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Black Expressive Art, Resistant Cultural Politics, and the [Re] Performance of Patriotism

Deborah Elizabeth Whaley

Introduction

During World War I, the Boston editor William Monroe Trotter described black American patriotism as a cautious endeavor and America’s willingness to participate in the World War while it turned its back on domestic issues as misguided. In an era when freedom bypassed most black women and men within the nation-state of America and in an era of mass lynching in the American South, he proclaimed that black Americans and the U.S. government might refocus their efforts on making the world safer for “Negroes.” As historian Eric Foner reminds us, black Americans were aware of the limits of American proclamations of freedom that Trotter alludes to in his discussion of nationalist loyalty during war:

It was among black Americans that the wartime language of freedom inspired the most exalted hopes. Blacks subject to disenfranchisement and segregation were understandably skeptical of the
nation's professions of freedom and fully appreciated the ways the symbols of liberty could coexist with brutal racial violence.¹

Like William Monroe Trotter, the rap group Public Enemy's rap odyssey "Welcome to the Terrordome," from their critically acclaimed concept album In Fear of a Black Planet, emphasizes domestic terrorism through lyrically exposing how our nation's state apparatuses inflict terror into and upon the everyday lives of black Americans. In Fear of a Black Planet comes out of the protest tradition often characterized in black American music; MC's Flava Flav, Chuck D, Professor Griff, Terminator X, and Bill Stephany chronicle a historical, cultural, and social lyrical map of the dominant culture's fear of, and attack upon, black Americans.² This process, their album cover explains, is a form of domestic terrorism often covered up by the dominant culture (and, at times, by people of color) as an exercise in legitimizing white supremacy and in protecting the toxic well of nation-state social relations from which historically marginalized groups are asked to drink. In response to the poisons of discrimination, Chuck D asserts in "Welcome to the Terrordome" that the creation of useful knowledge is a constructive response to oppression and a vehicle to unveil, and therefore transform, U.S. white supremacy. His proactive politics are evident when he raps:

Can't wait for the state to decide the fate
So this jam I dedicate
Places with racist faces
Just an example of one of many cases . . .
Instead of gettin' physically sweaty
When I get mad
I put it down on a pad
Give ya somethin' that cha never had controllin'
Fear of high rollin'
God bless your soul and keep livin'
Never allowed, kickin' it loud
Droppin' a bomb
Brain game intellectual Vietnam
Move as a team
Never move alone
Welcome to the Terrordome

Chuck D’s phrases that black Americans cannot “wait for the state to decide the fate,” and “instead of gettin' physically sweaty when I get mad I put it down on a pad” highlight the transformative power of the written word. Later in the piece Chuck D appears to critique those who fear the cultural politics of black contestation and who revert to uncritical patriotic sentiments in a time of political upheaval when he raps: “Every brother ain’t a brother cause a color. Just as well could be undercover, backstabbed, grabbed a flag.” When he includes the line “brain game intellectual Vietnam move as a team never move alone but welcome to the Terrordome,” Chuck D brings to light strategic, intellectual maneuvering as a constructive response to political and cultural turmoil. As William Monroe Trotter argued about the atrocity of lynching in the American South and the need for a cross-racial response to end it, Public Enemy’s “Welcome to the Terrordome” suggests that disparate race relations in the United States are upheld by the nation’s constituents regardless of ethnic heritage. It also implies informed, collective pro-action as a tactic, or, in the words of Chuck D, we need to “move as a team never move alone.”

Trotter’s argument and Public Enemy’s “Welcome to the Terrordome” open up a discussion about domestic terrorism perpetrated by the state upon its black citizens who are disenfranchised, although not exclusively so, from the nation. In the name of national loyalty, the subject of domestic terrorism is avoided, and perhaps no more so than in post-9/11 discourse. Right now, there is a lot of talk about international terrorism and terrorism against the nation-state of America, but little talk about domestic terrorism and how the former informs the latter. National crisis tends to promote in citizens the sentiment of sacrifice, where protection of the nation-state is synonymous with protection of the nation’s citizens. In the words of historian Gerald Leinwand, patriotism asks that the individual put national interest ahead of self-interest, ahead of personal or material gain. It
requires that short-term gratification be deferred so that the long-term interests of the nation and of future generations may ultimately be achieved.  

But for groups disenfranchised from the nation through gender, ethnicity, race, religion, and sexual orientation, patriotism also mandates that these citizen-subjects suppress and subsume subgroup identity and allegiance to, and avocation for, the communities from which they come, for the good will and maintenance of the nation-state. Patriotism is therefore more than the celebration of freedom, democracy, and the nation in its literal/material form; it functions as a complex mechanism of social control that permeates the nation’s ideological state apparatuses.  

What I want to speak about here are the advantages and consequences of this process for people of African descent living in America. The work of this paper is to focus on how black Americans forged and retreated from a critical national consciousness in response to domestic terrorism in the later 20th century and in the recent aftermath of 9/11. I focus on the multiple meanings and consequences that their reactions hold for realizing cultural citizenship in the public sphere, that is, actualizing the right to practice culture and politics as autonomous social agents committed simultaneously to a sub-cultural collective and to the national identity. The thread between these two historical moments—the late 20th century and 9/11—is provocatively visualized in a climatic scene in the 2001 film, Ali. The film depicts the life of boxer Muhammad Ali during the most significant time in his boxing career—the later sixties to early seventies, during which time Ali refused the draft, and converted to Islam and thus became a Muslim. In one pivotal moment in the film, Ali asserts cultural citizenship by refusing to answer to the name given to him at birth, Cassius Marcellus Clay, at a draft board line-up during the Vietnam War. Soon after his draft board defiance, a media personality asks Ali about his decision to refuse the draft and his position on the war in Southeast Asia. In a historic moment that would change the trajectory of his life and career, he defiantly responds, “Man, I don’t have qualms with no Viet Cong. No Viet Cong ever called me Nigger.” When a U.S. Boxing Association

I ain't draft dodging, I ain't going to Canada, and I ain't burning no flag. You want to send me to jail? I've been in jail for four hundred years and I can be in jail for four or five more. But I ain't going to help murder and kill other poor people. If I want to die, I'll die right here. Right now, fighting you. If I wanna die. You my enemy. Not no Chinese; not no Viet Cong, no Japanese. You my opposer. You my opposer when I want freedom. You my opposer when I want justice. You my opposer when I want equality. You want me to go somewhere and fight for you? You won't even stand up for me, right here in America, for my rights and religious beliefs. You won't even stand up for me right here at home.

Ali’s refusal of the draft board and his comment about the Vietnam War to the American media led to a series of extreme political and personal attacks. His criticism of international policy and of the war was construed as antipatriotic and therefore threatening to the national consensus and to U.S. liberal rhetoric of ethnic and religious inclusion. Ali’s statement and actions illustrate that despite the U.S. government’s rhetorical commitment to free speech and our legal apparatus to uphold that commitment, there are consequences for speaking out against domestic terrorism. The film also reveals the disjuncture between the promise of inalienable rights for all Americans and the real limitations placed on black people to realize and exercise those rights in the public sphere. This cohered most violently in the aftermath of his comments, when his ability to continue to box professionally was suspended for three and a half years, thereby threatening his professional status and his ability to make a living. While there is much to glean from Ali’s punishment in the filmic depiction of his life, there is even more to learn from his unrelenting cultural politics and integrity. In a key scene in the film, a boxing promoter tells Ali that the U.S. government was seeking to take his title of heavyweight champion away. Ali, in response to the proposed threat, remarks, "Oh, so
they’re going to take something from me that no other fighter in this world can?” No matter what the draft board, U.S. courts, and U.S. Boxing Association tried to do to Ali, this scene insinuates, they could never (re)possess his proven mastery of his craft, the skill with which he exercised it in the boxing ring, or the critical consciousness he developed after converting to Islam.

The film *Ali* is pertinent to an examination of patriotism and the cultural politics of contestation for several reasons. One, the film came out only two months after September 11, 2001, and its depiction of Ali’s critical consciousness stood in stark contradiction to the strong tenets of symbolic and rhetorical patriotism in the public sphere at that time. Two, *Ali* acted as a reminder of black Americans’ historical estrangement from national belonging and the conditions that often muster patriotism in the masses. Ali’s insistence that black Americans were threatened and under siege every day by various forms of domestic terrorism exposes this contradiction (this is clearly seen when he asserts that no Viet Cong ever called him “Nigger”). Third, the film points to the troubled relationship between patriotism and the cultural politics of contestation, especially in that an international public service announcement about the U.S. government’s possible response to 9/11 ran concurrently with the release of *Ali*. In the public service announcement, the real Mohammed Ali said to his intended audience—peoples from Pakistan, the Middle East, and Muslim groups generally—that the U.S. war on terrorism and any subsequent military action toward Iraq was not a war on Muslims or Arab-Americans, but a war that targeted “terrorists.” Given the politics of the film and of Mohammed Ali, this public service announcement shows that the patriotism of people of African descent and of Muslims living in America, was impacted by the two competing practices of asserting a sense of place and belonging in the nation. Ali performs important cultural work, as it is a historical reminder of the zeal to silence even the most popular iconic figures, especially those who purport any position strongly in opposition to entrenched ideas, of what it means to be a patriot in times of (inter)national upheaval.5

The arguments presented here, are inspired by the insurgency of the black public intellectual William Monroe Trotter, the film *Ali*, and the rap and hip-hop group Public Enemy’s album *In Fear of a
Black Planet. After the heinous attacks of 9/11, the influx of flags and ribbons in my diverse Boston, (Dorchester) community perplexed me, which immediately brought to my mind Public Enemy’s most commercial hit In Fear of a Black Planet, “9-1-1 is a Joke.” On this track, Public Enemy’s Flava Flav unabashedly lyricizes the racism of the nation and argues for a call to action against black subordination in the United States, racial profiling, and police state tactics. While I too felt pain for those who lost their lives and felt those behind the attacks were murderous cowards, my observations did not translate into a heightened feeling of domestic pride, as it initially seemed to do in many of the communities around me. As Public Enemy isolated 9-1-1, the emergency police assistance line, as having adverse effects for urban, black communities, it seemed to me that uncritical patriotic responses to 9/11 within black communities largely remained within symbolic rather than politically progressive realms, which, like the unreliability of 9-1-1, holds similar consequences for the masses of everyday black Americans. I argue that this struggle was especially apparent in response to the events of September 11, 2001, where black cartoonists, politicians, artists, actors, musicians, and everyday people struggled to make and inflect meaning into nationhood. This process of meaning-making, I will demonstrate through an analysis of black expressive art, fell on and between representations of symbolic patriotism and the more overt cultural politics of contestation.

I draw on black expressive culture and art—comics, hip-hop, visual culture and art, poetry, and political speeches to explore the relationship between symbolic representations of patriotism in popular culture and everyday life, and the forms of expressive art that question and assert national belonging, rather than assume national belonging. I illustrate how the former approach has created a form of cultural and political contestation through the inversion of revered, American national symbols, while the latter approach represents an already assumed place in the nation without reference to the work of political struggle needed for black, political transformation to occur. This paper was originally titled “Get Up, Get-Get Get Down, 9/11 Ain’t a Joke in Your Town: Patriotism and Contestation in Black Expressive Culture.” My own self-censorship in retitling this paper “Black Expressive Art, Resistant Cultural Politics, and the [Re] Performance of Patriotism” speaks volumes about the legal and professional ramifications of
intellectual work not squarely and definitively situated within the confines of post-9/11 symbolic patriotism. But the change in title also points to a central strand in my argument, that is, that 9/11, like 9-1-1, means different things for different racial, ethnic, and religious communities. Various members of those communities, my analogy of 9/11 and 9-1-1 hopes to convey, performed and re-performed their national consciousness based on their perceived relationship to, or estrangement from, the nation. For some, quite obviously, 9/11 meant unexpected tragedy aimed at a largely innocent nation; for others, the attacks seemed congruent with a long history of U.S. domestic terrorism targeted toward historically marginalized groups and the multiple international infractions by the U.S. government. In what follows, black expressive art is a critical tool in evaluating the uneasy tenets of cultural politics and the necessity for historically marginalized groups to re-perform their patriotism as a process of asserting and demonstrating their rightful place in the nation.

Wherever one stood on the issue of the U.S. government’s fault, or lack thereof, concerning 9/11 and its aftermath, it remains an important marker, a critical moment in U.S. social and international relations, which has had adverse effects on intellectual political groups, and the personal freedoms of everyday people and prominent personalities in the black public sphere. In the name of military expediency, since September 11, 2001, U.S. citizens and those living within the U.S. borders have had their rights signed away by Congress through search, seizure, and artificial intelligence laws. The U.S. Patriot Act has encouraged and enforced this legislative atrocity, despite the idea that the wave of patriotism since 9/11 is predicated on the notion of America as an innocent, national entity that welcomes all and refuses no one their voice, civil liberties, or justice. While I acknowledge the emotional necessity, contradictory, and important meanings black communities derive from enactments of post-9/11 symbolic patriotism, I also offer that the performance of patriotism absent a discourse and politics of contestation leaves black men and women, as members of a historically marginalized group, culturally and politically vulnerable. I contend through my analysis of the arts that genuine reverence for a nation can be compatible with critical thinking and oppositional politics, and that it is the varied forms of black expressive culture that may provide the needed artistic and intellectual matter for working out and
through the cultural morass created from the events surrounding September 11, 2001.

I begin with pivotal media responses to 9/11 from three black Americans who used their voice or art to reconstitute black patriotism within the cultural politics of contestation: cartoonist Aaron McGruder, actor Danny Glover, and congresswoman Barbara Lee. All three were publicly scorned and in the first case censured, because they challenged unthinking patriotism and refused to support—in their own various ways—the racial profiling of Arab-Americans and the immediate counter attack on Iraq. Next, I compare grassroots hip-hop youth movements and post-9/11 responses by popular rap and hip-hop artists. The latter reflects, in my estimation, the changing role of commercial rap and hip-hop as the most insurgent voice of everyday urban, black youth and communities. I end with a discussion of the rearticulation of black patriotism and exposure of domestic terrorism in the work of black artists Faith Ringgold, Emma Amos, and writer Amiri Baraka. The last two groups, I argue, provide insights into the successful, although often painful and difficult negotiation that the black citizen/subject endures in order to claim space in the nation, while at the same time defiantly maintaining an overt political platform through his or her artistic productions.

The Cultural Work of the Hip-Hop Generation and Post-9/11 Politics in the Public Sphere

In October of 2001, the popular black cartoonist Aaron McGruder came under verbal assault by newspaper conglomerates for his comic strip The Boondocks, which outwardly questioned the flood of patriotism among Americans after the World Trade Center and Pentagon collapsed. On October 5, 2001, McGruder’s comic strip featured one of the black characters, Huey, telephoning the FBI to report a perceived connection between the September 11 terrorist attacks and the 1980s Reagan-Bush administration. Boondocks’s Huey went so far as to suggest that Ronald Reagan and the CIA trained Osama bin Laden and that the current Bush administration covertly funded the Taliban. Although the United States government’s relationship to bin Laden is insinuated elsewhere in political discourse and the media, newspapers across the nation specifically targeted McGruder, threatened and in a few
cases did pull *The Boondocks* comic strip from major newspapers. *The Dallas Morning News* isolated the comic strip from the comic section, Long Island’s *Daily News* pulled it altogether for one week, and the *Daily News* in New York examined the strip each day for appropriateness before making the decision to run it.\(^8\) McGruder responded by temporarily changing the name of his hip-hop, youth-inspired comic strip from *The Boondocks* to *The Adventures of Flagee and Ribbon*. The strip featured an animated flag and ribbon that would “pontificate” Monday through Friday on the wonderful state of the nation, the necessity of patriotism at all costs, and how vital it was to shield youth from the dirty truth of American race relations, international policy, war, and politics. In one characteristically sarcastic strip, Ribbon asks, “Flagee, why do people do bad things to America?” To which Flagee responds, “Because they hate our freedoms Ribbon. They hate our right to privacy. They hate our right to free speech.”

McGruder commented in a *New York Times* interview that he struggled with how to represent 9/11 through his comic strip characters or if he should represent it at all.\(^9\) He knew *The Boondocks* might be pulled from news dailies for his polemical, political spin on 9/11 and its historical precedents, but McGruder argued that post-9/11 was “one of those critical moments in history, and I did not want to look back and regret not having said something.”\(^10\) Yet many newspaper readers did not appreciate McGruder’s integrity, especially those who were concerned their children might see and read the comic strip. The most consistent critique of McGruder’s strip was that it was inappropriate and was sending a bad message about the U.S. government during a time of mass mourning. A reader in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* echoed this sentiment, writing in opposition to the strip’s inclusion in the comic section. “If publishers are committed to Aaron McGruder’s serial diatribe, why not move it to the editorial pages where people are invited to vent their bitter spleens?”\(^11\)

McGruder, a college graduate who holds a degree in African-American Studies from the University of Maryland, has used his comic strip *The Boondocks*, which has become a popular cable TV show, for political critique since its inception in 1998. McGruder combines his knowledge of American politics and black history with his growing power within the realm of popular media and culture to critique U.S.
social relations to argue for the intelligence of the “hip-hop generation.”’’ The Boondocks—and rightfully so—regards black youth as a central source for fresh political outlooks and political mobilization.12 As journalist Bakari Kitwana argues in his 2002 book The Hip Hop Generation, instead of dismissing urban black youth as apolitical and socially apathetic based on assumed nihilism, low voter turn out, and contradictory positions on material wealth and violence, one might see this generation as a critical mass of insurgent cultural workers.13

The question for Kitwana in his analysis of the potential of the hip-hop generation in shaping and critiquing American politics and social relations is not only how to go about politicizing and galvanizing the critical mass that the hip-hop generation constitutes, but also how to learn from the cultural work of youth in everyday life. This work includes political advocacy, the politics of hip-hop style, and the representative struggle to negotiate the ideological poles in two of the hip-hop generation’s iconic heroes, that is the late multi-million-selling rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls.14 Rapper Tupac Shakur’s mother, Kitwana, suggests that instead of standing on top of youth and telling them what they are not doing, or what they are doing wrong, we need to look at the way in which we, as black pre-hip-hop generation intellectuals and cultural workers, are failing to meet the needs of our youth.15

While McGruder and Kitwana posit hip-hop as a political movement, actor Danny Glover was one of a few established black actors in the pre-hip-hop generation to rigorously use his position as a public personality to widen the discussion on international relations post-9/11. After a talk at Princeton University, an audience member asked Glover if he was against the death penalty in all cases, including the execution of Osama bin Laden. Glover reiterated that he was against the death penalty in principle in all cases, but he did not directly address the possible execution of bin Laden. Spearheaded by Ronald Reagan’s former U.S. military front man, Oliver North, after Glover’s Princeton appearance, a seminational boycott of Glover’s current film, The Royal Tenenbaums, began.16

As news spread about his comments at Princeton, Glover became the target of a character assassination campaign by a wide range of both conservatives and liberals, replete with racially inflected insults that equated his political consciousness with a lack of, and disdain for,
American nationalist loyalty. In the conservative newspaper the 
Trentonian, a writer retorted on the editorial page that if Glover did 
not support a bin Laden execution, he should “go back to 
Afghanistan.”17 For a period of several months after his Princeton talk, 
Glover also received written threats and city authorities attempted to 
cancel his talk in honor of the Martin Luther King holiday scheduled at a 
Modesto, California, community college. Officials there aimed to pull the 
plug on what they deemed his inappropriate, public political platform, 
and trustees threatened to withdraw funding to the auditorium where 
the MLK holiday celebration was scheduled to take place.18

Despite critique, censure, and financial assault, Glover stood by 
his position on the death penalty, and remarked that he was “shocked 
when right-wingers accused him of being pro-Taliban or suggested that 
he was personally campaigning on bin Laden’s behalf.” He included that 
“people had made a promise to Japanese Americans who had been put 
in interment camps in WWII—’Never again.’” This means, said Glover, 
“stepping out now to oppose the targeting of Arabs and Muslims.”19 
Political nay-sayers and monetary gatekeepers notwithstanding, Glover 
delivered his speech at a local black church in Modesto, titling it in 
memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, “The Long Road to Modesto.” The 
irony here, of course, is that the attempt to pull Glover from the MLK 
celebration stood in stark contradiction to what King was being 
celebrated for, that is, standing up for what he believed and free speech. 
As John Lucas, president of the Modesto Peace Life Center noted, the 
censorship of Glover takes us back in time instead of forward in time. 
“Given Dr. King’s opposition to the Vietnam War,” he commented in the 
Workers World newspaper, “I find it interesting that [this decision 
suggests] Martin Luther King would not even be invited to his own 
event [if it were held today].”20

Perhaps the most controversial position on 9/11 within black 
public life came from Washington, D.C., when California’s 
Congresswoman from the 9th Congressional District, Barbara Lee, cast 
the sole vote on September 14, 2001, against taking action toward 
Afghanistan. It is, in fact, this incident that began Aaron McGruder’s call 
to critical conscious about 9/11 via his character Huey. In his October 2, 
2001 edition of The Boondocks, McGruder’s Huey sits at a computer 
station and is in the midst of writing to Congresswoman Lee to thank her 
for her lone stance against Bush’s “warmongering.” In this now
infamous comic strip, Huey wrote to Lee in critique of black politicians who, in his opinion, stood by and did nothing about the government’s presumed precipitous action. “Tell the rest of the punks in the black Caucus,” wrote Huey in *The Boondocks*, “they have a steel-toe boot comin’.” Lee, though strongly supported in the majority of the black media, for her vote that found popular voice in a website launched days after her decision, titled the “DumpBarbaraLee website.” Here, David Horwitz, the famous former liberal turned conservative described Lee as “a ‘Communist,’ who ‘collaborated with America’s enemies.’” In addition, Lee’s vote of conscience, in the minds of critics, made her “a traitor, un-American, and one who engaged in ‘American hating.’” Lee held a press conference to respond to her critics and the widespread curiosity about her vote of conscience. The following excerpt appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*:

> I could not ignore [that what Bush was calling for] provided explicit authority, under the war of Powers Resolution and the Constitution, to go to war. It was a blank check to the president to attack anyone involved in the Sept. 11 events . . . . A rush to launch precipitous military counterattacks runs too great a risk that more innocent men, women, and children will be killed. I could not vote for a resolution that I believed would lead to such an outcome.

As Kitwana in the *Hip Hop Generation* argues, grassroots political formations within the hip-hop generation are more likely out-of-synch rather than in-synch with established, black political institutions and politicians. Still, my examples attempt to elucidate the ways the mass cultural collision of Lee with McGruder’s *Boondocks* cites the possibilities in energizing a cross-generational movement between the two. Success in revitalizing the insurgent qualities of black political life for the long term depends on genuine cooperation and shared leadership among artists, youth, and those with a voice in traditional political realms.

In Tucson, Arizona, for example, Wade Colwell, a bilingual education teacher in the Tucson Unified School District, and Ranson Kennedy, a record producer and founder of the hip-hop group Poetic Souljazz, co-created a political, educational, and
musical formation for youth, the Funkamentals. This educational formation teaches primary subjects, global, national, and political issues in secondary education using hip-hop and traditional teaching methods. Funkamentals’ motto is "education by any means necessary," which is also the title of their first album and video that instructs teachers on using hip-hop in the classroom. Using measured instruments and the collection of statistical data on test scores before and after introducing their program, Colwell and Kennedy found impressive improvements in students’ attitudes toward learning, their test scores, and knowledge retention. Other organizations that integrate arts, performance, community advocacy, politics, education, and hip-hop culture for youth include Project Hip Hop and Hip Hop University, which are designed to create new pedagogies and spaces for the artistic cultural productions of youth and their education. In 2002, Harvard University launched its Hip-Hop Archive project and first conference to commemorate its founding, where the Funkamentals, Project Hip Hop, Hip Hop University, and other grassroots youth organizations convened with university educators, musicians, and cultural workers to discuss and assess hip-hop’s impact on transforming social relations and galvanizing interest among youth in politics and community development. Grassroots hip-hop formations show how making the necessary linkages between the social, political, and cultural, especially among black youth, opens up exciting possibilities for a better America.24

9/11 Sentimentality and the Contradictions of Post-Soul Hip-Hop

During the months following 9/11, political mobilization through mass culture elided a form of black popular culture known for initiating critical discourses of change in times of cultural turmoil, that is, the field of rap and hip-hop music. Since the 1980s, hip-hop as a musical form and sub-culture alienated itself from uncritical, patriotic embodiments of the nation and emerged as the voice of everyday, urban black youth. I argue, however, that today’s rap and hip-hop, in contrast to yesteryear’s, is increasingly subtle in its critique of the nation—if that critique exists at all—and it appears to carry a less potent political message. This despite the reported mass disenfranchisement of African-Americans in the
2000 presidential election in Dade County, Florida, and the steady number of hate crimes and police brutality targeted at urban black youth. One of the most visible rap and hip-hop producers, Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliot, serves as an example of this context I describe and the textual contradictions of patriotism and contestation. In her patriotic dance number at the end of her tribute to the late R&B singer Aaliyah, in the music video "Take Away," Elliot and a group of back-up dancers performed in red, white, and blue attire against a lit American Flag. Before their dance number, Elliot enthusiastically signals the dancers by the announcement "this is for my American people!" Elliot's dance and her musical epilogue bear little relevance for the original concept of the video, and thus highlight a deliberate move of Elliot's to take part in, and make a statement about, hip-hop's place within the national schema of international relations post-9/11—one that is largely an assumed place and not an oppositional one.

Hip-hop and R&B singer Mary J. Blidge taped her music video "No More Drama" as a quasi-tribute to the victims and families of the 9/11 attacks. Blidge’s video consists of a series of vignettes cast on a large screen then refocused by the camera in a wide-pan where everyday people of various genders and colors struggle to work through common cultural hardships and various social and narcotic addictions. In many ways, the song perfectly fit the sentiments of mourning and reconciliation needed after 9/11, as evident in its melancholy yet hopeful lyrics:

I don't know
Only God knows where the story ends for me
But I know where the story begins
It's up to us to choose
Whether we win or lose
And I choose to win

(No more pain)
No more pain, no more pain, tired of hurting . . .
(No drama)

Blidge won an MTV award for the video and said in her acceptance speech at the 2002 MTV Music Awards ceremony that she
was especially appreciative of the award for “No More Drama,” because it was “taped after 9/11 when everybody was feeling so much pain and just needed to come together.” Blidge’s music video, which compressed the aftermath of 9/11 into a multi-racial statement of amorphous, national pain, echoed alternative rock band REM’s 1994 hit single “Everybody Hurts.” Nevertheless, Blidge’s visual and rhetorical prescription of unity did not highlight the specificity of pain that results from the stark contradiction of subjugation in a nation built on and upheld by the backs of black Americans.

The apparatus that once disseminated the largest number of black music videos, the now Viacom-owned cable station Black Entertainment Television, also engaged in what one might construe as color-blind, nebulous patriotism. In black Entertainment’s commemorative programming for 9/11 on September 11, 2002, the station’s two main music-video shows—Cita’s World and 106th and Park Street, focused its day’s programming on heroes of 9/11, which highlighted black police officers and 9/11 rescue workers. The programming ended with rap mogul Russell Simmons and RZA from the rap group Wu Tang Clan facilitating a conversation on unity in the black community post-9/11. There are contemporary exceptions of politically focused hip-hop, including the work of Lauryn Hill, Bone Thugs in Harmony, DMX, The Roots, and Nas. Yet the music from major players in hip-hop and the largest black-themed television media conglomerate BET illustrates post-9/11 patriotic performances and rhetoric symptomatic of what cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal describes as an increasingly fragmented, less-potent and therefore less-directed post-soul political discourse of twenty-first century hip-hop artists. 25 Nevertheless, these contradictory moments, wherein we find hip-hop politics wanting for the progressive elements cultural critics often like to pin on them, (or depin, respectively) is likely the result of looking in the wrong places. Today’s hip-hop culture is popularly associated with P Diddy Combs’ Bad Boy Entertainment, the label that is responsible for the success of Ja Rule and Ashanti, Murder Inc., and Master P’s No Limit Records, which overshadow the grass-roots cultural work of hip-hop as a cultural and political movement. 26

Post-9/11 reactions from the most visible players in the hip-hop community beg comparison with the political discourse
disseminated by rap group Public Enemy slightly more than ten years prior to 9/11 in the Spring of 1990. It is precisely the type of consciousness espoused by Aaron McGruder and a smaller fraction of today’s rap and hip-hop community mentioned earlier that Public Enemy cast attention to through their lyrics about the material marginalization of black people from the concept of, and the full citizenship of, the nation. Included in their lyrics and in the everyday politics they espoused was a proactive stance for the rectification of black subordination. As mentioned, Public Enemy used the example of the police assistance telephone number 9-1-1 as a semiotic signifier to expose a site that makes claims to protecting citizens, but carries little relevance to and in actuality at times works against the masses of black people in everyday life. The music video for “9-1-1 is a Joke” parodies everyday black people who call 9-1-1 for help only to find that law enforcement considers black men and women a threat to the nation-state and in need of surveillance, not protection. In their lyrical commentary on the nation’s exclusion and innate distrust of black men and women in urban sites and communities, Public Enemy’s Flava Flav goes about the work of “droppin” science:

Everyday they don’t ever come correct  
You ask my man right there with the broken neck  
He’s a witness to the job never bein’ done . . .  
Was a joke “cause they always jokin”  
They the token to your life when it’s always croakin’ . . .  
911 is a joke we don’t want ‘em . . .  
You better wake up and smell the real flavor  
Cause 911 is a fake lifesaver . . .  
So get up get, get, get down  
911 is a joke in yo’ town  
Get up, get, get, get down  
Late 911 wears the late crown

In their insistence that 9-1-1 is a joke to black people, Public Enemy demystifies the paternalistic idea of the “white protector,” cautioning black Americans to rise up and create change for themselves, as suggested by the sampled phrasing of the infamous 1960s James Brown song “Get-Up, Get Down.” Although the
cultural politics of Public Enemy’s music is the subject of many publications on rap, there is little written about their confrontation with American nationalist myths and the way their work rethinks the patriotic symbols that uphold and sustain the nation. In Public Enemy’s (in)version of the “Star Spangled Banner,” for instance, titled “Nutterbutter Song,” (as in nothin’ but a song) Chuck D espouses parallel sentiments to their hit 9-1-1:

I always thought dat power was to the people
O say can I see we ain’t the people
When I pledge allegiance I should got a sticka . . .
Verse that worked in the middle of class
Instead of singin’ bout bombs
Like a dumb ass
Land of the free
Home of the brave
And hell with us cause we slaves
That should been the last line
Of a song that’s wrong from the get
So when everybody stands [for the Star Spangled Banner]
I sit.

Public Enemy thus positions their music as a voice of contestation by their use of revered American entities and symbols, such as the un-reliability of 9-1-1 in urban communities and the “Star Spangled Banner.” In this way, they forge a cultural politics in the spirit of transformation, which lyrically intervenes in their and other black folks exclusion from American cultural citizenship. Through their (in)versions of American signs and symbols, an assertion is made about their right to reclaim the history of America and the semiotic referents of the nation that are used against them as people of African descent living in America. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, on September 13, 2001, Chuck D said as much in a letter to his fans, where he spoke of patriotism in the aftermath of 9/11:

I have issues with the US talking cocky. I have a problem with heartless cats training to fly planes in order to kill thousands of innocent people in the air or on the ground. I have a problem with Amerikkka,
and its relentless hyping and macho barroom tales of its “beat-u-down” past, [but] I don’t have a problem on what America can be (sic). In NEW YORK a place known for people not giving a damn about the next person, all of a sudden people are communicating with one another regardless of background unless the person has a Middle Eastern “visual characteristic” and that’s where Amerikka not America rears its ugliness. Understand the difference ya’ll (italics mine).

Chuck D’s statement not only alludes to U. S. imperialism and domestic terrorism, but he also specifies the contradiction and danger in supporting all Americans except those with “Middle Eastern visual characteristics” post-9/11. While he celebrates the renewed sense of commitment everyday people began to feel toward each other in the name of humanity, his support of the nation is not absent of critical thinking about race relations. Instead of calling for color-blind unity, Chuck D explains the way in which an informed consciousness about and intervention in the misuse of color, ethnic, and religious exclusion is a starting point for cultivating the potential of what he so poignantly states “America can be.”

The Black Citizen-Subject and National Negotiation: Imagined Communities and Artistic Polemics

Despite the cultural havoc and media frenzy caused by the insurgent stances of McGruder, Lee, and Glover, everyday people, especially within black East Coast ethnic communities, expressed patriotism and national identity. I turn now to the use of symbolic patriotism in post 9/11 urban blacks in order to tease out the nuance and complexity of their reactions. In New York City, Washington, D.C., and Boston, everyday people of African descent—like their other patriotism to prove their American counterparts—displayed flag bumper stickers, wore red, and espoused the rhetoric of what Aaron dominant culture McGruder parodied in his The Adventures of Flagee and Ribbon as uncritical, naïve American patriotism. Yet, this performance of post-9/11 patriotism among black ethnic groups and
immigrants requires historical and contextual framing. The display of patriotism in black communities is analogous to cultural critic Benedict Anderson’s idea of an imagined community: their symbolic patriotism is reflective of the shared emotional trauma experienced as residents of the states where the terrorist attacks were initiated or aimed.\textsuperscript{30}

Displaying flag stickers and wearing ribbons also acted as an attempt to claim space within the nation for which immigrant populations and black Americans typically do not have access. Many immigrant groups and people of color on the East Coast and cab drivers used flags and ribbons as a material shield from misguided nationalistic vigilantes who might boycott their businesses or act in violence against them in the name of American nationalism. Immigrant cab driver’s involvement in symbolic American patriotism in particular was not reactionary paranoia. In the wake of the Patriot Act, which provides for an increase in surveillance of American citizens suspected of engaging in suspicious, un-American behavior, cab drivers that do airport pickups are now seen as potential suspects and police may conduct random searches for terrorist paraphernalia at perceived key airport sites. It is surely no coincidence that in these proposed key airport sites where the attacks were initiated or aimed, that is, Boston, D.C., and New York City, a large percentage of cab drivers are of African, Middle Eastern, or South Asian heritage. This suggests an always-already idea in the popular imagination about the ethnicity of a terrorist. It is not a stretch to say then that while white Americans use symbolic patriotism to demonstrate their national pride post-9/11, many people of color felt the need to engage in symbolic patriotism to prove their loyalty to the United States in order to avoid acts of domestic terrorism propagated by the dominant culture.\textsuperscript{31}

Rather than read flag display and ribbon-wearing among black ethnic and immigrant groups only as a sign of misguided nationalistic pride, it is equally useful to understand symbolic representation as ambivalence about national belonging and domestic social relations. Historian Lawrence R. Samuel said of black patriotism during World War II that many black Americans, purchased war bonds to assert their place within American social relations and to help stimulate the war-diminished economy. He
cautions hasty skepticism and judgment about black patriotism when he writes:

viewing the significant African-American investment [in patriotism throughout history] as a display of ideological alignment with the power bloc consensus . . . is an incomplete and inaccurate conclusion. Black patriotism can at the same time strengthen group identity through its insistence of a national one.32

It may be helpful then to closely examine examples from black art and poetry that negotiate the two poles of assumed inclusion and the subtler forms of contestation that Samuel implies: the flag art of artists Faith Ringgold and Emma Amos and the spoken word of Amiri Baraka.

In the 1960s through the 1990s, Ringgold and Amos used the most recognizable sign of patriotism—the fetishized American flag—as an illustration of the negotiation between national, gender, race, and ethnic group consciousness. Faith Ringgold remains the most commercially successful in this use, as she employs various signifiers of black oppression in her work alongside versions of the American flag to provide a counternarrative of black patriotism. Over the past four and a half decades, as cultural critic Lisa Farrington observes, Ringgold has transposed signs of American nationalism, race, class, and gender to depict black realities and national violence.33 Through absence and subversion of the flag as a signifier of freedom, Ringgold and Amos complicate the meanings of patriotism to encompass the subjects rendered peripheral to the nation they inhabit, especially black women and men. Centering subjects such as sexuality, interracial unions, racial epithets, militaristic symbols, and crossracial political units, Ringgold and Amos transform the American flag into a symbol of protest, reconciliation, and paradoxically, black American hope.

The above aesthetic, cultural, and political mixture is seen in Ringgold’s *The Flag is Bleeding* (1967), and *The Flag is Bleeding, Part Two* (1990). *The Flag is Bleeding* places three subjects, a black male, white woman, and white male against a flag that drips with spurted blood. The men in the painting lock arms with the white woman in the middle. While the black male holds a dagger in his left hand
toward his genitals, the white male places his arms on his hips. The black and white males smile, while the white woman in the center projects a matter-of-fact, ineffectual stare. Visual artist and cultural critic Patrick Hill writes that Ringgold’s decision in *The Flag is Bleeding* to superimpose blood over the flag and the three subjects that stand before it “rejects as illusory any suggestion that interests of a racially balkanized body politic might be served simply by linking blacks and whites arm in arm.” While Hill’s observation is insightful, this image seems to also work as a statement on masculinist notions of freedom as predicated upon protection of, and access to, white women. Given Ringgold’s second version of the painting, *The Flag is Bleeding, Part Two*, this seems probable. In this image, a black woman stands behind a bleeding flag, huddling two black children, one in each arm, close to her chest. Blood flows from her breasts and back splatters onto the large flag that has colorful quilt patches as a border. Both images provide significant statements on how race relations work in society and for the latter, how the black female subject produces and understands culture. Through absence in the first image of the black female subject and centered insertion in the second image, Ringgold illustrates how black women are iconoclastic symbols of re-constitutive meanings of patriotism, a struggle that, as *The Flag is Bleeding, Part Two* shows, is often forged by a woman alone with her offspring. Again, writes Patrick Hill, as Ringgold asserted a self-conscious gender politics, she began to use her art “as a forum to openly address concerns specific to African-American women, and iconographic ground less thoroughly imbued with the violent history of American patriarchy.”

*Flag of the Moon* (1967) and *Flag Story Quilt* (1985) alter the formal components of the traditional American flag by integrating visual depictions of speech, and speech acts, overlaid on or as constructive material for her new, interpretive version of flag imagery. In *Flag of the Moon*, the word “die” is placed horizontally behind white stars embedded in a blue square, and the racial epithet “Nigger” is placed vertically in grayish-white to create semblances of red and white stripes. By transforming the American flag into a speech act, and act of hate, Ringgold provocatively asserts the contradictory meanings of freedom that the American
flag communicates for different communities: for some citizens it means freedom, for others, as the words “die” and “Nigger” convey, it means annihilation of the other, or Othered black citizen-subject. In comparison, Flag Story Quilt uses tie-dyed, appliquéd red stripes, strips of a written narrative that resemble newsprint, and profiled white heads with sequined eyes to form an image of an American flag. Flag Story Quilt, writes Ringgold, is about Memphis Cooley, an armless, paraplegic Vietnam veteran from Harlem, who is accused of an unlikely crime. The story is based on the premise that the black man’s guilt, whether likely or unlikely, is almost always taken for granted long before it is actually proven. Flag Story Quilt seems to bear a resemblance to [the] Rodney King case in which we were asked to disbelieve the classic video we all saw on television of the brutal police beating of Rodney King that would seem to suggest that the police applied undue force to an unarmed man.36

Ringgold’s mélange of patriotic symbols and a written narrative about attacks upon black freedom and the black body is used to illuminate the inconspicuous and unfortunate truths of democracy as it is unevenly disseminated. Flag Story Quilt also portrays the contradictions of law enforcement Public Enemy directly spoke of in “9-1-1 is a Joke.” Her dialogic images that take shape in the image of the American flag invites inquiry into the multiple and contradictory meanings of, and the limits placed upon, freedom. Moreover, through her use of biography in conjunction with the quilts and altered flag imagery, she tells a story of American history that the traditional version of the flag might obscure.

Artist Emma Amos integrates signs and symbols of black American history and segregation into her use of the flag in X Flag (1994), Confederates, (1994), and Equals (1992). Amos’s depictions of the American flag are similar to Ringgold’s use of the famous, iconic sign of freedom in the sixties and early nineties. Her approach, like Ringgold’s, implicates black Americans as in the middle of the paradoxes of American patriotism. In Amos’s work, the flag is a sign of racial
hatred and racial pride; freedom and entrapment; segregation and integration. *X Flag*, for example, places a Confederate flag border around a roughly painted American flag and she replaces the traditional stars and stripes with a black and white photo of three black children surrounded by stamps of revolutionary leader Malcolm X. In the middle of the painting Amos etches an “x” as a cross-out overlaid upon a smaller Confederate “x.” Here, Amos fuses competing positions on civil and human rights while asserting that black history and the black subject is at the center of the fight for American freedom and justice. In addition, the use of the two flags—American and Confederate—symbolize the beginning of a history that allowed black patriotism to form, that is, the Civil War. But Amos is too smart to leave symbols of patriotism un-mediated by contestatory politics, hence her use of Malcolm X stamps and the three children pictured in the left-hand corner that depict the historical moment of 1960s segregation, something for which post–Civil War reconstruction efforts promised to, but did not, end.

*Equals* pictures a black woman drowning in the ripples of an American flag with appliquéd yellow stars outlined in black with peering eyes in the center; a picture of a modest dwelling is positioned in the far left corner and the parameter is trimmed with quilted images of Malcolm X against Kente cloth. *Confederates* is a multi-media installation that fuses white interpretations of Southern pride, that is, the Confederate flag, with a photo of an interracial and mixed gender threesome who stand defiantly as if challenging a spectator’s gaze. Amos’s *Equals* and *Confederates* are indicative of patriotism as a process of national negotiation and confrontation with American history. Her use of national signs of patriotism, especially her integration of flags that represent the poles of bondage and freedom, situate patriotism as a fluid question and as a signifier for the need for national healing in cross-gender, white and black social relations. Like Ringgold, Amos illustrates that the black female subject is often caught in the middle of this negotiation, described well by the telling title of Debra Gray White’s history of black women’s political organizations *Too Heavy A Load*, and Akasha Hull’s book on black feminism, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave.*37
Ringgold and Amos transform the most prototypical American sign of freedom—the flag—and they embed it with multiple layers of meaning that eschew trendy deployment in culture, as represented so well in the white female artist Liane Ricci’s painting *Patriotism, the New Black* (2002). In this work, one might see the contradictions of contemporary, post-9/11 patriotism, where Ricci images a woman with large, dark sunglasses and full red lips. The woman’s head is wrapped in a red and white stripe scarf which hides her face and hair, and she stands behind a wall of white stars encroached within a blue background. The wrap the woman wears strikes an uncanny resemblance to the traditional dress of Arab-American women, especially in that the wrap and sunglasses obscure large portions of the woman’s face and body, revealing scant ethnicized features, such as her full mouth. Ricci’s form of artistic masking makes the woman indistinguishable and therefore distinguishable as an Arab-American woman at the same time. Her image, I believe, invokes at least two key questions: Have Arab-Americans—as implicated by the woman pictured—replaced black Americans as the threatening Other of the nation? Are Arab-American women, in this post 9/11 moment, the new black, and if so, how does this help one understand the problems suggested by Barbara Lee, Chuck D, and Danny Glover concerning black Americans’ responsibility in forming cross-cultural coalitions in order to realize long-term change and healing in U.S. race relations?

Although not produced by a black artist, I use *Patriotism, the New Black* as an illustration of my argument because it invokes such difficult questions, and because of the artist’s admitted intent with the painting. The intent with *Patriotism, the New Black* was not to depict an Arab American woman, racial profiling, or race relations; it is a “celebration,” in the words of the artist Liane Ricci, “of America.” Ricci’s painting of a woman wrapped up in the apparent goodness of the nation presents patriotism as now “en vogue” in our post-9/11 moment.38 Ironically, perhaps no other painting then, fits the argument of this paper more perfectly than *Patriotism, the New Black*, as it reveals the multiple ways of seeing patriotism, freedom, and the ways this seeing is impacted by post-9/11 racial discourses and subject position. In this image one can both see race and not see race through the woman’s features and dress; as a central subject the
woman pictured can work as an assumed sign of international oppression and as a sign of ceremonial reverence for a nation, depending on who is doing the looking. *Patriotism, the New Black* is a signifier for the complex layers of iconic signs of freedom as one may interpret it differently according to the gaze of the looker, their subject position, and relationship to oppositional looking relations. An analysis of the use of patriotic signs by the art of Ricci, Amos, Ringgold, and everyday black Americans demonstrate the utility in exploring the many facets and performances of patriotism as a critique of social relations and how artists and spectators simultaneously manipulate gaze. By rethinking how, why, and to what ends patriotism is expressed in culture, art, and everyday life, we not only discover the unlimited possibilities for evaluating its use and misuse in culture, we also discover the grounds by which we might combat it in its ideological and less progressive forms.

A historical venture into how patriotism shaped and mediated social relations is the subject of Roger Wilkins’ book *Jefferson’s Pillow*, where he traces the formation of black patriotism and contestation since the Revolutionary War. Black patriotism, argues Wilkens, is present throughout the history of America; it developed precariously in the shadow of the well-known historical reality that the nation’s leaders “created a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that whites were and should be supreme. They celebrated freedom while stealing the substance of life from the people they owned.” Amiri Baraka offers a strong example of Wilkins’s argument in his October 2002 poem “Somebody Blew Up America?” a work that takes historical moments and reinterprets them through the rhythmic mixture of metaphor, metonymy, polemics, black oration, and stylistic conventions characteristic of African-American spoken word poetry. Baraka’s poetic piece argues that the cause of terrorism—domestic and international—is an already answered question. New Jersey’s Governor, Jim McGreevey, asked Baraka to relinquish his title of poet laureate because of his controversial work, claiming that one line in a stanza, where Baraka insinuates Israel had previous information about the 9/11 terrorist attacks before it took place, was anti-Semitic. Baraka refuted claims of anti-Semitism in
“Somebody Blew Up America?” by insisting upon a separation between a people (Jews) and a nation (Israel).

Charges of anti-Semitism also plagued the group Public Enemy, as well as other “isms,” such as heterosexism and sexism, before their dismissal of Professor Griff, a member scorned for making anti-Semitic statements to the American media. Critiqued for their Black Nationalist leanings and commentary about black gay men, Public Enemy’s cultural politics is not free from jingoism, homophobia, and other components of well-documented hip-hop hypocrisy. The accusations directed at Baraka and Public Enemy is not something I will seek to prove or disprove here. Rather, I bring this up as an opportunity to assert the work necessary for cross-cultural and cross-religious coalitions, which is especially important in our post-9/11 era of ethnic, cultural, and religious profiling directed at Americans and those within our borders not connected to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As Henry Louis Gates observes, “attention to black anti-Semitism is crucial, however discomforting, in no small part because the moral credibility of our [own] struggle against racism hangs in the balance.”

If black anti-Semitism is to be eradicated and not merely evoked in ways that pit one group of black folks against another, that make one group of black folks ‘darlings’ among white Jews and another the ‘enemy,’ we must create critical spaces for the dialogue where the aim is not to cast “blame” but to look more deeply at why two groups who should and must maintain solidarity are drifting apart.

While one line in Baraka’s poem has gained scrutiny, the entirety of Baraka’s response to 9/11, where he expresses a possible cover-up of domestic and international infractions on the part of the U.S. government, has gained less attention. I quote Baraka’s telling stanzas at length to provide a nuanced picture of his poignant and emotionally charged political and historical arguments:

They say its some terrorist,
some barbaric
A Rab,
in Afghanistan
It wasn’t our American terrorists
It wasn’t the Klan or the Skin heads
Or the them that blows up nigger
Churches, or reincarnates us on Death Row
It wasn’t Trent Lott
Or David Duke or Giuliani
Or Schundler, Helms retiring

They say (who say?)
Who do the saying
Who is them paying
Who tell the lies
Who in disguise
Who had the slaves
Who got the bux out the Bucks

Who got fat from plantations
Who genocided Indians
Who tried to waste the Black nation

Who live on Wall Street
The first plantation
Who cut your nuts off
Who rape your ma
Who lynched your pa . . .
Who made the bombs
Who made the guns . . .
Who? Who? Who?

Who stole Puerto Rico
Who stole the Indies, the Philippines, Manhattan
Australia & The Hebrides
Who forced opium on the Chinese

Who the fake president
Who the ruler
Who the banker
Who? Who? Who?

Who own the mine
Who twist your mind
Who got bread
Who need peace
Who you think need war

Who own the oil
Who do no toil
Who own the soil
Who is not a nigger
Who is so great ain't nobody bigger . . . .
Who killed the most niggers
Who killed the most Jews
Who killed the most Italians
Who killed the most Irish
Who killed the most Africans
Who killed the most Latinos

Who killed Malcolm, Kennedy & his brother
Who killed Dr King, Who would want such a thing?
Are they linked to the murder of Lincoln?

Who invaded Grenada
Who made money from apartheid
Who keep the Irish a colony
Who overthrow Chile and Nicaragua later . . . .
Who decided Affirmative Action had to go
Reconstruction, The New Deal,
The New Frontier, The Great Society, . . .
Like the acid vomit of the fire of Hell
Who and Who and WHO who who
Whoooo and Whooooooooooooooooo!
Conclusion
Patriotism: The New Black?

The poem's incessant rhythmic meter is apparent in its concluding "who." Baraka presents his poetry in the style of a rhetorical dialogue in which the reader is invited to fill in the answer. Amiri Baraka's suggestive response makes clear the need of reconstituting patriotism through a critical politics of contestation. I hope to have shown that this work, as well as other forms of black expressive culture—rap and hip-hop, mass culture and art, play a key role in thinking through the limits and possibilities of traditional understandings of patriotism, and the consequences that uncritical patriotism holds for all Americans. For McGruder, Ringgold, and Amos, signs of patriotism simultaneously function as signs of contestation. Their use of symbolic doubling, counter discourses, and deliberate, artistic alteration shows this contradictory aesthetic. Lee's and Glover's unrelenting public position in support of the vote and the expression of conscience despite the risk of censure and overt political attack—carries strong utility in the creation of emergent political consciousness to the ends of long-term change. Whether Lee is re-elected and Glover recovers from the minor and now largely diminished assaults on his public persona, both set a precedent for those who will follow them. They will put their critics on notice concerning the misuse of nationalistic, paternalistic power in times of cultural crisis. As Public Enemy and Amiri Baraka use rap and poetry to reveal and to remind Americans of the forms of domestic terrorism for which black bodies continue to be targets, they also show how the same entity is often responsible for that terrorism in their very own sites.

For those cultural workers committed to change and transformation, we must decide whether we want patriotism, as represented in Liane Ricci's postmodernist painting, to become the "new black," or if we want clearly defined, interventionist cultural politics to become the way in which we represent and express a new form of American patriotism. This patriotism would "not demand assent at all costs and romantic notions of unity based on an assumed national consensus and silence of domestic forms of racism and violence. Rather, this form of patriotism would rely upon the much harder work of
maintaining diverse political polities composed of mutual respect, divergent and shared political goals. The latter, opposed to the former, would constitute a truly valuable and self-reflexive American patriotism worth fighting for and sustaining for the long term.” Certainly, one might argue that in times of crisis, scarce resources, and mass mourning, such critiques and insurgent knowledge production in the arts is counterproductive. At the least, it may be seen as bad timing. But I argue quite the opposite. If now is not the time to highlight these problems and contradictions in the culture, and in domestic, and in international relations, when is the right time?

In response to black accommodation to segregation, disenfranchisement, and cultural marginalization espoused so well by Booker T. Washington’s political and cultural prescriptions during Reconstruction, William Monroe Trotter wrote at the turn of the century that “it is not wise to assume one might obtain rights by not protesting their being taken away.” We might heed the words expressed in the film Ali where Mohammed Ali insisted (drawing from the words of Martin Luther King) that historically marginalized groups have already waited more than four hundred years for the unalienable rights experienced by few, but promised to all. For those who might be sympathetic to my arguments but still contend that, in times of mass mourning, contestation and insurgency are not wise choices for black cultural workers, intellectuals, and artists, I respond by reiterating Danny Glover’s argument in his MLK speech. Never again, Glover argued, can the nation-state take precipitous action or target a group based on wartime (or war play) hysteria; we cannot ask questions and open up discussion AFTER committing abominable acts of mistrust and war. In these troubling times of military expediency, surveillance in the name of national security, fragile international relations, and U.S. avarice for the natural resources that lay beneath the hot desert grounds thousands of miles away from our own nation-state, it seems appropriate to end with the words of Amiri Baraka: “All thinking people oppose terrorism—both domestic and international . . . but one should not be used to cover up the other.”

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Notes

A version of this paper, titled "Get Up, Get-Get Get Down, 9/11 Ain’t a Joke in Your Town," was delivered at the American Studies Association meetings in Houston, Texas, in November of 2002.

4. One might recall, for example, the use of patriotic symbols and language used by working-class whites during school desegregation in Boston, where manipulated notions of patriotism were used to make claims to moral superiority in order to defuse public opinion about the horrors of their race- and class-inflected discrimination targeted at black Americans. See John Bodnar, Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 10.
6. Black expressive art is chosen as the primary mode of textual analysis because it widens the parameters of meaning and distinctions made between folk, popular, elite, and oral art and cultures. Black expressive art encompasses all of these forms in their most permeable and performative forms. See for example, Shane White and Graham White, Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998).
oppressive Taliban regime, we are thankful that our leader isn’t the spoiled son of a powerful politician from a wealthy oil family who is supported by religious fundamentalists, operates clandestine organizations, has no respect for the democratic electoral process, bombs innocents and uses war to deny people their civil liberties. Amen.” The *Dallas Morning News* pulled this strip. See Eric Celeste, “What’s Up, Docks? The Morning News Keeps the Evil Thoughts Away,” *Dallas Observer* (December 6, 2001).


10. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


19. “Glover’s Long Road to Modesto.”


21. Horwitz is best known for his opposition to affirmative action and reparations for people of African descent living in America. He is the editor of the online magazine *Frontpage.com* and former president of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture. For an archive of all his articles opposing affirmative action, reparations, and advocacy of neo liberalism, see http://www.Frontpagemag.comlArticlesAuthors.asp?ID=4.

22. See http://www.DumpBarbaraLee.htm. This link, where David Horwitz’s comments were cited, was active as of November 2002.


24. I culled this information from my attendance at Harvard University’s hip-hop conference in September 2002 and interviews with Wade Colwell and Ranson Kennedy of the Funkamentals.


26. An interesting contradiction is that all of the record labels mentioned here are black-owned labels, and the aforementioned artists who retain a political platform are on mainstream labels. I am not suggesting a causal relationship, as Mary J. Blidge and Missy Elliot are on MCA, but it is interesting to note that generally speaking, black-owned labels formed with the intent of taking control over the distribution of the music and the monetary rewards and general artistic freedom, rather than the dissemination of a cultural and political message was their goal.

27. See for example Tricia Rose’s seminal work on the cultural politics of rap music in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994). Rose writes of the cultural work of rap and hip-hop, examining the contributions of Public Enemy as well as other influential artists in this genre.


31. I would like to thank the American Studies Association panel titled “Cultural Citizenship in the Age of George Bush” at the Washington, D.C. meetings in 2001, which brought to my attention the use of flags and ribbons, post 9/11, as carrying contradictory meanings and consequences for nonwhite cab drivers.


35. Ibid.


38. Liane Ricci is a New York–born artist who works in the post-modernist tradition. She explains her approach to Patriotism, the New Black, as a part of her press biography. She was a part of the artist coalition Unity Canvas in New York that responded to the 9/11 events through paintings inspired by the tragedy and local New York aesthetics. See Ajay Ghosh, “Unity Canvas Held in New York,” Art and Culture (February 2002). The artist may be contacted at liane@lianericci.com.


46. This statement was the epigraph to Amiri Baraka’s poem “Somebody Blew Up America?”