"BEWARE OF THE FRUSTRATED . . ." The Fantasy and Reality of African American Violent Revolt

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Throughout African Americans' struggle for liberation, there have been incidents of their engaging in violent revolt—from slave revolts to the urban riots of the 21st century. Images and depictions of violent revolt have also been a recurring element in African American artistic productions—including literature, music, and film. An analysis of these "fantasies" of violent revolt provides insight into how African Americans understand violent revolt, and under what conditions such actions are justified. The analysis reveals that violent revolt is understood by many as both instrumental (a means to a desired end—usually freedom) and cathartic. Furthermore, there are four recurring themes within these fantasies. These include a justification for violence, the need to fight to gain the "respect" of the oppressor, the rage of the oppressed along with their yearning for retribution, and the humanizing or transformative effect of participating in a violent revolt against an oppressor.

Keywords: *African Americans; violent revolt; hip-hop; political violence; African American literature*

Negroes,
Sweet and docile,
Meek, humble, and kind:
Beware the day
They change their minds!

—Langston Hughes (2001a)

Beware of the frustrated nigger.

—Jeru the Damaja (1996)

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"Americans" have been using violence to advance political objectives from the moment the first European colonists chose to force themselves on indigenous peoples and their land. During the 1960s, H. Rap Brown claimed that violence is as American as cherry pie, implying that one ought not be surprised to see the level of violence perpetrated by the state, nor should observers be surprised that the oppressed incorporated violence into their struggles. It is the American way.

African Americans have engaged in an ongoing struggle for liberation—from slavery, discrimination, and the various manifestations of racial oppression. In this struggle for liberation, African Americans have often used violence as a tactic or strategy. This is no surprise given American political history. What is intriguing, however, is the extent to which African Americans have fantasized about political violence—specifically, violent revolt.[1] Evidence of such fantasies of violent revolt can be found in artistic expressions produced by African Americans from slavery through the present; As early as Frederick Douglass's (1859/1993) depiction of a slave revolt or as recent as rapper Jeru the Damaja (1996) warning America to "beware of the frustrated nigger." Exploring these fantasies provides a useful glance into how African Americans understand violent revolt. They provide insight into the conditions under which such actions are considered legitimate, or even desirable.

This article examines the phenomenon of fantasies about violent revolt in an attempt to expand the understanding of why such incidences occur. That there is a connection between the fantasies of violent revolt and the real-life occurrences of violent revolt is illustrated by the concurrence of both phenomena throughout American history. Below, I provide a brief overview of African American violent revolt and consider how scholars and others have sought to explain such actions. I then examine some powerful examples of African American fantasies about violent revolt in order to get a better understanding of how African Americans have understood these actions.

The examination of these fantasies of violent revolt reveals that violent revolt is understood by many as both instrumental (a means to a desired end—usually freedom) and cathartic. Furthermore,

there are four recurring themes within these works. These themes consist of a justification of violence, the need to fight to gain the "respect" of the oppressor, the rage of the oppressed African Americans as well as their yearning for retribution, and the humanizing or transformative effect of participating in a violent revolt against an oppressor.

THE REALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN VIOLENT REVOLT

African Americans have engaged in violent revolts from the time they arrived in what would become the United States. Historians cite evidence of hundreds of incidents where enslaved Africans engaged in or plotted to engage in violent uprisings. These uprisings occurred throughout the period of slavery. They included the wide-ranging plots of Gabriel Prosser in 1800 and Denmark Vesey in 1822, as well as extensive violent clashes such as the Stono Rebellion of 1739 or the Nat Turner–led uprising in 1831 (Aptheker, 1943). There were even instances of enslaved Africans seizing control of the slave ships intended to carry them into perennial bondage, as was the case with the overtaking of the *Amistad* in 1841 and the *Creole* months later (Aptheker, 1943; Bly, 1998). Perhaps one of the most intriguing was the Christiana, Pennsylvania rebellion in 1851. There, a community of runaway slaves took up arms to chase off southerners intent on returning them to bondage (Forbes, 1998).

With the end of slavery, African Americans continued to be oppressed and often found themselves resisting oppression violently. Between 1875 and 1900, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of Blacks murdered through lynchings, race riots, and other massacres (Bennett, 1982). With the turn of the century, lynchings and other forms of mass violence against Blacks did not cease, or for that matter, decrease. In response, African Americans often took up arms to defend themselves, their friends, elected officials, schools, churches, and so forth (Norrell, 1985). Blacks even employed arson as a tactic for dealing with the oppressive practices in the South (Smith, 1994).

Violent attacks and violent revolt were a significant part of the political experiences of African Americans. Within such a context,

even those African Americans who were normally nonviolent considered using violence. Even W. E. B. Du Bois had to consider using violence. Du Bois, who was on the faculty of Atlanta University during the Atlanta riot of 1906, hurried back to the city on news of the violence and purchased a "shot gun and two dozen rounds of shells filled with buckshot." He proclaimed that "had a white mob stepped on the campus where I lived I would have without hesitation sprayed their guts over the grass" (quoted in Cain, 1990, p. 322).

Throughout the 20th century, the desire to resist White violence has at times resulted in African Americans forming armed groups. At times, these have been informal groupings—as was the case with the Columbia, Tennessee conflict in 1946 in which armed Blacks came together to thwart the lynching of a young Black man (O'Brien, 1999). At other times, Blacks have formed formal paramilitary organizations that have taken up arms to resist White violence (Umoja, 2002). The Deacons for Defense and Justice and the Black Panther Party are notable in this regard (Jones, 1998; Umoja, 1999b). At times, paramilitary organizations have even initiated violent conflict with authorities and even engaged in small-scale guerilla tactics—as the Black Liberation Army did during the 1970s and 1980s (Umoja, 1999a).

Perhaps the most familiar form of Black violent revolt is the mass riot. Riots occurred frequently during the 1960s and have continued to occasionally erupt in the years since. These "modern" race riots differ from the riots of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The earlier riots were race battles that normally entailed Whites attacking Black communities—aiming to injure or kill the people and destroy their property. The modern race riot, though violent, is characterized by masses of African Americans (and at times others) taking to the streets to destroy property, loot merchandise, and occasionally attack representatives of the "White" power structure (e.g., police). The primary difference is that the modern riots primarily entail the destruction of property and looting, though police officers and some Whites may be personally attacked. The earliest such riots occurred in Harlem in 1935 and 1943. Hundreds of riots such as these took place during the 1960s, and the United

States has seen extensive African American rioting as recently as 2002 in Cincinnati and 2003 in Benton Harbor, Michigan.

UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN AMERICAN VIOLENT REVOLT

Why have African Americans participated in violent revolts? Social scientists have been intrigued by this question for some time, especially during the 1960s and 1970s as they sought to explain the revolts of the 1960s (Upton, 1985). Political violence around the globe inspired some scholars to develop theories specifically focused on the question of why people engaged in violent revolts (e.g., the relative deprivation theory), while other scholars adapted existing theories to explain the emergence of violent uprisings (e.g., Marxist or class theories). Premiere among the schools of thought that emerged during that period were the resource mobilization and the "relative deprivation" (RD) schools of thought, each of which remain relevant (Rule, 1988).

RD, which grew out of the frustration-aggression theory espoused by psychologists during the first half of the century, essentially holds that violent acts resulted from the frustration that a group experienced as a result of some sense of deprivation. In this line of thought, violence is cathartic. Critics argued that the theory missed the strategic aspects of the use of violence. Resource mobilization theorists held that violent acts were instrumental endeavors aimed at a particular strategic objective in the service of some greater goal. Violence was just one tactic within a group's repertoire of actions (Rule, 1988).

Both of these schools of thought have had their critics. RD was criticized because it seemed unable to explain why some "deprived" communities revolted and others did not. Resource mobilization was critiqued because the theory did not offer much insight into the reasons for and the uniqueness of violence. These criticisms aside, the theories do offer an important insight when taken together. They suggest the dual nature of violent revolts. Violent revolts are both cathartic and instrumental.

Beyond the conclusion that violent revolt is both instrumental and cathartic, to truly understand this phenomenon one must have a sense of how the participants understand violent revolt. How have African Americans understood violent revolts? When is violent revolt appropriate? Why is it selected in particular circumstances? What makes it a legitimate strategy?

To answer these questions, it is worthwhile to consider how African Americans have justified calls for or participation in violent political action. African Americans who have promoted and/or engaged in violent revolts have frequently relied on the concept of self-defense as the primary justification. For example, during the 19th century, David Walker (1830) openly and directly called for violent means to be engaged in the cause of African American liberation from slavery in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. For Walker, violence was justified by the reality of the oppressor and the oppressive conditions of enslavement. Slaveholders were "wretches," "devils," and "the Lord's enemies" who were willing to murder Blacks in order to maintain slavery. Thus, Blacks had to be willing to "kill or be killed" in their quest for freedom.

> If you commence, make sure work—do not trifle, for they will not trifle with you—they want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition—therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, kill or be killed. Now, I ask you, had you not rather be killed than to be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little children? . . . [I]t is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty. (pp. 29-30)

Forbes (1998) has shown how the rhetoric of violent resistance to slavery was widespread during enslavement, particularly in the aftermath of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, and others expressed the legitimacy of violent resistance to the slavers, with references to self-defense. Key to this argument was the fact that the law was on the side of the slaveholders and kidnappers. As

William Parker, the leader of the Christiana rebellion, claimed, "the laws of personal protection are not made for us" (Forbes, 1998, p. 160). There was no recourse but to fight.

The limitations of the law are key. The inability or unwillingness of the state to protect the rights and lives of Blacks has been a critical aspect of the contexts that have produced violent revolts. During the civil rights movement, activist Robert F. Williams made just this point. Williams was leader of the Monroe County, North Carolina branch of the NAACP that had engaged in armed confrontations with White supremacists. He was one of the leading voices advocating armed resistance within the civil rights movement. Though he acknowledged the power of nonviolence, he called for what he termed "armed self-reliance" (Tyson, 1999). Williams argued that "Nonviolence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized . . . but nonviolence is no repellent for a sadist" (p. 214). Blacks were in a circumstance in which the law offered no protection against White attacks. As such, they had to defend themselves. It is important that Williams did not advocate offensive violence, or even vengeance. Violence was within a context of self-defense.

BLACK FANTASIES OF VIOLENT REVOLT

While there are many examples of African Americans engaging in violent revolts from the period of slavery to the 21st century, there have also been numerous examples of African American creative works that present fantasies of violent revolt throughout the time period. Examining the depictions and descriptions of violent revolt in a variety of African American creative works produced during this period of time reveals four recurring themes. The most common of these themes is the justification for violence. This justification usually entails a description of long-standing oppression and aggression on the part of White oppressors. A second theme is the need for African Americans to fight to gain the respect of their oppressor. There is a sense that the only thing the oppressive pow-

ers truly respect is a violent response to their aggression and unjust actions.

The third recurring theme is an expression of rage and the desire for retribution. Quite often, these creative works seem to be attempts to communicate the anger of the oppressed and their latent desire for vengeance. The most intriguing of the four themes is the notion that violent action in response to oppression can have a humanizing power. When the oppressed strike a blow for freedom, they in a sense seize back their humanity. They move from object to subject. Despite their conditions of bondage or the social, political, and economic constraints that smother and confine them, the violent actor is liberated internally.

Although there is ample evidence of the reality of violent revolt during slavery, there are also expressions of the fantasies of the use of violence to liberate enslaved Africans. Three novels, Frederick Douglass's (1853/1993) *The Heroic Slave*, based on the 1841 revolt aboard the *Creole*, Martin Delaney's (1859/1993) *Blake or the Huts of America*, and William Wells Brown's (1864/1993) *Clottelle: A Tale of the Southern States* stand out in this regard. All three depict heroes using violence to liberate themselves and/or others from slavery. Taken together, the three works reveal key aspects of how African Americans understand violent revolt.

All four of the themes described above can be found in these works. All entail a justification for the use of violence. Douglass (1853/1993), for example, locates the slave revolt within the "American" tradition of using violence to obtain freedom as he equates the violence of the slave revolt with that of the American Revolution. Douglass's hero, Madison Washington, justifies his deed, claiming that "We have struck for our freedom. We have done no more than that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so are they" (p. 75).

The rage of the enslaved and their desire for retribution is also described in each novel. In Brown's work (1864/1993), for example, the character Glen, an enslaved African who uses violence to seize his freedom, tells of the "volcano pent up in the hearts of the slaves of these Southern states that will burst forth ere long. When

that day comes, woe to those whom its unpitying fury may devour!" (p. 222).

Delaney's (1859/1993) work best expresses the notion that the oppressed must fight to gain the respect of the oppressor. An Indian chief tells the story's hero, Blake, who escaped slavery and commenced to organize insurrections throughout the South and Cuba, that "If you want white man to love you, you must fight 'im!" (p. 163). That the advice came from an Indian was a clear recognition of the fact that 19th-century Whites had a greater respect for the Indians who took up arms to resist White encroachment (Dippie, 1991; Worgs, 2000, pp. 396-399).

The humanizing capacity of violent action is seen most clearly in Douglass's work. Ronald Takaki (1993, p. 24) has argued that Washington, the leader of the rebellion, is "desperately trying to deal with the dehumanizing system" of American slavery. He regains his humanity, his sense of himself as a man and not a brute, when he commits to liberating himself or dying in the process. It is at that point that he is liberated, "at least in spirit." That Douglass included this notion in his novel is no surprise, given that he claimed to have had such an experience. In his autobiography, Douglass (1987) tells the story of his fight with "Mr. Covey," the man to whom the young Douglass had been sent in order to be "broken."

> This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom and revived in me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. (pp. 104-105)

As oppression and violent resistance to the oppression continued through the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, so

also did the Black fantasies of violent resistance. Some of the most celebrated literary works of the first half of the 20th century entailed images of violence against oppressive Whites or suggestions of such violence. Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die," written in response to the race riots of the early 20th century, is among the most poignant works in this regard (Wagner, 1973). McKay (1973) asserted that "If we must die, let it not be like hogs." For McKay, if death was to come, then Blacks ought to meet it nobly—facing their adversaries. "Like men we will face the murderous, cowardly pack / Pressed to the wall, but fighting back!" (pp. 229-230).

The poem entails much of what has already been discussed. There is the theme of gaining the respect of the oppressor, as he states, "even the monsters we defy / Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!" (McKay, 1973, p. 230). Implicit throughout the poem is the notion of fighting back being self-liberating or humanizing. As he says, Blacks ought to meet the adversaries "like men," implying that one's "manhood" could be attained or retained even in death.

Richard Wright's (1945) *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* also includes allusions to violence against oppressive Whites. Wright recounts stories from his youth that his friends would tell.

> "Yeah if they hava race riot around here, I'm gonna kill all the white folks with poison."

. . .

> "Yeah they send you to war and make you lick them Germans, teach you how to fight and when you come back they scared of you and want to kill you"

. . .

> "Man them white folks sure is mean"

. . .

> "The first white sonofabitch that bothers me is gonna get a hole knocked in his head!"

. . .

> "Man you reckon them white folks ever gonna change?"
> "Hell no! They just born that way."

. . .

> "They say a white man hit a colored man up north and that colored man hit that white man, knocked him cold, and nobody did a damned thing" (pp. 89-91).

These fantasies again include justifications for the use of violence against oppressive Whites. It is interesting that if this is an accurate retelling of the ideas Wright and his peers expressed as adolescents, we should be surprised that there were not more acts of violent rebellion. These young men had already learned that violent resistance to White oppression was "legitimate," in fact, desirable.

Justification and legitimacy are key to understanding violent revolt. What makes violence justifiable? When is violence a legitimate strategy to bring about change? The writers of the works considered in this article all base their justification on the conditions experienced by African Americans at that moment. The presentation of these fantasies then entail a description of how Blacks are experiencing these conditions—not merely the injustices, slights, abuses, and crimes visited upon Blacks but also what these transgressions are doing to the victims—the extent of the dehumanization. These fantasies are in a sense a report on the state of mind of the oppressed. In a sense, these fantasies are warnings. Consider the work of Langston Hughes (2001a) during the 1940s. It was then that he warned,

> Negroes,
> Sweet and docile,

> Meek, Humble, and kind:
> Beware the day
> They change their minds! (p. 199)

Soon after that "warning," Hughes (2001b) forced readers to ponder "What happens to a dream deferred?" Though the dream deferred may "dry up" or "fester," Hughes again warned that it may "explode!" (p. 145).

Of course, it did explode in the form of the civil rights movement. Though violent resistance was present throughout the struggle (Tyson, 1999), the initial explosion was primarily nonviolent. However, as the civil rights movement transformed into the Black Power movement, the explosion became increasingly violent. At the same time, there was an explosion in terms of the amount of African American artistic productions using the image of violent revolt. The images could be found in a variety of Black creative works—literature, music, even film. The concurrent production of real revolts and fantasies of revolts occurred at levels unseen before. In fact, there was a convergence of fantasy and reality. Perhaps the clearest example of this convergence was the Black Panthers, whose actual participation in political violence is well documented but whose newspaper also included poetry that often included images of violent revolt (Jennings, 1999).

The Black Panther poetry was not unique. The works of Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and many others frequently called for revolution and used the image of violence pursued in the cause of liberation (Giovanni, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Hudson, 1973; Sanchez, 1969, 1970). Giovanni (2003b) is a perfect example. In one poem she asked the questions, "Nigger / Can you kill? . . . Can a nigger kill a honkie . . . Can we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK?" (p. 49). In her "Reflections on April 4, 1968," the day of Martin Luther King's assassination, she expresses the rage of that moment.

> What can I, a poor black woman do to destroy America? This is the question, with appropriate variations, being asked in every black heart. There is one answer—I can kill. There is one compromise—I

> can protect those who kill. There is one cop-out—I can encourage others to kill. There are no other ways. (Giovanni, 2003a, pp. 19-20)

Elsewhere, she juxtaposes violent imagery with democratic imagery, further illustrating that the fantasy is driven by the constraints of the reality. She tells African Americans that

> if we vote this season we ought to make it
> effective
> the barrel of a gun is the best
> voting machine
> your best protest vote
> is a dead honkie (Giovanni, 2003c, p. 76)

One of the most instructive works that came out of this era is Sam Greenlee's (1969) *The Spook Who Sat by the Door.* The hero of the story is Dan Freeman, who becomes the first Black CIA agent in order to learn the skills and theories of guerilla warfare, as well as the practical knowledge of how to set up a revolutionary network. On completing his training, Freeman returns home to Chicago where he organizes local gangs into a revolutionary army. Once a riot erupts in Chicago, Freeman and his operatives set a prolonged revolt in motion.

A key moment in the novel occurs when Freeman is confronted by a Black police detective, who is also his best friend. In explaining himself, Freeman exclaims,

> I don't want to change this system, just get it off my back. I'm no f—g integrationist. Integrate into what? Whitey's welcome to his chrome-plated shit pile. I dig being black and the only thing I don't dig about being black is white folks messing with me. (Greenlee, 1969, p. 243)

The comment captures the rage of Freeman and his followers as it expresses his feeling of oppression and consequently the justification for his actions. It is interesting that as the above quote suggests, although Freeman looks to revolutionary movements and uses the methods of a revolutionary, he does not express a revolutionary ide-

ology. His goal of getting the system off his back is intriguing in its simplicity. His is a practical revolution. In his organization's first public appeal, he tells a reporter that the Black Freedom Fighters of America want the National Guard out of the ghetto. Once that occurred, they would then talk more about how to improve things. The limited vision for change suggests that Freeman is not a true revolutionary. In the end, he may simply be a reformer rather than a revolutionary. Violent reform? There is a thought.

A key element of the novel involves the gang members who join the revolutionary network. Implicit in their transformation is their finding a purpose through the struggle. Preparing for and engaging in a violent revolt liberated the youths from their undisciplined, directionless lives. They became a part of something they were willing to die for. Thus, as with other works considered here, there is not only an expression of rage and retribution as well as the justification of violent action, there is again the suggestion that violent revolt can have a humanizing capacity.

The Spook Who Sat by the Door, as well as many of the other works of this time period, express the instrumental side of revolt. It is not simply about vengeance, it is about change; changing the society so that Black people can live their lives in peace. Although Greenlee highlights the fact that violent revolt is not necessarily about revolutionary aspirations, his vision stands in contrast to other artists who depicted more comprehensive notions of change in their conceptions of "the revolution." The Last Poets (1970) stand out as an excellent example. In their work "When the Revolution Comes," the image of revolution is one of total social upheaval.

> When the Revolution comes
> Preacher pimps are gonna split the scene

. . .

> And Blood will run through the streets of Harlem
> Drowning anything without substance

. . .

White death will fall off the walls of Museums and Churches

. . .

Jesus Christ is gonna be standing on the corner
Of Lenox Avenue and a hundred and twenty-fifth street
Trying to catch the first gypsy cab out of Harlem.

The image of revolution is significantly different than a mere revolt. It is an image of fundamental change; a tearing down of the current systems of belief—the systems that give meaning to the world. It comes from an understanding that the present world is governed by ideas that have prevented the fulfillment of the humanity of African Americans—and most others, for that matter. It is interesting that this image of revolution was common in the expressive works during the 1960s and 1970s, yet it seems that such conceptions were missing from the actions of most of the actual revolts that took place. Freeman was probably a lot closer to the immediate objectives of those who rioted than were the Last Poets.

It is also noteworthy that the image of violent revolt was a significant ingredient in many of the Black films that were produced during this period. Significantly, many of the "Blaxploitation" films contained images of Blacks acting violently to relieve themselves from White oppression. In films such as *Super Fly* (Shore & Parks, 1972), *Black Caesar* (Sabiston & Cohen, 1973), and *Foxy Brown* (Feitshans & Hill, 1974), the hero is able to defeat a corrupt White power structure (consisting of the police, politicians, and/or the mafia) through violence and strategy. The films provide the viewer the vicarious thrill of killing off the White oppressor. Melvin Van Peebles's (1971) *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasss Song*, for example, depicts a hero, Sweetback, who beats down two White police officers who are brutalizing a Black man. The film concludes with the words, "A BAADASSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES."

It is important to note that the films were not solely the product of the Black imagination. White Hollywood was behind the production of many of these films. Still, the imagery of violent resis-

tance or revolt tapped into a sentiment within the Black community. Blacks welcomed the vicarious thrill that came with these fantasies of violent rejection of White oppression. That thrill likely played a role in the popularity of the films in the African American community despite their many shortcomings (e.g., negative stereotypes, sexism, the glorification of crime, etc.).

VIOLENT REVOLT IN THE ERA OF HIP-HOP— THE 1980S TO THE PRESENT

The emergence of the hip-hop subculture and the advent of rap music and rap music videos brought a new wave of artistic works that expressed images of violent revolt, particularly during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Countless rappers have presented images of violent revolt in their music and music videos. Whether it is Public Enemy's (1988) depiction of a prison riot and escape in "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos" or in Nas's (2002) "Revolutionary Warfare," the notion of violent revolt has been a constant in hip-hop for two decades. The images range from Public Enemy's prison riot to political assassinations, paramilitary operations, riots, and a variety of other scenarios, with perhaps the most frequent being violence against the police.

Again, as with earlier periods, there has been a concurrence of both the fantasy and reality of violent revolt. The year 1989 stands out in this regard. That year the song "F— the Police" appeared on the popular album released by Niggas With Attitudes (NWA), and the song "Bo Bo Bo" appeared on the album of Boogie Down Productions (BDP; 1989). Both songs depicted violent resistance and vengeance against oppressive police. In addition, the Spike Lee (1989) film *Do the Right Thing* climaxed with the killing of a young Black man by White police officers followed by a riot.

That year, three riots were covered by the national media. In January, there were 2 days of rioting in Miami after a Hispanic police officer killed a Black motorcyclist; in August, Blacks rioted in Vineland, New Jersey, after a White police officer shot and killed a Black man, and in September, Black college students rioted in Virginia Beach during a Labor Day beach party after what many

reported as constant harassing by the police (Jackson, 1989). Witnesses to the Virginia Beach incident reported that as tensions rose, students blasted "F— the Police" and Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" (the theme song from *Do the Right Thing*) from car stereos and shouted these phrases. The line between fantasy and reality disappeared.

Although "F— the Police" was more widely known, "Bo Bo Bo" essentially said the same thing, though in a different way. "F— the Police" begins with rapper Ice Cube stating,

> F— the police coming straight from the underground
> A young nigga got it bad cause I'm brown
> And not the other color so police think
> They have the authority
> To kill a minority
>
> F—in' with me cause I'm a teenager
> With a little bit o' gold and a pager
> Searching my car, looking for the product
> Thinking every nigga is selling narcotics

. . .

> A young nigga on the warpath
> And when I'm finished
> It's gonna be a blood bath of cops dying in L.A.
> Yo Dre I got something to say
> F— the Police! (NWA, 1989)

"F— the Police" is not a simple rejection of authority. It is a rejection of perceived injustice. Ice Cube first describes "his" treatment by the police, along with "his" objection to this treatment. Thus, when he tells the listener that he is going on "the warpath," it has been justified. He (or his character) is angry and seeks retribution.

"Bo Bo Bo" presents a similar message in the form of a story told in the first person. KRS One, the rapper, describes getting harassed by a White police officer. The incident turns violent when the offi-

cer hits KRS in the face with his gun and KRS responds by striking the officer with a bottle.

> As he fell, his partner called for back up,
> Well, I had the shotgun and began to act up
> With that
> (Chorus): Bo! Bo! Bo! Clack! Clack! Clack! Clack! Clack!
> Get your street knowledge
> Every posse know that
> Bo! Bo! Bo! Clack! Clack! Clack! Clack! Clack!
> The only way to deal with racism
> If you're black . . .
> I'm in too deep in this everyday ghetto game
> Black men are judged by their clothes
> Black women are looked at as ho's
> So I, as one of these uppity niggers
> Can only rely on the sound of a trigger
> Goin' (Chorus). (BDP, 1989)

"Bo! Bo! Bo!" moves from a mere justification for a violent incident to the intriguing notion that violence is "the only way to deal with racism if you're black." Both songs depict police abuse, Black anger, and retribution. "Bo! Bo! Bo!" goes beyond that to emphasize the instrumental side of violence as well. Violence is "the only way to deal with racism." But what does it mean to deal with racism? One interpretation could be that this is the simple assertion that violence against the oppressor is the only means to end that oppression. Yet the phrase can also be interpreted as a comment on the humanizing capacity of violence. Trapped within the dehumanizing system of racial oppression, the only tool the oppressed have to maintain or regain their humanity, their personhood—to reclaim their status as subject and not object—is violent action against the oppressor.

Rapper Ice Cube also provides another example of the concurrence of real revolts and fantasized revolts in rap. In his 1991 album *Death Certificate*, he seems to predict a Los Angeles riot. In a song called "Horny Li'l Devil," Cube uses the image of forced sex to represent the oppressor's insatiable thirst for exploitation. In admon-

ishing the "horny li'l devil," Cube tells "him" to "put your — on a diet/Cause this is Watts Riot 1991/I'm 'a get my gun and put an end to the devil." Thus, the idea of a riot was on the mind of at least one young Black man not long before the 1992 riots occurred.

The very next song on Cube's (1991b) album is "Black Korea." Here, he threatens that if Korean shopkeepers did not stop following him in their stores, they would be "a target of a nationwide boycott." He moves quickly from threats of nonviolent protest to threats of violence, stating "So pay respect to the black fist or get your store burnt down to a crisp." The final line of the song is "You can't turn the ghetto into black Korea." Thus, the conflict between Blacks and Koreans was presented in a way that emphasized the growing hostility. The song entails anger, retribution, and a justification for violence, as well as an implicit argument about the lack of respect.

Why the hostility toward Koreans? It seems that Koreans were depicted as outsiders profiting off the Black community. The last line of the song suggests a feeling that Koreans are taking over the ghetto—which essentially means taking over the Black community. Yet it is important to note that the hostility Cube expresses toward Koreans is nowhere near the hostility he expresses toward Whites. For Cube, ultimate blame for the conditions of Black America rests with Whites. However, the Koreans, although not as bad as the Whites, are on the side of exploitation. Consequently, like police officers, the Korean merchant is an immediate representation of oppression.

Do the Right Thing confronts the question of Black and Korean relations as well. Though but a small aspect of the film, Lee (1989) masterfully presents the mixed feelings of the Black community toward a Korean merchant. Some characters argue that the fact the Koreans were able to open a store in a Black neighborhood implied a position of privilege in the racial hierarchy. Other characters express an appreciation of the "industriousness" of the Korean business owner. Lee seems to weigh in on the side of the latter. As police officers drive away after having killed Radio Raheim, the Korean merchant is among those screaming hostilities at the police. This is despite his having had a hostile encounter with Raheim. As

the riot rages, the crowd moves from the White-owned business (the pizzeria) toward the Korean store. Some in the crowd call for burning the store as well. The owner, meanwhile, stands between the crowd and his store and exclaims, "I'm black too." The crowd hesitates a moment longer and with the admonishing of other Black characters, elects not to attack the store. Thus, Lee draws a line where the Korean is on the side of the oppressed; part of the "us," not the "them." This is in contrast to Cube's representation of the Koreans as part of the "them."

In Los Angeles in 1992, Ice Cube may have had a more accurate depiction of the sentiment within the Black community. Many Korean businesses were targeted during the rioting. This is not surprising given the intensity of the tensions between African Americans and Koreans leading up to that moment.[2] It seems Ice Cube was rather prescient. He recalled the riot imagery and predicted the fate of many Korean stores.

Given the insight into the pre-riot mind set, it is worthwhile to consider the post-riot analysis offered by Cube as well as another rapper, Willie D. On his next album, "The Predator," Ice Cube (1992) explained the riot rather succinctly, claiming that for "two days niggas laid in the cut/To get some respect, we had to tear this motherf—r up." Cube's song encompasses three of the themes discussed throughout this article—a justification for violence, rage and retribution, and the central theme of the song, the need to fight to gain respect.

Another rapper's post-riot analysis is also worth considering in this context. Willie D's (1992) song, "Rodney K" criticized Rodney King's attempt to quell the rioting as the deeds of a "sell out" who was ungrateful for the fighting that was done in his name. Beyond his critique of King, Willie D states that he was glad the rioters "Stayed out of check, Cause that's the only thing redneck's respect."

> We don't want your welfare checks
> Nigga need a real job to buy a Rolex
> Until we get it we gonna keep throwing them things
> F— Rodney King!

. . .

> . . .We shall overcome . . . We shall overcome.
> F— all that singing
> I'm 'a be too busy swinging.

Willie D's song comes across as an angry tirade complete with expletive-laced refrain ("F— Rodney King! F— 'em! F— 'em!"). Yet the relevance of the song to this discussion lies in his presentation of the purpose of such a revolt. Despite the expressed anger, violent revolt is not presented solely as a cathartic experience. Willie D argues for a revolt based on the results of the action—beyond the claim that "that's the only thing rednecks respect," toward the end of the song he envisions the creation of a better world in which the children can thrive.

> Gotta come on wit' it
> Get down for my little Willies
> So they can come up strong
> And live long
> And not be afraid to get it on!

Both Cube and Willie D give the rioting their blessing. This is in contrast even to the most sympathetic public voices that claim at most that observers ought to understand that the riots are the expressions of frustration. Here we have direct endorsements of riot behavior as a strategy for political advancement.

LESSONS FROM FANTASIES OF VIOLENT REVOLT: BLACK VIOLENCE AS VENGEFUL SELF-DEFENSE

The analysis of Black fantasies of violent revolt is instructive indeed. The analysis supports some of the insights of the social scientific theories of violent revolt as it reveals that the authors of these fantasies view violent revolt as both cathartic and instrumental. Beyond that, the fantasies offer insights into what makes violent revolt a legitimate strategy. The four recurring themes help us to

understand that violent revolt, or even the fantasy of violent revolt, is not taken lightly. The anger and desire for retribution are the product of a context of oppression and dehumanization. The violent fantasies are usually juxtaposed to a detailing of assorted abuses. Violence is justified by the conditions of oppression.

But what is it about the conditions that justify violence? The recurring notion that the oppressed must fight to gain respect helps to clarify this justification. The quest for respect is not a desire for sensitivity or inclusion. It is a yearning for a respect for Black life, for Black humanity. The creative works considered here consistently argued that Black people are under attack, and violent revolt is one means of halting the attack. It is self-defense. The fantasies portray violent revolt as what might best be called vengeful self-defense. Violence is called for in defense of Black humanity but is carried out with rage and a desire for retribution as well as liberation.

Finally, there is the notion of the humanizing aspect of violent revolt. Frederick Douglass and others have made compelling arguments supporting the notion that violent revolt can be a means to reconstitute the humanity of the oppressed. Richard Wright (1940) suggests this idea in *Native Son*. Wright describes the character Bigger Thomas's murdering of a White girl as "the first full act of his life. It was the most exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. He accepted it because it made him free" (p. 364). Robinson (1983) has argued that for Wright, "violence could not be separated out from the formation of consciousness" (p. 427). Jean Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon tell us that the violence of the oppressed against the oppressors is "man recreating himself" (Sartre, 1963, p. 21). The oppressed find "freedom in and through violence" (Fanon, 1963, p. 84). It is "a cleansing force" (p. 94).

The idea of violent revolt as a means for the oppressed to seize or reconstruct their humanity ought to be frightening for those who reject violence. Though convincing arguments are made that violence ultimately does not have that impact (Kebede, 2001), what is most important for the student of violent revolt is that many may believe that it is true. That this is a recurring theme in Black fantasies of violent revolt suggests that it is a persistent element in the

Black imagination. It is a component of the web of ideas that justifies the persistence of violent revolt within African Americans' repertoire of political actions.

CONCLUSION

Why do people participate in violent uprisings? Although we do know that violent revolts are both cathartic and instrumental, we do not know why people choose violence in any particular situation. But we know they choose it often. This article has taken the position that we might understand the violent revolt of African Americans if we consider how African Americans understand or think about violent revolt. The concurrence of real violent revolt with examples of the fantasy of violent revolt suggests that the violent uprising has been and continues to be a component of Black political thought. The examination of creative works that entail fantasies of violent revolt serve as one source of insight into how violent revolt is understood. Such a review reveals that violent revolt has been justified by references to the acts of the oppressor. Furthermore, violent revolt is understood as a means to achieve the goals of retribution and vengeance, as well as a way to force the oppressor to respect Black humanity. Most interesting, violent revolt is understood by some as a path toward the restoration of one's humanity. Where oppressive systems such as slavery or the racial caste system are dehumanizing, a violent challenge to those systems is understood by some as a means for one to reclaim or reconstruct their humanity. It is an act of individual liberation not only in terms of transforming one's circumstances, but also as a means to transform one's self.

NOTES

1. "Violent" refers to an attempt to injure persons and/or damage property. "Violent revolt" refers to a violent outbreak in resistance to a political or social authority. Given that definition, acts of violence taken by Blacks to resist White attacks are considered violent

revolt given that White aggression was deemed legitimate within the system of racial subordination.

2. Perhaps the most important incident in terms of the increasing tensions came when a Korean shopkeeper, Soon Ja Du, shot and killed a Black teenager, Latasha Harlins. Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter, yet was sentenced to 5 years' probation (Ford, 1992). Given the intergroup tensions already present, that decision likely solidified for many African Americans that Koreans were in fact on the side of the oppressor.

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