

## The Traumatic Mysticism of Othered Others: Blackness, Islam, and Esotericism in the Five Percenters

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### Abstract

This article draws from black critical theory, Western esotericism studies, and scholarship in Islamic studies to articulate the Five Percenters as expressing what I call “traumatic mysticism.” I first articulate blackness as the esoteric secret of the West. Then, I show how this blackness can produce mystical forms of black life. With these constituents in mind, I see “traumatic mysticism” as “an undifferentiated form of lived experience, characterized by radical relation and identification with others, that entails the perpetual refusal of categorical distinctions.” Traumatic mysticism owes its emergence to (the violence of) the Middle Passage, which resulted in what Hortense Spillers calls an “undifferentiated identity,” or what I label as a radical form of sociality that cannot maintain categorical distinctions. Examining Five Percenter history, thought, and life, I show that their understanding of Islamic terminology, the meaning of the word “god,” and their dissemination of their thought all articulate radical refusals of categorical distinctions—whether these be between transcendence and immanence, individual and collective, or even material (embodiment) and ethereal (divinity). Exhibiting these characteristics leads to a life of irrevocable immanence, manifested through radical democracy and rigorous communal ethics.

Keywords: Five Percenters; Blackness; Islam; Mysticism; Esotericism; Western

We made it/from slaves on a slave ship/Live from the cotton fields/straight into the spaceship.

– Jay Electronica<sup>1</sup>

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the oceanic, if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy on undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captives, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all.

– Hortense Spillers<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction: The Question of Otherness

We are told that the study of Western esotericism is a field of inquiry organized around and founded upon the investigation of alternate histories and non-normative frameworks. It is the realm of the kinds of transmissions—given orally, textually, or otherwise—whose contours defy generally accepted and tolerated norms regarding the emergence, development, and legitimacy of knowledge. Imagination and gnosis replace, or at least supplement, logical deduction and detached empirical observation. UFOs and strange coincidences populate the scholar’s source material; foreign beings and new languages are the esotericist’s domain. Exploring the history of Western esotericism, we find ourselves in a field of inquiry organized around those things and modes of knowing that have been, and continue to be, dismissed as merely foolish speculation or conspiratorial theorizing. While the rest of the world is caught up only in what they can see, feel, or read in the news, the scholar of Western esotericism investigates what has been ignored, overlooked, or devalued.

In other words (and maybe this is a pun, given what is about to happen at the end of this sentence), the study of Western esotericism is a study in and of

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1. Jay Electronica and Jay-Z, “We Made It (Remix),” independently produced, 2014. You can find the song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaLlzQJLBz0>

2. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 72.

otherness, of alterity. As Wouter Hanegraaf suggests in numerous publications, but perhaps most recently in his essay “The Globalization of Esotericism,” esotericism—particularly Western esotericism—operates as “the logical counterpart, the rhetorical ‘Other,’ of what we might refer to as the ‘Enlightenment’ form of thought.”<sup>3</sup> Articulated as rhetorical and epistemological alterity, esotericism often names that which remains outside of, and in opposition to, more dominant and accepted modalities of inquiry and engagement. Esotericism and otherness are, therefore, intertwined; to think about the history of esotericism in the West is to think about those movements, communities, and epistemological frameworks that have stood as distinct from, and in opposition to, the more generally accepted and celebrated ways of knowing in the world. To study esotericism is to study the other.

I am interested in this question of otherness. If Hanegraaff is correct—and, as of now, we have no reason to doubt him—then the otherness that is central to Western esotericism is a dialectical one. Which is to say, the otherness of Western esotericism—the otherness that is Western esotericism—is only other in relation to “Enlightenment thought,” and is therefore tethered to (it as) its constitutive counterpart. A problem arises because most—if not all—dialectics constitute what philosopher Emmanuel Levinas once described as a “totality.”<sup>4</sup> In this regard, even the very otherness that Western esotericism purportedly embodies becomes a self-enclosed reality, bounded by, and bound to, its constitutive other—namely “Enlightenment” thought. This shouldn’t come as a surprise; after all, this etymology of esotericism is tethered to the idea of boundary—between “inner” and “outer”, between who is in and who is out, between who is deemed normative and who is deemed abnormal, non-normative, other.

Bounded by and—again—bound to its epistemological, logical, and rhetorical counterpart, the study of Western esotericism articulates itself as a form of alterity whose very otherness, which should be a path to perpetually new and

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3. Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism,” 79. I refrain from using the exclamation mark in the quotation, as I do not share Hanegraaff’s excitement.

4. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35–39.

generative forms of openness, nevertheless closes in on itself, and therefore becomes total and totalizing. Instead of opening up and out onto the infinite ways in which alterity (which should be a signifier for that which has not yet risen to the level of disruptive visibility) manifests itself as an open space of engagement, the alterity of Western esotericism closes itself in, protecting and safeguarding its own sense of alterity—not, of course, from Enlightenment thought, with which it is happy and of which it may be even proud to be in relation to, but instead from those other forms of alterity, those “other others,” whose presence and potential touch would serve to disrupt and destabilize its own sense of otherness. This dialectical totality—between Enlightenment thought and Western esoteric currents, between normative and non-normative Western thought—struggles to acknowledge, let alone handle with nuance, other cultures and societies in the narrative of Western esotericism,<sup>5</sup> which are essentialized, reduced to their Westernist attitudes, if not left out, ignored, and, at worst, discarded. These “othered others” account for little more than footnotes, peripheral acknowledgements, in the (grand) narrative of the development of Esotericism in the West. I will have more to say on this later in the essay.

The goal of this essay is to sit with othered others, particularly a black esoteric group called the Five Percenters, in order to hear the disruptive and generative potential of their epistemological and ontological claims. The Five Percenters draw from both their blackness and their reading of certain Islamic tenets in order to elide the distinction between humanity and divinity. Put simply, the Five Percenters’ central claim is that black men (and in some cases, black women) are gods. And it is precisely this claim to godhood that stands as a racialized and religious disruption to the notions of boundary and otherness that appear to be important, if not central, to the study of Western esotericism. By turning our attention to the Five Percenters, we are attuned to the reality of those “othered others” whose presence demands “nothing less than a complex recasting of the dialectic” itself.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Saif, “What is Islamic Esotericism?”

6. Moten, *Black and Blur*, 2.

In this essay, I argue that attention to the Five Percenters “recasts the dialectic” through their expression of what I call “traumatic mysticism,” which I consider to be *an undifferentiated form of lived experience, characterized by radical relation and identification with others, that entails the perpetual refusal of categorical distinctions*. This mysticism is not (merely) a union of divine and mundane natures; instead, it is a disruption and denial of categorical forms of thinking that would necessitate a “union” in the first place.<sup>7</sup> As I will show, the language and thought of the Five Percenters inheres divinity in the black bodies and social relationality of the gods themselves, exhibiting the negation of distinctions. Moreover, divinity is articulated not as a supernatural union, but instead a coming into “knowledge of self.” One “becomes” divine not by transcending the world—there is no “heaven” or otherworldly reality in Five Percenter cosmology, and therefore there is no “union” between divine and human, transcendent and immanent, realities—but by figuring out what they have always been and committing themselves to the uplift of themselves, their families, and their communities. The mysticism of the Five Percenters, therefore, is a form of life that has little patience for distinctions: this is not about “mystery gods” or otherworldly heavens, but instead about a form of life that is irrevocably immanent—and therefore fundamentally social, and radically democratized.

This article, then, seeks to fulfill what Liana Saif articulates as a methodological possibility—namely, “rethinking the paradigms of comparison.”<sup>8</sup> And central to this rethinking is nothing less than a rigorous criticism of boundaries, of bounded and bound entities whose relations form enclosed totalities. The problem of the boundary is not simply at the level of West/non-West either: “The very idea of ‘self-contained’ traditions,” Saif writes, “is problematic,” indicating that, even within certain traditions, there is movement, change, dynamism, openness, and plasticity. Instead of adopting the comparative paradigms of prevalent scholarship

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7. Warren, “Black Mysticism,” 221.

8. Saif, “What is Islamic Esotericism?”

in Western esotericism, the Five Percenters' adoption and appropriation of Islamic concepts and terminology—refracted through the lens of their blackness—sets the problematic of self-containment in sharp relief. In so doing, the Five Percenters offer us a different way of understanding the relationship between blackness, esotericism, and mysticism. We begin with the relationship between blackness and esotericism; in the next section, I suggest that, based upon the Middle Passage and its aftermath, we can only conclude that blackness, in the West, is itself esoteric.

### **The West's (Marginalized, Impossible, and Pathological) Secret: Blackness and the Study of Western Esotericism**

In order to think about the relationship between blackness and esotericism, it is necessary to begin with a book entitled *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: "There is a Mystery . . ."*<sup>9</sup> The text is the first large-scale treatment of esotericism in Africana communities—particularly those in the United States. And, in the preface, the editors make their academic and conceptual commitments clear:

The essays in this collection destabilize dominant tendencies in multiple scholarly fields and disciplines including the Study of African American Religion, Western Esotericism, and other cognate arenas. More specifically, the contributors to this volume interrogate hidden, secretive, muted, and excluded religious discourses and practices that are located in persons and communities that posit direct access to secret knowledge, contact and interaction with some transcendent or invisible force that may pervade nature, and symbolic or actual correspondence between realms or worlds.<sup>10</sup>

The above quotation articulates, without defining, what esotericism could be and how it might be described: esotericism in black communities is situated within “hidden, secretive, muted, and excluded religious discourses and practices . . . that posit direct access to secret knowledge, contact, and interaction.” These movements, pushed to the “margins” and rendered “heretical,” “impossible,” or even “pathological,” are the realm of black esotericism. In

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9. Finley et al., *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*.

10. Finley et al., xii.

other words, marginalization, impossibility, and pathology are central to understanding esotericism in black life. In this section, I will make clear that, through these three features, this blackness—which cannot be disentangled from the black bodies who exhibit it—is inherently (though not essentially) esoteric.

What is interesting about the editors' analysis is that they stray from defining Africana esotericism. As I read them, there is a significant reason for this—namely, the distinction between “inherent” and “essential.” There are features of Africana esoteric cultures that are shared and endemic to the vast array of different orientations, but these features are malleable and expansive, unlike “essential” structures, which speak to timeless and immutable conditions of possibility. The lack of definition, then, is an attempt to explore “Africana esotericism” as an expansive and dynamic constellation of orientations whose appearances are constantly shifting based upon contextual realities.

What this means, then, is that the following three dimensions of Africana esotericism are precisely that—mutable dimensions whose manifestation and presentation are expansive and open. The following three dimensions, then, serve as heuristic categories offered that serve to show how one might read Africana esotericism in the context of the West.

### *Marginalization*

We begin with marginalization. As the co-editors say in their introduction, Africana Esoteric groups—and the scholars who study them—are “doubly marginalized.” They give two reasons for this double marginalization, but for our purposes here, I will stay with the first:

The first has to do with disciplinary shortsightedness—i.e., because these manifestations of the esoteric are “African American,” they tend not to be viewed as fully “American” or as part of the landscape of religion in America. What’s more, one could argue that the designation “Western” in the field devoted to the examination of Western Esotericism functions in a manner similar to “American,” which structures discourses and disciplinary boundaries.<sup>11</sup>

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11. *Ibid.*, 5.

The “structuring” attendant to the study of American religion and Western esotericism necessarily excludes the possibility of black esotericism; in other words, what is “hidden” from these fields is the presence of blackness itself. Due to the historical violence and erasure of the Middle Passage, blackness itself became the West’s secret. In other words, the West, figuratively and literally, hid blackness from itself through the reality and aftermath of the slave trade.

I wish I weren’t telling the truth here. But consider Wouter Hanegraaff’s essay, “The Globalization of Esotericism.” Discussing how the term “Western” has been rendered a problem in Western esotericism, Hanegraaff’s goal seems to be to interrogate whether or not the term “Western” should remain tethered to the term “esotericism.” If the term “Western” carries too much theoretical and methodological baggage, then there might be reason for our disavowal of its use in relation to esoteric movements and traditions.

Hanegraaff seems to agree with this line of logic—or at least the theoretical side of it. Making a (problematic) distinction between theory and method, Hanegraaff eventually suggests that the term “Western” can be reclaimed methodologically. I quote him at length:

Rather, our task consists in studying a wide range of quite specific and different, historically situated personalities, currents, ideas, practices, discourses, communities, or institutions. . . . If we choose to categorize all these different materials under the heading of “esotericism,” we do so simply because it is helpful to our research agendas to highlight certain things that they have in common and that make them stand out for us as somewhat “similar.” If we categorize them, more specifically, as *Western esotericism*, this is not in order to suggest that they are Western manifestations of “esotericism” in general . . . but simply because the only way in which they appear to us *at all* is as specific products of Western culture. . . . Seen from such a perspective, the theoretical baggage of “Western esotericism” is in fact quite light.<sup>12</sup>

According to Hanegraaff, the term “Western” determines a specific historical and geographic field of inquiry; as he tells us, “Western” forms of esotericism

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12. Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism,” 81–82.



“appear to us . . . as specific products of Western culture.” For Hanegraaff, the problem arises when we turn the term “Western” into a conceptual frame, divested from any historical context. But if we specify that “Western” is a methodological term, then it is possible to reclaim the term to speak about those traditions that emerge from the development of the West.

The problem with this formulation, however, is precisely the disciplinary “structuring” that we noted above. Having structured “Western esotericism” as “specific products of Western culture,” Hanegraaff fails to interrogate the meaning of “Western” itself. In so doing, he totally denies that certain traditions in the West—particularly those in black and Africana communities—emerge from the underside of the West, let alone that the West itself, identifying itself as such, also emerged in a large degree from undersiding communities such as the aforementioned. Part of the problem with the distinction between “West” and “East” (or at least non-Western) is that, in drawing lines around what is understood as “Western,” we also miss those communities in the West that are not included in that very moniker. Though sometimes it is acknowledged that “East” and “West” are always shifting in boundary and meaning, I would add that part of this shifting has everything to do with a damningly real-yet-repressed history of violence, murder, enslavement, and degradation. Through the production of Western culture, blackness and black bodies were rendered marginal.

### *Impossibility*

This marginalization entailed nothing less than an impossible existence (and we’ll say more about this impossibility in the next section). Even at a methodological level, the “West” names a constellation of political economies, sociocultural frameworks, and philosophical and theological orientations that were both animated and sustained by colonialism, racism, and violent forms of Atlantic capitalism. And these frameworks, as Stephanie Smallwood suggests, used a sociopolitical alchemy in order to change black people into commodified black bodies:

Buying people who had no evident social value was not a violation or an act of questionable morality but rather a keen and appropriate response to opportunity; for this was precisely what one was supposed to do in the market: create value by exchange, recycle someone else's cast-offs into objects of worth. . . . The alchemy of the market [was] derived from its effectiveness in producing a counterfeit representation; it had become plausible that human beings could be so drained of social value, so severed from the community, that their lives were no longer beyond price.<sup>13</sup>

I do not think Smallwood uses the term “alchemy” lightly or even metaphorically here. Indeed, the possibility of turning human beings into mere commodities was an alchemical operation, turning something into something else through a series of carefully calculated and specifically ritualized practices. Like fire gilding, the slave market made gold out of bodies—black bodies.<sup>14</sup> Through this alchemical operation, black bodies are transmuted—one of Faivre's intrinsic characteristics of esotericism—into commodities to be bought and sold.<sup>15</sup> People were impossibly turned into objects. We are already in the realm of Western esotericism, but we can't even see it.

The (esotericism of the) slave market was not an aberrant operation of the West; it was central to its constitution and continued existence. Tucked away in the holds of slave ships, and violently rendered silent through their trip over the Atlantic, enslaved Africans were the underside of the West's preoccupation with reason, individuality, and freedom; the literal placement of black bodies in secret holds produced hermetically sealed boundaries between the (inner) space of captivity in darkness and the (outer) space of freedom in the light. In this regard, blackness is already operative as an “other” to the same Enlightenment against which Western esotericism is situated; and it is also, already, and always steeped in a tradition that was forced to embody the results

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13. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 63.

14. I found out about fire gilding through a podcast entitled *S-Town*, produced by the NPR Radio show *This American Life*, which aired in 2017. The particular episode is entitled “Chapter VII” and aired March 28, 2017.

15. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 13.

of the distinction between “inner” and “outer”—esoteric and exoteric—forms of experience. Enlightenment itself utilized its righteous sense of “reason” to posit an opposition with the “unreasoning” other; in the case of Africans, it was only reasonable and profitable to commodify black bodies to construct its gilded glory. In this sense, not only were black bodies themselves transmuted by commodification, but they fueled its own transmutation. Without Nigredo there is no Albedo, there is no gold.

Through the commodification of black bodies, the West gains epistemological, existential, economic, and political footing. Whether or not one owned slaves, one always benefitted from the chattel slavery that had become a significant economic engine in the emergence and development of the West. The production and refinement of sugar, cotton, textiles, and other commodities were only made possible through the human commodities whose trips to the West were hidden from plain sight. In other words, without the slave trade—amongst other forms of degradation—(the traditions of) the West would not have appeared to us in the same way. Seen from this perspective, the theoretical baggage of “Western esotericism” is more than heavy; it stands as an existential burden, an inescapable and almost unbearable toll placed upon those whose bodies stood (and, if we are to be honest, still stand) as the West’s other.

### *Pathology*

Blackness is marginal, and impossible, articulating at least two of the three characteristics of esotericism described by the co-editors of *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*. But blackness is also pathological. In the aforementioned volume, I wrote a chapter entitled “Show and Prove,” and drew from Antoine Faivre’s fourfold classification to identify the esoteric dimensions in Five Percenter thought and life. They see correspondences between black women’s bodies and the earth itself; they use their hermeneutical numerology (which they call the Supreme Mathematics), amongst other tools, to discern liv-

ing nature; their imagination and mediation is articulated through their scientific paradigm—Five Percenters draw from their hermeneutical tools to further understand the deeper and esoteric significance of their manifold worlds; and, lastly, one’s induction into the group is nothing less than a transmutation—one becomes a god (*go[ld]*) upon being able to “show and prove” their godhood through their creative usage of the fundamental lessons of the group.<sup>16</sup> In other words, if Faivre’s schema is useful for discerning esotericism in the West, then the Five Percenters certainly fit the bill. They were—and are—esoteric.

However, despite the clear esoteric elements present in groups like the Five Percenters and other communities (like Candomblé, Santeria, Vodoun, Hoodoo, and the Nation of Islam), we are still confronted with claims that the contributions of Africana esoteric scholars(hip) have “extremely problematic” approaches to esotericism.<sup>17</sup> In other words, even if one uses the very tools of the field itself to articulate black esotericism, there remains a problem, a kind of “distortion”—a pathology. If Western esoteric thought is the “other” of Enlightenment thinking, then how do we think about the “other’s (problematic) other”?<sup>18</sup> What does it mean to simultaneously sustain and be excluded from the epistemological and political relationship between same/other to the point where one’s ideas, practices, communities, and dispositions are discarded?<sup>19</sup> Despite the language of alterity and the metaphor of the wastebin, the attachment to “Western” as a “methodologically light” umbrella term has simply rendered those forms of thought emerging from within the slave trade as the wastebin of the wastebin. These traditions, somehow birthed within the context of the West’s development, were nevertheless doubly discarded as expendable and dispensable in the Academy. Marginalized by disciplinary boundaries, impossibly constructed through the alchemy of the

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16. Gray, “Show and Prove, 182–85.

17. Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism,” 61n22.

18. See Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism,” 64–71, as well as Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

19. Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath*.

slave trade, and rendered pathological through a “problematization” of the way in which blackness exhibits even the esotericism in the West, blackness itself becomes esoteric—or it is at least esoteric in the sense that the co-editors of *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience* articulate it.

*Blackness: the Esoteric Secret of the West*

What I want to add here is that secrecy is the conceptual, political, and social glue that holds the three aforementioned characteristics (marginalization, impossibility, pathology) together. In fact, secrecy is precisely what conditions the marginalization, impossibility, and pathological presence of blackness in the West in the first place. Africana esoteric groups are marginal, impossibly present, and pathological because they are doubly hidden. First, they are physically and phenomenologically hidden through the production of hermetically sealed boundaries between (inner) captivity and (outer) freedom through the slave ships themselves. In the dark depths of the hold of the ship, there is no room for the light—whether this light is reason or revelation, rationality or gnosis. There is nothing to be gleaned, thought about, or experienced in the darkness; as philosopher Achille Mbembe claims, “[the black] exists where [he or she] is not thought.”<sup>20</sup>

The unthought space of the black has been theorized for quite some time, though maybe not as unthought. As Lewis Gordon and Frantz Fanon have pointed out, “the black” is a caricatured creature, a stereotyped and reductionist trope articulated in favor of the white gaze. This gaze cannot see anything other than its own projections; as such, the black—and his or her descendants—is reduced and reducible to their body, which takes the black beyond the scope of thought. The black, then, is hidden, tucked away, interior to the West—but only as its underside, which is to say, the tradition of blackness itself, of living as black, is so hidden that it cannot even enter into the dialectical interplay between normative rationality and othered esotericism.

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20. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 28.

This physical and phenomenological hiddenness entailed a more longstanding ontological obscurity that has contemporary implications: the alchemical operations that transmuted blackness and black people into mere commodities, and eventually into pathological threats, stays with us through the various ways in which we approach, perceive, understand, and study blackness (especially in the field of Western esotericism). As literary theorist Hortense Spillers tells us, the mere presence of black bodies in the West is “so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean.”<sup>21</sup> Having become, or inherited the legacy of, objectified commodities, black bodies appear as other than they are; the people, the agents, buried beneath (the meanings of) these bodies struggle to show up “legitimately,” particularly as it relates to the archive.

Much of Western esotericism scholarship relies upon historiographical research; in turn, historical and historiographical research heavily relies upon archival engagement. The “West” is what it is because the archive articulates it as such; and blackness is only present in Western archives as an excluded entity, as the black matter upon which the archive, and therefore archival knowledge, is built. On one hand, this occurs through certain historical documents, like slave traders’ accounting books or the fantastical descriptions of Africans in missionary travelogues; the production of the black emerges as an object of inquiry and accounting, as that which needs to be accounted for only in the service of use or disparagement.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, this occurs through the leisure made possible through the displacement of the West’s violence and terror onto the black; buried away in holding cells at the bottom of slave castles, enslaved Africans-turned-blacks constitute what Fred Moten might speak of as the West’s “underground,” the “anti- and ante-foundation” of the West that animates the West’s emergence through its dismissal. Or, as Achille Mbembe suggests, “The

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21. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 66.

22. See Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, particularly the introduction and first chapter; and see Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.

historical experiences of Blacks did not necessarily leave traces, and where they were produced, they were not always preserved. How could one write history in the absence of the kinds of traces that serve as sources for historiographical fact?”<sup>23</sup>

In a riff off of Mbembe, I claim that the “traces” left by black people were not non-existent, but instead operate as silent, as invisible in the Ralph Ellison sense.

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.<sup>24</sup>

Ellison’s point should be quite clear; black invisibility is the result of a practiced refusal, a choreographed aversion, to the reality of blackness.<sup>25</sup> As “invisible” in Ellison’s sense, blackness and black people trouble Western esotericism’s methodological comfort with historical and historiographical research—which heavily relies upon archives to substantiate and expand its conceptual, theoretical, and social claims. In other words, blackness exposes imperialism of historiography—an imperialism that Hanegraaff himself is troubled by. If blackness cannot leave an archival trace, then how could it even disrupt the historiographical specificity of the term “Western” in order to expand it? As Calvin Warren claims, “the neglect of black archives” is “a form of philosophical antiblackness.”<sup>26</sup> Although the study of Western esotericism is not necessarily limited to philosophical thinking, I think the principle remains: if we consider the Five Percenters, for example, “the 120 [the original lessons of the Five Percent nation] gives up its heart when translated to hypertext. Shared on a prison

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23. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 28.

24. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

25. Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath*, 112.

26. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 20.

yard or a playground, the degrees become living things.”<sup>27</sup> As is the case with the Five Percenters, many black esoteric traditions rely on oral transmission, sidestepping the textual archive in order to disseminate their knowledge. Words are spoken, but not crystallized; the dissemination and transformation of many forms of black esoteric knowledge remain dynamic because they are spoken, because it is the conversation—the building, as the Five Percenters call it—that constitutes the emergence and development of esoteric thought.

Phenomenologically hidden, ontologically obscured, and archivally erased, blackness is the West’s secret. This is not the case because blackness does not speak, but instead because its marginalized, impossible, and pathological speech is articulated in whispers, breathed in, through, beneath, and beyond the more dominant claims and statements that supposedly constitute the West’s existence. Operating as such a secret, the “archive” of blackness first emerges through its invisibility, through what is not said, through what Charles Long might call the silence that makes speech possible.<sup>28</sup>

Rendered silent and invisible through the slave trade and the lack and denial of a black archive, black Atlantic peoples are simultaneously “Western” and not Western; their geographic and cultural mores are birthed out of the violence of the West. But because they do not register as people with a trace in the West, they are excluded, discarded, and dispensed with. With this in mind, black people constitute an open secret; denied visibility and legitimacy, hidden behind the more visible archival materials produced by the West, blackness is already an esoteric horizon, constituting peoples, practices, and productions stemming from a reservoir of knowledge that larger and more dominant traditions don’t, won’t, and maybe even can’t understand. If this is the case for black people in general, then it stands to reason that black esoteric traditions, doubly secret because they are a secret knowledge that emerges from the West’s secret, would be twice removed from visibility.

Unless you know where to look.

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27. Knight, *The Five Percenters*, location 5025–43.

28. Long, *Significations*, 61–69.



## Poor Righteous Teachers: The Traumatic Black Mysticism of the Five Percenters

The above section sought to establish a relationship between blackness and esotericism. By paying attention to the ways in which the Middle Passage served to both exclude and occlude the presence and complexities of enslaved Africans and their descendants—in other words, by paying attention to how black people were placed in holds that made distinctions between (inner) captivity and (outer) freedom—we are attuned to the esoteric nature of blackness. Blackness is, in this regard, the West’s secret.

This section identifies the Five Percenters as an embodiment of traumatic mysticism. Up front, I must stress the wholly quotidian nature of this mysticism in Five Percenter life; though I have not engaged with them directly, all of their textual and oral sources suggest that they would be outraged at the suggestion of mysticism to characterize their way of life. This is the case because they do not understand themselves to be “religious” in any sense, and eschew any (claims to the) existence of supernatural and otherworldly “mystery gods.”

Their refusal is reasonable. Indeed, even a cursory examination of mysticism shows that the history of mysticism in the West has emphasized the necessity—or at least extreme importance—of a supernatural or transcendent element as part of the mystical life.<sup>29</sup> Or, as Amy Hollywood suggests—but does not fully affirm—much of the scholarship on mysticism is concerned with “the interplay between transcendence and immanence or between the community and the individual,” that also maps quite well onto the distinction between “God and humanity,” as they occur in history.<sup>30</sup> In this regard, mysticism is a problematic identifier for the Five Percenters; unconcerned with and allergic to the metaphysically supernatural, the Five Percenters’ eschewal of any (claims to) “mystery gods” appears to short circuit the possibility of mystical engagement

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29. Hollywood, “Introduction,” 1–33.

30. *Ibid.*, “Introduction,” 7–9.

from the outset. In fact, as I will show later, even the distinction between immanence and transcendence is problematic for the Five Percenters—although the meaning of “transcendence” changes within the context of Five Percenter life.

But—and I guess there is always a “but”—mysticism need not be defined so narrowly. In *Sensible Ecstasy*, Hollywood offers a different description of mysticism, one that is affective and embodied in its presentation.<sup>31</sup> Though much of the history of mysticism relies upon both the supernatural (and therefore the distinction between supernatural and natural realities), Hollywood’s consistent refrain is that there are other ways to theorize mysticism—many of which carry within them no need (or even desire) for supernatural realities and the distinction(s) such realities impose. Speaking of popular twentieth-century figures in the history of French thought, Hollywood suggests that thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, and Georges Bataille turn to earlier mystical figures because they “[subvert] the very distinctions between action and contemplation, emotion and reason, and body and soul, effecting . . . a disruption of the boundaries between them.”<sup>32</sup> Maybe there are other mystical possibilities. And maybe these possibilities (can) have nothing to do with mystery gods who dupe the masses into anesthetic inertia. I suggest traumatic mysticism as one such possibility.

Although I defined it in the introduction, it might be worth repeating here. Traumatic mysticism is *an undifferentiated form of lived experience, characterized by radical relation and identification with others, that entails the perpetual refusal of categorical distinctions*. There are two central characteristics of traumatic mysticism: 1) the refusal of distinctions; and 2) the centrality of physicality. Drawing from literary theorists Fred Moten and Hortense Spillers, I articulate the two characteristics.

In “Blackness and Nothingness: Mysticism in the Flesh,” literary theorist Fred Moten claims that, due to the violence of modernity and the violent legacy of

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31. Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*.

32. *Ibid.*, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 6.

the slave trade, blackness remains groundless—worldless, we might say—because there is no place that would constitute a “home” for blackness. “It is terrible to have come from nothing but the sea,” Moten tells us, “Which is nowhere, navigable only in its constant autodislocation.”<sup>33</sup> Drafted from the water, but simultaneously insulated from it, those who were birthed as black out of the hold of the ship announce a different relation to existence. Or, as Hortense Spillers puts it, the hold of the ship constitutes a Freudian sense of the “oceanic”:

Those African persons in ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic,’ if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all.<sup>34</sup>

We have already seen how life in the hold has produced blackness as esoteric; the difference here is that mysticism is a mode of existence, a way of life. It is the legacy of the nothing and the nowhere, the groundlessness of black being whose inaugural moment was an “oceanic feeling” of loss and perpetual disorientation, which obliterates categorical distinctions. Because black people were “removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either,” they and their descendants were forced to live under violent conditions. But if the conditions were violent, black people and their descendants both inaugurated and maintain a form of engagement beyond this very violence that is radically social—to the point where distinctions (between god and humanity, transcendence and immanence) are not simply disrupted; they no longer hold. Traumatic mysticism unfolds, therefore, as a form of undifferentiated black life impossibly lived in the face of black death; it emerges as the impossible (and impossibly lived) reality of black life within in a Western world that sustains itself through the denial and destruction of blackness.<sup>35</sup>

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33. Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 744.

34. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 72.

35. Warren, “Black Mysticism,” 219–29.

“Undifferentiated” is central here. Hollywood’s critical engagement with the continental philosophical (and psychoanalytic) tradition articulates that the “disruption of boundaries” can be more than enough to constitute mystical engagement. What Moten and Spillers theorize is blackness itself not simply as the disruption, but the negation, of boundaries.

Moreover, the very medium through which this undifferentiated identity emerges is the physicality of black flesh. As Moten argues, the hold of the slave ship,

our subcenoitic thing, our block chapel, is a hard row of constant improvisational contact, a dispossessive intimacy of rubbing, whose mystic rehearsal is against the rules or, more precisely, is apposed to rule, and is, therefore, a concrete social logic often (mis)understood as nothing but foolishness, which is, on the other hand, exactly and absolutely what it is.<sup>36</sup>

The “rubbing together” of black flesh in the hold of the ship highlights the centrality of physicality, of embodiment (though not quite the body), to the mysticism of blackness—indeed, the mysticism that is blackness. If blackness, as the West’s secret, is esoteric, then black life—the (after)life lived in and as the violent and traumatic secret of slavery during the Middle Passage—is mystical. And it is this “mystic rehearsal” of physical engagement in the holds of slave ships that continues to undifferentiate us. Black life, lived in the wake of the trauma of slavery, is mystical; no mystery gods required.

*A Mystical Non-Mysticism: the History and Thought of the Five Percenters*

Enfleshed and undifferentiated, traumatic mysticism is a modality of living that cannot maintain distinctions. In the case of the Five Percenters, this mode of living entails nothing less than a disruption of Islamic terminology, consequently demanding nothing less than the continued production of new forms of knowledge and language—or, more precisely, new forms of knowledge through

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36. Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 754.

new forms of language.<sup>37</sup> Which is to say, the Five Percenters draw from, adapt, and transform certain forms of Islamic thought and practice in order to articulate new modes of thought and practice; from the ontology of Allah and the reversal of his “transcendence,” the ontological embodiment of the divinity and its multiplication in black bodies.

One of these new forms of thought is the meaning of Godhood. Although there are Islamic currents, such as Sufism, that offer the possibility of self-divinization (or at least coming near to God—the Five Percenters’ central claim is that one is already God—which is why they do not understand themselves as “Islamic”); positing a difference between the 85% of people who do not know “the meaning of who god is” and the 5% of people—the “poor righteous teachers” of the Five Percent nation—the Five Percenters claim that black people (particularly black men) are already gods. What is needed is not a process of becoming, but instead an expression and display of the self-knowledge of one’s own inherent and embodied divinity. In order to show this, we must turn to Five Percenter history.

Initially operating in the shadow and wake of the Nation of Islam, the Five Percenters were birthed in 1964, due to the emphatic charisma and creativity of a man named Clarence 13X. Brought into the Nation of Islam (NOI) through his wife, he initially took quickly to the teachings of the Nation, eventually rising to the ranks of the NOI’s security force, the Advanced Fruit of Islam (AFOI). While becoming a member of the AFOI, Clarence 13X was catechized in the teaching of the Nation of Islam, and it was here where his thinking began to evolve. Although he would eventually be expelled for reasons that still remain shrouded in mystery—some attribute it to the fact that he bucked the restrictions against drug use and gambling in the NOI, while others claim that his expulsion was due to his reframing of NOI theology—what is clear is that his reframing of the NOI lessons became quite popular for young black men in New York in the early- to mid-sixties.<sup>38</sup>

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37. Warren, “Black Mysticism,” 221–22.

38. For two brilliant treatments of the historical emergence of the Five Percenters, please see

There are a host of peculiarities about the life of Clarence 13X, who assumed the name Allah, from multiple assassination attempts to the continued spread of his message while he was locked away at a mental institution—but this is not what leads to the conclusion that Clarence 13X’s movement has mystical elements. Instead, the first mystical dimension of the Five Percenters emerges from their rigorously social notion of black divinity. One particular lesson became the centerpiece of what would become the Five Percenters: in catechistic form, this lesson identifies the “Black Man” as God:

1. Who is the Original Man? The Original Man is the Asiatic Black Man, the Maker, the Owner, the Cream of the Planet Earth, the Father of Civilization, and the God of the Universe.<sup>39</sup>

Although the Nation of Islam sought to understand this teaching in terms of the “black man” collectively—i.e. black men collectively were and are God—the NOI actually identified its founder, W. D. Fard, as the highest knower, and therefore the embodiment, of God. 13X found this to be rather counterintuitive, and therefore suggested that each black man was an embodiment of God in his own right (and the “he” is central here; the possibility of women becoming gods still remains contested terrain). Calling himself Allah—and I will call him Allah from here on out—Clarence 13X took to the streets and began to share his reframing of the lessons he learned in the NOI.

By claiming that each black man was a god in his own right, Allah had also shifted the meaning of the terms “Islam” and “Allah.” Instead of tracing them back to their Arabic roots—whereby Islam signifies “the act of submission or surrender” and the term “Allah” is reserved for the God whom the Muslim serves—Allah reframed the terms as acronyms: Islam became an acronym for “I Self Lord And Master,” and Allah was rearticulated as the constitution of the

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Wakeel Allah’s *In the Name of Allah: A History of the Five Percenters* and Michael Muhammad Knight’s *The Five Percenters*. I have also discussed the history in my chapter, “Show and Prove.”  
39. Nuruddin, “A Teenage Nation of Gods and Earths,” 116.

god’s body: Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head.<sup>40</sup> Both of these acronyms articulated the divinity and self-sufficiency of the black man, grounding an ethical and theological framing in the actual embodiment of the gods themselves.

We cannot say that this is a deliberate Qur’anic exegetical exercise, but it can be, must be, integrated into the historical theological discussion concerning the Qur’an’s anthropomorphic description of God; him having a face, eyes, hands, and speech (Q. 28:88, 55:26–27, 5:64). As is well known, this subject was central to the medieval theological school of the Mu‘tazila who took the view that God’s transcendence necessitates an allegorical interpretation. This was at odds with the position of the Hanbalite/Ash‘arī school: “If the Qur’ān speaks of God’s hands or God’s eyes, then what hermeneutic device can legitimize the denial of them? Which is not to say that God has hands and eyes in the way in which we normally understand these features; we must simply accept such aspects of God without asking how (*bi-lā kayfa*) and resign our claims to knowledge of their modality.”<sup>41</sup> The anxiety then was about maintaining God’s unity and transcendence, an anxiety dropped by the Five Percenter; instead we have Allahs, multitudes of black bodies, rendering polytheism (*shirk*) irrelevant. By considering the Five Percenter’s understandings and including them in the historical tradition of exegesis, we exemplify our own stance against the anxiety we witness in academia concerning the inclusion of the Other-without-archive whose traumatic mystical orientation consciously subverts the tradition, here Islamic-Arabic, to sublimate blackness, an undifferentiated identity, the Asiatic Black Man. Furthermore, the position of the Five Percenter is in sharp contrast with the Sufi metaphysics of “ascent” exemplified by the mystical philosophy of the Grand Master (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*) Ibn ‘Arabī, who in a chapter of his *Meccan Revelations* (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*) called “On the true knowledge of the alchemy of happiness”—to mention one instance—describes the process of the

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40. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 126; Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 118.

41. Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts*, 3–4.

divinization of the soul as an ascent away from the mundane world, from bodies, from multiplication, from community.<sup>42</sup> To come close to the divine, one has to escape the clutches of bodies and communities (*taraqqī*).<sup>43</sup>

However, for the Five Percenters, I emphasize, the very claim to godhood already articulates a refusal of categorical distinctions—godhood is not articulated in (contra)distinction to quotidian humanity. Instead, godhood itself is quotidian. Reconfiguring the Islamic concept of the *Mahdi*, a salvific figure in Islamic thought, ethnographer and Five Percenter Michael Muhammad Knight recalls how one of the gods of the Five Percent nation broke down the meaning of Godhood:

For Five Percenters, there’s no UFO coming down to save the day, no Great Mahdi, no holy redeemer outside the self . . . . It’s you, the Mahdi of your own universe, with no one above you. This tenet’s full significance was broken down for me by a god named I Majestic Allah at a parliament [a gathering of Five Percenters] in Pittsburgh. He told me that to be God, as opposed to what you might expect—the claim to be a “supernatural being”—simply means that you alone are responsible for uplifting yourself, your family, and your community. That’s it. You can’t save anyone in a church or mosque, praying for the Man in the Clouds to do your work; you have to hit the streets and build.<sup>44</sup>

The term “God” doesn’t articulate “transcendent elements”; to be a god is not to be “supernatural,” nor is it the result of apotheosis or a union between supernatural and merely natural realities. Though it is a form of transcendence, it is a transcendence into community, into the complexities of black social life, not to some otherworldly realm of eternal peace. To be a God is to be responsible to both oneself and the community, the social life, within which one finds oneself. “Make money, teach kids,” Knight tells us, continuing, “That’s a god performing his duty.” If we were to use Heideggerian language, the Five Percenter maxim of “uplifting yourself . . . your family . . . and your community” could be understood as a mode of transcendence into relation, a transcendence

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42. Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, Chapter 167.

43. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 219, 269.

44. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 1013.



into the social world of blackness.<sup>45</sup> Embodied and fundamentally quotidian, the Islamic godhood—articulated through the god’s body as Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head, and I, Self, Lord, And Master—of the Five Percenters is neither submission nor supernatural transcendence. It is ethical engagement, situated here and now.

This reframing of both of these terms set traditional Islamic theological concepts on a different ground. By claiming that Islam speaks to one’s selfhood and self-responsibility, and by grounding the term “Allah” in the body, the Five Percenters disrupt the categorical distinction between transcendent and immanent, between (disembodied) divinity and (enfleshed) humanity.

This claim to godhood can be understood to have mystical elements in the sense in that the divinity articulated is one that is “undifferentiated,” announcing an inextricable tether between the limitations of human existence and the power of transformation. But this isn’t a “union”; instead, it is a fact of existence. This form of mysticism is not birthed out of an attempt to reunite with a transcendent force, but instead out of the process of discerning and continually reestablishing who one is: the source of the divine is oneself. As multiple sources claim, the Five Percenters remain in line with the NOI in that they do not believe in a “mystery god”; there is no transcendent being operating as the metaphysical and ontological guarantor of existence and goodness.<sup>46</sup> One is a god because one is a black man (or in some cases, a black woman). As Knight writes, “The Five Percenter message was at once simple enough to be easily digested by anyone—the black man is God of the universe—and complex enough, through its call to rigorous study of the lessons and Supreme Mathematics, to promise a challenging life of study and inner growth.”<sup>47</sup>

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45. The world toward which Five Percenters transcend, however, is not Heidegger’s world of *Dasein*, for *Dasein*’s world—a world marked by the normativity and supremacy of whiteness—is a world that cannot incorporate blackness as anything other than the object or, as Calvin Warren says, the nothing against which *Dasein* secures the certainty of its own existence. It is against the backdrop and horizon of blackness as nothing that *Dasein* is able to face up to its own death. “Heideggerian anxiety transforms into antiblack violence,” Warren claims, “when *Dasein* flees the anxiety nothing stimulates and projects it as terror onto blacks” (*Ontological Terror*, 9).

46. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 102; Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 124–25.

47. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 165.

The process of recognizing one's inherent divinity is called coming into “knowledge of self,” and it is here where the meaning of the nomenclature “Five Percenter” is also discerned. In the NOI's Lost-Found Lesson No. 2 (another catechetical lesson), the world's population is broken down into three groups, marked by percentages: 1) the “85%,” the masses of “uncivilized people” who are “slaves” that “do not know who the living God is, or their origin in this world and who worship that which they know not”; 2) the “10%” who are “the rich slave-makers of the poor, who teach the poor lies to believe that the Almighty True and Living God is a spook and cannot be seen by the physical eye”; and 3) the “5%,” the “poor righteous teachers” who “teach that the true and living God is the Son of Man, the Supreme Being, the Black Man of Asia.”<sup>48</sup> In this regard, the Five Percent are prophetic teachers, tasked with informing and educating the 85% about who the “true and living God is.” It is important to note here that these numbers are not empirical statistical realities. Instead, they serve as numeric heuristics: the “85%” speaks to the masses of people who do not know who they are, and who have believed in “mystery gods” for their sustenance and salvation.

In line with his reframing of the first lesson—namely, that the black man is god—Allah announced that the Five Percent's knowledge of “the true and living God” is nothing more and nothing less than self-knowledge; divinity is not housed in a “mystery god,” but is instead just who the black man is. Even if Jay-Z is not a Five Percenter, consider his lines in the remix “We Made It”:

Showed up to the last supper in some brand new J's/I'm the true and livin'/book of  
Hov/New religion, 8th wonder of the world/alien superstition/you're blind, baby/blind  
to the fact of who you are maybe/my bloodline's crazy/kings and queens and Michael  
Jordan rings ...

For Jay-Z, the blindness speaks to a lack of knowledge of self; being “blind to fact of who you are” is to be trapped in the mindset of the 85%, who do not know who God is—which means that they do not know who they are.

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48. Cited in Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 122.

It is one thing to simply claim one’s divinity; indeed, the Five Percenters are not the first to make such a claim. As Lewis Gordon tells us, the history of Western philosophical thinking might also be understood as a deification of whiteness; in an antiblack world, whiteness has already been reconfigured as divine while blackness is understood as beneath human.<sup>49</sup> Disrupting this logic, the Five Percenters claim that blackness is divine, but such a claim needs to be substantiated. One is not only tasked with knowing that one is god, but also showing and proving one’s divinity.

Elsewhere, I have claimed that this process of showing and proving spoke to a demonstrative phenomenological position that blurs the line between epistemology and ontology; one’s being as a God is connected to what one knows—despite the factual realities of white supremacist antiblackness.<sup>50</sup> The demonstrative disposition, however, is only possible through a rigorous catechism. In the same way that Allah trained to become an AFOI, each Five Percenter-in-training must be able to recite, from memory, a series of 120 lessons, as well as memorize a complex numerological and alphabetical system called the “Supreme Mathematics” and the “Supreme Alphabets.” These numerological and alphabetical systems constitute(d), among other tools, a critical hermeneutical device used for “sciencing out” or discerning deeper meanings of the universe.

It is also here that we see a comparative moment in Islamic esotericism. The Supreme Alphabets are immediately reminiscent of the esoteric “science of letters,” *‘ilm al-ḥurūf*, which developed within esoteric and Sufi milieus especially from the twelfth century onwards. Arabic letters were claimed to have divine significance, especially those known as “the disconnected ones” (*al-muqatta‘āt*) which appear at the beginning of some Qur’anic chapters. The interpretation of these letters occupied esotericists but were generally considered to “constitute the spiritual forms that emerge from God’s engendering fiat, ‘Be!’,” become

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49. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*.

50. Gray, “Show and Prove.”

understood as “the true essence of the thing that comes into being.” They are the building blocks of the cosmos, the realization and understanding of which reveals wisdom and transforms the internal and external reality of the one who pursues them. They can be steps on the ladder of *taraqqī*.<sup>51</sup> For our purposes here, we can see strong similarities—and possibly even stronger differences—between the two alphabetical systems, particularly the anti-quotidian orientation of the science of letters. We emphasize though that there is no evidence that the Supreme Alphabet is directly derived from the science of letters.

Similar to the science of letters, the Supreme Alphabet of the Five Percenters articulates significant correspondences between each letter and a larger conceptual reality. Moreover, the correspondence that each letter signifies can “[generate] an effect according to a purpose.”<sup>52</sup> This is, however, where the similarities stop, as the correspondences of the Supreme Alphabet are not supernatural; the “Allah” to which the letters (particularly the letter A itself) refer is simply the flesh-and-bone reality of the black (wo)men who are able to creatively use the letters to discern deeper meanings about the concrete natural and social worlds within which they find themselves.

Analogical resonances remain, however, between medieval and early modern Sufism and the Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets, one of which is the centrality of meditation—by which I mean consistent and rigorous intellectual engagement. Though the forms of meditation differ between Sufism and Five Percenter life, they share a similarity in that, like the science of letters, the Supreme Alphabet and Supreme Mathematics emerged after long and rigorous textual study—particularly of the NOI’s “Lost-Found Lesson No. 13,” which is a series of riddles that asks about the meaning of numbers and letters.

I quote part of the text here:

After learning Mathematics, which is Islam, and Islam is Mathematics, it stands true.  
You can always prove it at no limit of time. Then you must learn to use it and secure

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51. Liana Saif, “From *Gayat al-bakim* to *Sams al ma’arif*,” 311.

52. *Ibid.*, 312.

some benefits while you are living—that is luxury, money, good homes, friendships in all walks of life . . .

The Secretary of Islam offers a reward to the best and neatest worker of this problem.

There are twenty-six letters in the Language and if a Student learns one letter per day, then how long will it take to learn the twenty-six letters?

There are ten numbers in the Mathematical Language. Then how long will it take a Student to learn the whole ten numbers (at the above rate)?<sup>53</sup>

According to Wakeel Allah, “the Elders of the Five Percent Nation began to dissect the problem,” and eventually developed the Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabets, wherein each letter or number is given a “mystical meaning” that one can use to further understand the nature of the world around himself or herself. The Supreme Mathematics and the Supreme Alphabets are as follows:<sup>54</sup>

(1) Knowledge	(A) Allah	(N) Now, Nation, or End
(2) Wisdom	(B) Be or Born	(O) Cipher
(3) Understanding	(C) See	(P) Power
(4) Culture or Freedom	(D) Divine	(Q) Queen
(5) Power or Refinement	(E) Equality	(R) Rule, Righteous
(6) Equality	(F) Father	(S) Self, Savior
(7) God	(G) God	(T) Truth or Square
(8) Build or Destroy	(H) He or Her	(U) You or Universe
(9) Born	(I) I, Islam	(V) Victory
(0) Cipher	(J) Justice	(W) Wisdom, Woman
	(K) King	(X) Unknown
	(L) Love, Hell or Right	(Y) Why
	(M) Master	(Z) Zig Zag Zig

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53. Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 117.

54. *Ibid.*, 118–19. It is important to know that other sources (from whom I’ve heard orally) may not agree with the meanings of the numbers 5 and 8.

Drawing from both of these systems, one is able to “science out” or discern new and different meanings about one’s existence in relation to the world. In the song “On and On,” for example, Erykah Badu sings: “I was born underwater/with three dollars and six dimes/oh you may laugh/’cause you didn’t do your math.” One may actually laugh if one actually took the line to actually mean that Badu was born with \$3.60. But consider the math: 3.60 might mean that Badu was born with understanding (3) and equality (6), and this became her cipher (0), the key through which she could further understand the world. Or, the 3.60 might mean 360, as in 360 degrees, which is a perfect circle, which would, again, be a cipher (0), which would still be a key to knowledge. Or, further still, 360 adds up to 9 ( $3+6+0=9$ ), which would be the number for “born,” which would speak to her actual birth or her womb—the roundness of which would resemble the number zero, which would again be a cipher for unlocking new forms of knowledge.

Womb, understanding, equality, circle: in this single line, there are at least three different meanings that could be deciphered, and there are far more possibilities—because I am not a Five Percenter, my application of the Supreme Mathematics does not carry the same depth or breadth of understanding as an actual god’s analysis would. And this is why the chorus to her song is “on and on/my cipher keeps moving like a rolling stone”: the new knowledge keeps growing, so the cipher keeps moving, like a rolling stone—but only if one is attuned to the mystical meanings of the numbers themselves. You may laugh, but it’s because you didn’t do your math—which means you do not have knowledge of self. As Badu sings in the chorus: “If we were made in His image, then call us by our name/most intellects do not believe in God/but they fear us just the same.” To be able to do the math is to show and prove one’s divinity; it is to demonstrate one’s existence as God by proving one’s access to the hidden dimensions of existence made possible by the Supreme Mathematics.

From the reconfigured meanings of traditional Islamic terminology to the development and application of the Supreme Mathematics and the Supreme

Alphabets, the Five Percenters demonstrate an esoteric knowledge, known to the few, but delivered orally and in plain sight. What makes these teachings mystical, however, is the fact that the demonstration of one's divinity is only done in community; the term "cipher" also takes on a social meaning, as ciphers are often informal circles where the gods come together to "build," to "science out" new meanings in community with one another. Showing and proving is a social reality. The impossibility of showing and proving on one's own—that is, by oneself—speaks to an "undifferentiated identity," a blurred line between the individual and social, such that even if the gods emphasize individual identity (which they do), such an identity is only legitimated, only recognized, in the space of the social, in the hold of the community.<sup>55</sup>

One final point about this sociality is that it is fiercely egalitarian. Each god has his own right to understand the lessons how he pleases. One god can, for example, endorse marijuana, while another might condemn its use. This egalitarianism also speaks to the social; with no hierarchical structure, the Five Percenters allow the development of knowledge to be an ongoing affair, grounded in nothing but the communal sharing of various perspectives—yet another dimension of the undifferentiated identity I have been tracing up to this point.

Lastly, the traumatic mysticism of the Five Percenters is refracted through the lens of a black tradition whose most forceful announcement occurs within the slave ship and the plantation. In the song "We Made it," rapper Jay Electronica (who is associated with, but not fully a part of, the Five Percenters) raps:

The devil, the haters, the bloggers, the papers, the labels, they labeled me; but they can't relate to our struggle . . . we came up from slavery . . . this one is for all of the lost and forgotten black angels who prayed for me.<sup>56</sup>

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55. On the social versus individual orientations of Islamic esotericism see, Saif, "What is Islamic Esotericism?," in this issue.

56. Jay Electronica, "We Made It."

Later on, rapper Jay-Z will pepper in Five Percenter references, claiming that “G is the seventh letter made/so with my arms and feet shackled, I still get paid.” Though neither of them is fully incorporated into the Five Percenter way of life, both rappers articulate the mystical power and promise of the Five Percenters’ lifeworld. Even when one isn’t a Five Percenter—which is to say, even when one stands “outside” of the “boundaries” between who is in and who is out—the potency of Five Percenter thought is palpable, offering non-gods the possibility of at least resonating with divine knowledge. And, as I said before, this form of divinity is concrete and mundane—it’s about the here and now.

Jay Electronica’s and Jay-Z’s references to the Five Percenters’ worldview articulate a mystical possibility of non-relation, the refusal—or at least the transcendence—of the validity of the world (the bloggers, the papers, the labels . . .) that is occasioned by a tradition inaugurated in slavery, in the “cotton fields” where black life emerged in and through the perpetual threat of various forms of black death. This kind of life beyond the social death conferred to black people in the United States is consistent with the life lived in the hold of the ship, the life developed in the darkness of social death that could not be contained or restrained through various forms of repression and violence. The Five Percenters’ emergence came at a time of racial upheaval in the ‘60s, and Allah was continually surveilled by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies; indeed, at one point, Allah was committed to the violent Matteawan Institute for the Criminally Insane in New York because he claimed to be god and because his followers were understood as a street gang.<sup>57</sup> And yet, despite his committal, various sources tell us that the Five Percent Nation grew during Allah’s stay upstate. Though Jay Electronica may not be a Five Percenter, his song “We Made It” is an ode to the beyond of blackness, to the story of making it “from slaves on a slave ship, live from the cotton fields,” and “straight into the spaceship.”

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57. Wakeel Allah, *In the Name of Allah*, 165–80.



However, in typical Five Percenter fashion, we would do well not to understand the spaceship literally. Jay Electronica’s invocation of the “spaceship” is likely a reference to the “mothership” of the NOI: in NOI mythology and cosmology, the “Mothership” is a large military spacecraft that will contribute to, if not completely inaugurate, an apocalyptic era in which the United States will be razed to the ground and black people will rise up to lead in its ashes.<sup>58</sup> It will at once destroy this evil age and regenerate the world in a “millennial” era. However, Allah interpreted “mothership” as “mother’s hip,” reconnecting it back to the concrete world of en fleshed social engagement. In this regard, the growth of Allah’s Five Percent nation had everything to do with hitting the streets and building; it was the mystical commitment to blackness—not the mysticism of a mystery god—that occasioned the growth of Allah’s movement. And this growth offered nothing less than a new and different way of engaging in community. “Peace, God!” is as much a greeting as it is a communal identification.

From the violent context of antiblackness to the production and development of new forms of knowledge and sociality, the Five Percenters speak to a (non-)mystical tradition, one birthed out of the blackness that is the West’s secret and sustained by the continued attempts to live lives of communal uplift. This is not to say that the Five Percenters are perfect; I do not want to romanticize the group. There are gendered and sexual distinctions that can be and often are quite troubling. But I am saying that their community—birthed from an esoteric blackness and generative of esoteric and mystical forms of knowledge—speaks to a kind of relation that is a non-relation, a transcendence of the violence of this world in order to speak to an inherent unity, an “undifferentiated” identity that continues to preserve and enable black people—usually men—to live with dignity. Jay Electronica tells us that the story of blackness is “the greatest story ever told,” and I’m inclined to agree, with a slight modifica-

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58. For more on the NOI’s Ufology, see “The Meaning of ‘Mother’ in Louis Farrakhan’s ‘Mother Wheel,’” 434–65.

tion: maybe this is the greatest story never told—or at least not told sufficiently. The 5% remain the 5% precisely because they know most of the world won't listen. And while this might be a problem, it does not stop the Five Percenters from living their lives and continuing to build in community.

## Conclusion

As I conclude, I want to highlight a significant implication that, until this point, has been implicit throughout the essay. Part of refusing distinctions is the refusal of the boundary between secret and public; though they are “poor righteous teachers,” Five Percenters have become notorious because of their ability to disseminate their knowledge through one of the most innovative forms of American popular culture: hip hop. Throughout this article, I've referenced hip hop and neo-soul music in order to signal how music has been a considerable medium for the sharing of Five Percenter thought. Indeed, many people who have been associated with Five Percent thought, life, and culture—from the Wu Tang Clan to Jay Electronica and Erykah Badu—have shown that the emphasis on lyricism in hip hop can be used as a powerful tool for sharing the knowledge of the gods. It may be the case that such dissemination is coincidental, but I don't think that this is actually the case; hip hop's emphasis on verbal mastery and improvisation makes it a critical and productive outlet, a musical archive, that allows for esoteric thought to be developed and transmitted. Not all Five Percenters are rappers, neither are all rappers Five Percenters. But what hip hop does, what the Emcee can do, is leave traces of one's heritage in one's musical production.

Leaving such a trace does not simply allow for many Five Percenters to take care of themselves and their families; it also allows for them to continue their tradition, as they continue to apply their knowledge of the Lessons to the world of white supremacist antiblackness. The language and knowledge of the gods offers the possibility of turning one's shackles into one's adornments, of transforming languages of constraint into discourses of prosperity. Birthed out of

the secret of blackness, and maintained through the continued mystical practice of undifferentiated identity, “making it” signals the possibility of a life lived beyond the purview of antiblack violence; it names a life that is fiercely individual, but only substantiated in community. It names the impossibility of distinguishing between the ethereal and the material, between the human and the divine.

To be a god is to deny the violence of the white supremacist and antiblack world of the West (including the study of Western esotericism) its legitimacy; godhood is the announcement of the perpetual attempt to transcend (the violence of) the “Western” world in favor of those who have been denied access to the world. It is to transcend downward and inward to the social life of social death, to live beyond the constraints of the death imposed upon blackness from the outside. In this regard, even if Western esotericism carries the heavy existential baggage of its own dialectical and totalizing alterity; even if the language and thought of the gods is “extremely problematic”; and even if the only esotericism that emerges in the West are the forms that are recognized as the “specific products of Western culture,” the Five Percenters will still persist. Or, as Allah himself once said, “Even if the whole world denies you, never deny yourself, because it’s your own doubt that can stop you from being Allah.”<sup>59</sup> Maybe self-denial is the hindrance, not the portal, to the mystical life—a life lived in undifferentiated identity, where the lines between the individual and the social, between the esoteric and the exoteric, between the divine and the human, are blurred—or at least rendered permeable.

Or at least it seems this way for the gods of the Five Percent Nation.

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59. Knight, *Why I Am a Five Percenter*, location 165.

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