

## Rap, Race, and Politics

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Whatever may be the conditions of a people's political and social factors...it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement.

Amilcar Cabral<sup>1</sup>

For many black youths in the United States, in the words of the classic song by War, the world is a ghetto. Trapped in and witness to cycles of violence, destitution and lives of desperation, their aspirations and views find expression in political behavior, social practice, economic activities, and cultural outlets. These streams came together and informed a culture of resistance that has been termed Hip Hop whose most dynamic expression is in the form of rap music. On the one hand, rap is the voice of alienated, frustrated and rebellious black youth who recognize their vulnerability and marginality in post-industrial America. On the other hand, rap is the packaging and marketing of social discontent by some of the most skilled ad agencies and largest record producers in the world. It's this duality that has made rap and rappers an explosive issue in the politics of power that shaped the 1992 U.S. elections and beyond. It's also this duality that has given rap its many dimensions and flavors; its spiraling matrix of empowerment and reaction.

Influenced by a tradition of oral leaders and artists, from Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Nikki Giovanni to Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets, young black cultural activists evolved from the urban cosmos of the early 1980s ready for rap. Denied opportunity for more formal music training and access to instruments due to Reagan-era budget cuts in education and school music programs, turntables became instruments and lyrical acrobatics became a cultural outlet. Initially underground, by the late 1980s, rap and the broad spectrum of Hip Hop had become the dominant cultural environment of young African-Americans, particularly males.

Following the historic example of the cultural modes of the civil rights and Black Power movements, rap has had an international impact. Just as the Vietnamese sang civil rights freedom songs, so have the political imperatives of rap traversed the globe and found expression in venues from Mexico to India. In Czechoslovakia, local rappers rap about the struggle of being young and penniless. Wearing baseball caps and half-laced sneakers, youth in the Ivory Coast have found a bond in the music. Australian rappers kick it about the mistreatment of the Aborigine people. Tributes to the victims of U.S. atomic bombs form the substance of local rappers in Japan.<sup>2</sup>

The cultural power of rap as global protest music is undeniable. To understand the genesis of this power, however, requires a return to the source. It is rap's impact on the economics, politics and gender issues in the African-American community that must be examined, if only briefly, to sense its significance, possibilities and contradictions. The enemies of rap, as one observer noted, have gone after "the message, the messenger and the medium."<sup>3</sup> And it is not just whites who have dismissed and criticized rap. As Salim Muwakkil wrote in *In These Times*, "for many middle-class black Americans, rap is...a soundtrack for sociopaths."<sup>4</sup>

### Hip Hop Capitalism

From slave town to Motown, from Bebop to Hip Hop, black music has been shaped by the material conditions of black life. Contextually, today's black youth culture flows out of the changes that affected the political economy of U.S. capitalism over the last two decades. Incremental economic and social gains made in the late 1960s and the 1970s were destroyed with a vengeance in the Reagan and Bush years. Many observers of black politics saw the handwriting on the wall when Reagan came into power. In 1982, political writer Manning Marable prophesied:

The acceleration of black unemployment and underemployment, the capitulation of many civil rights and Black Power leaders to the Right, the demise of militant black working-class institutions and caucuses, and the growing dependency of broad segments of the black community upon public assistance programs and transfer payments of various kinds; these interdependent realities within the contemporary black political economy are the beginning of a new and profound crisis for black labor in America.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the material basis for the production and reproduction of black youth alienation is the growing immiseration of millions of African-American working-class families. Between 1986 and 1992, according to the Census Bureau, an additional 1.2 million African-Americans fell below the poverty line.<sup>6</sup> As stunning as that may be, the Bush administration achieved the same result in half the time. A report issued by the Children's Defense Fund documents that 841,000 youth fell into poverty in the first two years of the Bush administration, affecting, in some cities, as many as two-thirds of minority children.<sup>7</sup> The official poverty rate for blacks is 32.7 per cent, 10.2 million people, which is higher than for Hispanics (28.7 per cent), Asians (13.8 per cent), or whites (11.3 per cent).<sup>8</sup>

Most critical, however, has been the unemployment situation of African-American youth and what has happened to black youth economically over the last three decades. Since 1960, black youth suffered the largest decline in employment of all component groups of all races. In 1986, in the middle of the Republican years, black teenage unemployment was officially as high as 43.7 per cent. In October 1992, six years later, the numbers remained virtually unchanged, with black youth unemployment officially at 42.5 per cent.<sup>9</sup> One does not have to agree with the rantings and rage of Ice T, Sister

Souljah or other rappers to unite with their sense of isolation, anger and refusal to go down quietly. Ignored and “dissed” by both major political parties and much of what passes for national black leadership, is it any wonder that Ice Cube reflects the views of so many youth when he sings:

Do I have to sell me a whole lot of crack  
For decent shelter and clothes on my back?  
Or should I just wait for President Bush  
Or Jesse Jackson and Operation PUSH?<sup>10</sup>

It was, then, perfectly logical that Hip Hop culture should initially emerge most strongly in those cities hardest hit by Reaganomics with large minority youth populations—New York, Los Angeles, Houston and Oakland. For many of these youth, rap became not only an outlet for social and political discourse, but also an economic opportunity that required little investment other than boldness and a competitive edge. In a period when black labour was in low demand, if one could not shoot a basketball like Michael Jordan, then the entertainment industry was one of the few legal avenues available for the get-rich consciousness that dominated the social ethos of the 1980s.

Rap music is big business. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, in 1990 rap brought in \$600 million (in that year, two rap albums alone—admittedly from the “soft” end of the spectrum—Hammer’s *Please Hammer Don’t Hurt ‘Em* and the white group, Vanilla Ice’s, *To the Extreme* sold 14 million copies just in the United States, while the hard-hitting Public Enemy’s *Fear of a Black Planet* and Digital Underground’s *Sex Packets* also sold over a million each); in 1991, sales rose to about \$700 million.<sup>11</sup> 2 Live Crew’s *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, the subject of law suits and arrests, sold more than two million copies. In their debut album, *Straight Outta Compton*, NWA sold over a million copies and followed that up in 1992 by breaking all sales records with their *Efil4zaggin* (Niggaz 4 life spelled backwards) album. The album sold an unprecedented 900,000 copies in its first week of release and later went on to sell millions.<sup>12</sup>

Rap is attractive because it requires generally low-investment costs for the corporations. According to one producer, a rap album can be produced for less than \$50,000, while an equivalent album for an established rock group or popular R&B group can cost \$100,000–300,000. And while rap artists are signed with a bewildering frenzy, they are also dropped more rapidly than musicians from other music forms. If an artist or group doesn’t do well within the first six to eight weeks of their release, they are often sent packing.

Annually, young black consumers age 15–24 spend about \$23 billion a year in the United States, of which about \$100 million is spent on records and tapes.<sup>13</sup> African-Americans, however, are not the main purchasers of rap as, increasingly, rap is being bought by non-blacks. A survey taken in mid-1992 found that 74 per cent of rap sold in the first six months of that year was bought by whites.<sup>14</sup> This is one reason why every major record company and communications conglomerate, from Sony to Atlantic, has made significant investments in rap music.

For many rappers, Hip Hop capitalism promises both riches and racial integrity. Rappers found that they could yell at the system and be paid (highly) by it at the same

time. A legitimate desire and need for economic empowerment could be turned into profit with only minor ideological adjustments and rationalizations about “free speech” by capital. Some of those who have been the target of censorship, such as rapper Ice T, would argue that free enterprise will only let free speech go so far. As he says in his song “Freedom of Speech”:

Freedom of Speech  
That's some mutherfuckin' bullshit  
You say the wrong thing  
They'll lock your ass up quick

In the laissez-faire capitalist atmosphere that dominated the early years of modern rap, a number of black entrepreneurs were able to enter the business and become highly successful. Queen Latifah's Flavor Unit Management and Records is home to popular groups such as Nikki D, Black Sheep, D Nice, Pete Rock & CL Smooth, and Naughty by Nature.

No one better symbolizes the contradictory aspirations of the rappers than Russell Simmons and his phenomenal achievements with Rush Communications and its rap label, Def Jam. By any estimation, Rush Communications is huge. Home to top rap groups such as Public Enemy, Run DMC and Big Daddy Kane and producer of the highly rated, hip hop-ish cable comedy series Def Comedy Jam, Simmons has transformed what was essentially a small basement operation into a \$34 million conglomerate. Rap artists at Rush have earned ten gold records, six platinum records, and two multiplatinum records. Plans are afoot to expand the conglomerate into film production and even sell public stock. Rush Communications is the thirty-second largest black-owned business in the United States and the second largest black-owned entertainment company.<sup>15</sup>

As CEO, Simmons earns an estimated \$5 million annually. Usually attired in sneakers, sweatsuits and baseball caps, Simmons is a major driving force behind the music and in attacking the racist structures of the popular music business that have historically reduced the role of African-American to that of powerless entertainer.

Simmons' success and efforts are as laudable as they are remarkable. They do not represent, however, a break from the economic system that is responsible for the misery that forms the substance of the music that Rush produces. The commodification of black resistance is not the same as resistance to a society built upon commodification. Rap artists, even those who obtained some level of economic power and independence, are still slaves to a market system that requires an economic elite and mass deprivation.

It's critical to note that it has been more than just the multinational recording industry that has benefited from the reduction of black culture to the circumscribed limits of Hip Hop. The alcohol, tennis shoe, clothing, hat and film industries have boomed as a result of the new markets that have opened up or expanded, based on the spread of Hip Hop and the often exploitative use of rap artists in advertising.

Alcohol companies, already complicit in the disproportionate targeting of the black community for liquor sales, were quick to front rap stars to sell their product. (One group that did not buy into the hype was Public Enemy. After McKenzie River Corp illegally used PE's Chuck D's voice in one of their commercials, PE went on the offensive and

denounced malt liquor sales, used the company for \$5 million and recorded a song, “One Million Bottalebags,” criticizing the practice of selling the brew mainly in the black community.)<sup>16</sup> Ice Cube, Eric B. & Rakim, EPMD, the Geto Boys, Compton’s Most Wanted, Yo! MTV Rap’s Fab Freddie and Yo-Yo—who was not even drinking age at the time—were all used to sell highly potent malt liquor. Sexually-suggestive scripts also attempted to convince consumers that malt liquors are aphrodisiacs. Yo-Yo would moan that St Ides Malt Liquor “puts you in the mood [and] makes you wanna go oohh.” Ice Cube claimed that with St Ides you could “get your girl in the mood quicker” and that the beverage would make your “jimmy thicker.” The alcohol content of St Ides, Elephant, Magnum, Crazy Horse, Olde English 800, Red Bull Malt Liquor, PowerMaster and other malt beers is greater than regular beer—nearly twice as great in some cases. Malt beer accounts for only about 3 per cent of all beer sold, yet more than 30 per cent of its sales are in the black community.

This exploitation of these rappers’ popularity was denounced by community activists and black health advocates around the country. Makani Themba of the Marin Institute in California pointed out astutely that the beer companies were “appropriating a very important part of our culture to sell what is a dangerous product for many of these kids.”<sup>17</sup>

Rap’s impact on the Hollywood film industry has also been significant. Across the spectrum, rap has found its way into the soundtrack and themes of movies both big and small. Black films, in particular, have been built around the symbols of Hip Hop and black resistance, even as the substance of most of the films has retained a profound commitment and defense of middle-class, bourgeois culture and values.

Official Hollywood has produced an avalanche of films targeted at the black community in the last few years that have run the gamut from gratuitously violent action dramas, such as “New Jack City” and “Trespass,” to absurdly embarrassing comedies, such as “True Identity” and “Sister Act.” Spike Lee, who embodies much of Hip Hop’s contradictory strengths and weaknesses, along with other black directors, actors and producers, has challenged the standard fare and attempted to create a new generation of black films that honestly reflect black youth culture.

Hollywood has been willing to produce both these types of films for a very simple reason: with a relatively small investment there is the potential for large returns. While African-Americans constitute only about 12 per cent of the U.S. population, they make up about 25 per cent of the movie-going audience.<sup>18</sup> John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood*, for example, which starred rapper Ice Cube, cost about \$6 million to produce and raised at least \$57 million. This translates into a profit of roughly \$51 million. *House Party (I)*, by the Hudlin Brothers, starring rappers Kid ‘N Play, cost a paltry, by Hollywood standards, \$2.5 million and brought in \$26 million in revenue for a cool \$23.5 million in profits. Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever* cost about \$13 million and raised \$31 million in sales. The dirt cheap *Straight Outta Brooklyn* cost \$327,000 and brought back \$2,173,000.<sup>19</sup>

In all of these films and many more, the background music is rap and Hip Hop is the atmosphere in which mainly moral tales are told and the politics of liberalism are preached. From Public Enemy to Digital Underground to Arrested Development, every genre of rap is represented. Many rappers are finding it a smooth move from rapping to acting. The Ices, T and Cube, are the most active of the rapper-actor set, but are being

followed closely by Queen Latifah, the Fresh Prince, Kid 'N Play, 2Pac, and LL Cool J, all of whom have made movies and television appearances.

The political economy of Hip Hop, i.e., its capacity to open markets, maximize profits, and commodify legitimate grief and unrest, is the material basis that drives it forward. However, the nature of Hip Hop, its political soul, is to provoke and agitate.

### Fear of a Black Planet: The Politics of Provocation

Nightmare. That's what I am  
 America's nightmare  
 I am what you made me  
 The hate and evil that you gave me...  
 America, reap what you sow.

2 Pac

The dominant ideological trend of the rappers is black nationalism. Universally wedded to the notion that black leadership, for the most part, has sold out, the black nationalist rhetoric of Hip Hop becomes a challenging and liberating political paradigm in the face of surrender on the part of many political forces in the black community. While there are leftist rappers, such as the Disposal Heroes of Hiphoprisy and KRS-One, who to some extent embody Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition notion of politics, most range from the soft-core nationalism of Arrested Development to the hard-core nationalist influenced raps of the political and gangsta rappers.

In particular, minister Louis Farrakhan and his Nation of Islam have had tremendous influence on the political views of black youth, in general, and of rappers, more specifically. Ice Cube, for example, joined the organization, stating that, "To me, the best organization around for black people is the Nation of Islam."<sup>20</sup> And a whole set of Muslim rappers has come on the scene. This includes groups such as Brand Nubian, Poor Righteous Teachers, King Sun, Movement Ex and Paris, who created his own mini-controversy when he wrote the song "Bush Killer"—the title of which should be explanation enough.

Other nationalist groups and movements have also emerged, such as the hard-core cultural nationalist Blackwatch movement, centered in New York, which sees itself as building a national black youth movement. It is spearheaded by the group X-Clan and includes other rappers such as Isis, Professor X and Queen Mother Rage.

In modern rap, Public Enemy (PE) is the leading, though by no means only, force espousing a black nationalist ideology. Public Enemy's Chuck D, recognized by many as the leader of radical rap, calls Hip Hop music "black folks' CNN."<sup>21</sup> Although many newer and more provocative rappers have come on the scene, PE can still be controversial with the best of them and maintains its reputation as the "Black Panthers" of rap<sup>22</sup>—for example, with the release in 1992 of its "By the Time I Get to Arizona" rap and video. In Arizona, the reactionary former Republican governor, Evan Mecham, had rescinded the state holiday celebrating the birthday of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. This made it virtually the only state in the nation that did not officially honor King.

Indeed, Mecham went as far as to state that “King didn’t deserve a holiday and that blacks needed jobs more than another day off.” Boycotts and protests over the issue cost the state an estimated \$360 million.

In Public Enemy’s video, a white governor is blown to bits by a car bomb, a white state senator is poisoned and members of the state legislature are gunned down. Chuck D’s song leaves no mistaking his intent: “I’m on the one mission to get a politician,” he says, and “until we get some land, call me the trigger man.” Coretta Scott King denounced both PE and the video: “We do not subscribe to violence as a way to achieve any social or economic ends.” PE was also soundly condemned by other civil rights leaders both inside and outside of Arizona.

In interviews, Chuck D stated that he viewed King as far more militant by the time of his death than he is generally portrayed as being, both by the media and by civil rights leaders. Chuck D claimed that if King were alive today, he would probably be referred to as “Martin Luther King Farrakhan.”<sup>23</sup>

Rap’s rage interjected itself into the world of black politics in 1992 in other ways. Its most celebrated entrance into black political life occurred when the then presidential candidate, Bill Clinton, shot a stinging criticism at rapper Sister Souljah for provocative remarks attributed to her following the Los Angeles uprising. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Souljah is reported to have said, “I mean if black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people.”<sup>24</sup> Although she said that the statement had been taken out of context, and subsequent examination of the full text of her interview seems to support her contention, her remarks set off a firestorm of white protest and a wave of black defensiveness. Both Clinton and Souljah had been invited to speak (a day apart) at a meeting of Jesse Jackson’s National Rainbow Coalition. Jackson was taken to task by Clinton for inviting Souljah to speak—he went as far as to equate her with the racist demagogue, David Duke.

Most black observers asserted that Clinton bludgeoned Jackson with Souljah in order to win back to the Democrats white support that had fled to the Republicans over the last several elections. Although Reagan and Bush had played the race card effectively in their previous campaigns, Clinton’s move appeared to be a preemptive strike. As one reporter noted, “Move over Willie Horton. Sister Souljah has arrived.”<sup>25</sup> While it may be some exaggeration to say that Clinton owed his triumph to Souljah, he received more media attention for his willingness to make a calculated attack on her and Jackson than he did for his pleas for racial harmony. His rise in the polls, particularly and almost exclusively among whites, in June and July of 1992, was due in no small part to this tactical hit. While blacks responded negatively to the attack by three to one, whites, by three to one, showed a favorable response.<sup>26</sup>

But while many in the Hip Hop and black communities denounced Clinton, at least one rapper found some common ground with the new president. Clinton (and his vice president Al Gore) could be seen during the inaugural festivities rocking to the rhymes of long-time popular rapper LL Cool J. Illustrating the way in which form can be divorced from content, Cool J delivered the following conciliatory rap:

’93 unity, you and me  
time to party with Big Bill and Hillary...  
We’re making history a landslide victory

Raise the flag, blast the mag, let the plane fly  
Pack the bags and tell George and Barbara Bush bye.<sup>27</sup>

### Gangsta Rap

Much of rap's political pedagogy comes from the so-called gangsta rappers. Dismissed by many as vulgar, profane, misogynist, racist, anti-Semitic and juvenile—accusations that carry a great deal of validity—gangsta rap, at the same time, reflects and projects what scholar Robin D.G. Kelley calls “the lessons of lived experiences.”<sup>28</sup> In a sense, Cube, NWA, Too Short, the Geto Boys and others are the “organic intellectuals” of the inner-city black poor, documenting as they do their generally hidden conditions and lifestyle choices. Naughty by Nature's “Ghetto Bastard” is a captivating and engrossing piece of verbal literature and sociology. This autobiographical tale of a black male teenager's urban experience is a brilliant exposition of what Foucault has termed the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges.” The song is rich in a wide array of themes—absent ghetto fathers, the attractiveness of lumpen activities, the racist assumptions of the education system, the vicissitudes of consumer culture, dilapidated housing and the ever-present threat of violence—that reflect an experience that is collectively endured, daily, by millions of African-Americans. It's social anthropology with rhythm. Naughty by Nature's Treach projects the anger and frustration of many when he raps,

Say somethin' positive, well positive ain't where I live I live right around  
the corner from West Hell Two blocks from South Shit and once in a jail  
cell<sup>29</sup>

An examination of today's rap songs quickly demonstrates that the principal topic of the music is the social crisis engulfing working-class black America. Unlike the moralistic preaching, escapism or sentimentality that defines most popular music, including the moderated rap of Hammer, hard-core rappers detail the unemployment, miseducation, discrimination, homicides, gang life, class oppression, police brutality and regressive gender politics that dominate the lives of many black youth. The macho boasting, misogyny, violent fantasies and false consciousness exist side by side with an immature, but clear, critique of authority, a loathing of the oppressive character of wage labor, a hatred of racism and an expose of Reaganism.

Many rappers, for example, address the racist character of the nation's war on drugs. Although blacks make up only about 15 per cent of the nation's drug users, they are close to 50 per cent of those arrested on drug charges, mainly for possession. The drug war's collateral damage continues to grow in what one senate committee calls a “\$32 billion failure.”<sup>30</sup> Raps like NWA's “Dope Man,” “Ice T's “New Jack Hustler “Ice Cube's “The Product” and CPO's “The Wall” all expose the bankruptcy of the war on drugs and its deadly impact on the black community. And Houston's Geto Boys, notorious for their brutal depictions of women, address the contradictions of drug dealing in their hit “Mind Playing Tricks on Me.” Pinpointing the anxiety and frustration of a young drug dealer,



the song struggles to find a human character in what has become a media stereotype. They state in one passage:

Can't keep a steady hand  
 Because I'm nervous  
 Every Sunday morning, I'm in service  
 Praying for forgiveness  
 And trying to find an exit out the business<sup>31</sup>

Debates over police brutality were also forced into the public arena as a result of rap songs. While the video of the Rodney King beating introduced many in the United States to the reality of police brutality in the black, the rap community noted that it had been discoursing about the issue for years. In his 1987 "Squeeze the Trigger," Ice T links the police attitude with police murders:

Cops hate kids, kids hate cops.  
 Cops kill kids with warnin' shots.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar vein, NWA also addresses the issue of police brutality as well as the issues of racial oppression, violence, black-on-black crime, self-hatred, unemployment and human rights—often all in the same song. Their signature song, "F□□ Tha Police," embodies a street-felt rage that resonates through the entire national black community:

Fuck the police coming straight from the underground  
 A young nigger got it bad 'cause I'm brown  
 I'm not the other color  
 Some people think  
 They have the authority to kill a minority  
 Fuck that shit, 'cause I ain't the one  
 For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun  
 to be beaten on, and thrown in jail<sup>33</sup>

Other rappers also address what has become a virtually black-only experience: police shootings. In their "Behind Closed Doors," W.C. and the MAAD Circle rhyme:

I'm being charged for resisting arrest  
 But it was either catch a bullet or be beaten to death<sup>34</sup>

Or, in Ice Cube's "Endangered Species":

Every con killer goes ignored

They just send another nigger to the morgue<sup>35</sup>

Los Angeles, in particular, has been notorious for its police killings and for the way the police view the black community as a war zone. Under the leadership of the (now departed) police chief Daryl Gates, the LAPD viewed young blacks as unredeemable urban terrorists who were best kept locked up, contained or eliminated. (Under the cover of fighting the drug war, for example, LAPD initiated Operation Hammer which, time and time again, invaded the black community and, on 9 April 1988, arrested 1,453 young blacks.)<sup>36</sup>

In 1992, Ice T returned to this theme with his song "Cop Killer," which generated a massive counter-reaction from conservative luminaries, such as George Bush, Dan Quayle, Oliver North, and the National Rifle Association. His flight of fantasy this time, however, advocated a pro-active preventative measure:

I got my 12-gauge sawed off  
 I got my headlights turned off  
 I'm 'bout to bust some shot off  
 I'm 'bout to dust some cops off.  
 Cop killer, better you than me.  
 Cop killer, fuck police brutality.<sup>37</sup>

Not surprisingly, there have been moves to censor rap. One organization active in this is the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) founded by Tipper Gore (wife of former vice president Al Gore) and Susan Baker (wife of Bush's campaign manager, James Baker). In 1985, PMRC led the movement that forced congressional hearings on record labeling. Record companies succumbed to the pressure and began to put warning labels on rap and rock music felt to be obscene and too explicit. The first album to have a warning label placed on it was Ice T's *Rhyme Pays*. Evidence indicates that most of the groups targeted for labeling are black. In a 1989 newsletter put out by PMRC, every song listed as having warning labels was done by a black artist. Other groups calling for censorship of rap records have been more explicitly racist. Missouri Project Rock passed out information packets that criticized "race-mixing" and called Martin Luther King "Martin Lucifer King."<sup>38</sup>

Tipper Gore battled Ice T on the Oprah Winfrey show and wrote about it in the *Washington Post*. In an article titled "Hate, rape and rap," she justifiably criticized some of the vile sexist statements made by rappers, particularly Ice T. In words that specifically seem to be addressed to Ice T, she said, "We must raise our voices in protest and put pressure on those who not only reflect this hatred but also package, polish, promote and market it; those who would make words like 'nigger' acceptable."<sup>39</sup> In highly moral tones, she then unconvincingly attempted to make a link between rap music and rape.

One of Ice T's responses was to write a song, "Freedom of Speech." In the song, he attacks Gore personally. He says:

Think I give a fuck about a silly bitch named Gore?  
Yo, PMRC, here we go, war!<sup>40</sup>

### The Evil that Men Do: Rap's Phallo-Centric Musings

Gender issues in rap remain controversial. From its earliest days to the present, women and more than a few men have rightfully condemned much of rap music as misogynist and degrading to women. National Council of Negro Women president Dorothy Height states: "This music is damaging because it is degrading to women to have it suggested in our popular music that [women] are to be abused."<sup>41</sup> Former head of the NAACP, Benjamin Hooks, echoes that sentiment. He says, in reference to the music, "our [black] cultural experience does not include debasing women."<sup>42</sup>

Scholar Marilyn Lashley is uncompromising in her denunciation of the portrayal of women in rap music. It is "explicitly and gratuitously sexual, occasionally bestial and frequently violent. These images, in the guise of 'art and music,' exploit, degrade and denigrate African-American women as well as the race. They encourage sexual harassment, exploitation and misogyny at their best and sexual abuse at their worst," she states.<sup>43</sup>

Others, mainly men, have defended these projections as part of a continuity in black culture that is not as harmful as it appears. No less than Harvard scholar and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates walks softly on this turf, he pooh-poohs the uproar by stating that the male rappers are playing out the old black tradition of "signifying,"<sup>44</sup> a practice that is relatively harmless and culturally important. Some have attempted to justify the degradation of women by arguing for the singular uplifting of black males. Ice Cube, for example, argued in an interview with Angela Davis that black women have to wait for black men to be uplifted first.<sup>45</sup>

Rap has become a forum for debating the nature of gender relations among black youth. The name-calling, descriptions of graphic rapes and other negative encounters between young black women and men dominate the music's gender politics. For many of the rap groups, their songs are one long extended sex party. This aspect of the music has also drawn fire, though many of the male rappers have argued that they are engaging in meaningless fantasies. However, as one feminist correctly pointed out, it's "not so much the issue of sex as an obsession, but that of sex as a violent weapon against women." She goes on to say that songs like "Treat Her Like a Prostitute" "One Less Bitch" "Pop that Coochie," "Baby Got Back," "Me So Horny," "That Bitch Betta Have My Money" and "She Swallowed It" "not only desensitize their audiences to violence against women, they also help rationalize and reinforce a nihilistic mentality among those who already suffer from the effects of ghetto reality."<sup>46</sup> The escalating incidence of rape and sexual harassment against women in general, and black women in particular, underscores her concerns.

A number of positive female rappers have emerged to challenge the musical and ideological dominance of the male rappers. Strong women, such as Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Queen Mother Rage, Isis and MC Lyte, have produced popular songs that have

advocated positive relations among men and women, called for sisterhood and projected what scholar Patricia Hill Collins calls an "Afrocentric feminist epistemology."<sup>47</sup>

In one of her first songs, "Latifah's Law," Queen Latifah, who has also managed rap groups, makes it clear that she sees herself, and demands to be seen, as an equal to the male rappers:

The ladies will kick it, the rhyme is wicked  
Those who don't know how to be pros get evicted  
A woman can bear you, break you, take you  
Now its time to rhyme. Can you relate to  
A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream?<sup>48</sup>

In addition, some rap male and gender-mixed groups, such as the Disposal Heroes of Hiphoprisy and Arrested Development, have shown that a positive perspective on black female and male relations is possible.

But, for every (social) action, there is an opposite and equal (social) reaction. Hardcore female rappers, such as Bytches With Problems, Nikki D, Hoes With an Attitude and LA Starr, have come on the scene and demonstrated that they can be as vulgar, blasphemous and homicidal as the men. BWP's Lyndah and Tanisha, whose records are distributed by mega-corp Columbia Records, have been called the "Thelma and Louise" of rap.<sup>49</sup> In song after song, they gun down men, cops and anyone else who crosses or is perceived to have crossed their path. When they are not committing homicide, they are busy either screwing men to death or ripping them off. All the while, they hold high the banner of women's liberation.

In their song "Shit Popper," they denounce woman beating by advising sisters to:

Wait until he goes to bed,  
then give him three to the head,  
leave his motherfucking ass for dead.<sup>50</sup>

While addressing important themes, such as date rape and adultery, their solutions, more often than not, are to just blow the suckers away.

It is ironic that BWP, like many of the hardcore women's groups, are produced by men who also write many of the lyrics. That women producers and managers are far and few between is one of the main reasons why the music remains so misogynist. Progressive women rappers complain incessantly about how difficult it is for their music to be produced. Even some of the songs produced by the political, usually black nationalist, rappers run counter to women's liberation. While eschewing the violence and sexual exploitation of the hard-core gangsta rappers, groups such as Public Enemy and X-Clan will often project a romanticized notion of black womanhood that does not fundamentally challenge male domination. More critically, they will also use language that fundamentally reinforces the power relations of gender oppression.

As one scholar noted, for many, the rappers are "urban griots dispensing social and cultural critiques."<sup>51</sup> While this may be true, the nature of those critiques is

simultaneously painfully naive and incredibly insightful; abjectly dehumanising and rich in human spirit. Rap's pedagogy, like the initial stages of all pedagogies of oppressed people, emerges incomplete, contradictory and struggling for coherence. If we look closely, the birth and evolution of rap tell us as much about the current state of black America as rap's content and form.

At the same time, we must be careful not to reduce African-American culture to the commodities and political ambiguities of Hip Hop. Music forms, including jazz and blues and other non-Hip Hop cultural expression deserve criticism, reaffirmation and validation. In the end, Hip Hop is neither the cultural beast that will destroy black America nor the political panacea that will save it, but is a part of the ongoing African-American struggle constantly reaching for higher and higher modes of liberation.

### Notes

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3. Robin Givhan, "Of rap, racism and fear: why does this message music seem so menacing?," *San Francisco Chronicle* (6 August 1992).
4. Quoted in Kathleen M.Sullivan, "2 Live Crew and the cultural contradictions of Miller," *Reconstruction* (Vol. I, no. 2, 1990), p. 23.
5. Manning Marable, "The crisis of the black working-class: an economic and historical analysis," *Science & Society* (Summer 1982), p. 156.
6. National Urban League, *The state of black America 1993* (New York, National Urban League, 1993), p. 168.
7. Barbara Vobejda, "Children's poverty rose in '80s; suburbs, rural areas also show increase," *Washington Post* (12 August 1992).
8. Press release, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 3 September 1992.
9. See *The state of black America*, op. cit. and K.Jennings, "Understanding the persisting crisis of black youth unemployment" in J.Jennings (ed.), *Race, politics and economic development* (New York, 1992).
10. Ice Cube, "A bird in the hand," *Death Certificate* (Priority Records, 1991).
11. Paul Grein, "It was feast or famine in '90 certs; platinum ranks thin, but smashes soar," *Billboard* (12 January 1991), p. 9.
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17. Media Action Alert issued by the Marin Institute, 23 July 1991.
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19. "Black video distribution," *Washington Post* (8 March 1992), and Carla Hall, "Breaking down the color barrier," *Washington Post* (24 September 1991).
20. Ice Cube and Angela Davis, "Nappy happy," *Transition* (no. 58, 1992), p. 191.

21. Leland, op. cit.
22. K.Carroll, "One black nation under a groove," *Black Arts Bulletin* (October 1992).
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