

"It Be's That Way Sometimes 'Cause I Can't Control the Rhyme": Notes From the Post-Soul Intelligentsia

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

One of my earliest musical recollections is riding in my uncle's car with my pops, driving down 168th Street in the Bronx listening to what I would later learn was Junior Walker's "What Does it Take? (To Win Your Love)." The late [Alice Walker]'s tenor sax continues to resonate among a spate of childhood memories, all cradled by the sounds of Soul that dominated the era. In truth, I can barely imagine a world without Diana Ross's 7-minute epic "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" or The Spinners' "Mighty Love," though in fact this was the world that I faced as the Soul tradition gave way to the unbridled nihilism of Disco and the ragged emotion of funk. Don't get me wrong, I got my original "groove on" listening to Funkadelic's "One Nation Under a Groove," but somehow these were the sounds of a world slipping away into an uncertain and unfamiliar future. Given these dynamics, it seemed logical to ignore the rudimentary sounds of a musical genre I would, a decade later, embrace as my own and my generation's. If Hip-Hop was my music...was my future, it was noise I wasn't willing to hear as the 70s waned and [Ronald Reagan]'s Roarin' 80s dawned.

In his controversial essay "The New Black Aesthetic," Trey Ellis identifies the primary sensibilities of this generation of largely non-academic critics and artists.(6) Generally regarded as that generation's manifesto, Ellis's essay encapsulates what Ronald A.T. Judy has identified as the traditions of "avant garde modernism" and "Leftist vanguard agitprop,"(7) traditions that of course link the "New Black Aesthetic" to the "high Negro style" of the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance period and the provocative popart of the Black Arts Movement. At the crux of this New Black Aesthetic is a profound rearticulation of the sounds and signs of socially constructed notions of blackness as the praxis of obliterating "old definitions of blackness" that "show us the intricate, uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be."(8) Ellis's manifesto links radical and transgressive notions of blackness as expressed in the work of Katherine Dunham, George Clinton, Jimi Hendrix, Albert Murray, [Ishmael Reed], Patti Labelle and Labelle, LeRoi Jones (early [Amiri Baraka]), and Melvin Van Peebles. Moreover, in that the New Black Aesthetic attempts to rearticulate traditional conceptions of blackness, the aesthetic movement also aims to animate and deconstruct popular assumptions of black identity through process the of parody/pastiche and the democratization of black critical discourse.

Within the area of gender, contemporary black intellectuals profoundly differ from earlier generations of black scholars in that black women, academic sexism and misogyny notwithstanding, are prominent within the community of contemporary black scholars and academics. The scholarship of women like Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, Patricia Hill-Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Katie Cannon has arguably redefined gender studies within the context of the African-American experience, although the marginal status of their scholarship to the canon of contemporary black thought is the obvious price they have paid for the patriarchy that continues to inform such thought. Ironically, it has been the significant presence of black women within the academy that has provided the context for an acceptance of black and mainstream feminist scholarship among both female and male thinkers within the Post-Soul intelligentsia. This reality has furthered the de-essentialist project most recently articulated within the "New Black Aesthetic" movement.(13) While [Greg Tate]'s concept of "anti-essentialist essentialism," like the tradition of public and oppositional discourse that is so rooted in the black intellectual tradition, is inherently

located in the broader universe that produces the "Post-Soul" intelligentsia – really emblematic of the hyper-consumption that has defined the "Post-Soul" period – two major themes primarily inform the intellectual project of the "Post-Soul" intelligentsia: the reconstruction of history/memory and the reconstitution of community. These particular tensions are the product of structural developments that have informed if not defined the socialization process of the "Post-Soul" intelligentsia.

FULL TEXT

"IT BE'S THAT WAY SOMETIMES `CAUSE I CAN'T CONTROL THE RHYME"

One of my earliest musical recollections is riding in my uncle's car with my pops, driving down 168th Street in the Bronx listening to what I would later learn was Junior Walker's "What Does it Take? (To Win Your Love)." The late Walker's tenor sax continues to resonate among a spate of childhood memories, all cradled by the sounds of Soul that dominated the era. In truth, I can barely imagine a world without Diana Ross's 7-minute epic "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" or The Spinners' "Mighty Love," though in fact this was the world that I faced as the Soul tradition gave way to the unbridled nihilism of Disco and the ragged emotion of funk. Don't get me wrong, I got my original "groove on" listening to Funkadelic's "One Nation Under a Groove," but somehow these were the sounds of a world slipping away into an uncertain and unfamiliar future. Given these dynamics, it seemed logical to ignore the rudimentary sounds of a musical genre I would, a decade later, embrace as my own and my generation's. If Hip-Hop was my music...was my future, it was noise I wasn't willing to hear as the 70s waned and Reagan's Roarin' 80s dawned.

The house parties and park jams which figured so prominently in Hip-Hop's early development and which represent perhaps the last hospitable social spaces afforded black youth in the burgeoning post-industrial city, were often outside my concerns. Somehow Hip-Hop's appeal for me rested beyond its use as an aurally constructed notion of space and physical site(s) for the invisible, though everpresent urban-determined youth with whom the genre has been so readily associated. Having given up the Soul and given up on Funk a few years earlier, my impending maturity found refuge and its muse in the pressing political and social issues of the mid-to-late 80s. Fortunately, I was part of an ever-maturing generation that was thankfully spared cosmic interpretations of our contemporary history via network mini-series, cinematic epics, and multicultural school textbooks. Our history – the history of the modern Civil Rights movement and its brash and angry offspring, the Black Power and Feminist movements – was shared with us via its dominant icons: the common, god-fearing, everyday black folks whose revolutionary charge was simply to transcend absurd and bizarre circumstances immediately and often. Yes, we would relive these moments in the living rooms, back porches, and church pews of our increasingly dispersed and mythical black nation, but these were not our moments...these were not our stories. Those stories were neatly packed away with the memories of Diana's shrill voice urging us to "touch somebody's hand" and brother James saying it loud and proud.

Yet, we remained uniquely poised – this first post-Civil Rights, post-nationalist, post-Black Power, post-Gary, Indiana, post-integration...Post-Soul generation – to interpret the political and cultural terrain of our own conflicted moment. Lacking many of the nostalgic ties that both defined and bound earlier generations of Civil Rights leaders and followers, we witnessed Jesse Jackson's two historic presidential campaigns, the rebirth and rise of the Nation of Islam, the first black Miss America, the child murders in Atlanta, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, the liberation of Nelson Mandela, and the publication of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as subjective strangers equally disdained by an old Negroid guard and a young generation of whites remorseful perhaps that they were the first generation who could not legally deny our freedom – or so we thought. But we were also a generation that would ultimately be politicized by the successful rise of the Conservative Right, its predominant icon Ronald Reagan, and the failure of our leadership – elected and anointed – to respond adequately to the realities of black urban life in

the 1980s and the hazards posed by Right-wing ideologues masquerading as legislators, presidential candidates, objective political pundits, and members of the Hollywood elite.

Hip-Hop, whose early rhythms and cadences foreshadowed its oppositional potential a decade later, served as the ideal conduit for the inner rage of displaced, disadvantaged, and mis-educated urban masses as well as the embryonic political musings of an urban-defined, college-aged, burgeoning Post-Soul intelligentsia. In short, the "Post-Soul" generation came to maturity during – and is thus marked by – the incidents of black middle-class flight, a substantial deterioration in the quality of black public life, the unequivocal re-emergence of the conservative right, and the failure of post-Civil Rights strategies to respond adequately to any of these life-affecting threats.

Writer/critic Nelson George first used the term "Post-Soul" to delineate the cultural production of African Americans since the Blaxploitation era of the 1970s.(1) While I am appropriating the spirit of George's idea, I have a very specific context in which to apply the "Post-Soul" theme. I believe the Post-Soul intellectual to be a unique and transitional figure in the arena of African-American arts and letters. It is the critical musings of this generation of thinkers that will construct transitional social and political strategies for the 21st century, creating the necessary connections between our most recent political struggles and the struggles that will visit the generations that will immediately follow us. We are unique in that we are, perhaps, our people's best intellectual hope to bridge the widening gap between yesterday's civil rights marcher and today's crack baby. Skeptical as we may be of the previous generation's watershed movement, it has endowed us with a spirit of purpose and the capacity to hope, though I believe in our darkest hours our sentiments remain allied with the pessimisms of the marginalized African American Diaspora of our urban centers. To be sure, though, the dissertations of the brothers and sisters of crack babies, if not former crack babies themselves, have yet to be written, though we may be uniquely positioned to facilitate their emergence.

Like the brash young thinkers of the early 20th century, whose New Negroess continues to inform the traditions of African American arts and letters, we are charged with navigating a new world defined by radical shifts in labor demographics, a bottom-to-top redistribution of wealth, and the development of computerized networks that have redefined the very notions of communication, commerce, and public discourse. In our best moments, we hope to eschew the "HNIC"(2) elitism that perhaps defined and limited some members of the generation of New Negro thinkers, by critically interrogating our positioning to the black urban masses that we aspire to empower and the tradition of black intellectual thought that informs us. Whereas this earlier generation of thinkers often failed to relate equally to the Phi Beta Kappa and the Harlem Dandy, we have little choice but to engage the B-Boy, the Buppie, and the many diverse manifestations of black identity that continue to proliferate. At the crux of this reality is to position ourselves beyond a mere gatekeeper status of some truncated, sanitized, and historically determined version of blackness, but to broaden the context of what are concurrently individualized, communal, and socially determined constructs.

Our status, as intellectuals and academics, demands some allegiance to the staid plaster of the Ivory Tower and the middle-class lifestyle it affords, while the essence of our being – are some of us not the first and second generation of the most profound migration movement of the 20th century? – lies in the "ghetto-hoods" that we called home. Brother Gil Scott-Heron was right: "home" is often where the "hatred" is, but this home, as Esther Phillips attested in her version of Scott-Heron's "Home is Where the Hatred Is," has also been a place of love and sustenance, if not a living metaphor for human survival. Such realities can no longer be simply accepted as the dilemma that excuses our inability to have an adequate impact upon the social and political policies that most adversely affect our communities. This movement of "Post-Soul" intellectuals is poised to redefine the nature and purpose of traditional arts and letters, on the one hand blurring often oppositional discourses of popular and academic expression, and on the other positing, as did earlier generations of black scholars, the academy as a site

to influence public policy and to confront critically the specter of race in American society. Our mission differs from earlier generations of black scholars in that the white academy of desegregated America has emerged as the primary site of our scholarly endeavors, providing the context to access valuable resources but also to confront our growing marginalization (as intellectuals) from the concentrated mass of young black minds that continue to emerge from historically black institutions. Our abilities to counter these contradictions will be witnessed in our commitment critically to engage public discourse, popular culture, political activism, and the belief that our theoretical groundings serve as viable models of mass social praxis.

The intellectual sensibilities of the "Post-Soul" intelligentsia are the dual product of America's segregated past and its failed attempts at an integrated present. Not simply "Affirmative Action Babies" – the realities of post-Civil Rights race relations are simply more expansive than debates about set-aside programs and quota systems – our access to predominantly white institutions within academe represents perhaps the most compelling example of the success of the Civil Rights movement. But in many regards our political groundings were most notably influenced, not by the traditional leadership of the Civil Rights movement, but by the largely urban intelligentsia that was locked out of the mainstream academy during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s because of segregation in higher education, and who perceived the Negro academy as an increasingly limiting and inadequate paradigm to address the issues of the black urban North. This cadre of thinkers, though not expressly defined by the rigors of traditional academic life, was nevertheless devoted to examining the philosophical issues surrounding black identity in a highly industrialized moment. More compellingly, their work highlighted an alarming paradox within the African American diaspora. As the masses of blacks became increasingly urbanized as a result of mass migration, the Negro intelligentsia remained rooted in a social context that was distinctly Southern and rural, rendering them incapable of adequately addressing the developing crises of black urban life. It is thus not surprising that the first major work on the black urban condition, St. Clair Drake's *Black Metropolis*, was produced by one of the first black scholars legitimately to integrate a major urban university in the North.(3)

Writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Gwendolyn Brooks represent an urban intelligentsia shaped by their experiences in the North and willing to use their texts as vehicles for social protest. Embracing a self-defined lifestyle that often existed beyond the Negro academy and mainstream American public life, this generation of thinkers and artists laid the foundations for an independent intellectual movement in the Black community in the post-World War II era. Wright in particular carried this responsibility like a badge of honor and was highly skeptical of traditional black scholars, particularly those still fixated on black life in the rural South. This is of course not to ignore valuable contributions by scholars like E. Franklin Frazier or Oliver Cromwell Cox, but to recognize the reanimation of a third stream of black intellectual thought, not explicitly produced from the traditional white academy or the historic sites of black intellectual discourse, and whose presence can be dated back to the work of 19th century scholars like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Martin Delany, Anna Julia Cooper, and Alexander Crummell.

Wright's work, of which *Native Son* and the non-fiction pictorial essay *12 Million Black Voices* are most emblematic, details the deteriorating conditions of black urban life and the existentialist spirit inherent to it, even as the urban North continued to be championed as the "Promised Land." Wright's efforts, like those of his contemporaries, inform the activist agendas of the young and often urban-based intellectuals of the 1960s like Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez. Representatives of the Black Arts Movement and a school of black nationalist thought, scholars like Baraka, Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Haki Madhubuti form the intellectual building blocks of the "Post-Soul" generation. The work of many of these scholars continues to resonate in the work of the "Post-Soul" intelligentsia, perhaps because they rightly understood that accessibility to the masses was not necessarily antithetical to high creativity, political activism, and intellectual acumen. Despite a proclivity for problematic and ultimately confining constructions of nationalism and masculinity, this generation of thinkers, however briefly,

established itself as the most visible and independent stream of black scholars of the 20th century, though many of their basic sentiments were at profound odds with the largely middle-class and Southern-based leadership of the Civil Rights movement. These scholars, like their most influential political icon Malcolm X, dared to imagine a post-colonial world that included their role as its dominant aestheticians.

In reality, then-revolutionary acts were reduced to tenured faculty appointments and guest lectureships on predominantly white university campuses, where former intellectual revolutionaries were increasingly found as faculty within the first generation of Black Studies programs and as regulars on the Black History Month/Black Student Union lecture circuit of the 1970s and early 1980s. While on one level emblematic of the problematic limitations of diversity efforts within higher education, the presence of black intellectuals on predominantly white campuses represented the draining of valuable resources to the black community, even if such resources had been formerly distributed largely within the parameters of a black academy bound to middleclass aspirations. With rare exceptions, many Black Arts scholars remained significantly marginalized from mainstream African-American life or frustrated and entrenched within a bevy of tenure battles, retrenchment initiatives, and university committees within the mainstream American academy, equally marginalized from the people and the policies that define contemporary African American life. Interpreted within the broader context of American race relations, black intellectuals were effectively desegregated away from the very communities of blackness that produced them, while their presence tacitly validated America's claims to the realization of an integrated society.

These phenomena highlight many of the perverse benefits of segregated black life. Within the structure of segregated black life, the diversity of class and political interests was largely constrained by the physical dynamics of the black community. Thus, within both formal and informal public life, mechanisms of accountability and communal critique were integral to daily life within the black community. In our contemporary moment – which in the context of black life is now defined by black middle-class flight, the erosion of traditional forms of public life, and the emergence of a black urban underclass – intellectuals and politicians are no longer constrained by any formal means of communal critique. This relationship is most profoundly exhibited in the black masses' unrelenting distrust of black intellectuals. I speak here of those many intellectuals who have chosen to silence their voices in return for faculty appointments, tenured status, endowed chairs, rich publishing contracts, and "I am the only black in my..." status, and who refuse to address the critical questions facing the larger black community.

In a broader sense, the problematic conflation of intellectual and academic life represents, as Russell Jacoby suggests, the demise of a vibrant bohemian culture in America's urban spaces.⁽⁴⁾ Though contemporary academic life does afford a lifestyle supportive of America's elite intellectuals, too often the energies and the interests of the average academic remain aligned with the business of running the academy as opposed to the business of producing original and provocative scholarship. Unfortunately the most publically affecting contemporary scholarship is rarely produced by intellectuals within the academy, but rather by so-called scholars supported by well-endowed conservative think-tanks like the Hoover Institute and the Heritage Foundation, whose scholarship is produced in concert with the public policy initiatives of the Right. The Left in America has rarely been positioned to generate significant and consistent financial support, and the remnants of the Left that continue to seek influence on matters of public policy have found the most accessible avenues of public debate – television and commercial print media – to be inaccessible to their financial and political means. In reality, the demise of a vibrant intellectual culture within American bohemia – think here of the non-corporatized coffee house and parlor spaces that defined New York's Greenwich Village as well as San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury – has significantly affected the generally tenuous status of the American Left. Often viewed as the Left's poorer relation – was not Harlem simply New York Bohemia's uptown annex? – black public life has obviously been adversely affected by the changes in overall American public life, as the cottage industry of African-American arts and letters has always required the patronage of the liberal bourgeois establishment or the strategic support of the Right, when such scholarship

helps valorize the latter's public policy inclinations.

Ironically, it is the remnants of bohemian culture in the Lower East Side and East Village of New York City that have provided the impetus for the generation of cultural and social critics who directly precede the Post-Soul intelligentsia. Heavily concentrated in the urban underground of the 1980s that produces creative individuals as varied as Greg Tate, Vernon Reid, the Black Rock Coalition, Jean Michel Basquiat, Public Enemy, George C. Wolfe, Darius James, Cassandra Wilson, and Geri Allen, this cadre of thinkers and artists is directly related to the generation of esoteric black intellectuals who inhabited New York's East Village during the 60s, when self-styled black bohemians like Ellen Stewart, Steve Cannon, Ishmael Reed, and Archie Shepp purposely embraced the edges of marginalia to guarantee a hyper-objectivity towards a liberation movement gone awry. In one of Tate's seminal essays, an examination of the work of Basquiat, he suggests that "To read the tribe astutely you sometimes have to leave the tribe ambitiously, and should you come home again, it is not always to sing hosannas or a song the tribe necessarily wants to hear."⁽⁵⁾ Tate articulates a vantage point that the East Village bohemians of the 1960s craved. While Baraka left the confines of New York's bohemia, landing in Harlem as a nationalist and later a communist, East Village Bohemians maintained a cautious distance from the site of too many poorly-conceived "Black to the Future" dreams. It is this same community in the East Village that was home to the Negro Ensemble Company, which under the direction of Douglas Turner Ward consistently and effectively presented complex and brilliant representations of African American life that undermined acceptable depictions of African Americans.

Particularly visible in weekly journals as diverse as the Village Voice and Billboard, a collective of urban critics emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s to impose consistency on the then-dispersed – at least relative to earlier generations – nature of black intellectual thought and meaning vis-à-vis the fleeting improvisation of black urban life. Championing Hip-Hop as the Black Arts critics had championed Hard Bop and BeBop, writers like Tate, Nelson George, and Harry Allen instigated an aggressive, oppositional criticism that embodied the sonic kinetics of Hip-Hop and black urban life as primarily defined by black male sensibilities. Beyond politics and cultural history, Tate in particular instilled a sense of intellectual urgency to the life and art forms of America's most despised and condemned constituency. Crucial to the basic sensibilities of this group was their distance, philosophically if not generationally, from both the pettybourgeois visions of the traditional Civil Rights leadership and the essentialist, demanding ideology of some within the black nationalist wing of black intellectual and political thought. Beyond oppositional stances, this was a generation of critics devoted to redefining essentialist notions of black culture. Their project was, in large part, protected by their commitment to remain on the margins and thus to remain unbought and unbothered by the thought police and "soul patrol" alike. Their commitment to presenting what Tate has called an "anti-essentialist essentialist" perspective of black culture is largely realized in the diversity of their aforementioned icons and their ability to bring to bear African-American influences on matters deemed distinctly non-black.

In his controversial essay "The New Black Aesthetic," Trey Ellis identifies the primary sensibilities of this generation of largely non-academic critics and artists.⁽⁶⁾ Generally regarded as that generation's manifesto, Ellis's essay encapsulates what Ronald A.T. Judy has identified as the traditions of "avant garde modernism" and "Leftist vanguard agitprop,"⁽⁷⁾ traditions that of course link the "New Black Aesthetic" to the "high Negro style" of the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance period and the provocative popart of the Black Arts Movement. At the crux of this New Black Aesthetic is a profound rearticulation of the sounds and signs of socially constructed notions of blackness as the praxis of obliterating "old definitions of blackness" that "show us the intricate, uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be."⁽⁸⁾ Ellis's manifesto links radical and transgressive notions of blackness as expressed in the work of Katherine Dunham, George Clinton, Jimi Hendrix, Albert Murray, Ishmael Reed, Patti Labelle and Labelle, LeRoi Jones (early Amiri Baraka), and Melvin Van Peebles. Moreover, in that the New Black Aesthetic attempts to rearticulate traditional conceptions of blackness, the aesthetic movement also aims to

animate and deconstruct popular assumptions of black identity through process the of parody/pastiche and the democratization of black critical discourse.

It is this latter example of the "New Black Aesthetic" which of course links the aesthetic movement to the oppositional stances of black critics like Anna Julia Cooper, George Schuyler, Bayard Rustin, Audre Lorde, Ralph Ellison, and to a lesser extent James Baldwin. Representative of the often hyper-democratic tendencies of black public discourse, the work of the above critics and scholars has served to problematize simple constructions of black identity and black thought. Cooper, Rustin, and Lorde in particular were instrumental in a rearticulation of notions of blackness along an axis of gender and sexual preference – constructions that remain at odds with dominant representations of blackness and challenge popular notions which increasingly posit patriarchy and heterosexuality as the foundations for acceptable social constructions of blackness. For instance, it has been the proclivity of much black nationalist thought, particularly that which emerged during the 1960s and reanimated itself during the 1980s in the form of Louis Farrakhan, to silence alternative and radical constructions of blackness by asserting heterosexual capitalist patriarchy as the primary vehicle for black empowerment, often to the detriment of maintaining real solidarity within the broader African American community. Though the Million Man March cannot be reduced to singular ideological viewpoints – to do so fails to acknowledge the broad interpretations the March holds for many – the acceptance of Louis Farrakhan as the March's figurehead is a tacit acceptance of heterosexist capitalist patriarchy within the black community. In its essence, the "New Black Aesthetic" aimed to confront the increasingly oppositional nature of black identity within the context of a liberating creative process, inclusive of both the production and the subsequent criticism of contemporary art forms.

Marginalized from both mainstream and academic life, the "New Black" aestheticians emerge almost simultaneously with the new face of the elite American Academy. Twenty-five years after the historic emblems of segregated life eroded from the walls of the ivory tower and sixty years after the intellectual triad of Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Charles S. Johnson were emphatically denied access to the mainstream American academies of the North, a generation of young black intellectuals emerged from within the very confines that denied access to the best minds in the black community for much of the 20th century. Though many of these new intellectual voices would eventually find their institutional base in the African-American Studies departments at elite universities, they were not necessarily the product of efforts to refit the university landscape with ethnic studies departments, but rather the beneficiaries of liberal opportunism as reflected by this country's elite academic institutions.(9) To be sure, these folks had major skills. What most uniquely separated them from previous generations of black academics is that they were produced by and would work almost exclusively within the mainstream academy. What connects these thinkers to the broader examples of African American intellectual thought is their devotion – a devotion that is arguably second nature – to public, political, and critical discourse, though much of this discourse is invariably linked to a literate white consumer public. As Robert S. Boynton suggests, "...theirs is scholarship with a social purpose. This generation of public-minded academics, while notable, is hardly the first to have straddled the worlds inside and outside the university.... What distinguishes these new public intellectuals from those of the past, is that their desire to transcend the academy was motivated almost exclusively by an interest in race."(10) It has been as the popular interpreters of race signs and race relations that this generation of scholars, both those linked to the left and the right, has been most influential. In many regards, they have served to validate the identity politics simultaneously articulated within the "New Black Aesthetic."

With a striking inclination to popularize critical issues and debates within the black community, the visible presence of scholars like Molefi Asante, Patricia Williams, Derrick Bell, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Manning Marable, Michele Wallace, bell hooks, Cornel West, Barbara Smith, and Michael Eric Dyson has had a significant impact in positing academic life as a viable pursuit for the Post-Soul generation. The high visibility of the "new Black intellectuals" has arguably been the primary stimulus for the generation of blacks which has just emerged or will

shortly emerge from doctoral programs within the humanities and social sciences, areas that have historically supported discourse and research on race and race relations. Ironically, the primary stimulus for the high visibility of many of these intellectuals has been the intense commodification of black popular culture during the past two decades – a process which demands articulate interpreters of a culture inherently exoticized by mainstream consumers – particularly as black popular culture has framed and informed racially volatile events like the murder of Yusef Hawkins, the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill debates, the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, and the Million Man March. This conspicuous presence of black intellectuals within contemporary middle-brow and high-brow media culture has been unprecedented in American history and arguably bespeaks the significant presence of racial discourse within the same cultural parameters.

It is within the context of this commodification that unprecedented volumes on race and the African-American experience have been produced by black intellectuals for academic, trade, and popular presses alike – volumes that have ultimately served to "grandparent" the "Post-Soul" Intelligentsia, with many of these scholars serving as distant and not so distant mentors to "Post-Soul" thinkers.(11) The present emergence of a public class of black intellectuals who ply their trade beyond the ivory tower and within the organs of mass culture has had a particularly compelling impact on the development of a Post-Soul intelligentsia in that contemporary black intellectuals have largely been framed and contextualized by their presence within mass media – arguably the dominant institution in the socialization process of the Post-Soul intelligentsia. I maintain that the development of the Post-Soul intelligentsia is wholly predicated on the explosion of mass consumer culture and the significant commodification of black popular culture within it. While the 1920s and 1950s were also periods that marked a major expansion in the influence of mass consumer culture, the 1970s would witness the most significant incorporation of African American culture into the discourse of mass consumer culture. Part and parcel of America's efforts to construct an integrated America that was not wholly experienced by African Americans, the symbolic integrating of American society via popular culture would offer the perception of full citizenship for a generation of young African Americans in the post-Civil Rights era. Furthermore, this last explosion was largely interpreted through the guise of "televisual" expression, again separating this era from earlier eras.

Within this context of mass culture, contemporary black intellectuals by extension have posited the intellectual process and the lifestyle it affords as elements of what "Post-Soul" aged Motown CEO Andre Harrell has referred to as contemporary "Big Willie" or "High Negro" style.(12) As the Black Arts Movement blurred the historic boundaries between high art and black popular culture, contemporary black intellectuals have blurred the boundaries between academic and popular writing, in some respects reducing the critical process into accessible mass media fodder like mainstream film reviews and reviews of popular fiction. Though the contemporary class of black public intellectuals is located firmly within the tradition of the so-called "New York intellectuals" of the 1940s and 1950s like Diana and Lionel Trilling, Dwight Macdonald, and Irving Howe – a generation of public intellectuals largely sustained by highbrow interests beyond the academy – much of their scholarship must be interpreted within the context of contemporary mass culture. While the accessibility of popular non-fiction on the African-American experience has been invaluable to a generation of black undergraduate and graduate students alike, the very essence of mass culture has demanded the dulling of the critical and theoretical edge of much of this scholarship. While this process clearly obstructs the nuanced realities of pursuing a life of the mind, there is perhaps no precedent to the access that young black scholars and writers have to the prominent thinkers within the community, excepting the example of the dynamic web of historically black colleges and universities that, in large part, are solely responsible for the generation of black male intellectuals that dominated black intellectual life prior to the 1970s.

Within the area of gender, contemporary black intellectuals profoundly differ from earlier generations of black scholars in that black women, academic sexism and misogyny notwithstanding, are prominent within the

community of contemporary black scholars and academics. The scholarship of women like Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, Patricia Hill-Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Katie Cannon has arguably redefined gender studies within the context of the African-American experience, although the marginal status of their scholarship to the canon of contemporary black thought is the obvious price they have paid for the patriarchy that continues to inform such thought. Ironically, it has been the significant presence of black women within the academy that has provided the context for an acceptance of black and mainstream feminist scholarship among both female and male thinkers within the Post-Soul intelligentsia. This reality has furthered the de-essentialist project most recently articulated within the "New Black Aesthetic" movement.(13) While Tate's concept of "anti-essentialist essentialism," like the tradition of public and oppositional discourse that is so rooted in the black intellectual tradition, is inherently located in the broader universe that produces the "Post-Soul" intelligentsia – really emblematic of the hyper-consumption that has defined the "Post-Soul" period – two major themes primarily inform the intellectual project of the "Post-Soul" intelligentsia: the reconstruction of history/memory and the reconstitution of community. These particular tensions are the product of structural developments that have informed if not defined the socialization process of the "Post-Soul" intelligentsia.

Perhaps no structural development delineates the emergence of the "Post-Soul" generation better than the postindustrial transformation of black urban centers. Broadly interpreted as the "death of community," the transformation of urban centers from the sites of industrial production to the incubators of surplus labor and displaced humanity provided the context in which the contemporary black underclass emerged. Furthermore, it continued to erode the already precarious status of the black working class, which, coupled with the incidence of black middle-class flight, provided the impetus for the radical transformation if not demise of the traditional black public sphere as represented in many segregated communities prior to the Civil Rights movement. While the transformation of the traditional black public sphere can be documented as early as the mid-50s with the migration of white middle-class elements from urban centers into suburbia and later with the urban uprisings of the mid-to-late 1960s, the structural transformation of the economy of the industrial city would have the most prodigious impact on black public life within these spaces. This would leave a compelling impression on the "Post-Soul" generation in that the seminal institutions of the traditional black public sphere were largely responsible for the transmission and reproduction of communal values within even stratified black communities. The erosion of the black public sphere opened up a chasm in which the Post-Soul generation was denied access to the bevy of communally-derived social, aesthetic, cultural, and political sensibilities that have undergirded much of the success of the black community during the 20th century, in part fracturing the Post-Soul generation and all those who followed from the real communal history of the African American diaspora.

Emblematic perhaps of the disconnectedness of contemporary American life, the Post-Soul generation is also marked by the hyperactivity of mass consumer culture and mass media, of which the commodification of contemporary black popular culture is a seminal enterprise. The Post-Soul generation becomes the first generation of African-Americans to perceive the significant presence of African-American iconography within mass consumer culture/mass media as a state of normalcy.(14) It is within this context that mass culture fills the void of both community and history for the Post-Soul generation, while producing a generation of consumers for which the iconography of blackness is consumed in lieu of personal relations, real experience, and historical knowledge. Furthermore, the quest for individual satisfaction that undergirds contemporary acts of consumption would in fact render the concept of community and communal activities foreign to contemporary experience.

Ironically, it was Hip-Hop, a multi-billion dollar industry and arguably the most commodified form of popular black expression ever, which provided the metaphoric inspiration through which the Post-Soul generation would generate its critical and intellectual perspectives. In its essence, Hip-Hop has aimed to stimulate a dialogue across the chasm of silence that has engulfed black communal discourse in the Post-Soul era, by popularizing the

dominant issues within contemporary black urban life. While there is of course a fine line between celebrating the realities of black urban life and reporting the facts, the fact remains that Hip-Hop has been singularly responsible for presenting issues inherent to contemporary black urban life to broader audiences via mass culture, even if many of its constituents are simply constructed as consumers and aspects of black urban life are reduced to emblems of stylistic acumen for mainstream consumers. This aspect of HipHop, which I believe is a quintessential trait of the Post-Soul intelligentsia, differs from aforementioned uses of mass culture by contemporary black intellectuals. Hip-Hop does not simply posit mass culture as a vessel of mainstream acceptance, but as a conduit to introduce marginalia, on their own merit, into mainstream discourse – a process predicated in large part on the dominance of mass culture in framing public opinion and the recognition of the role of mass production and distribution outlets in contemporary African-American culture.

Hip-Hop's imagination provides the metaphoric capital for the Post-Soul intelligentsia to address dually the issues of history/memory and community. Hip-Hop's continuous mining of the decades-old soul, funk, and soul jazz traditions represents a concerted effort to reconstruct an aural history of the community. Inherent to the reconstructed collage of sonic history that Hip-Hop documents are broader efforts to create community, via the marketplace and across the generational divide of the African-American Diaspora. The music of Gang Starr, Pete Rock and CL Smooth, A Tribe Called Quest, and Common Sense, for instance, with their heavy reliance on hard-bop and 70s jazz fusion samples, represents artistry uniquely accessible to normally disconnected male constituencies. The broader network of Hip-Hop artists, listeners, consumers, and critics represents a reconstitution of community designed specifically within the parameters of Post-Industrial public life and contemporary mass consumer culture. The construction of such a community can of course serve as the basis for broader social movements informed by the sensibilities of the Post-Soul generation.

Concurrently, I must consider the relative explosion of popular fiction during the Post-Soul era by black women writers like Terry McMillan and Bebe Moore Campbell, whose core constituency entails a construction, like those among black men and Hip-Hop, of black women across class and social divisions. McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, arguably the most popular of the genre, was made into a film in 1996. The film's allwomen soundtrack, which was largely written and produced by Kenny "Babyface" Edmonds, was the antithesis of much that was produced in Hip-Hop during the period. This would seem to suggest that my thesis may not hold as much value for female Post-Soul intellectuals, though Hip-Hop and its representative sexism, objectification of black women's bodies, and misogyny, has accordingly served as a primary discursive site of contention for many Post-Soul intellectuals, both male and female. This mode of cultural critique is perhaps most visible in Tricia Rose's important text, *Black Noise*.

Afforded incredible access to the intellectual rumblings of the elite minds within the contemporary black intelligentsia and informed by the sonic constructs of community and memory that ground the best of HipHop, the Post-Soul intelligentsia is poised to interpret the disparate energies and discourses of contemporary urban life and to provide the critical and theoretical framework to have an optimal impact upon the conditions of those within black urban spaces. While the overall project of the Post-Soul intelligentsia does not markedly differ from that of contemporary black intellectuals, the former has clearly been produced within a context more organically connected to the realities that black intellectuals are expected to interpret for both communal and mainstream constituencies – particularly those realities in which urban life and Hip-Hop culture serve as clear pretexts and subtexts. With rare exceptions – for example, the work of Rose, Michael Eric Dyson, Robin D.G. Kelley, British critic Paul Gilroy, and Todd Boyd – much of the scholarship of the contemporary black intelligentsia has inadequately interpreted black urban life as witnessed by the Post-Soul generation, many of whom were still in the "hood" when crack rhetorically and physically transformed already-reeling black communities in the late 1980s.

But the context(s) that produce Post-Soul intellectuals is also observed, beyond content, in the nature and stylistic

tendencies of their scholarship. Because the Post-Soul intelligentsia is uniquely bound to the emergence of contemporary mass consumer culture, mass media and culture will maintain an almost hegemonic influence over it. In that much of the modern world for the Post-Soul generation has been interpreted primarily and secondarily through the guise of mass media and culture, the Post-Soul intelligentsia's interpretations of contemporary life will obviously use the iconography of mass culture to frame and inform its critical insights. Moreover, the nature of Post-Soul scholarship will differ dramatically from that of earlier generations in that the style of writing and structuring of information will reflect the collage form that is dually represented in the electronic cut-and-paste techniques of contemporary mass media and Hip-Hop music. This break with traditional notions of wholly contained intellectual ideas is much more representative of the increasingly interdisciplinary and post-modern nature of the contemporary academy and contemporary American life.

NOTES

(1). George gives a full detail of the highlights of "Post-Soul" Black culture in his book *Buppies, B-Boys. Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Sou/Black Culture* (New York: Harper- Collins, 1992).

(2). HNIC is an acronym for "head nigger in charge." As Ronald Dorris suggests, many of the artists and critics of the New Negro movement resisted the imposition of such paradigms on them by the movement's more visible hierarchy.

(3). Drake taught at the University of Chicago.

(4). Jacoby's text *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) offers a trenchant commentary on the demise of public discourse and the collapse of spaces for independent intellectuals not exclusively tied to the academy.

(5). Greg Tate, "Nobody Loves a Genius Child: Jean Michel Basquiat," *Fly Boy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 232.

(6). Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 12.1 (Winter 1989): 233-243.

(7). Ronald A.T. Judy, "The New Black Aesthetic and W.E.B. Du Bois, or Hephaestus, Limping," *Massachusetts Review* (Spring 1995):250.

(8). Ellis, 237.

(9). I am referring to the financial benefits afforded predominantly white institutions during the 1970s and 1980s that actively recruited black students and faculty.

(10). Robert Boynton, "The New Intellectuals," *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1995): 64.

(11). My own academic career has been framed by brief yet weighty interactions with scholars like West, Marable, Wallace, Tricia Rose, Manthia Diawara, Mwalimu Shujaa, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Michael Eric Dyson.

(12). Darnetta Bell suggests this context to interpret the introduction of Cornel West's mainstream foray *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), in which he meticulously describes his twiceweekly sojourn from Princeton to New York City's Sweetwaters restaurant and club.

(13). In regards to my own career, the direction I received from womanist scholar Masani Alexis DeVaux was invaluable to my ability to broaden my own critical skills beyond knowledges deemed necessary by the patriarchal norms of black intellectual life and the larger academy.

(14). I am reminded here of my own experience as an eighty-year-old watching the Jackson Five cartoon on Saturday morning television.

DETAILS

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