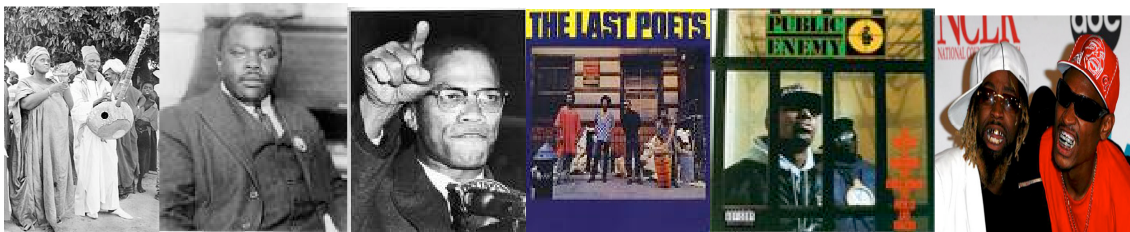

<u>Potently Sterilized: The Evolution of the Black Arts Aesthetic in Hip-Hop Culture</u>

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Introduction

During the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, a group of politically aware and community minded activist artists posited a definition of what they termed the "Black aesthetic." This aesthetic was the foundation of their Black Arts Movement (BAM). The soul of the aesthetic was based in the self-representation of the beauty and truths of Black society, artistic productive autonomy, and an elevation of Black consciousness that implored Black people toward self-determination and collective change. It is often described as the antithesis of the individualist, Western-European aesthetic that advocates "art for art's sake." Furthermore according to Call and Response, in the Afterword of Black Fire, an anthology of the period, Larry Neal declared, "the artist and the activist are one." In his seminal essay, "*The Black Arts Movement,"* Neal asserted that the artist is responsible to his/her people and his/her community and must relinquish the sense of Americanized (white) ideas of the individual experience. These concepts were not new at the time of the BAM, they had only been reintroduced, explicitly defined and formulated to adapt to the demoralized experience of African descendants in the Americas.

In fact, the roots of the Black arts aesthetic can be traced from the West African griot tradition across the Atlantic to the plantations of the Americas.[1] Enslaved Africans did whatever they could to preserve valuable components of their homeland. Music, storytelling and proverbs were among these treasures.

The guiding principles of this art, and one of main reasons it has been preserved, is its function and purpose in the history of West African cultures. The orality of the art

[1] Griots are professional musician/storytellers present in many West African societies (i.e. Ghana, Senegal, the Gambia, Mali) that use their art to preserve the rich history heritage and culture of their community.

has ensured that, at least in form, it will be passed through generations. This discussion will elucidate such a claim.

Enslaved and freed Africans waged an ideological war on slavery in the Americas with protest songs and poems. In the early Twentieth Century Marcus Garvey gravitated towards the function of music and the spoken word and utilized these tools to fuel and propagandize his movement for black liberation. He is given a great deal of recognition for his contribution to the ideologies of the Black Power Movement and BAM artists. Author and leading Garvey scholar Tony Martin has done extensive work on this area of Garvey's life and will be used accordingly to aid this discussion. In Literary Garveyism Martin asserts:

> …[T]he generation of the 1960's found a fitting precursor to its own actions. Garvey, too, had tried to mobilize the Black World's resources in its own behalf. Garvey, too, had preached race pride, community control, self-reliance and in a word, Black nationalism. And Garvey had done so with unparalleled success. The Black Arts Movement, therefore, looked to Garvey for political inspiration.

Essentially, Garvey is a primary forbearer of what the BAM codified four decades later. Moreover, the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Five Percent Nation, both carriers of the Black aesthetic principles, came under Garvey's influence and through this lineage would in turn inform the aesthetics of the hip-hop nation[2].

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[2] 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….Hip hop nationalism, like [B]lack nationalism, generally, provides an imaginative map and inspirational territory for African-Americans who wish both to end the institutional legacy of slavery and to create self-sufficient, organically based organizations such as black businesses and Afro-centric school curriculums. Decker, Jeffrey Louis. "*The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism"* Social Text, No. 34. (1993), pp. 53-84.

In addition, Blues and Jazz exploded and flew on the wings of these same aesthetic traditions. By the1960s, with intelligence, precision and rage, black artists attempted to explicitly define the black arts aesthetic and became a major force of struggle in the Black Power Movement. In turn, this legacy would give rise to beacons of hip-hop culture, a group of young leaders that had access to an ancient tradition they did not fully understand.

As hip-hop culture developed it quickly became the resounding voice of youth of African descent. It had the power to overwhelmingly influence generations[3]. In the beginning the culture was more about youth unity, healthy skills competition with the four elements (DJ-ing, Emceeing, Breakin' and Graffiti) and sheer fun; however, because of its apparent connection to its fore-parents, hip-hop culture became another conduit for the Black arts aesthetic tradition. Some artists dedicated their entire body of work to these principles. Afrika Bambaata, considered a "Godfather" of hip-hop culture, established a whole movement based on the Black aesthetic conventions. Others acknowledged them in their music, but maintained a more neutral identity. There were also those who prided themselves on being the antithesis of the Black aesthetic. Whatever the case, the obvious power of hip-hop culture combined with the slightest presence of the Black arts aesthetic posed a political threat to American interests as Garvey and BAM artists had done.

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[3] Whereas previously the voices of young Blacks have been locked out of the global age's public square, the mainstreaming of rap music now gave Black youth more visibility and a broader platform than we had ever enjoyed before. At the same time, it gave young blacks across the country who identified with it and were informed by it a medium through which to share a national culture. In the process, rap artists became the dominant public voice of this generation.
Kitwana, Bakari. The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture .1st ed.Basic Books, New York, 2002. p10

As a result, the new youth movement was culturally and politically neutralized, but exploited for corporate financial gain. Niggaz Wit Attitudes (N.W.A), a group given the abhorrent distinction of having established 'gangsta' rap in hip-hop culture, provides and poignant case study to this effect. **In essence, as hip-hop was commodified, the once present cultural tenets of the Black arts aesthetic evolved to near absence in hip-hop culture. I will discuss the cultural forbearers of hip-hop and the Black arts aesthetic evolution in hip-hop culture.**

Garvey and the Black Arts Aesthetic: Art as a Tool of Black Liberation

In the case of traditional West African cultures, explicitly defining the black arts aesthetic was irrelevant and unnecessary. The societal systems consistently acknowledged the cultural values of the people; however, some African descendants severed from their original cultures deemed it imperative to define the world in their own terms with images that affirmed their existence. Given the second-class, dehumanizing conditions of African people across the globe at the turn of the Twentieth Century, Marcus Garvey felt that art, among other things, had to serve the cause of fueling Black liberation. Accordingly, as a dominant component of his influential United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Garvey adopted the Black arts aesthetic legacy with fierce determination.

Garvey's UNIA reached into every part of the world where Black people lived, propelling this movement in dynamic fashion. A strong advocate of nationhood and cultural propaganda, Garvey employed several means of disseminating his message to his followers. One of the most influential instruments of propaganda was Garvey's use of potent art forms in capturing the imagination of his people and igniting the discourse

toward social and political action. Understanding functional art as a core component of African cultures, Garvey utilized the arts as a valuable tool to reach his people. Regina Jennings alludes to this in her Malcom X and the Poetics of Haki Madhubuti:

> The motivation of race love inspired Marcus Garvey to write poetry in order to instruct, direct, guide, and transform "the Negro" into a complete human being capable of leading his people to greatness…[Writing] was a vehicle to leave a lyrical and instructional legacy. Through poetry, readers and listeners could recall or learn his philosophy, thoughts and most importantly his practice. Garvey wanted his words to leap off the page and into the Negro psychology (123-4)

In his "*Africa for the Africans*", he calls for people of the African Diaspora to reclaim what is theirs as other people of the world have and to fight for the right to govern themselves and their ancestral homeland:

> Say! Africa for the Africans,
> Like America for the Americans:
> This the rallying cry for a nation,
> Be it in peace or revolution.
>
> Blacks are men, no longer cringing fools;
> They demand a place, not like weak tools;
> But among the world of nations great
> They demand a free self-governing state…
>
> …Cry it loud, and shout it Ion' hurrah!
> Time has changed, so hail! New Africa!
> We are now awakened, rights to see:
> We shall fight for dearest liberty.

Moreover, it was no secret to those of Garvey's time that he did not consider himself a "poet laureate" by any stretch of the imagination. Many of his followers loved his pieces and committed favorites to memory. Put simply, he harnessed a powerful tool and used its reach to successfully propagate his philosophies. In a lesser-known work of Garvey's poetry, The Poetical Works of Marcus Garvey, Tony Martin writes:

> To say that Garvey's poetry was without significant literary merit is not to say anything of which Garvey himself was unaware. From a purely

> literary standpoint, he inspired better poetry that he himself produced. He even expressed doubt as to whether his poetry efforts actually measured up to real poetry. Even so, however, he could still justify the attempt, for he saw his verse as an important supplementary vehicle for propagating his ideas. And these are the ideas upon which the world's greatest Pan-African movement was built (vii).

Garvey was very clear about the role that art was to play in this movement. Though he was a prolific writer, he sought first to define an aesthetic that set the terms of expression for African people (this aesthetic would reemerge during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's and will be fully addressed later in this discussion). For Garvey, the international political climate and the conditions of his people precisely dictated the function of art. Furthermore, in his *"Pan-African Cultural Movements: From Baraka to Karenga*," an intense look at the interface between Pan-African politics and literature, Nagueyalti Warren remarks, "For Garvey, art…had to serve a political function. Garvey articulated a philosophy that became known as the Black Aesthetic in the 1960s. In "African Fundamentalism," Garvey wrote: 'We must inspire a literature and promulgate a doctrine of our own, without any apologies to the powers that be. This right is ours and God's (20).'" His understanding and subsequent organization of these ideas into an internationally circulated publication, *The Negro World*, was arguably the source of his greatest impact, one that has yet to be rivaled. Martin alludes to this fact:

> There exists no greater demonstration of the massive interest in poetry of which Black Communities are capable, than that to be found within the pages of the *Negro World*. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960's certainly rivals the poetic interest of the Garvey heyday. But in one crucial area at least, the Garvey era clearly outdistanced the 1960s. For the poetical outpourings of the *Negro World* were thoroughly international, to a degree unmatched by the Black Arts Movement (43).

Even with decline of the UNIA and his subsequent deportation, Garvey achieved immortality in the annals of revolutionary thought and action. His use of "art propaganda", among other means, as a galvanizing force to foster Black liberation allowed him to achieve an influence that birthed many ideological offspring. This progeny continued to forge a path toward the hip-hop nation.

The Black Arts Movement, Garvey and The Nation of Islam

The Civil Rights Movement that was firmly in place at the time of Malcolm X's ascent prided itself in the integrationist philosophies of Frederick Douglass and W.E. B. DuBois. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Roy Wilkins were among the movement's leadership and are seen as the ideological opponents of Black Nationalism. The inevitable dichotomy created by the proponents of civil rights is described by a term W.E. B. DuBois borrowed, ironically from European theorists Goethe and Emerson, to refer to a critical part of the Black experience: "double-consciousness."[4] This term refers to, as DuBois reflected in Souls of Black Folk, "this sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others" and fighting for liberation with the limits set by the oppressor. It was the antithesis of Garvey and Malcolm's view. Malcolm inherited Garvey's mantle and led the charge for a separate Black nation. Larry Neal, a prominent scholar on the Black Arts Movement, assists in placing Malcolm in context in Visions of a Liberated Future:

> Malcolm X whose father had been a Garveyite, was destined to confront the double consciousness of black America. But his confrontation would be a modern one, rooted in the teachings of the Nation of Islam and the realities of contemporary politics. That is to say, his ideas would be a synthesis of black nationalism's essential truths and as derived from Martin Delaney…Garvey, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Fanon and Richard Wright…He was the conscience of black America, setting out, like a warrior, to destroy the double consciousness (13).

[4] Lewis, David Levering. W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race 1868-1919. Henry Holt and Company. New York 1993. p 281-2.

For Malcolm the struggle for liberation, reflective of Garvey's doctrine, had to be about self-definition, self-determination and self-reliance in terms set by Black people. "Black Power" is the term coined to describe this proactive struggle. He heavily informed the political positions of the Black Panther Party and other prominent Black Nationalist leaders of the time ushering in the dawn of calls for Black Power. Of course, this stance was not reserved for political leadership and became a potent force in the Black artist community, hence giving rise to the BAM. Just as Garvey's political mantle came to adorn Brother Malcolm, so too did his philosophy of a Black arts aesthetic come to shape the BAM of the 1960s through Malcolm. Jennings explains that, "Malcolm understood that his art of oratory had to revolutionize his people from subservience to autonomy…For his art, Malcolm had…a functional objective. His art of oratory was to speak into existence transformation, renewal, and productivity (9)." Continuing her discussion of Malcolm's impact she adds, "X not only energized political activists. He also stimulated artists (12)." This was yet another cultural evolution that served to sculpt significant aspects of the hip-hop nation.

It was not until the period of the BAM that Black nationalist sentiments took center stage among many leading personalities of the Black arts community. Some have attempted to link the Harlem Renaissance in its entirety with this tradition in accordance with the chronology of Black artists in America; however, Neal writes, "The so-called Harlem Renaissance was for the most part, a fantasy-era for most black writers and their white friends. For the people of the community, it never even existed. It was a thing [a part] sic (15)." This reality is parallel to the opposing views of civil rights leaders and proponents of Black Power. In addition, though DuBois, a key theorist of the period

proclaimed that, "…all art is propaganda and must ever be," this was a notion based more in DuBois using art to humanize African people in the eyes of their white oppressors rather than the inherent power of functional art to mobilize African people toward liberation. In continuing the discussion about the Harlem Renaissance in context of Garvey, Martin offers, "The major figures of the Black Arts Movement, however, were inclined to espouse Black-nationalism and tried harder to mobilize the resources of their own community. It was during the period of the Black Arts Movement that the Black world rediscovered Marcus Garvey in a big way (1)." As much as Garvey's political ideals were rediscovered, so too was his understanding of the importance of developing, maintaining and using a black arts aesthetic to raise the consciousness of Black people toward changing their condition. In his *"Black Arts Movement and the Genealogy of Multimedia,"* Daniel Punday makes this connection in a discussion of Addison Gayle, a prominent Black Arts Movement figure:

> Gayle's aesthetic program claims that the role of black art is to define a community and to contribute to changes in the material conditions of that community.[11] The first step in achieving such changes is teaching members of the community themselves how to understand their own experiences and thus to fully recognize the forces that have shaped how they live (780).

The rebirth of the Garvey inspired Black arts aesthetic was very matter of fact and explicit in its implementation during the BAM. It was the perfect apparatus of expression for the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. Like Garvey, BAM practitioners used widely distributed publications to proliferate their platform of Black Power politics and aesthetics. <u>In The Black Arts Movements: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s</u>, James Edward Smethurst corroborates this claim:

> On a very basic level, the Black Arts largely cohered as a movement in its early days through the printed media…it was the journals, including the *Liberator*, the

> *Crusader*, *Freedomways, Negro Digest* (later *Black World*), *Black Dialogue*, *Soulbook*, *Black America* and [*Journal of Black Poetry*] that built the community in which an ideology of aesthetics were debated and a wide range of approaches to African American artistic styles and subject displayed (92).

Furthermore, Neal draws clear correlations between the aesthetics (Garvey and BAM) and gives a great deal of insight into their practical functions. As Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and various other activist organizations were hoisting the banner of Black Power, a segment of the Black artist community began unfurling these tenets artistically. Neal writes:

> The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to the concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept…The Black Arts and the Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics….the political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians and novelists. A main tenet of the Black power movement is the necessity for black people to define the world in their own terms. The black artist has made the same point in terms of aesthetics (62).

These ideas became the basis of creativity for artists like Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Sonia Sanchez, Askia Toure', Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets to name a few. These artists used their pens and their voices to fight the tyranny and oppression under which the white power structure held African descendents in America. Baraka captured this essence in his poem *Black Art*: "We want a Black poem. And a Black World./ Let the world be a Black Poem/And Let All Black People Speak This Poem Silently/or LOUD." In Rap and Street Consciousness, Cheryl Lynette Keyes further describes these artists' charge: " They espoused that art should be functional, community-based, and it should resonate with real-life black experience, establishing a mandate for what would soon be termed 'the new black

aesthetic (33).'" Malcolm X's death in 1965 accelerated this process. Neal reports, "After Malcolm's death, thousands of heretofore unorganized black students and activists became more radically politicized. The Black Arts Movement started in Harlem…Never before had black artists entered into a conscious spiritual union of goal and purpose (129)." The Last Poets screamed *"When the Revolution Comes"* and *"Niggas Are Scared of Revolution"* over African inspired percussion; Scott-Heron warned *"The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"* and along with their contemporaries, they were poised in the belief that their work could change the world.

BAM artists wanted to capture the imagination of their people in ways that would not only raise community consciousness, but also move them to action. Just as Garvey postulated forty years prior, art uses powerful media to relate to the people and helps create a participatory culture around the tenets of Black nationalism. Neal is precise in his discussion of these issues and narrows the discourse even closer to hip-hop, by advocating the importance of music.

Writing at the time of the BAM he contends, "Our literature, our art, and our music are moving closer to the forces motivating black America. You can hear it everywhere especially in the music, a surging new sound…We must take this sound, and make this energy meaningful to our people. Otherwise, it will have meant nothing, will have affected nothing. The force of what we have to say can only be realized in action (20)."

A few popular musicians of the time like James Brown (*I'm Black and I'm Proud, 1969*), The Temptations (*A Message from a Black Man, 1969*) Marvin Gaye (*What's*

Going On, 1971), The Isley Brothers (*Fight the Power, 1975*) and The O'Jays (*Give the People What They Want, 1975*) gave energy to these theories in their work while it was seemingly acceptable. As aforementioned, other musician/poets dedicated their entire life's work to Neal's premise. According to Smethurst, "Like Baraka, Toure' not only argued that militant black artists-activists should pay attention to the developments in rhythm and blues but that some R&B musicians, especially Curtis Mayfield, were in fact part of the Black Arts Movement (150)."

According to Joanne V. Gabbin in Furious Flowers, these artists waged "iconoclastic attacks on all aspects of white middle-class values…it is not surprising that they rejected unequivocally Western poetic conventions. Their poetic techniques emphasized free verse; typographical stylistics; irreverent, often scatological diction; and experimentation (xxiii)." In his *"Wise 1: WHY's (Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen) (Trad.),"* Amiri Baraka typifies this description:

> If you ever find
> yourself, some where
> lost and surrounded
> by enemies
> who won't let you
> speak in your own language
> who destroy your statues
> & instruments, who ban
> your oom boom ba boom
> then you are in trouble
> deep trouble
> they ban your
> oom boom ba boom
> you in deep deep
> trouble
>
> humph!
>
> probably take you several hundred years
> to get
> out!

In addition, music is a defining element of these artists work. Gabbin writes, "Their poems are evidence of full absorption of musical forms, such as blues and jazz; call and response features; improvised lines; the tone and rhythm and structure of folk form and the entire range of spoken virtuosity seen in the sermon, the rap, the dozens, signifying, toasts and folktales (xxvi)." Sonia Sanchez's *"the final solution"* lends yet another example of this rebellious rhythmic and musically inspired poetry (as it appears on the page):

america.

land of free/

dom

land of im/mi/grant

wh/ites

and slave/

blacks. there is

no real problem here.

we the

lead/ers of free

a/mer/ica

say. give us your

hungry/

illiterates/

criminals/

dropouts/

(in other words)

your blacks

and we will

let them fight

in vietnam

Moreover, as Keyes offers, it is important to note that, "Poetical skills were not judged on rhyme per se but rather on one's ability to articulate themes relevant to African-American life. Poetic lines were executed in rhythmic fashion using breath cadences, alliteration, repetition, and expletives for emphasis. Performances included shifts from casual talk to heightened speech and sometimes to musical chant. It is for these reasons that I define BAM poetry as song poems (33-4)." These artists sought to master the form and function of artistic revolution and created work that preserved an aesthetic rooted in the tradition and tumultuous history of their ancestry.

Though the BAM did not survive the 1970s, the will and cultural impact of the content and innovation of some of these artists contributed to the rise of another cultural phenomenon: hip-hop. Specifically, the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron are identified as critical components to the birth of hip-hop. In addition to fortifying the performance style of rhythmic poetry over sound-scapes of the Black experience, these artists often laced their work with various tenets of the Black arts aesthetic. While their poetry presentation certainly influenced the hip-hop nation, so too did their politics and as Keyes lucidly explains, "The Black Arts Movement…set the tone for hip-hop, a youth arts movement (38)."

Footsteps to Hip-Hop

"Conscious" is the name given to the strain of hip-hop that best reflects the BAM and hence reflects the Black arts aesthetic practiced in the griot traditions and espoused by Marcus Garvey. As Marvin Gladney asserts in, "*The Black Arts Movement and Hip Hop*," "The establishment of aesthetic values specific to Black art was the legacy of the

Black Arts Movement, and it has been passed on to hip-hop in a strikingly direct form (298)." In African Classical Music and the Griot Tradition, Tunde Jegede explicitly traces the lineage between hip-hop and the BAM ideology carried by The Last Poets. He writes, "The Last Poets functioned as initiators stirring public awareness and they were a symbol of the thriving culture of inner cities. At the street corner, with a small drum and the spoken word, they caught the heartbeat of the people and were heralded as the 'Godfathers of Rap' (21)." Eric Perkins enhances the credibility of this assertion in his well crafted Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture. He draws parallels in ways that are rather undeniable. Perkins relates:

> The message oriented poetry of the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron laid the groundwork for political rappers. The Last Poets set lyrics to the beat of the conga drum…to create a distinctive rap performance style that would have an almost infectious appeal for the masters of the old school and their successors…What makes The Last Poets' style so important to the emergence of rap music is its orality. The poetry's effectiveness comes through only when it is spoken, just like rap (4).

Though it is difficult to experience the full effect of their work less the music, the following example, from their 1970 *"Niggas are Scared of Revolution,"* elucidates the Last Poets connection to conscious hip-hop:

> Niggas tell you they're ready to be liberated
> But when you say 'Let's go take our liberation'
> Niggas reply: 'I was just playin'
> Niggas are playing with revolution and losing
> Niggas are scared of revolution

These are the roots from which hip-hop groups like Public Enemy (PE) and X-CLAN blossomed into prominence. Just as the Last Poets became an extension of Black nationalist traditions during the BAM by way of Malcolm X's influences, these groups, in addition to others, exploded and had an impact on hip-hop culture that made Black Power contemporary. As Chuck D, PE front man explained,

"'We're out for only one thing, and that's to bring back the resurgence of Black Power. But we're not racist. We're nationalists, people who have pride and who want to build a sense of unity amongst our people (Keyes, 87).'" Perkins posits, "Public Enemy's lyrical style is the standard by which all political rap should be judged. The group has redefined the political terrain of rap music, helping to refuel the Malcolm X revival and political fashion while speaking out against the moral and economic decay of the inner city (21)." Perkins reflects further on X-CLAN in stating that:

> X-CLAN…led by Professor X (Lumumba Carson, son of the well-known Brooklyn activist and black nationalist Sonny Carson) represent the epitome of the African-centered genre of political rap…XCLAN's freedom or death, unite-or-perish philosophy, along with their African garb, invokes a nostalgia for the cultural nationalism of the 1960s (23-4).

Even more recently came the dawn of Black Star, a group created by Brooklyn duo Mos Def and Talib Kweli. Their name reflects the moniker of Garvey's UNIA ship fleet that had the intended use of repatriating African descendents in America back to their homelands. The connections that trace this ancestry are very sound.

Examples of these parallels are increasingly evident with the juxtaposition of works from the BAM and hip-hop. BAM frontrunner Amiri Baraka's "*Ka'Ba*" is a poem about reclaiming the African-ness lost as a result of the turbulent Black experience. He writes:

> *We are beautiful people*
> *With African imaginations*
> *full of masks and dances and swelling chants*
> *with African eyes, and noses, and arms*
> *though we sprawl in gray chains in a place*
> *full of winters, when what we want is sun.*
>
> *We have been captured,*

and we labor to make our getaway, into
the ancient image…

This theme reappears in the politically charged duo Dead Prez's 2000 release, *Let's Get Free*. In the second verse of "*I'm an African,"* M1 rhymes:

Ayo my life is like Roots it's a true story
It's too gory for them televised fables on cable
I'ma runaway slave watching the northstar
Shackles on my forearm, runnin' with the gun on my palm
I'm an African, never was an African-American
Blacker than black I take it back to my origin
Same skin hated by the klansmen
Big nose and lips, big hips and butts, dancin

Both of these selections speak about the capture and desired escape of enslaved Africans in addition to expressing pride in the culture and physical features of their African origin. Another example that embodies the transfer of the Black arts aesthetic to hip-hop culture is present in a comparison of Nikki Giovanni's 1973 *Ego Trippin'* and Black nationalist hip-hop group X-CLAN's *Earth Bound*. Both pieces tap into the glorious ancient past of African descendents with a first person empiricism. Giovanni writes:

I walked to the Fertile Crescent and built the sphinx.
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
that only glows every one hundred years falls
into the center divine perfect light.

I am bad.

…I sat on the throne drinking nectar with Allah.
I got hot and sent an ice age to Europe to cool my thirst.
My oldest daughter is Nefertiti.
The tears from my birth pains created the Nile.

On *Earth Bound*, from their 1991 release *To the East Blackwards*, X-Clan's Brother J and Professor X write:

I take a ride on the cosmos
The utmost toast of my raft
Now mortals want a dose of the voice of key
with the bass of the great war chant

and

I am, the blood of the pharoahes
The spear bearers, the elephant riders
The everlasting conquerors
I AM, the original power of blackness
The strength exampled, in our people as a whole
I am the voice of unearthly soil
Earth bound, by will of the Creator

In these two examples the artists display a haughty swagger that emanates confidence about their knowledge of their stolen and often hidden heritage. One last example that strengthens this lineage is apparent in a comparison of Mari Evans' *"Speak the Truth to the People"* and Brand Nubian's *"Wake up"* from the group's 1991 release *All for One.* Evans, a powerful writer, not often mentioned at the forefront of the BAM writes:

It is not necessary to blow the mind
Only to free the mind
To identify the enemy is to free the mind

A free mind has no need to scream

A free mind is ready for other things
To BUILD black schools
To BUILD black children
To BUILD black minds
To BUILD black love
To BUILD black impregnability
To BUILD a strong black nation

To BUILD

Writing almost twenty years later, Brand Nubian reflects and reiterates this call with Grand Puba's lyrics:

The solution -- knowledge of self to better ourself

> Cause I know myself that we can live much better than this
> Nothing's changed, it's just another sequel
> The devil's still causin trouble amongst the righteous people…
> …It's time to motivate, build and elevate
> Blind deaf and dumb we've gotta change their mind-state

While the BAM is a root in the family tree that produced these bearers of "Garveyesque", politically charged hip-hop, these were not the only contributing factors in creating hip-hop of the "conscious" sort. As Perkins states, "Political or message rap falls into three categories: African centered, neo-nationalist, and Islamic (dominated by the eclectic Five Percent faction of Muslim blacks) (20)." To more holistically understand all the factors that shaped Black nationalist forms of hip-hop that mirror the Black arts aesthetic, we must return to the turmoil that plagued the Nation of Islam during the early 1960s and the dissension that ensued.

<u>Hip-Hop Invades the Five Percent Nation</u>

During the time of Malcolm X's rise to an ever-powerful status above the general body of the NOI, there were factions of dissent brewing in the rank and file under Elijah Muhammad's leadership. It is very important to note that the opposition was not based on the aspects of the NOI related to the traditions of Garveyism. Various sources provide differing accounts.

Some claim the issues of contention centered on the religious doctrine propagated by Muhammad. Spearit, a PhD in Religious Studies, gives insight into this friction in his article *"God Behind Bars"*:

> In the early 1960s, Clarence 13X began to ponder the NOI creed that Farad[5] was Allah in flesh since the NOI taught that the original Black man was Allah, and Farad himself was of light complexion…Eventually, this difference in opinion would cause NOI leaders to censure Clarence 13X in 1963, the year he broke

[5] NOI members believe that Farad Muhammad, creator of the Temple of Islam, which became the NOI, was Allah or God in the flesh.

> away from the organization…and began to preach a new and improved Black-God doctrine to the street youth in Harlem (507).

The organization that formed as a result of Clarence 13X's new teachings became known as the Five Percent Nation or the Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE). Though conflicts in doctrine persisted, the Five Percent Nation held fast to the Black nationalist philosophies that informed its predecessors. Felicia Miyakawa, an accomplished Musicologist and leading researcher of Five Percent hip-hop, reflects on this in her Five Percenter Rap:

> …[Much] of Five Percenter rhetoric falls squarely within black-nationalist traditions. Like many black nationalists, Five Percenters seek to establish both cultural and historical ties to Africa and the African [D]iaspora in order to form a sense of identity. A frequent corollary to black nationalism is Pan-Africanism, the belief that the fate and future of all African people are somehow linked (67).

After spending six years building a firm foundation for his Five Percent Nation, Clarence 13X was slain under mysterious circumstances in 1969, a fate that had befallen many of his predecessors in the history of the NOI. Soon after his death, hip-hop culture was burgeoning in New York City:

> Within five years of [Clarence 13X's] death, hip-hop was forming in New York City's African-American and Latino neighborhoods; Five Percenters quickly became a part of the new cultural movement. The pairing of rap and the Five Percent Nation was perhaps inevitable. The Five Percent Nation, essentially a youth movement, found resonance in hip-hop, another youth oriented culture (Miyakawa, 21).

Garvey used the arts to proliferate his Black nationalist messages because of his critical understanding of the functional uses of art to rouse his people. Being cut from the same cloth, "Five Percenter and Nation of Islam rappers are clearly aware that the quickest way to the souls of their intended audience-black American youth-is through African-America's cultural soul: black music (Miyakawa, 138)." They have been so effective in

promulgating their messages in the music that, aside from the lineage of the Last Poets and some NOI rappers, the Five Percent Nation is seen as one of the most consistent forces of the black arts aesthetic in hip-hop:

> As one of the most popular forms of American youth music, rap music is perhaps the most effective tool to reach the souls of young blacks and lead them to redemption and "knowledge of self". Within its layers, rap music carries both oral and musical traditions…[Fiver Percenter Rap] lyrics not only bring Five Percenter doctrine to the public, but also extend a number of black intellectual traditions: [Five Percenter Rap] lyrics draw on centuries of black nationalist and Pan-Africanist rhetoric and celebrate self-sufficiency, the family, and cultural unity (Miyakawa, 139).

Similar to Garvey's use of the arts to spread his philosophies, the Five Percent Nation has been successful in disseminating its message to black youth in the United States through hip-hop. In fact, much of the overall language and culture has been affected by this influence. In his article "*Hip Hop Hysteria*", Salim Muwakkil asserts that:

> Some of hip-hop's most important innovators are Five Percenters: Rakim (whom some still consider hip hop's best lyricist) is a member, as are rappers Nas and Busta Rhymes and singer Erykah Badu. Numerous rap groups, including Brand Nubian, Gang Starr, Mobb Deep and the Wu-Tang Clan, are also affiliated. Much of the hip hop vocabulary ("word is bond," "represent," "show and prove," "dropping science," "cipher," "seeds," and "G") is rooted in Five Percent ideology.

Furthermore, The Five Percent Nation has used the music as a vehicle to transport their teaching to international audiences as well. A plethora of Five Percent artists have used their platform to spread the doctrine on a global scale. Some have even compared their impact through music to Garvey's historic status. Muwakkil continues:

> Ted Swedenburg, a University of Arkansas anthropologist who has studied the Nation of Islam and its offshoots for many years, has compared today's "Islamic rap" to the spread of Afrocentric ideas during the days of Marcus Garvey…in the early 20th century. But through music, the Five Percenters' influence has been much greater. "What is interesting here is the fact that these heretical, esoteric teachings have been propelled, from their heretofore obscured places of origin, to the center of global culture."

With the birth of such a powerful art form and these prominent artists use of hip-hop to spread a Black nationalist, Pan-African agenda, the body politic of the United States has taken measures to combat and dilute the potency of these messages. This is nothing different than what has been done to undermine the Black Power struggle throughout the Black experience in America.

Hip Hop History and the Music Industry

Hip-hop's lineage, its sweeping influence on urban youth culture and its relationship with societal power structures, especially the music industry, raise interesting questions about the evolution of the hip-hop industry and the Black arts aesthetic within it. Since life on the plantation cultural instruments of unification have been met with contempt, legal bans, adversarial surveillance and attempts to co-opt or destroy them by European oppressors of African descendants. Slave owners outlawed the African drum as a tool of communication in the United States slave colonies; Garvey's *Negro World* was banned in the European controlled African colonies as the FBI mounted a case against him for eventual deportation; proponents of the BAM found themselves in the middle of a war waged against the Black Power Movement leadership by the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) and the federal government. Due to hip-hop's apparent connection to these entities, logically it would encounter similar circumstances. As the tactics of oppression and suppression have featured less physical and militaristic attacks, the strategies have turned to economic controls on cultural production. These tactics have been precisely designed to stifle the

transfer and growth of the Black arts aesthetic. This is especially significant with a cultural phenomenon as explosive as hip-hop.

Early in its history, hip-hop culture was used as a powerful tool of unification. Its birthplace, the South Bronx, NYC, was a volatile environment that fostered a great deal of conflict among the people that resided there. In the Vibe History of Hip-Hop, John F. Szwed gives more incite into what characterized the South Bronx in the mid to late 1970s. He writes: "The South Bronx was tuff turf, characterized by burned out buildings, brutal street gangs, and the scourge of drugs and poverty (15)." In Hip Hop America Nelson George echoes this sentiment in claiming that, "In the mid 70's …no place in America was held up more consistently as a symbol of pitiful urban priorities than the Bronx, particularly its southernmost section (10)." In short the Bronx was a "hell hole" that had been exploited, systematically destroyed and publicly slandered.

In the midst of this seemingly 'incorrigible chaos' hip-hop was born and in many respects facilitated pockets of unity throughout this impoverished community: "As a leader of the city's biggest and baddest street gang, the Black Spades, [Afrika Bambaata, one of hip-hop's founders] commanded the respect of his peers with intelligence, a sharp tongue and a bold vision of what his Black and Hispanic brothers and sisters could accomplish if they worked toward a common cause (Szwed, 15)." Bambaata, often called the Godfather of Hip Hop, "asserted his concept of youth solidarity by re-channeling violent competition into artistic contests (Keyes, 47). Two integral elements of hip-hop culture, MC-ing and break dancing, were simultaneously gaining prominence among youth culture in the South Bronx. Bambaata was responsive to this in his actions. Keyes reveals:

> In 1973 he formed a nonviolent organization called the Youth Organization, which he eventually renamed Zulu Nation. The Zulu Nation is a "huge young adult and youth organization which incorporates people that are into break dancing, DJ-ing, and graffiti. "I had them to battle against each other in a non-violent way, like rapper against rapper rather than knife against knife (48)."

Moreover, Bambaata's ideas about community unification were greatly influenced by his admiration for the leaders of the Black nationalist movements of the 1960's. He became involved with the NOI and sought to instill variations of those teachings into this budding culture through his own community influence. The ingredients for a potential movement among young people were certainly present.

In Black Noise, an in-depth analysis of rap music and Black culture in contemporary America, Tricia Rose adds dimension to the cause of hip-hop's creation, while alluding to its power to politicize and mobilize youth:

> Hip-Hop culture emerged as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished along with large sectors of its built environment…Identity in hip-hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family. These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds that, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may serve as the basis for new social movements (34).

Though this was the case, the prospect of a social movement was not the monolithic view of the culture. All practitioners of this new manifestation of Black expression did not envision or concern themselves with the potential for hip-hop to affect some marked social change. Hip-hop had many dimensions, styles and approaches, most of which maintained the fundamental essence of the culture.

As the culture evolved and gained more visibility and mainstream access, a segment of artists adopted the banner of political commentary and social consciousness:

> During the late 1980's, several U.S. hip-hop artists dubbed "nation conscious rappers" popularized the Black Nationalist message as a theme of hip-hop music. These artists impart a form of 'nationalism like the black-nationalism that provides inspirational territory for African Americans.' Using the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam, Rastafarianism, the styles and expression of Black Panthers and Black Nationalist poets of the 1960's, and the wearing of African garb, nation-conscious rappers address the political and economic disenfranchisement of black people in mainstream America. Their songs are designed to promote empowerment awareness, and ethnic pride among black youths (Keyes, 158).

This was not the first time rappers had fused their subject matter with socially and politically conscious messages. Melle Mel gave us "*The Message"* in 1982 and Brother D released *"How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise"* in 1984.

Several artists began propagating the use the art to facilitate changes in their ailing communities. Artists like Public Enemy, X-CLAN, KRS-ONE, Brand Nubian and many others were using their understanding of their gift and its legacy to mobilize the minds of Black youth across the country. Their message was not only political, but it was formulated to carry an uplifting and empowering value system echoing Garvey and his progeny; however, as hip-hop gained even wider acceptance and more commercial airplay, "more artists veered away from the nationalist tone" and "…began using rap as a vehicle to glorify a "gangsta" image, used gendered expletives (e.g. "bitches and hoes"), and exploit drug lore, violence, and sexual promiscuity on and off the stage (158)."

A Change in the Message: A Case Study of N.W.A

Niggaz Wit Attitude (**N.W.A**.) is a group that presents an interesting case study in the surge of "gangta" rap. Entering the scene the same time that PE released its critically

acclaimed *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back,* NWA's initial 1988 release, *Straight Outta Compton,* was a mixed bag of vulgar, misogynist, violent and political messages. The album sold 2 million copies without major label or radio support and yielded a great deal of success and criticism. The song on the record that came most heavily under fire was *"Fuck the Police,"* a blunt and brash vendetta against the LAPD for rampant police brutality, its incessant abuse of power and its constant attack on Black youth. In the first verse of the song Ice Cube raps:

> "Fuck tha police…Comin straight from the underground/Young nigga got it bad cuz I'm brown/not the other color…so police think/They have the authority to kill a minority…Fuckin with me cuz I'm a teenager/With a little bit of gold and a pager/Searchin my car, lookin for the product/Thinkin every nigga is sellin narcotics…Ice Cube will swarm/On any muthafucka in a blue uniform/Just cuz I'm from the CPT, punk police are afraid of me/A young nigga on a warpath/And when I'm finished, it's gonna be a bloodbath/Of cops, dyin in LA…Yo Dre, I got somethin to say….Fuck the police.

This verse was said to support active retaliation against the police for their offences on young Black people. These sentiments, that interestingly enough reflect components of the Black arts aesthetic, drew attention from the FBI, which had closely monitored the propaganda and activity of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers two decades before. In his BAM poem *"Black Art,"* Baraka writes with emotion that Ice Cube seemed to echo:

…we want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead

Rose recaps what occurred in regards to the FBI attention Ice Cube's "inflammatory" speech produced in September of 1989:

> The song and its apparent resonance among rap fans and black youths in general provoked an unprecedented official FBI letter from Milt Ahlerich, an FBI assistant director, which expressed the FBI's concern over increasing violence (indirectly linking music to this increase) and stating that as law-enforcement

> officials "dedicate their lives to the protection of our citizens…recordings such as the one from NWA are both discouraging and degrading to the brave dedicated officers." He justifies this targeting of NWA by suggesting that the song allegedly advocates violence against police officers. As far as Alerich knows, the FBI has never adopted and official position on a record, book, or artwork in the history of the agency (128).

NWA had already been arrested for performing or just chanting the song at some venues across the country. Ahlerich's decree fueled "an informal fax network among police agencies that urged cops to help cancel NWA's concerts (128). "

With incredible pressure being placed on its label, Ruthless Records, and the departure of Ice Cube (who later in his career converted to the NOI) it seems that NWA's second album, Efil4zaggin (Niggaz4life) was a complete glorification of the antithesis of the Black arts aesthetic. Intriguingly, in the wake of numerous censorship attacks and radio airplay rejection, their sophomore LP sold two million copies and reached number one on the Billboard charts in 1991. Here, it is significant to note other developments that were simultaneously occurring in the music industry; events that would not only give NWA their historic Billboard distinction, but would severely impact the creativity, cultural production and commercialization of hip-hop culture in general. As Michael Eric Dyson illuminates in Between God and Gangster Rap, "By 1991the rules of hip-hop were changing, with biting black-nationalist commentary and an Afro-centric worldview giving way to sexual hedonism and the glamorization of violence (167)."

The Colonization of Hip-Hop Culture

In his underground gem, Culture Bandits, Del Jones explores the purpose, power, and source of Black music in general and engages an interesting perspective on the threat

in the power of hip-hop music and culture. Serving as the mouthpiece of African youth in America, hip-hop was initially dismissed in mainstream media as a short-lived trend. However, as it developed a sweeping influence, the maintainers of the status quo and purveyors of corporate and political interest found themselves in a dilemma.

While they did not want the culture to pose a formidable political threat, as evidenced by the FBI's reaction to "Fuck the Police," they deemed the art form potentially lucrative. It seems that the principles of the Black arts aesthetic coupled with the power of hip-hop's medium was too volatile. The solution came in the form of colonization and control. Jones explains that the music had to be exploited for profit and controlled for political stability. He writes, " This insulated their system (white supremacy) from the natural attack of our music as we responded to an environment that holds our dreams and aspirations hostage (44)." He goes on to state, "…[They] destroy/control/define our music for us, they isolate the songs/dance poems that threaten their control and destroy them. How? By making the creation of such work unprofitable, because they control the other mediums of communication (44)." This colonization of Black music has been occurring since the forced immigration of Africans to the Americas and has continued to manifest itself throughout African cultural production in this oppressive experience. In his pensive work, <u>A Rhyme is a Terrible Thing to Waste: Hip Hop and the Creation of a Political Philosophy</u>, Carlton Usher writes:

> This frame of reference for analyzing [Hip-Hop Culture] recommends that it should be conceptualized as a contemporary episode of historical continuity. Unstable historical interactions between America and its Africans, the political climate such interactions create, and new cultural art forms as weapons of resistance form the essence of this continuity. [Hip-Hop Culture] represents a new culture form responding to a historical crisis. Jazz, Blues, Soul, Rock and Roll, and presently [Hip-Hop Culture], have all attempted to offer politicized products that reflect and respond to the political climate. All these forms have experienced the crisis of incorporation (18-19)

Traditionally, in response to the conditions faced by Africans in the Americas, art has been a means of resistance and cultural preservation. It is merely an extension of the black arts aesthetic tradition mentioned at length throughout this discussion. In fearing the affects of the African response to a horrid American reality, the oppressive social architects had to develop a counter-response. Rose offers, "The terms of the assault on rap music…are a part of a long-standing sociologically based discourse that considers black influences a cultural threat to American society (130)." This is especially true when referring to tendencies toward resistance, for Black influence in Amereican society is diverse. In addition Usher asserts that:

> Cultural products were created in part, as a response to segregation and racism. Technology allowed these form, especially music, to be mass-produced. The political climate and the owners of the technology dictated which aspects would be mass-produced. Those cultural products and producers deemed less threatening to the social order benefited. Neal focuses on intransigent black artists who challenged the oppressive institutions in the society and who consequently saw their careers abruptly diminished (19).

With these forces at work, music industry executives began to forcibly determine what rap messages were appropriate for mass production. Clearly, black arts aesthetic associated messages were not among them. Instead, the industry offered a model that would prove debilitating to hip-hop culture and the black community as a whole. Kitwana speaks directly to this in his Rap on Gangsta Rap. He writes, "In terms of capitalist economics and corporate behavior, corporations rarely support efforts that don't meet their financial goals. Certainly such corporations are not interested in developing rap music as an art-form or in defining and protecting Black community interests (15)."

Moreover, the violence unleashed on the activists and artists of the preceding generation who staunchly espoused Black Power and aesthetics has had a demoralizing

effect on many contemporary youth who would consider embracing these traditions. Kitwana addresses this in his The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture:

> One of the obstacles to activism in this generation is one that worked to disrupt the civil rights and Black power movements. The setbacks that the movements suffered at the hands of local police action and the FBI's COINTELPRO strategy…are now legendary. The attacks on activist groups …have discouraged this generation of activists as well. Those physical and psychological blows—alongside today's even more sophisticated and often blatantly racially unjust criminal justice, policing, and incarceration systems—have had one of the greatest silencing effects on today's hip hop generation activists and would be activists (153-4).

Kitwana, among others, deems this yet another contributing factor the ease with which hip-hop culture has been colonized and the voices of contempt have been silenced.

Consequently, any perspectives of using the art form for the collective wellbeing had to be destroyed and replaced with a very strict code of individualism. This is the hallmark of "American Dream" ideology and a far cry from the principled approach of the black aesthetic. Diallo is very frank in expressing how this dynamic is created:

> The star system I see in Western popular music goes very much against the standards of conduct for the village musician with which I was raised. The star does not give time to the community but to himself or herself. The star usually seeks to amaze people, not to care for them; to be admired and praised by the anonymous throngs, not to honor distinct individuals whose lives depend on one another in community. It is forgotten that the reason for playing is to bring wellbeing to people. This is different from driving fans into ecstasies of overexcitement. Music should not be a means to build a personal cult. That is idolatry. My village teaches that music is a calling greater than the individual. I can give my life to it if I love it. In serving this music, I can share with other people and contribute to their joy and health (196).

In turn, this individualist ethic is supported by the chaotic conditions many African descendants in America find themselves in. It is not complex to understand that a person's depravity may lead that individual's desire to survive by any means necessary, legitimate or otherwise. As the American music industry

is considered a “legitimate” workforce, executives have been known to prey on young, Black artists, talented or not, who just want a way out of a life of constant struggle and hardship. Jones relates how this is detrimental to the collective: “And as they use the carrot on the stick technique on poor rural and inner-city kids, [these Black youth] unconsciously churn out all the musical products they use against [Black people’s] struggle to create healthy families, progressive communities…and true freedom (45).”

On the other hand, there are also those artists who understand the ramifications of individual stardom and choose the low road as opposed to a more collectively inspired approach.

Jones also discusses why many contemporary Black artists are oblivious to the cultural significance of African music and why the outlines of the Garvey and BAM aesthetic have become secondary:

> Most Black artists dream of million sellers, fast cars, and quicker women, and the development of their work has nothing to do with the struggle or cultural maintenance. Many only want to try and find out what’s happening and plug into it for profit. Consequently, the development of our musical culture is stagnated by profit motive (44).

Furthermore, as Kitwana adds in Rap on Gangsta Rap, “In a highly technological, capital driven society, where thought control via mass media permeates the society, individual worth is glorified beyond the collective and corporate profit supercedes community interest (41).” This mentality and practice of hip hop music and culture has been in control of this powerful art form for almost two decades. The entire music industry and all of the systems that support it have effectively rendered such an infectious entity “apolucrative,” a term coined by New York University Professor Michael Dinwiddie. In

other words, it has no collective political or community consciousness and it functions to generate massive amounts of revenue perpetuating attitudes and behaviors that are severely detrimental to African descendents in America. Gladney iterates a similar sentiment: "The existence of dominant commercial concerns has meant that mainstream successes have almost invariably lacked hip-hop's political, racial and social consciousnesses, as well as being insensitive to many of the aesthetic principles (294)." The majority of contemporary hip-hop artist content, at least that which surfaces for mass consumption, is replete with the aforementioned themes of violence, misogyny, materialism, minstrelsy and self hate.

The list of artists that have played an active role in this demoralization of the culture is too long to include here; however, there are a few notables that are worthy of mention due to their impact. Dr. Dre, former member/producer of NWA has single handedly created one of the most exceptional musical sound-scapes for artists engaging in the aforementioned debauchery. He has produced and overseen the careers of such mega stars as Snoop and G-Unit, most notably 50 Cent. He is also responsible for what some cultural purists deem an act of hip-hop treason: the signing and promoting of Eminem (the most successful white rapper of all time). Also, throughout his career, Jay-Z has also been a producer and promoter of destructive music. Other recent contributors include the Ca$h Money Millionaires and other prominent southern artists like Little John, Young Jeezy and the Ying Yang Twins. One must only review a project from any of these artists to substantiate this claim. Additionally, one of the vilest Black arts aesthetic offenders is Harlem's Dip Set. With Camron, Jim Jones and Juelz

Santana at the helm, Dip Set's trademark brand of music is based on shock value and pushing the envelope of offensive content. Many others gaining mass media exposure in today's hip-hop marketplace are openly degrading the hip-hop culture to line their own pockets. A cursory glance at the hip-hop segment of the music industry reveals what some consider an incorrect, misleading view of Black culture. Though hip-hop culture only accounts for a segment of an ever expansive Black culture, its pervasiveness lends it to becoming a primary representation. In fact Kitwana relates that, those artist participate in the commodification and distortion of "Blackness" and, therefore, their own degradation (27)." Moreover, this is a distortion and blasphemes use to neutralize the potential of hip-hop to affect social change or perpetuate affirming cultural value systems. Kitwana writes:

> Due to their extensive influence on the industry, corporate recording companies have ultimately established the boundaries for much of the discourse about rap music, even within the black community. Too often rap artists' styles and lyrics and Black community response to them are the result of corporate visions. Certainly, the recording industry's current focus, with its distorted images of Blackness and its emphasis on "sales first" effectively undermines hip-hop's potential influence for social change (24)."

In the wake of this reality, it would seem that the spirit of the black arts aesthetic has been completely removed from the culture and replaced with one that carries a much more sinister and targeted objective. While the latter is certainly present in contemporary hip-hop culture, the former exists; however, one must know where to find it. It is often difficult to navigate the matrix and cyclical vortex that

mainstream hip-hop culture has become; nevertheless, as it occurs in many situations, substance is found only after removing the superficial layers.

Usher offers insight into what has come to be called the "underground." It is a space that was created as a result of the overt exploitation and commercialization of hip-hop culture has endured. Artists carrying the mark of the black arts aesthetic that sought to remain relevant to the culture were forced to operate below levels of industry outlet access. Usher asserts:

> The origin of the term "underground" is not known but we know that the social reality to which it referred surfaced…as a response to the domination of [Hip-Hop Culture] by market forces. Artist viewing the music industry as exploitative developed alternative modes for producing and distributing their product…In keeping with the influence of NOI and [the Five Percent Nation], self-determination, black nationalism, and pan Africanism were the dominant ideological orientations that conditioned their political ideas…[A] rtists responded…by promulgating a set of principles that implied both a code of conduct for [Hip-Hop culture] artists and a set of standards by which the music industry should be judged (95).

This attitude of independence and subversive-ness is definitely reflective of the black arts aesthetic. The critical questions now become, "can the 'underground' gain enough strength to revive the Black arts aesthetic in hip hop culture and what will it take to reverse the adverse effects of the commercialism?" Gladney offers that, economic considerations have eroded aesthetic development, and the independent outlets must be established through which the artist can create and effectively stay "true "to his or her art and purpose. At stake is the effectiveness and functionality of an art form and in the case of hip-hop, the damage that has been done must be reversed (295)."

Conclusion

The time is now. The forces of the universe have conspired to present this historic opportunity to revive the Black arts aesthetic in hip-hop culture. Hip-hop culture has crisscrossed the globe and affected people in every corner of the world. In Hip-Hop America, Nelson George speaks to the international effects. He writes, "Because hip-hop has so many elements-music clothing, dance, attitude—its essential mutability makes it adaptable worldwide (203)." George goes on to say, "From Vancouver and Toronto in Canada, to Dakar in Senegal, to Holland, to Cuba's Havana, to every place satellites beam music videos and CD's are sold (or bootlegged or counterfeited), hip hop has made an impression (206)." Its power is obvious for even the entities that have worked to colonize it are using it to sell their products and spread their influence. Simultaneously, they are intentionally stifling a feared movement among young people that could change the face of human history.

In the United States, this music informs, determines and regulates culture among youth of African ancestry (including "Latinos") as well as other minority and majority groups that have been affected by the culture's intoxicating pervasiveness. At the same time, as a result of a combination of forces including a lack of culturally relevant education and the capitalist co-opting of the art form, hip-hop culture has become the bastion of the culturally and morally impoverished. It has come to propagate cyclical ignorance and perpetuate self-destructive tendencies. Moreover, it has created large fortunes for a few, spawned an illusion of achievement and left whole generations swimming in a pool of consumption and frivolous lifestyles. All of this for two basic reasons: 1) We are not connected to the purposeful artistic traditions of our ancestors; 2)

We do not own the means and modes of production, promotion and distribution of our art on a scale that will leverage a significant impact.

This was precisely the aim of the black arts aesthetic. Its proponents asserted that we must always remain in control of our cultural production and it messages to prevent exactly what has happened to hip-hop culture. At one time during the short history of African descendants in America, we were severely restricted from practicing any of our musical traditions. Throughout that history we have witnessed the exploitation and abuse of our art. In the case of hip-hop, we fell for the glamour of the entertainment industry in exchange for our cultural and community wellbeing. What is to come of it?

The music industry is losing its controls on the production and sale of music in general. This is an outcome of various technological advances that the industry is struggling to regulate. If we have a desire to reclaim our art the opportunity has arisen. Its power is magnifying daily and the industry strong hold is waning. In the end the responsibility falls on us. We have to make strides to control the hip-hop industry top to bottom. In addition, and more importantly, African descendants must gain a better understanding of the power hip-hop music and culture and use it to achieve its fullest potential. The griots/jail's of West Africa knew that something this powerful could not fall into the hands of those who would abuse it or we would be doomed. We must seize and harness its power in an effort to unify the Pan-African community and ignite worldwide movement for social change.

This is not as far-fetched as one might perceive. We need only to study the power of our musical cultural traditions in their essence and all of their subsequent manifestations to conclude that this vision is a realistic possibility. We will never know

the outcome of such a proposition unless we take the necessary action to execute it. The hip-hop nation is at a cross roads that will forever determine its fate. Its actions can either galvanize or demoralize its constituents. We must remember that hip-hop is the creation and practice of the strongest descendants of those Africans who survived the horrors of the middle passage and the slave trade. These are among the most powerful spirits on the planet. They are undoubtedly capable of such a feat. Garvey said “Africa for the Africans;” Neal said “…art for the people, by the people;” we must say “ real hip-hop culture for a sustainable future.”

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