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Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties

In this discussion of masculinist dimensions of black nationalism and cultural challenges to male supremacy, I reflect on the kindred character of black nationalism(s) and ideologies of male dominance during the sixties. Revisiting my own experiences with the nationalisms of the sixties, I suggest ways in which contemporary black popular culture may have been unduly influenced by some of the more unfortunate ideological convergences of that era.

I begin with some thoughts on the impact of Malcolm X's nationalist oratory on my own political awakening, which I would later think of in terms similar to Frantz Fanon's description of the coming to consciousness of the colonized in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

I remember the moment when I first felt the stirrings of "nationalism" in my – as I might have articulated it then – "Negro Soul." This *prise de conscience* occurred during a lecture delivered by Malcolm X at Brandeis University, where I was one of five or six black undergraduates enrolled. I might have said that I felt "empowered" by Malcolm's words – except that the notion of power had not yet been understood in a way that separated the exercise of power from subjective emotions occasioned by an awareness of the possibility of exercising it. But I recall that I felt extremely good – I could even say I experienced the joy that Cornel West talked about – momentarily surrounded by, feeling nurtured and caressed by black people who, as I recall, seemed to have no particular identity other than that they were black.

This invitation to join an empowering but abstract community of black people – this naive nationalist consciousness – was extended to me in a virtually all-white setting. It was a strange, but quite logical, reversal. Having grown up in one of the most segregated cities in the South, I had never personally known a white person in my hometown. The only one with whom I remember having any contact was the Jewish man who owned the

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grocery store in our neighborhood. White people lived across the street from my family's house, but we literally lived on the border separating black from white and could not cross the street on which our house was located. Because of the mandatory character of the black community in which I grew up I came to experience it as somewhat suffocating and desperately sought a way out.

Now finally, on the other side of this feeling evoked in me by the offensive nationalist rhetoric of Malcolm X – offensive, both because he offended the white people in attendance and because he was ideologically on the offensive – I was able to construct a psychological space within which I could "feel good about myself." I could celebrate my body (especially my nappy hair, which I always attacked with a hot comb in ritualistic seclusion), my musical proclivities, and my suppressed speech patterns, among other things. But I shared these feelings with no one. It was a secret thing – like a collective, fictive playmate. This thing distanced me from the white people around me while simultaneously rendering controllable the distance I had always felt from them. It also meant that I did not have to defer to the mandatoriness of my Negro community back home. As a matter of fact, as a result of this experience into which Malcolm's words launched me, I felt a strengthening of the ties with the community of my birth.

This nationalist appeal of the early Malcolm X, however, did not move me to activism – although I had been something of an activist since the age of thirteen. I didn't particularly feel the need to *do* anything. It ended for me where it began in changing the structure of my feeling. Don't get me wrong. I really needed that. I needed it at least as much as I would later need the appeal of the image of the leather-jacketed, black-bereted warriors standing with guns at the entrance to the California legislature. (I saw that image in a German newspaper while studying with Theodor Adorno in Frankfurt.) That image, which would eventually become so problematic for me, called me home. And it directed me into an organizing frenzy in the streets of South Central Los Angeles.

In a sense, the feeling that Malcolm had conjured in me could finally acquire a mode of expression – collective, activist, and, I hoped, transformative. Except that once I arrived in Southern California – with contacts I had gotten from Stokely Carmichael, whom I met, along with Michael X, in London at a "Dialectics of Liberation" conference – my inquiries and enthusiasm were interpreted as a desire to infiltrate local Black organizations. After all, I had just gotten off the boat from Europe. I had to be CIA or something. But, eventually, I did embark upon an exploration of some of the nationalisms of the era. I found out, during my initial contacts, that Ron Karenga's group was too misogynist (although I would not have used that word then). Another organization I found too middle class and elitist. Yet another fell apart because we, women, refused to be pushed to the back of

the bus. And even though we may have considered the feminism of that period white, middle class, and utterly irrelevant, we also found compulsory male leadership utterly unacceptable.

Today, I realize that there is no simple or unitary way to look at expressions of black nationalism or essentialism in contemporary cultural forms. As my own political consciousness evolved in the sixties, I found myself in a politically oppositional stance to what some of us then called "narrow nationalism." As a Marxist, I found issues of class and internationalism as necessary to my philosophical orientation as inclusion in a community of historically oppressed people of African descent. But, at the same time, I needed to say "black is beautiful" as much as any of the intransigent anti-white nationalists. I needed to explore my African ancestry, to don African garb, and to wear my hair natural as much as the blinder-wearing male supremacist cultural nationalists. (And, by the way, I had no idea my own "natural" would achieve its somewhat legendary status; I was simply emulating other sisters.)

My relationship to the particular nationalism I embraced was rooted in political practice. The vortex of my practice was always the progressive, politicized black community – though I frequently questioned my place as a black woman in that community, even in the absence of a vocabulary with which to pose the relevant questions. Within the Communist Party, "black" was my point of reference – which did not prevent me from identifying with the multiracial working class and its historical agency. I am not suggesting that the negotiation of that relationship was not fraught with many difficulties, but I do know that I probably would not have joined the Communist Party at that time if I had not been able to enter the Party through an all-black collective in Los Angeles called the Che-Lumumba Club.

The sisters who were my closest comrades, in SNCC, in the Black Panther Party, in the Communist Party, fought tenaciously – and we sometimes fought tenaciously among ourselves – for our right to fight. And we were sometimes assisted in this by sympathetic men in these organizations. We may not have been able to talk about gendered racism; "sexuality" may have still meant sexiness; homophobia, as a word, may not yet have existed; but our practice, I can say in retrospect, was located on a continuum that groped and zigzagged its way toward this moment of deliberation on the pitfalls of nationalism and essentialism. I revisit my own history here to situate myself, in this current exploration of postnationalism, as a revolutionary activist during an era when nationalist and essentialist ideas about black people and the black struggle in the United States crystallized in such a way as to render them capable of surviving in the historical consciousness of people of African descent throughout the diaspora, but especially in the collective imagination of large numbers of

African-American youth today. Perhaps we might make a similar observation about the Garveyism of the 1920s, but, among other things, the undeveloped state of – and forced exclusion from – both media technology and popular historical consciousness prevented us from later being inspired in the same way as by those slogans and images of the late sixties.

Today, of course, young people are explicitly inspired by what they know about Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. And I find myself in a somewhat problematic position because my own image appears now and then in visual evocations of this nationalist impulse that fuel the advocacy of revolutionary change in contemporary hip-hop culture. These days, young people who were not even born when I was arrested often approach me with expressions of awe and disbelief. On the one hand, it is inspiring to discover a measure of historical awareness that, in our youth, my generation often lacked. But it is also unsettling, because I know that almost inevitably my image is associated with a certain representation of black nationalism that privileges those particular nationalisms with which some of us were locked in constant battle.

Contemporary representations of nationalism in African-American and diasporic popular culture are far too frequently reifications of a very complex and contradictory project that had emancipatory moments leading beyond itself. For example, my own first major activist effort as a budding "nationalist" was the construction of an alliance with Chicano students and progressive white students in San Diego for the purpose of demanding the creation of a college we called Lumumba-Zapata. It is the only college in the University of California, San Diego system, that is identified today by its number – Third College – rather than by a name.

A further example: Look at the issue of the Black Panther Party newspaper in the spring of 1970 in which Huey Newton wrote an article urging an end to verbal gay bashing, urging an examination of black male sexuality, and calling for an alliance with the developing gay liberation movement. This article was written in the aftermath of Jean Genet's sojourn with the Black Panther Party, and Genet's *Un Captif Amoureux* reveals suppressed moments of the history of sixties nationalism.[1]

Such moments as these have been all but eradicated in popular representations today of the black movement of the late sixties and early seventies. And I resent that the legacy I consider my own – one I also helped to construct – has been rendered invisible. Young people with "nationalist" proclivities ought, at least, to have the opportunity to choose which tradition of nationalism they will embrace. How will they position themselves en masse in defense of women's rights and in defense of gay rights if they are not aware of the historical precedents for such positionings?

With respect to the exclusion of such progressive moments in the sixties' history of black nationalism, the mass media is not the sole culprit. We also

have to look at the institutions that package this history before it is disseminated by the media – including some of the academic sites occupied by obsolete and inveterate nationalists. Furthermore, we need to look at who packages the practice. The only existing mass black organization that can claim the so-called authority of having been there during the formative period of contemporary black nationalism, and therefore, of carrying forth Malcolm X's legacy, is the Nation of Islam. Who is working with gang members in South Central Los Angeles today? Who is trying, on an ongoing basis, to end the violence and to bring warring gangs together in dialogue? Why is the rap artist Paris, who calls himself the Black Panther of Rap, a member of the Nation of Islam? Why is Ice Cube studying with the Nation? Impulses toward collective political practice are being absorbed, in this instance, by a movement that accords nationalism the status of a religion.

As enthusiastic as we might be about the capacity of hip-hop culture to encourage oppositional consciousness among today's young people, it sometimes advocates a nationalism with such strong misogynist overtones that it militates against the very revolutionary practice it appears to promote. Where is the door – or even the window – opening onto a conception of political practice?

Where cultural representations do not reach out beyond themselves, there is the danger that they will function as surrogates for activism, that they will constitute both the beginning and end of political practice. I always go back to Marx's eleventh Feuerbach. This is because, as Cornel would say, it brings me joy: "Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it."

Note

1 Jean Genet, *Un Captif Amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986); translated as *Prisoner of Love* (London: Pan Books, 1989).