Introduction

In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 Supreme Court case affirming the legality of racial segregation in the United States, Justice Henry Billings Brown made a most extraordinary claim in his draft of the majority opinion. His legal argument was predicated on the belief that racism is natural and, therefore, not something the courts can effectively adjudicate:

> Legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts or to abolish distinctions based upon physical differences, and the attempt to do so can only result in accentuating the difficulties of the present situation. If the civil and political rights of both races be equal, one cannot be inferior to the other civilly or politically. If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane.¹

In the long, drawn-out march toward full citizenship, African Americans have had to push back against what Brown called “racial instincts.”² Defined by strong dispositions and taboos marking black and white bodies as fundamentally discrete and antagonistic, beliefs about racial inferiority and superiority have proven difficult to unlearn. In this respect, Justice Brown was right: political and civil rights are not necessarily transferable to social rights. African Americans have known, since the first slaves learned to speak the master’s language and worship by way of the master’s religion, that the battle for equality had to take place on at least two fronts—that of the law and the popular imagination. To be seen as fully human, and therefore deserving of equal legal protections and rights, African Americans had to repurpose the master’s rhetorical tools to prove that blacks were endowed by God with the same gifts of reason, goodness, and free will that whites boasted. As the last three hundred years have shown, this has been no easy task, but African Americans have excelled at understanding the political, existential, and intellectual machinery often intended to marginalize and
oppress. Well before Emancipation, Negroes had already translated a white supremacist reading of Christianity into a gospel of unabashed freedom and transcendence. As an early nineteenth-century white clergyman noted, somewhat painfully, in the Baptist periodical the *Religious Herald*, “Many of the blacks look upon white people as merely taught by the Book; they consider themselves instructed by the inspiration of the Spirit.”

Humanization necessitated struggles over representation and recognition. Blacks had to find a way to write their own stories, define their own identities, and rearticulate concepts of justice in light of human difference. And they did. Taking control of black representation has been a central feature of black transformative praxis from antislavery and anticolonial movements to Black Lives Matter. Citizenship for blacks was forged out of what Cornel West describes as collective insurgency articulated through art and discourse. Legislative and legal reforms were critical, but the cultural work of changing hearts and minds required a different approach. Disrupting learned racial instincts has meant the purposeful mobilization of theater, fiction, music, poetry, visual arts, dance, film, television, and now digital social media, targeted to the largest possible audiences. What these aesthetic renderings of alternative truths have done is reassemble racial, ethical, religious, historical, and cultural narratives in ways that denaturalize white supremacist commonsense. What emerges in these mediated spaces are challenges to dehistoricized notions of race and difference that, as Stuart Hall notes, move “us into a new kind of cultural positionality, a different logic of difference.”

Slavery, Jim Crow, convict leasing, and mass incarceration were all predicated on the idea that blacks were less intelligent, less moral, and less capable of pro-social behavior despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Notably, *commonsenseness*, a term capturing how we see our cultural beliefs as natural and irrefutable facts, continues to be the way by which black inferiority is made real. In hindsight, Justice Brown’s argument that racism is *instinctually just* seems outrageous—at least it should. As a cultural process, race-making remains, for most, hidden in plain sight. As a result, race as a category of difference is naturalized and dehistoricized, with the construction of whiteness representing a vivid case in point. When we forget where feelings about race come
from, they shape institutional outcomes even without active intention and create “racism without racists,” as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has labeled it. If we trace education, health, wealth, and incarceration disparities to these unmarked norms, we can recognize how assumptions about biological and cultural difference impact the ways in which people are treated and defined.

The dehumanization and reclassification of blacks as fundamentally different and/or inferior did not end with the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* desegregation ruling. Some writers continue to argue that genes and behavior mark clear borders between races, while others use “culture of poverty” arguments to explain contemporary racial inequalities of outcome and possibility. Many of these same writers are housed in elite think tanks and academic institutions, and often contribute to newspaper op-eds and television news talk shows. Notably, racial commonsense has continued to animate political discourse well into the twenty-first century, even though the majority of social scientists understand race to be a product of history as opposed to biology or cultural pathology. Regardless of how many Americans consider “the race question” settled in the United States, for the religious communities considered in this book, the project of redeeming the race through media has continued to be an urgent priority.

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate the powerful role black religious media has had since the eighteenth century in not only marking unmarked racial norms, but in altering racial instinct. Black religious media continues to challenge the taken-for-granted notions of white and European superiority not from a position of science and reason, but from a position of morality and justice. It has been central in humanizing African Americans, such that by the twenty-first century, around 40 percent of white voters chose a black president. We certainly do not argue that the election of a black president has marked an end point in the trajectory toward a “post-racial” America. Instead this book focuses on what black religious media has done to open a space for reconsidering what race means and for promoting racial justice.

Most historical representations of the struggles for racial justice avoid discussions of the critical subjective work required to change minds. Our goal as anthropologists in this book has been to unearth the motivations for the radical attitudinal changes toward race and racial identity
in the last three hundred years. These subjective dispositions are often lost to history, but we aimed to recover them by working backward. For us this meant methodologically starting with our conversations in the field and then moving in reverse to recover the texts, images, and sounds that led to the three traditions we focus on in this book: Christian prosperity ministry, African American Islamic consciousness, and black Hebrew Israelite reframings of race and belonging. By juxtaposing three different religious outlooks and their histories, we show that black identity, in part defined by identification with the past, has never been one thing. We selected Christianity, Islam, and Judaism because they represent the three Abrahamic faiths and the dominant religions among African Americans in the United States. We set out to describe what religious media was doing to viewers or listeners to change how they felt about themselves and the world.  

In this book, we employ anthropological theory and ethnographic methods to understand how African Americans continue to try to break free of what Edward P. Jones, in his Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, describes as *The Known World.* For centuries African Americans have had to develop, for lack of a better term, a code, or language, for understanding and articulating the ineffable. Oppression and its sources have not always been obvious, and therefore it is through stories, icons, tropes, and signifiers that African Americans have found a way to mediate their experiences with racism. But African Americans continue to challenge “the known world” of common sense. The racial instincts Justice Brown wrote about were so powerful that for many whites, taking a child to a lynching was considered a valuable education. In anthropology we write about the role of disgust and notions of filth in the development of concepts of the self. We also study taboos delineating that which is human from that which is animal; that which is clean versus that which is dirty. We are interested in dirt or matter out of place because it helps us to think about how societies map the distance between, in the words of Mary Douglas, “purity and danger.” Given what we know about cultural notions of purity and danger, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 should not be understood simply as a moment when white people came to their senses. Taboos regarding race are powerful, particularly those imprinted in childhood, and are as difficult to let go of as taboos against eating certain foods or proscriptions around caste and first cousin marriage.
We started with the assumption that a belief about racial inferiority is often as powerful as a sense of disgust. Thus, the emotional and cognitive work necessary to change minds about race rarely comes from a place of cold rational logic. The idea that slavery or racism was wrong required, for some, a complete reframing of that aforementioned known world. Whites had to have a “come to Jesus” moment. This moment could be proceeded by the simple recognition that the black nanny who fed and loved you had to be one of God’s children, or that the black child you played with, who learned everything as well as you did, could not possibly be intellectually inferior. While the role intimacy plays in challenging racism is important, in this book we focus on the mass-mediated images, words, and sounds that ultimately compelled a “come to Jesus” moment for blacks as well as whites.

For this book, the media on which we chose to focus had the power to effect radical dispositional changes in the consumer. We determined this power through interviews with our interlocutors and observations at our field-sites. We then traced media that inspired an epiphany in our interlocutors to historical touchstones marking the development of the concepts framing contemporary media. For the historical analysis we had to do our best to assess the affective impact of the media. Often that required being attentive not only to what was explicitly articulated in religious media, but to the nonverbal as well, including the multiple explanation points and capital letters in David Walker’s 1829 Appeal, an impassioned articulation of the rights of black people to physically defend themselves in the face of oppression, and the depictions in advertisements and cartoons in Muhammad Speaks, the official journal of the Nation of Islam. Ultimately, our goal has been to make visible the extraordinary labor and conceptual brilliance that has gone into trying to articulate a postcolonial blackness that effectively counters racism. In addition to locating the emergence of a common consciousness, the study of black religious media also exposes the schisms and ruptures within what outsiders often denote as “the black community.” American history textbooks often begin African American history at the point at which black bodies were unloaded on docks and placed on auction blocks, and then bracket that history with Martin Luther King, Jr., who, with Lyndon B. Johnson’s extraordinary leadership and compassion, is believed to have put all this racist nonsense to rest. Missing from much
of these histories are narratives of blacks as subjects rather than objects of history—as victims and perpetrators shaping social realities rather than merely victims of social forces beyond their control.

This book focuses on the struggles—undeniably contentious—over how to represent blackness. Throughout African American history, religious leaders, intellectuals, and business leaders have been at odds about the meaning of blackness, and more critically about precisely which representation of blackness would most likely compel the state to provide equal rights and protections. And the disputes were often ugly. Some black leaders believed, and still believe, that poor and morally loose blacks were the cause of continued black oppression. Others believed in colonialism as a redemptive project and traveled to West Africa and the Congo to save savages and reap financial rewards. In the late twentieth century, some black religious leaders turned their back on Martin Luther King, Jr., when he began to focus on poverty, and others failed to preach against mass incarceration or note the staggering spread of HIV/AIDS in the black community. The moral ambiguity of the victims—the poor, the convicted, and the diseased—that threatened the redemptive narrative they were trying to tell. Historically, creating a politically viable representation of blackness that has the power to redeem the race and effect real social change has been met by more failure than success.

What we find in the early media is success in capturing the imagination of some but not enough people, or enough people but at a time when the structures were not in place for large-scale change to take place. And often the effectiveness of a message promoted by a particular group was unrelated to the number of people professing the faith. For example, membership in the Nation of Islam, at its peak in the 1960s, was dwarfed by the number of African American Sunni Muslims in the 1990s. Yet the impact of the Nation of Islam’s rhetoric and social praxis far exceeds the impact of African American Sunni Islam. Regardless of momentary effectiveness or ineffectiveness, throughout the longue durée of African American history, black religious media has been central to ongoing efforts to open up a space for black citizenship.

Over the last three hundred years religious media has successfully humanized folks such that the concept of black inferiority has gone from being acceptable to being taboo; from being used as a rationale by the
highest court in the land to being associated with racist trolls on social media. This volume makes visible the labor that has gone into dismantling the master’s house from the perspective of those often marked merely as hapless victims. Far from being passive in the struggle for black citizenship, African American media producers have performed the arduous semiotic and discursive work necessary to make civil rights happen long before the famous March on Washington in 1963. And the work continues today as black folks continue to try to disrupt commonsense.

The fact that in 2015 the killing of nine African American Christians in Charleston, South Carolina, led to the symbolic end of the American Civil War through the decision to finally remove the Confederate flag from state grounds was no accident. The victims could have been eulogized as a group unlucky to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, thus allowing the South to once again leave discussions about the Confederate flag for another day. Instead, the victims were identified as descendents of a long line of black Christians sacrificed in order for the United States to fulfill its providential role as the land of equality. Their martyrdom was comprehensible because black religion has mediated the relationship between whites and blacks for centuries. Not only has it worked to reverse the narrative of white supremacy, but it also translates black experience in ways that make it intelligible to others. As a result, the massacre of a Bible study group and media reaction to that tragedy did the work that hundreds of political speeches could not. To be clear, black religious media includes not only media produced by black religious groups but also media produced by others about the black religious experience. And the stakes of this media are high.

As an example of the power of black religious media, we can consider Al Qaeda’s use of the iconic imagery and rhetoric of Malcolm X to justify their anti-Obama stance. Their appropriation of this Nation of Islam leader’s speech demonstrates the global impact African American religious media has had on what might be called “georacial” formations and contemporary postcolonial politics. Fifteen days after the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States, Al Qaeda’s news organization released a video, a missive to the incoming president-elect, characterizing him as little more than a “house negro.” This derogatory term—akin, in many ways, to the pejorative “Uncle
Tom”—has been used to differentiate traditional “race men” within the African American community from would-be race traitors and sell-outs. House slaves and field slaves had a different relationship to slavery, the argument goes, and that difference pivots on their investment in the “peculiar institution.” The video depicts Malcolm X proclaiming:

There were two kinds of Negroes. There was that old house Negro and the field Negro. And the house Negro always looked after his master. When the field Negro got too much out of line, he held him back in check. He put him back on the plantation. The house Negro could afford to do that because he lived better than the field Negro. He ate better, he dressed better, and he lived in a better house . . . And he loved his master more than his master loved himself. But then you had the field Negroes who lived in huts, had nothing to lose. They wore the worst kind of clothes, they ate the worst food, and they caught hell. They felt the sting of the lash. They hated their master . . . And today you still have house Negroes and field Negroes. I’m a field Negro.
The use of Malcolm X’s house versus field Negro dichotomy provides a partial clue about whom Al Qaeda was trying to reach. The visuals they used tell even more of the story. A triptych dominates their eleven-minute video. The panel on the left contains an image of Obama wearing a yarmulke at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The two Jews on either side of him in the image are meant to prove that Obama has no loyalty to the religion of his father. The middle panel contains a photo of Al Qaeda’s then number two leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, dressed in white and seated in front of a bookcase containing numerous volumes of hadith and secondary Qur’anic texts. The books, white turban, and prayer bump, or zabiba, all signifying his commitment to prayer, represent Al-Zawahiri as a pious scholar of the faith. The right-hand panel contains the iconic image of Malcolm X in Mecca on his knees in prayer. The house Negro/field Negro distinction is rendered in stark relief on opposite sides of that triptych, with Al-Zawahiri personifying the dispassionate arbiter and literal mediator of this seemingly simple truth.

The video was less an effort to insult Obama than an audacious attempt to undercut his potential influence in the Muslim world. Obama’s nomination disrupted some of the rhetoric that justified Al Qaeda’s violence. The easy binaries that had been used by the network to recruit new members—good/bad, subjugated other/Western imperialist, brown/white, Muslim/infidel—were now complicated by the election of an African American man born to a Muslim Kenyan. In order to reignite hatred for the West, now embodied in a black man, Al Qaeda mobilized Malcolm X’s image and speech as rhetorical evidence for the claim that Obama served the interests of powerful Western masters. Obama, the video warns, is an old-school imperialist who will protect the interests of Israel and the West over those of the world’s weak and oppressed. At the global level, black Western imperialists were rebranded as house Negroes writ large. Mimicking the projects of Malcolm X (who also went by the name Malik al-Shabazz) and the Nation of Islam in the 1960s, Al Qaeda used media to make a point about appropriate racial sincerity. As Zawahiri’s voice over notes, “You represent the direct opposite of honorable black Americans like Malik al-Shabazz, or Malcolm X (may Allah have mercy on him).”

While it may not be surprising that Al Qaeda tried to make a case about Obama being a lapdog for others’ interests, it is instructive that
they chose to appropriate the words and images of Malcolm X in order to energize that claim. Indeed, the fugitive producers of this anti-America video seemed to believe that they knew Barack Obama (and/or “black America” and/or black America’s appreciation for figures like Barack Obama and Malcolm X). And they came to this understanding through the mass-mediated iconography of black religious media from the 1960s. The idea that one can know “the other” through mass-mediated consumption is fascinating, and it grounds one of the central concerns of this book.

The question of how African Americans have defined themselves, defined others, and been defined through electronic and digital mass mediation is at the center of our analysis. Racism is often characterized as a form of misrecognition, and religious media attempts to make blacks recognizable not only to others, but to themselves as well. Working against racist forms of misrecognition, religious media has been used to write blacks into moral narratives in which God bestows salvation on African Americans re-enlightened as to God’s true will. Separating agency from essence, the Abrahamic traditions have been used to argue that consciousness, intention, and action trump the physical body, which is indeed, but not in deed, black. In this redemptive media, race is treated as an artifact, not the essence of one’s being, thereby allowing free will to be the necessary precursor for full membership into humanity. This book focuses specifically on black religious media because it has transformed black subjectivity both by providing black Americans with new conceptual and practical tools for how to be in the world and by changing how black people are made intelligible and recognizable as moral citizens. Religious media has challenged some of the very ways in which race has historically been articulated, producing political possibilities that have yet to be fully replicated by “secular” movements. In this book, we examine how religious media deploys new forms of racialized thinking to interrupt particular genealogies of race-based exclusion and derogation.

Like language, mass media reconciles us to the social and natural world and can literally mediate our every waking hour. We are trained to interpret mass media in ways that can sometimes be strikingly similar to the ways in which we are taught to speak and read. Stories are replaced by iconography or terminology that then acts as a self-evident
kind of shorthand. Media signifiers condense narratives about value, meaning, history, and the future into symbols and words that can easily be deployed and redeployed in mediascapes. These signs are meant to speak for themselves, and over time, these same visual/mass-mediated signifiers begin to stand in for history itself, often in decidedly ahistorical ways, just as the terms “house Negro” and “field Negro” were used by Malcolm X and then resurrected by Al Qaeda to stand in for a complex national history in which political subjectivity was not neatly determined by a slave’s fit within such easy binaries.

Regardless of what these media signifiers lack in historical depth, Barack Obama would have been incomprehensible to the American public were it not for the discursive work on race that has taken place in mediascapes, such as “I have a dream . . . ,” Selma, the Little Rock Nine, the Watts Riots, James Cone, Muhammad Ali, Roots, Rodney King, and the Million Man March. Each of these signifiers names not just a time or an event, but also an iconic moment when the way people felt and talked about race was altered. The public was waiting to see if Obama was ideologically more like Martin Luther King, Jr., or James Cone. Was he charming like Muhammad Ali or frightening like Louis Farrakhan? Was his family’s story like Alex Haley’s, one of working hard and overcoming, or was he simply a spoiled “affirmative action baby”? And as the “birthers” never let Americans forget, his relatively exotic form of blackness and foreignness actually provided space for decoupling him from America’s historic leaders, including native-born race men like W. E. B. DuBois.

Of course, these signifiers of slavery, civil rights, race, and religion are by no means determinate and fixed, but they do constitute elements of America’s cultural literacy and, therefore, provide a foundation for the kinds of knowing that have radically changed the status of blacks from terrorized slaves and freemen to citizens (although theirs is a citizenship complicated by mass incarceration and continuing forms of exclusion). The American public did not read Barack Obama as if he emerged from a blank slate upon which he wrote his own destiny. Instead, his code-shifting and measured attempts to associate himself with icons, from President Lincoln to Jay-Z, are what made him legible at all. What the Al Qaeda video reminds us is that these rich symbols and canonized historical narratives that African Americans have used to make sense
of themselves also circulate internationally and have been taken up by others around the world to gloss Americanness in its various forms and manifestations.

This book describes the ways in which black religious media has been at the forefront of attempts to shape and reshape black subjectivity, often in competing attempts to categorize black bodies into submission or to liberate them from conceptual and even physical bondage. We characterize the media production of these different groups as “redemptive” because they express the will to liberate blacks from abjection and subjugation, from oppression and exploitation. The power of this media lies in its attempt to alter the emotional dispositions, ideologies, and behaviors of believers and others, potentially helping people to imagine new ways of being in the world.

In the process of providing blacks with tools for changing their social dispositions, this media also changes how those outside “the community” think about race and belonging. It informs them about who the members are, what they believe, and what one can expect from them by way of work ethic, political commitments, family organization, and gender roles. The media productions of black Christians and Muslims have forever altered, and perhaps overdetermined, how blacks are seen by others and how they see themselves. Moreover, the media production of black Jews demonstrates how difficult it is to step away from entrenched notions of race and identity or deeply held preconceptions about racial and religious possibility.

Redemptive Media-Scapes

In Formations of the Secular, anthropologist Talal Asad asserts that the Civil Rights movement was cast by Martin Luther King, Jr., as a means for white redemption.24 The images that circulated on television, in magazines like Ebony, and in newspapers around the country graphically depicted the forms of violence that protected institutionalized bigotry in America. Images of blacks being sprayed with water hoses and pummeled by police batons were juxtaposed with their steadfast religious commitments to nonviolent activism. “To be redeemed,” Asad writes, “and to redeem others was to restore an inheritance—the Judeo-Christian heritage in general and the American expression of it
in particular. In this way the prophetic language of the Old Testament was fused with the Salvationist language of the New. Asad argues that King offered white America deliverance from its history of moral debasement.

What Asad fails to thematize, however, is the degree to which such commitments to secular political reform, by way of moral and religious arguments, were not simply a way to make whites feel good about their racial achievements. Black Americans were as committed to redeeming their race as they were to redeeming the nation. The efforts of Civil Rights leaders were in keeping with over two hundred years of discourse dedicated to exploring ethical, legal, and religious justifications for a more robust form of racial inclusiveness. It was more than just narrowly strategic in that it cast its sights beyond the immediacy of short-term political gain. What these leaders had learned from the past was that violent resistance to slavery and Jim Crow had only reinforced the racist logics used to legitimate segregation, disfranchisement, violence, and murder. What the leaders of the Civil Rights movement recognized was that after winning a series of battles, the real war over the future of American society would be fought over precepts and principles able to sway hearts and minds. During the Civil Rights movement, not only did blacks have to author their own salvation, but they also had to beat back long-held assumptions about white racial superiority. Asad is right that the Civil Rights movement redeemed whites and the very principles of America’s constitutional democracy, but it also simultaneously redeemed and humanized blacks.

The Civil Rights movement was neither the first nor the last quasi-religious or religious movement that tried to redeem African descendants from the slings and arrows of white supremacy. In Black Redemption, Randall Burkett describes how Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA) embodied a call for existential salvation through everyday acts of resistance to white supremacy. It was imagined that by knowing their historical relevance as sons and daughters of ancient civilizations, blacks would embrace the fact that they were equal to whites in moral capacity and intellect. At the same time, they recognized that the belief that, against all odds, blacks could fight their own subjugation through faith was largely fanciful. Like Malcolm X’s father, the Reverend Earl
Little, who was an organizer for the UNIA, those who resisted white supremacy often died at the hands of white racists. Being a leader in the UNIA meant that belief had to be matched by action, which could lead to violence. But for many, once these redemptive narratives of salvation through the embodiment of new understandings of origins, racial essences, and religious goodness took hold, there was often no going back.

As anthropologist St. Clair Drake notes, Africa “was revitalized in the twentieth century by Marcus Garvey, who seemed to want to make the uplifting and redemption of that continent and its peoples a concrete political objective of the UNIA—without denying the continent’s more traditional role as a symbol of the eschatological goal toward which all of history was leading. It was precisely in holding these two dimensions of the ‘redemption of Africa’ together that Garvey achieved that religious synthesis of ethos and worldview that was so essential an ingredient in his power.”

Beyond the UNIA, black religious movements, as Burkett and Drake describe, have rarely been marked by a monastic turn inward to quiet engagement with ancient texts. Black religious movements encouraged orthopraxy, or practice informed by ideology, and remained strident, bold, and full of political purpose. Making a bold and impassioned case for the social, economic, and legal enfranchisement of black folks characterizes exactly what has always been at stake in the media productions of black Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Audiences and Constraints

Black religions might be said to sit somewhat precariously between empowering and constraining their adherents. Empowerment comes from interpretations of faith and politics that provide new ways of seeing and acting in the world. Constraints emerge when a community of believers sets rules for how to think and behave in order for the redemptive narratives to persuade outsiders that blacks are the moral and intellectual equals of whites. Even without the added emphases of religious belief, there is a history of blacks chastising other segments of the black community for making the race “look bad.” As far back as the nineteenth century, blacks have lashed out at other blacks for keeping the race down. W. E. B. DuBois focused on the positive by articulating the notion of a talented tenth, a demographic of blacks who actually
served the race proud in mixed company. But what about the other 90 percent? In 2007, for example, using Pew data, Juan Williams articulated a thesis that “now” there are two black Americas: one includes hard-working middle-class blacks, and the other includes people whose culture keeps them locked in cycles of poverty. Similarly, wealthy black comedian Bill Cosby lashed out at poor blacks at the NAACP’s fiftieth anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education. Importantly, the legal and economic empowerment of the individual is thought to reside in the collective performances of all blacks, which explains Cosby’s rant. To be clear, these public figures did not create the “culture of poverty” argument. Anthropologists did. But long before Oscar Lewis coined the phrase, black religionists were critiquing other blacks for causing their own social and spiritual self-destruction.

Since blacks began using mass media as a means to fight against slavery and institutional racism, two dominant tropes have been in play: the victim, objectified and pitiable; and the perpetrator, wanton and beyond the rule of law. The use of this victim/perpetrator dichotomy—Chris Rock’s blacks versus niggers, Juan Williams’ two black Americas, Bill Cosby’s Shaniqua, Taliqua, and Mohammed versus upstanding blacks—has rendered more nuanced public debates nearly impossible. Legal scholar Michelle Alexander, in The New Jim Crow, and political scientist Cathy Cohen, in The Boundaries of Blackness, argue that the strategy to disavow black abjection through the deployment of the virtuous and unblemished black martyr has paralyzed black leaders from stepping forward to support the most vulnerable: substance abusers caught in a racist criminal justice system, or those suffering from HIV/AIDS. The fear was that fighting for the rights of the morally impure would simply slow down the already sluggish march toward full democratic participation.

Countering some of this narrative that there exists a segment of black society that is almost irredeemable, the Nation of Islam remonstrated against the black bourgeoisie, blaming them for continued black disfranchisement. In their reading of history, which can be traced back to Malcolm X’s house slave/field slave dichotomy, the “field Negro” was responsible for most of the political progress actually made through the 1970s. But the message of the Nation was at odds with that of many black leaders who felt that anyone representing the black community had to be morally beyond reproach—meaning educated, free of vices, devout,
and employed. Black leaders feared that by addressing what some might describe as self-inflicted suffering, they would nourish negative stereotypes that had the power to produce real effects. Red-lining, the academic achievement gap, racial health disparities, unemployment, and wealth and income inequality are just some of the exclusions produced and reproduced by beliefs about the intellectual and moral inferiority of blacks. The fact that black religious communities still struggle to strike a balance between redemptive narratives meant to prove to others that African Americans are whites’ moral equals, on the one hand, and to chastise complicated and fallible members of their own communities, on the other, speaks to the fact that blacks in America are still insecure about their status as full citizens. As we show, benefits of religious intervention with regard to issues of citizenship have been uneven. Their impact is explored ethnographically in the chapters that follow.

Resignification, or the discursive practice of destabilizing one symbolic system in order to imagine it anew, attends to both the needs of the faithful to heal and desires for legitimacy in the eyes of those outside the faith community. This politics of recognition is at the heart of religious media given that it attempts to make the particularities of a religious community intelligible to outsiders while simultaneously attempting to guide or even alter the dispositions of believers themselves. Black religious media seeks not only to make coherent the belief system of the media producers but also to demand deliverance from oppressive and discriminatory politics and policies often bolstered by racist logics. At the same time that black religions offer a particular exegetical reading of scripture, they also attend to race relations and identity politics. They do so presupposing that the two seemingly distinct spheres, the so-called secular and religious, are not just mutually constitutive but inextricably linked when it comes to the politics of race-based exclusion.

Embedded in black religion is a self-conscious awareness of audience. The sense that outsiders are eavesdropping—or that the state is generating intelligence on the machinations of black radicals emboldened by religious fervor—plays a significant role in how black religious media is framed. This recognition that the audience may include people as far away as the caves of Afghanistan produces a kind of white noise that producers of religious media sometimes attend to and other times ignore. Audience—in this case, the imagined other—is often perceived
as a threat or an enemy with the power to subjugate. There is no more striking demonstration of the disruptive potential of a hostile audience than in the 2008 public airing of sermons preached by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the former pastor of President Barack Obama. Reverend Wright was caught on camera preaching a sermon that critiqued American foreign policy, racism, and economic exploitation of black and brown communities. With the help of the media, he was subsequently denounced as anti-American despite his years of distinguished military and community service. Discussions in the media rarely mentioned that Wright was one of only a few black pastors in a predominantly white denomination, that he received invitations to the White House during the Clinton administration, or that his church had made historic efforts in the areas of education, the remediation of HIV/AIDS, support of Pan African freedom, and care of the elderly. Instead, Reverend Wright and the United Church of Christ, the church he pastored, were eviscerated in a media-driven analysis that sought to typecast him as an anti-American black radical. Over thirty-years of Wright’s ministry was summed up in a two-minute clip of one sermon, and the sound-bite threatened to derail Barack Obama’s presidential candidacy. Reverend Wright and Barack Obama in many respects were irrelevant. Instead, the response of the white audience had been primed by centuries of suspicion about the radical nature of the black church. The visual and verbal signifiers tapped into cultural narratives and genealogies that are as entangled in the image of Malcolm X holding a rifle as he looks outside his window as they are in Martin Luther King, Jr., sermonizing during the height of the Civil Rights movement.

The Reverend Wright incident highlights the power of media to distort, as well as the tremendous work required to make an unedited clip from Wright’s sermon legible to average white Americans. The rebuffing of Wright by media-pundits led to Obama’s gradual move away from him. In many ways this event presaged Obama’s continuing struggle to avoid associating himself with religion and race politics at the risk of being cast as the president for black Americans and not all Americans.

Obama’s refusal to be cast in the role of a Reverend Jesse Jackson, Reverend Al Sharpton, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., or, to the chagrin of Al Qaeda, Malcolm X, speaks to the power of religiously mediated racial tropes. These tropes can facilitate communication, but they can
also lock people into prescribed social performances. Obama’s political strategy of disassociation became necessary because iconic renderings of black moral character do not support individuality or the types of hybridity that Obama’s self-narratives have attempted to foster: his mixed-raced and bicultural parentage, his transnational upbringing, and his refusal to let his own identification as a black man limit his inclusivist moral imagination. And it is this hybridity that most Americans, even black Americans, find incomprehensible. Scholar Cornel West’s and media personality Tavis Smiley’s casting of the president as a kind of race traitor in the press was a function of the fact that Obama broke free of traditional redemptive narratives and did not enact political blackness as they thought it should be enacted. But there was precedent. Both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X tried to connect the struggle of blacks and whites toward the end of their lives, and they both read the other as embodying the wrong kind of racialized politics. Black religious media shapes racial identities, demands particular racial performances, and has the power to unseat racist stereotypes. It also has the power to scold and further marginalize the already marginal.

The Medium and Resignification

Why does this book focus on religion and media? There are, after all, political discourses that attempt to redeem the race and other forms of grassroots activism that press key social concerns. What makes mass-mediated religious discourses particularly interesting is that they not only articulate what it means to be, as Lewis Gordon might put it, existentially black, but they also provide totalizing instructions for how people should act and feel. The fact that religious media has the ability to shape people’s dispositions, what Pierre Bourdieu calls habitus, makes it powerful and compelling as a research object.

On their own, religion and media each share many fundamental characteristics. Most notably, religion and media mediate our experiences in the world with a promise of inescapable ubiquity. Although often vague and indeterminate, religious texts sketch out necessary forms of doctrine-based practice informed by sacred texts. While there is much disagreement among different churches, masjids, and Israelite communities, to be part of a faith community often requires submission,
albeit of a contested and negotiated kind. Media shares this pretension to totality and includes implicit interpretive strategies (specific genre-based syntax and short-cuts) deployed as symbolic shorthand (editing, angles, composition, film speed, focus, soundtrack) and used to generate emotions (much like the emotional potency of traditional black homiletics and registers).

These ideological, discursive, and aesthetic short-cuts—rhetorical forms—rely on symbols laden with meaning that presume a shared cultural literacy. Ultimately, however, this media is read and misread, interpreted and misinterpreted, regardless of shared literacy. Media names a reality through the constant signification and resignification of signs, and these tropes that script our moral universe mediate our experiences at the level of the everyday. Together, religion and media have the power to alter what we know about ourselves and the world, and they are increasingly fused in a world of what might be called religious mediatization. We see religion’s relationship to media most distinctly in the case of renaming.

Within black religions renaming oneself has been one of the most important tools of resignification. This renaming, a form of embodiment-by-proxy, works against forms of misrecognition that make blacks vulnerable to racism and its attendant disenfranchisements: red-lining, mass incarceration, reduced access to healthcare, and differential treatment by educators. These signifiers are meant to help free blacks from feelings of abjection, as well as to communicate new social identities. Converts to Islam, for example, often change their names. Within the Nation of Islam in the 1950s and 1960s, new members would often replace their last name with an X. The rejection of one’s “slave name” was a signifier of a deeper rejection of white supremacy. For Sunni Muslims, adopting an Arabic name is not so much a turning away from the past as an embrace of the culture and wisdom of the Prophet Muhammad.

For Hebrew Israelites and various black Jews, adopting Hebrew names often signaled the fullest embrace of a new identity. Naming continues to be such a powerful signifier that to be called “black” instead of “African” or to confuse African Americans with Canaanites or Babylonians is associated with a whole host of conceptual traps that lead to self-hatred and self-destruction. Members of the Nation of Islam, for example, were not Negroes; they were Asians. Black Hebrew Israelites are decidedly
not Jews. Some are not even African. Black Christians, on the other hand, adamantly rebuke white denominations that use the same history and text, with many emphasizing that Jesus was born with “wooly hair.” A great deal is at stake in renaming. Summarizing the origin myth of the Nation of Islam, historian Claude Andrew Clegg highlights the importance of revisionist logics that begin with the donning of new names:

The black people, the first and sole human residents of the planet, were organized into thirteen tribes, which formed a Nation united by skin color (black), religion (Islam), and natural disposition (righteousness). . . . Ruling the earth from the sprawling continent of Asia, the black people prided themselves on being the original “Asiatic blackman, the maker, the owner, the cream of the planet earth, God of the universe.”

The history of Asiatic blackmen, as narrated by the Nation of Islam, is replete with instances of brilliance, triumph, and goodness. It is prophetic and profound. In contrast, the often-told stories of Negroes in North America describe instances of subjugation and powerlessness, debasement and denigration. This history of failure, as narrated in high school classrooms throughout the United States, opens up spaces for questions about whether blacks have the ability to lead themselves. Racial categories get linked to canonized histories in ways that imprison blacks in tropes of racial inferiority and make naming one’s own story nearly impossible—yet absolutely necessary.

Media and Struggles for Citizenship

In his now-classic argument, summed up in the phrase “the medium is the message,” Marshall McLuhan argues that if one wants to understand the message of media one must study both the medium—film, journalism, books, radio—and the content. In this book, we examine the role religious media has played in and through several different media sources, focusing primarily on the relationships between politicized religious rhetoric and electronic media (mostly visual) productions. While we try to escape what might be called McLuhan’s “technological determinism,” we also recognize that written, aural, and/or visual mediums impact viewers differently. Though we reject the idea that
technology determines how the audience interprets a message, we also recognize that black Muslims, Christians, and Jews use media in ways that link to how religious authority is understood. Contemporary African American Muslims, for example, tend to deploy media that is open and accessible: blogs, online forums, and journals. This is related in part to the way in which Qur’anic exegesis is a required practice of all (literate) Muslims. In addition, Muslims are encouraged to lead one another in daily prayers, and anyone who claims deep knowledge of the faith can lead a congregation. This dynamic differs markedly from Christian televangelism, in which a charismatic minister, often not the holder of a degree from a seminary, has singular authority to speak for the faith and is often seen as being touched by God or chosen to lead the faithful. Like Muslims, Christians also use websites and online forums, but the centers of gravity for Christian media have largely been profit-oriented ventures on cable television. Finally, the use of radio by black Hebrew Israelites reflects a particular ethic around language and renaming that makes aural communication an important part of knowledge production. The relationship between technologies and interpretive practice has not necessarily been essential to the faiths themselves but rather to the ways in which religious authority and authenticity are reckoned in the early twenty-first century. Equally important are funding, revenue, and distribution issues, where Christian media dominates given its larger audience size.

Rather than attempt to pool and categorize vast amounts of religious media, we have chosen in this book to focus on explicit and implicit discourses about citizenship vis-à-vis three religio-racial communities. Why citizenship? The struggle for citizenship and a sense of belonging is at the heart of black religious media. The Nation of Islam placed this mandate front and center. They wanted reparations from the United States in the form of two states, in which a second would be created out of the first and be a place where blacks could rule themselves. By the 1950s and 1960s, in the midst of postcolonial struggles around the world, many African Americans felt that they needed to look beyond the United States for membership in a community that would be more just, hopeful, and inclusive. Rather than desiring American legal citizenship, the contemporary religious projects of the Muslims and African Hebrew Israelites, in particular, demonstrate a desire for a cultural citizenship...
that transcends certain forms of nativism. With the transition from Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam, African American Muslims began to fight for recognition as members of the *ummah*, an international community linked by faith and the imagination, and African Hebrew Israelites chose to migrate to Dimona, Israel, where they struggled for decades, renouncing their American citizenship as a symbolic and literal show of faith. Only in the early twenty-first century did the Israeli government award members of the Dimona community permanent residential status, a step that the community imagined as the penultimate one before inevitable citizenship and one that allowed community members to work legally for the first time. Finally, since slavery, black Christians have been at the forefront of demanding the recognition of blacks as the moral equals of white co-religionists. While African American Christians identify most strongly with beliefs about American exceptionalism, Christian televangelism since the Civil Rights era has globalized black Christian spirituality and more and more Christians now feel a sense of unity with Christians from all corners of the globe.

To capture black struggles for belonging and citizenship rights, we present experiences of the faithful from Sharjah to Dimona, from Sanaa to South Carolina. Methodologically, this book draws on both historical analysis and ethnographic fieldwork with members of each of the religious communities. These groups have produced and distributed media meant to humanize the race, and our aim was to understand the impact these “televised” messages about black humanity and moral citizenship have had on the practices of the faithful. While all of our interlocutors, observed in churches, temples, and mosques, do not necessarily identify as black or African American, they all have African American heritage (though some Hebrew Israelite camps would dispute even that), and a good many were born in the United States. We first offer a historical look at the fight for equal protection and rights in the United States and the contribution of black religious media toward achieving this goal. We then draw on our ethnographic engagement with these communities, moving to broaden our gaze to include the international relationships desired by our interlocutors and their efforts to gain membership by establishing their religious authority via media.

Representing oneself in religious mediascapes is a gesture of social intimacy, a call to engage in conversations about the most complex as-
pects of what it means to be human. Therefore, just as we, as hosts and hostesses, may control which rooms in our houses we allow our guests to visit, black religious media regulates the story of black subjectivity not only through what it represents, but also through what it chooses not to represent. For the black community, representations are created with every expectation that the art piece, documentary, TV show, feature film, book, blog, and so on, will stand in for the whole, in a kind of racial synecdoche. What is at stake in any misreading of the black community is the production of fraught generalizations—stereotypes—that have the potential to diminish rights to full citizenship.

The culture of poverty theory is a case in point. Since the 1960s, this theory has been used to argue that black health, educational, economic, and incarceration disparities are the end result of black social dysfunction, weak moral character, and/or intellectual inferiority. President Ronald Reagan, who caricatured recipients of aid as Cadillac-driving (black) welfare queens and who associated politically with notorious racists, built his national social and economic agenda on culture of poverty theories. The idea that poor (black) people lack the character and capacity to take advantage of a free market justified the dismantling of much of the social safety net. In addition to busting unions and deindustrializing cities, Reagan encouraged the bleeding of programs, like education, designed to equalize opportunities. It is no coincidence that his agenda disproportionately impacted African Americans.

The us-versus-them discourses framing culture of poverty theories articulate a relationship between citizenship and deservedness that organizes people according to who is and who is not worthy of state support and legal protections. By legitimating reasons for exclusion, culture of poverty theories have, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, indirectly led to the systematic disfranchisement of voters, from ex-felon “civil death,” to gerrymandering, to the infusion of cash into electoral politics following the Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United decision, a ruling asserting that large campaign contributions by rich donors constitute acts of free speech. What should be clear is that racialized politics does not only disfranchise black people. It starts by treating the black body and black culture as unique, but then quickly marks individuals of any race who exhibit “black” characteristics as raced, as in the case of white sickle cell disease patients in the early twentieth cen-
tury, who were reclassified as black because it was thought that anyone with the disease had to be black. A Marxian would argue that this classification of us and them is useful for maintaining economic and social inequality.

Given this book’s goal of showing how three very different faiths deploy new notions of black subjectivity and citizenship through mass-mediated practices/productions, it is fair to ask how we have organized this endeavor. From the point of view of all three authors, this has been one of the most (if not the most) difficult research projects we have undertaken. New media is generated quickly and is plentiful. We have chosen, therefore, to focus on a few case studies rather than trying to capture black religious media in all of its discursive and material fullness. Instead of casting our net widely, we chose to explore, historically and ethnographically, a handful of works by a subset of engaging and somewhat representative producers and consumers. Of particular interest is the question of what these media producers are trying to represent, why they are making the choices they do, and how these representations are received by others. We also trouble the contours of these questions, especially given the fact that our interlocutors dispute some of what other African Americans consider as the constitutive center of the black community—a dispute about who, in fact, has the authority to represent the race and who can legitimately call themselves the faithful.

Chapters

This book is organized into two sections. As noted, the first section focuses on the historical antecedents used to authorize each religio-racial faith tradition and their particular redemptive narratives as instantiated in their responses to—and mobilizations of—mass media in the battle to define national belonging and existential worth in the context of ubiquitous assumptions about black depravity and primitivity. Through the juxtaposition of these three different (though also overlapping) histories, we can see that black identity has never been depicted as one thing. The histories that have mattered and continue to matter to African American Muslims, Jews/Israelites, and Christians—with their different emphases and interpretations—speak to the use of history as a signifying practice. In this case what is signified is a black subjectivity
fully humanized. The second section presents ethnographies of black religious media told from diverse corners of the world. These ethnographies demonstrate the continued importance of the corporeal, or the raced body, in the age of digital media and global communications.

Chapter 1 begins our exploration of the specific facets of each faith community with a focus on African American Christianity. The chapter delves into the development of African American Christian broadcasting over the past thirty years. Fused with mainstream media, black Christian televangelism looks distinctly different from the messages of redemption mapped out by black Muslims and black Hebrew Israelites. While the mid-century history of black Protestant religion on television was dominated by images of dark-hued Southerners advocating for the civil rights of African Americans by praying, singing, and nonviolently protesting in the streets, African American Christian media in the past thirty years has taken a decidedly individualist approach to redemption. Contemporary narratives of personal empowerment, salvation, and prosperity broadcast by black televangelists around the world map disjointedly onto histories of collective struggle for the redemption of the entire race. Biblical injunctions mandating social and political critique fade in light of audience-centered messages of individual change and personal empowerment. This more personalized tone in more recent African American Christian media reflects not only a change in sociopolitical climate since the 1960s, but also a shift in Christian media broadcasting, a shift driven as much by global neoliberal market demands as by religious inspiration.

Chapter 2 focuses on the Nation of Islam. Given state-sponsored and state-endorsed violence against blacks, the Nation of Islam encouraged followers to develop a religious disposition that intertwined ideas about faith with ideas about the rights and duties of citizenship. The chapter looks particularly at the NOI’s assertion about the right of self-defense as part of its effort to characterize blacks as worthy of respect. It begins with an analysis of David Walker’s Appeal (1829), published in the first African American newspaper, Freedom’s Journal. The Appeal was one of the first instances in which media was used to justify a right of self-defense against the United States. One hundred years later the Nation of Islam echoed Walker’s thesis, developing it further into a faith disposition. In the 1960s NOI leaders Elijah Muhammad’s and Malcolm X’s justification
for self-defense came to define the Nation of Islam in American media. In response, much of the redemptive work in the media produced by the Nation was an attempt to validate blacks’ entitlement to protecting themselves physically and psychologically from white supremacy. Rather than leading to the growth of a hate movement, the dispositions encouraged by the Nation of Islam actually inspired the opposite. This chapter explores why.

Chapter 3 focuses on black Hebrew Israelites. Relating a compelling origin story for black Judaism/Hebrewism/Israelite-ism in the United States requires that the storyteller discuss how Africans in the Americas—from the colonial period to the twenty-first century—have long confounded conventional assumptions about the links between race and religion. It entails conjuring tales of how the earliest African captives claimed Jewish descent from the corners of their Bostonian slave cells; recounting the complicately “colored” Christianities of early postbellum America, Christianities that were as quick to racialize Jesus (and the early Jews) as to genuflect to portraits of some European-featured God; recasting slave revolts—and the vaingloriously suicidal proclivities of those who lead them—in their fullest philo-Israelitic zeal; and requiring that the tale, especially if spun by an anthropological narrator, be brought up to a present moment of urban sidewalk spaces saturated with gnostic beliefs that are more prevalent in the lives of many black Americans than some religious experts seem willing to publicly acknowledge—beliefs such as Nuwabianism and Five Percenterism, which are completely incomprehensible without recognition of their historical and ongoing ties to various forms of black Israelite practices/beliefs. This chapter articulates portions of this history—and maps out a few of these important contemporary connections across denominations and larger religious traditions within black America, connections that mark a concerted effort to rethink prominent parameters of national and global citizenship in the twenty-first century.

In this book’s second half, the ethnography section, Chapter 4 considers the efficacy of African American Christian personal redemption narratives, which are intended primarily to disrupt psychic as opposed to social limitations on progress. Drawing on ethnographic research with black Christian women in the United States, the chapter argues that televangelists speak to women’s personal concerns about economic sus-
tainability in a way that black protest narratives of the previous generation, committed primarily to racial uplift, ignored. Prosperity gospels, it turns out, advance in the hands of women. Far from simply promising wealth without work, the much-maligned gospel introduces languages of possibility that disrupt economic and social limitations placed on black women. By the latter half of the twentieth century, black televangelists had stumbled upon the realization that there is little redemption of the race without the redemption of its women. Framing prosperity as possible and inherent to the believer regardless of social markers like race, class, or gender meant that women writ large instantly transcended the dictates of social norms or religious expectations. As with other instantiations of black redemption over the twentieth century, such as Father Divine’s Peace Mission Movement and Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, black women’s redemption in particular provides the litmus test for interpreting the pulse of a movement. The wild success of T. D. Jakes’ “Woman Thou Art Loosed” ministry has redefined what it means to address black women’s concerns over not only sexuality, but also economic possibility. And addressing these concerns helps us to think about how any discussion about the implications of race and religiosity for questions of citizenship is incomplete without some discussion of the gendered coefficients of any citizenry.

Chapter 5 explores how the postracial aspirations of African American Muslims play out both on the Internet and on the ground. In many instances, race still determines who is given authority to speak for the faith. Therefore, while African American Muslim media producers continue to aspire to postracialism—or a society free of racial discrimination and race-based identification—they acknowledge forms of exclusion and marginalization that make it difficult to develop an audience of Muslims who are not African American. The chapter highlights several instances of racially and ethnically inflected misrecognition, including the story of an expat journalist who finds forms of fellowship and citizenship in the United Arab Emirates—forms unavailable to her in the United States. The story returns us to the history of the Nation of Islam and its efforts to achieve rights of full citizenship for blacks either in the United States or in a territory handed over to them by the U.S. government. While in the twenty-first century the legitimacy of the U.S. government is taken for granted, the question of African American citi-
zenship remains less settled. Lingering concerns about what the United States has to offer African Americans, given that blacks continue to be disproportionately marginalized, are in part why many black Muslims seek recognition within the ummah, or world community of Muslims. This chapter describes how digital media in particular has been coopted into newer redemptive projects regarding race and citizenship.

Chapter 6 draws on research at an independent radio station in Philadelphia, WURD 900AM, owned by a family with complex and nuanced ties to the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem (AHIJ), the transnational spiritual community of African American expats that has been based in southern Israel for over forty years. The chapter takes an ethnographic look at one weekly show on WURD, The Green Hour, which is produced and hosted by two “saints” from the AHIJ community, and it explores how that show demonstrates an attempt to place specific claims about racial injustices in critical conversation with seemingly distinctive and separable domains such as environmentalism and health literacy. The Green Hour uses airtime to highlight new and innovative products that are environmentally safe and/or vegan-inspired, which the show’s producers help to sell wholesale and retail throughout the country in line with the AHIJ’s rigorous reconceptualization of the human body’s cellular capacities and its championing of specific techniques for keeping human bodies healthy and whole—for hundreds of years (maybe even forever). This immortalityist reconceptualization of the body’s physical capacities is based on the AHIJ’s purposeful reading of contemporary medical science and their fascinating rereading of the Holy Bible, especially the Old Testament (Torah). Using their radio show as an example of how this Hebrew Israelite group interfaces with a larger African American community in the United States and abroad, the chapter provides an ethnographic and analytic window into how the “Kingdom” gets its message (to use the station’s tag-line) “on the air, online, and in the community.” Moreover, with its focus on radio (often ignored in modern fetishizations of “new media”), the chapter also seeks to make a case for the continued relevance of seemingly outmoded concepts (such as the “televised” of this book’s title, Televised Redemption), concepts that aren’t so much antiquated as reanimated in our “convergent media” moment. As these Hebrew Israelite radio hosts argue for the physical and spiritual value of veganism and make a weekly case for God’s re-
quirement that his chosen people serve as stewards for the entire planet, they are also conjuring new ways of understanding citizenship in varied local, national, and international manifestations.

In all, this book illuminates how black religious media has been and continues to be part and parcel of the long struggle for equal protection and social inclusion in American society. By representing the moral capacities of African Americans, this media continues to play a role in insuring that legal rights transfer to social rights. Importantly, mass incarceration, marked by the disproportionate prosecution and sentencing of blacks, began soon after the adoption of civil rights legislation. And residential and educational segregation grew worse, not better, after initial efforts at racial desegregation in the early 1970s. A generalized sense of black inferiority has replaced more explicit beliefs about white supremacy, but in the end the effects are largely the same. The legal rights of blacks are whittled away as new discourses of black inferiority legitimate new forms of exclusion. To counter this racial recursion, black religious media continues to impact—at the level of social dispositions—how blacks perceive themselves and are perceived by others. Without this mediated discursive work, it is doubtful that the United States would have come as far as it has in addressing the race question. But as this book makes clear, the work of redeeming the race continues. And black Christians, Muslims, and Jews/Israelites have taken on this challenge by proclaiming, in numerous and varied televised forms, that blacks are equally the sons and daughters of God.