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Red, Gold, Black, and Green: Black Nationalist Aesthetics

Crispin Sartwell

Abstract

This paper tries to show that black nationalist movements have been pervasively influential on the music and visual culture of the world. In particular, it focuses on the Marcus Garvey movement and some of its religious expressions or extensions - Rastafarianism and the Nation of Gods and Earths - and on reggae and hip hop music. This is also an illustration of a wider conceptual point: that political ideologies are not only constellations of texts and doctrines but multi-media aesthetic environments. Race itself is articulated in aesthetic categories, not only in terms of body appearance and color, but in cultural productions such as music and visual arts, while questions about what art is, or what are the data of aesthetics, cannot be answered in isolation from racial or other social/economic/political categories.

Key Words

African-American, black nationalism, Bob Marley, Five Percent Nation, hip hop, Kool Herc, Marcus Garvey, Nation of Gods and Earths, Nation of Islam, race, Rastafarianism, reggae, U.N.I.A.

1. Introduction

The political and the aesthetic are not identical. But they are inextricable. Not all art is political, but all politics is aesthetic: at their heart political ideologies are aesthetic systems, multimedia artistic environments. The political "content" of an ideology can be understood in large measure actually to be, to be identical with its formal and stylistic aspects. It's not that a political ideology or movement gets tricked out in a manipulative set of symbols or design tropes; it's that at its heart the ideology *is* an aesthetic system, and that this is what moves or fails to move people, attracts their loyalty or repugnance, moves them to act or to apathy. But the function of the arts, including various crafts and design practices, is not merely a matter of manipulation and affect: the aesthetic expressions of a regime or of the resistance to a regime are central also to the cognitive content of political systems. Whether a political ideology is true or false, admirable or repugnant, the answers to these questions are not exclusively a matter of understanding its texts or speeches or assertions or laws but of understanding these as a part of a multi-sensory aesthetic surround or context. The aesthetic embodiments of political positions are material transformations and interventions with concrete effects.

We tend to think of political ideologies and constitutions as being essentially texts: paradigmatic cases might be the *Republic* of Plato, the United States Constitution, and the *Communist Manifesto*. But political ideologies and constitutions are aesthetic systems of which texts form a portion, in the precise sense that political systems appear in different media, none of which is fundamental and all of which are related. The ideology or system simply is, in part, the design style.

(Indeed, in the term's old acceptance, as in Aristotle or Blackstone, a 'constitution' is the structure of political arrangements, an institutional shape, or as Aristotle puts it, an arrangement of offices. It may be embodied in a text or it may simply be a series of traditional forms.) A politics is an aesthetic environment, whatever else it may be. When we talk about political constitutions, ideologies, or systems, we focus on textual materials and their authors, such as manifestos, constitutions, *Mein Kampf* or *The Analects*, Machiavelli and Rawls. But political systems are no more centrally textual than they are centrally systems of imagery, architecture, music, graphic arts, etc. It's not that systems use these things as tools to gain loyalty, for propaganda; it's that communism, Sharia law, and anarchism, for example, actually constitute artpolitical environments in all media.

In this paper, I illustrate these points through the example of twentieth-century Black Nationalism, originating in the Marcus Garvey movement, and its artistic, religious, and political embodiments and ramifications. I intend to narrate a story that shows at each node that the aesthetic and political aspects of Black Nationalism are inextricable, and I propose that this idea is generalizable to other political/aesthetic systems. Supporting such a claim, I think, can only be accomplished through an arrangement of bristling facts: the claim, in other words, is empirical. I try to weave together the aesthetic, religious, and political dimensions as they developed both in the Caribbean and in the United States into something like a coherent narrative. In addition, I suggest that this material has affected the world's artpolitical environment as a whole to a surprising extent.

Like most academics in this era, I think of race as a social/political/economic construction. But this construction can only be fully grasped in relation to categories that can be conceived as fundamentally aesthetic. Though official constructions of race may proceed in terms of ancestry (as in the one-drop rule), in everyday interactions they are a matter of embodied appearance, including color, but also incorporating movement and clothing styles, linguistic vernacular, music, artifactual surrounds, and so on. This is as true of whiteness as it is of blackness, which after all arise as a single system of constructed contrasts. Race is, among other things, an aesthetic repertoire. In this it resembles many other forms of power, taxonomies of populations, and political categories. By the same token, the understanding of the arts represented in disciplines such as aesthetics has to be understood as inflected by racial and other political categories. What counts as the data of the philosophy of art, and how that data are to be treated, cannot be held apart from the social practices that give rise to such ideas as race. Even the question, for example, of whether hip hop is music at all (because it is supposedly not melodic, or because it involves sampling, and so on) obviously has both aesthetic and racial implications, and the question about what items the philosophy of music ranges over is not, in fact, isolated from racial histories.

Most of the major political, religious, and musical figures I discuss are men. This, as well as many directly sexist expressions, has led to criticism of Black Nationalism as a

male supremacist movement. Without minimizing such criticism, I want to point out that, in having both liberatory and oppressive implications in many dimensions, Black Nationalism is typical of many resistance movements. Its achievements have been by any measure substantial, and by the 1970s it had entered a period of self-criticism driven by feminist women who also identified to one extent or another with the movement. [1]

The Garvey movement of the teens and twenties in the twentieth century is often called the largest organization of African diaspora peoples up to that point. And it is often regarded, as well, as a failure: it dissolved in the financial meltdown of Garvey's Black Star shipping line and in a vendetta against Garvey by the American government spearheaded by J. Edgar Hoover, issuing in Garvey's imprisonment and deportation. But though it never gave rise to an enduring mass movement or repatriated significant parts of the diaspora to Africa, it had infinitely rich ramifications, specifically in religion and the arts. In the Caribbean, one result of Garveyism was the religion of Rastafari, which informs the whole history of Jamaican recorded music: most famously, of course, the roots reggae of Bob Marley, the first third world superstar and, already for generations, a symbol of liberatory hope and marijuana use. In North America, Garveyism gave rise, among many other things, to the Nation of Islam and the ministry and political organization of Malcolm X, as well as the Five Percenters, or Nation of Gods and Earths, which has influenced American music to a surprising extent. The importation of Jamaican musical practices into New York resulted in the musical style known as hip hop: like reggae, a major dimension of world music ever since, with political as well as aesthetic ramifications.

Though music has been the most recognizable aesthetic heritage of Garveyite black nationalism, it has all possible aesthetic expressions, which in turn make connections between religious, political, and aesthetic spheres in an exemplary way. Indeed these spheres are indistinguishable on the ground, a fact that black nationalism displays continuously. Garvey himself developed the red, gold, and green (and sometimes black) black nationalist flag and color scheme; if one walks down the street of any city in the world, one is likely to catch a glimpse of it on people's clothing. Indeed, he wielded color *per se* as an artpolitical weapon, celebrating "blackness" and trying to change its valence in Western arts and imagery as a symbol of ignorance and annihilation. The Nation of Islam and many others have developed this theme systematically. Garvey denounced hair straightening and skin bleaching products then being marketed to black people, a theme later taken up by Malcolm X and others, and developed an aesthetic of the Negro body as an aesthetic/political site. The Garvey-influenced religions developed a series of iconographies that have likewise penetrated everywhere, from the Lion of Judah to the faces of Malcolm and Marley to the esoteric symbolism of the Five Percent Nation. Hairstyles such as dreadlocks and even the Afro (and hence, e.g., the "Jewfro") derive from the same sources. Whole minor languages, such as the "Dread Talk" of Rastafarianism as well as hip hop slang, have remade the poetry and the vernacular of English and other languages.

Graffiti, associated with hip hop, has changed the physical environment of American cities and been appropriated into advertising and typestyles.

The Garvey movement coincided closely with the Harlem renaissance, and its themes were mirrored by many figures in that movement, notably Zora Neale Hurston (also a Garvey skeptic), Countee Cullen, and Arna Bontemps. Langston Hughes developed what might be thought of as a Black nationalist poetics: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our dark selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too." [2] This statement was welcomed ecstatically by, among others, Garvey's wife, the activist Amy Jacques Garvey. [3] The vernacular literature of Hughes, Claude McCay, Jean Toomer, and many others was the literary embodiment of black pride and a celebration of black dialect.

2. Race Theory and Ethiopianism

Though Marcus Garvey was born in Jamaica (in 1887 in St. Ann's Bay, the same area from which Marley originated) and spent a good deal of time in Panama and elsewhere while also influencing anti-colonialism in Africa, it was of course in the United States and specifically in Harlem that he had the greatest effect in his own lifetime. He did this with a racist rhetoric that derived in turn from German nationalism and the thought of such nineteenth-century racist thinkers as Gobineau, who taught that each race of man had a particular origin and a particular destiny embodied in its thought, its politics, and above all in its arts. In Gobineau and in the black nationalism that made use of this tradition (for example, the early thought of W.E.B. DuBois), the concepts of 'race' and 'nation' were run together: race was conceived as the biological trace of national geography expressed in mythology and literature. [4] Again, I take the view - now an academic consensus - that race is a social construction corresponding to no biological, much less "spiritual" reality. We can look at "racism" as expressed by figures with such divergent goals as Gobineau or DuBois as a moment in this construction, one now long superseded. At any rate, according to racism each race had its spirit or genius, its contribution to make to world civilization. Indeed, one way to characterize much of the thought, particularly in Germany, that segued from Enlightenment to romantic was its enthusiasm for collective consciousness, present in such extreme degrees in Rousseau, Hegel, Herder, and Marx, for example that the locus of consciousness is removed from the individual human body and lodged in collective entities, including nations and races. It is this thought of historical actors, smeared over many human bodies and generations, that articulates the idea of race wielded as a weapon in genocides but also in movements of resistance and autonomy. The arts of a given people, race, era, and so on, became one conspicuous and decodable expression of its collective consciousness. Such a thought drives even an "empirical" or scientific program to the present, and stands at the origin of anthropology.

The black race, or "the Negro," or the nation(s) of Africa were often conceived in this structure to be repositories of a

particularly aesthetic consciousness, a thought fully expressed by Gobineau. Obviously, racial theory of this type -- racialism, for short -- is potentially racist, and every stereotype of every people, including every negative stereotype of black people, is inscribed somewhere in the various expressions of the theory. But just as obviously, there are resources in racialism for a reversal, as DuBois's (from a present perspective) bewildering 1897 essay "Conservation of the Races" makes clear. (DuBois had been educated, in part, in Germany.)

The history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history. What, then, is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions, and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life. [5]

If every race has a destiny, then every race finds a justification for its intrinsic identity in the unfolding of world history. When black folks turned this notion to account, the result was often termed "Ethiopianism," based on the historical use of "Ethiopia" essentially to mean Africa as a whole, and on the Biblical passage "princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand to God" (Psalms 68:31). This passage was widely quoted or paraphrased in African-American writing at latest by the early nineteenth century. For the Rastafarians, it made particularly vivid the crowning of Haile Selassie as Emperor of Ethiopia as a turning point in history or a harbinger of the judgment and the redemption of black people. The members of a given race were supposed to have a common origin, a common character, a common message to carry to the world, and if that were so, it should be a matter of pride to black folks to be black.

DuBois, in *Souls of Black Folk* found this expressed in the American Negro especially in music. He called Negro spirituals "the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil." [6] Even Frederick Douglass, who had little time for the cosmic essentialist theories of race, had said much the same thing. This is both a stereotype and a reversal of the stereotype or its strategic deployment in a liberatory ideology, typical of almost all black appropriations of racist theory: the music of Africa and the African diaspora captured in the image of the talking drum and in the notion of natural rhythm and ability to dance. Along with an accompanying innate religious faith, soul, or religiosity, it was both a limitation and a liberation. This was a contribution of the Negro to the world, like the supposedly innate philosophical consciousness of the Teutons or the commercialism of the Anglo-Saxons. "Black Nationalism" makes use of race theory as a way to unify black folks and, in particular, it imagines for them a nation, a common origin in Africa, from which unfolds a common destiny embodied in its cultural expressions, often crystallized in the concept of repatriation. These expressions are sources of pride but also

potentially vehicles of cultural construction, ways to forge a unity among, in this case, a despised, enslaved, and exploited people: the suggestion of a glorious destiny even in the midst of a degraded history.

Garvey managed to wield this thought in an unprecedented mobilization of the black race. He did it with great dignity, accessibility, and flair, wielding racialist theory as a potent form of liberatory propaganda aimed at average black folk of the Americas. Here, from a speech Garvey gave at the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) convention of 1924, is a characteristic formulation of black nationalism that formulates the common denominators of all such movements in the twentieth century, secular and religious.

The Negro wants a nation, nothing less, nothing more, and why shouldn't we be naturally free, nationally unfettered? We want a nationality similar to that of the English, the French, the Italian, the German, to that of the white American, to that of the yellow Japanese; we want nationality and government because we realize that the American nation in a short while will not be large enough to accommodate two competitive rivals, one black and the other white. . . . As we deliberate on the many problems confronting us . . . let us not lose control of ourselves; let us not forget that we are the guardians of four hundred millions; let us not forget that it is our duty to help humanity everywhere, whether it be black or white. . . . So, let no prejudice cause us to say or do anything against the interest of the white, or the yellow man; let us realize that the white man has a right to live, the yellow man has a right to live, and all that we desire to do is to impress upon them the fact that we also have a right to live. [7]

Within its racialist and nationalist presuppositions, this is an inspiring and decent vision, and Garvey made it literally inspiring in part by pointed, self-conscious, and eclectic spectacle. The images of Garveyism are above all Garvey himself in grand Napoleonic uniform. As Wilson Jeremiah Moses described it, Garvey "affected the airs of an Austrian archduke." [8] And the street parade combined oratory, music, mass participation, and spectacular clothing into a racial/martial/celebratory festival. He configured symbolisms of Africa, of Masonism, of religion, of science and medicine, of circus into coherent syntheses that called forth an ecstasy of celebratory identification. Garvey's was a political aesthetics of genius whose ramifications we still inhabit.

Garvey himself had been raised in the Catholic church, and even as he exploited the religious elements of his own spectacle: his image as Moses, his status as a prophet with all its rhetorical implications, his self-forged title and uniform as Provisional President of Africa, he was never quite comfortable declaring his movement to be religious or to be a religion. Nevertheless he helped found the African Orthodox Church, which remained a firmly Christian denomination, at the same time hinting at the blackness of Jesus or even of God. This was

a racist interpretation, which even Garvey understood as symbolic. Garvey's biographer E. David Cronon writes of the first bishop of the African Orthodox Church, George Alexander McGuire:

From the first . . . Bishop McGuire urged the Garveyites to "forget the white gods." "Erase the white gods from your hearts," he told his congregation [in 1921]. We must go back to the native church, to our own true God." The new Negro religion would seek to be true to the principles of Christianity without the shameful hypocrisy of the white churches. Garvey himself urged Negroes to adopt their own religion, "with God as a being, not as a Creature, a religion," a religion that would show Him "made in our own image - black." . . . Garvey's African Orthodox Church was able to report in its monthly magazine, the *Negro Churchman*, that "in its first year" it had "extended its mission through several states, into Canada, Cuba, and Hayti." . . . During the opening parade [of the UNIA convention of 1924] through the streets of Harlem, U.N.I.A. members marched under a large portrait of a black Madonna and Child. . . . "Then let us start our Negro painters getting busy," the Bishop declared, "and supply a black Madonna and a black Christ for the training of our children."^[9]

Such paintings were actually produced and carried in Garveyite parades. It is obvious that this is not the only possible response: one might also reject Christianity in its entirety and engage in one or another form of religious invention or repatriation. If the "white race" was associated with Christianity -- and of course Christianity had a role in the historical oppression of black people, if also in their liberation - - then the racial genius might demand its own autonomous religious expression. Frederick Douglass's most vituperative attack on slavery had been on the religious hypocrisy of slavemasters who professed Christianity: "I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial, and hypocritical Christianity of this land." ^[10]

3. Garveyite Religions

I want now to survey a series of historical developments out of the Garvey movement which display the intrinsic connection between political, religious, and aesthetic expressions. The religious developments seem restricted to relatively small, eccentric sects, though Rastafarianism and various forms of American Black Islam have grown over the decades to be fairly mainstream, or at least widespread, religious tendencies. But the political and religious messages have been largely embodied in aesthetic objects, in particular music. And what is remarkable is how far these movements and messages have changed globally the sensory surround of almost everyone: an aesthetic environment without reggae or hip hop or the current forms of street graffiti would be inconceivably different from the one we actually inhabit. And though the political

effects of this material are difficult to assess, I think they are more profound than they might appear to be, not only for black people but for all people.

As Garvey faded from the scene (he died in the UK in 1940 after at least a decade of decline for his movement), his followers began to preach various mystical interpretations of Garveyism. Indeed the mystical aspects of race were always implicit in racialist theory and were exploited on the other side by Hitler and many others. A number of astonishing scriptures that mentioned Garvey were produced by black mystics of the twenties and thirties, such as the *Holy Piby* of Robert Athlyi Rogers, an Afro-Caribbean working in Newark ("Therefore, Athlyi yielded him a copy of the map, and declared Marcus Garvey an apostle of the Lord God for the redemption of Ethiopia and her suffering posterities." [11]) We might also consider the surreal spiritual poem *The Royal Parchment Scroll of Black Supremacy* by Balintine F. Pettersburgh. The much older text of the *Kebrá Nagast*, which narrated the story of Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, and the religious history of Ethiopia and its line of emperors, was revived as an ancient source for Afrocentric religion. Most of the texts of the Afrocentric religious movements emerged from the intersection of the Caribbean and North America: Rogers came from Anguilla. He founded a church based on his inspired scripture that taught the destruction of Babylon and a "black Zionism:" repatriation to the promised land. Pettersburgh originated in St. Thomas. The Pettersburgh and Rogers texts provided the basis of the first properly Rastafarian scripture, Leonard Howell's *The Promised Key*.

In the United States, one post-Garvey religious tendency, perhaps also beginning in Newark, moved toward Islam. Some elements of Islam had been preserved in African-American culture by slaves of North African origin, and Islam provided an or perhaps the obvious alternative to Christianity as a monotheism that could be associated with people of color. Black Masonism is also a connection to Islamic ("esoteric") symbolism. An originary movement was the Moorish Science Temple, founded in Newark and then Chicago by the Noble Drew Ali (Timothy Drew) during the disintegration of the Garvey movement in the late twenties (though perhaps Drew Ali had been working toward it since the mid-1910s). The Moorish movement derived explicitly from Garveyism, and even as it taught the flatly heretical view that Drew Ali was Allah incarnate, it regarded Garvey as a prophet. Drew, too, had a flair for spectacle, and wore a feathered fez that paid tribute both to the mysticism of the Middle East and to Drew's American Indian ancestry. Drew Ali taught that "so-called American Negroes" originated in the Middle East and that Islam was their "natural" religion. He also produced a Garveyite scripture, *The Holy Koran of The Moorish Science Temple of America*.

In these modern days there came a forerunner, who was divinely prepared by the great God-Allah and his name is Marcus Garvey, who did teach and warn the nations of the earth to prepare to meet the coming Prophet; who was to bring the true and divine Creed of Islam, and his name is Noble Drew Ali: who was prepared and

sent back to earth by Allah, to teach the old time religion and the everlasting gospel to the sons of man. [\[12\]](#)

In a structure that was repeated many times, the Moorish Science Temple devolved into schism, with Drew dying, probably in Chicago in 1929 after a series of schismatic shootings, while various followers claimed to be his reincarnation, and thus Allah.

The Nation of Islam was apparently founded at around this moment by W.D. Fard, also an incarnation of Allah, a door-to-door salesman active in the Detroit area in the early 1930s, whose teachings were, after his disappearance, taken up by Elijah Mohammad (Robert Poole). According to a number of sources, Fard was one of a number of people who claimed to be the reincarnation of Drew Ali, though the connection was denied by the Nation of Islam. [\[13\]](#) Indeed, so elusive is Fard as a figure that one might be forgiven for doubting his existence, and in a Chicago police report from 1935, the leader of the Nation of Islam is identified as "Wallace Fard...or Elijah Muhammad" as though these were the same person. [\[14\]](#) Whatever the case, where Drew and even Garvey had preached the equality of the races, Elijah Muhammad preached black racial supremacy, saying that the white race had been the result of a breeding experiment by an ancient evil scientist. He taught also that the black race was God incarnate, and whites a race of devils. This notion could be taken literally or as a metaphor for the evils that Europeans had visited upon the world: imperialism, colonialism, slavery: in short, genocide.

The Nation of Islam recruited widely in prisons, where it found Malcolm Little (Malcolm X), who, working in Harlem, became its greatest preacher and organizer and an exemplar of its severely puritanical discipline, and who began to apply the teachings of the Nation explicitly to current political situations of the fifties and early sixties. Though Muhammad denied being influenced by Garvey, which is ridiculous, Malcolm's formative experiences had been in the Garvey movement, in which his parents were fairly major figures in Detroit, and in the service of which, according to Malcolm, his father had been executed by the Ku Klux Klan. Malcolm left the Nation in 1964, disillusioned by Muhammad's sexual and financial antics. He converted to orthodox Islam and founded new religious and political organizations. The Nation of Islam underwent a number of schisms in the sixties and seventies as Elijah Mohammed's son Wallace led much of the group toward orthodox Sunni Islam. The original teachings were revived by Louis Farrakhan, a preacher who had been trained by Malcolm, though Malcolm's family held that Farrakhan had been involved in Malcolm's assassination.

Another Nation of Islam preacher in Harlem in the late 1960s, Clarence 13X (Clarence Smith Jowers or Father Allah), founded the Five Percent Movement (five percent of us, or of them, will be redeemed) also known as the Nation of Gods and Earths, which dispensed with some of the ascetic and authoritarian aspects of the Nation of Islam. Indeed, Father Allah set up headquarters in a bar (the Glamour Inn) and was known as an excellent gambler. He did time in prisons and the notorious

mental hospital at Matteawan. "Gods" were black men, "Earths" black women, while children were referred to as "Stars." The Nation of Gods and Earths absorbed many of the texts and teachings of the Nation of Islam but also deployed as elaborate a set of teachings as any of these groups, including systems of numerology, a mystical interpretation of the alphabet, and a system of astrology. Starting out militant, the Five Percenters eventually tried to bring peace to New York and worked in the late sixties with the Lindsay administration to keep Harlem relatively calm, for example, after the death of Martin Luther King. Though it declined with Father Allah's shooting death in 1969, the Nation of Gods and Earths revived dramatically in the seventies and eighties, and spread over the boroughs of New York and then all over the country. It revived the "Circle-7" symbol of the Moorish Science Temple, adding a sun, moon, and star motif. The Five Percent Nation has carried its message above all by hip hop music, where its astonishing hermeneutics is ubiquitous and functions almost as a cipher. [\[15\]](#)

All of these groups postulated historical origins for the "lost-found" tribe of American Negroes; all of them taught repatriation in some form: physical, spiritual, or metaphorical; all of them took races seriously as historical actors and preached racial pride; all of them saw a glorious racial destiny for people of African descent; all of them conducted active ministries among the poor, the addicted, and the imprisoned; all of them, as can be seen by these themes, venerated the memory of Marcus Garvey as a precursor, a Moses, a John the Baptist.

Let us now turn from the United States to a strikingly parallel series of developments in Jamaica. There, a similar set of Afrocentric theological traditions developed, in part based on indigenous and African-inspired religious systems such as Obeah, and in part by various forms of Christian mysticism. Robert Athlyi Rogers founded a small Ethiopianist sect in Kingston in the 1920s. Garvey returned in the late twenties after his exile from the States and became a major local figure in Kingston, though again without an explicitly original religious orientation. However, Garvey had said that a king would appear in Africa and lead black people out of their Babylonian captivity.

In 1930, Ras Tafari Makkonen, supposedly a descendant of the biblical Queen of Sheba, was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia: "King of Kings and Lord of Lords, conquering lion of the tribe of Judah." This news caught the imagination of the entire African diaspora, including a street preacher named Leonard Howell, a Jamaican who had known and followed Garvey both in New York and in Kingston. According to Hélène Lee, in her remarkable book *The First Rasta*, Howell's friend Annie Harvey, who had been connected with the "black Jews" or "Israelites" in Harlem, attended Selassie's coronation in Addis Ababa. She brought back a photograph of Selassie "enthroned as the Prince of Peace." Howell began to circulate copies of this photo on the streets of Kingston, along with the purported Biblical prophecies and the words of Garvey that he connected to it. [\[16\]](#) Howell's street ministry was the origin of Rastafarianism, which was in full swing by the mid-1930s both in rural Jamaica (especially Saint Thomas parish on the

eastern part of the island) and in Kingston.

It was a remarkable religion for its eclecticism, if for nothing else. It was explicitly "Zionist," teaching, under an interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, that Ethiopia was the promised land and that the diaspora would be miraculously reunited in Africa. Howell composed *The Promised Key* in prison in the mid-thirties, incorporating passages of *The Holy Piby* and *The Royal Parchment Scroll of Black Supremacy*, and published it under the "Hindu" name Gangunguru Maragh, or "Gong." (Bob Marley was later known as Gong and his record company was Tuff Gong). Hinduism, including the cult of Kali, had been imported into the island with Indian laborers in the mid-nineteenth century and provided Rastafarianism with much of its ceremonial and aesthetic features, including the use of ganja (Kali or Collie weed) as a sacrament, the dreadlocks hairstyle reminiscent of Indian ascetic sects, and the vegetarian diet that became known as "ital." [17]

In 1935 Italy invaded Ethiopia, an event easily framed as the last battle between Babylon and Zion. Italian propaganda invented a worldwide conspiracy of black people to kill white people, supposedly headed by Selassie and called "Nya-Binghi." Bizarrely, when this screed was republished in Jamaica, it became almost a scripture, and led to the founding of a more violent strand of Rastafarianism. (Howell, under the influence of Gandhi, had preached non-resistance.) [18] Eventually 'nyabinghi' became the name both of a radical Rastafarianism and of the ceremonial drumming style (often using three drums, an African motif) used at Rasta ceremonies known as groundations, and subsequently a sub-genre of reggae music that hewed close to ceremonial styles.

In 1939, after stints in prison and a mental hospital as a political prisoner, Howell founded a community in the hills of Saint Catherine Parish known as the Pinnacle, which practiced the worship of Selassie as the living god, and also began systematizing Rastafarianism in terms of groundation ceremonies and ganja as sacrament (also as cash crop). Perhaps 5,000 Rastas were resident in the immediate area, according to Lee (137). The Jamaican government raided the Pinnacle a number of times. In 1954 they destroyed more than a million marijuana plants and seized piles of cash (Lee, 189-192). In 1958 the compound was burned. Thousands of Rastas scattered into Kingston and Spanish Town, where they practiced their ceremonies in "yards" or small public spaces in ghettos such as Trench Town. Under the influence of Jamaican music, starting in about 1960, Rasta doctrine was carried to the whole world and gained adherents in many places, notably Africa. Haile Selassie visited Jamaica in 1966, where he received the astonishing welcome offered to the living god. He set aside a tract of land in Ethiopia, Shashamani, to host repatriated Rastas and diasporic Africans. The Rasta movement faced a crisis in the seventies when Selassie was deposed and when, a couple of years later, he was reported to have died. This many Rastas regarded as impossible and as a lie of the Babylonian media.

Like the "Black Muslim" movement, Rastafarianism taught that Garvey was a prophet, that the black race would be carried to the promised land, and that it had a grand historical destiny.

In addition, it taught explicitly that "Babylon" (first, the British colonial government, then the Jamaican state, then the system of white and Western oppression as a whole) must fall. Rastas attempted to "chant down Babylon" or literally bring the end of the system by singing and drumming. They employed the red, gold, black and green as a symbol of black redemption. And both north and south, the movements were apocalyptic: they anticipated the end time.

And like American black Islam, Rastafarianism taught (in the words of Bob Marley) that "mighty God is a living man:" that people must make their heaven or hell on earth now, in this life. Both African-American Islam and Rastafarianism, that is, are, as we might put it "immanentist" religions: they reject pure spirit and affirm the essential embodiment of both people and god. "'The Holy One' is God in person and not a spirit!" wrote Elijah Mohammed in *Message to the Blackman in America*, referring no doubt to Fard, as Marley and Peter Tosh to Selassie: "we know and we overstand, that mighty God is a living man." [19] That, of course, has revolutionary political implications, as we do not seek redemption after death, but here and now: redemption is identified with justice. Indeed, the spiritual orientation of Christianity, captured in the "Negro spiritual," was associated in both movements with oppression: it justified patience and capitulation, promising a reward after death. But as Peter Tosh and Bob Marley said: "If you know what life is worth, you will look for yours on earth. So now we see the light, and stand up for our rights."

It is essential to understanding these movements that they reproduced as well as resisted existing power structures. The Nation of Islam, in particular, was an extremely authoritarian structure. The basic concepts of racialism on which these movements relied were artifacts of the very oppression they used them to resist. They are liberatory movements but, perhaps like most liberatory movements, intensely equivocal in relation to power: expressions of both resistance to power and the craving for power of people to whom it has been denied. It is worth repeating, in particular, that all of these religious movements practiced subordination of women on religious grounds. This is an extremely complicated matter with which I cannot deal fully here. Suffice it to say that, like many liberation movements, black nationalist religions, in their aesthetic expressions among others, reproduced some oppressions even as they sought to overturn others. And I might remark, as well, that gender relations in the black diaspora were not comparable to those in white, Western culture, and that the masculinity of black men, understood in terms of power and privilege, had been under attack from the beginnings of colonialism and the slave trade. Thus an assertion of the power of black men, like black nationalism as a whole, was simultaneously a reproduction of and a resistance to the forms of white power. At any rate, all of these movements, including Garveyism itself, the Nation of Islam, and Rastafarianism, have been male-dominated, even as each has also given rise to internal gender struggles led by women. And male suprematism has been a theme in the aesthetic expressions of these movements, including in roots reggae and, in particularly pointed and problematic ways, in hip hop.

4. Music

We might remark in a general way about the political power of music, from national anthems to the centrality of Wagner to the Nazis, from the rebellions of the sixties configured around rock 'n roll and the symbol of Woodstock to the anarcho-punk of mainstream groups such as the Clash and radical collectives such as Crass. Music in all these cases is, I think, not mere propaganda but an *embodiment* of political life that, among other things, articulates the movements of human bodies in military parades and peace festivals and mosh pits. Jefferson's neo-classical republicanism was embodied among other places in his violin-playing, and music has been central, for example, to the construction of youth sub-cultures in the West since, at latest, the 1950s.

From the beginning Rasta ceremony was marked by chanting and drumming. And from the beginning of Jamaican recorded music, around 1960, the Rasta elements were central. Count Ossie, who ran a Rasta commune in eastern Kingston, appeared on one of the first Jamaican-recorded hit songs, "O Carolina" by the Folkes Brothers. The record was also one of the first to move toward the beat that became known as "ska," and which has since informed a number of revivals, such as the "Two-Tone," a specifically interracial style of the late seventies in Britain associated with bands such as the Specials and Madness, and a later stateside ska revival in the 1990s that produced a number of hit songs, as well as enduring pop stars such as No Doubt and its singer, Gwen Stefani. Indeed, members of the foundational ska group the Skatalites, such as Dizzy Moore and the great trombonist Don Drummond, had also played in Rasta groundations. The nyabinghi style played by Ossie, based on African-revival "burru" drumming, probably dated from the thirties and involved three drums (the bass, the funde, and the repeater, African ceremonial styles), along with whatever instruments were at hand, and chanting or spoken-word lectures or meditations on slavery, Garvey, African repatriation, Selassie, and so on. The best document of this style and ideology is the album "Grounation" (a variant spelling), by Count Ossie and the Mystical Revelation of Rastafari recorded in the early 1970's, where the connection of groundation ceremonial music to ska, rock steady, and reggae is developed with beautiful coherence, and in which the music is presented in conjunction with Rasta prayers for peace and brotherhood, and meditative developments of esoteric Rasta doctrine. But from the very start, Jamaican recorded music featured recognizably Rasta political and religious themes and ceremonial drum styles in such songs as "Babylon Gone" by Winston and Roy and "Another Moses" by the Mellow Cats. [\[20\]](#)

Ska blended American R&B, which could be heard in Jamaica on radio stations out of New Orleans and Miami, with a distinctive lurching beat originally associated with a dance craze. The featured instruments were horns, though the style was defined by its rhythm, like the styles that followed, and began the tremendous emphasis on drum and bass that has characterized Jamaican music, and hence the music of the world, for much of the last fifty years. The teen-aged Wailers began their career in the ska era as a vocal trio consisting of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Bunny Wailer. At the start,

Rastafarianism was still a controversial and repressed religion, and though many of the musicians were involved in it to one extent or another, the Rasta themes were for the most part slightly disguised under images of lions or possibly Christian spiritual motifs such as the promised land or judgment day, traditional since Negro spirituals in slavery. Indeed, much ska was primarily instrumental, which made thematic subterfuge otiose, and some early artists were Christians (such as Toots and the Maytals) or even Muslim (as in the astonishing Prince Buster). As subsequent developments would show, however, these religious strands were not necessarily regarded by their practitioners as ultimately incompatible, and a whole strain of Christian Rastafarianism developed, associated with "Jesus Dread" Yabby You and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, to which Marley converted before his death.

During the hot summer of 1966, the beat began to slow down. Partly because the large ska-style band was an expensive proposition, the horns were to some extent sheered away and emphasis shifted to what could be termed a rock band: guitar, bass, drums, and vocals. The style that eventuated became known as "rock steady," and it has provided the foundation for Jamaican popular music ever since, which has continuously sampled or reproduced its rhythm tracks. Rock Steady as a dominant pop style lasted a bare two years. It produced a number of great singers in an American soul mode, and also began to introduce explicitly racial and political themes, as in "Young, Gifted and Black," by Marcia Griffiths and Bob Andy. Desmond Dekker had worldwide hits with "007" and the obviously Rasta-inspired "Israelites." Rastafarian theology became an ever-more explicit theme in the rock steady era.

Jamaican music of this period was presented largely by sound systems, in which huge speakers would be set up in fields for outdoor parties. These featured not bands but DJ's spinning records. Some of these DJ's themselves became stars by playing brand-new or unknown records (the main Jamaican record producers, such as Clement Dodd and Duke Reid, ran sound systems), and by "chattering" into and out of the record, as American R&B DJ's were wont to do. As DJ's such as King Stitt and Count Machuki became better-known than the recording artists they were playing, the producers started experimenting with issuing the B-sides of singles without vocals, so the DJ could do an extended "chatter" or "toast." Eventually they realized that multiple versions of songs could be successful commercially: the vocal version, the version with the vocal removed, and finally the DJ version, records in which they recorded the DJ rhyiming over the instrumental or with some of the original vocals in a call-and-response pattern. The first DJ to become a Jamaican recording star was U-Roy, who by 1970 dominated the Jamaican charts.

Meanwhile, producers also began to experiment with the instrumental versions, kicking the vocal in and out, adding echo or reverb effects by re-recording over the initial tracks (all on tube equipment). These "dub plates," the greatest technician of which was King Tubby, who owned a stereo repair shop in Kingston, became a fad in themselves and presented the possibility of yet another score with a single song, as well as a perfect context for DJ versions. Tubby stripped Rock Steady rhythms down to the drum and bass and

rebuilt them with a kind of cosmic insouciance, conceiving his hand-made recording equipment as a musical instrument in itself, a fundamental innovation that has ramified through world pop music ever since. Much of this was improvised as a set of cost-cutting measures. Rather than putting a band in a studio, producers would recycle the same riddims again and again, creating generations of hit songs from a single recording session. But in its conception of appropriation, recycling, or continuous re-interpretation, it also brought pop music into the postmodern era.

One question that arises in dub and in many other places is technology as a form of subordination, a form of resistance, and a form of aesthetic expression. Technology typically has multivalent or contradictory effects. It increases the integrity of bodies or expands that integrity: of the human body, of the state or corporation, of the specific inanimate thing. But it also compromises that integrity continuously. It is conceived as power, but it provides the equipment of resistance. The technologies of control, of systematic generation of and pursuit of purpose, always also enhance the possibilities of improvisation. Improvisation is one way to "turn" or deflect technologies, one way of showing their excess to their own essences or to mount a demonstration that they have no essence, that each instrument packs within it excesses to its conceived purposes. Each assertion of control is also an atmosphere of improvisation or makes possible improvisations heretofore unimaginable.

Dub music is a technological music in the sense that though its materials originate in the music-making of guitarists, drummers, etc., what makes the music dub is the technological intervention in the song by the "engineer." The engineer proceeds, first, by subtraction: removing vocals and dropping instruments out, then bringing them back in. And by enhancement, adding echo effects or reverberations that create a sense of vast space and then close it down, that project the sound into an imaginary world and then collapse that world back in on itself. And by addition of beeps or snatches of other songs, often in a different key, an explicitly foreign element disrupting or fragmenting the song, creating a fractured surface.

One effect of dub is to break down the integrity of "the song," and dub's expansion and destruction of the song is now common coin in the world's popular music. Like American pop, Jamaican music of the 1960s presented the listener with integral songs suitable for radio play, three-minute temporal organisms characterized by internal "narrative" order: verse/chorus verse/chorus bridge chorus. King Tubby used improvised effects to create shattered soundscapes that would be comprehensible to people already familiar with the song. He would throw or drop a reverb unit, for example, to create crashing echo effects. He would pull pieces of the vocal and DJ versions into and out of the mix, or delete the bass, suddenly pushing it back in, in a way designed to create a different atmosphere for sound system dancing. Now a single song could support an indefinite number of versions, at once an economical strategy for reducing overhead and a profound compromise of the very idea of a song. Some songs have sustained dozens or hundreds of versions from the rock steady

period to the present, have been extended to whole sides of LPs or have provided the vaguely recognizable underpinnings of entirely new generations of vocal, DJ, and dub versions.

In the seventies, dub became a Jamaican industry that came to be emulated in many ways all over the world. In the US, disco producers made "extended mixes" so that people could dance for ten or fifteen minutes at a time to, say, Le Freak. Hip hop masters such as Kool Herc (Clive Campbell, from the Bronx, but raised in Jamaica) started versioning or "sampling" previously-recorded funk and disco records and putting rappers over them, first at parties, and then on separate singles. These various uses of sound technologies (the turntable, the mixing board) had never been intended by the people who invented them, but they have been absolutely central to world popular musics since the seventies.

One aspect of these practices, again, is that they introduced new dimensions of improvisation, both in the sense of using technologies in unintended and unpredictable ways, and playing with them as a jazz player plays with his horn: by feel, as it were. Improvisation is in some sense opposed to the conceptual framework of technology, which relies on systematic administering of means toward a pre-determined end. Both the ends and means were put at stake by dub producers: songs undermined, combined, indefinitely extended or suddenly cut off in mid-stream. Michael Veal, in his wonderful book *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* writes as follows:

Given the heavy demand for dub mixes from sound systems preparing for weekend dances, it is important to realize that these mixes were improvised on the spot. . . . Most dub mixing was done on Friday evenings, when producers deposited their master tapes with engineers, and sound system operators gathered at the studio so that each could be given a unique mix of a currently popular tune. Under these circumstances, an engineer might create dozens of mixes of a given tune in one remix session. . . . [E]ngineers had no way of preparing a mix beforehand; they usually improvised their way through dozens of mixes of the same track. King Jammy's approach was typical of most engineers: "I don't plan it before I get into the mix, it just comes creatively. I don't plan like, Okay, I'm going to take out the bass at two minutes or whatever. It's just instant creativity." ... Using the mixing board as an instrument of spontaneous composition and improvisation, the effectiveness of the dub mix results from the engineer's ability to de- and reconstruct a song's original architecture while increasing the overall power of the performance through a dynamic of surprise and delayed gratification. [21]

Every new dimension of technology brings with it the possibility of creative misuse; you can throw it at the wall and see what happens. As the world becomes more subject to control, it exceeds or undermines the mechanisms of that

control, or pulls them into a subversion of themselves.

Technology territorializes the world, maps it, surveils it, brings more and more of it into the scope of comprehension. But people appropriate technologies in all sorts of bizarre ways, often with transformative effects, as dub music transformed world popular music. Then, of course, such developments are themselves colonized, comprehended, exploited, driving a new series of technological innovations (for example, in this case, digital sampling). Dub and digital sampling undermined such ideas as intellectual property or the integrity of the work, its authorship, its origin, which in many cases became untraceable or impossibly complex. These ideas then have to be reconstructed or elaborated at different levels, with different effects, which are in turn encoded in new technological means of definition and elaboration. Then of course these are in turn subject to misuse: they will be torn apart and turned to use and further than use in sequence.

Jamaican recording and remix studios, which created many of the most radical technological innovations of modern popular musics, were primitive by the standards of cutting edge Los Angeles, London, or Nashville recording facilities. No one is going to take a beautiful expensive new piece of technology and see what happens when you drop it. In superseding the technologies available to King Tubby or Scientist, recording technology suggested that those technologies were trash, detritus, which opened up a space of freedom for their exploration. The technologies, as it were, are made into pre-technological authentic equipment, hand tools or acoustic instruments; they are disinterpreted, we might say, underdetermined and hence enriched. Or, we might say, their determination and interpretation had lapsed, so there were no longer right or wrong ways to utilize them. They were rendered over into improvisational environments. Lee Perry famously buried unprotected tapes around his studio and then used the weathered, degraded material as masters. He treated his tapes with rum, smoke, and urine, among other things.

What circulated from the studio to the island, from the island to the world, were snatches of a torn-up revolutionary consciousness, a black nation in disintegration and re cohesion. Veal speculates that the reverberations and echoes of dub mixes were a symbol of the yearning for and disintegration of the African origin thematized in the original Rastafarian-oriented lyrics and nyamblinghi drum styles. Echo is a sonic representation of multiple repeated diasporas where the music circulated - Africa/Kingston/London/Toronto - where at each point the origin is lost and recovered, reconstrued, reasserted, mis- and displaced.

From rock steady emerged roots reggae music, built on the same pulsing beat which served as Rastafarian gospel music. The cult of Marcus Garvey was a dominant theme, spearheaded, as it were, by Burning Spear's Winston Rodney:

Yes, oh yes

The image of Marcus Mosiah Garvey

He was one of the first black men

Who try to uplift the masses

The image of Marcus Mosiah Garvey

Let's talk about the image

Let's talk about the image [\[22\]](#)

Burning Spear's album covers featured ghostly images of Garvey, which also appeared on flags and in murals throughout Jamaica.

As political art and political speech, reggae was carried around the world by the Jamaican (double-)diaspora, in particular to London, New York, and Toronto. Here is a scripture by the Jamaican/British band Steel Pulse, essentially an anthology of Garvey's sayings:

Rally round the flag

Rally round the red

Gold black and green

Marcus say, so Marcus say

Red for the blood

That flowed like the river

Marcus say, Sir Marcus say

Green for the land Africa

Marcus say

Yellow for the gold

That they stole

Marcus say

Black for the people

It was looted from

They took us away captivity captivity

Required from us a song

Right now man say repatriate repatriate

I and I patience have now long time gone

Father's mothers sons daughters every one

Four hundred million strong

Ethiopia stretch forth her hand

Closer to God we Africans

Closer to God we can

In our hearts is Mount Zion

Now you know seek the Lion

How can we sing in a strange land

Don't want to sing in a strange land no

Liberation true democracy

One God, one aim, one destiny. [23]

This is an anthology of quotations from Garvey's writings.

Such artists as Max Romeo issued a long string of Rasta hymns, underlain by the drumming of such Rasta masters as Horsemouth Wallace. A particularly interesting synthesis was developed by keyboard player/dub master Augustus Pablo, whose "far east sound" combined serene, hypnotic reggae with elements of Hindu chants and Jewish Klezmer. The early records of Marley and Wailers, like Romeo's and many others', were constructed by Lee Perry at the Black Ark studio in Kingston. Once Marley signed to Island records, Chris Blackwell reconfigured the Wailers into a showcase for Marley's strong-but-vulnerable voice and into something like a touring rock band rather than a studio construction. Marley himself had been assigned by Rasta leader Mortimer Planno to be a missionary to the world, a task in which he succeeded to an extent almost beyond belief. At this point, Bob Marley is perhaps the most recognizable pop music icon throughout the whole world, and has inspired a variety of liberatory political movements with songs such as the profoundly beautiful "Old Pirates (Redemption Song)." The political turn taken by punk, as represented by such groups as the Clash and Rancid, emerged from this tradition. In a particularly appropriate development, reggae has become one of the dominant popular forms in Africa, under the auspices of such singers as Alpha Blondy of Ivory Coast and the late Lucky Dube of South Africa. Indeed, a coup in Ivory Coast was in part credited to or blamed on Blondy's music, which carries a message of universal brotherhood delivered in French, English, Arabic, and Hebrew. There are Rastafarians throughout the continent and throughout the world.

The death of Haile Selassie presented roots reggae and Rastafarian religion with a crisis. Marley's death in 1981 was also disastrous for the form. These events and the influx of cocaine into Jamaica, the introduction of digital recording technology and in particular digitally-constructed rhythms, as well as a number of other factors, led to a disintegration of roots reggae in Jamaica in the eighties. It moved toward dancehall or ragga styles and "slackness," or obscene lyrics.

Nevertheless, the roots tradition in rhythm and lyric themes have also been in continual revival in Jamaica and all over the world ever since.

5. Hip Hop

Hip hop was born by an importation of Jamaican musical culture into New York City in the mid-seventies. DJ Kool Herc (Clive Campbell), generally acknowledged as the first hip hop DJ, grew up in Jamaica, going to sound system shows. In his definitive history of hip hop *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, Jeff Chang writes: "The blues had Mississippi, jazz had New Orleans. Hip-hop has Jamaica. Pioneer DJ Kool Herc spent his earliest years in the same Second Street yard that had produced Bob Marley.

'Them said nothing good ever come outta Trenchtown, Herc says. 'Well, hip-hop come out of Trenchtown.' [24] This represents a remarkably multi-dimensional artpolitical reconvergence. Garvey emerged from Jamaica into New York; Rastafarianism developed in parallel with American Black Islam; reggae was the essential Rastafarian expression; in re-importing it into New York, figures such as Herc established hip hop and connected all the strands and re-made world music. In the Bronx, Herc deployed the twin turntables of Jamaican DJ's, extending the "break" or drum/instrumental passages on disco and soul records to make them more danceable. The basic idea of constructing new songs from the remnants of old recordings on the fly was Jamaican in origin and opened the creation of music to a different set of people with different skills. Grandmaster Flash began employing "rappers" to do his talking, in the fashion of Jamaican chatters such as U-Roy and Big Youth, so he could concentrate on turntable heroics of his own invention, especially "scratching" or moving the record back and forth under the needle to produce a rhythm. Herc and Flash were party acts, and the rappers that appeared with them delivered party rhymes that encouraged participation ("Throw your hands in the air, and wave em like you just don't care"). The DJ Afrika Bambaataa began drawing some of the political implications, forming a community association in the Bronx to ameliorate gang struggles and police brutality: the Zulu Nation. The child of Caribbean immigrants, Bambaataa started sampling Malcolm X speeches over his rhythm tracks.

Hip hop from the start was essentially a system of all the arts. Its "elements" were DJing (now identified with turntable manipulation), rapping, breakdancing, and graffiti: movement and visual arts were intrinsic from the outset. Indeed graffiti has been one of its most potent political and aesthetic expressions, as "writers" "take space" or vie with officially sanctioned ways that the urban environment is articulated and adorned. This often involved the explicit defacing of monuments or advertising, for example, though the greatest graffiti gallery was the New York subway system. We might add that hip hop gave rise to clothing and hairstyles, starting with sweat suits and adidas, but later including designer lines such as Sean John. For a time double-dutch jumpropping was also considered a hip hop discipline. And hip hop in all its arts gave rise to practices of renaming in accordance with aesthetically-defined personal identities; few rappers or writers used their full given names but rather transformed them into poetic identities, such as Zephyr or Futura. The films of Spike Lee and others are also connected to hip hop aesthetics.

As I say, at the beginning, hip hop was a party style, but black nationalist political themes began to be woven into the lyrics from a fairly early point, for example in the records of Run-DMC. By the late eighties, Black Nationalism became a dominant theme of hip hop in the work of such seminal acts as KRS-One and Public Enemy. Sampling was a weapon in the aesthetic war, as speeches by people such as Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, and Khalid Mohammed (the radical Nation of Islam preacher) could actually be incorporated into the ever-more complex sonic structures. The teachings of the Nation of Gods and Earths were explicit from an early moment, for example in

the work of ur-rappers the Cold Crush Brothers, who never recorded, but can be seen performing in the indispensable graffiti film *Wild Style*. Kool Herc says: "a lot of Five Percenter . . . used to come to my party. . . . [Y]ou might call them "peace guards," and they used to hold me down" (that is, take care of him) (Muhammad 177). Indeed, much of the best-known hip hop slang or patois derives from Five Percenter teachings. One hears the phrase "dropping science," for example, continually. The term "Word!" or phrase "word up!" which has entered vernacular English, derives from the Five Percenter declaration "word is bond." The terms 'bombing' as applied to graffiti or 'da bomb' to mean any good thing probably originate in the Five Percenter practice of "bombing" one another with "knowledge of self" (Muhammad 178).

The work of Public Enemy, which in the late 1980s was the biggest act in hip hop, was particularly potent in this regard, and Chuck D, Flavor-Flav, DJ Terminator X, and "Minister of Information" Professor Griff, created hyper-aggressive hip hop that presented Nation of Islam and Black Nationalist ideologies in an extremely compelling way, constructing a sonic equivalent for a militant ideology on albums such as *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back* and *Fear of a Black Planet*. The stage presentations were filled with paramilitary imagery; Chuck D dressed in black with uniformed bodyguards scanning the crowd, while Flavor-Flav presented a jester figure or a bit of comic relief.

Flavor-Flav famously wore giant clocks to ask the political question "What time is it?" It's time. Past time. The rapper/poet/memoirist/activist Sister Souljah - whose supposedly anti-white lyrics became an issue in the 1992 presidential campaign in an argument between Bill Clinton and Jesse Jackson, also emerged from the PE nexus.

Here are some of the lyrics from Public Enemy's "Prophets of Rage:"

I rang ya bell
Can you tell I got feelin'
Just peace at least
Cause I want it
Want it so bad
That I'm starvin'
I'm like Garvey
So you can see B
It's like that, I'm like Nat [Turner]
Leave me the hell alone
If you don't think I'm a brother
Then check the chromosomes
Then check the stage
I declare it a new age

Get down for the prophets of rage
Keep you from gettin' like this
I'm considered the man
I'm the recordable
But God made it affordable
I say it, you play it
Back in your car or even portable
Stereo
Describes my scenario
Left or right, Black or White
They tell lies in the books
That you're readin'
It's knowledge of yourself
That you're needin'
Like [Denmark] Vesey or [Gabriel] Prosser
We have a reason why
To debate the hate
That's why we're born to die
Mandela, cell dweller, Thatcher
You can tell her clear the way for the prophets of
rage
(Power of the people you say) [\[25\]](#)

Hip hop in the nineties became a dominant pop style under the auspices of Dr. Dre on the West Coast and Sean "Puffy" Combs on the East, among others, who developed a melodic, loping style underneath lyrics about sex, cash, and substance abuse. This style became known as "gangsta" rap and was pointedly apolitical, though it said nasty things about the police, not to mention about women. Nevertheless, the political and Black Nationalist strains continued in "underground" hip hop. In particular, followers of the Nation of Gods and Earths turned in some of the most seminal and interesting material of that era, including records by Big Daddy Kane, Brand Nubian, Mobb Deep, and Poor Righteous Teachers. This strand became commercially potent under the auspices of the massive hip hop collaboration/nation Wu-Tang Clan and its many offshoots. Meanwhile, some of the most esoteric imagery associated with the Nation of Islam, Rastafarianism, and the Nation of Gods and Earths found its way onto the records of less commercial artists, such as Jedi Mind Tricks and Aceyalone, who have made some of the best and most absorbing hip hop records in the history of the style. A typical and outstanding Gods and Earths act is the California duo Self Scientific, who on "Love Allah" sum it up as follows: "News flash, the black man is God,

no doubt." This captures much in black nationalism in a single sentence: its religious immanentism; its ferocious race pride; and perhaps also its sexism.

Since Public Enemy, liberation movements all over the world have produced styles of hip hop and used it as a central mode of expression and dissemination, a reason to gather, a way to recruit, and an occasion to celebrate. There is Basque hip hop, for instance, and various African movements have configured around hip hop as a political/aesthetic style. One reason for this is that hip hop is the most text-heavy of musical forms, and a hip hop track can be a tract as well as a song. Another is sampling: and all recorded materials are potentially incorporable, from traditional musics to political speeches.

6. Conclusion

Political systems and ideologies, I believe, are systems of all the arts, though they are often conceived as primarily textual. At any rate, the history of Black Nationalism has re-made our aesthetic environment to a degree of which we are usually only dimly aware. And one cannot understand what Black Nationalism is or what effects it has had without focusing on its musics and visual arts as much as on its texts. I believe that this is quite generally true of political systems, an argument I intend to make in a full-fledged way elsewhere, but which I hope to have illustrated vividly here. Certainly the dissemination of black nationalism and Pan-Africanism - the politics of Garvey or Howell or Elijah Muhammad or Father Allah - cannot be understood merely in terms of sentences or books, but was centrally accomplished by music, by clothing styles, by images. Nor is this a matter of semi-literacy: the content of the American Revolution and Constitution, for example, is centrally conveyed by Thomas Jefferson's architecture, for example, as that of Nazism by the films of Leni Riefenstahl. We must stop thinking of such expressions as popularizations or forms of propaganda and begin to think of them as the very locus of political life.

By the same token, the concept of race is constantly articulated in aesthetic terms, and the concept of art was, during the heyday of race, constantly articulated in racial terms: wielded in the formation of nationalisms, racism, and the resistance to racism. Understanding what music is - literally, its ontology - at this point in its development is not possible without understanding the colonial, national, and racial constructions that drove that development. The music and other arts arose from (and captured and conveyed) these concepts, and they from it.

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Endnotes

[1] The feminist criticism can be found beginning at latest in the late 1960s. One excellent expression, originating in the sixties, can be found in the autobiography of Black Panther Assata Shakur: *Assata Shakur: An Autobiography* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1987). A summary can be found in Patricia

Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), pp. 135-38.

[2] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," originally published in *The Nation* in 1926, collected in *Modern Black Nationalism*, ed. William L. Van Deburg (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 50.

[3] See DeBurg, pp. 57-58

[4] Arthur de Gobineau, *The Inequality of the Human Races*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Putnam, 1915 [1855]).

[5] W.E.B. DuBois, "The Conservation of the Races" (1897), collected, e.g., in *Writings* (New York: Library of Americas, 1986), p. 817.

[6] W.E.B. DuBois, "Of the Faith of the Fathers," *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989 [1903]), p. 156.

[7] Marcus Garvey, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, compiled by Amy Jacques Garvey (Dover, Mass.: The Majority Press, 1986 [1925]), pp. 101-109.

[8] Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 143.

[9] E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969 [1955]), pp. 178-79.

[10] Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994 [1845]), p. 97.

[11] Robert Athlyi Rogers, *The Holy Piby* (1924-28: www.sacred-texts.com/afr/piby/index.htm), chapter 7.

[12] Noble Drew Ali, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America*, chapter 47 (www.hermetic.com/bey/7koran.html).

[13] It is worth saying that all sources that connect Fard directly to Drew Ali may derive from Arna Bontemps' and Jack Conroy's book *They Seek a City* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1945), and ever since the scholars may have been corroborating one another

[14] Quoted in E.U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 44.

[15] The definitive history is Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip Hop and the Gods of New York* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2007).

[16] Hélène Lee, *The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003), pp. 56-61.

[17] Lee, pp. 97-101.

[18] Lee, pp. 91-94.

[19] Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*, chapter 4 (1965: www.seventhfam.com/temple/books/black-man/blk4.htm).

[20] See the amazing book by Steve Barrow and Peter Dalton, *Reggae: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1997), p. 24.

[21] Michael E. Veal, *Dub* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), p. 78.

[22] Burning Spear, "Image," from the album *Farover* (Heartbeat Records, 1982).

[23] Steel Pulse, "Worth His Weight in Gold (Rally Round)," from the album *True Democracy* (Elektra Records, 1982).

[24] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: a History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005), p. 22.

[25] Public Enemy, "Prophets of Rage," from the album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam Records, 1988).