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RAP, RACE AND POWER POLITICS

by Clarence Lusane

Blessed are those who struggle
Oppression is worse than the grave
Better to die for a noble cause
Than to live and die a slave
– The Last Poets[1]

1992 will be remembered not only for the election of Bill Clinton as the 42nd President of the United States, but also as the year that rap came of age politically. The stormy relationship between rap music and contemporary U.S. politics was shaped by several incidents under which rested critical issues concerning the state of black culture, America's perpetual racism, and the future of African American politics.

The efforts to cool off Ice-T and send Sister Souljah back to the barracks are, of course, not about music at all. On the one hand, rap is the voice of alienated, frustrated, and rebellious black youth who recognize their vulnerability and marginality in post-industrial America. Denied access to the real levers of political and ideological power, rappers have created what Public Enemy's Chuck D calls black folks "CNN."[2] On the other hand, rap is the packaging and marketing of social discontent by some of the most skilled ad agencies and largest record producers in the world. It's this duality that has made rap and rappers an explosive issue in the politics of power that shaped the 1992 elections and beyond. It's also this duality that has given rap its many dimensions and flavors; its spiraling matrix of empowerment and reaction.

Even the briefest effort to understand the significance of rap requires that it be deconstructed into its most important dimensions, that those dimensions be viewed in their relevant social contexts, and then be reconstructed as a cultural paradigm of the oppressed with all the contradictions that that implies. These relevant, though by no means only, dimensions include rap as pedagogy, rap as mass culture, rap as subversion, and rap as farce.

While rap has devolved into many subgenres, it is the "political" and "gangsta" rappers whose evolution and future are most critical to grasp. Positive rappers, such as Arrested Development, have extended the music and made rap more palatable for many who previously refused to listen to it. The cross-over rap of acts like Hammer and Kriss-Kross (get it!) is deliberately mainstreamed, thus perpetrating rap in form — "rap lite" so to speak — without its hardcore substance. Forced to clean up their diction and enunciation, the cross-over rappers often distance themselves from rap's roots and the community of consumers for whom rap has the most empowerment value. Conversly, hard core rappers not only remain racially "true," but also advocate a distinct class perspective. In substance and in form, they evoke both a black nationalist and a working class (and often quasi-lumpen) orientation.

Much of rap music has rightfully been criticized as misogynist, violent, and a tool of profit-greedy, multi-national white record corporations. Many of the rappers, however, see themselves as ghetto revolutionaries voicing the only consistent radical urgings from a black America in crisis. Both of these views are reductive and, ultimately, not very useful in assessing the meanings and lessons of black popular musical expression in this historic period.

The significance of rap can not be located solely in the opportunist tendencies of politicians and corporate barons nor, for that mat-

ter, in the self-promotional pronouncements of the rappers themselves. The 1980s restructuring of U.S. capitalism, with its accompanying impoverization and racism, created not only political and economic upheavals, but engendered cultural eruptions of which rap is one of the most dynamic expressions. Contextually, rap is music that could only be born in the age of Reaganism and the "New World Order." The new (and still unfolding) global and national political and economic readjustments are disproportionately affecting people of color in the United States and the developing world. Predicting long periods of recession, unemployment, and social strife, capital has created the conditions under which radical political and cultural responses are inevitable and, indeed, necessary.

Reagan and Bush's greatly expanded (black) reserve army of labor, particularly its youth wing, did not go quietly into the night. While some decided to get into what rapper Ice Cube calls "steady mobbin,"[3] others sought more prosaic outlets, and still others founded cultural movements including rap. Influenced by a tradition of oral leaders and artists, from Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Nikki Giovanni to Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets, young black cultural activists evolved from the urban cosmos of the early 1980s ready for rap. Denied opportunity for more formal music training and access to instruments due to Reagan-era budget cuts in education and school music programs, turntables became instruments and lyrical acrobatics became a cultural outlet. Initially underground, by the late 1980s, rap and the broad spectrum of Hip Hop became the dominant cultural environment of young African Americans, particularly males.

The attacks on rap by politicians and others tied to the nation's power structures reflect a long history of America's dismissal of the anti-racist content of black popular music even as it rocks to its beat. At its core, African American music functions as a culturally empowering discourse that speaks to the aspirations of the black oppressed and at the structures of dominance under which they live. Black cultural resistance to racism, often in the form of the performing arts and always in terms of the language, has been a historic constant despite resilient efforts to corrupt, co-opt, and contain its liberating imperatives.

RAP AS PEDAGOGY

"Culture is always in the life of a society (open or closed), the more or less conscious result of the economic and political activities of that society, the more or less dynamic expression of the kinds of relationships which prevail in that society, on the one hand between man (considered individually or collectively) and nature, and on the other hand, among individuals, groups of individuals, social strata or classes."

– Amilcar Cabral[4]

From the moment Harriet Tubman sang "steal away" to signal runaway slaves that it was time to flee, music has been not only a weapon of African American resistance to racism, but part of the African American strategic arsenal of group consciousness. Rap rests comfortably on this historic tradition finding its place within the contemporary black freedom struggle albeit with contradictory and, and often, harmful impulses.

Pushed to what rap scholar Robin D.G. Kelley calls the "social and spatial fringes of the post-industrial city,"[5] for many black youth, rap is a form of political, economic, and ideological empowerment. It's a pedagogy necessitated by the abandonment of black youth by the nation's political institutions and leaders of all colors. As Kelley notes, rap reflects and projects "the lessons of lived experiences."[6] One does not have to agree with the rantings and rage of Ice-T, Sister Souljah or other rappers to unite with their sense of isolation, anger, and refusal to go down quietly. Ignored and dissed by both major political parties and much of what passes for national black leadership, is it any wonder that Ice Cube reflects the views of so many youth when he sings,

Do I have to sell me a whole lot of crack
For decent shelter and clothes on my back?
Or should I just wait for President Bush
Or Jesse Jackson and Operation PUSH?[7]

The rappers see themselves as not only schooling each other about the escalating social crisis they experience, but also schooling the community and the nation as a whole. The newly found popularity of Carter G. Woodson's *Mis-Education of the Negro* among black youth is a sign of the wholesale rejection of the educating institutions and social systems that fail to tell the truth and, more often than not, consciously distort it.

The material basis for the production of black youth alienation is the growing immiseration of millions of working class families. In the period 1986 to 1992, according to the Census Bureau, 700,000 African Americans fell below the poverty line.[8] As stunning as that may be, the Bush administration achieved the same result in half the time. A report issued by the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) documents that 841,000 youth fell into poverty in the first two years of the Bush administration.[9] According to CDF's figures, in some cities, as many as two-thirds of minority children are in poverty.[10]

Census Bureau figures state that between 1989 and 1991, the real median household income of African American declined by a 5.3 percent, from $19,862 to $18,807. The greatest drop occurred among single-women with families, 9.7 percent. However, even for black married couple with families, over the same period, income dropped by 5.4 percent. These drops in income account for the reason why the official black poverty rate for blacks is 32.7 percent, 10.2 million people, which is higher than for Hispanics (28.7 percent), Asians (13.8 percent), or whites (11.3 percent).[11]

It's no coincidence that the epicenters of political and gangsta rap — New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and Oakland — are also some of the economically hardest hit areas with virtually Depression era unemployment. Los Angeles lost 80,000 low-skilled and unskilled jobs during the 1980s.[12] This jobs gap has been filled by employment opportunities in the illegal economy. Furthermore, the repressive apparatus of the state, unbuffered by black political managers, has sharpen the growing class and racial cleavages that define urban America so well. The containment of marginalized, angry, and semi-lumpenized black youth has become the number one priority of post-industrial urban political and judicial systems.

Each new horrific homicide generates new calls for instituting or implementing the death penalty despite the fact that it has been shown to be racially bias in application. Government programs, like Weed and Seed — weed out "criminals, seed "development" — become acceptable even though civil liberties and civil rights are discarded and only the black community is targeted for these Draconian programs.[13]

The music of Ice-T, Yo Yo, pre-Nation of Islam Ice Cube, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, NWA, Public Enemy, Cypress Hill, X-Clan, KRS-One, Stetasonic, Compton's Most Wanted, Too Short and others capture the rawness that is the lived urban experiences of black youth, particularly black males. An examination of today's rap songs quickly demonstrates that the principal topic of the music is the social crisis engulfing working class black America. Unlike the moralistic preaching, escapism or sentimentality that defines most popular music, including the moderated rap of Hammer, hard-core rappers detail the unemployment, mis-education, discrimination, homicides, gang life, class oppression, police brutality, and regressive gender politics that dominates the lives of many black youth. Living in a post-industrial, Reagan-molded, increasingly-racist, anti-immigrant, less tolerant, more sexist, Jesse-dissing, King-beating, Quayle-spelling, Clarence Thomas-serving America, too many young blacks find too little hope in the current society.

A lyrical analysis of the gangsta and political rappers uncovers important political yearnings — yearnings that mostly go ignored by black leaders. The macho boasting, misogyny, violent fantasies, and false consciousness exists side-by-side with a immature, but clear critique of authority, loathing of the oppressive character of wage labor, hatred of racism, and expose of Reaganism.

Houston's Geto Boys, for example, notorious for their brutal depictions of women, address the contradictions of drug dealing in their hit "Mind Playing Tricks on Me." Pinpointing the anxiety and frustration of a young drug dealer, the song struggles to find a human character in what has become a media stereotype. They state in one passage:

Can't keep a steady hand
Because I'm nervous
Every Sunday morning, I'm in service
Praying for forgiveness
And trying to find an exit out the business[14]

Many other rappers address the racist character of the nation's war on drugs. Although blacks make up only about 15 percent of the nation's drug users, they are close to 50 percent of those arrested on drug charges, mainly for possession.[15] The drug war's collat-

eral damage continues to grow in what one Senate committee calls a "$32 billion failure."[16]

Rappers highlight these contradictions in their songs. Raps like NWA's "Dope Man," Ice-T's "New Jack Hustler," Ice Cube's "The Product," and CPO's "The Wall" all expose the bankruptcy of the war on drugs and its deadly impact on the black community.

Police harassment, virtually unheard of in white communities, remains an explosive element in the black community — an element that, at one time, produced the Black Panther Party, and, at another, the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion. Long before the Rodney King incident, Compton's Most Wanted, NWA, and KRS-One, among others, were kicking songs about police murders and harassment.

Los Angeles, in particular, has been notorious in terms of police killings and viewing the black community as a war zone. The relation between African Americans and the police has been nothing but antagonistic. Under the leadership of the now-departed Chief Daryl Gates, the LAPD viewed young blacks as unredemptive urban terrorists who were best kept locked up, contained, or eliminated. A report issued by Los Angeles County District Attorney Ira Reiner made the dubious claim that 47 percent of young black males in the Los Angeles area were gang members.[17] Under the cover of fighting the drug war, LAPD initiated Operation Hammer which invaded the black community time and time again, and, on April 9, 1988, arrested 1,453 young blacks.[18]

Years before he put out the controversial "Cop Killer," rapper Ice-T was broadcasting about the deadly character of the relationship between inner-city minority youth and city cops. In "Squeeze the Trigger," he raps against police murders (and Reaganism):

Cops hate kids, kids hate cops.
Cops kill kids with warnin' shots.
What is crime and what is not?
What is Justice? I think I forgot.
We buy weapons to keep us strong
Reagan sends guns where they don't belong.[19]

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

Fuck the police coming straight from the underground
A young nigger got it bad cause I'm brown
I'm not the other color
Some people think
They have the authority to kill a minority
Fuck that shit, cause I ain't the one
For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun
to be beaten on, and thrown in jail
We can go toe-to-toe in the middle of a cell
Fuckin' with me cause I'm a teenager,
With a little bit of gold and a pager
Searching my car, looking for the product
Thinking every nigger is selling narcotics.[20]

Ice Cube, always the most politically conscious of the group, eventually left NWA so that he could produce more "political" songs.[21] His role in John Singleton's movie "Boyz N' the Hood" and his joining of Minister Louis Farakkhan's Nation of Islam have been significant evolutions in his personal and professional political development. Other rappers also address what has become a virtually black-only experience: police shootings. In their, "Behind Closed Doors," W.C. and the MAAD Circle rhyme,

I'm being charged for resisting arrest
But it was either catch a bullet or be beaten to death[22]

Or, in MC Ren's "Real Niggaz Don't Die,"

They don't give a fuck about a nigger
They would rather pull the trigger[23]

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

Every cop killer goes ignored
They just send another nigger to the morgue[24]

It should be noted here that Latino youth, fast becoming the principle target of repression in many urban settings, have also been victimized by police excessiveness. That explains why Latino youth were at the center of the nation's most recent uprisings in Los Angeles' South Central, New York's Washington Heights, and Washington, D.C.'s Mount Pleasant/Adams-Morgan. The failure of black elected officials, who are vainly attempting to manage the exponentially-escalating social crisis in their cities, to redress the particular grievances facing Latino communities is part of the problem.[25]

Latinos have been actively been involved in Hip Hop since the early days. As graffiti illustrators, break dancers, and MCs, the Latino flavor of rap has been strong though sometimes hidden. In today's Hip Hop scene, Latinos are still active as dancers, but also as producers and rappers. Groups like Cypress Hill, Powerule, The BeatNuts, and rappers like Ruby D and Kurious Jorge have carved out niches for themselves and even collaborated with many of the black rappers such as Brand Nubian.[26]

Rap's social commentary, particularly gangta rap, is perhaps at its most contradictory when it addresses gender relations. One has to look no further than song titles themselves to experience the vicious misogynist side of rap. Songs like "One Less Bitch," "Pop that Coochie," "Baby Got Back," "Me So Horny," "That Bitch Betta Have My Money," and "She Swallowed It" reflect a perspective that is much more than fantasy or fad. Those songs meld into the increasing physical and ideological attacks on women, particularly feminists. The poisonous national atmosphere that saw men (and some women) rally around Clarence Thomas and Mike Tyson is the milieu in which rappers function. The music, therefore, reflects not just the contradictions facing the black working class in terms of male-female relationships, but effectively represents the entire array of social structures and ideologies that have aligned against the furtherance of women's rights. Rap's sexism is the expression of and not the cause of the growing attacks on women and their aspirations.

The woman-hating antics of male rap stars, most dramatically captured in the beating of "Pump It Up" television host Dee Barnes by NWA's Dr. Dre, are real.[27] While these individuals don't reflect the broad spectrum of relations that exist between black women and men, they unfortunately genuinely represent the actions and views of too many young (and old) black males for whom the feminist movement has had virtually no meaning.

A number of positive female rappers have emerged to challenged the musical and ideological dominance of the male rappers. Strong women, such as Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Queen Mother Rage, Isis, and MC Lyte, have produced popular songs that have advocated positive relations among men and women, called for sisterhood, and projected what scholar Patricia Hill Collins calls an "Afrocentric feminist epistemology."[28]

In one of her first song, "Latifah's Law," Queen Latifah makes it clear that she sees herself, and demands to be seen, as an equal to the male rappers:

The ladies will kick it, the rhyme is wicked
Those who don't know how to be pros get evicted
A woman can bear you, break you, take you
Now its time to rhyme. Can you relate to
A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream?[29]

Latifah has also been management. She is the CEO of Flavor Unit which manages rappers Black Sheep, D-Nice, and Almond Joy among others. She has also begun an activie acting career having appeared on "Fresh Prince of Bel Air" and in the movies "Jungle Fever" and "Juice."

Unfortunately, as Albert Einstein noted, for every (social) action, there is an opposite and equal (social) reaction. Hard core female rappers, such as Bytches With Problems, Nikki D, Hoes With an Attitude, and LA Starr, have come on the scene and demonstrated that they can be as vulgar, blasphemous and homicidal as the men. BWP's Lyndah and Tanisha, whose records are distributed by mega-corp Columbia Records, have been called the "Thelma and Louise" of rap.[30] In song after song, they gun down men, cops, and anyone else who crosses or is perceived to have crossed their path. When they are not committing homicide, they are busy either screwing men to death or ripping them off. All the while, they hold high the banner of women's liberation.

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

Wait until he goes to bed,
then give him three to the head,
leave his motherfucking ass for dead.[31]

While addressing important themes, such as date rape and adultery, their solutions, more often than not, are to just blow the suckers away. The bottom line is that women should act as doggish and reactionary as men.

It is ironic that BWP, like many of the hard core women's groups, are produced by men who also write many of the lyrics. Women pro-

ducers and managers are far and few between and is one of the main reasons why the music remains so misogynist. Progressive women rappers complain incessantly about how difficult it is for their music to be produced. Even some of the songs produced by the political, usually black nationalist, rappers is counter to women's liberation. While eschewing the violence and sexual exploitation of the hard core gangsta rappers, groups such as Public Enemy and X-Clan will often project a romanticized notion of black womanhood that does not fundamentally challenge male domination. More critically, they will also use language that fundamentally reinforces the power relations of gender oppression. Only after Sister Souljah joined Public Enemy did the group ease up on referring to women as "sophisticated bitches."[32]

In brief, this complex web of positive and negative impulses constitute the teachings of rap. Although new and softer forms of rap are coming on the scene, such as the Country Western-tinged rap of Arrested Development, the music will be driven by how close it remains to its base. The conflicted lived experiences of rappers gives rise to their consciousness which in turn forms the substance of the creative work. Rap's pedagogy, like the initial stage of all pedagogies of oppressed people, emerges incomplete, contradictory, and struggling for coherence. For many young listeners, it is through this musical dialogue that we witness what radical educator Pablo Friere calls the "awakening of critical consciousness."[33] However, it is also the commodification of rap that gives rap its social and cultural power.

RAP AS MASS (CAPITALIST) CULTURE

"I think that it would be completely myopic for anyone to seriously insist that the voice of a disenfranchised oppressed minority should be repressed."
– Eric Kronfeld, Chief Operating Office — PolyGram Holding Inc. (owner of Mercury, A&M, and PolyGram records)[34]

Under capitalism, culture is no more immune from the processes and pressures of capital accumulation than is making automobiles, selling drugs or playing basketball for the Dream Team. From production to consumption, black cultural expressions, and, more importantly, those who produce them, are vulnerable to control, manipulation, and exploitation. Rap grew out of the black urban realities of the 1970s and 1980s, but as it spread and became popular, capital began to be invested in this new arena of profit — expressing what Karl Marx described as the mobile character of capital.

Initially spurned by the major labels, rap's dominance and influence on popular music today is unquestioned. From the suburbs of America to the clubs of Japan, Germany, France, England and the Netherlands, rap has been marketed and distributed with the type of corporate backing that is commodity production at its highest. Make no mistake, rap is as much about bottom lines, market shares, sales areas, and consumer polling as it is about "skezzers," "bum-rushing," "rhyming," and "chillin."

According to the *Los Angeles Times,* rap brought in about $700 million in 1991; a $100 million increase over 1990.[35] Without radio or television airplay — indeed, often with a concerted effort to repress all exposure — rap records have sold in the millions. 2 Live Crew's "As Nasty as They Wanna Be," the subject of law suits and arrests, sold more than 2 million copies.[36] In their debut album, "Straight Outta Compton," NWA sold over a million copies and followed that up in 1992 by breaking all sales records with their "Efil4zaggin" (Niggaz 4 life spelled backwards) album. The album sold an unprecedented 900,000 copies in its first week of release and later went on to sell millions.[37]

In 1990, two rap albums alone, Hammer's "Please Hammer Don't Hurt Em" and Vanilla Ice's "To The Extreme," sold 14 million copies just in the United States. In that year, Public Enemy's "Fear of a Black Planet" and Digital Underground's "Sex Packets," also sold over a million each.[38]

From the early days of modern rap, when groups like the Fat Boys and Run-DMC dominated, to today's stars, ranging from the Fresh Prince to Hammer to Too Short, the music has made millionaires of black youngsters too young to drink, drive, or even vote. The music, of course, made millions more for the companies and corporations that controlled the production and distribution of the music. Capital has proven itself as adept at extracting

surplus value from creative production as it did from manufacturing.

Rap is attractive because it requires generally low-investment costs for the corporations. According to one producer, a rap album can be produced for less than $50,000 while an equivalent album for an established rock group or popular R&B group can cost between $100,000-300,000.[39] And while rap artists are signed with a bewildering frenzy, they are also dropped more rapidly than musicians from other music forms. If an artist or group doesn't do well within the first 6-8 weeks of their release, they are often sent packing.

Increasingly, rap is being bought by non-blacks. A Sound Data survey found that 74 percent of rap sold in the first six months of 1992 was bought by whites.[40] This is one reason why every major record company and communications conglomerate, from Sony to Atlantic, has made significant investments in rap music.

Advanced technology has also been key to rap's phenomenal growth. Unsurpassed computer-based music mixing allows seamless sampling, digitized turntables, and portable equipment that allows highly-developed percussive interplay all contribute to the relatively easy and cost-efficient production and performance of rap.

The commodification of black resistance by multi-national corporations embodies mind-boggling racial and class paradoxes. Time-Warner, one of the largest global corporations in existence, is not only the distributor of Ice-T's "Cop Killer," but are also the distributors of Spike Lee's "X" film about the life of Malcolm X, part-owner of Black Entertainment Television, and owner of HBO which produces black television shows such as Fox's *Martin.*[41]

And, it hasn't been only the communication industry that has benefited from the successful marketing of rap. Alcohol companies, already complicit in the disproportionate targeting of the black community for liquor sales, were quick to front rap stars to sell their product. Ice Cube, Eric B. & Rakim, EPMD, the Geto Boys, Compton's Most Wanted, Yo! MTV Rap's Fab Freddie, and Yo-Yo — who was not even drinking age at the time — were all used to sell highly potent and highly addictive malt liquor. Sexually-suggestive scripts also attempted to convince consumers that malt liquors are aphrodisiacs. Yo-Yo would moan that St. Ides Malt Liquor "puts you in the mood [and] makes you wanna go oooh." Ice Cube claimed that with St. Ides you could "get your girl in the mood quicker" and that the beverage would make your "jimmy thicker."[42]

The use of the Geto Boys was especially low. Geto Boys' Bushwick Bill, whose primary distinction is that he is the only dwarf in rap music, now is the only rap musician to have his eye shot out in an alcohol-related incident. According to Bill, after getting drunk to relieve his depression, he asked his girlfriend to shoot him in the head, which for some unknown reason, she obliged. Her aim was off and instead his eye was blown away. St. Ides' commercials using the Geto Boys were taped and used after that gun-slinging adventure.[43]

This exploitation of these rappers' popularity was denounced by community activists and black health advocates around the country. Makani Themba of the Marin Institute in California astutely pointed out that the beer companies were "appropriating a very important part of our culture to sell what is a dangerous produce for many of these kids."[44]

The alcohol content of St. Ides, Elephant, Magnum, Crazy Horse, Olde English 800, Red Bull Malt Liquor, PowerMaster, and other malt beers is greater than regular beer and nearly twice that, in some cases. In addition, the many of the malt beers are sold in 40 oz. units. Malt beer accounts for only about 3 percent of all beer sold, yet more than 30 percent of its sales are in the black community![45]

Ice Cube was the biggest rap star to sell the 40 oz. jugs of St. Ides malt liquor. His pitching value increased considerably when he was seen in "Boyz N' the Hood" with a "40" constantly in hand. The product placement of St. Ides in the movie was so egregious that reportedly even movie critics Siskel and Ebert mentioned it in their review.[46]

According to the Los Angeles Times, South Central Los Angeles, home to many nationally-known rappers and kick-off point for the L.A. uprising, had more liquor stores than the entire state of Rhode Island. Prior to the rebellion, South Central had over 700 liquor stores for a population of about 500,000 while

Rhode Island had only 280 liquor stores for a population of over 1.3 million.[47] South Central residents had complained to store owners for years about the problem of the stores being hangouts for alcoholics. Those complaints were ignored. Community antagonism towards the stores was so deep that the stores became a prime target for arson during the rebellion igniting an inferno that could truly be called the people's version of "a thousand points of light."

Carried out with military-like selection and execution, similar to that applied in the Persian Gulf war, nearly every liquor store in the area was burned down, most within the first two days. A community effort to secure 1,000 signatures to block the return of the liquor stores quickly mushroomed when, after one week, organizers had 10,000 signatures in hand. Within a month, the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment, the leaders of the campaign, had secured close to 30,000 signatures from residents in South Central.[48] Karen Bass, Executive Director of the project, wrote perceptively in the *Los Angeles Times*, "It would be a tradegy . . . to rebuild and replace the very structures that help fuel the rage in South Los Angeles."[49]

Community protests against small groceries, particularly Korean store owners in the Los Angeles area, for selling the dangerous brew to minors had fallen on deaf ears. As a hot item and profit-leader, the malt beers were sold by the thousands almost exclusively in black and poor communities. Ice Cube became a liability for the St. Ides brand, however, after the release of his song, "Black Korea." In the song, he suggests that, due to black's real and perceived slights at the hands of grocery store owners, community folks might "burn your store right down to a crisp."[50]

Ice Cube also used a number of racist terms in referring to the Korean grocers. In one passage, he refers to Korean grocers as "Oriental one-penny-counting motherfuckers" and in another, he says ". . . don't follow me, up and down your market or your little chop suey ass will be a target."[51]

Not taking too kindly to Ice Cube's words, the nationally-organized Korean store owners, 3,000 strong, yanked St. Ides off their shelves.[52] The National Korean American Grocers Association (KAGRO) demanded that Ice Cube be removed from all advertisements associated with St. Ides. In response, St. Ides yanked Ice Cube from their commercials. In other words, what the protests of the black community had been unable to do for months — remove the beer from the stores and end rap star promotion of the beers — was accomplished as an alliance of small merchants, out to punish Ice Cube, and a small corporation, out to protect its profits, was forged. This convergence of class interests was often obscured as the controversy degenerated into a racial conflict between blacks and Koreans.

The controversy over Ice Cube erupted at about the same time that a black community boycott of a Korean store was happening in Brooklyn, and the murder of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins by Korean grocer Soon Ja Du in Los Angeles county. Although Du was video-taped coldly shooting Harlins in the back of the head, she was let off with a $500 fine and community service.[53] That action prompted more black community outrage and protests. In a final slap to the black community, once McKenzie River Corp., the brewers of St. Ides, pulled Ice Cube's coat, the store owners went back to selling the beer.

One group that did not buy into the hype was Public Enemy. After McKenzie River Corp. illegally used PE's Chuck D's voice in one of their commercials, PE went on the offensive and denounced malt liquor sales, sued the company for five million dollars, and recorded a song, "One Million Bottlebags," criticizing the practice of selling the deadly brew mainly in the black community.[54]

They drink it thinkin' it's good
But they don't sell the shit in the white neighborhood"

In terms of the music itself, the risk of investing in cultural products is that they are also ideological goods whose message is more overt (and more debatable) than producing soap or potato chips where the exploitation of labor is "hidden" and fetishised. The fights in the nation's major media over rap, however, were not about the issues raised by the rappers in their music. Instead what was witnessed was a conflict between the economic greed of Time-Warner, Atlantic, Sony, CBS Records, and other multi-national corporations,

on one side, and the political ambitions of George Bush, Bill Clinton, Dan Quayle, Tipper Gore, Oliver North, the National Rifle Association, Charlton Heston, John Lewis, Mike Espy and other politicians, on the other side. In 1992, the most immediate field of mediation of this conflict was the presidential race.

RAP AS SUBVERSION

"It's just a matter of race,
Cause a black male's in their face"
– Public Enemy "Revolutionary Generation"[56]

George Bush is a terrorist
He creates terror in the minds
And neighborhoods of Black people
– Sister Souljah "Killing Me Softly"[57]

Framed by the 1992 presidential race and extending well beyond it, the battle between Republicans and Democrats is a fight over which bourgeois philosophy and strategy will guild a post-Cold War, economically-declining and socially-chaotic America into the next century. Although sharp differences exist between them, there is unity on a number of points. One of those points concerns the abandonment of urban America — a not-to-subtle metaphor for African Americans and other people of color. A consequence of that abandonment will be what writer Robin D. G. Kelley called in the Nation "mo' misery, mo' misery, mo' misery."[58] It follows, that the inevitable uprisings generated by escalating immiseration will then, of course, lead to mo' repression.

The politics of repression must have an identifiable foe. The jury is in and it is clear that the demonization of black youth has worked exceedingly well. Street crime and drug trafficking have been fixed in the minds of the U.S. mass as pathologies carried out only by blacks despite evidence to the contrary. The fact that white "white-collar" crime is much more socially harmful has been ignored and dismissed. Jackin' one individual, as brutal and inexcusable as that may be, pales dramatically with the social carnage engineered by the Saving and Loans bandits or the economic costs of Wall Street chicanery.

The black nationalist rhetoric of the political and gangsta rappers provoke what Public Enemy calls "fear of a black planet." The potential disequilibrium caused by an aroused black underclass can not be tolerated so rappers are being told, to use the words of George Bush, to "sit down and shut up." From the vantage point of those shouldering the responsibility for state security, black subversive music, and those who express it, clearly must be contained and neutralized.

It should be noted also that many black leaders also feel threatened by the rappers. As Salim Muwakkil wrote in *In These Times*, "for many middle-class black Americans, rap is . . . a soundtrack for sociopaths."[59] Few black leaders came to the defense of groups like 2 Live Crew and NWA, even for freedom-of-speech reasons, as they came under attack by a white judicial system that did not go after the equally obscene and lewd Madonna, Guns N' Roses, and Andrew Dice Clay. And, when Clinton used Sister Souljah to gourd Jesse Jackson, a number of black leaders ran to Clinton's defense including Reps. Mike Espy (D-MS), Bill Jefferson (D-LA), John Lewis (D-GA), and Cleveland Mayor Michael White.

Public Enemy's Chuck D, one of the acknowledged political leaders of the Hip Hop movement, notes that rap's audience has essentially broken from the false consciousness being spewed by the nation's political leaders as they seek answers to society's problems. Getting to the bone, he states, "The average rap fan respects Ice-T and Sister Souljah far more than they do Quayle and Clinton and Bush. Rap asks many questions that these politicians can't answer and provides insight and alternative to the mainstream opinion. It brings common sense to the table in a time when sense is not common."[60]

Bill Clinton's bum's rush on the black community, via Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition via Sister Souljah, was a double hit. He was able to slam Souljah and, at the same time, allay the anxieties of white voters that he might be kowtowing to Jackson. The catalyst for Clinton's attack was an interview that Sister Souljah gave in the Washington Post where she was reported to have stated, in response to the Los Angeles insurrection, "I mean, if black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people."[61] Although she stated that the statement had been taken out-of-context, and subsequent examination of the full-text of her remarks seem

to support her contention, her remarks set off a firestorm of white protest and black defensiveness. At the National Rainbow Coalition conference that both Clinton and Souljah were invited to speak at, a day apart, Jackson was sharply criticized by Clinton for inviting her to speak given her remarks in the *Post*. Clinton went as far as to equate Souljah with racist demagogue David Duke.

As it turns out, Clinton's remarks were a calculated tactic on his part to publicly chastise Jackson to demonstrate his independence from so-called "special interests." Souljah was the vehicle through which Clinton carried out his political game.

It is doubtful that Clinton has ever seriously listened to rap music and probably doesn't know the difference between Public Enemy and peanut butter. But, like George Bush and Ronald Reagan, and more than Michael Dukakis or Walter Mondale, the Clinton campaign understood the racial calculations of political power in America. Clinton received more media attention from his willingness to make a racial attack than for his pleas for racial harmony — pleas that he mainly delivered to black audiences. His rise in the polls, particularly and almost exclusively among whites, in June and July of 1992, were due in no small part to his hit on Jackson and Souljah. While blacks responded negatively to the attack 3 to 1, whites by 3 to 1 had a favorable response.[62]

The 1992 Democratic National Convention was notably absent in terms of minority youth. Compare the image of Jackson's five children — inspiring, confident, conscious, and clear-sighted — standing on the podium at the 1988 DNC in Atlanta with the tired parading of genuflecting black elected officials in 1992. Most of these self-annointed black leaders are considered sell-outs by young blacks. While Jackson's children arguably serve as role models, the black democratic officials represent a generational canyon to which they are either blind and insensitive or unwilling to address.

Clinton's election will, in all likelihood, only exacerbate the tension that already exists between the Hip Hop community and the status quo. The complete absence of any black youth perspective in the campaign and in the administration does not bode well for the need to address the myriad of issues facing minority youth. One can expect in the coming years rhythmatically critical assessments of the Clinton presidency from the rap community.

From both sides of the political aisle, rap came under assault in 1992. For the Republicans, Ice-T's "Cop Killer" became their rallying point. In the song, Ice-T raps about blowing away the police:

I got my 12-gauge sawed off
I got my headlights turned off
I'm 'bout to bust some shot off
I'm 'bout to dust some cops off.
Cop killer, better you than me.
Cop killer, fuck police brutality.[63]

COP KILLER

While rock singer Eric Clapton can croon "I Shot the Sheriff," and it become a smash hit, Ice-T's blackness provided him no such protection. Always prepared to unleash the stereotype image of the black male criminal element, the Republicans leaped to the attack. Having carefully cultivated the feared image of the urban black male predator — through the use of Willie Horton ads, the "war on drugs," and distorted media stories — the Republicans saw an opportunity to woo white votes.

First, Quayle expressed dismay at Time Warner for distributing the song, and his support for "the cops on the beat who are putting their lives on the line for us."[64] He was soon followed by a long line of conservatives including Bush, Charlton Heston, and the National Rifle Association who also attacked Ice-T and Time-Warner. The hypocrisy of the conservatives, who consistently opposed gun control legislation that would have benefitted and protected police officers, was obvious and shameless. In 1984, the NRA vigorously lobbied against legislation that sought to ban "cop-killer" bullets thereby putting more police lives at risk than all the rappers combined.

Well-documented prevaricator and Iran-Contra scoundrel Oliver North had the temerity to announce that he would provide attorneys to any wounded police officer to sue Time-Warner if the officer could show that their assailant had listened to and was inspired by "Cop Killer."[65] To draw a relationship between Ice-T's "Cop Killer" and cops being murdered is twisted logic indeed. To say that someone

who murders a cop once listened to "Cop Killer" is like saying heroin addiction is caused by drinking milk because that is a common denominator among drug addicts. In fact, given the clear facts that North's drug-dealing Nicaraguan Contras are responsible for a significant amount of the cocaine on America's streets, the renegade ex-Colonel is, in truth, responsible for more deaths than Ice-T and the rappers will ever be.[66]

One case has already risen to the surface that claims that a rap song influenced someone to kill a Texas state trooper. Ronald Ray Howard, an 18-year-old black man, has been accused of killing trooper Bill Davidson. Both Howard's court-appointed attorney, Al Tanner, and the prosecutor, Robert Bell, state that Howard was listening to a rap song about killing police just before the killing occurred. There is some dispute, however, over whether he was listening to a local Houston-based rapper Ganksta N-I-P or nationally-known rapper 2Pac who starred in the movie "Juice." 2Pac's (Tupac Amaru Shakur) music is distributed by a subsidiary of Time-Warner, Interscope Records, and it is believed that if Howard is convicted, then a lawsuit against Time-Warner filed by Davidson's widow will be more lucrative than winning against Gangsta N-I-P's smaller company, Rap-A-Lot.[67]

Among the groups that came to Ice-T's defense were the ACLU Foundation of Southern California, People for the American Way, the National Campaign for Freedom of Expression, the Recording Association of America, and the Hollywood Women's Political Committee.[68] At least two black police organizations sided with Time Warner and Ice-T. The African American Peace Officer Association labeled the Texas-based Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas' call for a boycott of the album "another act of police brutality."[69]

One of the most important statements of the whole affair came from the National Black Police Association. In a letter sent to the *Washington Post,* Executive Director Ron Hampton wrote that Ice-T is "entitled to employ any, and all, avenues available to him to express his opinions and perspectives. This vocal expression by Ice-T is no more than his personal anger and frustration with the conditions facing oppressed people."[70] Hampton also noted that the chorus of individuals and groups denouncing Ice-T did not show "the same level of outrage when Rodney King was brutally beaten by four Los Angeles police officers."[71] Ice-T eventually decided to pull the record himself and only distribute it as a free single at his concerts.

The attack on rap is not only bi-partisan in terms of the white male candidates, but also in terms of their spouses. Tipper Gore, wife of Democratic Vice President-elect Sen. Al Gore (D-TN) and Susan Baker, wife of Bush campaign manager and former Secretary of State James Baker, were co-founders of the censorship-demanding Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). They led the movement that forced congressional hearing on record labeling in 1985. That action eventually led record companies "voluntarily" to put warning labels on music deemed profane and explicit. The first album to have a warning label placed on it was Ice-T's "Rhyme Pays."

For the most part, as predicted by civil rights groups and civil libertarians, most of the groups targeted for labeling were black. In a 1989 newsletter put out by PMRC, every song listed as having warning labels was done by a black artist. Other groups calling for censorship of rap records have been more explicitly racist. Missouri Project Rock passed out information packets that criticized "race-mixing" and called Martin Luther King "Martin Lucifer King."[72]

Never shy, the rappers responded to Gore and Baker in statements and in song. Ice T's "Freedom of Speech" and Bytches With Problems' "Pro-me" were only two of many responses from rappers and rock groups. In one of the most bizarre actions related to Tipper Gore, 2 Live Crew's Luther Campbell announced that he would vote for George Bush — hardly a friend of black free speech — in response to Clinton's choice of the Gore family to be on the Democratic ticket.[73]

RAP AS FARCE: ARE YOU DOWN WITH GOP?

I never had dinner with the President, I never had dinner with the President, I never had dinner with the President,
And when I see your ass again, I will be hesitant
– Ice Cube's "No Vaseline" in response to Easy E's attendance at a fundraising dinner with President Bush[74]

Karl Marx, quoting Hegel, notes in *The*

Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte that phenomena and personages of great importance in history always occur twice: "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."[75] The tragedy of black youth self-destruction and social annihilation, seeking a reprieve through the medium of rap, has to now confront its comic mirror opposite.

While Republican rapper may seen to be a contradiction in terms and logic, the desperate struggle for political power in 1992 destroyed all notions of politics-as-usual. The 1992 Republican National Convention did indeed feature a young black conservative rapper known as TRQ. The 28 year-old performer, whose real name is Steve Gooden, called up the RNC, pledged his allegiance to George Bush, Dan Quayle, and the Republican Party, and wrangled an invitation to attend the convention and perform.

Gooden works as a youth minister for what even he describes as "an evangelical, conservative all-white' church" in the Los Angeles area. He proudly advocates sexual abstinence outside of marriage, he himself being a single virgin, but states that he is looking for a "young, bright, basically conservative professional woman."[76]

Like a lot of rappers, TRQ wears a bandanna during his performance. His, however, happens to be an American flag. Hypocritically, Republican flag-wavers and protectors don't accuse TRQ of desecrating their symbol nor do they call for constitutional amendments whenever he performs. When hard-core rappers 2 Live Crew performed, their flag bandannas were vilified and denounced.

TRQ also wears a tie, a button-down shirt, and suspenders during performance. TV host Arsenio Hall said that with that look, he should call himself "Run-CPA." Hall also joked that "a rapper supporting George Bush — now that's a public enemy!" In commenting on the name TRQ, Hall said, "I don't know what TRQ stands for, but I hope it stands for time to remove Quayle."[77]

There actually is some question about TRQ does mean. During the RNC, he told reporters that it stood for "The Right Rapper,"[78] which means either he is illiterate or that the "Q" is very silent. He told the Washington Post, however, that "TR" stood for truth and that the "Q" was added on to create a sense of mystery.[79]

The rap song that he performed at the RNC was called, "We Are Americans." Coming from the mouth of a young black man, the lyrics are both hysterical and tragic:

> *It's our duty to save our America*
> *From those who would blame America,*
> *For the ills of their own activity,*
> *For the riots in Southern California,*
> *And the murders in the District of Columbia,*
> *For the hunger and the death in the streets you know,*
> *And the kids without a dad and a happy home.*[80]

TRQ compares the Democrats to old slave masters and, like Bush, blamed the social programs of the 1960s, rather than the Reagan and Bush programs of the 1980s and 1990s, for the destruction of the black family. The song goes on and attacks the pro-choice movement, Ice-T, and black radicals. He also dedicated a rap to the odious Nancy Reagan titled "Just Say No to Drugs," which led one writer to comment after hearing it, that it made him "want to go take some — a lot."[81]

TRQ's hijinks at the Republican National Convention meant that there were at least three black rappers in the GOP camp. In addition to Luther Campbell, he joins Easy E (aka Eric Wright) of the notorious NWA. Two years ago, due to a $2,500 donation to the Republican Party made in his name by one of his financial advisors, Easy E became a member of an exclusive Republican high-donor set that includes conservative fanatic Joseph Coors and movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger. He received a letter from Sen. Phil Gramm (R-TX) inviting him to an elite dinner of Republican bigwigs, that stated, "I believe your accomplishments . . . prove you worthy of membership."[82] He attended the dinner and, reportedly, enjoyed himself. It's no surprise that Easy E has yet to record "F*** the Republicans."

The development of rappers like TRQ and the ease with which Easy E supped with the enemy demonstrates the revolutionary limits of rap as mass culture rather than, as some would argue, its expanded emancipatory power through mass distribution. If rap can be anything, then, in fact, it is everything. In Hegelian fashion, rapper's efforts to stay true to the music's core are undermined as they

try to expand its reaches — an irresolvable conundrum that exists when popular culture clashes with mass culture.

CONCLUSION

Armageddon has been in effect. Go get a late pass.
– Chuck D of Public Enemy

America's children are "embittered, amid violence and rejection, in broken streets, broken glass, broken sidewalks, broken families, broken hearts. They cannot imagine a job. We spend on them to go to high school $5,000 a year, but the downtown jail, $34,000 a year. For them, jail is a step up. For once they are jailed, they will no longer be hit by drive-by shootings, they are no longer homeless, the have balanced meals [and] adult supervision."
– Jesse Jackson speaking before the 1992 Democratic National Convention[83]

Rap, as dialogue, has contributed significantly to the growing radicalization of the masses of African American youths. More than any other political movement or leadership segment in the black community, in the current period, Hip Hop culture has resisted the racial and class backlashes unleashed in recent years under the guise of Reaganism, the war on drugs, New Covenants, New World Order, and family values. While much of black leadership has surrendered or made a tactical retreat, the rappers have moved to the frontlines of the struggle and, in return, have become more threatening than ever to those who hold power.

Rappers have done more than talk. They have produced and participated in socially-consciousness rap videos, such as the anti-apartheid "Sun City," and the anti-youth violence "Stop the Violence," and "We're All in the Same Gang." They have also formed organizations to address the issues raised in their music. X-Clan, for example, formed The Blackwatch Movement, a national youth organization while Sister Souljah has been active in numerous organizing projects for homeless youth.

Yet, despite these positive thrusts, the Hip Hop movement must confront its contradictions and weaknesses. While calling for revolution, too often it epitomizes the racist, sexist, individualist, and materialist tendencies that it rails against. These reactionary impluses prevent the music and the movement from projecting a liberating and presciptive paradigm for the future. It must be remembered, however, that cultural movements, though capable of being extremely political, are not in themselves political movements for power.

New dilemmas, new challenges and new choice confront the producers and consumers of rap. The music has moved from marginalization (a state faced by its original producers and consumers) to a state of massification. Now at the crossroads of further development, in a complex matrix of forms, substance, and genres, much of rap's future has been put in the hands of capital (also, a state faced by most of rap's African American producers and consumers).

Fortunately, it is at this juncture of tension that cultural resistance always reaches for its most creative hour. The more conscious rappers are trying to deconstruct and destroy racist images of black youth while at the same time construct a new humanity and new society that is more egalitarian and just than the one in which they live and function. This has been the "hidden agenda" of black popular music throughout history. This truth continues to elude political leaders to the peril of us all. So, listen up "g" because as rap teaches, in its most cogent moments, we must continue always to fight the power.

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