

Prophets of Rage:
Expressions of Black Nationalism in Hip Hop

By

Julian R. Manyoni

B.A. (Hons.) Carleton University, 1996

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of English, University of British Columbia)

We Accept this Thesis as Conforming
to the Required Standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

August 2000.

© Julian R. Manyoni, 2000.

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of ENGLISH

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date 31/08/00

Abstract

This paper deals with the development of Black nationalist politics in hip hop, focusing primarily on the years up to 1994. This investigation examines two primary strains of nationalist hip hop which emerged in the late 1980s: Afrocentric hip hop nationalism and pro-Black hip hop nationalism. Afrocentric nationalism is based primarily on the notion of Africa as the root of all Black diasporic culture and the idea that a return (either physically or intellectually) to Africa and its glorious past is the key to develop the Black nation and confront white racism and oppression. Pro-Black hip hop nationalism is expressed by rappers who look to the recent past in order to find their inspiration. They draw their inspiration from the leaders and ideologies of the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, in particular the 1960s when the movement developed a more militant stance. The paper seeks to examine critically these two forms of hip hop nationalism with special focus on how they envision and represent the Black nation through their art. What becomes apparent is that the main themes in the visual and lyrical imagery tend to be somewhat consistent in both these two forms. In Afrocentric hip hop, the central theme and preoccupation is with location. The literal and symbolic return to the African motherland is what the Black nationalist agenda must be predicated upon, while in pro-Black hip hop the concept of time (and Nation Time) is central. The paper then examines the way in which the above forms of hip hop nationalism use their respective themes, both in terms of effectiveness and coherence, ending in a sharp critique of the almost universally sexist nature of the discourse of nation. Finally, the thesis touches briefly on the next generation (1996-2000) of nation conscious hip hop artists in relation to the artists

examined in the main body of the paper and looks at their socio-political ideologies and aims in relation to their predecessors.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	ii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
I. <i>Roots: The Birth of the Hip Hop Nation</i>	11
II. <i>Prophets of Rage: Black Nationalist Rappers as Organic Intellectuals</i>	13
III. <i>Time to Get Busy: "Pro-Black" Hip Hop Nationalism</i>	17
IV. <i>Mother of the Nation: Representations of Women in Nationalist Hip Hop</i>	30
V. <i>Back to the Motherland: Afrocentric Hip Hop Nationalism</i>	39
VI. <i>Ladies First: Females Representin'</i>	47
<i>Conclusion</i>	51
<i>Recordings Cited</i>	54
<i>Bibliography</i>	55

Introduction

Much scholarship in the last decade has focused on hip hop as an important form of Black cultural expression. It is a phenomenon whose importance and appeal go far beyond the boundaries of its country of origin to form what has become known as the hip hop nation, a transnational community bound together by its connection to the various elements of hip hop culture¹, all of which are expressions of resistance to contemporary U.S-dominated corporate capitalist culture. Despite the inevitable banality that comes with the white co-optation necessary for any Black art form to achieve “mainstream” commercial success, the core of hip hop remains rooted in defiance and rejection of the tenets of white corporate culture. While most of the contemporary scholarship on hip hop culture, more specifically on its central element, rap music², has looked at it as a unified or monolithic entity, I think it is necessary to look more closely at the internal diversity of this art. Over the years, rap music has developed into several distinct genres, each of which embodies a particular worldview that draws from various aspects of the Black experience in North America and beyond.

One of the most important subgenres of rap is the politically and socially progressive brand generally called “(nation) conscious” rap. Artists of this genre are primarily concerned with spreading social and political consciousness through art to

¹ Hip hop culture is comprised of four main elements: turntablism, poetry (rap), dance (breakdance), and art (graffiti). Each takes existing elements of popular culture and reinvents them in original forms. They also defy traditional notions of intellectual and private property, seeing all cultural production as public property.

² Rap music (often erroneously called hip hop) is a combination of the first two separate elements of hip hop culture. Rap as a non-musical form of poetry is a separate entity. However, since this paper deals specifically with rap musicians and rap music, I shall (despite the technical differences) use rap here to specifically represent rap music.

the members of the Black underclass, providing political education and motivation contained within a supremely entertaining form. Like its historical counterparts in the continuum of North American Black music (soul, funk, jazz, blues, gospel), the music is able to appeal to an ethnically and culturally diverse audience, while still embodying a message and set of meanings that are specifically directed towards Black people. This paper, then, will examine the political and resistive nature of rap as a form of Black American cultural expression, focusing primarily on two specific forms of “(nation) conscious” rap: Afrocentric rap and “pro-Black” rap as articulations of contemporary Black nationalism. Looking at the works of specific artists, particularly Public Enemy, X-Clan and Queen Latifah, I will examine the way these two genres address the idea of nation and nationalism in terms of time and place and I will discuss the imagery and logic of national consciousness.

In order to contextualize the art appropriately, it is necessary to begin with a look at the historical and material conditions out of which nationalist hip hop developed. Hip hop culture arose through a combination of the poverty and suffering of “urban renewal” programmes of post-industrial urban New York and the increasing availability and affordability of basic recording/playback technology. It developed as a result of many social factors, including the disappointment and betrayal of the ideals and hopes of the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, the cancellation of numerous social programmes intended to promote Black equality, and the harsh economic realities of a major national recession which reconfirmed the position of Blacks as occupants of the lowest level of the socio-economic structure. As bell hooks has claimed, any society is seen most clearly by those occupying the lowest stratum;

therefore, as an articulation of the social and material conditions of life at the lowest stratum of North American society, rap implicitly reflects, and reflects on, that society. Frank Kofsky concurs. He claims that Black secular music “like black nationalism, springs from the lowest stratum of United States society, the Negro working class, [Leroi Jones’] ‘blues people’ (100). Seeing, knowing and speaking your situation within a society is the first step towards changing that condition, and this is exactly the function that rap ideally performs in the modern context: rappers literally speak their situation.

As it evolved both musically and lyrically, rap began to describe and analyze the social, economic and political factors that led to its emergence and development: drug addiction, police brutality, teen pregnancy and various forms of material deprivation linked to the systemic racism of North American society. This development found its clearest early voice in the lyrics of the most important early rap song: Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “the Message.” The picture of urban life for Blacks painted in this song was a far cry from the apolitical tone of much of the popular music of that time:

You’ll grow up in the ghetto living second rate
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
The places you play and where you’ll stay,
Looks like one big alleyway
You’ll admire all the number book takers
Thugs, pimps, and pushers, and the big money makers
Drivin’ big cars, spendin’ twenties and tens,
And you want to grow up just like them
...It’s like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin’ under.

“The Message” set the stage for the transformation of hip hop music/poetry into a form which could combine social protest, musical creation, and cultural expression

(Dyson 1993:4). As rap developed through the 1980s and into the 1990s, as with previous forms of Black musical expression, major shifts occurred within the genre directly relating to the commercialization and appropriation of the rap “subculture” by the mainstream. In response to the increasing commercial viability of rap music, several distinct sub-genres began to emerge; some capitalizing on the profitability of the genre and reaffirming the ideology of the capitalist hegemony, some using the medium as a means to mobilize their communities and invigorate a culture of resistance. The latter form, “nation-conscious” rap which is the focus of this paper, generally draws on Black historical experience to build a sense of a coherent culture and tradition for the purpose of revolutionary change. Conscious rap attempts to negotiate a path between the competing forces of Black liberation from white supremacist capitalism, and reliance on the commercial viability of its production to spread the message.

Culturally specific musical expression is an integral factor in the development of the social and cultural cohesion necessary for sustained political mobilization³. Its power lies in its ability to communicate a sense of shared history by forming a connection between diverse individuals and communities who share cultural-historical experiences and bringing them together within a performative framework. It is an articulation of and confirmation of Black subjectivity in the face of a society geared to erasing that subjectivity. Nation-conscious rap became not only an articulation of experiences, but an affirmation of the subjectivity of the marginal on their own terms.

³ For a more complete discussion of the use of music as a tool for political mobilization see Eyerman and Jamison. For a view of how this works in a specifically Black cultural context see Reilly.

How did the Black nationalism within rap music rise to prominence in the 1980s and 90s? Ice Cube offers some clues. On 1988's NWA debut album *Straight Outta Compton*, Cube raps:

Fuck the police! Comin' straight from the underground,
A young nigger got it bad cause I'm brown!
And not the other colour, so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority
Fuck that 'cause I ain't the one
For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun
To be beatin' on and throwin' in jail...
...fuckin' with me cause I'm a teenager
With a little bit of gold and a pager
Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product
Thinkin' every nigger is sellin' narcotics!
You'd rather see me in the pen
Than me and Lorenzo
Rollin' in a Benz-o

Cube's expression of Black relationships with the police is equally explicit on his 1991 album *Death Certificate*: "We're gonna treat you like a king," threatens a white LAPD cop on the "Death Side" of the album. "What goddamn king?" demands the indignant Ice Cube. "Rodney King! Martin Luther King! And all the other kings from Africa." As probably the premier gangsta rapper in hip hop, Ice Cube reinvents himself on the "Life Side" of the album as a born again Black nationalist. In the sleeve of *Death Certificate*, Ice Cube makes his transformation explicit: "We have limited knowledge of self, so it leads to a nigga mentality. The best place for a young Black male or female is in the Nation of Islam. Soon as we as a people use our knowledge of self to our advantage we will then be able to become and be called Blacks." As enforcers of a system of state control and repression within the Black community, the police represent an enemy to Blacks by their very presence: whether through their treatment

of Black youth through “race profiling” or their historical responses to Black empowerment. Ice Cube’s cop conflates and criminalizes all Black “kings” as suspects. His statement also draws attention to three distinct inflections of the meaning of “king” for Black nationalism today. “Rodney King” signifies both police brutality towards Blacks in America and Black consciousness of systemic racism in the subsequent trial results; “Martin Luther King,” who became progressively more radical throughout his life, marks the sixties as a time of both broken civil rights promises and Black Power militancy; and, finally, “kings from Africa” evokes the memory of glorious ancient African empires (and their demise through colonialism and the slave trade) which inspire those involved in building the new Black nation.

I submit that today’s nation conscious rappers draw their inspiration from the Black Power movements of the 1960s and from the Afrocentric notion that the original site of Black American cultural heritage is ancient Egypt. Hence, two corresponding tendencies exist within nation conscious rap: “pro-Black” hip hop nationalism and “Afrocentric” hip hop nationalism. Although rap groups espousing a Black nationalist sound, image, and message draw from both “pro-Black” and “Afrocentric” tendencies, this paper examines each category independently in order to unpack the logic specific to each. Both tendencies within rap imply a particular strategy for coding Black nationalism. While the notion of *time* is central to pro-Black nationalism, the idea of *place* has heightened importance for Afrocentric nationalism. Pro-Black hip hop, espoused by groups like Public Enemy, is time conscious in that it appropriates the language of organized Black revolts from the 1960s based on the concept of “nation time.” Afrocentric rap, which can be found in the music of X-Clan, reclaims ancient

Egyptian empire as the African origin in order to create racial pride and awareness of the struggles over injustice in North America. I am interested here in the ways in which rap music uses the language of nation to rearticulate a history of racial oppression and struggle which can reinvigorate the movement towards Black empowerment and independence. Rap groups espousing a nationalist sound, image and message draw from both present struggles that anticipate the coming of the Black nation (nation time) and a mythical attitude toward an ancient African nation (nation place). Nationalism exists in the space created by the equivocal relationship between these two tendencies: a simultaneous looking forward and backward. Tom Nairn writes:

[I]t is through nationalism that societies try to propel themselves forward to certain kinds of goals (industrialization, prosperity, equality, with other peoples, etc.) by a certain degree of regression – by looking inwards, drawing more deeply upon their indigenous resources, resurrecting past folk-lore heroes and myths about themselves and so on...

[N]ationalism can in this sense be pictured as like the old Roman god, Janus, who stood above gateways with one face looking forward and one backwards. Thus does nationalism stand over the passage to modernity, for human society. As human kind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past to gather strength wherever it can be found for the ordeal of "development." (348-9)

Nairn suggests that the politics of nationalism have always been morally ambiguous. In order for a nation to justify its experiences and to speak the language of progress and development to its people, it feels compelled to fabricate a myth of national origins. I believe Black nationalism draws from this Janus-faced logic, as it accounts for why hip hop nationalism nostalgically looks towards ancient Egypt as an African-

American motherland, while it simultaneously imagines an alternative future based on the rise of the anticipated Black nation.

Members of the hip hop nation form an “imagined community” (Anderson 2) that is based less on its realization through state formation than on a collective challenge to the consensus logic of U.S. nationalism. The language of nation is appropriated by the hip hop community as a vehicle for contesting the changing discursive and institutional structures of racism in America. For instance, the consensus discourses of cultural pluralism and the ethnic melting pot in the U.S. threaten the Black community with the loss of a collective identity. Hip hop nationalism, like Black nationalism generally, provides an inspirational territory for Black Americans who wish both to end the institutionalized legacy of slavery and to create self-sufficient, organically based organizations like Black businesses and Afrocentric school curricula. As I will demonstrate below, among nationalist rappers, only community based hip hop nationalists can create the basis for a critical and conscious struggle.

In the most general terms, rap music may be characterized as what Elizabeth Blair calls a postmodern commodity aesthetic (27), which is simultaneously a collective and contradictory expression of Black culture and politics. As Clarence Lusane points out, “The commodification of Black resistance is not the same as resistance to a society built on commodification” (45). However, I would agree with Elizabeth Blair when she argues that while the consumptive habits of individuals are manipulated by mass culture industries so as “to transform the production of meaning by subcultures into a managed market purchase” (28), this is not always the case,

“because consciousness itself cannot be controlled. There are not two people in the world who will perceive any given stimulus musical or otherwise exactly the same way” (28-9). Blair’s position opens a space of resistance for commodified (sub)cultural production within a culture of homogeneity enforced by mass-marketing. My focus is on the productive if limiting contradictions embedded in hip hop nationalism’s rethinking of the past in order to effect change in the present struggle for Black empowerment. I am less concerned with judging the “truth” of any particular historical claim made by hip hop nationalists than in attempting to describe and interpret the logic behind their use of the contemporary language of nation. I aim to deconstruct the cultural text of hip hop nationalism – presented in both lyrics and video images – in order to address several concerns. What are the conditions for the emergence of these particular narratives of nationalism at the particular moment in history when they developed? What makes the specific truth-claims of hip hop nationalism more (or less) culturally relevant, meaningful, and effective in the contemporary political climate? What kinds of contradictions are embedded in the logic of hip hop nationalism’s representation of ancient African civilizations, the 1960s struggles for racial empowerment in North America, and the promise of a Black nation to come? Furthermore, I will address the problematic representation and status of the “Black woman” and female rappers in both the pro-Black and Afrocentric varieties of hip hop nationalism. The figure of the black woman within Black nationalism, especially of the Afrocentric variety, is frequently deployed to represent “Mother Africa.” This type of objectification suggests some limits to Black nationalism as a narrative of liberation for Black women. Some female rappers, like

Sister Souljah and Isis, consent to their submissive assignment within hip hop nationalism, often as a means toward buoying the “fragile” institution of the Black family and showing solidarity with the much-maligned Black male. Other women rappers like Queen Latifah and Bahamadia provide innovation and new direction for the Black nation by challenging the patriarchal logic common to such nationalisms.

I also examine pro-Black hip hop nationalism for its appropriation and revision of 1960s Black militancy for the current era. These nation-conscious rappers not only uncover, but update a recent history of racial struggle for today’s Black youth who might otherwise have little or no access to this empowering past. Despite the urgency of their message, the limitations of pro-Black hip hop nationalists are illustrated in their tendency to romanticize Black revolutionary politics of the period, or to uncritically conflate the distinct and often opposing revolutionary politics of militant organizations, such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party. In these instances, they fail to enrich and transform the tradition of Black militancy for the present day. Afrocentric hip hop nationalism inspires racial self-worth in Black youth through the promotion of an Afrocentric value system. Afrocentric rappers generate a non-Western sound and message by rewriting the past so that Africa – more precisely Egypt – becomes the origin of all civilization. As I will attempt to show, this intervention, while it unsettles certain white supremacist notions at the core of modern civilization, nonetheless remains within the Western logic of “civilization” that it seeks to dismantle.

Roots: The Birth of the Hip hop Nation

The decline of Garveyism⁴ by the beginning of the Great Depression marked the end of large-scale emigration movements tied to Black nationalism in the U.S. Over the next quarter of a century, a new Black nationalism slowly emerged, led by the Honourable Elijah Muhammad, which preached the doctrine of “a Nation within a nation.” Although its petit-bourgeois philosophy advocates Western-style capitalism for the Black underclasses, the Nation of Islam preaches racial separatism based partly on an Egypt-centred interpretation of the African heritage of Black Americans. As the Nation of Islam continued to flourish among the working poor during the 1960s, Black middle-class nationalist movements such as Maulana Ron Karenga’s US organization, also emerged. Cornel West points out that these new nationalist movements, usually led by a younger generation of the Black intelligentsia, were much less effective than the NOI in capturing the hearts and minds of urbanized Black folk and in building Black institutions (53). It was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a Black Left revolutionary organization also led by young intellectuals but opposed to nationalism of any sort, which produced much more discernible results in the Black communities. By the mid-seventies, systematic state repression and state engineered internal

⁴ Garveyism refers to the separatist ideology espoused in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Marcus Garvey and his organization UNIA. His programme for Black liberation and self determination was based on two main tenets. 1) Black self-sufficiency in the New World based on unified segregated Black communities 2) A return of diasporic Blacks to the African continent. Garvey’s programme, while popular in its time was also highly problematic and self-contradictory. While he believed in self-determination and equality for Black people, his notions of culture and his socio-political values were based almost entirely on the forms of Euro-American civilization. One of the basic elements of the “repatriation” of diasporic Blacks was the reproduction of European and American forms of culture, nation and value in Africa. It was in essence a version of the ‘white man’s burden’ enacted by “civilized” New World Blacks.

conflicts brought about the collapse of the Black Panthers, and forced the newer Black cultural nationalists to reconceive their political strategies and agendas.

In the late 1970s, while the Nation of Islam reorganized after the death of Elijah Muhammad, the hip hop nation was born largely through the efforts of one of rap's pioneers, Afrika Bambaataa (Hager 72). Influenced partly by the release of a British feature film on the Zulus, Bambaataa summoned into existence the Zulu Nation in New York City's South Bronx in an attempt to bring about peace in a region increasingly prone to gang violence. It wasn't until 1983, when Brother D came out with "How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise," that an explicit nationalist message was heard in rap music. Later that same year, Tommy Boy Records released a collection of Malcolm X speeches officially endorsed by Malcolm's widow Betty Shabazz. The Malcolm X album, entitled "No Sellout," was made relevant for a 1980s audience by Keith LeBlanc, a white drummer previously with the Sugarhill label, who dubbed Malcolm's uncompromising voice over a hard-driving beatbox track (Toop 124-5).

It would take a full decade after the initial soundings of Bambaataa's Zulu Nation, however, for Black nationalism to emerge as a substantial force within rap music. Today, Bambaataa and his Zulu Nation are a powerful source of inspiration for high profile nation-conscious rappers. Hip hop nationalists disseminate the language of nation in rap music by inflecting it with oppositional "Black" meanings. To do so, they exploit the sounds and images of a wide variety of Black militants from America's past, but particularly those who advocate building the Black nation. Their sources most often include community-based activists such as Marcus Garvey, Elijah

Muhammad, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Muhammad Ali, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Angela Y. Davis, and Huey P. Newton. The predominance of male figures in this list hints at the masculinist nature of the discourses of nation and nationalism. Nationalist rappers also sample from the philosophies of distinctly Black institutions (ranging from the Black Panther Party to the Nation of Islam) that are organically tied to the communities they serve.

Prophets of Rage: Nationalist Rappers as Cultural “Organic” Intellectuals

While many nation-conscious rappers are not generally considered activists in the conventional sense, they do occupy a place between entertainers and politicians within Black communities. When the Los Angeles insurrections of 1992 erupted after a nearly all-white jury acquitted white officers of the LAPD of the charge of police brutality towards Rodney King, ABC's *Nightline* called Ice Cube for an interview. As the *Village Voice* (May 12, 1992) reported, Ice Cube declined to make the television appearance because “he was desperately looking through the South Central rubble for family and friends he hadn't heard from since the shit started” (80). Unlike most entertainers and politicians in the United States, many nation-conscious rappers sustain their organic ties to the Black communities from which they came and of which their music is a part. As the racial antagonisms that produced the recent insurrections in L.A. make clear, no cultural expression and neighborhood are as linked as rap music and South Central.

It is, however, not uncommon to find rap artists, especially those with explicit political messages in their music and videos, participating in grass-roots events, which

are organized around the dogged but changing structures of racism in North America. Rappers are conspicuous at public demonstrations, and frequently speak at rallies, schools, and prisons. For example, the 1989 murder of Yusuf Hawkins in Brooklyn's Bensonhurst by a mob of angry white teens prompted a protest march under the slogan "A Day of Outrage." The rally was organized by community activists with the assistance of the rap group X-Clan, and memorialized on their debut album. Furthermore, recent compilations like *No More Prisons* and *The Unbound Project* feature an assortment of rappers, community activists and intellectuals addressing prison reform, the death penalty, and the racist structures of the US justice system. While hip hop nationalists are not politicians, they are involved in the production of cultural politics, its creation, its circulation, and its interpretation, which is tied to the everyday struggles of working class blacks and the urban poor. Perhaps more than most popular Black musicians, hip hop nationalists follow Cornel West's assertion that: "[s]ince black musicians play such an important role in Afro-American life, they have a special mission and responsibility: to present beautiful music [or serious noise] which both sustains and motivates black people and provides visions of what black people should aspire to" (56).

The social efficacy of nation conscious rap ranges from unrevised imitation and misinformed representation of media-styled black militancy to historically informed and creatively transformative representations of oppositional politics for the turn of the century. In their least innovative moments, nation conscious rappers conjure the spirits of, for example, sixties revolutionaries, by borrowing the names, battle cries, and costumes of the period without transforming this legacy to meet the

needs of the present era. Alternatively, militant rappers are most effective when they appropriate popular knowledge from within a Black community and exploit its most progressive elements in the process of envisioning a new society. At these moments, rappers function in a manner resembling what Antonio Gramsci calls “organic intellectuals,” that is, intellectuals who are organically tied to their community of origin and who “function not only in the economic but in the social and political fields” (5).

Hip hop nationalists are organic *cultural* intellectuals to the degree that their activities are directly linked to the everyday struggles of Black people and that their music critically engages the popular knowledge of the communities of which they are a part. As Chuck D asserts, “regardless of what anyone says, the bases of these artists come from the Black community. Now these artists from the Black community have voices...” (Manyoni 17). Communicating popular knowledge, what Gramsci terms “common sense,” and extrapolating its most progressive tendencies is the greatest challenge posed to organically based cultural intellectuals (in this case conscious musicians). The task facing these musicians is to formulate “a criticism of ‘common sense,’ basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity” (Gramsci 330-31). The music and video images produced by hip hop nationalists must do more than mirror the interests of their urban constituency. They must actively shape popular knowledge in a manner that contests American nationalism from within the Black communities. The

effectiveness of hip hop nationalism is not grounded on a rap artist's ability, as a member of an "elite" avant-garde, to lead the "backward" Black masses. Instead, the cultural intellectual who is organically linked to the community begins from popular knowledge and appropriates its "healthy nucleus" (328) in order to make "coherent the principles and the problems raised by the masses in their practical activity" (330).

Strictly speaking, Gramsci's formulation of the organic intellectual extends only to nontraditional, community-oriented activists. As such, organically-based intellectuals in Black America would include activists of the late 1950s such as Ella Baker of the SCLC and Malcolm X of the NOI and OAAU. Nonetheless, I wish to insist that marginal cultures in North America have, historically, nurtured a variety of intellectuals involved in cultural work – such as musicians and filmmakers – who are organically linked to their communities of origin. Other recent commentators on popular culture might agree. Angela Y. Davis and Hazel V. Carby, for instance, both suggest that organic intellectuals emerge within the tradition of "classic" women's blues singers of the 1920s, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith (Carby 14). Likewise, George Lipsitz uses the Gramscian concept to describe the function of Mexican American rock musicians within ethnic minority communities of Los Angeles over the past fifty years (152-3). Film director Melvin Van Peebles points towards an interpretation of artists as potential Gramscian organic intellectuals in his comments on the role of community-based Black film:

The reality is that our people have been brainwashed with the "hip" music, the beautiful colour, and the dancing images flickering across the screen. This is what they know of cinema. And that's where we must begin. We obviously cannot dwell there, but it's a point of departure...That's what revolution is! It isn't everybody

standing up here on an intellectual high. And it's not meeting people and starting from where they are not. It is starting from where they can see. (George 26)

Hip hop nationalists are the most recent in a long line of organic cultural workers who are situated between the intellectual activist and the commercial entertainer⁵. They tend to be most progressive when they use their music, videos and public appearances to make relevant their constituency's "common-sense" understanding of historical Black militancy for today's struggles.

Time to Get Busy: Pro-Black Hip hop Nationalism

Nineteen eighty-eight was a landmark year in rap music for two reasons. On the popular front, MTV inaugurated its first regular hip hop programme called "Yo, MTV Raps!" to unprecedented network ratings. In the same year, Public Enemy released its second album, *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. It went multi-platinum, and is considered by many in the music industry to be one of the most important and influential albums ever recorded. *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* not only radically altered hip hop's sonic landscape, changing the way producers approached music and production, it also gave Black nationalism in the United States its first widely publicized expression in nearly two decades. Hip hop nationalism's immediate precursor in the Black arts was the Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s and early 1970s which, broadly conceived, included artists such as Amiri Baraka, Haki R. Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Gil Scott-Heron, and The

⁵ Nationalist rappers, especially those with an overtly socialist message, occupy an inherently unstable position within Black nationalism. While they use their art to spread a "subversive" message, they also rely on the capitalist commodification of their art as mass-disseminated entertainment to spread their anti-capitalist ideology.

Last Poets. Black Aestheticians were predictably technophobic in their firm rejection of mass media and commodity culture in favour of the community identity provided by the recovery of precolonial African oral and musical traditions. The Black Aesthetic movement's most powerful statement was, perhaps, formulated in the music of Gil Scott-Heron, who proclaimed: "The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised, will not be televised / The revolution will be no re-run brothers / The revolution will be live."

By the mid-seventies, however, Black cultural nationalists of the sixties emerged largely defeated due to both state repression and internal contradictions. Many Black Aestheticians understood that, given the changing face of American culture, they had failed to respond organically to their own constituencies' needs and desires. In his 1973 book entitled *From Plan to Planet*, Madhubuti recognized the "failure" of sixties Black nationalism to give struggling Black Americans cultural and political alternatives in their own language:

Black writers, as other black creators, deal in images. They understand the uses and manipulation of the image. One of the main reasons that our young so readily latch on to capsule form ideologies from outside the community is that black writers and others have failed. We have failed to give the young brothers and sisters a workable and practical alternative in the language and style to which they can relate. We've failed to direct or set up and help operate constructive programs dealing with the *real* issues on this planet. (96)

Madhubuti goes on to say that the Black artist's first allegiance is to the Black media: magazines, newspapers, and of course, radio. It is in the mass media, especially as it is situated within Black communities, that organic cultural intellectuals can produce a practical language of Black nationalism.

A fundamental difference between hip hop nationalism and Black nationalism of the sixties is manifested in the way nation conscious rap embraces and exploits postmodern information technologies in order to produce a new Black nationalist sound for the nineties and beyond. Chuck D of Public Enemy asserts: "Technology. We have to take advantage of it, and these Black businessmen, instead of backing Coca-Cola all the time, they can get together and create a B.E.T.I. [Black Entertainment Television and Information] service to inform us" (Leland 48). In the absence of a Black CNN, rap records are an invisible network that can inform and mobilize the Black community. Time and again, Chuck D has stated, "[r]ap is Black America's TV station. It gives a whole perspective of what exists and what Black life is all about. And Black life doesn't get the total spectrum of information through anything else" (Eure & Spady, 336). In the last few years, Chuck D has been focusing his efforts on exploiting the communicative power of the Internet to perform a similar function. With his Internet radio broadcast "Rap Station" and a burgeoning on-line publishing business, he is constantly attempting to develop a medium for the free dissemination of Black cultural expression and resistance by Black artists musicians and writers:

Out of sight out of mind is a terrible thing that's happened to a lot [of activists] in America. That only happens when you don't have control over media outlets. That's why I think the Internet is so important for us, 'cause we can continuously and consistently build our own media and have a lot of people flock to it. (Manyoni, 18)

He sees the Internet as a complement to music and video as a means of spreading critical and revolutionary consciousness, and raising awareness to effect social change.

Music videos such as "Night of the Living Baseheads" (which critiques racism within the contemporary discourse of the "war" on drugs) produce a dynamic fusion of sight and sound meant to move the audience's consciousness. The "Night of the Living Baseheads" video even creates its own television network, called PETV, to combat a media saturated culture where there exist few minority controlled radio stations and even fewer minority controlled television stations. Other Public Enemy songs, such as "Don't Believe the Hype," "911 is a Joke," "Can't Truss It," "More News at 11," and "How to Kill a Radio Consultant", express the group's desire to broadcast news and information to their hip hop constituency not readily available on and through mainstream channels. Sustaining the gains made by the Black Power revolt is especially important because, for nationalists, these efforts work against mainstream efforts to the contrary. As Sister Souljah states, "the media tr[ies] to move people's minds out of the consciousness of the '60s and into some type of Black backwardness" (Eure & Spady, 247). The sixties inspired hip hop nation understands that, today, control over the media means the ability to control representations of the real as well.

Hip hop's sixties inspired pro-Black nationalist groups (for example Paris, Intelligent Hoodlum, Laquan, and P.E.) make extensive use of the highly publicized and media-styled Black militancy of the sixties. The packaging of rap albums, CDs, and cassettes provides many illustrations of hip hop nationalism's historical borrowings. Aside from more obscure references, such as P.E.'s third album *Fear of a Black Planet*, an allusion to Madhubuti's *From Plan to Planet*, there are a number of explicit examples of this tendency. Frank Owen's article on P.E. in *Spin* (March 1990),

for instance, displayed a full-page photo of Chuck D seated between two members of P.E.'s paramilitary outfit, the SIWs (Security of the First World). On Chuck D's request, the magazine agreed to restage the trademark photograph of Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton sitting in a regal wicker chair with spear and automatic rifle in hand. This time, however, Chuck is decked out in "B-boy" fashion: high top sneakers, black baseball jacket and baseball cap with the P.E. insignia and logo. By taking on and yet revising Panther imagery, Public Enemy creatively updates the most media conscious iconography of sixties Black radicalism for a 1990s constituency. Broadly speaking, this revision of an historical image is generated by means of sampling. Public Enemy cites the speeches and TV images of Black political leaders of the sixties, especially Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Huey Newton, in the same manner that, for example, Motown hits are sampled. Hip hop nationalists are most effective when, by sampling the voices and images of political leaders from this period, they move beyond romanticizing media images of sixties Black Power. They perform this task when, as organic cultural intellectuals, they recontextualize these images and thus make Black militancy of the 1960s meaningful to the present.

B-boy and B-girl fashion – the almost parodic equivalent to (musical) sampling in the garment industry – is also significant to nation conscious rap. Mainstream consumption habits are parodied when price tags are left on hats and sneakers. B-girls conspicuously display large gold earrings which not only mock consumerism but give the B-girl the appearance of a local queen. Hip hop also parodies American consumerism by supporting the "fake fashion" industry (Owen 1988: 48). Designer logos are copied, cut up, and placed on hats, jackets, and pants. Public Enemy's Flavor

Flav, who often sports colourful (even clown-like) imitation designer clothes is an excellent example of this fashion trend: in addition to the fake fashions, he dons a huge clock or watch on chains draped around his neck. Chuck D and Terminator X wear smaller version of the same clock as well as medallions inscribed with red, black and green image of the African continent made popular by Black nationalist rappers. The clocks draw our attention to the multi-dimensional nature of the themes addressed by rap. On the one hand, the clocks, usually set at two minutes to midnight, are meant to remind us of the burdens of modern time, particularly industrialism's capacity to discipline and exploit through the control of temporality. On the other hand, the imminent stroke of twelve reminds P.E.'s audience that the time of reckoning for the oppressors, "Nation Time," is close at hand (Decker 62-3).

Furthermore, both musically and historically speaking, the clocks highlight the fact that Public Enemy's art is time conscious. Chuck D explains that the difference between the revolutionary Black music of yesterday and today is the latter's ability to move the masses through a musical timing that translates into rap's danceability:

The thing about the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron is that they were into a jazz-type approach, doing poetry over a beat. When rap music came along, it was poetry over a beat too, but in *time*. More important than the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, to us, was James Brown. His record "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" had the most impact because it was danceable yet you still thought about it...the groove was funk and soul, which was different from jazz. (Dery 88)

Chuck D continues, by explaining how, in response to the short history of rap in the 1980s, Public Enemy first went about altering musical time:

"See, rap comes from the idea of a deejay working a party. A lot of our decisions are still based on that

structure. We figure the thing that makes people really respond is changes in beats-per-minute. At one time, most rap music coming out was around 99-102 beats-per-minute, and that's what made us do 'Bring the Noise', where we jetted it up to 109." (88)

By increasing the sonic speed of the beat (as well as sampling high pitched horns, police sirens, automatic weapon fire, and broken glass), rap reproduces sounds that evoke experiences ranging from an ordinary summer day in the ghetto to an urban riot. It is the everyday urgency of Public Enemy's sound that was largely responsible for its widespread appeal.

Public Enemy's time consciousness goes beyond musical technique in its ability to conjure a particular history of struggle within Black communities. On "Don't Believe the Hype," for example, Flav exclaims: "Yo Terminator X, step up and show these people what *time* it is, boyeee." By mixing, sampling and scratching, Terminator X is the group's timekeeper, its time-consciousness. Immediately after stating that he's a "time-bomb," Chuck D boasts: "In the daytime radio's scared of me / 'Cause I'm mad, plus I'm the enemy / They can't come on and play me in primetime / 'Cause I know the time, plus I'm getting' mine." The lyrics point to the fact that marginalized groups are often excluded from "prime" or mainstream time. Hip hop nationalism, like contemporary Black nationalism generally, responds to this crisis of exclusion by advocating the creation of self-sufficient institutions that can empower the Black community through its own form of disciplinary time. As Chuck D (echoing the NOI) once told an interviewer, "The Black race needs order and discipline if it's going to prosper" (Owen 1990: 57).

If Chuck D's editorializing fails to reach the audience, the S1W's deliberate martial message is a very readable sign of Black power. In P.E.'s concert performance, the S1Ws, outfitted in military fatigues, respond to Terminator X's musical commands by stepping in time to the music and executing both "empty-hand" and armed martial arts routines. The S1Ws move their bodies with precision and in unison, producing a testosterone drenched display of control and power. The synchronic and syncopated moves are embedded not only in the military imperative of most nationalisms, but also specifically in the tradition of Black fraternity step shows. Even Flav's disorderly conduct – which balances the straightforward stepping and rhyming of Chuck D and the S1Ws – can be attributed to what is called "freaking" in step shows, where an individual deviates from what is otherwise a spectacle of group solidarity (Fine 39-59).

The S1Ws also evoke the Nation of Islam's paramilitary outfit, the Fruit of Islam. Although not directly affiliated with the NOI, Public Enemy has repeatedly shown itself to be in alliance with the Muslim organization. NOI rapper Prince Akeem, who has stated that "Our voice is for today's time" (Eure & Spady 271), teams up with Chuck D on a 1991 video titled "Time to Come Correct." The video comments explicitly on the relationship between time and Black nationalism. Set to the sound of screeching horns, the rap advocates the urgency of uplifting the race by building a new nation. The video opens in part of the NOI's Chicago Temple No. 2. Prince Akeem is surrounded by the NOI, who urge him to do something about the impending crisis in Black America. In a symbolic display of solidarity, Akeem opens by lip-synching over a sample of Chuck D's voice ("Again I said I was a time bomb"). The two alternate lines, but the topic remains the same: Akeem's lyric, "Time dictates the agenda,"

draws a response from Chuck D: "It's time to let 'em know". Pointing to his wristwatch, Akeem insists that "Time is short / So put the cause into effect." In the song's chorus, the two rappers proclaim: "Time to come correct!" Chuck D picks up the beat where Akeem left off, stressing the strategic allegiance between hip hop nationalists and the Nation: "Time dictates the agenda / It's time to unite with your people / I'm down with the NOI / The word is out / This time the winner is gonna' roll with soul." As the video draws to a conclusion, Prince Akeem pleads: "Time is running out." The sound and sight of the music video complements the lyrics of the rap: the camera captures, in slow motion, a DJ spinning a turntable as the high-pitched sound spirals down. Over the word-image LET'S BUILD THE NATION, Akeem and Chuck D rap, "Time dictates the Nation."

This video refers to Black nationalists of the sixties, many of whom perceived that the time was right for Black nation building. Perhaps the best known nationalist of the Black Aesthetic movement, Amiri Baraka, explained in 1970 that in Newark "when we greet each other on the street we say, 'What time is it?' We always say, 'It's Nation Time!'" (Sollor 202-3) Even Jesse Jackson at the 1972 National Black Political Convention, inspired by Baraka and nationalist sentiments, called to thousands at the Convention "What time is it?" to which the delegates responded "It's Nation Time!" In reference to contemporary Black nationalism, Chuck D explains: "we show them [Black youth] through the access of the media that this is what we have...an African medallion, or a clock to know 'what time it is'" (Eure & Spady 267). For the hip hop nation, the mass media is the means to convey their political message. While the African medallion displays a sense of homeland, belonging and racial solidarity, the

clock represents the importance of past, present, and future time. Today, hip hop nationalists are apt to say in reference to nation building, "It's time to get busy."

Hip hop nationalism taps a wide range of militant styles from the 1960s, often with less concern for the conflicts between Black radicals during the period than for the fact that they fit the time of sixties militancy. As demonstrated above, Chuck D and Public Enemy draw inspiration not only from the NOI but also from the vanguardist Black Panther Party. The Panthers were a Black Left Internationalist movement which, to a certain degree, was influenced by the ideas of Marx and Mao. The Panthers not only attempted to build political coalitions with other Left organizations regardless of racial identity, but challenged the romantic nationalism promoted by certain prominent Black nationalist organizations and leaders, as illustrated by the alleged murder of four California Panthers by members of Karenga's US organization. Public Enemy has expressed a genuine interest in forging both musical coalitions with white and multiracial rock bands (Anthrax, Sonic Youth, Rage Against the Machine) and cross cultural alliances. Not surprisingly, in rap music forums such as *Source* magazine, more militant Black nationalists have roundly criticized Public Enemy for their non-separatist tendencies. Public Enemy is remarkable for their ability to maintain their organic ties to the Black community while challenging blind racial solidarity. "Welcome to the Terrordome," for example, reminds Black nationalists that "Every brother ain't a brother / 'Cause a Black hand / Squeezed on Malcolm X the man / The shootin' of Huey Newton / From the hand of a Nig / who pulled the trig."

Hip hop nationalists, such as Public Enemy, have also provided a new direction in Black militancy through their attempts to forge an ideological coalition between the legacy of the Black Panthers and the heritage of the Nation of Islam. This is, at best, an uneasy cultural-political alliance, one which is as contradictory as it is creative, as prone to historical amnesia as it is to constructive historical revision. The BPP-NOI coalition is most succinctly expressed in pro-Black hip hop nationalism of the rapper Paris, the self-styled "Black Panther of rap." The title of Paris' debut album, *The Devil Made Me Do It*, is borrowed from the NOI myth of the sinister creation of the "white devil" by the god Yakub. The packaging of the album is indicative of this powerful conflation. On the front cover of the album is the rapper's logo: an image of a black panther superimposed on the word PARIS. Beneath the logo is the album title, "The Devil Made Me Do It," with its implicit NOI reference. On the back cover is a similar display: the Panther image on top, the NOI logo (a star inside a crescent moon) below. From "Panther Power" to "The Hate that Hate Made," the lyrical content of each rap confirms the record's bifurcated logic. "Panther Power," although framed by sixties recordings from the Black Panther Party itself, is about building a separate Black nation. The album's title song, although an explicit reference to NOI teachings, invokes the memory of political leaders and intellectuals who struggled for decolonization by challenging the indigenous colonial bourgeoisie: "So, Black, check out the tempo / Revolution ain't never simple / Followin' the path of Mao and Fanon / Just build your brain and you'll soon make progress." Paris' "Escape from Babylon" is inspired by

NOI ideology, but concludes with his rapping the Panther Party's 10-Point Platform over a funky hip hop beat.

Revolution, as "The Devil Made Me Do It" instructs, has never been simple. The contradictory expression of a revolutionary programme in rap music is a case in point. Hip hop nationalists provide Black youth an indispensable historical lesson concerning African American militancy unavailable in the public school curriculum. Yet nation-conscious rappers, such as P.E. and Paris, regularly conflate the competing political, cultural, and economic agendas of various Black militant organizations like the NOI and the Panthers. Historically, the stakes of this competition were the political efficacy of the nationalist agenda for the advancement of those most injured by poverty and racism. The price of this conflation within hip hop is that the politics of a national, class-based, coalition-oriented struggle are regularly overwritten by a separatist appeal to racial empowerment. This political strategy is not without its benefits: unlike the revolutionary vanguardism of the Panther Party, the language of nation tends to appeal to the everyday "common sense" working class Blacks and the urban poor. Given the recent demise of "socialism," and the rise of both nationalism and religious fundamentalism throughout the world, it is not surprising that parts of the Black community are inspired more by the Islamic nationalism of the NOI than by the pseudo-Marxist internationalism of the Black Panther Party. For example, the tension between Blacks and Jews in urban centers of the United States since the turn of the century, not to mention the continuing hostility between Arab and Muslim nations and Israel in the Middle East, gives a socio-political context for Chuck D's highly problematic public refusal to unequivocally denounce anti-Semitism in any form, a

stance which certainly problematizes his position as an anti-racist activist. The challenge, then, to hip hop nationalism is whether or not it can forge a “common-sense” politics capable of creating a more coherent and self critical interrogation into nationalism’s conservative tendencies.

Paris, like other pro-Black hip hop nationalists, continually returns to the relationship between time and tempo, rhyming and revolution. In “The Devil Made Me Do It,” Paris raps: “People with a gift from heaven / Tempo 116.7 / Keeps you locked in time with the program...” The high intensity tempo updates the sixties black nationalist call for “Nation Time” in the present. If anyone is responsible for keeping time and tempo in rap music it is the DJ. Terminator X, Public Enemy’s DJ, is no exception. While he is responsible (along with P.E.’s producers, the Bomb Squad) for generating the group’s signature guerrilla sound, he is also the keeper of nation time. His anonymous surname, marked by and X, recalls the Black Muslims of the 1960s who opposed the practice of Black Americans “wearing the white man’s name” (Haley & X 253) and called for a distinct African American identity tied to the politics of Black nationalism. According to Malcolm X, the “Muslim’s ‘X’ symbolized the true African family name that he never could know” (199). The “X” is donned by black nationalists as a sign of their consciousness of their erased African roots; origins which simultaneously affirm a racial identity while marking it as an historical absence.

Terminator X helps Public Enemy reformulate the identity politics of the sixties for the present. In one sense, Terminator X is rap music’s cyborg. Part human, part machine, he is an anonymous subject whose identity is claimed only through musical technology. As an “assault technician”, Terminator X not only works to

precision the technique of cutting and mixing, he also recalls the science fiction character that is his namesake. Although his voice is silent, Terminator X, an anonymous, relentless melding of human creativity and machine precision exuding menace and latent violence, sounds “louder than a bomb” by “yellin’ with his hands” (scratching, mixing, cutting, and sampling). He conjures the sound from the Black historical memory, manipulates and sets the sound in time and in motion, and merges the past with the present to mobilize minds and bodies for the future.

Mother of the Nation: Women in Nationalist Hip hop

Not unlike the hyper-masculine figure of Terminator X, much of hip hop nationalism is unabashedly patriarchal. While their musical and visual performances incite a politics of disbelief (“Don’t Believe the Hype”), Public Enemy simultaneously reproduces a particular form of sexism common to nationalisms of the 1960s. Compare the lyrics of P.E.’s 1988 “She Watch Channel Zero” to a passage from Malcolm X’s description of black women in his 1965 autobiography:

[Malcolm X] I don’t know how many marriage breakups are caused by these movie and television-addicted women expecting some bouquets and kissing and hugging and being swept out like Cinderella for dinner and dancing – then gets mad when a poor, scraggly husband comes in tired and sweaty from working like a dog all day, looking for some food. (231)

[Public Enemy] There’s a five letter word / to describe her character / But her brains being washed by an actor / And every real man that tries to approach / Come the closer he comes / He gets dissed like a roach.

[chorus] I don’t think I can handle / She goes channel to channel / Cold lookin’ for that hero / She watch channel zero.

While it is accurate to describe sexism in rap music as a symptom and a reflection of North American patriarchal culture in general, the above descriptions of Black women are specific to the language of Black nationalism. Hip hop nationalism follows in the footsteps of 1960s Black nationalism by positioning Black women who do not conform to the ideals of the patriarchal family structure as ungrateful wives or gold-digging lovers. Chuck D reiterated his concern for the disabling effect of the mass media on Black women: "if she has no man she has to hold on to something like television" (Eure & Spady 354). Much was made of Public Enemy's attempt to revise their sexism with "pro-woman" tracks on their 1990 album *Fear of a Black Planet*. In "Revolutionary Generation" for example, Chuck D evokes Aretha Franklin by rhyming "R-E-S-P-E-C-T / My sister's not my enemy." Yet, in the same track, in conventional Black nationalist tone he raps: "It takes a man to make a stand / Understand it takes a / Woman to make a stronger man." As they rap "I'm tired of America dissin' my sisters," it comes clear that sexism is Public Enemy's concern only insofar as it is connected with white supremacy in the United States. The unwillingness of even some of the most progressive forms of hip hop nationalism to seriously confront sexism suggests that the historical conditions for new thinking on gender relations have yet to be realized by the largely male-dominated organic intelligentsia of the North American Black communities.

Following *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy temporarily added a female adjunct member, Sister Souljah. A community activist prior to her entrance in hip hop, Souljah took on the role of "Sister of Instruction" and "Director of Attitude" for the group. One might assume that the introduction of an outspoken, ostensibly womanist

rapper to nation-conscious rap's most successful groups would transform Public Enemy's attitudes concerning gender issues. This has simply not been the case. Instead, Sister Souljah deflects gender-based criticism away from P.E. through her repeated affirmation that the war against racial oppression should be fought primarily on the terms set by men. Her presence thus seems to have hampered the group's potential for progressive critique in this area by allowing them to sustain an unrevised concept of sexual politics.

Black America, Sister Souljah insists, is in the midst of a war, and she is a revolutionary. Like the rest of Public Enemy, Sister Souljah urges her audience to pay close attention to time. This connection between her sixties inspired pro-Black political position and her hip hop pseudonym recalls the title character of Sonia Sanchez' militant 1969 play *Sister Son/ji*. Sanchez was probably the most prominent female of the Black Aesthetic movement, a movement dominated by men with very patriarchal attitudes. In 1972, the same year that Sanchez joined the Nation of Islam, *Sister Son/ji* was first produced on stage. As the one woman play opens, an elderly Sonji – according to Sanchez a Harriet Tubman figure (Tate 148) – asks: “Ain’t time and i made a truce so that i am time a blk / version of past / ago & now / time” (Sanchez 99). The play dramatizes the changing Black female self before and after the Black revolution in the United States (Evans 416) While the young Sonji is only beginning to come to nation-consciousness about gender and race relations in America, the post-revolutionary self carries with her the knowledge and wisdom of her people's struggles toward the realization of the Black nation. It is, however, the adult Sonji, the Black revolutionary female self, that is most relevant to the understanding of

(sixties inspired) pro-Black hip hop nationalism and the significance of a Black woman like Sister Souljah within it. "The time for blk / nationhood is here" (100), states Sonji as she is transformed from a teenager to a young adult. At a Black Power conference Sonji learns a great deal about her role in building the new nation: "this morning I heard a sister talk about blk / women supporting their blk / men, listening to their men, sacrificing, working while blk / men take care of bizness, having warriors and young sisters" (Sanchez 102). According to the play, during times of revolution Black women make sacrifices to the patriarchal hierarchy by both supporting Black men and taking care of private, domestic concerns such as bearing children.

Twenty years later we see and hear Sister Souljah, who has also stated that Harriet Tubman is her primary source of inspiration and her principal model for leadership (Eure & Spady 251-2), echoing Sanchez' Sonji in the Terminator X's video "Buck Whylin'." Souljah assaults the listener with her preachy, powerful voice, expounding on the topic of the "Black man": "We are at war! Black man where is your army?" Souljah's presence is felt not only in the beginning, but also the in the middle and at the end of the otherwise male-dominated video. At a break in Chuck D's rap, Sister Souljah screams "what is America's beef with the Black man? It's the way that you walk, it's the way that you talk. Every brother and sister has got to be a soldier in the war against the Black man." At the end of the video we hear: "Sister Souljah speaking. Sisters say 'Where are all the good Black men?' They're missing in action because we are at war!" Like her foremother, Sister Sonji, Souljah's voice is intended to appear as that of a visionary or prophet. Her message, too, is nationalist to the core. On her 1992 debut album, *360 Degrees of Power*, she raps "Turn all your talents and

skills to a Black business / Which helps to build the African community.” In line with orthodox patriarchal nationalism, Souljah claims that: “The number one thing we must do is rebuild the Black Man” (Eure & Spady 348). Black nationalism’s primary focus is the actualization of Black men’s political agency in the struggle for (male) liberation. The high rate of Black male mortality is understood as American genocide; it is the principal cause for action. Black women and men, according to Souljah, must fight together as soldiers in the battle for the survival of the Black man. The struggle is thus defined purely in terms of the remasculinization of Black men: “When you are a Black man in America you are automatically hunted” (247). In line with Public Enemy, Sister Souljah never allows sexual politics to contest the contradictions in Black nationalism’s concept of liberation. On the one hand, she stereotypes both white women (for their desire for Black men) and white feminists (as man-hating lesbians in global sisterhood clothing). On the other hand, she constructs an alibi for the stereotypical hyper-masculinity of Black men: “White people try to make Black men uncomfortable with black manhood...a lot of times sisters don’t understand the amount of pressure black men are under” (247). While Souljah’s remarks implicitly raise some pertinent issues concerning the uneasy relationship between, for example, liberal feminism and black sisterhood, the shortcomings of Souljah’s sexual politics are aggravated by the logic of Black nationalism. Agendas not based exclusively on racial politics are essentially foreclosed. All problems within the Black community – including gender antagonisms – are reduced to the omnipresent menace of white supremacy. While this brand of hip hop nationalism expresses only part of a far more

complex story, it ironically serves to show the limits of Black nationalism as a language of liberation for Black women.

In Sister Souljah's solo rap "The Final Solution; Slavery's Back in Effect" a snare drum keeps time to a military beat. Although the video is set in 1995 urban America, Sister Souljah instructs the Black community to "Remember the times when they bought and sold ya / We are at war! / That what I told ya / Slavery's back in effect." Slavery in the video is crystallized through the fascist slogan "the final solution." Black insurgents are called upon to fight the ideological and repressive state apparatus by any means necessary, including armed struggle. Not all Blacks are equally placed at risk by the myriad forms of white supremacy. Black men, in particular, are the targets of white supremacy, which threatens them with extinction: "So many brothers being killed by the enemy...The Black man will be harder to find than dinosaur food." It is only by means of "The will and the skill of the Black man, the exact man / Given a hand to his brotherman" that the race can survive. Not surprisingly, the video depicts an imaginary insurgency where Black men are, with some few exceptions, the primary fighters in the urban battles with heavily armed police in riot gear.

Sister Souljah enacts two roles in the video. In the war against the United States Government, she is garbed in generic blue fatigues, and her face is inconspicuous under her blue baseball cap. She is an anonymous Black freedom fighter – a sister who is, first and foremost, a soldier in a man's army. Black women's agency has, in this instance, undergone some revisions since the sixties. Prior to the challenge to the Black Power movement by Black feminists, such as Toni Cade and

Michelle Wallace, the language of Black nationalism attempted to keep women off the front lines and in the home. Hip hop nationalism, in this case, displays the capacity to imagine Black women fighting side-by-side with men to the degree that their gender identity *as women* is effaced. As music video, "The Final Solution" confirms a masculine identity for the struggle against racism.

When she is dressed in b-girl fashion, however, and armed only with her voice, the video audience confronts not the anonymous soldier but the gendered image of "Sister Souljah." As her title in P.E.'s revolutionary avant-garde is "Sister of Instruction" and "Director of Attitude", it follows that the song's male voiced refrain dictates that "Sister Souljah" is in charge of "the reeducation of the Negro." "I ain't the hero," Souljah raps, "I warned ya that it was coming / I gave you the message when the funky drummer was drumming." Once again, the gendered image of Souljah is projected as being an almost motherly figure: educating the youth and functioning as the bearer of the revolutionary message, limited to giving warning of the revolution to come, yet being excluded from the actual conflict. Souljah's message is conveyed not only by her contemporary rhyming but by means of the drum, which is thoroughly African in its significance and associations. The rap continues: "The end is near for big and small / Mother Africa's final call because [male voice] slavery's back in effect." In this closing moment of the video, Souljah stands alone, unarmed. Arms folded in defiance, she faces a squad of riot police, their guns poised in her direction, who stare blankly through her. Her message delivered, Souljah's inspirational presence somehow miraculously summons a group of Black insurgents who overtake the police from behind. The final shot is a close up of Souljah, still defiant and unmoved by massive

military intimidation. Already having given “Mother Africa’s final call,” she is silent. ‘Sister Souljah’ as the voice and image of powerful Black womanhood in nation-conscious rap is frozen as the *sign* ‘Mother Africa.’ As Mother Africa in the video’s final scene, Sister Souljah not only inspires men of the “Black nation” to another “final solution” (undermining white supremacy through an armed insurrection against the repressive force of the U.S. nation’s military apparatus). She also illustrates, unwittingly, the limitations placed on women’s agency by a masculine discourse of nation that exploits the category of “woman” as a sign for the motherland (Cowie 49-63).

The tendency to objectify Black women as the sign for “Mother Africa” is fully entrenched in Afrocentric hip hop nationalism. This objectification is a consequence of the Afrocentric interest in fabricating ancient Egypt as a mythical homeland for the Black nation to come. Black female rapper Isis, a member of the Afrocentric rap group X-Clan, functions as the sign “Africa” within their nationalist rap. In ancient Egyptian mythology before the primacy of Amon-Ra, Isis was the goddess of fertility and second in status only to her husband/brother Osiris. One myth tells of the murder and dismemberment of Osiris, Isis’ discovery of the crime, her recovery of the pieces of his body, and finally her successful effort to restore not only his existence, but his supreme power as “Lord of the perfect black.” As the wife of Osiris and mother of Horus, Isis was worshipped as the goddess of fertility, and thus the mother of Africa.

Not surprisingly, within the Afrocentric group X-Clan, Isis takes on the role of her mythological namesake. For example, in Isis’ debut video, “The Power of Myself Is Moving,” she plays the part of fertility goddess along the Nile: “I am a self coming

forth / A creature bearing life, a renaissance, a rebirth.” Throughout the song, Isis speaks primarily about “love” and “Blackness,” “birth” and “motherland.” Her visual and audio narrative are conspicuously framed by Professor X’s (self-)righteous rapping. While he opens the rap claiming that “We, who write...summons [sic] the goddess Isis,” he closes the song with his recitation of X-Clan’s trademark proselytizing as Isis silently crosses her arms. This representation of the venerated Black woman within Afrocentric hip hop nationalism strongly suggests that Black men control Black women’s messages by framing their voices and images. Professor X, speaking in an interview on X-Clan’s production of solo albums for both of its female members (Queen Mother Rage and Isis), states: “It’s important that X-Clan’s point of view can be expressed in different tones and in different ways, but all with the same message, but with different angles” (Eure & Spady 194). The key is that the message remains the same despite the potentially conflicting gender interests of different Afrocentric rappers.

Afrocentric hip hop nationalism tends to limit the range of representations of Black women to a set of rigidly coded sexist oppositions. Black women are either good or bad, mothers or whores, wives or gold-digging lovers. Poor Righteous Teachers, another Afrocentric rap group, use this binary logic in their veneration of the ideal African woman in their music video entitled “Shakiyla.” The video opens with the image of an “uppity” Black woman dressed in a business suit, who deliberately ignores the friendly advance of the Black men on the street. As this image dissolves, rapper Wise Intelligent states: “This is not a love ballad.” Instead, he raps, “We come to pay tribute to Shakiyla,” who is described as “the mother of civilization” and “the

Black woman.” As the chorus repeats the lyrics “The Black queen is mine,” a map of Africa is superimposed on the screen implying not only the possession but the objectification of Shakiyla, the revered queen of the Black nation, as the sign “Africa.” Isis is mapped with a similar effect in X-Clan’s video “Heed the Word of a Brother.” On the screen, her primary function is to silently strike a “Cleopatra” pose in front of a painting of Egyptian monuments (pyramids & Sphinx). The queen of the Nile, X-Clan’s Isis is exploited at this moment as the sign “Egypt.” Isis and Shakiyla both function as the black woman who stands in for a romanticized notion of Africa as the nurturing mother of all prior civilizations and as the inspirational source for the emerging Black nation. However, by representing the Black woman in this way, Afrocentric rap reaffirms her objectification while constraining the possibility for Black women’s autonomy and agency.

Back to the Motherland: Afrocentric Hip hop Nationalism

Many hip hop nationalists labour under a loose set of ideals labeled “Afrocentricity.” According to its leading scholarly proponent, Molefi Kete Assante, an Afrocentric perspective “means, literally, placing African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour” (6). Assante, like Afrocentric hip hop nationalists, maintains that the members of the African diaspora can never reach their full potential as individuals or as a group unless they “place Africans and the interest of Africa at the centre of their approach to problem solving” (198). Afrocentricity attempts to reverse a history of Western economic dependence and cultural imperialism by placing a distinctly African value system – found in “deep

[spiritual and psychological] structures” (172) of the African being – at the centre of the black American world view. Assante goes on to great lengths to avoid making arguments for racial difference that are rooted in biological essentialism, but many Black nationalists, including some of those involved in hip hop, do not. Afrocentric rapper Wise Intelligent, for example remarks: “You have to understand that the potency of melanin in the Black man makes him naturally rhythmic...This is our blood” (Eure & Spady 74). Obviously there are a great many highly problematic aspects to such an ideology, not the least of which is the tendency to conflate thousands of separate cultures under the moniker “African” and the reinscription of traditional racist stereotypes.

All historical thinking, to a great extent, consists of remembering the past in terms of the present. As a popular culture form, rap music – and hip hop nationalism in particular – is a powerful vehicle that allows today’s Black youth to gain a better understanding of their heritage and their present identities when official channels of remembering and identity formation continually fail to meet their needs. I am, therefore, not so much specifically concerned with the relative “truth” of hip hop nationalism’s historical claims for their Afrocentric identity, as with the contradictory yet productive logic within which this revision of the past takes place. Afrocentric nationalism places Africa at the core of its value system by attempting to find – through spiritual and psychological transcendence – freedom from Western oppression. In “Grand Verbalizer, What Time Is It?” X-Clan focuses much less on temporality than on imagining a transcendent origin for the Black nation. The rap immediately transports the listener to an unmistakable place: “African, very African /

Come and step in Brother's temple and see what's happenin'." At the conclusion of X-Clan's video "Funkin' Lesson," the viewer sees a map of the Atlantic. A pink Cadillac is superimposed on the map, and a line is drawn which begins in New York City and ends in Africa. As Professor X states in an interview, the pink Cadillac is a "time-traveling machine" (Romaine 35) which presumably links Black Americans with Africa. It is also a machine for rewriting the history of Western and non-Western civilization at a moment of historical transition. In "Funkin' Lesson," contemporary Black Americans are transported back – to Africa "at the crossroads" – as much in spirit as in reality, not on Garvey's Black Star Line but while driving on Aretha Franklin's funky "freeway of love." The '59 Cadillac is one of X-Clan's trademarks: a complex symbol of both modern Black consumer culture in the U.S., and the dawning of the contemporary civil rights struggle. X-Clan places this image in tension with the group's excessive and serious display of Afrocentric garb: black leather crowns, African hand-crafted staffs, and heavy African jewelry , beads, chains, medallions, ankhs, and rings. As the Cadillac makes its transcendent journey across the Atlantic to the east, the viewer cannot help but notice its apparent final destination: North Africa or, possibly, Mecca.

Rappers such as X-Clan and Lakim Shabazz are among a growing group of hip hop nationalists who are committed to a militant Afrocentric value system in one form or another. Unlike X-Clan, Lakim is an active member of a Nation of Islam sect called the Five Percent Nation, which also includes such rappers as Rakim, Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, and Movement Ex. The Five Percent Nation's belief system is similar to that of the NOI mainstream in that Five Percenters essentially follow the

teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Although Lakim goes so far as to insist that “[t]he only difference between the Five Percent Nation and the Nation of Islam is that they’re always dressed formally with a suit and tie and we figure you can wear anything” (Ahearn 76), other Five Percenters might disagree. In fact, the Five Percent Nation follows the rival teachings of Clarence 13X, who claimed in the 1960s that God was to be found not in some external or monolithic force (Allah), but within the Asiatic Black man himself. Five Percenters thus believe themselves to be those who know that the “original Black man” is God; furthermore, the Five Percenters, like other Afrocentric nationalists, place the origins of the Black Asiatic man in ancient Egypt rather than Mecca (see below). Another distinction between the NOI and the Five Percenters is that the latter insist that any corrupt person – Black or white – is the “devil.” Yet, as a roundtable discussion among Five Percenters revealed, there is less of a consensus among them about the differences between their group and the NOI (Allen 49).

Despite the philosophical and religious differences between Five Percenters and other Black Muslims in America, Louis Farrakhan is the closest the Five Percenters have to a spiritual leader. Perhaps most important is the appropriation by the Five Percenters, in their music and videos, of the NOI’s declaration of Islamic origins for members of the African diaspora currently living in North America. According to the teachings of NOI founder Elijah Muhammad, Blacks in North America are the original people and were originally from the Holy City of Mecca (which has somehow been joined with the African continent). They are members of the lost tribe of Shabazz. NOI doctrine states that the Black man must strive to regain his original religion (Islam), language (Arabic), and culture.

Afrocentric hip hoppers such as X-Clan, in an effort to create a counter-nationalism of sorts, look eastwards and backwards for a collective racial identity. Their gaze is, like the NOI's, based on a combination of mythical and historical reenvisionings the origins of Western civilization; however, in the interest of locating a more original and even superior civilization that can be attributed to the ancestors of Africans and the African diaspora, they focus on ancient Egypt. For this, and other reasons, they rarely show an interest in exploring the languages and customs of precolonial African sub-Saharan empires or tribal groups. An important exception to this rule is the widespread appropriation of West African drumming. In X-Clan's "Funkin' Lesson," for example, they present tribal drummers in an open field while Brother J. raps "African, call it Black man..." to the sampled screams of James Brown over generic "African" drum beats. Professor X has stated that the importance of drumming in nation-conscious rap in rather racially essentialist terms: "we found that coming back to the drum it connects our African genes whether we are conscious of our connections or not. It is natural...that we talk through the drum" (Eure & Spady 191).

While X-Clan takes a symbolic journey to North Africa, Lakim Shabazz convinced his small independent record label to actually send him there (specifically Cairo, Al Uqsar and Aswan) to shoot "The Lost Tribe of Shabazz" video from his 1989 *Pure Righteousness* album. In the resulting video, Lakim is filmed making his pilgrimage through the Islamic world. With the pyramids along the Nile as his backdrop, Lakim raps Five Percent lessons concerning knowledge, wisdom and understanding over a mixture of synthetic beats and West African drumming. In

discussion of the video, Lakim stated: "I always wanted to go to the Motherland. I couldn't think of a more righteous place to make my video than in Egypt...I wanted to show that our people were the builders of the pyramids, that our people invented science and mathematics" (Ahearn 57). On a cut from X-Clan's *To the East, Blackwards*, Professor X raps: "You see, we've always been here before / The background then, the pyramids / The background now, the Statue of Liberty."

"Afrocentricity" according to Assante, "reorganizes our frame of reference so that we become the centre of analysis and synthesis...Indeed, this movement recaptures the collective will responsible for ancient Egypt and Nubia" (39). Afrocentric hip hop nationalists valorize the great ancient civilizations of North Africa as both the origin of all Western civilization and the glue that binds diverse Black American communities together. Current non-Afrocentric scholarship supports the Afrocentric claim of Egypt as the effaced source of Western civilization. This effacement was a result of two centuries of European scholars' systematic erasure of the influence of ancient Egypt on Greece. Afrocentric hip hop nationalists counter this historical erasure by laying claim to the artifacts of ancient Egypt as a marker of the cultural superiority of pre-colonial Africans relative to Europe during the same period. X-Clan raps: "I am an African, I don't wear Greek / Must I be reminded of a secondary thief? / Who tried to make Greece in comparison to Egypt / But they just gypped 'cause their mind's not equipped." In X-Clan's "Heed the Word of a Brother," as Brother J. raps "Jealous of what are ours / Becomes a tendency for thievery," the busts of Greek philosophers Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates are flashed across the screen only to be quickly dismissed. Wise Intelligent explains: "We're teaching Black youth

that our history goes beyond slavery...beyond Africa. Black people are the mothers and fathers of the highest forms of civilization ever built on this planet, and Plato, Socrates, and so forth, they learned from the Black masters of Egypt" (Eure & Spady 68).

The contemporary deployment of the word "civilization" extends only as far back as the late eighteenth century. As a modern concept, civilization tends to be associated with developments in Europe since the Enlightenment, including the birth of modern forms of nationalism and imperialism. Throughout the nineteenth century, European "civilization" was rigidly contrasted with the "savagery" of non-Western cultures (including those found throughout Africa). For example, when, in 1871 Karl Mauch discovered the ruins of an ancient civilization in Zimbabwe, no European believed that they had been made by sub-Saharan Africans. Instead, Europeans advanced the idea that this was King Solomon's Golden Ophir – ruins only attributable to the creative genius of a superior race. It was not until 1906 that archaeologists began the process of dismantling the myth of "King Solomon's Mines." The point is that the civilizing mission of Europe could only see the African continent as other; Europe had to invent "savage" Africa to rationalize colonization. Afrocentric hip hop nationalists contest the Western notion that precolonial Africa was barbaric. They make ancient Africa civilized by drawing on incontrovertible evidence for a thriving Egyptian empire that preceeded Greece. Yet this important assertion is limited in its political scope inasmuch as it only produces a reversal – and not a displacement – of the modern opposition between "civilization" and "savagery." In order to challenge the binary logic of the civilized/barbaric opposition, Afrocentric rappers would do well

to turn their gaze from Egypt and toward the largely ignored, precolonial African sub-Saharan. Up to the fateful appearance of the Portuguese on the western coast of Africa in the mid fifteenth century, three great African empires thrived to the south of the Sahara. These empires, based in Ghana (700-1200), Mali (1200-1500), and Songhai (1350-1600), provide a possible way for Black militants to explode the European concept of civilization without repeating its logic.

The Afrocentric assertion that Egypt is not only the origin of the Black nation to come, but also the cradle of all civilization empowers hip hop nationalists in their struggle against a history of white supremacy. The logic of this claim (based as it is on Western notions of “civilization”) is nonetheless contradictory. Exploiting Egypt as an alternative frame of reference does not necessarily allow nationalists to break with European notions of civilization but, rather, allows Blacks to occupy a category previously reserved for whites. As a result, Afrocentric hip hop nationalists advocate a notion of civilization which still has its conspicuous origins in the slave cultures of the Mediterranean. With the possible exception of early Egypt, the great monuments which testify to the glory of these fallen empires – whether Greek, Roman or Ptolomaic Egyptian – were built largely with slave labour. Given that Black militants in North America have always struggled against colonial forms of slavery and its legacy in the Americas, it is a sad irony that Afrocentric hip hop nationalists embrace an ancient empire whose enduring monuments are also markers of slavery during antiquity.

Ladies First: Females Representin'

Within Afrocentric hip hop nationalism, a rapper such as Isis is assigned the role of Black woman to the extent that she passively mirrors the monuments of Egypt that signify the glories of an African empire. Thus in X-Clan's "Funkin' Lesson" video, Isis silently stands in front of a mural of pyramids and the sphinx as Brother J. raps. In a strikingly different pose, rapper Queen Latifah, in her 1989 debut "Ladies First" stands over and above a map of *southern* Africa. Instead of becoming a sign for ancient empires, Latifah exploits the language of Black nationalism in order to engage contemporary struggles in and around South Africa. Unlike Isis, whose voice is authoritatively framed by Professor X and Brother J.'s rapping, Latifah's "Ladies First" is simultaneously woman-centred and Afrocentric. And, unlike sister Souljah, whose allegiance is primarily to the male leadership of the NOI and P.E., Latifah creates alliances which are less dependent on traditional hierarchies imposed by Black nationalism. While Latifah is a member of an Afrocentric rap collective called the Native Tongues, she also has membership in other types of hip hop posses, such as the Breakfast Club and the Flavour Unit. Even when the Native Tongues (which includes De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, and Jungle Brothers) speak the language of Black nationalism, it is hardly as masculinist (though often equally militant) as other nationalist rappers, and always playful. The fact that Latifah maintains her status as a solo artist allows her a real and symbolic autonomy that sets her apart from most other female nationalist rappers. Paradoxically, this affords Latifah a heightened capacity for collaborative work with other rap artists of varying backgrounds. Latifah's Afrocentric

expression is remarkable not only because it is devoid of the concomitant sexism of nationalism, but because it challenges the masculinist logic of *nation* as well.

In her commentary on an interview with Latifah, Tricia Rose suggests that Latifah is “uncomfortable with the term ‘feminist’” (176):

During my conversations with Salt, MC Lyte, and Queen Latifah it became clear that these women were uncomfortable with being labeled feminist and perceived feminism as a signifier for a movement that related specifically to white women. (Rose, 176)

Latifah’s pro-woman stance that both refuses the category of white feminism and is energized by sixties-inspired Black nationalism can be contained by the concept of the organic cultural intellectual. Black women rappers, both nationalist and not, are gendered agents of racial struggle, but rarely through a public embrace of a feminist identity. I read their political agency as organically based women rappers as being grounded in their ability to articulate and elaborate upon competing interests between men and women within Black communities:

Without referring to or attacking Black men, “Ladies First” is a powerful rewriting of the contributions of Black women in the history of Black struggles. Opening with slides of Black female political activists Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Winnie Mandela, the video’s predominant theme features Latifah as Third World military strategist. She stalks an illuminated map of Southern Africa the size of a conference table and with a long pointer shoves...chess-like figures of briefcase carrying white men off from the white dominated countries replacing them with large, Black Power-style fists...Latifah positions herself as part of a rich legacy of Black women’s activism, racial commitment and cultural pride. (Rose 164)

The fact that Latifah not only inhabits but is also the commander of the room symbolizes her leadership role within the imaginary nation. Latifah and all the “ladies” of the hip hop nation are involved in the nationalist liberation struggle against oppressive white regimes. A rap such as “Ladies First” illustrates Latifah extracting what Gramsci would call a kernel of good sense embedded in our popular or “common” sense notions of a Black woman’s place in the hip hop nation. Latifah explains her use of newsreel footage of black women fighting alongside men in national liberation struggles in the video as follows: “I wanted to show the strength of Black women in history. Strong Black women...Sisters have been in the midst of these things for a long time, but we don’t get to see it that much” (Rose 165). As a member of the African diaspora, Latifah’s nationalism is based not on a romantic return to an archaic land, but on her engagement with contemporary forms of racism and sexism affecting the people of Africa and North America. “Ladies First” suggests the reciprocal relationship between Black liberation struggles at home and abroad over the last forty years. Her strategic use of a Black Power sign system, for example, melds an Afrocentric perspective with the sixties inspired nationalism of pro-Black hip hop nationalism, and makes this nationalism relevant to the (at the time) contemporary struggles in countries such as South Africa, while reminding her audience of the inspiration provided by Third World national liberation movements to Black Power militants in the sixties.

Over a visual representation of Latifah strategizing in the war room, she boasts: “A woman can bear you / Break you / Take you / Now it’s time to rhyme / Can you relate to / A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream...ladies first? Yes!”

The video moves back and forth from the war room scene to Latifah singing with other women rappers, including Monie Love with whom Latifah shares credit for the cut. The fact that Latifah is simultaneously woman-identified and a leader in the struggle for racial justice explodes the masculinist lure of Black nationalism. As the self-proclaimed "Queen of royal badness," she is a far cry from the Nubian princess which is X-Clan's Isis. Sister Souljah, in a lecture delivered at Howard University called for a "new definition of Black womanhood" (Eure & Spady 257). Latifah, however, is actually acting towards this goal. Perhaps more than any other rap artist, she has progressed on the journey on a seldom traveled road, remapping the terrain of sexual politics for women of the hip hop nation and the African diaspora. Even when she presents a maternal aspect in songs like "Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children," Latifah transforms rigidly domestic notions of womanhood within a nationalist discourse by de-essentializing motherhood: "So check out the sounds of Mama Zulu / As I relay the story I told you / If you're wondering why I got kids so big / They weren't born from the body / They were born from the soul."

While Latifah's name is Arabic for "delicate and sensitive," her rhymes and baselines are as forceful, urgent and danceable as anything offered by her male counterparts. In "U.N.I.T.Y." she raps defiantly: "One of them felt my booty / He was nasty / I turned around, somebody was catchin' the wrath / Then the little one said 'Yeah me bitch' and laughed, / Since he was with his boys he tried to break fly / I punched him dead in the eye: said / Who you callin' a bitch?" In "Latifah's Law," she gives new meaning to Marcus Garvey's UNIA call by rhyming: "One Tribe, One God, One Destiny / ... You know what the plan is to be / I order you to dance for me." In

“Ladies First” she displays a tough, regal tone when she raps: “Strong, stepping, strutting, moving on / Rhyming, cutting but not forgetting / We are the ones who give birth / To the new generation of prophets / ‘Cause it’s ladies first.” In the 1970s Claudia Mitchell-Kernan exposed the persistent misconceptions concerning Black women’s participation in Black American expressive forms. Her ethnographic studies revealed that cultural practices within Black communities, such as signifying and playing the dozens, were not fundamentally male (310-328). By insisting on the vitality of Black women’s agency in the production of cultural politics, Queen Latifah restates this point in the hip hop nation.

It should come as no surprise that Latifah’s music exceeds *nation* conscious rap and often goes beyond the usual limits of Black nationalism of any sort. The fact that she is something of an anomaly within hip hop nationalism suggests the degree to which the discourse of nation among Blacks, as elsewhere, remains masculinist. Latifah not only reveals the severe limitations of nationalism as a language of equality for women in general, she also clears a space within hip hop nationalism for the empowerment of Black women. For both these reasons, her contribution to building the hip hop nation is particularly important.

Conclusion

In the last four years there have been some significant changes in the rap world. Since the mid-1990s nation-conscious rap has almost totally disappeared from the mainstream music industry. As the commercial music industry discovered the rap’s potential as a hugely profitable enterprise certain things changed, in particular the

demographics of the consumers. Rap went from being primarily a Black cultural phenomenon to having an overwhelmingly white audience. The marketing strategy also changed. The promotional strength of the major labels fell behind artists who were willing and able to exploit their visibility to market both particular products and a particular commodity driven lifestyle. This shift served a multiple purpose. It shifted the focus from Black discontent to materialism and hedonism. It also appealed to traditionally consumerist and materialist middle class white American youth. Finally, it shifted the focus of violence in rap culture from anti-white and anti-police violence to violence against Blacks. This was not only useful as a means of channeling Black anger, it also presented a more palatable outlet for white middle class youths' aggression. As a reaction to the materialist excesses of mainstream rap, a strong underground culture resurfaced. Harkening back to the early days of hip hop, underground artists rejected the concessions necessary for mainstream support and success and developed their own independent networks of communication and creativity. Underground hip hop was the place where conscious rap found its new support. Contemporary independent conscious hip hop presents a different view of nationalism from its earlier incarnations, being more closely related to the ideology expressed in Queen Latifah's early work. Nation-conscious hip hop acts such as Blackalicious and Dead Prez, while affirming an agenda that is ostensibly nationalist, seek to move the concept of nation beyond its traditional reactionary bounds. Their art testifies to the vital work being done by community based intellectual-musicians in hip hop today. Hip hop nationalists are particularly skillful in generating fresh understandings of the ill-mapped history of racism at home and abroad, while

challenging claims of the “colour-blind” capitalist globalism of the “New World Order” that seeks to erase historical and cultural difference by recreating diverse populations as generic consumers. While they rely on this global market to spread their message, like the early pioneers of hip hop they manipulate the tools with which they are presented in order to create a resistive sound, image, and message that belies the commodified nature of their art.

As organic cultural intellectuals, they can transform “common-sense” knowledge of oppression into a new critical awareness that is attentive not only to racial, but also to class and gender contradictions. Hip hop nationalism is particularly adept at interpreting the past in a manner that develops Black consciousness about alternatives to the hegemony of traditional nationalism. Yet for Black nationalism to be a sustained vehicle of progressive social change, its reactionary conservative tendencies need to be addressed and transformed. The point is that within nation conscious rap, “a certain degree of regressiveness” (Nairn 348) that manifests itself in a nostalgia for ancient Egypt or a romanticization of sixties Black Power, is not the only available form for imagining the time and place of a new Black militancy. Rather, as Ice Cube’s image of “kings” demonstrates, the most effective nationalist rappers have a consciousness of the *present* which blasts apart the stale notion of a simplistic historical continuum. In the most effective contemporary militant rap, the apocalyptic noise of the racial crisis in North America shatters notions of mythical historical origins whether in a distant and majestic homeland or a romanticized revolutionary past.

Recordings Cited

Ice Cube. *Death Certificate*. Priority Records, 1991.

Isis. *Rebel Soul*. 4th & B'way Records, 1990.

NWA *Straight Outta Compton*. Ruthless/Priority Records, 1988.

Paris. *The Devil Made Me Do It*. Tommy Boy Records, 1990.

Public Enemy. *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam Recordings, 1988.

_____. *Fear of a Black Planet*. Def Jam Recordings, 1990.

Queen Latifah. *All Hail the Queen*. Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

_____. *Black Reign*. Motown Records, 1993.

Scott-Heron, G. *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. Flying Dutchman Records, 1974.

Shabazz, L. *Pure Righteousness*. Tuff City Records, 1989.

Sister Souljah. *360 Degrees of Power*. Epic Records, 1992.

Terminator X. *Terminator X & the Valley of the Jeep Beats*. Def Jam Records, 1991.

Various Artists. *No More Prisons*. Raptivism Records, 2000.

Various Artists. *The Unbound Project Vol. I*. Realized Records, 2000.

X-Clan. *To the East, Blackwards*. 4th & B'way Records, 1990.

Bibliography

- "Rockbeat." Editorial. *Village Voice* 37 12 May 1992: 80.
- Ahearn, C. "The Five Percent Solution." *Spin* 6 (Feb. 1991): 48-79.
- Allen, H. "Righteous Indignation." *Source* 19 (Mar/Apr. 1991): 48-53.
- Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- Bennett, L. *Before the Mayflower* Baltimore: Penguin, 1966.
- Blair, E. "Commercialization of the Rap Music Subculture." *Journal of Popular Culture* 27.3 (Winter 1993): 21-33.
- Blauner, R. *Racial Oppression in America*. New York: Harper, 1972.
- Bracey, J. *Black Nationalism in America*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.
- Brewer, R. "Theorizing Race, Class and Gender: The New Scholarship of Black Feminist Intellectuals and Black Women's Labour." *Theorizing Black Feminism*. Eds. S. James and A. Busia. London: Routledge: 1993. 267-82.
- Cade, T. "On the Issue of Roles." *Black Woman: An Anthology*. Ed. T. Cade. New York: New American Library, 1970. 101-10.
- Carby, H. "It Jus Be Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." *Radical America* 20 (1986): 14.
- Charmichael, S. and C. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. Penguin, 1969.
- Cowie, E. "Woman as Sign." *m/f* 1.1 (1978): 49-63.
- D, Chuck. *Fight the Power: Rap Race and Reality*. New York: Delta, 1997.
- Davis, A. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. New York: Vintage, 1999.
- _____. *The Angela Davis Reader*. Ed. J. James. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Decker, J. "The State of Rap." *Social Text* 34 (Spring 1993): 53-84.
- Dery, M. "Public Enemy Confrontation" *Keyboard* 16 (Sept. 1990): 85-90.

- Domhof, G. *Who Rules America?* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1967.
- DuBois, W. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Fawcett, 1961.
- Dyson, M. *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.
- _____. *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1993.
- Early, G. ed. *Lure and Loathing*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Ellison, R. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage, 1964.
- Eure, J. and J. Spady, eds. *Nation Conscious Rap*. New York: PC International Press, 1991.
- Eyerman, R. and A. Jamison. *Music and Social Movements*. Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Fine, E. "Stepping, Cracking, and Freaking: The Cultural Politics of African-American] Step Shows." *Drama Review* 35 (Summer 1991): 39-59.
- Firth, S., A. Goodwin, L. Grossberg, eds. *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*. London: Routledge 1993.
- Gottdeiner, M. "Hegemony and Mass Culture: A Semiotic Approach." *American Journal of Sociology* 90.5 (1985): 979-1001.
- Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Trans. Q. Hoare & G. Smith. New York: International, 1971.
- Gunther, L. *Black Image*. London: Kennikat, 1978.
- Hager, S. "Africa Bambaataa's Hip Hop." *Village Voice* 27 (Sept 21 1982): 71-73.
- Haley, A. and M. X. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.
- hooks, b. *Outlaw Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- _____. *Yearning: Race Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End, 1990.
- Hutchison, E. *Assassination of the Black Male Image*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- Kofsky, F. *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. New York: Pathfinder,

1970.

- Krasilovsky, S. *The Business of Music*. New York: Harper, 1995.
- Madhubuti, H. (D. Lee) *From Plan to Planet* Detroit: Broadside Press, 1973.
- Lipsitz, G. "Cruising Around the Historical Bloc: Postmodernism and Popular Music in East Los Angeles." *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1990. 150-63
- Lusane, C. "Rap, Race and Politics." *Race and Class* 35.1 (July-Sept 1993): 41-55.
- McLaren, P. "Language, Social Structure, and the Production of Subjectivity." *Critical Pedagogy Networker* 12.3 (1989): 1-10.
- Manyoni, J. "Interview with Chuck D." *DiSCORDER Magazine* 202 (Dec 1999-Jan 2000): 16-17.
- Mitchell-Kernan, C. "Signifyin." *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*. Ed. A. Dundes. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973. 310-28.
- Nairn, T. *The Break Up of Britain*. London: Verso, 1981.
- Negus, K. *Popular Music Theory*. Cornwall: Blackwell, 1996.
- Owen, F. "Homeboy Fashion." *Spin* 4 (Oct. 1988): 44-50.
- _____. "Public Service." *Spin* 5 (Mar. 1990): 54-59.
- Protis, L. "Cultural Dialectic of the Blues." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 9.3 (1985): 23-35.
- Ransby, B. and T. Matthews "Black Popular Culture and the Transcendence of Patriarchal Illusions." *Race and Class* 35.1 (July-Sept 1993): 57-68.
- Reilly, J. "Sonny's Blues" *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed K. Kinnannon. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1974. 133-42.
- Romaine, L. "Roots and Boots." *Source* 32 (May 1992): 34-36.
- Rose, T. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Popular Culture in America*. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994.
- Rose, T. & A. Ross, eds. *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

- Sanchez, S. *Sister Son/ji New Plays from the Black Theatre*. Ed E. Bullins. New York: Bantam, 1969)
- Sollor, W. *Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones: The Quest for a "Popular Modernism"*. New York: Columbia UP, 1978.
- Speicher, B. "Some African American Perspectives on Black English Vernacular". *Language and Society* 21 (1992): 383-407.
- Tate, C. *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1983.
- Toop, D. *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop*. Boston: South End, 1984.
- Van Rijn, G. *Roosevelt's Blues: African American Blues and Gospel Songs on F.D.R.* Jackson: Mississippi UP, 1997.
- Walcott, R., ed. *Rude*. Toronto: Insomniac, 2000
- _____. *Black Like Who?* Toronto: Insomniac, 1997
- Welsling, F. *The Isis (Ysis) Papers*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1990.
- West, C. "The Paradox of the Afro-American Rebellion." *The Sixties Without Apology*. Ed. S. Sayres et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1984. 50-63.