
RESPONSE TO NBA CRITIQUES

By Trey Ellis

1. This New Black Aesthetic Movement I have tried to define somehow synthesizes the last two black art revivals, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. In the Twenties blacks wanted to be considered as good as dominant culture. In the Sixties we wanted no part of dominant culture at all. Today the NBA wants to dominate it. We feel “separate but better.”

2. As you can see, this new movement is also fueled by naive exuberance and a for now unshakable belief that our youthful black power can perfect society and perfect the soul. A certain amount of disillusionment and cynicism will eventually set in as it always does when we discover that changing the world will take more than a couple of summers, but ingenuous arrogance has been the spark for all important movements, artistic and political, from Cubism to *Sandinismo* to the Beats.

3. It is within this exuberance that you find our leftist, neo-Nationalist politic. We realize that a poem, no matter how fiery, isn't going to feed a homeless black child or make a black junkie clean his syringe. But it can perhaps disseminate some small corner of truth—either political, historical, or psychological—stumbled upon by the young artist.

At the same time, most of the young black artists I interviewed regularly involve themselves and their art in causes they believe in, and—no matter where they were raised—now live in black neighborhoods. Just because they are no longer ashamed that their parents and perhaps their grandparents went to college doesn't mean they cavalierly ignore the economic problems of the majority of blacks. In fact these black artists, like most young artists, almost ritualistically castigate their buppie contemporaries—misguided alter egos—that have turned into investment banker/Republicans.

4. To Ms. Hunter I have only to defend Public Enemy with their own words, “Don't Believe the Hype.” I realize they appear to be stepping right into the same stupid and sexist potholes some of the Sixties Nationalists did. But most of the negative hype surrounding PE concerns the loony remarks of one of the SIW's, their paramilitary bodyguards. Chuck D., the rapper himself, is the most talented and witty poet since Baraka and H. Rap Brown. He should be criticized, but only for not denouncing and divorcing himself from his friend's antisemitism and crackpot, pseudo-muslim theories of genetics. Don't confuse the man's message with the message of his minister. Don't confuse Jesse with Farrakhan.

Some of PE's heroes are heroines: “Hard—my calling card recorded and ordered—supporter of Chesimard [Asata Shakur].” And Sister Ava Muhammad is sampled on “Show 'Em What You Got.” Furthermore, Public Enemy in no way has ever shown

any empathy for drug dealers ever (“Stop illin’ and killin’ / stop grillin’ / Yo black, Yo (we’re willin’ ”). In fact, their strong-black-man, uzi-waving paramilitary posturing coopts both crack dealer and U.S. military machismo. Unfortunately the soldier and the gangster have both historically enthralled too many black males. But PE is trying to give black men a third, Nationalist choice (“They cannot understand that I’m a black man / and I can never be a veteran”).

5. It has always been impossible to have been educated in America without having been greatly influenced by non-black artists. Phyllis Wheatley never read any poetry written by a black person other than herself. Ironically, thanks to black-studies programs, today’s black artists, including the “cultural mulattoes” (blacks who grew up in white neighborhoods), have probably been exposed to more black art than any other black people in any other age. And being a middle class artist, black or white, has always been the rule rather than the exception.

Obviously I was not trying to suggest that a “cultural mulatto” has an edge over a black artist more traditionally raised. What is new and interesting now, however, is that we have a flood of both types. And for “cultural mulattoes” like myself, we know others raised exactly as ourselves who unfortunately are surprised by their own skin color every time they pass a mirror. We, instead, “chose blackness” as Lisa Jones put it. We don’t take our “soul” for granted because we have had to fight to maintain it.

6. It is important to remember that the New Black Aesthetic I try to define is really an anti-aesthetic that defies definition. The NBA is an attitude of liberalism rather than a restrictive code. I was not trying to induce from my observations a few precepts that would grip future artists into yet another aesthetic lock step. Instead, I was trying to argue that today we can be more honest and critical of ourselves than ever before, and this open-minded far-sightedness may very well produce some of the greatest works of art the world has ever known, because, like Newton, we stand on the shoulders of giants.