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College Literature; Winter 1999; 26, 1; ProQuest
pg. 98

"I Fought the Law (and I Cold Won!)": Hip-hop in the Mainstream

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INTRODUCTION

The appearance of objectionable subject matter—seeming glorifications of crime, violence, misogyny, or greed—in hip-hop music, especially "gangsta" rap, has become a determining factor about the genre for critics. Due to the campaigning and lobbying efforts of groups such as the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), and to the media hype that has surrounded such incidents as the violent deaths of Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G., rap has become, for many parents, politicians, and church leaders, a destructive influence, a site of practically pure anti-social values, of "negativity." Because of vocal and continued protests, it seems that cultural critics dealing with rap must now always address the form's "controversial" nature. In mounting both attacks and defenses, critics have had to decide just where and how to locate the debate, and there has been some confusion about how to go about the task. Most commonly, this entails merely drawing a connection in one direction or another between the artist and the consumer. This is primarily done in two ways: (a) through textual readings of the content of hip-hop music, lyrics, and culture which are said to have a negative effect on consumers, especially children; or (b) by explaining or excusing violent content as a reflection of unequal American race relations and socioeconomics.

Of the recent critics from the former school, Ronin Ro is perhaps the most vocifer-

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ous, writing that "Hip hop lives under the oppressive shadow of a handful of gangsta rappers with meager skills, drug-addled worldviews and far-reaching effects on American youth." This faction of artists, he asserts "is fast on its way to casting its shadow—projecting the artists' drug abuse, misogyny and self-hate—over this generation" (1996, 2-3). Critics from the latter school will point out that rap draws upon culturally specific narrative modes such as "playing the dozens," in which violence functions (merely) symbolically. For instance, Robin D. G. Kelley asserts that gangsta rap is almost purely symbolic, has become a straw man for other American problems, and is in fact best understood as mere "sonic force" (1996, 158). Tricia Rose and Houston A. Baker, Jr., have also asserted that rap's sometimes violent content is a confrontational response to privileged America's desire to close the already disenfranchised out of public space. Rose devotes a chapter to the relatively small group of "Black women rappers [who] articulate the fears, pleasures, and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the margins" (1994, 146). Russell Potter goes further, asserting that hip-hop violence is a post-colonial phenomenon resulting in a "moral panic" which functions as "ideological broadcasting" (1995, 85-89): "Behind the moral panics which deploy the word 'violence' to attack rap music is a culture that already sanctions all kinds of violence" (Potter 1995, 86).

Still, all of these critics often succumb to the temptation to enter the debate on the terms of rap's "opponents," pointing to the "good" rappers in order to deflect attention from the "bad." William Eric Perkins, for example, contrasts the negative effects of gangsta rap to the potential of "message" rap, which could become "a vehicle for a regenerative anti-authoritarianism (so necessary in an age of growing right-wing cultural fanaticism) in youth culture and black youth culture in particular" (1996, 19). In the response most representative of these moves, Houston Baker asserts that "if one concentrates on what I call the positive sites of rap . . . one realizes how signally creative, important, and varied rap is as a generational form" (1993, 52). It should be noted that there are many successful rap artists who avoid, and even protest, violent, misogynist, or racist subject matter. It should also be noted that as catalysts for social change, these artists seem to fail to fulfill their revolutionary potential at the moment in their careers at which increasing commercial success allows them access to "the mainstream," that amorphous middle-class majority that consumes entertainment in staggering quantities and never strays far from the middle of the political spectrum. If this great "mass" could be swung just a little to the left by entertainers, one imagines, it might be prompted to political action. Time and again, though, the potential for politically committed positive rap acts to enter the mainstream and jar it out of its political complacency seems to fail.

Too often, the role of the specific socioeconomic system of the music and entertainment industry, with its simultaneous and conflicting constructions of rebellious resistance and commercial stardom, is minimized, simplified, or ignored by critics in making sense of this failure. Usually, the role of the

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recording industry is seen as an either-or proposition: either propagating controversy for the sake of profit (Ro), or giving voice to the disenfranchised (Baker). If, however, we see the problems of the marketplace as primary in relation to the moral content of entertainment, a more complex picture emerges, one in which it is not so easy or useful to differentiate rappers' social production from their marketing strategies, or indeed from the uses made of rap by consumers. Of particular importance in the nebulous relationship between the marketplace and moral content is the dichotomy between entertainment that is seen to comprise an "authentic" threat to deep-seated inequality, and is therefore doomed to embrace commercial and popular obscurity; and entertainment that does not threaten the socioeconomic status quo and so may become "mainstream," commercially successful on a mass scale. As a critical model for such an examination, bell hooks's "Gangsta Culture—Sexism and Misogyny: Who Will Take the Rap" might serve usefully. In this work, hooks also argues for a shift of emphasis from the moral content of rap to its commercial context, which she terms "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (1994, 115-24). The scope of this context is very broad, but hooks is right to include the music industry as a part of the social context of rap. The analysis below will make a similar move, but will focus more specifically on the popular music marketplace. In addition, rather than moving strictly from social context as cause to lyrical content as effect, it will explore the shifting dynamics between the two as a means to find a more appropriate scholarly use of rap music. Perhaps no historical moment in the music industry has illuminated the negotiations surrounding these subtle dynamics of socioeconomics, race, and power in a consumer society as thoroughly as the emergence of hip-hop into the mainstream during the years 1986 to 1989.

STRAIGHT FROM THE UNDERGROUND: N.W.A.

The most obvious site at which to begin examining the mainstream reception of hip-hop during this period is the group N.W.A., short for "Niggaz With Attitude," a favorite target of the PMRC in its heyday in the 1980s. Their second album, 1988's *Straight Outta Compton*, was the group's breakthrough product, not least because of the attention surrounding their most famous song, "Fuck tha Police," a revenge-fantasy narrative in which the tables are turned on abusive Los Angeles cops. The song's very first lines, "fuck the police coming straight from the underground / a young nigga got it bad cause I'm brown" functions socially, of course, calling attention to the fact that in America, and especially in Los Angeles as an American microcosm, race and economics are inexorably linked to create the ghetto as a vast socioeconomic American "underground."

However, the line also has important commercial implications, positioning the group in a category of music—"the underground,"—that was at the time crucial in the process of reaching a select audience of teenagers and college students, historically some of the most loyal music fans. Calling itself "underground" positioned N.W.A. outside a mainstream constructed in this

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category as primarily commercial and therefore exploitative, insincere, or "out of touch." The idea of a musical underground was no less real at the time for being very much in the popular consciousness; in fact, in the late eighties, college radio, along with independent urban radio stations like Compton's KDAY, along with small, cheap, barely advertised, often all-ages clubs, were methods of maintaining a small but tight network of performers and fans that was entirely separate from the Top-40 system of commercial success. Often, only these stations and clubs dared to put rap on playlists and bills alongside the underground staples of punk and indie rock; all of it was off-limits to the mainstream, but nothing was off-limits in the underground, even unreleased swap-meet demo tapes (Cross 1993).

In addition to identification with this network, "Fuck tha Police," (and every song released by N.W.A.) helped ensure its underground status by upping the level of obscenity, violence, and misogyny, often simultaneously in the same line, in order to ensure that only radio stations local enough to slip between the cracks of FCC regulations could play their music. The subject matter also ensured that performers such as N.W.A. would have no chance, at the time, of inking a major-label deal, so publicity would have to come through local, underground, or word-of-mouth channels. For acts like N.W.A. (as well as for punk bands like the Dead Kennedys), this reinforced a commercial self-marginalization, and therefore became attractive to fans of "the underground."

This is an old story—entertainment that tweaks the system with obscenity has often found its own alternative channels and venues, and by 1988, some level of obscenity had in fact become commonplace in rap. One of the things that made "Fuck Tha Police" a watershed was the fact that the song not only worked outside official boundaries of authority, but also took aim at the authority group charged with the preservation of those same boundaries. Suddenly the mainstream media took notice, an unprecedented letter of admonishment was supposedly written to N.W.A.'s record label by the FBI, the PMRC advised parents to censor it from their children's record collections, and police working security at N.W.A. shows began storming the stage to arrest group members. Whether or not this was a deliberate marketing strategy, all the publicity immediately made the album extremely sought after. At the same time, N.W.A. could not be accused of the worst sin for both underground and black artists, "selling out" or "crossing over"; rather, they had the luxury of the moral high ground and could say they had merely called attention to a pre-existing racist suppression of free speech. One could argue that this effect even intensified the problem under protest by N.W.A., in turn increasing the appearance of an oppositional stance even as the group became more and more popular.

Another possibility is that the song's perceived threat had more to do with consumers' response to the self-proclaimed identity of the artists, "Niggaz With Attitude." Does the graphic narrative of "Fuck tha Police" revolve around a cultural dynamic of the effects of symbolic violence, or around the fear of an

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invasion of the very word "nigga" into black and white middle-class bedrooms and the common parlance of a generation? As hooks writes, mainstream culture becomes most concerned about disruptions to its set of norms "when young white consumers utilize black vernacular popular culture to disrupt bourgeois values." This particular word, printed on an album in a 13-year-old boy's bedroom, invokes a revolution far closer to home than thugs assaulting police in some ghetto street: "A young white boy expresses his rage at his mother by aping black male vernacular speech (a true story); young white males (and middle-class men of color) reject the constraints of bourgeois bondage and the call to be 'civilized' by acts of aggression in their domestic households. These are the audiences who feel such a desperate need for gangsta rap" (hooks 1994, 122). It is of no small importance that the familiarly horrifying word "nigger" was modified for public use by N.W.A. and tied to "attitude." Finding the album in a son's bedroom, parents might wonder whether their child has proclaimed himself (been proclaimed?), through attitudinal subcultural consumption, a "nigga." Further, parents might wonder what exactly that term connotes. In 1968, only a few years before their child was born, striking black garbagemen in Memphis wore signs reading "I am a man." Only a hardcore racist could argue, and the only available rebuttal, "no, you are a nigger," constituted an admission of guilt, an attitude regressing all the way back to the moment in American history when that word meant that a person could be bought and sold.

Now, if the child of that parent (who remembers too well the heartbreaking turmoil of the civil rights years) wears a subcultural sign: "I am a nigga," he reverses the "progress" that had for a while allowed us to excise the violence of those years. "I am a man" was easy to agree with. "I am a nigga" is not. Is it oppression to deny someone the right to self-identify as oppressed? N.W.A. here effectively turned the problems of marginal production into those of marginal consumption.

TALK THIS WAY: RUN-DMC

Another rap group that found success during these three years, Run-DMC, broke through to the mainstream with a less direct invocation of racial and commercial conflict. Their 1986 album *Raising Hell* was the first hip-hop product to go gold, and the cover of the 1975 Aerosmith song "Walk This Way" from that album, propelled by an immensely popular MTV video, was the main reason. Hip-hop groups had not yet collaborated with non-rap artists, instead relying on DJs and producers who manipulated snatches of songs directly off of other people's records through the deft use of turntables and samplers. Run-DMC's DJ, Jam Master Jay, does indeed do this for some of the instrumentation for Run-DMC's version of "Walk This Way," but Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and Joe Perry also both actually perform "live" on the song. In addition, whereas other hip-hop artists had heretofore written or improvised their own lyrics over the top of the DJ breaks (rendering strange the recognizable sounds of a familiar song such as Chic's "Good Times"), Run and DMC

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use the original Aerosmith lyrics of the song, adding only the stylistic touches of rap, rather than rock, convention. The fact that this song is more a cover than an improvisation could be used to say that Run-DMC's version of "Walk this Way" is an assimilationist text, one that compromises its black urban "authenticity" by "crossing over" culturally or "selling out" commercially. Much could also be made of the fact that the impetus to cut the track in the first place came from *Raising Hell* producer Rick Rubin, a white heavy metal and punk fan. (Kept in the dark by Rubin, Run-DMC reportedly thought the name of the group whose song they were covering was "Toys in the Attic," the title of the Aerosmith album containing "Walk This Way.") (Adler 1991).

Emphasizing the racial component of Rubin's guidance would be in line with the normal critical mode in which the music industry is often read. The history of twentieth-century commercial American popular music is often seen to reflect the history of American race relations, either in a pejorative way, as in Baker's, Rose's, or Brian Cross's work, or in a way that celebrates the unifying power of music, as in the PBS series *Rock and Roll*. Most serious critics at least raise the possibility that the musical expressions of marginalized or oppressed groups, especially black Americans, are time and again co-opted to reduce their threat to the white mainstream. The entertainment "plantation system," as hooks would term it, leaves black musical artists, often including the very "originators" of a particular style, form, or genre, in a very vulnerable position: to make a living from their art, they must help to maximize profits for the owner of their product. In some cases this may entail an accession to what executives and marketers feel is greater "accessibility" to a privileged audience. David Marc writes of this "path of least resistance" phenomenon, " . . . if a garage band comes up with a new pop sound or a TV producer comes up with a new wrinkle in a formula drama, the task of the vast entertainment-industrial complex is not so much to evaluate the quality or lack of quality of this invention, or its beauty or truth or lack of same, but rather to test how deeply it can penetrate the market without causing disruption of the marketplace" (1995, 56). Certainly moral content is a part of quality.

An assimilationist reading of "Walk This Way" which asserts that its blackness has been toned down for accessibility is complicated, however, by the MTV video that was a crucial factor in the song's success. Set consecutively in a rehearsal studio and a concert hall, the video plays on the idea of tension between Aerosmith's genre, traditionally white-suburban consumed "hard rock," and Run-DMC's genre, traditionally black-urban consumed rap. At the beginning of the video, Aerosmith is shown in the studio performing the "original" version of the song, but as Tyler opens his mouth to sing the first line, he is interrupted by the sound of Run-DMC launching loudly into their version of the song from the rehearsal room next door. The hip-hop version of "Walk This Way," characterized by Jam Master Jay "scratching" the song's trademark guitar hook and a new electronic drum part, and Run and DMC rapping the lyrics so hard they seem to be shouting at the top of their lungs, is so objectionable to Tyler that he smashes a hole in the wall between the two

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rooms and the two groups face off, arms folded, regarding one another suspiciously. In the second part of the video, Aerosmith is on stage performing "Walk This Way" before a cheering multiracial crowd, when once again Tyler is cut short by Run-DMC, who crash through the back wall of the stage and beat him to the punch by rapping the words to the next verse just as Tyler opens his mouth to sing. Perry and Tyler stop playing and singing and at first regard Run-DMC with the same disdain as earlier, but as the rappers make their way to the front of the stage, they win Aerosmith over and they all end up singing and dancing arm in arm, kicking in unison like a chorus line. The multiracial crowd cheers its approval.

Hence, on the surface, the video seems based on an assimilationist parable: "good music," regardless of genre and audience demographics, overcomes superficial differences and achieves a microcosm of the American melting pot. Inside this melting pot, the critical reading goes, minorities lose the ability to express themselves fully on their own terms, achieving success only on the terms of the already accepted white mainstream. Around the text of the video, though, the music fan's contextual narrative arises that, coming at an extremely low point of Aerosmith's career, the video may have rescued them from the 70s rock graveyard, a fact that diminishes their assumed dominant status in relation to Run-DMC. In the end, Aerosmith has no choice but to accept the power of rap simultaneously to corrupt and revitalize their song, just as traditional rhythm and blues was simultaneously corrupted and revitalized by British and American hard rock and heavy metal in the 70s and 80s. In the video for "Walk This Way," underground or marginal musical practices are overlaid on Aerosmith's traditional musical virtuosity, and the conventions of contemporary black urban speech are layered over Aerosmith's updated rhythm and blues vocal style in a kind of reclamation of the black roots of American popular music. In the end, Run-DMC may be the ones who issue the command to assimilate—as chorus of the song, sung enthusiastically in unison by both groups, says, to "walk this way," and "talk this way."

Such an outcome is a surprisingly counterintuitive manipulation of MTV as a commercial tool. At the time, the network was one of the worst offenders ever in an already historically regressive music industry: because the network had established its demographic as white suburban adolescent males, it actively refused to play videos by black artists for the first few years of its existence, capitulating only when it saw that Michael Jackson could be as big a cash cow as heavy-metal hair bands. In a kind of commercial judo move, Run-DMC used Aerosmith's momentum of failure and MTV's momentum of regression in a way that propelled themselves into the mainstream.

THE FALSE DISGUISE OF SHOWBIZ: DE LA SOUL

De La Soul, another successful group of the late 1980s, attempted to construct its commercial oppositionality in a different way. The flagship band of the "Native Tongues" wing of rap, a loose network of groups including Jungle Brothers, A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah, Monie Love, and others, De La

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Soul epitomized the Native Tongues' emphasis on anti-fashion, Afrocentrism, and "peace." Where other groups positioned their particular variants of slang, lyrical meter, and rhyme as points on a spectrum of what could broadly be construed as "rap language," De La Soul members Posdnuos (Plug 1), Trugoy the Dove (Plug 2), and PA Pacemaster Mace (Plug 3) construed their own vocal style, "speak," as not merely a variation but a new language in itself, radically different from both mainstream speech and the stylings of other rappers. Combining this anti-conversational style with producer Prince Paul's mentoring and samples from across the commercial spectrum of musical genres (including Johnny Cash, whose "Five Feet High and Rising" was sampled for the album's title track), 1989's *Three Feet High and Rising* announced itself as the aesthetic of a new and better era, the D.A.I.S.Y. age (an acronym for "Da Inner Sound, Y'all"). On the album, the group includes some standard meditations on girls and the problems of ghetto life, but also breaks with tradition in its exposition of its own historical and cultural niche.

The band's first twelve-inch single release on independent label Tommy Boy, "Plug Tuning," included on the album in both its original form and as a remix, introduces the new aesthetic with a technological metaphor, as Mace, the "PA," or DJ, intones Houston-command style, "Yo, Pos and Dove, prepare to be plugged up into lines one and two so y'all can flaunt that new style of speak," and then scratches an official-sounding male voice saying "good luck to both of you." The song goes on to expound on the new style, which involves "paragraph preaching," words "sent to the vents of humans, then converted to a phrase called talk," and the ominous and cryptic ending "least but not last I'm frightened / cause the words that I reply hold doom / life of the chant can be stopped by accident when you trip in the wire of the plug tune." Here, as elsewhere in their oeuvre, De La Soul seems to emphasize the transitory nature of mainstream success, predicting not only their own skyrocketing success, but also the consequences of such success: disconnection from their tight-knit group of allies and from their loyal "underground" hip-hop audience. "You" here is perhaps the consumer, who will for a while be a part of the ecstatic crowd-participation chants that have always marked rap performances, but will eventually somehow "pull the plug." "You" could also function grammatically here as "one," a more generic pronoun which includes the group members themselves, whose over-amped careers result in the silencing of their voices; too much "juice" shorts out the system, and the "plugs" fall motionless as broken robots.

A similarly prescient suspicion marks the album's breakthrough hit, "Me, Myself, and I," which was also propelled by MTV. With this song, the group gained acceptance from white suburban consumers by "protesting" hip-hop fetish fads like gold rope chains, Kangols, and Adidas "shell-toes." In their stead, the band espouses the value of being oneself, no matter how normal such a self might be. The video does this by capitalizing on (or creating) the band's preppy fashion sense—lumpy hairstyles, khakis, hiking boots, and rugby shirts—as they are persecuted by track-suited, gold-rope wearing bullies. Posdnuos

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begins the song with the lines "Mirror, mirror on the wall / tell me, mirror, what is wrong / can it be my De La clothes / or is it just my De La song" and Trugoy continues "Proud, I'm proud of what I am / poems I speak are Plug 2 type / please, oh please let Plug 2 be / himself not what you read or write / write is wrong when hype is written / on the Soul, De La that is / style is surely our own thing / not the false disguise of showbiz." Further, on "Take it Off" the band provides a two-minute catalog of all the hip-hop fashion objects you, the listener, shouldn't wear to try and be cool. In this context, the group's image can be read as a (sarcastic?) appropriation of the standard uniform of bland privilege, but constructed in a way that also allowed suburbanite "preppies," who already dressed a lot like this, a validation of their "normal" image as hip. Fashion consumption within the sphere of hip-hop here is disconnected from its aura of an idiosyncratic black urban difference.

Even so, criticism of hip-hop fashion, and the corollary assertion that "preppy" constituted a new anti-style, led to a new conception of "underground" hip-hop culture that could oppose a "mainstream" form of the genre no one had heretofore thought to really exist. As with punk rock, this view based its authenticity on the assertion that a group of outsiders could create an entire music culture without positive reference to the materialist framework of the star system. Already, rap had become one of the most overtly materialistic genres in popular music, and De La Soul countered by imitating a materialism arising out of privilege and regarded as "normal." Where other rappers, even the more heavily "underground" N.W.A., worked within a system that expected the listener to sympathize with tales of the disenfranchised earning or stealing large amounts of money and committing violence on the symbols of mainstream America, De La Soul proposed that the listener sidestep the social problem resulting in unequal distribution of wealth by focusing instead on inequality's resulting personal problems: lack of belief in oneself, loss of character. While this move seemed to "cross over," it also presaged hooks's assertion that a symbolic violent attack on societal power structures merely reproduces, in miniature opposite, the oppression it means to subvert. The "hype" of success, they seem to be saying, can only result in an alienation from one's selfhood as "normal," predicating further social injustice. In this model, consumption itself is corrupt and does violence to one's identity.

YOUR RIGHT TO PARTY: THE BEASTIE BOYS AND PUBLIC ENEMY

In 1986, the same year as De La Soul's debut, the Beastie Boys became the inevitable product of hip-hop's move to the mainstream: a white rap group. Originally a sloppy, fast, and funny New York band in a fairly insular East Coast hardcore punk scene, the band's underground sensibilities, perhaps sharpened by the obscure conventions of the hardcore culture that regards all music as a parody of itself, led them to begin listening to early eighties rap (the only thing going that confused the terms of music consumption as much as hardcore). In the liner notes to a retrospective compilation of early- to mid-

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eighties Beastie Boys punk tunes, Beastie Boy Mike D. describes how they cut their first hip-hop-influenced song, 1983's "Cooky Puss,"

> Somehow [Beastie Boy MCA] hooked us up . . . in a studio where they just did commercial jingles, so it didn't really have the hard-core vibe, whatever that means. The group Meco had just recorded their disco Star Wars shit there. So the only stuff that came out that we really liked was the shit where we were just fucking around trying something different. . . . by this time we were collecting [early hip-hop record labels] Sugarhill and Enjoy 12" singles more than hardcore 7" singles. . . . The weird thing was that people started to like this shit. (Diamond 1994)

This transformation is telling: the switch from an underground white genre to an underground black one is inspired in equal parts by the band's activities as record consumers (rather than producers), and is predicated on the circumstantial access to the means of production for not only commercial music (Meco's "*Star Wars Shit*") but music for commercials. Ultimately, the jump in genre led to 1986's *Licensed to Ill*, hip-hop's first platinum-selling album, produced on the Def Jam label by Run-DMC producer Rick Rubin. The Beastie Boys appeared on the back sleeve of *Licensed to Ill* and in concert dressed in over-the-top approximations of hip-hop gear. The album itself verges on a parody of both the gangster rap and the 70s-rock ethos, spinning tales of petty crime and rock-star delusions of grandeur over beats and riffs largely sampled from superstar 70s groups like Led Zeppelin, War, and the Clash. Where the always-sincere British punks the Clash, for example, covered Sonny Curtis' rockabilly "I Fought the Law" in an attempt to squeeze radical meaning out of American rock, the Beastie Boys in turn sample the Clash cover on their own song, "Rhyming and Stealing," but where Curtis and the Clash sang "I fought the law, and the law won," the Beastie Boys changed the phrase to ". . . and I cold won!"

The Beastie Boys' move to rap coincided roughly with the explosion of punk as big business; the Clash opened for the Who on their 1982 tour and headlined the massive US festival in 1983, the year "Cooky Puss" was released. In the face of the impending mainstreaming of a genre based on the principles of obscurity or even failure, the Beastie Boys retained their difference by succeeding from the racial margins of a genre often defined by racial marginality. This possibly colonial tactic was then de-politicized by the band's overblown emphasis on drinking, drugs, and sex. Taking N.W.A.'s tack and presenting their "fight" as a rebellion against mainstream social abstractions like law, justice, or free speech would have been problematic for the Beastie Boys since, in hip-hop, such battles are almost always constructed around the boundaries of racial marginality.

Instead, the band abstracted violence into hedonism, framing the whole as "the New Style." A characteristic set of lines from "Rhyming and Stealing" reads "My pistol is loaded! I shot Betty Crocker! / Deliver Colonel Sanders down to Davey Jones' locker!" The phrases, traded off between the members Run-DMC style, are delivered in a pure hardcore whine, at the very top of the

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rappers' lungs, and still (especially in the case of the thinnest Beastie voice, Mike D.) only manage to display the complete lack of anything social behind the lyrics. Instead, what comes through is the sheer force of the Boys' willful pretension. As the epitome of this commercial and aesthetic revision of the message-oriented seriousness of hip-hop politics, their breakthrough single, the teen anthem "Fight for Your Right (to Party)," galvanized a white audience around the not-so-controversial topic of not wanting to go to school. For a moment, it seemed as if the Beastie Boys could, by parodic juxtaposition, single-handedly empty the social threat of hip-hop violence by asserting that such a threat was a commercial construction ultimately amounting to mere entertainment. They seemed to be saying that anyone can produce or consume any identity, and, as long as that identity is framed parodically to show that you know what you're doing, there will be no consequences.

That the Beastie Boys were successful rap artists from a position marginal to, or even at the expense of, rap's authenticity as a threat from the socioeconomic margins, was given an interesting twist by late '80s rap superstars and Def Jam labelmates Public Enemy. Along with Run-DMC's *Raising Hell*, The Beastie Boys' success helped propel Def Jam directly to the commercial forefront of the few extant independent rap labels. In 1987, the year after *Licensed to Ill* broke, Public Enemy put out their first album; in 1988 they released *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back*, the most overtly sociopolitical statement hip-hop had known up to that time, and still the benchmark of the "message rap" subgenre. The subject matter of the album is roughly divided between Nation of Islam explications of American racism—often quoted or sampled directly from Malcolm X or Louis Farrakhan—and preemptive, goading strikes on mass media criticism of the group's radical views. To round out the "by any means necessary" ethos, the group's crew included the fake-Uzi-toting "Security of the First World," who stood at attention during live shows; "Minister of Information" Professor Griff, who did not appear with the group for nearly a decade after publicly voicing his anti-Semitism; and "Media Assassin" Harry Allen.

What made this album special, both aesthetically and politically, was the canny matching of Hank Shocklee's and Eric "Vietnam" Sadler's production with frontman Chuck D.'s "Rebel Without a Pause" poetics and sidekick Flavor Flav's enthusiastic "cold lampin'" adlibs. While Chuck D.'s lyrics used a variety of rhyme schemes and line lengths, Shocklee's and Sadler's "Bomb Squad" production followed a pattern of nearly pure repetition, especially of high-pitched horn blast samples. These bending notes, scratched so ferociously by Terminator X as to be nearly unrecognizable as horns, appear on nearly every minute of every song on the album. The net sonic effect of this is an hour's worth of police sirens blaring down a burning street outside the studio, as if the group's prophecy had somehow transported the world back to Watts or Detroit in the late 1960s.

Public Enemy's thorough commercial reconstruction of the age of "black power" resistance was broken during the late eighties only by the fact that the

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group had no choice but to share the limelight with the frivolity of the Beastie Boys, often even opening for their white counterparts on Def Jam tours. A response to this compromise of Public Enemy's austere political aesthetic can be heard in the closing song of *Nation of Millions*, "Party for Your Right to Fight." This song is the most overtly racialized political statement on the album, merging the history of the demise of the Black Panther Party with Five Percent Nation conspiracy theory ("this party started right in '66 / with a pro-black radical mix / Then at the hour of twelve / Some force cut the power / And emerged from hell / It was your so-called government / that made this occur / like the grafted devils they were"). In between the verses about J. Edgar Hoover having "King and X set up / also the Party with Newton, Cleaver, and Seale" and Masons suppressing the history of the "original Black Asiatic Man" is a chorus that, curiously, samples the Beastie Boys rapping the words "fight for your right to party." The chorus, however, reorganizes those words into "party / for your right / fight, fight."

In this pieced-together form, the meaning of the individual words "party," "right," and "fight" are divested of the call for hedonistic pleasure put there by the Beastie Boys. "Party," still used as a verb, and in the context of the verse lyrics, now can be read as a reference to the Black Panthers—something like "organize." "Fight for your right," morphed into "Right to fight," now becomes a possibly violent call to arms. Public Enemy has never publicly criticized the Beastie Boys, but, in the context of the album and the consistency of the political tenor maintained by the group, it is hard to think of this moment as an homage. Rather, it is an insertion of the politics of racialized resistance into a precise textual location: the point at which hip-hop's political seriousness had first begun to be called into question through parody from the inside. Thus, the presence of this song, especially in conclusion of an album of Public Enemy's strongest statements, worked in two ways: it positioned Public Enemy at a distance from the Beastie Boys' means of pop success (perhaps even implying that their success did violence to the social function of rap music), and it preserved the commercial symbiosis between the independent rap record industry and the group's political commitment. If consumption is a violent act here, that violence is framed as necessary, because the resistant political power of authentically resistant politics is always under attack.

CONCLUSION

More than anyone else at the time of rap's coming of age, these groups demonstrated the difficulties of underground passage into the mainstream, the constant tension between succeeding in a commercially driven art form and retaining the oppositionality that engendered the form's success in the first place. They also made it apparent that the music industry's "mainstream" functions as microcosm for a larger system of socioeconomic domination, one that has remained maneuverable by its powerful helmsmen in order to maximize their interests and ward off threats to their primacy. In hip-hop texts, and in the circumstances of its consumption and production, this industry influence

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is often conflated with the maintenance of violent systems of power and domination, especially racism in both obvious and subtle forms. As evidence of this maneuverability, all the artists discussed above have either faded into legend or abandoned their oppositional status. N.W.A. splintered into discrete solo artists and producers who defined the West Coast gangster sound of the mid-1990s (a now already despised style that spawned the ill-fated Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G.); Run-DMC have become born-again Christians who tour colleges as a nostalgia act; the Beastie Boys moved to California and began performing earnest and empty multicultural funk; Public Enemy has reinstated their resident anti-Semite and has not been well-received in years; and De La Soul, constantly complaining about the lack of money their underground status earns them, have perhaps recorded their last album.

Perhaps the most complicated 90s turn from these groups is Beastie Boy MCA's rise to power as the organizer of the hugely successful Tibetan Freedom Concerts, which gather a stable of currently popular "alternative" rap and rock artists for two-day charity festivals. "Freeing" Tibet is, of course, a worthy cause, but the focus and scale of this effort can also be said to mark an abandonment of attention to more immediate local, or even domestic, issues. As Marc Anderson, co-founder of the Washington, D.C. based punk rock community service group Positive Force, said to the *Washington Post* about the festival, "A lot of these folks [playing Free Tibet] are quite wealthy now, and it impinges on your own lifestyle if you're challenging the increasing concentration of the entertainment industry or the systematic destruction of the safety net for the poor." Anderson sees these celebrity activists as merely "representatives of large multinational corporations, an insidious, but very real, mechanism that co-opts people. I wish there were a D.C. Freedom Concert, but the folks engaged in this concert just don't want to address those questions" (Fisher 1998, G6). On the level of the fan, such charges of "sellout" are often expressed more personally as a perception that underground stars who have broken through into the mainstream are punishing their early, and most loyal, fans by extorting hundred-dollar tickets from them in the name of charity.

That the music industry breeds such violent hostility between fans and artists, and between artists and record labels is, as we have seen, compounded in hip-hop by the insertion of a racial socioeconomics into its moral and critical framework. But this moral framework cannot be merely considered in terms of the content of rap music; it must be extended to include the socioeconomic context of the recording industry itself. This context may also go some way toward explaining the violent and untimely deaths of Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. Biggie's first record was titled *Ready to Die* and his last was *Life After Death*, while Tupac's *Don Killuminati* featured a crucified portrait of the artist on the cover; they had already been selling their own deaths for some time. No wonder that fans, saddened though they were by these events, were strangely unsurprised by the deaths, and even willing to speculate on the complicity of Tupac's and Biggie's respective record companies. Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace not only predicted this phe-

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nomenon in 1990, they correctly placed it in the realm of the music industry as big business, writing that when every act of shocking sex and pain had been successfully sold, as hip-hop culture, industry moguls would have no choice but to move toward the contextual limit already passed in pornography: "snuff rap," in which someone is supposed to have been actually killed as the premise for the making of the record itself.

However, as I have tried to show in these case studies, the exertion of such maneuverable power is not lost on the level of the entertainment industry that includes the performers themselves. Aware of the socioeconomic stakes of negotiating success in the face of such a system, aware of the historical importance of challenging that system from within, these performers went a step further. N.W.A., Run-DMC, De La Soul, the Beastie Boys, and Public Enemy didn't just break through into the mainstream; they enacted the cultural and commercial violence of that process by "staging" it in their music and their very identities. This is not to say that the violent imagery or obscenity in a group such as N.W.A. is merely meant to symbolize transparently the violence of an industry, nation, or "post-industrial society," for these artists also embed their own consumption—pleasurable, righteous, or guilty—in their texts as part of the violence they enact. They do not attempt to solve the problems of socioeconomic inequality, race relations, or violence. Instead they acknowledge them as a deep-seated part of broader historical circumstances, and tie them to their own circumstances as participants in the music industry. To stop at positive or negative classification is to miss an opportunity to study these circumstances in order to learn about our own daily involvement in a consumer society.

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