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Social Text, No. 34. (1993), pp. 53-84.

Stable URL:
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The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism

Jeffrey Louis Decker

“We’re gonna treat you like a king,” threatens a white cop from the LAPD on the “Death Side” of Ice Cube’s 1991 album, *Death Certificate*. “What goddamn king?” inquires the indignant rapper from South Central Los Angeles. “Rodney King! Martin Luther King! And all the other goddamn kings from Africa!”1 As the premier “gangsta rapper” in hip hop (whose credits include the gangsta anthem “—— tha Police”),2 Ice Cube emerges on the “Life Side” of this album, to the astonishment of many, as a born-again black nationalist. In the sleeve of *Death Certificate*, Ice Cube makes his transformation explicit: “We have limited knowledge of self, so it leads to a nigga mentality. The best place for a young black male or female is the Nation of Islam. Soon as we as a people use our knowledge of self to our advantage we will then be able to become and be called blacks.”

How can the recent and widespread emergence of black nationalism within rap music be accounted for? The words of Ice Cube’s cop offer some clues. As an enforcer of a system of state control and repression within the African-American community, the cop conflates all black kings as criminal suspects. His statement also draws attention to three distinct inflections of the meaning of “king” for black nationalism today: “Rodney King” signifies both police brutality toward blacks in America and black consciousness around official racism in the 1990s; the name “Martin Luther King” marks the sixties as a time of both broken civil rights promises and black power militancy; and, finally, “kings from Africa” conjures the memory of glorious ancient African empires (and the loss of these empires due to the Western slave trade) which inspire those involved in building the new black nation.

Following the Rodney King–Martin Luther King–African king continuum generated by Ice Cube, I want to suggest that today’s nation-conscious rappers draw their inspiration primarily from the black power movements of the 1960s and the Afrocentric notion that the original site of African-American cultural heritage is ancient Egypt. Hence, there exist two corresponding tendencies within nation-conscious rap: what I’ll call “sixties-inspired hip hop nationalism” and “Afrocentric hip hop nationalism.” Although rap groups espousing a black nationalist sound, image, and message draw from both “sixties-inspired” and “Afrocentric” tendencies, this paper examines each category independently in order to unpack the logic specific to each. Both tendencies within rap
imply a particular strategy for coding black nationalism. While the notion of time is central to sixties-inspired nationalism, the idea of place has heightened importance for Afrocentric nationalism. Sixties-inspired hip hop, espoused by rap groups such as Public Enemy, is time conscious to the degree that it appropriates the language of organized black revolts from the 1960s around the concept of “nation time.” Afrocentric rap, which can be found in the music of X-Clan, reclaims the ancient Egyptian empire as the African origin in order to generate racial pride and awareness in the struggle over injustice in America.

I am interested in the ways in which rap music uses the language of nation to rearticulate a history of racial oppression and struggle which can energize the movement toward black empowerment and independence. Rap groups espousing a black nationalist sound, image, and message draw from both recent struggles that anticipate the coming of the black nation (nation time) and a mythical attitude toward an immemorial African nation (nation place). Nationalism is defined by the ambivalent relationship between these two tendencies—that is, a simultaneous looking forward and backward. Tom Nairn argues persuasively that this is the modern Janus:

[It is through nationalism that societies try to propel themselves forward to certain kinds of goal (industrialization, prosperity, equality with other peoples, etc.) by a certain sort of regression—by looking inwards, drawing more deeply upon their indigenous resources, resurrecting past folk-heroes and myths about themselves and so on. . . . [N]ationalism can in this sense be pictured as like the old Roman god, Janus, who stood above gateways with one face looking forward and one backwards. Thus does nationalism stand over the passage to modernity, for human society. As human kind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past, to gather strength wherever it can be found for the ordeal of “development.”

Nairn suggests that the politics of nationalism has always been morally ambiguous. In order for a nation to justify its existence and to speak the language of progress and development to its people, it feels compelled to fabricate a myth of national origins. Black nationalism, I believe, draws from this Janus-faced logic. This accounts for why hip hop nationalism nostalgically looks toward ancient Egypt as the African-American motherland while it simultaneously imagines an alternative future based on the rise of the anticipated black nation.

This essay analyzes rap music’s explicit engagement with the discourse of nation in the form of hip hop nationalism. Members of the hip hop nation form an “imagined community” that is based less on its realization through state formation than on a collective challenge to the consensus logic of U.S. nationalism. The language of nation is appropriated by the hip hop community as a vehicle for contesting the changing discursive and institutional structures of racism in America. For instance, the consensus discourses of cultural
pluralism and the ethnic melting pot in the U.S. threaten the black community with the loss of a collective identity. As rapper Daddy-O puts it: if you’re not careful, “you get mapped, or should I say [taken] off the map, like a laundry stain in the laundromat.” Hip hop nationalism, like black nationalism generally, provides an imaginative map and inspirational territory for African-Americans who wish both to end the institutionalized legacy of slavery and to create self-sufficient, organically based organizations such as black businesses and Afrocentric school curriculums. As I will demonstrate below, only community-based hip hop nationalists create the basis for a more critical and conscious struggle.

In the most general terms, rap music can be characterized as a postmodern commodity aesthetic which is simultaneously a collective and contradictory expression of African-American culture and politics. My focus concerns the productive if limiting contradictions embedded in hip hop nationalism’s rethinking of the past in an effort to empower the present struggle for black liberation. I am less concerned with judging the “truth” (i.e., the accuracy or inaccuracy) of any particular historical claim made by hip hop nationalism than in attempting to describe and interpret the logic behind its use of the contemporary language of nation. I want to ask, implicitly if not always explicitly: What are the conditions for the emergence of these particular narratives of nationalism at this particular historical moment? What makes the specific truth-claims of hip hop nationalism more or less culturally relevant, meaningful, and effective in today’s political climate? What kinds of contradictions are embedded in the logic of hip hop nationalism’s representation of ancient African civilizations, the sixties struggles for racial empowerment in the U.S., and the promise of a black nation to come?

I examine, for instance, sixties-inspired hip hop nationalism for its appropriation and revision of 1960s black militancy for the 1990s. These nation-conscious rappers not only uncover but update a recent history of racial struggle for today’s black youth who otherwise would have little or no access to this empowering past. Despite the urgency of their message, the limitations of sixties-inspired hip hop nationalism are illustrated in their tendency to romanticize black revolutionary politics of the period or to uncritically conflate the distinct and often opposing agendas of militant black organizations, such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party. At these moments they fail to enrich and transform the tradition of black militancy for the 1990s. Afrocentric hip hop nationalism inspires racial self-worth in black American youth through the promotion of an Afrocentric value system. Afrocentric rappers generate a non-Western sound and message by rewriting the past so that Africa—or, more precisely, Egypt—becomes the origin of all civilization. As we will see below, this intervention, while it unsettles certain white supremacist notions at the core of modern accounts of civilization, nonetheless remains within the Western logic of “civilization” that it seeks to dismantle.
I will also address the status of the “black woman” and women rappers in both the sixties-inspired and the Afrocentric tendencies of hip hop nationalism. The figure of the black woman within black nationalism, especially of the Afrocentric variety, is frequently deployed to represent “Mother Africa.” This kind of objectification suggests some of the limits of black nationalism as a narrative of liberation for black women. Some women rappers consent to their passive assignment within hip hop nationalism, often as a means toward buoying the fragile institution of the black family and showing solidarity with the much maligned black male. Other women rappers provide innovation and new direction for the black nation by challenging the patriarchal logic common to all nationalisms.

**The Black Nationalist Continuum**

The various inflections of nationalism in hip hop culture are often difficult to understand without some knowledge of the long and complex history of black nationalism in the United States. Dating back to the late eighteenth century, black nationalism in America is embedded in the emergence and rapid spread of Western nationalism during the same period. As Wilson Jeremiah Moses suggests, black nationalism gains its first substantial expression as early as 1850. Influential members of the nineteenth-century black bourgeoisie, such as the Reverend Alexander Crummell, unconsciously took on the European language of the civilizing mission in their attempt to bring Africa into the modern world. Crummell was typical in his Victorian belief that Africans lacked “civilization,” a concept (like “nationalism”) born in late eighteenth-century Europe. Without an Anglicized culture, it was understood that Africans also lacked the means for racial uplift and were destined for extinction. Even black nationalists who advocated separatism were usually staunch civilizationists. The key, as technocrat Booker T. Washington understood it, was to imitate white institutions within the black community. By the turn of the century, with the beginnings of cultural relativism in the West, there was a slow and uneven shift toward “pan-Africanism,” promoted by W. E. B. Du Bois and others. Pan-Africanism was crystallized by the disillusionment, among black intellectuals, with European civilization in the aftermath of World War I.

At the same time that nationalism began to decline among the black bourgeoisie during the 1920s, it spread among an emerging black proletariat. Armed with the post–WWI emigrationist militancy of “Africa for the Africans,” Marcus Garvey combined class consciousness with pan-Africanism in an effort to mobilize large numbers of newly urbanized black folk in America. Despite his awareness of the crimes committed against Africans throughout the world in the name of progress, Garvey nonetheless valorized capitalist enterprise, Christian civilization, and authoritarian empires. Garveyism marks
both the culmination of the so-called “Golden Age” of black nationalism, which advocated Western civilization, and the beginnings of contemporary black nationalism, which speaks to the urban working poor by celebrating the inherent racial uniqueness and solidarity of Africans in the motherland and throughout the diaspora.

The decline of Garveyism by the beginning of the Great Depression marked the end of large-scale emigrationist movements tied to black nationalism in the U.S. Over the next quarter of a century a new black nationalism slowly emerged, led by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, which preached the doctrine of “a Nation within a nation.” Although its petit-bourgeois philosophy advocates Western-style capitalism, the Nation of Islam preaches racial separatism based partly on an Egypt-centered interpretation of the African heritage of black Americans. As the Nation of Islam continued to flourish among the working poor during the 1960s, black middle-class nationalist movements, such as Maulana Ron Karenga’s US organization, also emerged. Cornel West points out that these new nationalist movements, usually led by a younger generation of the black intelligentsia, were much less effective than the NOI in capturing the hearts and minds of urbanized black folk and in building black institutions. It was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a Black Left Internationalist organization also led by young intellectuals but opposed to nationalism of any sort, which produced more discernable results in the life of the black community. By the mid-seventies, systematic state repression and internal contradictions brought about the collapse of the Black Panthers, and forced the newer black cultural nationalists to reconceive their political strategies and agendas.

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

It would take a full decade after the initial soundings of Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation, however, for black nationalism to emerge as a substantial force within rap music. Today Bambaataa and his Zulu Nation are a powerful source of inspiration for high profile, nation-conscious rappers. Hip hop nationalists di-
seminate the language of nation in rap music by inflecting it with oppositional “black” meanings. To do so, they exploit the sounds and images of a wide variety of black militants from America’s past, but particularly those who advocate building the black nation. Their sources most often include community-based activists, such as Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Muhammad Ali, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Angela Y. Davis, and Huey P. Newton. They also sample from the philosophies and attitudes of distinctly black institutions—ranging from the Black Panther Party to the Nation of Islam—12—that are organically tied to the communities they serve.

**Homeboys Meet Gramsci, or, Organic Cultural Intellectuals**

While most nation-conscious rappers are not activists in the conventional sense, they do occupy a place between entertainers and politicians within the black community. When the Los Angeles riots of 1992 erupted after a nearly all-white jury acquitted white officers of the LAPD of the charge of police brutality toward Rodney King, ABC’s Nightline called Ice Cube for an interview. As the Village Voice reported, Cube declined to make the television appearance because “he was desperately looking through the South Central rubble for family and friends he hadn’t heard from since the shit started.”13 Unlike most entertainers and politicians in the United States, many nation-conscious rappers sustain their organic ties to the black community from which they came and of which their music is a part. As the racial antagonisms that produced the recent riots in L.A. make clear, no cultural expression and neighborhood are as linked as rap music and South Central.

It is not uncommon to find rap artists, especially those with explicit political messages in their music and videos, participating in grass-roots events which are organized around the dogged but changing structures of racism in the United States. Rappers are conspicuous at public demonstrations, and frequently speak at rallies, schools, and prisons. For example, the 1989 murder of Yusuf Hawkins in Brooklyn’s Bensonhurst by a mob of angry white teens prompted a protest march under the slogan “A Day of Outrage.” The rally was organized by community activists with the assistance of the rap group X-Clan, and memorialized on their debut album. While hip hop nationalists are not politicians, they are involved in the production of cultural politics—its creation, its circulation, and its interpretation—which are tied to the everyday struggles of working-class blacks and the urban poor. Perhaps more than most popular black musicians, hip hop nationalists follow Cornel West’s assertion that “[s]ince black musicians play such an important role in Afro-American life, they have a special mission and responsibility: to present beautiful music [or serious noise] which both sustains and motivates black people and provides visions of what black people should aspire to.”14
The social efficacy of nation-conscious rap ranges from unrevised imitation and misinformed representation of media-styled black militancy to historically informed and creatively transformative representations of oppositional politics for the 1990s. In their least innovative moments, nation-conscious rappers conjure the spirits of, say, sixties revolutionaries by borrowing the names, battle cries, and costumes of the period without transforming this legacy to meet the needs of the nineties. Alternatively, militant rappers are most effective when they appropriate popular knowledge from within the black community and exploit its most progressive elements in the process of envisioning a new society. At these moments rappers function in a manner resembling what Antonio Gramsci calls “organic intellectuals.”

Hip hop nationalists are organic cultural intellectuals to the degree that their activities are directly linked to the everyday struggles of black folk and that their music critically engages the popular knowledge of which they are a part. Popular knowledge is what Gramsci terms “common sense,” and extrapolating its most progressive tendencies is the greatest challenge posed to organically based intellectual-musicians. “First of all, therefore, it must be a criticism of ‘common sense,’ basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity.” The music and video images of hip hop nationalists must do more than mirror the interests of their urban constituency. They must actively shape popular knowledge in a manner that contests U.S. nationalism from within the black community. The effectivity of hip hop nationalism is not grounded on a rap artist’s ability, as a member of an elite avant-garde, to lead the backward black masses. Instead, the cultural intellectual who is organically linked to the community begins from popular knowledge and appropriates its “healthy nucleus” in order to make “coherent the principles and the problems raised by the masses in their practical activity.”

Strictly speaking, Gramsci’s formulation of the organic intellectual extends only to nontraditional, community-oriented activists. As such, organically-based intellectuals in black America would include activists of the late 1950s such as Ella Baker of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam. Nonetheless, I want to insist that marginal cultures in the United States have, historically, nurtured a wide variety of intellectuals involved in cultural work—such as musicians or filmmakers—who are organically linked to their communities of origin. Other recent commentators on popular culture might agree. Hazel V. Carby, for instance, suggests that organic intellectuals emerge within the tradition of “classic” women’s blues singers of the 1920s, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Likewise, George Lipsitz uses the Gramscian concept to describe the function of Mexican-American rock musicians within ethnic minority communities of Los Angeles over
the past fifty years.¹⁹ Pioneering director Melvin Van Peebles confirms these sentiments in regard to the role of organically-based black film:

The reality is that our people have been brainwashed with the “hip” music, the beautiful color, and the dancing images flickering across the screen. This is what they know of cinema. And that’s where we must begin. We obviously cannot dwell there, but it’s a point of departure. . . . That’s what revolution is! It isn’t everybody standing up here on an intellectual high. And it is not meeting people and starting from where they are not. It is starting from where they can see.²⁰

Hip hop nationalists are the most recent in a long line of organic cultural workers who are situated between the intellectual activist and the commercialized entertainer. They tend to be most progressive when they use their music, videos, and public appearances to make relevant their constituency’s “common-sense” understanding of black militancy past for today’s struggles against racism.

**The Time of Sixties-Inspired Hip Hop Nationalism**

Nineteen eighty-eight was a landmark year in rap music for two reasons. On the popular front, MTV inaugurated its first regular hip hop program, called “Yo, MTV Raps!” to unprecedented network ratings. In the same year, Public Enemy released its second album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, giving black nationalism in the United States its first widely publicized expression in nearly two decades. Hip hop nationalism’s immediate precursor in the black arts was the Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s and early 1970s which, broadly conceived, included artists such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Haki R. Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Gil Scott-Heron, and The Last Poets. Black Aestheticians were predictably technophobic (not unlike the white New Left of the same period) in their firm rejection of mass media and commodity culture in favor of the community identity provided by the recovery of precolonial African oral and musical traditions. The Black Aesthetic movement’s most powerful statement was, perhaps, formulated in the music of Gil Scott-Heron, who proclaimed: “The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised, will not be televised/The revolution will be no re-run brothers/The revolution will be live.”²¹

By the mid-seventies, however, black cultural nationalists of the sixties emerged largely defeated due to both state repression and internal contradictions. Many Black Aestheticians understood that, given the changing face of American culture, they had failed to respond organically to their own constituencies’ needs and desires. In his 1973 book entitled *From Plan to Planet*, Haki Madhubuti recognized the “failure” of sixties black nationalism to give young African-Americans cultural and political alternatives in their own language.
Black writers, as other black creators, deal in images. They understand the uses and manipulation of the image. One of the main reasons that our young so readily latch on to capsule form ideologies from outside the community is that black writers and others have failed. We have failed to give young brothers and sisters a workable and practical alternative in the language and style to which they can relate. We’ve failed to direct or set up and help operate constructive programs dealing with the real life issues on this planet.\textsuperscript{22}

Madhubuti goes on to say that the black artist’s “first allegiance is to the black media”—magazines, newspapers, and, of course, radio. It is in the mass media, especially as it is situated within the black community, that a practical language of black nationalism can be produced by organic cultural intellectuals.

A fundamental difference between hip hop nationalism and black nationalism of the sixties is manifested in the way nation-conscious rap music embraces and exploits postmodern information technologies in order to produce a new black nationalist sound for the nineties and beyond. “Technology,” Chuck D. of Public Enemy asserts, “we have to take advantage of it, and these black businessmen, instead of backing Coca-Cola all the time, they can get together and create a B.E.T.I. [Black Entertainment Television and Information] to inform us.”\textsuperscript{23} In the absence of a black CNN, rap records are an invisible network that can inform and mobilize the black community. Time and again, Chuck D. has stated, “[r]ap is black America’s TV station. It gives a whole perspective of what exists and what black life is about. And black life doesn’t get the total spectrum of information through anything else.”\textsuperscript{24}

Music videos, such as “Night of the Living Baseheads” (which critiques racism within the contemporary discourse of the “war” on drugs), produce a dynamic fusion of sound and sight meant to move the audience’s consciousness. The “Night of the Living Baseheads” video even creates its own television network, called PETV, to combat a media-saturated culture where there exist few minority-controlled radio stations and even fewer minority-owned television stations. Other Public Enemy rap songs, such as “Don’t Believe the Hype,” “911 Is a Joke,” “Can’t Truss It,” and “More News at 11,” express the group’s desire to broadcast news and information to their hip hop constituency not readily available on and through mainstream channels. Sustaining the gains made by the black power revolt is especially important because, for nationalists, these efforts work against mainstream efforts to the contrary. As Sister Souljah of Public Enemy states, “the media tr[ies] to move people’s minds out of the consciousness of the 60s and into some type of black backwardness.”\textsuperscript{25}

The sixties-inspired hip hop nation understands that, today, control over the media means the ability to control representations of the real as well.

Hip hop’s sixties-inspired nationalist groups—such as San Francisco Bay area’s Paris, Queens’ Intelligent Hoodlum, Los Angeles’ Laquan, as well as Long Island’s Public Enemy—make extensive use of the highly publicized and media-styled black militancy of the sixties. The packaging of rap albums, CDs,
and cassettes provides many illustrations of hip hop nationalism’s historical borrowings. Aside from more obscure references, such as Public Enemy’s third album, Fear of a Black Planet, which recalls Madhubuti’s aforementioned From Plan to Planet, there are numerous explicit examples of this tendency. A recent Spin article on Public Enemy, for instance, displayed a full-page photo of Chuck D. seated between two members of PE’s paramilitary outfit, the S1Ws (an acronym for Security of the First World). Upon Chuck D.’s request, the magazine agreed to restage the trademark photograph of Black Panther leader Huey Newton sitting in a regal wicker chair with spear and automatic rifle in hand. This time, however, Chuck D. is decked out in “homeboy fashion”: high-top, brand-named, leather basketball sneakers, black baseball jacket and cap with PE insignia and logo. By taking on and yet revising Panther imagery, Public Enemy creatively updates the most media-conscious iconography of sixtyies black radicalism for a 1990s constituency.

Broadly speaking, this revision of a historical image is generated by means of what is referred to as “sampling” within rap music itself. Sampling occurs in rap when previously recorded materials are appropriated, often without regard for copyright laws. In rap music and video, the speeches and TV images of black political leaders of the sixtyies, especially Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Huey Newton, are cited by Public Enemy in the same manner that, for example, Motown hits are sampled. Hip hop nationalists are most effective when, by sampling the voices and images of political leaders from this period, they move beyond romanticizing media images of sixtyies black power. They perform this task when, as organic cultural intellectuals, they recontextualize and, thus, make black militancy of the 1960s meaningful for the 1990s.

Homeboy and homegirl fashion—the sartorial equivalent to sampling—is significant to nation-conscious rap. Mainstream consumption habits are parodied when price tags are left on hats and sneakers. Homegirls conspicuously display large gold earrings which not only mock consumerism but also give each B-Girl the appearance of a local queen. Hip hop also parodies American consumerism by supporting the “fake-fashion” industry. Designer logos are pirated, cutup, and placed not on handbags, but on hats, jackets, and pants. Public Enemy’s Flavor Flav, who often sports brightly colored Troop sweats complemented by dark glasses with brightly colored frames (a.k.a. Flavavision) is a peculiar example of this fashion trend. Flavor wears brightly colored clothes with all of the trappings of designer fashion. He dons a large clock or clocks draped around his neck which display time or different time zones upon his chest. Chuck D. and Terminator X wear a smaller version of the same clocks as well as medallions inscribed with a red, black, and green image of the African continent made popular by black nationalist rappers. The clocks worn around Flavor’s neck draw our attention to the multidimensionality of time in rap music. On the one hand, these heavy clocks remind us of the burden of modern time, particularly industrialism’s capacity to discipline and
exploit through the control of temporality. On the other hand, this conspicuous display of clocks is an entertainingly excessive comment on time’s invisible inscription, which reminds PE’s audience that rap music exists within moments of community play time.

Musically and historically speaking, Public Enemy’s nationalist sound is time conscious. Chuck D. explains that the difference between the revolutionary black music of yesterday and today is the latter’s ability to move the masses through a musical timing that translates into rap’s danceability. “The thing about the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron is that they were into a jazz-type approach, doing poetry over a beat. When rap music came along, it was poetry over a beat too, but in time. More important than the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, to us, was James Brown. His record, ‘Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud’ had the most impact because it was danceable and yet you still thought about it . . . the groove was funk and soul, which was different from jazz.” Chuck D. continues by explaining how, in response to the short history of rap music in the mid-1980s, Public Enemy first went about altering musical time. “See, rap comes from the idea of a deejay working a party. A lot of our decisions are still based on that structure. We figure the thing that makes people really respond is changes in beats-per-minute. At one time, most rap music coming out was around 99 to 102 beats per minute, and that’s what made us do ‘Bring the Noise’ [from It Takes a Nation . . . ], where we jetted it up to 109.”

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

Public Enemy’s time-consciousness goes beyond musical technique in its ability to conjure a particular history of struggle within the black community. On “Don’t Believe the Hype,” for example, high energy rapper Flavor Flav exclaims: “Yo Terminator X, step up on the stand and show these people what time it is, boyeee.” By mixing, sampling, and scratching, Terminator X is the group’s timekeeper, its time-consciousness. Immediately after stating that he’s a “time bomb,” Chuck D., the group’s deep-voiced lead rapper, boasts: “In the daytime the radio’s scared of me/’Cause I’m mad, plus I’m the enemy/They can’t c’mon and play with me in primetime/’Cause I know the time, plus I’m gettin’ mine.” These lyrics point to the fact that marginalized groups are often excluded from “prime” or mainstream time. Hip hop nationalism, like contemporary black nationalism generally, responds to this crisis of exclusion by advocating the creation of self-sufficient institutions that can empower the African-American community through its own form of disciplinary time. As Chuck D. once told an interviewer, “The black race needs order and discipline if it’s going to prosper.”

If Chuck D.’s editorializing fails to reach the audience, the SLW’s deliberate
visual message is a very readable sign of black power. In PE’s concert performance the S1Ws, outfitted in military fatigues, respond to Terminator X’s commands by stepping in time to the music. The S1Ws move their bodies with precision and in unison, producing an impressive display of masculine muscle and order. The synchronic and syncopated moves are embedded not only in the military imperative of most nationalisms, but also specifically in the tradition of black fraternity step shows. Even Flavor Flav’s playful and disorderly conduct—which balances the straightforward rhyming and stepping of Chuck D. and the S1Ws—can be attributed to what is called “freaking” in step shows, where an individual deviates from what is otherwise a spectacle of group solidarity.30

The S1Ws also evoke the Nation of Islam’s paramilitary outfit, the Fruit of Islam. Although not directly affiliated with the NOI, Public Enemy has repeatedly shown itself to be in alliance with the Muslim organization. NOI rapper Prince Akeem, who has stated that “Our voice is for today’s time,”31 teams up with Chuck D. on a 1991 rap music video titled “Time to Come Correct.”32 The video comments extensively on the relationship between time and black nationalism. Set to the sound of screeching horns, the rap advocates the urgency of uplifting the race by building a new nation. The video opens in front of the NOI’s Chicago Temple No. 2. Prince Akeem, whose name means “independent warrior,”33 is surrounded by the NOI, who urge him to do something about the impending crisis in black America. In a symbolic display of solidarity, Akeem opens by lip-syncing over a sample of Chuck D.’s voice (“I’m a time bomb”). The two alternate lines, but the topic remains the same. Akeem’s lyrics, “Time dictates the agenda,” draws a response from Chuck D.: “Time to let ’em know.” Pointing to his wristwatch, Akeem insists that “Time is short/So put the cause into effect.” In the song’s chorus, the two rappers exclaim: “Time to come correct!” Picking up the beat where Akeem left off, Chuck D. stresses the strategic alliance between hip hop nationalists and the Nation: “Time dictates the agenda/It’s time to unite with your people/I’m down with the NOI/The word is out/This time the winner is goin’ to roll with soul.” As the video draws toward its conclusion, Prince Akeem pleads: “Time is running out.” The sound and sight of the music video complements the rap’s lyrics: the camera captures, in slow motion, a DJ spin a turntable as the high-pitched sound spirals down. Over the word-image LET’S BUILD THE NATION, Prince Akeem and Chuck D. rap “Time dictates the Nation.”

This rap video refers to black nationalists of the sixties, many of whom believed that the time was right for black nation building. Perhaps the best known nationalist of the Black Aesthetic movement, Amiri Baraka, explained in 1970 that in Newark “when we greet each other on the street we say, ‘What time is it?’ We always say, ‘It’s Nation Time!’”34 Jesse Jackson of Operation PUSH, inspired by Baraka at the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, called to the thousands at the Convention “What time is it?” The
delegates responded enthusiastically: “It’s Nation Time!” In reference to black nationalism 1990s-style, Chuck D. explains: “we show them [black youth] through the access of the media that this is what we have . . . an African medallion, or a clock to know ‘what time it is.’”35 For the hip hop nation, the mass media is the means to convey their political message. While the African medallion displays a sense of homeland, belonging, and racial solidarity, the clock represents the importance of past, present, and future time. Today, hip hop nationalists are apt to say in reference to nation building, “It’s time to get busy.”

Hip hop nationalism taps a wide range of militant styles from the sixties, often with less regard for the conflicts between black radicals during the period than for the fact that they fit the time of sixties militancy. As we saw earlier, Chuck D. and Public Enemy draw inspiration not only from the NOI but also from the vanguardist Black Panther Party. The Black Panthers were Black Left Internationalists who generally followed the ideas of Marx, Lenin, and Mao. The Panthers not only attempted to build political coalitions with other Left organizations regardless of racial identity, but challenged the romantic nationalism promoted by certain prominent black nationalist organizations and leaders.36 PE has expressed a genuine interest in forging both musical coalitions with white rock bands (such as Anthrax) and cross-cultural alliances. Not surprisingly, in rap music forums such as Source magazine, more militant black nationalists have openly criticized members of PE for their nonseparatist tendencies. PE is remarkable for their ability to maintain their organic ties to the black community while challenging blind allegiance to racial solidarity. On a rap such as “Welcome to the Terrordome,” they remind their black nationalist brethren that “Every brother ain’t a brother/Cause a Black hand/Squeezed on Malcolm X the man/The shootin’ of Huey Newton/From a hand of a Nig who pushed the trig.”37

Hip hop nationalists, such as Public Enemy, have also provided a new direction in black militancy through their attempts to forge an ideological coalition between the legacy of the Black Panthers and the heritage of the Nation of Islam. This is, at best, an uneasy cultural-political alliance—one which is as contradictory as it is creative, as prone to historical amnesia as it is to constructive historical revision. The BP-NOI coalition is most succinctly expressed in the sixties-inspired hip hop nationalism of rapper Paris, the self-proclaimed Black Panther of rap (“I’m PD [Paris-dog] from the BP [Black Panther] posse”). The title of Paris’s debut album, The Devil Made Me Do It,38 is borrowed from the NOI myth of the sinister creation of the “white devil” by the god Yakub. The packaging of the album is indicative of this powerful conflation. On the front cover of the album is the rapper’s logo: an image of a black panther inscribed onto the word PARIS. Beneath the logo is the album title, “The Devil Made Me Do It,” with its implicit NOI reference. On the back
cover a similar display: the Panther image on top, the NOI logo (star inside a crescent moon) below. From “Panther Power” to “The Hate That Hate Made,” the lyrical content of each rap confirms the record’s bifurcated logic. “Panther Power,” although framed by sixties recordings from the BP Party itself, is about building the black nation. The album’s title song, although an explicit reference to NOI teachings, invokes the memory of political leaders and intellectuals who struggled for decolonization by challenging the indigenous national bourgeoisie: “So, black, check out the tempo/Revolution ain’t never been simple/Followin’ the path of Mao and Fanon/Just build your brain and we’ll soon make progress.” Paris’s “Escape from Babylon” is inspired by NOI theology but concludes with his rapping the Panther Party’s 10-Point Platform over a funky hip hop beat.

Revolution, as “The Devil Made Me Do It” instructs, has never been simple. The contradictory expression of a revolutionary program in rap music is a case in point. Hip hop nationalists provide black youth an indispensable history lesson concerning African-American militancy unavailable in public school curriculum. Yet nation-conscious rappers, such as PE and Paris, regularly conflate the competing political, cultural, and economic agendas of various black militant organizations, such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers. Historically, the stakes of this competition were the political efficacy of a nationalist agenda for the advancement of those most injured by poverty and racism. The price of this conflation within hip hop is that the politics of international, class-based, coalition-oriented struggle are regularly overwritten by a separatist appeal to racial empowerment. This political strategy is not without its benefits: unlike the revolutionary vanguardism of the Black Panther Party, the language of nation tends to appeal to the everyday “common sense” of working-class blacks and the urban poor. Given the recent demise of socialism and the rise of both nationalism and religious fundamentalism throughout the world, it is not surprising that parts of the black community are inspired more by the Islamic nationalism of the NOI than by the Marxist internationalism of the Black Panther Party. The tension between blacks and Jews in urban areas of the United States since the turn of the century, not to mention the continuing hostility between Arab nations and Israel in the Middle East, gives a partial context for Chuck D.’s refusal to unequivocally denounce anti-Semitism in any form. Perhaps too, it provides a gloss for one of Paris’s signature rhymes: “Now you know why this Panther went crazy/The devil made me.”

The challenge to hip hop nationalism is whether or not it can forge a “common-sense” politics capable of creating a more coherent and self-critical intervention into nationalism’s conservative tendencies.

Paris, like hip hop nationalists such as PE, continually returns to the relationship between time and tempo, rhyming and revolution. In “The Devil Made Me Do It,” Paris raps: “People with a gift from heaven/Tempo
116.7/Keeps you locked in time with the program. . . .” The high intensity tempo updates the sixties black nationalist call for “nation time” in the present. If anyone is responsible for keeping time and tempo in rap music, it is the disk jockey. Terminator X, Public Enemy’s DJ, is no exception. While he is responsible (along with PE’s producers, the Bomb Squad) for generating the group’s guerrilla sound, he is also the keeper of nation time. His anonymous surname, marked by an X, recalls the Black Muslims of the 1960s who both opposed the practice of black Americans “wearing a white man’s name” and called for a distinct African-American identity tied to the politics of black nationalism. According to Malcolm X, the “Muslim’s ‘X’ symbolized the true African family name that he never could know.”42 The “X” is donned by black nationalists as a sign of African roots—origins which simultaneously affirms a racial identity while marking it as a historical absence.

Terminator X helps PE reformulate the sixties-inspired identity politics for the nineties. In one sense, Terminator X is rap music’s cyborg. Part human, part machine, he is an anonymous subject whose identity is claimed only through musical technology. An assault technician, Terminator X not only works to precision the technique of cutting and mixing, he also recalls the futuristic film by the same name. Masculine, indestructible, and always on the edge of violence, Terminator X, although his voice is silent, sounds “louder than a bomb” by “yellin’ with his hands”43 (e.g., by scratching and sampling). He conjures the sound from the black historical memory, sets the sound in time and in motion, and brings the noise to the hip hop constituency.

A Woman’s Place: Mother Africa

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

[Malcolm X:] I don’t know how many marriage breakups are caused by these movie- and television-addicted women expecting some bouquets and kissing and hugging and being swept out like Cinderella for dinner and dancing—then gets mad when a poor, scraggly husband comes in tired and sweaty from working like a dog all day, looking for some food.44

[Public Enemy:] There’s a 5 letter word/To describe her character/But her brains being washed by an actor/And every real man that tries to approach/Come the closer he comes/He gets dissed like a roach/
[Refrain:] I don’t think I can handle/She goes channel to channel/Cold lookin’ for that hero/She watch channel zero.\(^{45}\)

While it is accurate to describe sexism in rap music as a symptom of American culture in general, the above descriptions of African-American women are specific to the language of black nationalism. Hip hop nationalism follows in the steps of sixties black militancy by positioning black women who do not conform to the ideals of the patriarchal family structure as ungrateful wives or gold-digging lovers. Chuck D. reiterated his concern for the disabling effect of the mass media on black women in a recent interview: “if she has no man she has to hold on to something like television.”\(^{46}\) Much was made of Public Enemy’s attempt to revise their sexism with pro-black woman tracks on their 1990 album, *Fear of a Black Planet*. On “Revolutionary Generation,”\(^{47}\) for example, PE evokes Aretha Franklin by rhyming, “R-E-S-P-E-C-T/My sister’s not the enemy.” Yet they can rap on the same cut, in conventional black nationalist tone: “It takes a man to take a stand/Understand it takes a/Woman to make a stronger man.” As they rap “I’m tired of America dissin’ my sisters,” it becomes clear that sexism is PE’s concern only insofar as it is connected to white supremacy in the United States. The inability of even the most progressive forms of nation-conscious rap to confront sexism suggests that the historical conditions for new thinking on gender relations have yet to be realized by the largely male-dominated organic intelligentsia of the African-American community.

More recently, PE has added a female member, Sister Souljah, to the group. An activist in the black community prior to her entrance into hip hop, Souljah has taken the role of “Sister of Instruction” and “Director of Attitude.” One might assume that the introduction of an outspoken, pro-black woman rapper to nation-conscious rap’s most successful group would transform Public Enemy’s attitudes concerning issues of gender. This has simply not been the case. Instead Sister Souljah deflects gender-based criticism away from PE through her repeated affirmation that the war against racial oppression should be fought primarily on the terms set by men. Her presence thus seems to have tempered the group’s potential for progressive critique in this area by allowing them to sustain an unrevised concept of sexual politics.

Black America, insists Souljah, is in the midst of a war—and she is a revolutionary. Like Public Enemy, Sister Souljah urges her audience to pay close attention to time. The connection between her sixties-inspired political posture and the hip hop pseudonym, Sister Souljah, recalls the title character of Sonia Sanchez’s militant play, *Sister Sonji* (1969). Sanchez was the most prominent female Black Aesthetician in a movement dominated by men. In 1972, the same year that Sanchez joined the Nation of Islam, *Sister Sonji* was first produced on stage. As the one-woman play opens, we hear an elderly Sister Sonji—a Harriet Tubman figure according to Sanchez\(^{48}\)—ask: “Ain’t time
and I made a truce so that I am time a blk/version of past/ago & now/time." The play dramatizes the changing black female self before, during, and after the black revolution in the United States. While the young Sonji is only beginning to come to nation-consciousness about gender and race relations in America, the postrevolutionary self carries with her the knowledge and wisdom of her people’s struggles toward the realization of the black nation. It is, however, the adult Sonji—the black revolutionary female self—that is most relevant to understanding sixties-inspired hip hop nationalism and the significance of a black woman, such as Sister Souljah, within it. “The time for blk/nationhood is here,” states Sonji as she is transformed from a teenager to a young adult. At a black power conference, Sonji learns a great deal about her role in building the new nation: “this morning I heard a sister talk about blk/women supporting their blk/men, listening to their men, sacrificing, working while blk/men take care of bizness, having warriors and young sisters.” During revolutionary times, according to the play, black women make sacrifices to the patriarchal hierarchy by both supporting black men and taking care of private, domestic concerns such as bearing children.

Twenty years later we see and hear Sister Souljah—who has stated that Harriet Tubman is her primary source of inspiration and her principal model for leadership—echoing Sanchez’s Sonji in the rap music video “Buck Whylin’.” The video is from the 1991 album Terminator X & the Valley of the Jeep Beets, upon which Souljah makes her first recorded appearance with Public Enemy. “Buck Whylin’” begins with a sample from PE’s “Bring the Noise” (off It Takes a Nation . . .). The listener is immediately assaulted by Sister Souljah’s powerful and preacherly voice. Her topic is “the black man,” and she exclaims: “We are at war! Black man where is your army?” Souljah’s presence is felt not only in the beginning, but also in the middle and at the end of the otherwise male-centered video. At a break in Chuck D.’s rap, Sister Souljah roars “What is America’s beef with the black man? It’s the way that you walk, it’s the way that you talk. Every brother and sister has got to be a soldier in the war against the black man.” At the music video’s conclusion the listener hears the words: “Sister Souljah speaking. Sisters say ‘Where are all the good black men?’ They’re missing in action because we are at war!”

Like her foremother, Sister Sonji, Souljah’s voice is that of a visionary or prophet. Her message, too, is nationalist to the core. On her 1992 debut album, 360 Degrees of Power, she raps “Turn all your talents and skills to a Black business/Which helps to build the African community.” Souljah, in line with Chuck D., claims: “The number one thing we must do is rebuild the Black Man.” Black nationalism’s primary focus is the actualization of black men’s political agency in the struggle for liberation. The high rate of black male mortality is understood as American genocide; it is the principal cause for action. Black women and men, according to Souljah, must fight together as soldiers in
the battle for the survival of the black man. The struggle is thus defined purely in terms of the remasculinization of black men: “When you are a Black Man in America you are automatically hunted.” In line with PE, Sister Souljah never uses sexual politics to contest the contradictions in black nationalism’s concept of liberation. On the one hand, she stereotypes both white women (for their desire for black men) and white feminists (as man-hating lesbians in global sisterhood clothing). On the other hand, she constructs an alibi for the stereotypical hyper-masculinity of black men: “White people try to make black women uncomfortable with black manhood. . . . a lot of times sisters don’t understand the amount of pressure that black men are under.” While Souljah’s remarks implicitly raise some pertinent issues concerning the uneasy relationship between, for example, liberal feminism and black sisterhood, the shortcomings of Souljah’s sexual politics are aggravated by the logic of black nationalism. Agendas not based exclusively on racial politics are essentially foreclosed. All problems within the black community—including gender antagonisms—are reduced to the omnipresent menace of white supremacy. While this brand of hip hop nationalism expresses only part of a far more complex story, it ironically serves to show the limits of black nationalism as a language of liberation for African-American women.

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

Sister Souljah enacts two roles in the video. In the war against the United States government, she is garbed in generic blue jump-suit fatigues and her face is inconspicuous under the blue baseball cap. She is an anonymous black freedom fighter—a sister who is, first and foremost, a soldier in a man’s army. Black women’s agency has, in this instance, undergone some revisions since the sixties. Prior to the challenge to the black power movement by black feminists, such as Toni Cade Bambara and Michele Wallace, the language of
black nationalism attempted to keep women off the front lines and in the home. Hip hop nationalism displays the capacity to imagine black women fighting side-by-side with men to the degree that their gender identity as women is effaced. As music video, “The Final Solution” confirms a masculine identity for the struggle against racism.

 However, when she is dressed in homegirl fashion and armed with only her booming voice, the music video audience confronts not the anonymous soldier but the gendered image of “Sister Souljah.” Recall that her official role among PE’s revolutionary avant-garde is in the areas of “instruction” and “attitude”; the song’s male-voiced refrain dictates that “Sister Souljah” is in charge of “the reeducation of the Negro.” “I ain’t the hero,” Souljah raps, “I warned ya that it was coming/I gave you the message when the funky drummer was drumming.” Souljah’s apocalyptic message is conveyed not merely by her contemporary rhyming, but by means of the drum, which is thoroughly African in its significance. The rap continues: “The end is near for big and small/Mother Africa’s final call because—[and male vocals chime in with the rap’s refrain] slavery’s back in effect.” This is the closing moment of “The Final Solution”: Sister Souljah stands alone, unarmed. Arms folded in defiance, she faces a squad of riot police (their guns poised in her direction) who stare blankly through her. Her rap concluded (and with both the male-voiced refrain “slavery’s back in effect” and a sample of Chuck D.’s “refuse to lose” repeated over this image), Souljah’s inspirational presence miraculously summons a small group of black male insurgents who unexpectedly overtake the police from the rear. The final shot is a close-up of Souljah, still defiant and unmoved by massive military intimidation. Already given “Mother Africa’s final call,” she is silent. “Sister Souljah,” as the voice and image of powerful black womanhood in nation-conscious rap, is frozen as the sign “Mother Africa.” As Mother Africa in the music video’s final scene, Sister Souljah not only inspires black men to another “final solution” (e.g., undermining white supremacy through an armed insurrection against the repressive force of the U.S. nation’s military apparatus). She also illustrates, unwittingly, the limitations placed on women’s agency by a masculine discourse of nation that exploits the category of “woman” as sign for the motherland.60

 The tendency to objectify the black woman as the sign “Mother Africa” is fully entrenched in Afrocentric hip hop nationalism. This objectification is a consequence of the Afrocentric interest in fabricating ancient Egypt as a mythical homeland for the black nation to come. Black woman rapper Isis, a member of the Afrocentric hip hop group X-Clan, functions as the sign “Africa” within nationalist rap. According to Frances Cress Welsing,61 in ancient Egyptian mythology, Isis is the goddess of fertility, and second only to her brother/husband, the god Osiris, in status. One myth tells of the murder and dismemberment of Osiris, Isis’s discovery of the crime, her recovery of the
pieces of his body, and, finally, her successful effort to restore not only his existence, but his supreme power as “Lord of the perfect Black.” As the wife of Osiris and the mother of Horus, Isis is worshiped as the goddess of fertility and the mother of Africa.

Not surprisingly, within the Afrocentric hip hop group X-Clan, rapper Isis takes on the role of her mythological namesake. For example, in Isis’s debut music video, “The Power of Myself Is Moving,” 62 she plays the part of fertility goddess along the Nile: “I am a self coming forth/A creature bearing life, a renaissance, a rebirth.” Throughout the song, Isis speaks primarily about “love” and “blackness,” “birth” and the “motherland.” Her visual and audio narrative are conspicuously framed by Professor X’s righteous rapping. While he opens the rap by claiming that “We, who write . . . summons the goddess Isis,” he closes the song with his recitation of X-Clan’s trademark proselytizing as Isis silently crosses her arms. This representation of the venerated black woman within Afrocentric hip hop nationalism strongly suggests that black men control black women’s messages by framing their voices and images. Professor X, speaking in an interview on X-Clan’s production of solo albums for two of its female members (Queen Mother Rage as well as Isis) states: “It’s important that [X-Clan’s] point of view can be expressed in different tones and in different ways, but all with the same message, but with different angles.” 63 The key is that the message remains the same despite the potentially conflicting sexual interests of different Afrocentric rappers.

Afrocentric hip hop nationalism tends to limit the range of representations of black women to a set of rigidly coded sexist oppositions. Black women are either good or bad, mothers or whores, wives or gold-digging lovers. Poor Righteous Teachers, another Afrocentric rap group, use this binary logic in their veneration of the ideal African woman on their music video titled “Shakiyla.” 64 The video opens with the image of an uppity black woman, dressed in a business suit, who deliberately ignores the friendly advance of two black men on the street. As this image dissolves, rapper Wise Intelligent of Poor Righteous Teachers states: “This is not a love ballad.” Instead, he raps, “I’ve come to pay tribute to Shakiyla,” who is described as “the mother of civilization” and “the black woman.” As the chorus repeats the lyrics “The black queen is mine,” a map of Africa is superimposed on the screen implying not only the possession but also the objectification of Shakiyla, the revered queen of the black nation, as the sign “Africa.” Isis is mapped with a similar effect on X-Clan’s music video “Head the Word of a Brother.” 65 On the screen, her primary function is to silently strike a Cleopatra pose in front of a painting of Egyptian monuments (the pyramids and the sphinx). The queen of the Nile, X-Clan’s Isis is exploited at this moment as the sign “Egypt.” Isis and Shakiyla thus function as the black woman who stands in for a romanticized notion of Africa as the nurturing mother of all prior civilizations and as the inspirational
source for the emerging black nation. However, by representing the black woman in this way, Afrocentric rap affirms her objectification while constraining the possibility for black women’s autonomy and agency.

**The Place of Afrocentric Hip Hop Nationalism**

Many hip hop nationalists labor under a version of the ensign “Afrocentricity.” According to its leading scholarly proponent, Molefi Kete Asante, an Afrocentric perspective “means, literally, placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior.” Asante, like Afrocentric hip hop nationalists, maintains that members of the African diaspora can never reach their full potential as individuals or as a group unless they “place Africans and the interest of Africa at the center of [their] approach to problem solving.” Afrocentricity attempts to reverse a history of Western economic dependency and cultural imperialism by placing a distinctively African value system—found in “deep [spiritual and psychological] structures” of the African being—at the center of the black American worldview. Asante goes to great lengths to avoid making arguments for racial difference that are rooted in biological essentialism, but many black nationalists, including some of those of the hip hop variety, do not. Afrocentric rapper Wise Intelligent, for example, remarks: “You have to understand that the potency of melanin in the black man makes him naturally rhythmic. . . . This is our blood.”

All historical thinking, to a large extent, is a remembering of the past in terms of the present. As a popular culture form, rap music—and hip hop nationalism in specific—is a powerful vehicle which allows today’s black youth to gain a better understanding of their heritage and their present identities when official channels of remembering and identity formation continually fail to meet their needs. Thus I am less concerned with the relative “truth” of hip hop nationalism’s historical claims for their Afrocentric identity than with the productive and contradictory logic within which this revision of the past takes place. Afrocentric nationalism places Africa at the core of its value system by attempting to find—through spiritual and psychological transcendence—freedom from Western oppression. On their rap “Grand Verbalizer, What Time Is It?” X-Clan focuses much less on temporality than on imagining a transcendent origin for the black nation. The rap immediately transports the listener to an unmistakable place: “African, very African/Come and step in Brother’s temple and see what’s happenin’.” At the conclusion of X-Clan’s music video “Funkin’ Lesson,” the viewer is shown a map of the Atlantic. A pink Cadillac is superimposed on the map, and a line is drawn which begins in New York City and ends in Africa. As Professor X stated in an interview, the pink Caddy is a “time-traveling machine,” one which presumably links black
Americans with Africa. It is also a machine for rewriting the history of Western and non-Western civilization at a moment of world-historical transition.

In “Funkin’ Lesson,” contemporary black Americans are transported back-to-Africa “at the crossroads”—as much in spirit as in reality, not on Garvey’s Black Star Line but while driving on Aretha Franklin’s funky “freeway of love.” The ’59 Caddy is one of X-Clan’s trademarks: a complex symbol of both black consumer culture in the U.S. (“what Detroit Red went through to become Malcolm X”) and the dawning of the contemporary civil rights struggle (“[t]hat kind of attitude that had to come out of that era that led into the 60s”). This image is placed in tension with the group’s excessive and serious display of Afrocentric garb, such as black-leathered crowns, African hand-crafted staffs and heavy African jewelry, beads, chains, medallions, ankhs, and nose rings. As the Caddy makes its transcendent journey across the Atlantic and to the east, the viewer cannot help but notice its apparent final destination: North Africa or, perhaps, Mecca.

Rappers such as X-Clan and Lakim Shabazz are among a growing handful of hip hop nationalists who are committed to, in one form or another, a militant Afrocentric value system. Lakim, unlike X-Clan, is an active member of a Nation of Islam splinter sect called the Five Percent Nation of Islam, which includes Afrocentric hip hop nationalists such as Rakim (of Eric B. and Rakim), Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, Movement Ex, and King Sun. The Five Percent Nation’s belief system is similar to that of the NOI in that Five Percenters essentially follow the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Although Lakim goes so far as to insist that “[t]he only difference between the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation is that they’re always dressed nicely with a suit and tie and we figure you can wear anything,” other Five Percenters might disagree. In fact, the Five Percent Nation follows the rival teachings of Clarence 13X, who claimed in the 1960s that God was to be found not in some external or monolithic force (Allah) but within the Asiatic black man himself. Five Percenters thus believe themselves to be “the poor righteous teachers”: that is, those who know that the “original Black Man” is God. Another distinction between the NOI and the Five Percenters is that the latter insist that any corrupt person—black as well as white—is the “devil.” Yet, as a publicized roundtable discussion among Five Percenters revealed, there is less than a consensus among them about the differences between their group and the NOI.

Despite the philosophical and religious differences between Five Percenters and other Black Muslims in America, Louis Farrakhan, the present head of the NOI, is the closest the Five Percenters have to a spiritual leader. Perhaps most important is the appropriation by Five Percenters, in their music and videos, of the NOI’s declaration of Islamic origins for members of the African diaspora presently residing in the United States. According to the teachings of Elijah
Muhammad, who founded the Nation of Islam sixty years ago, blacks in North America are the “original people” and were originally from the Holy City of Mecca. They are members of the lost tribe of Shabazz. NOI doctrine states that the black man must strive to regain his original religion (Islam), language (Arabic), and culture (astronomy and mathematics).

Afrocentric hip hoppers such as X-Clan, in an effort to create a vital counternationalism, look “to the east, backwards” for a collective racial identity. Their gaze is, like the NOI’s, based on a combination of mythical and historical revisionings of the origins of Western civilization. In the interest of locating a more original and even superior civilization that can be attributed to the ancestors of Africans and the African diaspora, hip hop nationalists focus on ancient Egypt. For this and other reasons, they rarely show an interest in exploring the language or customs of precolonial African sub-Saharan empires or tribals. The important exception to this rule is the widespread appropriation of West African drumming in rap music. In X-Clan’s “Funkin’ Lesson” video, for example, we observe tribal drummers and dancers in an open field while Brother J. raps “African, call it black man . . . ” to the sampled screams of James Brown over African drum beats. In an interview, Professor X states the importance of drumming to nation-conscious rap in racially essentialist terms: “we found that coming back to the drum was the most important move that a black man can make. . . . Because, via the drum it connects our African genes whether we are conscious of our connections or not. It is natural . . . that we talk through the drum.”

While X-Clan takes a symbolic journey to North Africa, Lakim Shabazz convinced his small and independent record label to actually send him there (specifically, to Cairo, Al Ugsur, and Aswan) to shoot “The Lost Tribe of Shabazz” video from his 1989 debut album, Pure Righteousness. In the resulting music video, Lakim is filmed making his pilgrimage through the Islamic world. With the pyramids along the Nile as his backdrop, Lakim raps both Five Percent lessons concerning knowledge, wisdom, and understanding and his refrain—“Our people will survive America”—over Mark “The 45 King” beats. Of his journey to the Islamic world, Lakim states: “I always wanted to go to the Motherland. I couldn’t think of a more righteous place to make my video than in Egypt . . . . I wanted to show that our people were the builders of the pyramids, that our people invented science and mathematics.” On a cut from To the East, Blackwards, X-Clan’s Professor X raps from an Afrocentric perspective: “You see, we’ve been here before/The background then, the pyramids/The background now, the Statue of Liberty.”

“Afrocentricity,” according to Asante, “reorganizes our frame of reference so that we become the center of analysis and synthesis. . . . Indeed, this movement recaptures the collective will responsible for ancient Egypt and Nubia.” Afrocentric hip hop nationalists valorize the great ancient civiliza-
tions of North Africa as both the origin of all Western civilization and the inspirational glue that binds the diverse black American community together. Recent non-Afrocentric scholarship supports the Afrocentric claim of Egypt as an effaced source of Western civilization. This effacement was a result of two centuries of European scholars’ systematic erasure of the influence of ancient Egypt on Greece. Afrocentric hip hop nationalists counter this historical erasure by laying claim to the artifacts of ancient Egypt as a marker of the cultural superiority of precolonial Africans relative to Europe during the same period. X-Clan raps: “I am an African, I don’t wear Greek/Must I be reminded of a legendary thief?/Who tried to make Greece in comparison to Egypt/But they got gypped ’cause their mind’s not equipped.” In X-Clan’s music video “Head the Word of a Brother,” as Brother J. raps “Jealous of what are we/Becomes tendency for their thievery,” the busts of the Greek philosophers Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates are flashed upon the television screen only to be quickly dismissed. Wise Intelligent explains: “We’re teaching black youth that their history goes beyond slavery . . . beyond Africa. Black people are the mothers and fathers of the highest forms of civilization ever built on this planet . . . Plato, Socrates, and so forth, they learned from black masters of Egypt.”

The contemporary deployment of the word “civilization” extends only as far back as the late eighteenth century. As a modern concept, civilization comes to be associated with developments in Europe since the Enlightenment, including the birth of modern forms of nationalism and imperialism. Throughout the nineteenth century, European “civilization” was rigidly contrasted with the “savagery” of non-Western cultures (including those found throughout Africa). For instance, when, in 1871, Karl Mauch came across the ruins of an ancient civilization in Zimbabwe, no European believed that they had been built by sub-Saharan Africans. Instead, Europeans advanced the idea that this was King Solomon’s Golden Ophir—ruins only attributable to the creative genius of a superior race. It was not until 1906 that archaeologists began the slow process of overturning the myth of “King Solomon’s Mines.” The point is that the civilizing mission of Europe could only see the African subcontinent as Other; Europe had to invent “savage” Africa to rationalize colonization.

Afrocentric hip hop nationalists contest the Western notion that precolonial Africa was barbaric. They make ancient Africa civilized by uncovering incontrovertible evidence for a thriving Egyptian empire that preexisted Greece. Yet this important assertion is limited in its political scope inasmuch as it only provides a reversal—and not a displacement—of the modern opposition between civilization and savagery. In order to challenge the binary logic of the civilized/barbaric opposition, Afrocentric rappers would do well to turn their gaze from Egypt and toward the largely ignored, precolonial, African sub-Sahara. Prior to the fateful appearance of the Portuguese on the western coast of Africa
in the mid-fifteenth century, three great African empires thrived to the south of the Sahara. These empires, based in Ghana (700–1200), Mali (1200–1500), and Songhai (1350–1600), provide a possible way for black militants to explode the European concept of civilization without reproducing its logic.

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

Women’s Time: On the Front Line

Within Afrocentric hip hop nationalism, a rapper such as Isis is assigned the role of black woman to the extent that she passively mirrors the monuments of Egypt that signify the glories of an African empire. Thus in X-Clan’s “Funkin’ Lesson” video, Isis silently stands in front of a mural of pyramids and the sphinx as Brother J. raps over the beat. In a strikingly different pose, rapper Queen Latifah, in her 1989 music video debut “Ladies First,” stands over and above a map of southern Africa. Instead of becoming a sign for ancient empire, Latifah exploits the language of black nationalism in order to engage contemporary struggles in and around South Africa. Unlike Isis, whose voice is authoritatively framed by Professor X’s rapping, Latifah’s “Ladies First” is simultaneously woman-centered and pro-black, feminist and Afrocentric. And, unlike Sister Souljah, whose allegiance is primarily to the male leadership of the NOI and PE, Latifah creates alliances which are less dependent on traditional hierarchies imposed by black nationalism. While Latifah is a member of an Afrocentric rap collective called the Native Tongues, she also has membership in other types of hip hop posses, such as the Breakfast Club and the Flavor Unit. Even when the Native Tongues (which consists of rap groups such as De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, and Jungle Brothers, among others) speak the language of black nationalism, it is hardly militant or masculinist, and always playful. The fact that Latifah maintains her status as a solo artist allows her
both real and symbolic autonomy that sets her apart from most other women rappers within the hip hop nation. Paradoxically, this affords Latifah a heightened capacity for collaborative work with other rap artists of varying backgrounds. Latifah’s Afrocentric expression is remarkable not only because it is devoid of the concomitant sexism of nationalism, but because it challenges the masculinist logic of nation as well.

In her commentary on an interview conducted with the queen of the hip hop nation, Tricia Rose suggests that Latifah is “uncomfortable with the term ‘feminist.’” Latifah’s pro-black woman stance that both refuses the category of white feminism and is energized by sixties-inspired black nationalism can be explained, I believe, by the concept of the organic cultural intellectual. Black women rappers, within and outside of nationalism, are gendered agents of social struggle, but rarely through a public embrace of a feminist identity. Instead, their political agency, as organically based women rappers, is grounded in their ability to articulate and elaborate upon competing interests between men and women within the black community. A rap video such as “Ladies First” illustrates Latifah extracting (what Gramsci would call) a kernel of “good sense” embedded in popular or “common-sense” notions of a black woman’s place within the hip hop nation. Latifah explains her use of newsreel footage of black women fighting alongside men in national liberation struggles in the video as follows: “I wanted to show the strength of black women in history. Strong black women... Sisters have been in the midst of these things for a long time, but we just don’t get to see it that much.”

The music video for “Ladies First” opens by sampling snapshots of women of color who were also activists—such as Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Winnie Mandela—but who have, until recently, been marginalized in or even censored from the official memories of black liberation struggles. The camera pans to Latifah at her command post in a darkly lit war room with her dancers, the Safari Sisters, flanking her. Latifah dons commando military garb while she smashes pawn statues of corporate multinational businessmen and replaces them with figures of black power fists on a map of southern Africa. The fact that Latifah not only inhabits but is also the commander of the war room symbolizes her leadership role within the imaginary nation. Latifah, and all the “ladies” of the hip hop nation, are involved in the nationalist liberation struggle against oppressive, white regimes. As a member of the African diaspora, Latifah’s nationalism is based not on a romantic return to an archaic past but on her engagement with contemporary forms of racism. “Ladies First” suggests the reciprocal relationship between black liberation struggles at home and abroad over the last thirty years. Her strategic use of a black power sign system, for example, makes relevant sixties-inspired black nationalism for the continuing struggles in countries such as South Africa (where self-determination is still denied to the majority population) while reminding her
audience of the inspiration provided by Third World national liberation movements to black power militants during the sixties.

Over a visual representation of Latifah strategizing in the war room, she boasts: “A woman can bear you, break you, take you/Now it’s time to rhyme/Can you relate to/A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream. . . . ladies first yes? Yes!” The video moves back and forth from the war room scene to Latifah singing with other women rappers, particularly Monie Love. The fact that Latifah is simultaneously woman-identified and a leader in the struggle for racial justice explodes the masculinist lure of black nationalism. As the self-proclaimed “Queen of royal badness,” she is a far cry from the Nubian princess which is X-Clan’s Isis. Sister Souljah, in a lecture delivered at Howard University in 1991, called for “a new definition of African womanhood.”

Queen Latifah, more than any other rap artist, has begun to make the journey along a seldom traveled road, remapping the terrain of sexual politics for women of the hip hop nation and the African diaspora. Even when waxing maternal on a cut such as “Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children,” Latifah is capable of transforming rigidly domestic notions of womanhood within a nationalist discourse by de-essentializing motherhood: “So check out the sounds of Mama Zulu/As I relay the story I told/If you’re wondering why I got kids so big/They weren’t born from the body/They were born from the soul.”

While Latifah’s name is Arabic for “delicate and sensitive,” her rhymes and baselines are as forceful, urgent, and danceable as anything offered by her male compatriots. On “Latifah’s Law,” she gives new meaning to Marcus Garvey’s UNIA call by rhyming: “One Tribe, One God, One Destiny/ . . . You know what the plan is to be/I order you to dance for me.” Or, she displays a tough and regal tone on “Ladies First”: “Strong, stepping, strutting, moving on/Rhyming, cutting but not forgetting/We are the ones to give birth/To the new generation of prophets/Cause it’s ladies first.” Two decades ago anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kerman made intelligible to scholars the persistent misconceptions concerning black women’s participation in Afro-American expressive forms. Her ethnographic studies revealed that cultural practices within the black community, such as signifying and playing the dozens, were not fundamentally male. By insisting on the vitality of black women’s agency in the production of cultural politics, Queen Latifah restates this point to the hip hop nation.

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

Like many other nation-conscious rappers, Latifah’s performance testifies
to the vital work being done by community-based intellectual-musicians
within rap music today. Hip hop nationalists are particularly skillful in gener-
ating fresh understandings of the ill-mapped history of racism at home and
abroad while challenging the claims of the New World Order. As organic cul-
tural intellectuals, they can transform “common-sense” knowledge of oppres-
sion into a new critical awareness that is attentive not only to racial but also to
class and sexual contradictions.

Hip hop nationalism is particularly adept at interpreting the past in a man-
ner that develops black consciousness about alternatives to the hegemony of
U.S. nationalism. Yet, for black nationalism to be a sustained vehicle of social
change, its conservative tendencies need to be addressed and transformed. The
point I am making is that within nation-conscious rap “a certain sort of regres-
sion” (as Nairn puts it) that manifests itself in a nostalgia for ancient Egypt or
a romanticization of sixties black power, is not the only available form for
reimagining the time and place of a new black militancy. Rather, as Ice Cube’s
lineage of “kings” demonstrates, the most effective nationalist rappers have a
consciousness of the present which blasts apart the stale historical contin-
um. In nineties-based militant rap, the apocalyptic noise of the racial crisis
in America shatters a mythic past of the nation.

Notes

For their comments, criticisms, and encouragement on earlier versions of this paper, I am
indebted to Tricia Rose and Jenny Sharpe.

1. This exchange between Ice Cube and the LAPD provides an interlude between “My
Summer Vacation” and “Steady Mobbin’” on Death Certificate (Priority Records, 1991).
2. Ice Cube composed “—— the Police” with M.C. Ren before leaving the rap group
NWA; it was recorded on NWA’s album Straight Outta Compton (Priority Records, 1988).
partly on the work of Nairn, Benedict Anderson makes a similar point: “If nation-states are
widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political
expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and . . . glide into a limitless future.”
See Anderson’s Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of National-
4. It should be noted that within rap culture and hip hop culture there exist a number of
distinct agendas, some intersecting and many which have little or nothing in common with
nationalist politics of any sort.
5. The term “hip hop nation” was first used in print as the title of a Village Voice special
section on this topic from 19 January 1988. More recently, the music industry’s weekly
publication, Billboard, titled its 23 November 1991 cover story “State of Rap: Triumph of
the Hip-Hop Nation.” The use of the phrase “hip hop nation” is now commonplace in dis-
cussions of rap music, and almost always refers to the community of hip hoppers regardless
of their relationship to the legacy of black nationalism in America. My usage of the term is
more exclusive to the degree that I focus on the various forms that nationalism takes within
hip hop culture.
8. See Raymond Williams’s etymology for “civilization” in Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, 2d ed. (London: Flamingo, 1983), 57–60.
12. The Nation of Islam has returned the favor to the hip hop nation by running a regular column, titled “Muhammad Inside Music,” in its organ, The Final Call, with frequent analyses of rap music.
17. Ibid., 328, 330.
21. Gil Scott-Heron, The Revolution Will Not Be Televised (Flying Dutchman Records, 1974). In a brief interview in Source 32 (May 1992), 59, Gil Scott-Heron betrays his hostility to rap music by suggesting that it is too commercialized and that rappers are not musicians because they rely on sampling techniques rather than playing instruments.
29. Frank Owen, “Public Service,” Spin 5 (March 1990), 57. More recently, responding to a question from Robert Christgau, Chuck D. insisted that “because business is family . . . [black] self-sufficiency is the best program.” See Robert Christgau and Greg Tate, “Chuck D. All Over the Map,” Village Voice Rock & Roll Quarterly (Fall 1991), 16.
36. The ideological distance between the Left Internationalism of the Black Panthers and black nationalism was tragically illustrated in the alleged murders in southern California of four Panthers by members of Ron Karenga’s rival black nationalist US organization.
43. Public Enemy, “Louder Than a Bomb” and “Terminator X to the Edge of Panic,” It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back.
46. Nation Conscious Rap, 354.
48. Sonia Sanchez, in an interview with Claudia Tate, states: “In ‘Sister Son’ji’ I portray a woman . . . [who] ages on stage, but her spirit is ageless. She is Harriet Tubman, a woman.” See Black Women Writers at Work, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983), 148.
50. Ibid., 102.
    (Epic Records, 1992).
55. Ibid., 247.
60. This formulation is drawn partly from Elizabeth Cowie’s “Woman as Sign,” m/f 1 (1978), 49–63.
63. Nation Conscious Rap, 194.
67. Nation Conscious Rap, 74. It is interesting to note that Asante, despite his vigilance against essentialism in describing the relation between an Afrocentric perspective and the people of the African diaspora, nevertheless betrays this tendency in the “naturalizing” analogies upon which he relies. In his book Afrocentricity, rev. ed. (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1988), 43, Asante explains that, for people of African descent, embracing an Afrocentric spirituality “is like a fish swimming in water, it cannot escape the water. Its choice is whether to swim or not, that is, to activate. There is nothing the fish can do about the existence [and biological necessity?] of the water.”
69. X-Clan, “Funkin’ Lesson,” To the East, Blackwards.
70. Professor X, quoted in an interview with Louis Romain; see “Roots and Boots,” Source 32 (May 1992), 35.
71. Ibid.
72. While I include rappers with Islamic beliefs as part of the Afrocentric tendency in hip hop nationalism, Islam lies outside the concept of Afrocentricity according to Asante’s definition. In the opening pages of his book Afrocentricity, Asante argues that an Islamic belief system goes against the Afrocentric idea because the former is based on an Arab (as opposed to an African) heritage. Islamic religion is thus, like European Christianity, a non-African spiritual practice.
73. Lakim Shabazz, quoted in an interview with Charlie Ahearn; see “The Five Percent Solution,” Spin 6 (February 1991), 76.
74. The lack of consensus among Five Percenters about what it means to be a member of the Five Percent Nation is revealed in a 1991 “Islamic Summit” sponsored by the hip hop magazine, Source. The transcript of the roundtable discussion, put together by Harry Allen, was later printed under the title “Righteous Indignation,” Source 19 (March/April 1991), 48–53.
75. Elijah Muhammad, Message to the Black Man (Chicago: Muhammad’s Temple No. 2, 1965), 31–32.
76. Nation Conscious Rap, 191.
80. Asante, Afrocentricity, 39.
82. X-Clan, “In the Ways of the Scales,” To the East, Blackwards.
83. Nation Conscious Rap, 68.
87. Tricia Rose, “Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile,” Camera Obscura 23 (May 1990), 127. For a discussion of African-American women scholars who have attempted to combine black nationalism and feminism, see E. Frances White, “Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse, and African-American Nationalism,” Journal of Women’s History 2 (Spring 1990), 90–94.
88. It should be noted that most commercially successful, pro-women, female rappe—
such as Salt 'N' Pepa and MC Lyte—tend to avoid the language of black nationalism.

89. Queen Latifah, quoted in an interview with Tricia Rose; see “Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile,” 123.

90. Queen Latifah, “Ladies First,” All Hail the Queen (Tommy Boy Records, 1989).

91. Nation Conscious Rap, 257.

92. Queen Latifah, “Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children,” All Hail the Queen.

93. Queen Latifah, quoted in an interview with Tricia Rose; see “One Queen, One Tribe, One Destiny,” Village Voice Rock & Roll Quarterly (Spring 1990), 19.

94. Queen Latifah, “Latifah’s Law,” All Hail the Queen.


96. My formulation is inspired by the antihistoricist thinking of Walter Benjamin. See, for example, Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (in Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken, 1969], 261) where he states: “The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action.”