Music / Culture

A series from Wesleyan University Press

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Tricia Rose

Black Noise

Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America

Wesleyan University Press

Published by University Press of New England
Hanover & London

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Public Enemy's "Can't Truss It" opens with rapper Flavor Flav shouting "Confusion!" over a heavy and energetic bass line. The subsequent lyrics suggest that Flavor Flav is referring to lead rapper Chuck D's story about the legacy of slavery, that it has produced extreme cultural confusion. He could just as easily be describing the history of rap. Rap music is a confusing and noisy element of contemporary American popular culture that continues to draw a great deal of attention to itself. On the one hand, music and cultural critics praise rap's role as an educational tool, point out that black women rappers are rare examples of aggressive pro-women lyricists in popular music, and defend rap's ghetto stories as real-life reflections that should draw attention to the burning problems of racism and economic oppression, rather than to questions of obscenity. On the other hand, news media attention on rap seems fixated on instances of violence at rap concerts, rap producers' illegal use of musical samples, gangsta raps' lurid fantasies of cop killing and female dismemberment, and black nationalist rappers' suggestions that white people are the devil's disciples. These celebratory and inflammatory aspects in rap and the media coverage of them bring to the fore several long-standing debates about popular music and culture. Some of the more contentious disputes revolve around the following questions: Can violent images incite violent action, can music set the stage for political mobilization, do sexually explicit lyrics contribute to the moral "breakdown" of society, and finally, is this really music anyway? And, if these debates about rap music are not confusing enough,
rappers engage them in contradictory ways. Some rappers defend the
date of gangster rappers and at the same time consider it a negative
influence on black youths. Female rappers openly criticize male rappers'
sexist work and simultaneously defend the 2 Live Crew’s right to sell mi-
sogynist music. Rappers who criticize America for its perpetuation of
racing and economic discrimination also share conservative ideas about
personal responsibility, call for self-improvement strategies in the black
community that focus heavily on personal behavior as the cause and
solation for crime, drugs, and community instability.

Rap music brings together a tangle of some of the most complex
social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society.
Rap’s contradictory articulations are not signs of absent intellectual
clarity; they are a common feature of community and popular cultural
dialogues that always offer more than one cultural, social, or political
viewpoint. These unusually abundant polyvocal conversations seem ir-
ational when they are severed from the social contexts where everyday
struggles over resources, pleasure, and meanings take place.

Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices
from the margins of urban America. Rap music is a form of rhymed
storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based
music. It began in the mid-1970s in the South Bronx in New York City
as a part of hip hop, an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth
culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. From the
outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black
urban life in contemporary America. Rappers speak with the voice of
personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer or narrator.
Male rappers often speak from the perspective of a young man who
wants social status in a locally meaningful way. They rap about how to
avoid gang pressures and still earn local respect, how to deal with the
loss of several friends to gun fights and drug overdoses, and they tell
grandiose and sometimes violent tales that are powered by male sexual
power over women. Female rappers sometimes tell stories from the per-
spective of a young woman who is skeptical of male protestations of love
or a girl who has been involved with a drug dealer and cannot sever her-
sel from his dangerous life-style. Some raps speak to the failures of black
men to provide security and attack men where their manhood seems
most vulnerable: the pocket. Some tales are one sister telling another to
rid herself from the abuse of a lover.

Like all contemporary voices, the rapper’s voice is imbedded in
powerful and dominant technological, industrial, and ideological insti-
tutions. Rappers tell long, involved, and sometimes abstract stories with
catchy and memorable phrases and beats that lend themselves to black
sound bite packaging, storing critical fragments in fast-paced electrified
rhythms. Rap tales are told in elaborate and ever-changing black slang
and refer to black cultural figures and rituals, mainstream film, video and
television characters, and little-known black heroes. For rap’s language
wizards, all images, sounds, ideas, and icons are ripe for recontextual-
ization, pun, mockery, and celebration. Kool Moe Dee boasts that each
of his rymes is like a dissertation, Kid-N-Play have quoted Jerry Lee
Lewis’s famous phrase “great balls of fire,” Big Daddy Kane brags that
he’s raw like sushi (and that his object of love has his nose open like
a jar of Vicks), Ice Cube refers to his ghetto stories as “tales from the
darkside,” clearly referencing the television horror show with the same
name. Das Efx’s raps include Elmer Fus’s characteristic “OOOH I’m
steamin’!” in full character voice along with a string of almost surreal
collagelike references to Bugs Bunny and other television characters.
At the same time, the stories, ideas, and thoughts articulated in rap
lyrics invoke and revise stylistic and thematic elements that are deeply
wedded to a number of black cultural storytelling forms, most promi-
nently, risque and the blues. Ice-T and Big Daddy Kane pay explicit
homage to Rudy Ray Moore as “Dolemite,” Roxanne Shante toasts
Millie Jackson, and black folk wisdom and folktales are given new lives
and meanings in contemporary culture.

Rap’s stories continue to articulate the shifting terms of black mar-
ginality in contemporary American culture. Even as rappers achieve
what appears to be central status in commercial culture, they are far
more vulnerable to censorship efforts than highly visible white rock art-
ists, and they continue to experience the brunt of the plantation-like
system faced by most artists in the music and sports industries. Even
as they struggle with the tension between fame and rap’s gravitational
pull toward local urban narratives, for the most part, rappers continue
to craft stories that represent the creative fantasies, perspectives, and
experiences of racial marginality in America.

Rap went relatively unnoticed by mainstream music and popular cul-
ture industries until independent music entrepreneur Sylvia Robinson
released “Rappers Delight” in 1979. Over the next five years rap music
was “discovered” by the music industry, the print media, the fashion in-
dustry, and the film industry, each of which hurried to cash in on what
was assumed to be a passing fad. During the same years, Run DMC
(who recorded the first gold rap record Run DMC in 1984), Whodini,
and the Fat Boys became the most commercially successful symbols of rap music's sounds and style.

By 1987, rap music had survived several death knells, Hollywood mockery, and radio bans and continued to spawn new artists, such as Public Enemy, Eric B. & Rakim, and LL Cool J. At the same time, women rappers, such as MC Lyte and Salt 'N' Pepa, encouraged by Roxanne Shante's early successes, made inroads into rap's emerging commercial audience. Between 1987 and 1990 a number of critical musical and industry changes took place. Public Enemy became rap's first superstar group, and media attention to its black nationalist political articulations intensified. The success of De La Soul's playful Afrocentricity, tongue in cheek spoof of rap's aggressive masculinity and manipulation of America's television culture encouraged the Native Tongues wing of rap that opened the door to such future groups as A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah, Brand Nubian, and Black Sheep. Ice-T put the Los Angeles gangsta rap style on the national map, which encouraged the emergence of NWA, Ice Cube, Too Short, and others.

At the industry level, the effects of rap's infiltration were widespread. Black filmmaker Spike Lee's commercially successful use of b-boys, b-girls, hip hop music, and style in the contemporary urban terrain as primary themes in She's Gotta Have It and Do the Right Thing fired up Hollywood's new wave of black male ghetto films, most notably, Colors, New Jack City, Boys in the Hood, Juice and Menace II Society. By 1989, MTV began playing rap music on a relatively regular basis, and multimillion unit rap sales by the Beastie Boys, Tone Loc, M.C. Hammer and Vanilla Ice convinced music industry executives that rap music, for all of its "blackness" in attitude, style, speech, music, and thematics, was a substantial success with white teenagers.

Rap's black cultural address and its focus on marginal identities may appear to be in opposition to its crossover appeal for people from different racial or ethnic groups and social positions. How can this black public dialogue speak to the thousands of young white suburban boys and girls who are critical to the record sales successes of many of rap's more prominent stars? How can I suggest that rap is committed culturally and emotionally to the pulse, pleasures, and problems of black urban life in the face of such diverse constituencies?

To suggest that rap is a black idiom that prioritizes black culture and that articulates the problems of black urban life does not deny the pleasure and participation of others. In fact, many black musics before rap (e.g., the blues, jazz, early rock 'n' roll) have also become Americ-

can popular musics precisely because of extensive white participation; white America has always had an intense interest in black culture. Consequently, the fact that a significant number of white teenagers have become rap fans is quite consistent with the history of black music in America and should not be equated with a shift in rap's discursive or stylistic focus away from black pleasure and black fans. However, extensive white participation in black culture has also always involved white appropriation and attempts at ideological recuperation of black cultural resistance. Black culture in the United States has always had elements that have been at least bifocal—speaking to both a black audience and a larger predominantly white context. Rap music shares this history of interaction with many previous black oral and music traditions.

Like generations of white teenagers before them, white teenage rap fans are listening in on black culture, fascinated by its differences, driven by mainstream social constructions of black culture as a forbidden narrative, as a symbol of rebellion. Kathy Ogren's study of jazz in the 1920s shows the extensive efforts made by white entertainers and fans to imitate jazz music, dance styles, and language as well as the alarm such fascination caused on the part of state and local authority figures. Lewis Erenberg's study of the development of the cabaret illustrates the centrality of jazz music to the fears over blackness associated with the burgeoning urban nightlife culture. There are similar and abundant cases for rock 'n' roll as well.

Fascination with African-American culture is not new, nor can the dynamics and politics of pleasure across cultural "boundaries" in segregated societies be overlooked. Jazz, rock 'n' roll, soul, and R&B each have large devoted white audience members, many of whom share traits with Norman Mailer's "white negroes," young white listeners trying to perfect a model of correct white hipness, coolness, and style by adopting the latest black style and image. Young white listeners' genuine pleasure and commitment to black music are necessarily affected by dominant racial discourses regarding African Americans, the politics of racial segregation, and cultural difference in the United States. Given the racially discriminatory context within which cultural syncretism takes place, some rappers have equated white participation with a process of dilution and subsequent theft of black culture. Although the terms dilution and theft do not capture the complexity of cultural incorporation and syncretism, this interpretation has more than a grain of truth in it. There is abundant evidence that white artists imitating black styles have greater economic opportunity and access to larger audiences than black innova-
tors. Historical accounts of the genres often position these subsequently better known artists as the central figures, erasing or marginalizing the artists and contexts within which the genre developed. The process of incorporation and marginalization of black practitioners has also fostered the development of black forms and practices that are less and less accessible, forms that require greater knowledge of black language and styles in order to participate. Be Bop, with its insider language and its "willfully harsh, anti-assimilationist sound" is a clear example of this response to the continuation of plantation system logic in American culture. In addition to the sheer pleasure black musicians derive from developing a new and exciting style, these black cultural reactions to American culture suggest a re-Claiming of the definition of blackness and an attempt to retain aesthetic control over black cultural forms. In the 1980s, this re-Claiming of blackness in the popular realm is complicated by access to new reproduction technologies and revised corporate relations in the music industry.

In a number of ways, rap has followed the patterns of other black popular musics, in that at the outset it was heavily rejected by black and white middle-class listeners; the assumption was that it would be a short-lived fad; the mainstream record industry and radio stations rejected it; its marketing was pioneered by independent entrepreneurs and independent labels; and once a smidgeon of commercial viability was established the major labels attempted to dominate production and distribution. These rap-related patterns were augmented by more general music industry consolidation in the late 1970s that provided the major music corporations with greater control over the market. By 1990 virtually all major record chain store distribution is controlled by six major record companies: CBS, Polygram, Warner, BMG, Capitol-EMI, and MCA.

However, music industry consolidation and control over distribution is complicated by three factors: the expansion of local cable access, sophisticated and accessible mixing, production, and copying equipment, and a new relationship between major and independent record labels. In previous eras when independent labels sustained the emergence of new genres against industry rejection, the eventual absorption of these genres by larger companies signalled the dissolution of the independent labels. In the early 1980s, after rap spurred the growth of new independent labels, the major labels moved in and attempted to dominate the market but could not consolidate their efforts. Artists signed to independent labels, particularly Tommy Boy, Profile, and Def Jam continued to flourish, whereas acts signed directly to the six majors could not produce comparable sales. It became apparent that the independent labels had a much greater understanding of the cultural logic of hip hop and rap music, a logic that permeated decisions ranging from signing acts to promotional methods. Instead of competing with smaller, more street-savvy labels for new rap acts, the major labels developed a new strategy: buy the independent labels, allow them to function relatively autonomously, and provide them with production resources and access to major retail distribution. Since the emergence of Public Enemy and their substantial cross-genre success in the late 1980s, rap artists have generally been signed to independent labels (occasionally black owned and sometimes their own labels) and marketed and distributed by one of the six major companies. In this arrangement, the six majors reap the benefits of a genre that can be marketed with little up-front capital investment, and the artists are usually pleased to have access to the large record and CD chain stores that would otherwise never consider carrying their work.

In the 1980s, the trickle-down effect of technological advances in electronics brought significantly expanded access to mixing, dubbing, and copying equipment for consumers and black market retailers. Clearly, these advances provided aspiring musicians with greater access to recording and copying equipment at less expense. They also substantially improved the market for illegal dubbing of popular music for street corner sale at reduced cost. (Illegally recorded cassette tapes cost approximately $5.00, one-half the cost of label issues.) These lower quality tapes are usually sold in poorer, densely populated communities where reduced cost is a critical sales factor. Rap music is a particularly popular genre for bootleg tapes in urban centers.

Even though actual sales demographics for rap music are not available, increasing sales figures for rap musicians (several prominent rap artists have sales over 500,000 units per album), suggest that white teenage rap consumers have grown steadily since the emergence of Public Enemy in 1988. Middle-class white teenage rap consumers appear to be an increasingly significant audience. This can be inferred from location sales via market surveys and Soundscan, a new electronic scan system installed primarily in large, mostly suburban music chain stores. It is quite possible, however, that the percentage of white rap consumers in relation to overall sales is being disproportionately represented, because bootleg street sales coupled with limited chain music store outlets in poor communities makes it very difficult to assess the demographics for actual sales of rap music to urban black and Hispanic consumers. In addition to inconsistent sales figures, black teen rap consumers may also
have a higher "pass-along rate," that is, the rate at which one purchased product is shared among consumers. In my conversations with James Bernard, an editor at The Source (a major hip hop culture magazine with a predominantly black teen readership), The Source's pass-along rate is approximately 1 purchase for every 11—15 readers. According to Bernard, this rate is at least three to four times higher than the average magazine industry pass-along rate. It is conceivable, then, that a similar pass-along rate exists among rap music CD and cassette consumption, especially among consumers with less disposable income.

Cable television exploded during the 1980s and had a significant effect on the music industry and on rap music. Launched in August 1981 by Warner Communications and the American Express Company, MTV became the fastest growing cable channel and as Garofalo points out, "soon became the most effective way for a record to get national exposure." Using its rock format and white teen audience as an explanation for its almost complete refusal to play videos by black artists (once pressure was brought to bear they added Michael Jackson and Prince), MTV finally jumped on the rap music bandwagon. It was not until 1989, with the piloting of "Yo! MTV Raps" that any black artists began to appear on MTV regularly. Since then, as Jamie Malanowski reports, "Yo MTV Raps' has become one of MTV's most popular shows, is dirt cheap to produce and has almost single-handedly dispelled the giant tastemaking network's reputation for not playing black artists."

Since 1989, MTV has discovered that black artists in several genres are marketable to white suburban teenagers and has dramatically revised its formatting to include daily rap shows, Street Block (dance music), and the rotation of several black artists outside of specialized-genre rotation periods. However, MTV's previous exclusion of black artists throughout the mid-1980s, inspired other cable stations to program black music videos. Black Entertainment Television (BET), the most notable alternative to MTV, continues to air a wide variety of music videos by black artists as one of its programming mainstays. And local and syndicated shows (e.g., "Pump It Up!" based in Los Angeles and "Video Music Box" based in New York), continue to play rap music videos, particularly lower budget, and aggressively black nationalist rap videos deemed too angry or too antiwhite for MTV.

MTV's success has created an environment in which the reception and marketing of music is almost synonymous with the production of music videos. Fan discussions of popular songs and the stories they tell are often accompanied by a reading of the song's interpretation in music video. Music video is a collaboration in the production of popular music; it revises meanings, provides preferred interpretations of lyrics, creates a stylistic and physical context for reception; and valorizes the iconic presence of the artist. Can we really imagine, nonetheless understand, the significance of Michael Jackson's presence as a popular cultural icon without interpreting his music video narratives? The same holds true for Madonna, Janet Jackson, U2, Whitney Houston, Nirvana, and Guns N' Roses among others. The visualization of music has far-reaching effects on musical cultures and popular culture generally, not the least of which is the increase in visual interpretations of sexist power relationships, the mode of visual storytelling, the increased focus on how a singer looks rather than how he or she sounds, the need to craft an image to accompany one's music, and ever-greater pressure to abide by corporate genre-forming rules.

The significance of music video as a partner in the creation or reception of popular music is even greater in the case of rap music. Because the vast majority of rap music (except by the occasional superstar) has been virtually frozen out of black radio programming (black radio representatives claim that it scares off high-quality advertising), because of its limited access to large performance venues, music video has been a crucial outlet for rap artist audiences and performer visibility. Rap music videos have animated hip hop cultural style and aesthetics and have facilitated a cross-neighborhood, cross-country (transnational?) dialogue in a social environment that is highly segregated by class and race.

The emergence of rap music videos has also opened up a previously nonexistent creative arena for black visual artists. Rap music video has provided a creative and commercially viable arena where black film, video, set design, costume, and technical staff and trainees can get the crucial experience and connections to get a foot in the world of video and film production. Before music video production for black musicians, those training grounds, however exploitative, were virtually inaccessible to black technicians. The explosion of music video production, especially black music video, has generated a pool of skilled young black workers in the behind-the-scenes nonunion crews (union membership is overwhelmingly white and male), who are beginning to have an impact on current black film production.

**Shooting in the Ghetto: locating rap music video production**

Rap video has also developed its own style and its own genre conventions. These conventions visualize hip hop style and usually affirm
Rappers' primary thematic concerns: identity and location. Over most of its brief history (rap video production began in earnest in the mid-to-late 1980s), rap video themes have repeatedly converged around the depiction of the local neighborhood and the local posse, crew, or support system. Nothing is more central to rap's music video narratives than situating the rapper in his or her milieu and among one's crew or posse. Unlike heavy metal videos, for example, which often use dramatic live concert footage and the concert stage as the core location, rap music videos are set on buses, subways, in abandoned buildings, and almost always in black urban inner-city locations. This usually involves ample shots of favorite street corners, intersections, playgrounds, parking lots, school yards, roofs, and childhood friends. When I asked seasoned music video director Kevin Bray what comprised the three most important themes in rap video, his immediate response was, "Posse, posse, and posse... They'll say, 'I want my shit to be in my hood. Yeah, we got this dope old parking lot where I used to hang out when I was a kid.'" The hood is not a generic designation; videos featuring South Central Los Angeles rappers such as Ice Cube, Ice-T, and NWA very often capture the regional specificity of spatial, ethnic, temperate, and psychological facets of black marginality in Los Angeles, whereas Naughty by Nature's videos feature the ghetto specificity of East Orange, New Jersey.

Rappers' emphasis on posses and neighborhoods has brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness. It satisfies poor young black people's profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated. These are the street corners and neighborhoods that usually serve as lurid backdrops for street crimes on the nightly news. Few local people are given an opportunity to speak, and their points of view are always contained by expert testimony. In rap videos, young mostly male residents speak for themselves and for the community, they speak when and how they wish about subjects of their choosing. These local turf scenes are not isolated voices; they are voices from a variety of social margins that are in dialogue with one another. As Bray points out, "If you have an artist from Detroit, the reason they want to shoot at least one video on their home turf is to make a connection with, say, an East Coast New York rapper. It's the dialogue. It's the dialogue between them about where they're from."

However, the return of the ghetto as a central black popular narrative has also fulfilled national fantasies about the violence and danger that purportedly consume the poorest and most economically fragile communities of color. Some conservative critics such as George Will have affirmed the "reality" of some popular cultural ghetto narratives and used this praise as a springboard to call for more police presence and military invasion-like policies. In other cases, such as that of white rapper Vanilla Ice, the ghetto is a source of fabricated white authenticity. Controversy surrounding Ice, one of rap music's most commercially successful artists, highlights the significance of "ghetto blackness" as a model of "authenticity" and hipness in rap music. During the winter of 1989, Vanilla Ice summoned the wrath of the hip hop community not only by successfully marketing himself as a white rapper but also by "validating" his success with stories about his close ties to black poor neighborhoods, publicly sporting his battle scars from the black inner city. According to Village Voice columnist Rob Tannenbaum, Robert Van Winkle (aka Vanilla Ice) told Stephen Holden of the New York Times that "he 'grew up in the ghetto,' comes from a broken home, hung out mainly with blacks while attending the same Miami high school as Luther Campbell of 2 Live Crew, and was nearly killed in a gang fight." Yet, in a copyrighted, front page story in the Dallas Morning News, Ken P. Perkins charges, among other things, that Mr. Van Winkle is instead a middle-class kid from...
Dallas, Texas. Vanilla Ice's desire to be a "white negro" (or, as some black and white hip hop fans say, a Wigger—a white nigger), to "be black" in order to validate his status as a rapper hints strongly at the degree to which ghetto-blackness is a critical code in rap music. Vanilla Ice not only pretended to be from the ghetto, but he also pretended to have produced the music for his mega-hit "Ice, Ice Baby." In keeping with his pretenses, he only partially credited—and paid no royalties to—black friend and producer Mario Johnson, aka Chocolate(1), who actually wrote the music for "Ice, Ice Baby" and a few other cuts from Vanilla's fifteen times platinum record To the Extreme. After a lengthy court battle, Chocolate is finally getting paid in full. Convergent forces are behind this resurgence of black ghetto symbolism and representation. Most important, the ghetto exists for millions of young black and other people of color—it is a profoundly significant social location. Using the ghetto as a source of identity—as rapper Tech would say, if you're not from the ghetto, don't ever come to the ghetto—undermines the stigma of poverty and social marginality. At the same time, the ghetto badman posture-performance is a protective shell against real unyielding and harsh social policies and physical environments. Experience also dictates that public attention is more easily drawn to acts, images, and threats of black male violence than to any other form of racial address. The ghetto produces a variety of meanings for diverse audiences, but this should not be interpreted to mean that intragroup black meanings and uses are less important than larger social receptions. Too often, white voyeuristic pleasure of black cultural imagery or such imagery's role in the performance of ghetto crisis for the news media, are interpreted as their primary value. Even though rap is aware of the diversity of their audiences and the context for reception, their use of the ghetto and its symbolic significances is primarily directed at other black hip hop fans. If white teen and adult viewers were the preferred audience, then it wouldn't matter which ghetto corner framed images of Tech from rap group Naughty by Nature, especially as most white popular cultural depictions of ghetto life are drained of relevant detail, texture, and complexity. Quite to the contrary, rap's ghetto imagery is too often intensely specific and locally significant, making its preferred viewer someone who can read ghetto-centricity with ghetto sensitivity.

The fact that rappers' creative desires or location requests are frequently represented in music videos should not lead one to believe that rappers control the music video process. Music video production is a complex and highly mediated process dictated by the record company in what is sometimes a contentious dialogue with the artists' management, the chosen video director, and video producer. Even though the vast majority of the music video production budget is advanced from the artists' royalties (rap video budgets can range from a low $5,000 to an unusual $100,000 with an average video costing about $40,000), the artist has very little final decision-making control over the video process. Generally speaking, once the single is chosen, a group of music video directors are solicited by the record company, management, and artist to submit video ideas or treatments, and an estimated budget range is projected. After listening to the rapper's work, the video directors draft narrative treatments that usually draw on the rap artists' desires, strengths, lyrical focus, and the feel of the music while attempting to incorporate his or her own visual and technical strengths and preferred visual styles. Once a director is selected, the treatment and budget are refined, negotiated, and the video is cast and produced. In the first few years of rap video production, the record companies were less concerned about music video's creative process, leaving artists and directors more creative decision-making power. As rappers developed more financial viability, record companies became increasingly invasive at the editing stage, going even so far as to make demands about shot selection and sequencing. This intervention has been facilitated by record companies' increasing sophistication about the video production process. Recently, record companies have begun hiring ex-freelance video producers as video commissioners whose familiarity with the production process aids the record company in channeling and constraining directors, producers, and artist decisions. For veteran music video director Charles Stone, these commercial constraints define music video, in the final analysis, as a commercial product: "Commercial expectations are always undercurrent. Questions like, does the artist look good, is the artist's image being represented—are always a part of your decision-making process. You have to learn how to protect yourself from excessive meddling, but some negotiation with record companies and artist management always takes place." With rap's genre and stylistic conventions and artists' desires flanking one side of the creative process and the record company's fiscal and artist management's marketing concerns shoring up the other, music video directors are left with a tight space within which to exercise their creativity. Still, video directors find imaginative ways to engage the musical and lyrical texts and enter into dialogue with the rappers' work. For Bray and other directors, the best videos have the capacity to offer new
interpretations after multiple viewings, they have the spontaneity and intertextuality of the music, and most importantly, as Bray describes, the best videos are “sublime visual interpretations of the lyrics which work as another instrument in the musical arrangement; the music video is a visual instrument.” Sometimes this visual instrumentation is a thematic improvisation on the historical point of reference suggested by the musical samples. So, a cool jazz horn sample might evoke a contemporary refashioning of a jazz club or cool jazz coloring or art direction. Stone often relies on text and animation to produce creative interpretations of musical works. “Using word overlay,” Stone says, “is particularly compatible with rap’s use of language. Both are candid and aggressive uses of words, and both play with words’ multiple meanings.” His selective and unconventional use of animation often makes rappers’ lyrical delivery and performance.

Satisfying the record companies, artists, and managers is only half the battle; MTV, the most powerful video outlet, has its own standards and guidelines for airing videos. These guidelines, according to several frustrated directors, producers, and video commissioners, are inconsistent and unwritten. The most consistent rule is the “absolutely not” list (that some people claim has been subverted by powerful artists and record companies). The “absolutely not” list includes certain acts of violence, some kinds of nudity and sex, profanity and epithets (e.g., “nigger” or “bitch” no matter how these words are being used). The list of censored words and actions expands regularly.

Independent video producer Gina Harrell notes that the process of establishing airing boundaries takes place on a case-by-case basis. MTV is frequently sent a rough cut for approval as part of the editing process to determine if they will consider airing the video, and often several changes, such as word reversals, scene cuts, and lyrical rewrites, must be made to accommodate their standards: “Afterwards, you wind up with very little to work with. There is so much censorship now, and from the other end, the record company’s video commissioners are much more exacting about what they want the end result to be. It has extended the editing process and raised production costs. Basically, there are too many cooks in the kitchen.” There is, not surprisingly, special concern over violence: “The cop issue has really affected rap music video. You can’t shoot anybody in a video, you can hold up a gun, but you can’t show who you’re pointing at. So you can hold up a gun in one frame and then cut to the person being shot in the next frame, but you can’t have a person shooting at another person in the same frame.” Even so, many artists refuse to operate in a self-censoring fashion and continue to push on these fluid boundaries by shooting footage that they expect will be censored.

MTV’s sex policies are equally vague. Although MTV has aired such a video as Wreck-N-Effect’s “Rumpshaker,” whose concept is a series of closeup and sometimes magnified distortions of black women’s bikinoclad gyrating behinds and breasts, it refused to allow A Tribe Called Quest to say the word prophylactic in the lyrical soundtrack for the video “Bonita Applebum,” a romantic and uncharacteristically emotionally honest portrayal of teen desire and courtship. MTV denied Stoner’s request to show condoms in the video, even though the song’s mild references to sex and his video treatment were cast in safe sex language. Given the power of cultural conservatives to “strike the fear of god” in music industry corporations, most video producers and directors are bracing themselves for further restrictions.

Rap music and video have been wrongfully characterized as thoroughly sexist but rightfully lambasted for their sexism. I am thoroughly frustrated but not surprised by the apparent need for some rappers to craft elaborate and creative stories about the abuse and domination of young black women. Perhaps these stories serve to protect young men from the reality of female rejection; maybe and more likely, tales of sexual domination falsely relieve their lack of self-worth and limited access to economic and social markers for heterosexual masculine power. Certainly, they reflect the deep-seated sexism that pervades the structure of American culture. Still, I have grown weary of rappers’ stock retorts to charges of sexism in rap: “There are ‘bitches’ or ‘gold diggers’ out there, and that’s who this rap is about,” or “This is just a story, I don’t mean anything by it.” I have also grown impatient with the cowardly silence of rappers who I know find this aspect of rap troubling.

On the other hand, given the selective way in which the subject of sexism occupies public dialogue, I am highly skeptical of the timing and strategic deployment of outrage regarding rap’s sexism. Some responses to sexism in rap music adopt a tone that suggests that rappers have infected an otherwise sexist-free society. These reactions to rap’s sexism deny the existence of a vast array of accepted sexist social practices that make up adolescent male gender role modeling that results in social norms for adult male behaviors that are equally sexist, even though they are usually expressed with less profanity. Few popular analyses of rap’s sexism seem willing to confront the fact that sexual and institutional
control over and abuse of women is a crucial component of developing a heterosexual masculine identity. In some instances, the music has become a scapegoat that diverts attention away from the more entrenched problem of redefining the terms of heterosexual masculinity.

Rap's sexist lyrics are also part of a rampant and viciously normalized sexism that dominates the corporate culture of the music business. Not only do women face gross pay inequities, but also they face extraordinary day-to-day sexual harassment. Male executives expect to have sexual and social access to women as one of many job perks, and many women, especially black women, cannot establish authority with male coworkers or artists in the business unless they are backed up by male superiors. Independent video producers do not have this institutional backup and, therefore, face exceptionally oppressive work conditions. Harrell has left more than one position because of recurrent, explicit pressure to sleep with her superiors and finds the video shoots an even more unpredictably offensive and frustrating terrain.

For instance, during a meeting with Def Jam executives on a video shoot, a very famous rapper started lifting up my pants leg trying to rub my leg. I slapped his hand away several times. Later on he stood onstage sticking his tongue out at me in a sexually provocative way—everyone was aware of what he was doing, no one said a word. This happened quite a bit in the music business. Several years ago I had begun producing videos for a video director who made it clear that I could not continue to work with him unless I slept with him. I think that women are afraid to respond legally or aggressively, not only because many of us fear professional recriminations, but also because so many of us were molested when we were children. Those experiences complicate our ability to defend ourselves.

These instances are not exceptions to the rule—they are the rule, even for women near the very top of the corporate ladder. As Carmen Ashhurst-Watson, president of Rush Communications (a multimedia offshoot of Def Jam Records) relates: "The things that Anita Hill said she heard from Clarence Thomas over a four-year period, I might hear in a morning."

Mass media outlets need to be challenged into opening dialogue about pervasive and oppressive sexual conditions in society and into facilitating more frank discussion about sexist gender practices and courtship rituals. The terms of sexual identities, sexual oppression, and their relationship to a variety of forms of social violence need unpacking and closer examination. Basically, we need more discussions about sex, sexism, and violence, not less.

MTV and the media access it affords is a complex and ever-changing facet of mass-mediated and corporation-controlled communication and culture. To refuse to participate in the manipulative process of gaining access to video, recording materials, and performing venues is to almost guarantee a negligible audience and marginal cultural impact. To participate in and try to manipulate the terms of mass-mediated culture is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways—it provides communication channels within and among largely disparate groups and requires compromise that often affirms the very structures much of rap's philosophy seems determined to undermine. MTV's acceptance and gatekeeping of rap music has dramatically increased rap artists' visibility to black, white, Asian, and Latino teenagers, but it has also inspired antirap censorship groups and fuels the media's fixation on rap and violence.

Commercial marketing of rap music represents a complex and contradictory aspect of the nature of popular expression in a corporation-dominated information society. Rap music and hip hop style have become common ad campaign hooks for McDonald's, Burger King, Coke, Pepsi, several athletic shoe companies, clothing chain stores, MTV, anti-drug campaigns, and other global corporate efforts ad nauseam. Rap music has grown into a multimillion dollar record, magazine, and video industry with multiplatinum world renowned rappers, disc jockeys, and entertainers. Dominating the black music charts, rap music and rap music cousins, such as Hip House, New Jack Swing (a dance style of R&B with rap music rhythms and drum beats), have been trendsetters for popular music in the U.S. and around the world. Rap's musical and visual style have had a profound impact on all contemporary popular music. Rock artists have begun using sampling styles and techniques developed by rappers; highly visible artists, such as Madonna, Janet Jackson, and New Kids on the Block wear hip hop fashions, use hip hop dances in their stage shows and rap lyrics and slang words in their recordings.

Yet, rap music is also Black American TV, a public and highly accessible place, where black meanings and perspectives—even as they are manipulated by corporate concerns—can be shared and validated among black people. Rap is dependent on technology and mass reproduction and distribution. As Andrew Ross has observed, popular music is capable of transmitting, disseminating, and rendering "visible 'black' meanings, precisely because of, and not in spite of, its industrial forms of production, distribution, and consumption." Such tensions between rap's highly personal, conversational intimacy and the massive institutional and technological apparatuses on which rap's global voice depends are critical to hip hop, black culture, and popular cultures around
The world in the late twentieth century. Inside of these commercial constraints, rap offers alternative interpretations of key social events such as the Gulf War, The Los Angeles uprising, police brutality, censorship efforts, and community-based education. It is the central cultural vehicle for open social reflection on poverty, fear of adulthood, the desire for absent fathers, frustrations about black male sexism, female sexual desires, daily rituals of life as an unemployed teen hustler, safe sex, raw anger, violence, and childhood memories. It is also the home of innovative uses of style and language, hilariously funny carnivalesque and chitlin-circuit-inspired dramatic skits, and ribald storytelling. In short, it is black America's most dynamic contemporary popular cultural, intellectual, and spiritual vessel.

Rap's ability to draw the attention of the nation, to attract crowds around the world in places where English is rarely spoken are fascinating elements of rap's social power. Unfortunately, some of this power is linked to U.S.-based cultural imperialism, in that rappers benefit from the disproportionate exposure of U.S. artists around the world facilitated by music industry marketing muscle. However, rap also draws international audiences because it is a powerful conglomeration of voices from the margins of American society speaking about the terms of that position. Rap music, like many powerful black cultural forms before it, resonates for people from vast and diverse backgrounds. The cries of pain, anger, sexual desire, and pleasure that rappers articulate speak to hip hop's vast fan base for different reasons. For some, rappers offer symbolic prowess, a sense of black energy and creativity in the face of omnipresent oppressive forces; others listen to rap with an ear toward the hidden voices of the oppressed, hoping to understand America's large, angry, and "unintelligible" population. Some listen to the music's powerful and life-affirming rhythms, its phat beats and growling bass lines, revelling in its energy, seeking strength from its cathartic and electric presence. Rap's global industry-orchestrated (but not industry-created) presence illustrates the power of the language of rap and the salience of the stories of oppression and creative resistance its music and lyrics tell. The drawing power of rap is precisely its musical and narrative commitment to black youth and cultural resistance, and nothing in rap's commercial position and cross-cultural appeal contradicts this fact.

Rap's margin(ality) is represented in the contradictory reaction rap receives in mainstream American media and popular culture. It is at once part of the dominant text and, yet, always on the margins of this text; relying on and commenting on the text's center and always aware of its proximity to the border.

Rap music and hip hop culture are cultural, political, and commercial forms, and for many young people they are the primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic windows on the world. After the Los Angeles riots, author Mike Davis attended an Inglewood Crip and Blood gang truce meeting in which gang members voiced impassioned testimonials and called for unity and political action. Describing their speeches, Davis said: "These guys were very eloquent, and they spoke in a rap rhythm and with rap
eloquence, which I think kind of shook up the white television crews.” Later, he noted that the gang truce and the political struggles articulated in that meeting were “translated into the [hip hop] musical culture.” Hip hop, Davis concluded, “is the fundamental matrix of self-expression for this whole generation.”

CHAPTER TWO

“All Aboard the Night Train”

Flow, Layering, and Rupture in Postindustrial New York

Got a bum education, double-digit inflation
Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station
Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge
I'm tryin' not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under.

—“The Message”

Life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip hop style, sound, lyrics, and thematics. Situated at the “crossroads of lack and desire,” hip hop emerges from the deindustrialization meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect. Hip hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community. It is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame for the development of hip hop.

The dynamic tensions and contradictions shaping hip hop culture can confound efforts at interpretation by even the most skilled critics and observers. Some analysts see hip hop as a quintessentially postmodern practice, and others view it as a present-day successor to premodern oral traditions. Some celebrate its critique of consumer capitalism, and others condemn it for its complicity with commercialism. To one enthusiastic group of critics, hip hop combines elements of speech and song, of dance and display, to call into being through performance new identities and subject positions. Yet, to another equally vociferous group, hip hop merely displays in phantasmagorical form the cultural logic of
Notes

1. Voices from the Margins (pp. 5–20)


5. At the last three annual New Music Seminars in New York, panels were devoted to the issue of bootleg record sales and their effect on rap music sales.

6. Although some evidence suggests that more adults are buying rap music, rap is still predominantly consumed by teenagers and young adults. See Janine McAdams and Deborah Russell, “Rap Breaking Through to Adult Market,” Hollywood Reporter, 19 September 1991, pp. 4, 20. Chuck D and Ice-T have claimed that white teenagers consume approximately 50 to 70 percent of rap music. Ice-T claims that “more than 50 percent are going to white kids. Black kids buy the records, but the white kids buy the cassette, the CD, the album, the tour jacket, the hats, everything. Black kids might just be buying the bootleg on the street. It’s only due to economics.” Alan Light, “Ice-T,” Rolling Stone, 20 August 1992, pp. 31–32, 60. My research has yielded no source for these statistics other than speculation. Furthermore, these rappers may be specifically referring to their fan base; Ice-T and Public Enemy are both known for mixing rock and rap, making it more likely that white consumers would be drawn to their work.


9. Rose interview with Kevin Bray, 18 March 1993. Kevin Bray has directed
many rap videos, some of which are quite well-known and highly regarded, including: "Strobe Light Honey" and "Flavor of the Month" for Black Sheep; "All for One" for Brand Nubian; "Not Yet Free" for The Coup; "The Creator" and "Mecca and the Soul Brothers" for Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth; "I've Got the Power" for Chill Rob G; and "I Got To Have It" for Ed O.G. and the Bulldogs.

Of course, rap videos narrate other themes and situate rappers in other settings and locations. Probably, the next most frequent rap music video theme features the objectification of young women's bodies as a sign of male power. Some rap videos are explicit political and social statements, others are comic displacements of rappers from familiar surroundings, and increasingly, rap videos feature abstract props and images that deploy fewer location-specific settings. However, no other concept or location is as recurrent and emotionally significant as the depiction of one's home turf and posse.

11. Rose interview with Bray.
13. Rob Tannenbaum, "Sucker MC," Village Voice, 4 December 1990, p. 69. See Stephen Holden's "Pop Life" column, New York Times, 17 October 1990, p. C17, for published details of the fabricated biography. After the Perkins story and others, Ice's publicist significantly revised the bio, admitting that Vanilla Ice had actually grown up in both Miami and Dallas and deleted all references to Luther Campbell. Although fabricated artist biographies are not uncommon, Vanilla Ice's claims are particularly far from the truth and, as Tannenbaum points out, insulting to poor black communities.
15. Special thanks to producer Gina Harrell for her help in explaining this process.
16. Interview with Charles S. Stone III, 15 July 1993. Stone, who has been directing music videos, especially rap music videos, for several years is especially known for his creative use of animation and humor in his video treatments and concepts. Some of his more prominent and well-respected videos include "The Choice is Yours" for Black Sheep (which won MTV's and The Source's best rap video award for 1992); "911 is a Joke" for Public Enemy; "Bonita Applebump" and "I Left My Wallet In El Segundo" for A Tribe Called Quest; "Blackman" for Tashan; "Funky Vibe" for Living Color; and "Sassy" for Neneh Cherry (featuring Guru).
17. Rose interview with Gina Harrell, March 20, 1993. Harrell is an experienced video producer who has worked on dozens of music videos, commercials, and other projects.
18. Ibid.

2. I have adopted Mollenkopf and Castells use of the term postindustrial as a means of characterizing the economic restructuring that has taken place in urban America over the past twenty-five years. By defining the contemporary period in urban economies as postindustrial, Mollenkopf and Castells are not suggesting that manufacturing output has disappeared, nor are they adopting Daniel Bell's formulation that "knowledge has somehow replaced capital as the organizing principle of the economy." Rather, Mollenkopf and Castells claim that their use of postindustrial "captures a crucial aspect of how large cities are being transformed: employment has shifted massively away from manufacturing toward tourism, corporate, public, and nonprofit services; occupations have similarly shifted from manual worker to managers, professionals, secretaries, and service workers." John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells, eds., Dual City: Restructuring New York (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1991), p. 6. Similarly, these new postindustrial realities entail the rapid movement of capital, images, and populations across the globe have also been referred to as "post-Fordism" and "flexible accumulation." See David Harvey, Social Justice and the City (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). For an elaboration of Bell's initial use of the term, see Daniel Bell, The Coming of Post-Industrial Society (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
4. My arguments regarding Afro-diasporic cultural formations in hip hop are relevant to African-American culture as well as Afro-diasporic cultures in the English- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, each of which has prominent and significant African-derived cultural elements. Although rap music, particularly early rap, is dominated by English-speaking blacks, graffiti and breakdancing were heavily shaped and practiced by Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities that have substantial Afro-diasporic elements. (The emergence of Chicano rappers took place in the late 1980s in Los Angeles.) Consequently, my references to Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities should in no way be considered inconsistent with my larger Afro-diasporic claims, particularly those that dominate future chapters devoted specifically to rap music. Substantial work has illuminated the continued significance of African cultural elements on cultural production in both Spanish- and English-speaking nations in the Caribbean. For examples, see Herbert S. Klein, African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Ivan G. VanSertimer, They Came before Columbus (New York: Random House, 1976); and Robert Farris Thompson, Flash of the Spirit (New York: Random House, 1985).
6. In hip hop, the train serves both as means of interneighborhood communication and a source of creative inspiration. Big Daddy Kane says that he writes his best lyrics on the subway or train on the way to produce Marly Marl's house. See Barry Michael Cooper, "Raw Like Sushi," Spin, March 1988, p. 28. Similarly, Chuck D claims that he loves to drive; that he would be a driver if rap didn't work out. See Robert Crispau and Greg Tate, "Chuck D All Over the Map," Village Voice Rock & Roll Quarterly, vol. 4, no. 3, Fall 1991, pp. 12-18.
7. Morphing is a computer-based special effect that allows any image to transmigrate into another apparently seamlessly.