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"THE CHAIN REMAIN THE SAME"[1] Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation

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> It is true that the nature of society is to create, among its citizens, an illusion of safety; but it is also absolutely true that the safety is always necessarily an illusion. Artists are here to disturb the peace.
>
> *Baldwin (1992)*

The term *hip-hop* refers to urban youth culture in America. Hip-hop is manifested in such cultural productions as graffiti art, break dancing, styles of dress (e.g., baggy pants, sneakers, Malcolm X caps, appropriately worn backward), love of b-ball (basketball), and so forth. Although the Hip Hop Nation is predominantly Black, Latinos comprise a significant minority within this nation. Three different New York artists have been credited with coining the term hip-hop (which dates back to the 1970s): Busy Bee Starski, DJ Hollywood, and DJ Afrika Bambaataa (founder of the Zulu Nation in New York). It is uncertain which of the three is *the* originator of the term, but according to Kool DJ Herc (January 24, 1994, personal communication), the acknowledged father of hip-hop, "only these three could argue it." Fernando (1994) indicates that the term was given broad popular exposure by "Rapper's Delight," the first commercially successful rap song, which was released by the Sugar

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Hill Gang in 1979.[2] The song featured the lyrics: "With a hip, hop, the hipit, the hipidipit, hip, hip, hopit, you don't stop" (p. 13).

Rap music and rappers—such as Treach of Naughty by Nature, Ice Cube (aka Cube), formerly of NWA [Niggas Wit Attitude], P.E. [Public Enemy], Ice-T, Queen Latifah, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Dr. Dre, Yo-Yo, Kam, 2 Pac—and others are the artistic representatives of the Hip Hop Nation. Through their bold and talented productions, they are fulfilling the mission of the artist: "disturb the peace." Of course, the United States Ghetto (USG) is a hotbed of unrest, dispossession, and powerlessness; so, for African Americans living on the margins, for this "underclass," there is no "peace." What is being disturbed is the peace of middle-class White and Black America.

Interestingly enough, the term *rap* was originally used in the African American speech community to refer to romantic, sexualized interaction, usually originated by a man for purposes of winning the affection and sexual favors of a woman (see, e.g., Kochman, 1972). By the late 1960s, when the term crossed over into mainstream public language, it had lost its sexual innuendo and came to mean *any* kind of strong, aggressive, highly fluent, powerful talk. One finds both uses of the term in today's Black speech community, and of course, rappers represent both meanings in their artistic productions.

Rap music is rooted in the Black oral tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification/signifyin, the dozens/playin the dozens, Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices. The oral tradition itself is rooted in the surviving African tradition of "Nommo" and the power of the word in human life (see, e.g., Dance, 1978; Dundes, 1973; Gwaltney, 1980). The rapper is a postmodern African griot, the verbally gifted storyteller and cultural historian in traditional African society. As African America's "griot," the rapper must be lyrically/linguistically fluent; he or she is expected to testify, to speak the truth, to come wit it in no uncertain terms. Further, in the early formation of rap music, the rapper was expected to speak with a quickness.

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> The rate of speech in rap must be constant in order to correlate it with the beat of the music. . . . A rap song averages one hundred forty-four beats per minute . . . each beat of the music can be correlated to a stressed syllable. If the number of unstressed syllables is equal to the number of stressed syllables in a rap song, the rapper utters a minimum of two hundred and fifty eight syllables per minute. (Yasim, 1995, p. 38)

A blend of reality and fiction, rap music is a contemporary response to conditions of joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment (Smitherman, 1994), which continue to be the norm for the Black UN working class. A cultural critic, describing himself as from the "front lines of the White Struggle," provides this description of rap music: "[It is a rebellion against] white America's economic and psychological terrorism against Black people" (Upski, 1993). Morgan (in press) expresses it this way: "Petulant, raw, and screaming with vibrant and violent images . . . [rap music] represents people who are angry that the power apparatus tried to bury it alive."

Given its mission—"disturb the peace"—much of rap music has a moral edge. As Poor Righteous Teachers (a Five Percent Nation rap group[3]) says, "The gods are ruling up in hip hop" (quoted in Ahearn, 1991). This music has become a—or, perhaps *the*—principal medium for Black youth to "express their views of the world" and to seek to "create a sense of order" (Allen, 1996) out of the turbulence and chaos of their, and our, lives. Despite the 1990s' emergence of guns, violence, misogyny, and overused taboo language in rap music, the founding mission of rap remains that clearly reflected in Rapper Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 1982 hit song, "The Message." Here they decry, for all the world to hear, the deplorable conditions of the hood:

> Broken glass everywhere,
> People pissin on the stair,
> You know they just don't care.
> I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise . . .
> Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge,

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I'm trying not to lose my head.
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder
How I keep from going under. (used by permission, Sugarhill Publishing Company)

For contemporary Blacks, then, as Naughty by Nature raps, the chain remains the same as in enslavement.

[Introduction]: I think it's about time you explained to everybody the real reason you wear this chain
around your neck . . .
[Treach]: Too many of my people got time
It shows as crime unfolds
. . . their goals locked in a facility where time is froze
God knows the heart hurts
To see no sky, just dirt
They give a man a cell quick before they give a man work . . .
Bars and cement instead of help for our people
Jails ain nothin but the slave-day sequel
Tryin to flee the trap of this nation
Seein penitentiary's the plan to plant the new plantation . . .
Who's locked up, who's shot up, who's strung out, who's
bleedin—keep readin
I need to explain: the chain remain the same ("Chains Remain," Naughty by Nature, 1995; used by permission, © 1995 WB Music Corp. [ASCAP] & Naughty Music [ASCAP])

There is currently afoot a concerted campaign against rap music despite its political and moral messages and its celebration of the Black oral tradition. On June 5, 1993, African American minister Reverend Calvin Butts held a "rap in" in Harlem, New York, to which he had invited participants to bring offensive tapes and CDs to be run over with a steamroller. (The steamroller effort was foiled by members and supporters of the Hip Hop Nation who blocked the steamroller. Reverend Butts and supporters thus took the pile of CDs and tapes to the Manhattan office of Sony and dumped them there.) In 1994, Dr. C. Delores Tucker, head of the National Political

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Congress of Black Women, was successful in getting the U.S. Congress to hold hearings against rap music. She joined forces with a White male conservative, former Secretary of Education William Bennett, to mount an all-out campaign against rap music. By late September 1995, Tucker and Bennett had succeeded in forcing Time Warner to sell off their interest in Interscope, the recording company for the most prominent of the "gangsta" rappers.

Admittedly, rap has its violence, its raw language, and its misogynistic lyrics. However, it is an art form that accurately reports "the nuances, pathology and most importantly, resilence of America's best kept secret . . . the black ghetto" (Dawsey, 1994). Hip-hop/rap culture is a resistance culture. Thus, rap music is not only a Black expressive cultural phenomenon; it is, at the same time, a resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against White America's racism and its Eurocentric cultural dominance.

AFRICAN AMERICAN LANGUAGE/U.S. EBONICS AND HIP-HOP

It is critical to keep in mind that the racialized rhetoric of rap music and the Hip Hop Nation is embodied in the communicative practices of the larger Black speech community. The language of hip-hop is African American language (hereafter AAL), also known as Black English, African American vernacular English, and Ebonics (from "ebony," for Black, and "phonics," for sound; see Williams, 1975). AAL has been studied extensively during the past three decades (see, e.g., Baugh, 1983; Costello & Wallace, 1990; Dandy, 1991; Dillard, 1972; Fasold & Shuy, 1970; Garofalo, 1992; Ice-T, 1994; Jones, 1994; Kochman, 1972, 1981; Labov, 1972; Major, 1970, 1994; Nelson & Gonzales, 1991; Rickford, 1992; Rickford & Rickford, 1976; Scott, 1986; Smitherman, 1977, 1994; Stewart, 1967; Wolfram, 1970).

AAL is a product of free African slave labor, having evolved from a 17th-century pidgin English that was a lingua franca in the

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linguistically diverse enslavement communities throughout Britian's North American colonies that became the United States of America. The pidgin blended European American English (hereafter EAL) with patterns from the Niger-Congo family of African languages (e.g., Yoruba, Wolof, Efik, Twi—see, e.g., Asante, 1990; Turner, 1949). The result of this blend was a communication system that functioned as both a resistance language and a linguistic bond of cultural and racial solidarity for those born under the lash.

Although the lexicon of AAL can readily be identified as EAL, it is the nuanced meanings, the linguistic rules, the rhetorical and semantic strategies, the ways in which the EAL words are strung together to form a set of discursive practices that distinguish AAL from EAL. Consider the statement, "The Brotha be lookin good; that's what got the Sista nose open!" (From a 30-ish African American woman at a hair-braiding shop on Chicago's South Side, 1992). "Brotha" is AAL for an African American man, "lookin good" refers to his attractive appearance, "Sista" is AAL for an African American woman, and her passionate love for the Brotha is conveyed by the phrase "nose open." The use of "be" means that the quality of "lookin good" is not limited to the present moment but reflects the Brotha's past, present, and future essence.

Although such an example may be considered illustrative of implied racial resistance—that is, in the continued use of these kinds of verbal forms despite White America's linguistic disapproval—other forms of AAL suggest a more explicit rhetoric of resistance. In Lonne Elder's late 1960s' play, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, there is a debate between the central protagonists in which one Brotha, articulating a key theme in the drama, says to another, "Don't nobody pay no attention to no nigga that ain't crazy!" Because EAL stigmatizes the use of double negatives, AAL goes one better and uses multiple negation (a characteristic feature of AAL grammar). Because "nigger" is a racialized epithet in EAL, AAL embraces its usage, encoding a variety of unique Black meanings. And "crazy niggas" are the rebellious ones, who resist racial supremacist domination and draw attention to their cause because they act in ways contrary to the inscribed role for Africans in America.

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As we move toward the 21st century, it is clear that African America continues to constitute itself as a distinct speech community, with its own linguistic rules and sociolinguistic norms of interaction.

COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES AND LINGUISTIC PATTERNS IN RAP AND HIP-HOP

GRAMMATICAL AND PHONOLOGICAL FORMS

One of the most distinctive and widely cited grammatical features of AAL is the use of *aspectual be* to indicate iterativity; that is, actions or attributes that are continuous, intermittent, or ongoing, as in "The Brotha be looking good" statement cited above. Also referred to in the AAL research literature as "habitual be," this feature is pervasive in the Hip Hop Nation. In his big seller, "Big Poppa," the late Notorious B.I.G. used this form extensively. And from the Geto Boys:

> He be in for a squabble no doubt/So I swung and hit
> the nigga in his mouth/He was goin down, we fig'ged,
> but this wasn't no ordinary nigga/He stood about six
> or seven feet/Now thass the nigga I be seein in my sleep. ("My Mind is Playing Tricks on Me," Geto Boys, 1992; lyrics reprinted with permission © N-The Water Publishing, Inc.)

Another copula pattern common in AAL is *zero copula*. This form occurs in environments where the meaning is noniterative or static. The sense of the utterance characterizes the present moment only, as in "This bus on time today, but most times, it be late"; or the utterance has the force of an all-time truth, as in "This my brother." Some examples from hip-hop can be found in Ice-T's (1988) "I'm Your Pusher" and in Queen Latifah's "Ladies First": "Yeah, there gon be some changes over here" (Latifah with Monie Love, 1989; used by permission, T-Boy Music L.L.C., © Warner-

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Tamerlane Publishing Corp. [BMI], Now & Then Music [BMI], Queen Latifah Music [BMI], & Forty Five King Music [ASCAP]).

The past participle *been*, when stressed, is used to denote the remote past. It appears in written form in the following excerpt from an interview in *The Source* (a widely read hip hop magazine):

> Source: Tell me about the beef you had with Three Times Dope.
> Rapper Steady B, aka MC Boob: That's a old story. . . . Come to find out the tables turned and they was right . . .
> Source: Y'all worked that out? Are you down with E-S and them now?
> Cool C: We *been* worked that out.

In AAL, future tense is often indicated with *go*, a nasalized vowel sound close to, but not identical with, EAL's "gone," and *not* the same as colloquial EAL's "gonna." Artistic pioneers of rap, Public Enemy (known as "P.E.")—consistently political—give us: "Black is back, all in, we gon win" ("Bring the Noise," 1988; used by permission, courtesy Bring the Noiz, Inc.). (See also the Queen Latifah-Monie Love line above.)

AAL speakers use *they* for the third singular plural possessive. In hip-hop, we hear:

> All the girls had they turkish link/If it broke, they
> made errings to it, like they meant to do it. ("Back in the Day," Ahmad, 1994, used by permission, Interscope Records)

And from Nation of Islam Rapper Kam:

> You know, we all looking out for Number One
> That's why Brothas sell dope and girls get they nails done. ("Trust Nobody," 1995, by DJ Battlecat and Kam, used by permission, © Famous Music Corporation, Vent Noir Music Publishing, and I-Slam Music)

Postvocalic -r deletion is widespread among AAL speakers. And, of course, in hip-hop, as for example in Snoop Doggy Dogg's 1993 top seller, "Gin and Juice." And from the Geto Boys

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Hey, yeah, man, I got Willie D. on the other end
Say, fellas, I been kickin a few lyrics in the back
of my mind . . . I'm tied [tired] of muthafuckas disrespec-
tin us because we're Black-own and won't sell out. ("Do It Like A G.O.," Geto Boys, 1992; lyrics reprinted with permission © N-The Water Publishing, Inc.)

Among AAL speakers, */Ang/* and */ank/* are used in words such as *think*, *sing*, and *drink*. This is how we get the popular expression, "It's a Black Thang" [not "thing"]. From *The Source*, we read: "Sangin' sistahs Brownstone feelin' it in Oaktown . . ." (photo caption, July 1995). Given that the rapper has to meet the artistic demand for rhyme, use of this systematic AAL pronunciation rule can generate a unique rhythmic line, as in the following:

Hittin all the spots but I'm comin up blank
I'm headed to the liquor stowe [store] to
git myself some drank. ("Big Pimpin'," Tha Dogg Pound, 1994, used by permission, © 1994 WB Music Corp. [ASCAP] & Suge Publishing [ASCAP]; also on the motion picture soundtrack, *Above the Rim*)

Notwithstanding the grammatical integrity of AAL, by now well established in the scholarly literature, the syntax of rap music is often attacked for its departures from "standard English." Because many rap artists are college educated, and most are adept at code switching, they obviously could employ "standard English" in their rap lyrics. However, in their quest to "disturb the peace," they deliberately and consciously employ the "antilanguage" of the Black speech community, thus sociolinguistically constructing themselves as members of the dispossessed. Even when the message in the music does not overtly speak to racial resistance, the use of the Black speech community's syntax covertly reinforces Black America's 400-year rejection of Euro-American cultural, racial—and linguistic—domination.

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RHETORICAL AND SEMANTIC STRATEGIES/DISOURSE MODES

Given that the rapper recalls the griot of old, rap lyrics are often woven into a narrative. Indeed, although there are ritualized forms of storytelling in AAL—such as the Toasts (see, e.g., Jackson, 1974)—*Narrativizing* is a characteristic feature of general Black discursive practices. Everyday conversational talk may be rendered as a "story." Narrativizing is a Black rhetorical strategy to explain a point, to persuade holders of opposing views to one's own point of view, and to create word-pictures about general, abstract observations about life, love, and survival. Rapper Ice Cube rules [reigns supreme] in his artistic deployment of this Black communicative practice to explain racialized oppression, for instance, how it happens that such huge numbers of African American men are in prison:

> [Voice]: In any country, prison is where society sends its failures, but in this country, society *itself* is failing.
> [Ice Cube]: How you like me now? I'm in the mix, it's 1986, and I got the fix . . ./Dropped out the 12th cause my welfare's shorter than a midget on his knees . . ./Fucked up in the pen, now it's '94, back in L.A. and I'm fallin in the door/Everybody know I got to start from scratch . . ./No skills to pay the bills/Talkin bout education to battle inflation/No college degree, just a dumb-ass G . . ./I got a baby on the way/Damn, it's a mess/Have you ever been convicted of a felony?—Yes!/Took some advice from my Uncle Fester, all dressed up in polyester/"Welcome to McDonald's. May I please help you?"/Shit, what can I do? ("What Can I Do?" Ice Cube, 1993; used by permission [Street Knowledge Music (ASCAP)])

Braggadocio is richly interwoven into the everyday AAL conversational context, and it is ritualized in the toasts, long-standing narrative epics from the oral tradition. "Shine," "Stag-o-Lee," "Dolemite," "the Signifyin Monkey," and other well-known toasts are rendered with clever rhymes, puns, and culturally toned experiences and references from a fresh and new perspective. The toast-teller projects himself (or herself, but usually himself) as a

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powerful, all-knowing, omnipotent hero, able to overcome all odds. In this way, he personifies the self-empowerment dreams of his Black audience and symbolizes for them triumph and accomplishment against the odds. In the hip-hop/rap generation, the braggadocio theme is generally about the rapper's lovemaking or verbal skills. While Notorious B.I.G. boasts about his rapping prowess in male-female relationships (see, e.g., his "Big Poppa"), gifted producer Dr. Dre brags about his ability to "flow" [verbal skills]:

> Well, uhm beepin and uhm creepin and uhm freakin . . ./Now it's time for me to make my impression felt/So sit back, relax, and strap on yo seat belt/You never been on a ride like this befo/With a producer who can rap and can throw the maestro/At the same time wit the dope rhymes that I kick/You know and I know I throw some ol funky shit/To add to my collection, this selection symbolizes/ Take a toke, but don't choke/If you do, you'll have no clue of what me and my homey Snoop Dogg came to do. ("Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang," Dr. Dre, 1992, used by permission, Interscope Records)

The art of verbal insult is displayed in AAL's communicative ritual, *the dozens/playin the dozens* (traditional terms) or *snappin* (newly emerging term; see, e.g., Smitherman, 1995a). It has analogues among some ethnic groups in West Africa, such as the Efik in Nigeria (see, e.g., Dalby, 1972; Simmons, 1963). This linguistic-cultural practice involves what Black woman writer Zora Neale Hurston (1942) referred to as "low-rating the ancestors of your opponent." Although any relative may be the target of a *snap*, the mother is generally the preferred subject. Given its ritual nature, there are stock linguistic conventions for launching the verbal insult, the most common being "yo momma." And there are some critical rules. For one thing, the insult must be funny and original (or a new twist on an old line). And, most important, it must not be literally true because, then, it is no longer a game.

> Yall remember way back then . . ./I think I was about ten/One of those happy little niggas . . ./Always tryin to rag . . ./Sayin, "Yo momma black," "His momma this," "His momma that." ("Back in the Day," Ahmad, 1994)

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Yo momma so fat, she fell over, her leg broke off,
and some gravy poured out.
I saw yo momma kickin a can down the street
I asked her what she was doin, and she said movin. (*White Men Can't Jump*, 1992 film)

Your mother is so old, she went to the Virgin
Mary's baby shower.
Your sister is so nasty, I called her on the
phone and got an ear infection. (*Double Snaps*, by Percelay, Dweck, & Ivey, 1995; collected from hip-hoppers, older musicians, and others from across the United States).

Signification/signifyin is a type of verbal insult that is leveled at a person, rather than at his or her mother or relatives. Whereas the dozens is fairly blunt and pointed, signifyin is subtle, indirect, and circumlocutory (see e.g., Asante, 1972; Lee, 1993; Mitchell-Kernan, 1969; Morgan, 1989; Smitherman, 1995b; Watkins, 1994). Although it may be employed for just plain fun, it is often used to make a point, to issue a corrective, or to critique through indirection and humor. For instance, Malcolm X once began a speech to a Black audience with a bit of signifyin to let his audience know that he knew he had enemies among them. He said, "Brother Lomax [the moderator], ladies and gentlemen, friends and enemies." In rap and hip-hop, as in contemporary African American literature, women rule when it comes to signifyin. Female rappers use this age-old rhetorical strategy to launch critical offensives against the sexual objectification of women practiced by some male rappers.

In "Fly Girl," the ever-inventive Queen Latifah strikes back at what many women consider a disrespectful form of address: *Yo, baby!* Other female rappers respond to rap's sexism by coming hard themselves. Smooth provides such an example in her 1993 hit, "Ya Been Played":

Ya been played and I think you know it
You too large to even try to show it . . .
I used you as a steppingstone
Then when I was through, I sent yo sorry butt home . . .

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You know that ya been played, git out my face. (used by permission, © 1993 Zomba Enterprises, Inc. [ASCAP], Teaspoon Music [BMI])

In their 1993 hit, "Shoop," Salt N Pepa not only create an entire rap (and music video) full of sexual hyperbole and the sexual objectification of a Black male, they also weave in a bit of signifyin on rapper Big Daddy Kane. In his "Very Special" jam, Big Daddy Kane celebrates the sexual beauty of a woman and gives tribute to her father: "For giving me something this beautiful, have mercy, I want to kiss yo father." So in "Shoop," Salt N Pepa credit the mother for the sexual beauty of the male they rap about.

Like Prince said, you're a sexy mother . . .
Makes me wanna do tricks on him
Lick him like a loly pop should be licked . . .
Don't know how you do the voodoo that you do
So well, it's a spell, hell
Makes me wanna shoop shoop shoop
You're packed and you're stacked
Especially in the back
Brother wanna thank your mother for a butt like that . . .
You're a shot gun bang! What's up with that thang!
I wanna know, how does it hang. . . . (used by permission, © 1993 Bed of Nails Music, Inc., Tyran Music, UniChappell Inc., Next Plateau Music, IZA Music Corp., and Sons of K'Oss Music, Inc.)

Revisiting the Black musical tradition is what rap's sampling is all about. Some critics of rap music have argued that the use of lyrics and melodies from older work in the Black musical tradition demonstrates that rap is not innovative, that it merely imitates rather than creates. Yet, what rappers are doing when they sample is revisiting and revising earlier musical work. As a rhetorical strategy, sampling is a kind of structural signifyin, similar to what Henry Louis Gates (1988) and others have shown that contemporary Black writers, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others are doing: They are indirectly commenting on the work of earlier Black writers within the narrative structure of their own literary productions. The sampling of rappers thus represents a conscious preoc-

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cupation with artistic continuity and connection to Black cultural roots. In this sense, the Hip Hop Nation is grounding itself squarely and unabashedly in the Black musical-cultural tradition, even as they extend that tradition and put their own imprint on the game. In fact, there are clear aesthetic distinctions between this kind of sampling, which triggers the cultural memory associated with a given musical work, and sampling, which simply *duplicates* that work. An example of the latter is "Bop Gun," from Ice Cube's *Lethal Injection* album, which merely replays George Clinton's 1970s' hit, "One Nation Under a Groove," with no modification, throughout the entire song. (However, this purely imitative sampling is rare for Cube, who is one of the most verbally clever and innovative rap artists.)

As with other discursive practices, sampling reflects the way in which rap music capitalizes on Black cultural expression as a scaffold for resistance rhetoric. P.E.'s "By the Time I Get to Arizona" was released in 1991, when Arizona was the only state that did not honor the national holiday for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. With appropriate irony, P.E. samples what was a popular talk-singing love jam, "By The Time I Get to Phoenix," recorded by musical giant Isaac Hayes in 1969. The rhetorical effect is a text of racial protest that became a popular 1990s' rallying cry against racism, Arizona-style.

> Why want a holiday? Fuck it, cause I wanna/So what if I celebrate it
> standin on a corner/I ain't drinkin no 40
> I be thinkin time with a nine/Until we get some land
> Call me the trigger man . . ./They can't understand why he
> the man/I'm singin bout a king/They don't like it When I
> decide to mike it . . ./I'm on the one mission To get a
> politician/To honor or he's a goner/By the time I get to
> Arizona. (used by permission, courtesy Bring the Noiz, Inc.)

The late 2 Pac [Tupac Shakur], whose mother was a member of the 1960s'-1970s' revolutionary group, the Black Panthers, pays tribute to his mother in "Dear Mama." The song recalls "Sadie," recorded in the 1970s by the Spinners, a male ballad/Rhythm N Blues group. In "Sadie," they celebrate the devotion and love so

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unselfishly displayed by the mother of one of the Spinners. Similarly, in 1995, 2 Pac raps:

> When I was young, me and my momma had beefs
> Seventeen years old, kicked out on the streets . . .
> Back at the time I never thought I'd see a face
> Ain a woman alive that could take my momma's place . . .
> I reminisce on the stress I caused/It was hell huggin
> on my momma from my jail cell . . ./One day, runnin from
> the po-lice, momma catch me, put a whuppin to my
> backside . . ./Even as a crack fiend, momma, you always
> was a Black Queen, momma/I finally understand for a
> woman it ain easy tryin to raise a man/You always was
> committed/A poor single mother on welfare—tell me how
> you did it/There's no way I can pay you back, but my
> plan is to show you that I understand/You are appreciated
> [Chorus]: Lady, don't you know we love you, sweet lady/
> Place no one above you, sweet lady. (used by permission, Interscope Records)

One of the least understood communicative practices in AAL is the manipulation of EAL's semantic structure. Often inappropriately dismissed as "Black slang," this rhetorical maneuvering amounts to linguistic appropriation, what late linguist Grace Holt (1972) called "semantic inversion." Today hip-hoppers call it *flippin the script*. It is a process whereby AAL speakers take words and concepts from the EAL lexicon and either reverse their meanings or impose entirely different meanings. In the hip-hop world, New York and Los Angeles, gigantic sites of Black oppression, become "Zoo York" and "Los Scandalous." Semantic inversion/flippin the script was an act of linguistic empowerment as Africans in America took an alien tongue and made it theirs; simultaneously, they created a communication system that became linguistically unintelligible to the oppressor, even though it was his language.

Given this origin as an antilanguage, when an AAL term crosses over and gains linguistic currency in the EAL world, AAL speakers generate a new term to take its place. Of course, many words in the script do not cross over. For example, historically, *Miss Ann* did not

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refer to *any* woman named "Ann" but, derogatorily, to the White mistress of the slave plantation. Today, the term still refers to the White woman, and by extension, to any Black woman, who acts uppity, or "White." Historically, *the Man* was not *any* man but, again, derogatorily, the White man. In the 1960s and 1970s, the term came to be applied not only to the White man but also to the policeman. Among hip-hoppers, this script has been flipped again, as *the Man* has come to mean a person with great power, knowledge, skill, and so forth. (This sense of the term is in the process of crossing over.)

Semantic inversion: in the hip-hop lexicon, to be *down* is to be "up for something," that is, enthusiastic and supportive, like Ice Cube who is "down for whatever," and like Brandy who croons to her would-be man: "I wanna be down with you." Kam plays with semantic inversion when he raps "People make the world go round/They ask me, What's up?/I tell 'em what's goin down" ("Trust Nobody," 1995, by DJ Battlecat and Kam, used by permission, © 1994 by Famous Music Corporation, Vent Noir Music Publishing, and I-Slam Music).

D-Knowledge [i.e., THEE Knowledge], a "spoken word artist," flips the script to create a text contrasting hip-hop/AAL meanings with those from the EAL cultural context. The resulting subtext symbolizes linguistic resistance to the dominant culture's lexicon:

> Like when a brotha's talkin' 'bout a beautiful sistah
> An' he says that this sistah is phat
> But not "fat" like overweight or obese
> 'Cuz this sistah's fresh
> An' not fresh like she's got attitude or fresh like
> she's inexperienced
> 'Cuz this girl's tight
> But not tight like uptight or stiff
> 'Cuz this girl's dope
> An' not dope like the stuff some of us smoke
> 'Cuz this girl's fine
> But not fine like "just awright" or fine like "that'll do" . . .
> 'Cuz this honey's the shit
> An' not and not like the real, stanky shit

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'Cuz this honey's fly
But not like the buzz, buzz flyin' fly that hangs around
the shit . . . ("All That And A Bag of Words," D-Knowledge/Derrick I. M. Gilbert [9/28/93; recorded, 1995], words by D-Knowledge, music by Mark Shelby, © 1995 D-Knowledge Music/Chrysalis Songs/Mark Shelby Music. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission)

The inversion/script flippin that has taken place with "nigger" is often misunderstood by European Americans and castigated by some African Americans. When used by AAL speakers, "nigger" has a different pronunciation, because of AAL's postvocalic *-r* deletion rule, and in today's hip-hop world, a different spelling: *nigga*, and for the plural, *niggaz*. In AAL, the term has a variety of positive meanings. Your best friend, your homey, is your nigga; so, 2 Pac dedicated a rap to his "homiez," titled "Strictly for My Niggaz." Black women use nigga to refer to their boyfriends and lovers; so, female rapper Yo Yo celebrates the fact that she has a "down-ass nigga on my team" in "the Bonnie and Clyde Theme" duet she recorded with Ice Cube. Further, even the negative meaning of "nigger" has a different nuance from the racial epithet of White Americans in that the genetic/racial/bloodline association does not apply. Rather, in AAL, negative "nigger" refers to negative social behavior, and thus, anybody—including White folk!—who is "acting out" may be called "nigger."

Encoded within the rhetoric of racial resistance, *nigga* is used to demarcate (Black) culturally rooted from (White) culturally assimilated African Americans. Niggaz are those Bloods (Blacks) who are down for Blackness and identify with the trials as well as the triumphs of the Black experience in the U.S.G. N.W.A. provides: "EFIL4ZAGGIN" [NIGGAZ 4 LIFE represented backward], title of their 1991 album, a reaffirmation of cultural pride and life in the hood.

In yet another flippin of the nigga script, rap group Arrested Development plays on the negative meaning of nigga, that is, the negative meaning in AAL, to illustrate the difference between Black, Nigga, and African. In their 1992 hit, "People Everyday," they use "Black" as a generic racial term to refer to anybody of

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African descent. "Nigga" refers to the negative antisocial behavior of a Black person who lacks a sense of kinship and brotherhood. "African" is the positive "Black" person, who doesn't "act out," and who practices love, brotherhood, and respect for other Blacks.

> I was pleased, my day was going great, and my soul
> was at ease/Until a group of Brothas started buggin
> out, drinking the 40 oz., going the nigga route, dis-
> respecting my Black Queen, holdin their crotches and
> bein obscene/At first I ignored 'em cause, see, I
> know the type/They got drunk, they got guns, and they
> want to fight/And they see a young couple havin a time
> that's good, their egos want to test a Brotha's man-
> hood/I stayed calm and prayed the niggas please leave
> me be/But they squeezed a part of my date's anatomy . . .
> I told the niggas please let us pass/I said, please,
> cause I don't like killin Africans/But he wouldn't stop
> And . . . I was mad by then/It took three or four cops to
> pull me off of him/That's the story, yall, of a Black
> man actin like a nigga get stomped by an African. . . . The
> moral of the story is that you better look very hard at
> who you steppin to/You might get killed or shot at, and
> it's not worth it. Africans supposed to be lovin one
> another. (used by permission, Speech/Arrested Development)

CONCLUSION

The communicative practices of the Hip Hop Nation are firmly rooted in the African American speech community. Hip-hop's rappers are both in and of this community, sounding the clarion call, arousing the dead citizens of America [those lacking in consciousness], showcasing the culture of the U.S.G. and representing the case of America's still dispossessed slave descendants. Chuck D., of Public Enemy, summed it up this way: "Rap music is Black folks' CNN" (quoted in Chambers & Morgan, 1992, p. 83).

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Rapping about their pain and the violence they live with has rescued several rappers from "thug life" and given them legitimate, productive careers—such as Ice Cube and Ice-T, both former California gang members, and Notorious B.I.G., former drug dealer. In fact, it is no secret that the culture of hip-hop has created a multi-billion-dollar industry. What *is* a secret, however, is that the big paper [lots of money] in this multi-billion-dollar industry goes to big business. For instance, out of every album, CD, or tape sold, the artist gets only 5.7%, the songwriter, only 3%, but the recording company gets 43.4%, and the record store, 31.7% (*Vibe*, 1995).

In the absence of a national movement to provide a cohesive political framework, such as that which emerged during the 1960s-1970s, the Hip Hop Nation grapples with contradictions it lacks the political experience to resolve. Moreover, there is little help from their elders, as few of these African Americans, those who have "made it," are offering guidance to rappers. Legendary singer and entertainment artist Stevie Wonder (1995) addressed this void when he was asked to comment on rap music:

> I learn from rap. . . . Listen hard, and you'll hear the pain. Without feeling the pain yourself, you'll never understand. And what we don't understand, we can't change, can't heal. I hate it when the very folks who should be listening to rap are attacking it so hard they miss the point. The point is that children and the neighborhoods—the whole country . . . is drowning in violence.

The Hip Hop Nation employs African American communicative traditions and discursive practices to convey the Black struggle for survival in the face of America's abandonment of the descendants of enslaved Africans. The rap music of the Hip Hop Nation simultaneously reflects the cultural evolution of the Black oral tradition and the construction of a contemporary resistance rhetoric. Of course, one might be moved to reflect on Maya Angelou's (1981, p. 22) words: "My people had used music to soothe slavery's torment or to propitiate God, or to describe the sweetness of love

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and the distress of lovelessness, but I knew no race could sing and dance its way to freedom." Nonetheless, the rap artists of hip-hop appear to have heeded poet Margaret Walker's admonition to "speak the truth to the people," and they are doing it in a language that the people know and understand. As a womanist activist from back in the day, I applaud the Hip Hop Nation for seeking to disturb the peace lest the chain remain the same.

NOTES

1. From Naughty By Nature. (1995). Chains remain. *Poverty's Paradise*. Tommy Boy Records.

2. Although "Rapper's Delight" was the first big rap hit, selling over 2 million copies in the United States (Rose, 1994, p. 196), it was not the first rap record. That "first" occurred earlier in 1979: "King Tim III (The Personality Jock)," recorded by the Fatback Band (George, 1992, p. 16).

3. Their name derives from a central tenet of the Five Percent Nation. The people who are all wise and know who the true living God is are only 5% of the population. This 5% are called the "poor righteous teachers." The Poor Righteous Teachers rap group comes from a ghetto project in Trenton, New Jersey, dubbed "Divineland" (Ahearn, 1991).

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