

The black bar mitzvah

Representations of Jews in US hip-hop lyrics

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ABSTRACT • References to Jews and to matters included in Jewish discourse are commonplace in US popular culture in general and in US-produced hip-hop lyrics in particular. This article deals with the latter, and aims to analyse how Jews are represented there. It is suggested here that 1. these representations are rendered comprehensible by analysing them in the light of the term coined by Zygmunt Bauman: *allosemitism*, which denotes that Jews are ‘other’. This article further suggests that 2. the representations of Jews featured in the lyrics cannot be made comprehensible without looking into the historical relations between American Jews and African Americans. According to Jeffrey Melnick, this relation is characterised by ‘robust ambivalences’. This article arrives at the conclusion that the representations of Jews draw on classical conspiratorial and economic antisemitic ideas that situate Jews within the realms of shadowy (economic and instrumental) power, but which at times can be understood as philosemitic, as Jews are represented as wealthy and influential role models. Hence the usage of the term *allosemitism* to analyse the empirics.

Introduction and aim

In April 2013 the hip-hop artist Scarface gave an interview to Hard Knock TV, a video production company that focuses on hip-hop music. On the question of ‘the current state of hip-hop’ Scarface answered, ‘I feel like we [African-Americans] are ‘losing it’, and ‘I feel like the people that are in control of what hip-hop does is so fucking white, and so fucking Jewish’. Later on, Scarface puts it frankly: ‘There is no fucking way that it is not a conspiracy against ... the blacks in hip-hop.’¹

Scarface’s statement, however, was not uttered in a cultural vacuum. On the contrary, recurring references to Jews and matters included in Jewish discourse made within the

- 1 KollegeKidd 2013. Cf. the critique that was aimed at Jay-Z by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) upon the release of Jay-Z’s thirteenth solo album *4:44*. The critique held that a lyric that features in the song ‘The Story of O.J.’ ‘feeds stereotypes’. On the song Jay-Z says, ‘You wanna know what’s more important than throwin’ away money at a strip club? Credit/You ever wonder why Jewish people own all the property in America? This how they did it.’ JTA and Schwartz 2017. Shortly after the ADL addressed the issue, Jay-Z gave an interview to Rap Radar Podcast (2017), where he defended the lyric on the argument that he was using exaggerations, and that ‘context is everything’.

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framework of US popular culture in general, and in US-produced hip-hop in particular, should be perceived as a widespread, yet under-researched phenomenon. Statements and comments on Jews and references drawn from Jewish discourse have been embedded in US hip-hop since at least the late 1980s. But the US case is not an isolated example. On an international level, similar statements with regard to Jews have been uttered by agents within the global hip-hop community.

In 2019, this development prompted *The Times of Israel* to publish an article on the topic; it focused on anti-Jewish hate-speech in hip-hop lyrics from Western Europe, and mentioned artists from countries including France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and others. The article highlights the fact that while US artists, on the one hand, tend to invoke classic stereotypes about Jews that link them to money and power, their European counterparts are more inclined to use the Arab–Israeli conflict as a proxy for hate-speech against Jews (Liphshiz 2019).

Against this backdrop the aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, it aims to answer the question of how mainly non-Jewish hip-hop artists construct Jews in US hip-hop lyrics. Secondly, it aims to contribute to the broader academic discussions that deal with both the representation and construction of images of Jews and/or Jewishness in various strands of US popular culture. Within certain circles in the hip-hop community this is discussed at length in various media outlets, such as so-called industry press such as *The Source*, *XXL Magazine*, and *HiphopDX*, internet-based discussion boards and fan-produced videos uploaded to YouTube.²

2 This does not negate the importance of looking into how Jewish hip-hop artists' lyrical production helped contribute to the construction of the image of Jews. Such a

The research assumption, design and empirics

Let us return to Scarface's statement quoted above. Although it holds antisemitic overtones it is here proposed that the empirical material entails both positive and negative representations of Jews, which are all grounded in stereotypes, myths and prejudiced assumptions. Therefore the corpus will be analysed in the light of the term *allosemitism*, here used as a one-size-fits-all for any representation of Jews, be they 'good' or 'bad'.

Simply put, the term 'allosemitism' connotes 'the idea that Jews are other' and was coined by Zygmunt Bauman. He argues that both antisemitism and philosemitism should be seen as subgenres of allosemitism, and that it

is sustained by two discursive currents:

(1) 'the casting of Jews as the embodiment of ambivalence' and (2) 'the abstract Jew', the Jew as a concept located in a different discourse from the 'empirical Jew', and hence located at a secure distance from experience and immune to whatever information supplied by that experience and whatever emotions may be aroused by daily intercourse. (Bauman 1998: 148)

This relates to the question that arises when sifting through the empirical material: what causes African Americans to draw on Jewish discourse and to produce allosemitic representations? This article suggests that a possible answer lies in African American–Jewish interaction historically, which is reflected in the lyrical production of US hip-hop artists. This assumption rests on Jeffrey Melnick's conclusion that African American–Jewish interaction, historically,

future study could be conducted in comparison to the present study.

has been characterised by ‘robust ambivalences’ (Melnick 2001: 15).

At last, to help explain, give depth to and ‘decode’ the at times desultory lyrical structure of hip-hop lyrics, the term ‘narrative abbreviation’ is a useful tool, as conceptualised by Jürgen Straub:

Narrative abbreviation contains stories or suggestions of other stories without themselves being stories. They can be hermeneutically explicated only by recourse to the stories that they contain or suggest. Isolated terms or concepts that simply become semantically invalid as soon as their inner relation to the past, or even the future, are ignored. (Straub 2006: 62)

Hip-hop lyrics are replete with narrative abbreviations that serve as semantic entries into wider historical narratives, which in this particular case relate to African American–Jewish interaction. And apropos the empirical evidence, a few words need to be mentioned on its delimitation.

Hip-hop lyrics form a vast corpus that keeps expanding day by day. Therefore it is impossible to set a clear-cut delimitation on it in regards to both agents and time. But this does not contradict the assumption that conclusions can be made upon analysis of the different allosemitic statements. This is because they can be tied to a wider historical and societal context in the US in which statements on Jews and matters related to Jewish discourse are commonplace. This makes the empirics worthwhile analysing.

In summary, this article rests on a research design that consists of one assumption, one theory and one method. The assumption is that the reason why mostly African Americans produce Jewish stereotypes, both ‘good’ and ‘bad’, relates to African American–Jewish interaction historically. The theory

is that these productions cannot be understood by merely understanding them as mere expressions of antisemitism. Instead they ought to be understood as expressions of allosemitism, as conceptualised by Zygmunt Bauman. The method to make sense of swathes of the empirical material is to look at them as narrative abbreviations, as semantic entries into wider historical narratives.

Scarface’s statement above might be seen as controversial. Yet hip-hop is no stranger to controversy, but replete with occurrences that time and again generate controversy and scandals that span from fatal violence – where the assassinations of the artists Tupac Shakur (1996) and The Notorious B.I.G. (1997) are the most well known – to demeaning and objectifying constructions of women, romanticised narratives of gun-related violence, trafficking of controlled substances – and allosemitic representations of Jews. With this in mind this article aims to tie itself into a body of critical inquiries on hip-hop; they focus, for example, on the problematic relation between the representation of black masculinity and white consumption in the US, and the complexities that surround black women’s engagement in hip-hop, which to a large extent is masculinist and misogynistic (Jeffries 2011; Sharpley-Whiting 2007).

‘Jews! Jews! Jews!’

African American–Jewish relations

The following section makes no claim to provide a full historical account of the relations between African Americans and Jews, but aims to account for some selected events. Within the context of US hip-hop, they are seemingly significant. As will be illustrated in the next section, some artists invoke them in their lyrics. It is here suggested that the tensions that have characterised the relations between Jews and African Americans,

historically, can give us important insights into the sources of artists' representations of Jews. In other words, the historical account presented here has been received by US hip-hop artists, has taken a mythologised quality and has given rise to mythologised narratives, which have had an impact on their cognitive universes from which bits and pieces have been invoked and reproduced in these artists' lyrics.

To expediate the understanding of African American–Jewish relations historically, in which the latter group's identity came to feature a dimension of 'whiteness', the shift that occurred in the approach of 'white America' to Jews following the Second World War needs to be highlighted.

Karen Brodtkin writes that 'white America' embraced Jews and even Jewishness as part of itself' after the guns fell silent in 1945. Now Jewish public intellectuals rose to prominence, and a philosemitic coded, commodified consumption of Jewish culture and Jewishness came into vogue. By the 1950s, non-Jews started to accept (male) Jews as white, writes Brodtkin. For example, Jewish American writers such as J. D. Salinger were perceived and accepted as American writers. Eventually, Jews were cited as a model minority and contrasted with 'African Americans as culturally deficient'. In sum, on a general scale, Jews were accepted as whites, and 'being Jewish was a way of being American' (Brodtkin 1998: 141–3).

During the Civil Rights Era, African Americans and Jews famously marched and protested together. A photo from 1965 captures Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr marching arm in arm from Selma to Birmingham. For many people, this iconic picture represents the 'golden age' of African American–Jewish relations in the US during the 1960s; the two groups then worked together and



Wikimedia Commons

Rabbi Abraham Heschel presenting the Judaism and World Peace award to Dr Martin Luther King Jr in 1965. New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection.

shared common goals (Greenberg 2006: 1).

But African American and Jewish relations during the 1960s were also racked by tension, stoking radicalism on both sides of the divide. As elsewhere in the US during the Civil Rights Era, which saw a spate of city riots and college protests, and the assassinations of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, ethnic tensions were rising in New York.

According to Robert Friedman, this was particularly true in Orthodox Jewish and white blue-collar neighbourhoods. With a growing number of economically challenged African Americans and Hispanics moving in, these neighbourhoods underwent a shift in demographics. Moreover, the New York of the late 1960s also witnessed a shift in social politics. This resulted, for example, in open admission to universities. Following this, Friedman concludes, 'the polarization over race in New York was on the verge of

exploding into violence' (Friedman 1990: 83).

In the midst of these transformations, and as a radical response to an alarmist interpretation of them, the New York Rabbi Meir Kahane, who drew on the revisionist Zionism of the hawkish Ze'ev Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940), established the ultra-nationalist vigilante movement, the Jewish Defense League (JDL). Among other causes, the JDL was intent on safeguarding Jews' political rights, for example by protecting old and economically destitute Jews in low-income neighbourhoods. Kahane claimed, according to Friedman, that they were falling prey to so-called black street crime, 'which had skyrocketed in the 1960s' (Friedman 1990: 84). Notwithstanding Kahane's militancy, fuelled by his paranoid fantasies about an impending new Holocaust egged on by 'black antisemitism', and conspiring African Americans who were preying on Jewish and white neighbourhoods, he was not entirely mistaken.

Radical African American leaders – who overlooked how Jews and blacks had made common cause with civil rights – had emerged and risen to prominence during the 1960s.

Malcolm X singled out Jews as owners of 'major businesses' in 'every major ghetto', and Stokely Carmichael condemned Zionism with the argument that it was equal to racism (Friedman 1990: 85).

Moreover, in the much-cited poem 'Black Art', the controversial poet Amiri Baraka, one of the leading proponents of the Black Arts Movement, writes, 'We want poems. Like fists beating niggers out of Jocks. Or dagger poems in the slimy bellies of the owner-Jews' (Baraka and Neal 2007: 302).

This poem has been deemed the major poetic manifesto of the Black Arts Movement. Baraka also expresses antisemitic viewpoints in several other poems, such as 'The Black Man is Making New Gods', in which

he brands the Jewish religion a 'Dangerous Germ Culture' (Watts 2001: 230). The Black Arts Movement inspired countless writers, musicians, playwrights and poets, such as the Last Poets, a loose-knit collective of poets and musicians that arose from the radical cultural climate informed by the radical Black Arts Movement. The Last Poets are often cited as one of the earliest influences on hip-hop music (Neal 2014: 182).

Finally, John F. Hatchett, a schoolteacher, claimed in a piece published in the *African-American Teachers' Forum*, that Jews "dominate and control" New York schools, "where Black children were mentally poisoned ... This spells the death for the minds and souls of our Black children" (Friedman 1990: 85).

When the news that Hatchett had been appointed as the head of the Martin Luther King Jr Afro-American Student Center in August 1968 reached the JDL, it staged its first demonstration. It was held at New York University, where they picketed for twelve hours. Following the picketing there, the JDL continued to organise demonstrations to protest against so-called black antisemitism (Friedman 1990: 85).

Sagtkd, Wikimedia Commons



A Moshiah poster featuring the rebbe that hangs over a building in Crown Heights, 2006.

If the photo of King and Heschel represents the high point of the complex relationship between Jews and African Americans, the riots in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn might be seen as a slump, albeit temporary. In a car accident that occurred in August 1991, a Jewish man accidentally killed Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old boy of Caribbean descent. As a result of Cato's death, three days of riots ensued in the neighbourhood. At the time, *The New York Times* accounted for how the riots started:

More than 100 police officers, some in riot helmets, surrounded the accident scene as more than 250 neighborhood residents, mostly black teen-agers shouting 'Jews! Jews! Jews!' jeered the driver of the car, a Hasidic man, and then turned their anger on the police. (McQuiston 1991)

Throughout the riots, several Jews were attacked, and Yankel Rosenbaum, a Jewish doctoral student from Australia, was stabbed to death by a mob of African Americans (Greenberg 2006: 244). In the wake of the riots, African American-Jewish relations normalised in Crown Heights. However, on a national level, more conflicts were impending.

In 1993 Khalid Abdul Muhammad, the national advisor of Nation of Islam (NOI), gave an infamous speech at Kean College, New Jersey (today Kean University). In the speech, Jews were described as 'slum lords', 'vendors of rotten meat' and 'bloodsuckers of the Black Nation'. *The Washington Times* columnist Arnold Beichman described the rhetoric as something 'not heard since the days of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels and Josef Stalin' (1994).

At a Washington press conference, Louis Farrakhan, the head of the NOI, denounced the speech, characterising it as 'vile in manner,



Mohammad Ali Marizad, Wikimedia Commons (CC-BY-4.0)

Louis Farrakhan (b. 1933), the former leader of Nation of Islam, photographed here in 2016. Southern Poverty Law Center has classified Farrakhan as an 'antisemite'. He disputes this label.

repugnant, malicious and mean spirited' (YouTube 2010).

Although Khalid Abdul Muhammad was suspended from all his commitments within the NOI, Farrakhan also added a caveat to his denunciation: 'While I stand by the truths that he spoke, I must condemn ... the manner in which those truths were presented'.

Many Jewish groups interpreted this as a defence of the ideas ('truths') expressed by Muhammed. More and more Jewish institutions placed demand on other African American leaders to repudiate Farrakhan's statements; but as pressure piled, their refusal grew ever more resilient. This was not so much because they agreed with Louis Farrakhan; African American leaders were simply not interested in being told what to do. Instead they accused the Jewish institutions of racism (Salzman 1997: 4).³

3 It should be noted that Khalid Abdul Muhammad's speech was denounced by a wide array of prominent African American

It did not help either that Louis Farrakhan himself had a history of problematic statements concerning the Jewish community. For example, during a radio sermon in 1984 he referred to ‘using God’s name to shield your religion’, in reference to the Israelis. This was extensively reported in the media as ‘Farrakhan calls Judaism a gutter religion’. Farrakhan has also stated that ‘The Jews don’t like me ‘cause I am saying they’re not the chosen people of God’ (Deutsch 2000: 110–11).

Nathaniel Deutsch argues that Farrakhan’s relationship to Jews and Judaism is ‘complicated’, and that it cannot simply be condensed to widespread quotations. He denounces Jews as whites, but with greater potential for doing either good or harm. On the one hand, Farrakhan praises the Jewish community for what he perceives as their cultural accomplishments and for their supposed unity; on the other, he cultivates classical antisemitic myths and assertions such as, for example, the idea of a Jewish conspiracy that controls the international banking system, and that Jewish interests run the entertainment industry in Hollywood (Deutsch 2000: 110).⁴

Travis L. Gosa writes that hip-hop culture and the ‘politically and economically disaffected, in particular African Americans, may subscribe to conspiratorial and alarmist beliefs’, and that these streams of thinking and ways to make sense of the order are utilised by agents within the culture to challenge racial inequality and stratification. By

leaders, such as Jesse Jackson, Kwesi Mfume, Wyatt Tee Walker and the Rev. Al Sharpton (Gardell 1996: 256).

4 For a lengthy discussion on the topic of Nation of Islam and Louis Farrakhan’s relationship to the Jewish community, see for example Gardell 1996: 254–71.

analysing a bricolage of empirical material such as US hip-hop lyrics, Gosa sets out to show how ‘conspiracy theory [in singular] appears in the form of “counterknowledge”’. Gosa defines the term as ‘a subversive racial reframing of social problems that is also meant to entertain’ (2011: 1–2).

Considering this theoretical vantage point combined with, on the one hand, the white dimension of Jewish American identity that took form after the Second World War, and on the other, the African American experience that includes institutionalised slavery followed by institutionalised racial segregation, a partial explanation of the antisemitic tropes mentioned above, solely informed by a socio-economic perspective, may possibly be within reach. Following Gosa’s line of reasoning, these tropes have been expressed to challenge racial inequality in a society where whites and Jews – who have been white since the 1950s – by the sole virtue of being white and Jewish, allegedly sit at the top of the social stratum.

Following the debate concerning Khalid Abdul Muhammad’s speech, anti-Jewish sentiments continued to gain momentum within academia. At several universities around the US during the 1990s, clashes erupted between African American and Jewish students. Cheryl Lynn Greenberg describes some incidents that fanned the flames of these racial tensions:

the black student magazine *Nommo* asserted the validity of the anti-Semitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. At Howard, a law student led an audience in a chant blaming Jews for the death of Nat Turner and the prosecution of Marcus Garvey. *The Protocols* and the NOI’s new book, *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*, which distorted and exaggerated Jewish involvement in the slave trade,



William Braunstein (b. 1972), photographed here in 2006, known by his stage name Ill Bill, is an American rapper and record producer from Brooklyn, New York City.

slavery, and other forms of exploitative racism, could readily be obtained at student rallies and through campus organizations. (Greenberg 2006: 245)

These tensions also spread in places beyond academia, such as in popular culture. One telling example is the uproar that followed the release of Michael Jackson's song 'They Don't Care about Us' (1995).⁵ It contains the lines 'Jew me, sue me, everybody do me, kick me, kike me, don't you black or white me'. In the context of the tense situation between African Americans and Jews, Jackson faced allegations of antisemitism, which he repudiated in several interviews and public statements. Aside from American pop music and film industry, as will be shown later on, narratives on African American and Jewish interaction have echoes in the lyrical production of a whole host of hip-hop artists.

5 Michael Jackson, *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I*, 'They Don't Care About Us', Epic / MJJ Productions © 1995.

African American-Jewish relations reflected in hip-hop lyrics

Hip Hop brought cultures together
I remember cuzines in Camaros pumping
'Tougher than Leather'
Yankel Rosenbaum still got stabbed in
Crown Heights
Gavin Cato got hit when they ran that red
light,
Over a decade of healing but the scars
remain
Both families involved still harbor the
pain.⁶

This is taken from the song 'White Nigger', performed by Ill Bill (Non Phixion, now dissolved, and La Coka Nostra). It deals with the experiences Ill Bill endured during the 1980s when growing up in the Gleenwood Housing Projects, a 'racially mixed' – in Ill Bill's own words – community in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn. Conceptualising the excerpt as a narrative abbreviation that holds semantic entries to a wider historical narrative makes it understandable; in the song Ill Bill sketches some defining incidents, some of a personal character and others that had a larger societal impact, such as the effects ensuing upon the accidental killing of Gavin Cato: the Crown Heights Riots and the fatal stabbing of Yankel Rosenbaum.

'Personal character' refers to the fact that Ill Bill is Jewish. In the US context Ill Bill is therefore also white, and it is therefore, furthermore, reasonable to assume that the controversial song title is in part a reference to Ill Bill's dual racial identity: a Jewish/white American engaged in a predominantly African American artform who came

6 Ill Bill, *The Hour of Reprisal*, 'White Nigger', Uncle Howie Records, Fat Beats © 2008.

of age in a 'racially mixed' environment to a marked extent divided along racial lines. Ill Bill is also, according to himself, a grandson of Holocaust survivors, which he addresses in the song.

This stands as one rich, revealing and illustrative example of the fact that the tensed historical relationship between Jews and African Americans, the 'robust ambivalences', are reflected and described in hip-hop lyrics. But it is not the only one.

An illustrative example of a narrative abbreviation that concerns the Crown Heights Riots features in the song 'How Many Mics' by the Fugees. In the song, Wyclef Jean states his unbigoted stance towards Jews by claiming that he plays golf with David Sonnenberg, the Fugees' then manager; he also makes a reference to the Crown Heights Riots:

So on my day off with David Sonnenberg
I play golf
Run through Crown Heights screaming
out Mazel Tov!
Problem with no man
before black, I'm first human.⁷

The sentence 'Run through Crown Heights screaming out Mazel Tov!' is clearly given a deeper meaning if one deems it a semantic entry into the broader narrative of the Crown Heights Riots. The statement is now woven into the larger historical narrative of the 'robust ambivalences' that have characterised the relations between Jewish and African American communities in US society; seen in this light, the quotation is fused with more authority and a deeper meaning. But this does not exhaust the possibility of conflicting or ambiguous narrative

7 Fugees, *The Score*, 'How Many Mics', Ruffhouse, Columbia © 1996.

abbreviations that open up windows to a plurality of different historical narratives.

To complicate things further, Lauryn Hill's verse on the same song contains another reference that could be interpreted as an allusion to the relationship between Jews and African Americans, especially if viewed in association with the quotation above:

I get inner visions like Stevie
See me, essential from the chalice like the
weed be
Indeed be like Khalid Muhammad
MC's make me vomit
I get controversial.⁸

In the first part of the quotation Lauryn Hill pays homage to Stevie Wonder's 1973 album *Innervisions*, making a pun on Stevie Wonder's visual impairment. The second bar contains a reference to the long-stemmed water pipe (chalice) used by certain adherents of the Rastafari religion in their ceremonial use of marijuana. Lastly, Lauryn Hill is comparing herself to Khalid Muhammad by claiming that her level of controversiality is on par with that of his. By paying homage to Khalid Muhammad, albeit not necessarily in a positive manner, it is here suggested that Lauryn Hill connects to his vitriolic remarks about the Jews as an imagined collective, and to the historical tensions between them and African Americans.

Lauryn Hill is not the only hip-hop artist who has invoked Khalid Muhammad in her lyrics. In 1988 excerpts from one of his speeches was sampled by Public Enemy to serve as part of the intro to their song 'Night of the Living Baseheads'. Three years on, Ice Cube followed suit; the firebrand Khalid Muhammad appears on two of his albums:

8 Fugees, *The Score*, 'How Many Mics', Ruffhouse, Columbia © 1996.

Death Certificate (1991) and *Lethal Injection* (1993). And on a guest appearance on the Scarface song 'Hand of the Dead Body', the first single from Scarface's third album, *The Diary*, Ice Cube salutes Khalid Muhammad by stating that he is 'Down with Khalid Abdul Muhammad'.⁹

Moreover, the now retired NBA-star and, at the time, part-time rapper Shaquille O'Neal compared himself to Khalid Muhammad in the song '(I Know I Got) Skillz'. Here he declares he is 'Still ripping rhymes and dropping bombs like Khalid Muhammad'.¹⁰

In 2010, Vinnie Paz (Jedi Mind Tricks and Army of the Pharaohs) invoked Khalid Muhammad in his lyrics. Paz boasts that someone beating his lyrical stylishness would be as absurd as 'Khalid Muhammad saying he's White Power'.¹¹ This stands as a testimony to the fact that the memory of Khalid Muhammad is preserved within US hip-hop culture.

Aside from Khalid Muhammad, other radical elements that drew nourishment from and increased the polarisation between Jews and African Americans, particularly in New York during the late 1960s, are reflected in one bar of the song 'Kublai Khan',¹² which features on Jedi Mind Tricks's third album, *Visions of Gandhi* (2003). Here Goretex (Non Phixion) invokes this polarisation as a metaphor for something he seemingly perceives to be contradictory by nature. The narrative runs: 'In heaven and earth, barcodes to measure my

girth, that's like the JDL [the Jewish Defense League] joining the Zulu Nation for turf.'

The JDL of the late 1960s was intensely hostile towards African Americans, whose radical elements are encapsulated by Goretex's use of the Zulu Nation, even though the body of works on the JDL does not report that the two radical nationalist movements came to blows. However, it is suggested here that the 'Zulu Nation' is employed as a metonym for the then burgeoning radical African American nationalism and activism, most notably expressed by the BPP.

Scholars have recognised the influences of different Islamic traditions of interpretation on US hip-hop culture; they range from the African American Islamic movement Nation of Gods and Earths to different mainstream Sunni interpretations (Ackfeldt 2019; Miyakawa 2005; Alim 2006; Mohaiemen 2008). Louis Farrakhan has at least since the early 1990s maintained a powerful sway over hip-hop culture. Among artists such as Big Daddy Kane, Brand Nubian and Public Enemy, to name a few, the Nation's message of African American redemption and empowerment has found fertile soil.

These artists' use of samples from Farrakhan's speeches, alongside tributes to him,¹³ have unmistakably helped spread NOI's message within hip-hop culture. Even today, when Farrakhan is approaching his 90th birthday, and his clout perchance may have slumped within the culture, he maintains his

9 Scarface Ft. Ice Cube, *The Dairy*, 'Hand Of The Dead Body', Rap-A-Lot Records © 1994.

10 Shaquille O'Neal, *Shaq Diesel*, '(I Know I Got) Skillz', Jive © 1994.

11 Vinnie Paz, *Season of the Assassin*, 'Righteous Kill', Babygrande, Enemy Soil © 2010.

12 Jedi Mind Tricks, *Visions of Gandhi*, Babygrande, © 2003.

13 'Farrakhan's a prophet and I think you ought to listen to' (Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, 'Bring the Noise', Columbia Records © 1988) or 'The follower of Farrakhan don't tell me that you understand until you hear the man' (Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, 'Don't Believe the Hype', Columbia Records © 1988).



Professor Griff performing with Public Enemy in 2014.

association with artists such as Killer Mike, Kanye West and (Young) Jeezy, as well as his engagement with the hip-hop community at large.

When Public Enemy grew ever more famous following the release of their celebrated sophomore album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988), the group's appreciation of and connection with NOI was increasingly scrutinised in US media.¹⁴

Following a series of controversial statements on gays and Jews to British and US media made by Professor Griff, Public Enemy's minister of information, which catapulted him to notoriety, the group's media relations reached boiling point.

In *Melody Maker*, a British music weekly, Professor Griff was quoted as saying that

¹⁴ Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Columbia Records ©1988.

'There's no place for gays. When God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, it was for that sort of behavior'. Griff also commented on the Arab–Israeli conflict: 'If the Palestinians took up arms, went into Israel and killed all the Jews, it'd be alright'. And to David Mills of *The Washington Times*, Griff was quoted as declaring that 'Jews have a grip on America', and that they are responsible for 'the majority of wickedness that goes on across the globe'. The statements were linked to his membership in NOI. In an attempt to defend himself, Professor Griff publicly stated that the quotations were taken out of context. He was also misquoted, he said. However, Chuck D (Public Enemy) had no other choice but to release him from his duties as minister of information in June 1989; but off the record, he remained an affiliate of the group (Christgau n.d.).

Today, Professor Griff, once again, serves as the minister of information for Public Enemy. He also continues to lend credence to conspiratorial ideas, which he elaborates and shares on various alternative media outlets, such as the Infowars website, hosted by Alex Jones, a well-known conspiracy theorist. On the show, Professor Griff has elaborated on the Illuminati conspiracy theory. This is one example of how hip-hop artists and right-wing conspiracy theorists create seemingly unlikely alliances and make common cause, using their conspiratorial conceptions of the order of things.

'Stack chips like Hebrews': allosemitic representations reflected in US hip-hop lyrics

Understood in the light of allosemitism, the robust ambivalences that have historically characterised US Jewish–African American interactions help to make the mythological and romantic representations of Jews in US

hip-hop lyrics – prejudiced but fused with a positive connotation – comprehensible. It is suggested here that a great many of these representations are grounded in classical antisemitic notions, though in most cases they are not employed to reproduce and spread antisemitic ideas. Instead, employing a mythological and romantic figure of ‘the Jew’ and Jewish ritual practice, such as the Jewish rite of passage for thirteen-year-old boys, the bar mitzvah, seemingly serves many hip-hop artists as a practice to signify a sense of exclusivity.

When Jadakiss (The Lox and D-Block) suggests that an unidentified ‘other’ follow suit, that is, ‘to do what we do, stack chips like Hebrews’, one has to be at pains to explain that he does not draw on antisemitic discourse.¹⁵ Jadakiss does not employ this stereotype to pour scorn and contempt on the Jews. On the contrary, because Jadakiss boasts that the collective ‘We’ he claims to adhere to do what ‘Hebrews’ (Jews) allegedly do, the simile should instead be seen as a salutation to the Jews’ supposed inherent talent to make money. On the song ‘Bitches from Eastwick’ (1997), Jadakiss again resorts to the same type of stereotyping:

Today I got a session with Ronnie, I mean
Veronica
Met her last year about a week before
Hanukkah
Sounds foolish, I mean honey wasn’t Jewish
But she had a lot of dough, and she was
nice on computers.¹⁶

15 Puff Daddy featuring the Notorious B.I.G., The Lox and Lil’ Kim, *No Way Out*, ‘It’s All About the Benjamins’, Bad Boy Records © 1997.

16 The Lox, *Money, Power, Respect*, ‘Bitches from Eastwick’, Bad Boy Records © 1997.

As the excerpt illustrates, Jadakiss connects affluence with Jews, and articulates a twofold construction of it. First he constructs it as a quality mostly peculiar to Jews; and second, as a quality infused with the ability to make someone ‘appear Jewish’, meaning that by the mere virtue of having ‘a lot of dough’, the logic seemingly runs, one can easily be passed off as Jewish. This construction is contingent on the sentence ‘honey wasn’t Jewish, *but* she had a lot of dough’ (emphasis added).

Within *The Lox*, these sorts of prejudiced assumptions on Jews as an inherently well-off and business-minded collective are not confined to Jadakiss. His colleague Styles P also represents Jews along these lines: ‘I don’t get the newest [Mercedes] Benz, I get the newest house or newest business, I learned that from a Jewish friend’, Styles P asserts.¹⁷

Here Styles P draws on the discourse of finance, investment and saving when he represents Jews as inherently business-minded, the reason being that the excerpt hints that Styles P seems to have basic knowledge of the principles of investing and saving as he pits liabilities, ‘the newest Benz’, a material thing that incurs expenses and which easily decreases in value, against assets, ‘the newest house or newest business’, material things that are acquired with the intention of producing cash flow and hopefully an increase in value.

It is here assumed that Styles P’s representation of Jews as an inherently business-wise collective, reflected in his reference to a ‘Jewish friend’ who taught Styles P some basic principles of finance and investing, can partly be tracked to his hometown: New York.

New York is not only the geographic location where hip-hop originated but also

17 Styles P (Sheek Louch Ft. Jadakiss and Styles P), *Silverback Gorilla*, ‘Gettin’ Stronger’, Koch, D-Block © 2008.

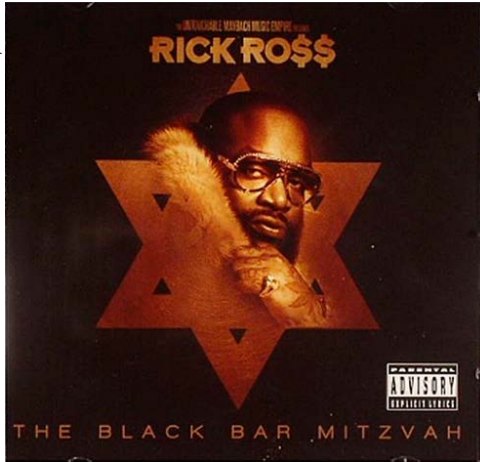


Photo of the cover of Rick Ross's mixtape *The Black Bar Mitzvah* (2012). Cover art by Mike Rev.

the finance capital of the world. New York is the home of Wall Street, where the New York Stock Exchange is located, and where some of the most renowned financial institutions that bear traditional Jewish surnames have their headquarters: Lehman Brothers that went bust in September 2008, and which in part helped set off the financial crisis of 2008–9, Goldman Sachs and BlackRock Inc., the world's largest asset manager, founded in 1988 by Robert Kapito and Larry Fink, both Jewish. It is reasonable to assume that these phenomena help perpetuate the allosemitic stereotype that Jews are inherently good with money, a constructed part of economic antisemitic discourse, which Styles P draws on.

Jay-Z is also seemingly inclined to see an inherent connection between wealth and lavishness on the one hand, and Jews and Jewish ritual practice, on the other. On the song 'Roc Boys (And the Winner Is)' Jay-Z invokes the bar mitzvah and constructs it as a metaphor for a lavish party: 'Rich niggas, black bar mitzvahs, *mazel tov*, it's a celebration bitches, *L'chaim*'.

Upon analysis, it appears as if Jay-Z is prone to see bar mitzvah celebrations as

something reserved for the well-off, and thereby as by default as lavish parties; because Jews are inherently rich, they have the economic muscles to splash out on lavish parties. So once African Americans start to ascend to the higher income brackets of US society, they can throw a so-called black bar mitzvah. This sort of celebration is staged in the music video to 'Roc Boys', which features footage from the inside of a smart nightclub where Jay-Z and other hip-hop industry heavyweights flaunt bottles of Ace of Spades champagne and puff on cigars.

Scarface's antisemitic bent is also reflected in his lyrics. In the song 'Baby Don't Do It' he draws on the classical antisemitic notion that Jews are inherently rich and stingy to convey the fact that he accumulates money, which he economises. 'So I stack my green to match my means, straight Jewish, when niggas spent money, I ain't do it.'¹⁸

Prejudicial statements concerning supposed Jewish control over the music and hip-hop industry can also be found in lyrics. In 2004, Mos Def was widely criticised for his statement 'Some tall Israeli is running this rap shit', uttered in the song 'The Rape Over'.¹⁹

'The tall Israeli' is a direct reference to the music executive Lyor Cohen. The declaration was part of a large critique of the state of hip-hop by which Mos Def blamed white men in general, drug and alcohol abuse, and corporate forces for what Mos Def perceived to be hip-hop's downfall.

Some hip-hop artists seem to enjoy consorting with Jewish people, and boast about it in their songs. This phenomenon can be

18 Freeway featuring Scarface, *Free at Last*, 'Baby Don't Do It', Roc-A-Fella Records © 2007.

19 Mos Def, *The New Danger*, 'The Rape Over', Geffen Records © 2004.

seen as a display of their connectedness to supposed Jewish power. The aforementioned Rick Ross claims: 'Only fat nigga in a sauna with Jews'; and Nas does not fail to mention his close proximity to alleged power: 'Up in the steam room chilling, exfoliating the skin, Israeli men conversatin' on ends, probably businessmen'.²⁰

Both quotations allude to the idea that 'the sauna' is a masculine-coded space where important business decisions are made. This idea seemingly draws nourishment from romanticised movie depictions of high-ranking mobsters that conduct business meetings in saunas. An example of this can be seen in *The Sopranos* episode 'Watching Too Much Television' (2002).

Seemingly, also Doap Nixon (Army of the Pharaohs) claims he has inroads to power, 'My head wrapped but got ties with the Jewish'.²¹ The expression 'got ties with' might allude to the fact that it is not Jews in general that Nixon is referring to; rather, it is more likely that he makes a reference to Jewish American organised crime (cf. the expression 'mob ties'/'mafia ties'). In this context it should be noted that name-dropping Jewish American crime bosses such as Meyer Lansky or Benjamin 'Bugsy' Siegel is of frequent occurrence in hip-hop lyrics; this can be seen as a part of the widespread fascination with organised crime in US hip-hop culture.

US hip-hop artists' penchants for flashy fineries, such as immense gold and platinum pendants in Cuban links, custom-made

Audemars Piguet watches and dental grills inlaid with diamonds are well-known. These material things are staple goods within the culture. Another notable marker of success that stretches beyond pure materialism is to keep a lawyer on retainer in the event of a legal problem, preferably a defence lawyer of Jewish extraction. Taking some lyrical statements at face value, Jews, by nature, are pre-determined to fare especially well within the business of law, especially criminal law. At the drop of hat, a Jewish defence lawyer will have any detainee released on bail and beat any case; because Jewish lawyers, as represented in US hip-hop artists' lyrics, are inherently skilful lawyers and practitioners of law – simply because they are Jewish.

'I be out tomorrow, my lawyer's Jewish', to quote A\$AP Ferg. Or as Fredo Santana puts it: 'In the trap, movin' bags the size of baseball, cash out, Jewish lawyer, now the case is closed'.²²

Put otherwise, if you peddle zip-bags of drugs the size of baseballs and get snared in by the long of arm the law, just write a cheque for a Jewish lawyer and you will 'be out tomorrow'.

In fact, to have a non-Jewish lawyer is even portrayed as foolish. This notion is exemplified by Jim Jones: 'Getting locked up for crimes, and your lawyers ain't Jewish (stuuupid!)'.²³ The frequent references to 'Jewish lawyers' among prolific artists such as Jay-Z, Jim Jones, Jadakiss and Chief Keef, to name a few, has led to numerous articles in hip-hop journals profiling 'hip-hop lawyers', and articles listing the top Jewish lawyer references (Rosenthal and Rosenthal 2011).

20 Rick Ross (Drake Ft. Rick Ross) *Take Care*, 'Lord Knows', Young Money Entertainment, Cash Money Records, Universal Republic © 2011; Nas Ft. Kelis, *Street's Disciple*, 'American Way', Columbia Records © 2004.

21 Doap Nixon Ft. Celph-Titled and Planetary, *Gray Poupon*, 'Grand Opening', Q-Demented © 2011.

22 A\$AP Mob Ft. A\$AP Ferg, *Lord\$ Never Worry*, 'Work', Not on label, self-released © 2012.

23 Fredo Santana Ft. Ball Out Capo, and Gino Marley, *Fredo Kruger*, 'Change', Glory Boyz Entertainment © 2013.

The notion of Jews as inherently skilled lawyers on the one hand, and scheming and argumentative on the other, is not confined to hip-hop culture, but traces its roots back all the way to the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, and to the story in which Pharaoh pinned the blame on Joseph for the food shortage (Asimow and Mader 2004: 76). This stereotype echoes through the centuries, and has been embodied in the 'Jewish lawyer' in US popular culture for decades. One early example is the main character George Simon, a skilful lawyer in the movie *Counsellor at Law* (1933). In their book *Law and Popular Culture* Michael Asimow and Shannon Madder write that:

George Simon exemplifies both the stereotype of Jews in general and Jewish lawyers in particular. This stereotype is double-sided. The positive side is that Jews and Jewish lawyers are well educated, crafty, clever, and loyal. The negative side is that they are greedy and exploitative. (Asimow and Mader 2004: 76)

Some more recent examples include two defence attorneys: David Kleinfeld, corrupt and strung out on cocaine (*Carlito's Way*, 1993), and Maurice 'Maury' Levy, slick and cunning (*The Wire*, 2002–8).

Conclusion

By drawing on previous research it has throughout this article been argued that the historical relationship between Jews and African Americans is characterised by 'robust ambivalences' (Melnick 2001: 15). They reflect upon the lyrical production of US hip-hop artists. The knowledge about these ambivalences is a prerequisite for the understanding of the lyrical production dealt with in this article, and helps answer the question

of why Jews are represented in a way that conjures up images grounded in age-old anti-semitic canards. But these stereotypes are not invoked to reproduce antisemitic ideas. For that reason, this article employs Zygmunt Bauman's term 'allosemitism' to make them understandable.

It is concluded here that the representation of Jews present in the materials used for empirical analysis can be slotted into four different categories.

First, Jews are represented as an ethnic group that entertains a special relationship to money and wealth. In a nutshell, Jews are represented as an inherently rich 'other'. Following this, it is here further suggested that this well-off other serves as a role model and a source of inspiration for socio-economically disadvantaged African Americans. This representation forms the embryo to Rick Ross's term 'the black bar mitzvah', later employed by Jay-Z as a metaphor for an over-the-top party. It has also inspired hip-hop artists to label economic assets as 'Jewish' – provided that these assets are in abundance.

Second, anchored in a tradition that according to Asimow and Mader stretches back to the Book of Genesis, through Anglo-American literature, and later to be picked up by the American film industry, Jews are represented as an ethnic group that is pre-determined to succeed in the business of law, especially criminal law; because Jews are inherently cunning and endowed with the gift of the gab. This millennia-old representation echoes in the lyric 'I be out tomorrow, my lawyer's Jewish'.

Third, in step with classical antisemitic traditions of ideas that blame Jews for striving to achieve world dominion, Jews are in a seemingly philosemitic way represented as an inherently powerful ethnic group that one should establish relations with. Rub shoulders with Jews and you will soon walk on the

road to power, the notion seems to suggest. Hence the reason some US hip-hop artists boast about their alleged relations with Jews. Some hip-hop artists have also reproduced the flipside to this philosemitic coin that ties Jews to power. The list of names includes, for example, Scarface and Mos Def.

Fourth and last, specific events that touch upon the relations between Jews and African Americans are also present, but are in the main confined to narratives emanating from the blood-letting that ensued upon the Crown Heights Riots in 1991.

On a final note, let us reconnect to the introduction of this article and point to further research. One attractive avenue for further research would be to survey how Jews are represented in European hip-hop lyrics. While the majority of the US artists are of African American background, the majority of the European hip-hop community consists of youth of Middle Eastern and/or Muslim family background hailing from disenfranchised areas, for example in Germany, Belgium, France, and Sweden. ■

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