

MCs and Hate Speak

It is said that the past is prologue. The poetry of this simple truth scares me when I contemplate the hate music made by an increasing number of hip hop and dance hall performers. I cringe at the vision of thousands of my young sisters and brothers listening to a litany of lyrics casting women as sexual toys to be used and discarded and gay men as perverts (and sometimes sexual toys) to be beaten and killed while sexist and homophobic language can be found in some of the early rap classics, this black male animus toward all who are or perceived to be feminine has heightened in popularity and intensity. As the most important genre of artistic, political, cultural and sexual discourse for young blacks and all American youth, hip hop has often served as a powerful medium of progressive social change. To the extent that it both mirrors and manipulates a myriad of popular beliefs, when hip hop speaks we must listen.

When hip hop encourages black people to hate black people, we must ask why and then we must act in order to save ourselves from ourselves. Whether we see the hate speaking artist as a messenger who reports the acts and beliefs of his people, or an instigator who incites those acts and beliefs, we must look not only to him, we must consider his mother and father and the neighborhood he grew up in, what his mother showed him, what his father didn't show him, the sermons he heard, what he was taught about being a man, the women he knew, how the men around him treated them, what men said of them in their absence, how he related to gay boys he grew up with, what his straight kin said about his gay kin, what if anything was said about what it means to love, the attitudes of his people, black people, when it comes to love, sex, women, men, sexuality, homosexuality, gender, and more. In short, we must look to ourselves as a people, how we have or have not raised him, and what we have come to expect and demand from each other.

Throughout the 60s and 70s, Black nationalist artists like Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka (then known as Leroi Jones) etched distinct borders across the terrain of traditional and newly emerging black identities. They articulated the values of this new "Blackness" as we were recreating ourselves, Africans in America no longer shackled by internalized hatred but now self-loving defiantly. As more masculinist factions came to

dominate this movement, more animosity was directed toward the archetype considered most threatening to Black progress, the Negro. In this male-centered matrix, Black man and thus Blackness itself was presented as hard, domineering, tough, utterly masculine and uncompromising, the Negro was seen as soft, servile, meek, effete and accomodating. Regardless of his actual sexual orientation, the Negro was thus viewed as analogous to a homosexual male.

With the exception of an Angela Davis or Kwame Toure (then known as Stokely Carmichael) it was our liberation artists who commanded more attention than our political leaders. They gave the word and decreed who was black and beautiful and who was Negro and not to be trusted. Perhaps it was the license we extend our muses and our men that afforded writers like Eldridge Cleaver the entitlement to make odious pronouncements about women and homosexuals. Despite the pivotal leadership of women organizers like Davis, Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker, many of the male leaders relegated their sister comrades to traditionally subordinate roles that were quite counterrevolutionary. In spite of the immeasurable contributions of openly gay agents of social change such as James Baldwin and Bayard Rustin, gay brothers were painted as immoral unmanly perverts who have no place in the revolution unless they were deeply closeted at the back of the bus.

The brothers who hijacked the movement by reinforcing and exploiting these rigid codes ultimately sabotaged themselves and the rest of our people. Successive generations of black people are still paying the cost of this foreclosure. Their narrow vision of racial equality failed to recognize the intersectional relationship between racism and sexism and homophobia. They were too busy trying to beat “the man” so that they could be “the man”.

Hip hop is highly derivative of those fabled activists and artists of the 60s and 70s, considering its rhythms and highly stylized performance values as well as its overtly political nature. Activist hip hop royalty such as Public Enemy and KRS evoke the assertive eloquence of Gil Scott Heron and Malcolm X. The pimp, gangsta and thug drag sported by Snoop Dogg, and DMX have antecedents in the sweetsweetback superfly black anti-heroes of the 70s and the Cagney-style mob flicks of the 30s. Alas, along with the liberating traits passed down from these subversive roots, hip hop and the young men

who create it may also have inherited a syndrome of patriarchal tendencies that were passed on like an unchecked virus that overtakes the entire body. Perhaps if brothers had listened to the accurate critiques of black feminists back in the day instead of dismissing them as man-hating lesbians and pawns used by the white man to kill the movement, we might have saved a generation from this crisis of self hatred.

As low as the U.S. rappers have stooped in their pandering to the violence embedded in our culture, in us, several dance hall artists have matched if not surpassed their depths of hostility. Buju Banton and Beenie Man's invocations of murdering and torturing gay men are directed toward the millions of young men from Kingston to Brooklyn who revere them as much as U.S. rappers. I wonder how widely and deeply has this pan-African exchange of homo-hatred spread throughout the Diaspora.

The homophobic and misogynist attitudes broadcast by several of today's hip hop artists are inextricably connected to the practices of the patriarchy known as the United States. We often highlight the links between this dysfunctional flexing and the keloid scars inflicted by a continuum of oppression from 17th century slavery through the 21st century prison industrial complex. Black cultural and political analysts often underscore the commodification of black art by white moguls who profit from the mass production of hypermasculine outlaw tales that objectify and vilify women and gay men. But when do we at long last examine our own hand in the cyclical denigration of those of us who are not heterosexual men? How many women have to have their asses card swiped before 100 Black Men of Atlanta stands in public solidarity with Spelman College students declaring this as unacceptable? How many millions of records encouraging brothers to blow gay men's brains out must be sold before the NAACP identifies this as hate music and boycotts CD and concert bookings as have other organizations around the world?

Let us indeed examine the possible factors behind NAACP's decision to give Kelly an "Image award" after months of bootleg copies of his most infamous video debuted in black and other households across the country. In doing so, we may begin to at least ponder the painful lessons we repeat as we refuse to learn. The double standards demonstrated by responses to Kelly's antics and those of Tevin Campbell and Michael Jackson certainly suggest that hip hop serves more as an reflection than a source of our obsessions and anxieties about black men, masculinity and sexuality. Kelly was shown

having sex with a minor and is more successful now than ever and black people apparently forgave him and forgot about it. Campbell was arrested for soliciting sex from an undercover cop and lost his career. Jackson was accused of sleeping with and molesting boys and black people have judged him as a certified predator without any evidence as compelling as the Kelly tape. Our responses or rather the differences between them suggest more about us than the actors in these scenarios. They suggest that we are less offended by the actual abuse of girls than the alleged abuse of boys and so we value boys more than girls. We consider the rape and abuse of women in our communities as a private affair that is not to be publicly challenged. We find pedophilia committed by heterosexual men much more acceptable than homosexual sex whether or not the same gender partners are of consenting age. After all, we seem to be saying, that despite his documented acts, R. Kelly is still natural man unlike Campbell or Jackson. When we do this do we think that our young men are not watching and learning? We show them that they can brutalize certain members of their own community and they will ignore or pardon their wanton acts. Yet we act astonished when they grow up to be women beaters and gay bashers, like a confused father that asks aloud why his son “cusses so damn much.”

Black people recognize that no other being arouses more fear and hatred across this land than black men. As with any endangered species, healthy black men are precious because they are rare and indispensable to us. Those who achieve any notable level of acclaim attract much more scrutiny than their white counterparts. The media, which is painfully white, is much less forgiving of black men’s transgressions and so with all their fame and fortune, they are soon reminded of who they really are in America’s eyes. Niggers. Knowing this we are slow to hold our men responsible for their deeds, at least in public. We are more inclined to have their back even when we know their actions are indefensible. This is understandable. It is also dangerous. This coddling, this refusal to enforce accountability among our young men sends a message that we believe what is said and thought about them over yonder. That “you are not capable of being a productive, loving, free thinking adult”. That “you are not a man.” We say this every time we say and do nothing and thus comply when a black men beats his wife, or rapes a woman, or bludgeons another man to death because he flirted with him. We say

this every time we say and do nothing to challenge not only hip hop artists, but the record companies and the venues like BET who may be staffed if not run by black people who apparently feel no responsibility for their role in producing and broadcasting these hurtful images and messages. We do this every time we tithe at churches that teach our young men to hate and fear same gender loving men and women. Our silence is our complicity and it seals the fate of not only present and future victims, but also the black men who brutalized them and the black boys who will soon be men who witness our inaction.

Interrogations of oppressive hip hop may prompt assumptions that if the critic is white, he or she is racist, if the critic is black, then he or she is a sell-out conservative, and if the critic is a woman, she is probably hysterical, as are all women who challenge sexism are branded. Hip hop has been scapegoated and stereotyped as if it's a monolithic exercise in anarchy by more than a few critics and these unfair attacks should be revealed as such. We still must be willing to make and receive constructive critical examinations about these matters so that we can act. So that we can demonstrate not only that black-on-black violence and subjugation is unacceptable but that we are willing to look within and root out the self loathing. I am not willing to excuse hip hop hate mongers just because homo hatred and femphobia did not spring from this or any other commercialized art form. Nor am I suggesting that taking them to task is enough to address the source of this systematic abuse. We need to challenge these artists and our own extended community. The time has come for black people to shift from seeing ourselves only as victims of oppression and acknowledge how we enable the black-on-black violence and abuse committed by black men and sanction or participate in the oppression of black women and black gays and lesbians.

We can begin by shifting our discussions from the private spaces of our homes and families to the public and political arenas of our neighborhood and tenants associations, public forums, and the elected official we have elected to serve us. In the time it takes to read this article you could have written a letter or made several phone calls to address these matters with the hip hop artists, producers, distributors and cable stations. As black gay men, we certainly do not help our cause by bopping and twirling to beats that summon our annihilation without giving at least our djs proper readings for spinning hate on the floor. Imagine Jewish gay men dancing to Nazi techno and

recognize the absurdity. After you're done with this last paragraph, you can call GLAAD and ask them what they are doing to confront not only Eminem but also Nelly, Beenie Man and others like them. Ask the women you know who are engaged in some feminist work if they could use your support in challenging the misogyny practiced not only by high profile rappers but also the everyday brothers at their schools, campuses and workplaces. Or you can make a donation to Men Stopping Violence, a male-led organization that rehabilitates men who beat women. We all have a role that awaits us through which we may actively and creatively participate in the salvation of our people. It is said the past is prologue. Do not wait to take your place in this struggle. It's later than you think.

Peace,
Craig Washington