

Rap, Black Rage, and Racial Difference

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner

Enculturation, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 1999

[About the Authors](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

"Don't believe the hype!" Public Enemy

"My music is a product of who I am and where I came from. I'm made in America. I'm not from Mars or nowhere else," Ice Cube

"What's a brother gotta do to get a message through to the Red, White, and Blue?" Ice-T

Rap music has emerged as one of the most distinctive and controversial music genres of the past decade. A significant part of hip hop culture, [1] rap articulates the experiences and conditions of African-Americans living in a spectrum of marginalized situations ranging from racial stereotyping and stigmatizing to struggle for survival in violent ghetto conditions. In this cultural context, rap provides a voice to the voiceless, a form of protest to the oppressed, and a mode of alternative cultural style and identity to the marginalized. Rap is thus not only music to dance and party to, but a potent form of cultural identity. It has become a powerful vehicle for cultural political expression, serving as the "CNN of black people" (Chuck D), or upping the high-tech ante, as their "satellite communication system" (Heavy D). It is an informational medium to tune into, one that describes the rage of African-Americans facing growing oppression, declining opportunities for advancement, changing moods on the streets, and everyday life as a matter of sheer survival. In turn, it has become a cultural virus, circulating its images, sounds, and attitude throughout the culture and body politic.

Rap artists like Grandmaster Flash, Run DMC, Public Enemy, Ice-T, N.W.A., Ice Cube, Salt 'n' Pepa, Queen Latifah, Wu Tang Clan, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Tupac Shakur, the Fugees, and countless others produced a new musical genre that uniquely articulated the rage of the urban underclass and its sense of intense oppression and defiant rebellion. Given the relatively low expenses in producing and distributing popular music, black artists and producers themselves have often controlled this mode of musical production and have been able to create a form of communication relatively free of censorship and control by the dominant class and social groups. Moreover, rap is part of a vibrant hip hop culture that itself has become a dominant style and ethos throughout the world today.

The Moment of Hip Hop

Just as ragtime, jazz, R&B, and other black musical idioms and forms entered mainstream culture earlier in the century, today it is hip hop culture and its distinctive sound of rap music that is becoming an important form of music and cultural style throughout the globe. Hip hop erupted from New York dance and party culture of the 1970s. Encompassing dance and performance, visual art, multimedia, fashion and attitude, hip hop is the music and style for the new millennium. A highly protean and assimilative cultural ethos, it is here to stay, as it absorbs new influences, is appropriated throughout myriad cultural forms and forces across the globe, and has become a major mode of the global popular.

Hip hop culture is intense body culture; it finds its expression in dance and gesture. Expressive, dynamic, and energetic, hip hop gave rise to new forms of dance like break-dancing, while gesture, movement, and bodily rhythm is a key aspect of its cultural style as well as musical performance. Hip hop is a highly vocal culture and rap music provides its voice and its sound. Drawing on the sonorities and inflections of the the rhythms of everyday vernacular discourse, as well as the sounds of traditional music, creative use of previous musical technology, and appropriation of new musical technologies, hip hop is noisy, oral, and rhythmic, providing a soundtrack for life in a high-tech world of rapid transformation and turbulent change. Hip hop is also highly visual, creating its distinctive art form of graffiti and urban art, as well as fashion (B Boy, wild style, and ghetto street couture) that provides extremely strong visual imagery, which also serves as models of fashion and badges of cultural identity and belonging. Together, these forms provide a vivid hip hop spectacle, providing style, identity, politics, and a way of life for individuals throughout the world.

Rap is thus the voice and sound of hip hop culture while dance and bodily movement enact its rhythms and moves; graffiti inscribes spatial identity and presence and fashion provides subcultural style; music videos present a compendia of hip hop's sounds and images; and digitized multimedia furnish a sign of its migration into new cultural terrains and the next millennium. Encompassing style, fashion, and attitude, hip hop culture thus becomes a way of living, a genuine subculture and way of life, appropriate for the postmodern adventure.

Indeed, rap embodies a postmodern aesthetic, absorbing every conceivable musical style--R&B, funk, soul, reggae, techno, pop, house--while migrating to every national culture, local scene, and realm of culture. In turn, hip hop and rap have influenced all other musical styles and culture, involving a breaking down of boundaries between music, image, spectacle, and everyday life. Hence, rap is becoming the familiar soundtrack to postmodern technoculture, part of advertising, film and TV, and the new digital and multimedia culture. As it knocks down borders between musical styles, absorbing every conceivable type of music, rap crosses the national borders of the world becoming a key component of global culture. Rap is currently rocking the casbah and the ghetto, rolling across the mountains and the deserts, hopping across oceans, and becoming hip to cyberspace and the new technologies, bringing sound and attitude into digital space. Firmly ensconced in cyberspace and everyday life from London to Los Angeles, rap is becoming the flagship of the global popular, bringing style, attitude and voice to marginalized groups and hip entrepreneurs who package its sounds to a growing audience throughout the world.

Hence, in the postmodern global cultural scene hip hop now rules. A dominant cultural form in many parts of the world, hip hop is hybridizing and localizing, producing new cultural matrices from Sao Paulo to San Francisco. Rap articulates the hip hop ethos and gives voice to the subcultures that are producing and circulating it. As a new and democratizing cultural force, rap levels the playing field, opening doors to new cultural players, circumventing the old guard and corporate sharks ready to pounce on and exploit all new alternative cultures. Circulating ideas, images, sound, and style, it is becoming central to the new multimedia global culture and is an expression of a multicultural world with no borders and limits. Given to excess, it explodes boundaries of good taste and cultural propriety, bringing a new loud, plebeian and disruptive ethos into the interstices of the mainstream, announcing a multicultural and potentially subversive presence, as well as vitality of marginalized culture in the new world (dis)order.

An organic expression of urban hip hop culture, rap quickly became the distinctive sound of African- American anger, rebellion, cultural style, and contemporary experience. Anticipated by the ground-breaking work of the West Coast-based Watts Prophets and New York area Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets in the early 1970s, the current configuration of rap emerged out of Sugar Hill Gang's 1979 "Rapper's Delight" and Grandmaster Flash's 1982 hit "The Message." Hip hop culture began developing its style, sounds, and ethos in New York party scenes in the Bronx, Brooklyn and other ghetto areas in the late 1970s. By the 1980s, a whole cycle of New York-based hip hop and rap artists emerged to public attention, including Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, Run DMC, Eric B and Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, KRS-ONE, Tone Loc, Salt 'n' Pepa, Queen Latifah, and Public Enemy. Russell Simmons founded his Def Jam music label, winning wide-spread distribution for many artists now considered "old school," representing the first wave of rap.

East coast rap ranged from the black nationalist fervor of Afrika Bambaataa and

the Zulu Nation, to the radical politics of Public Enemy, to the feminism of Queen Latifah, to the emphasis on ghetto experience of Grandmaster Flash, Run DMC, and KRS-One. Yet it should not be forgotten that from the beginning there was a strong component of dance and party music connected with rap, that it was integrally bound up with a broader hip hop culture, and thus was a highly energetic and expressive cultural form.

The rap explosion and controversy would dramatically accelerate with the rise to national and then global influence of West Coast gangster rap. Anticipated by Ice-T, the "original gangster" (see Kellner 1995), it was N.W.A.'s 1987 album Straight out of Compton that prefigured a grittier, grosser, and more controversial form of gangster rap, extolling the dilemmas and pleasures of what became known as "thug life." N.W.A. ("Niggaz With Attitude") comprised a group of young African-Americans from the 'hood, including Ice Cube penning lyrics and singing, Dr. Dre composing and orchestrating, Easy E rapping, and DJ Yella and Renn performing, N.W.A. crystallized attention on a new gangster genre and musical idiom. In turn, Easy E put out his own record and split with the group, Ice Cube and Dr. Dre also separated from N.W.A. and produced their own records, and Suge Knight formed Death Row Records, which released Dr. Dre's influential The Chronic in 1992 and then signed on Snoop Doggy Dogg and Tupac Shakur, who would become highly controversial rap megastars.

Meanwhile, the East coast put out its version of G-rap, with Wu Tang Clan creating a sensation through its hard, gritty urban sounds. Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs and his label Bad Boy Entertainment, featuring The Notorious B.I.G. brought a NY urban ghetto realism into rap, while the Fugees imported funk and R&B into the rap sound. A wide range of younger rap artists spun off of these groups and erupted from seemingly every corner of ghetto (and sometimes black middle class) life.

In the mid-1990s, spectacular feuds between East and West coast rap groups broke out with highly publicized shoot-outs and the murder of Tupac and The Notorious B.I.G. Following the bizarre ruptures of divisions between art and life in G-rap, with the artists living and dying the violent scenarios they were performing, [2] a movement to stop the violence, to heal the rifts between East and West, emerged as did what became known as "New School," or "Now School," building on and going beyond the sounds of the "Old School" (now interpreted largely as the first wave of East Coast rap but in some genealogies including early gangster like N.W.A.). New York groups like De La Soul and The Fugees produced less harsh rhythms, more affirmative and romantic lyrics, and new fusions with Soul, R&B, and pop. Wyclef Jean and Lauryn Hill spun off the Fugees to create their own megahits and the multiple Grammys, including best album of the year, won by The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill in 1999 showed that rap had matured, entered the mainstream, and gained recognition as a significant musical idiom. [3]

Thus, today, rap covers a large spectrum, ranging from the urban fury of gangster rap to the rural fusion of blues and rap in Arrested Development, to the educated raps about black history of Chuck D, to the poetic and political discourses of the

Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, to the G-funk melodies of Snoop Doggy Dogg and celebrations of thug life by the late Tupac Shakur. It is therefore a mistake to identify the genre of rap per se with its most extreme expressions such as gangsta rap, as there are countless varieties of urban rap, suburban rap, rural rap, rap and soul fusions, reggae rap, Latino rap, white rap, and even Christian rap groups, so the genre is highly flexible and can be used for a variety of purposes.

Yet it is gangster rap, G-funk, or what we'll call "G-rap" that is still the cornerstone of rap's billion dollar plus market, an authentic voice of organic hip hop culture, and probably the genre that elevated rap to the global popular. G-rap provided a distinctive language, style, and attitude that made rap a significant oppositional form and subject of intense controversy. While break-dancing, graffiti, and other forms of hip hop have declined in significance, rap and the hip hop style enshrined in rap performance and music video have become a highly significant part of contemporary culture. Hence, our study below will focus on G-rap, saving engagement with other important rap and hip hop forms for later work.

G-Rap from Gangster to Funk

Much rap music provides a spectacle of self-assertion with images of black rap singers threatening white power structures, denouncing racial oppression and police violence, and celebrating a diverse realm of black cultural forms extending from Afrocentric nationalism to the gangster lifestyle. With its staccato beat, multilayered sound, aggressive lyrics, in-your-face messages, and defiant style, rap provides a spectacle of revolt and insurrection in its live performances, music videos, and recorded forms. Blasting out of boom boxes in the ghettos, roaring from car stereos, and blaring from home sound systems, rap provides a cascade of sounds threatening middle class order and decorum and the powers that be.

Some rap singers cultivate the outlaw and rebel image through their clothes, their life-styles, and in many cases their crimes, serving as a warning of the rage and violence seething in underclass ghetto communities. But other rap artists engage in political rap, or "conscious rap," seeing themselves as "knowledge warriors" and spokespeople for an oppressed underclass. "Organic intellectuals" (Gramsci) of the underclass, political rap warns that subordinate groups have periodically mobilized their anger into political struggle and insurrection. Other rap artists articulate a variety of black cultural styles, ranging from Afrocentric black nationalism to cool and funky urban hedonism. Rap thus points to the diversity of the African-American community and is itself a musical genre that makes its audiences vividly aware of the differences between various social groups in U.S. society and the oppression of the underclass.

Although there were rap artists in the 1970s, it was in the 1980s that rap became massively popular, coming of age during the Reagan-Bush era. As a result of conservative attacks, the 1980s was a period of immense hardship for blacks as the Reagan right shifted wealth from the poor to the rich, cut back on welfare programs, and neglected the concerns of blacks and the poor. [4] During this

period, the standard of living and job possibilities for African-Americans declined and living conditions in the inner-city ghettos deteriorated with growing crime, drug use, crack cocaine, teen pregnancies, AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, gangs, and urban violence.

Stylistically, rap music arguably stands between the modern and the postmodern, deploying postmodern techniques of sampling, quotation and collage of various sounds for modern purposes of self-expression and articulating social critique and rebellion. [5] Rap has a close relation with musical technologies and can be seen as a form of technoculture, for while it depends heavily on the voice and diction for its effects, its production involves highly skilled use of new musical technologies. While early hip-hop music mocked the technical sophistication of disco through the medium of a technically versatile DJ's manipulation of turntables, and while some early rap was technically primitive, later rap evolved into a highly complex tapestry of sound, using sampling, multi-track overlay, computers, and a variety of sophisticated mixing techniques. There is, in fact, often not much "real" or "original" music, but simply basic drum beats and guitar riffs, overlaid with recorded sounds.

Starting around 1987-88, Public Enemy and other rap groups began experimenting with multilayered sound collage, appropriating sounds from contemporary media culture, everyday life, and the archive of the voices of black radicalism. Thus, the DJ or mixer, such as Public Enemy's Terminator X, plays an important part in the production of the sound of rap and is often respected accordingly. At this moment, rap articulated with a postmodern aesthetic of sampling, quotation, and appropriation, thus becoming part of the postmodern turn in culture (on postmodern aesthetics, see Best and Kellner 1997, Chapter 3).

In particular, rap groups "sample" previous music (also known as "sonic shop-lifting"), sometimes respectfully in the manner of quotation, sometimes ironically in the mode of juxtaposition, and sometimes satirically or critically by counterpoising a romantic love song with misogynous lyrics or violent street sounds. Rap groups regularly sample black classics like James Brown, but also engage in crossover poaching with DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince ironically sampling the "I Dream of Jeannie" theme for their rap "Girls Ain't Nuttin' But Trouble." The group De La Soul created something of a scandal by sampling an Aerosmith song in the early 1990s, but by now this is accepted as normal, as, for example, when Coolio sampled ("interpolated") Kool and the Gang's song "Too Hot" to make its catchy riff and lyrics more relevant for the 90s: " 'A mind is a terrible thing to waste'/That was the slogan/But now it's '95 and its 'Don't forget the Trojan."

In a postmodern media culture, there is evident pleasure in quotation, sampling, and mixing material from different sources and eras. Houston Baker accordingly describes rap as "postmodern" by virtue of its "nonauthoritative collaging or archiving of sound and styles that bespeaks a deconstructive hybridity. Linearity and progress yield to a dizzying synchronicity" (1993: 89). Like other postmodern artistic products, rap is eclectic and pastiche-oriented, and subverts modernist

notions of authorship. But from the perspective of Jameson's concept of postmodern culture, marked by depthlessness, the absence of affect, the disintegration of the authorial voice, and so on, rap appears to be modernist in form. Creating highly expressive modernist collage, the best rappers have distinct voices, styles, and messages, often related to modern politics. Thus, rap draws on both modernist and postmodernist strategies and is between the modern and the postmodern (for further explication of this claim, see Kellner 1995: 147f).

A Sense of Time and Place

When listening to rap, one immediately notices that it is a form of articulating identity and self-assertion. The rap artists frequently call attention to their origins, usually grounded in a particular region like South Central Los Angeles, the Bronx, or Compton; thus there is a highly articulated awareness and sense of place in rap music. In particular, rap is frequently a music of the 'hood, that arises from distinct neighborhoods where identification with place supplements the strong identification with race and is certainly stronger than identification with the nation.

Rap also functions as a means of affirming and constructing individual identities for the group or rap artist. This identity may border on narcissism and a materialism that brags of its record sales and material possessions, as well as a macho bravado that boasts of being kick-ass tough, but it is also a key mode of assertion in an environment hostile to any form of African-American self-expression. It also situates the rap artists in their specific milieu, gaining identity and authenticity from being located in a specific space and time.

Rappers also frequently state the time in which they are rapping ("Ice-T, 1991, mother fucker, you should have killed me last year"). They are frequently asking the question, "What time is it?" and answering: Time to Wake Up! Flavor Flav of Public Enemy wears a clock around his neck and rappers situate their work in a specific time and place, often signalled in music videos by newspapers, graffiti, or graphics, as well as the lyrics. Rap tells us that it is the time of conflicts between the dominant and subordinate race, gender and class forces, that it is time for change, that it may be the fire this time, that apocalypse is on the horizon, that its time for change.

Thus, rap undercuts the placelessness, timelessness, and contextlessness of much popular music, especially the schizophrenic play of signifiers of music video, with a drive to contextualize, narrativize, and signify. The rap singer wants you to know who she or he is, where they are from, what time it is now, and what is happening. The images of the music videos show specific urban sites, often the ghettos of the underclass. Ice T's videos of the songs in "Original Gangster" show him in the 'hood, experiencing the stories he narrates in his songs, as do many videos of N.W.A., Ice Cube and other ghetto-based rap artists. The images and lyrics show and tell us that it is a time of intense poverty and differences between the haves and the have nots, that it is a time of urban crime and violence, a time of gangs and drugs, a

time of STDs, HIV, and AIDS, a time of buck-wilding and extreme sexuality, a time when the urban underclass is striking out and striking back, and thus is a tense and frightening time for the culture at large.

The lyrics and images of rap stars like Ice-T and Ice Cube anticipated the L.A. uprisings, which henceforth became a significant part of the iconography of rap. Thus, rap engages a specific political era and spaces, showing what is going on in the urban underclass and its rage and fantasies at the end of the millennium. Public Enemy's music video of "By the Time I Get to Arizona" shows black revolutionaries going to Arizona to protest the state banning of the Martin Luther King day holiday and depicts them assaulting white politicians and attempting to bring revolution to the state. Their video of "Shut it Down" also projects images of black revolution, evoking the legacy of Karl Marx, Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and Angela Davis, with the PE rappers calling for the shutting down of the system of exploitation and oppression.

The rap spectacle therefore resists the ruptures of signification within much music video in favor of narrativization and contextualization, telling their stories and getting out their messages. Indeed, voice, lyrics, and rhyming are very important in rap which can be read as an acronym for Rhythm And Poetry. The songs are often long, highly complex, and expressive, continuing an African-American tradition of extended stories with individual variations each telling, as well as drawing on the forms of the solo riffs of rag-time, jazz, and the blues. Rap continues earlier African-American traditions of "signifying" and "playing the dozens" (Gates 1988), involving ritualized verbal contests to demonstrate verbal dexterity, mental acumen, and creativity. The "dissing" of other rap groups, women, and white politicians reproduces the African tradition of the toast or boast, rendering some rap highly confrontational.

Yet other rap artists are like a minister in the black church, with a message for the audience, which the rapper conveys in distinctive ways, and like in the black church, rappers often have choruses in the background. Rhyming in complex patterns, rap songs create tension between the spontaneity of the performance and the fixity of the lyrics. Thus, in opposition to fragmentary, disconnected, flat, and one-dimensional postmodern texts, which only refer to themselves or lack depth of meaning, most rap music strongly signifies and the collaging often adds up to a political statement, rather than fragments of nonsense. This approach identifies with politics like '60s black radicalism or Afrocentrism, and uses transgressive sounds such as the noise of police cars, helicopters, bullets, glass breaking, and urban uprisings in order to underscore the tension, desperation, and violence in the inner cities.

Rap thus involves an articulation of black aesthetics, experience, style, and cultural forms in a hybridized synthesis of black culture and new technologies. By the late '80s, Rap replaced R&B as the most popular music for young blacks, but the largest audience for rap music is white suburban youth, thus continuing the phenomenon of the "white negro" diagnosed by Norman Mailer in 1957. [6]

According to Mailer, American existentialism, unlike its European counterpart, is based primarily on mood and feeling, rather than theory à la Sartre and others; it finds its first major expression in the "hipster," the cool white cat who drops out of white culture--condemned as staid, boring, affectless, corporate, and conformist--in order to enter the exotic world of black culture with its mesmerizing rhythms and powerful expressions of sexuality and soul. Fleeing from the culture of "spiritual death," where the dominant norms are consumerism and careerism, the "white negro" finds passion and creativity in a far more vital black culture. From jazz to rock and roll to rap, many whites males have identified primarily with black music, language, dress, and style.

Young suburban whites identify with rap because they too feel deeply alienated and rebellious, and like to identify with the "gangsta" image, such as "the wigger" subculture which appropriates the forms of black culture for oppositional white identities. As Ray Mazarek, the keyboard player for the Doors put it in a VH1 interview, without black culture, Americans "would still be dancing tippee-toe to the minuet." In fact, rap is a global popular with rap groups appearing on every continent in various languages and cultures. It is a product of the African diaspora, drawing on a wealth of African traditions and its rhythms, rhymes, and rebellions strike a responsive chord throughout the postmodern global village, suggesting the existence of a yet-to-be-organized Youth International of the disaffected. Especially "gangsta rap" flaunts disrespect for the authority, laws, and norms of white culture.

As is clear in songs like Ice-T's "Mic Contract," the microphone is seen as a symbol of power, a phallic extension or gun, that enables rappers to engage in sublimated warfare. Rap reveals that the word "nigger" has been appropriated by African-Americans in various ways, either as a positive term of endearment and solidarity, as a term of hostility toward a peer, or as a political identity for a member of an oppressed class, such as when Ice-T insists in "Straight up Nigga" that "I am a nigger, not a colored man, negro, or black," terms widely accepted by white culture that euphemize the actual conditions faced by blacks, and which the word "nigger" refuses to tidy up.

Much rap music attempts to communicate the plight of young blacks in the inner cities and, especially, to call attention to the problem of police violence which they confront on an everyday basis. While the police are supposed to "serve and protect," young blacks find instead that the cops are there to harass and exploit, and that these "guardians of the peace" in fact pose one of the gravest dangers to the community--as well dramatized in films like Menace II Society, or the Mark Fuhrman tapes during the O.J. Simpson trial which one African-American commentator described as an appropriate soundtrack for the Rodney King beating. In "Body Count," Ice-T satirically reflects on the white utopia of Ozzie and Harriet and the Cleavers, as a time and place where cops would help a kitten down from a tree. Nowadays, in the inner cities, Ice-T notes that "Shit ain't like that!" Every day, from L.A. to New Orleans, Philadelphia to New York, the complaints of the rappers are confirmed as white police have been caught beating and killing blacks, ordering

their execution, imprisoning them on bogus charges and planted evidence, and shaking down their communities for whatever blood money they can extort, often from the poorest of poor. To these conditions, N.W.A. dedicated their anthem, "Fuck tha Police!"

Tupac Shakur's Me Against the World (1995) paints an especially vivid portrait of life in the inner city. Titles like "If I die 2nite" and "Death Around the Corner" describe the danger and paranoia of living in no-peace zones where bullets fly more than birds, while "Me Against the World," "So Many Tears," and "Fuck the World" express both sadness and rage concerning this plight. Reminiscing about his past, he tells us:

I was raised in the city,
shitty ever since I was
an itty bitty kiddy,
drinkin' liquor out of my mama's titty.
And smokin' weed was an everyday thing
in my household,
and drinkin' liquor `till you're out cold.

Shakur regrets his mother and the preachers couldn't save him from a life of drugs, drunkenness, and violence. Although he often appeals to God and affirms struggle and hope, he condemns the world that has taken so many of his friends ("I've lost so many peers/I shed so many tears") and which threatens to take his own young life at any moment: "Fuck the world 'cause I'm cursed/I'm havin' visions of leaving here in a hearse. ... Will I survive to the morning to see the sun?" The paranoia of life is intense: "If you're black, you'd better stay strapped," or: "You want to last? Be the first to blast." The expectation of death is especially heightened in Shakur's "Death Around the Corner," which opens with his young son asking him why he is standing by the window with his gun and the father answering that: "My destiny is to die." The rapper explains that "I guess I've seen too many murders" and is prepared for more violence at any moment. Still, he is not afraid to die, figuring that any place will be better than the ghetto: "Don't shed a tear for me nigga/I ain't happy here."

The Politics of Rap

As concerned citizens and activists, some black rappers consider themselves to be "knowledge gangsters," such as Black Liberation Radio activists like Mbanna Kantako and Zears Miles, who raid U.S. scientific and military documents in particular to find evidence for economic, cultural, and biological warfare against blacks (Fiske 1994). Translating information from white systems into black terms, knowledge warriors reconstruct mainstream or suppressed knowledge into "blackstream knowledge," thus using information and knowledge as tools of struggle and counter-hegemony. Some of this is the black version of a politicized Pynchonian paranoia that mines white information systems for clues as to how white America is preparing genocidal attack on the black population. Paranoia is in fact rampant in the black community; for instance, 1990 polls showed that one-third of African-Americans found it plausible that AIDS had been deliberately created by the

government and white scientists as a form of chemical warfare against their people, seeing it more as a "black disease" than a "gay disease," [7] just as many believe the liquor and tobacco companies have targeted black people in specific to hawk their poisons.

Some rappers attempt to play a positive role in their community. The initials of the group KRS-ONE are short for "Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone" and the rapper urges his people to put aside the gold chain and braggadocio and to straight out tell people what is happening in the black community. KRS-ONE also began a Stop the Violence campaign--with song, record, and concerts--and published an article which argues that it is new technologies of violence that make it more lethal, that violence is thus a social problem that must be addressed, and that we must gain knowledge of what is accelerating violence, and then how to control the technologies and social conditions that are accelerating violent incidents. [8]

For many rappers, it is time to wake up, a time to do something, a time to get educated as to what is happening, a time to think and act for oneself. "Don't believe the hype!" and "Fight the Power!" shouts Public Enemy. While some rap is sexist, some is mediocre, and some is just plain silly, the best rap music is intensely political and incarnates what Herbert Marcuse (1964) described as "the great refusal," refusing to submit to domination and oppression. Rap songs frequently invoke groups that **are** doing something, as well as the black radical heroes and traditions of the recent past, such as Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, H. Rap Brown, and MLK. Thus, certain forms of rap, like Public Enemy, are good examples of a political form of postmodernism that turns the forms of media culture against the established society.

On the other hand, there are more apolitical, narcissistic, sexist rappers like 2 Live Crew and Snoop Doggy Dogg who are consistently derogatory toward women, portraying them as good only for sex, and who are looking primarily for good times. Snoop's lyrics and cover art cartoons are a panegyric to a hedonistic lifestyle of gin and juice, chronic (highly potent weed), cars, sex, and money. The world of danger, paranoia, suffering, and oppression that Tupac has underscored is largely absent in the exploits of Snoop and the Dogg Pound. Snoop revels in his distance from it all. As the chorus in "For All My Niggaz & Bitches" celebrates: "Put your hands in the air/We don't care/About nothin' at all/Real niggers don't give a fuck nigger." Such attitudes have erased the distinction between pessimism and apathy. Like many other rap artists, Snoop is obsessed with being a "G," a gangster, a lawbreaker who smokes dope and kills with impunity. Indicative of the situation in the inner cities, his rage is directed against fellow blacks, not whites, and he brags "I never hesitate to put a nigger on his back" -- as he does on Doggystyle in an argument over a woman, and as he was prosecuted for in real life, before being acquitted.

Snoop's rhythms are infectious, and his rhymes clever indeed, but his lyrics put women through a verbal shredder similar to the infamous Hustler cover featuring a

naked woman being ground into meat. Doggystyle's cartoon-art portrays a woman merely as a hole to be filled by the man and the songs have hundreds of disparaging remarks toward "'ho's" and "bitches." In "Ain't No Fun, for example, Snoop and the pound swagger:

I have never met a girl
that I loved in the whole wide world.
Well if [I] gave a fuck about a bitch
I'd always be broke,
I'd never have no motherfuckin' Indo to smoke ...
I have no love for her,
that's something that I had in the past,
you're just the latest 'ho.

Now that pussy's mine,
so I'll fuck it a couple mo times,
and then I'm through with it,
there's nothing else to do with it,
pass it to the homies ...
It ain't no fun
if the homies can't have none ...

Use of the terms "bitches" and "'ho's" replicate sexism and oppression within the black community, showing clearly that an underclass is not necessarily an enlightened class, and prompting angry outcries by female rap singers. Queen Latifah, for instance, in her 1993/1994 hit music video and song "U.N.I.T.Y." calls for black solidarity and says indignantly: "Who you calling a bitch?!" A chorus tells the black woman audience, "You ain't a bitch and a 'ho" and "You gotta let 'em know." Women rappers also appear on Ice Cube's albums telling the male rapper that their sexism is unacceptable. Coolio, for one, seems to have heard the message, dedicating "For My Sister" to the "young black queens from the neighborhood scene who haven't lost their dream" and is repentant for using the word "bitch," saying:

Now I done used the word 'bitch' a few times in a rhyme
But that was '95, so let me drop a line ...
Coolio knows that you ain't no 'ho
And its time to put you up on a pedestal ...
For every nigger that ditched you
For every nigger that hit you
Accept my apologies for my brothers,
My sister ...

Occasionally, sexist rappers attempt a lame defense of their language. In various interviews, Snoop claimed that he calls women bitches and 'ho's only to denigrate their tendencies to exploit men for their money, paying him and his friends attention only when they became successful. [9] Similarly, Tupac Shakur reveals in "Wonder Why They Call U" that men rightly call women bitches and sluts when they

play men for money and ignore their responsibilities to their children while partying all night. In "Bitches 2," Ice-T sings that "Ladies we just ain't talkin' about you/` cause some of you niggers are bitches too," implying that anyone can be a bitch, male or female. Nevertheless, many rappers indiscriminately use these words, such that they are virtual synonyms for "women." Even Coolio's 1996 release -- despite the apology that we cited above -- enjoins men to "get your woman on the floor." Clearly, there is a far deeper misogyny in black male culture than rap artists care to admit -- as well as in the white male community that buys and listens to rap. [10]

A Contested Terrain

Thus, rap music, like U.S. society in general, is a contested terrain in which a variety of different, often conflicting and self-contradictory, positions are articulated. In addition to misogyny, Ice Cube and other rappers are not immune from the kind of racism they condemn when directed at them, making derogatory references to Korean-Americans and other racial minorities in their songs, while restricting the proud badge of "nigger" to African-Americans. In "Black Korea," for example, Ice Cube warns: "So pay respect to the black fist/or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp," thereby inflaming serious racial tensions among minorities themselves that continue to erupt in bombings and killings, such as occurred between various minorities in Los Angeles and Harlem in 1995, leading to shootings and firebombings.

Snoop's lyrics indicate that drugs, alcohol, sex, and money are means of escape from systemic oppression, tranquilizers that dull the pain, but they also blunt the critical vision and will. Many rappers, political or not, uncritically reproduce violence in their music. Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg play tough, with Snoop himself "Snoopy Dogg Killa" and pining, "How can I be the 'G' that I want to be?" Ice-T and Ice Cube adopt the "ice" metaphor, signifying their absolute coolness and hardness. Ice Cube describes himself as "America's Most Wanted" and choruses taunt "Fuck you Ice Cube" as he raps his radical rant. Ice-T is probably the most macho of all. He constantly evokes his own name, sometimes embellished with the refrain, "Ice, motherfucking T." He presents himself as the "baddest motherfucker around" ("I'm as hard as they come"), taunting the cops or anyone else to try to fuck with him and his guns. In "Mic Contract," he brags: "Violent? yeah, you could call me that. Insane? you're on the right track." While he draws an extended parallel between the microphone and gun as symbols of power, Ice-T wants us to know he really lives the life of crime; indeed, this "cop killer" wants to distinguish himself from pseudo-tough rappers to claim the mantle of "O.G., Original Gangster."

Thus, in much rap music, "black pride" mutates into overweening hubris and machismo taken to absurd extremes. It quickly becomes clear that many rappers only condemn violence when it is directed against them; otherwise, they celebrate it, internalize it, and embrace it as an ethos and means of self expression. In fact, during the mid to late-1990s, violent episodes between East Coast and West Coast rappers erupted in response to members of each group dissing other groups,

translating the violence of the music into violent acts. In November 1994, West Coast rapper Tupac Shakur was shot and wounded in New York, claiming he was set up by, among others, Randy "Stretch" Walker, a producer employed with East Coast rival rap firm Bad Boy Entertainment. Exactly one year later, Walker was murdered gang-execution style in his Queens, New York, neighborhood. Next, a member of the Bad Boy group shot and killed an employee of West Coast Death Row records and while shooting a video in New York, shots were fired at the West Coast Dogg Pound group in a drive-by shooting (In These Times, July 22, 1996: 24). Then, Tupac was shot to death in Los Vegas in September 1996 in a gangstyle drive-by shooting, followed by the execution of the Notorious B.I.G., a star of the N.Y.-based Bad Boy Entertainment. [11]

During the mid to late-1990s, the East/West "war" thus exploded into violence, carried out in rap music, Internet exchanges with members of each side dissing the other, shootings, and gangstyle executions. In the early rap classic "The Message," Grandmaster Flash suggests that "You grow up in the ghetto/living second rate/and your eyes will sing a song of deep hate," but this hardly excuses reproducing violence and failing to seek positive alternatives. One could add to this that the "gangsta" identity is often nothing but a promotional image constructed because it sells. Dr. Dre, for example, tells how he started off as an R&B artist and admitted he's only in it for the money, and M.C. Hammer helped resurrect his career with a gangster pose. In fact, market demands for ever more shocking and provocative products reward the most extreme excess, leading some rappers to complain that they have to play the gangster game and make their work ever more shocking in order to sell and have it distributed.

By the late 1990s, however, there was such revulsion against the excesses of gangster rap that even members of the "hardcore" were seeking new directions. By 1993, the conventions of G-rap music and style were so exaggerated and over the top that Rusty Cundieff could produce a hilarious satire of its pretensions and eccentricities in the film Fear of a Black Hat. The real-life violence erupting constantly in rap culture, its sexism, and its problematic celebration of gangster life and style drove many away from the genre. Yet for a diagnostic critique, rap violence replicates the exorbitant competitiveness of contemporary capitalism, while its ferocity is part and parcel of a society that places sex and violence at the center of its media culture, and is not hesitant to use extreme force to defend the interests of its ruling elites, whether in the form of police brutality against the underclass or military intervention against declared enemies of the state.

Moreover, the excesses of rap are explained by Henry Louis Gates Jr. who acknowledges violence in rap is extreme, but argues: "When you're faced with a stereotype, you can disavow it or you can embrace it and exaggerate it to the nth degree. The rappers take the white Western culture's worst fear of black men and make a game out of it" (cited in Howe and Strauss 1993: 14). There is indeed an element of extreme parody, of constantly going over the edge, of hyperbolic exaggeration in rap, creating the need to constantly up the ante, making the next performance more extreme than the last.

Rappers often defend themselves by arguing that they are only describing black experience and sounding warnings about "black rage." Thomas Kockman suggests that the purpose of black verbal aggression "is to gain, without actually having to become violent, the respect and fear from others that is often won through physical combat" and that rap, therefore, might actually help to reduce physical violence (cited in Fiske 1994: 187). None of these apologies are very convincing. Indeed, the misogynistic, hedonistic, and violent outlook of gangsta rappers has involved many of them in real-life trouble: Flavor Flav, Dr. Dre, and others have been arrested on drug and alcohol charges; Snoop was charged with conspiracy in the murder of another black man that he claimed was in self-defense, although he was cleared in 1996; Tupac has been arrested on rape and sodomy charges, and was himself the victim of violence when shot and seriously wounded outside his recording studio, and then later shot to death; Easy E, who celebrated thug life, began a victim of its excesses himself dying of AIDS (though he made safe sex and anti-drug commercials during his last days); a member of Da Lench Mob was sentenced to 29 years to life for the murder of a male friend of his girlfriend, while another member of the same group was charged with murder in an altercation at a L.A. bowling alley; the founder of Death Row Records, Suge Knight, is back in jail after a parole violation and is reportedly the subject of a grand jury investigation for his possible role in the execution of Biggie Small; rapper and mogul Sean "Puffy Daddy" Combs is accused of assaulting an executive of Interscope Records, while other stories of violence within the rap music industry continue to circulate. [12]

Rap is thus a highly ambivalent cultural phenomenon with contradictory effects. At its best, rap is a powerful indictment of racism, oppression, and violence that calls our attention to the crisis of the inner cities and vividly describes the plight of African-Americans. Rap provides a positive valorization of blackness, celebrating black culture, pride, intelligence, strength, style, and creativity. It supplies a voice for a social group excluded from mainstream communication and enables members of other social groups to better understand the experiences, anger, and positions within the black community. It constitutes a set of oppositional cultural practices that can mobilize awareness and understanding of oppression and revolt, providing musical resources that can be used by groups struggling for justice and liberation. It is a potential wake-up call urging African-American and other audiences to break out of the cycle of drugs and violence, accept self-responsibility, and begin to restore their lives and communities in whatever ways possible as they struggle for broader societal changes.

At its worst, G-rap is itself racist, sexist, and glorifies violence, being little but a money-making vehicle that is part of the problem rather than the solution. Many of its images and models are highly problematic, such as the gangsta rap celebration of the outlaw, pimp, hedonistic pleasure seeker, and drug dealer. Yet rap is a contested terrain with its most virulent sexism contested by other rap artists who also attempt to provide an array of alternatives to the dubious figures of gangster rap. Some rap is random in its circulation of violence and anger, channelling it indiscriminately against the entire world, while other rap artists correctly target

anger against the actual forces of oppression that have historically subjugated the black community. In short, G-rap is but a part of a much broader and more multifaceted hip hop culture that has become a dominant cultural form and style in the present era.

Rap music is thus highly complex and many-sided with contradictory effects. It is clearly a formidable mode of cross-cultural communication, enabling white audiences to listen to black voices and assimilate black views that they might otherwise miss. Rap music makes the listener painfully aware of differences between black and white, rich and poor, male and female. Rap music brings to white audiences the uncomfortable awareness of black suffering, anger, and violence. More upscale and privileged audiences are enabled to experience the painful effects of deprivation and pain suffered in the urban ghettos. They can also confront grotesque caricatures of its own mainstream celebrations of wealth and materialism via the often gross in-your-face recounting of their new found wealth by black rap artists. Moreover, the aggressive expressions of male misogyny and violence toward women in some rap are a grim reminder of male violence and the hostile and dangerous attitudes that many men hold toward women, as its homophobic and racist attitudes indicate that oppressed underclasses also harbor prejudice and anger against other oppressed groups. Very often the oppressed direct their rage against their own people and other subaltern groups, thus furthering their own oppression and subordination.

Rap has thus proven itself to be a very potent and powerful musical idiom. The best rap draws on the Dionysian tradition in rock visible in Elvis Presley, James Brown, Janis Joplin, and others, driving its audiences into ecstasy and frenzy. [13]

With its extreme sexuality and violence, rap bursts through all boundaries of propriety, good taste, and decorum, creating genuine shock effects of the sort described by Walter Benjamin (1969), who argued that in a media-saturated world art must shock its audiences to get their attention. Rap often goes to extremes, over the edge, into that tabooed region of excess that threatens the protectors of law and order, morality and taste. The rap spectacle is thus potentially highly subversive and in its more extreme forms enacts a Dionysian subversion of boundaries, entering a realm of anarchy, lawlessness, and chaos.

Rap is thus at once a formidable form of musical expression, a subcultural means of opposition, a cultural idiom of counterhegemonic anger and rebellion, and an indicator that existing societies are structured according to a system of differences between dominant and subordinate classes, groups, races, and genders. Exploding false homogenization and humanisms, rap music is thus an anthem of postmodern marginality and conflict, a vivid articulation of the extent to which difference and opposition are structuring principles of contemporary society, and a reminder of the growing differences between the haves and the have nots. It is the thorn on the rose of media culture which pricks its audiences into awareness of the shadowside and underclass of American society. It is a frequently embarrassing reminder that all is not well in the home of the brave and the land of the free. Rap vividly reminds us that the red, white, and blue of the flag are not yet signifiers of a

multicultural society where the colors of the rainbow complement each other and harmonize rather than clash.

Yet rap can further a destructive type of identity politics, promoting a binary opposition between white and black, cops and gangsters, men and women, straight and gay, that stigmatizes one of the terms of the binary. However, with its heavy emphasis on color, rap music calls attention to the importance of racial difference and focuses attention on whiteness as well as blackness. Rap thus troubles and problematizes the system of racial difference whereby blackness is marginalized, silenced, and excluded from the cultural dialogue and whiteness is assumed as the norm and the normal. Rap can force white audiences to reflect on their own racial construction, on the ways that whites oppress blacks, on the ways that their own subject positions are constructed in opposition to an Other who is often presented in a negative light. Rap is thus a significant part of the postmodern adventure that forces an increasingly multicultural and multiracial society to become aware of its differences and to learn to live with otherness and dissimilarity.

Endnotes

1. As we note below, hip hop is a broader cultural matrix that includes dance, performance, visual art, style, fashion, and a mode of life; rap is the form of musical idiom that articulates the ethos of hip hop culture. On the relationship between hip hop and rap and for various accounts of their historical genesis and significance, see Toop 1984; George 1988 and 1998; Gilroy 1991 and 1994; Dyson 1993 and 1996; Rose 1994; Lipsitz 1994; and Kellner 1995. This study was carried out as part of our forthcoming The Postmodern Adventure, which follows Best and Kellner 1991 and 1997. ([back](#))
2. Tupac recorded songs anticipating his death, including "Death Around the Corner" and "If I Die 2nite", which we discuss below; Biggie Smalls also cut two records entitled "Ready to Die" and "Life after Death" before his execution, which were released after his death. ([back](#))
3. Two recent testimonies to the potency and popularity of rap are found in Newsweek article (February 8, 1999: 52-66) which documents rap's global popularity, claiming that it is to the present era what Benny Goodman was to the swing era and the Beatles to the 1960s; the article notes that rap music sold 81 million CDs in 1998, compared with the ever popular country music which sold 72 million. And in March 1999, MTV featured a five-day hip hop retrospective that looked back on the genre, played rockumentaries on the main figures, engaged in panel discussions and demonstrations of DJ and MC style, and played top rated songs of the "old school" and "now school," and the top twenty-five rated rap music videos of all time. ([back](#))
4. As Ferguson and Rogers write: "the combination of social-spending cuts, other budget initiatives, and the massively regressive tax bill produced a huge upward distribution of American income. Over the 1983-1985 period the policies reduced

the incomes of household making less then \$20,000 a year by \$20 billion, while increasing the incomes of households making more then \$80,000 by \$35 billion. For those at the very bottom of the income pyramid, making under \$10,000 per year, the policies produced an average loss of \$1,100 over 1983-85. For those at the top, making more than \$200,000 a year, the average gain was \$60,000. By the end of Reagan's first term, U.S. income distribution was more unequal than at any time since 1947, the year the Census Bureau first began collecting data on the subject. In 1983, the top 40% of the population received a larger share of income than at any time since 1947" (1986: 130). ([back](#))

5. On rap as a modernist genre, see Gilroy 1994 and Kellner 1995a. While one could read the highly elaborate productions of Ice-T and Ice Cube and the entire work of Public Enemy as deploying modernist cultural strategies of creating a unique voice and style, of producing a distinctive vision of the world, and envisaging radical cultural and social change in the mode of the modernist avant-garde, there are also distinctive postmodern motifs in rap, as we will stress in the following analysis. ([back](#))

6. In the mid-1980s, MTV came under heavy fire for not playing enough black music. They rectified this situation by featuring soul music and rap in regular time-slots. Beavis and Butt-Head too have expressed their appreciation for rap, albeit often with tongue-in-cheek, as they playfully satirize its language and dance style (with Butt-Head mimicking doggy-style sex spiced with spanking). They also can easily spot a white negro like Vanilla Ice, whom they devastatingly dismiss with only a contemptuous glance at one another. Yet the more politically explosive music videos like Public Enemy's "Shut it down!" are not shown on MTV or other mainstream musical venues. Yet MTV's showcasing of rap, culminating in a five-day March 1999 focus on rap and Hip Hop culture, has done much to circulate rap/hip hop as a global popular. ([back](#))

7. Black paranoia is evident even in mainstream Black celebrities like Bill Cosby who in a 1991 interview on CNN's Showbiz Today stated: "AIDS was started by human beings to get after people they didn't like." For Public Enemy's version of this belief, check out the song "Race Against Time" on their 1994 album Muse Sick-N- Hour Mess Age. ([back](#))

8. KRS ONE's article "Stop the Violence Movement" is published in Rap Sheet (August 1994): 14. ([back](#))

9. He provided this defense in a 1996 MTV interview "Snoop Raw" and in a Playboy interview, October, 1995: 60. ([back](#))

10. A book on a Canadian serial murderer who tortured and killed young women indicated that he constantly listened to rap music as he performed his vile acts (Burnside and Cairns 1995: 265ff), and an account of a gang rape by a women who suffered it indicates that the prolonged assault was accompanied by rap music (Morgan 1995: 181f.). Thus, there is evidence that rap misogyny does provoke and

provide a pretext and soundtrack for sexual violence. ([back](#))

11. Rivalry and dissing between East and West Coast rap goes back to the early 1990s; see Paul Gilroy's (1996: 308f.) citing and discussion of New York rap artist Tim Dogg's attack on West Coast gangster rap in his 1991 EP Fuck Compton. After the shooting of Tupac and Biggie, however, there has been a concerted effort to cool the rivalry between East Coast and West Coast. ([back](#))

12. Members of the rap culture tell of recurrent violence within Death Row records in a 1998 MTV rockumentary, while a Los Angeles Times story reports violence against writers for rap music magazines (January 1, 1999: F16, F18). ([back](#))

13. The term "Dionysian" derives from the Greek god Dionysus, the god of the festival and ecstasy; see the description in Nietzsche 1967. From this perspective, the more extreme versions of rap are a bacchanian festival of excess, an expenditure of anarchic and creative energies that draw on the deepest roots of Eros and Thanatos, sex and violence. ([back](#))

Works Cited

Baker, Houston A. Black Studies, Rap and the Academy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Best, Steven, and Kellner, Douglas. Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations. London and New York: MacMillan and Guilford Press, 1991.

_____. The Postmodern Turn. London and New York: Routledge and Guilford Press, 1997.

_____. The Postmodern Adventure. New York: Guilford Press, (forthcoming).

Dyson, Michael. Reflecting Black. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

_____. Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Ferguson, Tom and Joel Rogers. Right Turn. New York: Will and Wang, 1986.

Fiske, John. Media Matters. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Gates, Henry Louis. The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

George, Nelson. The Death of Rhythm & Blues. New York: Pantheon, 1988.

_____. Hip Hop America. New York: Viking Press, 1998.

Gilroy, Paul. 'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack'. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

_____. The Black Atlantic. London and New York: Verso, 1994.

Howe, Neil and Strauss, Bill. 13th Generation: America's 13th Generation, Born 1961- 1981. New York: Vintage, 1993.

Kellner, Douglas. Media Culture. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

Lipsitz, George. Dangerous Crossroads. Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place. London: Verso, 1994.

Mailer, Norman. Advertisements for Myself. New York: Putnam's, 1959.

Marcuse, Herbert. One-Dimensional Man. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Birth of Tragedy. New York: Random House, 1967.

Rose, Tricia. Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America. Wesleyan, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

Toop, David. The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop. Boston: South End Press, 1984.

Copyright © Enculturation 1997-1999

[Home](#) | [About](#) | [Submissions](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Copyright](#) | [Review](#) | [Links](#)