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"Sampling Rage: The Acoustics of African American Righteous Discontent from the Harlem Renaissance to the Age of Obama"

by

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"People bear all they can and, if required, bear even more. But if they are black in present-day America they have been asked to shoulder too much. They have had all they can stand. They will be harried no more. Turning from their tormentors, they are filled with rage."

-William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage*

Black folks sure do have a lot to be fired up about. They have lived in some challenging times. Indeed, the black presence in America is an old one. It began in 1619 when the first 20 black people disembarked at Jamestown. During most of the time since then blacks have existed either in complete bondage as slaves or in a peculiar state of semi-freedom. Over all these years American society has grappled with the dilemma of the black presence, while blacks have worked, fought, and died to end their oppression. Along the way, some blacks in the United States responded to their subordinate status and second-class citizenship with a strong feeling of anger that was sometimes difficult to control, a rage.

What brings out the rage of blacks? How does rage articulate the collective indignation and disquietude of black America? Why do black folks refuse to contain their rage? These questions are important as they have informed how scholars think about race and cultural expression in the United States. The editors of the Oxford Companion to African American Literature observe that the consciousness of blacks changed over time, moving from resignation to urgency: "The old attitudes of self-pity and apology were replaced by a frank acceptance of the position of African American in American society. A growing racial awareness among African American writers prompted self-discovery… [and] a new kind of self-determination and self-reliance" (587). Art was not just for art's sake, but art was now for political sake.

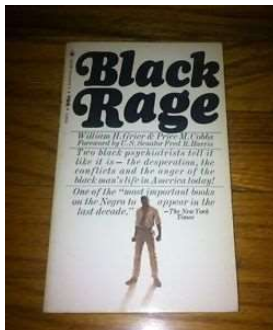
This essay will briefly examine the phenomenon of *black rage* and consider some of its impact on race relations in the United States. The first section surveys the origins of black rage as a theoretical intervention on the psychological profile of African Americans. Psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, in their seminal study *Black Rage*, characterizes the pent up frustrations and grievances of African Americans to respond to racial inferiority and subjugation. The next portion will frame black rage in the context of the Harlem Renaissance and Claude McKay's "If We Must Die." From here, this essay will explore the relationship between black rage and the development of the Civil Rights Movement through Nina Simone's satirical recording "Mississippi Goddam." Then this essay will focus on twenty-first century discussions of black rage via Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Lauryn Hill's song "Black Rage," the recent deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and Prince's remarks at the 57th annual Grammys.

THEORETICAL MELODIES OF THE OPPRESSED:

What William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs heard

William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs explore the alienation that black folks experienced from not being able to exercise their rights as citizens. Frequently citizenship is used in a very broad sense to indicate a status that provides one with certain basic rights and responsibilities in an organized society. Grier and Cobbs suggest that citizenship implies fundamental equality of rights as part of a societal community including the right to participate in the life and activity of that community. Consider what the psychiatrists have to say about the troubling connection between psyche, citizenship, and education: "The relationship between intrapsychic functioning and the larger social environment is exceedingly complex. Among other things, Negroes want to change inside but find it difficult to do so unless things outside are changed as well. It is simplistic solution of 'more education' is meaningless when a society is more attuned to race than it is academic achievement" (22). Grier and Cobbs observed that blacks did not necessarily feel that increased education would be their entrée to a better life. There was more distress about the politics of integration rather than the fulfillment of inner peace. The United States Supreme Court rendered two separate *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions, one in 1954, and the second in 1955. Both were written for unanimous Court by Chief Justice, Earl Warren. The first decided the principle that segregated schools were a denial of equal protection of the laws, guaranteed by the 14th Amendment. The second, with the famous phrase "with all deliberate speed," laid down the bases for the transition to integrated education. As the first opinion states, these cases had a long history, including a re-argument for clarification of the history of public education and the relevance of the 14th Amendment to public education. Nevertheless, Grier and Cobbs surmised that blacks did not always equate equal protection with peace of mind.

The 1960s saw the beginnings of several important federal programs aimed at reducing the burden of poverty which the nation's blacks and other disadvantaged peoples carried. The Job Corps was established for young people who lacked skills. Operation Headstart provided pre-school training for youths whose home could not give them the background needed for success in school. Community Action Programs at local levels framed projects which attacked all types of poverty-related ills: employment, housing, health, education, community relations, etc. Nevertheless, Grier and Cobbs observe that the efforts of blacks in the United States to shed their subordinate status was not entirely complete: "The culture of slavery was never undone for either master or slave. The civilization that tolerated slavery dropped its slaveholding cloak but the inner feelings remained. The 'peculiar institution' continues to exert its influence over the nation. The practice of slavery stopped over a hundred years ago, but the mind of our citizens have never been freed" (26). From Grier and Cobb's standpoint, segregation represents slavery's lengthening shadow and fostered a sense of despair and disquietude among blacks.



Meanwhile, Daniel Patrick Moynihan completed a major study of the black family in 1965. Moynihan documents what he perceives as the widespread breakdown in the black family structure, reporting that in the decade 1950-1960 33% of black homes in urban areas were headed by females as opposed to 8% for whites. He finds that the same pattern also prevailed in rural areas with only slight improvement. Furthermore, Moynihan felt this deterioration in black family structure would have

severe consequences for the security and stability of the home as well as for its ability to contribute effectively to political socialization. Grier and Cobbs, in part, share Moynihan's assessment: "The Negro family is in deep trouble. It is coming apart and it is failing to provide the nurturing that black children need. In its failure the resulting isolated men and women fail generally to make a whole life for themselves in a nation designed for families and white families besides. A great many of the problems of black people in America can be traced backed to the widespread crumbling of the family structure" (83). However, Moynihan's conclusions are not unanimously shared as Grier and Cobbs questioned his analysis of available data and his understanding of black family life: "The Negro family is weak and relatively ineffective because the United States set its hand against black people and by the strength of wealth, size, and number prevents black families from protecting their numbers. Moynihan's argument seemed to have been developed in reverse. Starting with the task of providing a sociological basis in theory for a federal program of jobs for Negroes, he was obviously limited to a few concepts which support his argument" (84).

Grier and Cobbs's conception of black rage was also shaped by the civil rights struggles of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X not only differed in the goals they held out to their fellow African Americans – King urging racial integration and Malcolm X black separatism – but also in the means they advocated to achieve them. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington on August 18, 1963, King proclaimed to a quarter of a million people assembled the Lincoln Memorial, "In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred… We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force." About three months later, Malcolm X angrily rejected King's peaceful "turn-the-other-cheek" revolution: "Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way. And you, sitting around here like a knot on the wall, saying, 'I'm going to love these folks no matter how much they hate me,'… Whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms,…singing 'We shall overcome?' You don't do that in a revolution. You don't do any singing, you're busy swinging."

Emergence of the nonviolent protest movement was not accidental. It was an inevitable consequence of the increasing restiveness of the black population with their subordination in spite of decades of patient, largely quite efforts for change and the lack of adequate resources with which to compel substantial change. In resorting to nonviolent protest blacks were utilizing a strategy uniquely adapted to their objectives with the beliefs and values embraced by the society. Its effectiveness under these conditions had been demonstrated by the Indian leader, Mahatma Ghandi, in leading India's struggle against British colonial rule. In adapting the strategy to the situation in the United States Dr. King combined a moral commitment to nonviolence with a deep religious conviction about the positive power of love for the opponent even while engaged in struggle against him. Finally, the Movement was predicated on a firm belief in the basic morality and sense of justice of white America and on the conviction that, when confronted with the reality of their behavior and the extent of black oppression, whites would alter their behavior toward blacks.

Although Dr. King managed to infuse large segments of the Movement with his philosophy of nonviolent resistance, Grier and Cobbs observe that some blacks were deeply disillusioned in the wake of King's death: "For a moment be any black person, anywhere, and you will feel the waves of hopelessness that engulfed black men and women when Martin Luther King was murdered. All black people understood the tide of anarchy that followed his death. It is the transformation

of *this* quantum of grief into aggression of which we now speak. As a sapling bent low stores of energy for a violent backswing, blacks bent double by oppression have stored energy which will be released in the form of rage – black rage, apocalyptic and final" (210). This new set of emotions precipitated impatience with nonviolent direct action and stressed the need for more extensive changes in the character of black-white relations.

The decade of the 1960s witnessed a heightened affection for the African motherland reflected in clothing and hairstyles, in academic pursuits, and in increased concern with the political and economic problems of black peoples. However, Grier and Cobbs also maintained that nationalism among blacks produced dreamers or visionaries, rather than political realists. Commenting on the loss of Malcolm X, they write, "After his death he was recognized by black people as the 'black shining prince' and recordings of his speeches became treasured things. His autobiography was studied, his life marveled at. Out of this belated admiration came the philosophical basis for black activism and indeed the thrust of Black Power itself, away from integration and civil rights and into the 'black bag'" (201).

Prior to King's assassination, there was evidence of a growing sense of identity, pride, and confidence among blacks. Stokely Carmichael's initial advocacy of "black power" on June 25, 1966, as the immediate goal for blacks highlighted the severe internal strains which were developing in the nonviolent movement since the March on Washington. The black power concept, then still inadequately defined, represented a search by the younger and less patient elements of the Movement for new approaches to the struggle for change. Grier and Cobbs observe

> Black Power activism – thrust by default temporarily at the head of a powerful movement – is a conception that contributes in a significant way to the strength and unity of that movement but is unable to provide the mature vision for the mighty works ahead. It will pass and leave black people in this country prouder, stronger, more determined but in need of grander princes with clearer vision.
>
> We believe that the black masses will rise with a simple and eloquent demand to which new leaders must give tongue. They will say to America simply: "GET OFF OUR BACKS!" (202)

Prolonged subordination and even dehumanization produced a sense of shame and demoralization that was frequently alluded to but not yet fully understood. Grier and Cobbs, in effect, suggest that black power moment tapped into the rage of black folks in several ways. First, it has been vital in stimulating group identity or consciousness and racial pride. While blacks have always been a visibly distinct group, it required an awareness of this distinctness by group members, and a recognition that their place in society is defined by reference to group characteristics for the emergence of national consciousness. Such an awareness was stimulated by the various forms of nationalist expressions which emphasized the concept of "us," the oppressed, as opposed to "them," the oppressor. Second, it articulated on one level some broad, abstract goals such as citizenship rights or self-determination. On another level, it involved the articulation of specific group demands – for improved economic opportunities, increased access to the political system, and improvement in basic services to black communities.

For Grier and Cobbs, race functions as a basis for distinctions and affects the division of labor as well as account for class distinctions. Traditional mechanisms for maintaining subservience and social distance break down and are replaced by intense competition between subordinates and the working class of the dominant group. Grier and Cobbs write, "With the passing of the need for black laborers, black people have become useless; they are a drug on the market. There are not enough menial jobs. They live in a nation which has evolved a work force of skilled and semi-skilled workmen. A nation which chooses simultaneously to exclude all black men from this favored labor force and to deny them the one thing America has offered every other group – unlimited growth with a ceiling set only by one's native gifts" (205). Under these conditions physical segregation was introduced, and society was compartmentalized further into racially homogeneous communities with duplication of basic social institutions like churches, schools, and recreational facilities.

Few can deny that the past acts upon living individuals in myriad ways. The impress of family, community, nation, and race develops historically, yet it is no easy matter to make our contemporaries aware of these pervasive historical influences. Grier and Cobbs underscore the "humanness" of history and recreate the vitality and vigor which give old issues their rightful relevance to today's crises: "For there are no more psychological tricks blacks can play upon themselves to make it possible to exist in dreadful circumstances. No more lies can they tell themselves. No more opiates to dull the pain. No more reason. Only a welling tide risen out of all those terrible years of grief, now a tidal wave of fury and rage, and all black, black as night" (213). Indeed, men and women make history only within the framework bequeathed to them by earlier generations. For better or worse, they march forward along time's path bearing the burdens of the past.

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AS A SOUND BOARD TO BLACK RAGE: What Claude McKay heard

African Americans were searching for their cultural heritage and contribution to civilization. These were particularly important because slavery left a largely rootless and demoralized black population constantly bombarded with assertions of their inferiority and only vaguely, if at all, aware of their heritage. This was the task of black "cultural nationalism," a dramatic cultural awakening which got underway during the first decade of the twentieth century. Toward this end the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History was organized in 1915 by Carter Woodson and began publishing the *Journal of Negro History*. This cultural nationalism helped blacks in discovering themselves, imbued them with a new degree of dignity and self-confidence, so much that the press at that time referred freely to it as the "New Negro."

By the 1920s the "Harlem Renaissance" became the focal point of this cultural outburst. It was marked by a new pride in blackness, by a celebration of the creativity and effervescence of the separate black society, by a search for cultural and historical roots, and by the expression in poetry and song of the political attitudes and aspirations of black peoples of the world. This rich and exciting era brought international attention to its foremost contributors such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. In particular, the cultural expressions of the time reflected the political mood of blacks in a variety of ways. The anger and frustration resulting from widespread violence against blacks prompted Claude McKay's immortal statement of resolute defiance in his poem "If We Must Die":

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

The loneliness and alienation felt by many was also reflected in the themes portraying blacks as an alien people hopelessly longing for the motherland. World War I developed an intense patriotic fervor, which embraced a resurgence of democratic feeling, a belief in the equality of men, and its consequent application to government – rule by majority. Since African Americans participated in the war effort as soldiers and on the home front, they too were caught up in the swells of patriotism, which many believed would carry over after the war and break down racial barriers. The more critical observers, like Claude McKay were less sanguine, and in a burst of militant rhetoric sounded the tocsin for a continuation of the struggle against racial inequality. The poem "If We Must Die" represents one example of the unrest and potential subversion among blacks, but its major import was to arouse blacks in the United States to stand up and strike back when attacked.

In some measure, the fighting posture of African Americans in the race riots of 1919-1921 was attributable to McKay's poem. The race riots stemmed from a variety of local causes, but they had some common features. Newspapers generally treated African Americans with a minimum of respect and frequently headlined allegations of assault and petty crime where an African American was accused, with little regard to the substance of the allegation. Economic exploitation of black people in urban and rural areas became a way of life for white landlords and merchants. In the city, overcrowding bed unsanitary housing, exorbitant rents, and high segregation. In rural areas, sharecroppers and tenants were at the mercy of the white farmer-owner who kept the accounts with his own brand of arithmetic. The inability of black factory workers to get a fair shake from unions further agitate the relations between the races.

The "New Negro", ever more conscious of his race, his environment, and his potential was determined to shatter racial barriers for his own good and that of the country. One of these barriers, an increasing flow of racist ideology, fed the Ku Klux Klan, which sprang up during World War I. The Klan attacked Catholics, Jews, and foreign-born, as well as blacks, with equal fervor, burning crosses, sponsoring lynching parties, and publishing shrill cries for purity. "Keep Caucasian blood, society, politics, and civilization PURE," the KKK's blue book proclaimed. The Klan was strong enough, in both the North and the South, to become openly a social organization, sponsoring picnics to which the public was invited and supporting political candidates who endorsed its viewpoint.

In the early twentieth century, African Americans were reacting to white prejudice and violence. Young intellectuals in the ghettoes of the North were forced to question their race, their surroundings, and their nation. Through the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans began to give expression to their inner sense of self, their feelings, and in part, their rage.

NO ORDINARY SHOW TUNE: What Nina Simone Heard

By the 1950s and 1960s, civil rights protest was in high gear. From bus boycotts to lunch counter sit-ins, freedom rides, church demonstrations and the March on Washington protests occurred. Most of these tactics were nonviolent, following the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. The participants were trained neither to flinch nor strike back, no matter the violence that their presence encouraged. As a result, some of the participants were subjected to merciless beatings and crude torment. Nonviolence exposed as never before the ineffectiveness and indisposition of local police authorities to handle crowds and protect its victims.

Despite these earnest efforts, blacks still faced fierce opposition. In the deep South, the reaction defied description. Bombs and bullets were ever present threat. Reports of police brutality and judicial insensibility of policy dogs and cattle prods echoed in the press like ghostly laughter, but to those blacks and whites who suffered from southern justice, it was sickeningly serious. Albany, Georgia and Selma, Alabama were prototypes and the reports of the Civil Rights Commission testify to too many other towns and cities for Albany and Selma to be dismissed as exceptions. In northern cities, where ghettoes bound the young and squeezed the old, activism sometimes ricocheted into riot.

Outraged by the scourge of Jim Crow, Nina Simone composed “Mississippi Goddam,” a strident “show tune” that represents an invulnerable argument favoring equal opportunities and equal rights. The speaker identifies names and places that were well-known for opposing integration - Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi:

> Alabama’s got me so upset
> Tennessee made me lose my rest
> But everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam.

Why is Simone “so upset” about Alabama? When Governor George Wallace of Alabama made his infamous stand “in the schoolhouse door” to prevent black students from entering the University of Alabama in 1962, he was defending a long-standing symbol of black subordination by invoking “the sovereign rights of the states” against the federal system. Alabama also aroused the nation’s attention when the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church, injuring 26 children. Four of them, under the age of 14, would eventually die. Next, why did Simone “lose rest” over Tennessee? In 1960, Nashville, Tennessee’s activists had staged city-wide “sit-ins” to protest segregation at area diners and boycotted local businesses that engaged in racially unjust practices. Protesters faced retaliatory violence and mass arrests, including the bombing of the home of civil rights lawyer Z. Alexander Looby. Lastly, what “everybody knows about Mississippi” is the murder of Medgar Evers, a field secretary for the NAACP. On June 13, 1963, Evers drove home from a meeting, stepped out of his car, and was shot in the back. Immediately

after his death, the shotgun that was used to kill him was found in the bushes nearby, with the owner's fingers still fresh. Byron de la Beckwith, a vocal member of a local white supremacist group, was arrested. Despite the evidence against him, which included an earlier statement he wanted to kill Evers, two trials with all-white juries ended in deadlock decisions, and Beckwith walked free. Additionally, everybody knew about death of Emmett Till. In 1955, Till, 14 years old, was visiting Mississippi from Chicago on summer vacation. He was abducted from his uncle's farm one night, brutally beaten, and shot through the head by white men who were then quickly acquitted in a trial that made a mockery of the judicial system. Hence, the placement of the word "goddam" after Mississippi punctuates the Simone's disgust and poignantly captures her contempt for segregation.

Indeed, the push for equality can have devastating effects. In some instances, demonstrators and activists paid the ultimate price for equality. Simone's use of "you" and a series of interrogatives heightens the drama that was (and is) the Civil Rights Movement. Seeking relief, the speaker prays:

> Can't you see it
> Can't you feel it
> It's all in the air
> I can't stand the pressure much longer
> Somebody say a prayer

From here, Simone approaches mainstream white America's blatant disregard for black life with amused contempt:

> This is a show tune
> But the show hasn't been written for it, yet

By referring to her song as a "show tune," Simone underscores the legacy of white racism and the social hierarchy built upon it. Racial subordination in America society long has been viewed as inconsistent with the ringing assertion of the Declaration of Independence that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." For Simone, the "show" is the eminent collapse of American culture and society from racial discord. With the word "yet," she takes on the role of a prophet, forecasting doom and destruction.

In the next two sections, Simone continues her prophetic tone, infusing a bit of Delta blues tradition along the way:

> Hound dogs on my trail
> School children sitting in jail
> Black cat cross my path
> I think every day's gonna be my last
>
> Lord have mercy on this land of mine
> We all gonna get it in due time
> I don't belong here
> I don't belong there

I've even stopped believing in prayer

She pays homage to Robert Johnson with the verse "hound dogs on my trail," which parallels the title for one of his songs, "Hellbound on My Trail"). Also, she recognizes Howlin' Wolf with the verse "Black cat cross my path," which is the subject of his song "I Ain't Superstitious." Moreover, Simone captures the ethos of the blues with the lines "I don't belong here/I don't belong there," telegraphing her escalating fear and despair. Alas, resignation truly sets in when she abandons prayer (recall in an earlier verse, Simone was a bit more hopeful when she uttered, "Somebody better say a prayer).

Nothing angered Simone more than gradualism when it came to the agitation and implementation of civil rights. She repeated the phrase "do it slow" no less six times in her song. The reverberation of "do it slow" represents a haunting reminder of the unfinished work civil rights agitation. Drawing upon the technique of call and response, Simone conveys the breadth and depth of her righteous discontent:

Don't tell me
I tell you
Me and my people just about due
I've been there so I know
They keep on saying "Go slow!"

But that's just the trouble
"do it slow"
Washing the windows
"do it slow"
Picking the cotton
"do it slow"
You're just plain rotten
"do it slow"
You're too damn lazy
"do it slow"
The thinking's crazy
"do it slow"
Where am I going
What am I doing
I don't know
I don't know

Over the years presidents became *gradually* more attentive and responsive to blacks. For example, in 1940 Franklin Delano Roosevelt rejected appeals by blacks to support anti-lynching legislation in Congress. His 1941 Executive Order creating a Fair Employment Practices Commission was the first direct presidential response to blacks, and it came about in the face of a threat by A. Phillip Randolph to lead a massive march on Washington, D.C., to protest racial discrimination in wartime industries.

It was not, however, until the Truman administration that a president managed to forthrightly assert his commitment to "equality" for blacks. Like several national politicians before him, Truman had sought earlier to limit his concern to "the constitutional rights of Negroes,"

considered then to include only "legal" and "political" rights, not full social equality. He told a 1940 meeting of the NAACP that "I wish to make clear that I am not appealing for social equality of the Negro. The Negro himself knows better than that, and the highest types of Negro leaders want justice, not social relations." By 1947, as President, he appeared to go further, suggesting to the 38th NAACP Annual Conference that "Our immediate task is to remove the last remnants of the barriers which stand between millions of our citizens and their birthright. There is no justifiable reason for discrimination because of ancestry, or religion, or race, or color."

Dwight Eisenhower equivocated on the subject of civil rights, refusing even to publicly endorse the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision. The Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that segregated schooling in fact had detrimental consequences for black children and thus violated the equal protection principle of the Fourteenth Amendment. The decision had much broader implications than the drastic change in public education that it initiated, however, because by reversing an earlier Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) which declared separation of the races constitutional as long as the facilities available to each race were equal it provided a new constitutional basis for the struggle against black subordination. This case was prepared by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Legal Defense Fund (LDF) and argued before the Supreme Court by its chief counsel Thurgood Marshall. The ruling was followed by a directive from the Court one year later (i.e., *Brown II*) that public schools discontinue segregation of black and white students, "with all deliberate speed." Notwithstanding, Simone condemns legal efforts as slow and tedious. When Simone decries, "You keep on saying 'Go slow!'" she reminds us that Supreme Court victories, in the short run at least, represent paper victories, since implementation of its decision may be delayed, circumvented, or even ignored for years. The Brown decision is a case and point: its basic principle remained unimplemented for years afterward because of both official and private hostility. Thus, while victories in the courts have been loudly applauded, often they have had immediate impact on the lives of black people, especially in the South, for a long time after.

On another occasion, Eisenhower chose not to confront integration and equal rights issues until they were forced upon him. Although he had created two presidential equal rights committees, one on government contracts and one on government employment, they lacked sufficient authority to exercise their responsibilities adequately. The two civil rights bills which were passed during the Eisenhower administration received little support from the White House. The 1957 act created the Civil Rights Commission with limited authority to investigate and study deprivations of the right to vote, and the 1960 act strengthened the federal government's right to take into court certain nullifications of voting rights and made property destruction by fire or explosive a federal crime under specified conditions. This provision was an effort to stem the rash of bombings and fires which spread over the South and in northern cities to civil rights agitation.

After a surprisingly long period of equivocating, John F. Kennedy clearly and forthrightly presented the case for full equal rights for blacks, noting in a February 1963 message to Congress thatRace discrimination hampers or economic growth by preventing the maximum development and utilization of our manpower. It hampers our world leadership by contradicting at home the message we preach abroad. It mars the atmosphere of a united and classless society in which this nation rose to greatness. It increases the costs of public welfare, crime, delinquency and disorder. Above all it is wrong.

> Therefore, let it be clear, in our hearts and minds, that it is not merely because of the Cold War, and not merely because of the economic waste of discrimination, that we are committed to achieving true equality of opportunity. The basic reason is because it is right.

Presidential rhetoric can often be safely dismissed as empty, self-serving assertions, but when presidential expression on the race issue are examined over several decades, they do reflect a pattern of painfully slow but significant change in attitude toward blacks. Although the cumulative effect of several small steps taken in response to persistent pressure has been far-reaching, Simone alludes that so much work still remains. Behind the polite veneer of gradualism, she believed there still existed racial hatred, bitterness, mistrust, and deceit:

Picket lines
School boycotts
They try to say it's a communist plot
All I want is equality
for my sister my brother my people and me

Yes you lied to me all these years
You told me to wash and clean my ears
And talk real fine just like a lady
And you'd stop calling me Sister Sadie

Oh but this whole country is full of lies
You're all gonna die and die like flies
I don't trust you any more

The message of "Mississippi Goddam" was one of measured hope but its expression varied from amused contempt to dark anger and frustrated optimism. As important as the message was the tone. Simone grappled with interracial dilemmas as American problems the solutions to which lay within the democratic process. At the end of her song Simone intimates this when she remarks, "You don't have to live next to me/Just give me my equality). Ultimately, she urged blacks and whites to take more active roles, to stand up and be counted.

PRISON BLUES, CARCERAL RAGE: What Michelle Alexander heard

"…When those who have been locked up and locked out finally have the chance to speak and truly be heard, what we hear is rage. The rage may frighten us; it may remind us of riots, uprisings, and buildings aflame. We may be tempted to control it, or douse it with buckets of doubt, dismay, and disbelief. But we should do no such thing. Instead, when a young man who was born in the ghetto and who knows little of the life beyond the walls of his prison cell and the invisible cage that has become his life, turns to us in bewilderment and rage, we should do nothing more than look him in the eye and tell him the truth" (260-261).

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*

The events and attitude changes since the election of President Barack Obama have not been without direction and purpose, although the very complexity of change has sometimes made these obscure. A number of identifiable forces have provided the thrust which brought about significant change, a revolution within the limits of law. It is not enough to identify institutional and mass forces, however, because change begins in the intellect and emotions, the minds and hearts of individuals communicating and communing together.

Incarceration represents one of the most perplexing and persistent issues impacting blacks' relationship to the United States. The problem of incarceration provides a convenient focus for examining black rage. Currently, America has a criminal justice system that tracks young black boys from kindergarten to prison rather than to college. More precisely, legal scholars Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres observe, "In the United States, if young men are not tracked to college and they are black or brown, we wait for their boredom, desperation, or sense of uselessness to catch up with them. We wait, in other words, for them to give us an excuse to send them to prison. The criminal justice system has thus become our major instrument of urban social policy" (260-261).

In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander describes the militarization of the police, foreshadowing the heavy weaponry used by police in Ferguson. In the section titled "Waging War" in Chapter 2, Alexander states, "The transformation from 'community policing' to 'military policing,' began in 1981, when President Reagan persuaded Congress to pass the Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act, which encouraged the military to give local, state, and federal police access to military bases, intelligence, research, weaponry, and other equipment for drug interdiction. That legislation carved a huge exception to the Posse Comitatus Act, the Civil War-era law prohibiting the use of military force for policing" (76-77).

Democratic values held by Americans have not been a significant hindrance to the institutionalization of racism. Rather these values have been easily adapted to the task of maintaining racial subordination. To protect everyone in society, the democratic process as it exists in America requires the existence of an overarching set of values that includes everyone on equal terms. From Alexander's perspective, police militarization has been the hand-maiden of racism in the United States because of the absence of such values.

HIP-HOP HARMONIC HOSTILITIES: What Lauryn Hill Heard

New century, same problems. Lauryn Hill picks up where Nina Simone leaves off. Just as Simone called upon the entire nation to demonstrate concern and outrage for the gross violation of human and civil rights practiced as mob violence in the 1960s, Hill exhorts the nation to condemn poverty, racial profiling, and the militarization of the police in the 2010s. Moreover, each artist had critical moments or events that motivated them to use their lyrics to protest the status quo. For Simone, the murder of Medgar Evers and the Ku Klux Klan bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church were the catalysts and for Hill the deaths of Mike Brown and Eric Garner. Most

significantly, Hill, just like Simone, taps into the rage of black folks and uses it as a platform to promote positive change.

Lauryn Hill, in her song "Black Rage," underscores the roots of racial discrimination and inequality experienced by black Americans. Along the way, she appropriates Rodgers and Hammerstein's popular piece, "My Favorite Things," replacing merriment and mirth with fear and loathing. Immediately with the first two stanzas, Hill shows that the problems of modern black Americans can be traced back to slavery:

> Black Rage is founded on two-thirds a person
> Rapings and beatings and suffering that worsens,
> Black human packages tied up in strings,
> Black Rage can come from all these kinds of things.
>
> Black Rage is founded on blatant denial
> Squeezed economics, subsistence survival,
> Deafening silence and social control.
> Black Rage is founded on wounds in the soul!

In what became a pattern in the development of the American political system, the birth of the nation involved a compromise perpetuating slavery. Thomas Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence contained a strong indictment of slavery as an immoral institution inflicted on America because of Britain's greed. Some other delegates also shared Jefferson' discomfort with slavery, but before the document could be approved, denunciation of slavery had to be deleted. So fervent was the commitment to the enslavement of blacks in some colonies that the issue threatened to obstruct agreement on a declaration of independence. As Jefferson wrote later, "Southern states wanted to continue slavery," and "[our] Northern brethren, though their people had very few slaves themselves, yet they had been pretty considerable carriers of them themselves." With this compromise the ground was laid for the strange coexistence between a dedication to freedom and equality on the one hand and a commitment to racial oppression and subordination on the other.

Because slaves were considered "property" and not "persons," the Northern states refused to have them included in the "population" of the South when computing representation among the states. On the other hand, they insisted that they all be counted in computing the taxes for these states. The South took the opposite position whereupon both sides agreed, after a long stalemate, that five slaves would be counted as three persons for both representation and taxation. This agreement, known as the "Three-fifths Compromise," resolved one of the major controversies of the Constitutional Convention and at the same time represented an endorsement of "a less than human" status of blacks.

Black subordination through the institution of slavery was legitimized by a complex array of laws and customs designed to ensure the dehumanization of all blacks or at least establish their inferiority to whites. The laws of the land defined slaves as "chattel" rather than persons" and imposed severe constraints on every of the lives of all blacks, notably marriage and family relations, movement and assembly, education, religious practice and interpersonal relations within and across racial lines. Ultimately, Hill suggests that blacks had every right to be hostile,

considering this less than amenable arrangement. The social, economic, and political livelihood of blacks would forever be impacted by the scheming of Jefferson and the Founding Fathers.

As Hill proceeds to the next stanza, she continues to display her despair, yet tries to find solace and comfort:

> When the dogs bite
> When the beatings
> When I'm feeling sad,
> I simply remember all these kinds of things and then I don't feel so bad!

Here she substitutes Rodgers and Hammerstein's "bee stings" with "beatings," capturing the utter physical and psychological pain associated with social inequality. While both "bee stings" and "beatings" are quite painful and are generally avoided by most people, "beatings" usually are a form of corporal punishment inflicted on one human being by another human being, and "bee stings" are not. In short, human beings, generally, are higher ordered beings have the capacity to reason (e.g., that know the difference between right and wrong), while animals tend to act on instinct alone. Taken in a larger historical context, Hill also alludes to the abuses that blacks endured during the protest movements of the 1960s (e.g., Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor and his police force using attack dogs and billy clubs against civil rights activists in Birmingham, Alabama).

From here, Hill links the historical past to the psychological present. She uses the polarities of racial status and the dualities of black-white interactions established in the previous stanzas to suggest that African Americans have developed a cultural split resulting in a schizoid mentality:

> Black Rage is founded: who fed us self-hatred,
> Lies and abuse while we waited and waited
> Spiritual treason, this grid and its cages,
> Black Rage is founded on these kinds of things.
>
> Black Rage is founded on draining and draining,
> Threatening your freedom to stop your complaining.
> Poisoning your water while they say it's raining,
> Then call you mad for complaining, complaining.

The functional stress of two-ness or double-consciousness to which Hill alludes, has created pathological problems for the black community, among them a sense of collective inadequacy and individual impotence. Through such phrases as "self-hatred," "lies and abuse," and "spiritual treason," she draws upon W.E.B. DuBois's intellectual framework in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Furthermore, the repetition of "draining and draining" and "complaining, complaining" by Hill underscores the ongoing alienation of black folks who have grown weary of living life on the hyphen.

Pressing forward, Hill condemns the domestic policies of former President Ronald Reagan for the present state of political, social, and economic disaster:

> Old time bureaucracy drugging the youth,
> Black Rage is founded on blocking the truth!
> Murder and crime, compromise and distortion,
> Sacrifice, sacrifice who makes this fortune?
>
> Greed, falsely called progress,
> Such human contortion
> Black Rage is founded on these kinds of things.

Among the paramount goals of Reagan's political life was his ambition to slow the growth of government, and especially to block or even repeal the social programs launched in the era of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. Reagan pursued his smaller-government policies with near religious zeal and remarkable effectiveness. He proposed a new federal budget that necessitated cuts of some $35 billion, mostly in social programs like food stamps and federally funded job-training centers. Furthermore, the economy of the 1980s was not uniformly sound. For the first time in the twentieth century, income gaps widened between the richest and the poorest Americans. The poor became poorer and the very rich grew fabulously richer, while the middle-class incomes largely stagnated. While Hill does not call Reagan out by name, she indirectly references his "law and order" tactics. The "old time bureaucracy drugging the youth" represents a veiled description of Reagan's anti-drug program of the 1980s": "Crack hit the street in 1985, a few years after Reagan's drug was announced, leading to a spike in violence as drug markets struggled to stabilize, and the anger and frustration associated with joblessness boiled. Joblessness and crack swept inner cities precisely at the moment that a fierce backlash against the Civil Rights Movement was manifesting itself through the War on Drugs" (51). Moreover, the "truth" was that in 1982 "less than 2 percent of the American public viewed drugs as the most important issue facing the nation" (49). The "murder and crime" as well as the "compromise and distortion" that resulted from Reagan's War on Drugs had almost nothing to do with narcotics and everything to do with race: "By waging a war on drug users and dealers, Reagan made good on his promise to crack down on the racially defined 'others' – the undeserving (49). The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 only exacerbated matters because the law "included mandatory minimum sentences for the distribution of cocaine, including far more severe punishment for distribution of crack – associated with blacks – than powder cocaine, associated with whites (53). According to historians John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, things are not looking much better in the 21st century:

> America's prison population has grown from 200,000 in 1970 to an estimated 2.25 million in 2006, and young minority males account for the bulk of that increase. The crackdown on the use of marijuana, which are commonly used in poor communities. Arrest for drug possession has resulted in long sentences for poor, black youth convicted of nonviolent drug-related offenses (621).

Continuing on, Hill reiterates that have been hit by drugs, crime, unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, and prison sentences. One could add that these conditions have also created a severe shortage of perspective spouses within the black community.

With the final portion of her song, Hill shows that years of indifference on the part of the federal government and state agencies have left blacks Americans in a state of perpetual uncertainty and powerlessness:

Free enterprise, is it myth or illusion?
Forcing you back into purposed confusion.
Black human trafficking or blood transfusion?
Black Rage is founded on these kinds of things.

> Victims of violence both psyche and body
> Life out of context is living unGodly.
> Politics, politics
> Greed falsely called wealth
> Black Rage is founded on denial of self!

The “black human trafficking” and “blood transfusion” refers to the political economy of dealing drugs. As historians Moss and Higginbotham assert, “The drug trade is seen by inner-city youths with few other economic options as a viable way of making money. Boys as young as seven to ten years old often become involved in drug trafficking as lookouts or carriers and end up in prison by age eighteen” (621). As Hill ends her song, she echoes the breadth and depth of black suffering. Hill implies that black folks must get right with God if they hope to live a more harmoniously and cope positively with their rage. Also, by repeating the word “politics,” she emphasizes her alienation regarding the public policy which dismantled civil rights and widened the chasm that divided the haves and have-nots in black America.

The black community has continued to face significant problems. Lauryn Hill reminds us that blacks have not yet overcome. Most of the frustrations of that precipitated the upheavals of the 60 or so years still exist. Yet, blacks retain their strength to make it against all odds. The gains of the past several decades must now be consolidated, and new approaches must be developed to meet changing circumstances.

MATERIALITY IN THE WAKE OF RAGE: What Prince heard

At the 57th annual Grammys, Prince delivered a poignant, yet pointed statement. Prior to handing out the album of the year, the music icon stylin’ and profilin’ in an orange suit remarks, “Albums…remember those? Albums still matter. Albums, like books and black lives, still matter.” Here Prince provides some insight into contemporary black America and sought to stimulate both pride in the achievements of the past and a measure of confidence in the future. From his perspective, an album was indeed more than a long musical recording on a record, CD, etc. that usually includes a set of songs or a book with blank pages used for making a collection (as of autographs, stamps, or photographs). Prince implies that the production, control, transmission, and reception of black experiences was distinct. This suggestion has three basic implications. First, there may be substantial disagreement about what are in fact salient aspects of the black experience, and even greater disagreement about their interpretation. Second, black (political) life is a more complex and contradictory than might initially seem apparent. Several aspects are still inadequately studied, making attempts at a comprehensive and organized overview both difficult and sometimes faulty. Third, there is a sense of profound pride and admiration for the strength, resiliency, and creativity of black America, which is reflected in their epic political struggle for survival and for the dignity to which all human beings are entitled.

From Claude McKay to Lauryn Hill, this essay has explored some of the complexities and nuances of black rage over the last century. More precisely, it situates the rage of black folks within a historical and cultural context, showing its connections to other aspects of American society. The value of black rage, in part, lies in its unapologetic expression of black life and struggle. Black rage paves the way for more honest and open discussions about race relations and illuminates the strategic ways in which art may be used to expose hypocrisy as well as question regimes of truth. The Center for Constitutional Rights recognizes both the power and impact of black rage especially in understanding the present and future motivations of the Black Lives Matter movement, noting "Everything, including anger, can be used in pursuit of Black freedom. Must be used. Rage is a righteous response to injustice. Black rage is a powerful source of insight into the intolerable reality of Anti-Black racism and a guiding force toward our collective liberation." These developments provide the basis for a profound faith in the inevitability of further progress toward a genuinely humane society in which color ceases to determine status or opportunity.

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