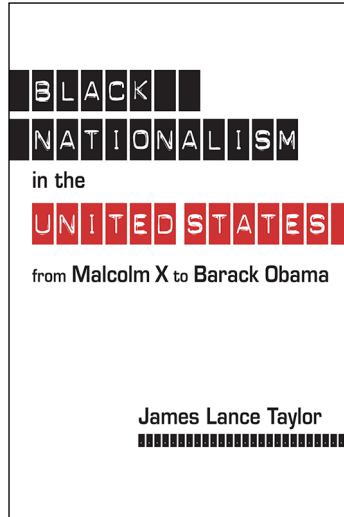


EXCERPTED FROM

**Black Nationalism
in the United States:
From Malcolm X
to Barack Obama**

James Lance Taylor

Copyright © 2010
ISBNs: 978-1-58826-778-8 hc
978-1-62637-185-9 pb



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314
Boulder, CO 80301 USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	1
Part 1 Foundations	
1 Black Political Development in the United States	13
2 A Black Sacred Cosmos and the Making of a Black Counterpublic	35
3 The Religious Content of Black Political Ideologies	53
Part 2 Formulations	
4 A Genealogical Inquiry into Black Nationalism	111
5 Martin Robison Delany and the Nationalism of Ends	133
6 David Walker and the Politics of the Black Jeremiad	157
Part 3 Transformations	
7 Black Power and the Problem of Black Nationalism	219
8 Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, and the Haunting of America	265
9 The Black Nationalism of the Hip-Hop Generation	313
<i>Timeline of Key Events</i>	367
<i>Bibliography</i>	375
<i>Index</i>	391
<i>About the Book</i>	415

Introduction

This book is about black nationalism. In African American politics, ideology matters as a vital site that organizes strategic approaches, policy concerns and formulations, leadership styles, institutional commitments, and class or group preferences. *Black Nationalism in the United States* attempts to articulate how and why individuals who were born during or near the 1960s employed the persona of Malcolm X and his ideological orientation to speak to their times and circumstance in racial politics. Although this is not another book about Barack Obama, it is about his generation cohort, whether identified as the metaphoric Joshua Generation, or as the hip-hop generation(s) and the encounter with black nationalism in the decades following the civil rights and Black Power eras. What I hope it provides for readers is an understanding of the religious dimension of black nationalism as a political orientation and the ways in which individuals in the late twentieth century engaged what remained of it as an imagined means to address pressing issues affecting African American communities.

Scholars and intellectuals have contributed several generations of research and thought to the subject of black nationalism. Literary historians, in particular, tend to dominate research and conceptualize the tradition almost exclusively in terms of land or geographic racial separation. Other research, often driven by scholars who emerge from analytical standpoints that focus on the most salient contradictions in black nationalist thought and tradition, routinely highlight the shortcomings of key figures such as Martin Delany, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Black Power militants, and, later, the likes of Minister Louis Farrakhan and many affiliated organizations. Political science research on black nationalism in the post-civil rights and Black Power eras

2 *Black Nationalism in the United States*

tends to rely mainly on opinion research that delineates measures of communal, racial separatist, and emigrationist tendencies in African American political thought. The political history of black nationalism tends to be reduced in its importance in many of these studies. A recent tendency to view black nationalist tradition as being essentially mimetic of white nationalism, similarly narrow in its religious imperialism toward Africa, and essentialist, chauvinistic, and masculinist tendencies toward others in the United States, has emerged from the earlier historical analyses.

Black Nationalism in the United States offers an alternative reading of black nationalist discourse from David Walker to Malcolm X and from Malcolm X to Black Power and the hip-hop generations. I analyze the arc of black nationalist discourse across some 180 years between David Walker's *Appeal* and Jeremiah Wright's jeremiad against war imperialism that imposed on (and arguably made possible) the election of Barack Obama. I posit that David Walker's *Appeal* and his organizing among Boston's black abolitionist community foregrounded an organic US form of black nationalist discourse that would emerge most coherently in the middle twentieth century in the public ministry of Malcolm X. The book thus presents a transhistorical treatment of black rage, or "revolutionary anger" in the research of Wilson J. Moses, as a formulation of "stay at home" black nationalism that is distinct from the emigrationist strand. If it fails to make a persuasive case, it is not because there is no evidence of its persistence in African American political thought and history—from David Walker's certain *Appeal* to Malcolm X's "jihad of words," to Louis Farrakhan's practicum and performance (1983–1995), to Barack Obama suggesting in *Dreams from My Father*, more black rage, *not less*, is warranted to curtail the Reagan revolution's social and policy impacts on black people in the United States. The book asks readers to consider the historical backdrop to black nationalist discourse in the United States from its religious foundations in early-nineteenth-century protest fulcrums to the hip-hop generations' attempts to activate it to articulate the social and political circumstances that confronted them in the late twentieth century. It ultimately asks readers to consider how the widely criticized quest to raise Malcolm X from death as a symbol of opposition to the Reagan revolution, during which they were politically socialized, served as a jeremiad of the hip-hop generations to speak to their sense of besiegement in society and in public policy.

I argue that this "longing for Malcolm" contributed to Louis Farrakhan's (and Khalid Muhammad's) prominence in African American politics in the late twentieth century. The hip-hop generation embraced an ascendant parochial form of black nationalism recast as that which Malcolm X proffered—even though the religiosity of the Nation of Islam and Farrakhan was largely put in abeyance in deference to his jeremiadic "truth-telling" performances in the Reagan era. The black jeremiad political sermon device was previously written and spoken by the likes of David Walker against Thomas Jefferson, Frederick

Douglass against Abraham Lincoln, William Monroe Trotter against Woodrow Wilson, Martin Luther King Jr. against Lyndon Johnson, and Jesse Jackson against Ronald Reagan. Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan spoke in the black jeremiad tradition, and they were also held up as jeremiads against these times, the Reagan revolution, and conservative reactionism.

In order to give context to hip-hop's shortsighted attempt at leadership recruitment, the book delves further into a reading of historical, intellectual, movement, and electoral politics facets of the black freedom struggle as they pertain to and bridge a coherent understanding of the period that shaped their political socialization—from Jesse Jackson's campaigns to the Million Man March/Day of Absence (MMM/DOA). If Jackson's campaigns and Farakhan's alliances were impositions in black politics, especially with the latter, the hip-hop generation was equally rendering a "no confidence" statement to those living, mainstream elites who emerged in the Democratic Party and remaining civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, by attempting to recruit nonelectoral, nonintegrationist elites into their politics.

Still later, when Trinity United Church of Christ pastor Jeremiah Wright Jr.'s criticism of the Bush administration's aggression against Iraq was streamed in media outlets throughout the United States in the 2008 presidential primaries and general election, the defeat of his longtime church member Barack Obama seemed a foregone conclusion. The looping of the words "no, no, not God-bless America, God-damn America" led to widespread condemnation of Wright as "un-American," "Obama's crazy pastor," and racist. Not since the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* attributed comments to Malcolm X—claiming a 1962 Paris airplane crash was Allah's justice in retaliation for the murder of a Los Angeles member of the Nation of Islam—had Americans been so shocked over the words of a black American religious and political leader, calling down the judgment of God on the United States. But at closer view, Wright's articulation of black liberation theology discourse was within the mainstream of many African Americans' feelings toward the US government during the Reagan revolution. Concern over the source of the HIV/AIDS crisis, the War on Drugs and crack cocaine, and neoliberalist abandonment of national responsibility for the group character of African Americans' experience in the United States was held by either majorities or pluralities just a decade earlier. The jeremiadic nationalist tradition that Wright represents, and that Obama and other members of Trinity United Church of Christ embraced for decades, has deep roots in African American religious discourse. That it has been perennial is the premise of *Black Nationalism in the United States*. Like his peers, Barack Obama embraced many of its black solidarity tenets. But Barack Obama subsequently distanced himself from the man and the ideological and spiritual traditions that grounded his own encounter with everyday black people in Chicago for two decades. It was the act of managing the Jeremiah Wright controversy that convinced many potential primary and general

election voters that Barack Obama represented something new in US politics. This book, *Black Nationalism in the United States*, makes the case that Wright's ministry was embedded in the most "American" form of oppositional political rhetoric and speech: the jeremiad political sermon. That it nearly prevented the election of the first individual of African ancestry to the US presidency was merely a historical accident that brought the two phenomena together, but its precedents, as noted above, were many.

The campaigns of Barack Obama were resonant with many themes in black politics. With the emergence of Michelle and Barack Obama, analysts rushed to scuttle the traditional leadership and ideological modalities that directed previous epochs of African American politics; indeed, there is now much questioning concerning whether we have reached the end of black politics. In terms of governing the United States, what Barack Obama's emergence means is an ongoing development, and it is not my interest here. But his election cannot be isolated from the movement efforts in black politics, to position the black freedom struggle in a way that maximized the bargaining position of black voters since the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, including the 1971 Northlake, Illinois, black strategy meetings, the 1972 National Black Political Convention, and the campaigns of Jesse Jackson.¹ The fact that disavowing Wright and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan became the single most important litmus looming over the Obama campaign is testament to the persistence of black prophetic discourse despite the ascendancy of materialist and state-friendly religion in contemporary African American churches.² What we witnessed was a coming together of core elements of African American politics. There was the matter of black women having to weigh their stakes in the extraordinary plausibility of a woman "first" and a black "first" nomination. There was the matter of civil rights-era elites confronting an emergent hip-hop cohort (which included, in my estimation, the Obamas no less than it included Michael Jordan and Chuck D, age-wise). There was the matter of loyal black Democrats (in the Clinton camp) pushing against an upstart black presidential candidacy (as was the case with Shirley Chisholm in 1972 and Jesse Jackson in 1984). There was the matter of black religious discourse intruding on unprecedented electoral political achievement. And then there was the ideological matter of black nationalism imposing on mainstream integrationist political ambition, approaching Obama's call for a *more disruptive form of black nationalism* than that which Farrakhan promoted. Disappointed with Farrakhan's mangling of a patently salient period of black nationalist assertion in black politics, Obama returned from the 1995 MMM/DOA with a resolve to effect policy changes in Chicago and Illinois.

It is important to note here that I do not attempt a structured historical or political analysis of black feminism except where it or womanist perspectives inform or debunk aspects of traditional masculinist black political thought dis-

cursively throughout the book. It is worth noting that in all of the feminist discourse about black nationalism, we have yet to see a full-length study of black women nationalists that treats them as subjects (not objects of men's activities) with agency.³ The multiple and intersectional effects of race, gender/sexuality, and poverty/class are integral to the serious study of African American political ideologies. Important African American women who held race, gender, and class political critiques, such as Maria Stewart of Boston and Harriet Tubman, have from the very beginning informed black politics and inundated the black liberation struggle. This takes into account Sojourner Truth among the abolitionists, Ida B. Wells's and Mary Church Terrell's valiant antilynching campaigns through to Fannie Lou Hamer's, Gloria Richardson's, Septima Clarke's, and Ella Baker's antimasculinist and commitments in the modern civil rights movement, and those younger women activists/artists, such as Elaine Brown, Lorraine Hansberry, Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, and Kathleen Cleaver in the Black Power era. As ideology, black feminism and womanism have always included a strong race-consciousness at the center of their intersectional analyses of gender, race, and poverty socioeconomic status. And at least with regard to majority feminist interests, this race-consciousness was patently nationalistic, particularly concerning interracial social and political relations—and especially in the realms of black male to white female relationships and marriage.⁴

I also do not include black conservatism as an integral political tradition in African American social and political thought, first because this form of conservatism emerged as an extrinsic development among a minute cadre of intellectuals and political elites in the 1980s and 1990s in tandem with syncretistic Goldwater-Nixon-Reagan (West Coast) racial and political conservatism as it became dominant in the Republican Party.⁵ This is not to suggest that political conservatism is novel among African Americans as much as it is to mark the trajectory of white establishment and foundation sponsorship of the cadre of African American elites and intellectuals who developed somewhere between Lyndon Johnson's attempt to promote Samuel Reilly Pierce in the political sphere as an alternative to Martin Luther King Jr. and recent conservative black Republicanism.⁶ Second, where African Americans have tended to yield relatively high levels of support for socially conservative positions on abortion rights, death penalty, same-sex marriage (and gay rights generally), they have not embraced an operational political conservatism or mobilized en masse in opposition to these and related issue areas.⁷ As stated in his *Autobiography*, Malcolm X expressed the general feeling among many African Americans that conservatism in US politics (regardless of partisanship) means "let's keep the niggers in their place." In politics, black conservatives have acted patently hostile toward the issue areas and policy matters that most African Americans support, and some, such as Shelby Steele, have ex-

pressed racial resentment toward African Americans in a manner that confounds the black nationalist academic concepts, racial solidarity, and “linked fate.”⁸ Scholar Ronald Walters notes that “contemporary Black conservatives manifest views that are seemingly consistent with those of whites who espouse an orthodox conservatism either directly or indirectly connected to race.”⁹ Thus, black conservatives are perceived as largely hostile antiblack *racial* conservatives whose social criticisms and policy preferences have been at odds with preponderant African American support for state intervention. The political biography of freeborn Negro writer William Hannibal Thomas (1843–1935), author of the infamous antiblack diatribe *The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is, and What He May Become* (1901), is an early-twentieth-century example of ideologically driven black self-loathing that characterizes the long line of black “Negrophobic” thought that comports with contemporary black racial conservatism.¹⁰ Of the six broad categories that are the subject of Michael Dawson’s *Black Visions*, he contends, “the most marginal tendency during most historical periods has been black conservatism.”¹¹ In the end, black conservatism is parasitic to the extent that it can attach itself to nationalism, integrationism, feminism, and Black Power.¹²

The foregoing analysis is outlined in three broad sections listed respectively as Foundations (Part 1), Formulations (Part 2), and Transformations (Part 3). Each section consists of three chapters. The chapters of Part 1 outline the book’s framework and theoretical grounding. Chapter 1 introduces readers to the concept of black political development as a theoretical framework that focuses on Reconstruction-era elected officials and the towering alternative presence of Booker T. Washington and his Tuskegee machine that significantly undermined them. Because black political development also has to do with how leaders emerge among constituent groups, I focus as well on the most definitive example of grassroots recruitment of Harold Washington to the mayoral elections in Chicago, and the independent challenge to Daley machine and national Democrats. Washington’s election germinated as a manifestation of black rage in the city, and it prompted the modern phase of black politics. Further, the notion of elite recruitment is inherent in the hip-hop generation’s activation of Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan, as noted, to speak to their times at the height of the Reagan conservative revolution. Black religious leaders, with the major exception of Jesse Jackson, were left out of the series of Voting Rights Act–initiated meetings held throughout the 1970s and early 1980s before his campaigns. Chapter 2 outlines the monadic role of black religion in formulating a paralleling cultural fulcrum that provides for the counterpublic narrative against Eurocentric readings of black political discourse. Chapter 3 outlines the relationships between African American religion and the major political and ideological orientations—black nationalist, and black liberal and radical integrationism—that have constituted the basis of black politics since the early nineteenth century, according to Harold Cruse and other scholars.

The chapters of Part 2 provide an analysis of the ways in which African American religious elites in the nineteenth century actually implemented black nationalist discourse. It seeks to intervene in a persistent debate in the literature concerning black nationalism and its origins. Chapter 4 analyzes a religiosity-nationalism nexus and traces it in religiopolitical elites of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a way of explaining the perennial importance of black nationalism in the African American freedom struggle and the specific variant of black nationalism, which I argue is traceable in the black freedom struggle from abolitionism through the modern civil rights era as a historical point of departure to speak to ongoing scholarly discourse concerning the qualities, characteristics, and origins of black nationalism.

Chapter 5 preferences black religion in black nationalist discourses in answer to a tendency in several works to compartmentalize black nationalism as a discontinuous, episodic phenomenon that simply reacts to and mimics white nationalism, where its essential identity is thought derived from its Anglo cultural heritage but otherwise ought not be historicized because such could only be accomplished through ahistorical readings. What started with Wilson Moses's sympathetic historicity of black nationalism, with its resurgence in the 1960s, morphed into a kind of you-are-not-the-father paternity; this ultimately lends itself to the lie that black nationalism—as a *black* political formulation—does not exist: It was—in all of its classical and modern manifestations from Delany to Garvey—white nationalism in blackface. I take issue with the conventional understanding of black nationalism as necessarily entailing the acquisition of land. Where Chapter 5 focuses on Martin Delany and his role as a father of black nationalism, Chapter 6 focuses on the orientation that is represented by David Walker and his *Appeal*. On several scores, Chapter 6 attempts to intervene in scholarly discourse concerning Malcolm X and David Walker, arguing that ideological parallels are striking enough to assert that either both individuals should be considered “nationalist” or that Malcolm X (and Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam) should cease being regarded as such, because the doctrine of racial separation they advocated in the Nation of Islam can only be interpreted as *rhetorical*—a jeremiad. In my view, it is the nonterritorial, dissident psychic orientations promoted by the likes of Walker, Maria Stewart (even Delany in *Blake*), Richard Wright, and Malcolm X that set off their revolutionary anger as a coherent strain of black nationalist thought that was born of the claims and demands of the American Revolution no more than the Haitian Revolution.

The chapters of Part 3 focus on key black nationalist projects that emerged with Black Power and the brief but transformational hegemony it underwent in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It places Malcolm X at the center of black politics, particularly in terms of the hip-hop generation's encounter with his persona and with Louis Farrakhan's co-optation of their effort. Chapter 7 attempts, discursively, to address the several “deaths” of black nationalism since the civil

rights and Black Power eras of African American politics on the way to discussing the attempts at black nationalism on the part of the hip-hop generation in Chapter 8. It is not an attempt to cover the subject exhaustively. Nowhere in this book, for instance, are there lyrical, narrative, or cultural production samplings of hip-hop as a phenomenon. Most treatments of the politics of the hip-hop generation tend to focus on its cultural politics, its subterranean veil of “thug and gangsta” antiestablishmentality, misogynistic elements, and corporatization; this book is a concrete political analysis of its actual political inclinations and activities epitomized in the MMM/DOA event. The chapters here focus on events in black politics, from Black Power and the Million Man March to the election of Barack Obama. Following a treatment of the hip-hop generation’s recruitment of Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan to articulate their repudiation of the conservative ascent in the early Reagan era, Chapter 9 returns to the beginning, focusing on Chicago’s role as the site of incubation for modern black politics, from Harold Washington to the election of Barack Obama.

Notes

1. Concerning Northlake, please see James Richardson, *Willie Brown: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 193–195. Also see Robert C. Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 41–43.

2. Michael Leo Owens, *God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-State Collaboration in Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

3. Amy Jacques Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

4. See esp. Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Verso, 1990). It is also noteworthy that implicit in the occasional black nationalist Booker T. Washington’s 1895 metaphoric “five fingers” (separatist) and “united as the fist” (interracial cooperation) rhetorical devices were the clear message and prohibition that interracial marriage, love, and intercourse fell under the former category. For Washington’s contemporaries, this must have been a welcome perspective in light of Frederick Douglass’s marriage to a white woman (his second marriage) and heavy-weight champion Jack Johnson’s open courting of white women and hostility to the “white slave” Mann Act.

5. Ronald Walters, *White Nationalism, Black Interests: Conservative Public Policy and the Black Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 223–224.

6. Robert Smith, *We Have No Leaders*.

7. Ronald Walters, *White Nationalism*.

8. Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2001.

9. Ronald Walters, *White Nationalism*, p. 233.

10. John David Smith, *Black Judas: A Story of Racial Self-Hatred in America, William Hannibal Thomas and the American Negro* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000). Black conservatives have been associated with the accommodationist philosophy of

Booker T. Washington, but contemporary black conservatives have more in common with Strom Thurmond, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan than, say, the pragmatic accommodationism of Booker T. Washington.

11. Michael Dawson, *Black Visions*, p. 19. The six are radical egalitarianism, black nationalism, disillusioned liberalism, black feminism, black socialism, and black conservatism.

12. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Quill, [1967] 1984), p. 564.