White Conspiracies Against Black Empowerment

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The devil is alive, I feel him breathin'
Claimin' money is the key, so keep on dreamin'
And put them lottery tickets just to tease us
My Aunt Pam can’t put them cigarettes down
So now my lil’cousin smokin’ them cigarettes now

Kanye West, “Heard ‘Em Say”

1 For black nationalists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, both the American government’s aggressively interventionist foreign policy and its domestic strategy of “repression and containment” signalled the existence of a carefully calculated conspiracy against people of color. Afraid that such schemes would destroy their own Black Power initiatives, consciousness-raising revolutionary cadres joined with cultural nationalists and fellow-traveling poets, playwrights, and novelists to provide early warning of the coming pogroms. This essay will place these responses in historical context, noting their origins and tracing the black community’s belief in white conspiracies to bring about an African-American Final Solution through the 1980s and 1990s.

According to modern-day history texts, the chief legacy of lynching was fear. According to many within Black America, it was suspicion. While subtle, the differences between these competing perspectives are significant. The first conjures up visions of a panic-stricken black peasantry in urgent need of the compassionate white liberal’s help. The latter posits the existence of a self-directed African-American community capable of calmly and accurately processing information essential to survival. Its constituent members maintain that actions speak louder than words and refrain from putting too much stock in the liberals’ claims of being different from “the worst sort”. Thus, in the black world view, it is considered vitally important to entertain the suspicion that all whites are potential conspirators against minority group interests. Like the sage Uncle
Daniel, a character in Frances E.W. Harper’s 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy*, vigilant, historically-aware African Americans recognize that “white man’s so unsartain, black man’s nebber safe” (Harper, 173). Within early twentieth-century intellectual circles, speculation on the origin and ultimate meaning of whites’ conspiratorial nature was encouraged by a widely held belief that each racial group possessed a unique set of attributes or “gifts”. W.E.B. Du Bois’ reading and interpretation of this patently racialist concept was among the most distinctive. According to the Harvard-educated activist’s nuanced depiction, blacks were a race of artists, endowed with a unique sense of beauty—of sound, color, and “spiritual joyousness” (Du Bois, 1970, 158, 178). As a result, their contribution to western civilization was more aesthetic and spiritual than technological or military. A “tropical” love of life not only enabled the peoples of the African diaspora to benefit from the therapeutic properties inherent in laughter, song, and dance, but also led them to place a premium on the development of personal qualities such as honesty, humility, faith, and compassion. Strong, resilient, yet “deliciously human” (Du Bois, 1968, 148), African Americans provided an “oasis of simple faith and reverence” (Du Bois, 1997, 43) in an artificial and hypocritical land.

Contrasting dramatically with this idealized ancestral race, the United States’ branch of the European-American family tree was believed to be horribly diseased. Indeed, to Du Bois, the terms “Anglo-Saxon” and “Teuton” stood for all that was wrong with contemporary society. Crass, self-indulgent, and boastful, white people were practiced deceivers. They had a taste for “the tawdry and flamboyant” (Du Bois, 1926, 292), but were incapable of camouflaging their essential meanness of spirit. Having deified Self and adopted “kill or be killed” as a behavioral watchword, this joyless, emotionally-stunted race was said to be governed by the “cool logic of the Club” (Du Bois, 1986, 811)—might transformed into sacred right at the expense of human brotherhood. Often acting more as destroyers than as agents of civilization, their highly-touted “honor” was that of thieves. Lacking the leavening, humanizing component of blackness, their history was nothing less than a study in “moral obtuseness and refined brutality ” (Du Bois, 1986, 812)—of “murder, theft, rape, deception, and degradation” (Du Bois, 1965, 23).

On at least one occasion, Du Bois gave public thanks that to the best of his knowledge, no Anglo-Saxon blood flowed through his veins (Du Bois, 1918, 160). Nevertheless, deeply-felt racial loyalties did not prevent him from urging fellow blacks to share their racial gifts with the mainstream. He considered proud, race-conscious African-Americans to be “the spiritual hope of this land” (Du Bois, 1968, 153). By providing a complement and corrective to the whites’ brash and bloody mind set, it was hoped that they would win long-overdue recognition as co-workers in the kingdom of culture. (Du Bois, 1997, 39). But, could the moral power of the oppressed actually redeem their tormentors and thereby salvage the American Dream? Here, even Du Bois seemed to waiver. In the 1928 novel, *Dark Princess*, he described an insidious Ku Klux Klan-sponsored campaign to “pit the dark peoples against each other—Japanese against Chinese; Indians against Negroes; Negroes against Arabs; Mulattoes against Blacks” (Du Bois, 1995, 78). Given the nation’s racial history, it seemed only logical to conclude that the Anglo-Saxons’ hunger for power was insatiable; their conspiratorial bent intractable.

During the depression years of the 1930s, many who had come to doubt the ability of black redemptive society to provide the sort of tropical leaven capable of transforming Nordic cruelty into compassion were attracted to the separatist message of the Nation of Islam. Determined to redeem the dark-skinned tribe of Shabazz from centuries of unjust
white rule, patriarch Elijah Muhammad urged his followers to escape “mental poisoning” (Muhammad, 1965, 223) by relocating to a “state or territory of their own—either on this continent or elsewhere” (Muhammad, 1970, 404). If frequently couched in eschatological language or hidden in cryptic references to “the earth that originally belonged to us” (Berger, 1964, 58), the black Muslim position on territorial nationalism was clear. Only by (re-)establishing a vibrant Islamic culture “beyond the white world” could the North American branch of a once powerful” Asian Black Nation find relative safety from white conspirators (Essien-Udom. 1962, 130, 263).

In the Nation’s decidedly non-orthodox theology, African Americans were considered divine by nature—“the first and last, maker and owner of the universe” (Muhammad, 1965, 53). Nevertheless, a black creator God had seen fit to test their mettle. A race of inherently evil spawns of science was allowed to dominate and mislead the “so-called Negroes” (Muhammad, 1965, 53). For centuries, both mental and physical chains had kept blacks ignorant of the fact that they were a chosen people, sacred to Allah and destined for greatness. Fortunately, the time of judgment for these “blue-eyed devils” (Lincoln, 1961, 77) was fast approaching. Hell was “kindling up” (Id., 73) and soon would be densely populated by cadres of colorless Caucasians. After Armageddon, America was to burn in a great lake of fire for 390 years, but eventually would become the Original People’s brave new world—a black Muslim promised land with neither sickness nor sorrow; worry or white people (Clegg, 1997, 64-67).

According to the faithful, both this fantastic futurescape and Elijah Muhammad’s interim program of territorial nationalism had the devils in a perpetual state of panic. As a result, envious whites continually schemed and plotted in order to maintain their hegemony over the smarter, more physically attractive black race. Major conspiratorial schemes included: (1) the enslavement of Allah’s chosen ones in the wilderness of North America; (2) all subsequent cultural dislocations wrought by a force-feeding of western Christianity; (3) the devastating moral pollution of Black “Sacred Vessels” (Essien-Udom, 1962, 140) by strong drink, filthy songs, suggestive dancing, and the “sexual worship of the same sex” (Muhammad, 1973, 89); (4) deceptively-packaged “smooth lies” such as integration, interracial marriage, and government-sponsored birth control programs (Muhammad, 1965, 64, 104-106). Secretive in intent, but bold in their display of evil and indecency, “cowardly enemy devils” (Muhammad, 1973, 28) understood that their days were numbered and sought to implicate as many blacks as possible in their crimes.

The separation of the races that would allow blacks to avoid both moral contamination and Allah’s coming wrath even extended to dietary matters. Convinced that all human illness—“from social disease to cancer” (Muhammad, 1972, 115)—could be traced to white evildoers, Elijah Muhammad viewed mainstream foodways as part of a corrupt scheme to shorten the life span of the righteous. Because it was their nature “to do the opposite of right” (Muhammad, 1972, 133), the Nation’s enemies ate the wrong foods and ate them far too often. They sought to weaken the black race by encouraging the consumption of spicy, greasy, hastily-prepared dishes. “Filthy hog meat,” catfish—“the pig of the water,” “half-cooked breads,” and overly sweet or starchy items were particularly harmful (Muhammad, 1972, 10, 65, 78). A single serving of walnuts or “that concrete-like peanut butter” could shorten one’s life by five years (Muhammad, 1972, 82, 96). According to black Muslim lore, “eating as beasts eat” (Muhammad, 1972, 7) during their centuries-long exposure to the white world’s dietary practices had multiplied illness and decreased life expectancy dramatically. Due to a healthful regimen of infrequent, vegetarian meals...
and monthly fasting, the African-Americans' earliest ancestors were believed to have lived to the extremely ripe old age of 1,000 (Muhammad, 1972, 17).

In addition to serving as negative role models for personal hygiene and a sensible diet, New World whites conspired to make food an instrument of destruction. Apparently, the slow death brought about by eating cornbread and pork was not alleviating the problem of troublesome blacks quickly enough. To hasten their demise, scientists were said to have developed a variety of toxins which, when introduced into the food chain and water supply, shortened black lives. According to the Nation, this deliberate adulteration of foodstuffs was done so that white physicians and undertakers could “make more money” (Muhammad, 1972, 189-190). Certainly, this was just the sort of behavior one expected from a race of swine-eating schemers. To thwart their ghoulish conspiracy, it was deemed essential that survivalminded black folk shun the blue-eyed devils, stay away from their tainted food, and “eat to live” (Muhammad, 1972, 15).

For the remainder of the century, Black America’s response to rumors concerning white conspiracies ran the gamut from healthy skepticism to debilitating paranoia. As the least likely segment of the community to envision an integrated future for people of color, nationalist-oriented African Americans came to be especially adept at crafting worst case scenarios. Equal parts organizational raison d’être, ancient history lesson, and self-promotional tool, their chilling theories focused on identifying enemies and attributing motivation; less so on mapping viable survival strategies. Here, individualistic, exploitative “Ice People” replaced Du Bois’ warlike Anglo-Saxons and Muhammad’s blue-eyed devils as the chief threat to communalistic, spiritually-gifted “Sun People.” Separated from their Nile Valley roots by a prehistoric migration to Ice Age Europe, the Neanderthal-Caucasoids’ subsequent evolution in an unforgiving glacial environment was believed to have had telling consequences for future generations. Aggressive, territorial tendencies and the deep-seated need to acquire material possessions were useful survival tools, welladapted to rugged environs. Unfortunately, as the climate of this European cradle of civilization became more temperate, the Caucasians continued to react to outmoded environmental stimuli. Increasingly out-of-touch with the times, they were unable to cope with change in a rational manner. Recognizing that the beneficial adaptive properties of light-colored skin no longer were critical to group survival, but finding it impossible to darken permanently the Caucasian complexion, this melanin-deficient race became painfully aware of its abnormality. As a result, white people’s fears, frustrations and insecurities came to be vented in pathological, anti-black behaviors. In short, black nationalist conspiracy theories were rooted in the belief that caveman ways die hard—that “you can take the Savage out of Europe, but you can’t take the savage out of the European” (Arnold, 1997, 69, 114-123; Bradley, 1991, 26-28).

Caucasoid psychobiology determined whites’ obsessive-compulsive need to dominate groups that are more proficient in producing the hormone melatonin, but jealousy was a key motivating factor in the hatching of conspiratorial plots. Updating Du Boisian terminology, late-century nationalist writers claimed that it was marvelous to be a “hueman”. Certainly, melanin-rich peoples were gifted with far more than natural sunscreen. They were credited with encompassing the totality of the human condition in ways that made their chalky-faced cousins positively green with envy. As “perhaps the most fantastic stuff on the planet” (Welsing, 1996, 81), the pigment melanin was said to confer paranormal powers and to enhance athletic ability. It enabled blacks to experience higher levels of spiritual awareness and was responsible for both the ecstatic nature of
African-American religious expression and the rhythmic, emotionally-charged character of secular music and dance. Considered the “neurochemical basis of what we call ‘soul’” (Welsing, 1996, 82), melanin purportedly allowed Sun People to “decode the energy emanations from plants” (Montellano, 1993, 48) and “negotiate the vibrations of the universe” (“Skin Deep,”, 1994, 16). Understandably, powers such as these generated feelings of envy in Caucasoid circles. Unable to jettison the burden of genetically-recessive white skin, European-Americans sought to forestall their own racial annihilation by plotting against the Black nation (Welsing, 1991, ii-v, 4-5).

Rooted in what City College of New York Black Studies professor Leonard Jeffries has termed “anti-Kemetism,” or “the inability to deal with the blackness of the Nile” (Hecht, 1992, 12), this subversive struggle for white genetic survival was seen as an ongoing conflict orchestrated by various conspiratorial groupings of Ice People. Some modern-day conspiracy theorists claimed to have identified a “cabal of elitists and money lords... beyond just the powerful and rich” that had successfully infiltrated traditional Establishment circles and was using its influence to “enslave the people” (Brown, 1998, xv, 13). Others were more specific, holding “rich Jews” responsible for all manner of anti-black deceptions—in effect, making them honorary Ice People so that their ancestors could be blamed for financing the international slave trade (Morrow, 1991, 19; Nation of Islam, 1991, 89-91). Still others announced that the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff was planning a war against urban youth “under the pretext of national security” (Farrakahan, 1989, 10) and that survivalist militias were “polishing up their rifles in anticipation of a violent showdown” (Brown, 1995, 119). At the very least, a “white media conspiracy” was seeking to discredit nationalist prophets like themselves (Traub, 1993, 46). Whatever the specific leadership cohort, any threat to Caucasian self-preservation was believed capable of mobilizing the white masses in support of acts that were both desperate and deadly.

During a volatile nuclear age in which governments periodically experimented with ethnic cleansing as a geopolitical solution to the problems of state, white genetic survival came to be seen as the ultimate skin-color privilege; genocidal plots against nonwhites the penultimate conspiratorial act. Seeming plausible even to marginalized individuals who had ridiculed and rejected every other programmatic aspect of contemporary black nationalism, the concept of a “black genocide” was widely discussed by intellectuals and common folk alike. Indeed, the nationalists’ notion of cannibalistic whites emerging en masse from their “carnivorous condo caves” in order to purge the most melanin-rich element of the population from the “hue-man chain” was so repugnantly bizarre that both debate and elaboration were virtually guaranteed (Jones D., 1992, 14, 28). Ultimately, the catchphrase “black genocide” was used to describe a wide variety of rumored conspiracies. Perceived by many to be the “logical conclusion of racism” (Brown, 1995, 94), it served as a clarion call summoning activists to organize their communities for survival.

The failure of a succession of U.S. presidential administrations to win congressional approval for the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide gave credence to these allegations. As a result, conspiracy theorists of the 1960s and 1970s were kept busy identifying new plots and posting periodic warnings. Escalating police brutality suggested that whites were capable of having “the gas ovens built before you realize that they’re already hot” (Breitman, 1966, 165). Many found little in the military’s conduct in Vietnam to alleviate the fear that it could happen here—that the Nazis’ reign of terror soon might be “replayed on American soil with a new cast of...
characters” (Vivian, 1970, 132). By the time right wing opposition was overcome and the Genocide Convention ratified in 1986, a host of African-American activists had joined the discussion. Claiming that their people existed in “a pregenocidal state” characterized by frequent physical and psychological abuse, they called for increased vigilance, group unity, and the promotion of self-defensive behaviors. Recognizing that mass murder “always remains a live option when those in power hold contempt for those who are powerless in their midst,” the boldest among them spoke of fomenting a preemptive Black Power revolution (Wright, 1969, 50).

For the revolutionary nationalist supporters of the Black Panther Party, there was little to debate. Both the Johnson administration’s aggressively interventionist foreign policy and the “Nixon clique’s” domestic strategy of “repression and containment” signaled the existence of a “Fascist Genocidal Conspiracy” against people of color (Black Panther Party, 1970, 267-268). Once they had napalmed the Vietcong into submission, the nation’s leaders were sure to give blacks their undivided attention. Already, “Gestapo police” were on the warpath in the urban ghetto—rousting outspoken militants and filling gulag-like penitentiaries with members of a socioeconomic caste made expendable by advances in technology (Newton, 1972, 14; Seale, 1970, 305-306). Those escaping incarceration or elimination were sent on a forced march through the power elite’s maze of poverty programs. Here, a sinister corps of social workers recruited from the Silent Majority practiced bait and switch tactics—luring entire communities into welfare dependency only to cut funding so that they could watch the poor fight to the death over the remaining crumbs (Carmichael, 1971, 117).

In response to these cruel and cynical white initiatives, the West Coast Panther vanguard declared themselves a consciousness-raising cadre of “revolutionary executioners” (Newton, 1972, 14). Party members worked to educate the “sleeping masses” (id., 16) in effective liberation strategies. They instituted an impressive number of community-based “survival programs” (id., 20) and petitioned the United Nations for redress and reparations. Most effectively of all, they put the white Establishment on notice that blacks were willing to risk death in order to forestall a racial holocaust. “We’re not going to play Jews” (Scheer, 1969, 175), Panther minister of information Eldridge Cleaver told an interviewer in 1968. Before they would accept genocide, Panther loyalists were prepared to launch a “War of Salvation” capable of inflicting “Total Destruction upon Babylon” (Black Panther Party, 1970, 271).

Meanwhile, at the other end of the Black Power movement’s ideological spectrum, cultural nationalists and fellow-traveling dramatists, poets, and fiction writers enhanced the revolutionary narrative with a variety of cautionary tales. Recognizing that distinguishing an actual conspiracy from an imaginary one was, at best, a subjective process, African-American authors let their imaginations run wild. Melding partially documented evidence with inference and rumor masquerading as fact, their stories gave voice to recurring fears that Washington was primed to implement a program of black population control. Incapable of generating compassion for others, the “rhythmless hearts” (Walker, 1971, 383) of the white leaders were said to harbor only thoughts of death and destruction. There was no middle ground. High-status public officials, military officers, and government scientists wanted black people enslaved or buried (Joans, 1969, 67).

In Floyd McKissick’s “Diary of a Black Man,” the tip off that the black pogroms were about to begin came with congressional passage of strict gun-control legislation. After police
and national guardsmen had disarmed the African-American population, a National Registration Act ordered all blacks to carry special identification cards. Then, in a television address, the President urged implementation of a National Heritage Act which would declare subversive all overt expression of “alien” cultures. At about the same time, development of a new “pill bomb” was announced. No larger than an aspirin tablet, it could destroy limited areas without danger of widespread fallout. After testing in Bedford-Stuyvesant, black bodies were to be cleared away and the bombed-out district redeveloped by major corporations (McKissick, 1969, 160-163).

19 Other fictionalized depictions of the evil white empire’s response to black demands were somewhat more subtle, but no less insidious. In Ben Caldwell’s play, Top Secret or a Few Million After B.C., “Operation Pre-Kill” was adopted by Federal authorities only after proposals such as establishing concentration camps or A-bombing Harlem had been rejected as “too barbaric.” The approved plan centered upon a crash program to develop and market an inexpensive birth control pill. In the words of McNack, head of the President’s Inner Space program, the pill would “kill the nigger babies before they’re born! Fast as them black bucks can shoot ’em in! Simple as that!” If Operation Pre-Kill was a success, the government no longer would have to worry about marches on Washington. The Boy Scouts could handle any future disturbances. Within twenty years, he predicted, there would be a severe—and most welcome—shortage of black people (Caldwell, 1968, 47-50).

20 Alternative portrayals of the nation’s movement toward an African-American final solution told of plans to engage the minority population in an all-out domestic race war (Williams, 1967, 371-376); to promote “behavior and aspirational changes” through psychobiochemical mind control (Evans, 1975, 59); and to implement a Pentagon-sponsored “Forget-for-Peace” program that would induce mass amnesia and erase “militant” racial memories (Herve, 1973, 57-64). One writer even predicted that all black folk eventually would be shipped off to the moon “whether they like it or not” (Washington, 1972, 389). But only if the moon proved unfit for white habitation. In each case, black creative artists reiterated essential wisdom about the nation’s “Dangerous Germ Culture” (Jones L., 1969, 206): “Throat-cutting time” (Bush, 1970, 5) was drawing nigh and no honkie could be trusted. The hateful “pink faced monkeys” (Moreau, 1967, 185) considered North America a White Power enclave—and would seek to attain exclusive occupancy by any means necessary.

21 Determined to convince doubters that these dire scenarios were reality-based, black activists of the 1980s and 1990s assembled an impressive file on the whites’ covert activities. Nevertheless, even though they culled a treasure trove of incriminating data from the historical record, pervasive distrust of white people and their governing institutions caused disparities in evidence and logic to be overlooked. In the quest to connect the loose ends of causal relationships, varying amounts of rumor and speculation also were added to the mix. Ely century’s end, the most intuitive—some would say the most easily excited and paranoid—conspiracy theorists became convinced that whites had developed “higher forms of killing” that went “beyond war, beyond genocide and into the realm of madness” (Jones D., 1992, 8).

22 Just as tall oaks grew from tiny acorns, complicated genocidal plots were shown to be rooted in individual racist acts. Over time, this festering anti-black sentiment helped shape a social and intellectual environment that was believed capable of supporting state-sponsored terrorism on a massive scale. From a mainstream perspective, the
ethnosociological evidence which undergirded such notions was irredeemably flawed—the stuff of urban legend. But for African Americans, these sometimes odd, often interrelated beliefs and suspicions had great utility. Speculation on the provenance of “black genocide” provided a culture-specific mechanism for defining, interpreting, and resisting white villainy. The chief theaters of conflict in this no-holds-barred war for racial dominance were as follows:

1. Macabre Medical Research

To many, white medical researchers and physicians personified the modern-day genocidal personality. Their calculating, clinical manner and eagerness to garner lucrative grants from both multinational corporations and the U.S. military encouraged the belief that these so-called health care professionals had taken an oath to hypocrisy, not Hippocrates. Such individuals seemed determined to advance medical science by using blacks as guinea pigs.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, negative media reports on the Public Health Service’s longitudinal (1932-1972) study of untreated syphilis in a group of some four hundred Alabama black men generated widespread outrage—fueling fears that these non-therapeutic experiments were part of what activist lawyer Fred Gray termed “a program of controlled genocide”. Certainly, the government’s cost-conscious $15,000 out-of-court settlement with the heirs of each “deceased syphilitic” set a depressingly low price on the lives of poor, uneducated folk who had been told only that they were afflicted with “bad blood” (Jones J., 1981, 216-217). Soon, health care horror stories proliferated.

In addition to expressing concern that “Amerikkkan Medical Association”-certified doctors were harvesting body parts in inner city emergency rooms and tricking prison inmates into testing experimental drugs, critics of the health care delivery system complained loudly about government-sponsored birth control initiatives (Jones D., 1992, 92-101). Convinced by Black Power era patriarchs that there was strength in numbers, they greeted with skepticism any movement to impose white middle-class norms on black family size and structure. The most cynical viewed abortion rights activists as New Age eugenists and considered Planned Parenthood a stalking horse for involuntary birth control and coerced sterilization. In such circles, illadvised, medically unnecessary hysterectomies were known as “Mississippi appendectomies” (Roberts, 1997, 90). Zero Population Growth was devil-speak for “no more black babies” (Weisbord, 1975, 130-132). Norplant and Depo-Provera were the social engineers’ coldblooded contraceptive solutions to “the welfare mess” (Davis, 1983, 215-221). Aggressively promoted by pharmaceutical companies and Medicaid caseworkers, such products, procedures, and programs seemed little more than thinly-disguised attempts to deny African Americans basic reproductive rights. Collectively, these FDA-approved disincentives to procreation caused concerned students of comparative history to reflect on the fact that it was a compulsory sterilization law that foreshadowed an earlier Holocaust in 1930s Germany (Roberts, 1997, 103).

Many of the same questioning voices were quick to charge white scientists with complicity in the rapidly spreading AIDS epidemic. A 1990 public opinion survey revealed that nearly a third of New York City African Americans believed it true or possibly true that the virus responsible for the deadly disease was “deliberately created in a laboratory in order to infect black people.” At the time, blacks accounted for almost twenty-eight
percent of reported AIDS cases—more than double their share of the U.S. population. Within five years, the overall black/white percentages were equal (40%) (Cohen, 1999, 21-23, 25-26).

As the plague worsened, conspiracy scenarios became ever more complex and varied. One popular theory maintained that the virus was artificially-engineered and intentionally spread throughout Africa via World Health Organization smallpox vaccination programs. This unleashing of biological weaponry was thought to be part of a scheme to destroy indigenous peoples and to seize control of the continent’s natural resources. Purportedly designed to reduce specific “undesirable” populations, the experiment soon went awry as AIDS proved to be a far more indiscriminate killer than government scientists had imagined (Ani, 1994, 437-444). Variants of this theory added Haiti to the list of targeted nations; speculated about the degree of CIA involvement (Turner, 1993, 151-163); and told of Jewish doctors injecting black infants with AIDS as part of a Zionist plot to seize world power (Pipes, 1997, 3).

Since conspiracy theorists also held that the “AIDS establishment” sponsored a massive disinformation campaign to disguise its true intentions, no government response to the disease crisis could be considered legitimate (Brown, 1995, 176). The experimental AIDS drug AZT, said critics, was toxic (France, 1998, F6). Hypodermic needle exchange programs purportedly designed to lower the rate of HIV infection among drug users were blamed for increasing levels of substance abuse among urban youth. These, too, were thought to be components of a “genocidal campaign” (Page, 1991, 17) that was no more accidental “than small pox was an accident with the Indians. Sending them blankets and killing them with disease” (Gardell, 1996, 327).

2. Fatal Food and Drugs

In his grimly satirical 1982 novel The Terrible Twos, Ishmael Reed depicted the evolution of a Hitleresque conspiracy to rid the planet of troublesome “surplus people”. As noted by one high-level strategist, nothing seemed capable of stopping these doltish pests from “reproducing like mink”. “We tried spermicide, and sterilization.... We contemplated germ warfare but ruled that out because some of the surplus people were mixed up with the vital people,” he complained. A third approach to the problem was to create an artificial famine. Hopefully, elimination of free lunch programs and food stamps would end the threat of societal “mongrelization”. It didn’t work (Reed, 1982, 53-58).

As if addressing a still unmet need, other white megalomaniacs profiled by black writers were said to have developed alternative strategies for transforming the staff of life into an instrument of death. Conspiracy theorists of the 1980s and 1990s voiced particular concern over reports that ghetto grocery stores were being stockpiled with tainted or highly addictive food items. According to these suspicious consumer advocates, for the USDA to find nothing wrong with recommending that lactose intolerant African-Americans wolf down two to three servings of milk, yogurt, or cheese daily was prima facie evidence of both regulatory malfeasance and conspiratorial intent (France, 1999, F7). Little wonder, then, that several other laboratory-tested, name brand products seemed to be causing harmful side effects. Of far more consequence than occasional stomach discomfort or a milk moustache, the fruit-flavored soft drink Tropical Fantasy allegedly contained a secret ingredient that made African-American men sterile. So did St. Ides malt liquor and Church’s Fried Chicken. Rumor had it that the latter company
also laced their food with chemicals that led to mental retardation in black infants. Some claimed that Church’s—along with the Marlboro, Uptown, and Kool cigarette brands—was owned by the Ku Klux Klan (Turner, 1993, 82-83, 101, 139, 171, 227).

Consumers who were clever enough to find the three hidden K’s on a pack of Marlboro’s and who understood that the reason for substituting a K for the C in Cool had nothing to do with enhancing menthol freshness rarely questioned the likelihood of Federal involvement in plots designed to induce habit-forming and potentially deadly behaviors in blacks. As if to confirm the viability of folk wisdom, conspiracy theories, which posited government complicity in the spread of drug trafficking and gang warfare, became front page news during the mid-1990s. Popularized by Hollywood films such as Boyz N the Hood, Deep Cover, and Panther, the seemingly implausible notion that Ronald Reagan would say “yes” to crack cocaine in order to (1) provide funding for CIA-sponsored Nicaraguan contra rebels and (2) permanently narcotize political insurgency within black America broke free from urban legend and came to be perceived by many as an urban reality.

In the wake of these revelations, a variety of angry voices weighed in on the issue—crafting convincing word portraits of undocumented, but vividly-imagined meetings between South American drug lords and South-Central Los Angeles street gangs. California congressional representative Maxine Waters found it unconscionable that the U.S. intelligence community “could think so little of people of color that they would be willing to destroy generations in an effort to try to win the war in Nicaragua” (Vistica & Smith, 1996, 72). Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan was not terribly surprised about the apparent degree of governmental complicity, but was outraged nonetheless. [Imitating a devilish official]: “Feed them cocaine. Then make it a pure form that they can smoke and call it crack, and feed it to the young warriors among them so that they now will turn the power of their youth and their anger and hostility on themselves” (Gardell, 1996, 301). Less voluble critics, such as syndicated columnist Clarence Page, scored the CIA’s “unholy alliances... with thugs and thieves,” ripped the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) for providing aid and comfort to known enemies, and called for a full-scale congressional investigation of the disgraceful mess (Page, 1996, C1). Ultimately, even those who held open the possibility that the West Coast drug scourge was no more than an accident of history made worse by the government’s “unbridled criminal stupidity” somehow managed to feed the flames of controversy that nurtured black genocide theories (Webb, 1998, 438). As Ishmael Reed suggested in 1996, while it certainly was possible that not every word of such stories was true, “the weight of the evidence” gave credence to black America’s worst fears (Reed, 1996, C5).

Fortunately, the African-American worldview privileged suspicion over fear. Its adherents counseled skepticism as opposed to surrender. As a result, even the most ominous rumors of a black genocide through drugs or disease were capable of energizing—not paralyzing—resistance to oppression. White America’s unsavory history of conspiratorial scheming both strengthened the black community’s resolve and mandated that its members learn the ways of whites so well that their every secretive move could be anticipated. To “know” white people, their aspirations, and their characteristic approaches to problem solving was not to love or to value them as role models. Such knowledge was, however, considered essential to group survival.

Convinced that almost any interaction with whites carried with it the potential for disaster, conspiracy theorists labored unceasingly to provide an early warning system. In the process, some became expert at crafting questions that were (mis-)perceived as
answers. Others developed a fondness for grand display and rooftop shouting. Still others compromised their effectiveness through unnecessary argumentation and intra-group sectarianism. All, however, believed in themselves, in the essential goodness of black folk, and in the need to convince unwary racial kinsmen to watch their backs at all times.

The possibilities for white villainy seemed endless. This late twentieth-century “quiet war” against people of color was said to include psychological and cultural terrorism (schools that systematically programmed African-American youth for failure/mass media promotion of negative racial stereotypes) (Kunjufu, 1984, vii-ix; Fancher, 1997, 1, 65-82); environmental racism (the targeting of minority group neighborhoods for toxic waste dumps) (Bullard, 1994, 26-36; Lee, 1993, 41-52); and all manner of police conspiracies and political assassinations (most notably the killing of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.) (Evanzz, 1992; Lane & Gregory, 1977). More often than not, the “official” position on these and related issues was considered suspect. Alternative interpretations were preferred—at least until all the evidence was in. The following hypotheses may have seemed peculiar to those socialized within the mainstream, but were fully compatible with a marginalized population’s negative perception of white people:

- The U.S. government keeps tabs on African Americans by assigning them social security numbers that contain an even number in the fifth digit (Ruffins, 1998, 26). Ditto photo IDs on driver’s licenses (Jones D., 1992,59).

- White-authored history texts lie: 1920s blues queen Bessie Smith and pioneering blood plasma researcher Charles Drew died from injuries sustained in automobile accidents after they were refused treatment at “whites only” hospitals (Albertson, 1985, 215-226; Love, 1996,32, 47-48, 261-262).

- Secret contingency plans (code names “King Alfred” and “Rex 84”) exist. They call for suspension of the constitution, the unseating of minority group members of congress, and the relocation of blacks to detention camps in time of national emergency (Jones D., 1992, 58-69).

- The Jonestown, Guyana, tragedy of 1978 in which over 900 people drank cyanide-laced grape Flavor Aid at the command of People’s Temple cult leader Jim Jones was part of a mind-control/black genocide experiment (Vankin & Whalen, 1998, 392-398).

- The multi-race check-off provision of the 2000 U.S. census was designed to reduce African-American political clout, shrink economic benefits programs, and complicate the enforcement of civil rights laws (Shepard, 2000, 1A, 11A; Nelson, 2000, 17A).

Naturally, whether to accept the authorized or the alternative position on a particular issue was an individual decision. Achieving consensus was difficult and not all such stories carried the same weight of authenticity within black communities. Some were ridiculed unmercifully or dismissed out-of-hand. Nevertheless, to reject a specific scenario as being far-fetched did not require one to be a head-in-the-sand Polyanna. Black America’s many tragic encounters with unprincipled whites suggested that it was only reasonable to believe that new plots were being hatched daily.
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ABSTRACTS

Over time, African-Americans’ distrust of mainstream institutions and authority figures has been manifested in a variety of conspiracy theories. Informed by the belief that early European-Americans were a cruel, power-hungry people, black nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s warned of contemporary plots against non-whites. Throughout the era, the concept of a state-sponsored “black genocide” was widely discussed. Even today, speculation over these often fantastic schemes provides intellectuals, creative artists, and everyday citizens with a culture-specific mechanism for interpreting the government’s response to social issues such as the AIDS and crack cocaine epidemics.

Au fil du temps, la méfiance des Africains-Américains envers les institutions et les figures d’autorité de la société américaine s’est manifestée par un grand nombre de théories sur des complots ourdis contre la population noire. Persuadés que les premiers américains d’origine européenne étaient un peuple cruel et assoiffé de pouvoir, les nationalistes noirs des années 1960 et 1970 ont alerté la population sur des complots contemporains contre ceux qui n’étaient pas blancs. Pendant cette période, la notion d’un « génocide noir » organisé par l’État fut largement diffusée. Aujourd’hui encore, de telles machinations, souvent fantaisistes, offrent aux intellectuels, aux artistes et aux citoyens ordinaires, des mécanismes culturels pour interpréter les réponses gouvernementales à certains problèmes sociaux comme l’épidémie du SIDA et la prise de crack.

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