



Review of Charise L. Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), x + 222 pp.

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It's about framing. One morning I see the profile of Henry Louis Gates pan across the television screen. The commentator introduces the segment of "Good Morning America" by emoting, "Rap music, the music of angry black youth..." Gates, a black male, an intellectual with titles behind his name, speaks directly and passionately defends rap music, attempting to disrupt and even "reframe" the genre, asking the audience to place rap within its proper context to be understood. Today the same preamble occurs in the discussion of rap music in contemporary American culture—"the music of angry black youth." Cheney's *Brothers Gonna Work It Out* disregards the popular demagoguery and forbids a populist perusal common amongst documents produced by many popular intellectuals; instead her text frames hip-hop culture from a critical cultural perspective, which recognizes nationalism, rap music, and even African American culture as contested domains where black nationalism is explored "as an embodied-social politics or a politics that is determined by race and gender discourses." Through the use of oral, literary and lyrical text, "race/gender politicking" is made apparent within hip-hop culture (p. 3). Such a critical perspective provides greater flexibility to enable "scholars to envision black nationalism in ways that are inclusive of various forms of expression, from those of territorial nationalists to those of cultural nationalists and from oral performances to literary stylings" (p. 17). Acknowledging the artists as raptivists, Cheney reminds the reader that "[h]ip hop nationalists are the most recent in a long line of organic cultural workers who are situated between the intellectual activist and the commercialized entertainer."

The book is comprised of six chapters in which three major themes are developed: the history of hip-hop music; race and gender performance; religion and social change. Drawn from the author's dissertation, this thoroughly researched and well-written book leaves very few stones unturned. Cheney opens with a meticulous review of various methods that support the critical cultural frame the project embraces. While providing the reader with a comparative analysis of methods and approaches of interpreting black popular culture, Cheney "messys" the dominate reading of black culture as stable, linear and parsimonious to unfold the goal of the text which is to re/frame how this genre is discussed in American culture and to engage in the sexual politics of rap.

An excavation of masculine protest discourse is performed in the chapter titled, "We men ain't we." The chapter documents the history of nationalism and nationalistic discourse and foregrounds historical narratives of such "race men" as Alexander Crummwell, Mualana Karenga and Amiri Baraka to Black Panther leaders Seal and Cleaver. The rhetorical analysis reveals the seeds of the pervasive phallic

discourse in black nationalism and the reader is reminded of the complexities of such rhetoric within African American communities, including the role of women who embraced and supported the “men in charge” discourse of the Black Panthers, not to mention the ongoing debate between “Nationalism = Masculine versus Non-Violent = Feminine.” Cheney also highlights ruptures in the discourse embodied by figures such as Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin and James Baldwin. The opening chapters outline the often hidden or not-well-articulated link between the rhetoric of black nationalism, the civil rights protest of the Black Panther movement to the hip-hop raptivists of the golden age.

The author moves to focus on the work of Chuck D and Public Enemy to explore the popular and political culture of rap music. Cheney opines, “As a trailblazer of the consciousness movement within rap music, Chuck D claimed his legacy as the political progeny of the Black Panther Party” (p. 63). We learn, though, the rap artists reared in the pervasive integrationist discourse of the late 70s and early 80s, were highly influenced by the visible disparities of Reganomics and the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas hearings which suggested that “race could no longer ensure political allegiance” (p. 67). While this community of organic intellectuals understood that, “For the first time in the history of African American history, civil rights were no longer an integral part of the Black nationalist agenda as young, working-, and middle-class black men and women attempted to redefine and revise liberatory politics at the end of the twentieth century,” music was their response to such social conditions (p. 71). We gain further insight as to how the raptivists (by the way, most of whom were educated at small elite private liberal arts colleges) used their intellectual prowess in the construction of lyrics, in staging their performances; even the mere act of naming themselves were highly intellectual and political choices drawn from both African American cultural history and American politics. For the raptivist, music was a vehicle that endorsed the pro-black nationalist discourse that critiqued both the black middle-class and the pervasive anti-black and anti-working-class rhetoric of the Bush and Reagan regimes.

The topic of sexual politics and same sex desire are giving adequate attention in the chapter titled “Ladies first.” Cheney encourages the reader to place the strident homophobic, sexist and misogynist rhetoric of rap nationalist in its proper context: “the social-political struggle for the remasculation of black men” (p. 100). The focus on the ‘race first, gender second agenda,’ hindered female rap artists from speaking publicly against such patriarchy, opting to remain silent rather than having their statements used “against their brothas.” However, several such as Queen Latifah, we learn endorsed the masculinist discourse in both her music and her public performances. On the topic of homosexuality in hip-hop culture, Cheney suggests that homophobic rhetoric be read as metaphor for black male disempowerment and white men (who in Black Nationalist discourse are rendered as weak). Although Cheney acknowledges Rigg’s “Tongues Untied” (1989) documentary as a testament that “black nationalism as a politics of masculine protest is not necessarily dependent upon heterosexism,” the author falls short in considering the ramifications of homophobic and sexist discourse, assuming rather that the majority of Americans are media literate.

A fascinating highlight of this text is the placement of religious doctrine in the context of hip-hop culture. The apparent inclination toward Islam is apparent with

the (male) hero worship of Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey: “With very few exceptions, raptivists of the Golden age were influenced by the teaching of Elijah Muhammad” (p. 119). For raptivists, even the traditional black church was not beyond critique, while the Nation of Islam (a black nationalist theology) becomes the privileged faith for its social and political emphasis on the ‘here and now’—instead of the ‘life thereafter’ offered by the traditional Christian faith. It is not until the final pages of the text where a synthesis of the before mentioned strands of Cheney’s major argument are fully realized. It is at the demise of the movement that we get a sense of its being.

The final chapter is where the book should begin. It is here that Cheney is more explicit about sexual politics, addresses the demise and the failure of black nationalism as a movement and waxes eloquent about the feminist rappers who are accomplishing progressive and radical social change. It is here, also, that she actually begins to further develop what she seeks to do—explore gender and sexuality in the golden age of rap. More poignantly, the return to the thoughts of filmmaker Marlon Riggs, whose career speaks to the “reframing” of black men, is what I consider should be the nascence of her argument for the text: “Perhaps Riggs was onto something when he boldly pronounced that “black men loving black men is the revolutionary act of our times. Once black men - particularly heterosexual men - begin to address their own gendered oppression, redefine the masculine ideal, and learn to love themselves and their communities without fear or anxiety, they can discover and appreciate the value of freedom” (p. 171)!

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