The African American Apocalyptic as Prophetic Social Protest

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a rhetorical analysis of how Black nationalist protest rhetors have employed apocalyptic discourse in order to call into question the ideological underpinnings of the hegemonic white American nation building project and to imagine new alternatives to replace them. Previous studies by Howard-Pitney (2005), Harrell (2011), and Murphy (2009) have explored how African American abolitionist and civil rights jeremiahs such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. have employed appeals to American civil religion in order to mobilize their audiences to seek liberal reforms to racial injustices by appealing to established values and institutions. While apocalyptic rhetoric also constructs its audience as a chosen people, it tends to take a much more skeptical stance toward the established social order. African American apocalypticists such as David Walker, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party rejected the notion of American chosenness that underpins much Black and white American jeremiadic speech, and employed a Burkean perspective by incongruity in order to draw attention to the inaccuracy of white supremacist and American exceptionalist representations of the social world. The end result of this history is the nation's imminent destruction, which has been envisioned as a divine intervention in the case of traditional sacred apocalyptics, such as David Walker or the early Malcolm X, or as a revolutionary uprising of the oppressed, as in the secular apocalyptics of the later Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. African American apocalyptic rhetoric is prophetic in that it invokes a vision of the national past, present, and future defined by a set of values that are at odds with those of the established social order. African American apocalypticism invites its audience to disidentify themselves from hegemonic white American formulations of

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Black and white identities and to identify themselves instead with radical alternatives. To the extent that an audience is persuaded by apocalyptic narratives of the American nation, new possibilities for action become available to their consciousness, typically involving either withdrawal from a corrupt society or militant resistance involving measures more radical than the nonviolent direct action and moral suasion advocated by liberal African American jeremiahs.

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CHAPTER 1

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN APOCALYPTIC AND AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

1.1. Introduction

Apocalyptic rhetoric, in both sacred and secular forms, has occupied a central position in the discourse of Black nationalist rhetors such as David Walker, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party. This strain of African American prophetic social protest overlaps with the African American jeremiad, which has been the subject of studies by David Howard-Pitney, Willie J. Harrell, Anna Hartnell, Andrew Murphy, and others. Like the white American and African American jeremiads, African American apocalyptic rhetoric is addressed to an audience to whom the rhetor assigns the quality of chosenness within the ultimate arc of history. In traditional jeremiads, this chosenness grew out of a perceived covenant between the chosen people and God; in later secular jeremiads, this chosenness is framed as a result of the audience's alignment with historical trends that will determine the ultimate destinies of present day societies. Both the jeremiad and apocalyptic rhetoric identify certain trends and forces at work in society that work against the chosen people's fulfillment of their destiny, but also present the audience with a particular set of actions that can be followed in order to overcome these obstacles and ensure the ultimate historical triumph of the chosen community. Within the context of the white American and African American jeremiads, the present-day decline of the chosen community is typically framed as a result of the failure of the American nation to live up to its foundational values. The audience of these strains of jeremiadic rhetoric is identified by the rhetor as ultimately being in alignment with existing American social and political institutions, even if American society and government have frequently failed

to live up to the supposedly egalitarian and democratic ideals on which the nation, it is said, was founded. In this sense, while white American and African American jeremiads frequently denounce the present day failure of the social and political American mainstream, these modes of discourse are fundamentally reformist in that their aim is to adjust existing institutions until they are in line with what the rhetor frames as foundational American values.

African American apocalyptic rhetoric may be considered part of the jeremiad tradition in that it addresses what the apocalyptic rhetor constructs as a chosen community and directs that audience toward a set of actions that it can take to overcome present evils, but in the apocalyptic cosmology, the hegemonic social establishment is emphatically not part of the chosen community. In terms of Biblical typology, the white American jeremiad frames the American nation as the modern-day Israelites, whose ancestors escaped the corruption of Europe/Egypt in order to found a new nation based on a covenant with God and/or Enlightenment values. The African American jeremiad typically frames African Americans as the Israelites, and denounces their present-day oppression by white Americans, calling upon the nation to repent and return to its foundational covenant by putting an end to racial injustices such as slavery, segregation, and economic exploitation. In African American apocalyptic rhetoric, however, the hegemonic white American establishment is identified with Biblical oppressors such as the Egyptians, Babylonians, or Romans. Due to the evil and corruption inherent in the existing social order, the apocalyptic rhetor argues, there is little to no possibility of its redemption, and it will soon be destroyed, either by God or by historical forces. Members of the chosen community, then, are urged to dis-identify themselves from hegemonic

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understandings of American national identity, and are given a new vision of the national covenant (or, in the terms of Enlightenment political theory, the social contract) with which to align their actions in the struggle for liberation. Unlike white American and African American jeremiads, which promote liberal reform within the confines of existing institutions and value systems as redress for historical injustices, African American apocalyptic rhetoric tends to promote either withdrawal from a corrupt society in order to avoid being caught up in its destruction, open resistance against oppression, and/or attempts to build parallel institutions that could ultimately take over, at the community level, many of the functions currently performed by the American economic and political establishment. In either case, this type of discourse involves a radical re-envisioning of the American nation as understood by hegemonic modes of thought, in ways that go beyond the challenges to the status quo posed by liberal white and African American jeremiads, which typically accept the narrative of a foundational American promise and attempt to persuade their audiences to take action to reform existing institutions and ideologies until they are in alignment with this perceived promise.

The present study aims to expand the existing scholarly discussion on the African American jeremiad by contributing an analysis of the ways Black nationalist rhetors, specifically David Walker, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party, have employed apocalyptic rhetoric to evoke a vision of the history and destiny of the American nation in which the present-day social order has become so corrupted by its oppression of Blacks that only a fundamental overhaul of current social relations is likely to bring about Black liberation. Although the African American jeremiahs discussed by Howard-Pitney, Harrell, Hartnell, and Murphy have often been uncompromising in their denunciations of

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white America's oppression of Blacks while maintaining hope in the American nation's prospects for future repentance, insufficient attention has been given to the discourse of Black nationalist rhetors who have employed a jeremiadic emphasis on chosenness toward Black communities, but have granted the American nation, as it currently exists, no favored messianic status within the divine/historical plan. Instead, rhetors such as David Walker, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers have presented their audiences with narratives in which the hegemonic nation will soon be destroyed, either by God or by a culmination of social and historical forces, as a result of its corruption and its role in the oppression of Black communities. This study, then, aims to provide a counterpoint to discussions of the African American jeremiad that approach the American social and political establishment with a reformist impulse by providing a discussion of African American apocalyptic rhetorics that have approached the hegemonic American nation from an oppositional standpoint with the intention of mobilizing their Black audiences to openly resist the nation's racist and oppressive practices, and to call into being new concepts of Black and white American identity, history, and destiny that provide a radical alternative to hegemonic conceptualizations of the American nation.

At the same time, academic studies on apocalyptic rhetoric by Brummett and O'Leary have advanced a useful framework for understanding the rhetorical dimensions of apocalyptic discourse, but have tended to take as their subjects white fundamentalist Christians, who often perceive themselves as oppressed by a mainstream American society that has strayed away from their values, but who have not experienced anything comparable to the historical oppression of Blacks within American society, which provides African American apocalyptic rhetors with a strong impetus to promote concrete

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action to oppose and correct racial injustice rather than simply withdrawing from mainstream society to await its destruction, as fundamentalist Christian apocalypticists such as Hal Lindsey typically advocate. By focusing on African American apocalyptic rhetors, then, scholars can increase their understanding of how apocalyptic rhetoric not only attempts to persuade its audiences to accept formulations of community and national identity that run counter to those handed down by dominant social institutions, but also how it works to move that audience toward social and political actions with the purpose of resisting the oppressive practices of existing institutions and attempting to move toward a new vision of the social order that the apocalyptic rhetor argues will be more in line with the community's interests and values.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will discuss the key elements of the white and Black American jeremiads, as well as the white and Black apocalyptics, focusing specifically on how these genres of discourse frame the American nation's role within the divine and/or historical arc of history and the sets of social, theological, and political values that they evoke in urging their audiences toward particular courses of action. I will also explore how these modes of discourse, while historically rooted in sacred narratives from scripture, have evolved into secular forms that have maintained emphasis on the community's chosenness and destiny while substituting liberal or radical political values for the sacred values evoked in traditional jeremiadic and apocalyptic discourse. Finally, I will provide a brief summation of how the three Black nationalist rhetors I discuss in this study have employed apocalyptic rhetoric to challenge hegemonic white understandings of the American nation and its role in history, to evoke a new vision of the covenant/social contract as an alternative to the ones provided by Black and white liberal

jeremiads, and call upon their audiences to exercise their agency by committing themselves to certain actions that, according to the narrative crafted by the apocalyptic rhetor, will lead to the liberation of the chosen community from the oppression inflicted upon it by the hegemonic social order.

1.2. The American Jeremiad

Beginning with the Puritan settlers in the 17th century Massachusetts Bay Colony, American national identity has frequently been framed in messianic terms. This vision of American destiny was most famously (if not first) articulated by John Winthrop in his sermon, *A Model of Christian Charity*. In this sermon, Winthrop declares that the Massachusetts Bay settlers had entered into a covenant with God, who had accorded them special favor as his chosen people. However, Winthrop warns, this covenant in not unconditional, and furthermore, Americans are in jeopardy of losing God's favor should they choose the wrong course of action:

> The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us such a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'may the Lord make it like that of New England.' For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from

us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world (qtd. In Gardella

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In this passage, we see an early articulation of multiple themes that would later come to comprise parts of the American civil religion, a set of ideals, values, and practices associated in the popular imagination with American national identity (Gardella 3). First, we have the theme of chosenness, in which Americans are rhetorically situated as having been selected by God for a special destiny in his divine plan for history. We also see the three-part structure of promise, failure, and fulfillment that Sacvan Bercovitch argues is typical of the American jeremiad, which typically presents "first, a precedent from Scripture that sets out the communal norms; then, a series of condemnations that details the actual state of the community (at the same time insinuating the covenantal promises that ensure success); and finally a prophetic vision that unveils the promises, announces the good things to come, and explains away the gap between fact and ideal" (16). In the passage quoted above, Winthrop identifies the Puritan colonists as a people on an errand given to them by God, and promises that if the settlers hold up their end of the covenant, their colony will become an example for the rest of the world to strive toward. However, he also warns that should the colonists fail to keep faith with God, they will be punished accordingly.

Drawing on the Biblical Exodus story, in which the Israelites, with assistance from God, delivered themselves from oppression under the Egyptians, the American jeremiad constructs a narrative of the American past in which the early colonists broke away from European tyranny in order to found a new nation. As Sacvan Bercovitch notes, the nation envisioned by the Puritan jeremiahs was originally supposed to be a

theocracy which would be instrumental in inaugurating the millennium. However, with the failure of the New England theocracy, the vision of American destiny promoted by American jeremiahs became increasingly secularized, losing much of the grounding in Biblical prophecy and typology that had characterized it during the colonial era:

> During the eighteenth century, the meaning of Protestant identity became increasingly vague; typology took on the hazy significance of metaphor, image, and symbol; what passed for the divine plan lost its strict grounding in Scripture; 'providence' itself was shaken loose from its religious framework to become part of the belief in human progress . . . In effect [the Yankee jeremiahs] incorporated Bible history into the American experience—they substituted a regional for a Biblical past, consecrated the American present as a movement from promise to fulfillment, and translated fulfillment from its meaning within the closed system of sacred history into a metaphor for limitless secular improvement (Bercovitch 93-94).

Following the American Revolution, America's professed revolutionary ideals came to occupy a central role in the narrative of American promise constructed by American jeremiahs. Bercovitch argues that, in the worldview of American jeremiahs, and contrary to the traditional view of revolution as disobedience that threatened to destabilize the social order, "Revolution in American was a vehicle of providence. It took the form of a mighty, spontaneous turning forward, both regenerative and organic, confirming the prophecies of Scripture as well as the laws of nature and history" (134). Where Puritan jeremiahs had envisioned the New England colonies as the fulfillment of a promise based in scripture, later jeremiahs came to see this fulfillment in secular terms, in which a

nation (allegedly) based on Enlightenment ideals of liberty, democracy, and private
property rights took the place of the millennium promised in Scripture.

Anthony D. Smith argues that modern nationalisms can in many ways be
fruitfully analyzed as replacements for traditional religions, with some differences:

> while modern nationalisms often incorporate motifs from earlier, traditional
> religions, they also reject many of their ideas and practices, particularly those that
> hold out the prospect of seeking salvation from a cosmic, other-worldly source.
> On the other hand, while they proclaim a new heroic, secular world of
> autoemancipation and collective choice, they also take over the popular forms and
> often some of the contents of the earlier traditional religious worlds they have
> officially rejected (18).

Specifically, the major function of the modern nation, according to Smith, is to provide
the unity and cohesion traditionally provided by religions. Smith contends that "the
nation is not merely an object of contemplation and imagination . . . Cognition must lead
to the exercise of collective will and the arousal of mass emotion . . . the nation of
nationalist dreams demands action based on collective purposes and excites the emotions
of those who share a common history and culture" (22). Similarly, Bercovitch makes the
case that the jeremiad served this function during the post-Revolutionary period,
providing the American people with a common identity and source of cohesion that they
would otherwise lack. Bercovitch argues that

> Surely a major reason for the triumph of the republic was that the need for a social
> ideal was filled by the typology of America's mission . . . It gave the nation a past
> and future in sacred history, rendered its political and legal outlook a fulfillment

of prophecy, elevated its 'true inhabitants,' the enterprising European Protestants who had immigrated within the past century or so, to the status of God's chosen, and declared the vast territories around them to be their chosen country . . . In virtually every area of life, the jeremiad became the official ritual form of continuing revolution. Mediating between religion and ideology, the jeremiad gave contract the sanctity of covenant, free enterprise the halo of grace, progress the assurance of the chiliad, and nationalism the grandeur of typology (140-141).

The jeremiad thus provided a narrative of national history and destiny for a nation in need of one. Although the jeremiadic narrative originated from and was patterned upon Biblical tropes of exodus and millennium, it quickly evolved into a secularized narrative of human progress.

Despite the American jeremiad's professed ideals of liberty, democracy, and equality, however, these values were extended at first only to property-owning white males. During the Jacksonian era, many of the property qualifications that barred non-property-owning white men from participation would be dropped, but it would be much longer before women, Blacks, Native Americans, and other minorities began to make strides toward full participation in civil society. Bercovitch argues that one function of the jeremiad was to provide a "prescribed ritual form" for dissent. As he puts it, "[i]n the United States, the summons to dissent, because it was grounded in a prescribed ritual form, pre-empted the threat of radical alternatives. Conflict itself was rendered a mode of control: a means of facilitating process through which process became an aid to socialization" (160). In other words, the jeremiad provides a rhetorical idiom through which marginalized groups can argue for their inclusion within American civil society by

appealing to the values on which that society was, at least in theory, founded. Bercovitch provides the example of the declaration produced at Seneca Falls Convention, which argues for women's rights by appropriating the language of the Declaration of Independence:

> The cause [early feminists] fought for, as Stanton said over and again, was no 'foreign import.' It was the 'legacy of the Fathers,' augmented now by a 'new spirit of energy': open competition, free labor, equal opportunity under the law, and the sanctity of private property—all the values, in short, prefigured by Puritan New England, fulfilled by the Revolution, and now applied to the cause of feminism. It was not just for the sake of propaganda that the manifesto of the first women's rights convention, at Seneca Falls, July 1848, followed the form and phrases of the Declaration of Independence (158).

Although women were not originally granted the same rights as men under the Constitution, the values of American civil religion provided a language that they could use in order to argue that fidelity to America's foundational values required that these rights be extended to them. However, as Bercovitch reminds us, the jeremiad also imposed constraints upon the types of reforms that could be advocated within its bounds, as in the passage quoted above, where the values sought are those of the middle-class culture central to the American jeremiad and American civil religion. The jeremiad, in Bercovitch's view, thus provides a rhetorical vehicle for reformers to voice their grievances and seek redress, but only so long as they remain within the bounds of the bourgeois and Enlightenment values prescribed by American civil religion.

Although Bercovitch's book remains the seminal text on the American jeremiad, some scholars have challenged his conclusion that the parameters for dissent established by the jeremiad necessarily work to constrain dissent within the values of the dominant culture. In *Exodus!*, his survey of early 19th century Black Exodus rhetoric, Eddie S. Glaude argues that Bercovitch's account of ritualized discourse in the context of the United States overlooks the ways in which such rhetoric can provide a language for resistance to entrenched power structures. In Bercovitch's view, Glaude contends, "[t]he ultimate goal of ritual in the context of the United States is that of conflict resolution and the instilling of a dominant ideology. What gets lost in this view is any sense of ritual activity as an arena for the negotiation of power, that is, the negotiation of particular relations of domination, consent, and resistance" (50). Glaude concedes that "Bercovitch's point is well taken: the extraordinary cultural continuity that is America sets it apart from most nations. What holds all of this together is the ritual of consensus" (53). However, Glaude argues that this view is incomplete: "Ritual activity cannot be limited to the maintenance of hegemony . . . for ritual symbols are too indeterminate and flexible to lend themselves to any simple process of instilling fixed ideas. They entail too many qualifications of the complexity of relations of power" (53).

Similarly, Andrew Murphy, in *Prodigal Nation*, adds nuance to Bercovitch's analysis by distinguishing between two major strands of the American jeremiad, progressive and traditional, which each presents a different narrative about the American promise as well as how, specifically, contemporary Americans have failed to live up to it. Murphy concludes that

[T]he jeremiad has been deeply divisive as often as it has served to reinforce an ideological consensus. Certainly, the jeremiad *is* a reformist impulse, and not one that calls for transformations of the deep structure of American life. Such movements as Prohibition, abolition, civil rights, and the Christian Right all hold on to the notion of national promise, in spite of their critique of American practice. But we should not understate the radical challenge that such reformers can pose and have posed to American society, nor the significance of the transformations that they have helped to bring about by holding up to Americans both their noble aspirations *and* the damage done by their continued inability to live up to those aspirations (167-68).

Although the American jeremiad and American civil religion certainly lay out a complex of values that it identifies as essential to American nationhood, Glaude and Murphy are correct that there is a lot of room left for definitions of American nationhood to be contested by parties with competing political visions. They are also correct that the reforms advocated by American jeremiahs are not uncontroversial simply because of their appeals to "American" values. As I will discuss in the next section, African American jeremiahs including Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. have often employed this mode of discourse in order to advocate reforms that have gone against long-established and highly-entrenched practices of the American nation, including slavery, segregation, and economic discrimination. That said, Bercovitch is not completely wrong that the bourgeois and Enlightenment values put forth by the jeremiad frequently work to impose limitations upon the types of reforms that can be successfully advocated within this rhetorical idiom, especially if those reforms challenge the ideals of

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free enterprise and private property rights central to the ideological underpinnings of American capitalism.

1.3. The African American Jeremiad

Despite American civil religion's professed values of liberty, democracy, equality, and economic opportunity, African Americans were excluded from the American social contract through such injustices as slavery, segregation, and economic discrimination at the nation's founding, and have only gradually made strides towards full inclusion within the body politic. One strategy employed by African American rhetors of social protest has been the African American jeremiad, which points toward America's injustices towards Blacks as a betrayal of the nation's foundational promise and calls upon white Americans to live up to their professed values by ending racial injustice and taking measures that will ensure equal rights for Blacks. In addition, Black jeremiadic rhetoric employs the concept of chosenness in an attempt to create a sense of unity and shared purpose among their Black audience members in order to encourage them to mobilize for the cause of Black liberation.

The African American jeremiad reflects an ambiguity that many Blacks have historically experienced in relation to dominant understandings of American national identity. On one hand, many Blacks have embraced America's professed democratic and egalitarian ideals at the same time as they have been marginalized by a white-dominated civil society. This tension was perhaps most famously articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois through his discussion of "double consciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

[The Negro] would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white

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Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face (2).

This passage illustrates one of the central themes of the African American jeremiad, in which Black rhetors uphold major tenets of American civil religion and American chosenness, while simultaneously challenging white America's racist treatment of Blacks and attempting to cultivate a sense of racial pride and race-consciousness among their Black audiences.

Currently, the major text on Black jeremiadic rhetoric remains David Howard-Pitney's *The African American Jeremiad*. Building on Bercovitch's analysis of the American jeremiad, Howard-Pitney explores how Black jeremiahs, including Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr. have employed jeremiadic rhetoric in order to frame their struggles for social, economic, and political equality as consistent with the egalitarian values supposedly inherent to the American promise. According to Howard-Pitney, the African American jeremiad typically addresses itself toward Americans as a covenantal people, but also toward Blacks as a chosen group within the greater American public. Following W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, Howard-Pitney argues that due to "blacks' simultaneous integration into an American culture largely created by whites and their social exclusion from white society . . . [t]his contradictory experience has bred both an American and strong separate group identity among African Americans, a dual identity that has often been reflected in black messianic traditions" (12). Thus, "[t]he African

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American jeremiad tradition . . . characteristically addresses *two* American chosen peoples—black and white—whose millennial destinies, while distinct, are also inextricably entwined" (13).

However, Howard-Pitney's concept of two chosen peoples and his conclusion that the prevalence of jeremiadic themes in Black protest rhetoric signals Black acceptance of American millennialism have been challenged by a number of scholars. Patrick Rael cautions us that the use of jeremiadic themes by Black rhetors should not necessarily be taken at face value, as a reflection of Black acceptance of dominant norms and ideologies, but should rather be understood as part of a strategy for pursuing equal rights through appeals to values widely accepted by the dominant culture: "Black leaders' pervasive calls for black uplift were not a capitulation to existing values nor were they symptoms of their internalization of the mores of middle-class society. Black elites *did* internalize those values, yet their faith in them must be considered distinct from black spokespersons' use of them as a strategy for racial activism" (119-120). Similarly, Willie J. Harrell, in his work on the Black jeremiad, aims to draw our attention to the strategic dimension of Black appeals to American civil religion, arguing that African American jeremiads should be seen not so much as an appropriation of the dominant culture's values, but rather as "a form of deconstructing the dominate *[sic]* culture's values" (16). Harrell sees in African American jeremiads a radical critique of white supremacy: "African American Jeremiahs attacked the very essence of white hegemony and criticized the nation for not fulfilling its credence that 'all men are created equal'" (62). Thus, although Black jeremiads employ the language of American civil religion in order to promote Black liberation and equality, they should not necessarily be taken at face value

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to mean that those Black rhetors who employed this rhetoric have uncritically accepted the tenets of American civil religion. Due to the widespread acceptance of these values among those who adhere to the dominant culture, the American jeremiad does provide Black activists with a widely-accepted language within which to voice their appeals for reform, at the same time as it does work to confine the range of acceptable reforms within certain boundaries.

Howard-Pitney's argument that Black jeremiadic rhetoric appeals to two chosen peoples has also been challenged. In a review of *The African American Jeremiad*, Stephen W. Angell criticizes Howard-Pitney's exclusion of Black nationalists from his study, as they have promoted a very different view of the relationship of African Americans' to hegemonic white America's values and institutions from that put forth by Black jeremiahs:

> The Puritan concept of declension is difficult to apply to black Americans, since American society is not characterized by an original goodness as seen from the black perspective; but the concept of two chosen peoples . . . is even more nettlesome . . . could America ever be described as a 'New Jerusalem' for blacks Americans, or is it always more properly described as a place of oppression? (528).

In other words, Howard-Pitney's selection of Black rhetors who have advocated reform within the boundaries of existing institutions and ideologies to remedy America's long history of racial oppression toward Blacks provides a one-sided view of the attitudes held by Black activists toward the American nation. A significant number of them, from David Walker, to Marcus Garvey, to Malcolm X, to the Black Panther Party have

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rejected the idea of American promise with respect to Black Americans, and have tended to view the American establishment as hopelessly corrupt, and its professed egalitarian and democratic values as thinly-veiled hypocrisy. It is to fill this gap in the present literature that I have put together the present study on African American apocalypticism, which rejects the notions of American promise and chosenness, and seeks outside the bounds of American civil religion for solutions to the problem of racial oppression in America.

This last point is important because Howard-Pitney himself acknowledges the limitations historically encountered by the African American jeremiad as a strategy for social reform. Despite the success of Black jeremiahs in challenging slavery and segregation, Howard-Pitney notes that

> Even these two great leaps forward, fostered by unusually propitious national and international conditions, had important limits. At its height, reform went only so far as to guarantee civil and legal equality and mainly affected the unique Southern caste system. When black jeremiahs expanded their agendas to include structural economic changes that would reconstruct the North, too, a reform consensus among black and white Northerners failed to materialize (217).

According to Howard-Pitney, the failure of Black jeremiahs to win whites over to the cause of economic reform is due to the fact that "most whites regarded such proposals as illegitimate invasions of personal property rights" (218). As noted in the previous section of this introduction, the private property rights associated with laissez-faire capitalism are one of the pillars of American civil religion. In this instance, Bercovitch's point that the jeremiad imposes important limits on the types of reforms that can be successfully

advocated within its bounds is well-taken. Although it is certainly true that the meanings of national myths and rituals are open to be contested by competing interests, in this case, it seems that the boundaries of American civil religion work to shut down any fundamental challenges to American capitalism, thus imposing limits on attempts at pursuing racial justice within these boundaries. Thus, one might argue that the pursuit of Black liberation in America requires a fundamental re-imagining of the American nation and its values. Indeed, many radical Black rhetors, including David Walker, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers have attempted such a re-envisioning on the grounds that American nation, as currently conceptualized, is incompatible with the Black liberation struggle. Although it is certainly debatable whether liberal reform or militant resistance is the best means of pursuing racial justice in America, the current literature on the Black jeremiad is heavily skewed towards those rhetors who have pursued the former strategy. More emphasis on the latter, as I attempt to provide in the current study, is needed in order to paint a more complete picture of the rhetorical strategies pursued by Black activists vis-à-vis hegemonic conceptualizations of America.

Although Howard-Pitney sees the African American jeremiad's two chosen people as historically the most common way of framing Black social protest, he notes that a significant number of Blacks have opted for alternative messianic ideologies in which Blacks stand as a chosen people apart from white Americans: "many blacks have embraced exclusive black nationalist myths such as those in Garveyism and the Nation of Islam, which posit a messianic destiny for blacks apart from, or even in opposition to, the national mission imagined by Anglo-Americans" (12). However, despite this acknowledgement, Howard-Pitney does not devote significant space in his study to

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discussion of Black nationalist rhetors who have rejected the idea that America was founded upon inherently democratic ideals, and who sought instead to construct a separate concept of Black nationhood outside of the American nation state, beyond a single chapter on Malcolm X, who Howard-Pitney analyzes as an incomplete jeremiah due to his lack of faith in the inherent promise of white Americans:

> [Malcolm X] was a bona fide jeremiah toward African Americans, combining stern social criticism of them with expression of faith in their millennial destiny, but he was *not* unambiguously jeremiadic toward whites . . . Although Malcolm forcefully delivered God's message of judgment to America in decidedly jeremiadic terms, for most of his career he did not subscribe to the American jeremiad's quintessential hopefulness and optimism about America's final outcome (183).

If the rhetorics of Malcolm X and other black nationalists cannot be considered within the scope of the American jeremiad, than what categories are most useful for analyzing them? How should we understand Black protest rhetoric that employs tropes of chosenness to foster unity and cohesion among black audiences, but which simultaneously rejects the notions of America as a promised land, and Americans as a chosen people in covenant with God? These questions fall outside the scope of Howard-Pitney's study, which is focused on African American jeremiahs who accept the concepts of American chosenness and destiny, but are very much worth asking. I argue that the concept of apocalyptic rhetoric can help us gain a better understanding of how these oppositional rhetorics work in order to pose a radical challenge to existing understandings of Blacks' relationship to the American body politic and to mobilize their audiences to

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resist the current social order, which the apocalyptic rhetor sees as inherently corrupt—even evil—and to take certain actions to bring about a new social order, which the apocalyptic rhetor frames as more conducive to the interests of African Americans.

1.4. Apocalyptic Rhetoric

Apocalyptic rhetoric evokes the end of the existing social order, and its transition into a new state of affairs. Like the jeremiad, apocalyptic rhetoric is a genre of discourse that relies heavily on narrative. However, the narratives of the existing social order differ distinctly from those evoked by the jeremiad. Where the American jeremiad views America as a "city on a hill," or "promised land" that, however imperfectly realized in practice, has the potential to become an ideal state of social relations, apocalyptic rhetoric tends to view the existing social order as doomed due to its inherent corruption. Due to these drastically different perspectives on the existing nation, apocalyptic and jeremiadic rhetoric call upon their audiences to take different types of actions with respect to existing social relations. Within the American context, jeremiadic rhetoric calls upon audiences to live up to their birthright as Americans by reforming existing social relations to be more in line with what the jeremiadic rhetor frames as the American promise or covenant. Apocalyptic rhetors, on the other hand, denounce what they see as the corruption inherent in the established system of social relations, and call upon their audiences either to withdraw from mainstream society in order to await its impending judgment and destruction by the hand of God, or to actively resist the status quo.

Currently, the seminal text on apocalyptic discourse is Stephen D. O'Leary's *Arguing the Apocalypse.* O'Leary contends that "the essential topoi of apocalyptic discourse are authority, time and evil" (20). In other words, apocalyptic rhetoric explains

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how evil has managed to rise to a position of temporal authority over time. In this sense, O'Leary argues, apocalyptic rhetoric addresses the problem of evil, a commonplace of Christian theology where theologians attempt to explain the existence of evil in the face of the Christian belief that the universe is ruled by a just and loving God. Apocalyptic rhetoric tends to resolve this problem by framing the triumph of evil as temporary, and evoking a future moment in which evil will be destroyed by God. O'Leary writes that "the Apocalypse is (among other things) a mythic narrative about power and authority, and affirmation of divine and spiritual power over and against the idolatrous claims of state authority. The problem of evil is not only a question of why God allows the innocent to suffer, but also of why the wicked are allowed to rule and how believers may resist their power" (56). By posing the possibility of the impending destruction of the established social order, apocalyptic rhetoric calls upon its audiences to rethink their relationship to dominant constructions of national identity and presents the possibility of a post-apocalyptic future in which new forms of social organization will prevail.

Barry Brummett defines apocalyptic discourse as "that discourse that restores order through structures of time or history by revealing the present to be a pivotal moment in time, a moment in which history is reaching a state that will both reveal and fulfill the underlying order and purpose in history" (10). Brummett argues that the functions of apocalyptic rhetoric are twofold: first, it aims to "[secure] the adherence of an audience," and second, it aims to "[move] an already secured audience to accept further social and political commitments" (11). However, Brummett does not believe that apocalyptic rhetoric aims to activate human agency so as to change existing social relations: "unlike prophecy, [apocalyptic] pronouncements are not exhortations to change

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history, but rather to change oneself so as to take advantage of the unchangeable, impending culmination of history" (12). In Brummett's view, apocalyptic discourse can hardly be considered a rhetoric of social protest. Although it does present narratives of evil and corruption being inherent in the existing social order, the ultimate agency for resolving this evil, according to this view, rests with God. Human beings, then, are called upon merely to change themselves in order to prepare for the impending apocalypse.

This view may be an accurate assessment of the rhetoric of the white fundamentalist Christians who comprise the subjects for Brummett's and O'Leary's work on apocalyptic discourse. In Hal Lindsey's bestselling apocalyptic text, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, for instance, the author spends the majority of the text "proving" that current events are the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. Like other apocalyptic texts, Lindsey provides a scathing critique of what he sees as the evil and corruption in the contemporary American establishment. America, he argues, will soon lose its current position of global hegemony due to a combination of internal "evils": "Internal political chaos caused by student rebellions and Communist subversion will begin to erode the economy of our nation. Lack of moral principle by citizens and leaders will so weaken law and order that a state of anarchy will finally result" (184). Unlike in the jeremiads of the early New England Puritans, America's claim to divine covenant, in Lindsay's view, is no more than a hollow masquerade. Lindsey predicts that "[t]here will be an ever-widening gap between the true believers in Christ and those who masquerade as 'ministers of righteousness.' I believe that open persecution will soon break out upon the 'real Christians,' and it will come from the powerful hierarchy of unbelieving leaders within the denominations" (183). Unlike in the American jeremiad, Lindsey lacks

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optimism in the fulfillment of any fundamental American "promise." Despite his critical attitude, however, the solutions that Lindsay provides to his audience are purely individualistic, and center around making sure that one is right with Jesus Christ. In his concluding section, Lindsay's advice to believers is, "[t]he only thing you need to understand is that God offers you in Jesus Christ a full pardon and new spiritual life" (186). Rather than social activism, Lindsay calls upon his readers to go forth and evangelize: "far from being pessimistic and dropping out of life, we should be rejoicing in the knowledge that Christ may return any moment for us. This should spur us on to share the good news of salvation in Christ with as many as possible" (187). Lindsay's rhetoric thus fits with Brummett's observation that apocalyptic rhetoric is more concerned with changing individuals than with social activism.

However, the current literature on apocalyptic rhetoric is limited in that it focuses on the rhetoric of white fundamentalist Christians and not on members of marginalized groups. Although American Christian fundamentalists often perceive themselves as marginalized, they have not experienced the long history of institutionalized oppression and discrimination historically encountered by Blacks and other minority groups from the hegemonic white American establishment. As O'Leary notes, the feelings of marginalization experienced by his white fundamentalist subjects are largely "a rhetorically induced perception; for there is an obvious difference between being torn apart by lions in front of cheering crowds and being forced to endure media onslaughts of sex, violence, and secular humanism" (11). The historical experiences of African Americans with slavery, segregation, and economic discrimination, on the other hand, provide a pressing exigency for African American apocalyptic rhetors not only to change

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the perceptions of their audiences, but also to encourage them to exercise their own agency in resistance to the institutions and ideologies that help uphold white supremacy. By including African American apocalypticists, such as David Walker, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers, within the literature on apocalyptic rhetoric, as the present study aims to do, we can gain a greater understanding of how this genre of discourse can function as a radical challenge to existing social arrangements that calls upon audiences to exercise their agency not to withdraw from these arrangements, but rather to actively resist them with the goal of transforming them.

Before I turn to my discussion of African American apocalypticism, two important points remain to be made. First, although apocalyptic discourse is typically understood as evoking the literal destruction of existing social arrangements, this is not the only level on which is operates. As Brummett reminds us, one use of the term "apocalypse" is "in the sense of a transition from this world, era, or state of being to another one" (9). Although this definition certainly includes the traditional understanding of apocalypse, in this study I will also focus on the ways in which apocalyptic rhetors aim to transform the consciousness of their audiences, or how individuals and groups understand their own identities in relation to the established social and political order. After all, the established order consists not only of material institutions, but also of the narratives and ideologies that justify the continued existence of said institutions. In this sense, apocalyptic rhetoric performs the function which progressive theologian Walter Brueggemann assigns to prophetic discourse, namely "to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (17). As I have noted in previous sections, jeremiadic

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rhetoric presents audiences with specific narratives of the origins, development, and ultimate destiny of the dominant culture, which work to impose limitations upon the types of reforms that are seen as legitimate by those who adhere to the dominant culture's norms. By presenting an alternative narrative of the dominant culture which emphasizes its corruption rather than its promise, apocalyptic rhetors aim to dismantle and reconstruct many of the ideological assumptions that help justify the continued existence of hegemonic forms of social organization. To the extent that audiences accept apocalyptic narratives, new possibilities are opened up for social reform.

Second, although apocalyptic discourse has its roots in Biblical scripture, it has frequently been employed in secular forms as well. Marxism, for instance, is often apocalyptic: it presents audiences with a narrative of the rise of evil, in the form of an exploitive capitalist system, over time, and identifies a chosen people—the international proletariat—whose ultimate destiny is to overthrow capitalism and replace it with a socialist or communist alternative. Like the jeremiad, then, apocalyptic discourse has undergone a transition from sacred to secular, while maintaining many of the same tropes. Over the course of this study, I will chart this development from the sacred apocalypticism of David Walker and the Nation of Islam, to the secular apocalypticism of the later Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party.

1.5. The African American Apocalyptic

Where the African American jeremiad tends to maintain hope in the ultimate fulfillment of the American promise, despite African Americans' historical exclusion from American civil society, the African American apocalyptic tends to take a more militant and oppositional attitude toward hegemonic white society. Like the white

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fundamentalist apocalyptic rhetors discussed by O'Leary and Brummett, African

American apocalyptic rhetoric is concerned with explaining the rise of evil over time, as

well as how that evil will ultimately be resolved. Unlike white fundamentalist

apocalypticism, however, the historic oppression faced by African Americans tends to

give a greater urgency to the need to pursue immediate changes to existing social

arrangements. Thus, the African American apocalyptic is more likely (although by no

means guaranteed) to advocate a specific program for social reform than its white

counterpart. Different apocalyptic rhetors envision this program differently, however. Of

the rhetors discussed in this study, David Walker evokes the possibility of slave revolt,

and the Nation of Islam advocated the withdrawal of Blacks from white society in order

to avoid its ultimate destruction by God. Malcolm X began his career as a minister for the

Nation of Islam who promoted their official ideology, but eventually grew disillusioned

with the NOI's refusal to become involved in politics. During his later career, Malcolm X

shifted to a secular apocalypticism and began to evoke the possibility of a global

revolution of the oppressed against American racism, capitalism, and imperialism. The

Black Panther Party picked up this secular strand where Malcolm X left it off and

provided perhaps the most developed version of secular African American

apocalypticism, which provided a Marxist-Leninist program for the reconstruction of

American society in which power would be shifted away from hegemonic institutions and

back to local communities. Although African American apocalypticism is universally

critical of white-dominated forms of social organization, then, it can cover a range of

responses to this problem.

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In Chapter 1, I discuss David Walker's 1829 pamphlet, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, in which Walker calls upon his Black audiences to resist the oppression of slavery by force if necessary, and warns white Americans that their nation will soon be destroyed by the hand of God unless they immediately abolish slavery. Although Walker does employ some of the tropes of American civil religion in order to expose the hypocrisy of white slaveowners who preach liberty and democracy while holding Blacks in bondage, I argue that although Walker's *Appeal* includes some elements of an African American jeremiad, such as the emphasis on Black chosenness and the appeals to American civil religion, the apocalyptic dimension of the *Appeal* is too pronounced for Walker's text to be analyzed only in terms of Walker's acceptance of liberal Enlightenment values. I argue that Walker's *Appeal* should not be read merely as an affirmation of American civil religion or American promise due to the deftness with which Walker deconstructs the narratives employed by white Americans to frame themselves as a chosen people with a special destiny to play in world history. I employ Kenneth Burke's concept of perspective by incongruity in order to demonstrate how Walker turns many of the conventional narratives of American exceptionalism and messianism upside down. In this sense, Walker's *Appeal* contains a strong apocalyptic dimension in that it is very much concerned with the rise of evil, in the form of white supremacy. However, Walker evokes not one but two potential futures in which this evil is resolved—the jeremiadic one, in which white Americans repent of their sins of racism and slavery and accept Blacks as their equals, and the apocalyptic one, in which white Americans fail to do so and are destroyed by either the hand of God, or by a slave uprising. This ambiguity enables Walker to simultaneously take an uncompromising line

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in denouncing white Americans for their racism toward Blacks while also calling upon them to repent by ending slavery and their other racist practices. Either way, Walker's apocalypticism presented a radical challenge to current hegemonic understandings of Black and white American identities while simultaneously bringing new identity concepts into being, with which Walker's audience is urged to identify. In this sense, Walker's *Appeal*, like the other texts discussed in this study, is one example of what Maurice Charland would call a constitutive rhetoric.

Chapter 2 focuses on Malcolm X, both before and after his split with the Nation of Islam (NOI). I focus largely on the transition between the sacred apocalypticism of his career as a minister for the NOI and the secular revolutionary apocalypticism that he expressed following his split with that organization, and on the dimension of Malcolm X's apocalypticism which aims to dismantle the ideologies that uphold the existing social order and provide new alternatives, and I frame him as an *iconoclast*, or "breaker of images." I begin with the sacred apocalypticism he expressed as a minister for the Nation of Islam, and explore how he employed a Burkean perspective by incongruity to undermine hegemonic narratives of white supremacy and replace them with an elaborate theological counternarrative in which Blacks were the original and superior humans, and the "white devils" would soon be destroyed as punishment for their sins. Although these narratives presented his Black audiences with a source of self-pride and self-respect denied them by white supremacist society, Malcolm X increasingly grew disillusioned with the NOI leadership's refusal to get involved in direct political action. After he split with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X retained many of his apocalyptic tropes, but began to express them in a more secular idiom. This involved a softer line on the issue of evil—

rather than being created evil by nature, as the NOI preached, Malcolm X now charged that whites were not *inherently* created evil, but were nevertheless complicit in evil due to their involvement in oppressive and exploitive social systems. Rather than awaiting the impending destruction of hegemonic white America by the hand of God, the later Malcolm X began to advocate that Blacks join in coalition with other people of color around the world in order to resist the social systems that perpetuated racism and oppression against people of color. In both cases, Malcolm X evoked for his audiences an alternative narrative of the American nation state to that presented by the jeremiad, in which America had no fundamental promise and could not be counted upon to bring about Black liberation and equality. Once this understanding was in place, Malcolm X directed his Black audiences to alternative political actions that he argued were more likely to lead to their liberation.

Chapter 3 discusses the Black Panther Party, who picked up where Malcolm X left off and advocated a full-fledged program for the revolutionary transformation of American society. Of the rhetors discussed in this study, the Black Panthers went furthest in promoting a political platform for the apocalyptic transformation of American society which, if successful, would dismantle the hegemonic American nation state and restore power and autonomy to local communities. To this end, the BPP brought together a broad coalition for social reform, which included Blacks, other revolutionary minority organizations, both in America and abroad, as well as white radicals. The programs advocated by the BPP covered a wide spectrum of issues, from armed self-defense against police brutality, to providing free breakfast for children and other social services in low-income communities. Although BPP rhetoric tended to be entirely secular, it

retained the apocalyptic preoccupation with the evils of the existing social order, the impending destruction of hegemonic forms of social organization, and the attempt to get their audiences to view themselves as part of a "chosen people" with a role to play in dismantling corrupt, oppressive institutions and ushering in a new era, in which more just forms of social organization would prevail.

For a brief period of time, the BPP attracted a broad, interracial coalition of support and put forward a vision of a post-apocalyptic future that was appealing to supporters to a diverse range of constituencies. However, the BPP experienced a gradual decline in influence due to a combination of factors, including government repression and mismanagement by the Party leadership. Since the BPP's decline, there have been several African American organizations who have promoted an apocalyptic vision of the American future. None, however, have come close to attaining the level of cultural influence held by the BPP at the height of its power. In the Conclusion, I will discuss two contemporary African American organizations with apocalyptic views, Israel United in Christ and the Huey Newton Gun Club, before closing with an assessment of the current prospects for African American apocalypticism.

CHAPTER 2

DAVID WALKER AS APOCALYPTIC PROPHET

2.1 Introduction

David Walker's 1829 pamphlet, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*

represents perhaps the most cogent and articulate statement of African American

apocalypticism of the antebellum period. In contrast to liberal abolitionists such as

Frederick Douglass, who employed moral suasion and appeals to American civil religion

to advocate the abolition of slavery by the federal government, Walker's *Appeal* is a call

to Black agency in resistance to racial oppression, given additional force by Walker's

prophetic promise to both Black and white audiences that God is on the side of slave and

free Blacks in their struggle for liberation, and will intervene to destroy the white

American nation unless it immediately takes action to correct its ongoing injustices

toward Blacks. In this chapter, I will argue that although Walker's *Appeal* has often been

read as an African American jeremiad due to its appeals to Enlightenment values such as

individual liberty and democracy, the highly pronounced apocalyptic elements of

Walker's text deserve careful attention, as they provide a narrative of the American

nation's role in past, present, and future history very different from the one found in most

white American or African American jeremiads. The *Appeal* could be considered a

jeremiad toward its Black audiences due to the text's framing of them as a chosen people

and its professed faith in their eventual liberation, but its stance toward the white

American nation is more apocalyptic than jeremiadic, as Walker grants America no

special status in God's plan for history, and warns white Americans that despite their

belief in their own chosenness, God will destroy their nation as punishment for their sins

towards Blacks unless they immediately repent. Furthermore, where the typical white and African American jeremiads frame the American nation as having been founded on Enlightenment ideals such as democracy, individual liberty, and property rights, however imperfectly realized in practice, Walker's *Appeal* presents a counternarrative of the history of the American nation, as well as European society more generally, that is characterized not by progress, but by degeneration, corruption, and the rise of evil. If Walker aligns his Black audience with the Biblical Israelites through his rhetoric, white Americans are compared to Biblical oppressors such as the Egyptians and Babylonians, and are warned that their nation, too, will be destroyed by God unless they take immediate action to correct centuries of slavery and racial oppression.

In the next section of this chapter, I will start with a discussion of the critical literature that analyzes Walker's *Appeal* in relation to the African American jeremiad tradition and American civil religion. I argue that although Walker's rhetoric displays some of the characteristics of the (African-)American jeremiad, focusing only on Walker's appeals to Enlightenment values and his vision of future racial coexistence in America misses the ways in which the apocalyptic dimension of his text works to dismantle hegemonic white American ideologies of white supremacy and Black inferiority. I further argue that Walker's challenge to hegemonic identity concepts and his attempt to construct new ones around the concepts of self-pride and agency for Blacks and humility and repentance for whites makes the *Appeal* an example of what Maurice Charland calls constitutive rhetoric, which aims to call into being the subject position that it addresses and to direct its audience toward a specific set of actions in the world. Then, in the following section, I draw on progressive theologian Walter Brueggemann's

concept of the prophetic consciousness to analyze how Walker's *Appeal* functions as an act of prophecy that works to challenge the worldview of the status quo and to open up an alternative position from which the marginalized can voice their grievances and mobilize for their own liberation. In the final section, I discuss Kenneth Burke's concept of perspective by incongruity, in which a rhetor takes qualities typically assigned to one category and re-assigns them to another in order to draw attention to the inaccuracy of hegemonic discourse in representing a situation. In the case of Walker's *Appeal*, the author employs the perspective by incongruity to undermine hegemonic white American assumptions of chosenness and exceptionalism by representing Black Africans as the originators of civilization and portraying white European history as characterized by barbarity and moral degeneration, thus inverting the white supremacist trope that opposes civilized whites with non-white "savages." I will further argue that Walker's retelling of the American past is more characteristic of apocalyptic rhetoric than the jeremiad. Here, I will draw upon Steven O'Leary's discussion of time, evil, and authority, which he contends are "the essential topoi of apocalyptic discourse." (20). I will examine the narratives of evil Walker employs in his *Appeal* to show how Walker depicts evil as being deeply intertwined with the rise of the American nation and white European civilization more broadly. In Walker's counternarrative, white Americans become aligned with the Biblical Egyptians, Romans, and/or Babylonians rather than the Israelites, as in the American jeremiad. Walker's apocalypticism thus works to undercut the dominant white culture's messianic narratives of chosenness and a divinely ordained role in history by substituting for them a new set of narratives and subject positions from

which Walker's audiences are encouraged to view the world and with which they are urged to align their actions.

Like African American jeremiahs such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., David Walker denounces the evils that white Americans have inflicted upon Blacks through their practices of chattel slavery and racial degradation, even in what was supposedly a "Republican Land of Liberty" (5). Walker calls upon Blacks to resist white oppression, calls upon them to go to work to enlighten and liberate their fellow Blacks, and promises that God will be on their side in their struggle for freedom. However, unlike in most American jeremiads, both Black and white, the American nation is not assigned the quality of divine favor, either in the past, present, or future. White slave owners, Walker charges, "forget that God rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, having his ears continually open to the cries, tears and groans of his oppressed people; and being a just and holy Being will at one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed, and arrest the progress of the avaricious oppressors" (5). Rather than a chosen people who have forgotten their covenant with God, the white American nation is thus depicted as an oppressive force whose actions go against God's plan for history, and who will soon be punished for their sins unless they immediately and dramatically alter their ways.

However, Walker also warns Blacks that they must exercise their own agency in order to bring about the end of slavery and Black liberation more generally: "there must be a willingness on our part, for God to do these things for us, for we may be assured that he will not take us by the hairs of our head against our will and desire, and drag us from our very, mean, low and abject condition" (2). Although Walker does not rule out the

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possibility that white Americans could fundamentally alter their treatment of Blacks, Walker also expresses a deep skepticism that white Americans will repent and reform without Black resistance. Walker's primary concerns in the *Appeal* are to assert Black humanity and agency counter to the dehumanizing stereotypes of Blacks disseminated by white American culture and to promote racial solidarity and activism among Blacks in resistance to the evils of slavery and racial degradation. As far as white Americans are concerned, Walker offers them a choice between two futures: the jeremiadic future in which whites accept Blacks as full equals and peacefully co-exist with them within America, and the apocalyptic future in which whites fail to repent for their sins and face imminent destruction by God, who Walker promises will soon deliver slave and free Blacks from their oppression.

2.2. David Walker and the (African-)American Jeremiad

Many past scholars who have written about Walker's *Appeal* in relation to the American civil religion have tended to view it as an African American jeremiad, albeit one that takes a harder line against hegemonic white America than usual. Although the apocalyptic future Walker evokes may be more pronounced than in most Black and white American jeremiads, which typically express optimism that American will redeem itself and renew its commitment to its founding promise, these scholars have argued that Walker's appropriation of Enlightenment political discourse and Walker's vision of future racial coexistence in America demonstrate that David Walker was ultimately a believer in the ideals of the American civil religion even as he condemned its practices of slavery and oppression of Blacks. David Howard-Pitney argues that "while his fiery rhetoric expressed alienation from the land of his birth, his skillful use of jeremiadic

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rhetoric reflected his active participation in the highest ideals of American society" (11).

Similarly, Walker biographer Peter P. Hinks contends that Walker ultimately admired the professed ideals of Euro-American society:

> Walker perceived slavery as an abominable aberration in a society that was otherwise healthy and even morally righteous. He found nothing wrong with the individual freedom and equality promised by the Declaration of Independence, except that blacks were savagely excluded from it . . . [Walker] was confronted with the conundrum of attempting to build an opposition to a society he basically endorsed (247).

Ian Finseth, in an article on David Walker and early Black nationalism, likewise finds that "the clearly emotional longing for inclusion in 'America' must qualify our common perception of Walker as a militant black nationalist" (359).

Other scholars of Black nationalism and American civil religion have been critical of the idea that the appropriation of tropes of the American civil religion by African American rhetors should be taken as a sign of their wholesale acceptance of the dominant (white) culture's values and narratives. Patrick Rael argues against the use of what he views as an overly simplistic assimilation/resistance binary for interpreting Black protest discourse, and cautions that the deployment of hegemonic white American values such as uplift and respectability by Black protest rhetors should not be read merely as a sign of Black assimilation into white American culture: "Black elites *did* internalize those values, yet their faith in them must be considered distinct from black spokespersons' use of them as a strategy for racial activism . . . Through these rhetorical devices, they hoped to create the circumstances in which whites would be compelled to alter their racial attitudes so as

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to yield rights to blacks" (120). Willie J. Harrell, on the other hand, focuses on the role played by the jeremiad in the formation of African American racial consciousness. In Harrell's view, "[t]he central problem . . . for early African American jeremiadic discourse was the construction of an elevated black consciousness against the racial stereotypes that had been formulated by whites" (18). Harrell sees in the jeremiads of oppressed minorities not so much their appropriation of the dominant culture's values so much as "a form of deconstructing the dominate *[sic]* culture's values" (16). These readings remind us that Black jeremiadic appeals to the values of American civil religion should not be taken at face value as signs of Black acceptance of white American values, as Black jeremiahs have frequently employed these values with the intention of transforming white racist consciousness as well as transforming the ways Blacks think about themselves as a people.

In this sense, the African American jeremiad is what Maurice Charland calls a constitutive rhetoric. Charland defines constitutive rhetoric as rhetoric which aims to calls into being new subject positions and invites the audience it addresses to identify with these new identities:

> Our first subject positions are modest, linked to our name, our family, and our sex. As we enter the adult world, they become more complex, as different constitutive rhetorics reposition us with respect to such formal and informal institutions as the state, the economy, the church, and the school. Thus, though we are subjects through language, and indeed can only speak as subjects, our subjectivity and ideological commitments are not fixed from our first utterance (147).

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Using the Peuple Quebecois as his example, Charland demonstrates how constitutive rhetors construct historical narratives that purport to explain their audience's role in relation to the present social world: "To tell the story of the *Quebecois* is implicitly to assert the existence of a collective subject, the protagonist of the historical drama, who experiences, suffers, and acts. Such a narrative renders the world of events understandable with respect to a transcendental collective interest that negates individual interest" (139). If the constitutive rhetor is successful in persuading her or his audiences to identify with the new subject position and to accept the rhetor's narrative of history, the audience is then urged to pursue specific political actions as a result of their new ideological commitments: "constitutive rhetoric . . . positions the reader toward political, social, and economic action in the material world and it is in this positioning that its ideological character becomes significant" (141).

In the Introduction, I discussed how the American jeremiad constructs a narrative of American political identity, which typically features such tropes as the Exodus of white settlers from political repression in Europe, the chosen status of the American nation within God's plan for history, and the idea that America has a divinely ordained errand to perform in spreading liberty worldwide. Jeremiadic discourse also frequently evokes an apocalyptic future that could come to pass if the chosen people fail to live up to their covenant, but remains optimistic that America will ultimately redeem itself. As Bercovitch notes of the early American jeremiad, "[the Puritans] believed God's punishments were *corrective*, not destructive. Here, as nowhere else, His vengeance was a sign of love, a father's rod used to improve the errant child. *In short, their punishments confirmed their promise*" (8; italics mine). In the American jeremiad, the chosenness of

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the American people is thus never called into question. African American jeremiads, although often uncompromising in their challenge to white supremacist practices, typically appeal to the democratic values professed by American civil religion and Enlightenment political philosophy, and express a faith in the ultimate redemption of the American people.

In this light, it is understandable how one could view Walker's *Appeal* as a hardline jeremiad. Alongside the apocalyptic future Walker imagines there exists a second possible future, in which Walker imagines Blacks and whites peacefully co-existing in America. Walker writes, "I speak Americans for your good. We must and shall be free I say, in spite of you . . . Throw away your fears and prejudices then, and enlighten us and treat us like men, and we will like you more than we do now hate you . . . Treat us like men, and there is no danger, but we will all live in peace and happiness together" (73). It should be noted, however, that Walker states that Black liberation is *inevitable*, regardless of the choices ultimately made by white Americans. ("We must and shall be free, I say, in spite of you.") Elsewhere in the *Appeal*, Walker expresses a deep skepticism that whites will, in fact, repent: "I hope that the Americans may hear, but I am afraid that they have done us so much injury, and are so firm in the belief that our Creator made us to be an inheritance to them forever, that their hearts will be hardened, so that their destruction may be sure" (42). For Walker, it seems, white Americans are not inherently a chosen nation, and instead are compared to Pharaoh of the Exodus story with the allusion to their 'hardened hearts.' Walker further suggests that white Americans' faith in their own chosenness and exceptionalism is a false one. In the narrative Walker constructs in his *Appeal*, the American nation has been thoroughly corrupted by the sin of

slavery, which poses an immediate threat to the nation's continued existence. In contrast to the ultimate optimism offered by the American jeremiad, in both its Black and white variants, Walker promises deliverance to white Americans only if they fundamentally and immediately alter their ways: "O Americans! Americans!! I call God—I call angels—I call men, to witness, that your DESTRUCTION *is at hand,* and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT" (45). Contrary to the "corrective" punishments of American jeremiad traditions, Walker thus frames the apocalyptic destruction of the American social and political establishment as a justly deserved and irrevocable reprisal for the nation's past actions. Furthermore, where Black and white American jeremiads put forth a narrative of American history that emphasizes promise and progress despite present decline, Walker characterizes the American past as dominated by slavery and exploitation toward Blacks. As I will explore in the following sections, these rhetorical moves works to open up a new standpoint from which Walker's audiences can view existing social relations within America and decide which courses of action can best resolve the problem of racial injustice. In the following sections, I explore how the prophetic dimension of Walker's *Appeal* and his employment of a Burkean perspective by incongruity work to dismantle oppressive hegemonic ideologies and narratives and to make available new perspectives that enable audiences to step outside the worldviews that have been handed down to them by hegemonic institutions.

2.3. The Prophetic Dimension of Walker's *Appeal*

In *Malcolm X: Inventing Radical Judgment*, Robert E. Terrill argues that the prophetic mode, in which the rhetor claims to have a special insight into God's plan for history and urges her or his audience to act accordingly, is fundamentally limited as a

strategy for social critique. After an overview of various strands in 19ᵗʰ century African

American prophetic rhetoric, Terrill concludes that

> All of these various strategies of prophetic interpretation mark out for their
> audiences confining patterns of judgment. These audiences are trained to read or
> to reread texts according to specific and articulated teleological commitments. For
> these prophetic rhetors, history shall—or should—follow a predetermined arc,
> and the appropriate strategy is to bring the interpretation of texts, cultures, and
> signs into alignment with that arc (63).

In Terrill's view, prophetic discourse thus provides a limited role for human agency. He
argues that since prophecy relies on closed systems of interpretation in which the end of
history is predetermined, "the available means of engaging, resisting, and interrogating
the dominant culture occupy a fairly narrow range" (64). It is certainly the case that some
groups of apocalyptic rhetors, including the Nation of Islam leadership, have promoted a
worldview in which the end will soon come about through God's initiative alone, leaving
no role for human agency other than the choice to withdraw from the corrupt dominant
culture or to be destroyed along with it. However, prophetic discourses need not shut
down agency entirely. As noted above, David Walker promises Blacks that God is on
their side in their struggle for freedom, but that they must exercise their own agency if
Black liberation is to become a reality, as God "will not take us by the hairs of our head
. . . and drag us from our very, mean, low and abject condition" (2). In Terrill's
discussion of Walker, he notes that the *Appeal* "exhibits mixed motives and an
ambiguous role for human agency," and that it "does consistently urge its audience

toward race pride and solidarity through education" (62). However, Terrill does not incorporate these themes into his discussion of prophecy as a mode of discourse.

An alternative view of prophecy with regards to human agency is put forward by progressive theologian Walter Brueggemann in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*. Brueggemann distinguishes between two types of consciousness, the prophetic and the royal. The royal consciousness is that of the dominant social order, and it depends on the illusion of the perpetual stability of current social and political arrangements. Brueggemann writes that the royal consciousness posits a "religion of the static gods," which "is not and never [can] be disinterested, but inevitably [serves] the interests of the people in charge, presiding over the order and benefiting from the order" (17). By contrast, the prophetic consciousness entails the capacity to imagine new potential social arrangements. In this sense, it is a potentially radical force due to its power to remind audiences that the way things are now are not the way things always have to be, and to provide audiences with a vision of a better future to work towards. Brueggemann contends that "[t]he task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (13). Following this logic, Brueggemann reads the challenge posed by Moses to the royal consciousness of Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus as "nothing less than an assault on the consciousness of the empire." (19). According to Brueggemann, the prophet poses this challenge by asserting "the freedom of God," or the idea that God stands apart from and does not permanently favor any existing social institution. Thus, the prophet presents his or her audience with "a religion of God's freedom as alternative to the static imperial religion of order and triumph" (18). Rather

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than a confining system that limits judgment, Brueggemann sees prophecy as potentially a powerful progressive force for challenging the entrenched ideologies of the status quo, and argues that "a truly free God is essential to marginal people if they are to have a legitimate standing ground against the oppressive orders of the day" (30).

From this perspective, narratives of American exceptionalism that assign the American nation an enduring role within the arc of world history can be seen as an example of Brueggemann's royal consciousness in that these narratives lay claim to permanence and universality on behalf of the status quo. By asserting the freedom of God, the prophetic rhetor denies this claim to divine favor by the powerful and claims instead that God is on the side of the marginalized in their struggle for freedom. David Walker, in this sense, embodies the prophetic consciousness, and evokes the freedom of God throughout the *Appeal*. In doing so, Walker launches a direct assault on the idea that the American nation has a permanent and messianic role to play in God's plan for history. Walker accuses white Americans of having forgotten God, and emphasizes that God is a god of the oppressed. Walker asks, "if [God] gives peace and tranquility to tyrants, and permits them to keep our fathers, our mothers, ourselves, and our children in eternal ignorance and wretchedness, to support them and their families, would he be to us a God of *justice*?" (8). Several times throughout the course of the *Appeal*, Walker accuses white Americans of displaying Satanic hubris, framing the system of slavery as a usurpation of the authority that properly belongs to God alone: "God Almighty is the *sole proprietor* or *master* of the WHOLE human family, and will not on any consideration admit of a colleague, being unwilling to divide his glory with another" (7). The hubris of white Americans, in Walker's view, has gotten to such a point that he asks, "[i]f it were

possible, would they not *dethrone* Jehovah and seat themselves upon his throne?" (19). White Americans may view themselves as exceptional and as being in covenant with God, but Walker contends that, in God's eyes, white Americans are more properly aligned with the oppressors in the Biblical typology and are likely mistaken in believing themselves to be chosen.

Near the end of the *Appeal*, Walker compares contemporary white Americans to several groups of people who were destroyed by God for their sins, including the Egyptians and the Romans. Of the latter, Walker writes, "many of them were really so ignorant, that they thought the whole of mankind were made to be slaves to them; just as many of the Americans think now, of my color. But they got dreadfully deceived" (76). White American belief in their own superiority, Walker argues, has blinded them to the imminent possibility of their destruction: "So would Christian Americans doubt, if God should send an Angel from Heaven to preach their funeral sermon" (76). Despite the doubts of white Americans, however, Walker asserts the freedom of God in order to assure his audience that the current social order does not have God's permanent approval, contrary to the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. Furthermore, he frames white American pretensions to superiority as an illegitimate attempt to usurp the place of God.

In *Rewriting Exodus*, Anna Hartnell argues that Black Exodus narratives often serve as receptacles of Black memory in the face of state memory, which provides a set of officially sanctioned narratives of the American past that often erases the experiences of African Americans: "As well as preserving the memory of slavery and oppression against a system that routinely turns a blind eye to the origins of systemic racial inequalities, African American renditions of Exodus crucially 'remember' the experience

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of resistance, the defiance tradition that has shaped much African American culture" (3).

Walker's *Appeal* begins with the assertion that "we Coloured People of these United States, are, the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began" (2). This sentiment will be repeated, often verbatim, throughout the *Appeal* as Walker describes the cruelties and injustices that white Americans have inflicted upon Blacks. Walker assures his Black audiences that their sufferings at the hands of white Americans have not been overlooked by God, and indeed will soon lead to the destruction of white America unless immediate action is taken. However, Walker also aims to encourage Blacks to exercise their own agency in resistance to white supremacy. In doing so, he addresses Blacks as a chosen people with a divinely sanctioned errand to perform in working for the liberation of the oppressed.

As a constitutive rhetoric, Walker's historical narratives have the intention not only of remembering Black experience in America, but also of calling into existence what Hartnell calls a "black counterpublic," which she describes as "a black public sphere that is to an extent defined by its oppositional relationship to the white mainstream" (11). Walker states in the Preamble to his *Appeal* that "my object is, if possible, to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this *Republican Land of Liberty!!!!!!*" (5). Walker argues that it is

> an unshaken and for ever immovable *fact*, that your full glory and happiness, as
> well as all other coloured people under Heaven, shall never be consummated but
> with the *entire emancipation of your enslaved brethren all over the world*. You
> may therefore, go to work and do what you can to rescue, or join in with tyrants to

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oppress them and yourselves, until the Lord shall come upon you all like a thief in the night (32).

Walker acknowledges that contemporary white society worked to obstruct Black education. In his role as a prophet, Walker evokes a future in which Blacks will be delivered from their current slavery and degradation by the hand of God, and will be able to fully develop their talents: "I know well, that there are some talents and learning among the coloured people of this country, which we have not had a chance to develope, in consequence of oppression; but our oppression ought not to hinder us from acquiring all we can. For we will have a chance to develop them by and by. God will not suffer us always to be oppressed" (17). Here, and throughout the *Appeal*, Walker employs the Biblical trope of deliverance to promote Black agency. By claiming divine favor for the cause of Black liberation, Walker constructs a narrative in which Blacks are framed as a chosen people in covenant with God whose destiny is to be free. White Americans are not accorded a similar chosen status in Walker's rhetoric, despite his sporadic use of tropes from American civil religion. White readers are instead faced with a choice to either repent of their sins of slavery, white supremacy, and exceptionalist hubris and to allow Blacks the full range of their agency and freedom, or to be destroyed by divine wrath like other Biblical oppressors such as the Egyptians and Romans.

2.4. Perspective By Incongruity: Master- and Counter-Narratives in the *Appeal*

Although David Walker does frequently appeal to Enlightenment values throughout his text, such as in his appropriation of the Declaration of Independence in defense of Black resistance against slavery and racism, Walker's depiction of the American nation through the historical narratives he constructs is not characterized by

any fundamental promise, as in both Black and white American jeremiads. For Walker, the story of the American past, present, and future is not characterized by progress towards a social or transcendental ideal, but rather by the moral degeneration of whites, as evidenced by their continued oppression of Blacks. In doing so, Walker employs a Burkean perspective by incongruity to invert white supremacist hierarchies which oppose 'civilized' whites to 'savage' nonwhites, and to assert that the role played by Black slave labor in building the country entitle Blacks to "ownership" of America.

Burke defines the perspective of incongruity as when "a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category" (308). Burke argues that the purpose of the perspective by incongruity is "to 'remoralize' by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy" (309). Where hegemonic white American narratives of white supremacy and American exceptionalism worked to emphasize the chosenness of the white American nation and to justify the enslavement of Blacks through narratives of Black inferiority, Walker employs the perspective by incongruity in order to draw his audiences' attention to these inaccuracies in the hegemonic perspective. In doing so, Walker wrenches the concept of chosenness away from the white American nation to which it had been assigned in the white American jeremiad and reassigns this concept to Blacks, thus calling into question the ideology of American exceptionalism that helps legitimate the white American nation-building project.

Chris Apap observes that the Exodus rhetoric of Walker's *Appeal* departs from the Biblical Exodus narrative in one significant way. Apap notes that in the Book of Exodus, "the Israelites *departed*—they left Egypt to the Egyptians and returned to their

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ancestral homeland" (332). Walker, on the other hand, frequently asserts Black

ownership of America throughout the *Appeal*, and denounces the American Colonization

Society, which aimed to encourage free Blacks to emigrate to Liberia, as a scheme to

help perpetuate slavery by removing the influence free Blacks could have on slaves (49).

By contrast, Apap argues, "Walker sees black ownership of America as just payment for

their enrichment of the land. The Exodus model is . . . insufficient; free blacks could not

leave with the riches of the nation on their backs, since land and property were the true

wealth and potential of the republic. The only viable option was African American

emplacement" (333-34). For instance, Walker asserts that "America is more our country,

than it is the whites'—we have enriched it with our *blood and tears*. The greatest riches

in all America have arisen from our blood and tears:-- and will they drive us from our

property and homes, which we have earned with our *blood*?" (67). Where the historical

narrative presented by the white American jeremiad locates the founding of the American

nation in the exodus of the Puritan settlers from Europe, Walker employs the perspective

by incongruity to disassociate this ownership from white Americans and to reassign it to

Blacks owing to the role of their labor in enriching America. Contrary to Enlightenment

narratives of European progress and civilization, Walker asserts that Blacks have been

unjustly denied the fruits of hundreds of years of slave labor which has been instrumental

in Europe's rise to hegemony.

Walker's perspective by incongruity also enables him to launch a rhetorical

assault on white supremacist discourses that framed Blacks as naturally inferior to whites.

Walker declares that the present condition of Blacks was not due to their inherent

inferiority, as proponents of white supremacy would have them believe, but rather one

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stage in a divinely guided historical 'plan' which would eventually culminate in their

liberation and elevation. Walker writes that "Ignorance and treachery one against the

other—a grovelling servile and abject submission to the lash of tyrants, we see plainly,

my brethren, are not the natural elements of the blacks, as the Americans try to make us

believe; but these are misfortunes which God has suffered our fathers to be enveloped in

for many ages, no doubt in consequence of their disobedience to their Maker" (23).

Walker also crafts a historical narrative in which Egypt rather than Greece is framed as

the 'cradle of civilization,' thus claiming that it was Blacks rather than whites who

originated civilization: "When we take a retrospective view of the arts and sciences—the

wise legislators—the Pyramids, and other magnificent buildings—the turning of the

channel of the river Nile, by the sons of Africa or of Ham, among whom learning

originated, and was carried thence into Greece, where it was improved upon or refined"

(21). In *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills argues that despite its professed

universality and egalitarianism, Enlightenment political theories of the social contract

construct 'civilization' as a white European accomplishment, which these theories oppose

to the figure of the (implicitly non-white) 'savage,' whose fitness for civilization and self-

government is (according to these theorists) limited. These theories frame the history of

white European colonization along lines established by a narrative in which "[w]hite men

who are (definitionally) already part of society encounter non-whites who are not . . .

These the white men bring partially into society as subordinate citizens or exclude on

reservations or deny the existence of or exterminate" (13). However, Walker's narrative

in the *Appeal* inverts this framing, so that it is now Black Africans who are identified as

the originators of civilization, and white Europeans and Americans who are identified as

savage due to their perpetuation of slavery and oppression toward Blacks. Together with Walker's prophecy of the eventual destruction of the hegemonic social order in reprisal for these sins, this narrative of the degeneration of white civilization as a result of its racially oppressive practices forms part of an apocalyptic pattern that plays out according to O'Leary's observation that the central *topoi* of apocalyptic rhetoric are time, evil, and authority.

Like other examples of apocalyptic rhetoric, David Walker's *Appeal* seeks to resolve the theological problem of evil, which asks why a just and benevolent God permits suffering to occur, by explaining how evil came to occupy a position of worldly authority in the past, and how that evil will ultimately fall from power in the future. The prime evil that Walker seeks to account for is slavery, and in doing so he crafts narratives of the historical role of slavery. Two major themes emerge here. The first of these themes is that the practice of slavery has gotten worse over time, with contemporary American slavery being worst of all. At the beginning of the Preamble, Walker declares:

> They tell us of the Israelites in Egypt, the Helots in Sparta, and of the Roman
>
> Slaves, which last were made up from every nation under heaven, whose
>
> sufferings under those ancient and heathen nations, were, in comparison with
>
> ours, under this enlightened and Christian nation, no more than a cypher—or, in
>
> other words, those heathen nations of antiquity, had but little more among them
>
> than the name and form of slavery; while wretchedness and endless miseries were
>
> reserved, apparently in a phial, to be poured out upon our fathers, ourselves, and
>
> our children by *Christian* Americans! (3).

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Walker then begins a lengthy discussion of the Book of Exodus, citing textual evidence to demonstrate that the Israelites were treated better under Pharaoh than Black slaves were in America. In the Exodus story, Walker reminds his audience, the Israelite Joseph was allowed to marry the daughter of a prominent priest and was given the best land in Egypt (10-11). Further, he challenges his critics to "show me a page of history, either sacred or profane, on which a verse can be found, which maintain, that the Egyptians heaped the *insupportable insult* upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the human family" (12). Against the American civil religion's narrative of American progress Walker thus opposes a narrative of degeneration in which contemporary America compares unfavorably to many "heathen nations of antiquity." In a passage that recalls the Nation of Islam's 'white devils' trope from over a century later, Walker go so far as to suggest that whites may be inferior in nature to Blacks: "The whites have always been an unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious, and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority . . . we see them acting more like devils than accountable men" (19). Later, in response to the white supremacist idea that Blacks were "the seed of Cain the murderer of his brother Abel," Walker proclaims, "I ask those avaricious and ignorant wretches, who act more like the seed of Cain by murdering the whites or the blacks? How many vessel loads of human beings, have the blacks thrown into the seas? How many thousand souls have the blacks murdered in cold blood, to make them work in wretchedness and ignorance, to support them and their families?" (63). Using perspective by incongruity, Walker suggests that whites may not be as good by nature as Blacks, and that one need only look at the actions of white Americans as proof.

The second theme that emerges from Walker's historical narrative of slavery is that it caused the destruction of many great empires in the past, and will be the downfall of America as well unless whites immediately repent of the sin of slavery. In addition to ancient Rome and Egypt, Walker also identifies current strife in Portugal and Spain, calling upon his readers to view these conflicts as 'signs' of God's displeasure over their involvement in the practice of slavery: "all who are permitted to see and believe these things, can easily recognize the judgments of God among the Spaniards. Though others may lay the cause of the fierceness with which they cut each other's throats, to some other circumstance, yet they who believe that God is a God of justice, will believe that SLAVERY *is the principal cause*" (7). Walker elaborates that "I ask, O ye *Christians!!!* Who hold us and our children in the most abject ignorance and degradation, that ever a people were afflicted with since the world began—I say, if God gives you peace and tranquility, and suffers you thus to go on afflicting us, and our children, who have never given you the least provocation—would he be to us *a God of justice?*" (8). Once viewed through the lens Walker provides for his readers, slavery becomes a force that inevitably leads to the decline of nations due to God's favor for the oppressed. In contrast to the master narrative of white supremacy, in which slavery was justified by reference to a 'natural order' in which whites were inherently superior to Blacks, Walker crafts a narrative in which slavery is an abominable sin which must be answered by divine justice. Walker's perspective by incongruity aims to shatter any of these ideologies which his Black audiences may have internalized, and to replace this worldview with one in which the end of slavery is a historical inevitability, in accordance with God's plan. Once the possibility of successful resistance to slavery and white supremacy has been opened

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up through Walker's use of apocalyptic rhetoric, his audiences are encouraged to exercise their agency accordingly.

Although Walker encourages his Black audiences to develop attitudes of resistance toward white supremacy and assures them of divine favor for their cause, Walker is also vague about what form resistance should take, and promotes caution, writing that Blacks should "[n]ever make an attempt to gain our freedom or *natural right*, from under our cruel oppressors and murderers, until you see your way clear—when that hour arrives and you move, be not afraid or dismayed; for be you assured that Jesus Christ the King of heaven and of earth who is the God of justice and of armies, will surely go before you" (14). Peter P. Hinks notes that "[d]espite his apparent confidence that African American triumph was foreordained, Walker feared the consequences of open racial warfare. If nothing else, violent resistance would yield profound civil turbulence and an uncertain outcome for African Americans" (246). Although Walker certainly encourages his Black audiences to cultivate the spirit of resistance and an awareness of their own agency, the practical details of the slave revolt he evokes remain vague. By evoking the destruction of the white American nation through his rhetoric, however, Walker's apocalyptic rhetoric works to dismantle concepts of chosenness, permanence, and exceptionalism central to the white American nation building project. By presenting this apocalyptic counternarrative, Walker challenges his audiences to rethink Black and white American identities as understood in hegemonic white discourse.

2.5. Conclusion

Although David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* does display some characteristics typical of the African American jeremiad, such as Walker's

call for white repentance, these jeremiadic appeals are less pronounced than Walker's apocalyptic appeals, which evokes a future in which most whites fail to repent, and are met with divine retribution. Although Walker encourages Blacks to exercise their agency for the causes of racial uplift and resistance to white supremacy, he is ultimately vague about the details of the resistance he envisions. However, in *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*, Barry Brummett writes that one meaning of the term 'apocalypse' is "in the sense of a transition from this world, era, or state of being to another one" (9). One must keep in mind that the social world consists not only of concrete institutions, but also of the ideologies and narratives which work to justify their continued existence. Apocalyptic rhetoric, then, is apocalyptic not only because it evokes the literal destruction of the established order, but also because of the challenge it poses to the ideologies which help maintain hegemonic institutions, often framing them as part of the natural or divinely ordained order of the universe. By evoking a future in which these institutions are called to account for their role in the oppression of the chosen community, apocalyptic rhetoric aims to transform the worldviews of its recipients so that they no longer view the current social order as natural or inevitable and begin to see new possibilities for the implementation of justice. In Brueggemann's terms, it opposes the royal consciousness of the established order with a prophetic voice that envisions a new, more just social order.

A large part of the apocalypticism of Walker's *Appeal*, then, lies in the narrative it presents of American history, and white European history more broadly. Against white supremacist narratives of Black passivity, Walker emphasizes the possibilities of Black agency. Where dominant narratives constructed whites as inherently more 'civilized' and superior to other races, Walker frames Egypt as the cradle of civilization and European

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history as one of degeneration through the sins of slavery and oppression. Where American civil religion framed white Americans as a 'chosen people' in covenant with God, Walker assigns the covenant to Blacks and aligns white Americans with Biblical oppressors such as the Egyptians and the Romans. Furthermore, he opposes the American civil religion's narrative of enduring historical significance for the American nation with a counternarrative in which God's anger over the practice of slavery will soon result in the nation's destruction unless whites repent immediately. In doing so, his language works to dismantle dominant white American narratives and assumptions and to replace them with an alternative consciousness in which Black agency plays a central role. Walker's *Appeal* is thus a constitutive rhetoric in that he aims to bring new identity concepts into being, and encourages his audiences to align themselves with these new identities. By reconceptualizing America, Walker expands the range of imaginative possibilities available to his readers, even despite the vagueness of his call to resistance.

In the next chapter, I will turn to the apocalyptic rhetoric of Malcolm X, both during his years as a minister for the Nation of Islam (NOI), and the years between his break with the NOI and his assassination. Like David Walker, Malcolm X employed discourse that was highly charged with apocalyptic themes throughout his career. Like Walker, the early Malcolm X employed a theological or sacred apocalypticism which opposed narratives of American exceptionalism with visions of an apocalyptic future in which whites would soon be destroyed by Allah as retribution for their racist treatment of Blacks. As a minister of the NOI, Malcolm X appropriated the concept of chosenness from white Americans, who he denounced as 'devils,' and reassigned it to Blacks. In doing so, he aimed to promote Black self-pride and an appreciation for their own agency.

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After his break with the NOI, however, Malcolm X began to move away from the religious discourse of David Walker and the Nation of Islam and to adopt a more secular discourse which shares some similarities with certain strains of libertarian socialist thought. Despite this secular turn, however, apocalyptic elements remained prominent within Malcolm X's discourse. After this turn, the apocalypse took the form of a global revolution of the oppressed, but the effort to construct new identity concepts *contra* those handed down by the white American nation remained, as did the theme of chosenness.

CHAPTER 3

IMAGE-BREAKING/IMAGE-MAKING: THE SACRED AND SECULAR

APOCALYPTICS OF MALCOLM X

3.1. Introduction

During the 1950's and 1960's, many of the most prominent figures in the struggle for Black liberation were liberal Black civil rights jeremiahs such as Martin Luther King, Jr. These Black jeremiahs typically accepted the narrative that the American nation had been founded on fundamentally progressive values that had been imperfectly realized in practice and aimed to mobilize their audiences to pursue moral suasion and nonviolent direct action to gain the support of liberal whites for reforms that would end segregation and ensure equal rights for Blacks within established social relations. One exception to this trend was the Nation of Islam (NOI), whose ministers, including Malcolm X, promoted an apocalyptic theology in which the white race was depicted as evil by nature and promised that the day would soon come when Allah would destroy the white race and liberate Blacks from their oppression. Like David Walker, the Nation of Islam theology applied a Burkean perspective by incongruity to invert hegemonic white narratives of the American nation, presenting an elaborate theological counternarrative in which America held no permanent or favored position in God's plan for history, and in fact faced imminent destruction for its long history of injustice toward the Black chosen people. Also like Walker, the NOI employed constitutive rhetoric to urge its Black audiences to dis-identify themselves from the white American nation and to re-imagine themselves as a new community in covenant with God. However, the activist impulse in Walker, which encourages his Black audiences to go out in the world and exercise their

agency to bring about the liberation of their fellow Blacks is for the most part absent from NOI rhetoric. Instead, the role of human agency for Blacks is mostly limited to the decision to separate from a corrupt white society or else be destroyed along with it.

Although Malcolm X promoted the NOI's official theology during his career as an NOI minister, his rhetoric underwent a shift from sacred to secular apocalyptic following his split with the organization, which ultimately led to an increased emphasis on human agency within Malcolm X's discourse. While certain themes from the earlier sacred/theological apocalyptic of Malcolm X's time as an NOI minister remain, such as his framing of Blacks as a chosen people with a special role to play in the historical "plan" and his evoking of the impending destruction of the established social order, the apocalypticism of Malcolm X's later career is no longer couched in theological narratives. Instead, the apocalyptic challenge to the status quo presented by the later Malcolm X is expressed in social, political, and historical terms that are often reminiscent of revolutionary socialist thought. Like Karl Marx, another left-wing secular apocalypticist, who believed that historical forces would eventually and inevitably bring about the end of capitalism and the rise of socialism, the post-Nation of Islam Malcolm X argues that a global revolution of people of color against white European and American racism and imperialism is the inevitable result of historical trends that are already in play. Unlike liberal civil rights jeremiahs, who encouraged their audiences to pursue liberal reforms within established institutions, the later Malcolm X expresses a deep skepticism that the United States government will willingly remedy its historical injustices toward Blacks. Instead, Malcolm X encourages his Black audiences to dis-identify themselves from the American nation state and to view themselves instead as part of a global

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coalition of the oppressed, who can then take action to resist American racism and imperialism.

Although Malcolm X was assassinated before he could fully articulate a platform for the reconstruction of society, in his later years he did articulate a definition of Black nationalism based around the control by Black communities of their own political and economic institutions as a remedy for the exploitation and oppression of those communities by white-dominated American governmental and business institutions. In doing so, Malcolm X plays the role of a secular apocalyptic prophet, as he evokes a vision of a society that is organized around a different set of values than those of the American civil religion, which tends to assert the exceptionalism of the American nation and to treat capitalist enterprise and private property rights as sacrosanct. By inspiring his audiences to envision this new social ideal and to act towards it, Malcolm X aims to rewrite the social contract that underpins American and global social relations. Where Black and white American jeremiahs typically evoke an ideal future characterized by what they frame as the foundational or fundamental Enlightenment values of the American nation, Malcolm X steps outside these constraints by adopting a militant, revolutionary stance toward the American nation as it currently exists and, in the process, begins to formulate a new civil religion based on radical left-wing values such as international solidarity among the oppressed, militant resistance to oppression, and the control by local communities of their own affairs.

3.2. The Apocalyptic Iconoclasm of Malcolm X

In a 1964 speech delivered at the Audubon, Malcolm X exhorts his listeners to be aware of how media outlets can manipulate their audience's perceptions of reality through the art of "image-making":

> If you aren't careful . . . you run away hating yourself and loving the man—while you are catching hell from the man. You let the man maneuver you into thinking that it's wrong to fight him when he's fighting you . . . That's the image-making press. That thing is dangerous if you don't guard yourself against it. It'll make you love the criminal . . . and hate the one who's the victim of the criminal (93).

Malcolm X has often been criticized by his detractors for his lack of a concrete political program to accompany his fiery rhetoric. As Robert E. Terrill notes in *Malcolm X: Inventing Radical Judgment*, "Malcolm X easily could be judged a failure. He never led his followers in large-scale political action, never organized a mass protest march, and never was associated with the passage of any piece of legislation designed to improve the condition of African Americans" (1). Terrill argues, however, that rhetoric designed to transform the consciousness of its audiences is itself a form of political action: "If, through his rhetoric, Malcolm X encouraged his audiences toward self-created victories, if he carved out sites where African Americans might become political actors, and if he left in his wake a new and liberated political consciousness—then he accomplished political action" (3). By this same token, Malcolm X, in the Audubon speech, argues that the transformation of his audience's consciousness is a more immediate priority than a codified political platform:

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We don't need to give them ["our people"] a program, not yet. First, give them something to think about. If we give them something to think about, and start them thinking in a way that they should think, they'll see through all this camouflage that's going on right now. It's just a show—the result of a script written by somebody else. The people will take that script and tear it up and write one for themselves. And you can bet that when you write the script for yourself, you're always doing something different than you'd be doing if you followed somebody else's script (119).

The word *iconoclast* is derived from the Greek *eikonoklastes*, meaning 'breaker of images.' In the previous chapter, I argue that apocalyptic rhetoric should be understood as having multiple dimensions, as the term includes both discourse which evokes the literal destruction of the existing social order as well as that which aims to dismantle hegemonic ideologies, which themselves constitute part of the social order, and to replace them with new alternatives. This latter dimension of apocalyptic discourse is thus inherently iconoclastic, in that it aims to 'break' the 'images' (including narratives, values, iconic figures, etc.) on which the established social order rests and to call into being alternative 'images' that can take their place.

During his tenure as a minister for the Nation of Islam (NOI), Malcolm X employed a sacred or theological apocalyptic frame in his challenges to the white American nation state. The white American jeremiad presented a narrative in which the American nation represents an ideal form of social organization and has a special role to play in the divine plan for history. Although Black jeremiahs such as Martin Luther King, Jr. have tended to be highly critical of historic and present-day oppression towards Blacks

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and have denounced the hypocrisy of white Americans in professing egalitarian and democratic values while perpetuating injustices such as slavery and segregation, African American jeremiahs have tended to assert that the American nation was founded on inherently liberating and egalitarian values and aim to move their audiences back into alignment with this foundational covenant/social contract. By contrast, Malcolm X argues that the American nation is not inherently chosen, and that its history better exemplifies the rise of evil to a position of power rather than the imperfect progress of liberal Enlightenment ideals. In accordance with NOI theology, Malcolm X presents his audiences with a narrative in which Black humanity are the "chosen people" who will eventually inherit the earth, with the white race being a race of 'devils' created by a mad scientist named Yacub. According to this narrative, whites have been allowed to rise to a position of global dominance with divine permission, but will soon be destroyed by the hand of Allah. Like David Walker, Malcolm X employs a Burkean perspective by incongruity in order to invert the narratives of white supremacy, progress, and messianism associated with many formulations of American civil religion. At the same time, however, the narrative put forward by the Nation of Islam, by placing the impetus for change on a divine agent, does not leave much room for human action. Indeed, insofar as the Nation of Islam-era Malcolm X urges his audiences to commit themselves to specific actions, these are largely limited to personal lifestyle changes, such as abstaining from drugs, alcohol, and pork, plus the decision to separate from white America in order to avoid destruction.

After his split with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X continued to employ discourse that was charged with apocalyptic energy, and to take aim at many of the

'images' that helped prop up the American nation-building project. However, his apocalypticism during this image takes a secular turn, which I argue is in many ways similar to libertarian socialist thought, which emphasizes the self-determination of autonomous local communities. During this time, Malcolm X would advocate a definition of Black nationalism that emphasized control by Black communities over their own politics and economics. He would also demonstrate an increasing level of internationalist consciousness, and urged his audiences to identify their interests with Third World liberation movements abroad rather than with white liberal civil rights supporters. In doing so, Malcolm X would demonstrate an apocalyptic iconoclasm not only towards conservative narratives of the American past, present, and future, but also toward liberal narratives which held that racial injustices were best resolved through civil rights reforms within established institutions. By 'breaking' these hegemonic images, Malcolm X aimed to break their hold over the imaginations of his audiences and to evoke a new vision of society that entailed a different set of actions for the pursuit of justice than those promoted by civil rights jeremiahs who advocated liberal reform within established institutions.

3.3. Sacred Apocalypticism of the Nation of Islam

American jeremiads present narratives of national chosenness, in which the American nation ultimately has a special role to play in the divine arc of history, despite the fact that Americans have failed to live up to the nation's foundational promise in the present. This necessarily involves the construction and reformulation of narratives of the American past, present, and future. As Andrew Murphy notes in *Prodigal Nation*, "What makes the American jeremiad American is its connection to a larger, sacred story

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intimately tied to the particularities of the nation's origins and developments" (10).

Murphy refers to these narratives as "usable pasts," and notes how these narratives are

often contested by competing jeremiadic rhetors: "[i]n constructing these usable pasts,

each jeremiad seeks to promote its own diagnosis of present ills as well as its vision of

the nation's future prospects" (128). Although apocalyptic rhetors tend to put forth a

more pessimistic view of the nation's future, apocalyptic discourse is likewise a narrative

genre which employs narratives of the national past, present, and future in order to

transform audiences' understanding of their own identities in relation to hegemonic

national identities, and to direct those audiences toward specific political actions, which

are usually at odds with the interests and values of the dominant social order.

As a minister for the Nation of Islam (NOI), Malcolm X would frequently deliver

variations on a speech alternately called "Black Man's History" or "Yacub's History."

(Like most of Malcolm's speeches, the titles were added by his editors rather than by

Malcolm himself.) Throughout this speech, Malcolm X repeatedly emphasizes the

importance of historical knowledge to Black liberation:

> The only thing that puts you and me at a disadvantage is our lack of knowledge
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> concerning history . . . In fact, you have to know history to know something about
>
> God. You have to know history to know something about God's religion. You
>
> have to know history to know something about God's people. You have to know
>
> history to know something about God's plans and God's purposes ("Black Man's
>
> History").

In keeping with O'Leary's observation that the central topoi of apocalyptic discourse are

time, evil, and authority, "Black Man's History," which, like much of Malcolm X's

rhetoric as a Nation of Islam minister, is based on NOI theology, as laid out by Elijah Muhammad, and presents a narrative explanation for how evil, in the form of the white race, rose to occupy a position of temporal authority over the course of history, and prophesizes that this evil will soon be resolved by the hand of Allah.

Like David Walker, Malcolm X, along with Elijah Muhammad and other NOI rhetors, employs a Burkean perspective by incongruity in order to destabilize hegemonic assumptions about the relationship between whiteness and the concepts of civilization and progress. As Malcolm X declared in one sermon delivered to a Black Muslim audience, "Black is *the* prime color. It is the strong color." Malcolm then goes on to derive several other premises from this statement: since Black is prime and therefore good, "the less black you are the less good you are," and since whites are "as nonblack as you can be," "the white man is therefore absolutely evil . . . and his time of destruction draws nigh!" (Lomax 55). In another sermon witnessed and reported by Lomax, Malcolm X promises that "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad will get this white, blue-eyed gorilla off your back!" (88). In previous sections, I have argued that discourse that promotes or otherwise evokes the literal destruction of the established social order is only one dimension of apocalyptic rhetoric, which also includes discourse which aims to dismantle hegemonic ideologies and replace them with alternatives that are more in tune with the values that the apocalyptic rhetor addresses/constitutes. In the excerpts quoted above, we can see Malcolm X inverting tropes associated with rhetorics of white supremacy, which was a commonplace feature of his rhetoric as a member of the Nation of Islam. As noted in the previous chapter, one standard rhetorical justification for the system of white supremacy is the idea that whites as a race are the most qualified for civilization, with

other races becoming suitable for self-determination to the extent to which they can "become" white. In its most extreme form, this rhetoric frames non-whites as bestial—that is to say, not fully human. Nation of Islam theology puts forth an elaborate history which inverts this binary, framing Blacks as the originators of civilization, and whites as a lower—even bestial, hence the "white, blue-eyed gorilla"—race that were created by a mad scientist named Yacub through a eugenics program which purportedly took place on the island of Patmos. As Malcolm X explains in "Black Man's History," this genetic engineering involved breeding together the lightest-skinned human beings until white was produced from black. According to NOI theology, this lightening of skin was accompanied by moral, physical, and mental degeneration: "Their blood became weaker, their bones became weaker, their minds became weaker, their morals became weaker. They became a wicked race; by nature wicked" ("Black Man's History").

As Louis E. Lomax observes, the doctrine of Yacub is the Nation of Islam's attempt at addressing the problem of evil, which asks how evil could exist in a universe created by a loving, benevolent God: "The doctrine concerning Yakub is the Black Muslims' attempt to answer that riddle. In biological terms of reference, accepting the Muslim notion that the black man is the original man, they must explain how the black race produced white people." (55).

Despite the inherent inferiority of the white race according to Nation of Islam doctrine, the narrative of "Black Man's History" holds that Allah has ordained that the white man should rule over the world for a set period of time before being destroyed: "The white man has taken mastery over the air, his airplanes rule the sky, his submarines and ships rule the sea, his armies rule the land. This was the man that was made six

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thousand years ago and the purpose for making him was so he could rule the world for six thousand years." By providing this counternarrative of the rise of the global system of white supremacy, Malcolm X aims to alter his audience's understanding of the American nation's role within the divine arc of history, as well as their views on which courses of political action will best resolve racial injustice. Since the nation is soon to be destroyed, in accordance with NOI doctrine, Black Muslims are urged to separate from white America rather than seek integration: "Once the American so-called Negroes have awakened to a knowledge of themselves and of their own God and of the white man, then they're on their own. And if we integrate we'll be destroyed along with them. If we separate then we have a chance for salvation" ("Black Man's History").

To this end, the Nation of Islam was successful in building some alternative institutions that could help enable Blacks manage their own communities after the coming apocalypse. Lomax describes how Black Muslims have developed their own economy, including temple restaurants which double as community centers, and assorted other small businesses: "Muslim men are watched by the Fruit [of Islam, the paramilitary branch of the NOI] and must engage in some kind of gainful employment. They are encouraged to go into small business whenever possible; they are assured of patronage from their fellow Muslims" (69). That said, the NOI's conviction that white America would soon be destroyed by Allah, and not because of any action taken on their part, often encouraged withdrawal from public affairs on the part of Black Muslims. Robert E. Terrill argues that the apocalyptic prophecy of "Black Man's History" is "a particularly hermetic brand of prophecy, severely limiting the role for human agency. It is designed to spur its audience not toward political action, but instead toward self-improvement and

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collective self-control" (18). Manning Marable notes that "[f]or all the strides the Nation had made in promoting self-improvement in the lives of its members, its political isolation had left it powerless to change the external conditions that bounded their freedoms" (177). The Nation of Islam's political isolationism and its emphasis on personal transformation instead of social activism was likely one factor contributing to the growing tensions between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, which would eventually lead to the former's split with the NOI. As Marable points out, "While the NOI stood virtually alone in its rejection of direct action, many black leaders, including Malcolm, grew increasingly enamored with the ideals and successes of Third World revolutionaries" (155).

Insofar as the theology of "Black Man's History" provides a role for Black agency, it is limited to the decision for Blacks to either separate from white America and be saved, or integrate and be destroyed along with it. The question of white agency in Malcolm X's rhetoric is more complicated. On one hand, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad taught that whites were "devils"—that is to say, evil by nature, and therefore beyond redemption. On the other hand, Malcolm X ended up frequently addressing audiences of white college students who were interested in, and sometimes even sympathetic to, what he had to say. This led him to adopt a slightly softer (or, to be less charitable, flat out contradictory) line on the possibility of white redemption. In one speech delivered at Harvard University in 1960, Malcolm X repeatedly compares white Americans to Pharaoh and calls upon them to atone for injustices toward Blacks by ceding a portion of the country to them:

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Just give us a portion of this country that we can call our own. Put us in it. Then

give us everything we need to start our own civilization here . . . that is, support

us for 20 to 25 years, until we are able to go for ourselves. This is God's plan.

This is God's solution. This is justice, and compensation for our 310 years of free

slave labor. Otherwise, America will reap the full fury of God's wrath, for her

crimes against us are many (Lomax 123).

In the passage quoted above, Malcolm X offers his white audience a choice: support the

foundation of an independent Black nation on American soil and live in peace. Elsewhere

in his rhetoric, however, he expresses deep skepticism regarding the possibility that white

Americans will choose this course of action, and often seems to view it as a foregone

conclusion that whites will *not* repent, and will therefore be destroyed. In a speech

delivered at Queens College, Malcolm proclaims, "God would not have destroyed the

slave master if he would have listened   . . . *but just as America is today*, the biblical slave

master (Pharaoh) was also too rich, too strong, and too proud to listen to Moses . . .

whom they contemptuously looked upon only as an inarticulate ex-slave" (Lomax 152;

italics mine).

Robert E. Terrill argues that one of the major limits of the Nation of Islam's

prophetic discourse was that it limits critique within the bounds of the predetermined

narrative of Yacub's History:

Malcolm X's prophetic Black Muslim rhetoric was characterized by a rigid

adherence to a predetermined narrative and a persistent call to recover an

authentic historical black identity. It presented interpretive strategies intended to

foster allegiance to this stable and codified identity as a way to prepare for

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inevitable future events, and it intended to equip the audience to be able to discern the omens that portended these events (109).

In the passages quoted in the above paragraph, we can see Malcolm bumping up against the pre-determined narrative of Nation of Islam history and theology. According to thi7s narrative, the white race is composed of devils, and is destined to be destroyed by Allah. Thus, when raising the possibility that whites *could* repent for their sins by granting Black Americans some land of their own, Malcolm X is forced to either insist that whites could not possibly make choices that would avert their own destruction, or else to stray from the official NOI narrative by allowing for the possibility of white redemption.

In *Arguing the Apocalypse*, Stephen D. O'Leary notes that "[t]he drama of the Apocalypse provides a set of symbols that allows the interpreter and his or her audience to view historical events as part of a cosmic pattern" (62). As noted previously, this pattern typically involves the historical rise of evil and its eventual fall from power. However, following Kenneth Burke, O'Leary distinguishes between two major ways of framing the apocalypse, the comic frame and the tragic frame, each of which includes a different view of the end times as well as different role for evil. In O'Leary's view, comic frame apocalypticism places the apocalypse at some unknown point in the possibly distant future while tragic frame apocalypticism evokes an "imminent and discernible" end to history. In terms of the respective views taken by the two frames to the problem of evil, O'Leary argues that "[t]ragedy conceives of evil in terms of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage, its plot moves inexorably toward sacrifice and the 'cult of the kill.' Comedy conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not toward sacrifice but to the

exposure of fallibility" (68). In the tragic frame, "[t]he sense of historical crisis [in the Book of Revelation] is intensified by a binary opposition of good and evil, forming a dialectic with no room for compromise" (64). In this frame, evil is inherent and absolute, and can only be resolved through its destruction. In the comic frame, on the other hand, "[g]ood and evil are no longer so distinct; God's will for the time being is inscrutable, making it difficult to distinguish the good guys from the bad. The conflict between good and evil, in this allegorical mode of interpretation, no longer appears as a predestined final struggle" (74). Furthermore, O'Leary contends that "[t]o be consistently comic, this interpretation [of the apocalypse] would address the *topos* of evil by defining it in terms of ignorance and foolishness (which can be overcome by exposure, education, and progress) rather than exclusively in terms of sin and guilt that require blood expiation" (84).

Nation of Islam theology would be an example of hardline tragic-frame apocalypticism. As I discuss above, NOI rhetoric frames whites as inherently and irredeemably evil, and presents their destruction by God as the inevitable solution to this evil. The possibility raised in the comic frame that evil might be the result of correctable human error is almost completely absent. Malcolm X's post-NOI rhetoric, which I will discuss in the next section, still falls within the tragic frame, as guilt still plays a major role in the narratives of evil that he presents. Nevertheless, there is *slightly* more room for error and recognition, and Malcolm's explanation of evil shifts from a metaphysical to a socioeconomic one. In other words, according to the rhetoric of the later Malcolm X, racial oppression is a result of white-dominated global political systems rather than the fact that whites are evil by nature. As he proclaims in "The Ballot or the Bullet," "[I]n

speaking like this, it doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean that we're anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn't want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us" (24-25). This secular, socioeconomic turn in Malcolm's rhetoric provides a greater role for human agency, both among Blacks and among whites, while maintaining the apocalyptic tenor of the early Malcolm X. As we shall see in the following section, however, the causes of the apocalypse have shifted: rather than the product of a divine hand, the apocalypse will instead be the result of an international conflict that has finally reached its breaking point.

3.4. Secular Apocalypticism of the Post-Nation of Islam Malcolm X

Near the beginning of "The Ballot or the Bullet," delivered April 3, 1964, shortly after his break with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X proclaims to his audience that they are situated at a critical apocalyptic moment: "If we don't do something real soon . . . we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It's one or the other in 1964. It isn't that time is running out—time has run out! 1964 threatens to be the most explosive year America has ever witnessed" (25). In contrast with Malcolm's rhetoric as an NOI minister, there is no promise of divine retribution made in this speech. Instead, the impetus is placed upon the listener to exercise her or his own agency in response to a potentially explosive global situation. Malcolm X is not always clear about the specific courses of action he believes need to be taken in order to resolve this situation, but it may be that his first priority was to change the way his audiences viewed and responded to the world around them. Terrill argues that Malcolm's rhetoric can itself be seen as a form of political action: "Redefining the terms by which a people understand themselves and their situation and demonstrating for them the modes of judgment through which to invent

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emancipatory responses appropriate to those redefinitions are actions with far-reaching and radical potential" (3). I have previously argued that, by rhetorically presenting audiences with the possibility of the nation's impending destruction, and thereby destabilizing hegemonic understandings of American civil religion, which typically assigns enduring historical significance to the American nation, apocalyptic rhetors are able to point their audiences toward courses of action that fall outside the boundaries that the jeremiad establishes for legitimate dissent. Furthermore, they are also able to redefine chosenness by framing some group other than Americans as the chosen people with a special role to play in history. As we shall see below, Malcolm X's post-NOI apocalypticism attempts to construct an international chosen people and direct them towards actions and attitudes that have the potential to destabilize the current hegemonic ideologies and institutions and bring more just alternatives into being to replace them.

While many Black civil rights leaders aimed at the full inclusion of African Americans within existing institutions and framed racial oppression as a deviation from America's founding promise, Malcolm X, in "The Ballot or the Bullet" and other speeches, presents us with a narrative of American history in which "[I]t is the government itself, the government of America, that is responsible for the oppression and exploitation and degradation of black people in this country . . . This government has failed the Negro. This so-called democracy has failed the Negro. And all these white liberals have definitely failed the Negro" (31). Elsewhere in the speech, he frames Blacks as "victims of Americanism" and denounces American democracy as "nothing but disguised hypocrisy" (26). What Malcolm aims to accomplish through this rhetoric is a paradigm shift in the minds of his audiences after which they will no longer see the "race

problem" in America as a domestic issue but rather as an international one. As he contends in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, "What makes the black man think of himself as only an internal United States issue is just a catch-phrase, two words, 'civil rights' . . . if the black man will start thinking about his *human* rights, and then start thinking about himself as one of the world's great peoples, he will see he has a case for the United Nations" (179). As noted above, Malcolm X had, by this time, taken a great deal of inspiration for Third World liberation movements abroad, and had come to see them as potential allies in the struggle against American racism, capitalism, and imperialism.

In "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm X reminds his listeners that "[w]hen you take your case to Washington, D.C., you're taking it to the criminal who's responsible." On the other hand, he argues that if Blacks expand their perspective to encompass the international scene, they can work in concert with other people of color to resist the injustices that result from the policies of the American government:

> Expand the civil rights struggle to the level of human rights, take it into the United Nations, where our African brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Asian brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Latin-American brothers can throw their weight on our side, and where 800 million Chinamen are sitting there waiting to throw their weight on our side (35).

By encouraging American Blacks to view their struggle as inherently linked to these movements abroad, Malcolm X aims to mobilize people of color around the world into a concerted movement for justice and to open up new possibilities for reform that go beyond the ones that had been put forward by civil rights liberals. As in the American

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jeremiad, Malcolm X is here concerned with identity formation, specifically with the construction of a "chosen people" who will exercise their agency against injustice. However, the jeremiad tends to take it for granted that the American people are the chosen ones, and that it is they who have the power to end injustice. By contrast, Malcolm X's apocalyptic discourse destabilizes the white-dominated American establishment's claim to chosenness by framing the nation instead as the oppressor of people of color around the world.

Throughout the final years of his life, Malcolm X would travel several times to Africa in an attempt to convince African leaders that they could find common ground with the African American freedom struggle. These attempts were not always successful, which may demonstrate that the international movement of people of color united by their common oppression by the white-dominated Western world is more of a rhetorical construction than a lived reality. Nevertheless, part of the constitutive dimension of apocalyptic discourse is its ability to call new forms of identity into being, so although such an international movement may not have existed, it is important to recognize that the goal was to *create* one by changing audiences' perceptions of the nature of racial oppression and the means appropriate to ending it so that an international struggle against white hegemony *could* become a reality. In his speech "An Appeal to African Heads of State," Malcolm X cites several cases where Africans have been brutally assaulted while travelling in the United States and then stresses that the burden of racial oppression is shared by Africans and African Americans in order to encourage his audience to start viewing the struggle of Africans against First and Second world imperialism as interconnected with the struggles of African Americans in the United States: "Our

problem is your problem. It is not a Negro problem, nor an American problem. This is a world problem; a problem for humanity" (75). In keeping with Malcolm's belief that racial oppression in the United States could not be resolved by liberal reform within established domestic institutions, he discusses the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), which he had recently founded, and whose aim was to "'internationalize' [the freedom struggle] by placing it at the level of human rights. Our freedom struggle is no longer confined to the domestic jurisdiction of the United States government" (76). Despite his conviction that the struggle against racial oppression in the United States was intertwined with the struggle against imperialism in Third World nations, Malcolm X recognizes that not all members of his audience share this perception. Thus, he urges the leaders he addresses not to "escape from European colonialism only to become more enslaved by deceitful, 'friendly' American dollarism" (77). As in "Black Man's History," the audience is posed with a choice. In "Black Man's History," the choice was separation vs. integration, and the inevitable consequences were salvation and damnation, respectively. In "An Appeal to African Heads of State," however, the choice is now between collaboration with American racism and imperialism or resistance against those forces. In this later speech, however, the impending apocalypse is less of a certainty, as it no longer depends upon the actions of a divine hand, but rather upon the agency of the audiences Malcolm addresses with the intention of encouraging them to exercise this agency toward the end purpose of revolutionizing worldwide social, political, and economic relations rather than helping to perpetuate current systems of domination.

The apocalyptic imagery of "The Ballot or the Bullet" is intensified in a speech entitled "The Black Revolution," delivered in April 1964 to a meeting of the Militant

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Labor Forum in New York City (45). One common trope of apocalyptic discourse is the tendency to read current events as "signs" of the coming apocalypse, and in that vein, Malcolm X opens this speech by interpreting the discourse of a "population explosion" of dark-skinned peoples as evidence of the coming apocalypse: "in most of the thinking and planning of whites in the West today, it's easy to see the fear in their minds . . . that the masses of dark people in the East, who already outnumber them, will continue to increase and multiply and grow until they eventually overrun the people of the West like a human sea, a human tide, a human flood" (46). In keeping with the growing internationalism of the post-NOI Malcolm X, he directs his audiences to view contemporary racial conflict in the United States as directly intertwined with issues of global imperialism, and notes that "the racial sparks that are ignited here in America today could easily turn into a flaming fire abroad, which means it could engulf all the people of this earth into a giant race war" (48). While the apocalyptic rhetorics of David Walker and the early Malcolm X framed the apocalypse as something that would be brought about by a divine hand, the apocalypse evoked by the later Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party (to be discussed in the next chapter) is entirely secular in nature, and takes the form of a climactic struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors.

In "The Black Revolution," Malcolm X positions himself as a prophet who reads the "signs of the times" in order to inform his audience about how history will play out in the near future. At the beginning of this speech, he distances himself from responsibility for inciting violence by stating that he is merely observing the consequences of certain trends that are already in motion: "I hope that this little conversation tonight about the black revolution won't cause many of you to accuse us of igniting it when you find it at

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your doorstep" (45). At the same time, his rhetoric, like most apocalyptic discourse, has a constitutive dimension. By framing the current domestic and international political scenes in a particular way, Malcolm X aims to persuade his audience to identify themselves as supporters of the philosophy of Black nationalism, which he defines as follows: "The political philosophy of black nationalism means that the black man should control the politics and the politicians in his own community . . . The economic philosophy of black nationalism . . . means that we should control the economy of our community" ("The Ballot or the Bullet" 38). Although this definition is relatively vague when it comes to specific actions that should be taken, it does present Black audiences and their white allies with an alternative set of goals to pursue when it comes to the struggle for racial justice. Indeed, the Black Panther Party would later pick up where Malcolm X left off and attempt to build a coalition that could fight for the decentralization of political and economic power in order that local communities could govern their own affairs. In "The Black Revolution," Malcolm X assigns to Black nationalists the role of chosen people, who have the capacity to play a leading role in bringing about the apocalyptic moment in which the current era comes to an end and the new one begins. Malcolm notes that "[t]he black nationalists to many of you may represent only a minority in the community. And therefore you might have a tendency to classify them as something insignificant. But just as the fuse is the smallest part . . . in the powder keg, it is yet that little fuse that ignites the entire powder keg" (47). As in Malcolm's Nation of Islam rhetoric, this ultimate conflagration is often framed as something inevitable, and yet he does present his white audiences with the possibility of averting the coming bloodshed through choosing the right course of action.

As noted by Breitman in his introduction to this speech, the audience at the Militant Labor Forum "was around three-quarters white. Most of it responded favorably to the talk" (44). Given the venue, it is to be expected that Malcolm X's audience for this speech mostly held radical and/or socialist views, which would have predisposed them to be sympathetic toward Malcolm X's definition of Black nationalism as self-governance by Black communities as well as his revolutionary rhetoric. Robert Terrill is correct when he notes that "Malcolm never, in any of his recorded speeches or statements, urged his audience to become socialists. Indeed the critical attitude that Malcolm X would foster in his audiences after his split with the Nation of Islam is one that would be as suspicious of socialism as it would be of any other codified, systematized set of precepts" (14). However, there are enough similarities between the nascent political philosophy that Malcolm X would begin to express near the end of his life and libertarian socialist thought to make this connection worth exploring. (I use the term "libertarian socialism" to denote strains of socialist thought which, like Malcolm X's definition of Black nationalism, emphasize decentralization of political and economic power in order to enable self-determination on the part of autonomous local communities, as opposed to totalitarian communism, where economies are managed by a centralized state.) This is especially true considering that my purpose throughout this study has been to explore the ways in which apocalyptic discourse allows protest rhetors to advocate causes that fall outside the boundaries for legitimate reform established by American civil religion.

3.5. Conclusion

As I argue in the introduction, by elevating secular values to the level of the sacred, the jeremiad works to close down reforms such as Black nationalism and

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libertarian socialism that do not conform with the values of liberal bourgeois democracy. As Howard-Pitney notes, Black jeremiahs such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders did have some level of success when it came to advocating reform within the terms of American civil religion, the middle-class, bourgeois values central to this mode of discourse put limits on the types of reform that could successfully be advocated through the jeremiad: "At its height, reform went only so far as to guarantee civil and legal equality and mainly affected the unique Southern caste system. When black jeremiahs expanded their agendas to include structural economic changes that would reconstruct the North, too, a reforms consensus among blacks and white Northerners failed to materialize" (217). In Howard-Pitney's view, this resulted from the fact that these economic changes would almost inevitably have required the government to take a hand in redistributing private property and providing expanded social welfare programs, which "most whites regarded . . . as illegitimate invasions of personal property rights" (217). Since a Puritan bourgeois ethic is a central component of American civil religion, one's economic success tends to be seen as a reflection of an individual's personal moral character rather than heavily determined by external social, economic, and political factors. Thus, since *laissez-faire* capitalism is usually seen as a central part of the "American Way," there is good reason to be skeptical that substantive social reforms to restrict the scope of free enterprise and redistribute wealth and power to marginalized communities can be successfully advocated within the boundaries of American civil religion.

Thus, we have come full circle to the concept of image-making with which I opened this chapter. The American jeremiad and American civil religion rest upon

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specific narratives that (re-)tell the story of the nation's origins and development. Depending on how one understands the story of the American nation, different approaches to resolving social problems may or may not be acceptable. If one assumes, as in the jeremiad, that the American nation, and its associated political and economic systems of liberal democracy and *laissez-faire* capitalism are not only fundamentally good, but also represent an ideal form of social organization, this limits the types of reforms that can be advocated within jeremiadic discourse. Apocalyptic rhetors are therefore involved in the work of breaking and remaking images of the American nation in order to open up new forms of identity and political possibilities, which their audiences are called upon to identify themselves with as an alternative to previous modes of identity.

Malcolm X employs apocalyptic discourse for these purposes both during and after his career as a Nation of Islam minister, although there are some significant differences between these two eras of his life. Malcolm's rhetoric during his time with the Nation of Islam emphasizes divine retribution as an inevitable response to racial injustice in America. In doing so, he crafts an alternative narrative, or "image," of America's role in world history, as well as the role played by the white race in general. Where Enlightenment political theory had framed the rise of the West to global prominence as evidence of "progress," Nation of Islam theology, like much apocalyptic discourse, frames the West's rise as the ascendancy of evil to a position of temporal authority. Malcolm thus urged his Black audiences to separate from white America in order to avoid being destroyed along with it. However, this apocalypticism posed a very limited role for human agency, as the apocalypse was to come about as the result of

divine initiative rather than human action. Following his split with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X's apocalypticism shifted into a more secular idiom, which is in many ways similar to libertarian socialist thought. Once again, the narrative "image" of the West's rise to prominence emphasizes the exploitation of Blacks and other people of color, but this time in an idiom that is more socio-economic than theological. Likewise, the role for human agency is much more pronounced: since there is no guarantee of divine intervention, Malcolm X adopts a broader, international perspective, and seeks to bring together a coalition of allies into a new "chosen people" who can work to end the international declension of Western racism and imperialism.

CHAPTER 4

REVOLUTIONARY APOCALYPTICISM OF THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

4.1. Introduction

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was founded in Oakland, California in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale (Jeffries, ix). The founding Panthers had grown disillusioned with the ability and willingness of the United States government to significantly improve the lives of African Americans. The Panthers initially coalesced around the issue of armed self-defense against police brutality in Black communities, but as the organization grew, the BPP would branch out to pursue a wide range of "survival programs" designed to improve the lives of lower-class Blacks in concrete ways, the most successful of which was perhaps their Breakfast for Children program. Where civil rights reformers such as Martin Luther King, Jr. had employed jeremiadic discourse to argue for the full inclusion of Blacks within the existing social order, the Black Panthers collectively put forth a large body of apocalyptic rhetoric which denounced the American establishment as a corrupt empire responsible for the oppression not only of African Americans, but of many other marginalized groups as well. Black Panther rhetoric was apocalyptic both in that it evoked and advocated a literal revolution to overturn the established social order, but also in that this rhetoric encouraged African Americans to join together at the level of local communities in order to build alternative institutions to those of the American nation state. To this end, the Panthers followed the lead of the post-NOI Malcolm X in emphasizing an international coalition of the oppressed to resist the racist and imperialistic tendencies that they believed to be inherent to the American nation/empire-building project. Unlike other contemporary Black nationalist groups such

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as the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), which addressed their rhetoric exclusively to African Americans, the Black Panther Party aimed to constitute a coalition of resistance groups representing constituencies including Third World liberationists, Chicano/a groups, feminists, gay liberationists, and white student radicals.

Like Malcolm X, following his split with the Nation of Islam, the Black Panthers' apocalypticism was a secular one which included few religious themes beyond the frequent references to America as Babylon. As with the later Malcolm X, however, apocalyptic themes of chosenness are present along with O'Leary's topoi of time, evil, and authority. As with the later Malcolm X, the 'apocalypse' evoked takes the form of a revolution that aims to overturn the current hegemonic social order and restore power to local communities in a decentralized form. In formulating its apocalyptic worldview, the BPP's ideological leaders, including Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, drew heavily from Marxist-Leninist theory and practice and emphasized class struggle in addition to anti-racism.

Bercovitch notes that the American jeremiad is "a powerful vehicle of middle-class ideology," with its endorsement of laissez-faire capitalism and its belief that one's material success reflects one's individual merit (28). By contrast, the Black Panther Party framed itself as an organization rooted in and representing the interests of lower-class Black communities. Following theorist Frantz Fanon, and contra Marx, the Panthers emphasized the revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat, a class comprised of "the unemployed and those living on the margins of society" (J. Smith, 35). As Eldridge Cleaver defined them, "[t]he Lumpen proletariat are all those who have no secure

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relationship or vested interest in the means of production and the institutions of a capitalist society," who are perpetually either un- or under-employed, but also including, and more problematic for the Party, "the so-called 'Criminal Element,' those who live by their wits, existing off that which they rip off" (qtd. in Booker 345). Newton and Seale believed that the lumpen class was "most likely to bring about change for they had little investment to continue to perpetuate the status quo" (35-36). Although Newton and many of the other founding members of the BPP, including Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver, were college educated intellectuals, the BPP directed most of its early recruiting efforts toward lower-income urban Black communities, arguing that the BPP was more capable of promoting meaningful change for low-income Blacks that civil rights liberals (Bloom and Martin 37). Believing that the political and economic institutions of the United States were inherently corrupt and would obstruct any meaningful efforts at change, the Panthers advanced a libertarian socialist platform which aimed to challenge hegemonic institutions and to reconstruct alternative institutions at the level of local communities.

To this end, the Panthers advanced a large body of rhetoric in both spoken and printed form. However, the Panthers accompanied this rhetoric with a wide range of grassroots social programs, the success of which they hoped would inspire other communities to follow suit in taking control of their own affairs. In "The Correct Handling of a Revolution," Huey Newton proclaims that "[t]he main function of the party is to awaken the people and to teach them the strategic method of resisting the power structure" (42). In order to accomplish this, Newton argues, it is important for a revolutionary party to lead the people not only with their words, but also with their actions. Later in "The Correct Handling of a Revolution," Newton writes,

The masses are constantly looking for a guide, a Messiah, to liberate them from

the hands of the oppressor. The vanguard party must exemplify the characteristics

of worthy leadership. Millions and millions of oppressed people might not know

members of the vanguard party personally, but they will gain through an indirect

acquaintance the proper strategy for liberation via the mass media and the

physical activities of the party (44).

Although Black apocalyptic rhetors such as David Walker and Malcolm X have, to one

extent or another, advocated armed resistance against racial oppression, none of these

figures went as far as the Black Panther Party in seeking to implement concrete measures

which aimed to transform social relations in the United States and throughout the world. I

argue in previous chapters that despite the apocalyptic future evoked in the rhetoric of

David Walker and Malcolm X, the primary impact of their rhetoric was in transforming

the consciousness of their audiences in terms of how they view their identities relative to

the American nation state. The Black Panther Party, on the other hand, made a significant

impact not only through their theory but also through their practices. Black Panthers

aimed to implement concrete solutions at a grassroots level to problems facing black

communities such as police brutality, child hunger, and the fact that the American

educational system and mass media retold the narrative of America from a hegemonic

white perspective.

My next section will explore the narratives of the American past, present, and

future that emerge in the BPP's rhetoric. Like David Walker and Malcolm X, the Black

Panthers employed apocalyptic rhetoric to dismantle hegemonic white formulations of

American identity and to provide their supporters with an alternative vision of social

reform to that pursued through civil rights jeremiads. Drawing on Joel Olson's discussion

of political imagination in *The Abolition of White Democracy*, I will demonstrate how

Panther rhetoric works to expand the range of social possibilities available to the

imaginations of its audiences. I will then discuss how the BPP's grassroots social welfare

programs fit into the Panthers' vision for the apocalyptic transformation of society.

Panther programs such as the Free Breakfast for Children program were attempts to

create parallel institutions, which were intended to eventually take over many of the

functions traditionally performed by institutions such as businesses and the state. I argue

that these programs can be seen as examples of apocalypticism-in-action, as they

demonstrate specific actions that can be taken to resist oppressive social structures,

organize supporters into a movement with a platform of specific actions that can be taken

to transform society into one that is more just and equitable, and, when they succeed, they

challenge the assumptions of legitimacy and exceptionalism associated with the

American nation building project by demonstrating the viability of alternative modes of

social organization. Next, I will turn to the Black Panther Party's police patrol initiatives.

I will demonstrate how Panther rhetoric frequently employed a Burkean perspective by

incongruity to draw attention to police brutality in Black communities. I will discuss the

issue of legitimacy, and how the Panthers attempted to convince Black communities that

the BPP were more legitimate representatives of their interests than the state police force.

The Black Panther Party had some level of success in achieving this goal, especially

during the first four or five years of its existence. However, a number of factors,

including government repression, violent in-fighting within the Party, involvement in

criminal activities, and increasingly centralized and authoritarian leadership undermined

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the trust that the BPP aimed to build among the communities it claimed to represent and led to the decline of the organization.

Finally, I will turn to the BPP's efforts at coalition building, through which they were able to attract a broad coalition of supporters during the initial years of their tenure as an organization. These efforts culminated in the 1970 Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, in which representatives of a diverse range of radical groups, including other racial liberation movements, women's liberation groups, and gay liberation groups came together in Philadelphia to draft a new Constitution which would be more representative of their interests than the old one. The RPCC represents a bold attempt at rewriting the social contract with the intention of transforming an old, corrupt society into a new egalitarian one. As such, it represents an instance of what George Katsiaficas calls the eros effect, in which "millions of people . . . see beyond the social reality of their day—to imagine a better world and fight for it" (7). For a brief period of time, it seems that many within Black communities, and within other oppressed groups, as well as many white radicals, felt that their interests were no longer served by the United States government. However, with the end of the Vietnam War and the fall of many barriers to economic and political participation by Blacks, many of the BPP's initial supporters no longer felt the same urgency for revolution, eroding the BPP's coalition. I conclude that the BPP's discourse can be seen as an example of secular apocalyptic prophecy, as it imagines an alternative vision of society to that envisioned by dominant institutions and points its audiences toward actions that could potentially culminate in an apocalyptic moment in which a new social order will emerge to take the place of the old one.

4.2. 'All Power to All People': The Black Panthers and the Promise of American

Democracy

Central to American civil religion has been the assumption that the American nation was founded on inherently democratic ideals, however imperfectly realized in practice. As Howard-Pitney notes in *The African American Jeremiad*, Black jeremiahs including Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. have appealed to these ideals in their advocacy of liberal reform, while Black nationalists have tended to be more skeptical of the American government to ameliorate the degraded and oppressed condition of American Blacks (12). As Andrew Murphy notes in *Prodigal Nation*, "political narratives," or "moralized tales about how and why the past has led to the present" are a central component of the American jeremiad (110). Jeremiahs, both Black and white, employ the narrative pattern of promise, decline, and a call to repentance in order to situate audience members within a narrative of American history in which the jeremiah calls upon them to renew their devotion to America's founding covenant by taking particular actions within the confines of existing institutions. Apocalyptic rhetoric, as Stephen D. O'Leary points out in *Arguing the Apocalypse*, is also a genre of discourse that relies heavily upon narratives about how the national past has led to the present. Where the jeremiad constructs the American nation as having fallen away from its covenant, the apocalyptic mode is concerned with explaining how evil has come to occupy positions of worldly authority, and how that evil will fall from power in the future (51). In contrast with the African American jeremiad's optimism regarding the foundational promise and ultimate redemption of the American nation, African American apocalyptic rhetoric tends to tell a narrative of the American past that emphasizes

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injustices such as slavery, genocide, and racial subjugation as foundational to the American nation building project as opposed to the emphasis on liberal Enlightenment values found in the white American jeremiad and often evoked in the African American jeremiad.

Progressive jeremiads typically urge their audiences toward liberal reform by framing injustices such as slavery and segregation as contradictory with America's professed democratic ideals. As Howard-Pitney notes, and as discussed in the previous chapter, African American jeremiahs affiliated with the civil rights movement successfully employed the jeremiad to end segregation in the South, but were less successful when it came to advocating economic reforms that would fundamentally restructure the distribution of wealth in America (217). Howard-Pitney attributes the failure of civil rights jeremiahs to attain the support of white liberals for these reforms to the fact that "most whites regarded such proposals as illegitimate invasions of personal property rights" (218). This resistance is consistent both with the jeremiad's emphasis on capitalist entrepreneurship and private property rights as well as with Olson's observations about how the white democracy obscures the racialized nature of American citizenship. Olson contends that civil rights reforms and the ideology of colorblindness have not eliminated white privilege, but rather, "the colorblind state makes [race] *pre-political*: it understands races as formed prior to the public sphere through essentially 'private' or natural means such as biology, ancestry, culture, or even personal choice" (72). The assumption that American capitalism provides equal economic opportunities to all, although a pillar of American civil religion, runs counter to the long history of economic exploitation of Blacks by American whites. Nonetheless, the widespread

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assumption that one's economic wealth reflects individual initiative and talent rather than systemic privilege or lack thereof works to delegitimize reform initiatives based upon a 'socialist' redistribution of wealth.

Enlightenment political theory has tended to justify the existence of the state through the theoretical construct of the social contract. Typically, social contract theories explain the emergence of society out of an anarchic, uncivilized "state of nature" through the rational consent of the governed. Charles W. Mills' book *The Racial Contract* aims to explain the historical contradiction between the democratic ideals professed by Western Enlightenment thinkers and the persistence of white supremacy as a global political reality over the past several centuries. Mills contends that traditional social contract theories work to obfuscate the historical roles of white supremacy and racial subjugation by putting forth narratives of the rise of European "civilization" out of the state of nature and into a position of global dominance that emphasize individual traits supposedly possessed by Europeans and ignore the role played by European conquest, slavery, and genocide and genocide against people of color: "It is still assumed that rationalism and science, innovativeness and inventiveness found their special home here, as against the intellectual stagnation and traditionalism of the rest of the world, so that Europe was therefore destined in advance to occupy the special position in global history it has" (33-34). The historical narratives provided by social contract theories tend to frame self-governance as a right of those who have attained "civilization," and then define "civilization" around white European values. The end result, as Mills puts it, is that "[w]hite men who are (definitionally) already part of society encounter non-whites who are not, who are 'savage' residents of a state of nature characterized in terms of

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wilderness, jungle, wasteland. These the white men bring partially into society as subordinate citizens or exclude on reservations or deny the existence of or exterminate" (13). The end result is that the social contract, rather than being an agreement between democratic citizens is in reality "a contract between those categorized as white *over* the nonwhites, who are the objects rather than the subjects of the agreement" (12).

Many of the Black Panther Party's initiatives were directed toward rewriting the social contract. Where civil rights advocates had often launched jeremiads aimed at the integration of Blacks within established institutions, the BPP urged its audiences to drastically reconsider their view of the American nation state and encouraged them to pursue actions that were intended to culminate in the empowerment of local communities. In the eyes of the Panther leadership, civil rights activism had failed to halt the oppression of Blacks at the hands of the United States government. The narrative of contemporary American race relations that emerges in Panther rhetoric is one in which the very existence of Black communities is threatened by a racist, oppressive government. Black audiences are then called upon to take action to reverse this trend.

"In Defense of Self-Defense: Executive Mandate Number One," was drafted by Huey Newton and read by Bobby Seale on the steps of the Sacramento Capitol in May 1967 in response to the Mulford Gun Bill, which would criminalize the Panthers' tactic of armed patrols of the police. The statement opens by situating the Mulford Gun Bill within a history of repression of Blacks by the American governments. Audiences are called upon to "take careful note of the racist California Legislature, which is now considering legislation aimed at keeping the Black people disarmed and powerless at the very same time that racist police agencies throughout the country are intensifying the

terror, brutality, murder, and repression of Black people" (40). Like other apocalyptic rhetorics, this document points to 'signs of the times,' which the rhetor interprets as portending an apocalyptic moment. Next, the Executive Mandate turns to the broader context of American history, and frames police brutality in Black communities not as an aberration from an inherent American democratic promise, but rather as a continuation of America's racist past:

> The enslavement of Black people from the very beginning of this country, the genocide practiced on the American Indians and the confining of the survivors on reservations, the savage lynching of thousands of Black men and women, the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and now the cowardly massacre in Vietnam, all testify to the fact that towards people of color the racist power structure of America has but one policy: repression, genocide, terror and the big stick (40).

The document next turns toward efforts at civil rights reform, which the Panthers argue have been ineffective at halting the rising tide of American racism and imperialism: "Black people have begged, prayed, petitioned, demonstrated and everything else to get the racist power structure to right the wrongs which have been historically perpetuated against Black people. All of these efforts have been answered by more repression, deceit, and hypocrisy" (40). Finally, the document concludes with a call to Blacks to join with the BPP in resisting these trends: "The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense believes that the time has come for Black people to arm themselves against this terror before it is too late. The pending Mulford Act brings the hour of doom one step closer . . . We believe that the Black communities of America must rise up as one man to halt the progression of

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a trend that leads inevitably to their total destruction" (40-41). The BPP's framing of the Mulford Act situates it not as an isolated event, but rather as part of a long-running pattern of the American government's repression of Blacks and other people of color.

Like Malcolm X before them, the Black Panthers believed that the social contract, as it existed in America at the time, had fundamentally failed to advance the interests of African Americans, even despite the successes of civil rights activists. Abandoning the jeremiadic appeals to American civil religion characteristic of civil rights rhetoric, the Ten Point Program of the Black Panther Party advances a new social contract which attempts to realize Malcolm X's definition of Black nationalism as when Black communities control their own politics and economics. The first point of the program declares, "We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black community" ("October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program" 2). The subsequent points advance a series of demands, many of which run counter to elements of American civil religion. For instance, the second point of the platform demands "full employment for our people" and declares that "[w]e believe that if the white American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living." The fourth point of the program demands "decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings." Again, the Panthers contend that "if the white landlords will not give decent housing to our black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives" (40-41). Both of these demands run counter to the spirit of American civil religion, with its

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emphasis on *laissez-faire* capitalism and its belief that individual initiative is the determining factor in one' economic success rather than structural factors.

In addition to the economic demands listed above, the BPP's Ten Point Program demanded several other reconfigurations to the social contract, including "education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society," trials for Black defendants by "a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities," and exemption of Black men from service in the U.S. government (40-41). Under this last point, the platform explains that "[w]e believe that Black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America" (41). Like Malcolm X, who in his later speeches encourages Blacks to view themselves as part of a revolutionary coalition with people of color throughout the world, the Panthers here express the idea that African Americans share more common interests with people of color in the Third World than with white liberals in the United States. Indeed, Panther rhetoric often expressed the idea that Black communities within the United States should be seen as internal colonies of the American empire. Echoing Malcolm X's distrust of the American government's goodwill toward Blacks as well as his call for the UN to take action against America's subjugation of Blacks, the tenth point of the "Black Panther Party Platform and Program" demands, "as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny" (4). As I explore later in this chapter, the Panthers did indeed attempt to hold a

referendum on the future of the social contract in America, which took the form of the 1970 Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. This convention attracted not only Black radicals, but also representatives of liberation groups representing a diverse range of constituencies who all believed that the existing social contract had failed to fill their needs and the moment had come to draft a new one that could take its place.

In *The Abolition of White Democracy*, Joel Olson argues that not only was the degree of liberty and democratic participation afforded to white men at America's founding dependent on the racial and economic subjugation of Blacks (xv), but dominant American constructions of democracy also "shape how the white citizen understands democracy":

> The democratic problem of the white citizen is that the tension between the desire for equality and the desire to maintain one's racial standing results in a narrow political imagination that constrains the way white citizens understand citizenship (as status rather than participation), freedom (as negative liberty), and equality (as opportunity rather than social equality). The white imagination exhibits little incentive to expand participation in public affairs because it construes citizenship as an identity to possess rather than a power to employ (xxi).

If ideologies such as American civil religion and social contract theory work to constrain the political imagination within certain predefined bounds of acceptability, Black Panther rhetoric aimed to capture the imagination of its audiences and provide them with an alternative vision of America's future and then to direct that audience toward specific actions that would lay the groundwork for the apocalyptic transformation of society. A

significant portion of Black Panther rhetoric advocated violent and immediate revolution, and this is the portion that has tended to survive in the American political imagination. However, many of the Party's initiatives were also directed toward building parallel institutions that could help lay the groundwork for the transformation of society. During the initial years of 1966-68, the BPP primarily emphasized armed self-defense against police aggression, which I discuss in the next section. However, from the launch of the Breakfast for Children program in late 1968 and onward, Panther activities became increasingly focused on grassroots social programs (Bloom and Martin 181). JoNina M. Abron, former Panther and editor of *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service* from 1972 to 1981, lists these programs as:

> [P]olice-alert patrols, *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service,* the breakfast for children program, free medical clinics, the Oakland Community School, free busing to prison [for visiting friends and relatives of inmates], the free food program, the free clothing and shoes program, the free ambulance program, sickle-cell anemia testing, Seniors Against a Fearful Environment (S.A.F.E.), and the free pest control program (179).

This list is worth quoting in full because it gives a sense of the wide range of social issues the Panthers were attempting to provide solutions for. These community programs were intended to provide Blacks who had become disillusioned with the ability and/or willingness of the American government to address their needs with alternative institutions that could eventually take the place of current hegemonic institutions. These programs were thus part of an attempt to bring about an apocalyptic moment in which the

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Panthers aimed to lead Blacks and a coalition of their allies in a movement for the radical transformation of American society from the grassroots up.

Bloom and Martin note that not only did these programs provide essential services to disadvantaged communities and help build solidarity among Party members despite increasing state repression, but they also helped to "[convey] the insufficiency of the capitalist welfare state to meet even to most basic needs of its citizens, especially its black citizens" (196). They further note that these programs should not be seen merely as reform efforts within established institutions due to the fact that they aimed to fundamentally alter the American social contract and its attendant system of power relations: "[t]hese kinds of formal programs constituted concrete steps to advance the best interests of the black nation within the American nation. Black Panthers saw their own community-based programs as part of their commitment to a black nation-building project, an expression of the Party's revolutionary nationalism" (197). The apocalyptic challenge that the Black Panther Party posed to the American nation state, then, aimed to transform social relations along a number of dimensions. Like David Walker and Malcolm X, the BPP's rhetoric was constitutive rhetoric which aimed to dismantle formulations of Black and white American identities that had been handed down by the hegemonic social order and to construct new forms of identity which call for an alternative set of actions to be taken than those promoted by the old ideologies. Beyond this, the Panthers also devoted a great deal of organizational energy and talent to building parallel social institutions at the grassroots level which would perform functions currently carried out by state and federal governments, including the policing of communities, the provision of education and healthcare, and providing food, clothing, and shelter to those

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in need. These programs represent no less than a grassroots effort at rewriting the social contract. Although revolution has traditionally been viewed as a violent overthrow of those in power, these efforts at organizing grassroots social welfare programs were no less revolutionary, and likely hold more promise for the successful democratic transformation of society due to their function as an alternative infrastructure that could, if successfully implemented, eventually take over many of functions traditionally performed by governments and corporations under the existing social order.

4.3. Watching the Watchmen: The Black Panther Party and Community Control of Police

Although the BPP would seek to implement a diverse array of community-based initiatives over the course of its existence, the issue that led to the founding of the Black Panther Party and inspired many of its early actions was police brutality in African American communities. The BPP originated with armed and uniformed patrols of Panthers who would monitor police activities in Black communities and record any instances of police brutality. This was legal under California law, which permitted citizens to open carry rifles and handguns and to observe police officers from a reasonable distance (Bloom and Martin, 39).

In creating this initiative, BPP co-founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale were inspired by a group called the Community Alert Patrol (CAP), which was organized in Watts in 1965 following the Watts rebellion in order to monitor and report acts of police brutality committed against members of Black communities. CAP members patrolled Watts in order to monitor police, but since members were unarmed, "CAP was not left alone to carry out its activities . . . it was vulnerable to harassment and abuse by the police" (Bloom and Martin, 39). In 1967, Newton, along with Bobby Seale and

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Bobby Hutton began to patrol Oakland in a similar fashion, except that they were armed. This quickly led to a series of tense confrontations with police, who usually backed down once the Panthers made it clear that their actions were within their legal rights, but that they were willing to use their weapons in self-defense if threatened. The Panthers' willingness to stand up to police piqued the interest of many local Blacks, many of whom had themselves been victimized by police officers, or knew someone who had. However, the Panthers' ranks remained small until the shooting of Denzil Dowell by police, and the subsequent indifference of the police department to Dowell's family's skepticism regarding the official police version of events, galvanized the Black Oakland community around the issue of police violence in Black communities and led to a surge in the Party's membership as the Panthers attempted to organize the Oakland community against police brutality (45-50).

Nikhil Pal Singh notes that the Panthers' patrols of the police were much more than acts of armed resistance against the abuse of police authority. Rather, their community policing efforts can be seen as part of a radical and highly visible challenge to state authority and legitimacy:

By arming themselves with guns and law books and observing police behavior, the Panthers actually enacted a profound transvaluation of conventional racist imagery by exposing the most visible representatives of the law and the crucial transmission belt of state power as the symbols of uniformed and armed lawlessness. Asserting their own right to organized violence, the Panthers began to police the police, while emphasizing their own 'disciplined adherence to existing law.' Invoking the United States Constitution, employing a logic of

policing and law against the police and the law, the Panthers thus posed a

stunning challenge to the legitimacy of state power in Black communities (81).

In Burkean terms, the Panthers employed perspective by incongruity extensively in order

to frame the representatives of the American government as illegitimate oppressors and to

attempt to persuade Black communities to accept the Black Panther Party as their

legitimate representatives. For instance, it was the BPP who introduced the term 'pig' as

an epithet for a police officer, or for an oppressor in general. A definition published

anonymously in *The Black Panther* newspaper defines a pig as "an ill-natured beast who

has no respect for law and order, a foul traducer who's usually found masquerading as a

victim of an unprovoked attack" ("The Black Panther: Voice of the Party" 14). Where the

hegemonic imagination of the white American nation has often cast African Americans

as a threat to 'law and order,' the above definition employs perspective by incongruity in

order to 'flip the script' and to draw attention to the fact that, in reality, it was often white

police officers who disregarded the law in their acts of brutality against Blacks. An

editorial attributed only to Candy and also published in *The Black Panther* makes this

point more bluntly. Candy argues that the police "are merely an extension of the state that

exists to keep the minorities in a state of neo-colonialism, and all people oppressed and

exploited. This means they must not allow for any disturbances of the status quo, which

would be detrimental to the interests of this capitalist, exploitative state" ("The Black

Panther: Voice of the Party" 35). Thus, the Panthers' "move for the decentralization of

the police department is just one means of attacking the existence of the hostile

occupying troops" (36). To this end, the Panthers believed that their police patrols could

eventually take the place of the existing police force, and they aimed to gain the confidence of Black communities in their ability to fulfill this function.

BPP co-founder Huey P. Newton would elaborate the political rationale behind these actions in his published writings. In "Functional Definition of Politics," published in *The Black Panther* in January, 1969, Newton argues that Blacks' lack of freedom in the United States is directly linked to their lack of power: "When one operates in the political arena, it is assumed that he has power or represents power . . . When White people send a representative into the political arena, they have a power force or power base that they represent. When White people, through their representatives, do not get what they want, there is always a political consequence" (45-46). However, the same is not currently the case for African Americans, and Newton argues, in language reminiscent of Malcolm X, that armed self-defense is one way for Blacks to build political power:

> When Black people send a representative, he is somewhat absurd because he represents no political power. He does not represent land power because we do not own any land. He does not represent economic or industrial power because Black people do not own the means of production. The only way he can become political is to represent what is commonly called a military power—which the BLACK PANTHER PARTY FOR SELF-DEFENSE calls Self-Defense Power. Black people can develop Self-Defense Power by arming themselves from house to house, block to block, community to community, throughout the nation (46; capitalization in original).

In Newton's vision, "[t]he police should be the people of the community in uniform. There should be no division or conflict of interest between the people and the police . . . The police should serve the interest of the people and be one and the same. When this principle breaks down, then the police become an occupying army" (47). The goal of the BPP's police patrols, then, was not only to protect Black communities against police brutality, but also to construct an alternative police force whose members were drawn from Black communities. Like the grassroots social programs, the police patrols were part of the BPP's alternative nation-building project, which aimed to build parallel institutions to those of the American nation state, which the Panthers believed had failed to serve the fundamental interests of Blacks, especially lower-class Blacks.

In the passages excerpted above, we see Newton, like Malcolm X before him, attempting to step into the role of a secular apocalyptic prophet. I argue in the previous chapter that although Malcolm X did transition from a sacred to a secular apocalypticism over the course of his career, apocalyptic prophetic discourse remained central to his rhetoric. Likewise, although the BPP was a secular organization who rarely if ever employed appeals to religion, much of the BPP's discourse could be seen as a form of progressive secular prophecy due to the fact that it imagines a future for the community it addresses that is an alternative to the one prescribed by dominant institutions, and directs its audience toward actions that will bring that future into being. Although some forms of apocalyptic prophecy, such as Elijah Muhammad's and that of the early Malcolm X, preach withdrawal from a corrupt society which will soon be destroyed by God, others, such as the apocalypticism of David Walker, take more of a social gospel approach, and urge their audiences to exercise their agency by taking actions that with advance the

cause of liberation. Black Panther rhetoric thus imagined a future for the American nation that was very different from that imagined in the American civil religion, and attempted to build a parallel infrastructure that would form the basis of that new order.

In order to bring this new order into existence, it was essential for the BPP to gain the trust of members of local Black communities in their ability to fulfill this role. To this end, the BPP initially had a significant level of success. At the height of its influence in the late 1960's, the Black Panther Party had attracted a significant membership including chapters in cities around the nation, an international section centered in Algiers, as well as a coalition of allies including representatives of other oppressed racial groups, Third World liberationists, as well as white radicals. Bloom and Martin attribute the height of the Black Panthers' success, from around 1968-1971 to the Panthers' policy armed self-defense. At the same time, they note that these practices made the Panthers a target for government repression, and also that the ability of Panther-like revolutionary organizations to resist this repression is dependent upon the support of allies:

> The power the Black Panthers achieved grew out of their politics of armed self-defense. While they had little economic capital or institutionalized political power, they were able to forcibly assert their political agenda through armed confrontations with the state. They obstructed the customary (and brutal) policing of black ghettoes, creating a social crisis. Drawing broad legal, financial, and political support from allies, the Party was difficult to repress. The Black Panthers' capacity to sustain disruption legitimized their revolutionary vision and attracted members looking to make a real impact (391).

George Katsiaficas, on the other hand, argues that the ability of the BPP to attract such a diverse constituency was due to its ability to capture the imaginations of a broad coalition of groups who, in that particular historical moment, all "enunciated similar goals—a decentralized world with genuine human self-determination—and they increasingly acted in unison" (20). With regard to the domestic political scene in the United States, Katsiaficas contends that

> [t]he civil rights movement all but disappeared as the Black Power impetus
> emerged, and in 1970, autonomous women's and gay organizations worked as
> parts of an emergent internationalist revolutionary movement whose main
> domestic leadership was the Black Panther Party. The imagination and aspirations
> of this historical force went beyond the needs and beliefs of its various component
> constituencies (21).

Although it is debatable that the Black Panther Party was the "main domestic leadership" of a coalition of organizations representing different marginalized groups with their own perspectives, Katsiaficas' point that the BPP's vision of a transformed society in which autonomous local communities would control their affairs was representative of the larger zeitgeist of the New Left is well taken. Although many of the groups mentioned above were pursuing their own agendas, perhaps without much thought given to the actions of the Black Panthers, the participation of members representing all these groups in the 1970 Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention shows that the BPP's vision for society was not restricted to the Panthers alone, but was shared among many New Left groups of the time.

Katsiaficas also cautions, however, that internal factors within the Party ultimately led to its decline and caused many of the BPP's allies to lose trust in the organization: "the Black Panther Party proved unable to maintain unity even among its own membership—let alone to provide leadership to the New Left (or the entire society). As the popular impetus faded away, shoot-outs within the Party evidenced its internal disintegration" (203). Part of the BPP's downfall was undoubtedly due to the FBI's efforts at disruption of the Party's activities through the COINTELPRO surveillance program. In his essay "'To Disrupt, Discredit, and Destroy,'" Ward Churchhill summarizes the many ways in which the FBI worked to undermine the Panthers, including colluding with media outlets to disseminate false news stories about the Panthers, exacerbating conflicts both within the BPP and between the Panthers and other organizations, and launching frequent raids on BPP chapter headquarters as well as the homes of Party members. Churchill argues that the COINTELPRO program "demonstrates a marked degradation of whatever genuinely democratic possibilities once imbued 'the American experiment,' an effect amplified significantly that the bureau's targets consistently were groups that, whatever their imperfections, have been most clearly committed to the realization of egalitarian ideals" (79). Clearly, the boundaries set by American civil religion for the acceptable range of reforms are enforced not only through ideology, but also through the possibility of state repression.

Nevertheless, the FBI's campaign against the BPP was not the only factor that led Party members and allies alike to desert the organization. One major factor was likely the heated conflicts that developed between the Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver factions of the Party, leading to a schism between the two factions, along with the cult of

personality that developed around Newton, which was at odds with the democratic egalitarianism formally professed by the Panthers and their allies. According to Ollie A. Johnson III: "In prison, Newton became a device for recruitment and his life the subject of a national and international 'Free Huey' campaign. Newton achieved mythic status among many Black and radical activists capable of facing down vicious white racist cops" (399). However, Newton would later take advantage of his cult of personality in order to impose an authoritarian style of politics within the organization. Johnson notes that

> Newton increasingly centralized power. During most of the BPP's first phase, state regional leaders developed their own contacts and relationships with various institutional and local individual supporters . . . After 1972, Newton required that all money coming into the Party go directly to him . . . He also diverted money from Party programs to support his personal activities. Party members tended to accept this centralization of money and power by Newton because of their excessive worship and later fear of him as leader (406).

Furthermore, the Party's later phase was marked by increasing involvement in extortion and other criminal activities. Chris Booker notes a fundamental ambiguity regarding violence within Black Panther rhetoric: "On the one hand, the Panthers announced that they opposed spontaneous violence, including rioting, and called for disciplined tactical use of violence within the framework of a long-term strategy. However, in reality, as evidenced by their own documents, the Black Panther Party, generally indirectly, encouraged spontaneous violence against representatives of the government, especially the police" (354). Booker argues that this problem was

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exacerbated by the fact that the BPP sought recruits from the criminal element of the lumpen class but lacked "effective mechanisms to reform new members," unlike the Nation of Islam. Booker concludes that

> the experience of the Black Panther Party strongly suggests that its survival, development, and institutionalization were undermined by the ascendancy of the criminal element of the lumpen in the Party. The reckless, erratic, and often violent behavior associated with this sector served to alienate many people from the organization, chronically destabilize it, and render it more vulnerable to the FBI-police onslaughts (357).

Clearly, the militancy of the Black Panther Party's apocalyptic challenge to the American nation-state was a double-edged sword. On one hand, the Party's willingness to stand up to racist white police and its articulation of a radical alternative to the status quo attracted many supporters from a diverse range of constituencies to the Party's cause. On the other hand, this rhetoric was highly divisive: those who were not for the Party were likely to be alienated and even alarmed by the apocalyptic vision of society articulated in the Panthers' theory and promoted in their practice. This led to a highly orchestrated FBI crackdown against the BPP. The Party was further undermined by the involvement of some of its members, including co-founder Huey P. Newton, in criminal activities. Finally, despite the egalitarian social vision promoted through the BPP's rhetoric, it should be remembered that the Party increasingly became subject to top-down authoritarian control by Newton and the Party's central leadership. Although Newton could be seen as a secular prophet who envisioned a new order and attempted to organize

a coalition to bring that vision into fruition, he ultimately replicated many elements of the top-down authoritarian control that he opposed in theory within the BPP.

4.4. Rewriting the Social Contract: The Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention

On June 19, 1970, the Black Panther Party issued a "Message to America," which called for a Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention (RPCC) to be held in Philadelphia on September 7, 1970. This convention would be attended "by over 10,000 people, including a sizeable contingent of students and young whites" (Katsiaficas 134). In previous chapters, I have explored how Malcolm X and other Black apocalyptic rhetors have employed constitutive rhetoric with the goal of calling new understandings of Black and white American identities into existence and encouraging their audiences to identify themselves and their interests with these new identity concepts instead of the existing hegemonic set. The BPP document that calls for the RPCC, by contrast, addresses an audience that has already adopted radical attitudes toward the current American state, including the belief that civil rights reforms within the system are an ineffective means of achieving significant progress and skepticism toward the American government's commitment to its supposedly democratic ideals.

Secular apocalyptic themes are woven throughout the text. In keeping with the apocalyptic trope of reading current events as 'signs' of an imminent apocalyptic moment, the author(s) present the current world situation as a dire one for Blacks and other people of color and colonized peoples worldwide. Like other examples of apocalyptic discourse in which human agency is emphasized, the BPP's "Message" frames the present moment as one in which evil, in this case a fascist conspiracy by

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power elites, occupies positions of temporal authority and threatens the destruction of the "chosen" community, and then presents a vision for the transformation of the social order that the audience is encouraged to act upon. Warning that "a well-planned, calculated Fascist Genocidal Conspiracy is being implemented against our people" by "White racist America," the anonymous author(s) of the document call upon their audience to avert this outcome by organizing in Philadelphia to draft a new Constitution ("Call for Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention…," 267).

The audience address by the BPP's "Message" is one that has already adopted a radicalized consciousness and holds at best a skeptical view toward the American state's willingness and ability to further the cause of social justice. The Constitution in particular is attacked as incompatible with the Black liberation struggle. The author(s) of the document summarizes the injustices African Americans have suffered under the present Constitution before declaring,

> For us, the case is absolutely clear: Black people have no future within the present
> structure of power and authority in the United States under the present
> Constitution. For us, also, the alternatives are absolutely clear: the present
> structure of power and authority in the United States must be radically changed,
> or we, as a people, must extricate ourselves from entanglement with the United
> States (270).

Although the "Message" is written from a Black perspective and uses the word "we" in reference to Black Americans throughout, Blacks are not the only audience the BPP aimed to bring to the RPCC. Near the end of the text, the author(s) extend the call to other activist groups who they believe will benefit from a rewritten Constitution:

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Other oppressed ethnic groups, the youth of America, women, young men who are slaughtered as cannon fodder in mad, avaricious wars of aggression, our neglected elderly people all have an interest in a new Constitution that will guarantee us a society in which Human Rights are supreme and Justice is assured to every man, woman, and child within its jurisdiction (271).

In *The Imagination of the New Left*, George Katsiaficas describes the social movements of the late 1960's as part of a "world-historical moment," which he describes as a period of turmoil in which hegemonic institutions and ideologies are contested by the actions and rhetoric of large groups of people acting at the grassroots level:

Such periods of the *eros* effect witness the basic assumptions and values of a social order . . . being challenged in theory and practice by new human standards. The capacity of millions of people to see beyond the social reality of their day—to imagine a better world and fight for it—demonstrates a human characteristic (the *eros* effect) which may be said to transcend time and space (7).

One of the Black Panther Party's aims was to mobilize Black communities at a grassroots level in order to develop alternative forms of power to those offered by hegemonic white America. At the same time, other marginalized groups within the United States—Latino/as, Native Americans, women, gays & lesbians—as well as colonized peoples in the Third World were engaged in their own liberation struggles. The goal of the RPCC, then, was to bring together these radicalized subjects for the purpose of imagining a new social contract for the American nation based around the demands of each group.

Katsiaficas argues that previous histories of the social movements of the 1960's have tended to over-emphasize the role of individuals identity groups and/or

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organizations rather the ideals and values shared between these groups: "To be sure, each of the above movements [civil rights, feminist, gay liberation, etc.] had its own autonomous organizations and beliefs, but . . . there emerged an international movement from 1968 to 1970 which fused these seemingly separate social movements into a unified world-historical movement" (21). The ideology that Katsiaficas attributes to this "New Left" tends to be non-hierarchical, in theory if not always in practice, and emphasizes grassroots struggle over top-down solutions for social injustices (17). This ideology also emphasizes the transformation of individual consciousness, promoting not only "freedom from material deprivation but also freedom to create new human beings" (24). Finally, one of the major aims of New Left movements is to transform society by creating, at a community level, alternative institutions that could eventually take the place of the present society: "In contrast to traditional views of revolution as a change in elites or the destruction of the existing economic and political structures . . . the New Left had raised the idea of the transformation of power into a decentralized and self-managed form" (182). Nevertheless, despite the widespread and enduring influence of many of its ideas, the New Left ultimately "proved itself incapable of reconsolidating a popular base and moving to the second phase of struggle: going from the contestation of power to the building of a hegemonic bloc capable of leading the entire society in a new direction" (183).

The documents produced at the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention, which are reproduced by Katsiaficas in an appendix, are thus of interest to scholars of social movements because they provide a snapshot of a moment in which representatives from a wide range of social justice movements came together in a forum

provided by the Black Panther Party as part of an initiative to make a list of goals and demands to pursue in order to resolve the injustices and disadvantages afflicting each group. The documents that came out of the RPCC were produced by workshops, each of which was centered around a particular constituent group or a specific area of action. Thus, these statements include one from the 'street people,' one from the women's liberation movement, and one from gay male representatives, as well as documents on the legal system, education, military & police, health care, and art (Katsiaficas 265-79). The demands made in these documents, if successfully implemented, would transform American society in ways which push at the boundaries of American civil religion.

For instance, the list of demands generated by the Workshop on Internationalism presents a very different narrative of America's role in world affairs than that found in American civil religion's view of America as a redeemer nation, or a 'City on a Hill.' The first point of this document declares that "[t]he United States is an international federation of bandits and we denounce its rights to nationhood." (Katsiaficas 266). The document then proceeds to "damand *[sic]* immediate withdrawal of all American forces around the world," call for reparations to victims of imperialism throughout the world, and oppose the United States "going into other countries and utilizing their wealth" (266-67). The documents from other workshops call for a range of social welfare programs which, if implemented, would collectively add up to a new social order very different from the *laissez-faire* capitalism promoted by American civil religion. The Workshop on the Self-Determination of Street People, for example, calls for "free de-centralized medical care," and the establishment of free, community-based food co-operatives (268). The Workshop on the Self-Determination of Women calls for a variety of transformations

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to the structure of society, including support for "the continued growth of communal households and communal relationships and other alternatives to the patriarchal family," the right to "free and safe birth control, including abortion, available upon demand," and the idea that "all services—health care, housing, food, clothing, transportation, and education—should be controlled by the people: and should be free" (268-69). The other workshops likewise produced lists of their demands, which all advocate a similar vision of a decentralized society in which power over the political and economic institutions that affect peoples' lives has been restored to local communities, who will administer those institutions for the benefit of the people in their communities rather than for the profit of a small group of economic and political elites.

The documents from the RPCC demonstrate that the rhetorics of the various liberation struggles of the 1960's had succeeded in radicalizing the consciousness of a significant base among the American populace, and that these individuals, who represented a wide spectrum of identity groups, had not only grown disillusioned with the capacity of established institutions to bring about social change but had begun to exercise their political imaginations in order to imagine and then bring about a more just society. Katsiaficas observes that the demands made in the RPCC documents, which were drafted collectively by participants in the RPCC's workshops, often exceed the radicalism of documents drafted by the leaders of liberation groups, including the Black Panther Party's Ten Point Program:

> However revolutionary the Black Panthers may have considered themselves, their program never included self-management of the country's factories and universities (although it did call for community control of black neighborhoods. It

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was only when the Panthers convened the Revolutionary Peoples' Constitutional

Convention, bringing together thousands of representatives of the popular

upsurge of 1970, that they explicitly stated the need to radically transform the

political and economic structures of the existing world system (22).

For a brief period of time in the late 1960's and early 1970's, it seems that the Black

Panther Party was able to become one leading force in a radical coalition for social

transformation. However, the revolutionary energy built by the BPP over these years

would eventually dissipate, and many of the demands articulated in these documents,

however compelling they may have been to their constituencies, have not been

implemented as of the present day.

In the previous section, I discuss a number of factors that were likely instrumental

in the BPP's demise. These range from the FBI crackdown against Black liberation

groups to the inability of the Party to suppress the violent and even criminal tendencies of

certain of its members, and the centralization of power in the hands of an increasingly

authoritarian Huey Newton. One additional factor in the Party's demise may be that the

convergence of interests that led it its attracting a broad coalition of allies was no longer

present. Derrick Bell argues that the Supreme Court's desegregation verdict in *Brown v.*

Board of Education should not be understood merely as evidence of the Supreme Court's

commitment to democratic values, and argues that this verdict would likely not have been

possible if not for a temporary convergence between the perceived interests of Blacks and

white elites within the United States: "the decision in *Brown* to break with the Court's

long-held position on these issues cannot be understood without some consideration of

the decision's value to whites, not simply those concerned about the immorality of racial

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inequality, but also those whites in policymaking positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation" (524). Specifically, Bell points to the fact that the United States was currently engaged in the Cold War, and the presence of the Jim Crow regime at home undermined the nation's claims to stand for democracy against the forces of totalitarian communism. Hence, the *Brown* decision contributed to the nation's credibility in what might be seen as an international public relations battle against the Soviet Union. Bell notes that "this argument was advanced by lawyers for both the NAACP and the federal government" (524).

If one extends Bell's argument that the advances that led to desegregation in the United States during the 1950's and 1960's came about at least partly because of a convergence between the interests of Blacks and whites, the success of the Black Panther Party in attracting members and supporters during the late 1960's tells us that, at least for a brief period of time, many in the Black community felt that the BPP's vision of a revolution to bring about a decentralized, egalitarian society and its call for Blacks to organize to control the politics, economic, and police in their community was more likely to advance their interests than the efforts of civil rights reformers. Furthermore, members of many other oppressed constituencies, including white students, had become radicalized around this time and felt that their own interests would be best advanced by a similar transformation of society. However, as the interests of these constituencies began to diverge, the apocalyptic impulse that led to the RPCC dissipated. As noted above, one set of factors leading to a decline in support for the Party involved vitriolic and sometimes violent in-fighting between the Newton and Cleaver factions of the Party, coupled with

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Newton's increasing centralization of power, as well as the Party's increasing involvement in criminal activities. Beyond this, one factor that led to the decline in support among white radicals for the BPP was the end of the Vietnam War. Bloom and Martin argue that

> [T]he Panthers drew a line dividing the world in two. They argued that the oppression of draft resisters by the National Guard was the same as oppression of blacks by the police and the same as the oppression of the Vietnamese by the marines. Forced to choose sides by the state, many young draftees chose the side of the oppressed. Alienated from the mainstream political leadership that had pursued the war despite popular opposition, many of their friends and family members supported their choice (393).

However, once the draft was ended and the Vietnam War wound down, many white radicals no longer felt the same urgency to join with the Panthers and their coalition of the oppressed in opposition to American imperialism.

Likewise, changes in economic opportunities for Blacks meant that many Blacks, especially in the middle classes, no longer felt that their interests were incompatible within the interests of established institutions. Bloom and Martin note that "Nixon . . . rolled back the draft, wound back the war, and advanced affirmative action. In the 1970's, black electoral representation and government hiring ballooned. As a result of these changes, the Panthers had difficulty sustaining broad support among blacks and anti-war activists" (393). For a brief period of time, it seems, the Panthers were able to convince many African Americans, as well as representatives of other oppressed groups, that the BPP was more capable of and willing to advance their interests within the

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political sphere than the United States government was. With the end of the Vietnam War and the social reforms of the 1960's and 1970's, however, many who had initially been drawn to the BPP's apocalyptic vision of a transformed, decentralized society no longer felt that the advancement of the interests of the oppressed depended upon them joining together in resistance to the United States government and global capitalism.

4.5. Conclusion

Over the course of the Black Panther Party's existence, Party members at all levels advanced a body of secular apocalyptic prophetic rhetoric. If Walter Brueggemann is correct that "[t]he task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us," then the Black Panther Party certainly fulfilled this function (13). Although the BPP was a secular organization that rarely if ever employed religious tropes in order to convey its rhetorical appeals, they nevertheless addressed their audiences as a chosen people who were tasked with transforming the world into a more just, egalitarian society. Like other apocalyptic prophets, the Panthers advanced a body of theory which provided narratives of the historical rise of evil, its current relationship to the chosen community, and how it would eventually fall from power. The Panthers mobilized supporters from Black communities as well as other oppressed groups as a revolutionary force by urging them to disassociate themselves from identification with the American nation state and by offering them new modes of identity linked to the Panthers' program for the transformation of society.

For a brief period of time in the late 1960's, the Panthers were able to capture the imaginations of supporters from diverse constituencies. Where American civil religion

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and Enlightenment political theory tended to frame the hegemony of white Europeans/Americans as a result of whites' greater fitness for civilization, or their development of more advanced institutions, the BPP's apocalyptic rhetoric denounced American racism, capitalism, and imperialism in no uncertain terms and provided supporters with an alternative vision of society in which economic and political power would be taken from the hands of elites and restored to local communities. Although this coalition would eventually dissipate due to a variety of factors, including government repression, violent in-fighting within the Party, criminal activities on the part of certain sectors of the Party, and increasingly paranoid and authoritarian leadership, the vision of a decentralized, communal society articulated in Panther rhetoric survives as an alternative framework for social reformers to the exceptionalist discourse prescribed by American civil religion.

CHAPTER 5

THE FUTURE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN APOCALYPTIC

5.1. Introduction

African American apocalyptic rhetoric arguably reached its high point during the 1960's due to the influence of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party on Black radicals. These groups provided alternative visions of Black identity in relation the white-dominated American nation relative to those put forth by civil rights jeremiads. These alternative narratives appealed to many Blacks who had grown disillusioned with the ability of the liberal reforms promoted by civil rights groups to fundamentally improve the status of Blacks within America. Although the solutions put forward by these groups ranged from the separatism from white society in order to await a divinely-directed apocalypse promoted by the Nation of Islam, to the international solidarity and self-determination promoted by the later Malcolm X, to the Marxist-Leninist program for the reconstruction of society put forward by the Black Panther Party, all of these groups shared a high degree of skepticism towards the notions of American chosenness and exceptionalism put forward by American civil religion. Furthermore, all of these organizations constructed counternarratives of the American nation, framing it as an oppressive, imperial Babylon rather than the promised land evoked in the American jeremiad. To the extent that they were successful in persuading their audiences to identify with these new narratives, these groups succeeded in altering their audiences' perceptions of themselves in relation to the established status quo, as well as their perceptions of which actions would be most likely to resolve the problem of white supremacy in America. These solutions were across the board more radical and

more militant than the nonviolent direct action and promotion of liberal reform advocated by civil rights leaders and organizations.

Many African American apocalyptic groups exist in the present day. However, none has the same level of cultural influence as Malcolm X or the Black Panthers did. Their numbers of followers tend to be relatively small, and they seem to be largely ignored by the authorities. This could be attributed to a number of different factors, including the success of civil rights reforms in improving the lives of many Blacks, especially among the middle classes, the lack of interest convergence between radical Blacks and potential allies, internationally or at home, or the success of government agencies such as the FBI in repressing the militant groups of the 60's. At the same time, the existence of contemporary African American apocalyptic groups shows that the appeal of this strain of rhetoric may have declined in influence, but has not completely vanished. Given the continued existence of racism in America in many forms, including racialized poverty, the mass incarceration of Black and other minority men, and high rates of police brutality against Blacks and other minorities, it is entirely possible that, given the right combination of factors, another Black apocalyptic group could rise in prominence on the American political scene.

In this conclusion, I look at two examples of such groups. First, I discuss Israel United in Christ, a group that believes that Blacks and other minorities are the modern-day descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel mentioned in the Bible, which they attempt to prove through interpretation of verses from scripture. Despite their apocalyptic challenge to white-dominated American society, however, their doctrine provides little room for human agency, as they believe that the problem of white supremacy will

ultimately be resolved by Jesus Christ during his second coming. Next, I discuss the

Huey P. Newton Gun Club, which, like the Black Panther Party during its early days,

aims to arm Blacks in self-defense against police brutality. Unlike the Black Panthers,

however, the Huey P. Newton Gun Club is, at present, a single-issue organization, and

lacks the overarching vision for the reconstruction of American society promoted by the

BPP. Both of these groups have relatively small followings, receive little attention in the

media, and seem to be largely ignored by the authorities. Thus, the prospect that either of

them could significantly influence or alter the present racial status quo within the United

States seems negligible.

5.2. Israel United In Christ

Israel United in Christ is one of a number of contemporary Black apocalyptic

groups who believe that Blacks and other people of color are the true descendants of the

Israelites mentioned in the Bible, but that this truth has been kept hidden by a conspiracy

of whites. Of the groups discussed in this study, they are most similar to the Nation of

Islam, in that their ideology is based on their own interpretation of religious scriptures,

and in that their attempts to change society are mostly focused on transforming the

consciousness and lifestyles of their followers. For the most part, they do not appear to be

engaged in direct political action, as they believe that the problem of white supremacy

will be resolved with the second coming of Jesus Christ. Like other apocalyptic groups,

Israel United in Christ is preoccupied with narratives of evil—how it rose to prominence

over the course of history, and how it will be resolved in the future. The Southern Poverty

Law Center, an organization which tracks the activities of hate groups, reports that Israel

United in Christ's ideology is rooted in a movement called Black Judaism, which grew

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out of the Pentecostal "Holiness" movement in the Southern United States in the late 19th century: "According to Black Judaism doctrine, when the Kingdom of Israel was destroyed, the Israelites were first scattered across the African continent and then selectively targeted by enemy African tribes who captured and sold them to European slave traders for bondage in the New World" ("History of Hebrew Israelism"). Although not all Black Judaism groups preach apocalyptic or anti-white themes, there is a strand of this movement which emphasizes these themes, preaching that the second coming of Christ will lead to a race war in which Blacks will inherit the earth and whites will be destroyed or forced into slavery. According to the SPLC, this strand dates back to 1886, when F.S. Cherry "started a 'Black Jew' church in Chattanooga, Tenn., where he preached that white people were inherently evil and hated by God. Cherry also instructed his followers that the earth is square and that Jesus would return in the year 2000 to install blacks over whites through a race war" ("History of Hebrew Israelism"). One can see a resemblance here to the Nation of Islam's doctrine that "white devils" were inherently evil, and that they would eventually be destroyed by Allah to make room for the Black chosen people.

Israel United in Christ is a modern day descendant of the doctrine preached by F.S. Cherry. Their website, located at israelunite.org contains a number of articles laying out their beliefs and doctrines, which tend to include a liberal dose of passages from the Bible followed by the organization's interpretations of these passages in light of the present racial situation in the United States. According to this organization, African Americans are the descendants of the tribe of Judah, with other racial minority groups representing the other eleven tribes of Israel. Israel United in Christ's article on the tribe

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of Judah interprets a number of Biblical verses referencing the tribe of Judah in order to craft a narrative explaining the current situation of American Blacks to their audiences. This article explains that, "In the late 50's and 60's [American Blacks] formed militant groups; no longer passive marches of protests but now carrying weapons in direct defiance of local law officials . . . It was a time for revolution, and during this era it appeared as if the American blacks would devour their enemies." However, "[i]nfiltration and drug addiction caused Judah to lay down arms, and become complacent in society. This was a diabolical plot by the Illuminati, the CIA and the FBI" ("Judah"). However, this article also claims that, in the present, Blacks are beginning to wake up to the truth, as interpreted by Israel United in Christ, and will soon be restored to their proper place: "As the American Blacks begin to wake up and return to the Lord (as Judah), they are choking the lies of Americas' *[sic]* educational and religious institutions; by teaching the truth of the Bible, proving Christ, is black and only died for the nation of Israel, and that the so called Negro and Indian scattered throughout the Americas are Israelites." As a result of their role in spreading this gospel among the other tribes of Israel, "the Lord promised that he will save Judah first, by giving him the understanding of the scriptures to teach and gather the other tribes of Israel under Christ; thereby all Israel will acknowledge Judah as the head tribe" ("Judah").

In the passages quoted above, we see a number of the apocalyptic themes discussed in this study, including O'Leary's concepts of time, evil, and authority, and the preoccupation with chosenness. Like the Nation of Islam, Israel United in Christ presents a narrative of Black chosenness, which will ultimately prevail against the wickedness of white supremacy. Also like the Nation of Islam, Israel United in Christ's promise of the

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ultimate deliverance of Blacks from their white oppressors rests primarily on the agency of God, with the role of individual agency largely limited to the decision to change one's attitudes and lifestyles in accordance with the divine will.

For instance, Israel United in Christ believes that the Old Testament's dietary laws are to be strictly followed, and that although "many deceivers claim that the dietary laws are done away with to justify their scorning of the law . . . prophecies prove the Lord will destroy those breaking the dietary law" ("The Dietary Law"). Adherence to Israel United in Christ's vision of salvation thus requires that one change one's lifestyle in accordance with the Old Testament's guidelines for clean, as opposed to unclean, foods. Other articles on the site mandate which holidays are appropriate to observe, and which are in fact the products of a corrupt, white-dominated culture. Furthermore, Israel United in Christ provides guidelines for appropriate, traditional gender roles. A link at the top of the main page labelled "For Women" (implicitly making the articles regarding history, theology, and politics on the main page "for men") links to Israel United in Christ's "sister" site, www.thedaughtersofsarah.com. This page promotes a traditional image of women, centered around ideas of domesticity, with articles on subjects such as maintaining a household, raising children, beauty tips, recipes, and so on. Thus, although Israel United in Christ aims to dismantle certain ideologies associated with white supremacy, such as the concept of white American chosenness, the alternative vision of society that they promote is in many ways deeply reactionary, as opposed to progressive.

Israel United in Christ's apocalyptic vision thus suffers from many of the problems that can be ascribed to the Nation of Islam's ideology. Although they may provide a sense of purpose, community, and self-pride to their Black adherents, their

apocalyptic vision does not provide much room for human agency, except insofar as one can choose to live a "holy" life by adopting certain traditions and practices promoted by the organization. Their activities outside of their own circles seem mostly limited to evangelism, and they do not provide any detailed platform for the transformation of society. Furthermore, the organization seemingly lacks any significant cultural influence, unlike the Nation of Islam under the leadership of the charismatic Malcolm X. Although they may persuade some individual Blacks to adopt their doctrines and accept their leadership, it does not seem that they have any significant prospect of affecting social change outside of their own circles.

5.3. The Huey P. Newton Gun Club

The Huey P. Newton Gun Club is an offshoot of the New Black Panther Party (no affiliation with the original BPP) which recently gained attention for staging open-carry protests in Dallas, TX in response to the shootings of Black men by police officers locally and nationwide. In this, they can be considered a modern day descendant of the original BPP's community patrols of police, which, as I argued in the previous chapter, represented the disillusionment of the Panthers and the communities they represented with the willingness and ability of established authorities to defend their interests. Like the Panthers, the Huey P. Newton Gun Club promotes a platform of self-determination and agency of local Black communities in response to what they perceive as police aggression.

In a press release for one of their patrols in Dallas, which they disseminated through various social media sites, the Huey P. Newton Gun Club lays out a narrative in which police murders of Black and Brown individuals has reached epidemic proportions,

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yet this problem has received little attention from a corrupt system: "In the past twelve years, the Dallas police have shot and killed over seventy unarmed individuals. Those victims are primarily Black and Hispanic . . . The Dallas Police who perpetrated these crimes against the people have sailed through a white-washed Internal Affairs and Grand Jury process, designed specifically to maintain the status quo: the murder of individuals based on race" ("Armed Self-Defense Patrol…"). The press release then notes that despite these killings, there have been no indictments against police officers since 1973. Since, according to the view put forth by the Huey P. Newton Gun Club, there is little chance that these injustices can be resolved within established institutions that have frequently worked to protect police officers accused of crimes against people of color in the past, the audience is called upon to join with the group in their march through Dallas, which would culminate with the group delivering a report on this issue to the U.S. attorney's office. Here we see some of the elements of the Black Panthers' apocalypticism: first, a narrative of the present racial order in which existing institutions are framed as deeply complicit in upholding white supremacy, and, second, a call to Blacks and other people of color to exercise their own agency in resisting these injustices rather than putting their faith in the goodwill of currently established institutions.

A second press release, this one dated 7 Jan., 2015, calls for a "National Day of Armed Civilian Patrols." This second press release expands upon the narrative presented by the first, framing the police force as an agency which helps uphold a racially unjust status quo. This time, it is not just the shootings of Black and Brown men by police officers that is the target of the Huey P. Newton Gun Club's rhetoric, but also the use of police to disperse protests where Blacks and other minorities have attempted to organize

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to voice their grievances: "As we attempt to organize and galvanize for mere survival on a daily basis, we are being shot down by malicious police agencies that have sworn to protect and serve the public, but have instead forsaken their oath. These police agencies protect the interests of the ruling class, much as they did in the past with slave patrols in the South and strike breakers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries" ("Arm Up For Self-Defense"). Employing the Burkean perspective by incongruity which I have argued is characteristic of many of the Black apocalypticists discussed in the study, the press release refers to these actions as "police terrorism" and "state-sponsored police murder without due process of law; otherwise known as being killed extra-judicially" ("Arm-Up For Self-Defense"). Where the discourse of the status quo situates the police as defenders of law and order, and the protectors of the community against lawlessness, the Huey P. Newton Gun Club's rhetoric inverts this frame in order to draw attention to the fact that the police are often allowed to act outside of the law, and without significant legal repercussions, within Black and Brown communities. The document then calls for a national day of armed protests on March 16th, 2015. It is not clear to me, based on the information I was able to find, if there was any significant turnout in response to this call to action.

The Huey P. Newton Gun Club thus represents a modern day manifestation of the Black Panther Party's armed patrols of police in response to police brutality, the issue that first galvanized the original BPP. However, so far, this organization lacks the influence of the Black Panthers, who, at their height, were able to open chapters nationwide and attract a broad coalition of supporters. An article published on *Vice* reports on the group's January 2015 protests in Dallas, and notes that although many in

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the Black communities that the Huey P. Newton Gun Club marched through voiced their support, but few were willing to join with the marchers. Furthermore, where the Black Panthers were joined by a coalition of similar groups, the Huey P. Newton Gun Club was accompanied only by the Indigenous People's Liberation Party, a similar group. The *Vice* article reports that a second group, Open Carry Texas, composed of white gun rights advocates, attempted to join with the marchers, but was turned away by the Huey P. Newton Gun Club (A.L. Smith). Furthermore, the article reports that when the group attempted to deliver their report, entitled "History of Violence," to the U.S. Attorney's office, the office manager took the report, but informed the group that the document would likely sit, unread, in a drawer (A.L. Smith). Although the Huey P. Newton Gun Club has managed to attract a small level of media attention through its marches, their influence seems, at present, to be very limited, with the group receiving lukewarm responses both from Black communities and from the authorities.

Furthermore, the Huey P. Newton Gun Club is, at present, a single-issue organization. Where the Black Panthers laid out a far-reaching vision for the transformation of American society and was, for a time, successful in persuading a significant constituency of supporters to subscribe to that vision, the Huey P. Newton Gun Club's challenge to established institutions has, thus far, been limited to the issues of police brutality and community policing. As noted above, the group's efforts seem to have attracted very little support from potential allies as well as little effort at repressing the group by authorities. However, the issue of police brutality against Blacks is still a pressing one, as evidenced by the recent murders of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York, among others. Depending on the ultimate response of governmental

institutions to these killings, it may be that the Huey P. Newton Gun Club or a similar organization will see an increase in support among members of Black and Brown communities who have grown increasingly disillusioned with the ability and willingness of the police to protect and serve them.

5.4. Conclusion

In this study, I have attempted to theorize major themes that have emerged in African American apocalyptic discourse over the 19th and 20th centuries. I have explored how these apocalyptic rhetors have presented their audiences with counternarratives of the American nation and its role in past and future history as alternatives to the messianic, exceptionalist narratives presented in the white American jeremiad. I have also explored how these rhetors aim to construct alternative visions of chosenness to those presented by dominant narratives, and to use these constructions as a jumping off point for persuading their audiences to engage in radical opposition to the status quo. In this sense, I believe that research into African American apocalypticism, of which there has at present been little, provides a necessary counterpoint to studies on African American jeremiads, which typically appeal to a foundational American "promise" to mobilize their audiences and appeal to the consciences of whites by confronting them with their hypocrisy in professing ideals such as liberty and democracy while allowing for the continued existence of white supremacy. African American apocalyptic rhetoric, by contrast, puts forward narratives of the corruption of the status quo, and calls upon audiences to dis-identify themselves from it in order to pursue alternative courses of action which, the apocalyptic rhetor believes, will be more likely to result in the realization of racial justice.

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As may inevitably be the case with such a large undertaking, I have been unable to cover every possible aspect of this issue, and have focused primarily on the most prominent examples of African American apocalypticism. This leaves a number of dimensions to be covered by future studies on this topic. First, much more needs to be said about the role of women in Black apocalyptic rhetoric, and in apocalyptic rhetoric more generally. As many readers of this study have no doubt noted, the rhetors discussed have been exclusively male, which may have influenced the theory of apocalyptic rhetoric laid out. Future research should focus on how Black women apocalyptic rhetors have presented narratives of the directions Black resistance to racial oppression should take relative to the status quo. Furthermore, these rhetorics should be contrasted to their male counterparts in order that scholars of social protest can gain a better understanding of how resistance to sexism and misogyny, in addition to racism, have inflected Black women's apocalyptic discourse, as well as women's apocalypticism more generally. Second, this study has centered on African American apocalypticism as a mode of advocating resistance and of retelling the narratives of the American nation in light of its long history of racial oppression. However, other minority groups, including Native Americans and Chicano/as have also experienced oppression at the hands of the American nation state, and have formulated their own rhetorics of resistance, many of which are apocalyptic in nature. These provide one source for future studies of apocalyptic rhetoric, which can explore how these groups have employed apocalyptic discourse in order to advance their own liberation struggles. Finally, the rhetors discussed in this study have been either prominent spokesmen for Black resistance, and/or the leaders of established organizations. More work needs to be done in assessing the impact

of rhetors such as David Walker, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers on the lives of ordinary people in Black and other minority communities. I have argued throughout this study that apocalyptic rhetoric aims to transform the consciousness of its audiences with the aim of persuading them to view their struggles for liberation in relation to established institutions through a radically different lens. However, further work needs to be done in assessing to what extent these rhetorics were successful in altering the perceptions of members of the communities they addressed in terms of the nature of American racism and the means best suited to resolve it. Despite these shortcomings, I hope that the theory of African American apocalypticism laid out in this study will provide a valuable jumping off point for future scholars. The apocalyptic rhetorics of minority groups is a subject that is under-discussed in the literature on rhetorics of social protest, and one that could potentially provide a rich and fruitful source for future scholarship.

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