Bradshaw also notes the gender disparity within black nationalism in general. The problem extends beyond the adherents of nationalism, to the scholarly record. Keiler-Bradshaw laments that “historically, there has been a tendency for scholars and authors who study Black liberation movements to ignore, belittle, or leave out the positions and perspectives of its women members due to pervading male dominance” (2010, 1). Black nationalist scholarship tends to accept gender disparities at face value without critically analyzing either the underlying causes or the effects that this position has on the participants in the

movement. Even Ron Karenga, the inventor of Kwanzaa and a champion of black liberation, argued in his early work that “the collective needs of black families depend on women's complementary and unequal roles” (White 2001, 476). Karenga changed his position later in his scholarship but his early work reflects the predominant position of men in the Nation of Gods and Earths. Keiler-Bradshaw's study supports the idea that many Gods “do not see the relationship between sun and earth, man and woman, as an equal relationship. The idea that the Black man is God is generally interpreted as the Black man has the right to rule over anyone or anything in his reality, including the Black woman” (2010, 121). Keiler-Bradshaw makes a bold recommendation for the Nation of Gods and Earths: “through an analysis of Earth's oral testimonies, this research concludes that though racism is the most pervading obstacle faced by Black people, The Nation of Gods and Earths must address and reevaluate the sexism that exists within its doctrines and practice” (2010, 21). Though I am neither positioned, nor do I have a desire to make any recommendations regarding the trajectory of NGE doctrine or practice, this researcher's conclusion is significant in that it reflects the position of the participants in the study. Many Earths themselves desire a reevaluation of the gender disparity within the culture.

As stated in the previous chapter, many theorists view the NGE as a manifestation of American Islam, though the organization occupies a space that is equally approachable as a New Religious Movement (NRM). The gender disparity in black nationalism is replicated in NRMs. Puttick argues that “in most of the world's religions women have played a subordinate role, excluded from participating in public rituals and often barred from even entering places of

worship” (1997, 151). She further argues that “...research demonstrates that women tend to perform traditional – that is, subservient – work and religious functions” in NRMs (Puttick 1997, 152), and that “comparative research on gender roles in NRMs has found an across-the-board subordination of women, even where the ideology was non-discriminatory” (Puttick 1997, 155). It seems that though there are a multiplicity of perspectives from which to approach the Nation of Gods and Earths, all of them tacitly imply a degree of gender inequality. This supports the understanding that patriarchy is almost universally embedded within NRMs. It also illustrates that the particularities of the NGE's historical and philosophical positioning predetermined the gender inequality that Earths experience. In other words, considering where they are coming from, it is inevitable that a large portion of the membership of the NGE will buy into assumptions of the naturalness of gender inequality and that those assumptions will transfer to practice. Anaya McMurray observes this constriction in her work. Speaking about female Muslim MC's (of which Earths are considered a part) she opines: “Community and/or commercial expectations of the roles of women in hip-hop music, Islam, and black religion in general converge to restrict the spaces that black Muslim women have to express in hip-hop culture a minority faith and perspective” (McMurray 2007, 89). Khabeer's observations support McMurray's findings, and he comments on the fact that “while the number of male Muslim emcees is significant, the number of female Muslim rappers is quite small” (Khabeer 2007, 132). Again, the demographics of participation illuminate the way(s) in which gender codes prescribe boundaries for participants, consequently situating the NGE firmly within what Albanese would consider a religious

community.

VOICES OF THE EARTHS

It is important not to essentialize gender relationships in the Nation of Gods and Earths. Often, the lived experience of adherents in any particular tradition is radically different than doctrinal orthodoxy indicates. Ortner discusses this discontinuity of doctrine and practice:

The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet within that universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of woman are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory. Further, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions.

(1974, 67)

In fact, women in the Nation of Gods and Earths present what White characterizes as “oppositional strategies that reveal contradictions in the dominant discourse” (2001, 480). Earths do not stick to the script. They are able to negotiate spaces of resistance within the Nation that allow them to understand themselves both as participants in the culture, and as powerful women in control of their own lives. Though a conceptual understanding of NGE lessons paints a somewhat bleak picture, experiential reality reveals that “women are not simply submissive followers within The Nation of Gods and Earths”, but can present as individuals with active agency (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 97).

Keiler-Bradshaw’s study is perhaps the only one undertaken specifically on women in the Nation of Gods and Earths. He notes that “this void in the literature gives an unfair outlook and perspective on the women in The Nation of

Gods and Earths who were and are instrumental in the group and its effect on the Black community” (2010, 2). Keiler-Bradshaw discovered both that most Earths take issue with the inequality that presents itself in the Nation, and that “the participants proved far from docile or submissive, as often it is encouraged for Earths to be by some Gods” (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 106). There is a disconnect between what the lessons teach and the actual manifestation of the culture. Knight observes the same kind of disparity in his interaction with the NGE. “There has also been room for negotiation within the Five Percent itself”, he observes. “One Five Percenter told me that to divide human beings with any kind of dualism, whether black/white or male/female, means that we don't know God” (Knight 2011, 144).

It seems that many if not most Earths, far from being mindless automatons controlled by their Gods, present a subtle but unified resistance to the patriarchal elements of the NGE. This resistance can be observed in the musical output of women associated with the NGE. Erykah Badu is perhaps the most visible representative of this group of women. McMurray notes that Badu's music at times supports traditional gender roles “in which women are relegated to roles of submission” (2007, 79). However, concurrent to her promotion of some elements of patriarchy, Badu complicates traditional gender roles and the expectations of modesty outlined by the teachings of the NGE. “While Badu espouses Five Percenter principles, she also maintains flexibility in the roles that men and women have, and certainly doesn't cover herself at all times in public or go without cosmetics” (McMurray 2007, 79). Indeed Badu's style early in her career was characterized by the flamboyant headscarves she wore, but her later career

has seen her sport any number of hairstyles, outrageous face makeup, and relatively revealing clothing. Though she named her first child Seven in deference to the Supreme Mathematics signifying God, she certainly does not adhere to the prescription to wear “refinement” by keeping three quarters of her body covered.

Anaya McMurray, a hip hop artist in her own rite, echoes this heterodox approach to participation in the NGE. She states: “I disagree with the notion that women revolve around men like the Earth around the Sun, which refers to the symbolism used by Five Percenter to describe the roles of men and women” (McMurray 2007, 84). This kind of dissension from the dominant ideology is normal within any group. Certainly not all Catholics agree with all of Rome's policies (Dillon 1999). In this context, “improvisation becomes a useful metaphor when describing the ways in which black Muslim women are agents in shaping their faith within a particular cultural environment” (McMurray 2007, 90). In an environment that is rigidly resistant to them, women improvise spaces of belonging.

Considering the oppressiveness of some specific teachings, it is a challenge to understand what redeeming qualities women find in the NGE that continues to attract them to the culture. For many Earths, the answer lies in the Supreme Mathematics. All of Keiler-Bradshaw's participants cited the Supreme Mathematics as a practical means of meaning making. The Supreme Math is the cornerstone of the spiritual practice of the NGE and constitutes the central creedal component of Five Percenter culture. Keiler-Bradshaw observes that

the application of the Supreme Mathematics and

Supreme Alphabet also served as a means for the women to understand their world and the ways in which to navigate through life. The Supreme Mathematics in particular were mentioned as a major factor that intrigued the women.. the association of positive attributes with numbers gave these women a process to follow on a daily basis. Like prayer in religious organizations, the Supreme Mathematics provided the women with a ritualistic means of being centred and in accord with the nature of life.

(2010, 95)

Actively participating in the process of “doing the science” supersedes the oppression within the organization and allows Earths to understand themselves within the confines of the Nation's traditions, despite their heterodox beliefs. Significantly, then, women identify what Albanese defines as a creedal basis for their affiliation with the Nation of Gods and Earths. This strengthens the association of the NGE with Albanese's model and supports the understanding of the NGE as a religious organization.

Another factor that draws women to the NGE is the social service element of the organization. Members of the Nation are active in their communities, and Earths in particular are known for their organizational and community building efforts, both within the Nation and in the larger black community. Keiler-Bradshaw notes that “the humanitarian efforts of Father Allah were mentioned by all of the Earths as a motivating factor in their attraction to The Nation of Gods and Earths” (2010, 94). The Earths' privilege the humanitarian teachings of Father Allah above the sexist elements of his lessons. The Father's insistence on the avoidance of marriage under the government and his personal polygamous practices are ignored or subsumed by Earths who see him as a loving progenitor

of a great black nation. They are able to create a space where NGE identity means community action rather than personal oppression. Community engagement is stressed so vehemently by Earths, both in their testimonials and in written creeds that it becomes a kind of cultic ritual among participants.

Personal exegeses are subjective in all teaching traditions and this is no less true of the Nation of Gods and Earths. This fact informs Keiler-Bradshaw's findings that the participants in her study agree with many of the ideological tenets of the Nation while simultaneously holding different interpretations of the implications of those teachings. Speaking about the NGE teachings regarding the relationship between women's nature and that of the planet Earth, Natural says, "if you look at the earth, it has habitable properties.... We have habitable properties. So I definitely see the correlation. Us being the nurturers, we are able to sympathize and show compassion and nurturance to others needing assistance" (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 96). At the same time, Natural insists that she "learned her love of history and culture from her mother, which led to a "natural attraction to the Nation of Gods and Earths"" (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 85). Natural's story suggests that her mother, rather than her God, was the primary agent of cultural acclimatization. Natural's story supports Ortner's claim that "woman's consciousness – her membership, as it were, in culture – is evidenced in part by the very fact that she accepts her own devaluation and takes culture's point of view" (1974, 76). By accepting the role of Earth, Natural is enacting her own cultural agency as opposed to being passively affected by it.

The NGE teaching that the black woman is "secondary but most necessary" is one of the most controversial among the Earths. Moonlight, the

oldest participant in Keiler-Bradshaw's study, has been affiliated with the NGE for over twenty-five years. When asked about the teaching she says:

I never liked that saying! Why? Because, what is secondary you can do without. How does that sound? Is your mother secondary? Did you not come through her womb? Now Cipher! [Now Cipher means "no"] I don't know that statement....Now, I don't teach the babies that crap.

(Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 97)

Moonlight has a more holistic idea of gender relations than NGE teachings suggest. She understands God as a dualistic synergy between man and woman: "There are two parts of God. You have man and 'womb-man.' The universe is what? Feminine and masculine" (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 108). Moonlight refuses to occupy a secondary space despite her dedication to the principles of the Nation of Gods and Earths. Many Earths appear to mimic this position to varying degrees. Another of Keiler-Bradshaw's participants, Queen, says that "for some it's egalitarian. For some the woman just adds on to God" but (when asked about the idea of "secondary but most necessary") she adds "I don't say that phrase. I've heard it but I don't teach it" (2010, 98). Like Moonlight, Queen has a more nuanced understanding of the complimentary nature of gender relations in the NGE that resists identification with oppression. She understands Earths as occupying the sixth position in the Supreme Mathematics, that of equality. She explains that for her

equality does not mean we are the same...culturally, yes my god did give me the knowledge. He brought the sun to my planet... Within this knowledge, the God is the foundation. The male is the dominant aspect. Does it mean that my worth is less or I'm not intelligent? No. I don't take on a subservient

role. There is a balance that's present between Earth and Sun. they are not in conflict. They work together to bring forth life. My God respects me as well.... He does have more knowledge than I do, and I respect that. We play different roles that balance out.

(Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 107)

The statements of these women illustrate both that the Earths are able to resist teachings that work to oppress them, even if they are understood by Gods as fundamental to the Nation's doctrine, and that they view themselves as having greater agency in the creation of culture than Gods give them credit for. Both Moonlight and Queen are teachers. They teach the Lessons to the babies and in so doing they both maintain and create Five Percent culture. They see themselves as in possession of active agency within the Nation. Rather than being merely passive receptacles, the Earths are active participants in the dynamic creation of culture. For Keiler-Bradshaw, "the objection to a concept so common in The Nation of Gods and Earths shows that there are definite discrepancies concerning the "place" of the female gender in the organization" (2010, 98).

Earths use unique hermeneutical approaches to the lessons in order to justify their own understandings of the culture. For Freedom, the idea that women are "secondary but most necessary" is completely lacking in historical legitimacy. She says "I ain't never seen no proof that The Father Allah even said that. A lot of these things you hear came after The Father died" (Keiler-Bradshaw 2010, 98). Freedom flatly denies the authority of the mythology surrounding the Father's teachings. This denial and the insistence that the Father taught a much more egalitarian form of Five Percent doctrine is a theme that is repeated both

among Earths and among more liberal minded Gods. This raises the question of whether the Earths are mimicking the black nationalist/womanist practice of hearkening back to an idealized past whose historical reality is uncertain. It is difficult to know exactly what the Father taught as he left no written records and the culture has been, until the advent of the internet, orally transmitted.

Prince A Cuba is one of these forward thinking Gods who works within the culture to move attitudes toward a more inclusive relationship to the Earths. The first degree in the *Student Enrollment* portion of the 120 Lessons asks “who is the original man?” The answer is “the original man is the Asiatic Black man; the Maker; the Owner; the Cream of the planet Earth- Father of Civilization, God of the Universe” (F. Muhammad). Prince A Cuba has published an alternative version of this degree which moves to empower women within the culture. This alternative version asks:

Who is the Original Woman?

The Original Woman is the Asiatic
Blackwoman,
co-maker, co-owner, womb of the planet Earth,
mother of civilization and Goddess of the universe.

(Knight 2011, 145)

HOMOSEXUALITY

The issue of gender is further complicated by the attitude of Five Percenters toward sexuality. The Nation's approach to sexuality helped to form and continues to both inform and be informed by the masculinity of hip hop culture. Dyson argues that “hip hop's hypermasculine pose reflects broader American traits” (Dyson 2007, 94), so again the NGE is not necessarily out of

step with the larger cultural context in which the organization operates. The nature of patriarchy, which is, as discussed above, culturally pervasive, dictates that white male privilege supersedes all others. However the NGE's oppressive gender mores mean that "even within Five Percenter culture, a white man could receive unearned privilege over black women. Additionally, a heterosexual white man is without question privileged in the Five Percent over gay black men" (Knight 2011, 135). Attitudes toward homosexuality in the NGE are aggressively negative. Knight observes that "Five Percenters emphasis on reproduction and adherence to 'natural' gender roles leads to a predictable condemnation of homosexuality" (2007, 222). This is in keeping with the impetus White observes in the larger arena of black nationalism where homosexuality is viewed as a threat to heteronormativity and is understood as a betrayal of the race (2001).

The *Nation of Gods and Earths: The Proclamation of Intent* lesson featured in Abdul Noor's collection states explicitly that homosexuality is unwelcome in the nation. "How can one become a 5%er?" the lesson asks. The answer is to "abstain from poisonous animals (pork), drugs and alcohol, homosexuality or any other unnatural sex acts..." (Noor 2002, 171). Again, the motif of natural vs unnatural is invoked in order to place homosexual activity outside the realm of acceptability. Although White observes a disparity in the treatment of gay men and lesbians in the black nationalist movement wherein lesbian activity is viewed as less damaging, both male and female homosexuality is prohibited in Five Percent culture (2001). Stereotypically macho performances of masculinity are idealized in the NGE. Within Five Percent culture, "to be a man is thus to control a woman; this leads to an image of lesbians as invaders of

male territory, and gays as not only failed men, but in fact anti-men, active destroyers of their maleness” (Knight 2011, 138). The impetus for this obtuse heteronormative masculinity may be the location of dissemination for the culture. Knight observes that “much of NGE culture evolved among men in prison, a society completely devoid of women” (Knight 2007, 223). The absence of women's voices in the process of cultural creation obviously limits the degree to which women's issues will be addressed by the culture. Furthermore, the fact that situational homosexuality is ostensibly rampant in prison populations may have influenced Five Percenters to move toward distancing themselves from that milieu (Blackburn et al 2010).

Homosexuality has become an issue in the Nation of Gods and Earths as recently as 2013. A debate about the issue has developed on internet social media sites Twitter and Facebook between Lord Jamar of the group Brand Nubian, a vocal advocate of the Five Percent, and Michael Muhammad Knight. The issue began when pictures of rapper Kanye West wearing a leather kilt at a Hurricane Sandy relief benefit surfaced on the internet. Lord Jamar used the incident as a launching pad for an extensive anti-gay diatribe comprising literally hundreds of tweets. He began trending the hashtag #halfafag, and released a rap single attacking West entitled “Lift Up Your Skirt” which featured the line “I rebuke all this gay shit” (Jamar 2013b). Knight took issue with Jamar's homophobic tirade and responded directly to the God, with whom Knight had personally built on a number of occasions. He questioned Jamar's insistence that black men are increasingly feminized in popular media, a belief that is reflected in the article *From Heru to 'How You Doin?': The Destruction of Masculine Black Men*, by

Beautiful SeaAsia, in the Five Percenter anthology *Knowledge of Self*. In this article, SeaAsia laments the careers of both Eddie Murphy and Tyler Perry, and the popularity of 'skinny jeans', which she sees as debasing the masculinity of black men (SU Allah 2009). Kanye West responded to the kilt debacle by insisting via his publicist that all photos of him wearing the kilt be removed from the internet. Jamar praised West for this recalcitrant move, tweeting “@kanyewest is a smart dude, maybe he didn't realize the ramifications of what he was doing. I applaud him for this humble gesture” (6 Feb. 2013, 1:03pm). The humbleness of West's insistence on controlling his internet presence is questionable, and it did not stop the flame war between Jamar and Knight. Knight challenged Jamar to a wrestling match and Jamar countered by calling Knight “the new Salmon Rushdie” (7 Feb. 2013, 1:18am) and threatening to physically attack him. Lord Jamar insisted via tweet that “in HIP HOP a faggot is a WEAK PERSON, A CHUMP, A PUNK THAT JUMPS UP TO GET BEATDOWN...have you heard anything sexual in that?” (7 Feb. 2013, 2:07pm) and that “just like every time the word FAGGOT is used it's not always in reference to someone who is GAY/HOMOSEXUAL” (7 Feb. 2013, 2:01pm). Knight subsequently wrote an article for his column in Vice magazine explaining the debate and his position on the matter and using an image of the Five Percent Universal Flag (Appendix B) coloured in shades of lavender. The image elicited so much rancor from Five Percenters that the content of the article has become subsumed by the secondary controversy engendered by its use. Knight admits that for every ten Gods who have threatened his life or otherwise degraded his support for gay rights, one or two Gods privately message him with thanks for

championing a cause that many are unable to publicly support themselves for fear of retribution from their peers (personal correspondence with the author). This debate illuminates the way in which attitudes toward homosexuality function as an aspect of the code by which Five Percenters live their lives, and work to restrict participation in the Five Percent community.

The complexities of gender relations in the Nation of Gods and Earths are multidimensional. Peripherally, women are secondary within the nation, constrained by traditional ideas of subservience and fertility. Practically, however, women in the nation manage to subvert the oppressiveness of the patriarchy and sexism that informs Five Percenter teachings in their own lives and to create a space where they both work against restrictive cultural practices yet also participate in the patriarchal culture as a whole. If patriarchy is understood as the dominance of white male privilege, the NGE's black nationalist perspective works to undermine it. However the issue of race is seemingly the only part of patriarchy with which most Gods are concerned. Anything that works to undo other aspects of patriarchy is viewed as a threat to society, to Five Percent culture, and to black masculinity.

In terms of Albanese's four c's model of religion, gender relations in the Nation of Gods and Earths manifest elements of all four of the categories: creed, code, cultus and community. The lessons, particularly the Supreme Mathematics and the Supreme Alphabet, as well as teachings concerning the nature of gender relations constitute the creed through which Five Percenters derive meaning in their lives. The attitude toward women and homosexuals that these lessons engender constitute a code that Five Percenters enact, and which structures their

daily existence. These creeds and code inform the cultic rituals in which Five Percenters participate, including community engagement. Finally, gender relations define the boundaries of community in the NGE by restricting the participation of women and homosexuals in the culture. This chapter has illuminated some ways in which women in the Nation navigate identity within the confines of Five Percenter community. It also illustrates how sexual orientation can be viewed as a barrier to entry within the community, and how the performance of masculinity defines the image of the Five Percent community to both internal and external observers.

Chapter 5

“...And Ya Don't Stop”:

God Hop and the Global Dissemination of the Five Percent

For an obscure sect, Five Percenters have had a disproportionate influence on global popular culture. Aidi notes that “Five Percenter beliefs have exerted a great influence on hip-hop argot and street slang. The expressions 'word is bond', 'break it down,' 'peace,' 'whassup G' (meaning God not gangsta) and 'represent' all come from Five Percenter ideology” (2004, 11; see also Knight 2007, Gallagher 2004; Allah 2009a). RZA, founding member of the seminal Wu Tang Clan has stated that “in a lot of ways, hip-hop is the Five Percent” (Knight 2007, 177). The connection between the Nation of Gods and Earths and hip-hop culture is deep. It is rooted in history and is the primary mechanism by which Five Percenter influence has been disseminated.

The socioeconomic situation in New York City in the 1960s and 70s has been detailed in the first chapter of this thesis. The historical milieu that gave birth to the Five Percent Nation also spawned the movement which would become known as hip-hop. It must be noted that hip-hop culture has, at its core, four key elements: DJ-ing, MC-ing, graffiti, and B-Boying (otherwise known as breakdancing). Though all four elements are equally important, for the purposes of this discussion the term “hip-hop” will most often be used to indicated the symbiotic relationship between DJ and MC that lies at the core of rap music. Hip-hop has had “an extraordinary trajectory for an African-American musical subculture that began in what is arguably the most economically and culturally

marginalized neighborhood of the country” (Sylvan 2011, 291). In her seminal volume *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose observes that “it is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of Black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame for the development of hip-hop” (1994, 21). Hisham Aidi furthers this argument when he asserts that “both cultures (hip-hop and the Five Percent) appeared in response to the poverty and desolation of the inner city...; both attempt to give voice and make sense of the pain of urban blight and nihilism” (Aidi 2004, 115). This chapter will illustrate the connections between the Nation of Gods and Earths and the religious content of hip-hop music. It will begin with a brief history of hip-hop culture, will proceed to discuss the flow of hip-hop culture from its crucible in the American East Coast across the globe, and will then illustrate the influence of the Nation of Gods and Earths on global hip-hop culture. This chapter will discuss the God Hop genre of hip-hop and will use lyrical analysis of specific God Hop artists to illustrate the mechanism by which NGE language and theology has been disseminated. Finally, this chapter will discuss current trends in hip-hop's religious discourse.

THE BIRTH OF HIP HOP

In the late 1970's, New York's inner city saw the rise of a unique party scene, one centered not on live instrumentation, but on DJ's, who began to use turntables creatively, isolating the most popular hooks and beats, or “breaks”, on disco, jazz, and R&B records in order to keep the audiences attention. Shortly thereafter, DJ's began “toasting” over the records, shouting encouragement and instructions to the crowd. Thus the MC (master of ceremonies) and hip-hop

music was born. One of the earliest hip-hop artists was a Jamaican immigrant known professionally as DJ Kool Herc. Although Herc did not go on to recording fame, his role in the birth of hip-hop is widely recognized (George 1999; Gallagher 2004; Chang 2005; Knight 2007; Allah 2009a). The influence of the Nation of Gods and Earths was felt even at this early stage in the development of hip-hop culture, and Knight argues that “years before hip-hop's emergence, the Five Percenters had secured a cemented place in New York's collective black psyche” (2007, 178). Kool Herc was himself influenced by Five Percenters, who were a recognizable presence at early hip-hop gatherings. Kool Herc says that “a lot of Five Percenters...used to come to my party...you might call them 'peace guards” (Allah 2009b, 374). Wakeel Allah argues that Kool Herc “sought refuge amongst Five Percenters. He met Allah Mathematics who tutored him on the subjects of reading and English” (Allah 2009b, 373). Whether this interaction ever happened is questionable as Allah Mathematics, the legendary producer and DJ most often associated with the Wu-Tang Clan and their affiliates, is seventeen years younger than Herc and would have been approximately seven years old when Herc was at the height of his DJ fame in 1979. What is undeniable, however, is that Five Percenters helped to coin the term “hip-hop”. The Five Percenter MC Raheem is one half of the duo Cowboy and Raheem who “added their vocals and coined the chorus, 'Hip Hop, you don't stop'; thus giving birth to the name of the new phenomenon” (Allah 2009b, 374). This chorus then made its way into the recorded version of “Rapper's Delight” by The Sugarhill Gang, the first official hip-hop record, and whence into the annals of hip-hop history.

Like the theology of the Nation of Gods and Earths, hip-hop is a syncretic

art form and synergizes other musical styles in a manner similar to the way that the Five Percent incorporate Christian, Muslim, Spiritualist and Masonic imagery and ideas (Winters 2011). Hip-hop incorporates jazz, reggae, salsa, and rock, “leading some commentators to refer to hip-hop as a form of post-modern pastiche” (Winters 2011, 263). The two cultures, hip-hop and Five Percenter, are complimentary and syzygistic. Both traditions are a response to economic and cultural oppression and serve to strengthen community bonds through shared experiential knowledge.

Hip-hop music engenders a type of poetics that has led many observers to compare the contemporary rap MC to “griots- the mythmakers, genealogists, praise singers, oral historians and social critics of Senegambian society” (Chang 2005, 275). Pioneer of Black studies, Dr. Geneva Smitherman, has called the rapper “a postmodern African griot”, observing that “as African America's 'griot,' the rapper must be lyrically/linguistically fluent; he or she is expected to testify, to speak the truth, to come wit it in no uncertain terms [sic]” (Miyakawa 2005, 137).

Black Religions scholar Anthony B. Pinn argues that historically,

poetry and prose framed a process of alchemy to transform into a meaningful existence by creative manipulation of the terror and dread that marked the realities of the death and rebirth of life as chattel. African Americans made use of their historical memory and the culturally derived materials available in order to do this work.

(2009, 14)

Rap music continues this poetic tradition. As hip-hop artists “articulate the tragic dimensions of their urban wasteland (through rhyme, story-telling, and chant), they temporarily establish a critical or reflective distance from the immediacy of

these stark conditions” (Winters 2011, 262). Thus hip-hop acts as a psychological tool by which participants in the culture negotiate their own realities and contributes to the shared experience that Catherine Albanese argues work to create community.

SPIRITUALITY IN HIP HOP

Recently the academic community has begun to embrace hip-hop culture as a fecund location for the application of Religious Studies theory and practice. In 2011, the American Academy of Religion began a three year initiative entitled “Critical Approaches to Hip-Hop and Religion” which supports Taylor's proposition that “rap music can be interpreted as a spiritual practice” (2003, 107). Taylor continues the work of Anthony Pinn when he argues that rap music “has social and political impact and performs and awakens certain spiritual functions. When it brings noise, then, rap music also conjures spirit” (Taylor 2003, 108). These scholars propose that hip-hop music provides a spiritual outlet for both performers and observers. This spiritual element often moves from implicit to explicit by way of the lyrical content of certain artists.

From the inception of the genre, hip-hop lyrics have reflected the spiritual activity of it's producers. Many theorists argue that of all religious traditions, American Islam and its variants, particularly the Nation of Gods and Earths, have had the most profound impact on hip-hop's religiosity (Alim 2006; Khabeer 2007; Sorett 2009; Winters 2011). Aidi argues that “the fluidity and variegated nature of Islam in urban America is seen in the different 'Islams' represented in hip-hop, and most poignantly in the friction between Sunni Muslims and Five Percenters. Today most 'Islamic' references in hip-hop are to the belief system of the Five

Percent Nation...” (Aidi 2004, 111). While the demographics of Five Percenter participation in rap production have shifted, as will be discussed later in this chapter, there is definitely a strong connection between “Hip Hop Culture and the Islamic Faith – which have both been separately constructed by dominating discourses as ‘threats to American civilization’” (Alim 2006, 45). Both traditions engage in the politics of resistance, allowing participants to articulate ideas and values that contravene conventional, implicitly Christian, American mores. For Anaya McMurray, who straddles the divide between hip-hop artist and scholar, the conflation of rap and religion allows participants to create “new meanings and interesting spaces of resistance through mixing faith and hip-hop culture” (2007, 76). Alim sees hip-hop artists as “verbal *mujahidin*”. Though the term has become associated specifically with radical Islamic militants, *mujahidin* are essentially those engaged in spiritual struggle. Alim argues that “as verbal *mujahidin*, artists also engage in *jihad* of the hand and fight in the way of Allah... to help improve their local communities” (Alim 2006, 56). Alim's research into American Black Muslim and Sunni rap artists “reveals that not only are these artists studying Islam....and applying it to their everyday lives, but they are also operationalizing Islam, that is, acting upon what they have learned in order to help build a nation” (Alim 2006, 56). This kind of active involvement further solidifies the outsider view of both Islam and hip-hop as threats to the so-called American way of life. However, as Winters observes, “Sunni-influenced artists share with their Five Percenter counterparts a salient concern for the inequalities and injustices that beset Black people and denizens of the post-industrial urban landscape” (2011, 265). Alim sees “the Global hip-hop Nation” as functioning

“within a borderless Islamic nation” (2006, 46). In an environment which is seen as hostile toward economically and socially marginalized populations, hip-hop provides a mechanism through which its proponents construct community.

SCHOLARLY LACUNAE

Ralph Watkins has written extensively about the religious elements of hip-hop music. He argues that “rap music is experiencing an emerging religious discourse founded on the rhymes of artists who claim to speak on behalf of God” (2003, 184). He insists that “rappers like Tupac are fast becoming defined as preachers/theologians by a generation who listens to them and accepts their claim that they speak for God” (Watkins 2003, 184). While his observation that “young people entering into dialogue with rappers, discussing and defining issues that have historically been associated with traditional religious institutions” is relevant, there is a fundamental flaw in Watkins argument that reflects the complex relationship between hip-hop and the NGE (Watkins 2003, 185). He seems to be entirely ignorant of the profound influence of the Nation of Gods and Earths theology over the religious orientation of hip-hop culture. Watkins argues that

while the notion of the gangsta's heaven as an alternate eschatology is vital, it must be noted that the first major theme in this mode of theological discourse is deity. In rap's religious discourse, there appears to be an assent to a God, but this God is distinctly different from God as described in orthodox Christianity or Islam.

(2003, 189)

Indeed, as we have seen throughout this thesis, Five Percenter's understanding of God *is* distinctly different from that of Christianity and mainstream Islam, and

that understanding has been transposed to hip-hop culture at large. When Watkins asks “is there a 'heaven' for a 'G'” he is apparently entirely unaware that the G in question is the God of Five Percent theology (2003, 190). Thus his argument that “the God of God-conscious rap has only hints of transcendence” becomes, in the light of Five Percent theology, a mere statement of the obvious (Watkins 2003, 191). God only hints at transcendence because the Five Percenter God is entirely immanent. Watkins observes that “one track on Common's compact disc entitled *G.O.D* (“*Gaining One's Definition*”) defines God as coming into a sense of self-awareness” (2003, 191). Again, Watkins fails to recognize the underlying Five Percenter concept of Knowledge of Self seeping into Common's work. Watkins argues that the religious discourse in rap music is “received and massaged by many inner-city African American youth, most of whom do not attend formal institutionalized religious services” (2003, 185). The problem with Watkins characterization here is one of degree. He characterizes raps religious discourse as “new”, when in fact, as previously stated, there have been religious sentiments in rap music since its inception and these sentiments have contributed to the formation of what Nuruddin describes as “urban mythology”. Nuruddin observes Five Percenter and Nation of Islam theology being incorporated into “the wider inner city subculture, where non-members are free to pick and choose any elements of either ideology, creating a syncretized and general belief system” (2006, 128). The Yakub story, the Supreme Mathematics, and other elements of the Five Percenter culture “are widely disseminated so that they no longer function solely as the ideology of a particular alternative religious movement but have become a universal feature of the urban subculture” (Nuruddin 2006, 128).

As a result of this process, the Nation of Gods and Earths “have an enormous influence on the inner city African American youth sub-culture which far exceeds their actual membership numbers” (Nuruddin 2006, 127).

Watkins is not the only observer who misses the connection between hip-hop and the Nation of Gods and Earths. Chris Thomas is a frequent contributor to the website HipHopDX. In his article *It Was Written: Nas' Odd Relationship With God Presented in His Lyrics*, Thomas compares Nas' lyrics to passages from the Bible. In doing so, Thomas entirely misses the influence of the NGE on Nas' spirituality. He accuses Nas of blasphemy in referring to himself as “God's Son”, implying that Nas is comparing himself to Jesus, when actually, in light of Five Percent doctrine, he is simply acknowledging his own position as God. Thomas compares the line “You ain't as hot as I is, all of these false prophets are not messiahs” from Nas' 2008 hit “Queens Get the Money” to the biblical passage in Matthew 24:11, “And many false prophets will appear and will deceive many people”, and then accuses Nas himself of being one of these false prophets. Thomas misunderstands the fact that the rapper is here articulating the NGE repudiation of organized religion. Finally, Thomas quotes Nas' 1994 hit “Life's A Bitch”: “We were beginners in the hood as Five Percenters, But something must of got in us cause all of us turned to sinners”. He acknowledges the existence of the Five Percent, but uses his own false Biblical analogy to accuse Nas of being a ten percenter, and then continues to equate Nas' lyrics with Biblical passages. At least one commenter, using the online moniker Godtruth, attempts to set the record straight regarding the theology of the Nation of Gods and Earths as it pertains to Nas' lyrics, but dozens of others get mired in the same problematic

Christianized interpretation of Nas' work as does Chris Thomas. Furthermore, in her recent (2012) book, *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangsta's God*, Dr. Ebony Utley, professor of Communication Studies at The University of California, Long Beach, discusses the construction of "Daddy-God" and "Lover-God" in female rap vocals. Utley's analysis neglects to take into consideration that when rappers like Erykah Badu use the term God to describe their lover, they are not being metaphorical but are using Five Percent theological terminology. Again, she peripherally acknowledges the existence of the Nation of Gods and Earths, but proceeds to project an image of God onto rap lyrics that is based on a mainstream Abrahamic construction of transcendent Godhood.

LINGUISTIC DISSEMINATION

The global reach of the NGE is reflected in the ubiquitousness of Five Percenter language in contemporary youth culture, where "much of Five Percenter rhetoric has become common parlance within the hip-hop community" (Miyakawa 2005, 138). Nelson George reflects that, in street parlance, "sometimes, when you really wanted people to believe what you said, 'on the strength' certified your commitment, though 'word is bond' and, ultimately, 'word' could work when you wished to be succinct" (George 1999, 208). Knight notes that "while originating in WD Fard's 120, today the phrase is widespread enough to be ideologically meaningless" (2007, 185). The terminology stems from the Five Percenter practice of building and is connected to the application of the Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabet. It originally derived from the Nation of Islam's *Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 1*, question 11:

Question: Have you not learned that your word shall be Bond regardless of whom or what?

Answer: Yes. My word is Bond and Bond is life, and I will give my life before my word shall fail.

Furthermore, the universal hip-hop greeting “Peace!” is said to have arisen as part of Father Allah's movement to bring Islam to the street. Five Percenter originally greeted each other with the Arabic “asalaamu alikum” in the manner of the Nation of Islam. Father Allah instructed his followers to anglicize the greeting to “Peace” in line with his desire to make his teachings accessible to urban youth who, for the most part, did not speak Arabic. Additionally, “to praise an emcee's rhyme as 'the bomb' came from the teaching battles in which Five Percenter 'bombed' each other with memorized lessons” (Knight 2007, 178). This phrase is featured in the work of Five Percenter rap groups like Brand Nubian, and has moved into mainstream usage through the work of such popular non-NGE artists as Ice Cube, Eminem, and Chris Brown. Knight observes that

the Five Percenter's unique terminology and language, having already entered into street slang, impacted an art form that would in turn be consumed by millions. Artists such as Nas, Busta Rhymes, and Wu-Tang Clan brought the culture to mainstream America, and Five Percenter have now entered popular consciousness.

(Knight 2007, xiii-xiv)

The dissemination of Five Percenter language has been so profound that “Wu-Tang lyrics have turned Five Percenter patois and lessons into slang for suburban white kids” (Knight 2007, 182). Indeed, I recall an incident where my friends' eleven year old daughter, who was born and raised in a small town on Vancouver

Island, British Columbia, finishing a sentence with “word” over the dinner table without having any idea that she was espousing the theology of a black nationalist group from New York City.

The Nation of Gods and Earths have influenced more than just the language of hip-hop, however. The classic “B-boy stance” which entails standing upright with arms crossed in front of chest is derived from Gods at those early hip-hop parties “standing on their squares”(Knight 2007; Allah 2009b). This posture was adopted by such popular hip-hop artists as Run DMC, who were often pictured in B-boy stance, and whose success led to the position becoming part of the visual appearance of hip-hop culture. Artists as diverse as caucasian California rapper Epidcmik, whose single “B-Boy Stance” is coupled with his tune “85 Percent”, to Japanese rap group Scha Dara Parr can be seen posing in B-boy stance. Thus, the Nation of Gods and Earths has had a profound effect on both the linguistics and the physicality of hip-hop culture.

GOD HOP

The connection between the NGE and hip-hop has manifested in an entire sub-genre of music. Known as God Hop, the genre is created entirely by Five Percent adherents and heavily incorporates NGE jargon and theology in its lyrical content. The success of this genre is the main vehicle for the global dissemination of Five Percenter thought. God Hop as a genre is dedicated to the dissemination of Five Percent theology. As Miyakawa notes, “God Hop is concerned first and foremost not with preaching war and hate, but with teaching and uplifting black men and women” (2005, 140). Artists achieve this goal through a combination of pointed lyrical content and musical ability. Miyakawa

argues that “the interaction between music and text in these God Hop examples is a complex, orchestrated negotiation of musical layers, polyrhythms, timbres, and message, and all of these layers contribute to the dissemination of the Five Percent Nation's message” (2005, 138). Dissemination of lyrical messages is aided by the fact that Brand Nubian and other God Hop artists just make good music. The music carries the message farther abroad than simple preaching would ever allow.

Miyakawa argues that within the genre, “the ultimate goal...is to 'awaken' the unconscious 'true self' of black men and women, as we hear from Lord Jamar in 'Wake Up': 'I keep to striving to do my duty to awaken'” (2005, 43). God Hop operates as a medium for Five Percenter prosthelytization. Lyrical content is a key part of this process as “within their lyrics, Five Percenter MCs bring their doctrine to the public's ears by presenting themselves as authoritative teachers...” (Miyakawa 2005, 42). The pluralism of Five Percent theology is reflected in Five Percenter rap, with some MC's lyrical content leaning heavily on Nation of Islam references and imagery, and others, like RZA from Wu-Tang Clan, incorporating Buddhist and Christian influence. Throughout the genre, however, there is a strong emphasis on teaching and uplifting the audience. Miyakawa notes that Five Percent rapper Lakim Shabazz “holds himself personally responsible for the education of the youth, as do many Five Percent rappers” (2005, 45). However, God Hop artists, like the Nation of Gods and Earths as a whole, are not entirely cohesive or consistent. Though Lakim Shabazz emphasizes the positive aspects of Five Percenter theology, not all proponents of God Hop present such a positive image. Many Five Percent rappers express a propensity for violence and illegal

activities. These artists seem to, as Miyakawa argues, “reinforce charges of hypocrisy within the rap community” (2005, 71). Miyakawa's interview with Five Percent rapper Akiem Allah Elisra is illuminating:

I would say that 'proselytizing' is not always really the main thing, like a conscious agenda. See, a lot of times when you hear the math on records it's just part of the way the MC communicates regularly, and might not necessarily be proselytizing, just being fresh [stylish]. And especially in [New York], there are neighborhoods where learning the Lessons was what you did as just part of growing up, so for a lot of people these words are just part of the English that they speak on a regular basis.

(Miyakawa 2005, 72)

Elisra's observations support Nuruddin's argument that Five Percent theology has become part of urban mythology. It also illustrates that the music is not reducible to a single simple definition but, like the theology of the Nation of Gods and Earths, is part of a complex cultural negotiation.

The rap duo known as The World's Famous Supreme Team (not to be confused with the Queens, NY, drug dealing gang known as the Supreme Team) “is synonymous with the explosion of real New York hip-hop” (Allah 2009b, 376). The group, founded by two Five Percenters, Sedivine the Mastermind and Just Allah the Superstar, and produced by former Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, hosted a popular radio show which was one of the driving forces of the movement in the early days of hip-hop and throughout the 1980s. In 1989, Lakim Shabazz followed the World Famous Supreme Team's success with the release of the first purely Five Percent album. His debut, entitled 'Pure Righteousness', would spawn the new God Hop subgenre of rap. Though Lakim Shabazz never

received the critical acclaim necessary to propel his work into the annals of classic hip-hop, many artists in the God Hop genre did. The duo Eric B. and Rakim brokered the first million dollar record deal for a hip-hop artist and Rakim is often cited as one of the most influential rappers in the history of hip-hop (Alim 2006; Knight 2007; Allah 2009a, 2009b). Such lucrative contracts brought exposure to markets beyond New York City, and Eric B. and Rakim used their influence in the music industry to promote the Nation of Gods and Earths, both explicitly and implicitly. Wakeel Allah notes that “in 1987, Rakim used the Universal Flag of Islam in his popular video 'Move the Crowd.' Only the gods knew the insignia of the 'Seven, Sun, Moon and Stars' represented the '5% Nation of Islam’” (2009b, 378). Rakim's influence continues to be felt in hip-hop. Multi-platinum selling rap artist Nas memorializes Rakim in his song “U.B.R (Unauthorized Biography of Rakim)”, released in 2004. Nas's track, in which he rhymes about how Rakim's “Scientific styling invented a new style” and how “Clarence 13X had New York on lock/ Gods on every block” introduced the Five Percent to a new generation of rap fans who might not have been familiar with Rakim's original work.

RZA insists that “about 80 percent of hip-hop comes from the Five Percent” (RZA 2005, 43). Though RZA is admittedly biased as a result of his position as a representative of Five Percenter hip-hop, many observers argue that Five Percenters are uniquely suited to the art of rapping by virtue of their training in the recitation of the 120 Lessons and their application of the Supreme Math and Supreme Alphabet in the process of building (Miyakawa 2005; Knight 2007; W Allah 2009a). Five Percenter Parliaments are like breeding grounds for skilled

rappers, with Gods in ciphers bombing each other on the lessons in much the same manner as a freestyle rap battle. In fact, some observers argue that the hip-hop freestyle cipher is modeled after the form of Five Percenter builds (W Allah 2009a). Verbal dexterity is essentially built into members of the Nation of Gods and Earths. To illustrate the manner in which God Hop artists incorporate Five Percenter teachings into their music, I have chosen two artists who I think exemplify the genre and whose work best illuminates the means by which Five Percenter theology has been disseminated to the population at large. I will begin with a discussion of the work of Brand Nubian and will then proceed to discuss the lyrics of the Wu-Tang Clan.

Brand Nubian, a group consisting of the trio of Lord Jamar, Grand Puba and Sadat X are among the strongest representatives of the God Hop genre. Grand Puba is a member of that generation of black urban New Yorkers who were born into the Nation of Gods and Earths. Lord Jamar continues to be one of the most vocal and visible representatives of the Nation as his presence on the social networking website Twitter, where he posts daily Mathematics updates, attests. His solo project “The 5% Album” is one of the most exemplary manifestations of the genre. Knight notes that “as Brand Nubian, the trio would serve as a virtual missionary wing for the Nation of Gods and Earths” (2007, 179). The group's first video for the song “Wake Up” was filmed in front of the Allah School in Mecca. A 1992 episode of the influential hip-hop show “Yo! MTV Raps” shows hip-hop legend Fab 5 Freddy interviewing the members of Brand Nubian in front of and inside the Allah School (Knight 2007). Though rap fans outside of the Five Percent cipher may not have realized the full implications of the imagery

they were being exposed to, the visual patina of Five Percent rap became part of hip-hop's cultural landscape.

Brand Nubian is one of the most successful groups in the God Hop genre. Their 1993 album "In God We Trust" rose to number twelve on Billboard's top 100 and number four on the R&B/hip-hop chart. The album brought to the public sphere songs like "Allah U Akbar" which insists that "Brand Nubian tracks are filled with black facts", and "Meaning of the 5%", which is literally a recording of NOI Minister Louis Farrakhan's speech explaining the teaching that spawned the Five Percent set to a groove from Marvin Gaye's "T is for Trouble".

Miyakawa insists that

much of the language of Five Percent lyrics resists easy comprehension. Five Percenter lyrics are often shrouded in hazy metaphors and arcane references to Five Percenter beliefs and black nationalist history and philosophy. Indeed, mystical obscurity has come to be expected from certain Five Percenter MCs...

(Miyakawa 2005, 41)

This is true of much God Hop, but "Meaning of the 5%" is far from subtle. It exhorts the core teachings of the Nation of Gods and Earths in a straightforward way that opens a space of access to audiences who might not be familiar with the teachings, as well as providing a sense of familiarity to those within the Five Percent cipher. Knight observes that by using these kind of lyrical strategies "a God emcee can have it both ways. He can use the medium to teach the world, but while millions listen, he can also engage his Five Percenter family in a private conversation" (2007, 186).

The Brand Nubian song "Ain't No Mystery" exemplifies the proselytizing

nature of God Hop. The song begins with an assertion of the nature of God:

“Who is that? The supreme black man, that's who”. The lyric is formed in the call and response catechism which reflects the structure of the 120 Lessons. In the first full stanza of the song, Lord Jamar raps:

Well can you tell me where to find that mystery god
I don't see him, so you know the shit is kinda hard
I searched and searched, but still there's no sign
It's gotta be a trick for the deaf dumb and blind
Now would you set up home, and wait for a
mystery god
To bring food, clothing, and shelter?
Emphatically no!
Mathematically that just don't go

The lyrics present a number of Five Percenter points of theology. Firstly, Jamar denies the existence of a mystery god, the central tenet of the theology of the Nation of Gods and Earths. Next, he asserts that the mystery god is intended to trick the “deaf dumb and blind”, the 85 percent of the population that Elijah Muhammad specified in the 120 Lessons. Jamar then asks if the mystery god will bring “food, clothing, and shelter”. This trio of necessities are drawn from the NGE's Twelve Jewels (Appendix G). The Twelve Jewels are part of the Nation of Gods and Earths plus lessons and are intended to compliment the core teachings. Knight notes that the Twelve Jewels “are treated with varying degrees of importance; at times they seem an essential third component of Five Percenter text behind the Math and Alphabets” (2007, 207). The phrasing “Emphatically no!” mimics Elijah Muhammad's phrasing in the 120 Lessons. Lesson 11 in the *Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2* asks the question “Will you sit at home and wait for that mystery God to bring you food?” The answer, which every Five Percenter must memorize is “Emphatically no!”. Jamar then goes on to privilege

the Supreme Mathematics. For Five Percenters, everything in the universe can be explained mathematically. If something does not “go” mathematically, it is logically impossible. This stanza, then, is an example of what Five Percenters call a “show and prove”. It illustrates the non existence of a transcendental deity through the mechanism of the Nation of Gods and Earths lessons.

The song goes on to reference NGE theology repeatedly. A long stanza rapped by Sadat X exclaims “Join the 10%, duty to sell the 85”, another reference to the teaching that spawned the term “Five Percenter”. Sadat then enjoins the audience to “Know that the black man is god...There ain't no mystery”, reinforcing the disbelief in a transcendent god. The spotlight is then passed back to Lord Jamar, who raps:

First soul, black like coal
The original one, with the power of the sun
Allah's god, always has been always will be
Never could be, a fuckin mystery
But you pray for Jehovah to come
That'll be the day when you leave the slum
Until that time, you just keep eatin swine
Drinkin cheap wine on the welfare line

This verse addresses the NGE belief that the original man was black. Miyakawa notes that within God Hop lyrics,

the most common momentary references to Five Percenter doctrine and rhetoric come in the form of self-naming, that is, identifying oneself or others as God(s), Asiatic(s), or Blackman(men) from Asia; speaking of women as Earths, children as seeds, and the family unit in the metaphor of sun, moon, stars; and identifying oneself as a member of the Five Percent Nation.

(2005, 64)

The “sun” of the second line is reflective of this practice. When Jamar insists that

“Allah's god, always has been always will be”, he is referring to the NGE understanding that the black man is Allah and that he has always existed and will always exist. Jamar then again denies the existence of a transcendental god and berates those who believe in a Christian god who are content to live a meager existence, struggling financially and eating pork, which is prohibited by orthodox adherents of the Nation of Gods and Earths. The final stanza of the song, rapped by Sadat X, states:

Courts writin lies, record company is mad again
These Asiatics is racist
Because I love the black faces
So put your Bible in the attic cause
I didn't come for static
The true and living g-o-d
It ain't no mystery

Here Sadat X identifies himself as Asiatic, and addresses the controversial nature of the Nation of Gods and Earths' racialist teachings. He emphasizes his love for his own race and indicates that the courts are wrong in their assertion that the the NGE is a racist movement. This may be in reference to the Southern Poverty Law Center, who list the Nation of Islam as a hate group and whose website features Brian Levin's article *Radical Religion in Prison* (2003), which compares the Nation of Gods and Earths to white power racist groups. Sadat X enjoins his audience to discard Christianity and to explore the NGE, who describe the Asiatic black man as the “true and living god”.

The Wu-Tang Clan are undoubtedly the most commercially successful God Hop group. With record sales in the millions, a global following, a successful clothing line, and an army of proteges, the Wu-Tang Clan are more than a rap group, they are a cultural force. The group formed in Staten Island,

New York in the late 1980's. Knight notes that "while Five Percenter typically rename cities and boroughs using an Arab-Islamic motif or the Supreme Alphabets, the RZA claimed his home of Staten Island as 'Shaolin'" (2007, 184). Wu-Tang are a loose affiliation of nine or ten MCs: RZA, GZA, Old Dirty Bastard, Method Man, Raekwon, U-God, Ghostface Killah, Masta Killa, Inspectah Deck, and sometimes Cappadonna. RZA is understood to be the de facto leader of the Clan and has produced the bulk of Wu-Tang's output. The initial plan, as stated by RZA in his autobiographical book *The Tao of Wu* (2009), was for members of the Clan to branch out into solo careers and dominate the hip-hop world. The group accomplished that goal and most members have gone on to solo careers. A number of Wu-Tang's solo projects are now considered hip-hop classics, including Method Man's 1994 album *Tical*, and Raekwon's 1995 album *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*, both of which reached number four on Billboard's Top 200, and number one and two respectively on the R&B/hip-hop chart. The Wu-Tang Clan have repeatedly been cited as both the best and most influential hip-hop group of all time (Adaso; NME 2004). They are undoubtedly the driving force behind the global dissemination of Five Percenter jargon.

The Wu-Tang Clan's 1993 debut album *Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers* is riddled with Five Percent references. Virtually every song on the album contains some allusion to NGE theology, however Wu-Tang lyrics tend to be more opaque than those of Brand Nubian. Wu-Tang's lyrics are emblematic of Miyakawa's observation that "themes long associated with rap lyrics in general...also find their way into God Hop lyrics. These themes include oral traditions of 'toasting' (ritualized boasts) and 'dissing' (ritualized insults);

fascination with material wealth and Mafioso lifestyles; and nostalgia for 'pure' hop-hop culture" (2005, 138). Wu-Tang Clan's lyrics often incorporate the most problematic elements of hip-hop culture and Knight argues that the group "also draws controversy within the NGE for promoting an image that associates Five Percenters with drugs, alcohol, crime and the objectification of women" (Knight 2007, 182). The song "Can It Be All So Simple" is an example of this problematic construction. The song praises the Five Percent with the line "In Medina yo no doubt the God got crazy clout", and references the NGE theological canon with the line "The God left lessons on my dresser", while simultaneously praising violence by dedicating the song "to all the niggas that do drive-bys". References to drug use and criminal activity pervade Wu-Tang lyrics, and this is reflective of the wider God Hop genre. In fact, Aidi notes that "Poor Righteous Teachers seem to be the only group from the 5% that shuns drugs, alcohol and foul lifestyles" (2004, 112). Derogatory language and images of women as well as references to sexual exploitation pepper Wu-Tang Clan lyrics. In the song "C.R.E.A.M.", Inspectah Deck says he is "ready to give up so I seek the Old Earth", a Five Percenter term for one's mother. In "Protect Ya Neck", RZA asks "It's ten o'clock ho, where the fuck's your seed at?", implying that the woman to whom the question is directed is derelict in her duty to her child, or "seed" in NGE parlance. Wu-Tang honors the role of mother while simultaneously degrading women with the term "ho". This impetus is symptomatic of the larger trend toward a "pervasive misogyny within hip-hop. Hip-hop is a male-dominated terrain that too often positions women, in songs and videos, as the objects and vehicles of male power and aggression" (Winters 2011, 263). Winters argues that "despite

ongoing interventions by women, hip-hop remains a salient example of the broader patriarchal order” (2011, 264). Wu-Tang lyrics illustrate how hip-hop fails in the same way as the Five Percent's larger project of equality and liberation fail in relation to women.

In “The Mystery of Chessboxing” U-God asserts that he is “makin devils cower to the Caucus Mountains”. In “Protect Ya Neck”, Old Dirty Bastard assures the audience that “I’ll be stickin pins in your head like a fuckin nurse”. A listener must have a strong grasp of NGE mythology to understand these references to the Yakub story. Furthermore, in “Wu-Tang Clan Ain’t Nuthin Ta F’ Wit”, RZA breaks down Islam to “I Slam” and directly addresses members of the NGE in the line “Peace to the Gods and the Earths. Word is Bond”. In the song “Clan in Da Front” Wu-Tang refer to themselves as a “God squad”, and in “Wu-Tang: 7th Chamber”, Inspectah Deck claims that “my rap style has/ The force to leave you lost, like the tribe of Shabazz”. In the same song, RZA enumerates his name as “Ruler Zig Zag Zig Allah”. Though Five Percenters immediately recognize these references to the NGE origin myths and the Supreme Alphabet, lay listeners have no frame of reference to guide them. Obtuse references to Five Percent thought can prove confounding for lay listeners because, as Knight notes, “unless you’re *in* enough to get what that means, it means nothing” (2011, 3). RZA relates an incident wherein “a DJ from the Bay Area called me up and said ‘What y’all doing? Y’all talking French?’”, implying that even those listeners intimately familiar with hip-hop culture are often confused by NGE references (Allah 2009b, 386). This can be problematic because, as Miyakawa points out, “the God Hop message is only effective if listeners hear, understand, and respond to the

music. Unfortunately, rap fans may easily miss the God Hop message when it is buried beneath heavily coded doctrinal language” (2005, 136). Even Michael Muhammad Knight, a life long hip-hop fan, admits that when first “stepping into the Five Percent cipher, I drowned in specialized language” (2011, 16).

Ultimately, “only the most dedicated, curious, and patient fans take the time to find meaning in the lyrics” (Miyakawa 2005, 136), and perhaps that suits the purposes of the Nation of Gods and Earths. They are, after all, only seeking to address five percent of the audience.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE FIVE PERCENT DIASPORA

Anaya McMurray notes that “hip-hop culture began to travel almost as soon as its inception” (2007, 77). Indeed, hip-hop historian Nelson George argues that “from Vancouver and Toronto in Canada, to Dakar in Senegal, to Holland, to Cuba's Havana, to every place satellites beam music videos and CDs are sold (or bootlegged or counterfeited), hip-hop has made an impression” (1999, 206). I purchased my first hip-hop cassette in 1984. Thus, five years after the first rap recording, white kids in Northern British Columbia, Canada, were accessing the music and its message. The global influence of hip-hop culture has only increased with improvements in communication technologies and economic globalization strategies, and while the music I was listening to in the early 1980s mostly came out of the Eastern USA, it is now possible to find hip-hop in French, Swedish, Arabic, and indigenous languages like Innu, Maori, and even Greenland Eskimo. Osumare observes that “Global technology and African American culture have indeed formed a mutually sustaining McLuhanian message-in-the-medium that is facilitated by cultural interpenetration” (2001, 172). It is this

phenomenon which has allowed the Nation of Gods and Earths to influence audiences well beyond their immediate geographical and sociocultural scope.

One of the reasons Five Percenter hip-hop appeals to global audiences is its oppositional position to traditional American values and hegemony. Aidi notes that

Sunni Islam, the heterodox Nation of Islam and the quasi-Muslim movements such as the Five Percenters and Nuwaubians allow for a cultural and spiritual escape from the American social order that often entails a wholesale rejection of Western culture and civilization.

(Aidi 2004, 109)

Though Sorett argues that “in today's scene Islam is no longer perceived to be a necessarily oppositional religious discourse”, the increase in Islamophobia post 9/11 would indicate otherwise (2009, 18). Osumare observes that “the so-called conscious brand of rap music motivates youth internationally to explore their own issues of marginalization in the hip-hop 'underground,' which continues to evade the dominant pop culture industries” (2001, 172). Ironically, though God Hop is seen as part of an oppositional strategy, Knight notes that “Allah taught Five Percenters to respect the government, and hoped that rather than separate, they would become part of mainstream America and change it from within” (2007, 105). Indeed, through their influence over the trajectory of hip-hop culture, the NGE has in a sense achieved this goal. Ten years after Osumare's assertion of hip-hop's underground status, Sylvan argues that “hip-hop sensibility has become part and parcel of mainstream American popular culture” (Sylvan 2011, 291). Furthermore, “hip-hop moved from being understood as an oppositional discourse to the lingua franca of popular culture around the world” (Sorett 2009,

18). So while hip-hop has merged with mainstream culture, Islamic hip-hop is still seen as oppositional to mainstream values.

The globalization of hip-hop culture and its move into mainstream acceptance has led to the dissemination of Five Percenter jargon and theology and Five Percenter linguistics as expressed in rap music have impacted listeners across the globe. Aidi has documented a considerable Five Percenter influence among French youth. He describes how some observers have “pointed to the 'African-Americanization' of speech patterns of French youth, noting that the verbal jousting and 'dozens-playing' (mother jokes) of French youth is similar to that of 'American rappers from black ghettos'” (2004, 118). This may be a result of the ongoing collaboration between one of the most popular French rap groups, Iam, and the Wu Tang Clan. Iam formed in 1989 in Marseille and began collaborating with members of the Wu Tang Clan on their 1997 single “La Saga”. The group ostensibly practices a form of Sunni Islam, but are strongly influenced by American Islam's affiliation with Egyptian culture, and have adopted Egyptian pseudonyms after the manner of Five Percenter MC's. Iam are heavily influenced by early New York hip-hop and express a number of Five Percenter concepts in their work, including breaking down the name of the group to “Imperial Asiatic Man”. The group often refers to “L'homme Imperial Asiatique” in their work, and the most prominent member of the group, Akhenaten, self-identifies as Asiatic, despite being of Italian descent. Specifically, in the song “Iam Concept” from the group's 1991 debut album *...De la planète Mars*, Akhenaten repeatedly identifies as “Asiatique” and asserts that “des quartiers nord De Marseille, jusqu'à Brooklyn New York”, effectively aligning the group with American Islamic

rappers. I am further associate themselves with Five Percenter thought by insisting that “Que certains pays noirs ont civilisé le monde”, mirroring the NGE teaching that civilization stemmed from the Asiatic black race. Aidi believes that the experience of black American hip-hop artists appeals to European youth because it gives them “a cultural vocabulary and historical experience with which to bond and from which to draw elements for local repertoires of resistance” (2004, 119). He suggests that “in Europe, many North African youth are (re)discovering Islam and becoming race conscious through Five Percenter and NOI rap lyrics” (Aidi 2004, 123). Thus the influence of the Nation of Gods and Earths has moved beyond the realm of popular culture and into the political sphere, allowing French youth to create spaces of active resistance.

The dissemination of Five Percenter linguistics is not limited to France. Evidence of NGE influence appears in hip-hop communities around the globe. Jewish-American rapper Necro's work is peppered with Five Percent terminology. His 2007 track “Death Rap” begins with the statement “word up” and ends with the assertion that he “represents”. Danny Breaks, a British Drum and Bass DJ owns a record label called “Droppin' Science” a name shared with the ongoing Wednesday night rap extravaganza held at a local club in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Somali-Canadian rapper K'Naan also uses Five Percenter terminology in his work. In his track “The African Way”, he lets the audience know that he will “just break it down” for them, and in “Somalia” he asserts that “it's only right to represent my hood”.

Columbia University professor Hishaam Aidi notes that “in the 1990's Islamic hip-hop emerged as the language of disaffected youth throughout the

West” (2004, 110). He argues that “many young African-Americans, and increasingly Latinos reject Christianity, which they see as the faith of a guilty and indifferent establishment” (Aidi 2004, 109). Watkins supports this argument. He observes that “rappers are challenging the religious hegemony of the Black Church because they perceive this institution as having failed to respond to the pain, despair and struggles of the inner-city working poor” (Watkins 2003, 186). However, Aidi and Watkins arguments neglect to acknowledge the “multiple ways rappers have engaged (and been shaped by) the American religious landscape” (Sorett 2009, 18). The difference between Aidi and Watkins observations and those of Sorett is engendered by the passage of time. As the 21st Century progresses, “the religious dimensions of hip-hop have evolved from a neo-nationalist, 'black' spirituality associated with the Nation of Islam to an embrace of Christianity” (Sorett 2009, 14). This movement may be the result of the post 9/11 “War on Terror” which has, as Miyakawa observes, “encouraged the American public to be leery of all things even vaguely Islamic” (2005, 140). Nevertheless, Sylvan notes that rap music “contains a powerful and distinctive African-American religious world view that runs directly counter to the religious world view of the mainstream culture it has come to permeate” (Sylvan 2011, 291). Regardless of the temporal location of the observer, “hip-hop confirms religion to be always historically contingent (if not wholly reducible to historical context), and the ways that rappers invoke religion bears witness to what's happening on the ground in black communities, in American society, and around the globe” (Sorett 2009, 19). However, because of its close historical ties, rap music seems to overemphasize the role of the NGE in American culture.

Despite the globalization of the movement God Hop as a genre has of late been largely subsumed within the wider body of hip-hop culture. Knight observes that “despite increased awareness of the role played by Allah's nation in shaping modern hip-hop, Five Percenters have not been a force in the industry for years” (2007, 186). The demographics of Five Percenter jargon are telling, and Knight notes that, with some exceptions, “Five Percent code appears most often with New York MCs of a particular generation” (2011, 4). In the second decade of the 21st century, Muslim rap is most often associated with mainstream Sunni practice. J. Floyd-Thomas argues that “the development of a more 'orthodox' turn in rap's Islamic sensibilities mirrors the general shift in the Islamic orientation within the larger black community” (Winters 2011, 264). In 1975, Elijah Muhammad's son, Warith Dean Muhammad, took over the leadership of the Nation of Islam and moved the organization toward a more orthodox Sunni theological position (McLeod 1995; Lee 1996; Austin 2003). He renamed the organization “The Society for American Muslims” and dissolved the NOI structure. The organization was revived in 1981 by Louis Farrakhan, but retains a much smaller following than its original incarnation. Sorett also observes a concurrent rise in Christian influence in hip-hop. Particularly, he notes that “references to Creflo Dollar, who is arguably the most popular black prosperity preacher of the day, have become a fixture in hip-hop music” (Sorett 2009, 14). Knight argues that the decline of Five Percenter rap has been affected by the increase in the total body of hip-hop productions. He notes that “in the 1990's, New York rappers lost their dominance to the west coast, and in the years since have had to share the genre with artists from Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta, St. Louis,

and Houston, where the Gods were not nearly as ingrained in local culture” (Knight 2007, 186). Instead of coming directly from Five Percenters, “talk of black 'gods' has moved from the mouths of black Muslims to the tongues of hip-hop moguls like Jay-Z, for whom the 5% lexicon figures as but one religious constellation in a universe of words” (Sorett 2009, 14). One of the more popular young rappers of the internet generation, Lil B, refers to himself as “Based God”, and though he uses Five Percenter phrases like “word is bond” in his lyrics, there is no evidence that his self-styled godhood is consciously connected to the NGE. The globalization of hip-hop has also meant competition from outside markets, so that rather than listening to American artists, hip-hop fans in other countries are creating and listening to domestically produced music whose content and concerns are culturally specific. The influence of this kind of globalization is reciprocal so that the NGE both influences and is influenced by global markets and new technology. Perhaps the best example of the changes wrought by the phenomenon of globalization is the fact that these days

it's possible for someone to have all of the textual tools needed to be a Five Percenter without even meeting a Five Percenter in real life, let alone experiencing the traditional Five Percenter transmission of knowledge. This opening up of the Five Percent has already impacted the culture, and will not decrease with time.

(Knight 2011, 89)

This shift in modes of transmission as well as increasing contact between far flung communities via both the internet and global travel networks has resulted in the spread of more than just Five Percenter music across the world. Five

Percenter themselves are showing up in small pockets across the globe. Knight notes that

A 'First Born' in Haiti is translating the lessons into Creole. Gods and Earths in the United Kingdom appear to be as organized as any cipher in the US. Supreme Understanding Allah brought the knowledge to Ghana. I often hear rumors of Gods and Earths in China and Japan.

(2007, 261)

Additionally, Utley notes that the post-9/11 rise in Islamophobia and the sensitivity it has created regarding Muslim themes and language has resulted in a linguistic shift in rap music in general. Thus Utley observes that in the 21st Century, “Muslim rappers continued to rap about their beliefs but the number of artists who were not Muslim but who incorporated Islamic themes declined significantly” (Utley 2012, 6). However, regardless of the level of current participation in hip-hop music production, the significance of the Nation of Gods and Earths in hip-hop culture is lasting. Rappers continue to acknowledge the influence of God Hop artists like Rakim, Brand Nubian, and the Wu-Tang Clan. Although God Hop artists may no longer be at the centre of focus in the hip hop community, the artists continue to produce and create music. Kids in the suburbs continue to assert that “word is bond”. The Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths has made an indelible impression on the nature of global hip-hop culture.

Conclusion

Religious Studies scholar Catherine Albanese suggest a model of religion based on four elements: creed, code, cultus and community. Throughout this thesis we have seen how Albanese's model can be applied to the Nation of Gods and Earth in order to illuminate the religious worldview of the organization's participants. This thesis discussed these elements in relation to the history and mythology of the NGE, the racial and gender norms that are enacted by the culture, and the musical production of members of the Nation.

This thesis has determined that the four c's apply to Five Percenter culture in myriad ways. There are numerous creedal elements to the culture of the Nation of Gods and Earths. Albanese insists that creeds can range “from highly developed theologies and sacred stories of origin to informal oral traditions” (1999, 9). The Supreme Mathematics, Supreme Alphabet and the 120 Lessons are the cornerstones of NGE theology. The Supreme Math and Alphabet are the manifestation of Father Allah's new revelation. These lessons are accompanied by various plus lessons, including the Twelve Jewels, and serve to structure the worldview of NGE members. The Nation of Gods and Earths have a complex origin story which centers around the figure of Yakub, the mad scientist who created the white race, and the concept of the Asiatic black race. These myths focus Five Percenter worldview on the black race and ensure that NGE creeds structure a racial hierarchy that privileges the black man. Other significant creedal elements of the culture include the complex hagiography that surrounds the figure of Father Allah, mythological understandings of the First Nine Born,

and the hijra journey from Harlem to Brooklyn.

Albanese describes codes in relation to her model of religion as “moral and ethical systems”, customs and ethos (1999, 10). In the Nation of Gods and Earths, gender and race relations comprise the codes by which people structure their lives. Racial understandings impel participants in the Nation to work toward the betterment of the black community. They structure participants orientation toward government and society. Racial understanding limit the interaction between members of the NGE and white people. White people are treated with suspicion and intermarriage and race mixing are generally eschewed. Gender relations within the Nation codify the interaction between men and women, and prescribe the manifestations of sexuality among members of the group. Women are subservient to men and homosexuality is forbidden. Women are encouraged to wear “refinement” by covering three quarters of their body.

The NGE has a rich body of cultic practices which satisfy Albanese's model. Albanese insists that cultuses are “formal and repeated” acts that “underline and reinforce the meanings evoked by creeds and codes” (1999, 10). For Five Percenters, the most significant cultic practice is “doing science”, also known as building. Building is done in groups of two or more, and a monthly gathering known as Parliament allows members to enact this cultus publicly. The process of building necessitates a theological exegesis, reinforcing the Lessons and the racial and gender codes contained therein. Many members of the Nation cite the process of building on the Supreme Mathematics as their primary impetus for participation. Members of the NGE have also developed a number of prayers, hymns, and meditations which further reinforce the culture's creeds and codes

through ritual repetition.

Catherine Albanese defines community as groups of people “bound together by the creed, code, and cultus they share” (1999, 10). This thesis has illustrate many ways in which the Nation of Gods and Earths conform to this definition. The racial and gender mores codified in NGE creeds serve to define the boundaries of membership in the culture. Women's roles and those of whites are limited. The demographics of the community are skewed by gender mores. Only one tenth of the community are women. Five Percenters adopt righteous names based on the Supreme Math and Alphabet. These names serve to identify members of the community to each other while distinguishing them from surrounding communities. The creeds and codes of the culture are operationalized in the hip-hop music that is produced by members of the culture. God Hop enacts a linguistic code that serves to bind the community together through the shared experience of music production and consumption, while simultaneously providing a platform for proselytization. God Hop's success is both a reflection of the strength of Five Percenter culture, and a mechanism by which the culture has been globally disseminated. Thus, it can be seen that the Nation of Gods and Earths has creeds, codes, and cultuses which structure a unique community, and therefore are, according to Catherine Albanese's “four c's” model, a religion.

There is a dearth of academic writing on the Nation of Gods and Earths, and while this thesis moves toward filling in some lacunae in the literature, it is limited by my own position in relation to the culture. My argument relies entirely on secondary sources. Further work on the subject of the NGE would benefit

from participant observation and direct interviewing of Five Percent adherents. One aspect of the culture which was only peripherally addressed in this thesis but may provide fertile ground for further inquiry is the nature of leadership in the NGE. Five Percenters insist that there is no hierarchy or priesthood in the NGE, but is this true in practice? How does the lack of an administrative body affect the functioning of the culture? Who decides where and when a Parliament is to take place, and what are the roles of senior members like the First Nine Born?

This thesis illustrates the true breadth and scope of globalization. The NGE are a demographically insignificant group whose language, by virtue of the globalization of hip-hop culture, has been disseminated throughout the world. Most people who use phrases like “word is bond” and “what’s up, G?” have no connection to the Nation of Gods and Earths and do not realize that when they enact these phrases, they are propagating the theology of an obscure black nationalist group from New York City. This thesis further illustrates the pervasiveness of religion in global culture, and in popular culture in particular. Religion appears in the most unexpected places. From a street corner in Harlem, to a hip-hop performance in France, religion manifests in mysterious and fascinating ways. This thesis has illuminated the importance of popular culture and specifically music as a location for critical analysis. When we listen to the music, we make unexpected finds. In the case of this thesis, when we listen to the music, we find the Nation of Gods and Earths.

APPENDIX A

Supreme Mathematics

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------|
| 1. KNOWLEDGE | 6. EQUALITY |
| 2. WISDOM | 7. GOD |
| 3. UNDERSTANDING | 8. BUILD OR DESTROY |
| 4. CULTURE | 9. BORN |
| 5. POWER | 0. CIPHER |

Supreme Alphabet

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| A - ALLAH | N - NOW OR END |
| B - BE OR BORN | O - CIPHER |
| C - SEE | P - POWER |
| D - DIVINE | Q - QUEEN |
| E - EQUALITY | R - RULE |
| F - FATHER | S - SELF OR SAVIOR |
| G - GOD | T - TRUTH OR SQUARE |
| H - HE OR HER | U - YOU OR UNIVERSE |
| I - I | V - VICTORY |
| J - JUSTICE | W - WISDOM |
| K - KING | X - UNKNOWN |
| L - LOVE HELL OR RIGHT | Y - WHY? |
| M - MASTER | Z - ZIG-ZAG-ZIG |

APPENDIX B

The Universal Flag of the Nation of Gods and Earths



Meaning:

7= the number for "God" in Supreme Mathematics.

Sun= symbol for Male; the points around the sun symbolize expanding consciousness

Moon= symbol for Woman/Female

Star= symbolizes Child/Seed

The Eight rays of the Sun are understood as representing divisions of the teachings of the Nation of Gods and Earths:

1. Supreme Mathematics; 2. Supreme Alphabet; 3. Student Enrollment (1–10); 4. Lost & Found Muslim Lesson #1 (1–14); 5. Lost & Found Muslim Lesson #2 (1–40); 6. English Lesson C-1 (1–36); 7. Actual Facts; 8. Solar Facts

The last six of these lessons (1–10 through Solar Facts) are collectively called 120.

APPENDIX C

The Pledge of The Nation Of Gods And Earths

I pledge allegiance to the Universal Flag and to the Nation that which it stands for, built for one common cause, the one God Allah, who is indivisible, with freedom, justice and equality for all the human families of the Planet Earth. From our Father, who brought the knowledge of ourselves from heaven and to the hells of Earth! Those who don't know should know his name, his kingdom has come their kingdom is done, and our Earth shall be like heaven. Build and destroy everyday, so that we can civilize those that were once like us, fall for not the devils temptations for we are the destroyers of evil. Knowledge of what we can, will and shall do. Its not a religion, but a way of life, strive for perfection and stay away from disaster...until the end it will always be I-Self-Lord-And-Master.

GODS MORNING MEDITATION (Should be recited 5 times daily)

Peace to the Gods!
Peace to the Earths!
Peace to Man, Woman and Child!
We are the ones
To save the dumb, deaf and blind
From the grasps of an evil that's divine
Only the math
Can lead those to the path
Never shall I forget who I was before the knowledge
The 85 need us so they can survive
Perfection is what we strive
Teach so that we unify
Cause if one dies then surely we all to too!
These are the last days, surely there's a disaster
Until the end I-Self-Lord-And-Master

(Noor 2002, 243-244)

APPENDIX D

Five Percent Enlightener Song

PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-U-JUSTICE
PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-AND-JUSTICE

Each and everyday
Each and everyway
I'm going to show andd rove
And teach the righteous way

PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-U-JUSTICE
PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-AND-JUSTICE

The knowledge is the foundation
The wisdom is the way
The understanding shows you
That you're on your way

PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-U-JUSTICE
PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-AND-JUSTICE

The culture is I God
The power is truth
The equality only shows you
That you have planted your roots

PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-U-JUSTICE
PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-AND-JUSTICE

God came to teach us
Of the righteous way
Now we must build with
That which he taught us
Build to be born
In this glorious day

PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-U-JUSTICE
PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-AND-JUSTICE

The knowledge of the Cipher
Is to enlighten you
To let you know
That God is right amongst you

PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-U-JUSTICE
PEACE ALLAH ALLAH-AND-JUSTICE

APPENDIX E

A Prayer of Reality

by Born Allah and Kihiem U Allah

Surely, we, the 5% Nation of Gods and Earth's, have turned to thee, Allah, striving to be steadfast and righteous in thy teachings...

Surely, our prayer our sacrifice, our life and our death are all for thee, Father, we are they seed...

No associates have thee, all, of this we are commanded. We are of those tho live and breathe they teachings of Universal Knowledge, Divine Wisdom and Supreme Understanding...

Originalman, Allah, thou art king, there is no God save thee, thou art our Lord, and we thyself...

We, Original People, have been unjust t self and we confess and ask forgiveness for acquired faults, grant us protection from ignorance and evil, for through experience we have learnt that none can grant protection from error, save thee, Father...

Turn us from failure, indecent morals, swine eating, birth control, and whatever trick or trap devised by thine enemy keep us in slavery. We, they seed have tried numerous so-called solutions to these ills and have discovered the only cure is thee, the great black God of truth and righteousness, who's proper and etername is Allah...

Our father, Allah, the originalman, guard and guide they seed, make us successful in all our overtakings, for surely, Allah, thou art praises and magnified...

O! Allah, bless they righteous seed, here in North America and all over the Earth, bless us Father so we may lift this yoke of oppression we have been forced to endure for 431 years. Bless they seed Allah with hindsight, insight and foresight, prepare us Father for the battle to come

Fore surely, Allah, thou art praised and magnified...

Amin (Allah great black mind)

(Knight 2007, 200-201; all grammatical and spelling irregularities present in original)

APPENDIX F

WHAT WE TEACH

1. That Black People are the Original People of the Planet Earth.
2. That Black People are the Fathers and Mothers of Civilization.
3. That the science of *Supreme Mathematics* is the key to understanding man's relationship to the Universe.
4. Islam is a natural way of life, **not** a religion.
5. That education should be fashioned to enable us to be self sufficient as a people.
6. That each one should teach one according to their knowledge.
7. That the Blackman is **GOD** and his proper name is **ALLAH** (Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head).
8. That our children are our link to the future and they must be nurtured, respected, loved, protected and educated.

APPENDIX G

THE TWELVE JEWELS

1. Knowledge
2. Wisdom
3. Understanding
4. Freedom
5. Justice
6. Equality
7. Food
8. Clothing
9. Shelter
10. Love
11. Peace
12. Happiness

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