

From Tricia Rose (1994), *Black Noise. Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press. 99-145.

CHAPTER FOUR

Prophets of Rage

Rap Music and the Politics of
Black Cultural Expression



With vice I hold the mike device
With force I keep it away of course
And I'm keepin' you from sleepin'
And on the stage I rage
And I'm rollin'
To the poor, I pour it on in metaphors
Not bluffin', it's nothin'
We ain't did before.
—Public Enemy¹

Public Enemy's prophet of rage, Chuck D, keeps poor folks alert and prevents them from being lulled into submission by placating and misleading media stories and official "truths." He holds the microphone with a vice grip and protects it from perpetrators of false truths, speaking directly to the poor, using indirection and symbolic reference. When Chuck D says that pouring it on in metaphor is nothing new, he refers to the long history of black cultural subversion and social critique in music and performance. In this sense, rap is "nothing we ain't did before." Slave dances, blues lyrics, Mardi Gras parades, Jamaican patios, toasts, and signifying all carry the pleasure and ingenuity of disguised criticism of the powerful. Poor people learn from experience when and how explicitly they can express their discontent. Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion. These cultural forms are especially rich and pleasurable places where oppositional transcripts, or the "unofficial truths" are developed, refined, and rehearsed. These cultural responses to oppression are not safety valves that protect and sustain the machines of oppression. Quite to the contrary, these dances, languages, and musics produce,

communal bases of knowledge about social conditions, communal interpretations of them and quite often serve as the cultural glue that fosters communal resistance.

In an expansive cross-cultural study, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott explores the dynamics of cultural and political domination and resistance by investigating how power relationships are solidified and challenged through social transcripts. Referring to these transcripts of power and resistance respectively as “public” and “hidden” transcripts, Scott argues that the dominant “public” transcript, a “short-hand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate,” supports the established social order, whereas the “hidden” transcript, the “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ or in disguised form,” critiques and resists various aspects of social domination.²

These dominant public transcripts are maintained through a wide range of social practices and are in a constant state of production. Powerful groups maintain and affirm their power by attempting to dictate the staging of public celebrations, by feigning unanimity among groups of powerholders to make such social relations seem inevitable, by strategically concealing subversive or challenging discourses, by preventing access to the public stage, by policing language and using stigma and euphemism to set the terms of public debate or perception. Resistive hidden transcripts that attempt to undermine this power block do so by insinuating a critique of the powerful in stories that revolve around symbolic and legitimated victories over powerholders. They create alternative codes that invert stigmas, direct our attention to offstage cultures of the class or group within which they originated, and validate the perceptions of the less powerful. These hidden transcripts, are “often expressed openly—albeit in disguised form.” Scott suggests that “we might interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power.”³ He goes on to say that by examining the “discrepancy between the hidden transcript and the public transcript we may begin to judge the impact of domination on public discourse.” His analysis of power relationships as they are acted out through social transcripts points to the critical role language and other modes of communication play in the sustenance, destabilization, and struggle over power.⁴

Rap music is, in many ways, a hidden transcript. Among other things, it uses cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities. Not all rap transcripts directly critique all forms of domination; nonetheless, a large and sig-

nificant element in rap’s discursive territory is engaged in symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically, ideologically, and materially oppress African Americans. In this way, rap music is a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless. On this stage, rappers act out inversions of status hierarchies, tell alternative stories of contact with police and the education process, and draw portraits of contact with dominant groups in which the hidden transcript inverts/subverts the public, dominant transcript. Often rendering a nagging critique of various manifestations of power via jokes, stories, gestures, and song, rap’s social commentary enacts ideological insubordination.

In contemporary America, where most popular culture is electronically mass-mediated, hidden or resistant popular transcripts are readily absorbed into the public domain and subject to incorporation and invalidation. Cultural expressions of discontent are no longer protected by the insulated social sites that have historically encouraged the refinement of resistive transcripts. Mass-mediated cultural production, particularly when it contradicts and subverts dominant ideological positions, is under increased scrutiny and is especially vulnerable to incorporation.⁵ Yet, at the same time, these mass-mediated and mass-distributed alternative codes and camouflaged meanings are also made vastly more accessible to oppressed and sympathetic groups around the world and contribute to developing cultural bridges among such groups. Moreover, attacks on institutional power rendered in these contexts have a special capacity to destabilize the appearance of unanimity among powerholders by openly challenging public transcripts and cultivating the contradictions between commodity interests (“Does it sell? Well, sell it, then.”) and the desire for social control (“We can’t let *them* say *that*.”). Rap’s resistive transcripts are articulated and acted out in both hidden and public domains, making them highly visible, yet difficult to contain and confine. So, for example, even though Public Enemy know pouring it on in metaphor is nothing new, what makes them “prophets of rage with a difference” is their ability to retain the mass-mediated spotlight on the popular cultural stage and at the same time function as a voice of social critique and criticism. The frontier between public and hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. Although electronic mass media and corporate consolidation have heavily weighted the battle in favor of the powerful, contestations and new strategies of resistance are vocal and contentious. The fact that the powerful often win does not mean that a war isn’t going on.

Rappers are constantly taking dominant discursive fragments and throwing them into relief, destabilizing hegemonic discourses and attempting to legitimate counterhegemonic interpretations. Rap's contestations are part of a polyvocal black cultural discourse engaged in discursive "wars of position" within and against dominant discourses.⁶ As foot soldiers in this "war of position," rappers employ a multifaceted strategy. These wars of position are not staged debate team dialogues; they are crucial battles in the retention, establishment, or legitimation of real social power. Institutional muscle is accompanied by social ideas that legitimate it. Keeping these social ideas current and transparent is a constant process that sometimes involves making concessions and adjustments. As Lipsitz points out, dominant groups "must make their triumphs appear legitimate and necessary in the eyes of the vanquished. That legitimation is hard work. It requires concession to aggrieved populations . . . it runs the risk of unraveling when lived experiences conflict with legitimizing ideologies. As Hall observes, it is almost as if the ideological dogcatchers have to be sent out every morning to round up the ideological strays, only to be confronted by a new group of loose mutts the next day."⁷ Dominant groups must not only retain legitimacy via a war of maneuver to control capital and institutions, but also they must prevail in a war of position to control the discursive and ideological terrain that legitimates such institutional control.⁸ In some cases, discursive inversions and the contexts within which they are disseminated directly threaten the institutional base, the sites in which Gramsci's wars of maneuver are waged.

In contemporary popular culture, rappers have been vocal and unruly stray dogs. Rap music, more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, "legitimate" (e.g., neoliberal) ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality. As new ideological fissures and points of contradiction develop, new mutts bark and growl, and new dogcatchers are dispatched. This metaphor is particularly appropriate for rappers, many of whom take up *dog* as part of their nametag (e.g., Snoop Doggy Dog, Tim Dog, and Ed O.G. and the Bulldogs). Paris, a San Francisco-based rapper whose nickname is P-dog, directs his neo-Black Panther position specifically at ideological fissures and points of contradiction:

P-dog commin' up, I'm straight low
 Pro-black and it ain't no joke
 Commin' straight from the mob that broke shit last time,
 Now I'm back with a brand new sick rhyme.

So, black, check time and tempo
 Revolution ain't never been simple⁹

Submerged in winding, dark, low, bass lines, "The Devil Made Me Do It" locates Paris's anger as a response to white colonialism and positions him as a "low" (read underground) voice backed up by a street mob whose commitment is explicitly pro-black and nationalist. A self-proclaimed supporter of the revived and revised Oakland-based Black Panther movement, Paris (whose logo is also a black panther) locates himself as a direct descendent of the black panther "mob that broke shit last time" but who offers a revised text for the nineties. Paris's opening line, "this is a warning" and subsequent assertion, "So don't ask next time I start this, the devil made me do it," along with his direct address to blacks "so, black, check time and tempo," suggest a double address both to his extended street mob and to those whom he feels are responsible for his rage. "Check time and tempo" is another double play. Paris, a member of the Nation of Islam (NOI) is referring to the familiar NOI cry, "Do you know what time it is? It's nation time!" and the "time and tempo" based nature of his electronic, digital musical production. Later, he makes more explicit the link he forges between his divinely inspired digitally coded music and the military style of NOI programs:

P-dog with a gift from heaven, tempo 116.7
 Keeps you locked in time with the program
 When I get wild I'll pile on dope jams.¹⁰

Speaking to and about dominant powers and offering a commitment to military mob-style revolutionary force, P-dog seems destined to draw the attention of Hall's ideological dogcatchers.¹¹ Although revolution has never been simple, it seems clear to Paris that not only will it be televised, it will have a soundtrack, too.

Attempts to delegitimize powerful social discourses are often deeply contradictory, and rap music is no exception. To suggest that rap lyrics, style, music, and social weight are predominantly counterhegemonic (by that I mean that for the most part they critique current forms of social oppression) is not to deny the ways in which many aspects of rap music support and affirm aspects of current social power inequalities. Few would deny the resistive weight of male rappers' critique of the so-called "peacekeeping" and "just mission" of urban police forces and the resulting redefinition of what constitutes violence, as well as which groups have the power to exercise hidden or institutional violence. At the same time rappers also tend to reinforce the male sexual domination of black women and confirm and sustain the construction

of black women as objects and status symbols. Although sexism in rap has been described as a means by which young black males buttress their socially devalued sense of patriarchal privilege, these attacks against black women are not critiques of social oppression and in too many instances they are frighteningly regressive. These attacks on black women ultimately reinforce the social domination of black women and have no place in politically progressive struggles. Similarly, rap's commentary on alienating and racist educational structures and curricula clearly critiques dominant ideologies regarding the reasons and solutions for the crisis in public education, yet some rap artists' homophobic and anti-Semitic lyrics are neither progressive nor resistive.

Such contradictions are not unique to rap, popular expressions, or organized political protest. Countless popular expressions and social and political movements have been rife with similar contradictions. The blues has long been considered a musical form critical of dominant racial ideologies and a resistive cultural space for African Americans under harsh racist conditions. Yet, blues lyrics usually contain patriarchal and sexist ideas and presumptions. British punk offered a biting working-class critique of British culture and society in the 1970s, yet simultaneously perpetuated sexist ideas and social formations. Feminist thought and organized protests have rightfully been recognized for their role in protecting, advancing, and redefining women's rights; yet many women of color and working-class women have criticized leading, white middle-class, feminist activists and thinkers for significant class and racial blind spots that have aided in the perpetuation of some inequalities as they attempted to abolish others. These contradictions are not reducible to the pitfalls of limited vision (although limited vision has often been a part of the problem) but, instead, characterize the partiality and specificity of cultural struggle. Nonetheless, these contradictions are not to be accepted fatefully; they are also to be contested and critiqued.

In the case of rap music, which takes place under intense public surveillance, similar contradictions regarding class, gender, and race are highlighted, decontextualized, and manipulated so as to destabilize rap's resistive elements. Rap's resistive, yet contradictory, positions are waged in the face of a powerful, media-supported construction of black urban America as the source of urban social ills that threaten social order. Rappers' speech acts are also heavily shaped by music industry demands, sanctions, and prerogatives. These discursive wars are waged in the face of sexist and patriarchal assumptions that support and promote verbal abuse of black women. Yet, at the same time, rap's social criticism

opposes and attempts to counteract the ways in which public educational institutions reinforce and legitimate misleading historical narratives and erase from the public record the resistance to domination that women, people of color, and the working classes have persistently maintained.¹²

A close examination of politically explicit raps from three central and well-established figures will give us some insight into how rap's social criticism is crafted and how such criticism is related to everyday life and social protest. The primary raps under consideration are KRS-One's "Who Protects Us from You?," L.L. Cool J.'s "Illegal Search," and Public Enemy's "Night of the Living Baseheads." KRS-One's "Who Protects Us" and L.L. Cool J.'s "Illegal Search" are compared as two related, but distinct, critiques of police harassment and brutality specifically against black males, and these texts are read in relationship to two incidents, one that illustrates the use of these texts as a part of lived cultures and the other that situates the song as a counterdominant revision of a well-publicized incident of police harassment and the conditions surrounding it.

This is followed by a close reading of the video, lyrics, and music in Public Enemy's "Night of the Living Baseheads," a multilayered critique of the government, the police, the media, and the black bourgeoisie. Visual and narrative elements in "Baseheads" symbolically refer to corporate development and to related anticorporate social protests, specifically to grassroots struggles against corporate real-estate acquisitions in Harlem and the symbolic and political relevance of community opposition. "Baseheads" is a productive example to examine closely because it analyzes several powerful groups at once and because it explicitly references on-going social protest.

The police, the government, and dominant media apparatuses are the primary points of institutional critique in rap, and these institutions are primarily critiqued by male rappers. Female rappers rarely address police brutality or media coverage of rap music and are instead more likely to render social and political critiques against limitations on female independence, identity, community, and most critically, the sexist character of black heterosexual relations.¹³

The cultural contestations articulated here are both black and masculine. Yet, race is a commonly shared category of oppression, even as it is articulated from a male perspective. Consequently, many of the issues addressed in the raps that I discuss speak both to black female and black male experiences of discrimination and oppression. These transcripts are part of a larger discursive struggle over legitimate inter-

pretations of black expression, urban America, and black contemporary youths. In some cases, these discursive battles have had significant social implications for and material effects on both male and female African Americans.

The second part of this exploration turns to the social and institutional constraints imposed on rap; or as I call it, the hidden politics of rap—that is, the politics of rap that are not generally given much attention in the public transcript. This section on the hidden politics will explore insurance policies, public space policing of rap fans, media coverage of violence at rap concerts, and rappers' collective responses to the media's interpretations.

Cultural Contestations: Discursive and Institutional Critiques in Rap Music

For many poor and working-class African Americans, police and brutality are synonymous. This is all the more the case after the April 1992 Rodney King videotaped beating at the hands of Los Angeles officers and the judicial responses to their crimes. As soldiers in the war against crime, police officers have a significant degree of power that is exercised, except in those highly egregious and publicized cases, autonomously. Outside the territory of "fighting street crime," the police have played a key role in averting black freedom struggles, brutalizing protesters, and intimidating activists.¹⁴ Police brutality, racism, and harassment form the political core of male rappers' social criticism, and lyrics that effectively and cleverly address these issues carry a great deal of social weight in rap music.¹⁵

In the Reagan and Bush era's war on drugs, urban police forces have been soldiers of war, and poor and minority communities are the enemy battleground. The antidrug war metaphor intensifies an already racially fractured urban America and labels poor minority communities an alien and infested social component and a hot spot for America's drug problem. The nature and character of this drug effort has collapsed categories of youths, class, and race into one "profile" that portrays young black males as criminals. What war has no casualties? The public dominant transcript identifies police officers as "our" troops, and young black and Hispanic males as the enemy, the primary targets. In this scenario, mistakes made by officers are combat errors; the victims are casualties of war.¹⁶

"WHO PROTECTS US FROM YOU?"

KRS-One, the central figure and lyricist in a group of rappers and musicians organized under the name Boogie Down Productions, addresses the power, perspective, and history of harassment of the police in a philosophical rap, "Who Protects Us from You?" In "Who Protects Us," KRS-One, the lead voice, challenges the equation of institutional power and truth as it relates to police authority:

FIRE! Come down fast!

You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you?

Everytime you say, "that's illegal," does it mean that it's true?

[Chorus:] Un hun.

Your authority's never questioned, no one questions you

If I hit you, I'll be killed, if you hit me, I can sue

[Chorus:] Order, Order!

Looking through my history book, I've watched you as you grew

Killing blacks, and calling it the law, and worshipping Jesus, too

[Chorus:] Bo Bo Bo!

There was a time when a black man couldn't be down with your crew

[Chorus:] Can I have a job please?

Now you want all the help you can get. Scared? Well ain't that true

[Chorus:] Goddamn right.

You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you?

It seems that when you walk the ghetto

You walk with your own point of view

[Chorus:] Look at that gold chain.

You judge a man by the car he drives or if his hat matches his shoe

[Chorus:] You're looking kind of fresh.

But back in the days of Sherlock Holmes, a man was judged by a clue

Now he's judged by if he's Spanish, Black, Italian or Jew

So do not kick my door down and tie me up

While my wife cooks the stew.

[Chorus:] You're under arrest!

Cause you were put here to protect us,

But who protects us from you?¹⁷

Organized as an aggressive verbal address to the police, "Who Protects Us" speaks on behalf of a poor black community voicing cynicism, fear, and suspicion. KRS-One focuses on the slippage between law and morality, pressing us to reflect on the distinction between legal codes and moral codes, between law and truth. "Killing blacks and calling it the law" and "everytime you say, 'that's illegal,' does it mean it that's true?" attempt to destabilize the institutional and moral authority of the police. Rendering the police criminals, KRS-One points to the fragility and historical variability of notions of legality. "Who Protects Us" not only raises the question of who will police the police but also to the larger issue of relative power when it connects racial harassment to

racial privilege by asking, "Who are the police protecting when they harass 'us'?"

Although it is absolutely clear that "Who Protects Us" is about police harassment, the police are never mentioned by name. They are an alien, external force "put here" by other outside forces. Unnamed, but clearly identified, the force of the police is challenged while its institutional name (its power) is silenced, marginalized and a critique of authority is positioned dead center. KRS-One is calling out to the police: "hey you," objectifying them, rendering their behavior suspect. When he says, "You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you," his voice is harsh, pointed, and in an echo chamber, magnifying and doubling his authority.

"Who Protects Us" is a conversational drama. At strategic points in the address, unidentified voices dramatize and comment on KRS-One's statements. These voices are call-and-response reactions to his sermon, local comments on KRS-One's theoretical reflections. When KRS-One asks if police charges of illegality are true, a voice resounds "Un hun," acknowledging that whatever the police say functions as truth. When he points out that the police force, understaffed and fearful are now eager to recruit minorities after retaining long-standing antiblack discriminatory policies, a voice calls out, "Goddamn right," suggesting perhaps that they have reason to fear for their lives, given their mistreatment of blacks. At the end, when they kick in his door and tie KRS-One up, the same voice shouts, "You're under arrest," a move that impersonates the police and calls for their arrest simultaneously. The police have been silent up to this point; when their victory cry is voiced, it is voiced against them. Anything you say can be used against you.

Accompanied by strikingly stark electronic beats, "Who Protects Us" opens with a powerful reggae cry, "Fire! come down fast," a symbolic call for fire's total destruction of current social structures. Fire is a common Rastafarian metaphor for massive social change, the destruction that precedes revelation, precedes new knowledge.¹⁸ "Who Protects Us" is offering and calling for new knowledge, new ways of thought as public service. The title and chorus of "Who Protects Us" borrows a key phrase from the Gil Scott-Heron poem, "No-Knock" that also speaks of police brutality in a different time and place.¹⁹ Scott-Heron's use of the phrase "who protects us from you," and the Rastafarian cry for destruction and reformation frame KRS-One's social critique, suggesting that this new knowledge will be diasporic in nature, reflective, historical, and collective.

"Who Protects Us" is from Boogie Down Productions' 1989 album

Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop, released in early 1989. New York urban contemporary radio stations occasionally played "You Must Learn," a black history rap. Throughout the spring of 1989, I heard "Who Protects Us from You" played more frequently than "You Must Learn" at a number of hip hop parties and caught the chorus and sparse beats blaring from dozens of Jeeps and other cars in New York City and New Haven, Connecticut. During the summer of 1989, I witnessed a moment in which the chorus "Who protects us from you?" was used in direct response to an incident of police harassment. In New Haven, on a street that is considered the dividing line between Yale University and a solidly black working-class community, I noticed a confrontation brewing between a young black teenager and a white New Haven police officer. On this narrow street, a teenager was aimlessly weaving his bicycle back and forth in the street and between the parked cars while he bantered with his male friend, who was talking with a young woman on a nearby porch. A slow-moving police car turned onto the street behind him, expecting him to move out of the way. It appeared that the vehicle was of no consequence to the teenage bike rider; whether he actually saw the vehicle or not, I am not sure. The officer did not beep his horn—he waited a brief moment and then stopped the car, emerging angrily. He went over to the porch and questioned the tallest boy, bellowing for identification, for information regarding where they lived and why they were on this street.

The boy on the bicycle lived in the house where the others were standing, and he continued to encircle the area where the police car was stopped and the area in front of his house. (I have no explanation for the officer's apparent disregard for the boy on the bicycle; perhaps it would have seemed too petty to address him directly.) The officer asked the young man what business he had there and demanded identification. The young man didn't have identification and asked the officer pointedly why he had to have it. He opened his pockets to show that he only had money, but no wallet. The officer glanced at me and my friend (the only two adults around) and as he continued speaking, he lowered his voice, apparently trying to ensure that we didn't hear him. We moved closer to them. The young man asked, loudly, if it was a crime to stand on this porch, yet, in his voice I could hear his anxiety, his embarrassment. The officer told him not to answer him with a smart mouth if he knew what was good for him. From the street, the boy on the bicycle said, "Who protects us from you?" The officer stopped for a moment and looked at us again, hoping we had gone away, I imagined. The boy repeated himself, this time a bit louder: "Who protects us from you?"

The words rang out like a communal protest; I could sense the tables being turned on the officer. His consensual authority slipping, he told the boy to watch his step, returned to his vehicle, and sped off.

The officer expected submission; instead he found contemptuous indifference, which in the context of tense power relationships is public transcript insubordination. The coded behavior of the subordination and domination was broken; as Scott points out, "if subordination requires a credible performance of humility and deference, so domination seems to require a credible performance of haughtiness and mastery."²⁰ "Who Protects Us from You," a phrase that at that time had considerable weight and communal resonance, was part of a hidden transcript that was used as a means to destabilize the police officer's performance of mastery.

I recount this incident not merely as an evidence of police harassment but, instead, as an illustration of the relationship between rap music as a musical text and as a communal African-American social discourse. At this moment, "Who Protects Us" was voiced as an open contestation of the public transcript, one that challenged police authority with hidden textual language and meanings. KRS-One's words conjured meanings and references that fortified a group act of resistance to police authority. KRS-One's words were used as a way to articulate communal knowledge of mistreatment at the hands of the police. These words are part of a contemporary discourse about social injustice; they have social weight and meaning. These words resonated for the bystanders as codes from a hidden text; the officer knew the meaning but not the reference, thereby temporarily destabilizing his verbal authority if not his physical, institutional authority.

"ILLEGAL SEARCH"

L.L. Cool J.'s "Illegal Search" is a similarly pointed antipolice rap that offers a version of "profile" arrests from the perspective of a profilee. "Illegal Search," which takes place on the New Jersey Turnpike, offers a detailed description of an incident in which L.L. Cool J. is stopped, searched, and arrested by a New Jersey State Trooper.²¹ Police harassment, especially "profile harassment" (my term for what takes place prior to or in lieu of a profile arrest), has significant emotional and social costs. "Illegal Search" is a hidden text on what subordinate individuals would like to say directly to dominant authority figures but cannot because they fear reprisals. "Illegal Search" narrates the hidden injuries generated by practices of domination, offering this normally hidden subordinate commentary as the public and dominant text:

What the hell are you lookin' for?
Can't a young man make money anymore?
Wear my jewels and like freakin' on the floor
Or is it your job to make sure I'm poor?
Can't my car look better than yours. . . .

Get that flashlight out of my face
I'm not a dog so damn it put away the mace
I got cash and real attorneys on the case
You're just a joker perpetrating the ace
You got time, you want to give me a taste
I don't smoke cigarettes so why you lookin' for base?
You might plant a gun, and hope I run a race
Eatin' in the mess hall sayin' my grace
You tried to frame me, it won't work.
Illegal search.

On the Turnpike and everything is nice
In the background is flashing lights (sirens)
Get out the car in the middle of the night
It's freezing cold and you're doin' it for spite
Slam me on the hood, yo that ain't right
You pull out your gun if I'm puttin' up a fight
The car, the clothes, and my girl is hype
But you want to replace my silk for stripes
You're real mad, your uniform is tight
Fingerprint me, take my name and height
Hopin' it will, but I know it won't work.
Illegal Search.

And all them cops out there,
Who did the wrong thing to one of my brothers in Jersey
Keep on searchin'. Cause that was foul. Peace.²²

Few young black males would dare speak out loud in the middle of the night to an angry state trooper as L.L. does here. Bringing to light the social context justifying the arrest, the discrimination that takes place within the confines of an officially color-blind justice system, "Illegal Search" is a symbolic confrontation in which subtexts are positioned above ground, center stage. It tells both the story of being searched and the angry responses that are usually repressed; it fuses aspects of the official story with the indignities that are usually rendered invisible in official texts. As is the case in profile arrests, L.L. need only be a young black male in an expensive car to warrant his being questioned, searched, and detained by the police on a cold night.

The rap's title is a legal term for such profile arrests gone awry; yet, the lyrics really address the expectation that the rapper will be stopped on the basis of his race and gender and the humiliation such treatment causes. L.L. tells his girlfriend in the beginning of the song: "Put your seat belt on. I got my paperwork, don't worry. It's cool." This introduc-

tion suggests that he expects to be stopped on the basis of his race and gender. The opening line also suggests that L.L.'s girlfriend may have asked him about his paperwork (e.g., registration) to protect herself from threatening confrontations with the police. Yet, even his excessive caution doesn't prevent him from being harassed; paperwork or not, he is likely to be detained and subjected to the hostility and presumption of guilt that often accompanies police profiling. The incident confirms the conditional nature of black masculine authority by pointing toward L.L.'s limited capacity to escort his girlfriend in public without fear of unwarranted state surveillance, a basic facet of masculine privilege. "Illegal Search" also hints at the relationship between conditional black masculine authority and the increased vulnerability of black women in public spaces.

At the song's end, L.L. addresses and challenges the New Jersey State Troopers and makes direct reference to the reality of illegal searches, specifically on the New Jersey Turnpike. *Mama Said Knock You Out*, the album that contains "Illegal Search," was released during the summer of 1990, four months after the press coverage of an incident that bears striking similarity to L.L. Cool J.'s story. Charles E. Jones and his wife Linda from Newark, New Jersey, were driving a rental car with California plates when they were stopped by New Jersey Troopers and subsequently charged with assaulting an officer and possession of cocaine. They have maintained their innocence and according to the *New York Times* were not informed of the reason they were stopped. This particular case was highlighted in the press because the defense attorney used statistical information from an undercover operation that strongly suggested that drug profiles that determine which vehicle will be stopped and searched, are in fact racial profiles. Profiling has resulted in heavy targeting of blacks driving late-model cars, especially those with out-of-state license plates. The study illustrated that although occupants in autos with out-of-state plates make up approximately 5 percent of the traffic, 80 percent of the contraband arrests referred to the Public Defenders office between February and December of 1988 involved black motorists driving out-of-state vehicles. According to Rutgers professor of statistics Joseph I. Naus, the difference between the typical traffic pattern and the rate of arrests of blacks in vehicles registered out of New Jersey "is dramatically above thresholds used to establish prima facie evidence of racial discrimination."²³

Keep in mind that these statistics show arrests, not people who are stopped and illegally searched, but not charged. It is likely that illegal searches based on race would illustrate even more dramatic figures.

Given the racially motivated behavior of the State Troopers, it seems that not only are many white drug dealers slipping by unnoticed but also that many innocent black people are being stopped and harassed on the basis of race. Under these conditions, it is clear that race is a critical factor in police judgment regarding the potentiality of criminal behavior and that such assumptions can be expected to shape behavior attitude and treatment of African Americans.²⁴

"Profile arrests," arrests of individuals that "look suspicious," require making categorical judgments that clearly discriminate on the basis of race. In *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike*, a study of the Turnpike's history and culture, Gillespie and Róckland illustrate that racially discriminatory profile arrests are a common, if informal, policy of the New Jersey State Troopers: "A New Jersey sociologist tells of a criminology class . . . in which one of her students was a state police officer. He candidly admitted that black and hippies *are* often stopped on the turnpike on some pretext. 'But that's because the numbers are there,' he said. 'There's a good chance we're going to find drugs or a weapon or something.'²⁵ Profile arrests were confirmed by Turnpike Authority chairman Joseph Sullivan and seem a close cousin to urban police profile arrests that draw almost a direct one-to-one correlation between young minority teenage males in sneakers and street gear and suspicious or criminal characters.²⁶ Profiling provides implicit sanction or justification for police officers to behave in profoundly racially discriminatory ways. Among other effects, this kind of explicit institutional racism perpetuates social stigma among young African Americans, as well as police brutality, antipolice responses, and a profound sense of alienation among black youths.

"Illegal Search" is a discursive revision of such incidents. Although he cannot prevent the incident from taking place, in his symbolic inversion L.L. challenges the assumptions that make such incidents possible, using his money and legitimate status as a means of taunting the officer. In the final verse, L.L. describes a court scene in which he wears a suit to court and the case gets thrown out, using profiling (along with his *real* legitimate status) against the justice system. His suit is important; L.L. seems to suggest that had he been wearing one when he was out on the Turnpike, he would have been stopped (blacks in suits are still "black" but not necessarily treated as harshly). In court, he uses the symbols of respectability to which he has access against the officers and as a means of self-protection, as they had used his hip hop, street symbols against him on the Turnpike. L.L.'s fantasy of revenge is situated inside the systematic and discriminatory practice of profiling and

is therefore part of a collective hidden transcript. As Scott argues, "An individual who is affronted may develop a personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation, but when this insult is but a variant of affronts suffered systematically by a whole race, class or strata, then the fantasy can become a collective cultural product. Whatever form it assumes—offstage parody, dreams of violent revenge, millennial visions of a world turned upside down—the collective hidden transcript is essential to any dynamic view of power relations."²⁷ Yet, these collective texts have class dimensions as well. L.L.'s method of retaliation is more accessible to persons with considerable economic privilege. Without his money and legitimate status ("I've got cash and real attorneys on the case"), he would have been less capable of negotiating the judicial system. L.L.'s confidence in dealing with the Turnpike officer is not only a consequence of his orderly paperwork, it is also a consequence of his status as a "legitimate" (read privileged) middle-class male. In this sense, his answer to KRS-One's question "who protects us from you?" is a privileged response that affirms institutionally based law-abiding revenge. He protects himself with quiet indignation and official legal means. Economically disadvantaged citizens, especially those of color, are less likely to have access to fair treatment by the judicial system and consequently expect less from it.

KRS-One takes a decidedly working-class and group-oriented position by focusing on incidents of police harassment that take place in the home and on the street, sites of heightened working-class vulnerability to surveillance. KRS-One refers primarily to the group in his analysis ("who protects *us* from you?"). In KRS-One's story, the law and court system cannot be depended on as a site for redress. L.L. Cool J.'s story depends on such institutions as arenas for his restitution.

Each story tells a tale of the degree to which race is a critical and unifying site of discrimination and oppression, but at the same time each speaks to the central importance of class as a point of either greater or lesser capacity to combat racially discriminatory practices. Both stories also use patriarchal heterosexual coupling as a setting within which to highlight the conditional status of black masculine privilege. More central to each narrative, however, is the way in which the raps place at center stage the generally submerged subordinate *group* hidden text, placing it in direct confrontation to the official one. Articulating a desire for risk-free confrontation and revenge, "Who Protects Us" and "Illegal Search" represent a contemporary African-American collective critique of police harassment in urban America.

"NIGHT OF THE LIVING BASEHEADS"

Capitalism used to be like an eagle, but now it's more like a vulture . . . it can only suck the blood of the helpless. . . . You have to have someone else's blood to suck to be a capitalist. He's got to get it from somewhere other than himself, and that's where he gets it. —Malcolm X²⁸

Public Enemy's "Night of the Living Baseheads" is a multilayered critique of several primary social narratives and institutions. "Baseheads" builds on the use of symbolic references to particular social events, multifaceted address, and the contradictory and discriminatory nature of policing as articulated in "Who Protects Us" and "Illegal Search." It is a narrative bricolage that offers critical commentary on the police, drug dealers, drug addicts, the black middle-class, the federal government, media discourse, and music censorship groups. A visual, symbolic, and conceptual tour de force, "Baseheads" is one of rap music's most extravagant displays of the tension between postmodern ruptures and the continuities of oppression. The video for "Baseheads" is an elaborate collage of stories, many of which move in and around the lyrical narratives, all of which address a variety of oppressive conditions and offer stinging media critiques and political statements. As "Baseheads" is one of the most ambitious and multilayered politically explicit rap videos, I present an in-depth analysis of it, followed by a reading of the video's political significance, social commentary, and implications.

The music video for "Baseheads" opens with Public Enemy (PE) in black-and-white footage, standing over a disheveled headstone marked "R.I.P. Basshead." This still image is spliced with a moving and flashing image of young black men and women writhing in bunches on the floor, eyes glazed and wide-open like zombies, the camera moving over them in short jagged motions. Over these two images the voice of Malcolm X booms: "Have you forgotten, that once we were brought here, we were robbed of our name, robbed of our language, we lost our religion, our culture, our god. And many of us by the way we act, we even lost our mind." Two quick jump cuts follow: first to an image of the famous PE target logo, a silhouette of a young black male in the center of a rifle sight and then, to the same logo alongside a station identification for PETV, both suspended above a television news anchor desk. The set lights come up on Sherelle Winters (a character played by a music video actress) and Flavor Flav (from Public Enemy) as PETV anchors. Flavor Flav irrepressibly blurts out his signature expression, "Yeah Boy-cc!!" while Winters smiles tightly, waiting for her turn to address the camera. Professionally, she announces that tonight's show will "address the

devastating effects drugs are having on our society and what has been termed the basehead syndrome.” The show will “also feature the controversial group Public Enemy and their new album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, which is causing a ruckus everywhere.”

Using this studio news desk as an anchor, the video moves swiftly and irregularly through several images and settings. The musical tracks are spare; sharply punctuated by a syncopated two-note tenor horn sample that loops urgently and endlessly. The lyrical point of departure is Chuck D rapping in front of the abandoned and boarded-up entrance to the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem where Malcolm X was assassinated (the caption reads: “Audubon Ballroom 23 years later”). Chuck points down sharply, directly into a ground-level camera, and begins his rhyme:

Here it is,
BAAMM!
And you say goddamn,
This is the dope jam
But let's define the term called dope
And you think it means funky now, no³⁰

Static interferes with the reception, and the video cuts back at the studio with Flavor Flav shouting, “Hey, yo Sherelle, kick the ballistics, G!”³¹ She looks at him impatiently and then announces another news item for the audience: “An ultra-hyper faction known as the Brown Bags lodged a protest today against rap music.”

The video cuts to live coverage of the Brown Bag protests with field reporter Chris Thomas (host of Rap City, a nationally syndicated rap show on cable television's Black Entertainment Television network) engaged in an interview with a protester who stands in front of a group of white males with brown bags over their faces, holding placards that read, “Elvis Lives” and “No More Rap,” while protestors chant the latter slogan in the background. A representative for the Brown Bags announces to Thomas that, “All the rap noise and the violence associated with it is bringing our country to our knees, and we're not going to stand for it anymore. And, we, the Brown Bags have a plan to put an end to it all.”

Cut again to Chuck D rapping from the entrance to the Audubon, then alongside drug addicts in the street, and then immediately—another static reception transition—to female rapper MC Lyte, as investigative reporter, standing in front of the New York Stock Exchange. She announces to the audience: “In the never-ending search for baseheads, we've come to a new hiding place.” And then she adds with cynical emphasis: “Yeah that's right Wall Street.” Static transition back to Chuck D at the Audubon:

Check out the justice and how they run it
Sellin' Smellin'
Sniffin' Riffin'
And brothers try to get swift an'
Sell to their own, rob a home
While some shrivel to the bone
Like comatose walking around
Please don't confuse this with the sound
I'm talking 'bout . . . BASS³²

MC Lyte sneaks into a Wall Street office and surprises several white business men and women sitting around a conference table covered with lines of cocaine. They try to hide from the camera and collect their belongings, but the cameras swarm around them, there is no escape. While investment bankers crawl around the floor trying to hide their faces, Chuck's image and booming voice is sampled in syncopated stutter “BASS BASS—BASS—BASS BASS!”

Another abrupt cut to the street where Chuck and Flavor Flav are moving among zombie-like baseheads, speaking on the devastation of drugs. These scenes are spliced with documentary-style night footage of shadowy figures hugging building doorways, avoiding the camera lights. Again, a jump cut to the newsroom: “Just in this red alert. (Legendary DJ Red Alert passes a news flash to Winters).³³ “Chuck D leader of the controversial group Public Enemy has been taken hostage by the Brown Bags. We'll have more on this story as it develops.” Next we see Chuck D rapping while tied to a chair struggling with his brow bag kidnapppers.

Another abrupt jump cut to a young black male in jeans, sneakers, and a jacket who is being pulled down a mid-Manhattan street by two cops while he shouts, “Yo man, get off me, Get off me!! I'm not a drug dealer, I'm not a drug dealer!” A middle-aged, balding white salesman peers into the camera: “Did this ever happen to you before? They think you're a drug dealer? We know you're not.” The salesman exclaims “Well, now there's Beeper Tie! Yes, for a limited time only, for only \$99.99 you can have your own beeper tie. To order, just call 1-800-555-1234. Woops, gotta go, beeper calling.” The same teenager reenters the frame now wearing a suit, broad smile, and beeper tie around his neck. He flips it up to show the hidden beeper underneath the widest point of the necktie as two officers stroll past him without notice.

The video collage continues to move abruptly between several themes/narratives: Chris Thomas enters a mock home of a family destroyed by a drug-addicted father and describes the effects of drug addiction on the mother and children; Flavor Flav, seated at his ancho

desk, calls for the release of Chuck D; baseheads dance like zombies; Chuck gestures to a homicide body marking with sneakers on a dark city street. Finally, a large still image of a skull with a white picket fence for teeth framed by “Crack House” on the top of the skull and “White House” below momentarily freezes the video’s kinetic pace. Chuck’s rap weaves through the images:

Daddy-O one said to me
 He knew a brother who stayed all day in his jeep
 And at night he went to sleep
 And in the mornin’ all he had was
 The sneakers on his feet
 The culprit used to jam and rock the mike, yo’
 He stripped the jeep to fill his pipe
 And wander around to find a different kind of
 . . . BASS

The SIWs (PE’s Security of the First World) storm the hiding place to rescue Chuck; Professor Griff yells into a telephone receiver on the street: “Succotash is a means for kids to make cash, selling drugs to the brother man instead of the other man.” Sampled shout: “Brothers and Sisters!” is followed by a more intense pastiche of images ending with the SIWs on a steaming dark city street with Chuck stalking toward the camera, punching his fist into the screen shouting “BASS!” As his voice echoes “BASS” four times, the rifle site logo freeze frames the opening graveyard scene. In time with his sampled “Bass!” each of the four target segments is filled in with a yellow screen.

“Night of the Living Baseheads” is, at the most obvious level, a black nationalist antidrug statement that revises the central concept in the cult horror film “Night of the Living Dead” using it as a metaphor for the way in which drugs can become a form of physical possession. The addicts are zombies possessed by drugs, the walking dead among us.³⁴ Bassheads, a reference to “baseheads” (a slang word for addicts who smoke freebase cocaine) is PE’s play on the powerful, possessive capacity of the bass tones in black music, “don’t confuse this with the sound. . . . I’m talkin’ bout BASS!” Chuck replaces *baseheads* with *bassheads* and wants his listeners to do the same. Chuck’s urgent bellowing chorus “I’m talkin’ bout BASS” calls for the music and the power of the drums, the rhythm of life to be the guiding light, the core black addiction. “Bass! How low can you go?” he warns in “Bring the Noise.” This powerful phrase is sampled and thus resonates here in “Baseheads.” How low can you go? How much of your life can you relinquish to the base? Alternatively: how much commitment can you make to African America? How far are you willing to go to free black people? How much of your

soul will you relinquish to the bass? In “Baseheads” black music is the medium through which one’s commitment to community and culture is realized. Using television as the loudspeaker, “Baseheads” revolves around these two competing seductions; “bass” and “base” form this work’s most consistent conceptual tension.

Malcolm’s imposing voice in the video’s opening is about loss, the reality of absences and their effect on African-American self-worth and cultural reproduction. Produced in the year and a half prior to the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X in the Audubon Ballroom, “Baseheads” uses the currently dilapidated and abandoned marquee and entrance as PE’s philosophical point of departure. The Audubon Ballroom is a symbol of black protest and loss. Twenty-three years ago it was a site where “truth” was spoken. But, today the Audubon is closed and gutted—Chuck cannot speak from its podium. Instead, he locates himself as close to the Audubon as he can possibly get and speaks through today’s primary communication medium—television—but invents his own channel.

PETV is a spoof on Black Entertainment Television, the primary, national outlet for black music videos and the network’s bourgeois news programming. PETV provides news items of interest to black urban Americans and comic interpretations of hip hop–related issues. Sherelle Winters, in white blouse, bow tie, and navy blue blazer represents the epitome of the responsible, respectable black professional. On PETV, she is seated next to Flavor Flav, rap’s most kinetic trickster. In “Baseheads” Flavor Flav is the source of the “real truth,” urging her to “kick the ballistics” and offering his own version of the news when she fails to deliver. Flavor Flav is a news activist, his role is to tell you the news and what to do about it all in the same breath. He is a “truth” watchdog, urging Winters to speak on behalf of black people by attending to the issues that concern rap fans and the black poor. BET professes dedication to black programming but fails to address black outrage and working-class black social issues; Flavor Flav and Chuck D fill this void. Furthermore, partially because of financial constraints, MTV viewers are far more likely than BET viewers to get the latest news on rap music stars, their lives, travels, and run-ins with the police and media.³⁵

On PETV these stories are brought center stage in a black context and in the language of the subordinate groups’ hidden text. Such a juxtaposition suggests that BET is a central carrier of black bourgeois ideology and is not committed to the hidden transcripts, the messages such transcripts carry, or to contextualizing black social issues so that they focus on the class-related dynamics of black oppression. For example,

the surprise-attack search for cocaine in offices on Wall Street to prove that the rich have serious drug problems, the need for black teenagers to hide one's beeper from the police, the symbolic confrontations between the right wing and rap artists are represented by Chuck's kidnap by the Brown Bags each suggest that class is an important facet of racial discrimination. Catching rich, protected Wall Street brokers snorting massive amounts of cocaine is sweet revenge for people especially vulnerable to police surveillance. Beeper Tie is a clever subversion of the class-based aspect in profile harassment. Police "profiling" on city streets is primarily a problem for young kids in working-class jobs or with no jobs at all; it is not a problem for suit-clad corporate managers whose beepers are symbols of responsibility and privilege. The Brown Bags are antirap activists whose name signifies a group without imagination or distinction, but who cover their faces like the Klu Klux Klan.⁵⁶ Like the censorship groups and their allies, the Brown Bags hunt down and attempt to silence (kidnap) rap artists to curtail their impact on American culture. Again, few middle-class black art forms are the target of such reactionary groups.

PE's target logo, a central symbol for the group, is heavily represented in "Baseheads." The rifle sight with a young black male at the center is the PETV logo in the video, but it is also the primary image on all merchandising and it appears prominently on their album covers and in PE press coverage. The target captures the widely held belief among African Americans that young black males are sighted for elimination by way of police brutality, poor education, drug access, and truncated economic opportunities.⁵⁷ It is a visualization of police profiling and surveillance against young black working-class males. This target covers the back of many PE tee-shirts, turning young fans explicitly into moving targets, externalizing the process of sighting and targeting that circumscribes black social space. Targeting also effectively silences the group under surveillance. Yet, in the context of PE's music and imagery, which is unapologetically pro-black, the target represents focus and commitment to black males. Public Enemy targets black males too, addressing them directly, placing them in focus and bringing their issues and concerns to the foreground. Women who wear this tee-shirt add another dimension of complexity to this sign. Because women are often moving targets for male sexual expression, the target takes on a sexual dimension not articulated in "Baseheads." Yet, without such explicit revisions, women wearing their tee-shirt may remain moving targets for men.

The fleeting skull image framed by "Crack House"/"White House" is a vivid image in "Baseheads" that draws an explicit link between the

government and its responsibility for the drug trade. The Reagan/Bush Administration-sponsored war on drugs has contributed to national press focus on "cunning Colombians" and "enterprising urban teens," leaving questions regarding federal responsibility for such trade generally unasked and unanswered. The "Basehead's" death skull, which equates crack houses with the White House, is a racial metaphor that rests responsibility for the drug trade at the door of the federal government.

Public Enemy's selection of the abandoned Audubon Ballroom carries even greater weight than its role as a silent monument to Malcolm X and the social context out of which he emerged. At the same time as the video for "Baseheads" was released, Columbia University plans were underway to purchase the Ballroom and the northern three blocks, demolish the Audubon, and build Audubon Park, a 100,000-square-foot commercial biotech lab complex. Audubon Park would be a complex of multinational corporate laboratories dedicated to generating new life forms more resistant to disease and poisons. Columbia doctors and scientists would be working hand in hand with major pharmaceutical companies: Johnson and Johnson, DuPont, Monsanto, and Mitsubishi, "transferring information developed in 'nonprofit' academic pursuits over to the commercial labs for profit-making ventures." In answer to questions regarding plans for safe use and policing of microorganisms, fungi, bacteria, and radioactive materials used in these labs, Columbia University planner Bernard Hacckle responded, "we as owners will have a management plan."⁵⁸

Seven years in planning, Audubon Park was submitted to City Planning in the fall of 1989 for review. Harlem residents and grassroots leaders protested the Park, calling instead for a monument to Malcolm X and for the restoration of the Ballroom for community-related services.⁵⁹ Harlem residents and activists see the project as a means of displacement, not economic investment in the community. Not only is New York estimated to pay \$18 million out of the \$22 million construction costs, the City would also give Columbia a 99-year lease and invest \$10 million in equity through the Public Development Corporation. Claims that the biotech lab will provide a shot in the arm for Harlem residents by way of new jobs and retail opportunities have fallen on deaf ears, and not without cause:

The lion's share of employment flows far from the local block. When the \$212 million project gleams with rows of microscopes, 90 per cent of the jobs will go to Ph.D.'s making \$38,000 and up; two-thirds of them will be in the commercial labs. Furthermore, most of the employees in the commercial labs will be

drawn from outside New York City. . . . In a city where the poor cannot afford to take care of their health, where hospitals have closed and those that remain open labor with patient gurneys often crammed in hallways, in a city where the voluntary hospitals—including Columbian Presbyterian—could not afford to give their employees a raise without a strike . . . the working poor, through the government, will subsidize a new frontier adventure for profit-making biology research, whose medicines they cannot afford.⁴⁰

In a single step, Audubon Park would reinforce social commitment to life not yet formed and attempt to erase the symbolic meaning of the Ballroom as a critical moment in African-American protest and mobilization.

Public Enemy's use of the Audubon Ballroom in "Bascheads" as the narrative point of departure is part of a larger community dialogue and struggle over social space and political power. Using the Ballroom as his "base," Chuck D situated PE's vision as an extension of Malcolm X and focused attention on the Audubon Park controversy while the issue was being hotly contested. His explicitly antimedia, antigovernment stance suggests that he supports the community-based distrust of the Audubon Park project and its effects on the surrounding Harlem community. "Bascheads" video images and lyrical focus on the dangers of drug addiction, the loss of power and agency it produces and its devastating effect on black people, is in brutal contrast with the City's proposed Audubon Park biotechnical complex, whose purpose is to create non-human life forms that can resist disease and poisons.

Under the guidance and direction of Chuck D, the collaborative process that brought together the video, lyrics, and music for "Bascheads" has produced a media-savvy, socially grounded, and relevant collage that not only offers biting criticism and commentary on contemporary American class and race relations but also does it to swirling and mesmerizing beats and rhymes. It is no wonder that so many folks, cultural critics included, look to rappers rather than politicians for political direction and vision.

During the February 1990 "We Remember Malcolm Day," just two months before the "Bascheads" video debuted on BET, Chuck D, along with a number of rappers, activists, and political leaders addressed the significance of Malcolm not only as a historical figure but also as a spiritual force in contemporary black America. Some speakers pointed out that the Audubon was a special place for African-American history and memory. After Reverend Calvin Butts, Betty Shabazz, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Percy Sutton, Lisa Williamson (aka Sister Souljah), and others addressed the crowd at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, a petition to stop the Audubon project was passed around. It suggested that

the ballroom should be renovated for use as a social center, library, or other community-based organization. Not surprisingly, it was widely supported by the crowd.

This kind of interactive, dialogical quality in rap's social commentary is quite common. References to recent social issues of particular concern to black urban communities are frequent and timely. D-Nice's rap, "21 to Life" and Ed O.G. and the Bulldogs' "Speak upon It" devote lyrical passages to summarizing the Charles Stuart case in Boston, Massachusetts, in which a white male murdered his wife and blamed the crime on a vaguely described black male. The local press's willingness to believe his badly crafted story was strongly encouraged by the social hysteria regarding the black male street criminal. Female rap trio Bytches with Problems (BWP) used the footage of Los Angeles citizen Rodney King being brutally beaten by a large group of Los Angeles police officers in their video for "Comin' Back Strapped." "Arizona," on Public Enemy's *Apocalypse 91* reminds the listener that the state of Arizona would not recognize Martin Luther King's birthday as a national holiday and critiques the racist logic in the governor's refusal.

Rap music's desire to respond to social issues that pertain to black life in America is part of a long-standing tradition in black culture to re-fashion dominant transcripts that do not sufficiently address racial slights and insults. Rap's capacity to respond to local and contemporary social issues so quickly is enhanced by technological advances in home studio systems and tape reproduction that allow rappers to incorporate their comments on recent events into their recorded and distributed material almost immediately. And so, rap's timely dialogical quality is situated in the current configuration of the means of production and distribution as well as in the history of black social criticism. Recent moves toward increased corporate consolidation and efforts to sanction and censor rap will most probably seriously affect the speed with which rap artists respond to contemporary concerns and the character of their criticism.

To understand the nature of oppression and its relationship to cultural production, we must concern ourselves not only with economic or institutional discrimination but also with social indignities carried out in public transcripts and acted out by individual representatives of the state. The experiences of domination and the hidden transcripts produced in relation to these experiences of domination are culturally coded and culturally specific. That is to say, although oppressed groups share common traits, oppression is experienced inside specific communities. Consequently, these hidden transcripts emerge not as overt cross-referential moments of protest but as culturally specific forms and ex-

pressions. They depend at some level on the addressed group's having special access to meanings or messages and can assume the privileging of in-group experiences. Although they share traits with other forms of social protest, the language, style, form, and substance in rap music's articulation of social protest are moments of black social protest. Black hidden transcripts are at once discrete moments of cultural expression and examples of discursive resistance to structures of domination. It is the specificity of a cultural practice such as rap, as well as structures of domination surrounding it, that shape the hidden transcripts that emerge.

Hidden Politics: Discursive and Institutional Policing of Rap Music

Confining the discussion of politics in rap to lyrical analysis addresses only the most explicit dimension of the politics of contemporary black cultural expression. Rap's cultural politics lies in its lyrical expression, its articulation of communal knowledge, and in the context for its public reception. As is the case for cultural production in general, the politics of rap music involves the contestation over public space, the meanings, interpretations, and value of the lyrics and music, and the investment of cultural capital. In short, it is not just what you say, it is where you can say it, how others react to it, and whether you have the power to command access to public space. To dismiss rappers who do not choose "political" subjects as having no politically resistive role ignores the complex web of institutional policing to which all rappers are subjected, especially in large public space contexts. The struggle over context, meaning, and access to public space is critical to contemporary cultural politics. Power and resistance are exercised through signs, language, and institutions. Consequently, popular pleasure involves physical, ideological, and territorial struggles. Black popular pleasure involves a particularly thorny struggle.

My central concern here is the exercise of institutional and ideological power over rap music and the manner in which rap fans and artists relate and respond to ideological and institutional constraints. More specifically, I try to untangle the complex relationships between the political economy of rap and the sociologically based crime discourse that frames it. This involves a close examination of the resistance to rap in large venues, media interpretations of rap concerts, and incidents of "violence" that have occurred.⁴¹ In addition, venue security reaction to a predominantly black rap audience is an important facet of this process



© Lisa Leone

of institutional policing. It sets the tone of the audience's relationship to public space and is a manifestation of the arena owners' ideological position on black youths.

THIS IS CALLED THE SHOW

Voice 1: The Economy, Phuhh!
 Voice 2: Yeah, I know.
 Voice 1: Politics, Phuffh!
 Voice 2: Yeah, say that also.
 Voice 1: The Police . . .
 Voice 2: Guilty, guilty . . .
 Voice 1: Everything!
 Voice 2: uhuh. Wait a, wait wait wait . . .
 Voice 1: Except for the youth.
 Voice 2: Yeah, yeah, wait wait.

Voice 1: It's about to come back!
 Voice 2: Yeah I know. . . Here it comes, ALRIGHT OKAY!
 —"Youthful Expressions," A Tribe Called Quest⁴²

The way rap and rap-related violence are discussed in the popular media is fundamentally linked to the larger social discourse on the spatial control of black people. Formal policies that explicitly circumscribe housing, school, and job options for black people have been outlawed; however, informal, yet trenchant forms of institutional discrimination still exist in full force. Underwriting these de facto forms of social containment is the understanding that black people are a threat to social

order. Inside of this, black urban teenagers are the most profound symbolic referent for internal threats to social order. Not surprisingly, then, young African Americans are in fundamentally antagonistic relationships to the institutions that most prominently frame and constrain their lives. The public school system, the police, and the popular media perceive and construct young African Americans as a dangerous internal element in urban America; an element that, if allowed to roam freely, will threaten the social order; an element that must be policed. Since rap music is understood as the predominant symbolic voice of black urban males, it heightens this sense of threat and reinforces dominant white middle-class objections to urban black youths who do not aspire to (but are haunted by) white middle-class standards.

My experiences and observations while attending several large-venue rap concerts in major urban centers serve as disturbingly obvious cases of how black urban youth are stigmatized, vilified, and approached with hostility and suspicion by authority figures. I offer a description of my confrontation and related observations not simply to prove that such racially and class-motivated hostility exists but, instead, to use it as a case from which to tease out how the public space policing of black youth and rap music feeds into and interacts with other media, municipal, and corporate policies that determine who can publically gather and how.

* * *

Thousands of young black people milled around waiting to get into the large arena. The big rap summer tour was in town, and it was a prime night to see and be seen. The “pre-show show” was in full effect. Folks were dressed in the latest fly-gear: bicycle shorts, high-top sneakers, chunk jewelry, baggie pants, and polka-dotted tops. Hair style was a fashion show in itself: high-top fade designs, dreads, corkscrews, and braids with gold and purple sparkles. Crews of young women were checking out the brothers; posses of brothers were scoping out the sisters, each comparing styles among themselves. Some wide-eyed pre-teenyboppers were soaking in the teenage energy, thrilled to be out with the older kids.

As the lines for entering the arena began to form, dozens of mostly white private security guards hired by the arena management (many of whom are off-duty cops making extra money), dressed in red polyester V-neck sweaters and grey work pants began corralling the crowd through security checkpoints. The free-floating spirit began to sour, and in its place began to crystallize a sense of hostility mixed with humiliation. Men and women were lined up separately in preparation for the weapon search. Each of the concertgoers would go through a body pat

down, pocketbook, knapsack, and soul search. Co-ed groups dispersed, people moved toward their respective search lines. The search process was conducted in such a way that each person being searched was separated from the rest of the line. Those searched could not function as a group, and subtle interactions between the guard and person being searched could not be easily observed. As the concertgoers approached the guards, I noticed a distinct change in posture and attitude. From a distance, it seemed that the men were being treated with more hostility than the women in line. In the men’s area, there was an almost palpable sense of hostility on behalf of the guards as well as the male patrons. Laughing and joking among men and women, which had been loud and buoyant up until this point, turned into virtual silence.

As I approached the female security guards, my own anxiety increased. What if they found something I was not allowed to bring inside? What was prohibited, anyway? I stopped and thought: All I have in my small purse is my wallet, eyeglasses, keys, and a notepad—nothing “dangerous.” The security woman patted me down, scanned my body with an electronic scanner while she anxiously kept an eye on the other black women in line to make sure that no one slipped past her. She opened my purse and fumbled through it pulling out a nail file. She stared at me provocatively, as if to say “why did you bring this in here?” I didn’t answer her right away and hoped that she would drop it back into my purse and let me go through. She continued to stare at me, sizing me up to see if I was “there to cause trouble.” By now, my attitude had turned foul; my childlike enthusiasm to see my favorite rappers had all but fizzled out. I didn’t know the file was in my purse, but the guard’s accusatory posture rendered such excuses moot. I finally replied tensely, “It’s a nail file, what’s the problem?” She handed it back to me, satisfied, I suppose, that I was not intending to use it as a weapon, and I went in to the arena. As I passed her, I thought to myself, “This arena is a public place, and I am entitled to come here and bring a nail file if I want to.” But these words rang empty in my head; the language of entitlement couldn’t erase my sense of alienation. I felt harassed and unwanted. This arena wasn’t mine, it was hostile, alien territory. The unspoken message hung in the air: “You’re not wanted here, let’s get this over with and send you all back to where you came from.”

I recount this incident for two reasons. First, a hostile tenor, if not actual verbal abuse, is a regular part of rap fan contact with arena security and police. This is not an isolated or rare example, incidents similar to it continue to take place at many rap concerts.⁴³ Rap concertgoers were barely tolerated and regarded with heightened suspicion. Second,

arena security forces, a critical facet in the political economy of rap and its related sociologically based crime discourse, contribute to the high level of anxiety and antagonism that confront young African Americans. Their military posture is a surface manifestation of a complex network of ideological and economic processes that “justify” the policing of rap music, black youths, and black people in general. Although my immediate sense of indignation in response to public humiliation may be related to a sense of entitlement that comes from my status as a cultural critic, thus separating me from many of the concertgoers, my status as a young African-American woman is a critical factor in the way I was *treated* in this instance, as well as many others.⁴⁴

Rap artists articulate a range of reactions to the scope of institutional policing faced by many young African Americans. However, the lyrics that address the police directly—what Ice Cube has called “revenge fantasies”—have caused the most extreme and unconstitutional reaction from law-enforcement officials in metropolitan concert arena venues. The precedent-setting example took place in 1989 and involved Compton-based rap group NWA (Niggas with Attitude) that at that time featured Ice Cube as a lead rapper. Their album *Straight Outta Compton* contained a cinematic, well-crafted, gritty, and vulgar rap entitled “___ the Police,” which in the rap itself filled in the f.u.c.k. at every appropriate opportunity. This song and its apparent social resonance among rap fans and black youths in general provoked an unprecedented official FBI letter from Milt Ahlerich, an FBI assistant director, which expressed the FBI’s concern over increasing violence (indirectly linking music to this increase) and stating that, as law-enforcement officials “dedicate their lives to the protection of our citizens . . . recordings such as the one from NWA are both discouraging and degrading to the brave, dedicated officers.” He justifies this targeting of NWA by suggesting that the song allegedly advocates violence against police officers. As far as Ahlerich knows, the FBI has never adopted an official position on a record, book, or artwork in the history of the agency.⁴⁵ NWA’s “___ the Police” is what finally smoked them out. This official statement would be extraordinary enough, given its tenuous constitutionality, but what follows is even worse. According to Dave Marsh and Phyllis Pollack, nobody at the agency purchased the record, nor could Ahlerich explain how he had received these lyrics other than from “responsible fellow officers.” Furthermore, Ahlerich’s letter fueled an informal fax network among police agencies that urged cops to help cancel NWA’s concerts. Marsh and Pollack summarize the effects of this campaign:

Since late spring (of 1989), their shows have been jeopardized or aborted in Detroit (where the group was briefly detained by cops), Washington, D.C., Chattanooga, Milwaukee, and Tyler, Texas. NWA played Cincinnati only after Bengal lineback and City Councilman Reggie Williams and several of his teammates spoke up for them. During the summer’s tour, NWA prudently chose not to perform “___ the Police” (its best song), and just singing a few lines of it at Detroit’s Joe Loius arena caused the Motor City police to rush the stage. While the cops scuffled with the security staff, NWA escaped to their hotel. Dozens of policemen were waiting for them there, and they detained the group for 15 minutes. “We just wanted to show the kids,” an officer told the Hollywood Reporter, “that you can’t say ‘fuck the police’ in Detroit.”⁴⁶

Unless, of course, you’re a cop. Clearly, police forces have almost unchallengeable entree in these arenas. If the police break through security to rush the stage, whom do security call to contain the police? Or as KRS-One might say, “Who Protects Us from You?” These large arenas are not only surveilled, but also they are, with the transmission of a police fax, subject to immediate occupation. What “justifies” this occupation? A symbolic challenge to the police in a song that, as Marsh and Pollack observe, “tells of a young man who loses his temper over brutal police sweeps based on appearance, not actions, like the ones frequently performed by the LAPD. In the end the young man threatens to smoke the next flatfoot who fucks with him.” It is clearly not in the interests of business owners to challenge the police on these matters, they cannot afford to jeopardize their access to future police services, so that the artists, in this case, find themselves fleeing the stage after attempting to perform a song that is supposed to be constitutionally protected. NWA’s lyrics have even more resonance after the FBI’s response:

Fuck the police, comin’ straight from the underground
A young nigga got it bad ’cause I’m brown
And not the other color, so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority.⁴⁷

It is this ideological position on black youth that frames the media and institutional attacks on rap and separates resistance to rap from attacks sustained by rock ’n’ roll artists. Rap music is by no means the only form of expression under attack. Popular white forms of expression, especially heavy metal, have recently been the target of increased sanctions and assaults by politically and economically powerful organizations, such as the Parent’s Music Resource Center, The American Family Association, and Focus on the Family. These organizations are not fringe groups, they are supported by major corporations, national-level politicians, school associations, and local police and municipal officials.⁴⁸

However, there are critical differences between the attacks made against black youth expression and white youth expression. The terms of the assault on rap music, for example, are part of a long-standing sociologically based discourse that considers black influences a cultural threat to American society.⁴⁹ Consequently, rappers, their fans, and black youths in general are constructed as coconspirators in the spread of black cultural influence. For the antirock organizations, heavy metal is a “threat to the fiber of American society,” but the fans (e.g., “our children”) are *victims* of its influence. Unlike heavy metal’s victims, rap fans are the youngest representatives of a black presence whose cultural difference is perceived as an internal threat to America’s cultural development. *They* victimize *us*. These differences in the ideological nature of the sanctions against rap and heavy metal are of critical importance, because they illuminate the ways in which racial discourses deeply inform public transcripts and social control efforts. This racial discourse is so profound that when Ice-T’s speed metal band (*not rap group*) Body Count was forced to remove “Cop Killer” from their debut album because of attacks from politicians, these attacks consistently referred to it as a rap song (even though it in no way can be mistaken for rap) to build a negative head of steam in the public. As Ice-T describes it, “there is absolutely no way to listen to the song Cop Killer and call it a rap record. It’s so far from rap. But, politically, they know by saying the word *rap* they can get a lot of people who think, ‘Rap-black-rap-black-ghetto,’ and don’t like it. You say the word *rock*, people say, ‘Oh, but I like Jefferson Airplane, I like Fleetwood Mac—that’s rock.’ They don’t want to use the word rock & roll to describe this song.”⁵⁰

According to a December 16, 1989, *Billboard* magazine article on rap tours, “venue availability is down 33% because buildings are limiting rap shows.” One apparent genesis of this “growing concern” is the September 10, 1988, Nassau Coliseum rap show, where the stabbing death of 19-year-old Julio Fuentes prompted national attention on rap concert-related “violence”: “In the wake of that incident, TransAmerica cancelled blanket insurance coverage for shows produced by G Street Express in Washington, D.C., the show’s promoter. Although G Street has since obtained coverage, the fallout of that cancellation has cast a pall over rap shows, resulting in many venues imposing stringent conditions or refusing to host the shows at all.”⁵¹

I do not contest that the experience was frightening and dangerous for those involved. What I am concerned with here is the underlying racial and class motivation for the responses to the episode. This incident was not the first to result in an arena death, nor was it the largest

or most threatening. During the same weekend of the Fuentes stabbing, 1,500 people were hurt during Michael Jackson’s performance in Liverpool, England. At Jackson’s concert a crowd of youths without tickets tried to pull down a fence to get a view of the show. Yet, in an Associated Press article on the Jackson incident entitled “1500 Hurt at Jackson Concert,” I found no mention of Jackson-related insurance company cancellations, no pall was cast over his music or the genre, and no particular group was held accountable for the incident.⁵² What sparked the venue owners’ panic in the Coliseum event was a preexisting anxiety regarding rap’s core audience—black working-class youths—the growing popularity of rap music, and the media’s interpretation of the incident, which fed directly into those preexisting anxieties. The Coliseum incident and the social control discourse that framed it provided a justification for a wide range of efforts to contain and control black teen presence while shielding, behind concerns over public safety, Coliseum policies aimed at black-dominated events.

The pall cast over rap shows was primarily facilitated by the New York media coverage of the incident. A *New York Post* headline, “Rampaging Teen Gang Slays ‘Rap’ Fan” fed easily into white fears that black teens need only a spark to start an uncontrollable urban forest fire.⁵³ Fear of black anger, lawlessness, and amorality was affirmed by the media’s interpretation and description of this incident. Venue owners all over the country were waiting to see what happened that night in Nassau County, and press interpretations were a critical aid in constructing a memory of the event. According to Haring, Norm Smith, assistant general manager for the San Diego Sports Arena, “attributes the venue’s caution to the influence of discussions building management has had with other arenas regarding problems at rap shows.” These “discussions” between venue managers and owners are framed by incident reports (which are documented by venue security staff and local police) as well as by next-day media coverage. These self-referential reports are woven together into a hegemonic interpretation of “what took place.” According to the *New York Times* coverage of the incident, the stabbing was a by-product of a “robbery spree” conducted by a dozen or so young men. Fuentes was stabbed while attempting to retrieve his girlfriend’s stolen jewelry. Staff writer Michel Marriott noted that out of the 10,000 concertgoers, this dirty dozen were solely responsible for the incident. Although the race of the perpetrators was not mentioned in the text, a photo of a handcuffed black male (sporting a Beverly Hills Polo Club sweatshirt!) and mention of their Bedford Stuyvesant residences stereotypically positioned them as members of the inner-city black poor.⁵⁴ The

portrait of black male aggression was framed by an enlarged inset quote that read: "a detective said the thieves 'were in a frenzy, like sharks feeding.'"⁵⁵ The vast majority of poor youths who commit street crimes do so to get money and consumer goods. In a society in which the quality and quantity of amassed consumer goods are equated with status and prowess, it should not be surprising that some of these teenagers who have accurately assessed their unlikely chances for economic mobility steal from other people.⁵⁶ Described as black predators who seek blood for sustenance, these twelve black boys were viciously dehumanized. Marriott not only mischaracterized their motives but also set a tone of uncontrolled widespread violence for the entire concert. There were no quotes from other patrons or anyone other than Police Commissioner Rozzi and detective Nolan. The event was framed exclusively by the perspective of the police. However, in my own conversations with people who attended the event, I learned that many concertgoers had no idea the incident took place until they read about it in the newspapers the next day.

In Haring's article on venue resistance, Hilary Hartung, director of marketing for the Nassau Coliseum, reports that there have been no rap shows since the September 1988 stabbing incident and that she "suspects it's by mutual choice": "The venue looks at every concert individually. We check with all arenas before a concert comes here to check incident reports for damage or unruly crowds. It could be [a] heavy metal concert or [a] rap concert."⁵⁷ In the Nassau Coliseum case, the police reports and the media coverage work in tandem, producing a unified narrative that binds racist depictions of blacks as animals to the ostensibly objective, statistically based police documentation, rendering any other interpretation of the "rampage" irrelevant. They provide perfect justification for venue owners to significantly curtail or ban rap performances from performing in their arenas.

The social construction of "violence," that is, when and how particular acts are defined as violent, is part of a larger process of labeling social phenomena.⁵⁸ Rap-related violence is one facet of the contemporary "urban crisis" that consists of a "rampant drug culture" and "wilding gangs" of black and Hispanic youths. When the *Daily News* headline reads, "L.I. Rap-Slayers Sought" or a *Newsweek* story is dubbed "The Rap Attitude," these labels are important, because they assign a particular meaning to an event and locate that event in a larger context.⁵⁹ Labels are critical to the process of interpretation, because they provide a context and frame for social behavior. As Stuart Hall et al. point out in *Policing the Crisis*, once a label is assigned, "the use of the label is likely to

mobilize this whole referential context, with all its associated meaning and connotations."⁶⁰ The question then, is not "is there really violence at rap concerts," but how are these crimes contextualized, labeled? In what already existing categories was this pivotal Nassau Coliseum incident framed? Whose interests do these interpretive strategies serve? What are the repercussions?

Venue owners have the final word on booking decisions, but they are not the only group of institutional gatekeepers. The other major power-broker, the insurance industry, can refuse to insure an act approved by venue management. In order for any tour to gain access to a venue, the band or group hires a booking agent who negotiates the act's fee. The booking agent hires a concert promoter who "purchases" the band and then presents the band to both the insurance company and the venue managers. If an insurance company will not insure the act, because they decide it represents an unprofitable risk, then the venue owner will not book the act. Furthermore, the insurance company and the venue owner reserve the right to charge whatever insurance or permit fees they deem reasonable on a case-by-case basis. So, for example, Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, tripled its normal \$20,000 permit fee for the Grateful Dead. The insurance companies who still insure rap concerts have raised their minimum coverage from about \$500,000 to between \$4 and 5 million worth of coverage per show.⁶¹ Several major arenas make it almost impossible to book a rap show, and others have refused outright to book rap acts at all.

These responses to rap music bear a striking resemblance to the New York City cabaret laws instituted in the 1920s in response to jazz music. A wide range of licensing and zoning laws, many of which remained in effect until the late 1980s, restricted the places where jazz could be played and how it could be played. These laws were attached to moral anxieties regarding black cultural effects and were in part intended to protect white patrons from jazz's "immoral influences." They defined and contained the kind of jazz that could be played by restricting the use of certain instruments (especially drums and horns) and established elaborate licensing policies that favored more established and mainstream jazz club owners and prevented a number of prominent musicians with minor criminal records from obtaining cabaret cards.⁶²

During an interview with "Richard" from a major talent agency that books many prominent rap acts, I asked him if booking agents had responded to venue bans on rap music by leveling charges of racial discrimination against venue owners. His answer clearly illustrates the significance of the institutional power at stake:

These facilities are privately owned, they can do anything they want. You say to them: "You won't let us in because you're discriminating against black kids." They say to you, "Fuck you, who cares. Do whatever you got to do, but you're not coming in here. You, I don't need you, I don't want you. Don't come, don't bother me. I will book hockey, ice shows, basketball, country music and graduations. I will do all kinds of things 360 days out of the year. But I don't need you. I don't need fighting, shootings and stabbings." Why do they care? They have their image to maintain.⁶⁵

Richard's imaginary conversation with a venue owner is a pointed description of the scope of power these owners have over access to large public urban spaces and the racially exclusionary silent policy that governs booking policies. It is also an explicit articulation of the aura created by the ideological soldiers: the red and grey arena security force described earlier. Given this scenario, the death of Julio Fuentes was not cause for regret over an unnecessary loss of life, it was the source of an image problem for venue owners, a sign of invasion by an unwanted element.

Because rap has an especially strong urban metropolitan following, freezing it out of these major metropolitan arenas has a dramatic impact on rappers' ability to reach their fan base in live performance. Public Enemy, Queen Latifah, and other rap groups use live performance settings to address current social issues, media miscoverage, and other problems that especially concern black America. For example, during a December 1988 concert in Providence, R.I., Chuck D from Public Enemy explained that the Boston arena refused to book the show and read from a *Boston Herald* article that depicted rap fans as a problematic element and that gave its approval of the banning of the show. To make up for this rejection, Chuck D called out to the "Roxbury crowd in the house," to make them feel at home in Providence. Each time Chuck mentioned Roxbury, sections of the arena erupted in especially exuberant shouts and screams.⁶⁴ Because black youths are constructed as a permanent threat to social order, large public gatherings will always be viewed as dangerous events. The larger arenas possess greater potential for mass access and unsanctioned behavior. And black youths, who are highly conscious of their alienated and marginalized lives, will continue to be hostile toward those institutions and environments that reaffirm this aspect of their reality.

The presence of a predominantly black audience in a 15,000 capacity arena, communicating with major black cultural icons whose music, lyrics, and attitude illuminate and affirm black fears and grievances, provokes a fear of the consolidation of black rage. Venue owner and insurance company anxiety over broken chairs, insurance claims, or fatalities

are not important in and of themselves; they are important because they symbolize a loss of control that might involve challenges to the current social configuration. They suggest the possibility that black rage can be directed at the people and institutions that support the containment and oppression of black people. As West Coast rapper Ice Cube points out in *The Nigga Ya Love to Hate*, "just think if niggas decided to retaliate?"⁶⁵

Venue resistance to rap music is driven by both economic calculations and the hegemonic media interpretation of rap fans, music, and violence. The relationship between real acts of violence, police incident reports, economic calculations, and media accounts is complex and interactive and has most often worked to reproduce readings of rap concert violence as examples of black cultural disorder and sickness. This matrix masks the source of institutional power by directing attention away from blatant acts of discrimination and racially motivated control efforts by the police and discriminatory insurance and booking policies. Media accounts of these rap-related incidents solidify these hegemonic interpretations of black criminality. Paul Gilroy's study of race and class in Britain, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, devotes considerable attention to deconstructing dominant images of black criminality. Gilroy's study reveals several ideological similarities between dominant media and police interpretations of race and crime in the United States and Britain. His interpretation of the construction of black criminality in Britain is appropriate here:

Distinctions between the actual crimes which blacks commit and the symbolism with which the representation of these crimes has become endowed is highly significant. . . . The manner in which anxiety about black crime has provided hubs for the wheels of popular racism is an extraordinary process which is connected with the day to day struggle of police to maintain order and control at street level, and at a different point, to the political conflicts which mark Britain's move towards more authoritarian modes of government: intervention and social regulation.⁶⁶

Deconstructing the media's ideological perspective on black crime does not suggest that real acts of violence by and against black youths do not take place. However, real acts are not accessible to us without critical mediation by hegemonic discourses. Consequently, this "real" violence is always/already positioned as a part of images of black violence and within the larger discourse on the urban black threat. Although violence at rap concerts can be understood as a visible instance of crimes by and against blacks, because it takes place in a white safety zone, it is interpreted as a loss of control on home territory. The fact that rap-related concert violence takes place outside the invisible fence that surrounds black poor communities raises the threat factor. Rappers have

rearticulated a long-standing awareness among African Americans that crimes against blacks (especially black-on-black crimes), do not carry equal moral weight or political imperative.

The two exceptions to the rule remain within the logic of social control discourse: black-on-black crimes that occur *outside* designated black areas (blacks can kill each other as long as they do it in “their” neighborhoods) and the undeniably racist attacks against blacks (as in the Howard Beach incident) that result in social outcry. (These unwarranted attacks might result in race wars that could seriously disrupt the current social configuration.) Each of these exceptions is circumscribed by the logic of social control and carries with it hefty institutional scrutiny.⁶⁷ The rap community is aware that the label “violence at rap concerts” is being used to contain black mobility and rap music, not to diminish violence against blacks. Ice Cube captures a familiar reading of state-sanctioned violence against young black males:

Every cop killer ignored
They just send another nigger to the morgue
A point scored
They could give a fuck about us
They'd rather find us with guns and white powder

Now kill ten of me to get the job correct.
To serve, protect and break a nigga's neck⁶⁸

Cognizant of the fact that violence is a selectively employed term, KRS-One points out the historical links between music, social protest, and social control:

When some get together and think of rap,
They tend to think of violence
But when they are challenged on some rock group
The result is always silence.
Even before the rock 'n' roll era, violence played a big part in music
It's all according to your meaning of violence
And how or in which way you use it.
By all means necessary, it is time to end the hypocrisy,
What I call violence I can't do,
But your kind of violence is stopping me.⁶⁹

Since the Nassau Coliseum incident, “violence” at rap concerts has continued to take place, and the media’s assumption of links between rap and disorder has grown more facile. On more than a dozen occasions I have been called by various media outlets around the country to comment on the violence that is expected to or has taken place at a given rap concert. The violence angle is the reason for the article, even in cases where incidents have not taken place. When I have chal-

lenged the writers or radio hosts about their presumptions, they have almost always returned to their own coverage as evidence of the reality of violence and usually ignored my comments. In one striking case I was told that without the violence angle they would kill the story. In effect, they were saying that there was no way around it. The media’s repetition of rap-related violence and the urban problematic that it conjures are not limited to the crime blotters, they also inform live performance critiques. In both contexts, the assumption is that what makes rap newsworthy is its spatial and cultural disruption, not its musical innovation and expressive capacity.⁷⁰ Consequently, dominant media critiques of rap’s sounds and styles are necessarily conditioned by the omnipresent fears of black influence, fears of a black aesthetic planet.

In a particularly hostile *Los Angeles Times* review of the Public Enemy 1990 summer tour at the San Diego Sports Arena, John D’Agostino articulates a complex microcosm of social anxieties concerning black youths, black aesthetics, and rap music. D’Agostino’s extended next-day rock review column entitled: “Rap Concert Fails to Sizzle in San Diego” features a prominent sidebar that reads: “Although it included a brawl, the Sports Arena concert seemed to lack steam and could not keep the under-sized capacity audience energized.” In the opening sentence, he confesses that “rap is not a critics’ music; it is a disciples’ music,” a confession that hints at his cultural illiteracy and should be enough to render his subsequent critique irrelevant. What music *is* for critics? To which critics is he referring? Evidently, critical reviews of rap music in *The Source* and the *Village Voice* are written by disciples. D’Agostino’s opening paragraph presents the concert audience as mindless and dangerous religious followers, mesmerized by rap’s rhythms:

For almost five hours, devotees of the Afros, Queen Latifah, Kid ‘N Play, Digital Underground, Big Daddy Kane and headliners Public Enemy were jerked into spasmodic movement by what seemed little more than intermittent segments of a single rhythmic continuum. It was hypnotic in the way of sensory deprivation, a mind- and body-numbing marathon of monotony whose deafening, prerecorded drum and bass tracks and roving klieg lights frequently turned the audience of 6,500 into a single-minded moveable beast. Funk meets Nuremberg Rally.⁷¹

Apparently, the music is completely unintelligible to him, and his inability to interpret the sounds frightens him. His reading, which makes explicit his fear and ignorance, condemns rap precisely on the grounds that make it compelling. For example, because he cannot explain why a series of bass or drum lines moves the crowd, the audience seems “jerked into spasmodic movement,” clearly suggesting an “automatic”

or “involuntary” response to the music. The coded familiarity of the rhythms and hooks that rap samples from other black music, especially funk and soul music, carries with it the power of black collective memory. These sounds are cultural markers, and responses to them are not involuntary at all but in fact densely and actively intertextual; they immediately conjure collective black experience, past and present.⁷³ He senses the rhythmic continuum but interprets it as “monotonous and mind- and body-numbing.” The very pulse that fortified the audience in San Diego, left him feeling “sensory deprived.” The rhythms that empowered and stimulated the crowd, numbed his body and mind.

His description of the music as “numbing” and yet capable of moving the crowd as a “single-minded, moveable beast” captures his confusion and anxiety regarding the power and meaning of the drums. What appeared “monotonous” frightened him precisely because that same pulse energized and empowered the audience. Unable to negotiate the relationship between his fear of the audience and the wall of sound that supported black pleasure while it pushed him to the margins, D’Agostino interprets black pleasure as dangerous and automatic. As his representation of the concert aura regressed, mindless religious rap disciples no longer provided a sufficient metaphor. The hegemonic ideology to which D’Agostino’s article subscribes was displaced by the sense of community facilitated by rap music as well as the black aesthetics the music privileged.⁷⁴ He ends his introduction by linking funk music to an actual Nazi rally to produce the ultimate depiction of black youths as an aggressive, dangerous, racist element whose behavior is sick, inexplicable, and orchestrated by rappers (that is, rally organizers). Rap, he ultimately suggests, is a disciples’ soundtrack for the celebration of black fascist domination. The concert that “failed to sizzle” was in fact too hot to handle.

Once his construction of black fascism is in place, D’Agostino devotes the bulk of his review to the performances, describing them as “juvenile,” “puerile,” and, in the case of Public Enemy, one that “relies on controversy to maintain interest.” Half-way through the review, he describes the “brawl” that followed Digital Underground’s performance:

After the house lights were brought up following DU’s exit, a fight broke out in front of the stage. Security guards, members of various rappers’ entourages, and fans joined in the fray that grew to mob size and then pushed into a corner of the floor at one side of the stage. People rushed the area from all parts of the arena, but the scrappers were so tightly balled together that few serious punches could be thrown, and, in a few minutes, a tussle that threatened to become a small scale riot instead lost steam.⁷⁵

From my mezzanine-level stage side seat, which had a clear view of the stage, this “brawl” looked like nothing more than a small-scale scuffle. Fans did not rush from all areas to participate in the fight, which was easily contained, as he himself points out, in a few minutes. In fact, few people responded to the fight except by watching silently until the fracas fizzled out. He neglects to consider that the 20-plus minute waiting periods *between each act* and the overarching sense of disrespect with which young black fans are treated might have contributed to the frustration. Out of 6,500 people, a group of no more than 20, who were quickly surrounded by security guards, falls significantly short of a “mob” and “threatened to become a small scale riot” only in D’Agostino’s colonial imagination.

D’Agostino’s review closes by suggesting that rap is fizzling out, that juvenile antics and staged controversy no longer hold the audience’s attention and therefore signify the death of rap music. What happened to the “single-minded moveable beast” that reared its ugly head in the introduction? How did black fascism dissolve into harmless puerility in less than five hours? D’Agostino had to make that move; his distaste for rap music, coupled with his fear of black youths, left him little alternative but to slay the single-minded beast by disconnecting its power source. His review sustains a fear of black energy and passion and at the same time allays these fears by suggesting that rap is dying. The imminent death of rap music is a dominant myth that deliberately misconstrues black rage as juvenile rebellion and at the same time retains the necessary specter of black violence, justifying the social repression of rap music and black youths.

Mass media representations and institutional policing have necessarily leavened rap’s expressive potential. “Rap-related violence” media coverage has had a significant impact on rappers’ musical and lyrical content and presentation. The most explicit response to rap-related violence and media coverage has been music industry-based Stop the Violence movement (STV). Organized in direct response to the pivotal Nassau Coliseum incident in September 1988, “it was,” in the words of STV’s primary organizer, writer and music critic Nelson George, “time for rappers to define the problem and defend themselves.” STV was an attempt to redefine the interpretation and meaning of rap-related violence and discourage black-on-black crime: “The goals of the STV [were] for the rappers to raise public awareness of black on black crime and point out its real causes and social costs; to raise funds for a charitable organization already dealing with the problems of illiteracy and crime in the inner city; [and] to show that rap music is a viable tool for stimulat-

ing reading and writing skills among inner-city kids.”⁷⁶ In January of 1990, STV released a 12-inch single entitled “Self-Destruction” featuring several prominent rappers “dropping science” on the cost of black-on-black crime for African Americans, on crime and drugs as dead-end professions, and on the media’s stereotypical depiction of rap fans as criminals. The lyrics for “Self-Destruction” focused on the need to crush the stereotype of the violent rap fan. They separated rap fans from the “one or two ignorant brothers” who commit crime and they called for unity in the community. At one point, rapper Heavy D pointed out that blacks are often considered animals and although he doesn’t agree with these depictions he thinks rap fans are proving them right by exhibiting violent, self-destructive behavior.⁷⁶ In addition to producing the all-star single music video and organizing several public marches, STV published a book in photo essay style on the STV movement. *Stop the Violence: Overcoming Self-Destruction* offered a history of STV, pages of black crime statistics, and teen testimonials about black-on-black violence. STV targeted young, urban African Americans with the hope to “educate and reform” them, to help them to “overcome” self-destruction. The book and the overall project were cosponsored by the National Urban League, which also served as the beneficiary for all donations raised as a result of STV’s efforts.

Unfortunately, STV’s reform-oriented response did not redefine the problem; it accepted the sociologically based terms laid out in the media’s coverage. STV responded within the parameters already in place regarding black youth behavior. Uncritically employing the labels “black-on-black crime” and “self-destruction,” STV’s self-help agenda fit comfortably into the social pathology discourse that explained rap-related violence in the first place. STV’s minimal attempts to position these acts of violence and crimes as symptoms of economic inequality were not sufficient to compensate for the logic of cultural pathology that dominated their statements. Pages of statistics documenting the number of blacks killed by other blacks reinforced the dominant construction of black pathology, while the economic, social, and institutional violence to which blacks are subjected remained unexplored.

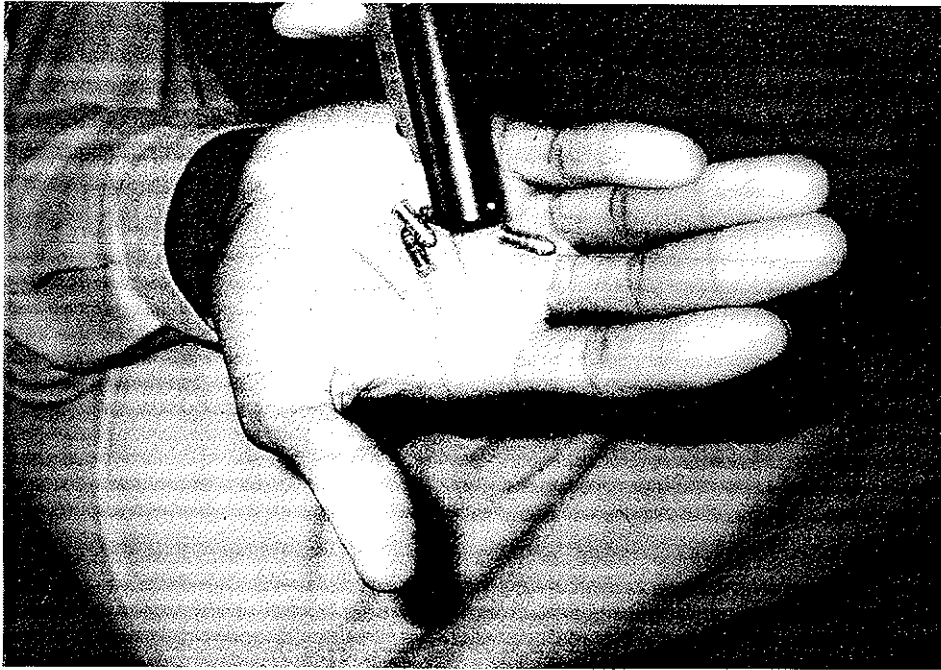
The media’s systematic avoidance of the destructive elements in urban renewal, deindustrialization, corporate crime, and the woefully flawed public education system were left undiscussed, effectively severing the mass media and government from their critical role in perpetuating the conditions that foster violent street crime. As Michael Parenti’s study on the politics of the mass media, *Inventing Reality*, makes clear, minimal coverage of these larger social crimes, coupled with maximum coverage

of street crimes, are directly related and illuminate the significance of class and race in defining the public transcript:

Press coverage focuses public attention on crime in the streets with scarcely a mention of “crime in the suites,” downplaying such corporate crimes as bribes, embezzlements, kickbacks, monopolistic restraints of trade, illegal uses of public funds by private interests, occupational safety violations . . . and environmental poisonings which can cost the public dearly in money and lives . . . How the press defines and reports on crime, then is largely determined by the class and racial background of the victim and victimizer . . . blacks, Latinos and other minorities are more likely to be publicized as criminals than the corporate leaders whose crimes may even be more serious and of wider scope and repercussion than the street criminals.⁷⁷

Economically oppressed black communities face scarce and substandard housing and health services, minimal municipal services (911, as Public Enemy says, *is* a joke), constant police harassment and brutality, and economic, racial, and sexual discrimination; these conditions are fundamentally linked to “black-on-black crime” and constructions of social violence. The label *black-on-black* crime, Congressman John Conyers points out, “gives the erroneous impression of a strange, aberrant, or exotic activity, when it is taken out of the context of the social and economic roots of crime.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, as Bernard Headley argues, the violence experienced by black and working-class people as a result of poor medical services, police use of deadly force, and industrial negligence far exceeds the threat of black-on-black crime.⁷⁹ Black-on-black crime is a concept that necessarily severs crime from the conditions that create it: “Crime is not the result of blackness (which is what the notion of ‘black on black’ crime implies), but rather of a complex of social and economic conditions—a negative ‘situational matrix’—brought on by the capitalist mode of production, in which both the black victim and the black victimizer are inextricably locked in a deadly game of survival.”⁷⁹

These missed connections were critical flaws in the STV movement. The STV agenda should have retained a dialectical tension between black self-destructive behavior *and* the immense institutional forces that foster such behaviors. Cries in the lyrics of “Self-Destruction” to avoid walking the (destructive) path that has been laid, to “keep ourselves in check,” and to “love your brother, treat him as an equal,” overemphasized the autonomy of black agency in the face of massive structural counterforces. There is an inherent tension between a desire to preserve personal agency and free will (e.g., fight the power, *self-destruction*) and a necessary acknowledgment of structural forces that constrain agency (e.g., institutional racism, white supremacy, class oppression). The illu-



© suckwon

sion that exercising black agency can be undertaken outside of the racist and discriminatory context within which such action takes place ignores the tension between individual agency and structural oppression. Once severed from social context, agency is easily translated into theories of cultural pathology that blame the victim for his or her behavior and, therefore, circumstances. This discursive tension is a critical element in contemporary black cultural politics; the forces that constrain black agency must be acknowledged while the spirit and reality of black free will must be preserved. Agency and oppression must be joined at the hip, otherwise an incapacity to “overcome” self-destructive behavior is no longer connected to structures of oppression and is easily equated with cultural pathology. Unfortunately, STV did not successfully negotiate this tension. Instead, they garnered significant financial resources and mobilized a critical mass of rap music representatives to speak on behalf of social control in the name of black free will.

The greatest irony of the STV movement is that it borrowed its name and spirit from a 1988 KRS-One rap that sustained the tensions and contextualizations that remained unrealized in the STV movement. KRS-One’s “Stop the Violence” draws direct links between the media,

the educational system, the government, and the frustrations that contribute to street crime, especially as it relates to hip hop. His portrait of the relationships between class, race, institutional power, and crime is subtle and complex and contrasts sharply with the lyrics from the STV project:

Time and time again, as I pick up the pen,
 As my thoughts emerge, these are those words
 I glance at the paper to know what’s going on,
 Someone’s doing wrong, the story goes on
 Mari Lou had a baby, some one else decapitated
 The drama of the world shouldn’t keep us so frustrated
 I look, but it doesn’t coincide with my books
 Social studies will not speak upon political crooks
 It’s just the presidents and all the money they spent
 All the things they invent and how the house is so immaculate
 They create missiles, my family’s eating gristle
 Then they get upset when the press blows the whistle

What’s the solution to stop all this confusion?
 Re-write the constitution, change the drug which you’re using?
 Re-write the constitution, or the emancipation proclamation
 We’re fighting inflation, yet the president is still on vacation

This might sound a little strange to you
 But here’s the reason I came to you
 We got to put our heads together and stop the violence
 ’Cause real bad boys move in silence
 When you’re in a club you come to chill out
 Not watch someone’s blood just spill out
 That’s what these other people want to see
 Another race fight endlessly³⁰

KRS-One’s narrative weaves social conditions and violence together, illustrating the links between them. He calls on hip hop fans to stop killing one another, to avoid turning their rage against society on one another, but he refuses to identify their behavior as the source of the problem. He captures the essence of the illusions created in the “dangerous street criminal” narrative in one critical line: “We’ve got to put our heads together and stop the violence ’Cause real bad boys move in silence.” For KRS-One, young black teenage males killing each other and their neighbors are acts of violence, but they are not any more violent than the federal government’s abandonment of black and Hispanic Vietnam veterans and billion-dollar expenditures for weapons while “his family eats gristle”; no more violent than the educational system’s historical narratives that “will not speak upon political crooks,” giving the green light to tomorrow’s generation of powerful criminals.

The first stanza in KRS-One’s “Stop the Violence” is organized as

a series of news fragments punctuated by his interpretations. At first, the fragments seem self-contained, but his comments begin to tie them together, weaving a narrative that illustrates contradictions in dominant transcripts and suggesting the existence of a common enemy. In the second main stanza, KRS-One addresses the hip hop community directly, suggesting that the first stanza was necessary background for his real agenda: violent crimes among poor black teenagers. Unfortunately, KRS-One does not have a “solution to stop this confusion”; his suggestion to rewrite the Constitution reads like rhetorical sarcasm, not a solution. What he does quite effectively, however, is to illustrate the self-destructive nature of crime among black teenagers without identifying black teenagers as the problem. KRS-One’s “Stop the Violence” contextualizes these crimes as an outgrowth of the immense institutional forces that foster such behaviors. In this version, individual agency and structural oppression are in tension. Finally, unlike many social scientists, he bypasses the culture of poverty trap as an explanation for contemporary inequality and the conditions it fosters.⁸¹

The institutional policing of rap music is a complex and interactive process that has had a significant impact on rap’s content, image, and reception. The Nassau Coliseum incident, which necessarily includes the social construction of the incident, the already existing discourse on black urban crime and fears of rap’s political and social power, served as a catalyst for the explicit and sanctioned containment of rap’s influence and public presence. This pivotal incident allowed an already suspicious public to “blame rap for encouraging urban violence,” placed the rap community on the defensive, and effectively refocused attention away from the systemic reasons for street crime.

Rap music is fundamentally linked to larger social constructions of black culture as an internal threat to dominant American culture and social order. Rap’s capacity as a form of testimony, as an articulation of a young black urban critical voice of social protest has profound potential as a basis for a language of liberation.⁸² Contestation over the meaning and significance of rap music and its ability to occupy public space and retain expressive freedom constitute a central aspect of contemporary black cultural politics.

During the centuries-long period of Western slavery, there were elaborate rules and laws designed to control slave populations. Constraining the mobility of slaves, especially at night and in groups, was of special concern; slave masters reasoned that revolts could be organized by blacks who moved too freely and without surveillance.⁸³ Slave masters

were rightfully confident that blacks had good reason to escape, revolt, and retaliate. Contemporary laws and practices curtailing and constraining black mobility in urban America function in much the same way and for similar reasons. Large groups of African Americans, especially teenagers, represent a threat to the social order of oppression. Albeit more sophisticated and more difficult to trace, contemporary policing of African Americans resonates with the legacy of slavery.

Rap’s poetic voice is deeply political in content and spirit, but rap’s hidden struggle, the struggle over access to public space, community resources, and the interpretation of black expression constitutes rap’s hidden politics; hegemonic discourses have rendered these institutional aspects of black cultural politics invisible. Political interpretations of rap’s explosive and resistive lyrics are critical to understanding contemporary black cultural politics, but they reflect only a part of the battle. Rap’s hidden politics must also be revealed and contested; otherwise, whether we believe the hype or not won’t make a difference.