

It's a Family Affair

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Paul Gilroy

The complicated phenomena we struggle to name as black nationalism, cultural nationalism, and neonationalism have now been so reconfigured that our essentially nineteenth-century, or maybe even eighteenth-century, understanding of them has to be abandoned. Everywhere, as a result of both internal and external pressures, the integrity of the nation-state as the primary focus of economic, political, and cultural action, has been compromised. The impact of this on nationalist ideologies (black and otherwise) is particularly important and needs to be taken into account. I am not satisfied with just pinning the prefix “neo” onto nationalism and feeling that we’ve done the job of analyzing it. If we are to distinguish the contemporary discourses of black nationalism from the black nationalisms of the past, we have to examine the novel modes of information and cultural production in which they circulate.

Perhaps the easiest place to begin is to think about the changes in information and communication technologies that have taken all nationalisms away from their historic association with the technology of print culture. This is one way of conceptualizing the changed notions of space and time we associate with the impact of the postmodern and the postindustrial on black cultures. If we are to think of ourselves as diaspora people, how do we then understand the notion of space? How do we adjust our understanding of the relationship between spatialization and identity formation in order to deal with these techno-cultural changes? One thing we might do is take a cue from Manuel Castells,¹ who describes the shift from an understanding of space based on notions of place and fixity to an understanding of place based on flows. Or, what another exiled Englishman, Iain Chambers, introduces in his very suggestive distinction between roots and routes.² (I don’t think this pun has quite the same force in American versions of English.) If we’re going to pick up the vernacular ball and run with it, then maybe the notion of the crossroads—as a special location where unforeseen, magical things happen—might be an appropriate conceptual vehicle for rethinking this dialectical tension between cultural roots and cultural routes, between the space marked out by places and the space constituted by flows. The crossroads has a nicely Africological sound to it too: a point at which the flows of black popular cultures productively intersect.

These issues point to the way we will have to refine the theorizing of the African diaspora if it is to fit our changed transnational and intercultural circumstances. Though the current popularity of Afrocentrism points to other possibilities, we might consider experimenting, at least, with giving up the idea that our culture needs to be centered anywhere except where we are when we launch our inquiries into it. Certainly, we will have to find a better way to deal with the obvious differences between and within black cultures—differences that live on

under the signs of their disappearances, constituting boundaries that stubbornly refuse to be erased.

I wish I had five bucks for every time I've heard the trope of the family wheeled out to do the job of recentering things when the debates of the last few days promised to question the spurious integrity of ideal racial culture. The trope of the family is especially significant right now when the idea of belonging to a nation is only infrequently invoked to legitimate the essence of today's black political discourses. Certainly in England, and probably in the United States, as well, there are a number of other legitimization strategies, but the invocation of "race" as family is everywhere. Its dominance troubles me because, at the moment, in the black English constituency out of which I speak, the trope of the family is not at the center of our discussion of what a black politics could or should be. And I'll return to that point later.

Afrocentricity names itself "systematic nationalism" (that's what Molefi Kete Asante calls it),³ but it is stubbornly focused around the reconstitution of individual consciousness rather than around the reconstruction of the black nation in exile or elsewhere. The civic, nation-building activity that defined the Spartan-style aspirations of black nationalism in the nineteenth century has been displaced in favor of the almost aesthetic cultivation of a stable, pure, racial self. The "ism" in that nationalism is often lacking, too; it is no longer constructed as a coherent political ideology. It appears more usually as a set of therapies—tactics in the never-ending struggle for psychological and cultural survival. In some nonspecific way, then, a new idea of Africanness, conveniently disassociated from the politics of contemporary Africa, operates transnationally and interculturally through the symbolic projection of "race" as kinship. It is now more often a matter of style, perspective, or survivalist technique than a question of citizenship, rights, or fixed contractual obligations (the things that defined nationality in earlier periods).

Indeed, though contemporary nationalism draws creatively on the traces of romantic theories of national belonging and national identity, derived from the ethnic metaphysics of eighteenth-century Europe, Afrocentric thinking attempts to construct a sense of black particularity *outside* of a notion of a national identity. Its founding problem lies in the effort to figure sameness across national boundaries and between nation-states. The first sentence of Asante's "Nia—The Way" can be used to illustrate this: "This is the way that came to Molefe in America."⁴ But the text's elisions of African-American particulars into African universals belie this modesty. Look also at the moment in the same text where the author struggles with the fact that only thirty-seven percent of the blacks who live in the Western hemisphere live in the United States. Forty percent, he muses to himself, live in Brazil. What do we do about that? Where are their inputs into Africological theory?

The understanding of blackness that emerges routinely these days gets projected, then, onto a very different symbolic landscape than it did in either nineteenth-century black nationalism, in Garveyism, or in the nationalism of the Black Power period. The new popular pantheon of black heroes is apparently a diasporic one—Marcus, Malcolm, Martin, Marley, Mandela, and *Me!* The narcissistic momentum of that masculine list is another symptom of a cultural implosion that must work against the logic of national identity. The flow is always inward, never outward; the truth of racialized being is sought, not in the world, but in the psyche. I know that the moment of epistemological narcissism is necessary in building movements that actually move, but doesn't it abandon the world of public politics, leaving us with a form of therapy that has little to offer beleaguered communities?

Some of the rhetoric of nationalism, however, does remain. It's there in the service of groups like the Five Percent Nation and the Nation of Islam. But for them it legitimates an ideology of separation that applies as viciously within the race as it does between blacks and whites. If there is still a coherent nationalism in play though—and I say this from my own perch in London—I want to suggest that it is the nationalism of black Americans. This

nationalism is a powerful subtext in the discourse of Afrocentricity, but it has evolved from an earlier period in black U.S. history. It is a very particular way of looking at the world that, far more than it expresses any exilic consciousness of Africa, betrays a distinctively American understanding of ethnicity and cultural difference. The family is the approved, natural site where ethnicity and racial culture are reproduced. In this authoritarian pastoral patriarchy, women are identified as the agents and means of this reproductive process.

This is where the question of the family begins to bite: representations of the family in contemporary black nationalism, transcoded—maybe wrongly—from London, appear to mark the site of what can, at the least, be called an ambivalent relationship to America. So, recognizing this, I don't want to call it Afrocentrism any more. I want to call it Americocentrism. And I want to suggest that it has evolved in a very uneasy mode of coexistence with the pan-African political discourses that gave birth to it. Of course, the identification with Africa, on which that Americocentrism is premised, is necessarily partial and highly selective. Contemporary Africa, as I have said, appears nowhere. The newly invented criteria for judging racial authenticity are supplied instead by restored access to original African forms and codes. It is significant, however—and this is where the trope of the family begins to look like a disaster for black feminism—that those definitions of authenticity are disproportionately defined by ideas about nurturance, about family, about fixed gender roles, and generational responsibilities. What is authentic is also frequently defined by ideas about sexuality and patterns of interaction between men and women that are taken to be expressive of essential, that is, racial, difference. This authenticity is inseparable from talk about the conduct and management of bitter gender-based conflicts, which is now recognized as essential to familial, racial, and communal health. Each of these—the familial, the racial, the communal—leads seamlessly into the next. Where was that heavy chain of signifiers forged? Whose shackles will it make? How does that conjunction reveal the impact, not just of an unchanged Africa, but of a contemporary America?

Now, the changed status of nationality in black political discourse can also be felt in the way the opposition between the local and the global has been reinscribed in our culture and in our consciousness. Today, we are told that the boys, and the girls, are from the 'hood—not from the race, and certainly not from the nation. It's important that the 'hood stands in opposition to foreign things—if you remember John Singleton's film—in opposition to the destructive encroachments of Seoul-to-Seoul Realty or the idea of turning the ghetto into black Korea. (Does Singleton's choice of that proper name for the Korean menace signal a rebuke to Soul II Soul?)

From London, the untranslatability of the term "hood" troubled me. I thought it marked a significant shift away from the notion of the ghetto, which is eminently exportable, and which carries its own very interesting intercultural history that we should be able to play with. But, if the 'hood is the essence of where blackness can now be found, which 'hood are we talking about? How do we weigh the achievements of one 'hood against the achievements of another? How is black life in one 'hood connected to life in others? Can there be a blackness that connects, articulates, synchronizes experiences and histories across the diaspora space? Or is it only the sign of Larry Fishburne's patriarchal power that holds these different local forms of blackness together?

This matters not just because images of black sociality not derived from the family seem to have disappeared from our political cultures, but also because, if Tim Dog is to be believed, Compton is as foreign to some blacks in New York as Kingston, London, Havana, Lagos, Aswan, or Capetown—possibly even more so. His popular outrage against West Coast Jheri curls and whack lyrics registers (as does his claim that all that gang shit is for dumb motherfuckers) disappointment and frustration that the idea of a homogeneous national commu-

nity has become impossible and unthinkable. Maybe this is what happens when one 'hood speaks to another.

Ah, shit. Motherfucker step to the ring and cheer.
 The Tim Dog is here.
 Let's get right down to the nitty gritty.
 And talk about a bullshit city.
 Talking about niggers from Compton.
 They're no comp and they truly ain't stompin'.
 Tim Dog, a black man's task,
 I'm so bad, I wear Superman's mask.
 All you suckers that rip from the West Coast,
 I'll dis' and spray your ass like a roach.
 You think you're cool with your curls and your shades,
 ... and you'll be yelling outrage.
 A hard brother that lives in New York.
 We suckas are hard, and we don't have to score.
 Shut your mouth, or we come out stompin'.
 And yo Easy, fuck Compton.⁵

Now, I don't pretend to understand everything Tim Dog's performance means here in the United States, but in London it has a very particular meaning. This has to do with a bewilderment about some of the self-destructive and sibling-cidal patterns of sociality that have been a feature of black U.S. inner-urban life. The same tension between the local and the global—implosion at one end, dissemination at the other—is, again, part of the story. Of course, when these things come down the transnational wire to us in Europe and to black folks in other parts of the world, they become metaphysical statements about what blackness is. And we have to deal with them on that basis.

Obviously, there are other voices, and there are other subject positions. In fact, one of the things I find troubling in debates about rap is that I don't think anyone actually knows what the totality of its hypercreativity looks like. I am a compulsive consumer (user, actually) of that culture, but I can't keep up with the volume of hip-hop product anymore. I don't know if anyone can. There is simply too much of it to be assimilated, and the kinds of judgments we make have to take that volume into account. It's a flood—it's not a flow, it's a flood, actually—and just bobbing up and down in the water is not enough.

But when we come back to the family, the idea of hip-hop as a dissident, critical space looks more questionable. Ironically, it is precisely where the motivation is constructive that the pastoral patriarchy of race as family gets reproduced. Another voice I want to present answers, in a sense, the calculated nihilism of Tim Dog. It's an attempt, by KRS 1 (Chris Parker), to locate the politics of race in what he describes as the opposition between civilization and technology—an interesting opposition because of its desire to hold onto the narrative of civilization and make it part of a grand narrative of black development. But this attempt is notable not just for its humanism—humanity versus technology—but for the extraordinary emphasis that falls on the family. I wonder how much the trope of the family allows him to hold the very diverse forces of this new racialized humanism together.

Be a Man, not a sucker.
 And don't disrespect your baby's mother.
 When the pressure's on, don't run for cover.
 We gotta move on and be strong for one another.

You can't just be a lover, build the nation.
 We gotta start with better relations.
 'Cause the family is the foundation.
 We're here to heal, and we're here for the duration.
 Multi-educating.

Definitely develop your African mind because we are all family. And once we see that we are all brothers and sisters no matter what, we go far beyond the nuclear family—from an Afrocentric point of view.⁶

I don't want to be forced into the position of having to point out that it may not help to collapse our intraracial differences into the image of ourselves as brothers and sisters any more than I want to be forced into the position of saying that we don't all recognize our own images in the faces of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill (which adorn the posters for this event) but that is some of what this Americocentric obsession with family brings to mind. I recognize that the discourse of racial siblinghood is a democratic one. I know it emerged from the communitarian radicalism of the church and that, as W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out long ago in *The Souls of Black Folk*, this happened in a period before the slaves enjoyed the benefits of nuclear family life. The political language of brotherhood and sisterhood can be used in ways that accentuate an image of community composed of those with whom we disagree. From this perspective, the differences we still experience, in spite of white supremacy's centripetal effects, might be seen as a precious and potentially productive resource. However, at the moment, the wind is blowing in another direction.

Obviously, not all of this popular culture wants to bury its differences in images of an organic, natural, racial family. And I have been especially engaged by the voices within hip-hop culture that have sought other strategies for living with difference and building on the hybrid qualities of the form itself to affirm the value of mixing and what might be called creolization. There are some absorbing poetic attempts to explore the consequences of a new political ontology and a new historicity. I am excited, for example, by Rakim's repeated suggestion that "it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at." It grants a priority to the present, emphasizing a view of identity as an ongoing process of self-making at a time when myths of origins hold so much appeal. Sometimes that kind of idea is strongest where the Caribbean styles and forms, very often dominated by pan-African motifs, are most developed. Caribbean popular cultures have their own rather more mediated and syncretized relationships to Africa. But it's also important to remember that reggae has constructed its own romance of racial nihilism in gun culture, misogyny, and machismo.

Rebel MC's "Wickedest Sound" comes from London and points to a different notion of authenticity.⁷ Its racial witness is produced out of semiotic play rather than ethnic fixity, and a different understanding of tradition emerges out of the capacity to combine the different voices, styles, and motifs drawn from all kinds of sources in a montage of blackness(es). This version of the idea of authenticity, premised on a notion of flows, is also alive in diaspora culture. It's dear to me because it appeared within the version of hip-hop culture that we have produced in London. There are, of course, African-American traces here struggling to be heard among the Caribbean samples, but, happily, the trope of race as family is nowhere in sight.

Against this playful, vibrant, postracial utopia—which argues that there is no betrayal in the acknowledgment of a white listening public—an Americocentric, postnationalist essence of blackness has been constructed through the dubious appeal to family.

There have been other periods in black political history where the image of race as family has been prominent. The nineteenth-century ideas of a nationality exclusively concerned with male soldier-citizens were produced in a period when an anti-imperialist or an anti-racist

political project among diaspora blacks was unthinkable. We would do well to reconsider them now because they haunt us. In *Africa or America*, Alexander Crummell drew his theory of nationality and racial personality from the work of Lord Beaconsfield (Benjamin Disraeli):

Races, like families, are organisms and the ordinance of God. And race feeling, like family feeling, is of divine origin. The extinction of race feeling is just as possible as the extinction of family feeling. Indeed, race is family. The principle of continuity is as masterful in races as it is in families, as it is in nations.⁸

This discourse of race as community, as family, has been born again in contemporary attempts to interpret the crisis of black politics and social life as a crisis solely of black masculinity. The family is not just the site of cultural reproduction; it is also identified as the mechanism for reproducing the cultural dysfunction that disables the race as a whole. And since the race is nothing more than an accumulation of families, the crisis of black masculinity can be fixed. It is to be repaired by instituting appropriate forms of masculinity and male authority, intervening in the family to rebuild the race.

Even hip-hop culture—the dissonant soundtrack of racial dissidence—has become complicit with this analysis. It's interesting, in thinking about the changing resonance of the word "nation" in black culture, that reports say Michael Jackson wants to call his new record company Nation Records. (One of the extraordinary things about the Jacksons is that they have turned their dysfunctionality as a black family into such an interesting marketing strategy.) Images of the black family complement the family tropes of the cultural forms themselves. These images are all around us in the selling of black popular culture. They are so visible in the marketing of Spike Lee and his projects that they point to the value of reading his oeuvre as a succession of Oedipal crises.

On the strange kind of cultural loop I live, I saw Marlon Riggs's powerful film *Tongues United* for the second time on the same night I first saw *Boyz N the Hood*. (We get these things in a different sequence than in the States.) Listening to that authoritative voice saying that black men loving black men was *the* revolutionary act—not a revolutionary act but *the* revolutionary act—the force of that definite article set me to thinking about *Boyz N the Hood*. I know there are differences between these two projects. I have an idea of where some of them dwell. But aren't there also similarities and convergences in the way that love between men is the common focus of these "texts"?⁹

Let me say why I think the prominence of the family is a problem. Spreading the Oedipal narrative around a bit can probably produce some interesting effects, but this bears repeating: the trope of the family is central to the means whereby the crisis we are living—of black social and political life—gets represented as the crisis of black masculinity. That trope of the family is there, also, in the way conflict, within and between our communities, gets resolved through the mystic reconstruction of the ideal heterosexual family. This is the oldest conservative device in the book of modern culture. Once again, *Boyz N the Hood* is the most obvious illustration of an authentically black and supposedly radical product that is complacently comfortable working within those deeply conservative codes. In Isaac Julien's recent film *Young Soul Rebels*, the fragile image of nonfamilial community that appears has been much criticized. It's the point at which the film ends and a kind of surrogate, joyfully disorganic, and synthetic kin group constitutes itself slowly and tentatively—in and around desire, through music, affirmation, celebration, and play.

Let this look like a binary split between conservative, familial Americana and the truly transgressive counterculture of black Britons, I want to amplify what I take to be a similar note of disorganicity in the way that kinship can be represented. It is drawn from an American hip-hop record popular on both sides of the Atlantic right now—a tune called "Be a Father

to Your Child” by Ed O.G. and Da Bulldogs.¹⁰ It’s been very popular in London, partly because of the sample it uses—a seventies black nationalist love song called “Searching” from Roy Ayers—which gets transposed into a different conceptual key by this contemporary appropriation. Two things interest me about this cut. First of all, the object of desire in the original version of the tune was gendered female; it is about searching for the love of a black woman. In the Ed O.G. version, the object of desire is ungendered. I found the opening up of that signifier suggestive. It means that when Ed O.G. talks about familial obligation, he’s not saying be a father to your son—he’s saying be a father to your child.

Second, and more important, Ed O.G. makes the pragmatic *functionality* of family the decisive issue, not the biological payback involved in family life. If you are responsible for producing a child with someone, he says, and that child is being supported by somebody else who is prepared to father it effectively when you fail, then back off and let him get on with it—even if that person is not the biological parent. That small gesture is something I want to celebrate. I think it shows—though I don’t want to sound prescriptive about this—that the struggle over the meaning of family is alive within the culture, that a critical perspective on these complex questions isn’t something that needs to be imported into that vernacular from outside by people like us. We don’t play that role.

Hey yo, be a father.

It’s not, Why bother?, son.

A boy can make ’em, but a man can raise ’em.

And if you did it, admit it. Then stick with it.

Don’t say it ain’t yours, ’cause all women are not whores.

Ninety percent represent a woman that is faithful.

Ladies can I hear it?

Thank you.

When a girl gets pregnant, her man is gonna run around,
dissin’ her for now, but when it’s born he wants to come around
talkin’ that I’m sorry for what I did.

And all of a sudden, he now wants to see his kid.

She had to bear it by herself and take care of it by herself.

And givin’ her some money for milk don’t really help.

Half of the fathers and sons and daughters don’t even want to take ’em.

But it’s so easy for them to make ’em.

It’s true, if it weren’t for you, the child wouldn’t exist.

Afterwards, he’s your responsibility, so don’t resist.

Be a father to your child ...

See, I hate when a brother makes a child and then denies it.

Thinkin’ that money is the answer, so he buys it
a whole bunch of gifts and a lot of presents.

It’s not the presents, it’s your presence and the essence
of bein’ there and showin’ the baby that you care.

Stop sittin’ like a chair and havin’ your baby wondering
where you are or who you are.

Who you are is daddy.

Don’t act like you ain’t ’cause that really makes me mad, G,
to see a mother and a baby suffer.

I had enough o’ brothers who don’t love the
fact that a baby brings joy into your life.

You can still be called daddy if the mother’s not your wife.

Don't be scared, be prepared.
 'Cause love is gonna getcha.
 It'll always be your child, even if she ain't witcha.
 So, don't front on your child when it's your own,
 'cause if you front now then you'll regret it when it's grown.
 Be a father to your child . . .
 Put yourself in his position and see what you've done.
 But just keep in mind that you're somebody's son.
 How would you like it if your father was a stranger,
 and then tried to come into your life and tried to change the
 way that your mother raised ya.
 Now wouldn't that amaze ya?
 To be or not to be.
 That is the question.
 When you're wrong, you're wrong.
 It's time to make a correction.
 Harrassin' the mother for bein' with another man.
 But if the brother man can do it better than you can, *let 'im*.
 Don't sweat 'im, dude.
 Let him do the job that you couldn't do . . . ¹¹

I'll end by saying that even the best of this familialization of politics is still a problem. I don't want to lose sight of that. I want to have it both ways: I want to be able to valorize what we can recover; and I want to be able to cite the disastrous consequences that follow when the family supplies not just the only symbols of political agency we can find in the culture, but the only object upon which that agency can be seen to operate as well. Let's remind ourselves that there are other possibilities. Historically, black political culture's most powerful notions of agency have been figured through the sacred. They can also get figured through the profane, and there, a different idea of worldly redemption can be observed. Both of these possibilities come together for me in the traditions of musical performance that culminate in hip-hop. In them, we find what I call the ethics of antiphony—a kind of ideal communicative moment in the relationship between the performer and the crowd that surpasses anything the structures of the family can provide.

Study Questions

1. Does any community formation have a monopoly on the black experience?
2. How do questions about realness and authenticity limit our understanding of black communities and practices that don't adhere to popular presentations of black pathology?
3. How might we think about diaspora as a concept within hip-hop practices?

Notes

1. Manuel Castells, *The Informational City* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
2. This distinction has also been employed in similar ways by Dick Hebdige and James Clifford. See Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
3. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1988).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Tim Dog, *Fuck Compton* [EP], Columbia Records, 1991. CD/Cassette.

6. H.E.A.L. [Human Education Against Lies], KRS 1, "Family Got to Get Busy," *Civilization Against Technology*, Elektra/Asylum Records, 1991. CD/Cassette.
7. Rebel MC, "Wickedest Sound," *Black Meaning Good*, Desire Records LUVCD12.
8. Alexander Crummell, *Africa or America* (Springfield, Mass.: Willey and Co., 1891), 46.
9. I use the word "texts" in quotation marks because I don't think any analysis that appropriates these cultural forms exclusively as texts will ever be adequate.
10. Ed O.G. & Da Bulldogs, *Life of a Kid in the Ghetto*, Mercury Records, 1991. CD/Cassette.
11. Ibid.