Recently I was watching the talk show "My Two Cents" that airs on BETJ and the discussion was about the "Talented Tenth." Scholar-Activist, W.E.B. DuBois asserted that it was the top ten percent of Blacks, those people with vision, perseverance and education who would lift the masses from ignorance and poverty. Later in his career DuBois discarded this theory after observing that middle and upper income Blacks were not necessarily enlightened or even interested in helping their less fortunate brothers and sisters....Anyway back to the cable program. When one guest stated that 50 Cent was a leader I immediately bristled up. As far as I was concerned 50 Cent is a multi-millionaire entertainer, but I was not aware that he supported any cause other than fattening his pockets. I have no indication that he was putting anything on the line to contribute to the advancement of Black Americans. Then as I sat back and gave it some deep thought. I had to admit that 50 Cent is a leader, not because he has done anything, but because Black folks have made him one.

In my book Stand & Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership & Hip Hop Culture, I talked a great deal about how Black people, to our detriment, have shifted our concept about leadership from "show and prove" to "who's got the biggest mic." In our longing to have Black heroes and spokesmen, we uncritically allow folks to step up as our leaders despite the fact that they don"t have a clue and never deliver and we also grab on to folks who have no interest in leading anyone but themselves. I suppose my real question is whether Hip Hop has the strength and frankly the capacity to make a course correction. Anyone who says that mainstream rap music or Hip Hop causes crime, illiteracy or promiscuity is a liar, but if we are honest, it is also not doing much in the way of solving these problems. As far as I see most folks within Hip Hop are heavily invested in the aspect of the culture that uses art to tell stories, to relay immediate truths. However, these same folks are reluctant to engage the notion that the most significant part of any culture are the beliefs, values and ideals that it transmits from generation to generation. While entertainment industry apologists shrug off critiques of rap music and Hip Hop by saying that it is just entertainment, most of us know better. For many young Black men and women, particularly those in the "hood, Hip Hop represents a way of life. If culture is a sort of roadmap that guides people on a life long journey, it is not an exaggeration to say that one's culture can fortify that person to excel to her fullest potential or justify that person remaining in the low caste of her birth.

I don"t think that it is scapegoating rap music and Hip Hop to say that our preoccupation with telling the grimy truth about street life has prevented it from developing a vision about "Blackness" and "realness" that extends beyond financial and emotional deprivation. Hip Hop boldly and frequently talks about poverty, death, betrayal, injustice and lust, but is more timid about discussing dreams, love, partnership, and gaining knowledge of self and the world that we live in. Recently 50 Cent and KRS-One appeared together of Rap City, not only did they show each other love and respect, it was obvious that they both have a place in Hip Hop. I therefore am not advocating that Hip Hop should censor artists or outlaw particular images, but

what I am saying is that we need to balance the present "what is" with the transformative "where do we want to end up". In a more mature and perhaps even progressive Hip Hop, Lupe Fiasco and Brother J would have the same visibility and mass appeal as Jay-Z and Ludacris. In a less sexist Hip Hop Jean Grae, Bahamadia and Mystic would not still be underground rap artists. It is a collective narcissism that makes Black folks believe that cathartic, but ultimately debilitating truth-telling, carries more weight than messages of hope and courage. I am not saying that everything has to be hearts and flowers and that there is no room for gritty reality. But either some faction within Hip Hop has to rise up from the margins, relatively soon, and effectively talk to the masses about how we can improve our lives and communities, or we should stop bullshitting ourselves by saying that Hip Hop is revolutionary and necessary for social change.

Anyone who is vaguely familiar with the Black nationalism of the 1960s has heard the question, "What will you do when the revolution comes?" The only acceptable answer is that you will be a soldier in the fight for liberation. Unfortunately, even if some Messiah rose tomorrow to lead us, the Black nation may not be ready. Almost 40 years ago, France Beal said in her classic essay, Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female (1970), "We live in a highly industrialized society and every member of the black nation must be academically and technologically developed as possible. To wage a revolution, we need competent teachers doctors, nurses, electronics experts, chemists, biologists, physicists, political scientists, and so on and so forth. Black women sitting at home reading bedtime stories to their children is not going to make it."

Beal's pronouncement is still relevant today, particularly since in many cities, the high school drop-out rate for Black Americans is more than 50 percent. Within many Black communities, there is a large uneducated population, meaning people who don"t read well enough to comprehend a bus schedule. In Washington, DC a recent study said that 1/3 of the population was illiterate. Let's imagine that Black folks won a revolution or finally got some states to create their own country, unfortunately this "Black nation" would not have enough citizens who are equipped to build and sustain the economic, political and cultural institutions necessary to protect our rights and values from a re-subjugation. A Hip Hop that is largely anti-intellectual is not going to help our cause.

I must say that I think that Beal was wrong on key point--- One of the most radical, revolutionary things that a woman (or man) can do, is to not only fight for justice, but also prepare her children (biological or otherwise) to be warriors. This means that we have got to be serious about educating our children so that they can think critically. We also got to be serious about ensuring that our culture, including Hip Hop, strengthens and expands their identities as young men and women, not diminishes them.

I know that Hip Hop alone is not supposed to be a panacea. It is not a substitute for lax parents, failing public schools, dangerous neighborhoods or dead-end jobs. I also know that when I look at my son, I am not still not sure where Hip Hop fits into his young life. I want him to understand the legacy of racial discrimination and social injustice in this country------poverty, crime and lack of education, but I don"t want his idea about who he is or who he can become to be confined by it. Right now mainstream Hip Hop just doesn"t provide a variety of narratives about being Black: hoochies, thugs and pimps. Some cat rapping about Pythagorean's theorem is not what I want to see, what I yearn for is a Hip Hop that blatantly articulates our collective condition, but also celebrates Black love, acknowledges the ancestors and that encourage us to strive toward excellence.

Maybe Nas is right, Hip Hop is dead if it doesn"t have the ability or the interest to school our young people about how to create a life beyond the corner, the strip club or the penitentiary. Then my mind goes on pause when I play something like Pharoache Monch's "Desire," Talib Kweli's "Get By"or Kanye's "Jesus Walks." I then reminisce about all the rap songs that have fortified me since my youth, both the so-called conscious and the so-called commercial. You know what---with the guidance of my parents I turned out just fine. I then realize that Hip Hop, like life and religion, has its share of fakes, crooks, liars, crackpots and extremists but their actions don"t alter its spiritual essence. I am not willing to summarily reject Hip Hop because people promote versions of it that don"t resonate with me. I feel obliged to continually push Hip Hop to support, in its words and deeds, the ideals of freedom and equality. But in the meantime, I understand that it is my duty as the mother of young Black man to decide which interpretations of Hip Hop are suitable for him because they affirm his humanity and are humorous or soul-filled. Similarly, I will have no problem keeping him from that aspects of Hip Hop that are buffoonish, nihilistic or suggest that intelligence and Blackness are mutually exclusive. I guess, for me, the Hip Hop that does not lead my son closer to the light is dead.

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