

Native Tongues and the Black Atlantic: Hip-Hop in the Afrodiasporic Tradition

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In a September 1988 interview with SPIN Magazine, Chuck D, MC¹ of the rap group Public Enemy, was asked whether he considered the group to be “prophets.” Chuck D responded by saying, “I guess so ... Rap serves as the communication that [Black people] don’t get for themselves ... Rap is black America’s TV station. It gives a whole perspective of what exists and what black life is about. And black life doesn’t get the total spectrum of information through anything else ... The only thing that gives the straight-up facts on how the black youth feels is a rap record. It’s the number one communicator, force and source, in America right now.”² Chuck D’s now-infamous comments (often misquoted as “hip-hop is the Black CNN”) hint at a truth about the ways in which hip-hop has historically functioned as social commentary and a barometer of Black public perception. Though some deride Chuck D’s comments as being ill-informed or self-righteous, they get at one of the central pillars of hip-hop’s importance: its ability to provide a platform for otherwise voiceless members of American society. By the late 1980s, hip-hop had begun its shift from live performance art to recorded and broadcast music, proving that this once-

¹ An abbreviation of “Master of Ceremonies,” an MC in the context of hip-hop is a vocalist who speaks or rhymes over the music provided by a DJ. While DJs were originally the main act of hip-hop music, by the mid-1980s, MCs had become the primary focal point, transforming it into a lyrical art form.

² Leland, “Armageddon in Effect,” 48.

minor art form was not a short-lived success but a commercially viable genre that was just beginning its rise to prominence in popular culture. This era in hip-hop, dubbed its “golden age,” saw not only a massive increase in the genre’s reach and impact but also a rapidly evolving complexity of artistic expression.

Much of hip-hop at this time was characterized by consumerism, braggadocio, and a tough-guy image, but the late 1980s saw the rise of a socially and politically-conscious collective³ of artists known as the Native Tongues who were unified in their pursuit of a hip-hop sound and modes of expression outside of the dominant styles. While some of their expressly political contemporaries looked outward to combat the inequities that were ever-present for those in their community head-on, the Native Tongues turned inward in an attempt to create a grounding and unifying force of positivity for members of the global Black diaspora. In so doing, they used the art form to create a space for their listeners that was welcoming and affirming of diverse identities and conceptions of blackness. Though their time as a unified collective was short-lived, it had a powerful and lasting effect on hip-hop and Black popular culture as a whole.

In order to understand what made the Native Tongues’ approach to hip-hop and social justice different, it is first necessary to contextualize the cultural moment that catalyzed their formation. At the tail end of 1988, just months after Chuck D’s SPIN interview, two albums were released that shine as examples of the growing complexity of the genre. These albums also represent two divergent modes of challenging the oppression Black people face in a post-Civil Rights American society. The first, N.W.A.’s monumental debut studio album, *Straight Outta Compton*, paints a vivid and immediate portrait of the group members’ lives as young Black men set against the backdrop of a city shaken by the Nixon administration’s War on Drugs, gang culture, and the routinized over-policing that led to the beating of Rodney King and the subsequent 1992 L.A. riots. In the aftermath of the album’s release, this new group of L.A.-area artists entered the crosshairs of media outlets, anxious parents, and even the FBI. To this day, *Straight Outta Compton* is revered as a paragon of hip-hop’s mainstream style and a work of combative social commentary. On the country’s opposite coast, another debut work was beginning to offer alternative modes of Black cultural expression, proving that hip-hop and its practitioners were no monolith.

The first Native Tongues album, the Jungle Brothers’ *Straight Out The Jungle*, though strikingly similar in title, delivered its message in a very different manner from the “gangster rap” that N.W.A. would help to make the dominant style of hip-hop for the next decade.

³ The term “collective” is here used to describe the collaborative association between separate musical acts in which membership is loosely-defined and flexible. Though they have separate recording deals, artists in a collective work together creatively, perhaps touring with one another, sharing studio space, or appearing on each other’s songs.

Straight Outta Compton is a gritty and in-your-face confrontation of racial inequities that forces the listeners' attention to the plight of Black Americans in the post-Civil Rights Movement era. Meanwhile, *Straight Out The Jungle* sets the stage for what the Native Tongues would become: it is playful and lighthearted in its sonic landscape, lyricism, and imagery. It meanders on its way to making its point, doing so with a relaxed energy and spending a significant portion of its runtime on lighthearted antics. While both of these albums worked in part to spread messages about the brutal realities of racial disparity in the United States, their approaches differed dramatically and represented the stylistic branching of the genre as it matured. By first examining N.W.A.'s approach to social commentary as a point of contrast, we can better understand the paradigmatic shift presented by the Native Tongues and their brand of afrocentricity.

Afrocentrism, as opposed to Eurocentrism, is defined as a "cultural and political movement whose mainly African American adherents regard themselves and all other Blacks as syncretic Africans and believe that their worldview should positively reflect traditional African values."⁴ From the beginning, the Native Tongues drew upon the legacy of other Black musical traditions such as call-and-response, jazz, rhythm & blues, funk, and soul, and repurposed them to fit within the inherently rebellious framework of hip-hop. Combined with a visual aesthetic and spirit that was pulled from both American culture as well as from other parts of the Afrodiaspora, *Straight Out The Jungle* is the first glimpse of a movement that would synthesize modern experiences of Blackness in the United States with a broader ancestral heritage.

Hip-hop is a distinctly rebellious African-American art form that has given voice to the oppressed since its creation in a 1970s New York City that was ravaged by the rampant use and persecution of crack cocaine, aggressive policing, and urban desolation. In her book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, prominent hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose recounts how hip-hop culture was an answer to the destruction of neighborhoods and community support institutions, offering youth a new form of identity creation.⁵ Working in this tradition, the many artists of the Native Tongues combined rearticulated afrodiasporic artistic practices, afrocentric imagery, and youthful positivity to create a cultural moment that was greater than the sum of its parts. By drawing artistic influence and inspiration from sources that move beyond national borders, the Native Tongues helped to shed pervasive ideas about blackness in the hip-hop generation and actively resisted the identities assigned to them by the hegemonic American culture.

⁴ Early, "Afrocentrism."

⁵ Rose, *Black Noise*, 19.

Contrasted with their musical contemporaries, and examined against the backdrop of Paul Gilroy's idea of the "Black Atlantic" and Mary Louise Pratt's theories about "contact zones," the music and image of the Native Tongues can be understood as an attempt to unify the disenfranchised people of the Black Diaspora through ideas of positivity and equality. In pushing the boundaries of hip-hop sound and their subversion of broader cultural ideas about blackness, they helped to transform the genre into transnational territory.

Reality Rap: Contact Zones of the Dominant Hip-Hop Style

While *Straight Outta Compton* was not the first hip-hop in the style that would come to be known as gangster rap, it was perhaps the biggest influence in the explosion of its popularity. The album followed in the footsteps of the 1986 hit "6 'N the Mornin'," a track which artist Ice-T dubbed "reality rap." After opening with the now-famous line "6 'n the mornin', police at my door,"⁶ the song chronicles snapshots of the narrator's life, moving between issues of search and seizure at the hands of the police to gang-related gun violence. Ice-T wrote the song while affiliated with one of Los Angeles' prominent gangs, and it was his attempt at opening a window into the world in which he lived.⁷ Inspired by this song to the point of borrowing its cadence for the album's titular track, N.W.A. wrote *Straight Outta Compton* in an attempt to give an account of their lived experience of Los Angeles from the perspective of young Black men. In so doing, they left nothing out, embracing and rearticulating the image thrust upon them by those in power.

In a keynote address delivered to the Modern Language Association in 1991, scholar Mary Louise Pratt coined the term "the contact zone," describing it as the place "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today."⁸ The rapid spread of hip-hop's popularity in the latter half of the 1980s proved a petri dish for this type of cultural clash between the hegemonic white culture and that of subordinated Black Americans. As music like that of N.W.A. spread beyond the boundaries of Black spaces and into the whitewashed streets of suburban America, the racial inequities that had always been present began to boil over in a new way. With the music and styles of gangster rap growing in popularity around the country, it was only a matter of time before white teenagers began to consume it and white society came face-to-

⁶ Ice-T, "6 'N the Mornin'."

⁷ "A Tale of Two Coasts."

⁸ Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 34.

face with artistic representations of the fractured and brutal world that it had created for black people over the course of centuries of oppression.

The album that received so much backlash can be understood as an example of autoethnography, a tool of the contact zone which Pratt defines as “...a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them.”⁹ Dubbing themselves “The World’s Most Dangerous Group,” N.W.A. from the very beginning sought to combat the routinized discrimination they faced by leaning into the role that the dominant white culture expected them to play. Even their group name, “Niggaz Wit Attitudes,” works by using a perversion of the language of the oppressors to create a parodic representation of themselves. By self-labeling with the slur that has been used to wound and demean Black Americans for centuries, they reclaimed the word’s power and turned it on those who would use it against them. While the original audience of hip-hop was the community in which it was created, hip-hop had transcended Black spaces by the time N.W.A. emerged. In her speech, Pratt explains how autoethnographies often constitute the marginalized group’s entry into the dominant group’s culture, and *Straight Outta Compton* bridged this divide almost immediately.

N.W.A.’s power as protest musicians comes from the aggression that they use to express the emotions that result from their oppression. While the album was created first and foremost for Black Americans, the message was delivered in a way that would pull their oppressors into this contact zone where they would be forced to look upon the imbalance of power buried in the foundational systems of the United States. As it boomed in popularity, the music was transplanted from the site of its inception to the suburbs, where, once in the hands of middle-class white teenagers, white society could not ignore it. Suddenly, the results of generations of systemic racism and the purposeful persecution of Black neighborhoods was an issue about which those in power could no longer feign ignorance. N.W.A. understood and embraced the risks and rewards inherent in this, addressing it directly in “Express Yourself,” one of the only tracks on the album devoid of profanity or violence and thus one uniquely situated to speak to an audience searching for reasons to dismiss it. The song is an upbeat anthem that champions the revolutionary power inherent in hip-hop and lambasts those who misuse it for personal gain or who attempt to silence its practitioners. Dr. Dre raps:

I’m expressing with my full capabilities
And now I’m living in correctional facilities.
Cause some don’t agree with how I do this
I get straight and meditate like a Buddhist.

⁹ Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” 35.

I'm dropping flavor, my behavior is hereditary,
But my technique is very necessary.¹⁰

In these opening lines, Dr. Dre acknowledges that this expression of his personhood will almost certainly bring him persecution by those in power, but also that this is necessary to spark fundamental change. Nowhere is this strategy put in action more than on the album's most inflammatory and infamous song, "Fuck Tha Police." The introduction of the song takes the form of faux-courtroom proceedings as the group's members take turns recounting instances of police brutality at the hands of the LAPD. Aggressive and unapologetic, the song encapsulates the feelings of Black people living in inner-cities and foreshadows the riotous reaction to the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King in 1991.

N.W.A.'s legacy is one of unabashed aggression towards a corrupt system that seemingly left them with no option but to rebel in the way that they did. Their art is exemplary of this era of mainstream hip-hop, one in which the musical form sought to complement the message at its core. The sonic foundation is loud and discomfoting; it shocks the listener and demands attention. However, unlike the earliest hip-hop in which DJing and repurposing breakbeats was the primary output, rapping had by this point become the *raison d'etre* of the music. The form was lyrically driven and the many MCs of N.W.A. spoke directly and aggressively against their oppressors. In this way, *Straight Outta Compton* and the gangster rap style that it helped to birth used the strife and discomfort of the contact zone to disrupt inequality. The Native Tongues would seek to address these issues in another way entirely.

Native Tongues and the Universal Zulu Nation: Community Creation in the Black Atlantic

While the Native Tongues helped to thrust their brand of Afrocentric positivity in hip-hop into the mainstream, they were not the first to promote its ideals. From the beginning, the members of the collective were heavily influenced by the philosophy of the Universal Zulu Nation, an international hip-hop awareness group that was created in the 1970s through the unification of several street gangs in New York City. Locally, the Zulu Nation was positioned as an alternative to gang culture in the South Bronx and worked in its early days to put together cultural events for local youth that centered around the different artistic elements of hip-hop: breakdancing, graffiti, DJing, and rapping. Recording artist Afrika Bambaataa, a former member of New York's Black Spades gang, began this work after going

¹⁰ N.W.A., "Express Yourself."

on a trip to Africa as a high school student.¹¹ With its mission inspired by what he experienced, the Zulu Nation embraces Afrocentric ideas and adopts styles and symbols of different cultures from around the African continent and the world at large to bring together members of the global Black diaspora.

In his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy presents the idea of the "Black Atlantic" as a space of transnational intercultural construction. In the chapter titled "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," Gilroy writes that "The contemporary black arts movement...[has] created a new topography of loyalty and identity in which the structures and presuppositions of the nation-state have been left behind because they are seen to be outmoded."¹² The Zulu Nation and its influence on the creation of the Native Tongues can be best understood in this context as a rejection of a single African-American identity in favor of this afrodiasporic intercultural expression. For Bambaataa, the focus on Afrocentricity is an attempt to borrow from shared history to unite people under the commonalities of the Black diaspora around the Atlantic. The African continent serves a dual purpose as a literal geographic ancestral homeland and as a core symbol of Black strength and unity, both of which would carry on as a throughline in the work of Native Tongues artists.

Bambaataa's work in the early 1980s as one of the pioneering artists in hip-hop's rise to prominence set the stage for what Native Tongues would do both musically and ideologically. His influence on them is immediately apparent even on cursory levels: one of the three members of Jungle Brothers adopted the stage name Afrika Baby Bam, a clear indication of his status as a disciple of this community-building effort and a claiming of the Zulu Nation as his ideological family. In *Black Noise*, Rose discusses this phenomenon of self-naming in hip-hop as an act of reinvention and self-definition: a means of asserting control. For both Bambaataa and Baby Bam, their use of "Afrika" in this ritual is a profession of the centrality of this heritage to their chosen identities.

At this time, hip-hop culture was largely positioned to celebrate the success of the individual artist or group, revering these musicians and activists as they used the form's aggressive masculinity to try and separate themselves from the pack in what was still a relatively new art form. The Native Tongues took a different approach in celebrating the success of the collective over that of the individual. Their musical collaborations reflected this community mentality in everything that they did in their early years. This strategy of

¹¹ Knopper, "Afrika Bambaata: Crate-Digger, Collector, Creator."

¹² Gilroy, "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," 63.

community building reflects an idea from Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone," where she wrote "[w]here there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone."¹³ The Native Tongues' first act of creation in this regard comes by way of their chosen moniker itself, an attempt to create this place of healing through the act of self-naming. The collective's name is borrowed from the lyrics of "African Cry," a 1972 song by funk group The New Birth that begins:

Took our whole black African tribe
Whipped our backs and enslaved our minds
Took away our shield and spear
Shipped and shackled, chained and feared
Took away our native tongue
Taught their English to our young¹⁴

The Native Tongues chose to align themselves with the diaspora of the Black Atlantic in place of an African-American identity that represents the loss of their ancestral cultural heritage through the Transatlantic Slave Trade. While many of their contemporaries looked to incite the disenfranchised to rebellion through direct clashes with the dominant culture, the Native Tongues sought to reject it and instead construct this type of "safe house" through their connection to afrodiasporic themes and images. An example of this break from the strategy of their contemporaries came by way of their sartorial expression.

By the time the Native Tongues entered the public sphere at the close of the 1980s, hip-hop had become mired in a particular image and sound. Larger-than-life personas dominated and the image of rap had become one of braggadocio and consumerism in the legacy of groups like Run-DMC and their groundbreaking Adidas sneakers sponsorship. Hip-hop had begun to cultivate a stylistic image that challenged structures of domination represented by this consumerism. Gold chains and other jewelry had become synonymous with hip-hop fashion as a way to appropriate and distort the culture of the ruling class. By forming a hip-hop identity through this capitalist tradition, rappers were able to subvert traditional class distinctions as a means of cultural expression.¹⁵

¹³ Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 40.

¹⁴ The New Birth, "African Cry."

¹⁵ Rose, *Black Noise*, 36.

While N.W.A. cultivated their gangster rap style of Starter jackets emblazoned with the Oakland Raiders logo and Run-DMC sported thick gold chains and Adidas sneakers, the Native Tongues threw off these hallmarks of American consumerism in favor of cross-cultural styles. Their sense of the self stood in stark contrast to their contemporaries: they subverted consumerism by rejecting its symbols rather than perverting them. Members of the Native Tongues were known for their incorporation of multicultural dress into the hip-hop aesthetic: female MC Queen Latifah, one of the earliest members of the collective, was a shining example of this. At the beginning of her career, she cultivated her style and public image around this cross-cultural connection.

A traditionally masculine space, hip-hop culture has often been criticized for misogyny and sexually exploitative themes. Despite this, Latifah burst onto the scene with her 1989 debut album *All Hail the Queen*. In line with the Native Tongues imagery, Queen Latifah and her album were obvious in their proud Afrocentricity. The cover of the album is simple: Latifah poses in front of a white background while in the corner her name and the title encircle a silhouette of the African continent. Latifah, dressed in a simple black suit with golden accents, a black head wrap, and a wooden beaded necklace, stands with her left shoulder towards the camera. Looking down at the camera, her posture evokes every bit of the royal portraiture that she emulates.

The music video for “Ladies First,” a lead single from *All Hail the Queen* and feminist hip-hop anthem, accentuated this pride by asserting the feminine power of women as activists, mothers, and artists: the music video opens with photographs of four black female activists: Madame C.J. Walker, Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Winnie Mandela. By invoking these women from around the Black Atlantic, Latifah asserts herself as a spiritual successor to their work while using the platform that hip-hop offered her to spread this powerful message. In her analysis of the video, Robin Roberts writes that “Latifah promotes herself as a representative of womanhood and shares her power and screen time with other women, who are a part of her universe. She connects her feminist power to the pleasure of the audience...The job of these sisters involved promoting an Afrocentric image of strong womanhood.”¹⁶ Latifah and Monie Love, a featured MC on the song and a fellow Native Tongue, succeed in adding positive and powerful femininity to the collective’s equation with their evocation of Black female icons and incorporation of traditional African clothing like Ghanaian Kente cloth. The imagery presented by Latifah and her fellow Native Tongues are indicative of what Gilroy calls “the playful diasporic intimacy that has been a marked feature

¹⁶ Roberts, “Ladies First,” 255-256.

of transnational black Atlantic creativity.”¹⁷ These musical and stylistic efforts by the collective reach across the Black Atlantic to draw from the power of their fellow members of the diaspora, transcending what had been a distinctly American art form until this point.

Transculturation: The Native Tongues’ Rearticulation of Diverse Musical Elements

While the Native Tongues would eventually blossom to include as many as twenty affiliated artists, the musical foundations of the collective can be traced back to three albums released by newly-created groups from New York City: *Straight Out The Jungle* in 1988, De La Soul’s *3 Feet High and Rising* in 1989, and A Tribe Called Quest’s *People’s Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* in 1990. These albums were the first in a discography of music that would help to popularize a divergent style of hip-hop that embraced ideas of Afrocentrism and inclusivity and glorified a more welcoming approach to social change and Black empowerment. In a genre that is heavily influenced by the legacy of the Dozens, a verbal game of one-upmanship in which contestants take turns in insulting one another, the Jungle Brothers laid the foundation for a different approach by speaking about consciousness in a way that wasn’t intended to dominate or exclude. In terms of tone, messaging, and musical production, *Straight Out The Jungle* constituted a blueprint for the sound and approach to hip-hop that the Native Tongues and their disciples would perfect.

Presenting themselves as the “everymen” of hip-hop, the Jungle Brothers set the tone for the playful creativity that would come to be expected from Native Tongues groups on *Straight Out The Jungle*. The cover of the album features the group’s three MCs wading through jungle undergrowth clad in khaki safari uniforms and sporting the beaded wooden Africa medallions that would become synonymous with the Universal Zulu Nation and the Native Tongues, an overt symbolic rejection of the gold chain consumerist image of their hip-hop contemporaries. While the music confronted political issues, it did so in a way that was approachable and had an enticing sense of youthfulness and fun. Busta Rhymes, who got his start as an MC in the Native Tongues-inspired group Leaders of the New School, said of the Jungle Brothers that “[they were] the first group that did the pro-Black thing without being preachy and [while] being fun at the same time. X-Clan, Chuck D, they were militant as hell. When Jungle Brothers did it, it was everything we wanted to be like.”¹⁸ By divorcing their message from the aggressive tone of their contemporaries, Jungle Brothers opened the door

¹⁷ Gilroy, “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity,” 63.

¹⁸ *Hip-Hop Evolution*, “Do the Knowledge.”

for a more multi-dimensional conception of blackness in the hip-hop generation that stretched beyond the monolithic “street” narrative.

The album’s title is an allusion to the 1982 song “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, widely recognized as the first hip-hop song to provide social commentary. The song opened with the iconic lines “It’s like a jungle sometimes/ it makes me wonder how I keep from going under,”¹⁹ comparing life in the turbulent ghettos to a jungle, an idea around which the Jungle Brothers would build their identity. The titular song, the first in the album’s tracklist, opens with the lines:

Educated man, from the motherland
You see, they call me a star but that’s not what I am.
I’m a jungle brother, a true blue brother
And I’ve been to many places you’ll never discover.²⁰

Rapped over the type of simple break-beat that the album is built upon, these first four lines instantly set the group apart from the mainstream hip-hop of the day. The album defines itself by its political messaging in its early tracks but does so in a way that sounds very little like the bold and assertive mode of artists like N.W.A. The lyrics claim the everyday status that the genre typically eschews in favor of bold self-assertion.

The album’s second track, “What’s Going On,” situates itself around another allusion, this time a nod to Motown legend Marvin Gaye’s 1971 album of the same name. Gaye’s album explored issues of racial inequality in the context of the Vietnam War; the song it inspired makes statements against dealing drugs, Eurocentric history, and street violence in the relaxed vocal delivery that characterizes the album. The group’s decision to allude to Gaye and rearticulate his words expresses the stagnation of civil rights progress from the release of *What’s Going On* nearly twenty years earlier. By building their song around this sample, they take Gaye’s work and elaborate not only upon the Motown sound but on Gaye’s message, using ethos to create a connection between these separate eras of Black expression; in this way, they build upon that legacy instead of starting anew.

De La Soul’s debut album *3 Feet High and Rising* builds upon the aesthetic of *Straight Out The Jungle*, creating a sense of youthful innocence by combining their goofy and often enigmatic lyricism with the introduction of inter-track skits, a trope of hip-hop that remains popular to this day. It was also the first album to include all of the Native Tongues core group,

¹⁹ Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, “The Message.”

²⁰ Jungle Brothers, “Straight Out The Jungle.”

featuring the Jungle Brothers and A Tribe Called Quest prominently on the song “Buddy.” The overall portrait put forth by the album is one of lighthearted fun and revelry. Dante Ross, the group’s representative at Tommy Boy Records, said of their presence in the industry, “The thing about De La is it allowed young Black kids to be bugged out. [You] don’t gotta be a stereotypical cat trying to be hard and all that. Being weird is okay--it’s cool to be weird. You know, it changed everything.”²¹ De La Soul’s place in hip-hop in 1989 was that of the class clowns. For their young listeners, they represented a new and different sort of Black role models that refused to bow to dominant stereotypes.

Just as Afrika Bambaata influenced their community-building efforts, these first Native Tongues albums are the spiritual successor to the pioneering work that he did in the early part of the decade. In his music, like the 1982 hit “Planet Rock,” Bambaata stretched the imagination of hip-hop by pulling inspiration from a variety of musical influences ranging from the Rolling Stones and the Monkees to television theme songs.²² While many of his contemporaries in the early 80s rapped over simple and sparse tracks of looping percussion, Bambaataa began to push the boundaries of early hip-hop sound by helping to expand the art of “sampling,” or borrowing and rearticulating segments of prior musical works to create new sounds. Bambaataa’s use of a diversity of sources in the dominant mainstream culture is an example of “transculturation” in ethnography, which Pratt defines as “processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture.”²³ Much like the autoethnographic work of N.W.A., this foundational aspect of hip-hop is an example of the workings of the contact zone. The Native Tongues would pick up where Bambaata left off, creating their lush sonic landscapes by borrowing from myriad genres and layering them to create original musical collages, much like their Universal Zulu Nation affiliation constituted a Black identity that was an amalgamation of cultural influences from around the Black Atlantic.

3 Feet High and Rising is a visible extension of Bambaataa’s musical innovations, featuring extensive sampling that borrows from a variety of musical traditions and cultural touchstones. While this technique had been employed in music for decades, it wasn’t until hip-hop’s golden age that it began to take off as a distinct art form thanks in large part to artists like Bambaataa and De La Soul. Rose discusses in *Black Noise* how, before rap’s rise in popularity, artists used sampled music in a way that would bury its identity; it was a technique that was meant to be disguised so that it would go unnoticed. However, “[r]ap

²¹ *Hip-Hop Evolution*, “Do the Knowledge.”

²² Knopper, “Afrika Bambaataa: Crate-Digger, Collector, Creator.”

²³ Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” 36.

producers have inverted this logic, using samples as a point of reference, as a means by which the process of repetition and recontextualization can be highlighted and privileged.”²⁴ In so doing, producers borrow not only the music but its cultural context. They are then able to rearticulate and transform the chosen segment, dismantling something old to make something with narrative originality that suits their purpose.

De La Soul was wildly inventive in building their instrumentals, pulling from myriad genres and even sampling from a *Schoolhouse Rock!* tune on *3 Feet High's* “The Magic Number.” They were not afraid to break rules, largely because they didn’t know them. Just teenagers when they put their debut album together (along with the other founding members of Native Tongues), they were unconcerned with the traditions of musical production. Dres, an MC of the Native Tongues group Black Sheep says of De La Soul that “You could see that they listened to everything. [they] find this insignificant snippet on a jazz record, fuse it with an insignificant snippet from a rock record and create something that you’ve never heard.”²⁵ In a time and place where budget cuts in inner-city minority communities led to diminished school arts programs, this embrace of technological innovation represented pure artistic expression in the face of inequality. Rose elaborates on this in *Black Noise*, writing that “[r]ap music, more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between Black urban lived experience and dominant, ‘legitimate’ (e.g. neoliberal) ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality.”²⁶ Q-Tip, MC and producer of A Tribe Called Quest has said that, “When we came up, we didn’t really have the curriculum that allowed us to play instruments. So the records would become our session players, if you will.”²⁷ By using sampling technology in this way, they were able to bridge the void created by school districts that were bereft of funding for the arts. This form of creation through the deconstruction and rearticulation of cross-cultural artistic traditions is central to the Native Tongues discography and the afrodiasporic theories of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic.

A Tribe Called Quest’s 1990 debut, *People’s Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*, combined all of the elements that had characterized the collective thus far. Q-Tip had done his first recording work on *Straight Out The Jungle’s* “Black is Black,” and he wore his Jungle Brothers and De La Soul influences on his sleeve. The album represented a clear glimpse of what was to come for the most commercially successful of the Native Tongues groups.

²⁴ Rose, *Black Noise*, 73.

²⁵ *Hip-Hop Evolution*, “Do the Knowledge.”

²⁶ Rose, *Black Noise*, 102.

²⁷ *Hip-Hop Evolution*, “Do the Knowledge.”

Unabashedly experimental, *People's Instinctive Travels* combined a jazz-influenced sonic palette with a relaxed and conversational lyricism that typified the light-hearted social consciousness that was becoming a hallmark of Native Tongues music. It continued to push sampling forward, famously employing the meandering bass line of Lou Reed's "Talk a Walk on the Wild Side" on its hit single "Can I Kick It?" and borrowing from the jazz tradition extensively. While it was not an overnight commercial success, it is widely regarded now as a masterpiece and a pioneering work in the development of the jazz-rap style.

The album shows off its myriad influences in other ways as well. The first phrase of the title can be read as symbolic of the far-reaching Black diaspora while the second is a nod to the rich history of music that the album draws upon; the connection to the Black Atlantic and all of its offshoots is reflected before the audience presses play. Even the interludes between tracks draw upon this tradition as they find group member Jarobi leading them in call-and-response over rhythmic clapping and a looping bassline. Included in these moments were Queen Latifah and members of the Jungle Brothers and De La Soul who were recording music in the studio at the same time. After albums like *Straight Out The Jungle* and *3 Feet High and Rising* succeeded in creating the musical and ideological foundation upon which the Native Tongues would build, *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* constituted a welcome mat for listeners to join as participants in the collective.

Conclusion

The legacy of Native Tongues is one of approachable and accessible intellectualism and Afrocentrism. Their messages were not preachy or forced because they were interested in garnering support and building a community around the topics that they spoke about. Their embrace of the ideologies of the Black Atlantic and of unifying behind more global themes about the African diaspora welcomed those who were outside of the hegemonic white culture but who didn't feel seen or included in the aggressive side of the dominant hip-hop culture either. They took hip-hop and made it for a larger audience based on ideas of inclusivity. Though their creative peak as a unified collective was short-lived, it was hugely influential on the course of hip-hop and other forms of Black cultural expression.

The sort of in-your-face hip-hop made famous by the tough-guy rappers like N.W.A. and Public Enemy is often easier to pin down in terms of its political statement about Blackness. The lyrics are combative and are laid upon sonic foundations that are loud and intended to disrupt; listening is not meant to be a peaceful experience, but instead one that shakes you to your core and demands that you pay attention to the inequities that inspired the music. The power of these artists is immediately clear to those it speaks to as well as those it speaks

against. In contrast, the music of the Native Tongues is laid back and welcomes you into its folds with open arms, disguising its power through its broad cultural influences and patina. Their musical foundations celebrate a history of Black art that includes rhythmic drums, call-and-response, jazz, funk, soul, and R&B, and which transcends the borders of nations or time; it makes its statement by creating a transnational space in which Blackness can be celebrated entirely separate from the status quo.

N.W.A. is remembered as a group that shouted their way into the collective consciousness of American society. *Straight Outta Compton* is remembered as one of the most important hip-hop albums of all time, and rightfully so. The Jungle Brothers and much of the music of the Native Tongues, while critically revered and beloved by fans of the genre, have faded into the underground of “alternative” hip-hop. *Straight Out The Jungle* is remembered by comparatively few but was just as influential for its musical merits and the collective that it helped to spawn. Released within months of one another, the similarity in the titles of these two albums is striking. Despite this connection, however, they illustrate two divergent ideas about how hip-hop might challenge White hegemony. *Straight Outta Compton* is directly confrontational: N.W.A. aimed to be the dangerous Black men that White society fears, but only because their music is a product of these racist institutions. *Straight Out The Jungle*, and the works of the Native Tongues as a whole, offered an alternative vision of racial justice: they are more than the trauma that society has inflicted upon them and they will heal together. Hip-hop’s golden age saw a rapid expansion of popular expression about the lived experiences of Black people in the United States; for their part, the Native Tongues helped to show that these experiences of Blackness are not monolithic.

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