

Department of Humanities, Northumbria University

Honours Dissertation

**Words as Weapons: Black Nationalist Poetry in
America during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s**

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Introduction

The 1960s marked a turbulent decade with regards to race relations in America. With the seemingly slow progress of the Civil Rights movement beginning in the 1950s and the growing discontent of African Americans in urban areas, black nationalism entered into American society and politics, gun in hand. Black nationalism, as an ideology, focusses on achieving self-determination for black people within the U.S. in the economy, politics and culture, although 'there is no fundamental black nationalist tradition or definition.'¹ Black nationalism had a large emphasis on the celebration of culture, history and revolution. One of the best ways to demonstrate the theories, practices and developments of black nationalism is through the analysis of art produced throughout the movement's most active years. Specifically, the use of literary art in the form of poetry is most telling of the trials and tribulations experienced by black nationalist organisations and individuals.

Although sharing many themes across the decades, black nationalism in America experienced phases. The 1960s marked an exciting decade in the development of black nationalist politics and culture demonstrated through the poetry of the Black Arts movement. Often described as the 'artistic wing of the Black Power movement,' the Black Arts movement was energised by the likes of Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal who demonstrated their overtly black nationalist outlooks through predominantly avant-garde poetry and essays.² Recurring themes of violence, oppression and the necessity of a socialist revolution captured the imagination of those living in urban areas, fed up with their position in a racist society and accompanied the rise of nationalist organisations such as the Black Panther Party and Karenga's US, providing hope for the future.

During the 1970s such groups experienced increased oppression in the form of J. Edgar Hoover's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), causing rifts between organisations attempting to unify along the lines of class and race. This became evident in the poetry of the

¹ Matthew W. Hughey, 'Black Aesthetics And Panther Rhetoric: A Critical Decoding Of Black Masculinity In The Black Panther, 1967—80', *Critical Sociology* 35, no. 1 (2009), p.30.

² Henry Louis Gates Jr., 'Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge', *Time* Vol. 144, Issue 15 (10/10/1994), p.74.

decade as frustration with the lack of enthusiasm for revolution amongst the black community began to show in the poems of Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets. Spoken word was used to criticise the role of white liberals and student movements whose sincerity was doubted, as well as the American foreign policies in Vietnam which saw the increased globalisation of black nationalism as an anti-colonial movement. However, the collapse of the Black Arts movement and continued repression of black communities marked the 'transformation from protest to silence,' that would emanate in the 1970s.³

The 1980s, however, ushered in a new age of black nationalist poetry in the form of hip-hop. Emerging from the traditions of the Black Arts movement and poetry of the 1960s and early 1970s, hip-hop spoke to the urban youth, as groups such as Public Enemy drew upon the themes of armed resistance, police brutality and the immortality of Malcolm X, reminiscent of the years of protest from the 1960s. This admiration of the past, facilitated by the presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson, highlighted the links and common themes within black nationalism across the 1980s and the preceding two decades, and the movement's interaction with the conservative politics of Ronald Reagan reenergised the emphasis on class divisions in America.

³ Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.61.

Chapter 1: A Hopeful Future

*'All art is propaganda...and ever must be...I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda.'*⁴

Black Nationalist poetry of the 1960s was largely dominated by the Black Arts Movement, of which Amiri Baraka, Askia Muhammad Touré and Larry Neal were some of the earliest and most prolific members. The poetry of this decade varied from the avant-garde to the more traditional, but shared common themes such as militarism and references to African culture. Relating to an African past was central to many of the works of black nationalist poets with regards to historic events such as slave uprisings as well as culture. In addition to this, of particular significance is the role of prominent Black Nationalist figures such as Malcolm X in inspiring a whole range of works, both within the official Black Arts movement and beyond. The impact of such figures, and indeed the writings of Frantz Fanon, inspired the underclass of criminals living in urban areas, known as the *lumpenproletariat*, which highlights the influence of Marxist ideology within some aspects of black nationalism. This encouraged the 'brothers off the block' to take on a greater cultural and political role in seeking a revolution in hope for a better future, demonstrated in the growth of cultural nationalism and the *bad man* persona evident in the poems of H. Rap Brown and Etheridge Knight.⁵

The poem *Ka'Ba* by Amiri Baraka uses imagery to produce a picture of African culture in the context of American society. A 'dirty courtyard' conjures up images of neglected black neighbourhoods, ghettos such as Harlem where black people 'suffer, and kill each other / and sometimes fail to walk the air'.⁶ Although Baraka acknowledges the existence of violence within African American communities, he includes unifying currents throughout the poem, explaining that

⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Criteria of Negro Art', *The Crisis*, Vol. 32, October 1926, p.296.

⁵ Huey Newton emphasised the importance of recruiting the unorganised criminals such as drug dealers and pimps for the BPP. See Bobby Seale, *Seize The Time* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1991), p.25.

⁶ Amiri Baraka, *Ka'Ba*. Online versions of this poem are available through 'Amiri Baraka: Online Poems', *English.Illinois.Edu*, URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/baraka/onlinepoems.htm. Accessed 4 April 2017.

‘our world is full of sound / Our world is more lovely than anyone’s’.⁷ In this he is talking about Africa, bringing African culture to the forefront to highlight how ‘We [African Americans] are beautiful people / With African imaginations’ – imaginations that anybody who does not have African blood within them could not comprehend.⁸ Baraka demonstrates the uniqueness of African culture and insists that it should be celebrated. ‘Sound’, ‘masks dances and swelling chants’ make clear Baraka’s emphasis on African music and expression, showing a certain nostalgia for what he perceives to be his homeland, perhaps literally, but more significantly in a cultural sense.⁹ He conveys this to the audience, calling for ‘magic’ and ‘spells, to raise up / return, destroy, and create.’¹⁰ Ruth Mayer has explained that Baraka ‘cherishes the ancient not for its own sake but because it brings about the new’, as demonstrated in the final stanza.¹¹ This is indicated further by the use of language such as ‘spells’ and ‘magic’, which displays the notion that something special is needed to bring change for African Americans, this something special being their African heritage, their uniqueness and unifying culture, which they should allow to shine within themselves and beyond in what can be described only as a black nationalist stance. As Baraka himself noted in 1968 in relation to his previous works through the 1960s, ‘there is a spirituality always trying to get through’, which allows the artist and the reader/listener to walk ‘the water of dead bodies europeans call their minds’.¹² This demonstrates the richness of African culture as seen by Baraka compared to that of ‘europeans’, the absence of a capital letter perhaps signifying the perceived inferiority of European culture and possible hostility towards it, compared to the continued use of capital letters for Black Art.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ruth Mayer, *Artificial Africas: Colonial Images in the Times of Globalization* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, 2002), p.6.

¹² LeRoi Jones, *Black Magic Poetry 1961-1967*, ‘An Explanation of the Work’ (Bobbs-Merrill Co. Indianapolis, Kansas City, New York, 1969) [no page number].

The significance of African culture in Black Arts poetry is demonstrated in *Kuntu*, by Larry Neal. 'I am descended from the Drum / I am descended from the Drum' shows the speaker reminiscing about his people's cultural past, using repetition to signify the beating of African drums.¹³ This repetition continues throughout. This poem is prideful, and the occasional reference to the 'Universe' shows the ability of the speaker to look at his situation in the context of a much larger, cosmic picture, something that is present in the works of other black nationalist poets such as Askia Muhammad Touré. Neal goes on to draw a link between words and action:

'The First that formed to link, to link
Word and Act
To link Word and Substance
To link Word and desire.'¹⁴

In this passage the speaker acknowledges the power of words when combined with action, and therefore acknowledges the limitations of words alone. The 'Drum', from which the speaker descended and hence the 'Word' is placed in the context of historic action in section III.

'Drum was there on the Armistad.
Drum was there in Jamestown.
Drum was there in Watts.
Drum was there in Newark.
Drum was there in Detroit'.¹⁵

The 'Armistad' is reference to a Spanish slave ship which experienced an uprising on board in 1839, whereas Watts, Newark and Detroit are mentioned as references to the riots in 1965 and 1967 respectively. The Watts uprising in particular achieved 'emblematic status,' and is perceived to have been a bid for the redistribution of wealth, supported by the reference to it in black nationalist

¹³ Larry Neal, 'Kuntu', in Stephen Henderson ed., *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: Morrow, 1973), p.294.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.295.

poetry.¹⁶ Considered to be a 'watershed event for the Black Power and Black Arts movements in Los Angeles', the Watts uprising helped to bring about a new 'cultural landscape...paradoxically promoting a feeling of new political and cultural possibility as well as frustration.'¹⁷ This manifested itself in the creation of the Watts Writers Workshop set up by Bud Schulberg following the riots. This places the riots of the 1960s alongside slave uprisings in the nineteenth century, reinforcing the significance of relating to an African past, an African culture and an African struggle with regards to black nationalist poetry.

The expansion of black nationalism as a political and cultural phenomenon can be traced back to particular political leaders, orators and historical figures who have demonstrated some of the key principles and beliefs of black nationalism, much in the same way as many other social and political movements have done. These include the likes of Marcus Garvey, who encouraged many to see black as beautiful and established the United Negro Improvement Association, and Frantz Fanon whose masterpiece *The Wretched of the Earth* became what many black nationalists, particularly those in the Black Panther Party, would consider the 'the Black bible'.¹⁸ One man, however, influenced black artists and poets like no other. This man was Malcolm X. Seen by many as the main inspiration behind many of the works of the Black Arts movement and beyond, Malcolm X 'was the bridge between the old nationalism and the new'¹⁹ – not just in terms of his development of a movement unaligned with religion, but also in terms of opening the door for black nationalism to take on a much bolder cultural significance.²⁰ However, much of this came after his assassination in 1965. Malcolm X's significance within black nationalism is no more apparent than in 'A Poem for Black Hearts' by Amiri Baraka.

¹⁶ James Edward Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p.248.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp.299,369.

¹⁸ Eldridge Cleaver and Robert Scheer, *Post-Prison Writings and Speeches* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p.18.

¹⁹ Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) & Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp.59-60.

²⁰ Ibid. p.60.

‘For
Malcolm’s hands raised to bless us
all black and strong in his image
of ourselves’.²¹

This passage represents Malcolm X as a Christ-like figure, with his ‘hands raised to bless us.’ This is very similar to the way in which Malcolm X is represented in other poems such as one created by Kathleen Cleaver during the ‘Free Huey’ campaign. The speaker explains:

‘The black mass needs but one crucifixion
And in that death
On the cross of America
We all received a new birth’.²²

The use of biblical language is no mistake, depicting Malcolm X as the black Christ and highlighting the belief that Malcolm X died for those who struggled against a power that systematically discriminated along purely racial lines.²³ The impact that the assassination of Malcolm X had on the revitalisation or new birth of the black nationalist movement cannot be understated, largely thanks to the range of black nationalist art that emerged in its wake, particularly in the form of poetry. Askia Muhammad Touré uses imagery to elevate Malcolm X to that of a spiritual figure, urging the black masses to ‘Reach with hungry Black minds towards that bright Crescent Moon glowing in the depths of Malcolm’s eyes’.²⁴ The ‘star-crossed plains of Destiny’ represent a hopeful future, which Malcolm X had alluded to and is seen to be at the centre of Touré’s poem.²⁵ Malcolm X has earned a certain immortality not just among black nationalists, but also across the perceived boundaries of race and nationality. This owes itself in no small part to the writings of the black nationalist poets, particularly those who made up the Black Arts movement.

²¹ Amiri Baraka, ‘A Poem for Black Hearts’, in Henderson ed., *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, p.211.

²² Kathleen Cleaver, in Regina Jennings, "Poetry of the Black Panther Party: Metaphors of Militancy," *Journal of Black Studies* vol. 29, no. 1 (1998), p.118.

²³ Jennings, ‘Poetry of the Black Panther Party’, p.118.

²⁴ Askia Muhammad Touré, ‘Tauhid’, in *Negro Digest* (A Johnson Publication, 1969), p.80.

²⁵ Ibid.

The effect that the assassination of Malcolm X had on black nationalist poets can be clearly felt through looking at the sheer number of poems that have been written addressing the charismatic leader's life, death and even afterlife. 'Malcolm X – An Autobiography' by Larry Neal is a poetic account of the 'Fire Prophet's' life written in first person.²⁶ Neal uses imagery to an incredible degree, describing 'a landscape on which white robed figures ride'.²⁷ This is a reference to events before the birth of Malcolm Little, when his mother was confronted by Ku Klux Klan riders at her home in Omaha, Nebraska.²⁸ Neal goes on to describe Malcolm's 'Garvey father silhouetted against the night-fire'.²⁹ This passage highlights Marcus Garvey as another important influence within black nationalist ideology. Malcolm Little's father was a follower of Marcus Garvey, and, according to his son, 'was not a frightened Negro'.³⁰ This is demonstrated through Neal's description of Malcolm's father, standing 'gun in hand / form outlined against a panorama of violence'.³¹ This highlights the kind of world that Malcolm X was born into, where his father embodied a kind of admirable manliness and was willing to use force to stand in the way to protect his family from the 'panorama of violence'. Conceptions of masculinity played a pivotal role within black nationalist thought. This was made apparent through the belief that black men were to be the main revolutionary participants, with women, by necessity, supporting the men and raising children.³² This was further solidified due to the fact that 'the public image of the Black Panther was of a highly masculine, defiant, angry youth'.³³ Stanza four begins with a description of Malcolm X, as if given by himself: 'I hustler. I pimp. I unfulfilled black man / bursting with destiny'.³⁴ Malcolm was known to have participated in criminal activity throughout his youth which resulted in him spending time in prison

²⁶ Amiri Baraka among others have referred to Malcolm X as the 'Fire Prophet'. See Amiri Baraka, 'The Wailer', *Callaloo*, no. 23 (1985), p.249.

²⁷ Larry Neal, 'Malcolm X – An Autobiography', in Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal ed., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, 1st ed. (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 2007), p.315.

²⁸ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography Of Malcolm X*, 1st ed. (London: Penguin, 2007), p.79.

²⁹ Neal, 'Malcolm X – An Autobiography', p.315.

³⁰ Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, p.79.

³¹ Neal, 'Malcolm X – An Autobiography', p.315.

³² Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, 'The Woman Question: Gender Dynamics Within the Black Panther Party', *Spectrum: A Journal On Black Men* 5, no. 1 (2016), p.39.

³³ Jane Rhodes, 'Black Radicalism in 1960S California: Women in the Black Panther Party', in Taylor and Moore, *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*, 1st ed. (University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), p.346.

³⁴ Ibid.

from 1946. Neal shows to the audience the kind of conditions that existed which in turn gave birth to such a prolific preacher of black nationalist thought. Through vividly illustrating what inspired and moulded Malcolm X, Neal gives an insight into the progression of a black nationalist mind, providing in itself an inspiring and empowering poem.

The theme of prison and the image of *bad men* are both present in many Black Arts poems. Black nationalism draws a large part of its following from what Marxists term the *lumpenproletariat*. This sect of society is largely made up of criminals or '*slum workers*' and was largely neglected by political intellectuals until Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.³⁵ As Fanon wrote, 'in capitalist countries, the working class has nothing to lose; it is they who in the long run have everything to gain. In the colonial countries the working class has everything to lose.'³⁶ Black nationalists likened their position within the U.S. to that of a colony, such as Algeria, which gained its independence from France in 1962. Therefore, Fanon's words reverberated with the *lumpenproletariat* in African American communities and contributed to the growth of black nationalism as a movement predominantly attracting the urban poor. The rise of the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s is testimony to this, as it was the 'brothers off the block' who took up arms in the name of revolution rather than the working class. An excellent example of this *bad man* culture in poetry is H. Rap Brown's work, *Rap's Poem*, which first appeared in *Die Nigger Die*, 1969. Brown describes himself as

'The gun slinger the baby bringer
The hum-dinger the pussy ringer
The man with the terrible middle finger.
The hard hitter the bullshitter the polynussy getter.'³⁷

Brown describes how this would be spoken, or rapped, and would arise 'maybe by a brother saying, "man, before you mess with me you'd rather run rabbits, eat shit, and bark at the moon."³⁸ This

³⁵ See the *Encyclopaedia of Marxism*. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/l/u.htm> Accessed: 09/02/17.

³⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched Of The Earth*, Trans. Constance Farrington, introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre (London: Penguin, 2001 [orig. 1961]), p.86.

³⁷ H. Rap Brown, 'Rap's Poem', in Henderson ed., *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, p.187.

would merit such a response as *Rap's Poem*. This kind of competitiveness is central to the *bad man* persona, with 'the terrible middle finger' giving the impression of a disregard for authority as well as the 'gun slinger' highlighting the willingness to use force. The symbolic and practical significance of the gun is something that can be seen to have spread through the examples of Robert F. Williams in the early 1960s and the BPP later in the decade.³⁹ Reference to race, of course, is not excluded in this poem. Brown gloats how he has 'a brand new home on the roadside made from a cracker's hide, / Got a brand new chimney setting on top made from the cracker's skull'.⁴⁰ The word *cracker* is a reference to the slave masters who would punish their captives with a whip that would *crack*. When reading through this passage it is clear to see that the speaker mentions possession of 'the cracker's skull' with pride and is a demand for respect from his black brothers. It is also a bold statement, showing that the speaker is not scared of the white man and parades the thought of displaying his 'hide' in an exhibitionist manner.⁴¹ This kind of sentiment was common within the black nationalist poetry of the 1960s, distinguishing it from the largely middle class Civil Rights movement that preached non-violence.

The role of the *lumpenproletariat* with regards to black nationalism is evident through Etheridge Knight and his *Poems from Prison*, published in 1968. Knight was imprisoned for robbery during a chapter of his life where he was addicted to heroin. In his poem 'Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane', Hard Rock was an inmate "'known not to take no shit / From nobody,'" and he had the scars to prove it.⁴² The image of a strong, battle-scarred black man is conjured up through Knight's descriptive first stanza, but is juxtaposed by the rest of the poem, where it becomes clear that,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Robert F Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Pub., 2013) for an earlier example of armed self-defence against racism within the U.S.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.188.

⁴¹ H. Rap Brown was eventually sentenced to life in prison in 2002 for the murder of a black County Sherriff's deputy during a shootout in 2000.

⁴² Etheridge Knight, *Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane*, in Henderson ed., *Understanding the New Black Poetry* p.327.

'Hard Rock wasn't a mean nigger
Any more, that the doctors had bored a hole in his head,
Cut out part of his brain, and shot electricity
Through the rest.'

When Hard Rock was returned to prison 'to try his new status,' a prison officer, or 'screw,' 'shook him down and barked in his face. / And Hard Rock did *nothing*. Just grinned and looked silly, / His eyes empty like knot holes in a fence.'⁴³ From this it is clear that Hard Rock's lobotomy had changed him fundamentally. The significance of this lies in the overwhelming sense of lost spirit, where a once proud Black man, unafraid of standing up to white authority, which in this case comes in the form of prison guards, has been broken to the point of not conformity, but complete submission. This sense of hopelessness is evident in the final stanza, where the speaker explains himself and his fellow inmates to be,

'Crushed.
He had been our Destroyer, the doer of things
We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do,
The fears of years, like biting whip,
Had cut grooves too deeply across our backs.'⁴⁴

This is reminiscent of the emotions that many black nationalists espoused following the assassination of Malcolm X. Hard Rock had been judged to be insane due to standing up to the white man, and was therefore subjected to having his spirit killed, reducing a proud black man to a memory amongst his fellow inmates, who longed for a leader to guide them.⁴⁵

The 1960s experienced a growth in cultural black nationalism thanks to the aforementioned artists and indeed their inspirations. This brought with it a greater focus on black culture, history and therefore the future of African Americans. The Black Arts movement helped in no small part in achieving this, although it was acknowledged by the likes of Larry Neal that these words needed to

⁴³ Ibid. p.328.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See 'Initial Reactions on the Assassination of Malcolm X', Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1999), pp.72-84.

be supported by action. This action, however, was spurred on by the increasingly politicised *lumpenproletariat* who took to writing about their experiences in American prisons and violence directed both at the oppressed and the oppressors. The sense of manliness and justified violence within poetry grew as the decade produced a more politically minded lower echelon of society, increasingly aware of their brutalised past, ironically helped by the destruction of such prominent black nationalist leaders as Malcolm X.

Chapter 2: Disdain for the Present

*'If the native does not express such pent-up aggression against his own people, then he sublimates it and finds outlet in religious mysticism or art forms.'*⁴⁶

As the 1960s drew to a close, the Black Power movement was still in existence and newer forms of poetry, namely spoken word, were becoming accessible through popular recordings by the likes of Gil Scott-Heron and the Watts Prophets. However, the continued criticism of capitalism and the call for revolution from black nationalists brought groups such as the Black Panther Party, US and even The Last Poets under increased scrutiny from the American government during the Nixon administration. Partly due to J. Edgar Hoover's oppressive COINTELPRO, 'the well of faith and idealism that had sustained the movements against the forces of rationalization and violence drained,' causing elements of frustration regarding the apparent lack of practical enthusiasm for revolution to surface in the poetry of the 1970s, accompanied by the collapse of the Black Arts movement.⁴⁷ This also manifested itself in the criticism of white liberals, who were seen by some black nationalist poets such as Gil Scott-Heron to be simply following trends of protest with a mere superficial sincerity. Groups such as The Last Poets saw this as reaffirming their belief that only black people could liberate themselves, which was echoed by their continued calls for direct action. This, in turn, highlighted the theoretical differences between factions of black nationalist ideology, particularly between cultural and revolutionary nationalists. However, many of the same themes of militarism, survival and elements of misogyny that were present in black nationalist poetry of the 1960s were also present in the 1970s.

Although he was 'reluctant to accept the title of 'Godfather of Rap', Gil Scott-Heron is widely considered to be so.⁴⁸ At the very least, Scott-Heron elevated his overtly political, black nationalist

⁴⁶ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.53.

⁴⁷ Jeff Chang and DJ Kool Herc, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), p.9.

⁴⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, *Now And Then ...The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (Edinburgh: Payback Press / Brouhaha Books, 2003), p.xiv.

messages through spoken word and vice-versa. As explained by Mark Anthony Neal, 'Scott-Heron successfully bridged the gap between the black literary and musical traditions that ground the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.'⁴⁹ Accompanied by live, Afrocentric drum beats, Scott-Heron's militancy resonates at every opportunity in his debut album, *A New Black Poet: Small Talk on 125th and Lenox*, released in 1970. This album opens with the musical landmark 'Introduction/The Revolution Will Not Be Televised'. 'You will not be able to stay home, brother / You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out.'⁵⁰ These opening lines cut straight to the point and sets the revolutionary tone of the rest of the album, stating that a revolution is unavoidable but black people *must* partake in order for it to succeed. This introduction to the album serves as a critique of American society in a number of ways, all of which relate to Scott-Heron's black nationalist outlook. By stating that 'the revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox' and 'will not go better with Coke', Scott-Heron is criticising America's commercialism through a host of commercial references, of course paying particular attention to the role of television in creating an increasingly consumerist society.⁵¹ 'The revolution will not be televised', because the revolution will be real.⁵² Through this Scott-Heron separates the tangible from the superficial, critiquing capitalism in the same way that black nationalists such as Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton and Amiri Baraka had done before him. This highlights the influence that the political left had on black nationalist thought during the 1960s and 1970s, largely popularised amongst black youths by the BPP and the realisation that capitalism was inherently racist, unequal and essentially flawed.

Scott-Heron is careful, however, not to let this criticism of capitalism overshadow the issue of racism in America as the two were seen to be intrinsically linked. This is supported by Amiri Baraka's belief that the black liberation struggle 'unfolded in stages: the first stage was for national

⁴⁹ Neal, *What the Music Said* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.107.

⁵⁰ Gil Scott-Heron, 'Introduction/The Revolution Will Not Be Televised', *Small Talk on 125th and Lenox* (LP, Flying Dutchman, 1970).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

liberation, and the second stage was for social transformation, involving some form of socialism.⁵³ This was consolidated through poems such as 'Ho Chi Minh' by The Last Poets, released in 1977. Ho Chi Minh was a revolutionary communist leader in Vietnam and was seen as heroic in the eyes of many black nationalists for standing up to 'the policeman of the world', America.⁵⁴ Black nationalists felt that they could relate to such a battle against American imperialism, manifesting itself in the socialist leanings of black nationalists such as Amiri Baraka due to the belief that socialists and black nationalists shared a common enemy. In the poem 'Ho Chi Minh', Uncle Sam questions,

'Where did this little man
Get the audacity
To take a weapon in his hand
And speak like that to me?'⁵⁵

This describes the shock to U.S. imperialism that armed resistance had in the Vietnam War, particularly after the Tet Offensive. This also highlights the internationalist aspects of black nationalism in the U.S., which was inextricably linked to the worldwide anti-colonialism struggle. The withdrawal of direct military involvement on behalf of the U.S. in the Vietnam War in 1973 was viewed as an important part of the global anti-colonial struggle. The poem 'Ho Chi Minh' ends with the defeat of U.S. imperialism in Vietnam with Uncle Sam exclaiming,

'I'm gettin' on out of here
You see, I just could not win
Against Ho Chi Minh
No, I just could not win
Against Ho Chi Minh.'

This interaction with various forms of socialism and the global anti-colonial struggle is essential to understanding the poetry of The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron as well as many others. This contributed to the sound of 'the revolution that so many journalists in the late 1960s thought would

⁵³ Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation*. p.161.

⁵⁴ The Last Poets, 'Ho Chi Minh', *The Last Poets With Bernard Purdie - Delights Of The Garden* (LP, Douglas Records, 1977).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

bring the end of the world.'⁵⁶ This of course would not be confined to the 1960s, as Scott-Heron's poetry and the work of others in the following two decades demonstrates.

The Nixon administration was understandably unpopular within large majorities of the black communities in America. J. Edgar Hoover's repressive COINTELPRO, which was intensified under Richard Nixon, targeted what Hoover claimed were 'Black Nationalist-Hate Groups' such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Nation of Islam.⁵⁷ The increasing number of reports within black communities of FBI agents infiltrating black nationalist organisations during the 1970s reaffirmed the belief in many that black people were only ever going to be oppressed unless they took it upon themselves to force change.

'The revolution will not show you pictures of Nixon
Blowing a bugle and leading a charge by John
Mitchell, General Abrams and Spiro Agnew to eat
Hog maws confiscated from Harlem sanctuary
The revolution will not be televised.'⁵⁸

In listing these prominent individuals in the Nixon administration, Scott-Heron is putting faces to the imperialist machine that is the American government, and uses somewhat humorous imagery in portraying his distrust of these individuals. John Mitchell was the U.S. Attorney General under Nixon, General Creighton Abrams was in charge of military operations in Vietnam and Agnew was Vice President under Nixon. The way that Scott-Heron refers to these individuals in this passage highlights his belief that African Americans could not rely on the white supremacist government to improve their conditions, therefore the only option that was available to black Americans was to lead their own revolution. In addition to this, hog maws are what was often deemed to be 'soul food', and is traditionally an African dish. Having 'hog maws confiscated from the Harlem sanctuary'

⁵⁶ Gil Scott-Heron, *Now and Then... The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* p.xv.

⁵⁷ Hoover in Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers*, 1st ed. (Boston (Mass.): South end press, 1990), p.111.

⁵⁸ Gil Scott-Heron, 'Introduction/The Revolution Will Not Be Televised'.

is symbolic of the Nixon administration wishing to consume and essentially destroy African culture within the United States. It is interesting to note, however, the way in which the reference to hog maws highlights to a degree the existence of different avenues of thought within black nationalism. For example, Eldridge Cleaver believed that 'the emphasis on Soul Food' was 'counter-revolutionary black bourgeois ideology'.⁵⁹ This, he claimed was the 'main reason Elijah Muhammad outlawed pork for Negroes'.⁶⁰ Although the actual consumption of pig meat, or hog maws, may seem to be a trivial point, it is interesting to see the differing ways in which African culture was interpreted in black nationalist thought during this period, and highlights the extent to which black nationalism in America was by no means black and white.

The belief that only black people could improve their position emerges again in 'Comment #1' which is perhaps the most powerful of Scott-Heron's poems within his first album. Scott-Heron's staunch criticism of what was being 'advertised in East Harlem as the "Rainbow Conspiracy" – a combination of the Students for a Democratic Society, the Black Panthers, and the Young Lords', is unmistakable.⁶¹ These white liberals, Scott-Heron argues, were,

'Fighting for legalized smoke, or lower voting age
Less lip from his generation gap and fucking in the street
Where is my parallel to that?
All I want is a good home and a wife and a children
And some food to feed them every night.'

In the eyes of many black nationalists, an alliance with white liberals was impossible as they were fighting for different things. In addition to this, it was believed by some revolutionary black nationalists that 'participation in the movement served as group therapy, making liberal whites feel guiltless and giving meaning to their sterile, middle-class suburban lives'.⁶² 'The irony of it all, of course', Scott-Heron claims,

⁵⁹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, p.49.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Gil Scott-Heron, 'Comment #1', *Small Talk on 125th and Lenox*.

⁶² William L. Van Deburg, *New Day In Babylon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.46.

'Is when a pale face SDS motherfucker dares
Look hurt when I tell him to go find his own revolution
He wonders why I tell him that America's revolution
Will not be the melting pot but the toilet bowl.'⁶³

This is a rejection of the 'melting pot' analogy, designed to describe the multiculturalism of the U.S. in support of integration. Revolutionary black nationalists saw integration as fruitless, hence revolution had to be centred predominantly around class, which white middle-class liberals were unable to relate to. Despite this, however, black nationalist groups such as the BPP created alliances with other non-nationalist groups, including at times the SDS, highlighting some contradicting opinions with regards to the progress of a black nationalist revolution.⁶⁴

The criticism of commercialism in America was common in black nationalist poetry throughout the 1970s. In The Last Poets' poem 'When the Revolution Comes', it is made clear that 'you'll know it's / revolution cause there won't be no commercials'.⁶⁵ This again highlights the influence of the political left on black nationalist thought, which ties in with the strong criticism of capitalism. Although arising in the late 1960s, The Last Poets released their self-titled debut album in 1970. All thirteen tracks within this are revolutionary in tone and built upon drum patterns that are unmistakably reminiscent of African culture. Although this may seem to be a focus on cultural nationalism, The Last Poets make it clear to the audience that they are aware of its limitations.⁶⁶

'When the revolution comes
Guns and rifles will be taking the place of poems and essays
Black cultural centers will be forts supplying the

⁶³ Gil Scott-Heron, 'Comment #1'.

⁶⁴ Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, p. 164.

⁶⁵ The Last Poets, 'When the Revolution Comes', *The Last Poets* (LP, Douglas Records, 1970).

⁶⁶ Many Revolutionary Black Nationalists saw cultural nationalism as fruitless and even debilitating to the African American struggle. The focus of cultural nationalists on the reclaiming and celebration of African culture was believed to be unable to accomplish anything of real value with regards to revolution, which occasionally manifested itself in the form of outright hostility between groups advocating these differing ideologies. This was embodied by the conflicts between the BPP and US, which the FBI facilitated through its COINTELPRO, resulting in fatalities at UCLA in 1969. See Joe Street, *The Culture War In The Civil Rights Movement* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), pp.153-157 for a more in-depth discussion of this.

Revolutionaries with food and arms when the revolution comes.’⁶⁷

Although this point was made through poetry, it serves as an example of how revolutionary nationalism in the 1970s differed from cultural nationalism, although they share similar themes. This passage also demonstrates that The Last Poets understood the importance and significance of maintaining a cultural dimension of the struggle whilst having revolution as the final goal. This, to some extent highlights the rift between cultural and revolutionary nationalism, and lends itself to the idea that Black Arts and other nationalist poetry ‘could be more accurately described as a series of debates linked to ideological and institutional conflict and conversation rather than a consistent practice’.⁶⁸ Identifying with one’s culture and recognising the need for revolution could both compliment and contradict each other in black nationalist ideology, seen most clearly in the conflict between the Black Panther Party and Karenga’s US organisation.

Many black nationalist poets were as critical of so-called black revolutionaries as they were of American society in general. The powerful poem ‘Niggers Are Scared of Revolution’, performed by The Last Poets, is perhaps one of the greatest examples of this. Whilst directly addressing the lumpenproletariat, The Last Poets criticise the willingness of black people to ‘shoot off at the mouth’ and ‘shoot dope into their arm’, but ask where they were ‘when the revolution needs some shots!’⁶⁹ This criticism is aimed at the predominantly unorganised elements of the *lumpenproletariat* situated in the ghettos, where drug addiction and prostitution were rife during the 1970s. These common practices created an environment in which black-on-black crime became commonplace, where ‘niggers kill other niggers / Just because one didn’t receive the correct change’.⁷⁰ The Last Poets highlight what they perceive to be a lack of unity among black people. Indeed, black nationalist ideology centres around unity, not just along racial lines, but through shared experiences of class and culture.

⁶⁷ The Last Poets, ‘When the Revolution Comes’,.

⁶⁸ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement* p.57.

⁶⁹ The Last Poets, ‘Niggers Are Scared of Revolution’, *The Last Poets*.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

'Niggers are very untogether people
Niggers talk about the mind
Talk about: My mind is stronger than yours
"I got that bitch's mind uptight!"
Niggers don't know a damn thing about the mind.'⁷¹

This particular stanza addresses this apparent disunity within African American communities, drawing particular attention to what The Last Poets perceive to be unnecessary and debilitating competition between black individuals.

This kind of criticism is present in the Watts Prophets second album, *Rappin' Black in a White World*. The poem 'Take It' criticises the inaction of large parts of African American communities and instead tells them to be more like bees.

'If a bee want honey he'll go out and make it
And if niggers want freedom
All they got to do is quit crying
And lying, and dying, and just reach out and
Take it!
Take it!
Take it!'⁷²

This is a return to the notion seen in the poems of Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets that the only people who could liberate African Americans from the political, economic and spatial oppression they faced were themselves. In the view of the Watts Prophets, this required action, implying that they were critical of the cultural nationalists that placed too much emphasis on culture and not enough on revolutionary actions. However, this could be a result of a 'great deal of misunderstanding between revolutionary nationalists and those fellow militants whom they

⁷¹ The Last Poets, 'Niggers Are Scared of Revolution'.

⁷² Watts Prophets, 'Take It', *Rappin' Black in a White World* (LP, ALA Records, 1971).

disparagingly referred to as bourgeois or 'pork-chop' nationalists.⁷³ This kind of hostility, and perhaps stubbornness, between the differing factions within black nationalist thought provides an insight into the possible reasons behind the lack of unity arising as an identifiable issue in black nationalism in America during the Black Power era. Unsurprisingly, this kind of disagreement in ideology was detrimental to the power of black nationalism as a unifying force, which was ironically its primary goal.

As with many of the Black Arts poets, Etheridge Knight was active throughout the 1970s. His poem, 'Dark Prophecy: I sing of Shine', first appearing in 1973, describes the experience of Shine, a black man aboard the Titanic as it was sinking.

'Millionaire banker stood on the deck
And pulled from his pocket a million dollar check
Saying Shine Shine save poor me
And I'll give you all the money a black boy needs –
How Shine looked at the money and then at the sea
And said jump muthafucka and swim like me –'⁷⁴

This interaction between Shine and the banker is the first of a series of interactions between Shine and various white individuals. Each has something to offer him in return for him saving their lives. In this instance, Shine does not need the money of the white man, who is too stricken with fear for his own life to care for what was previously so important to him. Shine is aware that materialism and wealth mean nothing to a dead man, a realisation that appears to slowly dawn on the banker.

Another instance describes,

'how the banker's daughter ran naked on the deck
With her pink tits trembling and her pants roun her neck
Screaming Shine Shine save poor me
And I'll give you all the cunt a black boy needs.'⁷⁵

⁷³ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon* p.170, see also 'Huey Newton Talks to the Movement About the Black Panther Party, Cultural Nationalism, SNCC, Liberals and White Revolutionaries', in Philip S. Foner ed., *The Black Panthers Speak*, 1st ed. (New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1995), p.50.

⁷⁴ Etheridge Knight, 'Dark Prophecy: I sing of Shine', in Henderson, ed., *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, p.331.

This profound passage sheds light upon how some black nationalists perceived white women. The banker's daughter clearly has nothing to offer Shine other than herself, which is emblematic of the view that white women were a commodity rather than being considered as equal to men. In addition to this, many black nationalists were resentful of the racial divide with regards to sexual relations. An extreme example of this resentment is in the action of Eldridge Cleaver, who believed that 'rape was an insurrectionary act', where his delight came from the belief that he was 'defying and trampling on the white man's law, upon his system of values, and...defiling his women'.⁷⁶ This highlights the extent to which some black nationalists did not hold similar values with regards to the oppression of white women when compared to the oppression of men, as well as reaffirming the belief that the laws themselves in America were oppressive of black people.

The last of these encounters, and indeed the most militant, comes when,

'Shine swam past a preacher afloat on a board
Crying save me nigger Shine in the name of the Lord –
How the preacher grabbed Shine's arm and broke his stroke –
How Shine pulled his shank and cut the preacher's throat.'⁷⁷

The response of Shine when his stroke is broken by the preacher is indicative of the still militant mind set of black nationalist poets. Here, Shine refuses to be dragged down and when the preacher interferes with the necessary actions taken by Shine to survive, Shine kills him in a brutal fashion. This can be applied to the daily lives of a small, yet significant portion of black nationalists, who when harassed by the police took up arms in the form of the BPP. This was in the name of self-defence and self-preservation. Therefore it was theorised that African Americans, if threatened or placed in a position where their ability to survive was impeded, it was their right, and duty, to defend themselves at the cost of their oppressor. It is also interesting to note the inclusion of the preacher in the poem. Black nationalism in the U.S. during the 1960s and the following two decades

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, p.33.

⁷⁷ Etheridge Knight, 'Dark Prophecy: I sing of Shine', in Henderson, ed., *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, p.331.

interacted with religious thought in different ways. The Marxist leanings of groups such as the BPP would tend to suggest that religion was disregarded as the 'opium of the people'.⁷⁸ The fact that little attention is paid to religion by the BPP is perhaps testimony to this. However, many black nationalists were members of the Nation of Islam, either having been so for a long period of time or having been persuaded by Malcolm X's conversion. Additionally, conversion to the Nation of Islam was common within prisons, where of course many black nationalists spent periods of time. Again, this serves to highlight the apparent flexibility of beliefs within black nationalist thought, with slightly differing ideologies surfacing in the poetry of the 1970s.

The poetry of the 1970s interacted with the political environment of the decade much the same as the poetry of the 1960s did. Similar criticisms of commercialism in favour of a more socialist outlook were present in the spoken word records released during the 1970s such as *Small Talk on 125th and Lenox*. The changing political climate and increasing globalisation enabled anti-colonialist sentiment to be developed within poetry, drawing on the examples of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnam War in a demonstration of global solidarity with anti-colonial regimes. The intensification of J. Edgar Hoover's COITNELPRO under Nixon reinforced the belief among black nationalists that only black people could solve the problems of black people, leading to criticisms of white liberals such as members of the SDS who were seen by the likes of Gil Scott-Heron as following the trends of protest rather than actually aiding the calls for freedom. Criticism of different factions in black nationalist thought resulted in hostilities between cultural and revolutionary nationalists, which came at the cost of unification. Many of these criticisms came from the perceived inaction of members of the black community in the U.S., demonstrated through the apparent frustration in poems such as 'Niggers Are Scared of Revolution'.

⁷⁸ An often paraphrased term appearing in Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843-44)*, trans. Joseph O'Malley (Oxford University Press, 1970) p.1 Online versions can be found through, Marxists.Org, URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>. Accessed: 04/04/17.

Chapter 3: Admiration of the Past

*'People want to know why Jesse Jackson speaks in rhymes. Black leaders have to be poets, otherwise the people wouldn't listen!'*⁷⁹

The 1980s are the decade within which black nationalist poetry took on a new form, evolving from the written and spoken poetry of the 1960s and 1970s. Many hip-hop artists that arose during the 1980s 'owe and acknowledge a large debt to the militancy, urgent tone, and multimedia aesthetics of the Black Arts movement and other forms of literary and artistic nationalism'.⁸⁰ This relatively new form of poetic performance embodied the 'nationalist ethos' that was also present in the poetry of the Black Power era.⁸¹ The hip-hop records and written poetry of the decade achieved this through demonstrating the same spatial awareness and militancy as previous black nationalist poets had done. The refusal to sugar-coat the situation of African Americans and the urban poor during Reagan's conservatism earned hip-hop the popularity it deserved amongst the urban youth through the themes of community, police brutality, prison and the gun. Youth unemployment in the 1980s facilitated the creation of gangs which filled the void that the Black Panther Party had once filled until its decline and eventual disbandment in 1982. The ability of poets such as Carlton Douglas Ridenhour, also known as Chuck D, and Gil Scott-Heron to draw upon experiences and events of the preceding two decades allowed the urban youth of the 1980s to experience a taste of the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s.

'The Message', by Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, was, in the words of Mark Anthony Neal, 'the first significant political recording produced in the post soul era, representing an astute critique of the rise and impact of the Reagan right on working-class and urban locales.'⁸² In the hook of this particular record Melle Mel, the only rapper on the record, warns the listener;

⁷⁹ Amiri Baraka, 'The Wailer', *Callaloo*, no. 23 (1985), p.254.

⁸⁰ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, p.3.

⁸¹ Errol A. Henderson, 'Black Nationalism And Rap Music', *Journal Of Black Studies*. vol. 26, no. 3 (1996), p.315.

⁸² Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said*, p.138.

'Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under.'⁸³

This hook resonated with many within African American communities, particularly in the South, as it mentions the existence of limitations, highlighting that despite the protest of the previous two decades, African Americans were still dissatisfied with their position in American society.

'God is smiling on you, but he's frowning too
Because only God knows what you'll go through
You'll grow in the ghetto living second-rate
And your eyes will sing a song called deep hate.'⁸⁴

This acknowledges that African Americans were born into the U.S. as second-rate citizens, crowded into ghettos where the issue of class arises yet again due to a form of economic imperialism which President Reagan highlighted with his cuts to welfare. This is where 'deep hate' manifested itself, a theme common in many of the black nationalist poems previously analysed, a hatred which the white capitalist inadvertently created as a bi-product of his oppression of black people. This is central to much of the poetry that arose out of the three decades being discussed, as the idea of limitations and hatred born out of the experience of oppression and economic inequality were elements which black nationalists were able to identify within their own communities. Melle Mel goes on to explain the plight of a Black child 'born with no state of mind.'⁸⁵ This boy grows up admiring the 'smugglers, scammers, burglars, gamblers,' but ultimately ends up in prison due to this infatuation. Melle Mel raps,

'Now your manhood is took and you're a Maytag
Spend the next two years as a undercover fag

⁸³ Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, *The Message* (LP, Sugar Hill Records, 1982).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Being used and abused to serve like hell

'Til one day you was found hung dead in the cell.'⁸⁶

The term 'Maytag' is prison slang for a male who is used in the way of sexual favours in exchange for protection and is linked to the rampant theory of domination within American prisons. Forced to live as an 'undercover fag' conjures up the recurring theme within black nationalist poetry of masculinity, or more specifically, emasculation, which was seen to be incompatible with male black nationalism. Considering that the prison population in America doubled between 1977 and 1989, these so called 'dated tropes of black masculinity and political resistance' highlighted the inability of the American prison system to rehabilitate those incarcerated, resulting in what was simply a 'site of sexual violence between men'.⁸⁷ From this it is clear to see how hip-hop enabled MCs in the early 1980s to draw upon their own experiences and observations to demonstrate black nationalist sentiment, in a similar yet diversified manner as the poets and spoken word artists of the 1960s and 1970s did.

With their first two albums surfacing in the late 1980s, Public Enemy have been attributed with aiding the rise of hip-hop. The group was 'perhaps the most accomplished at projecting black rage as a political discourse that would prove attractive to the youth audiences that hip-hop garnered'.⁸⁸ The leader of Public Enemy, Chuck D, criticised a racist police force and a political system that was inherently unequal through 'forcefully expelled rhymes about Black Nationalism and community uplift'.⁸⁹ African American youths could relate to the words of Chuck D when he rapped, 'this government needs a tune up / I don't even know what's happening, what's up / Gun in my chest, I'm under arrest'.⁹⁰ Chuck D made it clear that he believed that the police had no rights over African Americans, yet this passage in the song 'You're Gonna Get Yours' was typical of stories concerning police discrimination that emerged from African American neighbourhoods. *It Takes a*

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said*, p. 138.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.141.

⁸⁹ Melanye T. Price, *Dreaming Blackness*, 1st ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p.1.

⁹⁰ Public Enemy, 'You're Gonna Get Yours', *Yo! Bum Rush The Show* (LP, Def Jam Recordings, 1987).

Nation of Millions To Hold Us Back, released in 1988, was a ground-breaking album in terms of catapulting hip-hop, and hence Chuck D's black nationalist views, onto the world stage. Of particular note was the track 'Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos', which was 'an anthem for incarcerated Black youth'.⁹¹ This track tells the tale of a jailbreak, masterminded by Chuck D who was seemingly incarcerated due to the American government's refusal to accept that he was 'a Black man / And could never be a veteran'.⁹² The refusal of black nationalists to adhere to military conscription during the Cold War ties in with the idea that African Americans made up an internal colony within the U.S. and therefore had no commitment to fight for an oppressive, imperialist government. In 1963, Malcolm X explained this:

'If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad. If it's wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it's wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her.'⁹³

Black nationalists saw the American government as embodying hypocrisy on an incredible scale throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. These nationalists were told not to be violent towards their oppressor, even in self-defence, yet were sent to prison if they refused to be conscripted to kill those opposing American imperialism abroad.

The symbolic significance of the gun, which was popularised amongst the urban poor due to the BPP's understanding of it in the late 1960s, still played a significant role in black nationalist poetry in the 1980s. In 'Black Steel and the Hour of Chaos', Chuck D tells the listener, 'this is what it takes for peace / So I just took the piece'.⁹⁴ By 'piece', Chuck D is referring to a gun he took off a sleeping corrections officer during his escape, highlighting how power can change hands in a matter

⁹¹ Henderson, 'Black Nationalism And Rap Music', p.311.

⁹² Public Enemy, 'Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos', *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* (LP, Def Jam Recordings, 1988).

⁹³ Malcolm X, 'Message to the Grass Roots' (Speech, King Solomon Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan, 1963). Typed version URL: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/message-to-grassroots/> Recorded URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a59Kwp35Z80>.

⁹⁴ Public Enemy, 'Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos'.

of moments, embodying the original revolutionary attitude of many black nationalists in the 1960s and early 1970s. Chuck D goes on to explain how he,

'Got a woman C-O to call me a copter
She tried to get away, and I popped her
Twice, right? Now who wanna get nice?
I had six C-Os, now it's five to go.'⁹⁵

At this point, the listener is made aware that Chuck D and his fellow escapees are willing to be free 'by any means necessary'.⁹⁶ The apparent willingness to use violence to aid their cause within Public Enemy's lyrics ensured that 'Chuck D's call for truth, justice, and a black nationalist way of life was perhaps the most potent of any political narratives that had appeared on a black popular recording'.⁹⁷ These kind of militant recordings were particularly appealing to African American youths. In the early stages of hip-hop, however, the popularity of such recordings was generally limited to within poor urban areas such as the Bronx, partly due to the refusal of black radio to play hip-hop records. This signified the attitude of the black middle-class with regards to hip-hop and indeed 'reflected a historical trend among the black middle class regarding popular art forms that emerge from the black working-class experience'.⁹⁸ Youth unemployment was high from the mid-1970s, particularly in New York, due to numerous recessions which were compounded by Reagan's cuts to welfare.⁹⁹ Therefore, as Jeff Chang has stated, 'if blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work,' which, in turn was reflected in early hip-hop records.¹⁰⁰

Black nationalist poetry, particularly in the 1980s was very much rooted in events of the past. This is evident in the frequent references to specific events in black nationalist memory. Gil Scott-Heron, still active in the 1980s, recorded the poem "Inner City Blues" which was released on

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Malcolm X, 'Message to The Grass Roots'.

⁹⁷ Neal, *What the Music Said*, p. 142.

⁹⁸ Ibid. pp. 142-143.

⁹⁹ Henderson, 'Black Nationalism And Rap Music', p.318.

¹⁰⁰ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, p.13.

the album *Reflections* in 1981, under the title 'Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)'. The poem was originally performed between the two songs *Essex* by Bilal Sunni-Ali (1975) and *Inner City Blues* by Marvin Gaye (1971) as a medley.¹⁰¹ Within the fifth stanza Scott-Heron asks, 'did you ever hear about Mark Essex / And the things that made him choose / To fight the 'Inner City Blues'?'¹⁰² Between December 31st 1972 and January 7th 1973 Mark Essex, armed with a rifle and a revolver, killed nine people, five of which were policemen, and injured thirteen others. The spree, undertaken by 'a sensitive young man trying to come to terms with what he saw as extreme harassment', began in a parking lot in New Orleans and ended on the roof of a hotel.¹⁰³ Upon the roof Essex shot at police and was ultimately killed during a shootout with an armed helicopter. Gil Scott-Heron explains in his poem,

'Yeah! Essex took to the rooftops guerrilla-style
And watched as all the crackers went wild.
Brought in 600 troops, I hear
Brand new to see them crushed by fear.'¹⁰⁴

The reference to guerrilla warfare is a recurring theme in black nationalist poetry, even in the 1980s. This is evident in spite of the apparent decline of militant black nationalist organisations such as the BPP, and hence fits the trend of poems throughout the 1980s looking into the past for examples of supposed black nationalists taking direct action against a racist system. Scott-Heron signifies his support for Essex's actions and seems to revel in the thought of 'the crackers' running in absolute fear Essex's 'cries for freedom'.¹⁰⁵ An article in *The Washington Post* in 1974 read, 'give anybody enough publicity – it doesn't even have to be favourable publicity – and a certain number of people

¹⁰¹ This is explained in Gil Scott-Heron, *Now and Then... The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron*, p.54. The entirety of the written version of the poem "Inner City Blues" is also printed within this book pp.52-54. Unless otherwise stated, this is the version of the poem that will be analysed.

¹⁰² Gil Scott-Heron, 'Inner City Blues', *Now and Then... The Poems of Gil-Scott Heron*, p.53.

¹⁰³ Austin Scott, "'I Had Begun to Hate All White People": Deep Feeling of Harassment Sent Hotel Sniper AWOL', *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, 12 January 1973.

¹⁰⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, 'Inner City Blues', p.53.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

will start to admire him'.¹⁰⁶ This comment assumes that Mark Essex did not have any particular motivation and in fact there is no apparent evidence to suggest that he was linked to any black nationalist organisations. Despite this, relations between African Americans and the police were still such that some black nationalists would see the actions of Essex as heroic, just as many white people feared that there was a black 'conspiracy to kill policemen'.¹⁰⁷

The memories of messianic black nationalist figures were still very much present in the new styles of poetry emerging during the 1980s. Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in 1822 but managed to escape in 1849. Thanks to her bravery she helped hundreds of others to escape during the American Civil War. Run-D.M.C. pay tribute to Tubman's bravery on 'Proud to be Black', which appeared on the album *Raising Hell* in 1986.

'Now Harriett Tubman, was born a slave
She was a tiny black woman, but she was brave
She was livin to be givin there's a lot that she gave
There's not a slave, in this day and age.'¹⁰⁸

As with many poems with a black nationalist message, this passage relates back to a time in African American history of even greater oppression to reinforce a sense of pride amongst black Americans, arising from the sense of shared struggle and overcoming challenges such as slavery. Thanks to the actions of Harriet Tubman and others like her, slavery in America was abolished, and their example has been used to encourage African Americans to 'follow in the spirit of black revolutionaries'.¹⁰⁹ In addition to this, Malcolm X was still widely seen as the 'Fire Prophet', ensuring that his words inspired the words of others well into the years after his assassination.¹¹⁰ In 'Proud to be Black', Run-D.M.C. stated that 'like Malcolm X said I won't turn the right cheek / Got the strength to go the

¹⁰⁶ William Raspberry, "'They Were Becoming Heroes, Weren't They?'" , *The Washington Post*, 22 July 1974.

¹⁰⁷ 'Sniper's "War on Police"', *The Guardian*, 10 January 1973.

¹⁰⁸ Run-DMC, 'Proud to be Black', *Raising Hell* (LP, Profile Records, 1986).

¹⁰⁹ Max Stanford, 'Towards Revolutionary Action Movement Manifesto', CORRESPONDENCE (March 1964), pp.3-5, in John H. Bracey Jr., August Meier and Elliot Rudwick eds., *Black Nationalism In America*, 1st ed. (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1970), p.509.

¹¹⁰ Amiri Baraka, 'The Wailer', p.249.

length, if you wanna start beef / Start beef!'.¹¹¹ This is a reference to Malcolm X's grassroots speech given in Harlem in 1963, where he explained that 'you don't have a turn-the-other-cheek revolution. There's no such *thing* as a nonviolent revolution.'¹¹² Run-D.M.C. make it clear that if they are pushed, they will push back, adhering to the words of Malcolm X when he said, 'preserve your life. It's the best thing you got. And if you got to give it up, let it be even-steven.'¹¹³

This same speech was later used as a sample by Public Enemy in 'Bring the Noise'. This track opens with Malcolm X repeating, 'too black, too strong'.¹¹⁴ In this Malcolm X was referring to his views on integration, which he explained as being 'just like when you've got some coffee that's too black, which means it's too strong. What you do? You integrate it with cream; you make it weak'.¹¹⁵ With this, Malcolm X implied that African Americans were stronger by themselves despite being a minority and in turn discredited integration which aided the rise of black nationalism amongst the urban poor. The use of sampling is one of the foundations of hip-hop. Being able to use extracts from musical records or, as is the case with 'Bring the Noise', recorded political speeches, served the purpose of the 'tying together of generations important in the aesthetic sense', but most significantly through establishing a connection 'between a relatively apolitical generation of the 1970s and 1980s with the staunch Black nationalist African American subculture of the 1960s'.¹¹⁶ This is best explained by Mark Neal, who claims that the fact that Chuck D was born in 1960 and grew up during the BPP's rise and decline, means he experienced first-hand the appeal of black nationalism to those growing up in urban areas during the 1960s. This led him to attempt 'to reintroduce many of those themes to black youth within the contemporary social and aesthetic context'.¹¹⁷ Many of those born in urban areas in the early 1960s were influenced by the militant

¹¹¹ Run-DMC, 'Proud to be Black'.

¹¹² Malcolm X, 'Message to The Grass Roots'.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Public Enemy, 'Bring the Noise', *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back*.

¹¹⁵ Malcolm X, 'Message to The Grass Roots'.

¹¹⁶ Henderson, 'Black Nationalism And Rap Music', p.312.

¹¹⁷ Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said* p.141.

tone of the time, aided in no small part by the Black Arts movement.¹¹⁸ This helps to explain the recurring themes of nationalist militancy within the literary art forms of the 1980s.

Chuck D also refers to the Nation of Islam, again highlighting the remaining influence of this particular movement in the black nationalist poetry of the 1980s.

'Cause a brother like me said, "Well
Farrakhan's a prophet and I think you ought to listen to
What he can say to you, what you wanna do is follow for now"
Power of the people.'¹¹⁹

Louis Farrakhan reinvigorated the Nation of Islam following the choice of Elijah Muhammad's son to change the name of the movement in 1976 by adopting the title and practices of the original organisation. As Melanye T. Price noted in 2009, 'it is expected that Black Nationalists should be supportive of Louis Farrakhan...because of his role as the preeminent Black Nationalist and separatist leader in the last few decades.'¹²⁰ Clearly, the Nation of Islam played an important role in developing and supporting black nationalist thought even after the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s as well as undergoing attempted reformations by leading members. Mark Neal correctly places Farrakhan within the context of the emergence of hip-hop, whose rage and the growing hopelessness of African American life in urban areas combined to provide 'the impetus for segments of the hip-hop community [to] channel their own critiques of white supremacy and expressions of black rage into their music'.¹²¹ In 1984 and 1988, Jesse Jackson, a Civil Rights activist, ran for President, which was perceived to be 'in the tradition of resistance and struggle that has characterized the African American'.¹²² When the Nation of Islam provided security for Jackson in the form of their paramilitary wing the Fruit of Islam, 'the convergence of the integrationist and

¹¹⁸ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, p.3.

¹¹⁹ Public Enemy, 'Bring the Noise', *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back*.

¹²⁰ Melanye T. Price, *Dreaming Blackness*, p.106.

¹²¹ Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said*, p.141.

¹²² Amiri Baraka, *The Wailer*, p. 254.

nationalist hearkened back to the days of King and Malcolm'.¹²³ This highlights how links to the turbulent Civil Rights and Black Power periods appeared in both politics and culture, allowing these to intertwine as they did in the 1960s and early 1970s. Because of this, the politics and culture of the 1980s was reminiscent of the revolutionary tone of the 1960s.

Due to hip-hop's evolution from the decade and a half of the Black Arts movement and the poetry/music that emerged in its immediate wake, hip-hop has its roots in the politics of race and culture. This is evident through the common themes present in early hip-hop records and other poetry of the 1980s, such as police oppression and prison made apparent in tracks like 'You're Gonna Get Yours' and 'The Message'. The re-emergence of the Nation of Islam under Louis Farrakhan and his interaction with Jesse Jackson was reminiscent of the interaction between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., making it seem that for a time a return to the turbulent years of the later 1960s and early 1970s was perhaps possible, not just in a cultural sense, but also political. The presence of Malcolm X in the black nationalist poetry of the decade reaffirmed his status as the 'fire prophet,' and a true black nationalist martyr. This poetry, however, also reaffirmed the divide between the urban poor and the black middle-class, as the militant poetry that emerged still appealed most to seemingly disadvantaged youths when compared to the middle-class, exacerbated by youth unemployment and Reagan's economic conservatism.

¹²³ Henderson, 'Black Nationalism And Rap Music', p.319.

Conclusion

The range of Black Nationalist poetry that emerged out of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s provides an insight into the ideology behind an often misunderstood movement. The Black Arts movement that emerged in the mid-1960s laid much of the groundwork upon which the art of the following two decades was built, as well as informing the political ideology of different sectors of black nationalist thought. The militant language used in the early poetry of the period never ceased, from Amiri Baraka's avant-garde style of writing, to the soulful spoken word recordings of Gil Scott-Heron and the modern styles of rap over instrumental beats demonstrated by the likes of Public Enemy. The connection that much of this poetry had with the unorganised elements of the *lumpenproletariat* was established with the help of the Black Panther Party's focus on this section of society in the 1960s, thanks to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. The emphasis on armed self-defence helped to create a *bad man* persona that was demonstrated in the poetry of H. Rap Brown and Etheridge Knight which, in turn, fed into the militant language and revolutionary hope for the future.

As the 1970s began, socialist rhetoric became more explicit in many black nationalist poems, evident in the criticisms of the overly-commercialised, capitalist society in the U.S. in the works of Gil Scott-Heron. This mirrored Amiri Baraka's belief in the necessity of a socialist revolution in the black nationalist struggle due to American racism being too entrenched and institutionalised for mere reform to be acceptable. The Nixon administration and Hoover's COINTELPRO repressed the Black Power movement, creating a void where rampant political activism and protest once took place. The frustration evident in the poetry following the 1960s was aimed at the lack of active participation on behalf of black revolutionaries, who were criticised by The Last Poets. There was also a certain amount of cynicism with regards to the motives of white liberals and student movements such as the SDS concerning their involvement and apparent support for black nationalist organisations. Despite this cynicism, however, organisations such as the BPP at times aligned themselves with groups like the SDS. In addition to this, U.S. government foreign policies in the 1970s concerning

their involvement in Vietnam encouraged the continued globalisation of black nationalism, evident in poems such as 'Ho Chi Minh', which fed into the global battle against colonialism. Black nationalists were, by definition, anti-colonial in their world views due to the reality of the situation of African Americans being that they represented an internal colony within America. Despite this, however, the 1970s represented a frustrating time for black nationalists, evident in the poetry of the decade.

The 1980s saw the emergence of hip-hop as a politically and socially conscious form of poetry utilising new multimedia techniques of producing and performing. Hip-hop emerged out of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, evident in the clear references to the militant rhetoric of these decades. Youth unemployment and conservative politics created the necessary environment that facilitated a reemphasis on race and class that was seen in the Black Power era, aided by the fact that artists such as Chuck D were born at the start of the 1960s. This became evident through the presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson and the reintroduction of the Nation of Islam under Louis Farrakhan, mirrored by the works of Public Enemy, Run-D.M.C. and Gil Scott-Heron and their projected anger, discontent and social awareness.

The poetry that was produced during these three decades provides an insight into the theories, conflicts and prominence of black nationalism over time. The interaction between literary art and the political and social climate of the times serves to demonstrate how black nationalism in America was rooted in the experiences of the urban poor, which, over the course of three decades changed little. The recurring themes within poetry from the 1960s to the 1980s highlight the links from decade to decade, interspersed by varying levels of hope for the future, disdain for the present, and admiration of the past.

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