

BLACK POPULAR CULTURES INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY



LANGUAGE,
RHYTHM,
AND
SOUND



JOSEPH K. ADJAYE AND ADRIANNE R. ANDREWS, EDITORS



Focusing on expressions of popular culture among blacks in Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean, these multidisciplinary essays take on subjects long overdue for study. Recognized scholars cover a world of topics, from American girls' Double Dutch games to protest discourse in Ghana; from Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* to the work of Zora Neale Hurston; from South African workers to Leslie Harris's film, *Just Another Girl on the IRT*; from the history of Rasta to the evolving significance of kente cloth; from rap video music to hip-hop to *zouk*.

No previous book has placed the many voices of black popular cultures into a global context, with an emphasis on the triangular flow of culture linking Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. *Language, Rhythm, and Sound* powerfully demonstrates the continuity of black cultural forms from the African past into the future while simultaneously illuminating ongoing transformations in these forms. It affirms that black culture everywhere functions to give meaning to people's lives by constructing identities that resist cultural, capitalist, colonial, and postcolonial domination.

The contributors work through the prisms of many disciplines, including anthropology, communications, English, ethnomusicology, history, linguistics, literature, philosophy, political economy, psychology, and social work. Their interpretive approaches are informed by specializations in African studies, American studies, black studies, Atlantic studies, and women's studies.



SYMBOLS to the TRUTH
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Language,
Rhythm, &
Sound



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Language, Rhythm, & Sound



**BLACK
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INTO THE
TWENTY-
FIRST
CENTURY**

Edited by
Joseph K. Adjaye
and
Adrianne R. Andrews

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To my wife

Dinah (Borkai)

— J.K.A.

To my sons

Anthony and David

— A.R.A.

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In April 1995 an international conference entitled Black Popular Culture in Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean was convened by the Africana Studies Department of the University of Pittsburgh. This volume of essays represents a selection of the papers presented at this conference and the culmination of the conference effort.

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Language,
Rhythm, &
Sound

Introduction: Popular Culture and the Black Experience

JOSEPH K. ADJAYE

In the past two decades, the study of popular culture(s) has undergone a dramatic transformation, moving from the periphery and neglected backwaters of academic disciplines to becoming a legitimate field of serious inquiry unto itself. In the process, a number of theoretical traditions and fundamental assumptions have been vigorously contested, challenged, or overturned. Simultaneously, the thrust of cultural studies has gradually shifted from “elite” or “high” culture to focus on mass culture and the everyday lives of “subordinate” groups. Yet, even as popular culture slowly enters the mainstream of academic pursuits, the study of blacks, “subcultures,” and cultural minorities lags behind. This volume serves to redress this imbalance.

Popular culture is the everyday culture that comprises virtually every aspect of our lives. It finds expression in the way we live, the things we think about, the people around us, and their activities. Its forms encompass festivals, carnivals, songs, and dance; fiction and drama; newspapers, radio, and television; family, working-class culture(s), and women’s culture(s); and sports and leisure activities. Its major components are objects, persons, and events, but it is through the use of symbols that popular culture is mostly constructed. We are surrounded every day by these constructs of popular culture, big and small, enduring and transitory – from clothing and the symbolism of carnivals to language use, music, and film.

This book focuses on expressions of popular culture among blacks in selected areas of Africa and its diaspora – specifically, the United States and the Caribbean. Proceeding from the dual premise that culture is a complex system of signification as well as a socially constructed product, the contributors to this volume, through their respective disciplinary

prisms, seek to penetrate the hidden language of symbols in black popular culture in order to decode, decipher, and “translate” them, to reveal their multiple meanings, functions, and roles. Hence, the study of black cultural symbols and artifacts is pursued not as an end in itself but as a tool for understanding the culturally based values and attitudes that are represented or illuminated through those symbols, unlocking their meaning relative to the cultural group as a whole. Thus, in their broadest sense, the essays in this volume evoke the multifaceted ways in which blacks on the continent and in the diaspora make meaning and configure their realities through the shared experiences of everyday social interaction, pointing to the diversity as well as the commonalities within and between cultural groups.

At the more specific level, individual essays address questions such as: Why do we invent special symbols at particular times and in particular spaces? What multiple contexts – local, regional, and global – are configured in particular cultural texts? What dynamisms, continuities, transformations, or ruptures and disjunctures are embodied in cultural symbols and productions? How are various cultural forms and genres appropriated to negotiate self/individual or group/collective identities? How are meanings transferred and transformed through processes of globalization that connect the black world of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States through the transnational circulation of culture? How are cultural formations coopted and commodified by industry and capital as hegemonic instruments, or, conversely, what is the role of technology in linking marginalized peoples to a market-mediated collective discourse of resistance against colonial, postcolonial, and capitalist domination? And how effective, really, is such a market-mediated discourse?

Above all, since black societies tend to be group-oriented and collective, in contrast to many Western societies in which much emphasis is placed on individuals and their creative productions, a special effort is made to explore the connections between black cultural objects and their social “moorings,” the relations of symbols to social order, solidarities, and hierarchies, as well as the links between culture and class, economic determinants, gender, and race.

The Politics of Popular Culture

A fundamental issue that cuts across the entire volume is the politics of black popular culture. Throughout this book the language, discourses, and interpretations of popular culture are passionately contested – the

tension between cultural survivalism and radical cultural formations (Rose versus Jackson-Lowman, for example); Afro-centricism versus Eurocentricism (Jackson-Lowman); cultural authenticity versus commodification and commercialization (Adjaye); the cooption of black cultural productions by global and transnational commodity capitalism (Mphande and Newsum, Chude-Sokei, Buff, Berrian, Rose); contestations about socio-political identities; the politics of cultural resistance (Yankah, Rose), the empowerment of African peoples (Jackson-Lowman – note her spelling of Africa with a *k* instead of *c*); revolutionary black artistic production (Grant); the economics and politics of gender inequality (Andrews), questions of black authenticity (found in virtually all the essays); the connections among race, class, and sexuality (Willis, Gaunt, Dandridge, and Washington and Dixon Shaver); contestations of race, ethnicity, and nationality (Chude-Sokei, Buff, Berrian); the hybridization of cultural forms (Adjaye, Jackson-Lowman, Buff, Chude-Sokei, Berrian); the politics of linguistic indirection (Samatar, Yankah), et cetera, et cetera. These themes and issues, their multiple discourses and ideological bearings, and the manifold ways and angles at which they intersect to produce different meanings at different moments, energize and invigorate this collection. In a rich interplay of themes, informed by multidisciplinary perspectives, these essays examine questions of production and consumption; of youth, gender, and sexuality; of technology, capital, and labor; of the relationship between mainstream and the marginal; and of popular culture as a site of resistance.

Other equally critical questions pursued in these essays surfaced at the conference that produced them, where they were passionately debated.¹ These are questions of concern not only to the study of black popular culture but also to cultural studies everywhere.

Who determines and influences popular culture? Does it emerge from the people, the grass roots, as autonomous expressions of their reality and their modes of existence, or is it imposed from above by people in positions of dominance? Put differently, is it imposed by the elite, or does it rise from the masses? Or is its development, origin, evolution a matter of interaction between the two? That is, who put the *pop* into pop culture?

Conversely, is popular culture appropriated by those in power for indoctrination of a subgroup to dominant values and ideas, or as an instrument of resistance and opposition to dominance, or both?

To what extent is popular culture determined by commodification and the hegemony of commercialism?

Popular cultural study is for whom? In a sharp critique, Ioan Davies of-

fers the view that the study of popular culture is not really about “people” but about intellectuals, just as the vast amount of research conducted by anthropologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not about the Trobriand Islanders or the Nuer but about the ways in which colonial intellectuals tried to map out their sense of themselves in an alien world.² If this argument has any validity, then what legitimacy and authority do intellectuals have in deconstructing the lived realities of the masses who create and experience the high life music, reggae, *zouk*, rap music, and carnivals that are discussed in several of these essays? To what extent is Lyotard’s position tenable that “it is not up to us to *provide reality*, but to invent allusions to what is conceivable?”³ Are intellectuals driven by mere curiosity about how the Other lives? How can the gap between the intellectuals and “folks” be bridged? How does the study of black popular cultures, as presented in this volume, enable us to connect academia with the world and *spaces* beyond? Does this really mean that the information and theories developed by intellectuals are useless to the “folks?”

Another dimension of the intellectual debate relates to the perennial question of the role of the black intellectual and his or her sense of commitment. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s three books of cultural criticism and his drama project involving the masses in Kenya (Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Studies Centre) illustrate the passionate debates raised by the issue as well as the political perils facing African intellectuals of his persuasion (he was jailed as a consequence by the Kenyan authorities). In *Decolonising the Mind* (1988) and *Matigari* (1986), Ngugi warns that if cultural studies is to be anything more than an appendage of academic pursuits, then it must involve a thorough rethinking of the very constituents of culture. This, in his view, would entail contesting neo-colonialism in language, attitudes, and the fundamental values of society. His third work of cultural criticism, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), is a trenchant critique of the British educational tradition in Kenya, including linguistic imperialism, and the aping of English values by black faces wearing white masks – to paraphrase Frantz Fanon – who dominate politics as well as the literary tradition in Kenya.

A further problem arises out of the process of deconstructing texts à la Derrida.⁴ Does the “text” really provide answers? What constitutes a text? A book’s textuality might be concrete, but what about that of kente cloth, *zouk* music, West Indian festivals, teenage girls’ games, rap video music, and other complex genres of popular culture? And how do we read mean-

ing in these texts? Are they part of our intimate selves, or of the Other? Are intellectuals grasping the wrong meaning, as some have charged? Are texts articulations of the moment or the past, as lived by (the) people and interpreted by the author, thus inevitably biased?

Theoretical Paradigms

An introduction to an eclectic volume always presents a number of challenges as well as choices regarding theoretical perspectives, approaches, and scope. The temptation to impose a single, universal, overarching theoretical construct on this volume has been consciously eschewed. The multifaceted character of the black experience in Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean defies such an approach; nor would it be consistent with the antiuniversalist condition of postmodernism. Our purpose in this introduction is, therefore, not to present a comprehensive theoretical analysis of popular culture, about which there is a large body of work,⁵ but rather, in a limited way, to clarify conceptually the dominant paradigms that inform the individual essays. Further, it would be impossible to envisage a conceptual and theoretically informed interpretation of universal acceptability, since the African, African-American, and Caribbean spaces within which these manifold cultural artifacts are appropriated and manipulated, as well as the nature of social relationships, differ significantly from those that pervade most Eurocentered societies. Thus the theoretical perspectives and intellectual paradigms established by certain Western traditions are not equally applicable to the dominant popular cultural expressions of our black societies.

Of the Western intellectual traditions that inform many of the essays in this volume, two in particular are significant. The first is the tradition associated with the Frankfurt School. Drawing from the Marxian theory of commodity fetishism, Adorno and the Frankfurt School of Social Research advanced the theory that cultural forms like music function to secure the continuing economic, political, and ideological domination of capital.⁶ The culture industry, in particular, is perceived as shaping the tastes and desires of the masses and thereby promoting the ascendancy of monopoly capitalism.⁷ In this connection, the role of the mass media, for instance, is seen as legitimating inequalities in class, wealth, power, and privilege. Because the dominant class controls the flow of knowledge and information, it ensures that what is circulated through the mass media is not only in its interests but also serves to reproduce and reinforce the inequalities that benefit it socially, politically, and economically.⁸

This is what in Gramscian terms is known as hegemony – the cultural, capitalist, and ideological means by which dominant groups and social classes influence other classes of society to accept their own moral, political, and cultural values. For Gramsci, civil society is responsible for the production, reproduction, and transformation of hegemony. Indeed, in Lawrence Grossberg’s reformulated conceptualization of the hegemonic theory,⁹ echoing Stuart Hall,¹⁰ the idea of hegemony is “a struggle over ‘the popular,’ a matter of articulating relations, not only within civil society (which is itself more than culture) but between the State (as a condensed site of power), the economic sector and civil society.”

Ideas stemming from the paradigm of hegemonic and counterhegemonic actions inform, to varying degrees, a number of these essays, particularly chapter 11, Washington and Shaver’s analysis (following Gramsci) of the sites of conflict in the language culture of rap’s original gangsters, the organic intellectuals; Mphande and Newsum’s interpretation (chapter 15) of the relationship between the global production of indigenous southern African musical expressions and the creation of colonial and postcolonial capitalist hegemonic domination; and the role of technology in linking marginalized people to a market-mediated discourse as a counterhegemonic force (chapter 16).

In addition, several essays in this volume derive theoretical perspectives from the French tradition of semiology. Identified as the science of signs or systems of signification, semiology has contributed to analyses of popular culture, especially through the application of concepts such as signifying and decoding. Thus food, clothing, music, commercial advertisements, gestures, festivals, and language itself serve not only as modes of communication but also of distinctive moments in the production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction of cultural forms. According to the structural linguistics tradition established by the Swiss linguist Saussure, and later applied to popular culture via the authoritative work of the literary critic and semiologist Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1973), semiology is concerned with the production of meaning – or, in his language, “the process of signification.” However, material reality cannot be taken for granted, for reality is constructed by culturally specific systems of meaning. And codes and signs are not universally given; meaning is manufactured at given times and in given spaces through historically changing systems of codes and signs.

Further developing his theory regarding signification, in which he linked it to the construction, location, and role of myth in modern societies, Barthes argued that it is the task of semiology to go beyond the

“denotations” of signs to get to their “connotations.”¹¹ Barthes thus concluded that “bourgeois ideology” lies at the very heart of myth in modern society, “transforming the reality of the world into an image of the world . . . [that] is upside down.”¹² In this sense – the ideological role of popular cultural symbols – there are tenuous connections between Gramsci, Barthes, and another theorist of the French tradition, Althusser. The last argues that the superstructure secures the reproduction of the social relations of production through what he terms repressive agencies, which include the mass media or mass culture.¹³ Ideology speaks to us, drawing attention to structured conditions not only in language but also in the class relations that form the context within which action is generated. In important ways, issues of signification and the construction of reality, as well as social production and the ideological nature of cultural production, underlie a number of the studies in this volume, from the discourse of kente cloth (chapter 2) and rituals of “talking black” (chapter 7) to sung-tale metaphors (chapter 4), and the language culture of rap video music (chapter 11).

Feminist theoretic formulations are also of importance in this volume, especially the essays in part 2 by Andrews, Dandridge, Willis, and Gaunt. The feminist critique of popular culture addresses forms of female representation that marginalize or stereotype women, the dearth of attention given to women as cultural producers, and how the intellectual study of cultural production and phenomena has perpetuated this marginalization and/or trivialized women as a social category.¹⁴ The latter critique is characterized by Tuchman as the “symbolic annihilation of women.” Indeed, Tuchman argues that the mass media not only victimize, marginalize, or ignore women’s concerns, but also affirm the dominant, anti-feminist social values in the society.¹⁵ Modleski further advances the feminist critique, contending that women have been held responsible for *mass* culture and its harmful effects, whereas men are associated with *high* culture; that is, mass culture = femininity; high culture = masculinity.¹⁶

Another aspect of the feminist critique relates to women’s lives in patriarchal societies. The meaning of patriarchy as a concept is of course varied. Here, however, it refers to questions relating to what Baehr defines as “the relationship between women’s subordination in terms of their ‘economic’ place in patriarchal relations under capitalism and the representations of those relations in the ideological domain which women inhabit and construct.”¹⁷ Patriarchy, in this context, defines unequal gender relations and social relations in which men dominate, exploit, and oppress women – although, as the studies in part 2 demonstrate, equally

important structures of inequality such as class and race often operate concomitantly and are responded to by women in proactive, self-empowering ways.¹⁸ Van Zoonen concludes in no uncertain terms: “Since mass media are in the hands of [white] male owners and producers, they will operate to the benefit of patriarchal society.”¹⁹

A final feminist theoretical work warrants mention, insofar as its paradigmatic framework has a bearing on Gaunt’s analysis (chapter 10) of the ideological role of the playground games that African-American girls play. Drawing from concepts reminiscent of Althusser, Gramsci, and Barthes, McRobbie argues relative to the young female subculture that the “material practices” specific to certain institutions and teenage girls’ organizations mold and shape their subjects in particular ideological ways that function to reproduce a gendered position, role, and status in society.²⁰

The Post in Postmodernism

It is out of these and many other paradigms – not to speak of their *neo* strands and variants – that postmodernism has emerged as a (new or counter) movement. The *post* signifies a beyond stage, beyond the culturalism of the British tradition (for example, Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams), beyond the linguistic structuralism of the French tradition (Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Althusser), beyond poststructuralism, which speaks of a decentered version of structuralism (Jacques Lacan), beyond Foucault’s model that emphasizes the discreet ways in which power and knowledge are intertwined through concrete discursive practices,²¹ and beyond the political economy of culture – beyond these and other cultural theories and paradigms.²² Postmodernism, at heart, represents the confluence of antifunctionalism and antistructuralism. Whereas structuralism emanates from a universalism that assumes a virtually unchanging social structure, postmodernism effaces the distinction between image and reality. In the deconstructionist mode of Jacques Derrida, who coined the term in *The Postmodern Condition*, the postmodernist questions the assumptions and “truths” of modernity/the modern age and searches for ambiguity “behind” representation, the vagaries behind the structure.²³

Postmodernist discourse is decentering; that is, it rejects an overriding, central truth and instead concentrates attention on the margins. To a large extent, it focuses on genealogy, which, in postmodernist terminology, refers to the dismissal of a unitary body of theory in favor of local knowledges that are even discontinuous and illegitimate. For postmod-

ernists are antifoundational; they contend that questions of correctness, validity, and truth cannot and should not be posed or answered, least of all in reference to any pre-given principle or foundation.²⁴ According to Baudrillard, postmodernist analysis is one that is guided by hyper-reality – that is, a belief that there is no “reality,” only image and illusion.²⁵

Postmodernism thus loosens the hold of totalizing visions, the authority of grand theoretical paradigmatic styles, the “metanarratives” of Jean-François Lyotard in his acute depiction of the postmodern condition.²⁶ Lyotard further elaborates:

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the un-presentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and enquires into new presentations. . . . The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgment, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules or categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*.²⁷

Thus, postmodernism not only defies consensus but also induces conflicting theories and perspectives.

Though no single social theory can adequately capture the full range of meanings, approaches, perspectives, and discrete issues conveyed by the term *postmodernism*, its appeal is that it unfolds new openings, new possibilities for cultural studies. It is highly elastic, relativistic, and eclectic. In drawing greater attention to problems of epistemology, interpretation, and discursive forms of representation, postmodernism opens up new assumptions about the power and dominance of popular cultural signs and images, especially in how they influence and govern social relationships, not just in the mass media-dominated world of the West but also in the manifold cultural expressions of Africa and its diaspora. In particular, assumptions about reality are called into question. No longer do we take the mass media, for instance, as the reality; we now must go subsurface to find and define reality in its particular location. Postmodernism further enables us to search for new “knowledges,” understandings, and interpretations. Not all would agree with, or be pleased by, all the conclusions of our studies, but that is the enigma – some might say the vagary – of postmodernism, for in the different black cultural spaces

occupied by the essays in this book, the application of any of the strands subsumed under postmodernism has its own epistemic value and meaning.

Popular Cultural Studies and the African Diasporan Experience

From his base at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, Jamaican Stuart Hall has been a leading figure in both Caribbean and British cultural studies for some years now. Founded in the 1960s first under Richard Hoggart²⁸ and subsequently Stuart Hall, the Centre has had a long engagement with theoretical formulations regarding culture, beginning with early humanism (Hoggart and Raymond Williams), through contestations with Marxism, cultural critiques of the Frankfurt school and semiotics, to what Grossberg views as “structural-conjuncturalism,” and finally a “postmodern conjuncturalism.”²⁹ Within a diasporan/Caribbean context, Hall’s influence can be seen in several of our essays, especially his theoretical and empirical formulations on the intricate ways in which the transatlantic circulation of people, ideas, and culture has coalesced to transform Caribbean identity. An equally powerful influence is that of another leading cultural analyst in Britain, Paul Gilroy, whose recent publications have thrust him into the forefront of current analyses of the culture and politics of the black diaspora.³⁰

On the African-American literary scene, one of the most enduring voices for several decades has been that of poet, dramatist, essayist, and critic Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), whose writings have epitomized the most radical engagement of literature and culture and politics – black, nationalist, Marxist, and socialist.

In December 1991 an important Conference on Black Popular Culture was held in New York in an effort to help define this culture in the wake of the increased centrality of African Americans in various arenas of U.S. culture: film, dance, music, theater, sport, et cetera. The central concern of the papers (later published),³¹ which derived from a principally humanities perspective and were inspired by British cultural studies, was the continuing question of African-American identity: what is popular and black in Spike Lee’s films or black TV, for instance. Gates’s analysis of the film, *Looking for Langston*, epitomized this thrust:

[It] presents an identitarian history as a locus of discontinuities and affinities, of shared pleasures and perils. Perhaps the real achievement of this film is not simply that it rewrites the history of African-

American modernism, but that it compels its audience to participate in the writing.³²

The present volume carries the issue of identity, along with many other critical themes, beyond the boundaries of the African-American experience into a truly black global arena encompassing the continent and its diaspora and employing a combination of empirical and theoretical formulations that span both humanities and social science disciplines.

In *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy* (1993), Houston Baker explores the interrelationships between the “outside” expressive cultural energies of today’s black urban youth culture (rap music and poetry) and contemporary scholars “inside” the academy. At the same time, work by younger scholars such as Tricia Rose (rap music and youth culture), Robin Kelley, (black working-class and cultural politics), Andrew Ross (intellectuals and popular culture), and Michael Dyson (cultural criticism) has added to the sophistication of studies on African-American popular culture.³³

Postmodernity and Its Africanist Malcontents

In contrast to African-American and Caribbean studies, postmodernist analyses have been slow to capture the imagination of scholars in the field of African studies in any significant way, with the possible exception of central and southern Africanists.³⁴ Some Africanists question in general the utility of applying postmodernist interpretations to the study of Africa, while others not only view the application of postmodernism to colonial discourse analysis with skepticism, but even see it as a threat to long-entrenched traditions of historical methodology in African studies.³⁵ Still others see the limitations on knowing entailed in the postmodernist and deconstructionist deemphasis on “correct forms” and style in favor of ambiguity as being at the expense of “knowledge.” Some, furthermore, view certain elements of postmodernism such as a concern for subsurface analyses that are grounded in the particularities of local environments as redundant, in that such a mode of inquiry has long been associated with contemporary methodological approaches in African studies.

Indeed, Johannes Fabian’s ground-breaking essay, “Popular Culture in Africa: Findings and Conjectures,” was published as far back as 1978, and while the author modestly viewed it as a preliminary synopsis, it nevertheless identified critical issues, themes, and contexts that remain topical in the field even today.³⁶

Yet there is no doubt that deconstructionist perspectives could be immensely applicable to certain forms of Africanist analysis. The deemphasis on grand theories, with all their pretensions of universal truth, has loosened the sway of Northern theories on Africa – which, in turn, has led to uncovering previously subjugated and silenced voices. Thus Western claims to the hegemony of knowledge and theory are being questioned and overturned. This has resulted in the celebration of difference and the quest to “discover” or deconstruct the Other. In his celebrated *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said magisterially deconstructed how Western scholars, politicians, and writers had used the concept of the Orient so as to endow the West with a supposed superiority. This has opened the door to newer, more intricate analyses in colonial and neocolonial discourses on the hegemonic nature of colonialism. Homi Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration* (1990), for example, which expounds on the multifaceted ways in which resistance to oppression and domination finds expression, is obviously relevant to the study of Africa, not the least of which is his intricate conceptualization of the relation between the powerful and powerless. Likewise, in feminist studies, Ife Amadiume (1988) and others have challenged the right of Northern feminists to speak for and on behalf of African (and African diasporan) women. In a further example – an edited volume produced by yet another conference – Marianne Marchand and Jane Parpart challenge “Orientalist” representations of “Third World” women and the silencing of their development expertise by exploring how development theory and practice can be transformed to give voice to their expressions, “knowledges,” and political mobilizations.³⁷

Work produced in recent years – by Mudimbe, Fabian, Erlmann, Appiah, Diawara, Bourgault, and Martin, to cite just a few – point to the growing interest in applying postmodernist forms of analyses to African studies.³⁸ The postmodernist rejection of the universal and global in favor of local, quotidian (daily life) analyses and constructions of “reality” that are grounded in particularistic and more specific historical and cultural terrains has much to offer Africana studies, as the essays in this volume eloquently demonstrate, in searching for an understanding of the complex, multicode realities of the Africana experience. Counterhegemonic discourses and paradigms have much relevance for the construction and understanding of representations – and inventions – of black realities, past and present. As Jane L. Parpart cogently argues, given the fundamental restructuring of the current world economy and the emergence of new global systems,

Africa is part of these changes, and those who study about and seek to explain Africa cannot place the continent outside the questions of the postmodern era in which we all live. Postmodernism has not invented Africa, but it has much to say about those who claim to *know* the continent.³⁹

Organization, Structure, and Interrelation of Essays

While recognizing the interrelated nature of black cultural formations, we have grouped the chapters into clusters and subsets of closely related essays. Chapters 2–6, the first cluster, center on the language and aesthetics of culture – kente (Adjaye), poetry (Samatar), indirection (Yankah), proverbs (Jackson-Lowman), and drama (Grant), as each seeks to demonstrate the multifaceted ways in which black popular identities are manufactured culturally. These cultural modes become the manifold spaces for the constitution of self and construction of identity. The central theme among these essays is that of *being*. The subsets are apparent – for example, Adjaye and Jackson-Lowman’s search for an authentic/Afrocentric identity; Samatar’s, Yankah’s, and Jackson-Lowman’s exposition on the power of language as a conveyor of popular culture; and Jackson-Lowman’s and Grant’s identification of the confluence of culture and liberation.

The second major cluster, chapters 7–11, focuses on constructions of gendered identities, female and male. Andrews demonstrates processes by which a female self is constructed and respect negotiated through ritualized patterns of verbalized assertiveness; Dandridge’s essay centers on how the black women in Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* develop self-respect and integrity; Willis describes the social construction of gender as it is evoked in the black feminist work of filmmaker Leslie Harris; Gaunt analyzes how African-American women’s identity is constructed through the social games that black girls play (double-dutch, for example); and Washington and Shaver portray the multileveled ways in which young black urban males negotiate identity through the lyrics of rap music.

The third cluster consists of chapters 11–15, in which music becomes the site for processes of cultural formation, for articulating the culture and the politics of sound. Here, sound and its language and imagery are the spaces in which multiple narratives of identity are fashioned, contested, and celebrated – reggae (in Chude-Sokei’s essay) as a ritualized

construct for the (re)invention of nationalism (Jamaica), subnationalism (*patwah*), and race (“Africanity”); the multicoded music of *zouk* that evokes a new cultural consciousness grounded in the reclamation of creole (Berrian); Carnival, as a locus for the contestation of a pan-West Indian, pan-African hegemonic race that transcends ethnicity (Buff); and rural “folks” in southern Africa, whose cultural expressions such as choral music are appropriated in the exercise of colonial and capitalist hegemony (Mphande and Newsum).

Within this cluster, it is important to recognize once again carefully grouped subsets. For example, chapters 12–14 provide powerful case studies in the transnational, transatlantic circulation of culture, on the one hand, and (along with chapter 15) strong illustrations of the global production of sound culture as alternate systems for resisting colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial structures, on the other.

The fourth and concluding section serves as both closure and a point of departure into the twenty-first century. In chapter 16, Rose makes a powerful case for recognizing the transformative capacity of “underexplored spaces” both inside and outside marketplaces and how these “fissures” can be used as a counterhegemonic force, as “kernels” of change, as we approach the next century.

Conclusion

There are obvious limitations to what a single volume on a subject as expansive as black popular cultures can accomplish. However, we hope that this collection will help to advance our knowledge and understanding of the complex nature of black popular cultures in a number of important ways. They affirm that black cultural formations and productions everywhere function to give meaning and *reality* (as defined by the respective authors) to people’s lives, such as in configuring and constructing identity and consciousness – whether individual, ethnic (Adjaye, Andrews, Buff, Samatar), racial (Jackson-Lowman, Chude-Sokei, Buff, Adjaye, Grant), national (Buff), class (Adjaye, Andrews, Yankah, Samatar, Washington and Shaver), or gender (Andrews, Willis, Dandridge, Gaunt, Washington and Shaver) – and expressing and advancing resistance to cultural, capitalist, colonial, and postcolonial domination (Mphande and Newsum, Chude-Sokei, Buff).

At one level, the case studies powerfully demonstrate a continuity and dynamism in the symbolic language, rhythm, and sound of black cultural forms that transcend place, history, and time, from African proverbs to

African-American values; from kente cloth adornment in Ghana to its appropriation in the United States by African Americans craving for a lost identity; and from the cooption of cultural symbols in Africa to their commodification in the Caribbean and the United States. At another level, they demonstrate the transformations, ruptures, and disjunctures that are embodied in the changing landscapes of cultural forms and symbols throughout the black world (exemplified in studies by Rose, Adjaye, Chude-Sokei, Buff, to cite just a few). In yet another light, the volume provides powerful illustrations of how continental and diasporan connections are maintained and transformed through the Afro-Atlantic circulation of culture (see essays by Adjaye, Berrian, Buff, Chude-Sokei, Mphande and Newsum, Jackson-Lowman). Above all, we hope this book, the first collection of essays on popular culture that integrates studies from the African continent with those from its North Atlantic diaspora,⁴⁰ will further our understanding of the subject within the framework of its transatlantic connectedness as well as the Afrocentric perspective that considerably underpins it.

Yet, beyond the commonalities of themes highlighted above, the essays demonstrate the multivocality of black popular cultures and their complex expressions of values, ideas, and sentiments. In this context, it must be emphasized that the theoretical formulations to which I draw attention are intended to provide a framework for a broader understanding of these studies and their relationships to each other rather than to impose a particular interpretation on any essay. Indeed, these essays present something of a pastiche, a collage of ideas and views, some in opposition to others, each author providing his or her own *voice* (perspective), his or her own *reading* (interpretation), in a complex intertextual (interwoven) interrelationship, without finality or unison. Yet these voices echo important issues in the continuing dialogue on black popular cultures that we must carry into the next century.

In this postmodernist era, much of the discussion has heretofore tended to be theoretical and abstract rather than empirical. The studies presented in this volume are original, empirical explorations, undertaken through discourses that have a global relevance, on the multiple ways in which we can make sense (or perhaps *cannot*) out of the complex experiences of blacks in different geographic locations and cultural loci. The approach adopted by many of the contributors – “talking *with*” as opposed to “talking *at*” the reader, that is, Mikhail Bakhtin’s distinction between dialogic and monologic forms of discourse⁴¹ – permits powerful interpretations of and debates on the wide range of social and political

issues explored by the essays. Yet, at the same time, the particular approaches and perspectives adopted by the authors of these studies engage and compel us to rethink existing theories as they provide the framework for generating newer theoretical formulations.

Culture is never fixed, nor can the social conditions, relations, and meanings conveyed through culture be presented as fixed. Indeed, if some of the interpretations of the various contributors appear somewhat different from those in other publications, it must be understood that cultural conceptions, matrices, and the very modes of inquiry vary from one society to another. Yet, as intellectuals (or philosophers, in Gramscian terms), “we all come back ‘home’: to that bounded space, that space which grounds us in relation to our own lives and to history. And to learn our place in time, to learn to live inside a situation requires us to ‘draw the line(s),’ to acknowledge the need to live within our limits and yet, at the same time, to attend to what is gathering ‘beyond the boundaries,’ to respond as best we can to what is gathering, to yearn responsibly across it towards the other side.”⁴² This is what we have sought to do in our modest way in this volume. For if we are to heed Gramsci’s call for the creation of a “counterhegemony” against the “hegemony” of some cultural systems, then the alternate voices located within the texts and discourses on the forms and productions of black popular culture presented in this volume not only must be heard, too, but also will facilitate the counterhegemonic movement forward into the twenty-first century.



PART I

The
Aesthetics
of Culture



Introduction

ADRIANNE R. ANDREWS

Language, rhythm, and sound act to interconnect the people and (popular) cultures of a globally dispersed people, the people and cultures of Africa and its diaspora. Patterns of language use, rhythm, and sound connect these diverse yet similar cultures and underlie the themes that tie the studies in this volume together, pervading all the essays in one aspect or another.

In part 1, “The Aesthetics of Culture,” we see these patterns revealed in the subtle nuances of the nonverbal discourse encoded in the patterns and rhythms of Ghanaian kente cloth (Adjaye); in sophisticated, oblique verbal discourses, a “high” art employed by Somali practitioners to sanction social behavior (Samatar); in protests against social injustice (Yankah); in their use as tools of education and socialization (Jackson-Lowman); and, last, in dramas intended to radicalize and politicize “ordinary black folks” in the 1960s and 1970s, the “theater of the street” plays of Ed Bullins (Grant).

In chapter 2, Joseph K. Adjaye speaks to the significance of cultural continuities and disjunctures that are reflected in the transformations in production and consumption and, consequently, the social meaning of Akan (Ghanaian) kente cloth, changes not only within the cultural context of Ghana but transnationally and transatlantically as well. Addressing the importance of textiles and clothing as a prime indicator of popular values, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as a marker of social status, Adjaye lucidly weaves and simultaneously unravels the complex web of social relations inscribed in the production, acquisition, distribution, and, in the diasporan context, commodification and commercialization of kente. (Capitalizing on the very yearning for authenticity that Rose decries

in chapter 16 is also an element of black popular culture under global commodity capitalism.) Adjaye moves through a richly textured cultural history of the origins of kente weaving and the development of its association with the Akan elite as a barometer of wealth and prosperity. Describing kente as an Akan art form, he demonstrates the ways in which the colors and patterns of kente encode cultural values and subtly express in its textures the mood as well as aspirations of the wearer.

Adjaye describes the increased commercialization and commodification of kente cloth and how the cloth came to symbolize for diasporan blacks, particularly in the United States, a connection with and claim to a long-denied and devalued African origin and identity. Thus, an international market for this symbol of authentic African culture and world view came into being. With this transformation in kente's meaning and function from indigenous status symbol to commodified cultural artifact, we see kente as an appropriated symbol reluctantly relinquished by its originators to a global consumer economy and, following Tricia Rose, "transformed and newly emergent" as a symbol of a newly constructed cultural identity among diasporan blacks.

In chapter 3, Said S. Samatar continues the theme of subtlety in expression as he discusses a stylized form of discourse and ritual in Somali culture, *sarbeeb*. As "hidden" speech, a form of oblique communication, *sarbeeb* transmits encoded messages that are subsequently decoded by (male) specialists initiated in this genre of poetry. As with kente, the status associated with this centuries-old tradition of committing history to memory serves to create and distinguish a class, an elite body of male elders, pastoral poets, whose artistry and skill in the use of language enable them to perform a role comparable to that of electronic media in the contemporary global context. This tradition of using language to construct and maintain historical memory, values, and ideals as well as to sanction and warn against errant behavior is found in various forms throughout continental Africa and its diaspora.

Kwesi Yankah further illustrates this point in his discussion of linguistic indirection, *akutia*, in sung tales performed through Ghanaian high life music (chapter 4). Yankah describes how sung tales express the voice of dissent of a "silenced" underclass and help to shape a social identity for a powerless majority in a "racially" homogeneous but ethnically diverse nation. This process of adapting the traditional role of speech and sound in language culture to construct a discourse of protest is also addressed in the essay by Washington and Shaver (chapter 11). As with Somali *sarbeeb*, *akutia* reflects the aesthetics of indigenous com-

munication – in this instance performed by an individual, a culturally revered figure (Nana Ampadu) whose voice creates and celebrates constantly reconstituted sociopolitical local identities, ethnoscapas, within an overarching national one.

In chapter 5, Huberta Jackson-Lowman argues for the rediscovery, reclamation, revitalization, and retention of traditional African values, such as those represented in the essays by Adjaye, Samatar, and Yankah, by African Americans. Based on empirical research findings, Jackson-Lowman delineates the value of orally transmitted knowledge through proverbs. She delineates the positive functions and role of proverbs – as with *kente*, *sarbeeb*, and *akutia* – as carriers and “embodiments” of basic cultural values, beliefs, objectives. Arguing from, and for, an African-centric perspective, Jackson-Lowman advocates the empowerment of African peoples through language, by socializing youth and instilling values based on proverbs such as those that have historically sustained African and African-descended peoples across time. Jackson-Lowman affirms the necessity of building on the strengths of an underused knowledge base, in a effort to suture the cultural ruptures and disjunctures created as a consequence of the Atlantic slave trade. Those in the diaspora who have been socialized in “racially” homogeneous places have not been as challenged by historical circumstances to construct an identity as a people as African Americans have been. Blatant racism in the racialized context of day-to-day life in the United States, she argues, has forced a quest for identity – this despite critics who label this quest as narrowly essentialist and itself racist. The theme of a quest for a concrete racial identity is most intense among U.S. blacks because of (to paraphrase W. E. B. Du Bois) an ever present sense of “two-ness,” a double consciousness – two warring souls in one dark body – one “Negro,” one American.

This debate over identity – racial, gender, national, and international – and the conflicting perspectives and angles from which it is contested runs throughout this volume, invigorating the entire collection. Jackson-Lowman’s spelling of Africa with a *k*, for example, is a reflection of the author’s philosophical and ideological perspective, a perspective that is also an element of this thing called black popular culture. These voices, too, must be heard, not silenced and marginalized, lest we who speak of and write of the evils of oppression and marginalization and silencing be guilty of the same faults we decry in others. These voices, too, sing black popular culture.

Nathan L. Grant (chapter 6) also addresses issues associated with empowerment and the cultural construction of identity in his analysis of the

early works of playwright Ed Bullins's "theater of the street." Grant questions whether theater is a sufficient impetus toward a revolutionary culture, as Bullins was attempting to create in his dramatic works of the 1960s. Grant determines that Bullins was ultimately frustrated in his desire to overcome that mysticism and mystique of theater as politically empowering, even in his incorporation of soul as the "arena in which a new black vitality seeks to transcend mere survival." He speaks of Bullins's dilemma of seeking to empower blacks through theater while simultaneously avoiding what he describes as capitalist stasis, a condition that resists every effort to produce a defiant black presence, ultimately muffling the very voice that artistic expression seeks to make heard.

2

The Discourse of Kente Cloth: From Haute Couture to Mass Culture

JOSEPH K. ADJAYE

The past decade has seen the increasing popularization of kente accessories among African Americans. More and more graduating students all over the United States are donning kente at commencement ceremonies. Some college professors are also sporting kente stoles, often over their academic gowns. Kente stoles and ties are seen at school proms. At black churches, ministers, choirs, and some members of the congregation have equally taken to kente. African-American community leaders and politicians have similarly identified with kente.

What is kente? What are its history and traditions? What symbolic meanings does it embody, and what transformations have occurred in those meanings from its Akan (Ghanaian) origins to its present use in the American diaspora?

This is a study in the communicative capacity of cloth. It employs kente as a social artifact, using multiple interpretive approaches that recognize both the philological analyses of a work of art as a document of social history, a symbolic language, and as a tool in historical anthropology to reconstruct indigenous and ethnic history. The focus is the semiotics of kente consumption, and the ultimate goal is to unravel the transferred meanings conveyed in the transformation of an object that was initially an artifact of haute couture into one of mass popular culture today.¹

Textiles, more than any other art form, provide the most eloquent expression of the cultures of which we are a part. They are perhaps the "greatest barometers of popular culture in any period of time."² The capacity of cloth, as a visual piece of evidence, to substantiate cultural meaning is simultaneously individual and social. Cunningham and Lab succinctly capture the expressive function of material objects like cloth-

ing: they are “the media through which cultural ideas flow. . . . [They] substantiate the manner in which we order our world of cultural categories such as class, status, gender and age, and express cultural principles such as the values, beliefs and ideas which we hold regarding our world.”³ The sections that follow will demonstrate that kente has been an index of personal wealth and social values, revealing a complex of realized relationships in a dialectic process between the users and their social groups.⁴ As a conveyor of values, the emblematic and communicative role of kente has been dynamic rather than static, and its embodied meanings have undergone continuous transformation, not just in the American diaspora but even in its Ghanaian homeland.

History and Origins

Kente represents the highest point of technological and aesthetic achievement in the textiles of the Akan of Ghana, and indeed of all of Africa.⁵ Although the origins of Akan weaving cannot be dated with certainty, archeological evidence suggests that weaving traditions in West Africa predate the tenth century.⁶ In northern Ghana, weaving traditions have been traced to the twelfth century, and by the seventeenth century, when the Akan of the forest area established a centralized Asante kingdom in its historic form under Osei Tutu, gold production and a whole range of artistic traditions including textile manufacture were already in full bloom.

European visitors to the Asante capital of Kumase from the seventeenth century on were impressed by the magnificence of the court, notably their highly colorful clothing. An early description was recorded by the Scandinavian agent L. F. Romer, who documented reports of the visit to Kumase by a fellow Danish agent, Nog, in the 1730s. Nog observed that the *Asantehene* (Asante king) was a great patron of crafts and that he started “another kind of factory,” that is, a special weaving tradition. He continued:

Some of his subjects were able to spin cotton, and they wove bands of it, three fingers wide. When twelve long strips were sewn together it became a “Pantjes” or sash. One strip might be white, the other one blue, or sometimes there was a red one among them. . . . [Asantehene] Opoku [Ware] bought silk taffeta and materials of all colours. The artists unravelled them.⁷

This is an unusually revealing document confirming the early stages of kente production when the practice was to import silk and unravel

it to provide threads for the weaving of kente. Asante's oldest textile product, however, was cotton fabric with predominantly blue and white stripes. These fabrics were often interlaced with simple geometric designs and were known as *nbakuo*. Later, possibly in the sixteenth century, came a second stage of production characterized by cotton with silk inlays, as described by Romer. This was called *babadua*. The final stage was the production of the luxurious all-silk kente cloth. By the late eighteenth century – and certainly before the visit of English envoy Thomas Bowdich to Asante in 1817 – silk kente weaving was fully developed, Bowdich himself having observed the practice.⁸

The transition from the production of blue-and-white cotton fabric on a narrow loom with one pair of heddles to that of multicolored silk kente cloth with complex patterns on a loom with four or more heddles was made possible by a combination of indigenous Asante creativity and external influences. Cotton does not grow well in the Asante forests, and therefore much of it was imported, either in raw form or as spun fiber, from the neighboring savanna areas of Bondoukou (Côte d'Ivoire) and Mossi (Burkina Faso). Braimah and Goody further suggest that when Salaga came under Asante control in the mid-eighteenth century, its people were ordered to grow and spin cotton for the benefit of Asante weavers.⁹ The possibility of another external influence on Asante weaving designs, that of Fulani blankets, has also been noted, especially in the block arrangement of colors and inlay shapes.¹⁰

Notwithstanding evidence of the influence of external stimuli, Asante oral traditions affirm that kente weaving is an autochthonous development. According to legend, while on a walk a man named Ota Kraban and his friend Kuragu Ameyaw discovered a spider weaving an intricate web design. They were so impressed that they studied the design carefully. On their return home to Bonwire, they narrated their find to the local chief, Nana Bobie, who in turn sent them off to Kumase to tell of their discovery to the *Asantehene*, Osei Tutu. Greatly impressed, the *Asantehene* promptly laid claims to this discovery as part of his royal prerogative.¹¹

To this day, Bonwire, a cluster of some eight villages lying about twelve miles from Kumase, remains the kente weaving capital of Asante.¹² Etymologically, the word *kente* is said to be derived from the Fante word *kenten* (basket) because of an apparent resemblance in weaving techniques. According to information relayed by Bonwirehene (king of Bonwire) Nana Okae Ababio to Venice Lamb in 1970, the word *kente* was first applied by Fante traders who acquired handwoven fabrics in Asante and

brought them to the coast to sell to European merchants.¹³ Another variant suggests that the early weavers used raffia fibers to weave cloths that resembled baskets in design. By the nineteenth century, the word had gained general usage.

Symbolism and Color Differentiation

According to current usage, kente refers to both the narrow strips (about four inches wide) or whole cloths sewn together from these strips. Traditional Asantes, however, commonly refer to kente by an indigenous terminology like *awentoma* (woven cloth), or *nsaduasoo* (literally, a cloth hand-woven on a loom), or the name of the specific weave like *asatia*, *asanan*, and *asasia*, that is, cloth made from two, four, and six heddles, respectively. *Asasia*, the highest quality kente, was made for the exclusive use of the king and was specifically commissioned by him. Its techniques were held to be a secret. Production was under the careful supervision of the *Bonwirehene*, who was responsible for quality control. *Nsaduasoo* is also made of the finest silks. It is of a superior type generally and therefore implies that the wearer is a person of means. However, its status is lower than that of *asasia*. Over time, this became the type of kente cloth that a wealthy Asante could commission. These are distinguishable from *ntama*, the general name for cloth but a term commonly associated with cotton cloth, the type that most commoners could afford. Thus a hierarchy exists in the fabrics for body ornamentation.

Generally, the extent or component of silk involved is a measure of the quality and value of kente. However, there is rank differentiation also in the type of weave, ranging from *topreko* (single weave) to *toprenu* (double weave) and *fapremu* (double pick), the highest quality type.¹⁴ A third mark of distinction is in patterns, for a hierarchy is recognized from the simplest warp strips (*ahwepan*) to fully patterned kente (*edwene*).

However, each pattern, whether single or double weave, has a name based on the dominant background pattern. It is, however, the dominant color of the vertical warp that determines how a particular kente cloth is categorized by color. Asante weavers are exceptionally creative, and they employ a combination of naturalistic, representational, and abstract forms, each serving as symbolic motif. Thus a crescent or semicircle symbolizes the reverence or omnipotence of the Almighty, while rectangular designs symbolize a “point of attention, or power, or love.”¹⁵ The ubiquitous square symbol in kente signifies boldness, masculinity, and security. The checkerboard design that typically alternates dark and light col-

ors represents the oppositional contrasts that are found in everyday life as well as in the spiritual realm – male-female complementarity, contrasts of day and night, of order and disorder, and growth and decay. It is widely believed that some 300 recognized patterns, each with its distinctive name, are accepted as standard weaving designs.¹⁶ According to tradition, weavers are generally not expected to modify established patterns, although they may create or invent new ones.

Symbolism finds expression also in color. Akan textile traditions, including kente weaving, recognize the following associations: red with danger, war, death, disaster, sadness, anger, seriousness, struggle and sacrifice; blue with affection, love, calmness, tenderness, harmony, peacefulness, and spiritual sanctity; yellow and gold with richness, prosperity, long life, royalty, and success; green with fertility, growth, newness, vitality, and spiritual rejuvenation; black and dark brown with death, melancholy, and spiritual energy; gray with poverty, disgrace, and spiritual blemish; and white with purity, virtue, innocence, success, freedom, joy, and spiritual vitality.¹⁷

Furthermore, a number of kente cloths are known by individual names based on specific patterns or motifs, and over fifty are generally recognized. Kente cloth, like other major Akan art forms, is an embodiment of the history, social and ethical values, philosophy and beliefs, political ideals, and aesthetic principles of the people, many of which are expressed in simple aphorisms and proverbs like “Boafo ye na” (Helpers are rare), “Sika fre mogya” (Wealth strengthens family bonds) and “Nku me fie” (A murderer should not come from my own kin).

Some kente designs are associated with historical anecdotes. For example, “Oyokoman (ogyda da mu)” refers to a successional dispute between two factions of the royal Oyoko clan following the death of Asantehene Osei Tutu in the 1710s. The green and yellow represent the two factions, while the red between them symbolizes the crisis (*ogyda*, literally, fire). The cloth has come to symbolize unity in diversity, reconciliation, and royalty.

As another example, “Akyempem” (meaning, literally, has given him a thousand) is said to have originated in a generous gift from Osei Tutu to his Akyempemhene (head of princes) Owusu Sekyere; thus cloth of this pattern signifies loyalty. Another variant links “Akyempem” to Asante military history, this interpretation deriving from the proverbial use of a thousand shields (*akyem apem*) in Asante military formation. Based on the latter interpretation, the cloth symbolizes military strength and political vigilance.

“Aberewa aben” refers to a seventeenth-century elderly woman of

the Asenie clan; the cloth therefore symbolizes wisdom and strength of character.

“Kyeretwie” (literally, lion catcher) is a reference to a historical episode in the mid-nineteenth century when Asantehene Kwaku Dua I dared his warriors to catch a live lion. The appellation “Kyeretwie” has since been given to some members of the royal family for their bravery. This cloth thus symbolizes courage, valor, and exceptional leadership. Thus kente designs, like other Asante art forms, serve as one of the channels by which Asantes keep alive their oral culture and history.

A large body of kente symbolism relates to the Akan world view – social, ethical, and moral values, philosophical and religious beliefs. Common examples include the following. The design known as “Abusua ye dom” (There is strength in the [extended] family) symbolizes unity, family bond, cooperative responsibility, and understanding. “Nyankonton” (rainbow) symbolizes the importance of loyalty. “Sika futuro” (gold dust) recognizes the value placed on wealth and honorable achievement. “Ankonam” (I walk alone) draws attention to situations when one has to face life struggles by oneself. Cloth of this pattern thus exalts the values of self-reliance, perseverance, drive, and self-motivation. “Woforo dua pa a na yepia wo” (If you climb a good tree, you get [deserved] help) is interpreted to mean that God helps those who help themselves. This pattern recognizes reward for good effort.

Occasionally, too, political representations are conveyed through textiles, a prime example being the kente cloth that was named “Fatia fata Nkrumah” (Fathia [the Egyptian wife of] and Nkrumah make a perfect couple), an implied affirmation of the policy of Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, who espoused African unity; at the same time the cloth itself evoked mutual affection and happiness. “Fathia” has thus come to symbolize and animate pan-African consciousness. Two other examples of political symbolism in kente are worth mentioning: first, “Akosombo nkanea” (literally, Akosombo light) was designed to commemorate the completion of the historic hydroelectric dam at Akosombo by Kwame Nkrumah in the early 1960s, whence the association of the cloth with social progress and development. “Obaakofo mmu man” (literally, one person does not rule a nation), affirms the traditional Akan principle of participatory democracy and collective governance.

Yet other designs celebrate purely Akan aesthetic creativity and ingenuity. A prime example is the design named “Emmaa da” (meaning this design has no precedent in creative ingenuity). But the grandest and most expensive of all kente designs is “Edwene asa” (All designs are used

up or exhausted) – in other words, the ultimate in kente creativity and craftsmanship.¹⁸

Kente is created by male weavers on narrow horizontal looms that are distinguished from the broader vertical looms that women employ in other textile forms. Kente production raises questions of gender relations that have not hitherto been addressed. The limitation of kente weaving to males might have more to do with technical questions – that is, the nature of the horizontal loom – than with kente's early association with power, since power in Asante society is not the exclusive domain of men. Indeed, in the past women played a significant role in kente production by spinning the raw cotton into yarn, dyeing the yarn, and sewing the strips together into cloths. Today, as factory-spun yarns have replaced hand-spun yarns, women's role has been reduced largely to that of marketing kente.

In the process of creating designs and going about their intricate weaving processes, weavers are said to derive inspiration from their ancestors. Indeed, the slow, deliberate kente weaving process is analogous to life. Further, even in its apparent enduring majesty, the softness, malleability, and ultimate fragility of kente captures the inevitable vulnerability of human beings. Thus the discourse portrayed in kente manufacture is analogous to the regenerative and degenerative processes of life itself.¹⁹ Therefore, the transition to capitalist mass production and machine manufacture that is now evolving in kente production in some Western quarters runs counter to the cultural values associated with this unique cloth, for it eliminates the weavers' traditional opportunity to infuse their work with spiritual values.²⁰

In kente and other Asante art forms, tradition and creativity are not opposed categories. Although certain designs are standard and may not be modified, weaving traditions permit the artist to give full reign to his expressive and innovative skills in creating new ones. In this context of dynamism and creativity, applying the adjective *traditional* to a number of African art forms, including kente production, is often misleading, for African art should not be treated like the static product of an idyllic past. Indeed, in the textiles of Asante, we see the artist striving to take the creative potential of his individual skills and the available social, cultural and technical milieu to their very limits.²¹

Kente and the Discourse of Power

The Asante king, elegantly clothed in kente, bedecked with gold jewelry around his head, neck, arms, wrists, and ankles, surrounded by royal

insignia, and carried shoulder-high in a palanquin projects an image of consummate majesty and a spectacle of unmatched pomp. And from this commanding posture, he magnetizes himself to his subjects and assures them of the grandeur and prosperity of the state. This is an eloquent and highly visible testimony of the use of kente and other art objects in the construction of power. High visibility is an index of, and communicates, power, for many Asante art forms like kente have critical connections with the exercise of leadership.

Art in Asante, as elsewhere in Africa, has as much to do with power as with ideals. It “provides diverse channels for power and ideology, for it symbolizes, invokes, and even helps generate power and authority. . . . Art persuades, empowers, and transforms.”²² The Asante kings recognized this potential very early and thus from the beginning controlled kente production. As a result, it was a small, specialized “industry.” R. Austin Freeman observed such small-scale textile production during his visit to Asante in the late nineteenth century and described it as “certain special forms of peculiar excellence among which the most beautiful productions . . . take first place.”²³ These cloths, he confirmed, were woven entirely or in part of silk.

Royal control of kente production was inspired by the desire to proclaim the splendor and majesty of the court. Along with other royal regalia, kente transmitted notions of majesty, sanctity, and power. It betokened the king's wealth, stature, and discerning eye for quality. Whether seen in terms of its physical magnificence or its iconography, kente separated the chief from his people, elevating him. Asante art, as Cole asserts, was mainly directed to the kings' “glorification and the augmentation of royal strength in all spheres,” and then ultimately to the benefit of the entire nation.²⁴

Another illustration of kente as an instrument in the construction of power is found in the king's ability to dispense kente. At strategic and significant times in the course of the indigenous calendar and especially at the annual Odwira Asantemanhyiamu (meeting of the Council of State), the Asante king would reward deserving officials of state and senior functionaries with gifts of kente cloth that he had specially commissioned for the purpose.²⁵ The annual bestowal of kente thus became a medium through which the king not only communicated sentiments of merit but also generated authority and political patronage. The patron-client relationship thus cemented committed the recipients to present loyalty and future obligation. “Throughout history,” as Weiner and Schneider assert, “the architects of centralizing polities have awed spec-

tators with sartorial splendor, [and] strategically distributed beautiful fabrics among clients,” and Asante is no exception.²⁶

Kente Consumption and the Construction of Class and Status

Further, kente is imbued with social meanings. Indeed, social ideals are not just communicated through this special art form; they also emanate from it. In Asante, as elsewhere, particular textile types or embellishments have cultural value such that the wearer is immediately associated with the possession of great wealth or status.²⁷ Because kente in particular was first seen as synonymous with the dignity and grandeur vested in a king, status and class distinctions were associated with it between royalty on the one hand, and commoners on the other. Kente was manipulated to “separate noble and royal precincts from common ones.”²⁸ Acquisition of kente by the Asante aristocracy marked a significant distinction in purchasing power and social status between the elite and ordinary citizens.²⁹

Visitors’ accounts from a very early date emphasized the enormous differences in rank, status, and prestige between the royal class of kings and superior officers and the rest of the population. Bowdich observes:

The caboceers [chiefs], as did their superior captains and attendants, wore Ashantee cloths of extravagant price from the costly foreign silks which had been unravelled to weave them in all the varieties of colour, as well as pattern.³⁰

Indeed, it was a cardinal rule of traditional protocol that kings and commoners were not expected to wear the same cloth. Kings maintained a certain distance from their people. As Arhin points out, the social position of the lower orders was established not only by their relationship to the stool but also by their wealth, of which clothing was a marker.³¹ To this day, royal rank and high status associated with kente is expressed in the practice of covering objects of royalty – a palanquin or state drum or royal swords, for example – with kente.

Again, in times past, because the use of kente was governed by conventions of status and wealth as well as etiquette, it would have been unthinkable for a young man of no status to order, let alone wear, a kente cloth, even if he could afford it financially. Similarly a lesser chief was bound to wear cloth that did not outshine that of a higher chief at a *durbar* or festival.

Throughout much of Asante history, the ideological and class hierar-

chiefs of Asante society were given physical expression in dress, as in many arenas of Asante material culture. Asante was a highly hierarchical society, and kente was part of the sumptuary paraphernalia employed for the objectification of rank and the elaboration of class. As I have noted, because the highest quality kente, *asasia*, was reserved for royalty, a class separation was visibly maintained until recent decades when such distinctions began to weaken.

Throughout the nineteenth century, kente was connected with the ideology of power, and it encoded a hierarchy. It was part of the material accoutrements of a hegemonic group, and its use embodied a dialogue between the dominant and nondominant classes. In the public display of this material and scarce resource, structures of inequality were reproduced and played out.

In the first half of the twentieth century, with the expanding commercial opportunities brought about by the growth of the market economy in the Gold Coast under British colonialism, the base of the wealthy class expanded. With it, kente possession became a status symbol not only of chiefs and their senior functionaries, but also of the expanding class of the wealthy and well-to-do who could afford it. In the Asante concept of the *ommaamma*, the so-called big men, the accomplished person was one whose wardrobe included the prestigious kente cloth, the ultimate in textiles. By the mid-twentieth century, the expanding base of kente possession now came to be symbolized in the Asante concept of *enya wo ho*, the rise of the nouveaux riches.

To this day, the notion remains in Ghana that possessing kente is the ultimate in the creation of a personal wardrobe. As a young person starts working, he or she builds a wardrobe, first of ordinary, everyday clothing, then of several sets of *ntama pa* (wax prints), next of *adinkra*, and finally of kente. The possession of a single kente cloth is generally considered adequate, because it may be worn only once or twice a year and also because of its high price. A measure of its high cost is the fact that most Ghanaians pay for such expensive items of personal adornment in monthly installments.

There are gender differentiations as well as subtleties in the way kente is worn. The size for men – averaging twenty-four strips measuring twelve by eight feet – is worn by wrapping the cloth around the body but with the right shoulder and hand exposed. It is worn over a pair of pantaloons. Women wear it wrapped around their bodies from the waist down, with or without a matching blouse, the women's size varying from five to twelve strips measuring twenty to forty-eight inches by six feet.

By tradition, too, elderly women of high social standing may wear their kentes wrapped around their bodies in the togalike fashion of the men over a regular piece of cloth that is wrapped around the lower body. In all cases, however, traditional conventions based on age, marital status, and social standing influence the size, design, and manner in which one may wear kente cloth.

As a treasured item, kente cloths are generally passed down from one generation to another and become a source of pride to the possessor. Thus kente exhibits a binding quality, serving as an intergenerational connector between the living and the ancestors as well as the future progeny.

Today in Ghana, the rigid status distinctions of the past between the clothing of political leaders and rich merchants and that of the common people have become somewhat blurred. Kente acquisition or adornment is now more a matter of affordability and less of class, but its signification as the most esteemed item of clothing par excellence remains. It is reserved for special occasions like weddings, banquets, and, since the attainment of Ghana's independence in 1957 when it was identified as the national dress, for high political functions. Thus in political arenas, it has become, for Ghana, the most treasured gift item given to the most important visitors and dignitaries, and throughout Africa, it is a glorious symbol of national liberation from colonial domination.

Thus, even though the acquisition of kente is more widespread among the common populace now than in the past, it retains its status at the apex of textiles. It remains the most highly valued cloth, one that is worn on special and joyous occasions. It is not worn at funerals. It cannot be reduced and subjected to everyday, ordinary use. Nor do Ghanaians use it in undignified and trivialized forms such as handbags, slippers, and caps.

Diasporan Transformations

In the United States, however, kente production and use in recent years have undergone a drastic transformation from their Ghanaian conventions and antecedents. First, kente has become popular among African Americans. Second, it has become more or less a fashion. Third, to meet the demand for cheap, high-velocity manufacture, kente production has been mechanized, with inexpensive rayon and cotton imitations invading the market, instead of the original luxurious handwoven silk. But above all, the most dramatic change that has occurred in the diaspora

is the adoption by African Americans of kente-made accessories rather than of the cloth itself as worn by Ghanaian men and women.

Such dramatic transformations in the production and use of kente raise a number of questions with implications for the symbolic meaning of kente. Without doubt, the popularization and democratization of kente have completely transformed it from an artifact of haute couture in its original Ghanaian context to one of popular culture. Such transformations in meanings over time are not uncommon with many objects of popular culture. In the United States, for instance, denim (the fabric of blue jeans) was originally associated with the rugged male westerner and, if worn by a woman, with the tomboy. By the 1960s denim had come to be identified with the antiestablishment, anti-Vietnam movement; it was also a rejection of high fashion and an endorsement of simplicity. Blue jeans have long enjoyed wide popular acceptance, and denim is even used for expensive garments. Similarly, the popularization of kente, especially in the production of manifold accessories, represents a freedom of choice that accompanies democratization.³²

Yet this process raises a number of questions, especially among many "traditionalist" Ghanaians, who see their prized, cherished cloth subjected to forms and uses that they consider aberrations from traditional norms. By traditional Ghanaian conventions, the kente, the symbol of majesty and elevated status, is apparently being unseemingly debased and degraded in the United States.

Has the mechanization of kente production, increasing commercialization, and the expanding hegemony of fashion that accompanies its popularization undermined or transformed the traditional meanings associated with kente? To answer this and other questions related to transformations in the symbolic meanings of kente in the United States, I interviewed over two hundred African Americans. My primary concern was to investigate the varying shades of meaning embodied in wearing kente rather than to conduct a scientific survey. Therefore, I followed a loosely structured format in which I asked the same set of questions regarding the number and type of kente accessories possessed by each respondent; how often they were worn; occasions for wearing them; reasons for wearing them; whether respondents could explain the proliferation and growing popularity of kente among African Americans; and the symbolic meaning of kente vis-à-vis other African clothing.

My investigation brought out the following shades of meaning associated with kente in the United States. (The majority of informants who

avored categories 1–3 tended to be younger men and women, most of whom were college students.)

1. Fashion, style: Many, especially younger people, see kente simply as a matter of style, something in vogue. It is “like a fad, much like the ‘X’ thing.” They wear it because it is “the ‘in-thing’ more than [because of] a deep sense of being black or African.” People wear it, it was repeatedly said, because “it is in style and black also,” rather than out of “a sense of identification with Africa.” One informant in fact went as far as to predict that “if people were all of a sudden to say that it’s ugly, it would be out of the door.”

2. Attractiveness: A small number indicated an aesthetic reason for preferring kente: it is beautiful.

3. Appropriateness: Some respondents believed that wearing kente was the proper thing to do for African Americans.

4. Cultural identity: Many respondents linked wearing kente to a recognition of their African-American heritage and ancestors. Informants repeatedly said that kente gives them “a sense of pride, pride in being black.” Those in this category recognized kente as “a symbol of the motherland,” as “a display of African heritage and history,” and an indication that “you’re proud of who you are.” One respondent observed that wearing an African object like kente was for him the closest thing to getting to Africa physically. In this respect, the proliferation of kente has to be seen in the context of an African cultural renaissance or awakening not unlike that associated with the widespread adoption of dashikis in the 1960s and 1970s as an identification with the African homeland. As one aptly summed it, the popularization of kente is “due to the fact that it has become more acceptable to acknowledge our Africanness.” In this informant’s view, “kente conveys Africa.”³³

5. Prestige, hierarchy: Others still saw in kente symbolic associations that go beyond an assertion of cultural affirmation and pride to invoke perceptions of prestige and status. One informant proudly proclaimed that kente means that she is descended from royalty, “from African kings and queens.” Thus her view embodied a self-concept and self-esteem that transcended racial origins to embrace perceived status.

6. Africentricity, pan-Africanism: Representing perhaps the highest level of consciousness in the association of kente with the African heritage are those who see in it a “commitment to pan-Africanism.”

One respondent expressed it this way: "It is one way of reminding myself about this commitment." To him and others in this group, kente is a symbol of "the struggle." This sentiment was expressed by others in terms of Africentricity, of acceptance and identification with an Afrocentric world view. It is interesting to note, however, that those who profess this consciousness admitted that they see kente as no more of a symbol of Africa than any other African accessory or artifact and therefore view kente as symbolically African rather than a means of identification with the African country of origin. When I pressed one informant to explain the growing "kenteism," even though one African item of clothing is seen as no more an epitome of identification with Africa than another, he conceded: "This is difficult to say. I think the reason is availability. Kente is now so common that in some circles it has become a generic name for African clothing."

Cultural Identity: Continuity, Transformation, and Hybridity

It is evident that kente consumption has to be reconceptualized and contextualized, for it is more than simply a material appropriation of existence. For the most part, Ghanaians wear kente as a traditional product, to maintain themselves; African Americans in contrast consume modernized (i.e., mechanically produced) kente products to recreate themselves. This is a relationship that is analogous to Friedman's symmetrical inversion: production of tradition versus consumption of modernity.³⁴ Yet, though the contexts have been radically transformed, kente consumption in the African diaspora represents, on the one hand, a continuity with the past, and on the other, points of difference. To African Americans, kente is experienced simultaneously as a cultural artifact of an external past that has been lost but must be recovered and as a symbolic representation that is pregnant with new meanings, new possibilities for self-recreation.

Thus, though emblematic of a thread of continuity, it is important to recognize, however, that kente, as a symbol of cultural identity, has been and will continually be imbued with new, transformed meanings in the future. As Stuart Hall argues in a historicist manner,

Cultural identity . . . is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past. . . . Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to continuous

“play” of history. . . . Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.³⁵

In the process of the making and remaking of identity, it would be wrong to think that cultural formations flow one into another with unilinear continuity, or that the symbols of identity have always stood for the same things.³⁶ It is in this context that the imaginative recreation and hybridization of kente in the African diaspora has to be understood.

Conclusion: A Complex of Dialectics

The examination of kente production, bestowal, and adornment provides vistas toward understanding the role of a unique and special type of cloth in the construction and reproduction of social life. It has been demonstrated that kente is associated with a complex of values, ideas, and sentiments. Bogatyrev evidently overstated the point when he said that we must read costume as signs in the same way as we read and understand languages.³⁷ However, there is no doubt that kente adornment engages the wearer in a dialectic process, mediating in a realized relationship between the individual wearer and the sociocultural environment. Kente thus has a unique symbolic and rhetoric power to relate in a dynamic way.

In channels of communication, signification emanates first from the cultural world to the material object, kente, then from the object back to the individual, and finally back to the observer.³⁸ Because the Ghanaian cultural world where kente originated is significantly different from the current African-American world, the meaning of kente has undergone a transformation from the traditional contexts of royalty and elevated status in Ghana to a complex blend of fashion and affirmation of cultural heritage in the United States. Thus the discourse of kente is nonmonologic and multivocal.

But through the centuries of kente production and adornment from the Akan homeland to the American diaspora, certain constants remain in the signification of kente. It is a focal point everywhere for the construction of social identity and difference. At the social level, it has been a stamp of collective identity and representation then and now, whether to the Akan (and Ghanaians in general) or to many African Americans. It

validates who we are; it is a vital source of our heritage, past history, present orientation, and visions of the future, whether as Ghanaians or African Americans.


Furthermore, kente reinforces African solidarity and reproduces bonds of pan-Africanist orientation, connecting transatlantic communities in new space-time combinations through globalization.³⁹ It has been an instrument in the development and articulation of ideologies of nationalism in Africa and pan-Africanism in the United States. To many African Americans, kente accessories have become the mainstay in claims to an authentic African past and a cultural autonomy from Western values. A symbol of Africanism in a complex and changing society, kente is encoded with significant historical meanings as an artifact that celebrates both the past and the present, affirming continuities that bind African Americans to their African ancestral past while at the same time evoking new imaginings through the reinvention of Africanness.⁴⁰

At the individual level, kente forges a link between having and being. It is the ultimate means of self-definition and self-identification. Indeed, kente consumption is more than an expression of self; it is the constitution of self. It constructs, maintains, and accents identity, self-concept, inclusion and exclusion, and difference – again, in Ghana as in the United States. In the past it was a marker of one sort, as it is of another sort today. In either case, it is a marker of difference. In the acquisition and use of kente, reputations are played out as the wearers are situated in a social hierarchy within which they negotiate and define an identity space. This symbolic role typifies the Bourdieu theory of consumption as a social distinction.⁴¹

To many diasporan blacks, kente is real; it has a history, a past that continues to speak to them. And though it is often constructed through memory, transformation and a (re)invention of tradition, its signification simultaneously represents points of identification and suture, points of continuity, hybridity, and disjuncture along the long continuum of the African experience into the twenty-first century. To diasporan blacks, the meaning of kente depends not on the mere retention of tradition; it rests on its refiguration; not on a recall of its indigenous Akan meanings, but on evocations of new, enabling possibilities; not on a reattachment to the specificity of its ethnic origins, but on invocations of a remembered, generalized Africa. Indeed, Homi Bhabha's conceptualization of the ways in which minorities can employ art in the empowerment and negotiation of difference is quite germane to the reinvention of kente in the African diaspora:

The “right” to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the mere persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are in the minority. . . . In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition.⁴²

Kente thus encapsulates a dense dialectic complex in an interplay of multiple meanings. This is the type of discourse that Barthes, writing generally of fashion, termed “a concentrated meaning” and Weiner and Schneider “the manipulation of cloth.”⁴³ The concentrated meanings embodied in kente consumption incorporate transformations over time in a historical process. Such transformations have occurred because kente, like all works of African art, are products of a specific time in history, and therefore their meanings have not stayed the same. Africans and African Americans see their art forms and cultural products in dynamic terms, in a process of motion and fluidity, a convergence of tradition and modernity, a confluence of multivocality. It may well be remarked that the popularization of kente and the apparent equalization of class that have accompanied this process in the diaspora are in fact not too dissimilar from the fluidity and dissolution of class distinctions currently being experienced in kente acquisition in Ghana itself. Simultaneously, parallels are evident in the commercialization of kente in both Ghana itself and the United States. In the former, weaving is no longer the preserve of a small group of Bonwire specialists but occurs in distant places like Winneba; also, kente can now be purchased practically everywhere instead of through the old system of commissioning. In the latter, kente products can be purchased through J. C. Penney catalogues.



*Sarbeeb: The Art of
Oblique Communication
in Somali Culture*

SAID S. SAMATAR

Most societies have stylized forms of discourse and ritual action that serve to establish indirect but powerful patterns of communication. The symbols and idioms for expressing a stylized discourse vary greatly, from the mundane to the sublime and from the ordinary to the bizarre. Among the Somalis of the Horn of Africa, the dominant medium for addressing a hidden discourse is poetry – oral and written. This is the form of art that pervades so deeply the social fabric of Somali society.

The Somalis have been described as a “nation of poets” whose poetic heritage is intimately linked to the vicissitudes of the people’s daily life. In the great demoralization that followed the collapse of the Somali state, some Somalis turned for inspiration to what a former president has called “an asset of inestimable value” – namely, their lyrical poetry that moves the Somalis in almost primeval ways, alternately inspiring them for good or inflaming them for evil.

From early times foreigners who studied Somali language and culture observed the centrality of oral poetry in Somali literary temper and tastes. For example, in 1854 the romantic and highly eccentric British explorer, Sir Richard Burton, entered the Somali coast town of Zayla’ disguised as a Muslim holy man and traveling under the pseudonym of al-Hajj ‘Abdullah. Burton, who spoke flawless Arabic and knew Islamic theology well, resided in Zayla’ for some months, impressed the inhabitants with his considerable Islamic learning, and by some accounts induced them to appoint him the imam of the mosque of Zayla’, where he allegedly regularly led the faithful in Friday prayer.

Burton’s impressions of life in the Somali coast and the city of Harar,

which he visited some months later, are recounted in his book entitled, with characteristic Victorian arrogance, the *First Footsteps in East Africa*.¹ Among the phenomena that Burton reported with astonishment was the high level of interest in literature, oral poetry in particular, found among the Somalis. A revealing passage records his amazement:

The country teems with “poets.” . . . Every man has his recognized position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed in a century of magazines – the fine ear of this people causing them to take the greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetic expressions, whereas a false quantity or prosaic phrase excites their violent indignation. . . . Every chief in the country must have a panegyric to be sung by his clan, and the great patronize light literature by keeping a poet.²

The power and influence of oral poets in Somali society, rightly noted but wrongly explained by Burton over a century ago, stem from more significant social enterprises than the mere singing of tribal “panegyrics.” An important factor in the power and popularity of Somali poets was the versatile use made of their poetic craft in society. For example, poetry as a principal medium of mass communication. To a large extent, therefore, the pastoral poet’s prestige and influence rest on his ability, through the use of verbal art, to manipulate communication – in short, to exercise a monopolistic hold on the flow of information and ideas.

Given its alliterative and metrical regularity, Somali pastoral verse is easy to memorize, far more than prose. The significance of this fact is easy to grasp; in an oral culture where writing is confined to the clerical and commercial establishment in the cities, the only library or reference material people have is memory. Thus events that are truly memorable in their clan affairs are committed to a poetic form, first to underscore their importance, and second, so they will endure in memory through the generations. In this way poetic versification enables the pastoralists not only to transmit information across considerable distances but also to record it for posterity. Hence, Somali pastoral verse functions both as a social communicator and as an archival repository.

In doing so, it plays a role similar to that of the press and television in Western society. Somali poets, for example, like Western journalists and newspapermen, have a great deal to say about politics – about the acquisition and use of political power. Because it is the language and the vehicle of politics, the verse produced by Somali poets is an important

source of Somali history, just as the printed and broadcast word performs this function in the West.

It is the duty, for example, of the Somali pastoral poet to compose verse on all important clan events and to express and formalize in poetry the dominant issues of the age – in short, to record and immortalize the history of his people. And since the poet's talents are employed not only to give expression to a private emotion but also to address vital community concerns, his verse reflects the feelings, thoughts, and actions of his times.

Before descending into the anatomy of *sarbeeb*, or the art of oblique communication, I will summarize briefly the physical and structural properties of Somali pastoral verse to suggest its flavor. First, the verse springs for the most part from a nomadic pastoral base. Even though the majority of Somalis are semi-sedentarized and semi-urbanized today, the culture is still informed by pastoralism of a kind reminiscent of that of the pre-Islamic *Jahiliya* Arabs (from the Age of Ignorance). Indeed, in its environment of pastoral feud and vendetta, love of horses and camel rustling, contemporary Somali society may be characterized as a modern *Jahiliya*. This is not to imply any racial consanguinity between Arabs and Somalis, the latter being Eastern Cushites related by language, blood, and tradition to the Oromo of Ethiopia.

Second, the poetry of the pastoral Somalis is didactic, with a message to convey. A pastoral poem is intoned, chanted, or recited, with the poet presenting his work before an eager live audience, often in the circle of a campfire at night after the animals have been secured in a corral. A distinguished poet has a retinue of admirers and memorizers (*hafideyaal*) who commit his “noble lines” to memory and transmit and disseminate them throughout the peninsula. Sometimes poetic competitions, a kind of literary warfare, are held during the rainy season when the clans assemble to enjoy light literature, each clan's poet(s) doing artistic dueling with those of others, their verbal bouts overseen by a hoary panel of elder literary connoisseurs called *heerbeegti*. In the scheme of Somali pastoral poetry, therefore, the doctrine of art for art's sake does not belong. But to say that every poem contains a specific message which a hearer seeks to find is not to say that such a message can be abstracted with ease. While the meaning is direct in some poems, in others it is hidden or, as the Somalis put it, “closed” (*qafilan*) and requires considerable intelligence on the part of the hearer to decipher.³

The poet Ali Dhuuh, for example, of the Dhulbahante clan family, uses a straightforward declarative style in his poem “On Account of Four-

teen Points,” pleading plainly with the Ogaadeen to restore his stolen camels:

On account of fourteen points return the camels to me:
From the Gabaysane season(a plentiful year) when I
 was a mere lad
Until today when I am old, wearing silvery hair
There never occurred between you and us a matter for
 vendetta;
Know this – and so return the camels to me.
The man of many years brings forth wise advice;
Youths and fools understand not the so obvious point –
 pray, return the camels to me.
Listen, you did not find the camels astray;
A predator-thief brought them to you
And such rapine works all of us into death – pray,
 return the camels. (57)

In this fashion, he goes on to declare fourteen points, arguing persuasively why the looted camels should be returned. By contrast, another poet – say, Huseen Diqle – might shroud his verse in arcane language and “sings of the rapacious caprice of ‘Lion Justice’ when in truth he was not thinking of lions at all but of his people’s plight under a tyrant chief” (58).

The third principal characteristic of Somali pastoral verse is alliteration (*hikaad*) – in particular, head alliteration wherein the beginning of the line contains a consonant that corresponds to a similarly sounded consonant at the end of it. For an illustration of this, Sayyid Mahammad’s poem “Musuq-maasuq,” or “Flim-flammer,” will do:

Musuq-maasuq Soomaali waa *meheradeediye*
Hadba midab horlay kuula iman *maalin* iyo *layle*
Malahmalahda iyo *baanaha mowku* ka *adeegay*.

(Dissembling is the Somalis’ inveterate habit,
They come to you every day and night
 with a new color,
 Oh! Death to duplicity and bluster.) (59)

All vowels are considered alliterative, as in this excerpt from the poet Ismaa’iil Mire’s “My Lad.”

Wiilyahow ilmaa igaga timid aragtidaadiye!
Qalbigaa i oogsaday markaad tiri adeerow e!

(My lad, the sight of you brings tears to my eyes!
It caused my aching heart to throb the moment you called:
“Uncle!”) (59)

The fourth – and final – major characteristic is meter (*miizaan*, literally, balance). Meter in Somali poetry is acquired by the interplay of long and short syllables in a line much like ancient Greek, in marked contrast to English poetry where the meter is established by beat and accent. The Somali word for poetry is *maanso*, and there are four major forms in classical verse (*gabay*, *geeraar*, *jiifto*, and *buraambur*) with the *gabay* the most popular and having the longest syllabic units in the line, ranging from fourteen to eighteen syllables. This excerpt from Sayyid Mahammad’s “Gaal-Leged,” or the “Scourge of Infidels,” demonstrates the point:

Eeb-bow gar-ka ha-daan qab-sa-day gaah-she na-bad-diiye
Eeb-bow gam-maan i-yo wa-haan ga-ni ‘as dhii-baa-ye
Ee-bow ga-row ka-ga ma he-lin goo-la-shaan wa-day-e

(Lord, however much I’d plead with them, the infidels refuse to honor the peace,

Lord, they do not reward me with praises for my gift:
the red stallions and precious mares which I lavished upon them,
Lord, the choice camels which I sent them do not earn me their esteem.) (62)

To return now to the genre of *sarbeeb*, it may be said that the word *sarbeeb* in Somali means closed or hidden talk, as opposed to plain or straight talk. Hidden talk (hidden, that is, from the uninitiated and the ordinary) can only be interpreted by a poetic expert. While some may find the ambiguities, vagaries, and obliqueness of the communicative medium of *sarbeeb* as well as the manipulative capacity of its performer to be very much in the postmodernist vein, discourses on African cultural practice do not necessarily have to be couched in a deconstructionist mode.

In *sarbeeb*, forms of “hidden” speech are employed to transmit coded messages that, upon arrival at their destination, may be decoded by experts who are acquainted with the rules of the genre. Naturally, *sarbeeb* is supremely suited to the language of diplomacy where the art of oblique communication is essential in order to address sensitive issues – issues that by convention cannot be directly approached for fear that a direct

approach may compromise somebody's honor. In pastoral society, as in others, a social lubricant for face-saving is necessary for people to coexist harmoniously in the aggregate. This is particularly so in situations involving the external relations of the clans and lineages where incautious speech – a slip of the tongue, as we say in English – can easily provoke murderous feuds.

To illustrate the specific uses of *sarbeeb*, I will refer to an episode that occurred in 1946 when the delegates of two clans met to discuss a number of outstanding issues. I will call them clans A and B. The leading elder of clan A – named Saahid – who also happened to be an established poet, opened the tribal palaver by reciting a short poem of the *sarbeeb* genre, which he had addressed to the leading spokesman of clan B, a poet by the name of Feetin:

Among your many horses, O Feetin, there is a variety of mares:
Some withhold the gift of milk from their offspring,
While others barely know how to gallop.
As for the old stallion – behold, he's grown old – gone is his agile
step of time past.
If you love us, give us a trade-in for the old beast. Pray, do not refuse
to treat with us:
If you do, let that seal the standard of dealings between us.⁴

Feetin, the spokesman of clan B, responded in poetry of the same genre:

Men of noble blood, O Saahid, speak words of wisdom,
Ceaseless banter is the mark of the low-born.
He who knows the ways of a young mare prepares her gently.
Behold, your unkind lash has cut into her delicate back,
Making her trembling body to know fear.
Do you not know? She is barely two seasons old:
She will yet bloom with beauty.
Why blame us, my friend, if you do not know how to ride!⁵

To the uninitiated, the subject of the poem would seem to involve a quarrel about horses, especially a young mare that changed hands from clan B to clan A. Clan A found the mare an inferior breed, one that “barely knows how to gallop.” Clan A would like to have a trade-in, a new offer in place of the earlier one. If clan B refuses to make a new offer, he threatens, the refusal will seal for the worse the future relations of the two clans.

A quarrel about horses – such would be the apparent impression con-

veyed by the first poem. This impression is, moreover, strengthened by the response of the second poet who maintained that the trouble was not that the mare in question was inferior but that the owner did not “know how to ride.”

In fact, the real subject of the poem concerns a dispute about marital mismatch. The young mare is a metaphor for a young woman (from lineage B) whom the first poet had married, apparently at great cost in bridewealth but who proved disappointing as a wife. The unhappy man of lineage A is pleading with the elders of lineage B to reopen the marriage case, in particular, to provide a new wife, because the earlier wife “knows not how to gallop,” by which he means that she does not know how to run a home. If lineage B does not propose a new offer in place of the old, the poet would obviously be doomed to be stuck with an unwanted partner. But he warns that his plight is bound to strain the two clans’ future dealings.

The poet-spokesman for lineage B, however, remains unimpressed with this argument. Specifically, he has no intention of reopening the marriage case, for he blames the marital trouble on the man who has not learned “how to ride” (a loaded phrase, by the way), not on the mare who “will yet bloom with grace.” Far from sympathizing with the predicament of the unhappy man, the respondent poet charges him with wife-battering: “Your unkind lash,” he remonstrates, “has cut into the delicate back of the poor beast / Bringing fear into her innocent eyes.”

The poetic exchange can therefore be seen to be rough and remorseless, both poets having gone for broke, verbally, in order to present their respective cases persuasively. But the rough and remorseless language is permissible in pastoral negotiations so long as it is conducted in the context of a veiled talk. For our purposes, it should be noted that the whole communication was conducted not only in the arcane language of *sarbeeb* but also in an apparent exchange about horses, when in reality the issue had nothing to do with horses but everything to do with questions of interclan marital negotiations.

Perhaps the most famous *sarbeeb* poem of the twentieth century in the Somali peninsula is that of Ismaa’iil Mire, a distinguished poet and a top commander in the Dervish struggle against British, Italian, and Ethiopian occupation forces. Entitled “Pride Maketh You Stumble,” a Somali pastoral version of “Pride goeth before a fall,” the poem is a paragon of ambiguities. It was composed in the early twentieth century during Somalia’s anticolonial Dervish movement led by the poet, mystic, and

warrior Sayyid Mahammad ‘Abdille Hasan, the Mad Mullah of British colonial literature. In 1920, after two decades of bloody warfare, perhaps the longest drawn-out and bloodiest in the annals of African resistance, the Dervishes were finally demolished by the British, and the Sayyid and his force were driven to an inglorious flight westward into Arsi country in Ethiopia. British victory was made possible by the use of aircraft. As one of the pilots remarked, the airplane was a “convenient weapon to bomb the old villain out of his hiding place.”⁶

The defeat of the Dervishes gave the upper hand, politically, militarily, and economically, to the British-friendly clans over those who had been allies of the Dervishes. The latter now began to chafe under a perceived domination. What particularly infuriated the Dhulbahante (as the Dervish allies were named) was the appointment of a new police commissioner, one ‘Arab Dheere, who was alleged to have systematically harassed the Dhulbahante, seizing their camel herds, roughing up the men and ravishing the women. In protest, Ismaa’iil Mire composed his lugubrious jeremiad, a philosophical discourse on the vagaries and futilities of human existence. He sang rather darkly:

The Lord divides the bread amongst all his slaves
Taking care of the fishes in the sea and even of the contents of a cup.
Everyone will receive what has been prescribed for him;
Even though he runs fast or sets out early in the morning climbing a
high hill
No one will gain more than his allotted portion: let that be
remembered!⁷

This verse epitomizes what some have called Islamic fatalism, a disposition that seems to inform the poet’s world view, one in which the individual seldom plays a role in shaping his destiny. If the “Lord divides the bread amongst all his slaves” and “everyone will receive what has been prescribed for him, his allotted portion,” does human effort or self-exertion matter at all? Ismaa’iil Mire would probably dismiss this objection as irrelevant; he was reared in a frontier Islamic culture with ideas of human beings as “slaves” under the omnipotent hand of a Supreme Being who dispenses His cosmic plan regardless of what puny humans do or fail to do. His task is to make his case persuasively through the obliqueness and ambiguities of *sarbeeb*, and in the forty-one lines of the poem he embarks on a jumble of abstract allusions and intertribal relations, the intent being, as I once said in another context, “to range

far afield, holding the hearer in suspenseful anticipation while probing him for sympathy through the eloquence of language.”⁸ And by caustic analogy:

It was to his overweening worldly pride that Corfield owed his death;
It did not occur to him that young lads could kill him with their rifles.
Oh men, pride brings disaster: let that be remembered!

Richard Corfield was commander of a British expeditionary force, and the verse evokes his death at the battle of Dul Madoba between British and Dervish forces in 1913. As summarized by Anrzejewski and Lewis:

Isma’iil Mire is well qualified to speak of this incident since he led the Dervish attack. Corfield’s death, with other heavy casualties on the British side, was attributed to his supreme self-confidence and rash action in engaging the enemy without adequate numbers or resources and in underestimating the power of the Sayyid’s forces.⁹

As Corfield was brought down by the sin of “overweening arrogance,” so will another be ruined by his reckless behavior, oppression and greed – another, though, whom the poet is constrained from naming by the oblique dictates of *sarbeeb*. To name names or to be direct in communication is to violate the prevailing rules and ethos of the genre and Ismaa’iil Mire, master craftsman in the field, is unlikely to commit that error. For him the withering analogies will do:

Again and again the Sayyid made war and people helped him;
Thousand upon thousand, all with white turbans, he brought to the
battle of Beerdiga,
But what brought his downfall was the day when he destroyed the
Khayr people.¹⁰

Few could have been more appreciative than Ismaa’iil Mire, the veteran Dervish fighter who knew firsthand the violent early months of 1920, that what caused Sayyid Mahammad’s “downfall” was the “combination of British might and a smallpox epidemic which ravaged the Dervishes by turns.”¹¹ And yet Ismaa’iil Mire, like virtually all Somalis, sees a more transcendental cause of the collapse than the immediate: they attribute the “ultimate downfall of the Dervish movement to the Sayyid’s wanton attack on the Khayr section of the Dulbahante clan. This lineage is composed largely of men of religion whom Somali consider to be under Divine protection.”¹² By analogy, the poet implies that a similar “downfall” is sure to unfold through the commission of similarly wanton brutalities

incurred by an unnamed oppressor. And the nearest thing to revealing the identity of this “dark” oppressor occurs in the last verse in which the poet observes thus:

I saw a man such as those described who will not live long to enjoy
his wealth;
His bags are full of loot taken from men of honour and valour.
Watch silently, Muslims, and see how those who prosper lose their
souls!¹³

The accusing words, the plaintive tone, the evocative pathos – all were designed to state his case persuasively with the object of invoking mystical forces to intervene on behalf of the despoiled “men of honour and valour” pillaged by the “full, satiated man” who “has grown fat buttocks like a big ram” from loot. “I saw a man,” the poet obliquely remonstrates, “who will not live long to enjoy his wealth,” a poetic vision of Edenic proportions predicting the downfall of Mr. Fat Buttocks. Presently the Islamic, or universal community of faith, is called upon to “Watch silently . . . and see / how those who prosper lose their souls,” a pastoral version of the biblical “What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” The reader – or more appropriately the listener, since the poem would likely have been composed and performed orally around an evening campfire before a live audience of a nomadic homestead – wants to know this man of perdition against whom the sword of Providence is invoked. But the listener’s longing for knowledge is forever frustrated, without the exigetical aid of elders, by the *sarbeeb* artist’s ethos to conceal, to dissemble, to be coyly vague about the subject of his composition. The poet’s demurring to reveal the identity of “the man” but to enshroud him in mystery forces the listener with an enquiring mind to meditate on the “poetic eye,” or “I” of the composer – that is, to enter the poet’s very being if only to share his poetic vision in hopes of figuring out the “man” for himself.

Such are the ways of pastoral *sarbeeb*: at once mystifying, provoking, and soul-searching. One of the curious features of *sarbeeb* relates to its overarching dimensions that merge into other forms of prosodic genre in pastoral classical verse; other forms like, for example, the genre of *Kuhaan* (also *Guhaan*), or curse poetry. While *Kuhaan* refers to a collective category of verse, the pastoral word for the individual curse versicle is tellingly *gabay-awayti*, or a “stabber-poem,” the notion being that a curse poem possesses the stabbing effect of a dagger. The doctrine of the poetic curse in pastoral sanctions is based on the notion shared by nearly

TABLE 3.1. *Types of Curses in Somali Poetry*

	Who Can Use the Curse?	Against Whom?
Inkaar	All living beings, including plants and animals; a weapon for the weak against predators and the powerful	The powerful, oppressors, and those who use their advantage over others in irresponsible ways
Na'alad	God, angels, prophets	Unbelievers, liars, troublemakers
<i>Habaar</i>	Intelligent beings: men, angels, elders, holy men	Infidels, disobedient children
Asmo	–	Rival clans
<i>Kuhaan</i> (<i>Guhaan</i>)	Poets	Blatant offenders
Haanfil (Yu'asho)	–	Rival clans

all traditional Somalis that the poet possesses, as it were, a hotline with the deity and is therefore equipped through his poetic oration to intervene in natural events.¹⁴ Possessed of such a deadly weapon in the form of his poetic craft, the composer of *Kuhaan sarbeeb* is believed to have the power to injure others, often fatally, by directing his malevolent verse at them – likened, in pastoral imagery, to artillery fire. Consequently, few things scare the Somali pastoral heart as does being the object of a poetic curse attack. After all, one has the chance of dashing for cover in the face of incoming artillery shells – an art in which the Somalis have acquired some experience lately – but who can survive the mystically directed darts of a poetic curse?

There are many categories of poetic curse, as seen in table 3.1.¹⁵

The fear of being cursed helps to encourage an ethos of peaceful co-existence. After all, even a transhuman, constantly mobile society of pastoralists requires a modicum of rules, sanctions, taboos, and strictures in order to function as a society at all. In a segmental acephalous society without chiefs or any duly instituted central authority to impose some semblance of order, people need to devise strategies to control the vagaries and excesses of human behavior. Accordingly, in Somali pastoral ethos, with *gabay-awayti*, one commands the capacity, through the po-

etic curse, to inflict wounds, and this serves to empower mystically those who are powerless physically.

I offer elsewhere a detailed account of the full range and function of the poetic curse verse in Somali pastoral ethic.¹⁶ The relevant point here is to demonstrate the interplay of curse and *sarbeeb*. Simply put, Ismaa'iil Mire's hidden, lamenting allusions to the "man with fat buttocks" who has batted on "loot" taken from "men of honour and valour" signifies nothing short of the deadliest kind, in Somali eyes, of *gabay-awayti*, an attack directed with all its dark malevolent associations at the criminal despoiler who is the principal subject of the poem. What added a mysterious awe to Ismaa'iil Mire's *sarbeeb-gabay-awayti* raid on Mr. Buttocks (who, as we know from historical sources, was none other than Arab Dheere) was the fact that this gentleman was suddenly summoned by the angel of death soon after the composition of the poem. And although to the secular observer the man died of explainable natural causes, to the pastoral eye the transcendental cause of his death was the poetic curse. Thus poetic curse = death. It is as clear and automatic in the pastoral view as any cause and effect can be.

To speculate momentarily, one wonders why in the face of the recent Somali apocalypse of 1991 – 1995, an apocalypse that saw the wholesale plunder of the weak by the strong in that unhappy country, no poet of any stature – none known to this writer – came forward to utter a curse in the land; why the warlords' whirlwind of rape, despoliation, and mayhem failed to provoke a single line of poetic curse. This is indeed mysterious enough to stir the speculation of observers and pundits on the Somali scene. My own hobbyhorse explanation is twofold: one is that even in the most classical times in pastoral literary temper and tastes Somalis have shown great reluctance to compose *gabay-awayti*. To restate the point:

It is true that only under very extreme conditions does a poet compose *kuhaan*, for poetic curse, though a recognized power, is frowned upon in pastoral sanctions and its frequent user may therefore bring social ostracism upon himself. Moreover, once let loose, a poetic curse is uncontrollable, and may not only strike down the cursed object but return to the head of him who has uttered it. As one elder put it, "composing *kuhaan* is like allowing poison to seep into the air and is dangerous to both curser and cursed."¹⁷

As plausible as this explanation may be, it cannot fully account for what appears to be the total absence of curse poetry in the recent cataclysm of

the Somali peninsula. The overriding reason, in my view, for the dearth of *gabay-awayti* is that, as one elder put it, Somalis have “become a rudderless nation” – having lost their traditional cultural moorings while unable to avail themselves of the arguably modernizing systems of the colonial experience. The result is a “national coarsening of the soul,” a coarsening in which an entire generation of Somalis languishes, culturally, politically, and spiritually, in a state of suspended animation, no longer adept at the living tools of the past nor able to master the modern methods and manners in a strange world of nation-states. It is unlikely, for example, that any Somalis under fifty have the vaguest idea that such things as *sarbeeb* and poetic curse once flourished in their culture, let alone being able to use these cultural assets themselves. Hence one of the great misfortunes in Somalia’s troubled experience as a failed state concerns the desertification of the Somali collective soul to match the nation’s physical destruction and environmental degradation.

This explains why leading Somali intellectuals, faced with a collapsed state and consequent despair, today call for the recultivation of the artistic ambiguities of *sarbeeb* as a resource in Somalia’s present search for a viable political solution. This in turn will require the restoration of the institutions of elders and poetic experts with the skill and experience to appreciate the subtle and creative ambiguities of *sarbeeb*. To do this, it will be necessary to empower traditional leading elders and senior notables of the clans. The roots of Somalia’s political and economic instability, in my view, lie in a tragic mismatch between moral and physical authority. The Somali state inherited from the Europeans has placed power in the hands of faceless, self-made men who cynically and self-servingly manipulate clan competitiveness and antagonisms without knowledge of or interest in proven traditional methods of conflict resolution in particular and the governance process in general. All those in positions of leadership in the anti-Barre forces, as well as those in Barre’s entourage, have been part and parcel of Barre’s former dictatorship. Having fallen out with him over the division of the looted national resources, they took up arms in order to regain their fair share of the spoils. These are cynical, opportunistic people uninterested in Somali welfare or national reconciliation, only in pursuit of personal ambition.

The only moral and effective authority that the clanspeople recognize and obey are the clan elders. There is a need, therefore, to remove power and authority from the opportunists and self-seekers in charge of the various movements and to return it to the traditional elders. The elders, once empowered and with the benefit of educated advice, will bring to

Somalia the dual benefits of controlling and delivering their respective clans and of possessing the political skill and knowledge in traditional law and ways to negotiate in good faith and to settle with one another through a time-proven procedural framework, notably the *heer*, or political contract.

This writer therefore calls for the creation of a two-house parliamentary system for Somalia, consisting of a house of representatives based on numerical representation and a house of elders. Harnessing the resourceful ambiguities of *sarbeeb* and in line with traditional Somali cultural idiosyncrasies, the elders should be empowered to play a vital role in the reconstruction of Somalia. In particular, the principles and sanctions of poetic curse, verbal obliqueness in the conduct of political discourse, and the capacity to be a powerful tool of resistance in the hands of the oppressed, as I have noted, are the political/aesthetic attributes that triumphantly inhere in the genre of *sarbeeb*. Combined, these qualities should create for Somalia a new space in the struggle for national redemption and renewal.

4

Nana Ampadu, the Sung-Tale Metaphor, and Protest Discourse in Contemporary Ghana

KWESI YANKAH

Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a hidden transcript that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. . . . Domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power.¹

This essay seeks to articulate the resilience and efficacy of the folk tale as a hidden political text and examine the thematic and literary undercurrents that have made it a rallying force for protest within Ghana's contemporary political history. It is largely informed by the voice of a master narrator whose songs, spanning a quarter of a century, have virtually become a political charter, defining power relationships, lampooning political aberration, and advocating the restoration of ideal political values.

Noted for their skills in indirection, the Akan of Ghana would rather "speak to the wind" than directly speak to the Supreme Being. The construction of protest discourse under the surveillance of state and political authority could become a hazardous enterprise in power-laden situations. Prudence would require the deployment of revokable cultural representations in the construction of political dissent. Political critique under these conditions is handed over to the singer of tales, a culturally revered voice of the dominated, who creatively manipulates cultural symbols to convey themes celebrating the resilience of the deprived and exposing the gluttony of the dominant.

Not all tradition-based constructions of critical discourse succeed in

withdrawing into comparative safety. In Africa, a few such clandestine texts have been met with executive censorship and other forms of sanction. In Malawi, Mkandawire, a forty-two-year-old musician drawing inspiration from the oral traditions of Tumbuka, became a victim of Kamuzu Banda in 1988 when he sang the tale of a bird that could not be stopped from singing about an incident involving a mysterious death and subsequent cover-up attempts. The government banned the song from the radio, concluding that Mkandawire was singing about atrocities allegedly committed by the Banda regime.² At time of writing (1995), Kamuzu Banda, former president of Malawi, was being tried for the very murders of which the visionary bird sang.³

Discourse in Political Context

Discourse interaction in times of crisis has been expounded in various disciplines (sociology, politics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis) and subsumed under related rubrics such as “conflict,” “protest,” or “problem” encounters. In face-to-face encounters, it is expressed in situations where identities are threatened, interactions are disrupted, and convictions are not in harmony or diametrically opposed.⁴ Under such conditions, participants may interact voluntarily by various maneuvers or bargain a resolution to the problem and restore harmony.⁵ In other situations, the encounter may further degenerate into straight verbal abuse or physical violence unmitigated by negotiation or any attempt at conflict resolution.

A significant aspect of everyday conversation in Africa is its close interaction with other verbal economies. Here, interpersonal discourse is not restricted to ordinary talk. Conversation is a megagenre that embraces related modes of interaction such as song and tale. Depending on the social context, song and other genres may constitute interactive or dialogic discourses in their own right,⁶ or they may be evoked within the matrix of ordinary talk to heighten emotion or argument.

In conflict-oriented song, those involved in the interaction may take positions and lyrically register protest or disagreement or may lampoon or verbally assault one another, such as in the Ewe songs of abuse, in which the rules of the game require opposing groups to be present as part of the performance.⁷

In Africa, the face affront associated with such conflict-oriented song-dialogues is sometimes reduced by concomitant activities, such as pound-

ing, that provide supportive contexts and rhythms and also distract attention from the domestic crises being focused on.⁸ In effect, the latter forums provide socially approved mechanisms of indirection whereby conflict is successfully managed without recourse to open hostilities.

Protest against political authority in many cultures of Africa often finds expression in disguised discourses that are structured to preserve social relations and pose minimum threat to one's "face integrity."⁹ This concept of minimum threat partly recognizes the power of the spoken word in preliterate societies and its immense capacity to threaten the face integrity of individuals. Owing to the high stakes inherent in the execution of speech, cultures have adopted various means to overcome or minimize the hazards of oral interaction. These strategies are especially useful in situations where protest discourse is targeted at the centers of power. Here, the cultural reverence often accorded to elders and political authorities considerably restrains the flow of open, critical discourse. But avoidance of direct protest may also be due to the repressive and vindictive tendencies of those in power when they feel exposed by open criticism. Indirection then becomes essential and is expressed in verbal disguises, such as circumlocution and the use of metaphors, proverbs, folk tales, and other modes of cultural representation.

Since Ghana's independence, constitutional governance has been constantly suspended and freedom of expression stifled by various oppressive governments. Newspapers have been shut down, journalists have been arbitrarily detained and tortured, and dissident politicians have been jailed and sometimes maimed. Under such conditions of fear and tension, journalists have resorted to allegories, proverbial discourse, and song or folk tale metaphors that are either politically motivated or adopted by audiences as clandestine discourse. Of the various modes of folk wisdom, the sung-tale metaphor adopted by Nana Kwame Ampadu, a pioneer in the use of politicized folk tales, has been the most important medium for articulating political critique in contemporary Ghana.

Tale as Rhetoric

Being a discrete genre, the tale has a life of its own, with a fully developed plot, characterization, and norms of performance.¹⁰ Yet in certain cultural domains tales, like proverbs, are also rhetorical if they are tools for persuasion, and they can be spontaneously evoked in conventional talk to demonstrate a lesson, teach a moral, or reinforce an argument.

The basis of the close link between the proverb (brief, dense) and the tale (longer, more explicit) is that despite their varying structural features, the proverb and folk tale are the most accessible genres in which moral lessons are embedded.

It is not surprising that in certain cultures, the two are given the same label.¹¹ In cultures where different labels are used, such as among the Akan of Ghana, the tale (*anansesem*) is called a proverb (*ebe*) when it is triggered in normal discourse outside its conventional “fireside” milieu. Here it is the logical and metaphorical link between the tale and discourse that appeals to the user.

The rhetorical function of the tale as metaphor also means that its major objective of upholding social values and exposing social flaws can be fully exploited for the purposes of satire, innuendo, or verbal assault. A further advantage is the greater leverage for character development and dramatization provided by the tale, which also facilitates its effective use for humor, parody, and satire.

Remarkably, the tale has been effectively used to protest, satirize, and transmit “hidden transcripts” in volatile political contexts in Africa’s past. Here the aesthetic function of the folk tale is exploited by the teller, who weaves plot and characterization to reflect society’s values while at the same time ridiculing social excesses and foibles within the political hierarchy. In societies where tales begin with a disclaimer that denies the factuality of the narration and foregrounds its purely artistic and aesthetic intent – “The tale is not to be believed,” according to the Akan – it is only natural that a skillful narrator will exploit the situation to lampoon real-life characters, as long as no real names are mentioned.

Because the folk tale lends itself to dramatization, it is even more suitable for this purpose. The musical interludes and recesses it provides within the African context often offer opportunities for vivid satirization of real-life incidents. Here the performer and audience, during the interval, may collaborate to celebrate the story’s moral by competitively impersonating favorite characters in the story amid music, dance, and general merriment.

Continuities in the Diaspora

Clearly, there is a close interaction between the song and the tale in Africa, since song is an integral part of African folk tales, and tales may also be sung. This mutual interaction between tale and song applies also

to the African diaspora in general. In the words of Zora Hurston, referring to Jamaica,

Now and then [the narrator] sang a little. A short squirt song and then another song would come. . . . It fitted together beautifully because Anansi stories are partly sung anyway. So rhythmic and musical is the Jamaican dialect that the tale drifts naturally from words to chant, and from chant to song unconsciously.¹²

In situations of political censure where there is fear of reprisals, satirical song and tale provide a “backstage” conduit for self-expression and articulation of dissidence in Africa and the black diaspora. This has extended from traditional society, through the period of slavery and colonialism, to the era of the modern nation-state.

R. S. Rattray, early in this century, alluded to the use of folk tales by Akan slaves to ridicule oppressive masters.¹³ The use of the tale to lampoon and caricature authority figures is made easier by the persistence of the wily, smallish trickster figure – call it “political spider,”¹⁴ hare, or tortoise who in the tales manages to weave his way through a treacherous world of powerful and greedy animals out to devour him. This opposition between wit and force often provides fitting parallels in slave-master relationships and enables victims to satirize excesses of authority and to overcome adversaries vicariously. In the words of Sherlock,

Through the story the story-teller could often rake his revenge on those who offended him. Someone in the village, or even the chief, could be ridiculed, and his failings exposed. The story-teller had a measure of freedom, and through the story he could raise a laugh against the greed or hypocrisy or jealousy or deceit of someone more powerful than him.¹⁵

The artistic strategy of modeling dramatic characters after folk tricksters has also been extensively used by playwrights.¹⁶ In this way guile, cleverness, and resilience may be safely celebrated, whether in tales or stage dramas, without courting the hostility of dominant forces.¹⁷

Apart from satirical tales, songs of ridicule and lampoon are very widespread within Africa¹⁸ and have also been extensively used in slave cultures to “sing the master” or “put down ole massa.”¹⁹ Together with the proverb and the tale, the song constitutes a very effective mode of cultural discourse that helps to reinforce hatred of the powerful and celebrate the resilience of the underdog. In certain situations such as festivals, sung protest is infused with a shock element, consisting in the open

abuse of authority. Here, the normal rules of social intercourse are suspended and protest is ritually celebrated under the supervision of a demobilized state authority.

High Life and Political Satire

Oral satire in contemporary Ghana goes beyond pristine traditional discourse. Its power is enhanced by its “mediatization” on radio, as well as its incorporation within the matrix of popular high life music, which is a syncretic art form combining Western instrumentation and indigenous rhythms and lyrics.²⁰ Introduced into the country in the nineteenth century and developed during the First and Second World Wars, the social and geographical base of high life music has broadened from its historical association with the coastal elite to encompass most of the urban and rural areas of Ghana (and other West African countries). It is also enjoyed by both higher and lower classes. The wide reach of high life music, particularly its grass-roots appeal, naturally makes it an important medium for political mobilization and propaganda. Indeed, the panegyrics of high life guitar bands helped to shape the political agenda of President Kwame Nkrumah around the time of Ghana’s independence; some of the groups even traveled with him outside the country.

Over the years, however, musicians have generally avoided open critical comment on political processes for fear of censure. Significantly, though, several songs have been conventionally construed by the public as cryptic statements on the political process.²¹

In several cultures of Ghana, oblique criticism is an accepted part of the aesthetics of indigenous communication. Second, imaginative discourse in general tends to be susceptible to political interpretation, since a public starved for critical self-expression normally looks for appropriate public icons in which to anchor their repressed emotions.

But it is perhaps the electronic media, particularly radio, that has most substantially enhanced the power of political satire and its availability for public scrutiny. Even so, what constitutes political meaning in respect of sung discourse remains somewhat problematic, in that verbal artists would rather not openly admit political motivation in their discourse and often lament the subversive readings applied to them. Yet the public, in ascribing political meaning to such polysemous discourses, have been guided by a cultural aesthetic wherein the artful concealment of intentions by an artist is considered a hallmark of sophistication. The aesthetic maturity of a good artist is therefore taken for granted. The general pref-

erence for cryptic rhetoric as indicative of artistic sophistication is fostered by the relative absence of channels for open and spontaneous articulation of political opinion or opposition. Under such circumstances, refuge may be sought under suggestive symbols whose meanings (innocuous or otherwise) may be reinforced, transformed, or extended to suit a political purpose. When such protest symbolism in the public sphere coincides with a particularly suitable turn of political events, its efficacy as a weapon for insubordinate discourse (and as a shield) is further enhanced.

This is of course not to deny credit to the artist for consciously tabling a disguised text, but rather to note the delicate balance the artist must negotiate between private and public identities. As a guardian of community social values, the traditional artist is concerned with timeless ideals, and his “catch-words” and refrains become handy weapons for political activism when those ideals are subverted by those in power. Sometimes, catchwords and slogans may be reinforced by visual representations in textile designs that facilitate their adoption as cryptic discourse for conveying innuendo.

Akutia

The phenomenon of innuendo or indirect critique finds expression in what the Akan call *akutia*, a strategic verbal assault in which speakers in face-to-face confrontations avoid eye contact with their targets and make insinuations without mentioning names. Innuendo, couched in songs and tales, such as those discussed in this essay, are generally classified as *akutia*. *Akutia wo ne wura* (Akutia has a known target), the Akan say, implying that not only is *akutia* goal-oriented but also its target, if well schooled in the genre, is often aware of the subtext. Yet like all cultural indirection, such as *sanza* among the Azande,²² or *signifying* in African-American tradition, *akutia* speakers always have a potential line of retreat should their motives be challenged.²³

In certain domains, *akutia* overlaps stylistically with *ebe* (proverb) in that it is also a mode of indirection that can be replicated or recreated in other contexts. Yet *akutia* has a characteristic trait that lends itself readily for deployment in class- and power-laden contexts. It finds its best fulfillment in situations of power differentials – situations of conflict involving individuals of uneven sociopolitical status or class. Here it is deployed by the underdog as an offensive weapon and protective shield. *Akutia* in the hands of the powerful (to be used against the deprived) would be a

redundant device, since the dominant class has nothing to lose by adopting direct strategies of confrontation, including open abuse and physical aggression.

In the proverb or sung-tale, *akutia* then finds a fitting social niche in which the powerless can use these forms to create sociopolitical awareness and celebrate an exclusive social identity. Yet it is probably the recursive potential of this mode of *akutia* that is more significant. In the form of a tale, the popular appeal of *akutia* lies in its dynamism, its responsiveness to emergent social forces, which compels its principles to be reinforced, adapted, or reconstituted to meet new historical challenges. This way, one who is socially deprived is not doubly handicapped through verbal deprivation; a performer can adopt and adapt “ready-made” therapies in novel situations of stress. Even while celebrating a group identity, the protest voice constantly resonates and affords the listener vicarious participation in the political process. The efficacy of *akutia*, however, rests on the performer’s skills and integrity as an artist.

Nana Kwame Ampadu

The legitimization of the folk tale as part of the contemporary political process is largely based on the sung-tales of Nana Kwame Ampadu that came to public attention in 1967, a year after Nkrumah’s overthrow. His African Brothers Band had been formed in 1963. Born on 31 March 1945, Nana Kwame Ampadu has attained preeminence as the single most important folk commentator in Ghana’s contemporary history. He was indeed crowned *odwontofoohene* (singer-in-chief) in a nationwide competition in 1973.

Eloquent, prolific, and erudite in Akan oral traditions, Ampadu appeals to the rural folk with very philosophical lyrics and social commentary spiced with proverbs, witticisms, and idioms. He is certainly the most prolific high life artist, having composed and recorded more than 500 songs in his career. His sung-tales span a variety of social and cultural themes, ranging from marriage, interpersonal harmony and lineage disputes, to love of country. Ampadu’s songs are so commonly known that his sung-tale titles have often been adopted by traders as names of textile designs, shoes, and other materials, to facilitate marketing.

Born in Adiemmra in the Afram Plains of the eastern region of Ghana, Ampadu spontaneously broke into traditional song early in his life. His verbal wit and eloquence with proverbs and philosophical quips astounded his household. In primary school, storytelling was his favorite

pastime, and he would monopolize the floor for extended periods during proverb competitions and storytelling, regular features in the school curriculum. He had learned stories in his immediate neighborhood and would often sit for hours on end listening to folk tales told by elders. But it was probably his father's knowledge and practice of oral traditions as a professional that helped to sharpen Ampadu's verbal wit. His father was a lineage head and a subchief whose daily duties of adjudication required a deep acquaintance with customary lore, lineage history, oral traditions, and forensic skills. Ampadu recalls that even as an eight-year-old he sat at his father's feet during judicial deliberations.

Ampadu's musical career started early in the sixties during Nkrumah's regime, but it was not until Nkrumah's overthrow that he came out with his first commercial recording. The political significance of Ampadu's folk tales came to public notice in 1967, when he released his single hit, "Ebi Te Yie" ("Some are favorably positioned"). Over nearly three decades, from Nkrumah's overthrow to the regime of J. J. Rawlings, Nana Ampadu's folk tales have become the most powerful metaphors for popular comment on contemporary Ghanaian politics.

Yet it is useful to consider how Ampadu's poetic agenda was partly shaped by the social and political context in which he launched his career, as well as the turbulence and uncertainties of Ghana's political history. His dominant imagery of brute force, intimidation, and oppression, represented by carnivorous beasts, is often countered by the wily maneuvers of small oppressed creatures. However, it takes a closer look at the dynamics of Ampadu's tales to discern his message (whether benign or seditious). His maiden song releases coincided with a changing political order whose immediate past had been characterized by internal repression, political persecution, and inhibitions on free speech. In 1966 the *Legon Observer*, a fortnightly journal founded a few months after Nkrumah's overthrow, painted a vivid picture of the political context at the time and advocated an agenda for the oppressed:

We were held captive to a political tyranny which the Ghana army and police coup of 24th February 1966 has now rendered ridiculous and impertinent in retrospect, but which while it lasted made a pathetic spectacle of this country. We looked so bad at the height of the CPP ritual dance that a foreign news magazine described Ghana as a country inhabited by Kwame Nkrumah and seven million cowards. . . .

Among the people most culpable for these conditions were those of us, who for good reasons or bad, could speak out and damn the con-

sequences, but did not. We only stood and waited, though believing quite sincerely that we were in that way also serving. We have learnt by bitter experience that that was not so, and many of us are resolved never again to be caught trying to save the future by sacrificing the present; never again to remain quiet if our liberties are being invaded and curtailed, hoping that somebody else would perform any risky national obligations for us.²⁴

Articulation of Social Injustice

Ampadu's song "Ebi Te Yie" ("Some are favorably positioned"), released during the military regime of the National Liberation Council, highlights social injustice and the suppression of free speech in an imaginary animal world. Below is a summary of the tale:²⁵

There was once a meeting of all animals to discuss the concerns of the animal world. All the animals were present, including Leopard and the orphan Antelope. It so happened that Leopard took a seat directly behind orphan Antelope and started mistreating him. He clawed Antelope's tail to the ground, making it impossible for him to actively participate in the discussion. No sooner would orphan Antelope begin to speak than Leopard would silence him, with the warning that the meeting was not meant for skinny creatures. The mistreatment went on until orphan Antelope could bear it no longer. He plucked up courage and made a loud plea to the presiding chairman. "Petition on the floor, point of order," he said. "Mr. Chairman, secretary, elders here assembled. I move for an immediate adjournment of the meeting, because some of us are not favorably positioned. Some are favorably positioned, others are not." As soon as the meeting saw through the words of orphan Antelope, there was an immediate adjournment.

This tale depicts a world of social injustices under a veneer of peace and political order. Here, the democratic search for consensus within the decision-making process is quietly subverted by the tyrannical impulses of bullies, whose very legitimacy would be threatened by a dispensation of equal rights, democracy, and free speech. It is a world of class distinctions, where might and brute force prevail, the opinion of the deprived is censured, and representative forums are mere tokens. The fragile antelope, already anguished by orphanhood, is brutally suppressed in his attempt to represent the views of the needy. Besides the flushes of suppression and victimization, the tale is also a metacommunicative illustration

of indirection as a safe channel of protest by the politically endangered. Antelope, under constant physical harassment, manages to muster enough courage to cleverly convey his agony without mentioning his tormentor. He avoids open confrontation by seeking the intervention of the fair-minded majority through a protest judiciously constructed with an impersonal pronoun. This strategy is meant to transform a subjective concern into a shared experience. Note also the double entendre in Antelope's lexical depiction of his plight. The verb Ampadu uses, *te yie*, has the advantage of lexical ambiguity. Whereas it literally conveys an unfavorable seating position, it also depicts a world of social deprivation brought about by deviants and bullies who have been enriched (*te yie*) by ill-gotten wealth.

Since the antelope's community appears to be bound by the same cultural rules of indirection, they immediately decode his cryptic tale of agony and adjourn, to the relief of all assembled. The leopard's caution and muscle-flexing were clear signals that the antelope's sorry plight would perhaps have been visited upon the deprived majority. Told in Akan, the story provides tremendous comic relief based on code-switching at the climax, where Antelope's plea is dramatically presented in English, with all the jargon of formal parliamentary discourse.

The drama in this tale is indeed a microcosm of a modern nation-state encumbered with tyranny, oppression, and social inequity. Coming as the song did during a military dictatorship, when there was widespread social injustice and acquisition of ill-gotten wealth in Ghana, its adoption as a mode of political protest by the deprived was natural. Not only was the refrain sung as a form of lampoon; a new textile design instantly named "Ebi Te Yie" became an overnight commercial success. It is no wonder that the song disappeared from the government-controlled air waves soon after it was released. It reappeared after the military regime granted power to civilians. Nearly thirty years after its coinage, the phrase, *ebi te yie*, with all its political connotations, is still widely used in the Akan popular lexicon.

Social Responsibility

Two years after the military government of NLC handed over power to the democratically elected government headed by Dr. K. A. Busia in 1969, the transition from military muscle-flexing to a democratic order was marked by another popular tale composed by Kwame Ampadu, entitled "Article 204" (The Laws of Mmoadoma Kingdom). The tale goes as follows:

Animals in the kingdom passed a law, under Article 204 of their constitution, protecting weaker animals from being victimized by the powerful ones. As a result of this law, all carnivorous animals turned vegetarian. The timid not only started rejoicing, they also took advantage and started teasing the wild animals. One day, as Leopard relaxed under a tree with his mouth wide open, Bat took advantage and flew in and out of Leopard's mouth a couple of times. When Bat entered for the third time, Leopard shut his mouth. Witnessing all that was happening, Antelope reported the incident, and all animals met to deliberate on the matter. The meeting started with a roll call; whereas everybody else responded to their names, Bat did not respond. When Leopard was charged with the responsibility for Bat's disappearance, he denied guilt until he was betrayed by surgery on his entrails. But Leopard defended himself, saying he was fast asleep and was not aware he had swallowed Bat. Leopard's lawyer also argued that Article 204 of the animals' constitution banning meat consumption was no license for the weak to turn the mouths of wild creatures into playgrounds.

This tale, recorded in 1971, is an apparent adjunct to the previous one and signals an improved political order in which animals basically conform to the rule of law in a world of peace. Yet it is the deprived, now enjoying a new lease of freedom, who indulge in acts of provocation and thereby threaten social stability. This story, coinciding with the return of democratic rule in Ghana, lent itself to easy political interpretation at the time. It cautions against the exercise of freedom without responsibility and overtly incorporates elements from the national constitutional agenda. Including in the tale juries, lawyers, and laws based on articles in the constitution (Article 204) signals a political transition to a democratic order, an era governed by the rule of law. Leopard, this time on the side of the law, resorts to victimization not on impulse, but only upon provocation and only after his patience has been stretched to the limit.

Although victimized by Leopard, Bat has only himself to blame for his unnecessary acts of provocation. Significantly, the role of Antelope is transformed from victim in the previous story to witness; the new dispensation of freedom and equal rights emboldens him to openly initiate judicial action without recourse to verbal indirection.

Limits of Power

In a new political era in Ghana, where the military had been withdrawn to the barracks, it took such traditional rhetoric to caution the

civilian government, and Ghanaians in general, against actions that could provide an excuse for the return of the military. Less than a year after the release of this song, the military bounced back. The National Redemption Council took over power in a coup d'état in 1972 and made Lieutenant Colonel (later General) Acheampong head of state. In 1977, Nana Ampadu composed a tale whose release the following year coincided with Acheampong's overthrow in a military palace coup. It was entitled "Obiara Wo Dee Etumi No" (Every power is subject to a superior force). The song consisted of a series of short tales including the following:

Cock embarked on a journey to look for a wife. On his way, he met Fox, who offered to accompany him. Suspicious that Fox would attack him on the way, Cock answered that Dog was among the party and that he was hiding behind a tree. Scared, Fox then said, "Well, if Dog is going with you, I will stay back; you seem to be in good company." . . .

A talkative woman provoked a driver's assistant, who gave her a sound beating at the bus station. The woman reported the case to her husband, who bared his chest and, in a flight of fury, went to the station to fight. "Give way, give way, I will beat up my wife's assailant," he boasted. When the driver's assistant emerged, he happened to be a giant of sorts. Setting eyes on the giant, the "brave" husband recoiled, thanking the giant for trouncing his loquacious wife.

These stories portray a series of potentially explosive situations defused by a tactical, even if humorous and humiliating, retreat of inferior forces. Based on the principle that no man is invincible, those who are aware of the limits of their strength arrange a timely withdrawal to avoid humiliation. The cock, a virile force in his own right, is suspicious of his traditional predator's unusual offer of companionship on a perilous journey. But Fox himself tactically recoils at the announced proximity of a superior predator, Dog. The peace that results from this cloak-and-dagger dialogue can only be said to be tenuous, for social chaos might take over if the weaker animals relax their vigilance.

In the second tale, a major confrontation between two self-assured parties is once again averted by a tactical retreat of the weaker one, but this time only after a woman has been victimized. The husband here acknowledges the relative inferiority of his own strength and thereby avoids public humiliation. But the woman is doubly agonized, not just by physical assault, but by her husband's cowardice in the face of a superior force.

Whereas the stories portray the limitations of self-proclaimed prowess,

they also deride the absurd pretexts to which boastful cowards resort when faced with imminent danger. Arising as these tales did within Ghana's current political context, in which a military leader had been toppled by another soldier, after a series of botched takeover attempts, they appeared to be proverbial capsule versions of contemporary events. Predictably, it was adopted by General Acheampong's opponents as *akutia* (attack by innuendo) against the fallen head of state.

Negligence and Irresponsibility

Since J. J. Rawlings's appearance on the political scene in 1979, his political agenda has been critiqued by at least three sung-tales of Nana Kwame Ampadu. In all cases, though, the master storyteller attributes the outcome to subversive public readings by Rawlings's opponents, since he openly declared his support for Rawlings. Indeed, the witty singer of tales helped to campaign by song and deed for Rawlings's NDC party prior to the democratic elections in 1992 that gave constitutional legitimacy to its political agenda.

In 1982 Rawlings had made a tactical plea to musicians to use their art to mobilize support for his revolution and join in the crusade against greed, corruption, and commercial malpractices. In response, Nana Ampadu released what he considered a promotional song but which he claims was subverted and used for political critique. Its title foreshadowed danger, "Asem Beba Da Bi" (There will be trouble someday). The tale goes as follows:

Tortoise noticed that a raffia palm tree had sprouted at the bank of the river and suggested that all animals should join hands to uproot it, since it might pose a danger in the future. Nobody paid heed to Tortoise. Fish shrugged him off, saying that fishes live in water and have nothing to do with vegetation at the river's bank. Bird declined, with the excuse that birds fly in the sky; Antelope did not cooperate either. Disappointed, Tortoise maintained an embarrassed silence. Later, the raffia palm grew wild and was cut by Man, who constructed a fish trap and left it in the river and also made a bird trap out of it. Bird and Fish were both caught in the traps. A hunting trap made of the wild raffia also entangled Antelope. Tortoise was thereby vindicated, since he had warned of imminent danger.

This tale (reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon proverb "A stitch in time saves nine") demonstrates how a small problem can get out of hand

because of negligence. The Akan would normally advise against “mma mfofo nnane kwaee” (allowing shrubs to become a forest).

The call by Tortoise for an immediate solution could not have been based on selfish interest, since his own crusty exterior insulates him against any prickly plant, and the tortoise is by nature not liable to violent captivity. The Akan say, “Ekaa akyekyedee ne nwa nko ara a nka otuo nnto wo kwaee mu” (If tortoise and snail were the only creatures, there would be no gunshots in the forest). The various creatures that are eventually endangered by their own sloth and negligence display a lack of foresight and maturity, ignoring that a mature raffia palm could be put to uses that may endanger their own lives. As it turns out, the short-sighted animals had wrongly made Tortoise the object of suspicion, forgetting that man’s destructive propensities in his desperate search for survival may endanger their own lives.

This tale, on the one hand, advocates preventive action against social evils – quick redress of problems. Within Ghana’s political circumstances, it would then equate Tortoise with Rawlings (as the singer said he intended) and his wise counsel with Rawlings’s vision of a problematic future if social evils were not immediately arrested. In this case, the victimized animals would represent a cross section of Ghanaians who might ignore the leader’s counsel only to regret it later.

On the other hand, the tale was interpreted by opponents of Rawlings’s regime as signaling his negligence toward the country’s problems and predicting imminent political instability. In this interpretation, metaphorical equivalents are reversed: the wise tortoise is equated with opponents of the regime, advocating the immediate removal of the head of state (the raffia palm tree) who might otherwise pose a bigger problem to Ghanaians. In addition to being evoked in situations of tension and confrontation, the song’s title, “Asem Beba Da Bi” (There will be trouble someday) is occasionally inscribed on placards of activists and opposition groups demonstrating against the Rawlings government.

Political Responsibility

It was not until 1991 that political meaning was widely attributed to another song-tale by Nana Ampadu. If his song composed in the eighties called for the deployment of swift remedies, its sequel in the early nineties, according to folk interpretation, saw the key to sociopolitical order in exemplary behavior on the part of political functionaries. The agent of

the admonition this time was the most renowned trickster in Ghana – Kwaku Ananse, the spider:

When all animals met for elections to executive positions, Pataku the wolf lobbied to be *tankese*, the chief sanitary inspector. Having a hidden agenda, Wolf said he would be responsible for all burials at the cemetery. After each burial, he would then secretly visit the cemetery, exhume the body, and eat it. Kwaku Ananse had seen it all but kept quiet. Soon, Ananse lost his mother and vowed never to allow Wolf to have his own way with the corpse. After the burial, Ananse secretly dug an underground tunnel to his mother's grave and spent the night in the tunnel. As Wolf visited the grave and started digging to exhume the body, the downward thrust of his digging implement made the sound *kukrukukru*. Whenever Ananse heard that noise, he would reply with a metallic jingle: *kikekike*. Hearing this, Wolf concluded it was a ghost and went home in frustration. The next day when he tried *kukrukukru* again, it produced the echo *kikekike*. Wolf reported the matter to the elders, arguing that rituals performed by Ananse on the death of his mother were incomplete and must be done again. It was at this point that Ananse intervened and said there was no need for another round of rituals, adding, proverbially, that “When *kukrukukru* ceases, *kikekike* will also cease.”

The story here draws attention to the inherent challenges of leadership, advocating exemplary behavior in positions of responsibility and pointing out the ripple effect of irresponsible behavior in the high echelons of society. Whereas the previous story highlights the adverse effects of negligence, this one focuses on the causes. Significantly, the social disorder depicted by the tale is not a function of political tyranny, but the by-product of a democratic order, where governance devolves on popular will and personal liberties are not in jeopardy. As exemplified by Wolf, greed often supersedes public interest in the performance of public duties; but one can also blame the relaxation of public vigilance on the cultural symbols of gluttony in the animal world. In appointing Wolf to that position, was the animal world not guided by its typical habits?

Wolf's eventual exposure and public betrayal constitute the ultimate social sanction, but note the wily mechanism the trickster uses to ensnare Wolf. Ananse avoids open apprehension of the culprit as well as responsibility for initiating judicial action. He is not the plaintiff. It is Wolf, the

culprit, who is trapped into the role of plaintiff and ends up as defendant. His move to make Ananse answerable for the spooky graveyard experience redounds on him.

Note also here the significance of the semantic contrast between the two ideophonic expressions, partly based on contrast in vowel quality: the wolf's sound symbolism, *kùkrúkùkrú*, denoting a heavy, immense impact or power; and Ananse's metallic jingle, *kikékiké*, depicting lightweight marginality. The two ideophones, though contrasting in meaning, share the alliterative plosive sound *k* and have similar tone patterns. This tonal parallelism helps to heighten the cause-effect correlation and foregrounds the underlying irony. But one cannot miss the semantic effect of the sound symbolism: the heavy impact of the culprit's tool triggering an echo and cautioning that "there is no smoke without fire."

Significantly, Ananse's echo is not an attempt to replicate Wolf's gluttony; it is only a playful deterrent. As it turns out, the ploy betrays the coward in the predator who, for fear of a vindictive phantom, beats a quick retreat.

Ananse's detached public comment that betrayed Wolf is also reminiscent of the cryptic protest by the orphan Antelope under the intimidating gaze of Leopard. In Ananse's example, though, the proverbial punch line can only be quietly decoded between the speaker and "he whom the cap fits," even though the ironic truth is bound to be public knowledge.

Once again, we witness here the timely deployment of *akutia* innuendo within the confines of the tale itself, recalling another case in Akan traditional lore where the scavenging wolf is proverbially betrayed by a vigilant vulture who, quietly perched on a tree, sees it all. The proverbial refrain of the above tale, "When *kukrukukru* ceases, *kikekike* will also cease," is often used as a political innuendo protesting irresponsible behavior in high places.

However, as the singer himself lamented to me, the original meaning of his song has been subverted for political gains by opponents of the Rawlings government. In his words,

The folk tale was given to me by a friend in the late eighties, and I recorded it mainly because of the rampant grave looting in the country at the time. It was meant to advise against the criminal looting of graves, but its message is so important that I wish it would be played every morning on radio to help eradicate social vices in general, and promote honesty in life. I did not have any political meaning in mind; it is the public's own inscription.

But has the singer of tales himself ever made a conscious effort to compose political songs? Yes, he says, even though the meanings of some may have been “subverted.” To underscore Ampadu’s point, note that he has publicly endorsed President Jerry Rawlings since 1982. In more recent times, the famous singer has appeared on public platforms, rallying rural support for Rawlings in his campaign for constitutional presidency. He explained, “I admire Rawlings very much and would be the last to sing a tale to hurt him. I have admired him since the beginning of the revolution. He is a simple man who likes the rural folk and I like him for that.” Prior to the 1992 elections, Nana Ampadu composed and recorded a promotional song for Rawlings’s National Democratic Congress. “I did it from the bottom of my heart, and it became an overnight hit,” he added.

In 1992 Ampadu released a sung-tale meant to advise and frustrate opponents of Rawlings who were scheming to disqualify him in court as a presidential candidate on the basis of his half-Scottish parentage. Nana Ampadu intervened with a cautionary tale warning that laws deliberately made to create problems for opponents eventually become a burden for all. This was the song entitled “Oda mo do yi oda wo do” (A burden on me is a burden on you):

There lived a king who was very just and very popular among his people. Soon the king’s wife fell seriously ill, and it looked as though she wouldn’t survive. Enemies of the king then took advantage and conspired against him. The kingmakers quickly made a law that husbands would henceforth accompany their dying wives to the grave. The king did not protest; he agreed and signed it into law. Very soon his wife died, and the king was bound to comply with the law. Before departing, however, he shook hands with all the elders, accompanying each handshake with the words, “Oda mo do yi oda wo do” (A burden on me is a burden on you). Puzzled by the words, the elders went into consultation and decided to withdraw the law, since some of their own wives were very prone to illness.

Despite the tale’s apparent meaning, its philosophical refrain, “Oda mo do yi oda wo do,” is now generally sung as a political innuendo, insinuating that government policies perceived to hurt only a segment of the population would eventually be a burden on all, including the policy makers and their party members.

Thus whereas Nana Ampadu’s political stance has been openly declared to be progovernment, his philosophical ideals appear intact. He

may preach the ideals of the president, rally support for his policies, and publicly seek his reelection; but Ampadu remains a philosopher, a visionary with an abiding faith in cultural truths that stand the test of time.

As a sage, he knows the power of folk wisdom, the multiple voices encoded in its messages, its vast potential for bringing deviants into line with social ideals, and its tremendous appeal to the masses. With this knowledge, he has managed somehow to maintain separate private and public identities.

For nearly thirty years, Nana Ampadu's folk wisdom has provided a cultural prism through which the masses interpret and comment on political behavior. His vast resources of tales, proverbs, folk songs, and historical narratives collectively constitute a cultural megaphone by which the powerless exercise "free speech" even under political surveillance. His sung-tales continue to enjoy tremendous airplay; none has recently been censured for political reasons, nor has he himself been reprimanded, despite allegations to the contrary.²⁶

Yet Ampadu's animal world is dynamic and has not been static over the years. Actors have been changed, some renewed with vigor; roles have been shifted, realigned, shaped by the dynamics of the political landscape – from the intimidating glances of ferocious tyrants and bullies, through their domestication, to the haunted premises of a graveyard where the political spider betrays the nocturnal exploits of social deviants. In all cases, however, truth and social ideals have triumphed through the timely replication of time-honored conventions.

Conclusion

As Ampadu told me in a final word, "The hunter's hammock is not the monopoly of the antelope, it's for the smaller species too." The above proverb is itself a philosophical capsule of the intrinsic mechanisms undergirding the potency of the sung-tale metaphor as a form of popular cultural production: the hunter's hammock, like popular culture itself, subsists on fluidity, multiple uses, and applications. Its power revolves partly on its rustic appeal, but also on a flexible scope of application that defies time and space and facilitates constant reproduction to meet new challenges. Like the oral poetry of Sotho migrant workers, the sung-tale metaphor has helped to define new realities, formulate new images,²⁷ and articulate class-based contradictions that threaten social stability.

Thus *akutia*, as cultural production, does not emerge in a social vacuum; it is attuned to addressing the complexities of social experience,

even as it constitutes a rallying point for the celebration of sociopolitical identities and the articulation of the *vox populi*. The sung-tale metaphor sustains and empowers the silent majority, who see this medium of popular culture as the only weapon by which to articulate their political consciousness and seek to gain empowerment.

5

Using Afrikan Proverbs to Provide an Afrikan-Centered Narrative for Contemporary Afrikan-American Parental Values

HUBERTA JACKSON-LOWMAN

Proverbs are the daughters of experience.

Proverbs contain the narrative wisdom of the people from whom they are derived. Stored within them are truth, wisdom, experiences, values, customs, and traditions. Their high status as cultural retainers is illustrated in the number of proverbs about proverbs among diverse cultural groups such as the Yoruba, Igbo, Kongo, English, and Arabic-, Spanish-, Japanese-, Persian-, and Turkish-speaking peoples.¹ By examining proverbs we can perhaps begin to understand the consciousness of the foreparents of Afrikan and Afrikan diasporan people and gain insight into their values and world view.² For Afrikan Americans, this task is extremely important in that it provides an understanding of the world view held by their ancestors. Certainly, with some modification, Afrikan Americans have passed down from generation to generation the values, folk tales, dances, music, and language patterns of these ancestors.³ As an Afrikan people, blacks in the United States have also been inordinately influenced by the values, traditions, customs, and rituals of our oppressors, which in many instances has resulted in the alteration of core Afrikan-centered values.⁴

This chapter explores the relevance of selected Afrikan proverbs as a standard for the redevelopment of an Afrikan-centered context for parenting. Increasingly, Afrikan-American parents are experiencing the same difficulties in child rearing as those faced by European Americans, including lack of respect for elders, self-centeredness, and excessive materialism among their children, for example. These difficulties in parenting can be traced in large part to the infusion of Western values often

expressed in the music of black popular culture and internalized by both Afrikan-American adults and youth. One remedy offered by a growing number of theorists and researchers derives from Africentric ideology and espouses the return to an Afrikan-centered world view for Afrikan-descended people.⁵

Karenga, Asante, Myers, Nobles, Kambon, and other Africentric theorists and researchers have played significant roles in developing Afrikan-centered philosophical and theoretical frameworks that can guide research relevant to Afrikan peoples. Their work exemplifies a commitment to the Afrikanization of the social context in which Afrikan Americans exist. This study, a preliminary investigation, continues in this vein, offering an Afrikan-centered context for values expressed by Afrikan-American parents. My intention is to reconnect Afrikan narrative, in the form of proverbs, to the values of Afrikan-American parents by analyzing empirical data validating the effectiveness of Afrikan proverbs selected for use in this study.

There has been very little investigation of the relationship between contemporary Afrikan-American parental values and ancient and contemporary Afrikan proverbs. An exception is an innovative study of the transmission of values by Afrikan-American mothers to their daughters that documents the importance of proverbs in this process.⁶ Page and Washington demonstrated at statistically significant levels the role of proverbs in the transmission of instrumental and terminal values and in relation to a daughter's declared intention to pass on a proverb to her children. Another study, by McAdoo and Rukuni, applies the work of Page and Washington to women of Zimbabwe and provides further evidence of the integral role played by proverbs in the transmission of values.⁷

The above studies aside, the investigation of proverbs as purveyors of values in Afrikan-American families has been neglected in Western literature about child development, family, and social psychology. The findings presented here not only attempt to rectify this omission but also, more specifically, strive to augment the growing body of Africentric scholarship and to render it more accessible to those who inhabit the world of black popular culture.

Africentric Ideology

In contrast to the materialistic values of Western society, Africentric ideology expands the vision of what humanity is, redirects our atten-

tion to the relationships between humanity, nature, and the divine, and explicitly acknowledges that our lives have a purpose beyond material acquisition.

Three key assumptions fundamental to Africentric ideology, and particularly the reconstructivist tradition, underlie this effort to clarify and exploit the links between contemporary Afrikan-American parenting values and Afrikan proverbs. First, the reconstructivist tradition assumes that Afrikan-American culture, having been altered by European oppression and exploitation, must be reestablished in order to “release its liberatory and transformative potential.”⁸ Social movements such as the 1920s Harlem Renaissance and the Garvey Movement, the emergence of the Nation of Islam in the 1930s, and the Black Consciousness and Black Arts Movements of the 1960s and 1970s represent this tradition.

The second reconstructivist assumption asserts the presence of a homogeneous belief system undergirding heterogeneous forms of Afrikan cultural expression. Many studies of the cultures of Afrikan people support the existence of underlying commonalities in philosophical and religious systems, linguistic patterns, and social structures across various cultural groups.⁹ Though the rituals, customs, and traditions of Afrikan ethnic groups differ, their fundamental commitment to a value system that prioritizes spirituality expressed through reverence for ancestors and recognition of divinity in nature, along with communal life styles and a deep respect for elders, are readily discernible in the vast majority of indigenous Afrikan cultures.

Last, the presence of an intergenerational transmission process that survived the traumatic imposition of the *Maafa* (death and destruction beyond human convention) is assumed. Though this process has been uneven and is manifested differently among individual Afrikan-Americans and their families, its transmission has nevertheless been documented by scholars such as Blassingame and Courlander and through cultural media such as folk tales, legends, proverbs, songs, and musical instruments.¹⁰ A significant example is provided by Voss, who examines the role of enslaved Afrikans originating from the Bantu language groups whose influence on American society resulted in identifiable place names of Bantu origin, the preservation of Bantu linguistic characteristics in songs and folklore, and words derived from Bantu languages in American dictionaries.¹¹ Thus, Afrikan-American parents, certainly to varying degrees, have woven together their memories of their Afrikan cultural experiences as these were transmitted in the language, stories, sayings, and music of their foreparents. In the process, core values have been accentuated and

sometimes modified; at other times, new ones have been assimilated; but the transmission of cultural knowledge has continued nonetheless across time and space.

The Role of Proverbs

For indigenous Afrikan peoples, proverbs are the mainstay of life.¹² They are integral to every aspect of life from everyday informal social interactions to formal, legal, and ritual practices related to life transitions. Proverbs, for example, are used in ceremonies associated with naming, rites of passage, marriage, “eldership,” and death. Arewa and Dundes indicate that knowledge of proverbs, and (more important) how to apply them, is as fundamental to Afrikan legal debate as knowledge of legal precedents is to European jurisprudence.¹³

Additionally, in her study of Igbo “quoting behavior,” Penfield lists five functional properties of proverb use. These are depersonalization, which allows the speaker to bring out a very sensitive matter in a nondefinite or abstract manner, thereby absolving the speaker from personal responsibility for his or her statements; foregrounding, which places the proverb in a context; authoritativeness, which derives from community acceptance and/or attribution to a local “expert” or ancestor; reference to social norms and values; and prestige, which endows the user with “skillfulness in the language and ways of the culture.”¹⁴

Proverbs also embody the history and language of a people, “the virtues most admired, and the vices most despised.”¹⁵ They are rich in those nuances that distinguish one cultural group from another, and therefore their interpretations may not be quickly discerned by those from another cultural group or with a different world view. In proverbs, those unique qualities that define and describe cultural identity and authenticity are vividly revealed.

My conversations with several Afrikan-born residents of America, from a variety of ethnic cultures, consistently reveal that the use of proverbs is a regular component of communication with one’s elders. In proverb use, the listener (including a child) is often left to decipher the meaning of the proverb. One student who has lived in America for an extended period stated that her father assesses her cultural connectedness by her ability to understand the significance of proverbs derived from their ethnic group.

As Western influences impinge on Afrikan people, familiarity with native proverbs declines. Rattray, in his 1916 work on Ashanti proverbs,

noted that some of the sayings known to older Asante men and women were “strange or unknown among the young and civilized community.”¹⁶ When proverbs – often so intimately intertwined with the history and customs of a particular people that they are almost incomprehensible to those outside the group – are forgotten, a vital narrative of a people that was expressed in their language is erased and the result is often the loss of cultural identity. This idea is articulated in an Afrikan proverb of unknown origin, “To forget is the same as to throw away.” Ultimately, this “forgetting” leads to a diminished appreciation of the strengths, wisdom, and philosophy of Afrikans as a whole.

The enslavement and colonization of Afrikan people – a monumental upheaval that signaled the beginning of our *Maafa*, a disaster beyond comprehension – ruptured the spirits of Afrikan peoples physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially, and triggered the beginning of a collective forgetting.¹⁷

Afrikan-American Parental Values

The work of Jerome Taylor and other scholars formerly affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute for the Black Family (IBF), a research unit with applied community service programs in day care, teen parenting, substance abuse, Afrikan spirituality, and cultural values directly affecting the lived experience of “everyday” black people, affirms the centrality of values in the hopes and dreams that parents express for their children.¹⁸ Taylor and his colleagues have derived seven values from this research.¹⁹ In structured interviews with both black and white middle- and low-income parents, 80 to 90 percent of their responses to questions about what they want for their children could be classified within these seven value categories. These are:

Love and Respect: I want my child to *love and be loved, to be obedient to me and cooperative with others* having their best interests in mind, to *respect* my decisions, to be *open to constructive advice and assistance* during times of trouble.

Interpersonal Skills: I want my child to *be honest* in dealing with her feelings and those of others, to *be able to see others as they really are*, to *be effective in dealing with others*, and to *be capable of leading others*.

Learning Orientation: I want my child to *be savvy, a good thinker and a good learner, to be sharp, smart*.

Self-Confidence: I want my child to be eager to tackle new tasks, explore new places, meet new people, to be daring in constructive ways, to have excitement about living.

Self-Persistence: I want my child to be able to stick with a task until it's finished, to be able to stand in a storm, to be able to hang in there when the going gets tough and not give up.

Self-Esteem: I want my child to feel good about self, to feel beautiful inside, to enjoy who s/he is, to be proud of her/his heritage.

Self-Reliance: I want my child to be able to think and act alone when necessary; when appropriate I want my child to be able to say "no" when everybody else is saying "yes," or to say "yes" when everybody else is saying "no."²⁰

Although *Love and Respect* and *Interpersonal Skills* were identified as separate values, Taylor and colleagues have combined them into a single overarching category, *Love and Respect*, because of the difficulty in separating them statistically.²¹

From these six values has emerged the Institute for the Black Family's "Values for Life" model, crafted to enhance parents' and caregivers' ability to instill values that they desire in their children and to create environments that support, reinforce, and sustain them. The efficacy of these values in promoting excellence and resilience has been examined and upheld in seven preschool settings that range from day care, drop-in, and Head Start centers, to the home, as well as in a variety of other settings.²² A values-based education curriculum designed for educators working with children from birth to five years of age has demonstrated effectiveness in facilitating all of the valued child outcomes with the exception of *Self-Persistence*.²³

Despite parents' deep commitment to these values and a desire to transmit them to their children, they do not always know what kinds of behavior from caregivers are most effective and what strategies are most efficient; and they are not always able to manage the variety of environments that affect child socialization.²⁴ To this end, Jerome Taylor and associates have delineated methods for enhancing commitment to values across the following three ecosystems: microsystemic (within families), mesosystemic (in schools, churches, and other community organizations), and exosystemic (in public institutions).

The intervention strategies presented in relation to the microsystemic and mesosystemic arenas are directly pertinent to this research. One "cumulative teaching" strategy recommended to parents is "enrichment,"

defined as “systematic exposure to and discussion of proverbs, precepts, folk tales, games, and songs of constructive relevance to target values.”²⁵ However, many people may have only limited ability to draw upon proverbs, precepts, and folk tales (in particular), because of the ongoing impact of the historical trauma of Afrikan enslavement, disruption of families due to events such as migration to the North, resulting in the loss of southern-based cultural knowledge, and the infusion of a Western-Eurocentric world view and values into Afrikan-American communities. The last in particular has systematically eroded appreciation for Afrikan-centered narratives, replacing them with modern, technologically oriented Western narratives that devalue the past, people of color, and children. Consequently, without this cultural grounding, values that Afrikan-American parents say they want to instill in their children must, of necessity, be pursued in the context of a Western-Eurocentric world view that many Africentric scholars have deemed intrinsically destructive to the psyche of Afrikan people.²⁶ Of relevance here is scholarly evidence that “Values for Life” promotes resilience in children.²⁷ Resilient qualities include achieving higher IQ scores and having greater academic success than less resilient peers.²⁸ While these qualities appear desirable, resiliency models are rooted in “survival-of-the-fittest,” individualistic thinking that assumes scarcity of resources as the basic human condition. The suggestion here is that cultural context determines the meaning and expression of values. If these or any other values are to be collectively beneficial to Afrikan people, then they will be rooted in a world view that is life-affirming and facilitates harmony and balance.

Research Questions

The following discussion undertakes a preliminary exploration of the six value categories espoused by Afrikan-American parents, as outlined above, to ground them in an Afrikan-centered world view by identifying Afrikan proverbs that complement and support them. Four questions guided this phase of my study: (1) To what extent are the six values espoused by Afrikan-American parents in the studies undertaken by the Institute for the Black Family consensually validated in the content of Afrikan proverbs? (2) If they are present, how are these six values expressed in Afrikan proverbs? (3) What are the similarities and differences between the world view underlying these six values and the world view expressed in the Afrikan proverbs associated with these values? (4) What are the implications for the socialization of Afrikan-

American children that can be derived from the content and values encoded in Afrikan proverbs?

Methodology

PARTICIPANTS

A set of raters, composed of five Afrikan-American women who had been employed by the Institute for the Black Family (IBF) for periods of time ranging from less than one year to twenty-two years, were requested to evaluate the sample of Afrikan proverbs used in this study. All raters were familiar with IBF's "Values for Life" model. Their familiarity ranged from didactic and observational knowledge of the values to actual experience in applying the model.

INSTRUMENT

An inventory of Afrikan proverbs, which consisted of 153 proverbs, was developed by the researcher and presented to the raters in random order. All regions of the Afrikan continent were represented in the sample of proverbs: eastern, western, southern, northern, and central. Inconsistencies in attribution were found in many of the sources I consulted when compiling the proverbs (some cited nations, some specific ethnic groups within nations, some neither). For this reason, twelve proverbs were identified as "Swahili" without being attributed to a particular country or ethnic group. I assume, however, that these proverbs would be representative of a number of East Afrikan populations since Kiswahili/"Swahili" evolved over an extended period as a language used primarily in trade among Arabic and coastal East Afrikan peoples. For similar reasons, I identified twenty-five proverbs as simply "Afrikan" without reference to a geographical area or ethnic group. The inventory provides six categories of assignment reflecting the six values for life, plus a seventh category for proverbs deemed inapplicable to any of the values in question.

PROCEDURE

Collections of Afrikan proverbs by Leslau and Leslau, Knappert, and Zona served as the primary sources.²⁹ Additionally, I collected proverbs from various other works, thus expanding this database. I first screened 2,300 proverbs to determine whether they fit any of the definitional criteria described within each of the values. If a given proverb addressed at least one component of the value category, it met the definitional criteria and was included in the sample; if not, the proverb was rejected.

In the definitions of the values presented earlier, the highlighted phrases guided the identification of subclassifications within each value group. For example, the Akan proverb, "It is a bad child who does not take advice," might be assigned to the value category *Love and Respect* exemplifying "openness to constructive advice and assistance"; while the Dama proverb, "You do not know that you love your parents until they die," might also be classified under *Love and Respect* but associated with "to love and be loved." Proverbs that generally reflected one of the six values but did not seem to address an identified subgroup, were also included in the analysis and assigned to the subcategory *Other*.

In selecting proverbs for the value categories *Self-Confidence*, *Self-Persistence*, *Self-Esteem*, and *Self-Reliance*, the researcher suppressed the centrality of the focus on self as expressed in these definitions. This approach was designed to account for the differences between Western society, in which self is emphasized, and many Afrikan societies, in which it is not. In spite of the deemphasis on self in these value labels, the definitions were not altered.

After selecting 138 proverbs that were deemed appropriate to my research objectives (a mere 6 percent of the total) and identifying 15 unrelated proverbs (those which did not represent any of the six values), I presented the resulting set of 153 proverbs to the five raters in random order. The raters were then asked to assign each proverb to an appropriate value, as defined above. Proverbs could be assigned to one value only.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

A proverb was considered to represent a particular value if three of the five raters, or 60 percent, agreed that it did. Others were rejected. Once the proverbs were categorized, the researcher sought to clarify the themes that were most prevalent in the proverbs assigned to each value. The intent was to determine the range of applicability of the proverbs and their usefulness in expanding upon the existing definition and description of each value. My analysis includes an examination of the areas of Afrika or Afrikan ethnic groups represented by the proverbs associated with each value.

Findings

REPRESENTATION AND FREQUENCY OF PROVERBS

Of the 153 proverbs, the panel of five raters reached a consensus on 130. Over one-third of the total were associated with *Love and Respect*. Some examples of proverbs associated with this value are:

Hold a true friend with both thy hands. (Kanuri)

Respect the elders; they are our fathers. (Yoruba)

Do not beat the mother if you love the child. (Tetela)

The mean rate of agreement on proverbs assigned to *Love and Respect* was 87.5 percent. Associated with this value were proverbs from eight different ethnic groups within eleven nations representing all areas of the continent except northern Afrika.

In second place were proverbs upholding the value of *Learning Orientation*. More than one-fifth of the proverbs were associated with this value, with 88 percent agreement among raters. Proverbs associated with this value were attributable to several ethnic groups and ten Afrikan nations representing all regions of the continent. Proverbs reflecting this value included:

Instruction in youth is like engraving in stone. (Berber)

Wisdom is not like money to be tied up and hidden. (Akan)

No one is without knowledge except he who asks no questions.
(Fulfulde)

Thirteen percent of the identified proverbs were associated with the value *Self-Persistence*. The mean level of agreement among raters was the same as for the first two, 87 percent. This value was identified among the proverbs of six ethnic groups within ten Afrikan countries. With one exception, Swahili, all the proverbs associated with this value were drawn from West Afrikan countries. Some examples are:

Slowly, slowly the turtle arrives. (Swahili)

The one in front has arrived, the one behind has only heard about it:

Go on trying. (Hausa)

The moon moves slowly but it crosses the town. (Akan)

For the next two values – *Self-Reliance* and *Self-Esteem* – both the frequency of representation and level of agreement declined. *Self-Reliance* was found to be reflected in nearly 10 percent of the selected proverbs, while *Self-Esteem* was associated with slightly less than 7 percent. The mean level of agreement among the raters fell to 78.7 percent and 76 percent, respectively. Proverbs reflecting the value of *Self-Reliance* were derived from various ethnic groups and ten Afrikan countries from all regions of the continent. The following are representative:

One who cooks his own food does not beg. (Kikuyu)

If you do not help yourself, you will soon be dead. (Shona)

Borrowing brings you poverty. (Tetela)

The proverbs of selected ethnic groups from seven Afrikan nations located in the eastern, western, and southern regions of Afrika were identified as relevant to the value *Self-Esteem*. The following are representative of these proverbs:

If you like yourself, people will like you. (Ewe)

He who hates, hates himself. (Xhosa)

The tree may float for years in the river, but it will never become a crocodile. (Bambara)

Finally, the value of *Self-Confidence* was identified as being almost absent among the selected proverbs. Only one proverb was assigned to this value category – “Strategy is better than strength” (Hausa). The mean level of agreement among the raters fell to 60 percent for this single proverb.

Thus, it was possible to identify five of the six values identified by the Institute for the Black Family in this admittedly small subset of nonrandomly selected Afrikan proverbs. As stated previously, the category of *Not applicable* was included for proverbs that did not adequately reflect the content of any of the six values; however, only 3.2 percent were assigned to it. A minimum level of agreement of 60 percent was required to assign a proverb to this category. A total of 12.3 percent were assigned to a newly created category, *Rejects*, because raters did not agree at the minimum level of 60 percent.

To summarize, the value of *Love and Respect* was most frequently and consistently recognized as being reflected in the selected proverbs, followed by *Learning Orientation*. Over 50 percent of the proverbs were assigned to these two categories. Though with less frequency, the values of *Self-Persistence* and *Self-Reliance* were also found to be significant, with 20 percent of the proverbs reflecting these values. The values of *Self-Esteem* and *Self-Confidence* were least often reflected in the 153 proverbs under study.

Analysis of Themes Expressed in Selected Proverbs

The extent of representation of the value of *Love and Respect* among the Afrikan proverbs suggests the significance of interconnectedness among Afrikan peoples of varying ethnicities and locations. Virtually every aspect of human social relations is addressed in the selected proverbs, the most salient being helpfulness, courtesy, giving, listening, interdependence, communication, kinship, friendship, and respect for elders

and parents. The Kanuri proverb, “Hold a true friend with both thy hands,” stresses friendship, love, caring, tenderness, and protecting those you love. In the Yoruba proverb, “Respect the elders; they are our fathers,” not only are we reminded of the importance of elders, but we are given a lesson on the significance of intergenerational connectedness. The theme of interconnectedness is stressed again in the Tetela proverb, “Do not beat the mother if you love the child.” Here themes of love and respect are paired with the recognition that when pain is inflicted on a loved one, not only does the harmed person suffer but also those who are connected to that person.

Many of the proverbs assigned to the value of *Learning Orientation* place emphasis on spirituality. Two examples are found: a Swahili proverb, “Without knowledge, if we were not taught, we would be like wild animals,” and an Akan proverb, “Wisdom is not like money to be tied up and hidden.” In the latter proverb, the theme of interconnecting resonates. Learning in its most evolved state becomes wisdom and, as this proverb suggests, wisdom must be shared. These proverbs exhort the vast, invaluable, dynamic, and constant nature of learning and associate the outcome of learning with wisdom, which is highly prized among Afrikan people, as revealed in the proverbs themselves.

Qualities of patience, commitment, focus, and accepting the natural rhythm – the pace – of life are extolled in many of the proverbs associated with *Self-Persistence*. The Akan proverb, “The moon moves slowly, but it crosses the town,” the Fulfulde proverb, “Going slowly does not stop one from arriving,” and the Swahili proverb, “Slowly, slowly the turtle arrives,” all demonstrate these qualities. The themes and qualities implied in these proverbs go beyond the definition suggested for *Self-Persistence*. The emphasis is not simply on completing a task, enduring travail, and overcoming obstacles, but on accepting the process involved in goal attainment as an evolving, ongoing one that need not be hastened to achieve the desired end. A preference for a life-pace that is in harmony with nature’s ebb and flow is suggested by the wisdom contained in these proverbs. In addition, the focus in these proverbs is not on an idea of self in the individualistic, Western sense of the term. The entreaty is not for one to prevail over one’s circumstances or over the physical universe as a Western perspective might imply, but to operate in harmony with the rhythms of nature that will ultimately assure the attainment of the desired outcome.

Though with less frequency, the value of *Self-Reliance* was identified among the proverbs. Within the context of communalistic settings, Afri-

kan people recognize the importance of standing on one's own feet, of being prepared to take responsibility for one's life; and this is encouraged as a necessary part of development, a quality expected of each member of the community. Illustrative of this perspective are the proverbs: "A man's legs are his brother and sister: On what else can he rely?" (Yoruba) and "One who cooks his own food does not beg" (Kikuyu).

An emphasis on character development is also an underlying theme of the proverbs associated with *Self-Reliance*; thus, no confusion between interdependence and dependence emerges when self-reliance is adequately developed. The opposite of self-reliance, or dependence, is viewed as a delimiting condition that prevents one from achieving one's potential, as admonished by the Tetela proverb, "Borrowing brings you poverty." The proverbs associated with *Self-Reliance* offer many of the clearest pronouncements of the expectations and responsibilities of individuals within their families and communities.

In approximately half of the few proverbs that were associated with *Self-Esteem*, issues of identity and authenticity are prominent. The Bambara proverb, "The tree may float for years in the river, but it will never become a crocodile," and the Kikuyu proverb, "Nobody walks with another man's gait," illustrate the importance of identity (recognizing who you are) and authenticity (being who you are) for many Afrikan people. Proverbs asserting the need to know and accept oneself appeared to take precedence over those that advocate merely feeling good about oneself.

A second set of proverbs did, however, generally address individually held attitudes about self or individual productions. The Congolese proverb, "Every bird thinks its nest is the best," and the Ewe proverb, "If you like yourself, people will like you," illustrate this variation on themes related to the idea of the self. These proverbs, however, do not exhort the importance of liking oneself as much as they appear to emphasize the taken-for-grantedness of feelings of self-worth, the relationship between one's attitude toward oneself and the attitude of others (again, a reflection of a generally communal orientation within Afrikan societies), and the impact of one's attitudes and emotions on self-perception, as suggested by the Xhosa proverb, "He who hates, hates himself."

Discussion

As an exploratory study, this preliminary content analysis of selected Afrikan proverbs lays the groundwork for much more comprehensive and extensive research into the significance of proverbs as a tool of socializa-

tion and a reflection of world view. Several limitations must be acknowledged, however. First, only a small sample of the actual proverbs that exist among the diverse cultures of the Afrikan continent were examined. Although this study is not concerned with how often these values were represented in the content of Afrikan proverbs, it argues for the presence of these values within this small subset of proverbs. A further limitation of this study is that it uses a relatively homogeneous and self-selected group of raters – all of the same gender and from the same organization. A third limitation concerns the authenticity of the proverbs. Only English translations of the proverbs were provided in the sources used in this study.

Despite these limitations, a number of useful and provocative implications emerge for future research. Further investigation of Afrikan proverbs can lead to an understanding of the degree of retention of an Afrikan world view with respect to the six values identified in the research undertaken by the Institute for the Black Family (IBF) and has importance for extending the IBF's "Values for Life" model. Finally, the findings can provide insight into Afrikan-centered socialization strategies and their potential application in the socialization of Afrikan-American children.

Revisiting the signifiante of world view, the prominent emphasis on self in four of the six values expressed by parents in IBF research studies strikingly contrasts with its relative lack of centrality in the sample of Afrikan proverbs used in this study. Little evidence of a need to assert the value of self is reflected in the proverbs. Furthermore, two of the six values – *Self-Esteem* and *Self-Confidence* – were practically nonexistent in this subset of proverbs. The relative absence of these values may shed light on the impact of racism and oppression on Afrikan Americans. Their absence may also reflect deeply embedded cultural distinctions between Western-Eurocentric and Afrikan world views.

At the level of application, the use of proverbs in the socialization process of children has a number of very practical implications. The findings presented in this study suggest that proverbs are being used with much less frequency by younger parents in child rearing. As a socialization tool, proverbs can be extremely effective as a means of enforcing discipline. They provide a hands-on and easily implemented way to transmit values that often are ignored or disregarded by Afrikan-American children because of the inadequate strategies used to transmit them. Proverbs are imbued with multiple meanings that simultaneously affect the speaker and the listener. While they can foster critical thinking and

analytical skills on the part of the listener, they can also stimulate dialogue and debate because they are also open to subjective and idiosyncratic interpretations. The fact that raters often disagreed on the proverbs' meaning – some proverbs generated agreement of less than 60 percent – may be more indicative of this multilayered quality of proverbs than of the unreliability of the raters. This quality makes proverbs ideal for fostering the value of *Learning Orientation* by encouraging children to think and to analyze. Furthermore, the use of proverbs helps to refocus attention by facilitating a shift from a personal disciplinary situation that may be fraught with conflict to an impersonal, more objective, and higher source of truth.³⁰ For the attentive listener, this approach can contribute to prosocial behavior.

Another potential benefit of using proverbs is that they can empower children and youth to make healthy decisions. If children are given proverbs containing wisdom and knowledge about experiences they may not yet have actually experienced, they can possibly draw upon and apply that wisdom when they encounter unfamiliar and difficult situations. Interaction between adults and children is a critical component for developing this skill, for it is typically adults who must transmit the proverb to children so that they can draw upon this resource at some future point. The act of sharing a proverb with a child is an enactment of the value of *Love and Respect*. Infusing parenting programs with cultural strategies that restore Afrikan Americans' link to this body of ancestral wisdom as represented by proverbs, folk tales, and other cultural resources is therefore an essential next step.

Having access to a repertoire of useful proverbs could also be a deterrent to destructive, denigrating, and abusive communications that diminish the child's sense of worth and value, or *Self-Esteem*, as defined in the "Values for Life" model. The narrative of Afrikan people living in America was broken during our enslavement. It has been replaced all too often with a narrative of oppression and abuse, while the narrative of our resistance to oppression and abuse is rarely emphasized. The former, as it is typically told, perpetuates oppression by utilizing the language and images of the oppressor expressed in racist stereotyping of Afrikan people – as mentally defective and physically gifted.³¹ By reintegrating the proverbs from our larger cultural ancestry, we can begin to reconstruct a narrative based upon Afrikan experience and wisdom. Proper relationships between parents and children, between elders and youth, between actions and consequences, along with values and traditions, are embedded in these wise sayings. To offer a proverb to a child

whose behavior is unacceptable may be far more instructive, helpful, and esteem-preserving than either a lecture or, most certainly, a curse uttered in anger.

A further potential use of proverbs in contemporary North America is in the area of conflict resolution. Developing songs, poems, and raps, as well as identifying fables and stories based upon proverbs and making proverbs a prominent part of the educational process could potentially equip youth as well as adults with nonviolent ways to resolve their differences. Reclaiming the practice of Afrikan oral tradition as a strategy for managing conflict would be of great use under the social conditions currently found in many urban Afrikan-American communities.

To conclude, this study supports the possibility of reintegrating an Afrikan narrative with Afrikan-American parental values through the use of proverbs. Though some criticism can potentially be levied at the legitimacy of interweaving Afrikan proverbs with Afrikan-American parental values, given the vast differences in contexts, such a proactive step is a necessary effort to reconstruct that which we have lost and that which is deemed of considerable value among large numbers of people in the Afrikan diaspora. Proverbs contain a wealth of concise and readily transmitted information and wisdom. They also embody a philosophy that is life-affirming rather than life-negating. The adoption of a Western-Eurocentric world view by many Afrikan Americans has had deleterious effects on attitudes about self, relationships with one another, with nature, and with the Divine. By becoming centered in an Afrikan world view that asserts our intrinsic self-worth and humanistic values, we can avoid the traps of a Western-Eurocentric world view that associates human worth and value with occupations, job titles, money, and arbitrary social status. By contextualizing contemporary parental values through the use of Afrikan proverbs, Afrikan Americans and other diasporan peoples have at hand the tools for facilitating a liberation from self-negation and group negation rather than fostering the individual well-being of a select few.



6

The Frustrated Project of Soul in the Drama of Ed Bullins

NATHAN L. GRANT

For more than a decade during the sixties and seventies, the turbulent drama of Ed Bullins reigned in the off-Broadway theater. The “theater of experience,” which Bullins helped create and in which he participated, cast blacks in the reality of the urban ghetto. Bullins’s aim was to deliver to a black audience a representation of their true selves, blackness “as it really is,” in spite of contrary demands made by more vocal black and white publics who sought to marginalize Bullins’s intended audience. By unmasking this reality, black audiences would engage in a kind of “mirror stage” appraisal of the black self, the appreciation of which might awaken the consciousness of African Americans.

In 1973, Bullins commented on the connection between drama and the growing political consciousness of the black community:

A segment of the Black youth movement . . . identified themselves with some species of Black Revolutionary Nationalism. A handful of these “revolutionaries” evolved into what can best be described as *Black artists*, using the tired and wasted Western theater form as a medium to effect the most profound changes in Black people here in America, that process termed “altering consciousness,” at the same time revitalizing the form aesthetically and literally by attacking the intellectual and ideological premises of Western civilization. Their models for future Black conceptualization . . . brought about a confrontation with reality that developed into what is now known as *Black theater*.¹

The plays — spare, yet tortured statements on the black experience — are peopled with types that barely approximate the traditional, expected resolutions of self-realization or existential triumph. These elements

would only serve to mar what Bullins calls his “natural” style, which – though all of these traditional elements are here in place – is not to be confused with the naturalistic style of drama. This natural style, suggests Bullins, is best for presenting the reality of urban black folk across these United States and for delivering to black audiences reflections of their own selves² – aspects of being that have their broadest and most enduring expression within the context of soul, the period’s pervasive cultural characteristic.

Simply put, *soul* is an attitude of black life unique to the period in which the black theater movement and black aesthetic movement were at their zenith. These movements grew with and were supported by the sensibility of soul, in which the “baddest” character of either the street or the stage “walked the walk” while “talking the talk.” Soul was newly black and newly bold, reflecting the dissent of men and women in Harlem, Watts, Newark, and Chicago’s South Side. It was all defiance, tethered aggression, and vernacular as a lived and living experience. In his important book *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), himself a crucial influence in the development of Bullins’s drama, traces soul along its musical roots as it emerged from the hard-bop style of jazz and replaced *cool* as an attribute or style of jazz expression. Baraka informs us that for black musicians soul music represents a “return to the roots,” or at least a reevaluation of those roots. Cool, through the 1940s and 1950s, redefined the response of black jazz musicians to social alienation wherein a reserve and unflappability were the strict rules of life. Through the sixties, however, in the midst of the tempest that was the civil rights movement, the progression from cool to soul was an important, even necessary shift. It marked “a form of social aggression,” Baraka writes. “It is an attempt to place upon a ‘meaningless’ social order, an order that would give value to terms of existence that were once considered not only valueless but shameful. *Cool* meant nonparticipation; *soul* means a new establishment.”³

For Geneviève Fabre, while the blues “arises from a sense of loneliness in search of community, soul proceeds from a communal spirit and explores the cohesiveness of a group in spite of the isolation of its members.” It becomes evident, Fabre writes, “why a militant perspective often judges the idea of soul to be more effective than the spirit of the blues: it is more of a mobilizer since it creates a climate of confidence and fellowship and recognizes a control over destiny.”⁴

Soul would become an important ingredient of other contemporary arts; inevitably it would become a part of the stage. Bullins’s own statement on the goals of street theater (the species of agitprop theater that

shortly matured into the theater of experience) informs us exactly as to what kind of drama we should be prepared to witness. Street theater is “a skit, morality or political farce or black ‘commercial’ that subliminally broadcasts blackness”; its aim is to communicate “with diverse classes of people, the Black working class, or with special groups (e.g., winos, pool hall brothers, prostitutes, pimps, hypes, etc.) who would not ordinarily come or be drawn into the theatre.”⁵

The play that would best meet the objective of attracting these classes would itself have a message that was gritty and hard-hitting; “short, sharp, incisive plays,” counsels Bullins, are best for conveying blackness to itself. The content of such a body of theater would include

satirical pieces on current counterrevolutionary figures or enemies of the people, humorous themes, also children’s plays with revolutionary lessons are good street play material. Also, startling, unique material, something that gives the masses identifying images, symbols and challenging situations. Each individual in the crowd should have his sense of reality confronted, his consciousness assaulted.⁶

The crucial linkage between this formula for agitprop theater and the theater of experience is the importance of the realization and the fulfillment of black history, presence, and destiny for its audience. Both forms proceed from the premise that the reality of the diaspora has separated people of African descent from the cultural, and thus spiritual, sources of renewal – that diasporan Africans are thus denied the resources to which all cultures justly lay claim. “Challenging situations” intended to assault consciousness and the necessity for a children’s theater with “revolutionary lessons” are fashioned for a people divorced from even their own awareness of cultural and political right. Soul, then, as a means to a projection of a personalized defiance, is a necessary adjunct to this mode of theater, for it is uniquely qualified to do precisely what Fabre intimates: to recognize a control over one’s own destiny.

It seems reasonable to reflect, however, on whether the theater of experience, unalterably a theater of defiance – of black difference embraced and practiced by those who have always lived it – is a sufficient impetus toward a consciousness prepared to embrace cultural revolution. The exigencies of such a revolution are, finally, such that no one, neither its soldiers nor its poets, can afford to fear the possibilities of the fulfillment of its propaganda. This notion invites a return to the last time that a significant charge was made against a species of defiant blackness as cultural weapon, the debate over *négritude*.

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* outlines three phases in the evolution of the literature of the African intellectual. In the first phase, the inspiration is European; intellectuals will adopt and imitate European forms, and even in their best efforts to extol the virtues of their culture, their writing will be wholly characterized by the colonial model. The second phase finds what may be termed a disquieting of spirit. In this instance, intellectuals plunge themselves into the culture; they attach themselves decisively and intimately to its every aspect. Fanon writes that the African intellectual now "decides to remember what he is." Again, however, despite his most genuine endeavor, he is rendered effete by his tendency to reinterpret the movement of his culture within a European context. He cannot transcend the colonizer's frame of reference. In the third and final phase, however, the African intellectual becomes an "awakener of the people," creating a fighting, a revolutionary literature. The creators of this new cultural expression are, to Fanon, the purveyors of a national literature, for only this literature can accurately describe the malignity of life under colonial rule.⁷ Fanon's assault is directed specifically against the philosophy of *négritude* as it was practiced by its most outstanding African exponent, Leopold Senghor. But by extension, this indictment is leveled against all of *négritude*'s practitioners, including its Western diasporan contributors: Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jane and Paulette Nardal, Aimé Césaire, Nicolás Guillén, and of course, Langston Hughes.

In his 1926 response to George Schuyler, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Hughes championed not only the foregrounding of the black voice, but through this, the appreciation and embracing by blacks of the black self. The conservative Schuyler declared that since Negro art and artists were determined by the Anglo-Saxon tradition, Negro art was but a species of Anglo-Saxon art, as it should be. This assertion precipitated Hughes's fiery rebuttal, which demanded a reckoning with black art's racialized strain:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. . . . [If] colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.⁸

This rebuttal – called by Arnold Rampersad “the finest essay of Hughes’s life”⁹ – can be called the American manifesto of *négritude*. But it falls to every critique of *négritude* as its master contradiction inheres in the sentence, “The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs,” for such a pronouncement philosophically anchors both Hughes’s manifesto and *négritude* itself at only the second stage of Fanon’s description.

This very duality frustrates the black demand for the foregrounding or the recrudescence of the consistently defiant self, the self that defines the society that opposes it merely through its own instantiation and desires itself as the inexorable desideratum of all black nationalisms. Such frustration is evident in Hughes’s first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, wherein the perennially melancholic Wallace Thurman, author of the quintessential Harlem Renaissance novel of black self-hatred, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), appears to need the healing power of the blues. Thurman, however, whom Hughes characterizes as one “who liked being a Negro, but felt it a great handicap,” may ironically already have been a model for Fanon’s third stage of revolutionary consciousness, or an approximation thereto.¹⁰

Hughes remarks of Thurman’s insights on the “New Negro Renaissance”:

About the future of Negro literature Thurman was very pessimistic. He thought the Negro vogue had made us all too conscious of ourselves, had flattered and spoiled us, and had provided too many easy opportunities for some of us to drink gin and more gin, on which he thought we would always be drunk. With his bitter sense of humor, he called the Harlem literati, the “niggerati.”¹¹

Hughes nevertheless advances his prescription for Thurman’s miasma. *Knowing* how to feel bad is not admissible in Hughes’s construction of black life, because the blues just naturally overtakes him, “like a blind beggar with an old guitar”:

You don’t know,
You don’t know my mind –
When you see me laughin’,
I’m laughin’ to keep from cryin’.¹²

But while having one mind for the white stranger and another for your black neighbor was itself a practical means of survival, hiding the mind of the disenfranchised is tantamount to hiding the laboring body and its wounds. In the sharecropping and lynching era that was contem-

poraneous with the blossoming philosophy of *négritude*, such silence was broadly advantageous to oppressive whites but held only limited advantage to blacks oppressed by them. This very voicelessness of *négritude*, in which the phenomenological aspects of anger and rebellion are irremediably muted by the inevitable retreat inward toward the black self and its structures in the name of culture, becomes no more than the intellectual's desire to "remember what one is."

During the development of Black Consciousness in the 1960s, the cultural enterprise of soul was itself the raw material for a new cultural revolution. The representation of the angry black self renounced the silence of the earlier period and was committed to shattering the status quo. "Badness," the leading characteristic of the theater of the ghetto, was always prepared to reveal itself to whoever was looking, and especially to whoever was not. Bennett Berger's 1968 criticism of soul, which called it reified black lower-class prejudice toward American middle-class culture and those blacks who aspired to that culture, nevertheless revealed the potential revolutionary quality of soul by casting it as the irremediable cultural Other. Beyond the limitations of race prejudice, Berger writes, the ideology of soul as an expression of African-American lower-class culture "can expect *on this ground alone* to meet strong resistance from the overwhelming majority of the American population which will see in the attempt to legitimate it an attempt to strike at the heart of the ethic of success and mobility, which is as close as this country comes to having any really sacred values."¹³

It is precisely this province of "outness," then, that defines soul, for what Berger describes as the counterattack on soul is really what soul desires: resistance and even opprobrium from supporters of the American ethic of success and mobility, an ethic to which few blacks are invited to aspire. Soul actually thrives on this distinction for its self-definition and thus represents itself as antithetical to the tastes of what it considers a poisonous aristocracy. Soul, derived from the blues yet different in quality and experience, is the island of sensibility that Maulana Karenga envisions when he admonishes that blacks should do away with the blues;¹⁴ in its isolation, soul is the realized potential of the Fanonian enterprise. It follows the spirit, if not the letter, of Fanon's third stage of revolutionary culture, whose end is a shattering violence, the final unleashing of a terrible anger against the oppressor.

But the definition of soul at which Berger arrives by placing it in opposition to American middle-class culture gives us a lens through which to read Bullins's theater of experience. Berger enjoins a Marxist dialectic

between the ethos of soul and the capitalist ethic of middle-class culture, whose imperatives of mobility, enterprise, and acquisition create for itself, as Althusser reminds us, a standard of consciousness unique to its movement:

The time of economic production is a specific time (differing according to the mode of production), but also . . . as a specific time, it is a complex and non-linear time – a time of times, a complex time that cannot be *read* in the continuity of the time of life or clocks, but has to be *constructed* out of the peculiar structures of production It is an invisible time, essentially illegible, as invisible and as opaque as the reality of the total capitalist production process itself. This time, as a complex “intersection” of the different times, rhythms, turnovers, etc., . . . is only accessible in *its concept*, which, like every concept is never immediately “given,” never *legible* in visible reality: like every concept this concept must be *produced, constructed*.¹⁵

The rhythms of capitalist production – only inadequately articulated in terms of the different rhythms of capital formation – are, if only conceptually, the ultimate, subliminal valuations of those (that is, the middle and upper classes) who are intimately involved with their structures. The desires of the middle class, as well as their rhythms of labor and production, structured and unstructured, are rooted in this master rhythm. Soul – as a phenomenon existing in dialectical (i.e., Marxian) relationship to this rhythm – must seek to oppose this rhythm in its every manifestation. One can envision Fanonian violence or, what would be its African-American counterpart, the unlimited expression of soulful badness, as simultaneously annihilating this rhythm in an augury of revolution.

The efficacy of such an enterprise of defiance, however, is determined by its opposition to the rhythms of capitalism – which is to say, its essential opposition to capitalism’s “time of times.” In terms of artistic representation, such opposition means abolition or suppression of the temporal as the medium through which we realize ourselves. If the ordinary rituals of the actual world are constructed in a temporality that itself is the stuff of production, then new rituals in some new dimension of consciousness (or revivals of old ones that somehow preceded structures that were, again quoting Althusser, “always-already-begun”) become crucially necessary.

Violence is manifest on Bullins’s stage of experience, but not as a dramatic urge toward an enduring valuation of culture with revolutionary

foundations. Bullins's most ambitious theatrical project is his Twentieth-Century Cycle, a projected cycle of twenty plays focusing on the black experience. Whereas earlier black theater hid from view not only the life of the street, but also the people in it, the theater of experience presents more than its share of "bad cats" and no-nonsense women; the street becomes the arena in which a new black vitality seeks to transcend mere survival.

Recurrent characters like Cliff Dawson of *The Corner* (1968), *In the Wine Time* (1968), and *In New England Winter* (1971) seek often enough to impose their order on the street, as would a latter-day Stagolee or McDaddy, but they must also be prepared to pause when the street recoils. After choosing to marry one of his prostitutes in *The Corner*, Cliff's movement from pimp to respectable citizen begins to fail in *In The Wine Time* when he takes a murder rap to save his nephew from prison. In *In New England Winter*, Cliff's half brother Steve Benson suffers such overwhelming guilt at having slept with Cliff's wife while Cliff was jailed that he winds up killing someone who knows of the liaison, one of the partners in a gang of robbers of which Cliff is a member. But Cliff, aware of Steve's doings, had already forgiven his brother, thus making the murder unnecessary. In disposing of the body, both men act coolly, purposefully, determinedly – even soulfully. In a later play in the cycle, *The Fabulous Miss Marie* (1971), the trickster figure Art Garrison, who deceives his friends and steals their women with devastating efficiency in *Goin' a Buffalo* (1968), seems to be "beneath the blues" in both the Fanonian sense and that wrought by *négritude*. The condition in which he finds himself demands that he pursue any available advantage, even if it means betrayal:

I'm on my ass, man. Down, down, down . . . I mean down, brother. And my spirit is down. Way down. Down so low I can't fly . . . not right now. So I'm layin' . . . yeah . . . with this bitch and her ole man. . . . [I] just got out of the slam. Just gettin' myself together. I stay here and eat and sleep and do whatever they want me to do, which is mainly gettin' drinks for them and drivin' them around in their car. Just light work . . . except for the action I give the ole girl when her daddy Bill is out of sight or out like a light. . . . Good grease, man. . . . More drinks than I can stand to drink. And then there's Miss Marie . . . and maybe there's her little niece, Wanda.¹⁶

Steve Benson, who is a recurring character in Bullins's dramas and also appears in his novel, *The Reluctant Rapist* (1973), exemplifies the twin senses of disillusionment and bewilderment that so readily charac-

terize the plays. Unlike the other characters, however, Steve is the cycle's visionary, the dreamer and seeker whose disillusionment is somewhat understandable because that disillusionment is in inverse proportion to his efforts. In *The Duplex* (1971), Steve aspires to the middle-class life because education, health care, and a decent income are desirable things, but as the lover of his landlady Velma, a married woman who lives with her abusive husband in the same duplex as Steve, he locates his moral responsibility for her safety partly in his repudiation of the capital machine:

Nobody knows that I don't care if she has kids . . . children who will hate me forever if I get her like I plan. Nor will anybody know that she'll never know me . . . really know me . . . this black man . . . with this mind . . . they'll never understand the thoughts that flash through my head and scorch the back of my eyes . . . these eyes that see her being beaten and raped, these eyes that see the flames of the hell that we all live in . . . in our cool dark little lives . . . getting ready to become something we ain't now or will never be . . . really. Some names like what? Colored insurance man, postal clerk, negro journalist, teacher, lawyer, afro-american dentist, actor, horn blower, whiskey pourer . . . clown?¹⁷

The natural style of Bullins's plays is evident in his choice of having his characters reveal themselves to one another and to the audience, but disclosing only what they wish. Bullins never imposes his own view upon the action, an approach consistent with the demands of a black aesthetic, the code for an African-American naturalness and heightened sensibility. But whether Art's perfidy or Steve's honor is at issue, or whether Cliff's toughness, his resiliency, his privately fashioned code of machismo matures into a cynical, hard-boiled vision of life, the sense of opposition, represented as soul, is in fact a stultifying sameness – a nonrhythm that is antithetical to the rhythm of capitalist production, antithetical to the infamous “time of times.”

In this connection, soul music in the Bullins play, which could mean either the jazz of Coltrane or, as is often ambiguously rendered in the stage instructions, “the music of the period,” seems only adjunct to the play's action. Though music is important to the cycle plays in their fidelity to black life authentically lived, the tempestuously sensual rhythms of soul are beyond the reach of the characters. Black popular dance, when incorporated in the plays, again only shows us what the characters, as soulful black men and women, want their audience to see – but in the

phase of consciousness that should announce the progressive spirit, music in the Bullins play continues to mask their internecine struggles. Thus Steve's recollection of happier times in *In New England Winter*, wherein a lively and raucous dance governs the scene, is wedged between the seduction of Steve's mentally ill lover, Liz, by the nefarious trickster, Crook, and a confrontation with half brother Cliff over the difference between their fathers. Dance also figures in *The Fabulous Miss Marie*, where, despite the pain of infidelity and broken dreams, "it's party time every day at Miss Marie's house." Even though the pretentious Jack, who uses erudition and avoids black speech in order to escape his class in *Clara's Ole Man* (1965) participates in the rhythm that is natural to the depiction of black life in the play, it does not save him from the beating he endures at the end for being such a perfidious "brother." Music in the Bullins play becomes a medium that, while necessary to the life of the soulful, is in fact, to borrow from a title of Baldwin's, "just above their heads." What governs Bullins's theater of experience is the stasis that undercuts soul as a revolutionary project, the absence of the promise of "the fire next time."

Bullins's early commitment to art over ideology had forced a break with the Black Panther Party, which he served until 1967 as its minister of culture. Eldridge Cleaver, for whom art could be useful only as ideology, determined that "culture is a gun"; to be sure, Cleaver had advanced well beyond his reading of Fanon and appeared prepared to put his lessons into practice. But if Bullins's contribution to black theater is placed in proper historical context, it must be seen as sharing the moment of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and its politico-cultural effort, the Free Southern Theater (FST), which, in its attempt to educate and politicize blacks in the South, was beset by demands that had no cultural precedent; while seeking to empower blacks through artistic representation, the FST's employment of and support by whites produced a divided self-consciousness that only hastened its demise. While evolving toward its own notion of ethnic purity and black autonomy in its representations, it was increasingly challenged to find "suitable" plays for production.¹⁸

The political possibilities of this kind of theater formed another link in the evolution of black theater, in which Amiri Baraka, Bullins, Ron Milner, Sonia Sanchez, and others had already been developing their voices. Emerging in approximately the same period, more enduring voices of blackness would be heard, even though the lessons in audience erudition of the Free Southern Theater would not be ignored. The awakening of a particularly black aesthetic would mean limiting or excluding

white participation. As the history of the FST shows, the presence of whites was often as confusing to whites themselves as it was to blacks. Certain truths about black life would ultimately be exposed by dropping the protective black mask, which is, as Houston Baker writes, “the space of habitation . . . for the deep-seated denial of the humanity of inhabitants of and descendants from the continent of Africa.”¹⁹ What lifting the mask would reveal, however, would be that their vulnerability was made possible only through their degradation. As Geneva Smitherman wrote of Bullins’s dramas, “Bullins’ message . . . has to do with making the members of [the black] community see themselves in all their terrible ugliness – in hopes that from this profound glimpse, they will be cleansed.”²⁰ Inexorably, however, this awakening cannot transcend its limitations, which are made obvious by a necessary aesthetic estrangement from the awakening itself. The “realities and contradictions” of black life in Bullins’s plays are, to Smitherman, “a way of ritualizing our sufferings – but from an ironic distance, therein avoiding the trap of self-pity and masochistic martyrdom.” She writes, “As Langston Hughes put it in 1926,” they are “‘ironic laughter mixed with tears.’”²¹

Toward the end of the sixties, there appeared finally to be a route through this cul-de-sac, this frustrated project of soul. In the interview with Marvin X that prefaces *New Plays From the Black Theatre* (1969), Bullins expresses relief at having experienced his deliverance during his years in West Coast revolutionary theater:

My community fulfills me and makes me want to work. It makes me a peaceful, creative brother who wants to build, to create for the Black people and nation, where before I was like a very, very disturbed cat – I was a misfit, a Western, Negro/artist misfit. To paraphrase Brother Mao, those writers and artists who pursue bourgeois art become misfits because they separate themselves from the people to become dilettantes, personifying decadent culture instead of exposing and examining it. To extol decadence is to become decadent.²²

Far from either promoting or practicing a bourgeois dilettantism, Bullins here claims his place among a new breed of writers, who, with the invocation of Mao, come in all preparedness to inaugurate a bold new sense of culture. While in most of his plays the anchor of Fanon’s second stage is not weighed, one play of Bullins’s in this volume does seek to answer the final Fanonian call. Intriguingly, however, it is a play to which Bullins does not affix his name.

We Righteous Bombers (1969), written by Bullins under the pseud-

onym Kingsley B. Bass Jr., is modeled closely after Albert Camus's 1946 play, *Les Justes*. Both plays ask whether murder is a legitimate means to end humanity's suffering, even in the revolutionary sphere. But *Bombers* recreates more intensely the idea of the republic of fear through the enhancements of expressionistic theater. Here, Bullins's use of black music and nonchronological still projections evokes the notion of chaos in the revolutionary circumstance. Moreover, the applicability of the play to present-day America and its racial dilemmas commands the attention and compels the thinking of its audience. Coming to a reconciliation of their debate on the ethics of taking innocent lives, the terrorists Bonnie and Jackson begin also to confront the meaning of giving up their own lives for the cause:

JACKSON. But I believe in the revolution as strongly as they do. Like them, I'm ready to give my life up for the revolution. I, too, can be slick, silent, sharp, when it's called for. Only, I'm still convinced that life is a great thing, I'm in love with beauty, happiness. That's why I hate the Black people's position here in America and the world. The trouble is to make my brothers understand this. Revolution, by all means. But revolution for the sake of life – to give life a chance, if you see what I mean.

BONNIE (impulsively). Yes, I do! (Short silence, in lower voice.) Only – what we're going to give isn't life, but death.

JACKSON. We? Oh, I see what you mean. But that's not the same thing at all. When we kill, we're killing so as to build up a Black world where there will be no more killing. We have to be murderers so that at last the innocent and righteous, and only they, will inherit the earth.²³

One critic's suggestion that the play reveals "the realities of hate and fear and desire that the everyday life of black and white behavior only masks,"²⁴ invites speculation about Bullins's motive for using a pseudonym; the authorial masking and the confusion surrounding it become a metaphor for the play's ability to *unmask* society and reveal the apocalypse beneath. It is difficult to go beyond this notion in seeking a reason for using a pseudonym. It is interesting, however, that with this play's heady approximation of the Fanonian third stage, the apparently unstable resolve of the revolutionaries, and the final betrayal of the cause by a captured brother revolutionary (which results in the reassertion of hegemony by the opposing power) – all appear to give the masking of the author a different dimension indeed. Suggesting in the revolutionaries'

broken resolve the limitations of art as revolutionary praxis, Bullins seems, by using a pseudonym, to distance himself from his characters' crisis of confidence. Sharing the very moment of the fulfillment of the phenomenon of soul, the horizon of its self-realization as cultural revolution, is the arrhythmic impasse, the incommensurable frustration that seeks its eternal return to the stasis of anticapitalist time.

Heidegger writes, in *Sein und Zeit*: "The world in which I exist has sunk into insignificance; and the world which is thus disclosed is one in which entities can be freed only in the character of having no involvement."²⁵ It is with this sentiment that the anticapitalist world of Bullins's characters is constructed. Only an existential longing for black self-realization can be witnessed in this world, not the realized black self of Fanon's fighting revolutionary phase. The masking, authorial and otherwise, in *We Righteous Bombers*, and the breakdown of soul in the plays of the Twentieth-Century Cycle reflect Bullins's inability to accept the Fanonian challenge. The tremendous commitment toward a new era of nationhood that the third stage would require from a people not yet awakened first demands a painful, wrenching self-analysis. Bullins's characters, notwithstanding their philosophical rejection of the capitalist imperative, are barely prepared for such introspection, being irremediably bound in the cultural space that has been determined for them by a totalizing white hegemony – a space itself defined as stasis, as the island of no involvement. Bullins's limitations equal the limitations of soul – which is not, despite its loud and defiant rejection of the social order, a summary externalization of black rage but rather a look back through that social order and again into the black self, the overburdened repository of American shame and horror.



PART II

Culture and the
Construction of
Gendered Identities



Introduction

ADRIANNE R. ANDREWS

The essays in part 2 describe a variety of complex, culturally derived mechanisms through which African Americans construct gendered selves, intricate identities of black and female (“blackwoman”) or black and male (“blackman”). While these two categories do not exhaust the multiple possibilities of gendered identities, they do encompass those described in this volume.

In keeping with the theme of socially constructed identity, in chapter 7 Adrienne R. Andrews demonstrates a continuity in patterns and modes of constructing “blackwoman” identity across generations and regions among low-income African Americans – the “folk” who have come to stand for black popular culture. By analyzing the process of ritualized formulaic patterns of verbal assertiveness and the dramatized use of language, Andrews illustrates the ways in which African-American women negotiate respect from both men and women through verbal assertiveness. By interpreting Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* as an ethnographic, rather than literary, text, and by examining Beverly Stoeltje’s and Roger Abrahams’s findings relative to patterns of presentation of self among urban black Americans in the 1970s, Andrews reveals contradictions between the idealized values of gender relations and male-female roles that are contained in the folklore Hurston collected and the patterns of pragmatic interactions created by the demands of everyday life among the populations she, Stoeltje, and Abrahams investigated.

Andrews demonstrates that, within both economically disadvantaged populations, gender relations are largely shaped by the economic circumstances of the times. Just as rap, hip-hop, and reggae reflect the power of orality/language/text, in deprived circumstances, to motivate, shape, and

define identity and construct reality, so too have “mouth-all-mighty” black women used language to shape and define themselves and the dynamics of their interpersonal relations.

In chapter 8, Rita B. Dandridge also addresses how black women negotiate respect, for self and from others, as well as construct social identity. As with Jackson-Lowman (chapter 5), Dandridge contrasts a Eurocentric world view, and its potentially negative impact on the self-image and self-esteem of African-descended people, with an Afrocentric orientation, particularly regarding female beauty. As with the women described in chapter 7 (Andrews), Dandridge addresses the issue of competition between (black) women for the economic and social resources that men have predominantly controlled. She describes the processes whereby contemporary African-American women have bought into the (Eurocentric) beauty myth, the contradictions and conflicts inherent in being black *and* female *and* middle-class in America – and the futility, therefore, of seeking to attain an artificial standard of beauty. Dandridge analyzes the ways in which the four protagonists in Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale*, through experiences readily recognizable to the average black woman, gradually divest themselves of the values inherent in the beauty myth and come into their own by appropriating and internalizing the values and identity models already available in black *popular* culture and which they already embody.

In chapter 9, Andre Willis gives us a reading of Leslie Harris’s *Just Another Girl on the IRT*, again addressing the question of black female identity, as socially constructed, from the vantage point of a black woman filmmaker. Framing a postmodern interpretation, Willis problematizes Afrocentric *authenticity* as it has been validated primarily through the prism of black male experience. Critiquing the commodification of cultural productions, particularly the black androcentric and misogynist cultural productions of rap and hip-hop, Willis deplores the transference of “the images, styles and attitudes of rap and hip-hop culture to another area of nascent black cultural production – mainstream Hollywood films.” The cinematic production of black women offsets and serves as a respite from the relentless normativizing of “the hip-hop image of black life through the medium of mainstream film.” Harris’s film is exceptional in that it is effectively woman-centered, validating the experience of ordinary and *contemporary* black urban American women in a manner that other woman-centered films, even some of those produced by black women, have failed to do.

Harris’s struggle as a black woman to produce the film, as well as her

reinterpretation of black womanhood, speaks ultimately to possibilities, despite the potential for entrapment in ghettos formed by race, gender, class, or sexuality and its consequences.

Kyra D. Gaunt (chapter 10) also speaks of a womanist-feminist voice as expressed in yet another medium, the musical games of young African-American girls as they are socialized into their identity as black women through the site of the black female body and voice. Gaunt demonstrates that from the childhood games of double-dutch rope-jumping and hand-clapping games to adult rap performance, the construction of black female identity through language, rhythm, and black *sounding* persists. As in other essays in this volume, learned patterns of performance, formulaic rhymes and rhythms, the power of performance, and expressive movement are described as integral to the socialization process and the development of a gendered identity among African-American girls as they grow into womanhood.

Like Willis, Gaunt offers a critique of the decidedly androcentric focus of most contemporary (and historical) discussions of “black” musical expression as it has been “overwhelmingly imagined, talked about, and personified through black male heterosexual and patriarchally oriented experience.” Gaunt’s essay demonstrates how woman’s presence and voice, having been relegated to the periphery of black musical traditions, are articulated in the various rhythmic games played by young black girls. Through intricate hand-claps and finger-snaps, juxtaposed against silences, they create rhythms of “blackness” and socialize one another (“school” one another) in the *étude* of the street by enacting and performing the way(s) to be female, to be women, to be black women. Through the agency of female-generated, female-centered play, these girls learn to become effective participants in black woman and music culture through embodying and encoding a gendered identity based on the rhythms and values of black culture.

Patricia A. Washington and Lynda Dixon Shaver (chapter 11) present an in-depth analysis of urban African-American males’ language culture as expressed in the discourse constructed through the sounds and images of rap videos. Employing perspectival rhetorical analysis (the analysis of verbal and nonverbal discourse, the text), the authors deconstruct the text of the videos (the performers and the settings in which they perform) in terms of their “scripting, colors, staging, and environments” to reveal the underlying world view, the language culture, of rap’s “original gangstas” and rap’s original “organic intellectuals” (borrowing from Gramsci). The significance of this world view and language culture in creating, dissemi-

nating, and maintaining a national black popular culture is further demonstrated in their analysis of the sites of conflict evoked by the video discourse of contemporary outlaws of popular culture: rappers Public Enemy, NWA (Niggas with Attitudes), Ice-T, Ice Cube, (the late) Tupac, and Intelligent Hoodlum. While Washington and Shaver focus on sites of conflict within U.S. black communities – economic realities, violence, family dynamics, social alienation, polarization of social units, and cultural and social deprivation – their analysis can also apply to cultural production in a global, diasporan context. See, for example, Berrian’s analysis of Martinican and Guadeloupian *zouk* in chapter 13. Black male rappers, purveyors of one aspect of black popular culture (urban, black, male) through language, rhythm, and sound, are thus seen by Washington and Shaver as organic intellectuals, outlaw figures who simultaneously create and represent a national popular culture through rap.



7

Of *Mules and Men* and Men and Women: The Ritual of Talking B[l]ack

ADRIANNE R. ANDREWS

Patterns of negotiating respect through verbal assertiveness, through the power of the word, are a part of a living tradition among black women in the African diaspora, including the United States. Evidence of the historicity of this behavior can be found in sociological literature as well as in fiction and folklore. In this essay I explore this tradition as it occurs in gender relations represented in the ethnographic data and folklore contained in part 1 of Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935). This is a study of Hurston and her work as an anthropologist who collected folklore and produced an ethnographic text rather than as a literary figure who produced a literary text, which is how she and her work have typically been examined.

Hurston "has often been accused of making her folklore studies too literary and her literary works too folkloristic," writes John Roberts.¹ While he agrees that this criticism has some merit, he argues that by contextualizing the lore she presents in *Mules and Men* as a part of the ongoing narrative of events she both observed and participated in, Hurston "demonstrated a folkloristic sophistication and sensitivity to folklore processes shared by few of her contemporaries."² Indeed, both Hurston's narrative strategies and overt insertion of herself, her voice, into that narrative anticipated "postmodern" techniques in ethnographic writing at the height of the modernist era in which she worked.

Also referring to Hurston's "unorthodox" approach to folklore collecting and ethnographic writing, D. A. Boxwell offers a possible rationale underlying Hurston's practice of inserting herself as an actor in the narrative she constructed around her Eatonville and Polk County collect-

ing expeditions.³ Boxwell posits that Hurston was “signifying” on the academic establishment – of which she was (nominally, at least) a participant – regarding its criteria of “scientific objectivity,” the scholar’s obligation to maintain an emotional and professional distance from the objects of study, as well as the research “rigor” assumed to be an element of such “objectivity.” Hurston wrote herself into the text of *Mules and Men*, and *Tell My Horse* (1938) in conscious defiance of prevailing academic cultural norms; while appearing to conform, the covert subtext subverts those practices in a manner similar to that of the subversive female storytellers in *Mules and Men*.⁴

Thus I investigate the text of *Mules and Men* as ethnography in an effort to discover basic patterns of social interaction among one segment of the black American population at a particular time. I compare these patterns of male-female interaction in the “real,” everyday world – described by Hurston as the “the between-story conversation and business” – what I call the ethnographic text – and the idealized world of male-female relationships reflected in the folklore Hurston collected.⁵

Praising Hurston’s dialogic style in *Mules and Men*, part 1, and her presentation of “between-story conversation and business,” Roberts asserts that Hurston “demonstrated that the verbal skills of the [tale] tellers were not reserved for ‘lying sessions,’ but that they were evident in *everyday interactions between performers*.”⁶ My analysis of these everyday interactions in the realms of gender relations is not limited to male-female interactions in *Mules and Men*. I also include an interpretation of gender relations between women. These often conflictual interactions were motivated in large measure by competition for males and, concomitantly, for the economic resources held by those males.

Comparing the findings of folklorists Beverly Stoeltje and Roger Abrahams,⁷ who researched low-income urban African-American populations in the 1970s, to those of Hurston in the 1920s, I demonstrate the continuity of this pattern of verbal negotiation of respect and construction of identity across two generations and across regions, from the rural South to the urban North. Hurston collected folk tales, songs, jokes, and numerous lines of “signifyin’” – those infamous rejoinders and retorts that serve to establish and maintain the attributes of style that were also highly valued in the postagrarian urban black culture studied by Stoeltje and Abrahams – for women *respectability*, and for men *reputation*. Abrahams’s analysis of the “learned interaction patterns” and “formulaic routines” observed among urban blacks in the last quarter of the twentieth

century is useful in interpreting the ritualized and formulaic exchanges observed by Hurston in the first quarter of the century.

Folklore and Black Culture

What is the significance of folklore for understanding African-American folk and popular culture? Folklore has been described as “the dramatization of the psychic essences that bind a people . . . the sum total of rituals, practices, and behaviors undertaken with community sanction to reinforce the beliefs, the values, and the attitudes of a community . . . all culturally recognizable codes constitute a part of that culture’s folklore.”⁸

Brewer likewise suggests that this form of cultural tradition is “the surest key to a nation or race’s thinking, for folk materials offer a true and unbiased picture of the ways in which a given people in a special locality think and act.”⁹ In keeping with Brewer’s view, Seward suggests “that the study of black folklore is the key to understanding the black experience in America, and that folklore is the informing core of that experience.”¹⁰ And if, as Bascom asserts, ethnography requires the inclusion of a people’s folklore to be complete,¹¹ then Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* provides a thorough representation of the culture to which she, as a native daughter, returned in order to participate, observe, and record the lore and life styles she treasured and valued so highly.

Black Women and Folklore

Images of women in folklore collections are relatively sparse, images of black women in particular. When black women are represented, the images are generally negative and/or stereotypical and limited to certain prescribed roles: the religious woman (church activist, supporter of sinful relatives, the missionary, and the focus in sermons about “fallen” women and biblical prostitutes), the domestic woman (the sweetheart, the wife and mother, the unmarried woman, the aged or widowed mother).

According to folklore scholars, images of women in folklore typically revolve around hearth and home. According to Farrer, “Her image was that of a homebody; her behavior, even in areas outside the home, was consistent with her image.”¹² Jordan and Kalčík observe that researchers typically focus on folkloristic events as they occur in the public – that is, male – domain while ignoring activities in the nonpublic domain,

which means little attention is given to women's folklore or folklore about women.¹³ Even less has been written about the folklore of black women or lore about them. While Farrer is aware of this problem and stresses the importance of filling this gap, ideally with black women conducting the research, Jordan and Kalčík's edited volume on women's culture and folklore contains no reference to black women.

When Janice Lynn Stockard researched images of black women in folk tales spanning the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, her findings were further evidence not only of the dearth of folkloric literature relating to women in general, but of the rarity of black women, even in collections of African-American folklore.¹⁴ Before there can be a gender-balanced discourse in the production of knowledge regarding African-American (popular) culture, stereotyped perceptions of constrained and marginalized black women must be refuted. Such refutation is to be found in the work of Zora Neale Hurston.

The following discussion will highlight the contrast between the values espoused in the lore Hurston collected and the day-to-day behavior and attitudes she recorded. Again, this between-story business enabled Hurston to present a dynamic, rather than static, portrayal of the rural black sawmill workers, turpentine distillers, and phosphate mine workers among whom she lived and conducted research in 1928. Hurston's work vividly depicts the fluid interaction of the women, men, and children who populated these work camps.

"Behold de Rib!"

Hurston included in *Mules and Men* a sermon delivered by an itinerant preacher on a summer's eve in Polk County, Florida, in 1928. She presented it as follows:

BEHOLD DE RIB!

Oh, behold and look and see! hah
We see in de beginning
He made the bestes everyone after its kind,
De birds that fly de trackless air,
De fishes dat swim de mighty deep –
Male and fee-male, hah!
Then he took of de dust of de earth
And made man in his own image.
And man was alone,

Even de lion had a mate
 So God shook his head
 and a thousand million diamonds
 Flew out from his glittering crown
 And studded de evening sky and made de stars.
 So God put Adam into a deep sleep
 And took out a bone, ah hah!
 And it is said that it was a rib.
 Behold de rib!
 He put de man to sleep and made wo-man,
 And men and women been sleeping together ever since
 Brothers, if God
 Had taken dat bone out of man's head
 He would have meant for woman to rule, hah
 If he had taken a bone out of his foot,
 He would have meant for us to dominize and rule.
 He could have made her out of back-bone
 And then she would have been behind us.
 But, no God Amighty, he took de bone out of his side
 So dat places de woman beside us;
 Hah! God knowed his own mind.
 Behold de rib!¹⁵

The theme of this sermon, as with much of Hurston's work, was the dynamic and dramatic nature of female-male relations. The valuing of gender equality expressed in the sermon, the depiction of harmony between the sexes, was contradicted in the day-to-day interactions of the men and women who inhabited Polk County's Loughman and Mulberry sawmill camps, where Hurston gathered most of the folk tales and lore she presented in *Mules and Men*.¹⁶

Negotiating Respect: Woman to Man

The "real" dynamics of gender relations in Hurston's population stand in stark contrast to the ideal as reflected in the sermon, "Behold de Rib":

[MAN] Well, you know what dey say, a man can cackerlate his life till
 he git mixed up wid a woman or get straddle of a cow!

[WOMAN] Who you callin' a cow, fool? Ah know you ain't namin' my
 mama's daughter no cow! (134)

“R-e-s-p-e-c-t, find out what it means to me. . . . Give me my props when you get home.”¹⁷ Those words, sung by Aretha Franklin in the 1960s, echo the dynamics among Hurston’s agrarian-era workers as well as the postagrarian black population studied by Abrahams and by Stoeltje.

Abrahams reports that respect is not a given in black culture; rather, it “must constantly be earned, negotiated.”¹⁸ And it is earned and negotiated through social, dramatized interactions that occur as confrontations with those who challenge a woman’s sense of self-definition and self-respect. One of Stoeltje’s informants, “Evelyn,” often described her verbal behavior as having (or being) a “big mouth,” and “talkin’ smart.”¹⁹ Both modes of verbal behavior reportedly raised her status but also “got her into trouble” because she angered people by not using discretion in revealing information others would prefer not be revealed (thus, her nickname of Big Mouth), by “talkin’ smart” and “signifying.” Mitchell-Kernan defines signifying as “a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection . . . an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit,” as “verbal dueling.”²⁰ Both definitions apply to the various verbal encounters presented by Hurston in *Mules and Men*.

Cheryl Wall also points out that Hurston aptly demonstrates “the means by which women in that culture gain access to creative expression and power.”²¹ The women gained this access through verbal assertiveness and appropriating the power of “the word,” having the law in one’s mouth.

The behavior of Big Sweet, for example, a rough, tough woman who befriended as well as protected Hurston from assaults from other women in the camp (who were jealous of Hurston because she spent so much time with the men collecting lore) exemplifies the woman who negotiated respect through assertive verbal (ultimately, physical) interaction with men and women alike. Several other women are presented as significant actors in *Mules and Men*, but Big Sweet figured most significantly in Hurston’s experiences in Florida.²²

Big Sweet was in a relationship with a man named Joe Willard. Apparently Willard had been “fooling around with” another woman in Mulberry, a nearby sawmill workers’ camp, and Big Sweet had found out about it. Big Sweet, Hurston, Lucy, and some of the men (Willard among them) went on a fishing expedition one day when the sawmill had been unexpectedly shut down. During the process of entertaining one another by telling tales, “lies,” Big Sweet “signified” on Willard:

“And speakin’ ’bout hams”; cut in Big Sweet meaningfully, “if Joe Willard don’t stay out of dat bunk he was in last night, Ah’, gointer sprinkle some salt down his back and sugar-cure *his* hams.” (133)

According to Hurston’s depiction of events, “Joe snatched his pole out of the water with a jerk and glared at Big Sweet, who stood sidewise looking at him most pointedly. . . . ‘Aw, woman, quit tryin’ to signify’” (133).

Abrahams’s insight is valuable at this point in interpreting the significance of these behavior patterns in black culture. He notes, “One of the most important routines by which a woman defines her respectable sex-role is by speaking little with the mouth” – although Big Sweet does plenty of this – “and a great deal with the eyes, the arms and shoulders, the whole set of the body.”²³ He also suggests that the black women he studied define themselves in terms of respect at the point where “the home” and “the street” intersect. Willard has been “in the street” by seeing another woman, and Big Sweet is defending her image and her self-respect as a woman whose home life is threatened by Willard’s philandering. According to Abrahams, “It is in the inevitable confrontation between these worlds that a female is able to enact being a woman.”²⁴

Big Sweet continues, “‘Ah kin signify all Ah please, . . . so long as Ah know what Ah’m talkin’ about. . . .’ ‘See dat?’ Joe appealed to the other men, ‘We git a day off and figger we kin ketch some fish and enjoy ourselves, but naw, some wimmins got to drag behind us, even to de lake’” (133–34).

“‘You didn’t figger Ah was draggin’ behind you when you was bringin’ dat Sears and Roebuck catalogue over to my house and beggin’ me to choose my ruthers. Lemme tell *you* something, *any* time Ah shack up wid any man Ah gives myself de privilege to go wherever he might be, night or day. Ah got de law in my mouth.’ ‘Lawd, ain’t she specifyin’?’ . . . ‘Oh, she does dat. I know’d she had something up her sleeve when she got Lucy and come along’” (134). These last comments constitute tacit acknowledgement of Big Sweet’s persona, her established reputation as a woman to be respected. Willard acknowledges that respect is negotiated in accordance with her behavior in the role she has chosen to enact, that her behavior (verbal and nonverbal) is part of a formulaic routine²⁵ in which all the participants know what to expect, thus, “I know’d she had something up her sleeve.”

Given the tensions apparently inherent in male-female relationships among members of the community Hurston observed, the potential for

conflict is ever present. By her actions, Big Sweet has appropriated the public arena (the male domain, as clearly indicated by Willard's comments to the other men) and used a community forum to confront the challenge to her respectability as a woman in a home (the female domain). She has inverted the existing social order by "takin' it to the street," confronting Willard on his (male) turf on domestic issues more appropriately dealt with behind closed doors, on her (female) turf. The maintenance of self-respect – and, conversely, respect for self – requires, according to Abrahams, "the willful 'imposition of order' in monitoring behavior."²⁶ And Big Sweet had indeed imposed order.

Since, as Abrahams further notes, "acting and being regarded as *respectable* is not a static condition in any way, . . . the ladies most respected are often those who maintain themselves at the center of the action."²⁷ Although Big Sweet would appear on the surface to be a "street lady" (as distinguished from the lady "at home") she, like other women in the cultural context in which she operated, negotiated and commanded respect through dramatic, stylized, verbal interaction, as a consequence of a perceived threat to that locus of respectability symbolized by the home. In keeping with this line of reasoning, if one's home is in order, one merits respect. So, Big Sweet did what was necessary, "imposed order," and negotiated r-e-s-p-e-c-t.

Another important aspect of the (indirect) verbal exchange between Big Sweet and Willard is the mention by Big Sweet of the "Sears and Roebuck catalog . . . beggin' me to choose my ruthers." Giving money and/or material goods was an important way for a man to show his respect for a woman in the population described by Abrahams.²⁸ Big Sweet's reference to Willard's demonstrating his respect, giving her her "propers," during the courtship period of their relationship essentially established a contractual arrangement, an agreement, an understanding, similar to that which establishes marriage in many societies (among the Navajo, for example), and Big Sweet was demanding that he remember and honor that "contract."

Negotiating Respect: Woman to Woman

Continuing the saga of Big Sweet, Hurston tells her readers that folks were "going to the jook" in the evening, after the fishing trip described earlier. She states, "Big Sweet came by and we went over together. I didn't go with Cliffert because it would mean that I'd be considered his property more or less and the other men would keep away from me, and being let

alone is no way to collect folk-lore.”²⁹ Big Sweet was already in a foul mood because of her suspicions about Joe Willard’s fooling around and decided to vent her anger on the jook’s music man, Texas:

“Did somebody hit yuh tuh start yuh? ’Cause if dey did Ah’m goin’ ter hit yuh to stop yuh.” Texas and Big Sweet did what is locally known as “eye-balling” each other. His eyes fell lower. Her knife was already open, so he strolled on off. (154)

The festivities of the evening continued, with people playing cards, drinking, and socializing. Big Sweet was in a card game and winning. She motioned for Hurston to come over to where she was, gave Hurston her purse to hold (a sure sign of trust and a way of signaling to all onlookers that Hurston was okay with Big Sweet and, therefore, better be okay with everyone else). Big Sweet wanted a free hand in order to play unencumbered. She “raked in the money and passed it on to me,” continued Hurston (154). She was about to place another bet when into the joint walked one Ella Wall, Joe Willard’s “other woman.” “Ella Wall flung a loud laugh back over her shoulder as she flourished in. Everybody looked at her, then they looked at Big Sweet. Big Sweet looked at Ella, but she seemed not to mind. The air was tight as a fiddle string” (157).

Ella Wall’s arrival was followed by that of Lucy, the woman with whom they’d all been fishing earlier. Apparently Lucy had really gone on the fishing expedition to spy on Big Sweet on behalf of Ella. Big Sweet, realizing this, explodes into a litany of threats and name-calling. When Hurston expressed surprise at Lucy’s actions, Big Sweet explained:

“She mad ’cause Ah dared her to jump *you*. She don’t lak Slim always playing *John Henry* for you. She would have done cut you to death if Ah hadn’t of took and told her. . . . Neb mind ’bout ole Lucy. She know Ah backs yo’ fallin’. She know if she scratch yo’ skin Ah’ll kill her so dead till she can’t fall.” (158)

Again, the bond that had been forged between Hurston and Sweet is in evidence, clearly vocalized for all to hear – in case anyone had missed the significance of the earlier purseholding request.

What is also evident is the degree of jealousy and sense of rivalry Hurston’s presence aroused in the camp among the women. As an unattached woman, and despite the fact that she had constructed herself as a “bootlegger on the lam” (66), she posed a threat to established relationships, tenuous though they may have been, and consequently her role as ethnographer and folklore collector served as a destabilizing element in the

community. Hurston was in a double bind. She had avoided being associated too closely with any one man (such in the case of Cliffert) to avoid being isolated from interaction with others from whom she needed to collect lore, only to be seen as a threat (and to be threatened) because she was able to interact with a number of males in the community. The predicament Hurston faced, caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place relative to gender relations, is representative of the challenges still faced by women anthropologists in conducting field work. Despite being a “native anthropologist,” an African American and a southerner who spoke “with the map of Dixie on her tongue” (as she is oft quoted), Hurston’s femaleness (gender) complicated the research process for her – in this instance in a potentially life-threatening way.

After a bawdy song in honor of her virtues, Ella Wall also maneuvered to claim her own respect. “‘Tell ’em ’bout me!’ Ella Wall snapped her fingers and revolved her hips with her hands. . . . ‘I’m raggedy, but right; patchey but tight; stringy, but I will hang on.’” Big Sweet, using Hurston as a foil, said, “‘Look at her puttin’ out her brags . . . if she start anything ah got her some.’” Hurston reports thinking, “I knew that Big Sweet didn’t mind fighting; didn’t mind killing and didn’t too much mind dying. I began to worry a bit” (159). The tension between Big Sweet and Ella Wall continued to escalate, with verbal taunts tossed about by Wall and pointedly ignored by Sweet, who, Hurston wrote, told her to run if anything started because they’d try to hurt her too. “I thought of all I had to live for and turned cold at the thought of dying in a violent manner in a sordid saw-mill camp . . . but I knew I couldn’t leave Big Sweet even if the fight came. She had been too faithful to me.”³⁰

Ella Wall took her confrontational mode to an even higher level, pushing Big Sweet to the limits of her “cool.” She yelled out to her partner in crime, Lucy, “‘tell Lot’s-of-Papa Joe Willard Ah say come here. Jus’ tell ’im his weakness want ’im. He know who dat is’” (160). The only thing that saved Ella Wall’s life was the entrance onto the scene of the “quarter’s boss” (the white overseer) who broke up the ensuing fight and ordered Wall off the premises.

Everyone at the gathering rallied around Big Sweet who, in the course of the boss’s intervention, refused his demand that she give him her knife. She had become an instant hero to those present. One of the men praised her, “‘You was a whole woman and half uh man. You made dat cracker stand offa you.’” Another man said, “‘Who wouldn’t? She got loaded muscles.’” Big Sweet agreed, “‘Dat’s right,’” and shifted the focus back to her priorities; “‘and de nex’ time Joe tell his Mulberry woman tuh

come here bulldozin' me, Ahm gointer beat 'im to death grabbin' at 'im'" (162).

Joe Willard, the sweet-talking man, protested his innocence. "Come on Big Sweet, less go home. How 'bout uh li'l keerless love: Ahm all ravalled out from de strain.'" Law and order and respect having been firmly and dramatically established, "Joe and Big Sweet went home together and that was that" (162). In addition to negotiating respect for herself, Big Sweet had also established a reputation. Big Sweet was, indeed, "a whole woman and half uh man." "Behold de rib!"


Conclusion

In this essay, I have applied Stoeltje's and Abrahams's findings relative to black women's patterns of presentation, and the behaviors described as negotiation of respect, to an analysis of gender relations as portrayed in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*. In that representation, the ideal values regarding male-female relationships, as depicted in folklore such as the sermon, "Behold de Rib," do indeed meet and clash with the real, lived reality of everyday gender relations. As with the low-income urban dwellers studied by Abrahams and Stoeltje, Hurston found that these interactions were shaped to a large extent by the harsh economic circumstances of the times, low wages for the least desirable work – turpentine processing and sawmill labor, for example. This, in turn, fostered intense competition between women and between men – competition between women (mediated through sexuality) for access to the wages earned by the men, and between men for women's unpaid domestic labor and sexuality in the home, as well as wages earned from paid domestic labor in the homes of nearby whites.

I have attempted to shed light on, following Bascom, the "processes of diffusion, invention, acceptance or rejection, and integration" of values, beliefs, and attitudes associated with gender relations among African-Americans across time.³¹ In this way, we can gain a much needed understanding of the ways in which these relations have been, and continue to be, socially constructed and reinforced through language, direct and indirect verbalizations, and actions – in performances that support, following Goffman, the presentation of self in everyday life.³²

If Hurston's ethnography and Abrahams's and Stoeltje's research on expressive behavior can be taken as accurate reflections of the cultural realities of African-American life at two different points in history, then conflictual gender relations seem to have been the norm rather than the

exception, in stark contrast to the “psychic essence” of harmony suggested and called for in the creation myth contained in the sermon, “Behold de Rib.” The same strategies for addressing and resolving these conflicts of interest by black women and men have been handed down as learned interaction patterns and verbal repertoires across the generations represented in this essay, from the 1920s to the mid-1970s. Black women, while seldom portrayed in folklore as actors or heroes outside the home or church, were foregrounded in Hurston’s work and shown to have wielded power in a society where material symbols of power were lacking and in which, of necessity, one’s verbal skill was one’s armor, one’s words were one’s wealth and one’s ultimate weapon in the ongoing ritual of constructing identity and social reality by talking b[1]ack.



Debunking the Beauty Myth with Black Pop Culture in Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*

RITA B. DANDRIDGE

In his celebrated essay “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” Hoyt W. Fuller opines: “Black writers have turned their backs on the old ‘certainties’ and struck out in new, if uncharted, directions. They have begun the journey toward a black aesthetic. The road to that place – if it exists at all – cannot, by definition, lead through the literary main-streams. Which is to say that few critics will look upon the new movement with sympathy, even if a number of publishers might be daring enough to publish the works which its adherents produce.”¹

By 1996, nearly a quarter of a century after Fuller published his essay, Terry McMillan had produced three novels. The third, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), made the *New York Times* best-seller list during its first week at bookstores and received a \$2.64 million bid from Pocket Books for paperback rights. However, few critics have looked upon this novel or McMillan’s excursion into pulp fiction with sympathy. Judy Sokoll assails *Waiting to Exhale* for its “sexual frankness”; Susan Issacs dismisses it because “no new literary ground is broken”; and Faye Chadwell rejects it because the “prose . . . falls flat and [the] narrative lacks depth.”² These critics fail to note that McMillan journeys away from the literary mainstream toward an Afrocentric aesthetic by debunking the beauty myth with black pop culture.

I define black pop culture as a reservoir of Afrocentric expressions evident in the behaviors, belief systems, and creative productions of the common people of the black diaspora. It embodies an aesthetic that Ron Wellburn alternately refers to as a “black aesthetic,” “black sensibility,” or “soul essence” – all interchangeable entities that resonate with a distinctive spiritual beauty and serve as counterforces against the

corporeal glamour that capitalistic America mass markets.³ A creative reflection of this aesthetic, black popular culture factors in a beauty that assigns weight to feeling rather than to seeing; it values energized emotions rather than calculated observance. Black pop culture supports and strengthens this aesthetic by manifesting an Afrocentric world view that encodes collectivism, cooperation, interdependence, and spirituality – all values, according to John W. Chambers Jr., “that embody the ‘survival of the tribe’ philosophy.”⁴ For the purpose of this discussion, I include in black pop culture black music, paintings, little magazines, African-derived names, soul food, beauty salons, toys and trinkets, and self-help groups. Known for their regenerative properties in the black community, these components assume a hierarchical rank above the commercialized elements associated with the beauty myth.

The beauty myth postulates that there is one universal standard for beauty, that women must embody it, and that men only want women who do.⁵ Reflecting a Eurocentric aesthetic, the myth assigns beauty to those women who possess youth, virginity, Caucasian features, white skin, blond hair, blue eyes, and low body weight.⁶ Celebrated in the media, persons associated with the myth wear the latest fashions, drive expensive automobiles, and reside in luxurious homes. The values derived from such images come from a European world view that emphasizes materialism, individualism, competition, and independence, all qualities embodied in the survival of the fittest philosophy. I take exception to Naomi Wolf’s premise that the myth is based on politics and not on sex because, as she asserts, it encourages a belief system that fosters male dominance and devalues women.

In the context of the myth’s obvious racial bias, Wolf’s analysis involves a climate that is not only political but also race- and gender-specific. White women may compete unnaturally, as Wolf contends, for “resources that men have appropriated for themselves,”⁷ but I hasten to add that African-American women must compete unnaturally against white men and women for resources and recognition and occasionally have to confront black men in a society that imposes only one standard of beauty.

Beauty is culturally defined, and in white-dominated American culture, the definition of beauty is certainly disadvantageous to blacks. I will explore this theme through Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale*, which presents the negative aspects of the beauty myth relative to the social construction of gender identity among African-American women within black popular culture. Because the beauty myth lures black women whose physical features are incongruent with the European image, McMillan ex-

poses the myth to reveal four of its falsehoods: that good looks automatically attract a good (as opposed to a bad) man; that acceptance of the myth increases (rather than limits) African-American women's chances for happiness; that women are at harmony (instead of at war) with their bodies; and that competitive beauty creates closeness (instead of animosity) among women. These falsehoods are revealed by four women characters – Savannah Jackson, Bernadine Harris, Gloria Matthews, and Robin Stokes – who reside in Phoenix, Arizona, the city whose name conjures up the beautiful bird that immolates itself by fire to be reborn. Like the bird that has endured centuries of victimization, these four women have lived with the damaging effects of a Eurocentric beauty myth before purging themselves of the myth's falsehoods with the flame of black pop culture. They choose enculturation as an alternative to acculturation and self-liberation in preference to victimization.

Savannah Jackson, the thirty-six-year-old protagonist and public relations agent for a Phoenix television channel, is an amalgam of Afrocentrism embodied in black popular art and Eurocentrism manifested in the beauty myth. The culturally inspired works of black artists such as Joe Overstreet,⁸ Nash Purofoy,⁹ Charles Alston,¹⁰ Frank Frazier,¹¹ and Joe Holston¹² adorn her condo walls and floors and symbolize the essence of an Afrocentric aesthetic. Capturing the spirit of a displaced and enslaved people stripped of their African culture and forced to refashion their lives with whatever they could, much of this art is homespun and irreducible. It defies Eurocentric boundaries of subject, substance, and form and serves as cultural markers inscribing a shared group identity. Constant, natural, and spontaneous, this art comprises Savannah's private inner world of spirituality, which is separate and distinct from the public, outer covering of materialism. Vying with these artifacts, however, are the rouges, makeup foundations, breath sprays, and Aveda moisturizer that crowd Savannah's vanity top; the toiletries represent the commercial materialism that supports the beauty myth. Mutable, unnatural, and astringent, they disguise the natural self and serve as a deceptive, alluring facade. With this cosmetic mask and the commercial glamour that accompanies it, Savannah manifests a primary flaw in the myth: good looks alone do not necessarily attract a good man.

Believing another axiom of the beauty myth, that a woman can be successful only if she has a man, Savannah thinks she must have a man to live "a meaningful, significant, and positive life."¹³ Single and childless, Savannah laments, "I've got everything I need except a man. I know what I like, and it doesn't take that long for me to tell if there's any chemistry

at work or not" (4-5). Savannah's primary goal is to attract a husband, and she makes herself as sexually appealing as possible to accomplish this feat because proponents of the beauty myth say she should. For a New Year's Eve party, she color-codes her red-red lipstick and three coats of nail polish, wears a skin-tight, teal blue suede dress, endures toe-pinching purple pumps, and "sports drop-dead crystal earrings" (10). When highlighting her appearance seems not to be enough, she looks into the mirror and directs her attention towards altering gender-specific anatomical features. She confesses, "The black lace bra I had put on was damn near empty. . . . If I had the nerve, I swear I'd buy me some bigger breasts instead of walking around all these years with this big ass and big legs and these little sunny-side-ups on my chest" (14). Savannah's obvious abhorrence of her African anatomy and her fixation on the European female's larger breasts reveal her frustration as an African-American woman living in a society that idolizes the European image. More important, her self-loathing becomes the negation she must experience before her liberation through the revitalizing elements of black pop culture.

On Savannah's dining room wall, Charles Alston's watercolor of a black man and woman jitterbugging celebrates the rhythmic compatibility or the soul of the black sexes engaged in an Afro-Caribbean life dance without the intervention of shallow glamour. This painting diminishes the sexually demeaning relationships that Savannah has with Lionel, an unemployed hanger-on who growls like a wild animal and terrifies her in bed; with Kenneth Dawkins, a former boyfriend who has jilted her, who emotionally batters her when he returns years later, and who engages in sex but does not tell her how he really feels about her; and Charles Turner, a smooth-talking, good-looking man she meets at a Las Vegas seminar who renders her zombielike when he pretends he really likes her and has sex with her, but never calls her after the conference. The Alston painting serves as a metaphor for the *feeling* that Savannah tries to capture in a mate. "If this man isn't the one," she tells herself at the New Year's Eve dance, "at least let me have some fun tonight. Let me dance so hard that I sweat. Let me laugh. Hell, let me feel something" (15). Feeling becomes the cathartic agent that cleans away the visual component upon which the beauty myth thrives. This feeling/seeing binary represents a Januslike cultural dyad between an Afrocentric aesthetic and Eurocentric glamour to point up Savannah's frustration with the beauty myth. One part of the dyad is intuitive and unassuming, the other cognitive and calculating. Together the dyadic components represent the

antithesis of two Americas that Savannah inhabits – one black, the other white.

As Savannah continues the purgation process, she is even more appreciative of black popular culture. She embraces the emotive elements in black pop music that she listens to and that prepares her to seek a strong, loving relationship with a black man. Whitney Houston's lyrics, "How will I know / I've just a feeling? / How will I know / If you're deceiving?"¹⁴ juxtapose the (warm) feeling relationship that Savannah desires and the (cold) seeing one that she dismisses. Luther Vandross's "Let me hold you tight / If only for one night" certifies the touch Savannah needs in black male-female bonding, and Lionel Richie's "As long as I live / I'll give you all the joy / My heart and soul can give . . . / Because I'm truly / Truly in love with you, Girl" validates a deep-soul feeling in Savannah.¹⁵ That McMillan shows Savannah listening and reacting to certain songs (identified only by title) reinforces the feeling-seeing opposition. Feelings are rooted up, laid bare, and celebrated in these songs that shun erotic corporeality and embrace an impassioned spirituality.

The fact that Savannah dates men who see her prints on the wall and hear her music but can neither identity them nor identify with them suggests their own acculturation into a society that trivializes black culture, that promotes glamour for sex, and that pits African-American men and women against each other, especially those best educated and financially capable of sustaining the race. Alienated from an emotive art that Savannah responds to emotionally, these men fail her test of what a good man is. "I've met a whole lot of educated, successful, handsome black men," she says, "who don't turn me on" (5). What turns Savannah on is an emotional attachment, not just a sexual one. Thus, her collection of black art accompanies her scrutiny and dismissal of unfeeling black male partners and enhances her respect for the values of cooperation and interdependence. Although she wants a baby before she turns thirty-six, she insists, "I'm not having one by myself, that's for damn sure" (169). Her insistence on cooperation becomes the ultimate purgative as she dismisses the callous relationships that commercial glamour promotes. Seeking emotionally responsive relationships, she redefines her reality by caring for and sharing with family and female friends. Her remedy for self-healing fits that prescribed by feminist critic bell hooks: "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story."¹⁶

Savannah's friend Bernadine Harris, an attractive wife and mother of two children, proves that acceptance of the beauty myth limits the

African-American woman's chances for happiness and certainly devalues her as a woman. She buys into the myth by fulfilling the wishes of her husband, John, a rising entrepreneur who wants to prove to white people that he is as good as they are. To please John, Bernadine lets her hair grow long, wears "number 30 sunblock, or avoids the sun altogether" (31). John's attempt to make her look as white as possible pushes her to become a historical representation of the "mulatto hypothesis," a damaging premise that African Americans with light skin tone and "good hair" are more attractive and desirable.¹⁷ This mulatto thesis promotes and perpetuates intraracial prejudice and, according to black feminist Patricia Hill Collins, its regulation of skin color and hair length is "one concrete example of how controlling images denigrate African-American women."¹⁸

Bernadine's awareness of her own denigration manifests itself in her projection onto her daughter what she shuns for herself – an Afrocentric identity evident in the naming process. Instead of giving her daughter a European name such as her own, derived from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the French Cistercian monk and writer, she names her daughter Onika, a Yoruba derivative meaning "one in possession of."¹⁹ The name identifies Onika with a proud African heritage, and it directs attention to a behavioral system that reflects a life style coinciding with the name. Training her daughter to socialize with and appreciate others of African descent, Bernadine reinforces an Afrocentric sensibility by purchasing many black dolls and only one white doll. Reversing the expected racial ratio, Bernadine makes sure that Onika does not grow up believing that "blond hair, blue-eyed dolls . . . set the standard for beauty" (277). "Naming becomes a creative act," affirms Molefi Asante, "a productive architectonic act in personal development."²⁰ In Onika's case, her name and the behavior that accompanies it support ethnic preservation rather than ethnic assimilation.

Just as Bernadine debunks the visual aspect of the beauty myth, she also vilifies its extravagance. True, she drives a BMW, owns "more gold than Mr. T," dons two-hundred-dollar shoes, and carries Louis Vuitton luggage because John wants her to have what rich white folks have (30). But these possessions do not make her happy. She prefers her Legend automobile to the BMW that John has given her; she thinks silver looks prettier than gold; she likes the Seiko watch, not the more expensive Rolex; and she wants to wear shorts and a T-shirt rather than clothes with "somebody's name on the label" (30). Desiring goods of lesser value,

Bernadine points up the Afrocentric value of utilitarianism: a less expensive object is just as valuable as its more expensive counterpart if it serves the same function. Expensive objects have no value for her, anyway, since they increase John's status and not hers. And Bernadine is essentially just another object in John's collection of objects.

In fact, John's preoccupation with his wife's material beauty fosters his manipulative use of the beauty myth to appropriate power for himself and to alienate Bernadine from her own culture. Bernadine's move from urban Philadelphia to Phoenix to live in a mansion "on a mountainside acre in Scottsdale [among unneighborly whites] because John wanted his privacy" (29) isolates her from her family roots and cuts her off from those who could have validated her African-American identity. Her decision to give up her career, become a stay-at-home mother, and live in a mansion with French doors, Mexican tile, Kohler toilets, and "Casablanca ceiling fans" (29) makes her a colored clone of the white suburban housewife. John's manipulation of Bernadine masquerades as a "natural component" of her duty as a wife, when in fact it is John's way of enclosing her in the house while he carries on the ultimate cultural conspiracy: he has an extramarital affair with Kathleen, his young white blond bookkeeper who works in the software company that Bernadine has helped him to acquire.

Race and gender intersect in the beauty myth that distresses Bernadine. To break the myth's charm, when John leaves her, she rids her house of his "white" possessions. As the marriage skids toward divorce, Bernadine begins to shed the beauty myth. Confronting the issue of John's intended marriage to Kathleen, Bernadine sells all his belongings for one dollar each in a garage sale, including his Rossignol skis and his "Salomon ski boots" (94). She lets her mortgage go unpaid and her children go without new clothes. As her material possessions disappear, Bernadine enters a purgative period ironically marked by an excess that is essential in order for her to find a better aesthetic. She no longer uses cosmetics to compete with her white rival. She pops Xanax capsules for her nerves, smokes a pack of Kools per day, and locks herself in the house for five days without bathing, brushing her teeth, or combing her hair. Knowing that what she has become is not what she wants to be, Bernadine, in an antinarcissistic gesture, "kicks the hell out of the mirror," shattering it into tiny fragments (35). The act silences the European superstition that a broken mirror brings seven years of bad luck and epitomizes a black popular saying echoed by African-American beauty

consultant Naomi Sims: “Beauty is not skin-deep, but soul-deep!”²¹ But more important, the act marks the end of one kind of existence and the beginning of another that empowers Bernadine.

“People empower themselves,” says Molefi Asante, “when they become seekers of the types of connections, interactions, and meetings that lead to harmony.”²² Bernadine seeks and wins affirmation at Oasis Hair, a black beauty parlor that serves as a cultural shrine for uplifting the spirit and stimulating verbal exchange among its regular patrons. Her gay beautician’s adulation after cutting her hair – “My Lord . . . I didn’t know you were that pretty” (134) – affirms her obvious natural beauty and lifts the discomfort that the beauty myth has weighted her with. Others in the shop compliment her, too, and “she walked out of Oasis Hair with a fresh new look” (135). This popular cultural site of relaxation and conviviality validates Bernadine’s identity as one of the group and elevates her esteem both as a black and as a woman.

Bernadine also supports Black Women on the Move, a popular “buppie” group that debunks the values of independence and competition inherent in the beauty myth and that focuses on group support and sharing. She joins this group “for women who wanted to be more than role models, who were willing to make the time to do *something* for black folks whose lives – for whatever reason – were in bad shape” (33). The group collects money for scholarships, gives free legal advice, and addresses issues such as “breast cancer, incest, sexual harassment on the job, single parenting . . . [and] financial planning” (171). A self-empowering organization, it tackles concerns that minimize black women in an effort to help them redefine who they really are.

In keeping with the spirit of the group, Bernadine uses her \$964,000 divorce settlement to benefit others. She buys her girlfriends dinner, plans to take them on vacations, and promises one a baby shower. Money means nothing to Bernadine except for the happiness it brings to her knowing that her friends are happy. Instead of attaching independence, individualism, and competition to her monetary settlement, she assigns to it interdependence, collectivism, and cooperation – values that realign her with the spirit of the black community and that enhance her status as an African-American woman.

Gloria Mathews, Bernadine’s best friend and owner of Oasis Hair, points up another falsehood of the beauty myth: instead of being comfortable with their bodies, women are actually at war with them. Sixty pounds overweight, Gloria has tried every diet plan possible and has unsuccessfully tried to function with “liquid food, no food, tiny portions of

food, and stuff that didn't look like food" (99). The more she diets, the stouter she becomes. She represents "ninety percent of women," according to Sheila Ruth, who "gain back more weight than they ever lost."²³ Gloria's excessive dieting has nothing to do with her own obsession with beauty, but that of her teenage son Tarik, who wants her to become as skinny as the lady on television so that she can marry and he can have a father. Their sex war over the dieting issue is Tarik's further manipulative tactic to minimize the dominant and larger female force in his life as he approaches manhood and desires to spend time with his leaner, white female classmate.

Gloria is the antithesis of the neo-Empire look²⁴ introduced at the turn of the century, which is suited to Tarik's white classmate's body, and which represents the most powerful female form today. Whereas the Paris designer Poiret "brought the [linear] female body closer to the surface of the clothes" and deemphasized breasts and waist to play up the erotic beauty of the leg, Gloria's curvaceous form protrudes and spills out of her clothes. Tarik asks her bluntly "if she just had to wear her dresses so tight, with her boobs pushing all out like that" and watches "his mother's behind jiggle as she shook the frozen vegetables from the bag" (100). Tarik's manipulation of his mother highlights the difference between the Caucasian woman's linear form and Gloria's curvaceous one, between the Caucasian woman's reductive, shrinking figure and Gloria's enlarging, expanding one. Tarik's insistence that Gloria lose weight wreaks havoc on her mentally and physically.

"What happens to women's bodies," warns Naomi Wolf, "happens to their minds."²⁵ Being fat makes Gloria think about waste, about her own social atrophy. She avoids social gatherings, believing that attending them to find a date is a waste of time; she agonizes when Tarik prefers to be with his friends rather than with her; and she disintegrates when Tarik's father, David, who has never married her but who has had occasional sex with her, finally tells her he's gay. Having her own sexuality belittled and rejected while the European-minded David and son Tarik, both of whom seek and value what is the opposite of herself for oral sexual gratification, Gloria turns to food, as the hearty Afrocentric elixir, for her oral gratification.

Food becomes a soothing and purgative agent linking her to her Afrocentric roots. Gloria gulps down and shares with others hot buttered biscuits, hog maws, and home-made apple pie. Food broadens her frame and her frame of reference. Food fuels her with inner strength that she uses to discipline Tarik who insists on her slimness; food empowers her to lash

out at him in anger, “I’m not a goddamn whale . . . when I get up to a size twenty like Sister Monroe, that’s when you can talk about me” (99). The reference to size twenty affirms that she feels at home in the Afrocentric community among nurturing women who feed their bodies and ignore the smaller dress sizes on the racks of department stores that pander to the beauty myth. “To buy stylish clothes,” asserts Roberta Seid, “the ordinary woman *had* to slim down.”²⁶

Gloria, the ordinary woman, is unconcerned about cholesterol consumption, caloric intake, and cardiovascular disease. Her eventual hospitalization for a massive heart attack from a clogged anterior artery brings her even closer to Marvin, a widower neighbor who has tasted her food and respects her size: “I hope you don’t go losing too much weight on me gal,” he says. “I like my women big” (398). Marvin’s use of the possessive pronoun *my* suggests his own willingness to accept the recuperating but plump Gloria as his own. He bases his acceptance not on what Gloria *looks* like but on how she and he will *feel* in a warm relationship. Gloria’s bond with Marvin essentially validates her as a beautiful African-American woman.

Robin Stokes, the fourth character, illuminates the fact that competitive beauty creates animosity rather than harmony among women. She belongs to the category of women whose “faces and bodies,” in Naomi Wolf’s words, “become instruments for punishing other women.”²⁷ Five feet nine, size six with false breasts and a small butt, Robin believes that she can get any man, and she uses her body to steal men from other women. She has a clandestine affair with Russell while he lives with another woman. When he moves in with Robin, he has an affair with yet another woman who slashes the top of Robin’s Mercedes 5.0 to shreds. Working even harder to beautify herself to keep Russell from still another woman, Robin laments, “I did everything in my power to make sure Russell would keep loving me. I kept myself up. Worked out four days a week, and he hardly ever saw me without my make-up. I spent a fortune on this weave, and mine looks as good as – if not better than – Janet Jackson’s” (40–41). Ever mindful of her looks, Robin uses beauty as a weapon, hoping to ensnare Russell into marriage so that her wedding picture can appear in *Jet*, a popular African-American magazine that brings the community together on social, political, racial, economic and health-related issues.

The wedding pictures in *Jet*, however, do not mirror what Robin finds in her own relationships. The photographed weddings symbolize a com-

mitment to honesty, an enduring relationship, and happiness; in contrast, Robin's relationships epitomize lies, brevity, and animosity. Whether she takes a man from someone else or replaces one with another she has given to someone else, her attempts to conquer a man for her own ends are counterproductive. She wants Russell because "he can dress his ass off, he's the best lover I've ever had since I've been in Phoenix, he's fine as can be, and I know he'd make some pretty babies" (167). And she gets pregnant by Russell after he marries someone else. Next, she dates Michael, an average-looking but overweight man with "38-B breasts," because pretty boys have mistreated her. She gets rid of him, then wants him back when she sees him at a dance with another woman. "You never know how good something is until somebody else has it," she tells Savannah (175). Robin's inconsistency stems from her fears that another woman's beauty will surpass hers, and she fails to realize the divisiveness that such fear produces among women.

Wolf suggests that "to get past this divisiveness, women will have to break a lot of taboos against talking about it, including the one that prohibits women from narrating the dark side of being treated as a beautiful object."²⁸ The dark side for Robin is not only being treated as a sexual object but also coping with aging. "I've been trying to convince myself that I'm still a good catch," she says, "but I can't pass a mirror these days without staring at myself for not looking twenty-four any more and apologizing for being a six instead of a ten" (46). Later she tells Savannah, "I'm starting to get these bags under my eyes. . . . I used to look better. I don't like this getting old shit; I swear I don't" (169). Robin has been brainwashed to believe that youth is beauty and aging is ugly. Insisting on staying young, she buys into the youth aspect of the beauty myth that wants women to believe that their youth is beauty because it "stand[s] for experiential and sexual ignorance."²⁹

Robin, indeed, represents experiential and sexual ignorance because she has been victimized by the myth. She makes judgments based on appearance, engages in sexual indiscretion, and provokes envy. She abhors committee work for black organizations, detests going anywhere with black women, dislikes eating out by herself, and tells all her friends about her private affairs. Of the four women, Robin is the most damaged by the beauty myth, as is evident in Savannah's statement, "Women who think like her really piss me off" (201). Robin's ignorance is so pervasive that her female associates laugh at her to her face and talk about her behind her back because the flaws in her relationships are as obvious as

those in her makeup. "What she needs to do," says Savannah, "[is] get rid of that damn weave and stop wearing that red blush, because it [is] too bright for her dark skin" (69).

Robin gradually purges herself of the beauty myth by way of the vibrating rhythm of an Afrocentric aesthetic. Elements within the culture release syncopated frequencies that foreshadow the demise of each of Robin's bad relationships with men, thus easing her anger toward other women. Customers in the Oasis Hair beauty salon signify noisily that a pregnant woman drives the car Robin has co-signed with Russell, thus bringing Robin to the realization that Russell is not worth keeping. An African-American crafts stand selling "k[e]nte cloths, wooden and soapstone sculpture, handmade cards" and Malcolm X and Martin posters, spurs Robin's decision to buy two clanging bangle bracelets and marks the end of her relationship with Michael (165). At Gloria's birthday party, Robin's listening to Vanessa Williams's "Dreaming" portends her break with Troy, a man she has considered to be "past gorgeous" but whose mistress, she has discovered, is crack cocaine. Her own rejection of Prince's "Thieves in the Temple," in which he sings, "They don't care where they kick you / Just as long as they hurt you,"³⁰ is her climactic repudiation of the beauty myth and her own complicity in it as a thief who robs men from other women. Each step in Robin's transformation occurs in the presence of African-American women who function as cultural mother surrogates. Turning Robin inward toward the tribe, these women-mothers-associates serve to divest her of the Eurocentric myth through the medium of black popular art. Robin substitutes altruism for egoism and concentrates more on her father who has Alzheimer's and her mother who cares for him. Focusing on friends and family, Robin removes herself from promiscuity and aligns herself with the morality inherent in the Afrocentric ideal.

The portrayals of Savannah, Bernadine, Gloria, and Robin make it obvious that the beauty myth ill serves African-American women. Tricked into accepting the lies of a myth that promises men and reproduction, McMillan's characters "beautify" themselves, but with little success. Savannah does not find a husband, Bernadine's husband leaves her with two children, Gloria settles for visits from her widower neighbor, and Robin is left alone.

Men may argue that the beauty myth has denigrated and dehumanized black American men too, and that McMillan's novel only continues that pattern. After all, the black male's historically low economic status has prevented him from buying into the glamour that the myth upholds;

in addition, the physiognomy of the black male's progeny contradicts the "universal" standard of beauty that the myth has set for humans. McMillan might appear to continue the pattern of denigration and dehumanization because she tarnishes the image of black males who are prosperous enough to buy into the myth but who, nevertheless, exhibit callousness toward black women despite their acquisitions. While this contention has validity, I maintain that the beauty myth is a ritualistic custom that promotes racism and misogyny and that McMillan's text makes an overt stab not just at black men but, more important, at black women for the purpose of behavioral correction and ethnic identification.

Why, McMillan seems to ask, would African-American women want to be accessories to a culturally defeating myth that attracts black men and women to each other for lust and procreation and then divides them as quickly as did greedy slaveowners who groomed their slaves for mating and then separated or sold them for a profit? The answer is that black women have been psychologically manipulated to become a part of their ongoing, historical victimization through the beauty myth and that only with an Afrocentric mirror reflecting the liberating properties of black popular culture can the myth be defused.

Black paintings, music, names, little magazines, and support groups serve as a shield against acculturation and as a healthy transfer to enculturation. They are combined in McMillan's subversive black pop text, which shakes its sassy words at those critics who judge it on the basis of a white literary aesthetic and fail to understand its significance as a black womanist's candid view of the values of a black pop culture that manifests an Afrocentric aesthetic. No doubt, critics who disapprove of *Waiting to Exhale* see only the printed words and cannot feel what they say and thus lose McMillan's message. McMillan says that black popular culture is group-affirming and self-liberating and that African-American women have a right to self-liberation because they are human beings, not because they have slavishly accepted the false promises of a male-profiteering beauty myth. Negotiation for that liberation begins with the right personal choices, among which is seeking the good in one's own culture and passing it on. Only then can black women exhale.

A Womanist Turn on
the Hip-Hop Theme:
Leslie Harris's *Just Another
Girl on the IRT*

ANDRE WILLIS

What most people see of the Black Woman is a void, a Black Hole that appears empty, not full. The outsider sees Black Feminist creativity as a dark hole from which nothing worthwhile can emerge and in which everything is forced to assume the zero volume of nothingness, the invisibility, that results from the intense pressure of race, class and sex.¹

The most discernible developments in the African-American community during the last twenty years have been rap music and hip-hop culture.² These poignant forms of black cultural expression are a result of the synthesis between the creative impulses within black America and the unique postmodern context that African Americans inhabit. Rap music and hip-hop culture are, in some ways, an imaginative response within the black musical tradition to the numerous forces of economic decline, social separation, intraracial division, cultural exploitation, and political despair that comprise the African-American context.³ As market forces would have it, however, much of rap music and hip-hop culture have been severely commodified and subsumed by mainstream culture, thereby undermining their potential for radical contestation of the forces that were catalysts for their existence. Thus, not only is the pervasive influence of rap music and hip-hop culture today devoid of the prophetic possibilities offered by earlier rap and hip-hop, but also market-driven or mainstream rap represents the market values of debilitating anger, egregious immoralism, deep ahistoricism, and rampant individualism as authentic responses to the various factors at work on the contemporary African-American soul.⁴

The soaring success and marketability of rap and hip-hop, probably due to their antiauthoritarian impulses, ultra self-confidence, funky beats and rhymes, uniqueness, and claims for authentic selfhood,⁵ not to mention corporate support, have had a major impact on the American cultural landscape. Concomitant with the market success of rap and hip-hop is an increase in black poverty, black-on-black crime, and black single-parent households. Many have drawn a causal relationship between rap and hip-hop and this black degradation. Still, rap and hip-hop are vital market commodities, affirming the desire on the part of popular consumers (mainly young white males) for voyeuristic entry into the black world without actually participating in it emotionally or substantively. In short, this sort of commodification invites a sort of transracial prostitution, as white youths draw energy from the center of black subversive expression.

The potential for capital acquisition through the presentation of the images, styles, and attitudes of rap and hip-hop culture has recently moved to another area of nascent black cultural production – mainstream Hollywood films by black male directors. Led by Spike Lee, the movement has quickly proliferated, mostly on the heels of cinematic representation of rap and hip-hop themes and styles. John Singleton and Matty Rich are the most critically acclaimed, and central to all of their films is the hip-hop theme of young black males trying to escape the corruption and degradation of black urban life against the odds: drugs, women, and the cops.

Numerous other black-directed films were spawned by the commercial success of these films: *New Jack City*, *Menace II Society*, *Juice*, *South Central*, *Predator*, *Above the Rim*, *Fresh*, *Sugarhill*, and *House Party I, II, and III*. All of these films starred rappers as central characters, were made on much smaller budgets (an average of \$7 million) than the usual Hollywood film (\$32 million),⁶ and engaged the same hip-hop cultural theme just described. Granted, this is not the case for every black male-directed film over the last ten years (Eddie Murphy's and Robert Townsend's films and Bill Duke's *A Rage in Harlem* may run counter to this claim), yet these rap and hip-hop genre films make up the undisputed majority of black-directed films.

In short, when one goes to the theater to see a black-directed Hollywood film, nine times out of ten it will be a narrative inspired by hip-hop, including gun violence, drugs, easy women in hard pursuit of the protagonist (impediments to true self-fulfillment), "the projects," stereotypically dysfunctional black parents (either single mothers unable to help the young male negotiate successfully, or an abusive father, prob-

ably jobless, and a distressed mother), misogyny, homophobia, and various brands of subtle Afrocentric didacticism. The message is either that blacks are forced into self-destructive behavior or that whites are actually worse than blacks and we are all in a state of denial about it – see Nino Brown's appeal at the end of *New Jack City* and Furious Styles' nationalist rhetoric in *BoyzNtheHood*. This is the reality of black Hollywood. Normalizing this hip-hop image of black life through the medium of mainstream film is highly problematic because it ultimately makes false claims for black authenticity and propagates negative stereotypes. This not only negates the existence of black suffering and black striving – thereby making representations of suffering inauthentic – but also promotes a crass individualism that undermines a progressive sense of collective political and economic struggle.

Yet, there is respite from the propagation of the above black Hollywood conventions and stereotypes as authentic pictures of black life. It is seldom found, but it is located in the work of black women. Ironically, the few mainstream films that are directed by black women are either not centered on the experience of black women (*A Dry White Season*), are historical, or underdistributed (*Losing Ground*, *Passion of Remembrance*) to be considered with the contemporary black male rap and hip-hop films I mentioned above. The only film that challenges this genre of film is Leslie Harris's *Just Another Girl on the IRT*, which employs a rap and hip-hop impulse, style, rhythm, and narrative in the most provocative, revealing, and enlightening ways ever documented on film. Devoid of gratuitous violence, drugs, homophobia, misogyny, and many stereotypes, *IRT* overcomes most of the flaws of black male-directed mainstream films with the hip-hop theme and adds a very different flavor to the “escape from the ghetto” story.

Black film director Harris's first project is of immense proportions foremost because it presents the hip-hop cultural theme of escaping the ghetto from the perspective of a seventeen-year-old African-American girl. This fact alone is profoundly important. This film marks the first time a contemporary black story is centered on a woman, and it marks the first time a black woman has released her own feature film on a contemporary theme. As a society, we have not yet begun to understand the numerous obstacles and joys that accompany the life of the black female. Psychological, social, and political theorists have concentrated so much on black males that the black women's predicament has gone unremarked. Since most of us are unequipped with the interpretive

economy to deal with black women's issues, it is a miracle that Harris's rich treatment of contemporary black urban life even exists on film.

Market-obsessed studios had no room for such an unconventional story – no guns, no nudity, no drugs, no mistreatment of women – so, like many other nonconventional directors, Harris had to struggle to make the film. Keeping her day job, she put the entire project together over three years for under \$100,000. She borrowed money from friends, secured grants (from Women Make Movies, the National Endowment for the Arts, and NYSCA), solicited personal financial backers (author Nelson George, director Michael Moore, and writer Terry McMillan), rented equipment, and finally did the shooting in “seventeen grueling, unpredictable days, facing threats, expulsions, even a fistfight.” Like the project, its creator existed hand-to-mouth. “I didn't have food in my fridge,” Harris remembers, “I had film canisters.” The earliest screenings were held in her kitchen.⁷

Miramax films finally provided finishing money for the film (after Harris showed them a picture fine-cut) and picked it up for distribution. *IRT* was screened at the Toronto Film Festival and the Sundance Film Festival and played in twelve to eighteen major cities. Harris explains why she made it:

I hadn't seen realistic images of myself in film. There've been films made from an African American male perspective about African American males coming of age. The women in those films are just hanging on some guy's arm. I wanted to give people a different insight, to make a film from the perspective of a 17-year-old at the crossroads. I'd see these teenage women on the subway and I'd want to follow them home and show them as they are – with all their energy and all their faults and flaws.⁸

Just Another Girl on the IRT is a story about seventeen-year-old Chantel Mitchell, an African-American high school junior in Brooklyn. (Harris's Brooklyn looks much different from Spike Lee's in *Do the Right Thing*.) Chantel has a story to tell, and over the opening scene of a black man carrying a garbage bag through the night she informs the viewer that she is going “to tell us the real deal” about what happened, to save us from making prejudicial remarks after we read about it in tomorrow's newspaper or hear about it on the news. This suggests that Harris is responding to media misrepresentations and subconscious prejudices in her reinterpetive portrait of black womanhood; moreover, it marks a

conscious strategy and attempt to assert control over perceptions of black womanhood.

From here we are taken into Chantel's retrospective, which is woven into the story's omniscient perspective. The first five minutes of the film construct an immensely interesting and powerful lead character. Equally important, however, is how Harris, through Chantel, refreshingly negotiates the politics of power. The gender power dynamic is subverted quite clearly at the beginning. Chantel begins her commute from Brooklyn to her job at a small grocer's shop in Manhattan. At the train station, she is approached by a suave and sophisticated-looking young black male who asks her name. She responds cordially, teases him about his name ("Oh, Jerry from Tom and Jerry?") and then laughs in his face when he tells her he is a model. This black woman is clearly unafraid to challenge a confident black male. When he reveals that he has a car, however, her comedic tone quickly changes and she feigns interest.

Immediately following this show of verbal effrontery, quick-wittedness, and boldness, we see Chantel studying mathematics on the train. On the subway, she reads an older white man's newspaper over his shoulder and is unfazed when he shows displeasure. Walking to work from the subway, Chantel responds to a male bystander's ritual verbal harassment – "Hey, baby, you looking good tonight" – by assertively saying, "Oh, you're too cute to be nice today?" Already Chantel is negotiating issues of power in a deeply resistant fashion. Clearly, Harris is creating an unconventional character, an unequivocally courageous young black woman who is serious about her studies, is attractive, can talk with men, is comfortable with her body, is interested in current events, is unmoved when a white man shows criticism. Remember, no one in the viewing audience has ever seen this before on film. The film, having already deconstructed the male gaze and hinted at a subtle womanist vibe,⁹ most of the audience is alienated.¹⁰ But Harris wants to drive this point home and fills the rest of the first five minutes with scenes that continue to construct this young, fearless black girl.

Chantel then gives a first-person narrative in which she explains that she is a Brooklyn girl and that she goes where she wants to – when she wants to. Then, after a quick yet deeply meaningful exchange of hip-hop greetings with her friends at her job, her white boss seems displeased at her late arrival. Because she is already constructed as a brash and uncompromising character, and we are now aware that she has a very close and substantive community of "sisters" who are with her during this exchange, we expect an angry response. To add to her complexity, how-

ever, she offers an assertive yet deferential explication of her tardiness (“Those trains from Brooklyn are a mothafucka”). As though acknowledging that she is highly trustworthy, he immediately departs and leaves her in charge of the entire store.

In the manager’s absence, we are thrown another curve ball. A white customer is rude to her, yet Chantel holds her tongue. When the woman is rude again, she lets loose not with a vile and insidious attack, but with a well-thought-out insult (inspired by the customer’s purchase of Virgin Olive Oil) suggesting that the woman is unable to captivate her husband’s complete romantic attention and that she could not know anything about virginity. This is the only confrontation between Chantel and a white woman, and it is significant in terms of its sexual politics. (Chantel, we find out later, is a virgin.) Is this a possible reversal of the myth of black promiscuity? Nevertheless, Chantel’s challenge of white femalehood is consistent with her radical negotiation of the politics of power. She is a rare film character whose subjectivity is constructed in a provocative, complex, and real way.

Chantel, like most young black women, is independent, honest, hard-working, and self-controlled when she needs to be, yet crazy, funny, and fearless when she wants to be. Her attitude, language, and style are all deeply rooted in hip-hop culture. Her story is the hip-hop theme – how to escape from the projects. Yet, Chantel is not only different from any character we have seen in film; she says she *wants* to be different from her peers, and we know she is. She is unafraid to challenge the power of her boss, and, speaking directly to the camera (the second of nine times this method is employed in the film), she tells us that she is a good student who gets all A’s and B’s, that she enjoys “buggin’ ” with her friends and that people “trip” “when they find out really how smart she is.” Here we have the hip-hop masquerade. Tribal rites suggest that one is not allowed to publicly show talents that are not traditional or not venerated in the community. So, like most other teens, Chantel constructs a pretense for her survival: the overdeployed stereotype of a neck-rollin’, finger-snappin’, eye-cuttin’ Brooklyn flygirl. Yet, because Harris is sensitive to her audience’s inability to understand the depth – confusion behind Chantel’s outward presentation of herself – she has her character speak directly to the camera to help us understand her (or to control how we understand her). Here Harris interestingly employs an old film convention to make her point.

The following scene, with Chantel and her closest friend, Natete, in the subway, quickly reminds us that there is a critical distance between Chan-

tel's huge ambition and its attainment for her and those like her with the introduction of Danisha, an old friend of Chantel's. Danisha is a high school dropout and a new mother who lives at home with her mom in the projects. After a chat about life, pregnancy, and parenthood, Danisha exits the subway train and her daughter Imani (whose name, Chantel reminds everyone, means faith in Swahili) is practically impaled by a closing subway door. This provides an opportunity for Natete and Chantel to vilify the driver, then hold the door open while they invite Danisha to a party at Lavonica's on Saturday night. After this display of black women's collective critique, resistance to official power, and small protest on the subway, Danisha reluctantly agrees to come to the party, although she recognizes that she will have great difficulty convincing her mother to watch the child. In reflecting on Danisha with Natete, Chantel exhibits only insouciance. Unable to realize how perilously close she is to becoming like Danisha, she says, "I got plenty enough problems of my own tryin' to figure out how to get that new pair of sneakers and a jacket." Chantel's fixation on upward mobility here suggests a dangerous brand of narcissism, and for the first time in her disagreement with Natete we are shown her self-centeredness and the depths of her ambition. Also, Harris gives us a sneak peek at what Chantel will become.

Finally and painfully, Chantel reaches home. Harris provides a deeply stereotypical view of the projects. From the barren hallways to broken elevators, we are shown not only that her environment is problematic but that it is very different from her. We understand that Chantel's ambition is motivated by a desire to escape her environment, a typical hip-hop theme. Yet whereas the environment usually drives one to maladaptive and resistant behavior, Chantel has chosen the more traditional escape route – education. But why? Her parents are not predisposed to the life of the mind, nor is her community. Harris constructs an astutely pragmatic protagonist – Chantel sees education as the only way out. Her dream is to become a doctor. What she is too naive to recognize, however, is how much her future is almost entirely determined by the limitations of class, race, and gender. Her idealized conception of escape is inspired by the self-hatred of her father, the self-abnegation of her mother, the tightness of her living quarters, and so forth, but she fails to reconcile this conception of escape with the brutal fact of who and what she is – a poor black girl. The rest of the film is a brilliant attempt to show how Chantel learns that choice is "not a property of autonomous moral agents acting in an existential vacuum, but rather something that is created and exer-

cised within the interaction of social, psychic, political, and economic forces of everyday experience.”¹¹

Harris sets up for the dramatic turn by reconstructing Chantel as an atomistic individual. Her relationship with her mother turns dishonest, she disregards the feelings of her neighborhood “boyfriend,” she expresses discontent over her brothers and family life, and she pays more attention to parked cars, if they are Jaguars, than she does to her peers in her community. As her ambition heightens, her energy rises, and what was a sassy attitude becomes insensitive verbal bantering. She winds up, quite frankly, alone.

In a divisive exchange, Chantel interrupts a history class on the Holocaust to appeal to the teacher to discuss the moral obligations of the class toward the plight of African-American males. Harris adeptly shows the pervasiveness of parochial and sexist black nationalism (to have a thoughtful black girl transfer her own critical sensibilities to black males is sad but quite true), yet the attack on this Jewish teacher (while he is trying to claim some veritable turf) affirms a Jew-versus-black paradigm that raises an interesting paradox. Chantel’s critique of this history teacher is mostly right, yet so is his teaching the Holocaust. Of course, the black-Jewish schism needs no more fuel, particularly in Brooklyn, and (it seems to me) Harris could have been a bit more gentle in teasing her point out, because the scene could have successfully communicated the point no matter what the ethnicity of the teacher.¹² However, although Harris makes a subtle point here, it is the most trenchant and provocative critique of black-Jewish relations in modern Hollywood film. Harris uses other interactions with males to applaud, on the one hand, Chantel’s courage and her resistance to being defined by male interests and concerns — those of her principal, her father, and her boyfriend, Gerard. Yet, on the other hand, Harris seems to highlight the fact that Chantel is too self-involved to maintain a healthy idea of community *in addition to* her quest for self-definition. This is a difficult task, particularly for a poor, and black, girl, and Harris resolves it well.

Chantel’s negative conception of community, emanating from her experience in the projects, juxtaposed against her conception of a more “acceptable” community (most likely derived from the media), propels her to the type of individualism and personalism that destroy her relation to the small community that surrounds her. We see her fall away from the numerous social matrices that formed the community (family, school, and friends) as a result of her ambition to escape the ghetto. She becomes

so self-absorbed that even in the very intimate and playful yet misguided discussions of sex with her friends Natete and Lavonica, she seems slightly removed, as if she is thinking about something else. The image of three black teenage girls sitting around talking openly about sex is a challenging one. Again, we have no reference point for it, and it opens up an unexpected reality. Yes, black girls talk to one another, openly, about sex. Interestingly, it is on this topic that Chantel is least well-informed, and her grave misconceptions about contraception will ultimately force her to confront the naivete inherent in her ambition.

The dramatic twist in the film hinges on Chantel's relationship with Ty, who first noticed her at Lavonica's party. Initially drawn to his Jeep, his loot, and his charm (in that order), Chantel has sexual intercourse with Ty. Her old boyfriend Gerard rides the IRT, and has tokens for them both, but Ty has his own car – thereby moving Chantel to the framework of mobility and independence. The critical moment comes when Chantel implores Ty to use a condom during sex. He either does not want to or does not have one, and he refuses, suggesting that she's not really as tough as she leads people to believe if she doesn't have sex because he isn't wearing a "jimmy." Chantel really has no allies at this point in the film. She has lied to her friends and family (to be with Ty), alienated others, and seems solely self-interested. She is, therefore, in need of love and attention. In a moment of passion or weakness, this assertive and brash young black woman, who always had a response for everything, gives in, takes off her shirt and mounts Ty. Of course, she gets pregnant as a result.¹³

Harris employs a simple didacticism on a number of issues in dealing with Chantel's pregnancy. The first lesson, obviously, is the danger of unprotected sex – a point made emphatically by having the only sexual encounter result in conception. The second issue, that a woman should determine what happens to her own reproductive system, becomes Chantel's mantra. Numerous times when confronted by anyone (namely Ty, but Paula and Natete, too) about whether or not to have an abortion, she claims, "You can't tell me what to do with my body, it's my decision." Third, there is an antiabortion bias in this film, probably reflecting the attitude of many poor people regardless of race – children are to be kept at whatever cost – what else does one have? These issues are fairly flat-footed and direct in this film. What is provocative, however, is Chantel's denial of her pregnancy – what I see as the pivotal point in her journey to an identity.

Chantel completely denies what is happening to her body as it further

consumes her life. She constructs an elaborate scheme to hide her pregnancy from everyone and gets no medical treatment – is Harris suggesting why infant mortality is roughly twice as high for black infants as for whites? However, this refusal is actually a choice by default, the choice to become a mother.

While numerous reviewers felt that the denial was unrealistic on the part of such a “bright” and strong girl,¹⁴ it was an accurate description of one of the many responses to this predicament. Harris uses this denial to communicate that Chantel is overwhelmed by a need to come to terms with a reality much larger than the pregnancy. Chantel’s pregnancy forces her to face the fact that she really does not have many choices, that her ambition is naive. It is the first time that this young, fun-loving, gregarious girl has to confront how her trajectory, for the most part, has already been determined for her. Being pregnant forces her to deal with how she is embodied as a woman and how this embodiedness limits, sadly enough, where she can go in life. This also allows her to realize that in addition to being a woman, being black is an even worse plight, and being poor restricts her possibilities even further. The real chances of a person with her personality and race, class, and gender going to medical school (her dream) are quite slim. Being from Brooklyn, ensconced in her family, with her poverty, gender, and blackness, situates her deep ambition as understandable, but a pipe dream nevertheless. Ultimately, she has few choices.

If Harris stopped there, however, this film would wind up making the same statement that male rap and hip-hop films make: there is no way out. But Harris makes a much more profound statement in this film and directly challenges the hopeless, immoral, individualistic vision of rap music and hip-hop culture.

The birth of Chantel’s baby is a cathartic moment on many levels. It is this experience that forces Chantel to recognize her need for others, the uniqueness of being a woman, and her true potential. The labor occurs after a sexual encounter with Ty that she initiates after many weeks without any conversation between the two.¹⁵ Clearly, Chantel is isolated and lonely and finally recognizes that she needs to begin building bridges. This is the first time that her character exhibits this sort of need. During labor as well, she reaches out to the social worker Paula only because she recognizes her need to have someone help her through. Both Ty’s and Paula’s help are critical for her survival. At the crux of the drama, the “old” Chantel appears, as she suggests that they dispose of the child quickly so “no one will ever know” and they can get on with their lives.

This is a return to the reflexive, self-centered ambition of the early Chantel, who demands that Ty get rid of the baby. When confronted with a community of helpers – Paula and Ty – and after she is able to think straight, Chantel recognizes her need to keep the baby. We have to wait to find out whether or not her self-effacing attempt is in vain or not.

It turns out well. Ty finds a larger sense of self and recovers the baby before the police arrive. Chantel, with the newborn baby and newfound community, is finally safe, and we next see her some weeks later, books in hand, leaving a classroom building. Chantel speaks into the camera to make the film's final and major point. She is attending a community college (indicating her success in graduating from high school early), living with her parents, and back on the IRT – Ty had to sell the jeep. She has a positive relationship with Ty (in one scene, he cuddles the baby), she has new friends, and she is working to “get her shit together.” In essence, she has come to terms with her new identity and her possibilities within a community. This is not to suggest that she has accepted the stereotypical plight of a poor black girl or that she has been coopted and forced to change her style. No. At the end of this film, Chantel has learned how to manage and negotiate numerous thin lines and gray areas. She is strengthened by her ability to appreciate community, affirm her selfhood in it, and see beyond constraining models of it. In other words, she seems to be living an integrated life, and she is, indeed, “just another girl on the IRT.”

Harris presents a profound message that greatly deviates from the normative closure of the hip-hop theme. Instead of affirming the trap of race, class, and gender, Harris hints that one can live a fulfilling life by reconstructing one's conception of success, affirming a communal vision, and reconciling oneself to the long, slow battle with the limits produced by one's context. In other words, race, class, and gender do severely limit one's choices and possibilities, but with a positive awareness of these limitations and a vision constructed solidly on hope, one's talents, and one's history, one can live a fulfilling life and elevate oneself, slowly, to a less restrictive socioeconomic level and hopefully a life of deeper meaning. But one never escapes tradition, history, and embodiment entirely – one can only build from the best and trash the worst. One's life and its possibilities are played out only from within the confines and effects of familial, cultural, historical, personal, social, political, and economic forces. What Harris's film ultimately suggests is a sophisticated interpretation and response to black urban despair, and it is important that many are

exposed to it. Her reconstructed, “womanist” response is timely and a major contribution to African-American life.

Leslie Harris has made an important documentation of urban black life without falling into the conventions and norms of most Hollywood films. She takes us into the ghetto experience, yet holds at bay but does not ignore the shooting, the gangs, and other problems that some young urban blacks have to deal with. She gives us hip-hop culture without overstatement (or the word “nigga”) and sex without objectification of male or female. Harris accomplishes a great deal with her refreshing film. I hope that the transnational corporations trying to control her fate will not be able to see the subversive elements in her work and that she will be able to continue interpreting the issues, topics, and stories that she feels comfortable interpreting.

Translating Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop: The Musical Vernacular of Black Girls' Play

KYRA D. GAUNT

*The black cultural aesthetic is essentially both oral-aural and motor, focusing on action, performance and expression. The young black girl learns the significance of perfecting performer roles . . . by trying seriously to learn the current dances, by imitating adults' [ways of being] "hip" and "cool."*¹

*She performs within the circle of friends whose actions and song continually cue her: "This is play; do your thing."*²

These comments capture the ideals of black cultural performance as observed in ring games, hand-clapping games, and double-dutch jump rope. These observations reveal the often overlooked significance of the musical behavior (songs, rhymes, chants, rhythmic hand claps, and dance) associated with the daily rituals of many young black girls. Black girls' musical games promote the skillful development of musical authority that reflects blackness, gender, individual expressive ability, and the very musical styles and approaches that later contribute to adult African-American musical activities. I intend to show how these games act as oral, rather than written, *études*³ for learning simple and complex black musical aesthetics. These *études* are the first autonomous avenue for black girls to learn the "rules" for making music *sound* "black."

The musical phenomena within African-American girls' games offers an avenue for theorizing about women's participation in contemporary black music culture.⁴ My primary interest in this essay is how the games black girls play provide insight into black women's "ambivalent" partici-

pation in hip-hop music. I am particularly interested in how this operates given the contemporary appeal and contested opinions concerning the music of hip-hop culture, one of the most influential roles of popular music making in the United States today. Women's "real" musical behavior (what they actually do musically and what it means to them) is transformed and eclipsed by not only hegemonic discourses surrounding African-American women's so-called ideal and so-called dysfunctional social roles, but also by inflated discourse about black music as a "male" culture.

Indeed, we might conclude that black women make music not only *sound* blackness, but sound *black* woman-ness, as well. I will present a redefinition, a reinterpretation of women's "real" musical experiences that will allow an appreciation of their experiences as central, rather than peripheral, to black popular music culture.

"It's a Man's Man's Man's World (But It Wouldn't Be Nothing Without a Woman or a Girl)"⁵

The serious study of contemporary popular music (what I like to think of as contemporary folk music) from an ethnomusicological perspective is a recent occurrence. Formerly, the study of folk music investigated so-called preliterate or nonliterate music cultures – *premodern* or *pre-urban*. The study of gender in ethnomusicology emerged as a scholarly pursuit only in the early 1980s. Next to nothing has been written about African-American women's musical experience, even when compared to that of other African diasporan women (who are also underrepresented). Thus, women are rarely represented as generators (composers, producers, "leaders," or performers) of black music culture and style in spite of their actual participation. They are more often perceived as subsidiary to the "real" players of musical invention as imitators, followers, dancers, or idolizing fans. Women's musical involvement is often perceived as a reflection of, or a response to, men's participation. However, if one considers double-dutch and hand-clapping games as musical activity, African-American girls' and women's musical authority is evident.

Black popular music has recalled and signified the emotional and cultural experience of blacks in the United States more than any other cultural medium since 1920 (the year of the first "race" record). The terms associated with black music making (such as syncopation, improvisation, "ragging" and ragtime, bop, swing, being "on time," groove,

bridge, et cetera) often signify a way of encoding both musical and non-musical experiences associated with black identity. Words such as *hard*, *cool*, *improvisation*, and *gangsta* can have different, often derogatory and disenfranchised meanings for black women.

A central obstacle to understanding black women's musical experience in contemporary culture is that "blackness" has been overwhelmingly imagined, talked about, and personified through the experience of heterosexual black men. These specifically male configurations have been primarily projected by the exponents of black bourgeois values and the authenticating values of street or ghetto "underclass" life since the late 1960s. Surveying the precursors of contemporary black music, we can perceive the canonizing of a heterosexual and masculine authority simply by remembering the "greats": the striding ragtime contributions of Scott Joplin (1868–1917) and Jelly Roll Morton (1885–1941); "hard" bop to "cool" jazz by "cats" Dizzy Gillespie (1917–1993) and Miles Davis (1926–1991), the interpretive gestures of hip-hop's "b-boys" breaking, writing, rhyming, and cutting (breakdancers, graffiti writers and artists, rapping MCs, and turntable-spinning disk jockeys); and in the quintessential gangsta persona and posse of West Coast rap in the 1990s.

When one evaluates musical expressions in culture, rather than through dominant modes of historicized memory and theories of mass production and consumption, women's performance is uncovered. We are most likely to see it in leisure and play, which often produce and ritualize the musical sounds and somatic expression found in black visual representations of popular music. The application and understanding of a theory about play is useful here.

Play is considered an experience or an act that is performed for its own sake, for pleasure or reward known as *flow*. The rewards for flow experience are said to be intrinsic, often marked by imaginative creativity, improvisation, and adventurousness – unbounded and fearless exploration.⁶ Coincidentally, *flow* is the same word rappers in hip-hop culture use to characterize the creative energy they experience when writing, performing, or extemporaneously "freestyling" rhymes or spinning records. Flow is also used as a communal sensibility – "Me an' the crew was *flowin'* hard." Hip-hoppers also use flow to communicate the feeling of a never ending performance. Flow, in any case, is not simply about random improvisation, formless and idle. In considering play as cultural expression, we must avoid erroneous assumptions about a lack of formal ways of behaving and performing that lead to perceptions of randomness. Play does involve codes of formality. For example, the codes for play

performance tend to readily allow for more individualized and improvisatory expression than is common to, for instance, recorded music (for play is not expected to be recreated relatively the same way in each performance). In play, variation or improvisation on several levels is a more prominent ideal of expression, just as in jazz or hip-hop improvisation.

*“That’s the Way We Flow”: Girls’ Musical Play*⁷

Black girls’ fancy footwork and skillful execution abound when turning the ropes of double-dutch. The skipping of the ropes, the sounds on the pavement, act as a timeline for musicalized gestures and rhymes. Musical creativity is learned and practiced through the body and voiced through tuneful rhymes sung in unison. Often these game songs feature verses that describe the “body musicking” (the act of making the body “dance”) that accompanies the rhymes. The long practiced ring game known as “Little Sally Walker” is one example:

Rise, Sally, rise!
Wipe your weepin’ eyes.
Put your hands on your hip
and let your backbone slip.
Ahhh! Shake it to the east,
Shake it to the west,
Shake it to the very one that you love the best.

With each presentation and repetition of this verse, a new girl enters the center of the ring, into the gaze of her sisters in play. This game is also played by boys, but usually the game is performed by girls who share and imagine themselves through playful musical behavior. The girl in the center responds to the words of the verse as she acts out the role of Sally by shaking her “bass-heavy” hips to the east and west in her own stylish manner. Individual girls soon learn to experiment with snatches of steps observed among more experienced movers and shakers.

“Here [in a ring game] she need not fear the taboos of the ‘serious’ world, as she performs within the circle of friends whose actions and song continually cue her: ‘This is play; do your thing.’”⁸ This kind of expressive activity is rarely found among young black girls outside the ring in formal or public settings. To do so might seem out of place, as if showing off, which is not well regarded in certain public circumstances. Because social dance tends to thrive in adult settings, expressive social dance might be closely associated with adult sexual behavior or inspire the no-

tion that such behavior carries sexualized meaning about its performer. Thus, the dance could be considered somewhat taboo.⁹

Shaking one's hips is central to many black dance styles, whether it be individualized dance or "hand-dancing"¹⁰ characterized by constant hand-holding and turning between partners that is patterned after African-American dances – the Lindy Hop and jitterbug. The African-American social dances that allow for expression of individual style include the older forms of the 1950s and 1960s – the bop, the Twist, the Tightrope, the Dog, the Australian Slop – and more recent styles from the 1970s to the present – the Bump, the Smurf, the Womp, the Bogle, and the Pepperseed (these last two are Jamaican-derived via enclaves in New York City).

Girls graduate from ring games to hand-clapping. Hand-clapping games, in some urban areas, are actually known as "cheers" or "scolds," and among some groups of girls these games have no specific name at all. Hand-clapping games are played primarily by younger girls of generally the same age until the fifth or sixth grade. These games are played by two or four partners (the latter is called a "bridge"). Hand-clapping games are more complex than ring games because they require more specialized cooperative skill and an equitably shared knowledge among players. Hand-clapping play is structured by a repeated pattern that may include a series of clapping gestures (which incorporate individual clapping and motions cooperatively executed with a partner). Other gestures involve snapping one's fingers and a host of metrical motions involving slapping parts of the body to produce different timbres – knees, thighs, chest, head, mouth). Silences, especially accompanied by gestures, are also common to this play. Patterns of aural gestures usually articulate a four-beat time frame of strong and weak beats similar to most black popular music. For example, in hip-hop it is common to hear a four-beat pattern where a bass sound marks beats 1 and 3, while a treble-voiced sound marks beats 2 and 4.

Along with these motor skills must be learned a repertoire of synchronized musical tunes or songs. A tuneful melodic verse may or may not be accompanied by a refrain – a repeated text or phrase that recurs in a song or poem. The alternation of verse and chorus reflects a textual form of call and response common in most forms of popular music. Hand-clapping game songs, as well as double-dutch, may feature in part or throughout a tuneful declamatory style (using two to five pitches within a narrow range). This style closely resembles the melodic orien-

tation of rapping found in hip-hop music: a narrow range of pitches used to carry the ideas of the narrative or theme synchronized with other musical activity such as segments of previously recorded music woven together by a disk jockey. In the case of hand-clapping games, cheers, and double-dutch, segments may be interchanged with material from other game-songs or may borrow musical ideas from popular and secular folk music.

In the melodic display of girls' game songs, the use of variable intonation of pitch, inflection and tone color, linguistic nuance, and rhythmic articulations of phonics reflects equally complex but different melodic sensibilities from those of music that employs expansive melodies of six to twelve pitches. It is rhythm that is heard most, and it is rhythm that has become synonymous with black music. However, rhythm is not the sole aspect of black musical sound that makes its sound "black."

An Identifiable Black Musical Style

Defining musical behavior as a reflection of racial identity has become a sensitive issue in musical circles. However, musicologists Samuel A. Floyd Jr., director of the Center for Black Music Research in Chicago, and Olly Wilson, a noted University of California composer and scholar, distinguish some of the traits of an identifiable black style. Floyd develops his framework from the evolution of a slave practice known as the ring shout.

The shout was an early Negro "holy dance" in which "the circling about . . . is the prime essential." . . . [Participants performed] "jerking," "hitching" motions, particularly in the shoulders. These movements were usually accompanied by a spiritual, sung by lead singers, "based" by others in the group (probably with some kind of responsorial device and by hand-clapping and knee-slapping). The "thud" of the basic rhythm was continuous, without pause . . . and the singing that took place in the shout made use of interjections of various kinds, elisions, blue-notes, and call-and-response devices, with the sound of the feet against the floor serving as an accompanying device.¹¹

Wilson more specifically defines a set of conceptual approaches or tendencies in African-American musical style. Wilson's conceptual approaches include complex metrical textures, the performance of melo-

dies sung like speech (or played in a percussive manner), frequently overlapping and sometimes complex call-and-response patterns, a high density of discrete musical events (especially the weaving of short motivic ideas with contrasting sound colors and textures), and the inseparability of music and dance and/or stylized movement as a part of the music-making process.¹²

We find many of these traits in girls' musical games. For example, the shapes and sizes of the parts of the body, the light or heavy stress placed on gestures and movement, can create a sound that represents the different musical timbres we are accustomed to hearing in the rhythm section of popular music. The hand claps can reflect the use of the snare drum on the backbeat (beats 2 and 4 of a four-beat pattern) or can be used for off-beat syncopation. As the feet stomp on pavement or a floor, the sound can resemble the thud or slap of a string or electric bass guitar. Of course, these traits could not be simply combined like a recipe for creating black music. Certain ingredients are learned culturally and contribute to a social interplay that cannot be dissected.

Other traits of music making or sounding "blackness" common to African-American and African diasporan music involve the incorporation of speechlike or raplike oral delivery as a form of melody; the incorporation of any musical sound or noise as music; and the nuances of vowel sounds and other phonations, including consonants, as pitched musical sound. The last point can be more readily understood as the exploitation of the brightness and darkness of vowels and consonants, the range of vocal or sound color that can include nasal qualities, huskiness, grittiness, smoothness, and so forth, that are shaped by certain phonetic combinations. The significance of language as musical sound is largely implicated in these last few traits. Some believe that this is a sign of the retention of the tonal variation of African languages, contributing to a "kaleidoscopic" variation in black musical expression or a "heterogeneous sound ideal."¹³ This is more complicated than thinking black music is merely about rhythm. Black musical style is a marriage of rhythms of melodies, the body, and language.

Double-Dutch Jump Rope: Black Girls' Delight

Double-dutch is unique among traditional practices for African-American girls. It is performed by three to four girls at a time, but more can play by taking turns in rotation. It is often played on the sidewalk, on an asphalt blacktop at a playground, or in the middle of the

street. One extra-long rope – a clothesline – is all that is needed, but two ropes about ten feet long are ideal.

Two girls, designated turners, twirl the ropes so that they cut the air with a taut momentum. They alternately loop the ropes toward each other, creating an ellipsoidal space tall and wide enough for players to jump and perform stylized moves within it. One task of the turners, in addition to making sure the ropes do not stop turning, is to make constant adjustments so the space within the ropes fits the articulations of the moving bodies. Girls of varied body types excel at this play as both turners and jumpers. Double-dutch, like ring games and hand-clapping games, has a repertoire of songs that accompany it that draw from jingles, children's rhymes, and popular song.

I went downtown
To see James Brown.
He gave me a nickel
To buy a pickle.
The pickle was sour.
He gave me a flower.
The flower was dead,
So this is what he said:
Hopping on one foot, one foot, one foot.
Hopping on two foot, two foot, two foot.
Hopping on three foot . . .
Hopping on four foot . . .¹⁴

Although this game-song does not literally quote James Brown's music, the lyrics are clearly playing ideas about the "Godfather of Soul" with his emphatic dance and stage persona – "Dance on the good foot!"¹⁵ Brown is the epitome of coordinating movement with a range of vocal expression, rhymes, and speech about movement.

Seizing the optimal moment to enter the circling ropes of double-dutch, one or two girls leap inside immediately, alternating their feet to avoid the skip of the ropes as they pass under them. The jumpers execute styles of movement, from simple to complex choreographed activity (which may or may not be dance) while continuing to shift their weight from the left foot to the right. If an arm or leg movement isn't timed well or is out of place, the rope will stop and the turn is over. The goal is to perpetuate jumping inside the ropes for as long as possible. At times, girls improvise a popular dance move (such as doing the Bump with a partner as they stay within the turning ropes). All movements, improvised or cho-

reographed, must be “in time” with the metrical skips of the ropes – the musical time line. The skips against the pavement serve as a basic rhythmic pulsation, an inconspicuous and conscious rhythmic time line for both rhymes and somatic rhythms.

Double-dutch requires much more coordination, agility, strength, and sensitivity to kinesthetic timing in the body than other girls’ games. The body is constantly in motion, resisting and reacting to the gravity pull of the incessant jumping over the turning ropes. It is truly a concerted and musical effort on the part of the jumper(s) and the turners. Although jumpers and turners can be interchangeable, many girls tend to specialize in jumping or turning. But all girls memorize the tuneful rhymes that accompany the practice.

As girls grow older, the musical lessons that were learned, memorized, and danced through the various musical *études* of girls’ play are transformed again and again into newer and more mature or adult social activities. They may be employed in the cheerleading associated with male varsity sports in junior and senior high school, and later at some colleges. Here, girls still may be able to compose new cheers in the black style of their former activities, and many of these cheers are then circulated among other cheerleading squads over time and around the country. An apparent difference occurs at these levels due to the interracial and intercultural interactions of institutional education. One is more likely to find black styles of cheerleading in urban areas or at predominantly and historically black institutions. Also, in college and university settings, African-American women may employ their skills in the service of a black Greek-letter organization (sororities such as Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, and Sigma Gamma Rho) where “step shows” are common to group expression in black social settings. Throughout African-American women’s lives, dancing may incorporate the lessons of girls’ games through the constantly evolving styles of black “street” expression. “Doing your thing” has no age limit and can become quite serious even in its playfulness.

The many black women I have interviewed about the musical experiences during their lives support the cultural opinion that black girls see themselves as active and primary agents of the tradition of hand-clapping games, cheers, and particularly double-dutch. There is a way in which black girls make meaning of these activities that differs from other groups, though there may be commonalities. These activities clearly are connected to musical expression – singing, rhyming, dancing, and rap-

ping. Girls' games encode group identity through the use of idiomatic black linguistics and cultural images.

*“Here Come the Lady with the African Booty”:
Gestures Toward Sexuality in Girls' Games*

In her assessments of women, gender, and music, ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff is not surprised that the “majority of existing descriptions of women’s musical activities and rationales for their behavior focus on [women’s] primary social roles, for these roles are central to women’s gender identity.”¹⁶ African-American women’s gendered social roles have been plagued by myths about their sexuality (the mythical image of a sexually insatiable Jezebel comes to mind), myths about teenage pregnancy and single motherhood, myths about black women as matriarchs (evoking the image of the ugly Sapphire who usurps men’s dominance), myths about black women’s incompetence as mothers unable to raise their sons “right,” and exaggerated myths about black women’s marketability in the workplace relative to black men in a racist society. All of these stereotypes of black female identity contribute to the difficulty (the downright *unattractiveness*) of viewing or hearing the musical activities of black girls and women as reflecting authority and expertise in black music making.

It is through the autonomous experiences of women who once played and performed cheers among themselves – as opposed to standing saddle-shoed on the sidelines of boys’ or men’s activities – who once played hand-clapping games, who once enjoyed ring games, and who thrilled at trying and sometimes even failing at double-dutch, that we can recoup women’s musical participation as a sign of “flow.” We are beginning to see how the musical aspects of these games are transmitted, but how are these musical activities interpreted through the socialized assumptions about race and gender? Given the myths about black women’s sexuality and their “dysfunctional” roles, are these games (with their musicalized gestures, dance, and behavior) interpreted as “sexual”? Are girls playing with proverbial fire? Koskoff writes:

Sexuality, both self- and other-defined, affects music performance in three important ways: (1) performance environments may provide a context for sexually explicit behavior, such that music performance becomes a metaphor for sexual relations; (2) the actual or perceived loss of sexuality may change women’s musical roles and/or statuses;

and (3) cultural beliefs in women's inherent sexuality may motivate the separation of or restriction imposed upon women's musical activities; . . . young girls, older women, homosexual and "marginal" women (i.e., those who may be of childbearing years but are perceived as if "sexless" for other reasons) – may assume certain musical roles that deny or negate their sexuality.¹⁷

Let us look at two examples of sexual references in the lyrics of hand-clapping games played by African-American girls. In these games black girls play freely with idioms of sexuality. "Mailman, Mailman" was recorded by Carol Merrill-Mirsky from an eight-year-old African-American girl, Devonne, at King Elementary School in Los Angeles. I recorded "I'm a Nut" from twin sisters Jasmine and Stephanie in a predominantly African-American suburb of Detroit.¹⁸

Mailman, mailman, do your duty,
Here come the lady with da African booty.
She can do da wah-wah, she can do da splits,
She can do anything to make you split, so split!

On the surface Devonne's song frames the power of a black woman's "African" butt (or "booty" in the black vernacular). The mailman, doing his job by delivering the mail (male), is being warned about this Africanized (read: primal?) black woman who can do all kinds of tricks to make him succumb to her whim. It is not surprising that girls' games reflect stereotypical racial and gender ideology. However, girls are obviously employing these lyrics as a positive and playful identification. Maybe this game-song is symbolically calling attention to the advanced skill and performative traditions of girls playing hand-clapping games or dancing – countering the power of one kind of work with the power of displaying styles – dance. There is an obvious possibility that black female movement can overpower male duty. This game-song exploits the powerful meanings of movement and display in the black female body. This is articulated through third-person narration and rhyme. The power of the body is matched by the powerful idioms of sexuality – words that convey an inefable activity (the "wah-wah"). The "wah-wah" clearly alludes to powerful movement involving "da African booty." The "wah-wah" might have a vague but racial-musical connection to the dance called the Watusi that supposedly imitated the Tutsi ethnic dances of Rwanda and Burundi.¹⁹

Hazel Carby recalls that at one time illicit sexual behavior was a "natural" consequence of certain modern forms of dancing in black social

contexts.²⁰ Such perceptions in the late 1920s led to moral panic among whites and middle-class blacks concerning black women's lack of control over their sexual behavior or displays of sexuality. Such displays offended upper-class sensibilities and were considered "pathological" and in need of institutional control. If black urban life was synonymous with "commercialized vice," then urban women were precariously at risk. In girls' game playing, beyond any institutional control, sexual behavior and references to sex are neutralized and do not reflect actual behavior. "Doing your thing" here does not mean doing *the* thing, having sex.

In the second example, the implication of sexuality again surfaces. A wildness of behavior is captured and expressed through the words and movements. The girls perform a series of hand claps that involve slapping the chest, which is an unusual gesture in most hand-clapping games. But the chest slaps effectively sound a bass-heavy thud characteristic of black popular music's emphasis on beats 1 and 3.

I'm a nut [answered by clapping patterns highlighted by chest slaps]
In a hut [clapped response]
I met my boyfriend [indecipherable]

This was interrupted by "Jasmine! Stop!" They regrouped and started again.

I'm a nut
In a hut
I stole my mommy's pockie-book.
I'm cra - zy!
I'm foo - lish!
I'm burning, burning, hot ta hot.
I'm burning, burning, hot ta hot.
I'm burning, burning, hot ta hot, SO WHAT!

Jasmine and Stephanie performed these games under their mother's watchful eye. They executed a series of different hand-clapping games for me without pause, with the exception of "I'm a nut." Here they seemed to stop and correct themselves in certain places (apparently in a conscious effort to censor their play under their mother's "religious" eye). Stephanie initiated the censoring. If the phrases had not been censored, there would appear to have been a kind of erotic-erasure inherent in the game itself (without Stephanie's help). The "so what!" erases the possibility of taking what came before seriously. These nine-year-old girls had

previously shared their awareness of male genitalia when relating a bit of gossip from school: another girl accused Jasmine of touching a classmate's "thing." During their performance of "I'm a nut," therefore, I was aware that they knew something about sexuality.

In a study on dance among women in Trinidad, Daniel Miller notes that when women express signs of heterosexual behavior among themselves away from men (or in this case a mother), it is not about sex or directed toward men, it is autosexuality.²¹ African-American girl's games, like the dance among Trinidadian women at Carnival, make *use* of the idiom of sexuality rather than being *about* sexuality.²² Miller asserts, "Symptomatic of a more general avoidance of institutionalized relationships . . . there develops a more flexible moral code which allows affectivity to emerge through the construction rather than the fulfillment of a relationship."²³

As an oral-kinetic *étude*, "I'm a Nut" highlights the musical interaction of the vocal line and the body musicking. Although the metrical structure appears to be in four-four time, the metrical orientation does not lend itself to a quantitative conception of time – counting "one-two-three-four." The reiterated kinetic experience associated with the body-musicking is marked by the sensation and visual appearance of the emphatic chest slaps. Snarelike hand claps fall on beats 2 and 4, in alternation with the heavy-toned chest slaps on 1 and 3. The body musicking works in tandem with the vocal part on two levels. On one level, there is a call and response, a dialogue, between the vocal part and the body musicking. On another level, the risqué text – "I'm burnin', burnin' hot-ta-hot" – works in tandem with the musical tension experienced aurally and kinetically. Sexuality, as it is obliquely apparent in hip-hop texts, plays a critical role in shaping musical aesthetics within a performance event that is not explicitly about sexual relations. But "I'm a Nut" (as well as Jasmine's and Stephanie's specific performance of it) does allow girls to safely and freely voice and play out real and imagined ways of being black, female, and sexual through cultural musical expression.

*The Transformation and ReInterpretation of Women's
Participation in the Culture: The Case of Double-Dutch*

Jibber this, and jibber that,
Jibber kill the alley cat.²⁴

In the early 1970s, there were concerns about the idle minds *and* *bodies* of girls in the streets and neighborhoods of New York City. In the

streets, girls are “in trouble,” a code reference to girls’ sexual activity and, oftentimes, consequent pregnancy. In response to these concerns, in 1973 two officers of the New York City Police Department, David Walker and Ulysses Williams, who served in the Harlem community affairs division, initiated formalized double-dutch competitions and tournaments. By 1975, Walker and others had formed the American Double-Dutch League (ADDL), which now conducts local, national, and international competitions every year. Groups such as the 4-H Club, the Girl Scouts, the Salvation Army, and various justice and police recreational departments have sponsored teams during the league’s twenty-year history.

When Walker was considering an avenue for channeling girls’ behavior, he noticed how black girls in the city liked to show off while playing double-dutch and observed that they liked to teach each other rhymes. He was sincerely concerned that girls did not have a citywide athletic event. Boys had basketball, football, and baseball. Then he remembered his sister, who had spent hours playing double-dutch as a child.²⁵

Walker commented in an interview that young inner-city girls “are loners, going from toys to boys at an early age.”²⁶ The implication of Walker’s rhyme is that *toys* (employed in the play activities of younger girls) are transformed into another sort of game playing with *boys* as girls get older. The detective’s words also echo stereotypical perceptions that apply to female fandom in rap music – girls and women chasing after male rap stars rather than nurturing a “real” appreciation or understanding of the creativity and production (the work) involved in rap music. Women’s participation is reduced to being about the play of “catching a man” – sexual relationships and sexual politics (“Here come the lady with da African booty”). These are the games African-American women play according to the hegemonic discourse of rap.

Walker and Williams applied a set of rules and guidelines (written by Williams) that formalized the double-dutch tournaments. By 1995, the cost of the rule book was \$30. In order to compete, official ADDL ropes must be purchased, only athletic wear is allowed in competition, and each singles or doubles team is required to have a parental sponsor. As of 1980, the rules allow for the inclusion of boys (one boy allowed per singles team, two boys per doubles team).²⁷ The competition requires participation in compulsory rounds and freestyle rounds not unlike athletic competition in ice skating or gymnastics. Each double-dutch team must qualify to move on to compete in the final rounds. Within the compulsory competition, the officers devised a speed element (likely as a result of their interest in transforming the game into a sport). In street double-

dutch, the idea of absolute speed (speed for speed's sake) was never highly regarded. Rather, the appeal was the adventure and skill of cooperative play among black girls. Brought together by school, neighborhood, or other kinship systems, girls develop a repertoire of old and new game songs in which improvised choreography and rhymes structure the adventure. Officers Walker and Williams named the acts executed in the freestyle competition *tricks*, akin to acrobatic feats. The rule book encourages teams to use various props (batons, balls, extra ropes, et cetera).²⁸ Translating double-dutch from the street to the stage of competitive sport ultimately precipitated the loss of the rhymed songs that were integral to girls' games. In my interviews with David Walker and organizers of the ADDL competition, I heard no explanation for the loss of the verbal dimension of double-dutch.²⁹ I concluded that organizers consciously or unconsciously disapproved of the sexualized expression of many of the game songs. Organizers might have been making a conscious effort to make double-dutch accessible to girls (and later boys) of all ethnic and racial groups.

Institutionalizing the sport, with all the equipment, cross-country travel, and a \$30 rule book, situates adults at the center of the perpetuation and arbitration of double-dutch. These adults are often parents and justice and police officers who wish to create a "respectable" sport for competition. The theme for the 1995 World Invitational competition was "Rope, not Dope." Making double-dutch a "sport" has transformed girls' games possibly in response to fears about what African-American girls do with leisure time. Leisure time (once play time) becomes a dangerous period for girls entering puberty. Sexuality and its meanings for African-American women also get transformed and reinterpreted in the context of hip-hop music despite female participation in hip-hop through double-dutch.

The first presentation of rap overseas was a European tour in 1982 featuring representative subcultural expressions from New York City. "Also aboard [the New York City Rap Tour] were the breakdancing Rock Steady Crew, *the Double Dutch Girls*, and the graffiti artists."³⁰ With the emergence of rap as recorded music in 1979, public interest peeked into hip-hop culture and its performative street culture and dance party scene performed by the "troubled" youth of the South Bronx (and soon thereafter other New York boroughs).³¹ Since the early 1980s, the expressive acts of hip-hop have been generally cast as male. By the mid-1990s, girls' double-dutch rope jumping would no longer appear to be emblematic of hip-hop culture and would rarely, if ever again, appear as part of a bill for

a touring rap concert. Ironically, even female rappers seem to disregard girls' musical activities as generally reflective of black musical aesthetics or hip-hop aesthetics. One of the few examples of recognition in a hip-hop magazine of the 1990s was expressed by Leslie Segar, a top hip-hop choreographer. Segar noted in a 1993 interview that double-dutch represented an "old school" influence that contributes to hip-hop choreography.³² One way to understand the "erasure" of double-dutch from the collective memory of hip-hop culture is as the result of the politics of gender, the masculinization of rap. The imposition of masculinity and maleness on conceptions of music performance has been challenged only as a matter of nonmusical history.³³ Assumptions about gender in black music contribute to the belief that males and females have different musical spheres and experiences. In the black popular culture of the 1990s, nowhere is this more evident than in rap music and hip-hop culture. Most rap artists signed to major recording labels are men, most disk jockeys are men, and most fans have been characterized as men. The culture has been documented almost exclusively by men, through male experience, which has led to obvious assumptions that hip-hop culture is exclusive to African-American urban men (erasing not only women's contribution to its origins but also that of Latinos, West Indians, and whites).

Consequently, hip-hop culture has become associated with earlier expressive forms and traditions thought to also be exclusive to black men. Anthropologists collected linguistic practices primarily among African-American men on urban streets involving rhymes, indirection, and metaphor, such as "the dozens" or "cappin'." Rapping as it is expressed in hip-hop music was influenced by these and other antecedents involving tuned and inflected vocal expressivity – the "spiritual" sermon tradition, the rhymes and jive-talk of black radio disc jockeys, and even the poetic banter of Muhammed Ali (former world heavyweight boxing champion). These so-called progenitors of rapping all are connected to constructions of black male authority and privilege – the leader of the black church, the voice and musical personality of black radio, and the male bravado and physical power of black male athletes. Re-remembering these histories as "male" ritualizes and reproduces patriarchal ideologies within and outside black communities.

If one sees the interconnectedness of the black musical activities in both cultural and commercial settings, then an analysis of black girls' games suggests a reinterpretation of women's participation in contemporary hip-hop culture. This perspective is important, given the rampant criticism of misogyny and misrepresentations of women in both commer-

cial and “underground” rap music. If one accepts that the music of hip-hop culture embodies and articulates musical activities that are common to African-American girls’ experience, then women’s reception of rap might serve as a vehicle for remembering (consciously or subconsciously) their own distinctly female-oriented musical experiences. This explains women’s participation as the recovery of a distinctly female mode of expression within a “male” domain of commercial production. It is the ideological power of maleness in a mass-mediated hip-hop culture that makes it so difficult to fully appreciate African-American women’s creative and expressive participation as anything other than subsidiary to men’s. From such a distorted viewpoint, women are simply perceived as acting out myths and stereotypes. Girls and women play and live out their lives through a complex form of identity politics that questions prevailing constructions of maleness *and* femaleness.

This masculinized view of rap places female participants in rap and hip-hop culture in the precarious position of being attracted to a musical expression that is apparently “bad” for them, that “talks bad” about them, and therefore diminishes their social capacity and respectability as African-American women. Therein, silence is golden. Women appear as mute and unconscious daughters of the hip-hop revolution. Equipped in this distorted reality with an entire body of methods and meanings (“niggaz,” “bytches,” booty-shaking, hip-gyrating, singing, and speakingly vulgarly), black girls and women are actually excavating hidden treasures – girls’ games.

*Conclusion: Can There Be a Way of “Sounding”
Black Woman-ness in Musical Behavior?*

Olly Wilson described African Americans’ approach to style as a way of making music *sound* “blackness.”³⁴ If “blackness” has been constructed in letters and literature and in very public music performance as primarily male, we can reinterpret “blackness” in music by considering the not-so-public music making of women and girls. In cultural settings where meanings are not solely defined by written and recorded discourse, “blackness” can include and be represented by women and their gendered experience. This view offers a rare opportunity to reinscribe women’s musical experience into making music *sound* “blackness” and “femaleness.” The apparent emphasis on male authority, male performance, and exclusively male social experiences in the institutionalization

of rap music has nearly eclipsed the presence and performance of girls and women.

The games that African-American girls play suggest that both women and girls should recognize signs of their own private play in hip-hop music in addition to hearing it as an expression of black male life. Stuart Hall defines popular culture as the site “where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time.”³⁵ Women often must look beyond the publicness of popular culture to fully and playfully imagine their identities. When this is accomplished, African-American women will recognize the male *and* the female in their appreciation of rap music.

The Language Culture of Rap Music Videos

**PATRICIA A. WASHINGTON &
LYNDA DIXON SHAVER**

This study is a perspectival rhetorical analysis of the language culture in rap music videos created by urban male African Americans in 1993.¹ Using both the verbal and nonverbal discourse of rap music videos, this essay will compare the development of rap music to the evolution of the blues; it will trace the evolution of rappers we will call “organic intellectuals” while identifying their roles in the creation of a national popular culture (that is, a culture that reflects the perspectives of young urban blacks); and it will analyze the discourse of rap lyrics. The historical evolution of the communities of residence has shaped the music of both rappers and blues singers, and we will discuss the importance of community as both the source and solution for understanding outlaws.² The emerging patterns of behavior and topics within the discourse or rap constitute the following sites of conflict: economic problems, violence, family, social alienation, polarization of social units, and cultural and social deprivation. Although there are different styles of rap music, this study focuses on the hard-core “original gangsta” rappers, or OG rappers.

Literature Review

Understanding the original gangsta outlaw and his role in this evolution requires extrapolating from the following: history, expressive vernacular theory,³ theories about human behavior in the social environment derived from the social systems model;⁴ the African tradition of radical intellectuals;⁵ and the European tradition of organic intellec-

tuals.⁶ In Spencer's words, the rappers are in an "insurrection of subjugated knowledge."⁷ Fanon and Gramsci theorize that the language of oppressed people – the rappers – provides the basis for a national popular culture that encompasses an African-diasporan aesthetic.⁸ The OG rappers fit Gramsci's definition of organic intellectuals because they are members of a community of oppressed people whose music is the instrument with which they speak of their common social, political, and economic persecution.

Theoretical Foundations and Methodology

Our approach encompasses the disciplines of African-American studies, social work, communications, and sociology. The social work theory of human behavior in the social environment, as described by Compton and Galaway,⁹ provides a link between a historical perspective and projections for the future. The communication methodology used to examine the text of rap videos is perspectival rhetorical analysis.¹⁰

HUMAN BEHAVIOR IN THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Social work theory stresses the importance of understanding human behavior within the social environment of those who experience that environment and the impact of that environment on their past, present, and future behavior. In addition to Compton and Galaway, Hearn, Parsons, and Pincus and Minahan have contributed to social work theory.¹¹ This theory provides a structure for organizing the historical survey of the African-American community and its interactions with various institutions. In addition, interpreting human behavior in an environmental context provides a framework for understanding the relationship between the evolution of rap music and the development of the OG rapper.

PERSPECTIVAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

From rhetoric, semiotics, symbolic interaction, and interpretive theories, the study of human perspectives includes the text (both verbal and nonverbal discourse) of interactants and their settings, as discussed by Potter and Wetherell and by Eco.¹² Perspectival rhetorical analysis seeks to locate the "sites of conflict"¹³ that represent the major *agons* between people.¹⁴ The dilemmatic insight provided by Billig and his colleagues recognizes that positive and negative referents organize the

language culture of people and organizations.¹⁵ This theory applies Burke's idea that oppositional discourse structures the perceptions of participants by composing master metaphors that are agonistic (contesting and combative).¹⁶

Approaching discourse in this manner makes possible access to and confirmation of the semiotic coherence of the language culture under study, as discussed by Eco in *The Limits of Interpretation*. Studies already cited in this essay that draw upon theorists such as Eco, Billig, Burke, Cherwitz, and Hikins,¹⁷ use perspectival rhetorical analysis to examine human texts in several settings (such as construction companies, health delivery organizations, educational institutions, as well as state and federal governments).

The term *language culture* is used to describe the perspectives, or world views, of people revealed by their word choice, descriptors, method of speaking, kinesiology, proxemics (the study of the interaction of people with their environment), gestures, eye gaze, physical environment, spoken and written language, architectural design, colors, and other channels of communication. Examples are the multitude of available channels of communication as explained in Burke, Eco, Potter and Wetherell, L. Shaver, and P. Shaver.¹⁸ Therefore, the data for this study are the topics of videos as they are scripted, colored, staged, and placed in specific contexts and environments.

The discourse of individuals, groups, and organizations can be interpreted through methods developed by Billig and his associates to demonstrate that human thought and social discourse are made up of oppositions (dilemmatic elements) that are both explicit and implicit.¹⁹ These can be understood as sites of conflict.²⁰ This method of analysis is in sharp contrast to the traditional view of social psychologists that human thought is controlled by consistent internal schemata or templates.

Analysis of language cultures separately, together, and over time, reveals relationships that “[actualize] certain possible connections”²¹ and allows for interpretation.²² The “reader” of the video text experiences it through all channels of communication.

The language culture of rap videos can be analyzed as both conscious and unconscious revelation of dilemmas or sites of conflict between and among rappers and other individuals, social organizations, and cultures. The rappers' perspectives reveal the dilemmatic issues that constitute the belief systems of organic intellectuals and gangsta figures in rap. These sites of conflict are also found in the history of the African-American oral tradition and, more specifically, in the history of the blues.

The Evolution of Rap Music and the Blues

THE TRADITION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC

In order to understand rap music and rappers, one must understand the connection between African-American music and African-American history. Furthermore, one must incorporate the aesthetic of the African diaspora²³ and other theories into the analysis. The transmission of ideas or feelings through oral traditions has been the primary method for communication by Africans in the diaspora for more than a century.

Rap music is a black urban art form that requires serious study of the past and present urban culture, as suggested by Baker, Dyson, Hayes, Spady and Eure, and Spencer.²⁴ There are many parallels in the development of urban blues and OG rap, from their historical origins to today's preponderance of male singers to sexually suggestive lyrics. According to Leroi Jones (now Amiri Baraka), the blues is "primarily a verse form and secondarily a way of making music."²⁵ Blues evolved from the social realities of its time. It is necessary to understand the importance of the effects of the communities inhabited by the blues singers. These effects include a community's mores, biases, values, and socioeconomic history. Urban blues evolved from jazz, gospel, ragtime, spirituals, work chants, chain gang songs, and the functional music of West Africa that was used for social control and educating youth.²⁶

Rap music has also evolved from African-American music forms, with influences from be-bop, fusion, rhythm and blues, funk, and contemporary gospel. Rappers produce music that is both evolved from African-American oral tradition and a reflection of society from their own perspective.²⁷ Rap is primarily a rhymed verse form. The words and the rhythmic sounding of these words are critically important because, as with the blues, words describe the society from which it evolved. Both blues and rap speak of pain, struggle, and survival despite periods of hopelessness.

Early forms of the blues appeared in the rural South during the first post-Reconstruction period. It was a period of upheaval and violence; it was the period of the Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow laws, and lynchings. Massive numbers of African Americans left the farm for the urban South or moved west to Kansas, Oklahoma, and California. Others moved north to Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Iowa, Ohio, New York, and Pennsylvania. Freed by the civil rights legislation of the 1860s and 1870s but suffering from the backlash during the first post-Reconstruction period, African Americans transported their music with them.

African Americans also migrated during World War I, the Depression years, World War II, and the Korean War. The early blues changed over time and became classic blues. In large urban areas, especially northern cities, the blues was transformed once again into the urban blues. The music reflected the cruelty as well as the hopelessness of “backbreaking labor in the mills,”²⁸ the hopelessness of segregated substandard housing, and the slick sophistication of wailing electric guitars. The massive migration of African Americans discussed earlier created a kind of isolation for the newly arrived rural immigrants. They sought to leave behind the discrimination, prejudice, and senseless violence of the rural South for the hoped-for freedom and opportunities of the urban North. What many found was racial segregation, discrimination in housing and unemployment, and a law enforcement community that they perceived to be as hostile as the one they had left behind.²⁹

African Americans banded together to see familiar faces and to hear familiar voices singing familiar blues songs. They worked hard in the steel mills, auto assembly lines, appliance factories, stockyards, and docks. On the weekends, they played their blues loudly and testified with blues singers in neighborhood bars. The guitars and voices became amplified; singers sported diamonds and drove large flashy cars. They did not sing about the chain gangs, the high sheriff, and the “baadd” men and women of the South. They sang about the urban jails, big boss man, the “po-leese,” and the “baadd” men and women of the North.

Rap Music and Rap Music Videos

Rap music, like the blues, evolved during a similar period of social upheaval. The critical difference in the reception of, perception of, and reaction to rap, by both African Americans and others, is the visual impact of rap music videos as a result of widespread media coverage. Early blues music was heard in the rural South primarily by African Americans in small clubs and on the radio; in the urban North it was heard by both African Americans and Euro-Americans in small clubs. These settings limited the audience. The impact of radio broadcasts or recorded African-American music was far less than the visual impact of rap videos.

Early blues used humor and self-deprecation as a part of the presentation of self. In sharp contrast, early OG rap rarely used humor or self-deprecation. Even though the verses of early blues, urban blues, and OG rap alluded to slickness of African-American males in outsmarting establishment figures or their sexual prowess with women, they frequently

catalogued both the internal and external social problems plaguing their communities as they attempted to resist marginalization.

Rap is the music of the dispossessed freed by the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. The period following the landmark legislation of this era is sometimes referred to as the second Reconstruction. During this second Reconstruction, there was a massive migration of middle-class and upper-income African Americans from the central city to the suburbs. Many middle-class Euro-Americans had left the cities decades earlier. The working class and the poor were concentrated in the central cities in deteriorating housing, in areas plagued by high unemployment rates for young African-American males and escalating crime rates as the government lost both its war on poverty and its war against drugs.

D. C. Glasgow accurately described the 1970s and predicted the consequences of these policies manifested during the Reagan era of the 1980s as “a population of poor and unused black youth, confined in economic poverty . . . undereducated, jobless, without [the] salable skills . . . [necessary] to gain access to mainstream life.”³⁰ Drugs were flooding the country; farmers were losing their family farms; and health care was increasingly unaffordable for many. As Glasgow describes society, gangs were engaged in full-scale war for the increasingly lucrative drug trade that changed neighborhoods in the central cities into a postapocalyptic landscape with vacant lots, abandoned buildings, homeless people, crack houses, and deteriorating government-subsidized housing. M. E. Dyson and T. Rose linked the culture of hip-hop to these economic problems, increased violence in the inner city, social alienation, polarization of social units, and spiritual deprivation.³¹

During this period, punk music with its nihilistic verses swelled out of Europe; heavy metal lyrics contained an ominous message; rock music became louder, with screaming guitars played by snarling androgynous men who swirled out of MTV. Outside of this mix, rap music was being created in the parks and playgrounds of the South Bronx, West Bronx, and Queens. Scholars who study rap music, such as Baker and Rose, suggest that its beginnings were the megasound box parties held in the parks, school auditoriums, or abandoned buildings of the South Bronx, West Bronx, Queens, or Brooklyn during the late 1970s and early 1980s, with Kool DJ Herc from Kingston, Jamaica, along with Grand Master Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, and the Sugar Hill Gang.³²

Many of the early rappers spoke of their sexual prowess or their stellar ability to rhyme, but in 1982 Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five were among the first rappers to reach a large audience with an OG theme

about the problems that threatened them and their communities, with their recording of “The Message” (Grand Master Flash 1982). Not until the late 1980s and the early 1990s was there a substantial number of OG rappers: NWA, Ice-T, Slick Rick, Gang Starr, Geto Boys, Naughty by Nature, and Dr. Dre, for example.

Urban gangsta rappers continue the tradition of creating a functional music that restructures the language, images, and sounds of African-American music. Their voices are the voices of outlaws and outsiders. Dyson says that their words are being used to reclaim their history and to “project a style of self onto the world that disciplines ultimate social despair into forms of cultural resistance, and transforms the ugly terrain of ghetto existence into a searing portrait of life as it is lived by millions of voiceless people.”³³

Whereas all African Americans share a common heritage in the blues, some left the inner city for the suburbs, while others remained, and from this group comes OG rap. From this population came the original gangsta rappers. Jones notes that the lyrics of the urban blues were “a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time.”³⁴ Like the lyrics of the blues, the lyrics of gangsta rap in the 1980s and 1990s present a portrait of the lives of young, inner-city African-American males today.

Urban blues and rap music are both derived from the experiences and the lives of their creators. Rap is African-American people’s perceptions of the world in which they live as well as the world from which they have been excluded. Large numbers of African Americans are marginalized and estranged from the American dream of success. Estrangement and anger are reflected in the lyrics of their songs, particularly in gangsta rap.

The Evolution of Organic Intellectuals

Historically, Africans (in the diaspora) have relied on individuals who are talented in the transmission of ideas or feelings in the oral tradition as sources of information and inspiration. Young African-American rappers, who are primarily but not exclusively male, are reconstructing their reality through the discourse of rap.

TRANSFORMATION FROM ORIGINAL GANGSTAS TO ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS

The blues singers were the first to utilize the media in the “insurrection of subjugated knowledge.”³⁵ The lyrics of their songs spoke of feelings, events, and issues that most blacks either pretended did not exist

or spoke about in whispers. Houston A. Baker Jr. describes the (urban) blues as a vernacular expression created from an ancestral mix of economics and history.³⁶ From the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, black cultural nationalist poets (Haki Madhubuti, Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez), musicians (Last Poets, Gil Scott Heron, Nina Simone), and playwrights (Ed Bullins, Charles Fuller, Douglas Turner Ward, Adrienne Kennedy) continued the discourse. They clearly stated their objections to the inequality in the distribution of resources as well as the deadly harassment by law enforcement officers in black communities. These artists provided verbal and visual images of the way things were and the way things were “sposed to be.”

ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS

Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1992), Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1968), and Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* (1963) discuss the importance of creating a popular movement and organizing it into a social force that utilizes the voices of the oppressed.³⁷ According to Keen, these voices “must be organically born of and bound to the masses. If not, the social forces potentially unleashable through national popular culture will not come to fruition.”³⁸

Spencer acknowledges the importance of the hard-core OG rappers as men who engage in “insurrection of subjugated knowledge,” practice “self-determinative politico moral leadership,”³⁹ and have an “attitude” but are knowledgeable about the negative impact of various institutions on them and their communities. Furthermore, Spencer sees rappers as sources of knowledge who recognize knowledge as a tool for empowerment and an important resource in the emancipation of the black community.

Legal charges brought against various rappers from 1992 to 1995 (Snoop Doggy Dog, the late Tupac Shakur, and Slick Rick) have intensified both the professional causal analyses and evaluations of rap videos. Increased polarization between low-income African Americans and middle-class African Americans and whites has resulted in increased racism. Such racism is demonstrated in music videos and in other visual media such as film (*Jungle Fever* and *Higher Learning*) and television shows such as *New York Undercover*. The political rhetoric of conservative members of the Democratic Party and the far right wing of the Republican Party (as exhibited in 1995 in presidential campaign speeches by Phil Gramm, Robert Dole, and Patrick Buchanan) has deepened the widening gulf between the poor and the middle class (regardless of ethnicity). These fac-

tors have played an important role in the transformation of rappers into organic intellectuals.

OG rappers fit Gramsci's definition of organic intellectuals because they are members of a community of oppressed people who use music as an instrument to speak of their common oppression socially, politically, and economically. They perform several important functions: they (1) replace existing intellectuals who have ignored or rejected their origins; (2) use the existing experiences and feelings of urban people (through rap) to restore lost pride in self, ancestors, and community; (3) educate urban youth utilizing symbols they can understand in a language that permits them to shut out those not open to the message.⁴⁰ Ice Cube says, "People sometimes act as if [I'm] making up the stuff [I] talk about in my music . . . that [I'm] trying to be controversial and shocking, . . . but [my music] is also real . . . the language of the neighborhood."⁴¹

Rappers as organic intellectuals/OGs provide black youth (and often youths of other ethnic groups) with a sense of "homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in economic but also in social and political fields," in the words of Gramsci.⁴² Black youths are being informed that the world they live in is dangerous and that their future is jeopardized by the existing order. The sources of that danger lie within as well as outside their communities. By looking critically at the institutions that purportedly exist to help them, black youths can prepare themselves to understand and change the forces that threaten their future.

According to Gramsci, the first phase in the creation of a national popular culture requires the dissemination of information throughout the oppressed community by the organic intellectuals/OGs and the continuous forging of a natural bond between themselves and those who listen. In their songs, OG rappers critique the existing social structure, using an oral tradition that has historically been perceived as a reliable source of information for those who do not trust books. The community trust in the truth of their words is based on their membership in the community and belief in a shared experience of oppression from a common source — the police.

The second phase outlined by Gramsci requires that information be accessible to and presented in a format that people understand. Rap music meets the first two criteria because of the success of the cable channels BET and MTV, the proliferation and sales of rap videos and tapes, and the accessibility to both by all socioeconomic groups.

The third phase, as described by Keen, is that blacks develop a collective will that exercises hegemony, thus becoming the “architects of change and masters of their destiny.”⁴³ The national popular culture created by rap music will not become a liberation movement until such events occur. The rap music of the organic intellectuals/OGs is important to the development of the collective consciousness of disaffected African-American youths (and other youth).

Young men of Mexican-American, Irish-American, and Jamaican-American (Jaméican) ancestry, for example, are appropriating the form to talk about their oppression. Young men in Europe are utilizing the OG hard-core style to tell of the oppression that they (and their parents) are enduring in the present worldwide recession. Young African-American women also are using the form to discuss their oppression in a society that devalues them not only because they are women, but young women of color.

Many young adults do not have access to traditional media to discuss issues of concern to them. Rap music provides them with access to media that will permit their “insurrection of subjugated knowledge.”⁴⁴ The format of the music and the slang turns off many who should be listening if they are concerned about today’s youth and the issues that concern them. Walters says that those who view rap as negative do not understand that it comes from the frustrations of the current black urban generation with its own slang and is an “honest art form.”⁴⁵

The organic intellectual/OG rappers speak not in the voices of insiders but in the voices of outlaws. The words of their music and the images in their videos are usually stark urban landscapes that paint a desolate picture of the world they inhabit. Foucault says that outlaws speak about subjugated knowledge, that is, subjects banned from polite discourse.⁴⁶ Their words are intended to shock, and the images are deliberately provoking. It is the language of outlaws who are following a tradition as old as the journey of African Americans in America. The perspectives of African Americans reflected in early blues are now found in rap.

Rap has had a wider dissemination of its perspectives through tape recordings, radio, and television. The audiences – voluntary and involuntary – are shocked, gratified, frightened, entertained, discouraged, and encouraged by the sites of conflict revealed in the lyrics and the visual images of rap and rap videos. These sites are a critique of the existing economic order, of its violence, family disruption, social alienation, polarization of social units, and deprivation. The means by which they are

discussed and shown on the videos reflect the continuing crisis of urban black youth and the role of rappers as outlaws in the African-American oral tradition.

OG rappers since the early 1980s have continued the tradition of the African diasporan aesthetic in music videos. Neither the subjects of their lyrics (oppressive community conditions, male-female relationships, and the warfare between black males and the police) nor the graphic descriptions of these conditions are new. Rap video is unique because of the instant visual impact and the widespread dissemination through MTV, BET, Music Box, and other cable networks.

The Analysis of Rap Videos by U.S. Black Males

Rap music videos continue the themes and traditions of the blues. Like the blues, rap reveals the effects of community conditions and the development of rappers as organic intellectuals. Perspectival rhetorical analysis of the language culture of rap video texts reveals those effects and sites of conflict – that is, the choice of topics reveals their importance to the rapper and the rapper's perspectives toward the topics.

The data we have analyzed are derived from selected 1993 rap music videos, including transcripts of the lyrics. While rap is commonly associated with African-American males, rappers may be men or women from any ethnic group. Rap music has many distinctive styles: pop rap (DJ Jazzy Jeff, Fresh Prince), cultural nationalist (X-Clan), rap in native tongues (A Tribe Called Quest), political rap (Paris), alternative rap (Arrested Development), jazz rap (Diggable Planets), Latin rap (Mello Man Ace), and hard-core or gangsta rap (Ice-T). We focus exclusively on African-American males who are hard-core original gangsta rappers: Public Enemy, NWA (Niggas with Attitudes), Ice-T, Ice Cube, Tupac, and Intelligent Hoodlum. We analyzed their work separately, together, and over a period of several months.

The sites of conflict represent the social dilemmas selected by the rappers because of their implicit and explicit importance. They are economic problems; violence; family; social alienation; polarization of social units; and cultural and social deprivation. These are the dilemmatic issues that constitute the belief systems of rap's organic intellectuals and gangsta figures. Rappers seek to escape marginalization of self by the public presentation of the social dilemmas that mark their daily lives.

Not only rappers' lyrics but also graphic images emphasize the outlaw as a major figure in the videos. This image is portrayed through various

cinematic devices. These sites are illustrated and highlighted through the following: mixing color video with black-and-white images; narrating stories that combine main and subtext stories; directing messages to the viewer in “debate”; detailing messages in background signs and letters on hats and shirts; interrupting noises (for example, sirens and crashes); stage performance; and flashbacks. From *ciné noir* to complicated plots, to concert settings, to straightforward messages, to subtle subtexts with multidimensional matrices, to simple narratives, videos provide a variety of presentation styles that are designed to present their messages through channels easily understood by listeners and viewers. The freedom from restrictions of traditional film and video making allows most rap video makers to produce fast-paced, mixed-style, and challenging works in a language familiar only to rap insiders. Despite the “inside” language of rap, it should be analyzed and studied by those who are outsiders.

The OG rappers NWA, Ice-T, Ice Cube, for example, are members of the community of the dispossessed by virtue of their residence in the city. They do not need an “organic birth” in order to speak for residents of central cities; they are natural birth members of the social order of organic intellectuals. Frequently, the events described in their stories are events from their lives or the lives of friends and relatives.

“Brenda’s Got a Baby,” by Tupac Shakur (1993) focuses, as many videos do, on unmarried teen mothers and dysfunctional families plagued by drug abuse or missing parents. Abandonment, isolation, poverty, and fear are the emotions portrayed by the visual images. Some examples follow.

Public Enemy, in “Fight the Power” (1993), challenges urban black youths to fight social injustice, economic loss, police brutality, and urges them to value themselves, have positive self-perspectives, to be revolutionaries, and to make changes. The images and lyrics direct youths to specific behaviors and beliefs. They tell the older people and nonblacks to give young blacks what they want and need, that young people must have freedom and be willing to fight for it. This video has less narrative than others. Direct and unadorned persuasive devices and arguments are presented in a straight rap-talk format.

Intelligent Hoodlum, in “Grand Groove” (1993), gives a narrative of the rapper’s life. As in many of the videos analyzed for this study, it contains the same sites of conflict: poverty, dysfunctional family, socialization into gangs, anger against the unfair actions of the police, and death.

“Check Yo’ Self,” by Ice Cube (1993), is a short film in the tradition of storyline videos. There is a plot with rising action, climax, and denoue-

ment. This particular style is important for developing empathy in the listener or viewer, a sense of in-groupness. The performer raps "in character." He is shown being "busted" and processed into the local Los Angeles inner-city jail. The night scene, with sirens and flashing police car lights, shows a stereotypical view of an arrest of an African-American male. From arrest, to incarceration, to pictures of angry and unsatisfactory telephone conversations with the gangsta's woman, the video reveals the violence and psychological pressures of prison and the unfairness of the system.

The lyrics of the OG rappers are sources of inspiration and hope especially for inner city black youth who dance to the music. Ironically, the hope is in the attitude that "we are in this together." Listeners and viewers develop in-group connections with the rappers and with their peers who listen and watch with them. The more they distance themselves from their families because of conflicts about what adults perceive to be the messages of rap videos, and the more mainstream society (black or white) attacks rap videos, the more the audience identifies with the message and the bearers of the message.

Videos by Niggas with Attitude (NWA) represent the angry black youths who are "in the face" of the authorities with a semiautomatic weapon, saying all the things the viewers wish they could say, such as "Fuck the police," but cannot because those words could cost them their lives. Through the language, the rappers create fear in the law enforcement officers who are normally sources of fear for black youths. Spencer states:

Rap – whether pop or hard-core – attracts youths who are resentment listeners, who listen to rap as a means of protesting against the establishment. For Black youths who embrace rap as a symbol of protest it is an expression of Negritude. For white youths – who may despise Negritude, but emulate soul, despise Blackness of mind but wish to go "Black under the skin" – rap is an icon of the resentment they feel toward the "square" [Anglo] *status quo*.⁴⁷

Original gangsta rappers are transformed into organic intellectuals who are creating a popular culture movement that describes the problems of the social order.

Conclusion

These analyses of rap videos produced in 1993 by African-American males reveal the evolution of rap from its roots in the blues and the on-

going transition of rap. Rap music videos reveal the inclusion of the outlaw figure found in many examples of traditional African-American literature and music, especially the blues. The primary sites of conflict in rap videos are a continuation of the African-American oral tradition. Rappers are defining their roles and the roles of other young blacks in the creation of a national popular culture through rap. The rapper as gangsta, or outlaw, develops into an organic intellectual whose work expresses community values, anger, and protest. Future studies of rap videos by both African-American men and women, and by other disempowered cultural groups, will provide important insights to the ongoing development of organic intellectuals among the oppressed and their effect on society.



PART III

The Culture
and Politics of
Sound



Introduction

ADRIANNE R. ANDREWS

Part 3 begins with an essay by Louis Chude-Sokei (chapter 12) concerning the multiple transformations in “inventions” of Africa as Jamaicans “navigate the complex postcolonial maze of late-Babylon culture,” inventions of Africanity that simultaneously embody cultural continuities and discontinuities. Chude-Sokei critiques what he perceives as the racial essentialism underlying Rasta’s universal roots, reggae, and “dread” knowledge. He asserts that the digital technology of dance hall sound offers new possibilities for constructions of African “authenticity” and identity, for this is where they are constantly invented, refashioned, and contested.

In postcolonial Jamaica, Chude-Sokei argues, music is less concerned with romantic black universalisms and more informed by the new cultural identities constructed through Jamaican nationalism or subnationalism at home, or by the exigencies of a mobile, diasporan, transatlantic working class to whom African roots appear less important than to their colonized predecessors. To postcolonial blacks, dance hall music and its digital technology present spaces for the articulation of difference and disjuncture from the master narratives of race to new, particularistic histories and identities.

In keeping with the debate over postcolonial identities as reflected in and constructed through sound, Brenda F. Berrian in chapter 13 contextualizes her analysis of Martinican and Guadeloupean society and the emergence of *zouk*, a multicode music, against the background of a colonial legacy that has stratified those societies into social classes based on color – *béké* (white), *mulâtre* (mulatto) and *nègre* (black). Under postcolonial conditions, Berrian asserts, *nègre* is devalued and denigrated as

an identity in favor of that identity associated with the metropolis, white/*béké* France.

Berrian documents the cultural production of the world-renowned group of *zouk* performers, Kassav'. Kassav' has created a multicode music that, through its high-energy appropriation and incorporation of creole in its sound, forges a new landscape of cultural identity laden with multiple meanings. At one level, it evokes an internal vision that is rooted in positive self-discovery and acceptance: social harmony. There are contradictions within that vision, however, and they are captured in the sound constructions of *zouk*, which serve to create a national identity that resists postcolonial domination. Yet, paradoxically, *zouk* is created and produced in the very metropolis (Paris, and by extension, French cultural hegemony) it seeks to subvert. Kassav' is ensconced within the metropolis and virtually held captive within the framework of a global performance market that continues to be controlled by former colonial powers. Berrian thus illuminates the nature and dynamics of a neocolonial relationship that exists simultaneously with resistance to it. In the global neocolonial historical moment, however, the resource being exploited is the cultural production of postcolonial subjects rather than the natural resources and the physical labor necessary to extract them, as was the case during the period of French colonial expansion.

However, the dynamism of *zouk* music reaffirms pan-Caribbean solidarity and pan-African linkages that traverse artificially imposed imperial boundaries to connect dominated blacks in colonial and postcolonial societies throughout the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. At the heart of *zouk* music is a cultural consciousness centered on reclaiming creole and other languages and cultural heritages that were dispersed by the slave trade, as Kassav' proclaims in "An-ba-chen'n la" (We are all chained together). As with reggae (discussed by Chude-Sokei in chapter 12) and Carnival (discussed by Rachel Buff in chapter 14), lively and vibrant *zouk* performances encourage their audiences to coalesce around socially constructed forms of meaning. Through the social interaction and cultural production of *zouk*, despite its dependence on a world capitalist economy, individuals are linked to create structures of self, collective definitions, and identities mediated by sound and rhythm.

Rachel Buff (chapter 14) also addresses the transnational circulation of culture. Chude-Sokei's example of the dispersal and disseminations of these cultural knowledges through sound and rhythm is reggae, whereas Buff's is the annual West Indian Carnival formerly held in Harlem, now held in Brooklyn. Buff sees Carnival as a site where dominant meanings

of race and ethnicity are contested and reinvented through collective action and personal expression. Carnival provides a mechanism for enacting culture that is carried in the head, so to speak, and concretized through the ritual performance of Carnival. Buff also examines the intersection between popular practice and official policy exemplified by Carnival. In the confluence of hemispheric migration, colonialist discourse has continued to play itself out through socially constructed sites of contestation formed around West Indian Carnival in its metropolitan reincarnations from 1920 to 1994.

Because for Buff race is a social construct shaped by a confluence of discourses about policy, local politics, and cultural identity, she examines racial and cultural identity as creative inventions within spaces allocated to identity formation. In this process, in ways similar to those described by Berrian and Chude-Sokei, Carnival enables the formation of pan-West Indian, pan-African identities and dual affinities that permit linkages with other transnationals who share a consciousness of an ongoing fight against imperialism and (constructed) race-ism. According to Buff, the persistent phenomenon of Carnival is an enactment of the multifaceted meanings of race and nation. In the context of an ongoing dialogic process, tradition is revised to invoke a changing same.

As Carnival becomes a means of metropolitan identity formation for a geographically dislocated people, various formations of Afro-Caribbean identity come into being, and Carnival assumes diverse kinds of symbolic significance. Carnival continuously maintains links of memory between the exigencies of the present and memories of the past, further fostering a sense of identity that is grounded yet fluid, pragmatic, and adaptive to the reality of lived experience in the ever changing same of global capitalism.

In chapter 15, Lupenga Mphande and Ikechukwu Okafor Newsum discuss the connection between the global production of indigenous African cultural expressions, the exercise of colonial domination, and the operation of transnational capital as it flows throughout the entertainment industry. Their discussion, continuing themes established by Buff and Chude-Sokei, centers on the conversion of rural folk culture in southern Africa through migration and the subsequent appropriation of urban and township music by the entertainment industry. As outlined by Mphande and Newsum, in southern Africa aspects of indigenous culture, such as Ngoni choral music and Izibongo praise poetry, were appropriated by the advent of colonialism and Christianity. The subsequent circulation of music capital is reflected in the Ngoni music that is exported to Europe,

set to English lyrics, and then reimported into Malawi. Thus, we see cultural products appropriated from the periphery by colonial powers to the center (metropolitan sites), reproduced and reconstructed in the colonialist image, and returned to the source for consumption – a process not unlike that described in Berrian’s discussion of *zouk* music and its producers and not unlike the triangular transatlantic trade in African slaves, textiles, and rum during the period of slavery. The circle, indeed, remains unbroken.

And we have come full circle in this volume. Essays in part 1 establish an African-based aesthetic of nuanced verbal and visual expression as the foundation of contemporary global black popular culture. Studies in part 2 further articulate this aesthetic as it occurs in representations of black popular culture among U.S. blacks. Finally, part 3 explores the diasporan-Caribbean experience and concludes with an essay on the politics of sound in southern Africa.

In part 4 (chapter 16), Tricia Rose addresses the current realities of existence for Africans and African diasporan peoples at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The new century will be inescapably dominated by technological advances and an ever tightening noose of international, electronically interconnected, capital-driven economies – economies in which, one suspects, the capital of diasporan blacks will continue to be physical labor, intellectual labor to a lesser degree, and the ongoing production of language, rhythm, and sound.

The Sound of Culture:
Dread Discourse and
Jamaican Sound Systems

LOUIS CHUDE-SOKEI

*I exalt thee oh Jah
and live by my faith,
work power in sound
for Jah name is great.
– Danny Red¹*

*Outta dis rock,
shall come
a greenna riddim,
even more dread,
dan what
the breeze of glory bred.
– Linton Kwesi Johnson²*

Now that the dust has settled around that grand event, that spectacular black cultural explosion called Rasta, and an entirely new generation of diaspora articulation has come swaggering out of its mythic shadows (ashes?), I think we can finally ask the question: what was Rasta anyway? For to ask this question, freed of the *zeitgeist* of the cultural nationalisms of the seventies and freed of the rhetoric of repatriation and ethnic authenticity – in short, freed of negritude and its utopian myths – is to face the raw present of black diaspora, a present that is clearly in the process of inventing new myths, definitions, and stratagems for African cultural continuity. Indeed, new fundamental definitions of Africanness (Wilmot Blyden’s “African Personality” or the negritudinist “Présence Africaine”) can be heard all around us; they are there, present on what I

call the roughneck street level of black diaspora where myths are spontaneously constructed and deconstructed as black peoples navigate the complex postcolonial maze of late Babylon culture.

For despite the provocative stance of Rasta and the issues and contexts that it thrust into the mainstream of black popular discourse in Jamaica, Europe, the Americas, and then back to Africa, its most significant criticism has come from within its own cultural, symbolic matrix. It is a criticism that destabilizes the racial authority of dread mythopoeia, yet in my view allows us to use the dynamics of subcultural history making to comprehend how continuity (or discontinuity) is narrated outside the towers of literacy. Certainly criticisms of the racial essentialism and patriarchal assumptions of Rasta have come from all fronts and date back to its initial moment, paralleling its influence. But today, as we see the rise and dominance of a new vision of sound, politics, and culture, manifested in a distinctly raggamuffin vision, we are forced to not only reinvestigate Rastafari wisdom and its use of sound as history, but also to interrogate how post-roots reggae – dance hall – in more sophisticated ways poses the reality of contemporary black movements and migrations against the nostalgia for authenticity and precolonial wholeness that dominated dread knowledge and the sound of roots.

In his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker writes, “A nation’s emergence is always predicated on the construction of a field of meaningful sounds.”³ I would qualify this by saying that the emergence of distinct sounds *within* this same field – or perhaps on the margins of the emergent nation, like black seeds within it – fractures the nation and relentlessly questions its fundamental assumptions. In the context of an African diaspora, secondary soundings loosen (and adjust) some of the nation’s essential conceptual moorings. Baker continues: “Conglomerates of human beings seeking national identity engage myriad sounds in order to achieve a vocabulary of *national* possibilities.”⁴ It is this notion of a vocabulary of national possibilities that most appropriately describes the process of subcultural and preliterate history making that can be witnessed in Jamaican sound culture and its global progeny. Culture as an inexorably emergent (always “just-come”) space of resistance and survival in the black diaspora is, following Baker, a sounding, an establishment of boundaries in a separate ontological space.

The mechanics of sound, after all, operate independently of the strictures and structures of literacy. In colonial and postcolonial Jamaica, it was always suspected by the illiterate ghetto “sufferahs” that the written

word not only belonged to an elite class of “downpressors” but also produced an orientation to the world that was much different from the wisdom of precolonial magic, which resided as much in drum-speak as it did in the rituals of possession. For the Rastafari, “word sound” had immense power, and that power was in the sound itself, not just in the syntactic or logocentric properties of meaning. Sound itself was pregnant with semantic and – as the tiny nation moved toward independence – national possibilities. Sound, especially in the Rastafarian appropriation of atavistic African “Burru” percussion, produced a vocabulary of meanings, a discourse of belonging. Tropes, images, and symbols of “African-ness” seemed to consistently emanate from the “funde” and “repeatah” drums; and a myth of a continent, a dream of absolute plenitude – Rastafari “fullness” – was conjured up to possess the dispossessed.

Benedict Anderson’s very influential *Imagined Communities* connects the rise and spread of nationalism to the technology of literacy – writing, reading, printing, and the dissemination of such texts.⁵ The current don of black diaspora cultural studies, Paul Gilroy, has rightly criticized that view.⁶ In his reading, modern black nationalisms have also organized themselves and spread their sense of community by way of music and sound. Gilroy, despite acknowledging the nationalist parochialism of many of those who produce and consume these sounds, knows more than most that the very mechanisms of sound are diasporan. This means that sound itself cannot be limited to one space, one community, and one ideology of liberation, or even one geographically defined nation. The central irony here is that sound is also where authenticity and identity are ritualistically invented. It is the mechanism by which one group in the black diaspora distinguishes itself from others – whites and middle-class blacks, for example – by its music and the representations of self and community that attend it. This process of inventing authenticity applies widely, from the intimate rituals of Rastafarian “groundings” to contemporary dance hall and hip-hop subcultures, where belonging requires that each subject be fluent in the “vocabulary of national possibilities” as expressed in style, language, gestures, demeanor, and (of course) knowledge of and specific responses to communal sound. Also, the boundaries between “hard-core” insiders and “wanna-be” outsiders are always fiercely patrolled, despite the fact that sound travels promiscuously. Today’s market-media complex complicates and ultimately reifies this authenticity-hybridity paradox by disseminating elements of a particular national vocabulary, forcing it to

hybridize on the level of consumption. This almost never occurs with the sanction of the originators.

Bass History

*Bass history is a moving
is a haunting black story.*

—Linton Kwesi Johnson

In preindependence Jamaica, it was the entire country that was to be impregnated with a new vocabulary of national possibilities, one less saturated with Anglo-colonial conceits and more open to the liberating possibilities of black majority rule. Before 1962, the tensions between race and nation, the aching space between ethnicity and political power became especially charged by a particular use of sound. After all, it was on the eve of Jamaican independence that sound systems (known as “sounds” or “sets”) began to establish themselves as the preeminent media structure for the island’s black urban masses. In the years leading up to 1962 individuals like Clement Coxsone Dodd, Duke Reid, and the mighty Prince Buster strung up homemade, self-modified speakers and amplifiers in community halls, private homes, street corners, and empty lots in and around western Kingston; it was in these volume-defined spaces that a discourse of specifically black identity was celebrated and articulated. Perhaps I should say that the discourse of black identity was both remembered and invented in this context.

Until the sounds gained legitimacy as a space for cultural discourse, *Africa* as a primary source of positive personal and cultural affiliation was not a part of the official narratives of the nation. Indeed, *black* was never acknowledged as a suitable description for the island nation which, as Rex Nettleford so well argues in his *Mirror Mirror*, dodged and disempowered its black majority by facile talk of non- or multiracialism.⁷ Africa had not been forgotten, but it had been submerged by the official narratives that stressed mimicry and a slavish dependence on the British “mother country” and the increasingly significant American Atlantic empire. Despite its continuing relevance to ex-slaves and the continuum of oral expressive culture, *Africa* had no medium to disseminate it that could challenge the media structures that were controlled by the middle brown and white upper classes. As dread scholar Amon Saaba Saakana writes:

Middle and upper Jamaica controlled the cultural fate of Jamaica, if only ephemerally. They defended their inferiority complexes by inun-

dating radio with their American heroes, and looked contemptuously on the “noise” that was being made by local Jamaicans. Since local (and poor ones at that) Jamaicans possessed no example of “culture” or “history” it would be an impossibility to accept that they had anything meaningful to say to them.

Middle Jamaica was ashamed of the new strivings for Jamaican cultural identity and viewed the musical expression with ridicule.⁸

The musical expression that Saakana is talking about here is *ska*, the indigenous sounding of Jamaica, which erupted out of the initial attempt to mimic African-American rhythm and blues, the first music to be popular on island sound systems. Ska was the first “authentic” Jamaican cultural product to be birthed in the sound systems, and it occurred there on the eve of national independence. This is clearly an example of what Homi Bhabha means when he describes colonial mimicry as a radical departure from Western mimesis: for him, it is a subaltern political gesture that terrorizes authority by using the same to produce difference, using the *authentic* (labeled as such simply because it is dominant) to produce the hybrid: “The display of hybridity – its peculiar ‘replication’ – terrorizes authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery.”⁹

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, theorizing about Afro-Caribbean sound, calls ska “the native sound at the yardway of the cultural revolution” in Jamaican aesthetics.¹⁰ Although its historical context has never been foregrounded, this native sound was densely coded with meanings particular to the movement from mimicry to hybridity, from slavish imitation to the moment of cultural maturity and self-authorizing voice that occurs in all struggles for independence from the British empire. All of this, by the way, was accomplished by way of an initial attempt to mimic African-American music. This particular brand of mimicry has often been valorized because race is the governing principle of this cross-cultural appropriation. As Saakana goes on to emphasize, “It was rare that the music was played over local radio, because of the predominance of foreign [American] music. The main outlet was, of course, the sound systems.”¹¹ Sounds provided the space: in short, village drummers became “selectors” (or DJs in the American context) who provided the beats in which a new culture could remember (and invent) ancient roots.

However, in Saakana’s reading, the “American heroes” are dismissed as icons of hegemonic indoctrination. As mentioned above, these foundational influences are specifically African-American: they are products of the culturally distinct discourse of resistance, ethnicity, and group

identity that can be located in the American civil rights movement. In its own historical context, rhythm and blues was produced out of a politicized marriage of the sacred (gospel music) and the secular (blues). For Saakana to so casually dismiss the racial dynamics of this Jamaican appropriation of black American sound is to neglect the intricate postcolonial politics of black sound in the United States. It is also to neglect the centrality of race in the cross-cultural dynamics of the modern black diaspora. Duke Reid, Prince Buster, and their generation carefully selected “race records” in their sojourns to America as migrant workers. Even Saakana suggests that “Perhaps the similar rural/urban conditions in Jamaica and America (leaving the plantations/farms to go and live in slums and continued poverty in the city) caused Jamaicans to identify with Afro-American music.”¹² This was certainly the case. But also the racial politics of America (especially during the 1950s and 1960s) were seen as similar, if not identical, to the racial problems of preindependence Jamaica. Rhythm and blues not only reflected those North American issues, but also put forth an image of self-confident blackness, of progressive and capitalist black cultural values that were even more appealing to a Third World country where black inevitably meant poor.

Remember, this all occurred in the country that spawned the militant brand of pan-Africanism that was made global by one of Rastafari’s central prophets: the Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey. However, it all took place in the same cultural context where Garvey’s name was anathema to the island’s cultural elite who, a generation earlier, had forced him to carry his discourse of “Africa” to the United States, which proved more receptive to his message than the still colonized island. Although silenced by the official media and suppressed in the educational system, the Garveyite message survived. Garvey’s discourse of remembering, of recovering a source of national identity in race – race as the space of the nation, ethnicity as geography – was dangerous to a society still smarting under the wounds of slavery and the painful attempts to eradicate any positive associations with the African continent. Yet it survived and flourished. Indeed, it was through the sound systems that recordings celebrating a positive sense of black ethnicity and explicit Garveyite messages (as in the work of Count Ossie, Don Drummond, and so many others) were first recorded and played.

In the early 1960s, these thematic preoccupations (in addition to explicit depictions of ghetto life) appeared on the most popular recordings, yet were never played on the radio. Both Brathwaite and Saakana acknowledge that ska challenged and questioned the status quo in radical

ways. I would add that without the sound systems as alternate or underground media structures, this radical questioning could never have happened. With the influence of Garvey and the cross-currents of African-American radicalism, sound not only challenged the oppressive limits of a colonial and neocolonial sociopolitical structure, but also reached out to invent an alternate space of national affiliation, one rooted in race but organized and ritualized by sound.

“Race,” especially in the black modernist context, signifies the space of the nation. Sound systems, ska, and roots reggae exist in that “iffy” historical and aesthetic space known to scholars as modernism. Saakana makes this connection clear by referring to Bob Marley, Bunny Wailer, and Peter Tosh as modernists. Houston Baker’s reading of Harlem’s soundings makes the point that black modernism “seeks community and self-consciously pursues democratic advantage through the medium of race.”¹³ And of course no accurate or respectable discussion of African-American modernism (or postmodernism, as with hip-hop and dance hall) can exist without a hefty amount of space and time devoted to the central influence in New York of Marcus Garvey and West Indian immigration over the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, the African-American discourse of “Africa” and its distinct modernist tendencies depend much more on the cross-cultural process that is diaspora than is usually recognized. And before ska, there was Jamaican jazz in which New Orleans-style horn sections were translated into a local idiom; in fact, the first major Rastafarian recording was not reggae or ska, but jazz and poetry.¹⁴

However, in the modern African diaspora, race is not as susceptible to fragmentation and scattering as are music and the various technologies of sound that concern those who study and theorize about the diaspora and cultural dissemination. As a product of the nineteenth-century biological evolutionism, scientific categorization, and the social theories of logical positivism, the concept of race stresses a coherence among peoples of vastly different cultures and experiences. Indeed, it was constructed largely as a method for organizing and reducing the apparent chaos of a non-Western world to a knowable and governable singularity. But one of the side effects of this understanding of race was that among the black populations dispersed by the slave trade and controlled by the mechanisms of colonialism, the concept generated a resistance to European domination on those very terms. Race, as a radicalized mechanism of coherence empowered by the myth of Africa as a homogeneous source of diasporan traditions, gave birth to the discourse of identity that prefigures

and finds its fullest expression in Garveyism and in the pan-Africanism/Ethiopianism of W. E. B. Du Bois. This is the theoretical and political foundation of Rastafarianism. It was and is a response to what Nettleford describes as “the captivity of a protracted diaspora.”¹⁵

For the Rastafari, as with Du Bois, Garvey, and many of their generation, diaspora was the problem and race the solution. Race allowed the diaspora to be transcended for a discourse of ethnic and cultural similarity; and tradition (“roots and culture” in reggae music) was often articulated as an unchanging continuum. In Rastafarian aesthetics, every invention of “Africa” was a return to authenticity; every attempt, in Bongo Jerry’s words, at “brain-whitening” and every effort to “SILENCE BABEL TONGUES; recall and recollect BLACK SPEECH,”¹⁶ was in effect a remembering and a return to a precolonial African cultural state. It must be stressed, though, that the dynamics of diaspora remembering, especially among the Rastafari, is more accurately an inventing of authenticity via an inventing of “Africa.” The image of Africa as an ethnic homeland, as a monocultural landscape littered with pyramids, noble and just rulers, and edenic fruitfulness is an invention born out of a sense of exile that is as biblical as it is romantic and ahistorical, despite its obsessive historicity.

Although born out of the inexorable cultural fragmentation and dissemination that is diaspora – that process of radical difference that operates within the structure of “race” – Rastafarianism was less concerned with what blacks in the diaspora had become and more obsessed with what they essentially were. Like various black nationalisms, the concern was with what existed beneath cultural variation. As a vision of post-colonial black identities, a theory of culture, it fell victim to what James Baldwin noted as the pitfalls of *négritude*; it did not realize, to paraphrase his words, that in relation to Africans, blacks in the West had been made and mangled by another machinery altogether.¹⁷ The attempt at psychic and political reconnection would inevitably fail precisely because culture was subordinated to race and history was subsumed by a mythic vision that, I would argue, is the product of an oral ontology. But the primary resistance to this radical view of national identity came from Jamaica’s elite, who opposed it on two main counts. First, the acceptance of the Garveyite and Rastafarian view (prefigured in other island cults like the short-lived movement of Alexander Bedward) would force the neocolonial elite to accept black majority rule. Second, in an ironic turn, to celebrate race as nation, and Africa as homeland, would be downright

unpatriotic to emerging nationalist tendencies. The doctrine of social rejection by the Rastas, writes Nettleford, was deemed

a threat to the security of the fledgling nation which had committed itself since 1944 to building up a harmonious society from its transplanted diversity. To many, the Rastafarians were retrogressive and their cause was seen as political separatism, a betrayal of the movement towards self-government and a disrespect for the carefully nurtured Jamaican nationalism.¹⁸

So a Jamaican nationalism was in some quarters antithetical to a *black* nationalism and clearly at odds with a discourse that located Africa not only in historical memory, but also dead ahead in terms of a legitimate political destiny. Yet the Rastas persisted, and by the late 1960s their views had become almost status quo, despite the fact that the color-class structure only slightly altered and the locksmen were socially still held at arm's length.

It was in the late 1930s that the Rastafarians began to gain a significant presence in Kingston, and by this time the pre-Rasta Burru peoples (a culture of people in rural Jamaica who were known for their drumming rituals a century ago) had fully settled in the slums. Unlike the scenario in America, drumming in the Jamaican plantation system was officially tolerated, and the Burru-men, in addition to their role as timekeepers for slave labor, were keepers of African sound. In their search for "anciency" and cultural roots, the Rastafari knelt at the feet of the Burrus, appropriated their looks, style, and musics and, in return, imparted to them a political theology of race. But what was most important to this union of the Burrus and the early Rastafari were the rituals of sound that both communities instituted in the colonial ghettos of Kingston. Saakana has traced the Burru drumming ritual back to a Ghanaian ceremony that took place around Christmastime. In the 1930s, the ritual of drumming was a customary way of welcoming discharged prisoners back into the folds of the ghetto community.

When the Rastafarians took over the ritual, they modified it, adding their own thematic obsessions to the African songs of insult and praise. From this came the ritual of the *nyabinghi*, which was said to mean "death to black and white oppressors" and became a term also used to describe the most orthodox members of the Rastafarian creed. In the sacred space of ritual, members of the faith meditated, reasoned with each other, debated Old Testament doctrine, and soundly criticized the

exploitative and racist system they were living in. And they beat the drums, chanting down Babylon and conjuring up an alternate space of black community called “Africa.” They did this in the yards of West Kingston, the same spaces that decades later would provide the genesis of the Jamaican sound systems.

Many believe that the indigenizing tendencies in Jamaican music – the eruption of ska from African-American jazz and rhythm and blues – came out of *nyabinghi* percussion. The beat that distinguishes ska has been attributed, by Saakana, Dick Hebdige, and others, to the drums of the Rastafari. It is true that in the early days of Jamaican sound culture, musicians like Don Drummond, Rico Rodríguez, and Roland Alphonso lived in the same ghettos as the early Rastas, and many of them had accepted the philosophy of the black redeemer. These jazz and blues-trained musicians played with and learned from original Burru disciples like the great Count Ossie. And in this early time the influence of Rastafarian spirituality and morality always existed as a counter to the more crude excesses of ska music which, like today’s dance hall, often tended to wallow in carnality; this can be seen in the lyrical content of ska and early reggae music. This context for dread sound, this history of Rastafarian cultural soundings, will (I hope) make one of my main points clearer. By the time of Duke Reid, Coxsone Dodd, and others, the Rastafarian movement had cleared a cultural space for sound systems by way of *nyabinghi* and by linking African oral traditions with the new technologies of dissemination. Ruth Finnegan, Marshall McLuhan, and others have argued in very different ways that contemporary popular culture – twentieth-century media structures – depend on oral ontologies and mechanisms of perception, communication, and knowing that are distinct from the logics of literacy. In other words, with the continuum from the Burrus to the beat-boxes, the griots to the DJs (or MCs), we find not simply the resilience of the African oral tradition; certainly this is the case, yet all too often a monolithic “African oral tradition” is evoked as a crude and romantic answer to diasporan complexities. Also at work here is a conscious attempt on the part of sound culture to force new technologies to address forms of knowledge that are precolonial in origin but continually produced and modified by a racist system in which literacy is a privilege and the written word the signifier of official (white or elite) culture.

It is worth repeating that the original Rastafarian music was not ska or reggae and that the earliest Jamaican musics were not Rastafarian. Even in Bob Marley’s time his use of multitrack technology, popular musical

forms, and Western recording techniques was seen among the orthodox as heretical because it fomented an intimacy with Babylon (especially its capitalist tendencies) that the faith was sworn to reject. However, the generation of “roots and culture,” which established itself out of the rock-steady rude-boy era of the mid-1960s and reached its deepest sonic mysticism in “dub” (experimental, largely instrumental, reggae remixes), embraced the new technology. Producers and mixers like King Tubby’s, Lee Scratch Perry, Scientist and Prince (now King) Jammy transformed Babylon’s machinery and employed self-produced vinyl discs as the new site of orality. These producers and mixers all owned or operated sound systems. A more poetic way of seeing this process of roots cultural-sounding is this: in dread eyes, the nation was continuously growing, and the nation-peoples were cursed by diaspora, dispersing what *négritude* poet Aimé Césaire once described as an infinite rain of stars. Drum-speak and word-sound had to adapt to suit this widening community. Sound had to be made to reach the far-flung corners of what Paul Gilroy calls “the Black Atlantic.”

Many sound men of the roots reggae generation were committed to the new technology of (to make better use of Homi Bhabha’s fantastic Derridean pun) “dissemiNation.” Deep inside roots reggae wisdom was the assumption that the sounds that were produced – heavy bass, steady drums, and a relentless rearranging of mix elements within the space of a version – consistently represented a dread world view and an “African” sensibility. Very rarely, though, did this sound appropriate or even attempt to connect with contemporary Africa’s postcolonial soundings like Nigerian high life, Zairean *soukous*, or continental music. Yet there was the very sincere faith that “Africa” spoke in sound, not language. Where language expressed a microcultural specificity, sound transcended and ignored the fragmented context of a cultural diaspora. There was a sincere devotion to the notion that “Africa” was conjured up and disseminated in dread sound. This “Africa,” as I have said, was a space of cultural being that was defined essentially; it was rooted in the biological definition of race and authorized by the historical experiences of slavery and the color-class context of colonial and postcolonial Jamaica.

Rex Nettleford noted in the 1970s that over time, the notion of a literal Africa in opposition to a Babylonian exile as the primary source of the Rastafarian ideological struggle was resolved. Literalness, as stressed by early twentieth-century militant black nationalism, emphasized the necessity of large-scale black repatriation to the continent’s western coast. This was a central theme in roots reggae. But for very obvious reasons,

repatriation was impractical as a reality and clearly impossible as a political strategy. Instead, the “Rasta wa’an go home” narratives functioned as an allegorical gesture, one describing a deep-seated rejection of western culture and an overwhelming desire for a pre- (or post-) industrial “elsewhere.” Nettleford writes:

Many Rastafarian brethren have resolved the ideological conflict and have emerged with a concept of the “Africanization” of Jamaica. Just as the Kingdom of Heaven is within you (instead of somewhere in the clouds), Africa is in Jamaica, goes the reasoning. Some argue that Jamaica is Africa. The fact that the majority of the population is African is used as tangible support. But some claim that they have reached their decision by divine revelation.¹⁹

I include this point here because clearly this shift in doctrine has much to do with the new technologies of sound as employed by the ghetto producers and Rastafarian-oriented culture workers who came to power in the sound systems in the late sixties and throughout the seventies. If dread sound was “roots and culture,” and if “Africa” was in, and produced by, dread sound, then Black Uhuru was correct when they sang that “the whole world is Africa.” This is especially so since sound is so mobile, volume so powerful, and the “culture industry” so dynamic in its mechanisms and so far-reaching in its desire to sell and to make connections. The “divine revelation” was experienced in the rituals of sound system culture where the problematics of identity in a racist Babylon could be abandoned for a moment, buried in the womb of “bass and drums”; individual subjectivity could be lost in the pounding volume of a sound system that was devoted to freeing the body from the oppressive imbalance of black labor and white capital. There, in sound, was a space of community that was not geographical but was coded with the tropes and topoi of a specific invention called “Africa.” As South African poet Willie Kgositsile once said, “Home is where the music is.” For the roots reggae generation, sound enabled racial authenticity to travel and provided a space for historical memory to intervene and interrupt the contemporary discourses of race and nation, class and politics, there on the island and out there in the diaspora.

“Wickedness Increase”: The Psycho-Geography of Dance Hall

Jamaica: fragment of bomb-blast, catastrophe of geological history (volcano, middle passage, slavery, plantation, colony, neo-colony) has somehow

*miraculously – some say triumphantly – survived. How we did it is still a mystery and perhaps it should remain so. But at least we can say this: that the secret and expression of that survival lies glittering and vibrating in our music. – Edward Kamau Brathwaite*²⁰

*Ring the alarm,
another Sound is dying.
– Tenor Saw*²¹

In *Mirror Mirror: Identity, Race and Protest in Jamaica*, Rex Nettleford comments that “Jamaicans have . . . been a migrating people ever since the late nineteenth century when the first Panama Canal project was started.”²² He then connects the Rastafarian and Garveyite dream of repatriation to the desire in Jamaican society as a whole to immigrate to a better “else-where,” especially to London, New York, Miami, and Toronto. The Rastafarian “outernationalism” in this text is compared to the labor-oriented movements to various colonial metropolises. Without dwelling on the reductive features of this comparison, suffice it to say that Rastafari simply changed the pole of authenticity in a colonized psyche; like the literary movement of French *négritude*, they reversed the paradigm established by colonialism in which Anglo-American culture was the pinnacle and replaced it with an explicitly romantic construction. However, in a neocolonial economy like that of Jamaica, the pull came always from the major Western economies that needed labor and offered work. There was no economically viable reason to go to Africa – although many West Indians have returned – and no real sense that there would be room made for them if they went there. In fact, the most important thing that returned to Africa was the discourse of “roots and culture” as articulated in Jamaican sound.

But as West Indian communities began to establish themselves in Western metropolises and the market for reggae music became less and less centralized on Jamaica (with the rise of sound systems in Britain and New York), Rastafari wisdom had to contend with a specifically Jamaican diaspora. This was a diaspora fueled by the postwar labor shortage in England and the greater financial opportunities in New York and Canada. As Nettleford says, this Jamaican diaspora goes back to the nineteenth century, but by the late 1970s, these communities became more and more complex and variegated. And in the face of a discourse of Jamaican musical and cultural authenticity, where the originators tried to control and monopolize the trope of the “real,” the communities of the Jamaican diaspora began to be more self-assertive. One of the main ways they did this

was by establishing sound systems and their attendant cultural structures and economies. In catering to the communities produced out of this new experience of exile, the music became less universal in its thematic concerns and more distinctly – sometimes obsessively – Jamaican, or “yard.” In this context, “home” is whittled down in specificity from “Africa,” and even “Jamaica,” which – it could be argued – is a figment of the nationalist, bourgeois imagination. Instead, it becomes specific to the yards of Kingston.

Although it has never been acknowledged – and those devoted to the black nationalist monolith of “race” are still loath to admit it – one of the reasons that roots reggae lost its force in the 1980s was partly because of the dynamics of this specifically Jamaican diaspora. As is common, exile foments a fondness for “home” that was never there when one was at home. “Africa,” for example, exists largely as a trope and a construction in the diaspora; those on the continent conceive of themselves according to more specific tribal-linguistic structures. By the eighties, after the deaths of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Mikey Smith, and so many others, and in a new cultural context, Jamaica itself became susceptible to the mythopoeia of exile, the romanticism of distance. “Africa” became instead the signifier of the previous generation’s revolutionary desire while “Jamaica” became the authorizing trope for even “true” Rastafarianism. As a popular phrase went, “You haffe dread a yard, before you dread abroad!”

Even though the “hard-core” or “authentic” sound still came from Jamaica, it was produced by and for people who perpetually circulated through communities in London, New York, Miami, Toronto, and back to Jamaica. Indeed, by the late eighties, major sound systems and performers (not to mention cocaine mules and entrepreneurial posse gunmen) spent most of the year traveling in this circuit. The new music reflected this transnational landscape. It became less concerned with a romantic black universalism primarily because West Indians were more and more intimately aware of their own cultural specificity in relation to the various other “blacknesses” encountered in the postcolonial metropolis. Other types of colonial experience, other types of racism, other types of black history made Jamaicans (and other black, Third World peoples) aware of difference within that nationalist monolith that the Rastafari worshipped so passionately. Nowhere was this more deeply experienced than in New York, where West Indians and African-Americans had existed in tense, often violent relationships since before Garvey arrived in 1914. Feeling overwhelmed by the black Yankee majority and always careful to be dis-

tinguished from them, Jamaicans passionately guarded not a homogenizing “Africa,” but a culturally and linguistically particularistic Jamaica.

On the island things had changed as well. Whereas the regime of Michael Manley in the 1970s always leaned toward the left and depended on the old tensions between the West and the Soviet Union, the new prime minister, Edward Seaga – a former reggae producer – was always explicitly procapitalist. His policies were clearly aimed at making Jamaica into a suburb of the United States and his ties to posse politics were an open secret. Where Manley attempted to mobilize the grass roots in Jamaica by manipulating Rasta and its symbols in the late seventies – claiming at a certain point to have been blessed by Haile Selassie – Seaga’s moments in the political spotlight featured a severe lack of tolerance for the kind of culture criticism that came out of roots music. Today’s ragga-muffin dance hall music emerged from this context, one in which many a dread hero died in gang shootouts and political assassinations. The status quo that had been successfully challenged and in some senses changed by dread sounds and their cultural apparatus had become severely repressive with the Seaga-Reagan-Thatcher triumvirate. Moreover, the dynamic structure of capitalism that allowed the tiny island to generate such a lucrative cultural product and market it internationally required that the music cater to the tastes of its dispersed market. In Seaga’s Jamaica, dire necessity and government austerity measures helped drive the music into a new aesthetic and political space, one where rejecting or questioning capitalism was a luxury that very few could afford. With the coming of tourists in the sixties and seventies, Rasta had become a plaything for racist whites who paid for an exotic and erotic island fantasy. Rasta Rebels became “Rent a Rasta,” and the seriousness and authority of the movement were severely compromised. The themes of Rasta became not just dangerous to express in this climate, but also old and tired for a generation that had fully immersed itself in the perverse sprawl that is Babylon culture. The music of roots found itself static, stagnant, and losing its claim on a black diaspora mythos.

Rather than forwarding the utopian myths of the seventies and moving sound deeper into the pseudo-authentic “African roots” style typified by Marley, the new sound systems began to modernize (or perhaps “post-modernize”) reggae. Producers began to manipulate the latest in digital computer technology bought in New York and London, turning the music into a rhythmic hybrid of calypso, soca, rhythm and blues, and classic dub. What came out of this revolution within reggae is a sound that is

informed not by a diaspora based on a romanticized memory, but a diaspora that is truer to the experiences of a necessarily mobile, transatlantic working class. Unlike Rastafarian reggae, racial origins are not celebrated in this aesthetic; what is more important to depict is what I elsewhere call a sprawling, urban, Third World geography in which the various points of Afro-Caribbean disembarkation become incorporated.²³

Origins, as I have said, are now celebrated as specifically postcolonial – that is to say, specifically Jamaican. The language used (*patwah*) is articulated as a product of a particular history and experience that is grounded in Jamaica but disseminated throughout the diaspora via the commodity production of the music industry. “African roots” are much less important to this generation because the vagaries of diasporan life have taught them that roots are transitory and ever shifting; they circulate and reconstruct themselves like the flow of labor and capital, like the structure of memory itself. Here, to appropriate Iain Chambers, roots become “routes” in a postcolonial matrix. “Race,” then, recedes in the politics of contemporary dance hall music and culture is foregrounded – not culture as in “roots and culture,” as a product of the nationalist slippage between race and culture. Instead, culture is located in the rituals, language, and responses of peoples for whom sound systems are the focal point for a nomadic sense of authenticity. “Race,” I must stress, is not gone from this discourse of sound, but difference has entered that monolith, and issues like class, gender, and individual power have become much more prominent.

“Rewind and Come Again!”

I have attempted to map out how the street-level critique of black nationalism entails a transformation from one mode of cultural organization (“race” in the case of Rastafarianism) to another. The “massive” international dance hall sound and its cultural apparatus – specifically the sound system that has been transplanted and translated throughout the various points of black disembarkation – function as a principle of organization that foregrounds disjuncture and difference in the global economy of blackness. This transformation, this aesthetic and political shift, is in many ways paradigmatic of much of contemporary black sounds and their respective cultural apparatuses. From hip-hop to black British junglism, from roots reggae to ragga, cultural-historical specificity crashes against global dispersal and the attendant myths of racial solidarity. For

the Rastafari, sound was culture and culture was “race.” With today’s black underground media complex, sound is closer to culture than “race” ever was. “Race,” of course, is not out of the picture; it has not been banished from the discursive mechanisms of Jamaican sound culture. What has happened is that without the use of “Africa” as a centralizing logos, as a focal point for postmodern black destiny, “race” is deconstructed as a universal principle and is fragmented by culture and the differential histories of colonialism. This transformation features instead the reification of separate and distinct historical blacknesses, each migrating around each other, trapped in an orbit like planets around the dim memory of a sun. Arguing via Lyotard’s *The Post-Modern Condition*,²⁴ here the “master narrative” of a nation based on race has broken apart, yet the shards retain an intimacy and glow with essential and independent light.

Perhaps this movement was inevitable as reggae music became more intimately connected to the new technologies of digital sound production. Whereas King Tubby’s and Lee “Scratch” Perry examined the furthest reaches of dread mysticism by way of multitrack analog recording, in the 1980s ragga dance hall reimaged community through digital sampling and modem-oriented communication. Both the assertion of roots and the critique of roots are central to – in fact are constitutive of – a diasporan discourse that necessarily flickers between myth and history, form and void, race and cultural dispersal. Contemporary dance hall sound culture is not free of this self-reflexivity; it is the lasting legacy of the Rastafari and is kept alive by the continuing oppression of black peoples. But the question raised most trenchantly by the new sounds is this: how can roots even be contemplated in digital, nonlinear space? After all, the history of black cultural resistance and black cultural soundings is a history marked by manipulations of the major technologies of the era. To take this a step further, how can nationalism – race-based or otherwise – exist in the context of multinational corporations where Babylon itself – late capitalism – is increasingly mobile and decentered? Indeed, is the postmodern the end of “race” as a necessary structure and the beginning of more specific, culture-based articulations of ethnicity? Where now is the site of struggle, and how is resistance to be formulated?

These questions, I think, are what confounded the Rastafari, many of whom retreated further and further into the realm of rhetoric and myth (“roots and culture”) and only made small inroads on the far margins of capitalism. Dance hall sound, although it has not answered these ques-

tions or solved any problems, has engaged with them. In doing so, it manifests a ruthlessness and violence that celebrate both the liberating possibilities of diaspora and the horrific excesses of capitalism. Dread sound had a distinctly moral vision that was intended to free black culture from such a conflict. Dance hall sound and culture, however, exult in this paradox, this glorious aporia.

“An-ba-chen’n la”
 (Chained Together):
 The Landscape of
 Kassav’s *Zouk*

BRENDA F. BERRIAN

The land gives direction but confers ownership on those who establish a relationship that is both economic and moral.¹

The success of contemporary French Caribbean music can be traced to two popular musical forms – the biguine and mazurka² – and two traditional drum rhythms and dances (*gwo ka* from Guadeloupe and *bel air* from Martinique). Among the black elite and the *béké* (white) urban population, the popularity of the biguine and the mazurka began to decline during the 1960s. This was largely due to the disappearance of the *punchs en musique* (morning punch parties), the *thé dansants* (afternoon tea dance parties), and the *bals* (evening dances). Haitian *compas*, Latin American salsa, and Dominican cadence-lypso became the popular and preferred sounds. When the local bands, like Perfecta and Malavoi from Martinique and the Vikings de Guadeloupe from Guadeloupe, wanted to be hired to perform at major hotels or in other venues, they either imitated the Haitian sound and/or incorporated the Cuban-Latino sound into their repertoire. As a result, pride in local culture ebbed drastically as Guadeloupean and Martinican musicians functioned within a creative void.

Given their legacy of slavery, the population of twentieth-century Martinique and Guadeloupe is still divided into *béké*, *mulâtre*, *nègre* (white, mulatto, and black) social and racial categories. Prime land in Martinique and Guadeloupe, two economically dependent French *départements d’outre mer* (overseas departments) since 19 March 1946, is still owned by *békés* (descendants of French planters). The civil service and other professions are primarily filled by light-skinned blacks; and the

working class and agricultural workers are largely composed of dark-skinned blacks.

Not surprisingly, these class and racial distinctions, with the addition of geographical boundaries, have also spilled over into contemporary French Caribbean music. While the traditional economy of agricultural production of sugarcane, coconuts, and bananas has suffered a decline in recent decades, the music industry has risen to third place as a source of the gross national product. In the Martinican and Guadeloupean countryside, the *bel air* and *gwo ka* are still played for dances, but a negative image of traditional African culture has been instilled in succeeding generations. Young people living in the city still gravitate toward the piano (an instrument imported from France) rather than the drum (a locally made product). As a result, until recently, the piano and the drum symbolized a dichotomy of life styles and values. The French Caribbeans associate the drum with the poverty, backwardness, and creole language of the black working class while the piano represents modernity, the French language, and an assimilated life style that apes the French. Both French colonials and the assimilated mulatto middle class tend to regard the drum with contempt.

A French Caribbean group that has made a major impact on the Caribbean and world music industries has been Kassav'. Its core members consist of Jocelyne Béroard, Jacob Desvarieux, Patrick Saint-Éloi, Jean-Philippe Marthély, and Jean-Claude Naimro. Having sold over a million records worldwide, Kassav' has increased an interest in a sophisticated, complex, heavily layered discolike music called *zouk*. It is a band that has networked and listened carefully to other sounds across diverse landscapes. The key to Kassav's initial success was the musicians' conscious decision to return the drum to the foreground. When Kassav' searched for a way to reclaim the Caribbean heritage and music, the *gwo ka* and *bel air* drums became symbols of resistance for black islanders, through a rejection of assimilation and a return to ancestral roots. Assimilation for Martinicans and Guadeloupeans meant a denial of a collective, regional identity, and this is why Kassav' reclaimed the very instrument that came with the African slave. The playing of the *gwo ka* and *bel air* drums became a symbolic cry and flight from the enclosed world of French domination. During a *Caribbean Beat* interview, Desvarieux said: "Our rhythm really lends itself to the game between the music and the dancer. . . . Our tactic is: 'Pa ni problem' [No problem]." ³ Furthermore, Kassav's curiosity about harmony and search for new sounds have also resulted in a physical and psychological movement beyond the departmentalized landscape.

The group has learned that a shared cultural landscape does not depend on a specific fixed site.

Through *zouk* music and lyrics the multiracial band expresses a yearning and a hope for a return to social harmony with nature in connection with an identity that transcends confined false colonial boundaries. Kassav' has struggled with the domination of local and multinational record companies to establish its own creative landscape. Therefore, this essay will explore how Kassav' resisted the domination of Haitian music and promotes a cultural consciousness that is centered in the creole language.

Zouk Origins and Resistance to Domination

The name *Kassav'*, according to the group's only female soloist, Jocelyne Béroard, "refers to a crushed cassava mixed with coconut and sugar to make a cake. . . . There is a kind of poison in it. You've got to know how to extract this poison before you eat it. . . . So because they had to extract what was poisoning Martinican and Guadeloupean music, they called it *Kassav'*."⁴

In the mid-1970s Pierre-Edouard Décimus, a sound technician and bass player for the Vikings de Guadeloupe for over ten years, became restless and wanted to create a new sound to counteract the Haitian influence. In his efforts, he needed help from someone who could play Caribbean and other types of music, as well as be familiar with studio work. He found this person in the much sought-after guitarist, Jacob Desvarieux, who had previously worked with Décimus and Guy Jacquet (guitarist for the Vikings de Guadeloupe). The three musicians added a horn section and modified the sound after listening to certain American groups – Kool and the Gang, Blood Sweat and Tears, and Earth, Wind, and Fire. The first album they made together, unavailable today, was *Kazoo et Vikings Expérience*. After leaving their producer, Jacky Nayaradou of 3A Productions in Martinique, Décimus moved to Paris to start anew. The search for a new sound became an obsession. He said:⁵

C'est vrai que j'en suis le concepteur. Mais sans Jacob Desvarieux (à qui je rends hommage dans mon prochain disque) et mon frère Georges Décimus, *Kassav'* n'aurait sans doute pas connu le succès que vous savez. J'ai été fondateur de *Kassav'*, un de ses bassistes, puis son chef d'orchestre, son manager. . . . J'ai fait tout ce qu'il m'était possible de faire au sein de cette formation. . . . La musique parle directement au coeur des gens.

(It's true that I conceived the idea. But without Jacob Desvarieux [to whom I pay homage on my next record] and my brother Georges Décimus, Kassav', without a doubt, would not have had the success it has had. . . . I had been Kassav's founder, bass player, and manager. I have done all I could possibly do within the group. . . . Music speaks directly to people's hearts.)

In Paris in the late 1970s, the frustrated but determined Décimus continued his search to end the preference for Haitian music over the Guadeloupean and Martinican local music scene. Finally, in 1978, he enlisted his younger brother George (another bass player) and, together with Desvarieux, the three launched a successful musical career that broke the dependence of Guadeloupe and Martinique on Haitian pop styles and had commercial appeal beyond the French Caribbean.

After much sound experimentation and a close listening to other Caribbean music, as well as South American, African, and African-American music, the trio released records under the name Kassav' and named their music *zouk*. This new sound, according to Gene Scaramuzzo, is a marriage of "traditional Antillean musical elements with outside influences, all treated to the state-of-the-art Paris studio technology with which Desvarieux is so adept."⁶

The choice of the term *zouk* and the name Kassav' was strategic. *Zouk* is a Martinican word that refers to a party at which the greatest freedom of expression is permitted. Since French Caribbean music is associated with singing and dancing, the hot, loud, and intense tempo of *zouk* encourages its listeners to jump up in the streets, especially during Carnival time. Meanwhile, the formation of bands in Guadeloupe and Martinique had previously followed nationalistic lines. Bearing this in mind, the Décimus brothers and Desvarieux carefully selected singers and musicians over a five-year period (1979–1983) based on their qualifications rather than their nationality.⁷

Kassav' songs deal with love, nostalgia, and hope while revealing a need to free themselves from the imperialistic chains of the music and recording industry. Édouard Glissant suggests that the contemporary artist is engaged in becoming the voice of the collective consciousness of the people, recalling lived history and inspiring future action.⁸ Careful attention to Kassav's album *An-ba-chen'n la*⁹ reveals lyrics about how *zouk* puts a person in such a frenzy that she or he is sick with love of it ("Mwen malad'aw"); how a man sees a female "matador" and falls to his knees ("Filé zètwal"); and how a woman wakes up to a bad day and listens to

her music (“Mové jou”). Each song introduces its listener to a different fusion of musical styles. Each song also unfolds and places us into a world of West African high life, Zairien *soukous*, African-American blues and jazz, or Haitian *compas*. However, the heavy bass is always there with horns, a snazzy keyboard, a mixture of drum rhythms, and a hard rock guitar. In *zouk*, rhythms are built on top of each other, making it the most frequently heard music on the radio and television in the French Caribbean region.

Economically, colonialism, imperialism, and transmigration have devastated the Caribbean and left its population struggling for survival. Youth unemployment is extremely high, and people are still migrating to France. There are constant strikes as well as a steady influx of illegal migrants from Dominica, St. Lucia, and Haiti. The arrival of European Common Market nationals is seen as a threat to local citizens in the limited job market. Fully aware of an ongoing struggle to weather the effects of colonization, Patrick Saint-Éloi, one of Kassav’s soloists, synthesized a concentrated use of images to compose the title song, “An-ba-chen’n la” (Chained together). This song recalls a landscape that carried a turbulent and violent history:¹⁰

Ni dé sièk bato la rentré,
ni sa ki pa janmen rivé
Eske lespwi an nou maré toujou an ba chen’ a batoa
Démaré! . . .

(Two centuries ago the boat arrived
Many did not finish the journey
Are our spirits still chained in the bottom of this boat?
Let’s remove the chains . . .)

The song evokes a landscape of chained bodies facing horror, punishment, and death during the Middle Passage. Saint-Éloi brings to the surface: “Bien souvan nou ka pati lwen lwen di péi nou / Pou nou poté mizik an nou alé” (Sometimes we go far from our home / To let people hear our music). Then, with confidence, he offers the hopeful solution: “Van la van la ja ka tounen, zouk la pwen on lot’ direksyon / Pou eksplozé pou inondé lè mond’ antié é é” (The wind shifted / *zouk* took another direction, seduced, and captivated the entire world). Saint-Éloi prophesizes a continuity through the musical medium of *zouk* – a *zouk* that crosses the landscape between the colony and its colonizer and the internal landscape within the Caribbean islands and the African diaspora. Throwing

off the shackles represents a rebirth. Therefore, for Saint-Éloi *zouk* negates the colonial acculturation that prioritizes French cultural elements, proving that *delving within* rather than outside one's own African ancestry and French Caribbean landscape can provide the answer for the future.

Creole and Cultural Consciousness

Kassav's vocalists sing only in creole with a few English, African, Spanish, or French words thrown in for enticement and a demonstration of global appeal. Kassav's decision to sing in creole is not only a good marketing device to attract attention but also a political way to identify the group as Caribbean and to show solidarity with compatriots at home and in exile. Within the political context of the French *départements d'outre-mer*, creole *zouk* music has nurtured a feeling of solidarity among people across the islands who have been divided between the official French and their maternal language, creole.

The song writers return to creole for its poetic beauty, elegant formulations, rhythmic wordings, and incorporation of the sounds of traditional street games into the fluid rhythm of a line. To capture a larger international audience, Décimus deliberated on how to make creole as appealing as possible. He began to replace certain creole sounds with others more easily assimilated by foreign ears. Having studied how to write creole, Décimus was aware that certain sounds in creole could "heurter des oreilles" (offend the ears). He opted for a modified creole that privileged the vowels *i*, *a*, and *o* for a harmony that would express his "métissage culturel (occidental, africain, indien)" (cultural mixing [Western, African, and Indian]), leading to the formation of *zouk* music.¹¹

The phonetic aspect of these song texts led other Kassav' members to explore the natural rhythm and inflection of creole to produce meaningful poetic texts with pleasing rhythms and sounds. Two examples are found in "Ou pa ka sav"¹² and "Ki non a manmanw."¹³ In the first, Jean-Philippe Marthély conjugated the verb *to know*: "An pa ka sav / Ou pé ké sav / An pa jen sav" (I do not know / You will not know / I never know) to repeat the ending of a phrase by producing subtle shifts to illustrate the versatility of creole with the vowels *a* and *e*. In the second, "Ki non a manmanw," Desvarieux, Saint-Éloi, and Marthély insert Guadeloupean and Martinican idiomatic expressions in creole. One example is the expression *sa fèt* (It's done). This mixture of Guadeloupean and Mar-

tinican creole has actually created a new creole grammar for Kassav's compositions.

The popularity of *zouk* music, with its insistence upon creole lyrics, is a social and political phenomenon; as Max Jeanne states, "Cultural practices will take over as political acts and help to forge a national conscience."¹⁴ To support Jeanne's statement, Kassav' and other *zouk* singers legitimize and elevate the status of the creole language. Through their stage presence and concerts, *zouk* performers encourage a collective voice, thereby creating a feeling of confidence and credibility. This stance appeals to youth searching for a national identity. By establishing such an ideological space and pointing to creole roots and identity, Kassav' and other groups – Taxikréol, Kwak, and Dissonance – empower their Guadeloupean and Martinican audiences to affirm an indigenous Caribbean cultural identity. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant speak of creoleness as an internal process of freedom and a new self-consciousness that enables the individual to envision his own depths:¹⁵

C'est à dire: une liberté. Mais, tentant vainement de l'exercer, nous nous aperçumes qu'il ne pouvait pas y avoir de vision intérieure sans une préalable acceptation de soi. On pourrait même dire que la vision intérieure en est la résultante.

(That is to say: a freedom. And, trying in vain to use it, we perceived that there could be no internal vision without a prior acceptance of self. One could even say that the internal vision is the direct result of this acceptance.)

Without question, Kassav's internal vision is derived from a positive acceptance of self. This self-acceptance is reinforced with its insistence upon creating creole lyrics.

Performance, Social Actions, and Self-Definition

Kassav's first album, *Love and Ka Dance*, released in 1979, became the model of *zouk*. It featured the seven distinct rhythms of Guadeloupean folk *gwo ka* drums, the Martinican St. Jean Carnival rhythm, and the *ti-bois* (two sticks played on a piece of bamboo) into high-tech productions. Then, over a four-year period, the group slowly added new singers and musicians. New members were added for each new album and brought to the group a wealth of exposure to a wide variety of music.

The success of Kassav's *zouk* songs is not primarily based on the songs' themes but the overall dance mood they create. Numerous rhythms, audience participation, and easy-to-remember choruses are the prime ingredients in *zouk* songs. The musicians rely on synthesizer sounds, a percussion mix, punchy horn sections, and a quick tempo. Also characteristic of *zouk* music is a mixture of various tempos within the same song, with snare drum effects, a rhythm box, brass melodic contours, and Carnival upbeat rhythms. Based in Paris, the group is exposed to international music and, in particular, French-African music. Kassav' has also adopted Zairien soukous melodic riffs on the guitar and the Cameroonian Manu Dibango's soul makossa rhythms, as noted in "Légitime défense" (Legitimate defense) from *Kassav' #3*¹⁶ and "Filé zètwal" (Shooting star) from *An-ba-chen'n la*. Also, in the 1980s and 1990s, Kassav' and other *zouk* bands exercised the freedom to choose from an eclectic range of sound effects and to mix musical influences from different periods and countries.

In concert, Kassav's performers exude self-confidence. Handsome and energetic, Marthély, Naimro, and Saint-Éloi play the roles of sentimental lovers as they croon into the microphone, singing romantic double entendre songs. Jocelyne Béroard, dressed in the latest Paris fashion, brings "class" and a female perspective on romantic relationships. Kassav' has a spontaneous relationship with its fans. The audience feels as if it knows each member personally, for Béroard and her fellow band members draw them into the performance. For example, on Kassav's 1993 *Live au Zénith Sé Nou Menm* (Live at the Zénith that's us), the audience gives automatic call-and-response answers to questions raised in the songs. They sing along with the chorus, and they break into spontaneous clapping to increase the band's quick tempo. The album's title says it all: *we* includes a total fusion with Kassav' and its audience.

Zouk, with its polyrhythmic drumming, causes its audience and musicians to expend a great deal of energy. At the end of a Kassav' concert, the musicians and audience are drenched in perspiration, for they have danced to the point of exhaustion. This communal dancing results in a journey of self-discovery, bringing together people of all racial and social backgrounds and providing a temporary release from the pressures of daily living. By communicating wholly through rhythm and creole songs, Kassav' manages to cross all linguistic boundaries, to tap into the inner vitality of people of all ages, and to finalize its concerts with the simple statement: "Sa sé le zouk!" (That's *zouk*!)

The dynamism of *zouk* derives from between-island cross-fertilization.

A synthesis of popular and traditional songs and foreign music, it is in perpetual transformation. Furthermore, a great deal of social value is placed on *zouk* music in the French Caribbean, for it is constantly being sung, performed, listened to, and danced to. Lively and vibrant, *zouk* performance engages individuals to coalesce around social forms of meaning. Through social action and production, individuals are linked together to create structures that define both their reality and themselves.

Nostalgia, Social Harmony, and Hope

Zouk is primarily dance music, and its rhythm is more important to its French Caribbean listener than the lyrics. Consequently, people are quick to say that Kassav's songs are nonsensical and "lightweight." However, as soon as one pays attention to Kassav's compositions, it is obvious that great care has been allocated to the wording. The songs' themes range from nostalgic references and a longing for one's island landscape to social commentary, male-female relationships, religion, exile, and medicine. In 1983, Kassav's song "Banzawa"¹⁷ was popular, but it was Georges Décimus's hit "Zouk-la sé sèl mediakaman nou ni" (*Zouk* is the only medicine we have) that boosted the band to international stardom.¹⁸

Kassav's abandonment of the mother islands for France brings forth a strong form of nostalgia for the very landscape it has left. The self-exiled musicians Décimus, Naimro, and Saint-Éloi are alienated and suffer from the cold French weather and people. Yet the three performers recapture and reinstate their islands' traditions in alternating open, oblique, or subtle ways. In Décimus's "Wonderful," found on *Kassav*' #3, a woman and man's intimate communion with the island landscape lives in their blood. Every time he has the chance, Décimus returns to Guadeloupe. The tune "Wonderful" expresses his exact emotions:

Lè mwen débaké
En tè kon, on boug fou
Paskè mwen touvé péi la wonderful.

(When I landed
I was like a fool
because I found the country to be wonderful.)

Clearly, Décimus neither finds France to be beautiful nor wonderful. He continues with "Senti jan sé moun la yé / Sé moun la yé / Yo ka limé di fé / Lè yo ka dansé / Gadé jan sé moun la yé / Jan moun la yé" (Feel out

the people, the people / Feel their heat / When they dance, / Look at how the people, the people / All the people are). For Décimus, Guadeloupe is a place where people openly express their feelings and dance with abandon. Once he enters a familiar landscape, he becomes spontaneous because the landscape is imbued with bright colors that affect his psyche.

Jean-Claude Naimro's first recorded romantic ballad, "Korosol" from *Yélélé*, recalls his love for Martinique with its exotic fruit, the *korosol* (soursop). He explained that he deliberately chose the bumpy, thin-skinned delicate fruit because it is indigenous to the Caribbean, while pineapples, coconuts, and mangoes are also found in Asia and Africa.¹⁹ Equating his nostalgia for Martinique with soursop is like contrasting the cement walkways, skyscrapers, hectic pace, and anonymity of Paris with the lush greenery, sandy beaches, and slower rhythm of the Caribbean. In short, soursop is Naimro's comfort zone, for he has been living in France for a long time.

Saint-Éloi's solo career was launched with his song "West Indies" from *Misik-cé lan mou*.²⁰ Known for his double-coded poetic songs replete with imagery, Saint-Éloi sings about a vital, sensuous, and vibrant West Indies. Under the guise of delivering a song about the West Indies, he produces lyrics duplicating the love act between man and woman: "Lè mwen senti an ti lodè vanille / Mwen sav kè sété ou ki té ka vini doudou" (Whenever I smell vanilla / I know that it's you, you who are arriving, darling)." The smell of vanilla is associated with sweet things and soft textures; therefore, Saint-Éloi proceeds with: "Mè doudou ou tellement douss aprè lan-mou" (But darling you are so sweet after making love) and ends with "An décolage enko / pou nou sa monté, monté, monté, monté" (Another absinthe and rum drink / so that we can get higher), intimating that the love act will be repeated. The couple vibrates to the sensual quality of the Caribbean landscape, is entangled and interconnected with the landscape, and moves toward a mutual climax and a burst of life.

This interplay of man, woman, and landscape reveals Saint-Éloi's passion for a land that symbolizes a female body that opens up to conception. His vision of Guadeloupe is caught between sensation and memory, for "Ti zouézo ka chèché flè pou butiné" (Birds are looking for flowers to gather nectar). The vertical movement of the song's opening creole expression, "Décolage o coco," refers to a morning rum drink followed by a coconut water chaser to prepare farm workers to work in the fields all day.²¹ However, an interpretation of the last stanza: "Another absinthe and rum drink / so that we can get higher" can simply mean that farmers

will drink a straight white rum again in preparation for a hard's day work. The landscape is not simply the stage where passions are enacted but a place where human beings and the fruits of their labor coexist.

Concerning romantic relationships in their lyrics, Marthély's and Saint-Éloi's texts establish a new rapport between women and men. Instead of projecting a macho image to support the rumor that there are three women for one man in the French Caribbean, they equate love with vulnerability, doubt, fear, and respect for women. With great emotion and much tenderness, Marthély, a second tenor, sings about a man's deep love for his wife in the beautiful ballad "Bel créati" (Beautiful creature) from *Touloulou*.²² This song acknowledges that without her support he would not be such a success:

Épi ti mélodi ta la, sé sèl manyè
Mwen ké fèw wè, ou ké konpwan ou ké sézi
Bon djé sa mwen ka fè, si ou pa la.

(This song is my way of making
You see, understand, and grasp
God knows how much you mean to me.)

He is so dependent on her support that he sings: "Mwen ka tatoné mwen avèg' / sé trope pou mwen / San ou doudou pa ni jounen pa ni lan nuit" (I grope along like a blind person / It's too much for me / Without you, darling, there's neither day nor night).

Switching from this slow, tender ballad Marthély moans, groans, shouts, and scats on the sexy "Se-Pa-Djen Djen" (Love, it is not a joke) from *An-ba-chen'n la*. The message is that a loving relationship between a man and a woman develops from a fusion of the spiritual and the physical:

Sé pa selman ko dan ko,
Sé tèt' la ki pli enpowtan
Gadé ki jan i ka ba nou bon la fose
Pou nou pé wè douvan nou
Kan nou ka dékolé tchè nou toujou ansam' minm'.

(It isn't only the physical side that counts,
The spirit has its importance.
Look at how that gives us the strength
To think clearly about the future.
Even when we are not together, our two hearts beat to the same
rhythm.)

The creole expression *djen-djen* implies foolishness and childish behavior. Reinforced by the chorus with a heavy bass, Marthély places a great importance on the absence of *djen-djen* (making fun of everything). He begs the woman to look at (*gadé*) him so that they can reflect together (*réfléchi*) about their relationship. The verb *réfléchir* is repeated twice with an emphasis on the first syllable. Then Marthély adds *réfleksyon* (let's reflect), acknowledging that both parties are actively engaged in this relationship. To assure the woman that he loves her, he ends the song with: "Wouvé zié lèvé tèt, / pa kité douvan pwanw" (Open your eyes and raise your head / Think ahead). If she looks directly at him, she will surely know that their relationship is on firm ground.

In "Ou chanje" (You have changed), from *Tekit izi*,²³ Naimro relates how distance and mistrust can creep into a relationship when the husband is unfaithful. Enunciating each word with pathos, the singer expresses his regret that he has caused his wife's change of attitude. The movement from *tu* to the formal *vous* demonstrates the strain under which the couple lives. According to Naimro, "A song on this topic was badly needed to demonstrate that there are some Caribbean men who regret the harm they inflicted on the woman in their lives."²⁴ Obviously, Naimro was correct in his assessment because this song garnered for him the 1993 Prix Sacem-Martinique as composer of the year.

In Béroard's "Pa bisouin palé" (No need to speak), on *Ou pa ka sav*, the traditional male and female roles are reversed. This song marks the first time a French Caribbean female singer celebrates a woman who takes charge by publicly asking her man to "Fémé lapot la" (Close the door) to talk about their relationship. Making an appeal for love and understanding, Béroard repeatedly sings that her heart *frisonne* (shivers) for this man, who needs to be a more effective communicator. The unspoken message in "Pa bisouin palé" is that French Caribbean women have always been the backbone of their society. The tune was so popular that Béroard won a gold record after the sale of 129,000 copies.

Undoubtedly, Kassav' focuses on the individual, the couple, and the group. The singers and composers do not deny that love may hurt. Usually, they end their songs with the wish for reconciliation. Coming from a tropical climate, the group anchors its songs in a specific Caribbean space and landscape. Images of the sun, the ocean, the wind, the boat, and the rainbow arc metaphors for life patterns. Sometimes the sun can be quite brutal, burn up the crops, and dry up the water reservoirs. At other times it can energize people, lift up their spirits, and cause much happiness. For the *Lagué moin* album,²⁵ Décimus wrote "Solèye" (Sun), which did not

win the fans' attention until Béroard sang another version on *Vini pou*.²⁶ This new rendition of "Solève" finds Kassav' experimenting with the verbs *chauffer* (to heat), *rechauffer* (to reheat) and *éclairer* (to light up), underscoring Kassav's message of hope. The nouns or the infinitives for hope, light, and heat recur frequently to stress Kassav's optimism that the current inertia and despair that permeate the French Caribbean psyche will change. If the sun succeeds in making unhappy people happy and healing those who mourn, there is growth and harmony to energize into an upward arch.

Kassav' members work hard at their craft. Always rehearsing, changing and evolving, they are not afraid to delve into feelings. Again, in Saint-Éloi's "Zoukamine" we hear a message of hope, warmth, and tender commitment:²⁷

Ni on tan pou ri,
On tan pou réfléchi.
An ka pwoposé on térap
Pou pé agi.

(Neither a time for laughter,
Nor a time for reflection.
I propose a therapy
In order to take action.)

Saint-Éloi's lyrics are specific, offering a "vitamin" of "zoukamine" for world peace with a percussive, spicy, Brazilian-tinged melody. In fact, the 1994 song "Zoukamine" is a response to the 1984 "Zouk-la sé sèl medikaman nou ni."²⁸ In the earlier song, Desvarieux declared he was sick with love for *zouk*. Now, Saint-Éloi offers a prescription of "zoukamine" to cure social ills. The ever present sentimental yearning to rediscover the Caribbean home landscape, a pristine environment that abounds with natural beauty and social harmony, embodies an escape from the ambivalence of living in France and a continual search for a new, unfettered identity through the medium of *zouk*.

Pan-Caribbean and African Connections

In 1982, Kassav' moved out of the studio for its first live concert in Guadeloupe, the country of its three founders. Soon thereafter, Kassav' evolved into the prime musical force whose appeal spanned the entire French Caribbean because of its interdependent communication with

other musical forms that are encoded in its live performances. By 1986, the group had reached superstar status in the French Caribbean, Paris, and throughout French-speaking Africa. There were frequent grueling ten-month tours in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. The band released one to two albums per year, totaling nearly thirty by 1987. In addition, Kassav's records were illegally pirated and dubbed, especially in French-speaking Africa and the Caribbean. These activities made the group the most popular entertainers of francophone Africa and the Caribbean.

As performers, Kassav' promotes a professional and cultural consciousness by demonstrating a solidarity with its compatriots in the French Caribbean and reaffirming its Caribbean identity. Since creole is an oral language, Kassav's live performances become a reading of the lyrical text. To express thanks for its fans' support and pride in its Caribbean heritage (which provided the foundation for its music), on 23 February 1986 Kassav' returned to Guadeloupe to perform a free concert and to receive its first gold record. Before an enthusiastic audience of 50,000 (more than 15 percent of Guadeloupe's population) Kassav' played its gold record hit, "Zouk-la sé sèl mediakaman ni nou" (*Zouk* is the only medicine we have).²⁹ Coming from a region where the sale of 3,000–5,000 copies of a single album is a major success, Kassav' made history by being the first French Caribbean band to sell enough copies to win a gold record. With a sale of more than 200,000 worldwide, "Zouk-la sé sèl mediakaman ni nou" is still one of the biggest hit songs ever recorded by a French Caribbean band.

The song, first on the local hit chart for six months in 1985, consists of two phrases, one for the refrain and the second for the verse, with only eight lines of text. The song lasts for six minutes and twenty-four seconds. Desvarieux's gravelly voice enters on the first verse, commenting on how hard life is and asking the question, "Ki jan zot fè pou pé sa kenbé?" (How have you managed to survive?). Décimus's voice is then amplified and responds to Desvarieux's question, "Zouk-la sé sèl mediakaman nou ni" (*Zouk* is the only medicine we have), to which a chorus replies, "Sé kon sa" (That's how it is). Desvarieux then requests, "Ba mwen plan la mwen pé sa konpwan / Ba mwen plan la poko sézi" (Give me the secret for it so that I can understand / Give me the secret for I have not understood). The repetition of the title phrase, interspersed with the singers' encouragement, was very appealing to an enthusiastic audience.

Although Béroard insists that "Zouk-la sé sèl mediakaman nou ni" does not carry a distinct political ideology, the song stimulated a lively

public political debate in the French Caribbean. In the 1980s, the Nationalist Party interpreted the idea that *zouk* was “the only solution” to be a political attack on the state of local affairs. *Zouk* supporters, like the linguist Jean Bernabé, saw *zouk* “as a practice integrating fundamental elements of the creole *convivialité*. . . . Such therapy, moreover, would fit in with the belief that the salvation of our countries must first go through a cultural revolution, a decolonization of minds.”³⁰

In this respect, *zouk* symbolizes a liberating influence that forges a pan-African link among dominated blacks in colonial and postcolonial societies in the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. To resist assimilation into metropolitan French culture, Kassav’ members mingle with other immigrant musicians, family, and friends to maintain unique cultural boundaries. Steady reinforcement of their own identity and language (creole), along with an infusion of different musical rhythms, sustains the band’s global appeal.

Kassav’s records enjoy phenomenal sales in Europe. With its exchange of population and cultural commodities, the imperial capital, Paris, is an important site where African diasporan colonial peoples can play a vital role in the global economy and culture. Fully aware of this role, Kassav’ recognizes that it has African diasporan, Asian, and European audiences. The sold-out concerts at Zénith, a prestigious concert hall in Paris, in 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991, and 1993, have brought the group into the limelight. The French press conducted numerous interviews which, among other things, generated an audience of more than 300,000 at the Fête de la Musique on 21 June 1986 on the outskirts of Paris. This positive response reinforces Kassav’s initial goals: to create a new sound, to succeed financially, to provide Caribbean people with personal and national pride, and to make the French Caribbean and its culture more widely known.

Capital Domination and Marketing

For over six years Kassav’ has been struggling to enter the American market. The group first came to New York in 1988 and played before a Caribbean audience at the Club Ritz. The group’s last tour was with the 1994 Africa Fête held in major American cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., and Miami. The initial decision to enter the United States market occurred with the signing with CBS (now Sony) after eight consecutive sold-out nights at the Zénith in Paris in 1987.³¹ The November 1987 contract with CBS led to the release of the album *Majestik Zouk* in 1989, which garnered two gold records for “Domèyis” and “Raché Tchè”

(two songs derived from traditional music cowritten by Wilfred Fontaine and Marthély, with music by Naimro).

Ironically, the CBS/Sony contract guaranteed a constant production of creole lyrics but there were fewer releases. The production of only one album every two years led to wild speculations: the band had broken up, had reached its peak, was no longer popular, or its special sound had died a quick death. In the French Caribbean a band is not considered to be popular if it does not issue a new album at least once a year. Always concerned about its Caribbean audience, Kassav' has been able to circumvent the CBS/Sony restrictions by issuing albums under the names of individual members. According to Gene Scaramuzzo, because the group found these limitations "anathema," upon reconsideration Sony "turned the band over to their Tristar label, a subsidiary whose main goal is the U.S. promotion of Sony artists who are successful outside the States."³²

Each Kassav' vocalist has been recruited by other artists to be guest singers for such projects as the 1992 Malavoi's *Matébis*; the 1993 Mario Canonge's *Trait d'union*; the 1994 Tabou Combo's *Unity*; and the 1992 Shades of Black *Wonderful* album. The group was also invited to participate in the 1993 film *Siméon*, based on the impact of French Caribbean music. Directed by the Martinican Euzhan Palcy, Béroard and Desvarieux have lead roles in the film, and Naimro, Marthély, and Saint-Éloi play lesser roles. More than twelve songs were written by Kassav' for the film's sound track. The most popular "Mwen alé" (My departure) and "Mwen viré" (My return), both penned by Béroard, were released on the 1992 *Tekit izi*.

In the Caribbean, Kassav' has to contend with disk jockeys and *béké* sponsors who decide which song on an album is the best one to be featured. Because of the rapid turnover of hits, the local radio stations do not keep an archive and basically play only the most current hits. There is no time slot set aside once a week where the "oldies but goodies" are played on a specific radio station. Fearing saturation, Eric Andrieu of Déclic-Martinique suggests an alternative "to keep the group in the limelight by encouraging the local disk jockey to promote another tune from the already popular album."³³

French Caribbean musicians want to be successful in their home islands as well as on the international market. If they want to be full-time professionals, they must move to France, the very country that colonized and departmentalized their country. Concerts before Guadeloupean and Martinican audiences cannot provide enough revenue. Musicians who remain in the islands must hold other jobs and perform only on a part-

time amateur basis. The decision to move to Paris is viewed from two perspectives: musicians become dependent on the marketing whims of a multinational recording company, yet it is a liberation because it provides the venue, platform, and stimulus for further exposure and experimentation. It is a catch-22 position.


The French metropolis may impose conditions that ignore a musician's cultural uniqueness and socioeconomic needs. French recording companies only release new albums during the Christmas and summer holidays, whereas in the Caribbean there are three major seasons: Christmas, Carnival, and summer. Repeatedly, individual musicians or bands have requested a staggered release and an aggressive promotion of new albums to coincide with these three periods. Many expatriates return to the Caribbean in February to celebrate Carnival and to spend money on records to take back to their homes in exile. The musicians and bands would like to capitalize on this available income, but their requests have so far been in vain.

Although there is no infrastructure for mass distribution of music in Martinique and Guadeloupe, there are locally based record producers.³⁴ These producers provide the initial funds for the making of records, but the singers and/or musicians do not touch any royalties until they have repaid the fees for the sound engineer, the rental of the studio, pressing the record in France, distribution and marketing of the album, and so forth. For example, after "Pa bisouin palé" sold over 129,000, Béroard received only enough revenue from the producer, Georges Debs, to pay rent on her Paris apartment for four months. This accounting problem with Georges Debs Production (Martinique), along with others, was one of the reasons Kassav' left and signed with CBS in 1987.

The power relations entailed in the CBS/Sony contract and the constraints that Kassav' has suffered as a result are a clear example of the commodification and domination of cultural productions – in this case, *zouk* – by capital and industry. Nevertheless, Kassav' receives a monthly salary as a corporation, whereas the group did not have a signed contract with George Debs Production from 1984 to 1987.

Consistently, Kassav' celebrates pan-Caribbean and pan-African landscapes that provide creativity, nourishment, and life. Rhythm and nature coexist; the drum represents the heartbeat. *Zouk's* slick, sophisticated, layered sound evokes feelings by touching the inner core and memories of both its musicians and audiences. Kassav's mixture of Martinican and Guadeloupean creole has forced a new language into existence. The speed and cry of "Zouk-la . . ." and the offering of a "zoukamine" have

forged a new discourse for its listeners to rediscover the specificities of French Caribbean culture, history, and language through a celebratory union between body and music. Finally, with its multiracial group of musicians, Kassav' proudly demonstrates that *zouk* overcomes and encompasses social and cultural ties that are not yet possible in the colonial political arena.



Mas' in Brooklyn:
Immigration, Race,
and the Cultural
Politics of Carnival

RACHEL BUFF

Contemporary scholarship on racial formation points out that race is a social construct, shaped by a confluence of discourses about policy, local politics, and cultural identity.¹ Less clear in this analysis is the role that popular cultures play in this always dynamic, always dialogic process. Focusing on the history of West Indian carnivals in New York City, this essay examines the many intersections of popular practice and official policy. Carnival, a Caribbean hybrid of African and European cultures, migrated with West Indian people to New York in the twentieth century and it changed along with their lives. Blending European Lenten festivals with elements of African, East Indian, and native popular cultures, Carnival has always displayed the hybrid practice of daily life in the Caribbean. Revelers dance and costume themselves, in a nineteenth-century imitation of European masquerade balls that now give Carnival its slang verb: to *play mas*'. Carnival expresses, at various times, national, cultural, racial, and ethnic identities.

My contention here is that West Indian Carnival in New York is neither a planned diffusion of pressure, a release valve for the oppressions of everyday life in a race- and class-stratified society, nor is it simply a time of inversion, where those on the bottom seize moments of revolutionary opportunity. At different times, it is both of these. But Carnival, with its diffusion of grass-roots forms and high culture, its anarchy and moments of unity, its creative invention and invented tradition, is most of all a space of identity formation.

Carnival in New York combines the diverse forces that give race and ethnicity meaning: the police, the media, spectators, both black and white, rumors of raids by the Immigration and Naturalization Service,

immigrant and native-born revelers, Caribbean people in town from all over the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean. Here, West Indian immigrants in Harlem present their pride in their decolonizing homelands to their African-American neighbors; here Trinidadians and Vincentians dance down Eastern Parkway behind banners touting “Historic Africa,” while Haitians and Jamaicans party to their own systems on the side streets lining the parkway; here Jesse Jackson announced his presidential bid in 1984; here in 1992, the quincentennial year of Columbus’s first voyage to the Caribbean, city police dressed in riot gear because they anticipated racial tension cautiously advanced up a road, confronting peaceful black revelers dressed as Mayan gods. Transnational and local practices converge, drawing on recent experience and the long reach of hemispheric memory. In order to celebrate Carnival in New York, Caribbean people struggle against forces arrayed against them as new immigrants and as black citizens in a racist society. Carnival, then, is a snapshot of a moment in the process of racial formation, in the history of Du Bois’s famous color line as it is enforced, circumvented, ridiculed, and endlessly reinvented.

This essay focuses on the confluence of hemispheric migration, colonialist discourse, and grass-roots cultural forms in West Indian Carnival, in its metropolitan incarnations in Harlem and Brooklyn. Through the pageantry, music, and revelry of Carnival, Caribbean people, their children, and their African-American neighbors have responded to changing geographies, revising and updating their stories of exile and affiliation. At Carnival, people assert identities different from the ones prescribed by federal immigration and municipal policies. Taking over Eastern Parkway every Labor Day, these transmigrant peoples imagine sovereignties and affinities that correspond with their historical experience rather than with the dictates of cold war liberalism and neocolonialism. Here, traditional and revised practices invoke a changing same, and old friends meet on unfamiliar ground.

Places Like Home: Carnival in Harlem, 1920–1964

Carnival in New York began in Harlem in the 1920s, when immigrants from Trinidad and Tobago began to hold private dances to celebrate the pre-Lenten festivities as they had back home. In 1947, a Trinidadian woman by the name of Jessie Wattle organized a carnival celebration on Labor Day, obtaining a permit from City Hall to parade on Lenox Avenue from 110th to 140th Streets. This Carnival parade ended after the riots of

1964 resulted in a two-month ban against free speech and organized demonstrations in Harlem.² Rufus Gorin, a Trinidadian immigrant who had “played mas” in New York since 1947, then attempted to organize a carnival in Brooklyn in 1965. Along with Carlos Lezama, whom he had met in a New York steel band, Gorin was one of the founding members of the West Indian–American Day Carnival Association (WIADCA), which today sponsors not only the massive Labor Day Carnival on Eastern Parkway but also steel band, calypso, and reggae concerts, costume and music competitions, and a “kiddie karnival” at the Brooklyn Museum.³

This short history of Carnival traces the various formations of Afro-Caribbean identity in New York City. During the first half of the twentieth century, Caribbean immigrants to New York maintained cultural and political links to their home islands. This first generation of sizable West Indian immigration to the United States responded to the extreme racial segregation they encountered in this country by maintaining dual identities. Entering a society that saw them primarily as black regardless of their class or regional origins, West Indian immigrants lived, worked, and often became politically active in the African-American community while stoking economic, political, and imaginative ties to their home islands.⁴ Orienting themselves toward returning home rather than assimilation, they used these dual imaginative loyalties to resist the metropolitan racial order. In 1920 only 4 percent of West Indian immigrant men and 18 percent of the women had taken U.S. citizenship, as compared to 49 percent of European immigrant men and 53 percent of the women.⁵

First-generation West Indian immigrants in New York drew on their cultural identity to distance themselves from a society they saw as racist. At the same time, as immigrants they struggled for economic success in the United States. Tension in Harlem over racial hierarchy and internal divisions coexisted with contemporary efforts at black political and cultural unity. Such conflict between immigrants and native-born workers is an ongoing component of the history of capitalist development on both sides of the color line. In the case of black West Indians, race overrode ethnicity in its hegemony over their lives. Race determined where immigrants and their children were permitted to live and work and what political organizations would allow them membership.

At the same time, ethnicity and national identity remained important to these early immigrants, taking the form of voluntary associations, social ties, and active involvement in the politics and culture of their homes. Costume balls and Anglophile celebrations, like a mock coronation for King George VI in Harlem in 1937, marked immigrant cultural

distance and their desire to maintain this distance from mainstream black life in the United States.⁶ Carnival maintained immigrant connections to home, insisting on ethnic and national identities for people recognized in the dominant racial hierarchy only as black.

Indoor costume balls in Harlem in the 1920s paralleled contemporary trends in Trinidad. After the Canboulay riots in the 1880s in Trinidad, the colonial administration as well as the colored middle class favored the decorum of costume balls and calypso tent performances that offered safer, commodified Carnival leisure.⁷ The black working class and colored middle classes celebrated Carnival simultaneously, but the middle class, pressured toward anglicization, was ambivalent toward the display and licentiousness they saw in street processions and barracks-yard celebrations until after the Second World War. Colonial and police administration of Carnival continued to suppress the grass-roots, Afro-creole aspects of Carnival in favor of more manageable and commercially propitious forms of celebration throughout the first half of the twentieth century.⁸ During the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, the grass-roots or black working class in Trinidad again gained a foothold in the ongoing struggle over Carnival. Steel bands emerged from inner-city neighborhoods like Laventille, Port-of-Spain, to challenge the sway of calypso singers as the musical backbeat of Carnival.⁹ Loud, large, and mobile by nature, steel bands provided a road music that animated street processions and drew an increasingly diverse crowd of Trinidadians.

In Trinidad, this “recreolization” of Carnival provided cultural anathems for decolonization and nationalism. In New York, the move of Carnival out onto the streets of Harlem allowed an expanded population of Caribbean immigrants, their American-born children, and their African-American neighbors to participate. Jessie Wattle founded the outdoor Labor Day parade in Harlem the same year that the popular Les Amants Ballroom burned down in Port-of-Spain.¹⁰ Although coincidental, the simultaneous occurrence of these two events – the burning and inauguration – is nonetheless instructive about the transnational circulation of culture. Errol Hill argues that in Trinidad the burning of Les Amants was part of a larger shift in Carnival that saw the merging of fancy costume balls with popular processions. At the same time, the founding of Carnival in Harlem marked the beginning of a public pan – West Indian identity in New York.

Between 1932 and 1965, immigration from the Caribbean slowed; Kasinitz notes that between 1932 and 1937, return migration exceeded the number entering the United States.¹¹ Fewer new immigrants and

the difficulty of travel during wartime limited the circulation of Caribbean people between home and the metropolis. During this period, record companies and traveling calypsonians brought West Indian music to New York. Trinidadians like Rufus Gorin, Lionel Belasco, and Wilmouth Houdini popularized Carnival music to mixed black and white, immigrant and native-born audiences.¹² At the same time, the U.S. civil rights struggles in the 1940s and 1950s brought people of color together; West Indian immigrants participated in black politics at the same time that institutions like the NAACP consistently called for reform of the quota system instituted by the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952.¹³ Adam Clayton Powell, the popular congressman from Harlem, supported civil rights within the United States while also proposing unlimited immigration from the British West Indies.¹⁴ In 1948, West Indians and African Americans helped elect the first black member of the New York State Assembly, Bertram Baker.¹⁵ Caribbean Americans like Hulan Jack and Shirley Chisolm rose to power through African-American political institutions.

Although West Indians were partially integrated into African-American public life, stereotyped ideas about hardworking Caribbean immigrants succeeding where native-born blacks could not continued to cause divisions between American blacks and those of West Indian ancestry. Sociologists like Thomas Sowell perpetuated the myth of West Indian exceptionalism, arguing that limited West Indian success in the United States is proof that culture, not race, impedes African-American economic progress.¹⁶ Kasinitz points out that statistically West Indians of this first generation were economically closer to African Americans than to white immigrants or native-born people.¹⁷ Similarly, Basch and colleagues point out that this cultural-pluralist model, bounded by the political geography of the nation-state, fails to account for the global and hemispheric racial orders that keep black immigrants everywhere mobile and poor.¹⁸

The transformation of New York Carnival from small homeland balls¹⁹ to a Harlem street festival embodies the multiple tensions of Caribbean immigrant social life in the 1940s and 1950s. While they struggled alongside African Americans for equal rights, Caribbean people were emotionally and politically compelled by the struggles for sovereignty taking place in their home nations. The dual affinities of the previous generation could be resolved through popular pan-African, anticolonial discourses of Caribbean, American, and African figures like George Padmore, C. L. R. James, Amilcar Cabral, or Franz Fanon. However, such

narratives of liberation in the U.S. context sometimes maintained tension between native-born and immigrant blacks.²⁰ As with tensions between Caucasian immigrants and native-born workers, ethnic division based on economic competition was only partially absolved by the discourse of race.

The context of common struggle at home as well as in New York, however, brought West Indians in New York closer together. At Carnival in Harlem, West Indian immigrants celebrated their common origins along with a nascent ethnic pride that paralleled the growth of nationalist sentiment back home. Caribbean culture in New York could symbolize national, ethnic, and/or racial pride. Carnival in Harlem and Brooklyn became a space where dominant meanings of race and ethnicity were contested and reinvented through collective action and personal expression.

While contemporary accounts place steel bands at Harlem Carnival in the early 1950s, Victor Brady claims to have led the first Carnival steel band in New York in 1959. He felt that his music defied anti-immigrant prejudice. "I played in Labor Day Parade in Harlem in 1959," he recalled, "when they still used to call West Indian people 'monkey' in this country."²¹ Steel bands in the Harlem Carnival, alongside more military colonial-style organizations like St. Martin's Cadets Civil Defense Unit and the Junior Monarch League Batons, asserted a nascent Caribbean cultural and ethnic pride. Although U.S. and British flags flew over Harlem Carnival in 1958, the festival, like the national formations represented, was in the midst of great changes.²² Kasinitz points out the importance of Carnival in the development of a pan-West Indian identity in New York; while steel band or pan, particularly in 1959, was a Trinidadian form, its incarnation in New York came to signify *Caribbean* cultural identity.²³

Brady recounted another incident from his experience playing pan in Harlem during this period. His steel band performed for Nation of Islam leader Elijah Mohammed; in that context, Caribbean steel drums became a symbol of black pride and innovation: "Elijah Mohammed called me a genius," he recalled. "He put me on stage and said, 'We don't need the white men, this boy can make music from these cans.'"²⁴ Carnival practices took on diverse kinds of symbolic weight in New York, becoming at the same time a component of metropolitan identity formation.

Decolonization, Race, and Immigration, 1965–1972

By abolishing the national origins quotas of the McCarran-Walter Act, the Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act opened the door in 1965 to a

dramatic increase in immigration from the Caribbean. The foreign-born black population of the United States doubled between 1960 and 1970, and increased by more than two and a half times between 1970 and 1980. By 1980, almost 20 percent of New York's black population was foreign-born.²⁵

Along with the tensions around Caribbean performance in Harlem, this massive influx of immigrants helped move Carnival from Harlem to Brooklyn. Caribbean immigrants clustered in the more spacious and cleaner streets of Flatbush and Crown Heights, renting and buying property as the area was opened up both by antidiscrimination housing regulations and white flight.²⁶ The avenues and hills of Brooklyn "looked like home," Lezama told me. As the area gradually filled with immigrant residential and commercial enclaves, it became the site for New York Carnival after it was banned in Harlem.

The post-1965 immigrant cohort confronted a long-standing and highly developed black community in New York, along with a smaller population of older Caribbean immigrants. New immigrants experienced racism in some respects that native-born blacks did not: in dealing with the immigration and naturalization process; in the parallels they drew between U.S. racism and the racism that had caused them to leave the neocolonial Caribbean; in their discovery that their adjustment to their new country would be mediated by race in a way different from back home. While the experiences of transnational migration and settlement, along with the politically charged climate created by decolonization and civil rights struggles, provided ample grounds for solidarity between West Indian immigrants and African Americans, these experiences also created rifts and tensions that still exist in New York to some degree.

As settlement patterns for Caribbean immigrants in New York increasingly resembled ethnic enclaves, Caribbean peoples (at home and abroad) and African Americans debated the relationships possible among black peoples. In the wake of the black power uprising in Trinidad in 1972, Stokely Carmichael was banned from entering several Caribbean nations, as were leaders of the Trinidad and Tobago Ten and of the Trinidad uprising. Carmichael was prevented from crossing into Canada in 1972. "I don't know why they banned me in the Caribbean," Carmichael responded. "I have done nothing. I am from the Caribbean. I thought I was fighting against oppression of Black people. Maybe this is why they banned me, because I am fighting against people who oppress Black people."²⁷

The pages of New York's *Antillean Echo* debated Carmichael's pan-

hemispheric, transnational concept of black power. On the one hand, some writers used this notion of black power to call for “healing the split” between African Americans and West Indian Americans. On the other, some debated the usefulness of black power as a political ideology in the multicultural Caribbean. Particularly after East Indian students in Guyana protested the focus of black power on Afro-Caribbeans by walking out on Carmichael in 1970, many questioned the relevance of pan-African unity to Caribbean political struggles. Some writers doubted the use of a United States-based ideology, even for West Indian people in New York. Civil rights leaders, the *Antillean Echo* reported, had told Carmichael that he could always go home, since he was not really American anyway. West Indian involvement in U.S. civil rights struggles, some argued, did not represent their interests as black or West Indian people so much as it represented feelings of humanitarianism and a developing attachment to their new country.²⁸

The logic of the ethnicity paradigm, where new immigrants worked hard for a stake in the American dream, worked against black unity. Of course, this ethnicity paradigm has a deeply racialized basis, providing assimilation into a dominant conception of whiteness and offering upward mobility only on those grounds. But West Indians had long tried to use the tools of racialized hegemony with which to acquire some kind of economic security. In Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Seifert Yearwood argues with Deighton, who refuses to save money and has an African-American mistress:

“Remember,” he began, his restive eyes stilled for a moment. “When we first came here in 1920 we was all living in those cold-water dumps in South Brooklyn with the cockroaches lifting us up?” He gave a high wheezing laugh but his eyes burned with outrage. “The white people thought they was gon keep us there but they din know what a Bajan does give. We here now and when they run we gon be right behind them. That’s why, mahn, you got to start buying. Go to the loan shark if you ain got the money.”²⁹

While the rhetoric of decolonization and pan-Africanism celebrated grounds for Third World unity, both in the United States and abroad, paradigms of ethnicity and nationality provoked conflict between immigrant and native-born black people in the United States. Proud of their newly liberated homelands, black West Indians in New York were torn between the claims of multiracial societies at home, nationalist rhetoric (heard both in the Caribbean and New York) touting black power as uni-

fyng and liberating people around the globe, and the day-to-day facts of life in a racist country that promised upward mobility based on ethnic empowerment and solidarity.

Carnival on the Parkway, 1969–1991

Stories about Carnival's move from Harlem to Brooklyn after 1964 are emblematic of the tensions surrounding this process of identity formation. The mainstream New York press – including the *Times*, the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*, *New York Newsday*, and organs of the African-American press, such as the *Amsterdam News* and the *Daily Challenge* – tends to write the history of Carnival in New York as based on the innovations of Gorin and Lezama, with pre-1969 Harlem history serving as a historical footnote to this colorful narrative of ethnic celebration and pride.³⁰ Some writers maintain that Carnival moved out of Harlem after a “small disturbance” in 1964,³¹ while others link the change of venue to tensions between West Indian celebrants and “dissident elements in the Black Power movement.”³² The *Amsterdam News* recorded a brawl at the West Indian Day Parade in 1961 and speculated in 1978 that Carnival had been thrown out of Harlem, losing its permit, because the organizers could not control rioting and looting. Carlos Lezama, for many years president of the West Indian–American Day Carnival Association, declined to talk about the move, dramatically asserting: “I don't think there is anything to say about that. What I have been through is too terrible.”³³

Certainly the anti-riot injunction, effective after the Harlem riots early in the summer of 1964, foreclosed possibilities of a Labor Day festival that year. The Harlem riots marked the discovery of northern black America by the mainstream press. *Time* magazine's cover story about Harlem states:

No walls surround the ghetto except the invisible ones that can be the hardest of all to surmount. Harlem's Negroes have withdrawn behind the invisible walls, almost out of necessity, into a world of their own, complete with its own pride, its own lingo, and even its own time. In Harlem, CPT means “Colored People's Time,” and it runs one full hour behind white people's time.³⁴

Such legal prohibitions against holding a festival would have been familiar to Caribbean immigrants because of vivid memories of struggles over Carnival in the 1880s, as well as a growing consciousness of police repression of black culture in the United States and Canada. However, the

injunction does not explain why Carnival could not have resumed in 1965, as it had been celebrated in Harlem for almost twenty years. The many apocryphal stories surrounding the end of Carnival in Harlem indicate the difficulties of narrating West Indian immigrant history along the lines of racial, ethnic, or national loyalties. These difficulties bear on struggles for municipal power and cultural sovereignty.

Although the West Indian-American Day Carnival Association obtained a permit to parade in Brooklyn in 1969, since that time there have been many debates over whether Carnival should remain there or move to Fifth Avenue, like other “ethnic” parades. But Carnival is not a parade; Carnival culture does not move down the parkway in an orderly procession, and the Labor Day festivities serve as much to symbolically conclude a week of performance and partying for the Caribbean community in New York as they do to celebrate an ethnic identity. Both the form of Carnival and, more broadly, its capacity as an ethnic symbol, have been the subjects of much debate in the history of Carnival in Brooklyn.

As early as 1973, Shirley Chisolm, then state representative from Bedford-Stuyvesant, called for Carnival to be moved to a grander setting. “We want eventually to have our parade moved to Fifth Avenue, like all the other grand parades, specifically St. Patrick’s Day and Columbus Day. We deserve as big a celebration as the other ethnic groups.”³⁵ In 1974, a group who wanted to move Carnival to Fifth Avenue held a separate parade; groups like the New York Carnival Council, Inc., and the Committee for Concerned West Indian Americans have put pressure on WIADCA to move the Carnival as well. WIADCA responded by asserting that Carnival needed to stay in Brooklyn to maintain its cultural identity and community spirit.³⁶ By 1974, Chisolm had switched her position, advocating Brooklyn as the true home of West Indian Carnival. “Brooklyn is a great borough,” she said, “and I’d like to see it stay the home of this great parade.”³⁷

During the 1970s, the mainstream white press emphasized the ethnic and national aspects of Carnival. A *Daily News* headline in 1976 proclaimed, “It’s Trinidad in Brooklyn!” and *New Brooklyn* magazine reported that more West Indian people inhabited Brooklyn than any one Caribbean nation. As Caribbean immigrants migrated to Brooklyn, attendance at Carnival approached one million. Carnival during the 1970s expanded; WIADCA worked to upgrade the festival, holding fundraisers and working with local officials to provide health and maintenance services. Debates over the location of the festival indicate pressures within the Caribbean community over ethnic identification and municipal rec-

ognition during a time of community expansion and redefinition. Advocates of the Fifth Avenue parade saw West Indian people assimilating in a model of urban ethnicity displayed by Irish Americans and Italian Americans in their parades; this, they felt, was the deserved place of a hard-working immigrant population.

At the same time, many in the Caribbean community were seeking political and cultural alliances with African Americans. In 1972, the editor of the *Antillean Echo*, Neville Butler, was among the founders of the National Organization of West Indian Americans, a group dedicated to Caribbean integration into black communities while maintaining “West Indian cultural traits.” In their policy statement, the group emphasized the common origins of people in the African diaspora. “As to relations between blacks from the Caribbean and black Americans, the fact to be borne in mind is that it is sheer chance that the ancestors of the one lay his bones in the Caribbean and the ancestors of the other in North America.”³⁸ The *Antillean Echo*, while written from a distinctly Caribbean perspective, promoted such pan-black alliances, commenting on the racism of federal immigration policy and debating the representation of West Indians on television at the same time that it reported on events in the transnational Caribbean community in the United States and Canada. Carnival could play a specific role in this construction of Afro-diasporan unity. “When we join the hearts, hands, and resources of all the people of Black America, Africa and the West Indies in a permanent demonstration of our economic and political self-sufficiency and humanity, the ‘oneness’ we celebrate on the Parkway will be fully justified,” commented Horace Morancie in the *Amsterdam News*.³⁹

Efforts to move Carnival to Fifth Avenue, to earn for it the recognition accorded to other ethnic groups in New York, continue to this day. Randy Brewster is the well-known and popular costume designer of the Culture of Black Creation mas’ camp, one of many locations where people come to buy thematic costumes and march together. He told me that he feels the Carnival deserves to march down Fifth Avenue, that this would constitute recognition of his culture in New York City. Lezama commented: “It is not fair for us to be living in a place and to be rejected for so long from a place in Manhattan.”

At the same time, as Manning points out, Carnival is not an ethnic festival; the tradition resists assimilation even though the community seeks economic and political integration, demanding “full civic, political and economic rights and opportunities.”⁴⁰ In looking for these opportunities, the new cohort of immigrants confronted the rapidly changing

structure of opportunities in New York during the 1970s and 1980s. While Kasinitz follows William Julius Wilson in arguing for the “declining significance of race” consonant with the emergence of a permanent underclass in context of deindustrialization,⁴¹ the history of Carnival in the 1980s and 1990s suggests to me that contemporary Caribbean immigrants, as much as their predecessors, consciously confront a profoundly racialized urban landscape.

In 1979, there were several violent incidents at Carnival: muggings, chain snatchings, and one homicide. Rumors flew as to the cause of the violence. Lezama claimed to have received anonymous telephone threats informing him that there would be trouble on Carnival Monday. One potential source of violence, according to these anonymous sources, was the Reverend Herbert Daughtry, who had supposedly planned to lead members of the Black United Front to confront Hasidic Jews on Eastern Parkway. Daughtry publicly denied these charges.⁴² Police arrested a Rastafarian named Noah Robinson for the homicide and made public their assumption that the shooting must have been over drugs. The *Daily News* conflated an increasingly racialized representation of crime with an ignorance of Afro-Caribbean cultures, explaining that the Rastafarians were “a drug cult believed heavily involved in selling marijuana and cocaine, police said.”⁴³ Chain snatchings and muggings were attributed to roving bands of youths, but assertions about organized violence diminished as WIADCA and the Caribbean community in general attempted to put the event behind them and recover the public image of Carnival.

In the wake of violence at Carnival, Chief Robert Johnson of the Brooklyn police, working with WIADCA, implemented new restrictions. While this move purportedly responded to the incidents at Carnival in Brooklyn, it paralleled contemporary efforts in Britain to contain the Notting Hill Carnival in London. Police raids on the Mangrove Restaurant, a gathering place for panmen as well as multicultural residents of Notting Hill, together with an amplified police presence at Carnival in 1976, resulted in confrontations between the force and Carnival celebrants. Such repression polarized Notting Hill Carnival along lines of race and politics: the London Carnival was increasingly seen by whites as dangerous, while Afro-British participants became more involved in a political, pan-African interpretation of the festival.⁴⁴

Since 1980, the official parade time is from 8 A.M. to 6 P.M. Street discos are prohibited, vendors are required to register and obtain licences from WIADCA to sell their wares, and each mas' band must have its own marshals to keep the parade route clear.⁴⁵ The Police Department has ampli-

fied the number of officers present at Carnival, maintaining a force of about 2,000 throughout the 1980s. To contain the revelry to the parade and the ending time of 6 P.M., marchers are met at Grand Army Plaza, the end of the parade route, with a large complement of police, in military formation. In 1991, the first year I attended Carnival, the force was attired in riot gear, as it would be for years to come, probably in anticipation of “violence on the parkway” after a summer of incidents between black and Jewish residents of Crown Heights.

Such efforts to contain Carnival parallel municipal responses in cities like Rio de Janeiro, where Carnival takes place in an elaborately maintained and monitored sambadrome, and in London, where Police Chief Robert Mark commented in 1976: “We are not opposed in principle to the concept of an annual festival, which seems to us to be a remarkably happy occasion. But the police would prefer that in future it should be held in a stadium or some other controlled area.”⁴⁶ Heightened police presence at Carnival amplifies existing racial tensions over the festival. While the official rhetoric emphasizes the safety and security such a force provides, it also ensures a hundred small incidents that dramatize the everyday tension felt by an urban minority community toward the occupying forces. For every newspaper photo showing a beat cop festooned in Carnival attire and enjoying the music, there are thousands of un snapped photo opportunities of minor scuffles, arguments, and the ongoing hostility between police and neighborhood.

Many of the Caribbean-American people I talked to in Crown Heights have accepted the limitations on the official Carnival celebration. When I asked if the restrictions on Carnival affected the festival, Joyce Quinoma, a WIADCA official, put it this way:

Well, yes and no. Yes, because it goes on [at] night, we could have gone until we leave, at least nine o'clock at night. But no, because in view of the fact of all that is going on, it's best to be safe then be sorry, like my mother told me. You're better off doing it that way and having peace of mind.⁴⁷

Others in the community object to the restrictions on Carnival. Mighty Sparrow, a calypsonian who lives in both Brooklyn and Trinidad, wrote the popular Carnival hit: “One More Jam, Mr. Officer”: “People want to jump up / People want to wail / We come here to mash up / We not in jail.” As early as 1973, Knolly Moses linked police surveillance of Carnival to other government apparatuses of repression against black people: “They are so meticulous in their questioning about the upcoming cele-

brations,” he wrote in 1979, “that one might think they were working with the immigration authorities.”⁴⁸ Some link contemporary police and civic repression of Carnival in Brooklyn with Caribbean history, like the Canboulay riots of the 1880s.⁴⁹ In any gathering of over a million people, reasoned a neighborhood activist, some violence will occur. Why, he asked, does crime at Carnival result in official restrictions?⁵⁰

As I interviewed this activist, I was struck by the historical continuity of contemporary restrictions on Brooklyn Carnival and the dialectics of hemispheric social formation. While Carnival is a unique event, it is difficult to imagine any Euro-American festival being concluded by police dressed in riot gear. Some criminal activity took place on the parkway in 1979, fourteen years after the Immigration Reform Act allowed for the dramatic increase in immigration from the Caribbean. Caribbean immigrants took their place in a newly deindustrializing service economy in New York, Boston, and Miami. And, as Lee Bridges notes, “The policing strategy required to uphold the monetarist economic and social order, in which the new technology and Thatcher/Reaganite policies of enforced inequality combine to produce mass unemployment, growing social polarization and spreading urban decay,” required in turn a rearrangement of the urban politics of race and class.⁵¹ In this context, the struggle to represent Carnival and the Caribbean community along ethnic or racial lines is charged with new and contradictory meanings.

The 1990s: Popular Resurgence and Urban Conflict

In the early 1990s, some pan players and mas’ camps began to revive the tradition of J’ouvert (from the French *to open*), the early morning festive procession that starts off Carnival Monday. Historically a site for the most African, most repressed elements of Trinidadian culture, J’ouvert in Brooklyn comes out of some of the “rebel” panyards and “ole mas’” camps in East Flatbush that try to wear “traditional” Trinidadian costumes, using less color and invention and more face and body makeup than other mas’ bands currently wear. Responding to limitations on Carnival hours and the heavy police presence restricting access to the procession on Eastern Parkway, J’ouvert is an unregulated Carnival parade. A member of the Juju mas’ camp, which dresses in the black and white colors of ole mas’, told me that his costume band did not always make it to the parkway for Carnival Monday, because they sometimes met police who turned them back. Nonetheless, he said, J’ouvert and ole mas’ are

the heart of traditional Carnival, the most important aspects, and worth missing the official parade for.

Leslie Palmer describes J'ouvert in London in this way:

The place was Trinidad where I come from and all of we does get that feeling in the morning of the 1st day of the Carnival. I find you does only get that feeling when the pan on the road; so when we living in another country and we attempt to put the pan on the road – is the same feeling we looking to get for man to feel free with himself and get in tune with them rhythms that come through the bamboo and forge demself in steel clashing steel to shock you into the rhythmic excellence of blackness that does make you hair stand up when the tune-bum call from Africa.⁵²

The resurgence of J'ouvert indicates, on one level, the continuity of the struggle over grass-roots cultural forms so central to Afro-Atlantic Carnival traditions. In a metropolitan context, however, the increased policing of Carnival that has led to the renewed popularity of J'ouvert may represent a new trend in West Indian ethnic identity. J'ouvert has historically been a site where grass-roots Carnival revelers challenge more acceptable and easily appropriated kinds of celebrations. The experiences of both legal and illegal immigration, as well as the alienation of being black in a white-dominated society may, as Nancy Foner points out, transform “vague feelings of common ethnicity into a more articulated cultural and political consciousness,” thus responding to top-down pressures on racial definition by reimagining grounds for community coherence.⁵³

In both the black and white press during the 1980s, Carnival was interpreted variously as an expression of black unity and of emerging ethnic identity. In the aftermath of the deaths in 1991 that made Crown Heights a nationally recognized symbol for conflict between Jews and blacks, Carnival has been increasingly represented, by African-American and Jewish leaders and the media, as well as by a component of the West Indian community, as a black event. This most current representation of Carnival is an important moment in the ongoing processes of racial and ethnic formation in the metropolitan context.

I will briefly review the conflict in Crown Heights here and suggest an alternate reading of its origins and ongoing valences. In August 1991, a car driven by Yosef Lifsh, a Lubavitch Hasidic Jew, went out of control in Crown Heights, fatally injuring a seven-year-old Guyanese-American

boy, Gavin Cato. Lifsh was part of a Hasidic motorcade that was returning from escorting the Lubavitch leader, Rebbe Schneerson, on his weekly visit to his wife's grave in a cemetery in Queens. Several hours later, a crowd of black youths surrounded a Hasidic yeshiva student, Yankel Rosenbaum, and stabbed him to death. These incidents together became a focal point for deeply rooted social and economic tensions among the predominantly Caribbean black community and the largely Hasidic Jewish community in Crown Heights.⁵⁴

Because of the specific history of Crown Heights, as well as Jews' access to white privilege, many feel that the Hasids have had undue influence in local struggles over schools, police attention, and control over federal grants for urban development. According to Jerome Mintz, this happened when Hasids filled a demographic vacuum in the area in the early 1960s, a time when other white ethnics – predominantly other Jews – were fleeing the city and before African Americans and Caribbean people had moved into the area in sizable numbers.⁵⁵ As Jewish groups left the city, the Lubavitch Hasids gained control of the Jewish Community Council of Crown Heights and were for a time the only effective neighborhood organization able to take advantage of government loan programs initiated to fight urban decay.

The incidents that came to be called “Crown Heights” exacerbated deep tensions between Hasidic and black residents of the area over access to everything from housing to municipal funding and power. In this sense, the conflict in Crown Heights is part of a larger conflict between blacks and Jews that evolved as a component of postwar racial formation in U.S. cities; Jews, though discriminated against in other contexts, have gained access to white privilege and used it, while blacks, regardless of their ethnic or national origins, have been forcibly maintained at subordinate social and economic levels.

Whereas this conflict clearly reflects the dynamics of racial antagonism, stories told on both sides of the issue both complicate and refine this understanding. The Hasidic community, devoutly religious, considers itself separate from the mainstream American Jewish community. This alienation from other Jews, along with the focus on daily life in the Lubavitch community, leads to an intensely closed cultural identification, perhaps parallel to that of the Caribbean community in New York during the period of the costume balls in Harlem. At the same time, Hasidic Jews, having escaped the Holocaust, see themselves as an embattled minority. Conflicts in Crown Heights, from the murder of Israel Turner in

1975 to the more recent events of 1991, evoke memories of Kristallnacht and other violent incidents of Nazi anti-Semitism.⁵⁶

Jacob Goldstein, a Hasidic man active in community politics, told me a common Lubavitch story about relationships between blacks and Hasids in Crown Heights. "We all get along," he said, "our children play together. But I won't let my children go into the houses of their black friends, or of any non-Jewish friends, for that matter. Not because of race, but because they might eat something that isn't kosher."⁵⁷ By identifying themselves an embattled religious minority, the Crown Heights Hasids, in their perception, are exempted from accusations of white racism. This does not mean that they do not benefit from white privilege – their ample clout with police and city officials, despite their minority status, indicates the contrary. By 1981, for example, although whites were only 9.3 percent of the population, they controlled 33 percent of Community Development funds.⁵⁸ And protestations about kashrut seem disingenuous in light of the difficult racial history of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and New York City in general. But Hasids do not think of themselves as assimilating into white America or into a more or less powerful Jewish establishment.

Similarly, the politics of racial identity on the other side of what Anna Deavere Smith has called "Fires in the Mirror" turn on culture and nationality as well as skin color.⁵⁹ About a week after the events of August 1991, while I was working in a mas' camp in Crown Heights helping to make costumes for the upcoming West Indian Day Carnival, I overheard a conversation among three Trinidadian women. Angered by Lifsh's lawyer, who had publicly implied that the Afro-Caribbeans in Crown Heights were not Americans and therefore had no claim to equal municipal services, the women objected to this distinction among ethnic communities. "*We're not American!*" one woman said. "*They [Jews] don't even bury their dead here!*"

While a portion of this exchange reveals a lack of knowledge about Jews that parallels Goldstein's certainty that the black families on his street could not possibly learn to respect the dietary laws of their children's friends, the woman's main concern for citizenship and claims to home reflects the deep uneasiness of immigrants of color in the United States. Correctly, they perceive that access to citizenship, to becoming American and having the right to bury their dead here, is limited, restricted on the basis of race. At the same time, they resent the entitlement of Hasids – many people in mas' camps and panyards complain of Hasids' double parking and blocking traffic on side streets, of extra police protection the

Hasidic community received during Schneerson's weekly procession to the cemetery.

In this charged context, Carnival 1994 fell on Erev Rosh Hashona, the beginning of the Jewish High Holidays. Tension between the two communities mounted when Police Commissioner Ray Kelly asked Carlos Lezama if he would consider moving the Carnival to Sunday. Rabbi Joseph Spielman of the Crown Heights Jewish Community Council requested and got the city to cordon off a corridor of Crown Heights to facilitate access for Hasidic visitors in town for the High Holidays; this plan was roundly condemned by the New York chapter of the ACLU as creating ethnic separatism. Rumors accumulated on both sides: that anti-Semitic Carnival revelers wanted to urinate on synagogues; that the Hasidim planned to harass West Indian women as they made their way down the parkway. According to Peter Noel, a long-time writer about Carnival, several meetings between Lezama and Rabbi Spielman of the Lubavitch community, including some open town meetings, only amplified fears on both sides of this conflict.⁶⁰

While the conflict between Lubavitch and WIADCA officials was taking place, the Brooklyn police, operating under Rudy Giuliani's newly implemented "quality of life" campaign, began to move on panyards and mas' camps. They raided late night rehearsals and parties in the name of neighborhood quiet and order. Cecil Mitchell of Hawks International, one of two of the most popular mas' camps in Brooklyn, reported that membership in Hawks, as well as attendance at parties, had dwindled because of police intimidation. Not surprisingly, a target for such intimidation and harassment has been J'ouvert.

Such harassment is not new. In addition to the long history of repression of Carnival forms in the Caribbean, Brooklyn police have been active in monitoring and restricting Carnival activities, both on and off the parkway. In 1992, I interviewed Sargent Caramonica of Brooklyn's Sixty-seventh Precinct. Before the restrictions on Carnival hours, he told me, Carnival in the 1970s had gone from being a festive occasion to incorporating a "criminal element." Raids on panyards came about because some panyards were occupied by "squatters" who did not belong there; in other cases, neighbors had asked that the noise from practice be kept down late at night.

In the context of Crown Heights history, police repression of Carnival is likely to be read in the frame of ongoing black-Jewish conflicts. Tensions between blacks and Jews, between Hasidim and Caribbean people, take place in the context of struggles for local power and eco-

conomic mobility. And, in turn, these conflicts operate in a racialized urban and regional political economy.

Diasporan Citizenship

In its multiple diasporan incarnations in New York, Carnival has been a place where West Indian people create themselves – as foreign nationals, as proud citizens of newly decolonized nations, as striving new immigrants, and as black people. The different incarnations of Carnival in Harlem and Brooklyn, at dance halls, on Eastern Parkway, and on quiet side streets in the early morning hours have both responded to and created definitions of race, ethnicity, and nation. Caribbean and Caribbean-American people come to Carnival from all over the East Coast and Canada; some travel from the Caribbean to jump up on Eastern Parkway on Labor Day weekend. At Carnival in Brooklyn today, old friends from the Caribbean encounter one and other, Caribbean-American children who have never been “back home” discover a sense of place, and African-American neighbors come to see and participate in the Culture of Black Creation mas’ camp brought to them by the ongoing circulation of capital, labor, and culture.

Carnival has also been a place where the forces of state and capital – the INS, police, municipal regulations, candidates for office, corporate ad campaigns – attempt to inscribe Caribbean people as either dangerous inner-city denizens or potentially upstanding citizens. This dialectic between grass-roots imagination and colonial administration has long informed the creative strategies of Afro-Atlantic culture. While Carnival “refuses to speak in one voice,” everyone who “jumps up” on the parkway is involved in a broad politics of diasporan denizenship, where transnational people stake a claim to their homelands abroad and to their rights in the new countries where, perforce, they live and work. The multiple narratives of this diasporan denizenship challenge racialized discourses of citizenship and assimilation. They provide a context for ongoing struggles against municipal and hemispheric colonialism, in their equally myriad forms.

Whether mas’ bands celebrate “fancy Africa” or proclaim loudly that “Columbus lied” – their performance of the cultural richness of the Americas repudiating the idea that any European could have “discovered” a wilderness here – they mark a stake in history for denizens of the continuing diaspora in this hemisphere. Carnival has always maintained the links of memory between the exigencies of the present and

memories of the past. And in maintaining these links, Carnival has been a site for articulating identities not yet recognized or authorized by official institutions.

Throughout the history of Carnival in New York, Caribbean and African-American people have debated the possibilities for unity between them. As politicians and the media recognize the demographic power of “Black Brooklyn” in the 1990s, local activists and community leaders negotiate the fissures of ethnicity and nation. Just as Caribbean people are pressured to assimilate in a model of ethnicity designed by the experiences of European immigrants a century ago, they struggle alongside African Americans for access to dwindling municipal services, for entrance to a depressed job market, for places in a public educational system that is underfunded and constantly under attack. As Carnival has been increasingly identified by participants, police, and the media as a black festival, it has become larger and larger. This means that the very agencies that enforce the daily exclusions of racist culture – the police, the media, mayoral and gubernatorial initiatives that blame urban underdevelopment on the people who benefit least from it – may well help Caribbean and African-American people to recognize common enemies and goals. Certainly the popular arts of memory so central to Carnival are already engaged in writing an account that resists the daily exigencies of life in a city so stratified by race and by class.

Popular Music, Appropriation, and
the Circular Culture of Labor Migration
in Southern Africa: The Case of South
Africa and Malawi

LUPENGA MPHANDE &

IKECHUKWU OKAFOR NEWSUM

*When rhythm and blues lost its sensuality for me
i fell in love with a woman named gospel. we
met secretly in the churches of harlem, and
made love at revival meetings in mississippi.
and loving her as i did, i found a great yearning
to know of her roots. and i found them, and they were in
africa. and they left me breathless.*

– Neil Diamond

In this discussion, it is assumed that the meanings behind the social and political trends within subaltern nationalities give way to the interest of transnational capitalism via the migration and appropriation of cultural expressions that serve the consumer fetish of capital and subliminally disrupt colonial discourse with the intrusion of the Other. The relationship between the cultural institutions of transnational capital (the entertainment industry) and indigenous Third World cultural expressions demonstrates the tendency of hegemonic institutions to absorb and control Third World images and the tendency of these images to puncture popular notions of pleasure. In conflict in this collaboration is the ideological frame of reference represented by the agency of transnational capitalism, on the one hand, and that of indigenous cultural expressions born out of local traditions and a culture of resistance to colonial subjugation, on the other. The conflation of these dialectically related ideological frames of reference poses a threat to the subaltern/indigenous self-image and to its ideologies of resistance. Robbed of their historical and political meanings, these cultural expressions in the form of

commercialized commodities appeal to the pleasure zone of the social anatomy, while the political and social context of their origins is sublimated by a false altruism that masks the cannibalistic nature of capitalism.

Labor migration all across southern Africa, and in South Africa in particular, has not only served as a site of labor exploitation, but also has produced a means of adaptation and socialization by fostering cultural expressions that are marked by their ability to transform the aesthetic sensibility of a rural cultural-scape (a landscape of culture) to that of an urban worker community. The demands of metropolitan capitalism and its corresponding labor migration, therefore, have subordinated rural communities (labor colonies) in an uneven relationship wherein these communities serve as both the primary producers of culture and labor and as the consumers of their converted labor power and cultural capital in the form of commodities. The conversion of rural folk culture through migration, and the appropriation of urban-township music by the transnational entertainment industry, reveal an immense and complex system controlling the dissemination of images and meaning in the global marketplace.

Labor Migration and the Diffusion of Local Culture

The basic paradigm of colonial domination and colonial subjugation foreshadows the presence of indigenous, Third World cultural expressions in the global cultural economy. It is, after all, the economic imperative of the colonial and neocolonial *metropoles* (mainly the nations of Europe and the United States), and their need for raw materials, labor, and consumer markets, that have given rise to the proliferation of cultural identities and divergent cultural expressions in the era of late capitalism. The monopoly of technologies and the processes of appropriation and cultural reproduction are in part responsible for capitalism's resiliency.

During the early period of European expansionism in southern Africa, the colonialists subdued the cultural imagination of indigenous populations by identifying dominant native cultural groups and appropriating their cultural expressions so as to create the overarching image of a national culture that would facilitate the socialization and proletarianization of the people through indirect rule. In this instance, appropriation constitutes a process of social conversion driven by the economic demands of colonialism. It is a process whereby native culture becomes the property of capital and serves the reproduction of social-economic relationships necessary to maintain the colonial state. The appropriation of

indigenous culture at this early stage in the history of colonialism in southern Africa used those aspects of traditional culture that perpetuated an existing social hierarchy and division of labor appropriate for capitalist production and reproduction. Such is the case of the Ngoni, a major cultural group in Malawi. The Ngoni, having established domination over the indigenous Tumbuka through invasion and conquest in the 1850s, paved the way for the British, who in their turn of colonial conquest and domination condemned the indigenous Tumbuka culture for its matrilineality, claiming it was dysfunctional, and helped to impose the Ngoni language and patriarchal social structure through which the English mediated their colonial rule.

Since the appropriation of the indigenous culture served the colonial project, and since colonial invasion was heralded by Christianity, it is not surprising that the most contested spaces of cultural appropriation were the religious centers of the native populations – these being seen as the most resistant to foreign invasion. It is no accident that the invading forces, to effectively dominate and undermine the bedrock of the people's religion, not only invaded the shrines, but also appropriated other cultural expressions such as songs and dances and the means of producing these cultural entities, xylophones and drums.

In *The Ngoni of Nyasaland*, first published in 1956, Margaret Read describes an encounter that took place in the 1930s to illuminate the process of the appropriation of African cultural expression through the missionization of Ngoni culture. She relates a typical example of appropriation of the recreational cultural expression of the Ngoni called *ingoma*, which is the generic core of the nguni choral styles, *isicathamiya* and *Baqanga*, performed by such internationally famous groups as Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Read writes that when a party of Europeans “watched the rhythm and dignity of the dances, they were so favourably impressed that they asked the Paramount Chief to send senior men to teach the songs and dances to the boys in the mission schools; . . . the songs were used in the churches of the Scottish mission with different words written for them.”¹ With *ingoma* and other indigenous cultural expressions, the site of appropriation was usually the rural periphery and sacred places such as the *kraal* (the cattle enclosure where important ceremonies took place). It is important to note that in this process of appropriation the chief's “senior men” did not have to convert to Christianity before their culture could be taken over. Thus the initial aim is not to convert, but to take over the production of cultural expression and through it establish domination.

The Ngoni's own religious beliefs and the lofty and persuasive nature of their language and poetry made it more tempting for the Christian missionizing forces to appropriate and adapt the *izibongo* (praise poetry) for their proselytization.² Through this appropriation process, indigenous cultural expressions became the property of the Church of Scotland and the European colonial establishment. The following song, for example, has become a popular feature of church gatherings in the Ngoni-Tumbuka territories of northern Malawi, and is regarded as a prized addition to the Livingstonia church hymnal:

The earth does not get fat. It finishes off those in houses old as the
fig tree.

We shall die on the earth. Nhi hi hi hi!

The earth does not get fat. It finishes off those who are fleet-footed.

Shall we all die on this earth, then? Nhi hi hi hi!

Hearken, O earth! We shall mourn them. Hearken, O earth!

Hearken, O earth! Shall we all die on this earth, then?

The earth does not get fat. It finishes off kings.

Shall we all die on this earth, then? Nhi hi hi hi!

The earth does not get fat. It finishes off queens.

Shall we all die on this earth, then? Nhi hi hi hi!

Hearken, O earth! We shall mourn them. Hearken, O earth!

Hearken, O earth! Shall we all die on this earth, then?

The earth does not get fat. It finishes off noblemen.

Shall we all die on this earth, then? Nhi hi hi hi!

The earth does not get fat. It finishes off noblewomen.

Shall we all die on this earth, then? Nhi hi hi hi!

Hearken, O earth! We shall mourn them. Hearken, O earth!

Hearken, O earth! Shall we all die on this earth, then?

The earth does not get fat. It finishes off common people.

Shall we all die on this earth? Nhi hi hi hi!

The earth does not get fat. It finishes off beasts.

Shall we all die on this earth? Nhi hi hi hi!

Listen, you who are asleep, who are left tightly closed in the land!

Shall we all sink into this earth, then? Ho ho ho ho!

Hearken, O earth! The sun is setting tightly!

We shall all enter into the earth.

This song is usually sung at mammoth evangelizing rallies by the Uman-yano, a women's choir dressed in black and white. As we have mentioned, changing original words and substituting new ones based on English

melody, indicates that cultural products appropriated from the periphery to the center were reprocessed, reproduced, repackaged, and sent back to the periphery for the expansion of capital, of Christianity, and of political domination. In the process, traditional indigenous discourses were disrupted. The native population had to be indoctrinated and reconditioned to a capitalist cultural mode of consumerism so that they would crave the acquisition of the “new” products. As a consequence, today we find that even a traditional wedding among the Ngoni is not considered complete without the presence and performance of the local accordion band dressed in the full colorful leisure attire of the South African gold mine worker.

It is not just Europeans and the evangelizing missions who have learned how to dominate and control indigenous African people through their cultural expressions; in the accumulation of political capital, African leaders themselves now practice a degree of appropriation. Hastings Banda, former president of Malawi, for example, systematically revalorized the precolonial “authentic” cultural values of the Ngoni and used selected phenomena taken from their traditional cultures. Banda, once president for life, appropriated and effectively used the Ngoni oral tradition of *izibongo*. Banda employed the oral institution of the *imbongi* or praise poet so that his authority could be legitimated through orally transmitted recitations (praise songs) lauding his accomplishments. Banda institutionalized the oral tradition of the praise poet to reach a wider audience in a country that UNESCO has rated as one of the most illiterate in the world. In return for their services, Banda provided the praise poets with food, Java-print clothes, employment, free beer, and sometimes money and modern brick houses. Banda also provided transport to and from his political rallies, usually by air, in a country where such luxury is out of the reach of even senior employees. Thus Banda demonstrates that it is not just the cultural expression that can be appropriated, but the performer as well. From his first political campaigns, beginning in 1958, Banda was often accompanied on the stage by such famous musical performers as Dorothy Masuka. Even South African singers like the Dark City Sisters composed and sang his praises.

The function of appropriation is determined by what is appropriated, who appropriates it, and for whom appropriation takes place. Its value, thus, is determined by capitalist market forces. It is usually the melody, intonation, and the meaning-bearing unit that are first appropriated because it is the linguistic essence that contains the cultural trait marking its category. Words can be strung to the melody later, depending on the

intended audience and political exigency. If the church appropriates the cultural expression, words suitable to the proselytizing mission will be substituted for the original words. A similar process is undertaken if the appropriating agent is a politician. Thus politicians like Banda and Zulu Chief Buthelezi appropriate and subvert the phenomenon of *izibongo* itself.

The political efficacy of the indigenous praise song can be seen in how this expression is taken over by the local opponents of colonial occupation, and also in how they are repossessed by African neocolonialists, once the leaders of the national independence movement. The song “Mtwanami Washona,” about colonial farm policies and performed by the Mzimba Ngoni in northern Malawi, is a good example:

My son has disappeared
Because of forced banding
Hiyoo! Ayee! Eeh!
Because of forced banding.

The song is about the unpopular agricultural policies imposed by the colonial government on rural farmers as part of an attempt to control soil erosion. It criticized the colonial agricultural practice of contour banding, which meant the abandonment of traditional farming methods and the subsequent dissolution of the family.

In this song, a migrant worker leaves his homeland because of the excessive burden of agricultural work imposed by the planters. The song criticizes the breakdown of the rural African family where now the son is depicted as opting out, a coward deserting his communal responsibilities. The ChiNgoni word *washona* or *kushona*, which ordinarily means disappear and refers to the migrant workers who do not return, may also refer to death – and the nonreturn of a migrant worker is, in a way, a form of death.

After independence in Malawi, performers quickly substituted “Kamuzu Banda” for *mtwana wame* (the errant son), and a new meaning surfaced when the Tumbuka-Ngoni performers were forced to dance for Kamuzu Banda, at the time president of the country, and a neocolonial agent in the service of Pretoria (South Africa) and the former Rhodesia. The song was a very popular radio request until, predictably, the Banda regime got wise to the peasant counterdiscourse and banned it in the early 1970s. In the version with substitutions, it is clear that the *ingoma* performers regard the colonial expatriate officials as different from the local bourgeoisie, the chief of the district, or the president of the country. They

expect social responsiveness and reciprocity from the native authorities, but the kind of relationships they sought to objectify and mediate with the colonial officials were different because they were of a more generalized structure and cognitive order, since the colonial officials were never regarded as members of the peoples' immediate social structure. This form of subversion reveals that in their resistance to domination, the subjugated population will usually apply the same methods of appropriation that the invaders used to construct their domination. The African National Congress's counterappropriation of their anthem, "Inkosi Sikelele," is perhaps the best example.

The cultural reproduction of Ngoni praise songs, initially brought about by the missionization of indigenous cultural expression, marks the beginning of a system of regional integration wherein Malawi, like Namibia, Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, functions as a reservoir of surplus labor for the urban metropolises of South Africa.

The creation of commercial and industrial metropolises in the southern African region, namely South Africa and the former federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, gave rise to the influx of migrant labor from the rural outerbelt (border states and the so-called homelands) to the urban townships, which served as domestic labor colonies supplying the mining and manufacturing industries of the two colonial states. Migrant laborers brought their bodies and their cultures. Their music, dance, and theater became the raw material of a new kind of cultural production and, as such, vehicles of adaptation to the urban environment.³ The process of adaptation is not the mere conversion of the rural to the urban; it also means immersion into the capitalist economy. In his analysis of Zulu choral music and its place in the evolution of migrant music in South Africa, Veit Erlmann identifies the conversion from rural to urban, the loss of alternative sources of livelihood after World War II, and the urbanization of the "homelands," as aspects of a "restructuring of pre-capitalist forms of social organization that occurred simultaneously, both in the cities and in the countryside. Music and performance are part of a complex network of production and reproduction that spans towns and countryside."⁴

Colonialism and neocolonialism allow for the "indigenization" of capitalist relations of production and reproduction on the site of culture so that the rural-urban conversion becomes normalized – that is, a normal part, the stitching, if you will – of social and economic life. While it is clear that migrancy has been created to respond to capitalist demands and fosters relations that disrupt the precapitalist development of indige-

nous communities, these new relations of migrancy replace old patterns of production. Displacing indigenous communities by the geographic encroachment of the colonial state altered the traditional relationship of the native people to the land. Precapitalist agricultural production gave way to more attractive forms of livelihood in the growing urban centers. Because of their eviction from their ancestral land to less arable locations, farming was replaced by wage labor. Small-scale farming, for instance, was replaced by agri-industrial complexes. Such geographic dislocation established migration as a permanent, rather than temporary, solution to the procurement of livelihood. The normalized condition of migrancy is manifest in the transformation of cultural expression; the expressions of rural local cultures encounter the popular urban forms of entertainment, creating a hybrid culture of leisure.

Township Music and the Globalization of African Culture

The regional circulation of local expressions in southern Africa belongs to a larger global circulation and integration of African culture that inscribes a pattern moving from the periphery to the center and back again. In this context we can say that the transport of Africans from their homelands to the “New World” during the transatlantic slave trade marked one of the major migrations of African culture from the geoeconomic periphery to the geoeconomic center.

Borne on the bodies of Africans, captured and carried to the New World, traditional African forms of song and dance encountered European musical instruments and forms of leisure culture in the U.S. settler communities, creating a hybrid culture expressed in the form of work songs, Negro spirituals, minstrel shows, and ragtime music. However, the coded resistance strategies of the spirituals, to be specific, were usurped by a process of cultural reproduction so that when they were infused into the popular culture of South Africa (during the 1890s and the early twentieth century), they were received as American Christian music serving the missionization of the black indigenous population. Often performed by white troupes, African-American cultural expressions circulated from the geoeconomic center back to the geoeconomic periphery and, specifically for our purposes, to South African townships and the rural outerbelt, as missionized forms. Hence, cultural expressions born out of an antagonistic relationship with American capitalism – that is, the transatlantic slave trade – were appropriated by white artists for “civilizing” purposes, exported to South Africa, and embraced as American culture. The efforts

of the civilizing missions, however, did not elude the critical consciousness of black South Africans, specifically during African-American performances of Negro spirituals in the colony.

On one such occasion, in August 1890, in Kimberley's town hall, the Virginia Jubilee Singers "not only sang the Negro spirituals, the heart-piece of the oppressed culture of America's black slaves, deep into black South Africans' hearts, the tours also set ablaze the minds of South Africa's black population with a vision of black pride and dignity more powerful and clear than had ever been voiced before from a South African theatrical stage."⁵ This observation by Josiah Semouse, a young clerk at the Kimberley post office and prominent local choir member, reveals in a local newspaper the liberatory efficacy of the Negro spirituals, giving testimony to their original intent as resistance songs. The particular intonation and quality of voice that could be delivered only by African-American performers was possibly the single most important element of subversion operating in these tour performances. In this instance, the Negro spirituals, which had been appropriated from one marginalized black community located in the center, were restored to their original political intent in the marginalized periphery of the empire.

Notions of periphery and center grow more complicated when one considers marginalized rural communities thought to be of the periphery and urban proletariat communities, townships, thought to be in the center. The township of Soweto, peripheral in terms of its relationship to Johannesburg, is seen as a part of the center when the cultural scape is the rural outerbelt. The specific vantage point from which the site of cultural production is experienced explains the utility of the "landscape" metaphor employed by Arjun Appaduri in his essay, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" – that is, the lay of the land looks different depending on the position from which we view it. The global circulation of African cultural expressions, therefore, blurs distinctions of periphery and center, since the actual location of various African communities, continental and diasporan, rural and urban, exists within the colonizing metropolises as marginalized communities, and in the peripheral Third World as members of the colonial empire.

The late twentieth century finds an even more complex network of global cultural production than any model of center and periphery will allow. Appaduri writes, "The complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics which we have only begun to theorize."⁶ He offers a description of the relationship between five interrelated and interdependent

dimensions of cultural flow based on the metaphor of land-“scape,” a model that is both fluid and perspectival. He calls these dimensions ethnoscapescapes, technoscapescapes, finanscapescapes, mediascapescapes, and ideoscapescapes. Ethnoscapescapes refers to “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and persons [who] constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations.”⁷ Included in this category are the human cargo of the slave trade, representing the shift from kingdom to modern empire, and the migrant laborers of southern Africa, who represent the transition from precapitalist agricultural production to the wage economy of the colonial state.

The shifting reality of the rural and urban landscape of southern Africa can be viewed as ranging from the Mahotella Queens’ touring of the Mzimba district in northern Malawi and Dorothy Masuka’s sharing a platform with Banda in a Chewa village, to the intervention via Radio Zambia of the exiled South African cultural activist and composer of the traveling show, *King Kong*, Todd Matshikiza. The “tourists” from the center brought to the periphery not only the accordion and the blues musical style with which to renovate the rural cultural output, but also, upon their return to the South African center, brought back innovations for forms like *isicathamiya* and *Baqanga*.

The evolution of modern technology has determined to a significant degree the economic, political, and social development and organization of the global cultural economy, differentiating populations according to their degree of development of technological knowledge and instruments, and also inscribing differential access to technological monopolies. These fluid and changing “technoscapescapes” that have been developed by the big capitalist nations provide the means for the entrenchment of multinational commerce by establishing a heterogeneous yet hegemonic global culture. Air travel, satellite transmission of music and images, high-tech electronics, as well as the electronic flow of capital (Appaduri’s “finanscapescapes”), dissolve geographic barriers to accessible markets. By the time of the Harlem Renaissance and the Second World War, in the 1930s and 1940s, the American styles of the minstrel shows, ragtime, the blues, and swing had taken on the aura of a popular “world beat” music. Consequently, in South Africa, we see the emergence of dress and choreographic styles reflective of a proletariat leisure culture, such as the likes of one South African vocal quartet who called themselves the Manhattan Brothers.

As can be seen at this juncture, the circular flow of cultural production began early with the instruments of warfare and travel that facilitated the

movement of African bodies and culture to the New World; later the process of cultural dissemination used more efficient technoscapes with the advent of radio, recordings, and phonographs. Talent competitions, once performed in hostels and township meeting halls, were appropriated by the entertainment industry and commerce. The technological know-how and instruments of local record companies and U.S. subsidiaries (such as Bantu Batho, Gallo, Columbia, and Decca) facilitated the rapid dissemination of the migrant cultural expressions of the townships and workers' complexés. But as we have demonstrated, it was not the entertainment industry that gave rise to this cultural reproduction, but rather a confluence of forces emanating from the social organization of an industrialized wage economy. The affiliation of this cultural reproduction with "political and union militancy illustrated an important aspect of early working-class consciousness" in South Africa before the Second World War.⁸ Despite the assumption that some township music was an example of "co-opted working-class consciousness," the subversive potential has always been an integral part of its production and performance. Erlmann points out, "Until the late 1940s, politically motivated *imbube* songs such as the Dundee Wandering Singers' 'Poll Tax' or [Solomon] Linda's 'Yethul' Isigqoki' [Take off your hat]⁹ were even aired from the Durban studios of what later became the South African Broadcasting Corporation (S.A.B.C.)."¹⁰

The cultural flow moves back from the South African periphery to the U.S. center in the 1960s and 1970s in the musical presence of such South African performers as Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, and Abdul Ibrahim. Their association with such entertainment luminaries as Harry Belafonte and their appropriation by the Black Arts Movement of the time were signs of a growing pan-Africanist consciousness. Their presence in North America followed the state-sanctioned apartheid policies imposed in the late 1940s and the massacre in Sharpeville in March 1960. In 1976, the boycott against Afrikaans education sparked a violent retaliation from the South African government in Soweto and fueled opposition to apartheid in the United States. While the music of black South African artists did not enjoy broad-based popularity in the United States, their songs were frequently aired in alternative radio programming and enjoyed some international exposure through the British Broadcasting Corporation.

In the situation of southern Africa, radio is a key example of what Appaduri calls "mediascapes," that is, both the "distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations and film production studios), which are now

available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media.”¹¹

The interrelatedness and interdependency of these “scapes” (ethno-, techno-, finan-, and media-) suggest a web of relations in which differential capabilities give rise to the uneven and antagonistic exchange between communities competing for state power. The hegemonic and global cultural industry at the present moment absorbs images and streams of meaning that originate from the margin, creating not only profits, but also a heterogeneity of concepts representing the ongoing tensions that exist between and within the center and the margin. These media-deployed concepts are what Appaduri refers to as “ideoscapes,” that is, “concatenations of images . . . often directly political and frequently hav[ing] to do with the ideologies of states and the counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it.”¹² This heterogeneity of ideas has bizarre consequences as seen in the “Coca-Cola-ization” and Disney World fetish of Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Their appropriation by the global cultural economy of capitalism perpetrates both consumer and commodity fetish, on the one hand, and an aesthetic sensibility that can be associated with the antiapartheid movement, on the other. As depoliticized as their performances are, their association, even if imaginary, with the political struggle of black South Africans and the simultaneous endorsement of the commercial product cannot be escaped.

The multimedia project mounted by “Little Steven” Van Zandt and Artists United Against Apartheid, “Sun City” (1985), represents an action on the part of alternative mediascapes to strategically deploy streams of meaning in the service of the oppressed South African masses, causing problems for U.S. international policy. In Ullestad’s words:

“Sun City” emphasized communication of hard information and relatively shocking images of the situation in South Africa: the communication of truth to educate. The degree of attention to the educational aspects of “Sun City” is noteworthy in itself. The record album [was] stuffed with flyers and fact sheets; while the carefully prepared paperback book (Penguin), written in part by Dave Marsh, provides a no-nonsense portrait of apartheid and an entertaining view of the production of the event. The video (Karl-Lorimar) is a breathtaking example of how entertainment, reality and commentary can be effectively fused.¹³

Paul Simon’s album *Graceland* (1986), composed with South African artists, called global attention to the antiapartheid struggle,¹⁴ but its im-

port in the late history of apartheid follows the antiapartheid intervention of Van Zandt's "Sun City," which pricked the consciousness of many musical artists, including Simon. The distinction between "Sun City" and *Graceland* is apparent in terms of the embrace, in the United States, of Van Zandt's stance and the incredulous contempt articulated toward Paul Simon by Howard University student activists shortly after his album's release.

A precursor to Paul Simon's *Graceland* is Neil Diamond's *Tap Root Manuscript*, released in 1970.¹⁵ In the liner notes, Diamond asserts that the "African Trilogy" (side 2 of the album) is "an attempt to convey [his] passion for the folk music of [the] black continent." *Tap Root Manuscript*, as a sign of appropriation, enabled Diamond to make a grand comeback, having fallen into a brief period of obscurity. Diamond was able to capitalize on his version of East African rhythms (from Kenya) without having ever visited the African continent. Diamond's appropriation of the sign was superseded by Simon who not only appropriated an African cultural expression (the sign) but also its producer.

The appropriation of Ladysmith Black Mambazo by Paul Simon for his album *Graceland* and subsequent "Born at the Right Time" tour represents an occasion of political opportunism on the part of agents of the multinational capitalist cultural economy, including some white South Africans. The success of this collaboration in the concrete sense made Simon's *Graceland* "one of the most popular international releases ever in [South Africa]," going triple platinum with the sale of 150,000 copies while "bringing this country's township rhythms to world prominence."¹⁶ "More importantly, *Graceland* gave township rhythm a level of respectability it no longer had among township people themselves. In the '70s and early '80s, most black acts leaned toward U.S. funk and dance music, believing it to be superior to the local musical brews. Today, that pendulum has swung back toward [township] rhythms."¹⁷

The embracing of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, ostensibly as ambassadors of South African culture, enables white South Africans to identify with African cultural expressions and, by expressing a claim on indigenous black traditions, to legitimate their position as locals. Louise Meintjes, in her essay on Simon's *Graceland*, suggests, "By incorporating traditions and other signs of indigenous, subordinated groups into their own identity, they . . . establish a place for themselves in South Africa, . . . [and] diffuse the potency of those traditions and signs for the subordinated groups."¹⁸ Hence, they "affirm" their solidarity with indigenous forces leading the current process of political transition.

The utility and interrelatedness of mediascapes, and the strategic deployment of ideoscapes, can be detected in their ability to legitimize the political project of the white South African power structure in the form of broadcasts of the politically coopted Ladysmith Black Mambazo's early work and the celebration of their "collaboration" with Paul Simon on the state-run South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and Cape Town's CCV-TV.

Conclusion

Throughout this discussion, we have attempted to describe the global flow of African cultural expressions as they move from the peripheries to the center and back again. We suggest that the globalization of African culture is directly related to the impact of the colonial project of domination and the corresponding flow of finance capital and labor migration in the colonial and postindependence periods. Arjun Appaduri's landscape metaphors are useful in articulating the processes that predicate the heterogeneity of the hegemonic global cultural economy, wherein disjunctures and difference are the driving forces of global cultural and economic exchange. We have also sought to exemplify, as Appaduri suggests, the ways in which these various landscapes, "from the stabilizing perspectives of any given imagined world are in fundamental disjuncture in respect to one another."¹⁹ It is hoped that our approach to a general theory of cultural processes, and specifically a theory of the global production of African cultural expressions, can help to address deliberations regarding the production of cultural expressions in the black world with a view toward understanding cultural output, not as random or isolated events, but rather processes directly associated with the evolution of colonial domination and transnational capitalism. To this end, the forces of disjuncture and difference are viewed not as merely destabilizing elements but as overlapping configurations of cultural forms. Appaduri argues:

These cultural forms, which we should strive to represent as fully fractal, are also overlapping in ways that have been discussed only in pure mathematics (in set theory for example) and in biology (in the language of polythetic classifications). Thus we need to combine a fractal metaphor for the shape of cultures (in the plural) with a polythetic account of their overlaps and resemblances.²⁰


The events of colonial domination and appropriation of African cultural expression by the forces of colonialism and neocolonialism have

served two functions – exploitation and innovation – which any analysis should seek to explain, reconcile, and renovate. These processes simultaneously subjugate marginalized communities on the one hand, and rejuvenate indigenous cultural expression for liberatory purposes, on the other. The success of the latter is the most honorable work of black cultural activists.



PART IV

Black Popular Cultures
into the Twenty-first
Century



Cultural Survivalisms and Marketplace Subversions: Black Popular Culture and Politics into the Twenty-first Century

TRICIA ROSE

African-American history is paradoxical. It can be characterized as one in which black people's sustained and heroic struggle for freedom, equality, and justice has resulted in both greater and lesser degrees of each. Various struggles for and against parity for African Americans have produced uneven and contradictory forms of black political and social progress and new forms of isolation and economic fragility. Much has been achieved, but great hurdles remain. As we approach the next century, what strategies can we imagine for responding to what will likely be newly figured and less visible means of social, political, ideological, and material oppression for black people? How can we be most flexible, creative, forward-thinking, and resilient in our ability to create new communities, adopt and adapt technologies, and respond to future crises, attacks, and defeats; and how can we do this without erasing crucial historical knowledge, links, and patterns of cultural expression?

The economic, political, and cultural spheres are all crucial locations for establishing strategies of resistance against oppression and for developing visions of community and democracy. Few observers would question the importance of the first two; but the last, the cultural sphere, has been questioned as a location for resistance – especially now, in these times of heavily commodified culture. Why is the cultural realm so important? And why and how should our struggles for equity and freedom privilege the sphere of black cultural production, especially cultural forms that are a prominent part of the global capitalist economy?

Cultural expression is an important site of social and political reproduction. How we imagine, reproduce, and define ourselves, and how we are imagined, reproduced, and defined through culture, are critically

linked to (and often sustain) struggles for change and freedom. For black people, popular culture has long provided rich and complex opportunities for expression in which pleasure, pain, vision, desire, and the politics of racial resistance, identity, community, and historical memory converge. As we design and implement forward-thinking strategies, we must seriously consider the close links between black popular cultural representations and the history of black people's struggles for social and economic equality and dignity.

Cultural forms, expressions, and representations continue to be deployed, directly and indirectly, in the service of political agendas, not always those of our choosing. The present political moment is no exception. The political-cultural rhetoric of the Republican Right about family values, morality, and fighting crime supports draconian policies fueled by profoundly patriarchal, homophobic, and racist ideologies. Support for the expanding prison-building economy in the 1990s has been achieved by a politics of fear that systematically criminalizes and dehumanizes black and brown male adolescents and adults through racialized languages of cultural deprivation and primitivism. These criminalizing discourses very often tap into long-standing fears of dark-skinned men that overshadow collective narratives that might encourage other forms of institution building, such as schools, recreation, and political action centers, drug treatment facilities, sex education, and conflict resolution seminars – not just for troubled young people of color, but for all Americans.

Such nationally fanned, historically resonant fears are reworked, exaggerated, and reclaimed by young black men who feel trapped by them and are manipulated by an industry that has marketed blacks as exotic and dangerous subject matter. Hip-hop's maniacal gangstas are products of the white imagination *and* of the prisons, projects, and the subcultures of desperation these big business and government institutions help make. Gangstas serve two related purposes: they buttress white fears of black men and justify building more prisons to house them, and they fuel the proliferation of outlaw fantasies of power among black males in the face of extraordinary social, economic and political marginalization. As hip-hop's gangsta-laden fantasies absorb more and more of the social and creative space for young black males, conservative gangsta-laden policies take up more of our political and social space. Black cultural attempts to find prestige, pleasure, and power in exile are converted into fuel for social warehousing policies.

Black political actors have also participated in this public political exchange over culture. Under the (sometimes heartfelt) guise of “protecting our youth” from cultural expressions of violence and sexism, black leaders such as Sen. Carol Mosley-Braun, Rev. Calvin Butts, and others have encouraged antirap movements and coordinated antirap music hearings in the House and Senate. These hearings are in no way suited to serious and much-needed cross-racial, public dialogue on violence, sexism, patriarchy, and how some young people are reproducing these entrenched, multigenerational patterns in new and disturbing ways.

Such hearings and other strategic cultural-political outbursts cannot be expected to dismantle complex structures of sexual, racial, and economic oppression, nor are they designed to. At best, they are political sound bites for uncourageous, symbolic political action; at worst, they are the nation’s way of deflecting attention from the state-generated forms of structural oppression and focusing attention on sometimes destructive responses to these conditions. While rap music and our most troubled young people remain in the spotlight as the cultural carriers of sexism and moral decline, global and local cultures of gender, class, and racial oppression (the family, corporations, schools, religious institutions, the workplace) are shadowy figures in the national landscape.

For example, in the heated mainstream focus on vulgar and mean-spirited sexism against black women, a whole range of systematic erasures and quiet forms of degradation of women in both black and white patriarchal narratives go relatively unnoticed. Actually, more to the point, they are affirmed. Expressions of shock and outrage at examples of vulgar and extreme sexism are frequently silently anchored by an affirmation of the underlying everyday structures of patriarchy. It is much more difficult to stir up heated public dialogue about the deeply oppressive, less sexually vulgar forms of marginalization and objectification of black women.

Andre Willis’s essay (chapter 9) on Leslie Harris’s film *Just Another Girl on the IRT*, speaks eloquently to this problem. It highlights the fact that Harris’s mere narrative-centering of a young, urban black woman’s experiences is a significant break from the body of contemporary, often hip-hop inspired films. Vulgarly notwithstanding, most black popular cultural forms and film have fully marginalized black women’s points of view and all but erased young black women’s subjectivity and agency in favor of presenting their value only as showpieces of male power.¹ Both “positive” and “negative” tales from the ’hood share this mode of representing black females. Active and passive approval of the symbolic

domination, erasure, and marginalization of young black women in contemporary American culture reproduces the common assumption of black patriarchy itself.

A similar problem exists in the national debates about welfare. These debates frequently center on black women's "sexual irresponsibility" and "matriarchal power," which have resulted in their economic dependence on the state instead of their "proper" dependence on black men. Slavery-derived narratives about black breeding, now supposedly out of control (and, more important, no longer to the economic advantage of white people), are revised and reinvoked in the popular phrase "having babies for welfare." Again, black women stand at the symbolic center of narratives about cultural decline and excesses that are primarily designed to affirm an oppressive norm (and to support punitive economic policies), which in this case is a "normal" patriarchal family in which black women's dependence is shifted from the state to men.

Culture — most especially that produced and consumed by the least powerful — is central, therefore, to contemporary debate and policy on domestic budget issues and American values. More specifically, commodified mass-market culture is on the hot seat because many critics and activists from across the political spectrum believe that mass culture diminishes, intervenes in, and manipulates everyday and traditional cultures and rituals. Most critics begin with the assumption that mass culture has done substantial damage and consider responses to this condition.

Allow me to make some gross generalizations to illustrate the point. On the political and cultural right, mass culture is often understood as a morally debased, corporate-sponsored site in need of Christian policing. Here, a possibility for so-called good mass culture exists as long as it expresses better values. On the political and cultural left (except for those who also call for leftist, nonreligious versions of corporate cultural policing), the central question is whether the marketplace, the field of commodified culture, is an appropriate location for expressions of political and cultural resistance and organization. Those who answer no, or who believe that it is only rarely possible, see real politically progressive or radical work almost by definition taking place outside the market, a fundamental site of oppression itself.

Those who dismiss the idea of mass market-based culture as resistance are not a monolithic group. Two camps from the political left — black cultural survivalism folks and those who like their politics "uncut," or those who advocate so-called real (noncommodified) black politics —

frequently reject the possibility of black resistance in commodified spaces and in information technologies generally, as well as their potential for radical critique or politically subversive activity. These seemingly similar positions, especially on market-based culture, are less in agreement on the relationship between nonmarket culture and politics. The cultural survivalists are comfortable with culture as a form of racial, political resistance, while the others often see it as less important than traditional, direct political activism.²

This theme — the role of the market or commodified culture in sustaining subversive or resistant cultural practices — is what most interests me here. I suggest that commodified cultural production is a *deeply dangerous but crucial* terrain for developing politically progressive expression at this historical moment. In other words, whatever counter-hegemonic work is done outside the market, work that takes place inside it is also very important. In a way, *inside* and *outside* are fictions, since market forces and market logic, to one degree or another, pervade all American culture and politics. Still, the impact of the market varies significantly across social and cultural arenas, and it is critically important to distinguish between them. Market-based cultural politics, though, are not an easy space to manipulate from “below.” It is often difficult or impossible to resist these market-driven spaces, especially as cultural workers confront very powerful corporate interests. Further, information-based technology is not neutral; it is pivotal in cultivating or discouraging resistance among African Americans and oppressed people generally. Even so, the cultural and political terrain in which we live demands close attention to these possibilities and a consideration of market spaces, modes of mass communication and the access they provide, and the popular pleasures they construct and serve.

Black people and other oppressed people have cultivated cultural strategies of collective countermemory and cultural survivals to sustain links and rework lost traditions, and these strategies are some of the most innovative elements in black music, languages, and literature. Black dances, drumming, music, slang, and creolizations of European languages and religious practices are also major sources of pleasure and affirmation, a powerful necessity, especially under difficult social conditions.

Cultural survivalism and collective countermemory are not only sources of pleasure; they increase collective vocabularies and the sense of collective history that is so very much under siege. I think here of Mary Ellen Pleasant, the great black female freedom fighter who hired

escaped slaves to work in her chain of San Francisco hotels in the decade preceding the Civil War. She co-organized the raid at Harper's Ferry with John Brown, using profits from her hotel business to provide \$30,000 for guns. When he was captured, they found a note in his pocket from "m.e.p." that promised more money to support the armed insurrection of slaves.³ The historical erasure of this black woman who was such a crucial linchpin in this famous raid is not simply a matter of racism and sexism; it is a means by which antiracist coalitions are denied, made to seem impossible. It is a way of isolating those revolutionary heroes who worked, and are always working, in tandem and with the support of others. Michelle Cliff's resurrection of Pleasant's contributions forges crucial collective counter-memories of strategic, heroic behavior and selective collaboration.

At the same time, black social and cultural survivalist strategies are not always productive, nor should they always be celebrated. This is true not only of rap music's sustained tendency to perform and celebrate historically familiar aggressively sexist narratives, but also of less obviously deleterious forms of expression. The scholarly erasure of black women's contributions to oral and other popular cultural games and practices, especially in the areas of ethnographic research, is a less shocking but no less vulgar means of obliterating the role of black females. Kyra Gaunt's essay on black girls' games (chapter 10) is a much-needed critical corrective to this legacy. Similarly, celebrations of canonized artists and musical and cultural movements rarely, if ever, consider the fact that these forms are sustained in deeply male-dominated and male-cultivated spaces that actively sustain the creative marginality of black females. The more we wax eloquent about great geniuses, who are virtually all male, the more blinded we may become to black female creative privilege and to what degree collective community resources have been allocated to producing and reproducing this gross gender imbalance in the name of black excellence.

While knowledge and interpretation of recent and distant cultural traditions, forms of cultural production, and resistance are absolutely necessary to future political and cultural work, such knowledge can sometimes obscure how changes and ruptures *enable* rather than *disable*. A frequently nostalgic call for authentically black expressions, rooted in premodern African histories and myths, can contribute to stagnation in the name of historical reclamation. The popular Akan word *sankofa*, which means that one must look backward before one can move forward, is often used, in contemporary black American culture, to buttress a de-

sire to look backward rather than confronting how to move forward. This tension between survivalism and a need for fierce commitment to incorporation and change places black Americans at a crucial and dangerous crossroads as we make the transition to the next century.

The cogent phrase coined by Amiri Baraka about the relationship between continuity and improvisation in black music, “the changing same,” speaks to the tension between retention and hybridity. What if we further emphasize the elements of change and draw attention to black cultural changes that are so layered, so much concerned with multiple incorporations of the new that survivalism is not the driving point of analysis or creation, but a kernel from which radical cultural formations emerge? Perhaps then the “sources” of blackness, as it were, can be housed in the future as well as the past.

This attempt to doubly emphasize *historically and culturally literate change and transformation* – not just newness for its own sake or for the sake of the market, or newness admired out of ignorance, but informed, critical deployment of cultural knowledge – emerges partially from my suspicions about the conservative tendencies in black retentionist thinking and black canon building. Cultural conservatism is problematic not only because it tends toward rigid (sometimes suffocating), very often nostalgic notions of “truly black expression” located in another, mythically glorious time; it is troubling because it places excessive emphasis on cultural survivalism and the issues of purity and authenticity that seem destined to tag along with it. Thus it dehistoricizes black cultural formation and deemphasizes the degree of incorporation and vision that so often accompany new black expressions.

These tendencies are especially ill-suited to this moment, one of unprecedented and profound technological growth and change. In the face of current and future technologies of domination and dispersion, cultural survivalism has to be coupled with fearless acts of incorporation. These fearless acts are already present in some of the richest and most highly amalgamated black cultural forms; I am calling for a heightened awareness of the importance of these transformative moves. Some of these creative moves that break with tradition are crucial to mobility, flexibility, and rejuvenation. These breaks are not diversions from “tradition” that should be curtailed; they are occasions for creativity, experimentation, and transformation. I want to problematize facile understandings of continuity and survivalism as necessarily equal to progressive acts of sustenance and interrogate similarly reactive notions of rupture and change as signs of loss and crisis.

Cultural incorporation is not necessarily antithetical to cultural survivalism. The widely held scholarly notion that cultural forms have multiple simultaneous meanings and uses presupposes a mobility of cultural practices that reflect some degree of cultural incorporation. Incorporation sometimes involves the retention or reclamation of previous meanings (an act that presupposes rupture and change) and a sort of desire for reclamation under new conditions. In other moments, incorporation of new materials and technologies is privileged rather than reclaimed. These dynamics are most hotly contested when changes or new materials or technologies associated with the marketplace, or products of the market, are the basis of cultural incorporation or meaning making.

In chapter 2, Joseph Adjaye demonstrates that the uses and meanings of kente cloth over the past five centuries have changed not only as a result of aggressive capitalist-driven forms of European colonization; the transition from the production of two-color (blue and white) cotton cloth to multicolored silk kente cloth “was made possible by a combination of indigenous Asante creativity and external influences,” including the ecological difficulty of growing cotton in the Asante forest and the creative adaptation of weaving designs and patterns found in Fulani blankets. At the same time, however, the move from a slow, collective process of weaving kente cloth by hand, which enables the transmission of highly codified meanings and spiritual values, to a faster, more alienated machine process entails obvious losses. Yet, this change has also enabled Ghanaians with meager economic resources to have much greater access to the cloth. In this transformation from hand weaving to machine processing, kente cloth moves from being a fabric available only to an African elite to one that poorer Africans and other diasporan peoples are more likely to obtain. Kente moves not only from being a “pure,” richly symbolic Ghanaian fabric to mass commodity, but also from haute couture to a collective text with new and diverse meanings and uses.

This easily disparaged marketing and mass production of kente cloth (“we’ve lost the true, important meanings of kente cloth”) involves more than a masked but important celebration of elite control over important symbolic rituals; it also denies the possibility that mass market access can provide new contexts for collective consumption. The market circulates a fabric formerly virtually inaccessible to African Americans and British and Jamaican blacks, as well as the collective and multiple meanings and uses that come from such circulation. A collective meaning for kente cloth becomes possible in this global context, in Harlem, Watts, Brixton,

and Kingston, not despite multinational commodity exchanges, but *because of* them.

Louis Chude-Sokei's essay on Jamaican Rastafarian culture and the discourse of sound (chapter 12), explores how black diasporan identities and politics are formed and how they are related to market commodities and forces. The mobility of sound and sound technologies (not only in aural terms, but via market systems as well) has helped forge links between various black communities in the West and produced oppositional cultures and politics. This is especially clear in the development and significance of Jamaican massive sound systems that transmit anticolonial black identity and politics by incorporating the "downpressor's" latest technologies.

Similarly, the global circulation of hip-hop music and culture has produced new black diasporan links. In 1992, I was asked to participate in a panel discussion on hip-hop sponsored by the French Embassy and held at the Apollo theater in Harlem. The audience was a small, highly attentive group of French teachers and cultural and government officials interested in the American roots of hip-hop and its role as a prominent symbol of rebellion among North African immigrants in Paris. The French could not explain why young black immigrant males had adopted hip-hop as a sign of racial resistance, notwithstanding the sustained racist and nationalist exclusions and abuses to which they were subjected. After a brief discussion regarding the racialized conditions of economic oppression and social isolation endured by these recent immigrants, the French representatives reached a partially irrational but familiar conclusion: the demonstrations do not reflect any racial tension in France; instead, hip-hop is a vehicle for exporting America's race problem.

In part, this interpretation is correct: America's export muscle clearly produces U.S.-centered lines of cultural exchange and global racial narratives. But this does not fully explain the attraction of hip-hop's themes of social protest to marginalized North African youth in lower-class Paris suburbs. Through hip-hop, these people are linked to a market-mediated collective discourse that allows them to create a local race-based critique of French society. It names their condition in ways that reject France's racially repressive dominant nationalist narratives while linking them to other similarly oppressed communities of color in the neocolonial diaspora.

Similarly, Chuck D's famous sound bite, "Rap music is black people's CNN," is correct on at least two counts: rap music is a highly accessible,

quickly incorporative cultural form that gathers and presents information from multiple, black (usually inaccessible) sources, *and* it is a highly mediated corporate-dominated product that tends to produce homogenized and deeply problematic representations. The mass media market is a dangerous place; in it we spin narratives and narratives are spun around us. As narratives are more and more easily and quickly reproduced, and pressure to be on the cutting edge of these contortions grows more intense, our response skills must be continually sharpened in order to survive. This is the double-edged sword of the information game as we approach the end of the twentieth century.

These examples of international, hip-hop related meaning making are intertwined with the use of hip-hop by global capitalist advertisers to sell Campbell soup, Coca-Cola, clothing, and all brands of athletic shoes to children of all ages, black women's attempts to negotiate hip-hop's profoundly abusive narratives that float atop highly compelling beats, white males' voyeuristic love of gangsta profiling, and the many other means by which folks make sense of hip-hop. We must be sensitive to these multiplicities; without such sensitivity, we may accept monolithic understandings that either overly celebrate hip-hop's cultural survivalism or overly condemn hip-hop's use of technology and its reckless investment in getting paid, leaving us locked in a fruitless battle between equally one-sided, disabling interpretations of late twentieth-century cultural circulations.

In *Dangerous Crossroads*, George Lipsitz examines the musical and political history of a contemporary Haitian musical group called Boukman Eksperyans, with special and careful attention to the ways in which technology and market products can be used in politically resistant ways.⁴ In May 1992, Boukman Eksperyans, a musical ensemble of six men and three women, recorded an album featuring a song entitled "Kalfou Danjere," or "Dangerous Crossroads."⁵ Written for that year's Carnival celebration, the song warned "deceivers," "liars," "cheaters," and "assassins" to be careful of the dangers that awaited them at the crossroads of the Congo people. Drawing on the symbolic significance of crossroads in African folklore and Caribbean voodoo, this song suggested that such abuses and betrayals of the Haitian people would not go unpunished. In the wake of the September 1991 coup that ousted the democratically elected government led by Jean-Bertrand Aristide, this song had clear relevance for the Haitian people. It was unmistakably a song not only of Carnival celebration but one that channeled political ideas and produced a collective narrative about this violent betrayal of collective governance.

Through potent religious references to ideology and voodoo religion and metaphors, it “invoked ancestral spirits, minor deities and the Supreme Being to predict a dangerous future for those who abuse the Haitian people.”⁶ This song helped sharpen group responses to political conditions and to build solidarity among Haitians whose voices were publicly silenced.

How did the Haitian military respond to this music? It dispatched soldiers and civilian thugs to Boukman Eksperyans concerts to prevent them from performing this song and others with similarly political subtexts. Boukman Eksperyans foiled this strategy not by deciding to perform the song despite sure arrest and going to jail in civil protest, but by recording and selling the song and thereby further disseminating their message. They encouraged fans to make tape-recorded copies. Through this mode of performance and distribution, the song soon had a hearing not only among all the Haitian communities but also among exile communities in Miami, Montreal, New York, and Paris. Through market-based technologies and corporate structures of domination, “Kalfou Danjere” became a very significant, collective, politically resistant text and an indelible part of popular movements for democracy in Haiti. If they had chosen to fight the *tontons macoutes* head-on at these initial concerts, their ability to disseminate their message, to stay in the game, to continue to produce collective counternarratives, even their ability to exist, would have been seriously handicapped. And yet, their market-based form of intervention and resistance carries with it deep contradictions. As Lipsitz carefully points out:

The same circuits of investment and commerce that bring low-wage jobs to Haiti’s factories and fields carry the music of Boukman Eksperyans to a wider world audience. The same connections between U.S. multinationals and Haitian poverty that insures *[sic]* a perpetual presence on the island by the American security state also makes *[sic]* the visibility of Boukman Eksperyans in the U.S.A. a strategic resource for the group as they try to criticize their government and still stay alive.⁷

Dangerous crossroads must be traversed; oppressed people must push into and through them.

It is crucial that we press for a more intricate understanding of how popular expression and resistance works within and in relation to market forces. We must look closely at the pernicious effects of the market, the fissures and pockets within the market where critical counterhegemonic work can take place, and think carefully about how to sustain and enlarge

these fissures and pockets. The marketplace, its effects on our modes of communication, expressions, and political systems, are too vast, too diverse to be denied consideration as an environment in which resistance and/or subversion can take place. It simply takes up much too much cultural, political, and discursive space to be rejected out of hand. This is not to say that we should limit our imagination or our quest for counter-hegemonic work to this space. We must imagine and foster spaces that can be sustained outside these market conditions, nurture what Cornel West refers to as the nonmarket values of love, support, and nurturance. And yet we must be honest in representing the ways in which we all work within this market system and are profoundly shaped and influenced by it, whether we like it or not.

The information superhighway and its potential as a completely corporate-dominated and government-dominated vehicle of information gathering, policing, and dissemination of culture must be resisted by our taking up these spaces – especially as they are in formation – and making politically informed demands on them, carving out spaces that resist such controls, fighting the legal and ideological battles that might force important reconceptualizations of cyberspace. Avoiding, rejecting, refusing, or conceding these spaces – most crucially while the cyberink is still wet – is close to political and cultural suicide.

Black people have always made creative and interesting uses of technology, not only in unconventional ways, but in ways that make the environment resonate with black cultural ideas, traditions, and sounds. Blacks' use of musical instruments, electronic equipment, film, and other new technologies have figured prominently in the transformation of Western cultural ideas and forms. Given the speed with which contemporary technologies are introduced and dominated by the most powerful, exclusion based on gender, race, and class will have a profound impact on black creativity.

This is especially true of information and visual technologies. The explosion of video technology in the 1980s had the most significant impact in African-American communities through black musical creativity. The simultaneous occurrence of hip-hop and the introduction of music videos to market popular music has produced a quantity of black directors, camera operators, and other black production crew members versed in film and video technology. Access to these fields, the white male unions that control them, and the apprenticeship systems that sustain them, was all but denied to African Americans, especially women. Low-budget music videos offered low-risk, high-yield environments for untrained but

motivated teenagers and young adults. The hip-hop film business is completely indebted to the creative energy of a technologically skilled population that emerged vis-à-vis black music video. The fight for access to these and more cutting-edge, computer-based technologies paves the way for transforming visual representations and therefore assists in waging war against a well-funded battery of racist, sexist, and elite-dominated cultural representations. Of course, if we consider the marketplace to be fundamentally antithetical to progressive subversions, or if we imagine these technologies as valuable only insofar as they provide means of cultural documentation and survival (for example, black encyclopedias on CD-ROM), then black people will be further marginalized from affecting the processes that will surely work upon us.

Resistance to these diverse processes of domination is exhausting and fragmented work; it is not always progressive; it is not absolutely resistant. African-American history is packed with understandably romantic and heroic collective memories of struggles that highlight tenacious acts of cultural survival against daunting odds. However, romancing resistance, either within or outside market forces or technologies, encourages the reproduction of strategies that rely on organizational structures based on gender and class oppression. Buried beneath well-defended heroic narratives we find pervasive sexism in various black resistance struggles, black scholarship, subversive cultural forms, and “traditional” politics. Any one of these is a prime location in which to begin unpacking the complexities of unproblematized cultural survivalism and honoring of tradition. This is not a call to halt one kind of race/gender/class work in favor of another; it is a call for internal reconfiguration and collective self-critique, for sorting out what to keep and what to discard through honest self-examination and critical dialogue.

There are both passive and active modes of sexism and homophobia in much cultural survivalism and the resistance work that binds us to one another; at the same time, these tendencies blind us to the diversity and power struggles within our own communities. This tension often binds us to models of community and protest that ironically perpetuate many of the most problematic forms of oppression that black people face. These intragroup forms of oppression also blind us to the rich cultural expressions that take place in those marginalized sites. For example, black gay dance and cultural form-voguing are extraordinary revisions of sexual and racialized identities and fantasies as articulated through the white high-fashion industry. This example of how black people use the black body in relation to racialized, gendered, and class-stratified market

forces, as well as black subversive pleasures, aesthetics, and style is underexamined by black cultural critics for many reasons, not the least of which is the systematic marginalization of black lesbians and gay men.

As we move into the next century, racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppression seem well placed to follow us there and perhaps in some places may lead the way. Caribbean peoples, Afro-Europeans, African-Americans, Africans, and others have to forge ahead and fight the way in which global and postindustrial capitalism are transforming our mutual relations. The modes of oppression that we all face will likely be familiar and yet promise to be fundamentally transformed and transforming. If we are to respond to new systems of domination as quickly as we must, then we must grapple with technologies and the spaces they occupy as swiftly and creatively as possible. We have to look carefully and creatively at market-driven spaces as well as imagine and produce new social spaces for community building. I hope that we can sustain and remake the past while fearlessly fighting for access to, and to transform, the cutting edge. Nothing less will do as we move swiftly into the next century.

Notes

References

Index

Chapter 1. Introduction

1. Essays in this volume were first presented at the Conference on Black Popular Culture hosted by the Department of Africana Studies, University of Pittsburgh, with the exception of those by Berrian and Yankah, who were unable to attend.

2. Davies 1995, 109.

3. Lyotard 1992, 15.

4. Derrida 1976.

5. See, for example, Davies 1995; Jencks 1992; and Strinati 1995.

6. For an analysis and a critique, see Strinati 1995, 52–85.

7. Adorno 1991.

8. See, e.g., Murdock and Golding 1977; and Murdock 1993.

9. Grossberg 1986, 69.

10. Hall 1978.

11. Barthes 1968.

12. Barthes 1973, 154.

13. Althusser 1971.

14. The critique of gender inequality, exploitation and oppression in the ways in which women are represented in popular culture, of course, has a long history. Among the most prominent analysts are Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Simone de Beauvoir.

15. Tuchman 1981, 1988.

16. Modleski 1986, 38.

17. Baehr 1981, 149.

18. For a further discussion of patriarchy, see Hartman 1981; Barrett 1988; Walby 1990.

19. Van Zoonen 1991, 37.

20. McRobbie 1991; for a further elucidation of black feminist theory, politics, and literary criticism, see Carby 1987.

21. See Foucault 1980.

22. A good analysis is McGuigan 1992.

23. Derrida 1984.

24. Fish 1989, 342, 344.

25. Baudrillard 1983, 2, 146.

26. Lyotard 1984.

27. Lyotard 1992, 15.

28. Author of Hoggart 1957 and other books of literary criticism. On cultural studies in the Anglo-black diaspora, see Baker et al. 1996.

29. Grossberg 1992.

30. Gilroy 1993; see also Lipsitz 1994.

31. Published as Dent 1992. Also note other significant publications derived from conferences on popular culture: Grossberg 1992; Nelson and Grossberg 1988; Blundell 1993; Schelling 1991; also note the work and many publications of the American Popular Cul-

tural Association operating out of Bowling Green State University Popular Press under the direction of Ray Browne.

32. Gates 1992, 83.

33. See, for example, Dyson 1993; Kelley 1994; Rose 1994; Ross 1989, 1994.

34. See, for example, Coplan 1986; Erlmann 1994; Hannerz 1994; and Jewsiewicki 1991.

35. See, e.g., Bozzoli 1992; Vaugh 1994.

36. Fabian 1978.

37. Marchand and Parpart 1995.

38. See Mudimbe 1988; Fabian 1990; Erlmann 1991; Appiah 1992; Diawara 1993a, 1993b; Bourgault 1995; and Martin 1995. For an important collection of essays, see Barber, forthcoming.

39. Parpart 1995, 18.

40. Works like Shaw 1990 and Dent 1992 narrowly equate the black experience primarily with the United States; in addition, Shaw's approach predominantly derives from a single discipline, literature.

41. Bakhtin 1981.

42. Hebdige 1988, 244.

Chapter 2. The Discourse of Kente Cloth: From Haute Couture to Mass Culture

1. Although there is no Akan word that denotes *culture* in the Western sense, it is clear that kente initially was associated with an elite culture.

2. Cunningham and Lab 1991, 2.

3. *Ibid.*, 5; see also McCracken 1988, 73-77; Gilfoy 1987, 11.

4. A useful study of cloth as a focal point of identity and difference in urban Senegal is Heath 1992.

5. Picton 1992, 40.

6. Johnson 1980, 11.

7. Cited in Adler and Barnard 1992, 43.

8. Bowdich 1819, 332; see also Cruickshank 1853, 2:271.

9. Braimah and Goody 1967, v.

10. See, for example, Rattray 1923, 95; and Daaku 1970, 273.

11. See, for example, Gilfoy 1987, 34; Asihene 1978, 56. A variant of this story is extant and it relates that Otah Kraban actually traveled to Bondoukou where he saw and brought back a loom: see Rattray 1923, 220.

12. According to Agyeman-Duah 1965, 1, the Bonwirehene belongs to the Nsumank-waa division of the Asantehene's Gyaase stool.

13. Lamb 1975, 128.

14. Information derived from Nana Asante Frempong, a weaver and kente dealer.

15. Asihene 1978, 54.

16. Lamb 1975, 130.

17. On kente color symbolism, see Asihene 1978, 53-54.

18. A chart prepared by Kwaku Ofori-Ansa and titled "Kente Is More Than a Cloth:

History and Significance of Ghana's Kente Cloth," 1993, provides detailed information on the names of kente motifs and their symbolic meanings. The chart may be purchased from Sankofa Publications, 2211 Amherst Rd., Hyattsville, MD, 20783.

19. Compare Weiner and Schneider 1989, 3.
20. One of the best known associations of spirituality with weaving traditions can be found among the Dogon of Mali. According to Dogon mythology, weaving is a spiritual expression at the core of the creation of the universe. In fact, according to their creation myth, weaving was the means by which order came to be created from formlessness (Griaule 1965, 27-28).
21. See, for example, Picton 1992, 43-44.
22. Cole 1989, 15.
23. Freeman 1898, 381.
24. Cole 1989, 35.
25. On the Asantehene's use of Odwira as occasions for dispensing gifts for meritorious service, see, for example, Adjaye 1984, 206-07. On the Akan calendar, see Adjaye 1994.
26. Weiner and Schneider 1989.
27. Picton and Mack 1989, 11.
28. Cole 1989, 35.
29. Several useful sources exist on the use of cloth as currency in Africa. See, for example, Johnson 1980; Fyle and Abraham 1976; and Curtin 1975.
30. Bowdich 1819, 35.
31. Arhin 1968, 37.
32. On the popularization of clothing types as indicative of freedom of expression, see Kaiser 1985, 360, 388-89.
33. Views expressed by kente users on a college campus in North Carolina are reported in the July 1992 issue of *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 12.
34. Friedman 1994, 113.
35. Hall 1990, 225.
36. Larrain 1994, 162.
37. Bogatyrev 1971, 93.
38. On this process of signification, see McCracken 1988, 77.
39. On modernity and globalization, see McGrew 1992.
40. For comparable views on symbolic connections between the living and the dead through cloth in early England, see Gittins 1984.
41. Bourdieu 1984.
42. Bhabha 1994, 2.
43. Barthes 1983, 184-85; Weiner and Schneider 1989, 3.

Chapter 3. Sarbeeb: The Art of Oblique Communication in Somali Culture

1. Burton 1894.
2. *Ibid.*, 82.
3. Samatar 1982, 57. The following references to this work are given in parentheses.

4. Sheikh Mahamamad H. Huseen "Sheeka-Hariir," 4 April 1977, interviewed as part of field work for a Ph.D. dissertation.

5. Ibid.

6. Samatar 1982, 135.

7. Anrzejewski and Lewis 1964, 105.

8. Samatar 1982, 149.

9. Anrzejewski and Lewis 1964, 106, n. 4.

10. Ibid., 110.

11. Samatar 1982, 178.

12. Anrzejewski and Lewis 1964, 110, n. 1.

13. Ibid., 110.

14. Samatar 1982, 81.

15. Abstracted from Anrzejewski and Lewis 1964, 80.

16. Samatar 1982, 78-84.

17. Ibid., 82.

Chapter 4. The Sung-Tale Metaphor and Protest Discourse in Contemporary Ghana

1. Scott 1990, xii.

2. Chamley 1994.

3. See also Nkanga 1994.

4. Stokes and Hewitt 1976, 842.

5. Okolo 1995; Gumperz 1982; Yankah 1985.

6. See Anyidoho 1983; Mvula 1985; Omoniyi 1995.

7. Anyidoho 1983, 237.

8. See Mvula 1985.

9. Brown and Levinson 1978; Goffman 1967.

10. Finnegan 1970; Bauman 1977, 11.

11. Finnegan 1970, 419-23; Yankah 1989, 88.

12. Hurston 1938, 260.

13. Rattray 1930, x.

14. Salkey 1969.

15. Sherlock 1957, 12-13; see also Bascom 1969, 473.

16. See Imbuga 1995.

17. See also Purchass-Tulloch 1976, 242.

18. Finnegan 1970.

19. See Pierson 1977; Herskovits 1969; Blassingame 1979; Abrahams 1992.

20. Collins 1976.

21. See Van der Geest and Asante-Darko 1982; Yankah 1985.

22. Evans-Pritchards 1956, 1963.

23. Mitchell-Kernan 1972.

24. *Legon Observer* 1966.

25. This and all other songs in this essay are translated from the original Akan by the author.

26. See Van der Geest and Asante-Darko 1982.
27. Coplan 1986.

Chapter 5. *Afrikan Proverbs and Afrikan-American Parental Values*

The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful roles played by Eula Bagley, Barbara Burgess, Agnes Franklin, Lenall Thomas, and Beverly Walker in this investigation and the ongoing support and input of Jerome Taylor, Adrianne Andrews, and Joseph Adjaye.

1. Scheven 1981; Leslau and Leslau 1985; Finnegan 1970.
2. The author spells *Afrika* and *Afrikan* with a “k” because she agrees with several Africentric scholars who contend that there was no hard “c” phoneme in indigenous African languages; therefore she chooses not to participate in what she sees as an act of Eurocentric linguistic cultural imperialism by imposing an alien phoneme into the spelling.
3. Blassingame 1979.
4. Akbar 1984.
5. Kambon 1992; Karenga 1987; Myers 1991, 15–28; Nobles 1974, 10–17; Richards 1980.
6. Page and Washington 1988, 458–99.
7. McAdoo and Rukuni 1993, 48–62.
8. Semmes 1992.
9. Ben-Jochannan 1991; Diop 1991; Wimby 1986, 151–66; Osei 1970.
10. Blassingame 1979; Courlander 1976.
11. Voss 1979.
12. See, in addition to works already cited, Burton 1981; Dundes 1981; Eastman 1972; Penfield 1983; Seitel 1976; White 1987; Yanga 1977.
13. Arewa and Dundes 1964, 70–85.
14. Penfield 1983, 5–10.
15. Merrick 1969, 1.
16. Rattray 1916, 11.
17. The losses and traumas experienced as a result of the Middle Passage and the continuation of the *Maafa* have been discussed in Akbar 1984; Ginzburg 1988; Karenga 1987; and Richards 1980. On the retention of Afrikan values, traditions, rituals, and customs among Afrikan Americans, see Akbar 1979; Blassingame 1979; Courlander 1976; Kambon 1992; Martin and Martin 1980; Nobles 1974; and Nobles 1978, 6–14.
18. Denton et al. 1975; Taylor, forthcoming; Taylor, Turner, and Lewis 1992; Taylor et al. 1994, 210–33.
19. Denton et al. 1975; Taylor, Turner, and Lewis 1992; Wilson 1974.
20. Taylor, Turner, and Lewis 1992, 3. The italicized terms were guides to subclassifications within each value group.
21. *Ibid.*; Taylor and Turner, forthcoming.
22. Taylor et al. 1994; Taylor 1985; Taylor, Turner, and Lewis 1992.
23. Taylor, Turner, and Lewis 1992.
24. Taylor et al. 1992; Taylor and Turner, forthcoming.

25. Taylor et al. 1992, 27.
26. Akbar 1984; Fanon 1967; Some 1994.
27. McCorkle and Taylor 1995.
28. Cederblad et al. 1994; Fonagy et al. 1994; Radke-Yarrow 1993; Werner 1993.
29. Leslau and Leslau 1985; Knappert 1989; Zona 1993.
30. Arewa and Dundes 1964.
31. Taylor and Obiechina, forthcoming.

Chapter 6. The Frustrated Project of Soul in the Drama of Ed Bullins

1. Bullins 1973b, 3-4.
2. O'Brien 1973, 108-12.
3. Jones 1963, 219.
4. Fabre 1983, 50.
5. Bullins 1967-68, 95.
6. Ibid.
7. Fanon 1963, 206-48.
8. Hughes 1926, cited in Lewis 1994, 91.
9. Rampersad 1983, 130.
10. Quoted in Hughes 1986.
11. Hughes 1986, 238.
12. Ibid.
13. Berger 1969, 127.
14. Karenga 1969, 9-10.
15. Althusser and Balibar 1979, 101.
16. Bullins 1974, 28-29.
17. Bullins 1971a, 121.
18. Williams 1985, 57-66.
19. Baker 1987, 17.
20. Smitherman 1974.
21. Ibid.
22. Ed Bullins, interview with Marvin X, in Bullins 1969, ix-x.
23. Bullins 1969, 75.
24. Moore 1981.
25. Heidegger 1962, 393.

Chapter 7. Of Mules and Men and Men and Women

This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in November 1991. I wish to thank Yvonne Daniel, Smith College, and John Roberts, Ohio State University, for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Roberts 1978, 464.
2. Ibid.

3. Boxwell 1992.
4. See Wainwright 1991.
5. Hurston, quoted in Hemenway 1978, xxiv.
6. Roberts 1978, 464, emphasis added.
7. Stoeltje 1972; Abrahams 1975.
8. Thomas 1988, 1.
9. Brewer, quoted in Stockard 1980, 11.
10. Seward 1983, 50.
11. Bascom 1965, 26.
12. Farrer 1975, xii.
13. Jordan and Kálčík 1985, ix.
14. Stockard 1980. In a review of 934 collected African-American folktales, Stockard found only ninety that featured women as significant actors.
15. Hurston 1978, 148–51. Further references will be given in parentheses.
16. This kind of contradiction in the content of ethnographic data can serve as an epistemological window (following Werner and Schoepfle 1987) a crack in the window of culture, so to speak, that enables a glimpse at the “true” values, beliefs, and attitudes that shape behavior in any given cultural context, as contrasted with the cultural ideals, the collective “face” (following Goffman 1955) of the group as represented in folktales and other lore.
 17. Franklin 1967.
 18. Abrahams 1975, 65.
 19. Stoeltje 1972, 158, 166–67.
 20. Mitchell-Kernan 1990, 311.
 21. Wall 1989, 661.
 22. For more on the importance of Big Sweet in Hurston’s field work experiences, see Hurston 1971.
 23. Abrahams 1975, 71.
 24. *Ibid.*, 66.
 25. See Abrahams 1975.
 26. *Ibid.*, 65.
 27. *Ibid.*, 62.
 28. *Ibid.*, 73.
 29. Hurston 1978, 152. Hurston here reveals the depth of her cultural knowledge of gender relations among those from whom she collected folklore. While a non-“native” anthropologist might have learned the rules for appropriate behavior, Hurston had a decided advantage in that she could avoid social errors that could have slowed, if not halted, her project. (Franz Boas was likely aware of this advantage in assigning Hurston to the project.)
 30. Hurston 1978, 160. Farrar (1975, xvii), commenting on Abrahams, suggests a possible explanation for Hurston’s reasoning in this instance: “In contrast to similar styles among men, the women’s speech behavior requires the participation of others. . . . The women collaborate and support each other’s presentation, though they may not agree with the content of that presentation.”
 31. Bascom 1965, 28.
 32. See Goffman 1955.

Chapter 8. Debunking the Beauty Myth in *Waiting to Exhale*

1. Fuller 1972, 3.

2. Sokoll 1992, 142; Isaacs 1992, 12; Chadwell 1992, 118.

3. Wellburn 1972, 128–29.

4. Chambers 1994, 306.

5. No universal concept of ideal beauty exists. Beauty varies from one culture to another. The Maori, an aboriginal tribe in New Zealand, favor a flat vulva; the Padung of Indonesia admire sagging breasts; and Wodaabe men in Niger compete in contests against each other with elaborate makeup, fancy dress, and undulating movements (see Wolf 1991, 13).

6. *Ibid.*, 12.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Joe Overstreet (born 1933) experiments with “suspended painted canvasses” (Lewis 1990, 188). He threads cords through eyelets found at the edge of paintings which are then connected to walls, ceilings, and floors. Overstreet “avoids the conventional rectangular format” choosing instead the multisided canvas. His large-scaled composition such as *Gemini IV* (1971) “suggests brightly colored shields covered with cultural and religious symbols.” Each composition manifests an awareness of African-American history and culture.

9. Noah Purifoy (born 1917) was a participant in “66 Signs of Neon,” an exhibition of mixed-media assemblages “fashioned from the debris of the 1965 Watts Rebellion” (*ibid.* 198). *Sir Watts* (1966) – constructed from the rubble of glass, metal, wood, an old purse, dresser drawers, and safety pins – forms the figure of a knight and celebrates the struggles of a fighter at war.

10. Charles Alston (1907–1977) paints social realistic murals that comment on the historical experiences of African Americans. *Magic and Medicine* (1937) points up the cultural alienation of blacks in white America; *Exploration and Colonization* (1949) communicates the injustice of African Americans’ enslavement and disenfranchisement (Lewis 1990, 116–17).

11. Frank Frazier, born in Harlem, is a self-taught artist. His first professional art exhibit at Hunter College in 1971 featured oil paintings depicting his experiences in the Vietnam War. After moving to Dallas in 1980, he first explored the silkscreen medium and then ventured to collage, incorporating pieces he picked up on his various trips to Africa. *Good Fortune*, *Visions in Black*, and *Ayoluwa* capture swatches of vibrantly colored Kente cloths and figurines from Ghana and Burkina Faso. His works have been featured in the film *Coming to America* and on the television shows, *Frank’s Place* and *Bustin’ Loose*. He has exhibited his art at African-American museums in Hempstead, New York; the Armour J. Blackburn Gallery at Howard University; the Brooklyn Museum; and the Martin Luther King Jr. Library, Dallas. His wife manages his art company, Visions in Black Gallery (*Things Graphics and Fine Arts Brochure* 1994, 1–2).

12. Joseph Holston features the single portrait gouache, a medium of watercolor prepared with gum. His African-American portraits capture the various moods of children, adults, and the elderly. *Woman Ironing*, *Mother in Thought*, *Mtoto Mdogo* (Young girl) and *Miz Emily* are the most popular. His abstracts include *Perfect Blend* and *Woman Seated on the Sofa* (Peoples 1994).

13. McMillan 1992, 4. Subsequent references to the novel will be given in the text.

14. Houston 1985.

15. Vandross 1875; Richie 1982.

16. hooks 1989, 43.

17. Chambers 1994, 306.

18. Collins 1990, 79.

19. Oduyoye 1982, 102.

20. Asante 1987, 73.

21. Sims 1986, 320.

22. Asante 1987, 185.

23. Ruth 1990, 237.

24. Neo-Empire fashions were introduced in 1908 by Paris designer Paul Poiret, who did away with the “S-curve, the exaggerated hips, and voluminous skirts and petticoats of the past, and with them the Junoesque breasts and shoulders cherished by the Edwardians.” The radical new look shifted attention to the natural slimness of the body without the “aid of body-shaping undergarments” (Seid 1989, 81).

25. Wolf 1991, 196.

26. Seid 1989, 110.

27. Wolf 1991, 284.

28. Prince 1990.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 14.

Chapter 9. Leslie Harris’s Just Another Girl on the IRT

Thanks to the organizers of the 1995 conference on Black Popular Culture held at the University of Pittsburgh, Joseph Adjaye and Adrienne R. Andrews, for conversation and editing. Also thanks to earlier readers, editors, and interlocutors – Cornel West, Tricia Rose, Michael Hanchard, Margaret Miles, and Richard Newman.

1. Wallace 1990.

2. The most important treatment of rap music and hip-hop culture is Rose 1994. Although I disagree with Rose (23 – 27) on the placement of rap music in the history of black musical forms and her assessment of the pervasiveness of commodification in relation to technology and rap music, our dialogue has deeply affected my perspective on rap music.

3. Dyson 1992, 3 – 15.

4. Craddock-Willis 1989, 29 – 38; West (1993, 25 – 30) is most influential in my thinking about rap music, youth culture, and the market.

5. Much of the internal dialogue in rap music centers on a quest for authenticity. Whether the arguments are between Ice-T and LLCoolJ, a Tribe Called Quest and Wrexx-N-Effex, or Dr. Dre and Eazy E, BDP and the X-Clan, the challenge of who is the real gangster, a real street hood, a real hard “brutha,” is seminal within rap discourse. See Decker 1992, 53 – 84.

6. “Black Film Directors” (1991, 87) discusses the vast discrepancy in film budgets: “Black films remain small beer; they are doing little to shape the movie business. A black-owned film studio is still a distant dream, and the Hollywood studios have yet to experience their first black-directed box office failure, which will test their willingness to entrust big budgets to black directors. The most likely development is that studios will imitate the

music business and create separate divisions devoted to films for black audiences, where black producers who know their market best will determine what films are made. The result may transform black American films into a two tier system, with commercially successful directors on top and independent film-makers at the bottom, scrambling for scarce money. So what's new?" This further affirms the parallels between the film and music industries alluded to earlier.

7. Healy 1993, 24.

8. Harris, quoted in Taubin 1992, 24.

9. See Lauretis 1990 on what constitutes a feminist film.

10. Most of the responses I received suggest that young white women enjoyed it most and loved Chantel. This could reflect a fascination with difference and wonderment at the vitality and vibrancy of black cultural expression that I note when discussing white voyeurism associated with black rap music.

11. Giroux 1993, 1-27.

12. Harris's clear anti-Semitism and the film's leaning toward an antiabortion message show that some fundamental political nuances remain to be dealt with by this director.

13. On some levels, this would probably be considered a wonderfully "womanist" sex scene. Inverting usual gender roles, Chantel commences the foreplay with Ty and in the morning she leaves over his protests that she stay. While Kuhn (1990) argues that counter-cinema and deconstructive cinema should do more than this, she might agree that this scene, and perhaps the film as a whole, "provokes spectators into awareness of the actual existence of effectivity of dominant codes, and consequently engender[s] a critical attitude toward these codes."

14. See Denby 1993; Kauffman 1993; Canby 1993.

15. I omit the other two themes of the second half of the film. The first is her relationship with Ty - which Harris presents as a well-balanced teenage love relationship: breaking the stereotype, Ty tries to "help." The second is the dissolution of her friendship with Natete, which must be sacrificed to show Chantel growing toward a different level of consciousness.

Chapter 10. *Translating Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*

1. Rainwater 1970, 220.

2. Brady 1975, 9.

3. *Etudes* usually refers to musical exercises in written form underlining a melodic, rhythmic, or technical skill intended for application to "real" performances.

4. This essay is based on research conducted for my doctoral dissertation. In addition to field work in investigating girls' play, I include oral interviews concerning the musical experiences of African-American women (ages 18-56) born in U.S. cities such as New York, Chicago, Memphis, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., and Detroit. See Gaunt 1995, 1997.

5. Brown and Newsome 1991. Composed in 1965, this song is attributed to both Betty Newsome and James Brown; however, Newsome claims she composed it herself and Brown simply "rearranged it" (White and Bronson 1993, 17).

6. Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1988, 29.

7. "That's the Way We Flow" refers to Queen Latifah 1991.

8. Brady 1975, 9.

9. Black social dance styles may occur simultaneously in sacred and secular settings.

However, in sacred settings they are not apparently sexual and are dissociated from secular meanings.

10. Friedland (1993, 69) documents local opinion holding that “hand-dancing,” a black social dance, was developed in Washington, D.C., during the Motown era beginning in the 1950s. The rapid transmission of black dance styles across the country since then has been advanced by (1) black migration between the North and the South and along the East Coast, (2) televised local and national dance shows, as well as (3) popular touring acts on the “Chitlin’ Circuit” and other touring networks. Similar claims concerning “hand-dancing” might be made by blacks in other cities.

11. Floyd 1991, 266.

12. Wilson 1992, 328–29.

13. Wilson 1992.

14. Riddell 1990, 138–40.

15. Ibid.

16. Koskoff 1987, 4.

17. Ibid., 6.

18. Merrill-Mirsky 1988, 179, 213.

19. My mother, who grew up in Washington, D.C., recalls this vernacular dance among her teenage peers in the 1950s. She also recalls that a popular song accompanied the dance with the refrain “Wah-wah-tusi.”

20. Carby 1992.

21. Miller 1991, 333.

22. Ibid., 335.

23. Ibid., 331.

24. Jones and Hawes 1972, 45.

25. Walker and Haskins 1986, 15.

26. Goodwin 1980, B7.

27. Walker and Haskins 1986, 26.

28. Ibid., 54.

29. David Walker is no longer directly affiliated with the ADDL and has initiated another double-dutch organization, the International Double-Dutch League.

30. Adler and Beckman 1991, 17, emphasis added.

31. I date the formulation of an identifiable hip-hop culture as sometime between 1971 and 1973, according to information from several primary sources, although many aspects of the culture – rapping, certain dance patterns, graffiti – previously existed (George 1985; Toop 1991; Eure and Spady 1991).

32. Allah 1993, 48.

33. See Brown 1994.

34. Wilson 1992.

35. Hall 1992, 32.

Chapter 11. The Language Culture of Rap Music Videos

1. See P. Shaver and L. Shaver 1992a; P. Shaver 1991, 47; L. Shaver 1993, 119.

2. Washington 1996.

3. Baker 1984.

4. Compton and Galaway 1989.
5. See Fanon 1963.
6. See Gramsci 1992.
7. Spencer 1991, 4.
8. Keen 1985; Baker 1984.
9. Compton and Galaway 1989.
10. P. Shaver 1991; P. Shaver and L. Shaver 1992a.
11. Hearn 1969; Parsons 1964; Pincus and Minahan 1973.
12. Potter and Wetherell 1987; Eco 1991.
13. P. Shaver and L. Shaver 1992a, 1-5.
14. Billig et al. 1988.
15. Ibid.; Billig 1987.
16. Burke 1969a, 1969b.
17. Eco 1991, Billig 1987, Billig et al. 1988; Burke 1966, 1969a, 1969b, 1970, 1979, 1985; Cherwitz and Hikins 1986.
18. Burke 1966; Eco 1991; Potter and Wetherell 1987; L. Shaver 1993; P. Shaver and L. Shaver 1992b, 1992c.
19. Billig 1987; Billig et al. 1988.
20. P. Shaver and L. Shaver 1992a, 1-5.
21. Eco 1991, 148.
22. Ibid., 149.
23. Baker 1984, 80.
24. Baker 1993; Dyson 1991; Hayes 1993; Eure and Spady 1991; Spencer 1991.
25. Jones 1963, 50.
26. Ibid.
27. Morley 1992.
28. Jones 1963, 104.
29. Georges-Abeyie 1984; Mann 1993.
30. Glasgow 1980, vii.
31. Dyson 1991; Rose 1994.
32. Baker 1993; Rose 1994.
33. Dyson 1991, 24.
34. Jones 1963, 137.
35. Spencer 1991, 4.
36. Baker 1994.
37. Gramsci 1992; Fanon 1968; Kenyatta 1963.
38. Keen 1985, 5.
39. Spencer 1991, 7.
40. Keen 1985, 5.
41. Ice Cube, in Alonso 1991, 11-12.
42. Gramsci 1992, 5.
43. Keen 1985, 28-29.
44. Spencer 1991, 7.
45. Walters, in Whitaker 1990, 38.
46. Foucault 1990.
47. Spencer 1991, 5.

Chapter 12. Dread Discourse and Jamaican Sound Systems

1. Red 1994.
2. Johnson 1980.
3. Baker 1987, 71.
4. Ibid.
5. Anderson 1991.
6. Gilroy 1987.
7. Nettleford 1970.
8. Saakana 1980, 62–63.
9. Bhabha 1985, 176.
10. Braithwaite 1984, 41.
11. Saakana 1980, 61.
12. Ibid., 60.
13. Ibid., 81.
14. Coujnt Ossie 1990.
15. Nettleford 1970, 41.
16. Burnett 1986, 70.
17. Baldwin, in Drachler 1975, 102.
18. Nettleford 1970, 58.
19. Ibid., 101.
20. Braithwaite, in Davis and Simon 1992.
21. Saw 1992.
22. Nettleford 1970, 20.
23. Chude-Sokei 1994, 81.
24. Lyotard 1984.

Chapter 13. The Landscape of Kassav's Zouk

I am indebted to Jocelyne Béroard, Jean-Claude Naimro, and Patrick Saint-Éloi of Kassav', who graciously shared information about their songs. Also, special thanks is extended to Rose Marie Brival Fortune and Armelle Sainton, who translated several of Saint-Éloi's songs into French.

1. Case 1989, 596.
2. The biguine (a creole term) consists of two refrains with two couplets that was very popular between 1910 and 1960. The biguine was actually born on the plantations and represented a special class. Its melody is European, but its rhythm is African. The creole mazurka, younger than the biguine and derived from the Polish polka, was transplanted by soldiers and Alexandre Stello, a Martinican clarinetist.
3. O'Connor 1993, 10.
4. Ampigny 1992, 61–62.
5. Eyre 1994, 15.
6. Scaramuzzo 1994, 50.
7. Pierre-Edouard Décimus left Kassav' in 1989 to form the group KWID; George Décimus lives in Guadeloupe and has left Kassav' to found Volt-Face. The 1995 group roster

consists of Jean-Philippe Marthély and Jocelyne Béroard (Martinique, vocals); Patrick Saint-Éloi (Guadeloupe, vocals, guitar and drums); Jean-Claude Naimro (Martinique, keyboard, arranger and vocals); Jacques Desvarieux, (Guadeloupe, guitar, arranger and vocals); Philippe Joseph (Martinique, sound keyboard); Patrick Saint-Éloi (Martinique, percussions); Claude Vamur (Guadeloupe, trapset drums); Freddy Houssepian (France, trumpet); Claude Thirfays (France, saxophone); Guy N'Sangue (Senegal, bass); Natalie Yorke (Trinidad, chorus); and Karla Gonzales (Trinidad, chorus).

8. Glissant 1981, 236.

9. Kassav' 1985.

10. Cited creole texts, selected and translated by Jocelyne Béroard, are found in Conrath 1987, 134–83. With the exception of “Zoukamine,” translated by Armelle Sainton, Rose Marie Brival Fortune translated Saint-Éloi's songs into French. English translations are by the author.

11. Ampigny 1992, 60.

12. Marthély 1985.

13. Marthély 1985, 1986.

14. Max Jeanne, quoted in Ruprecht 1990.

15. Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant 1989, 24.

16. Kassav' 1980.

17. Desvarieux 1983.

18. Décimus 1984.

19. Naimro 1995.

20. Saint-Éloi 1982.

21. Saint-Éloi 1995.

22. Marthély 1984.

23. Naimro 1992.

24. Naimro 1995.

25. Décimus 1980.

26. Kassav' 1987.

27. Saint-Éloi 1994.

28. *Ibid.*; Décimus 1986.

29. “La Guadeloupe a fait un triomphe à Kassav’” 1986, 6–7. At the Anse Bertrand stadium, 30,000 people arrived two hours ahead of time, and 50,000 attended the free concert. Guadeloupe's population was 330,000 in the 1990 census, so over 15 percent of the population attended.

30. Bernabé 1986, 15–16.

31. Gardinier 1988, 39.

32. Scaramuzza 1994, 53.

33. Andrieu 1995.

34. Henri Debs Productions, Moradisc, and Déclie-Guadeloupe are the producers in Guadeloupe. In Martinique, there are Hibiscus Productions, Déclie-Martinique, GD Productions, and JE Productions. Studios are available for recording an album, but the actual pressing, distribution, and marketing are controlled by French record companies based in Paris.

Chapter 14. Immigration, Race, and the Cultural Politics of Carnival

1. Omi and Winant 1994; Goldberg 1994.
2. "Anti-Riot Injunction Lifted" 1964; Harlem Riot 1964.
3. Hill and Abrahamson 1979; Kasinitz and Friedenbergh-Herbstein 1987; Lezama 1992.
4. Kasinitz 1992, 19-37.
5. Toney 1986, cited in Basch et al. 1994, 76.
6. Basch et al. 1994, 78.
7. Hill 1993, 44-64.
8. Powrie 1956; Pearse 1956.
9. Hill 1993, 193-210; Stuemple 1991.
10. Hill 1972, 100.
11. Kasinitz 1992, 25.
12. Hill 1993, 114-44.
13. "Resolution Adopted" 1952.
14. *New York Times*, 6 January 1961.
15. Pierre-Pierre 1993.
16. Sowell 1981.
17. Kasinitz 1992, 91-92.
18. Basch et al. 1994, 22.
19. These balls still exist in the form of immigrant association-sponsored parties. These parties happen throughout the year, both at the traditional time and during the New York Labor Day Carnival season.
20. See Cruse 1967.
21. Brady 1992.
22. "165,000 Watched" 1958.
23. Kasinitz 1992, 134.
24. Brady 1993.
25. U.S. Census statistics. Such official figures do not account for illegal immigration. While official census data in 1990 put the West Indian population of New York City at 370,000, for example, estimates that try to account for illegal immigration and census miscounting put the number toward 700,000.
26. Kasinitz 1992, 38-89; Mintz 1992, 139-53.
27. "It's a Black World" 1970.
28. See the *Antillean Echo* for 3, 19 May 1969; 5, 12, 19 May 1970; 12 March 1971; 3 May 1996.
29. Marshall 1981, 38-39.
30. West Indian Carnival File.
31. Hill and Abrahamson 1979, 24; Kasinitz 1992, 141.
32. Nunley 1988, 166; see also Manning 1990, 30.
33. Lezama 1992.
34. *Time*, 31 July 1964.
35. "600,000 Get in Step" 1973.
36. "Getting Ready" 1974.
37. "Mardi Gras Spirit" 1994.

38. Butler 1972.

39. "Carnival Day" 1978.

40. Manning 1990, 35.

41. Kasinitz 1992; Wilson 1988, 33.

42. Noel 1979; Kappstatter 1979; Morancic 1979. The possibility of conflict between black and Jewish residents of Crown Heights was very real during the late 1970s, though likely spurious on this specific occasion. Responding to harassment of Yeshiva students and the murder of Israel Turner in 1975, Hasids organized "Maccabee Patrols" to provide a security they increasingly felt was threatened. In 1978, a sixteen-year-old black youth, Victor Rhodes, was badly beaten by a group of young Hasids. The Black United Front was organized in Crown Heights to counter both the police and the Hasidim. Rev. Heron Sam, a Guyanese community leader, spoke openly of black fear of "Zionist expansion" in the neighborhood. See Mintz 1992, 139-55, 236-47, 328-47.

43. *Daily News*, 6 September 1979.

44. Cohen 1980, 66-67.

45. "West Indian-American Day Carnival Thirteenth Annual Weekend" 1980.

46. *London Times*, 1 September 1976.

47. Quinoma 1992.

48. Moses 1979.

49. H. Johns 1991.

50. T. Johns 1991.

51. Bridges 1983, 32.

52. Palmer 1986, p. 21.

53. Foner 1987, 92.

54. Powell and Preston 1991; Gelman and Newkirk 1991; Noel 1991; Trebay 1991.

55. Mintz 1992, 141-43.

56. "A neighbor said Mrs. Turner was composed, even though she saw her husband fall before her. 'She told me that she and her husband had been inmates in the Auschwitz concentration camp, had seen members of their family tortured and had learned to have strength for things like that'" (*New York Times*, 28 September 1975, quoted in *ibid.*).

57. Goldstein 1993.

58. Mintz 1992, 330.

59. Smith 1993.

60. Noel 1994.

Chapter 15. Popular Music and Labor Migration in Southern Africa

1. Read 1970, 45.

2. Mphande 1993, 118.

3. Erlmann 1990, 199-200.

4. *Ibid.*, 201.

5. Erlmann 1994, 168.

6. Appaduri 1994, 328.

7. *Ibid.*, 329.

8. Erlmann 1990, 214.

9. Linda n.d.
10. Erlmann 1990, 214 - 15.
11. Appaduri 1994, 330.
12. Ibid., 331.
13. Ullestad 1987, 74.
14. Simon 1986.
15. Diamond 1970.
16. Goldstruck 1992, 1.
17. Ibid.
18. Meintjes 1990, 51.
19. Appaduri 1994, 336.
20. Ibid., 337.

Chapter 16. Cultural Survivalisms and Marketplace Subversions

1. Special thanks to Andre Willis for extended and very powerful dialogues which have informed and improved this essay.

2. Of course, these two positions are not exhaustive; there are cultural politics advocates, such as Stuart Hall, bell hooks, Hazel V. Carby, Robin D. G. Kelley, George Lipsitz, and others, who are less concerned with questions of survivalism than those who heavily privilege the matter of black cultural retention.

3. Cliff 1995.
4. Lipsitz 1994.
5. Boukman Eksperians 1992.
6. Lipsitz 1994, 7.
7. Ibid., 10.

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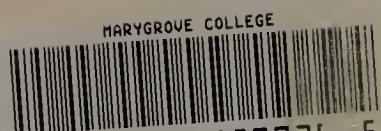
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