

The Dark Alliance: The CIA, Cocaine, and Understanding Black Conspiracism

by Bill Flanigan

In cultural studies at the end of the twentieth century, recognition was growing that conspiracy theory—once merely the realm of the psychotic—was worthy of scholarly attention. That recognition was spurred by the expansion of conspiracism out of esoteric communities and into the mainstream of America in the 1990s. Robert Goldberg, in *Mainstreaming Conspiracism*, explained that “large numbers of women and men had awakened to the threat, convinced that secret groups plotted the assassination of a president, sought the suicide of the black community, or planned world domination in league with Satan” (232). With conspiracy theories saturating the media, and conspiratorial explanations for various events attracting popular support, scholarship responded in kind.

This impulse to study conspiracy theory has taken many forms and directions, but most of these analyses agree on one point: conspiracism is not a black hole of culture. It produces fodder for legitimate social analysis, even if its factual merits are dubious. Retreating from the conclusion that conspiracism was the product of mental derangement, scholars assessed the theories as reactions to the social, political, and economic conditions of modern America. One of the fields in which this reassessment remains particularly important is the study of racial conspiracy theorism in the black community.

Few racial communities rival African Americans in the popularity of conspiracy theories. From crack cocaine to shoe companies, all manner of products, institutions, and maladies that

touch the black community have been the subject of conspiracy theorism. In his article “Crack, Contras, and Cyberspace,” black journalist Jack White wrote that “the hottest topic in black America, bar none, is whether the CIA was responsible for introducing crack cocaine to the ghetto. This idea is, of course, a hardy perennial among conspiracy theorists, who blame every plague that afflicts the black community on racist government plots” (Para. 2). For better or worse, many black Americans from across the economic and geographic spectrum believe in these theories.

I hold that “hyperconspiracism” in the black community is no fluke or symptom of mental disturbance. It is the product of authentic social pressures—some unique to black Americans, and some general to modern society. Using primary and secondary source analysis of the “Dark Alliance” conspiracy theory, I will analyze conspiracism’s functionality in the black community and the conditions that have spawned it and given it popularity and legitimacy. Further, I will situate black conspiracism within the context of *American* conspiracism by exploring the role that conspiracy theorism plays in the “Black Nationalist” movement. I will conclude with an evaluation of the theory’s usefulness or malignancy in provoking positive change.

The “Dark Alliance” conspiracy theory has been circulating in black communities for two decades. Generally speaking, the theory claims that the US government smuggled crack cocaine into black communities in the early 1980s. Variations of the theory are numerous. Some claim that it was specifically an act of the CIA—perpetrated to fund the Nicaraguan Contras. Others allege that the Government *invented* crack cocaine to destroy the fabric of black America. Most claim at the very least that the crack was deliberately marketed to urban blacks, and that the government’s participation was motivated by racism.

The theory remains popular among blacks much more than other groups, and black expressions of the theory have characteristics unseen elsewhere. A primary source example is the song “Conspiracy” by Gang Starr, from the early 1990s: “That’s why corrupt governments kill innocent people / With chemical warfare they created crack and aids / Got the public thinking these were things that black folks made” (6-8). All the major trends in expression are present here—blaming a racist government for inventing crack in an intentional attempt to destroy the black community. Versions that circulate in the black media and in black society highlight the effects of government betrayal, with descriptions of the ghettos that the crack trade helped to create, and the urban blight in which the drug thrives. In his 1991 movie Boyz N the Hood, black filmmaker John Singleton expresses the theory. “How you think,” asks the character Furious, “crack gets into the country? We don't own any planes. We don't own no ships. We are not the people who are flying and floating that shit in here” (861-63). Later, Furious asks “why is it that there's a gun shop on every corner here? [...] I'll tell you why. Just like there's a liquor store on every corner in the black community. Why? They want us to kill ourselves” (872-75). Singleton’s expression features graphic descriptions of urban blight, and the social toll of the drug trade. For blacks like Gang Starr and Singleton, the conspiracy prompts introspection—an analysis of urban black social conditions.

In contrast, the expressions of this theory that come from non-blacks focus on the Contra connection, refusing to accuse the government of a racist plot, and rejecting the idea that the government actually invented crack cocaine. Jeff Wells, a white Canadian, expresses the theory on his blog *Rigorous Intuition*. He points to international corporations and the American “War on Drugs” as the primary “bad men,” without referring to the situation of the black victims of the

drug trade. Wells' formulation of the Dark Alliance focuses on condemning the corrupt behavior of the government and corporations rather than finding a racist motive behind it (Para. 4).

Black musician Kanye West, in his song "Crack Music," raps that "Crack raised the murder rate in DC and Maryland / We invested in that it's like we got Merrill-Lynched / And we been hangin from the same tree ever since" (15-6). He likens the conspiracy to a public lynching. Again, the deliberate perpetrator of this crime against the black community is the government: the lynching party. West portrays the "Dark Alliance" as another chapter in a history of oppression, rather than an isolated event. Black writer Steven Barnes wrote in February of 2006 that "I find the CIA-Crack connection to be plausible. [...] Remember that line from *The Godfather*? 'I say we import the drugs, but confine it to the Coloreds. They have no souls anyway.' Anyone who doesn't think there are plenty of people who think just exactly this way about any group that isn't 'theirs' simply hasn't gotten out much" (Para. 3). Black characterizations of the Dark Alliance invoke the image of a heartless government picking and choosing which races will be tolerated, and conspiring to eliminate any others. Barnes specifically uses the harsh racism of *The Godfather* to portray the government. This ethnically-charged writing is unique to black expressions, with most non-blacks content to conclude that the government was simply motivated by profit. Even white journalist Gary Webb, whose "Dark Alliance" article series in 1996 popularized this conspiracy theory and who *did* mention the effect of crack cocaine on black urban communities, was convinced that the CIA was motivated by convenience, not racism. He calls the conspiracy simply "the union of a U.S.-backed army attempting to overthrow a revolutionary socialist government and the Uzi-toting 'gangstas' of Compton and South-Central Los Angeles" (Para. 3).

The Dark Alliance conspiracy theory is representative of other racial conspiracy theories that have gained currency in the black community. Like the Dark Alliance, these theories all involve racist attempts to attack the body and soul of black urban life—through chemical-laden fried chicken and fruit juice, overpriced clothing, or the AIDS virus. The perpetrators are not always the government, but the “bad guy” is always portrayed in the same way as the CIA: a powerful racist creating a plague to harm blacks. Studying the roots of the Dark Alliance and the theory’s effect on African Americans can yield insights into the role that racial conspiracism in general plays in a racially divided America.

In order to understand precisely how a conspiracy theory operates, we ought to have a specific idea of who tends to believe it. “Dark Alliance” has currency among blacks—but there are divisions within the black racial community. A significant portion of the African American population lives in poverty, but three quarters do not. Blacks live in a wide range of environments, including crowded inner cities, the suburbs, and rural areas.

In her article *Conspiracy Theories as Ethnosociologies*, black sociologist Anita Waters used a 1990 survey in order to determine the exact traits of blacks that believe in these racial conspiracy theories. The survey found that 22.9% of the black population comprised believers—people that were unwilling to dismiss any of the conspiracy theories and believed in at least one of them. The data was compared to the respondents’ answers to questions on race and socioeconomic situation. Waters wrote that “The picture of African American advocates of conspiracy theories that is painted by these data is hardly one of uneducated, uninformed, and socially isolated individuals with distorted judgment and political passivity. African Americans who believe in conspiracy theories are [...] closer than are skeptics to the front line of both

interethnic conflict and cooperation” (121). Waters determined that believers tend to be more highly educated than skeptics, more aware of current issues facing the black community, and more likely to interact with whites on a regular basis.

The constituency of this conspiracy theory, then, resembles the black middle class in education and interaction with whites. In her 1999 book Black Picket Fences, black sociologist Mary Pattillo-McCoy studied the black middle class suburbs of Chicago. She explains that “a more appropriate socioeconomic label for members of the black middle class is ‘lower middle class’” (2). The black middle class has always been more distinguished from the urban, poor blacks by its living situation, education levels, employment rates, geographic location and crime rates than by drastically higher income. Education is particularly important, as it was one of the factors correlated with conspiracy theory belief in the 1990 survey. More than one quarter of believers held at least a bachelor’s degree, with nearly one-third more having taken some college classes. Fewer than 15% of the believers had not graduated high school. Pattillo-McCoy’s black suburban statistics were strikingly similar: “In 1990, 73 percent of those twenty-five and older had at least a high school diploma (compared to 66 percent of Chicagoans overall), and 20 percent had a bachelor’s degree or higher” (61). Waters’ survey mentioned that believers tended to be more likely to interact with whites—in both positive and negative ways. This is a trend in the black middle class community, which—both geographically and in employment—serves as what Pattillo-McCoy called “the buffer between the black poor and the white middle class” (6). They tend to work in low-level professions interacting with black constituencies and white employers, and they tend to live in areas situated between the urban black “Ghettos,” and the white suburbs. By the logic that proximity breeds hostility, middle class blacks will be more

likely to experience persistent racism than urban blacks that are relatively isolated from white communities.

Cross-class sympathy in the black community can explain why educated, non-poor blacks, relatively isolated from the realities of the crack trade, might be so concerned with it. Pattillo-McCoy wrote that “recent studies continue to find allegiance across classes within the black community. Michael Dawson (1994) notes that despite heterogeneity, African Americans are surprisingly united in their political views” (19). Waters’ findings on education and interaction with whites support this claim that educated and non-urban blacks still find themselves concerned with the plight of urban blacks. Their feeling of ethnic solidarity, their awareness of current issues, and their experience with racism and discrimination have all spurred the involvement of blacks that are only peripherally affected by crack cocaine.

Analyzing primary sources reveals powerful functionality in the Dark Alliance conspiracy theory for blacks that believe it. Black expressions of the “Dark Alliance” serve to assign blame for urban conditions. They create a concerted system of oppression that brings order to complex urban blight. Often, the theory is a tool used by blacks to connect disparate social issues. “What followed [the smuggling] was an explosion of violence,” a 1996 article in *The Nation of Islam’s Final Call* stated. “Crack addicts, stiff drug laws, incarceration and the image of young Black males as predators” (para. 5). Using this theory, believers can point to a single “bad guy” who is responsible for all of the ills that have befallen the black community. The theory gives a human face to the cause of decay in urban Black society. All that is happening in the ghetto is rooted in the drug trade, this theory posits, and the Government is responsible.

Beyond understanding the functionality of the theory, studies of modern society explain why so many blacks use the “Dark Alliance.” These conditions are both general to “postmodern” society on a whole, and specific to American blacks.

Scholarship introduces the fundamental pressures of postmodernity on black conspiracy theorists. The inability to accurately frame one’s position in society—for example, the position of a racial minority vis-à-vis the majority—is a trademark symptom of the post-modern condition. In *Cognitive Mapping*, Frederic Jameson claimed that conspiracy theory was “the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system” (356). Conspiracy theory, Jameson asserted, was the uneducated person’s attempt to understand the complexities of a chaotic, postmodern world. With the rise of globalization and the increasing impersonality of society, we resort to simple, cause-effect explanations for complex phenomena—conspiracy theories—to describe our position in the world. Fran Mason, in *Poor Person’s Cognitive Mapping*, streamlined Jameson’s analysis. “Conspiracy theory is less a ‘poor person’s cognitive mapping’ than a paradigm of ‘everyone’s cognitive mapping’ in its attempt to make sense of the confusions of subjectivity in a multinational global society” (54). Mason perceived that the cause of post-modern conspiracy theorism was not a lack of knowledge, but the confusing conditions of postmodernity itself, which effect everyone—uneducated and educated—equally.

Mason and Jameson offer a compelling picture of postmodernity’s role in causing conspiracy theorism. However, they fail to explain why black theorists adopt the specific theories that they do, developing theories that specifically blame the US government for social ills. Nor do they explain why blacks resort to conspiracy theories *so much*. Social pressures

complete the gap in Jameson's and Mason's accounts of postmodern conspiracy theorism. Racism is the missing link—black experiences with an unfriendly white government and white society inform the modern blacks' choice of “bad guys” in their conspiracy theories. Anita Waters' statistics confirm this. The well-educated blacks that believe these theories are close to white society, and can perceive the racial divide. They are also more likely to be targets of racism. There is an affirmation of Mason's amendment to Jameson here, as well: the well-educated black theorists are hardly representative of Jameson's “poor person.” The effects of postmodernity may not be as equally distributed as Mason alleges, but they are definitely not merely the province of the simple, or low.

The perception of racism, then, determines this theory's particulars. Often it is cited in primary sources. Returning to Kanye West's song “Crack Music,” and its reference to 19th century lynchings in the American south: “We invested in that it's like we got Merrill-Lynched / And we been hangin' from the same tree ever since” (16-7). Racism, as the historical trend in black-white ethnic relations, has poisoned interethnic interaction, providing theorists like West with a built-in enemy—a target for cognitive maps of racial oppression. Drawing on the potent imagery of post-Civil War racism, West's formulation of the theory finds resonance in a community that experienced the terror of racial violence, and whose collective memory can still recall with horror Rodney King, “Bull” Connor, the Alabama church bombings, and Jim Crow. Black journalist Elijah Cummings of the *Afro-American Red Star* wrote in 1996:

We also know that our government was found to have supplied heroin and marijuana to our troops in Vietnam, knowingly refused to treat 400 Black men for syphilis in the famous ‘Tuskegee Experiment,’ and grossly under reported the use of chemical weapons by the Iraqis during the Gulf War. Knowing all of this, is it really unreasonable to believe that the CIA introduced crack to America to fund a war in Central America? I don't think so. (Para. 6)

It may be easy for them to imagine that the authority that enforced of a century of institutional discrimination against blacks was also behind the smuggling of crack cocaine, or the spread of AIDS.

All of this insight into the source of the “Dark Alliance” conspiracy theory in postmodernism and racism comes full circle when we consider the theory’s use in the “Black Nationalist” movement. William L. Van Deburg, Professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin, defined Black Nationalism:

Adapting traditional nationalist tenets to their own situation as members of a racially defined minority population, most African American nationalists equate “racial” with “national” identities and goals. Bound together by ties of history, culture, and kinship, they conceptualize themselves as being differentiated and (at least potentially) separated from competing social and ethnic groups. (4)

One of the most vocal advocates of Black Nationalism in the United States has been The Nation of Islam. Founded by converted Muslim Elijah Muhammed, the Nation of Islam uses the rhetoric of black separatism in its publications. The Nation of Islam’s *Final Call* has publicly advocated this conspiracy theory in the past. In 1996, it published the anonymously-penned article *The CIA Drug Lords*, supporting Gary Webb’s “Dark Alliance” articles. The Black Nationalist expression of this conspiracy theory blends mistrust of the government with calls for black withdrawal from white society. “Though ‘accepted’ Black leaders may want to ignore reality,” the article stated, “the truth is the U.S. government has never been a friend to Black people” (para. 10). Later, it claims that “no calvary [sic] is coming from the outside, no army is coming to save the day and no benevolent white man in the White House can save us. We must save ourselves and work on our own behalf” (para. 13). The article, beyond simply the expression of a conspiracy theory, is a clear example of Black Nationalism, as Van Deburg

defines it. It defines the black people as an embattled racial community whose only hope lies in communal unity, self-actualization, and divorce from reliance on other racial communities.

The connection between Black Nationalism and the “Dark Alliance” conspiracy is unsurprising: Black Nationalists use conspiracy theory in the black community to promote activism. “It is time for Black America to wake up, stand up and clean up,” Final Call writes (para. 13). This use has its roots in the community-building function of rumor—as explained by Gary Alan Fine and Patricia Turner in *How Rumor Works*. “Rumor serves a function for a social system by asserting collective values,” they write. “Rumor provides an indirect sanction, avoiding direct confrontation and strengthening group boundaries. To share a rumor is to announce that one is a part of a community” (65). By sharing this theory, the Black Nationalists announce their race as a national community—with shared interests and shared enemies—and assert that they ought also to have *shared goals*.

Other expressions of the theory from the ethnic minority press have Black Nationalist undertones. Malik Russell, a black journalist writing for the *New York Beacon* in December of 1996, claimed of the CIA operation that it “represents a cooperative of untold billions dollars operating under the authorization of an American governmental organization” (Para. 3). Later, he linked it to larger issues of black community later: “This should be no surprise, but the surprise for many should be the realization that despite the genocidal tendencies of this government, we as the descendants of the Original people, Aethiopians [...] are in control of our destiny” (Para. 7). Russell uses the rhetoric of black empowerment—inciting what Van Deburg calls “the spirit of group loyalty” (7). Russell’s reference to black heritage in Africa is also representative of a trend of racial nostalgia for African heritage that is present in Black Nationalism.

This portrait of conspiratorial Black Nationalism presents a curious phenomenon when placed in the context of American history: Black Nationalism appears to be similar to white American Nationalism. Both rely heavily on three related conceptions: exceptionalism, separatism, and demagoguery. Exceptionalism, in the white American context, was the 18th century concept that Jeff Pasley (in *Conspiracy Theory and American Exceptionalism*) calls “the widespread conviction that North America has been exempted [...] from such chronic Old World problems as inequality, scarcity, revolution, or, indeed, of any deep, inherent, or irreconcilable sociopolitical divisions” (para. 9). Pasley explains that conspiracy theories in American history have reinforced this Exceptionalism through 18th-century rationalism. “Bad things happen,” Pasley writes, “because evil men cause them, and this evil is typically regarded as pure and nearly unmotivated, a lust for power and/or wealth that reduces any other apparent causes or motives to mere pretexts or propaganda” (para. 11).

Conspiracy theories were abundant in early America, targeting the Free Masons, satanic plots to undermine Christianity, and the British monarchy. These theories legitimized nationalist American demands for independence by “demagoguing”: turning the targeted groups into malefactors. Conspiracy theories operate on a similar level in Black Nationalism. They assign blame not to complex social conditions, but to an easily identifiable “bad guy”: the white majority, and the US government acting on its behalf.

Given the popularity of the “Dark Alliance” in the African American community, the issue rises of its usefulness in the fight against urban blight. Anita Waters claims that conspiracy theories are a positive development for black activism. Her statistics show that a majority of people who believe the “Dark Alliance” theory also believe that electing black politicians would

help the problem (120). She sees this as evidence of the black commitment to political activity inspired by conspiracism. Robert Goldberg agrees, but offers an amendment: “Victories in such conflicts can only be pyrrhic. Conspiracy thinking has moved Americans beyond a healthy skepticism of authority” (260). The other end of the spectrum is represented by Jason DeParle, who speaks of conspiracism in the *New York Times*, asserting that it is a disabling agent: turning Blacks into victims of learned helplessness (para. 19-20).

Waters’ optimistic statistical analysis seems flimsy. Why does optimism about black politicians lead to effective political action? Waters fails to substantiate her connection here. Conspiracy theories seem to encourage activism, but with no guarantee of efficacy—there is no evidence that electing blacks solves the problem of urban blight or institutional racism. The benefits of this conspiracy reside in its community-building capacity, not its utility in revitalizing black urban depression. Conspiracism is an effective outlet for diverse groups to express general frustration with the United States’ government, but there is a danger that conspiracism will default to picking easy authorities—not *guilty* ones—to explain their problems.

It would be unproductive to characterize the discussion on conspiracy theory simply as a quest to debunk it. Decades of failed attempts to do this have shown the futility of that approach. Wim Roefs agrees that American conspiracism is essentially inevitable: “Conspiracy thinking is [...] bound to flourish in a huge and diverse country, where the competition is enormous, where ethnic groups are suspicious of each other, and where political propaganda, commercial advertising and the entertainment industry create everyday deception” (para. 36). Its utility in untangling the complex causes of urban blight will forever make it an attractive tool for blacks to express their concerns and angers. We must accept that conspiracism—though often a maladapted form of activism—is not going away. Understanding its causes and effects then

becomes the challenge. Postmodernity, racism, and ethnic misunderstandings have created the “Dark Alliance” conspiracy theory—only a fundamental change in these elements could possibly end it.

There is value here: conspiracy theories serve a role in correcting white dismissal of racism in modern society. Waters brings this to light, explaining that they are “corrective to the way in which ethnic inequality is often treated by European American writers as the outcome of accidental, inexorable social and political processes for which no one can, or should, be held accountable” (122). The individual agency and irresponsibility of the powerful must have a role in our explanations of social conditions, or we risk abandoning our ability change society by changing leaders. The focus, however, ought to be on isolating realistic opportunities for social change. Conspiracy theories create nonexistent racist conspiracies, when we ought to be using their energy to fight the very real racial hierarchies of our society. Struggling against a nonexistent enemy may foster community and nationalism and agitate us, but it may not be able to do much more.

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