Public Enemy’s “Can’t Trus It” opens with rapper Flavor Flav shouting “Confusion!” over a heavy and energetic bass line. The subsequent lyrics suggest that Flavor Flav is referring to lead rapper Chuck D’s story about the legacy of slavery, that it has produced extreme cultural confusion. He could just as easily be describing the history of rap. Rap music is a confusing and noisy element of contemporary American popular culture that continues to draw a great deal of attention to itself. On the one hand, music and cultural critics praise rap’s role as an educational tool, point out that black women rappers are rare examples of aggressive pro-women lyricists in popular music and defend rap’s ghetto stories as real-life reflections that should draw attention to the burning problems of racism and economic oppression, rather than to questions of obscenity. On the other hand, media attention on rap seems fixated on instances of violence at rap concerts, rap producers’ illegal use of musical samples, gangsta raps’ lurid fantasies of cop killing and female dismemberment, and black nationalist rappers’ suggestions that white people are the devil’s disciples. These celebratory and inflammatory aspects in rap and the media coverage of them bring to the fore several long-standing debates about popular music and culture. Some of the more contentious disputes revolve around the following questions: Can violent images incite violent action, can music set the stage for political mobilization, do sexually explicit lyrics contribute to the moral “breakdown” of society, and finally, is this really music anyway? And, if these debates about rap music are not confusing enough,
rappers engage them in contradictory ways. Some rappers defend the work of gangster rappers and at the same time consider it a negative influence on black youths. Female rappers openly criticize male rappers' sexist work and simultaneously defend the live Crew's right to sell misogynist music. Rappers who criticize America for its perpetuation of racial and economic discrimination also share conservative ideas about personal responsibility, call for self-improvement strategies in the black community that focus heavily on personal behavior as the cause and solution for crime, drugs, and community instability.

Rap music brings together a sample of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society. Rap's contradictory articulations are not signs of absent intellectual clarity; they are a common feature of community and popular cultural dialogues that always offer more than one cultural, social, or political viewpoint. These unusually abundant polyvocal conversations seem irrational when they are severed from the social contexts where everyday struggles over resources, pleasure, and meanings take place.

Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America. Rap music is a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music. It began in the mid-1970s in the South Bronx in New York City as a part of hip hop, an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. From the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America. Rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer or narrator. Male rappers often speak from the perspective of a young man who wants social status in a locally meaningful way. They rap about how to avoid gang pressures and still earn local respect, how to deal with the loss of several friends to gun fights and drug overdoses, and they tell grandiose and sometimes violent tales that are powered by male sexual power over women. Female rappers sometimes tell stories from the perspective of a young woman who is skeptical of male protestations of love or a girl who has been involved with a drug dealer and cannot sever herself from his dangerous lifestyle. Some raps speak to the failures of black men to provide security and attack men where their manhood seems most vulnerable: the pocket. Some tales are one sister telling another to rid herself from the abuse of a lover.

Like all contemporary voices, the rapper's voice is imbedded in powerful and dominant technological, industrial, and ideological institutions. Rappers tell long, involved, and sometimes abstract stories with catchy and memorable phrases and beats that lend themselves to black sound bite packaging, storing critical fragments in fast-paced electrified rhythms. Rap tales are told in elaborate and ever-changing black slang and refer to black cultural figures and rituals, mainstream film, video and television characters, and little-known black heroes. For rap's language wizards, all images, sounds, ideas, and icons are ripe for recontextualization, pun, mockery, and celebration. Kool Moe Dee boasts that each of his rhymes is like a dissertation, Kid-N-Play have quoted Jerry Lee Lewis's famous phrase "great balls of fire," Big Daddy Kane brags that he's raw like nau (and that his object of love has his nose open like a jar of Vicks), Ice Cube refers to his ghetto stories as "tales from the darkside," clearly referencing the horror television show with the same name. Dee Ez's raps include Elmore Fud's characteristic "OOGOO! I'm steamin'!" in full character voice along with a string of almost surreal collage-like references to Bugs Bunny and other television characters. At the same time, the stories, ideas, and thoughts articulated in rap lyrics invoke and revivify stylistic and thematic elements that are deeply wedded to a number of black cultural storytelling forms, most prominently but also the blues. Ice-T and Big Daddy Kane pay explicit homage to Rudy Ray Moore as "Dolomite." Roxanne Shante meets Millie Jackson, and black folk wisdom and folktales are given new lives and meanings in contemporary culture.

Rap's stories continue to articulate the shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture. Even as rappers achieve what appears to be central status in commercial culture, they are far more vulnerable to censorship efforts than highly visible white rock artists, and they continue to experience the brunt of the plantationlike system faced by most artists in the music and sports industries. Even as they struggle with the tension between fame and rap's gravitational pull toward local urban narratives, for the most part, rappers continue to craft stories that represent the creative fantasies, perspectives, and experiences of racial marginality in America.

Rap went relatively unnoticed by mainstream music and popular culture industries until independent music entrepreneur Sylvia Robinson released "Rapp's Delight" in 1979. Over the next five years rap music was "discovered" by the music industry, the print media, the fashion industry, and the film industry, each of which hurried to cash in on what was assumed to be a passing fad. During the same years, Run DMC (who recorded the first gold rap record Run DMC in 1984), Whodini,
can popular music precisely because of extensive white participation; white America has always had an intense interest in black culture. Consequently, the fact that a significant number of white teenagers have become rap fans is quite consistent with the history of black music in America and should not be equated with a shift in rap's discursive or stylistic focus away from black pleasure and black fans. However, extensive white participation in black culture has also always involved white appropriation and attempts at ideological recuperation of black cultural resistance. Black culture in the United States has always had elements that have been at least bifocal—speaking to both a black audience and a larger predominantly white context. Rap music shares this history of interaction with many previous black oral and music traditions.

Like generations of white teenagers before them, white teenage rap fans are listening in on black culture, fascinated by its differences, drawn in by mainstream social constructions of black culture as a forbidden narrative, as a symbol of rebellion. Kathy Oren's study of jazz in the 1920s shows the extensive efforts made by white entertainers and fans to imitate jazz music, dance styles, and language as well as the alarm such fascination caused on the part of black music experts and white authorities. Lewis Erenberg's study of the development of the cabaret illustrates the centrality of jazz music to the fears over blackness associated with the burgeoning urban nightlife culture. There are similar and abundant cases for rock 'n' roll as well. 

Fascination with African-American culture is not new, nor can the dynamics and politics of pleasure across cultural "boundaries" in segregated societies be overlooked. Jazz, rock 'n' roll, soul, and R&B each have large devoted white audience members, many of whom share traits with Neiman Maier's "white negroes," young white listeners trying to perfect a model of correct white hipness, coolness, and style by adopting the latest black style and image. Young white listeners' genuine pleasure and commitment to black music are necessarily affected by dominant racial discourses regarding African Americans, the politics of racial segregation, and cultural difference in the United States. Given the racially discriminatory context within which cultural syncretism takes place, some rappers have equated white participation with a process of dilution and subsequent theft of black culture. Although the terms dilution and theft do not capture the complexity of cultural incorporation and syncretism, this interpretation has more than a grain of truth in it. There is abundant evidence that white artists imitating black styles have greater economic opportunity and access to larger audiences than black innovators.
ters. Historical accounts of the genres often position these subsequently better known artists as the central figures, erasing or marginalizing the artists and contexts within which the genre developed. The process of incorporation and marginalization of black practitioners has also fostered the development of black forms and practices that are less and less accessible, forms that require greater knowledge of black language and styles in order to participate. Be Bop, with its insider language and its "willfully harsh, anti-assimilationist sound" is a clear example of this response to the continuation of plantation system logic in American culture. In addition to the sheer pleasure black musicians derive from developing a new and exciting style, these black cultural reactions to American culture suggest a reclaiming of the definition of blackness and an attempt to retain aesthetic control over black cultural forms. In the 1980s, this re-claiming of blackness in the popular realm is complicated by access to new reproduction technologies and revised corporate relations in the music industry.

In a number of ways, rap has followed the patterns of other black popular music in that at the outset it was heavily rejected by black and white middle-class listeners; the assumption was that it would be a short-lived fad; the mainstream record industry and radio stations rejected it; its marketing was pioneered by independent entrepreneurs and independent labels; and once a smidgen of commercial viability was established the major labels attempted to dominate production and distribution. These rap-related patterns were augmented by more general music industry consolidation in the late 1970s that provided the major music corporations with greater control over the market. By 1990 virtually all major record chain store distribution is controlled by six major record companies: CBS, PolyGram, Warner, BMG, Capitol-EMI, and MCA. However, music industry consolidation and control over distribution is complicated by three factors: the expansion of local cable access, sophisticated and accessible mixing, production, and copying equipment, and a new relationship between major and independent record labels. In previous eras when independent labels sustained the emergence of new genres against industry rejection, the eventual absorption of these genres by larger companies signalled the dissolution of the independent labels. In the early 1980s, after rap spurred the growth of new independent labels, the major labels moved in and attempted to dominate the market but could not consolidate their efforts. Artists signed to independent labels, particularly Tommy Boy, Profile, and Def Jam continued to flourish, whereas acts signed directly to the six majors could not produce comparable sales. It became apparent that the independent labels had a much greater understanding of the cultural logic of hip hop and rap music, a logic that permeated decisions ranging from signing acts to promotional methods. Instead of competing with smaller, more street-savvy labels for new rap acts, the major labels developed a new strategy: buy the independent labels, allow them to function relatively autonomously, and provide them with production resources and access to major retail distribution. Since the emergence of Public Enemy and their substantial cross-genre success in the late 1980s, rap's marketers have generally been signed to independent labels (occasionally black owned and sometimes their own labels) and marketed and distributed by one of the six major companies. In this arrangement, the six majors reap the benefits of a genre that can be marketed with little up-front capital investment, and the artists are usually pleased to have access to the large record and CD chain stores that would otherwise never consider carrying their work.

In the 1980s, the trickle-down effect of technological advances in electronics brought significantly expanded access to mixing, dubbing, and copying equipment for consumers among record retailers. Clearly, these advances provided aspiring musicians with greater access to recording and copying equipment at less expense. They also substantially improved the market for illegal dubbing of popular music for street corner sale at reduced cost. (Illegally recorded cassette tapes cost approximately $5.00, one-half the cost of label issues.) These lower quality tapes are usually sold in poorer, densely populated communities where reduced cost is a critical sales factor. Rap music is a particularly popular genre for bootleg tapes in urban centers.

Even though actual sales demographics for rap music are not available, increasing sales figures for rap musicians (several prominent rap artists have sales over 500,000 units per album) suggest that white teenage rap consumers have grown steadily since the emergence of Public Enemy in 1988. Middle-class white teenage rap consumers appear to be an increasingly significant audience. This can be inferred from location sales via market surveys and Soundscan, a new electronic scan system installed primarily in large, mostly suburban music chain stores. It is quite possible, however, that the percentage of white rap consumers in relation to overall sales is being disproportionately represented, because bootleg street sales coupled with limited chain music store outlets in poor communities makes it very difficult to assess the demographics for actual sales of rap music to urban black and Hispanic consumers. In addition to inconsistent sales figures, black teen rap consumers may also
have a higher "pass-along rate," that is, the rate at which one purchased product is shared among consumers. In my conversations with James Bernard, an editor at The Source (a major hip hop culture magazine with a predominantly black teen readership), The Source's pass-along rate is approximately 1 purchase for every 11-15 readers. According to Bernard, this rate is at least three to four times higher than the average magazine industry pass-along rate. It is conceivably, then, that a similar pass-along rate exists among rap music CD and casette consumption, especially among consumers with less disposable income.

Cable television exploded during the 1980s and had a significant effect on the music industry and on rap music. Lauched in August 1981 by Warner Communications and the American Express Company, MTV became the fastest growing cable channel and as Garofalo points out, "soon became the most effective way for a record to get national exposure." Using its rock format and white teen audience as an explanation for its almost complete refusal to play videos by black artists (once pressure was brought to bear they added Michael Jackson and Prince), MTV finally jumped on the rap music bandwagon. It was not until 1989, with the piloting of "Yo! MTV Raps" that any black artists began to appear on MTV regularly. Since then, as Jamie Malanowski reports, "Yo! MTV Raps' has become one of MTV's most popular shows, is dirt cheap to produce and has almost single-handedly dispelled the giant scaring network's reputation for not playing black artists."

Since 1984, MTV has discovered that black artists in several genres are marketable to white suburban teenagers and has dramatically revised its formatting to include daily rap shows, Street Block (dance music), and the rotation of several black artists outside of specialized genre rotation periods. However, MTV's previous exclusion of black artists throughout the mid-1980s, inspired other cable stations to program black music videos. Black Entertainment Television (BET), the most notable alternative to MTV, continues to air a wide variety of music videos by black artists as one of its programming mainstays. And local and syndicated shows (e.g., "Pump It Up!") based in Los Angeles and "Video Music Box" based in New York), continue to play rap music videos, particularly lower budget, and aggressively black nationalistic rap videos deemed too angry or too antithetic for MTV.

MTV's success has created an environment in which the reception and marketing of music is almost synonymous with the production of music videos. Fan discussions of popular songs and the stories they tell are often accompanied by a reading of the song's interpretation in music video. Music video is a collaboration in the production of popular music; it revises meanings, provides preferred interpretations of lyrics, creates a stylistic and physical context for reception, and valorizes the iconic presence of the artist. Can we really imagine, nonetheless understand, the significance of Michael Jackson's presence as a popular cultural icon without interpreting his music video narrative? The same holds true for Madonna, Janet Jackson, U2, Whitney Houston, Nirvana, and Guns N' Roses among others. The visualization of music has far-reaching effects on musical cultures and popular culture generally, not the least of which is the increase in visual interpretations of racist power relationships, the mode of visual storytelling, the increased focus on how a singer looks rather than how he or she sounds, the need to craft an image to accompany one's music, and ever-greater pressure to abide by corporate genre-formating rules. The significance of music video as a partner in the creation or reception of popular music is even greater in the case of rap music. Because the vast majority of rap music (except by the occasional superstar) has been virtually frozen out of black radio programming—black radio programmers claim it scares off high-quality advertising—and because of its limited access to large performance venues, music video has been a crucial outlet for rap artist audiences and performer visibility. Rap music videos have animated hip hop cultural style and aesthetics and have facilitated a cross-neighborhood, cross-country (transnational) dialogue in a social environment that is highly segregated by class and race.

The emergence of rap music video has also opened up a previously nonexistent creative arena for black visual artists. Rap music video has provided a creative and commercially viable arena where black film, video, set design, costume, and technical staff and trainees can get a crucial experience and connections to get a foot in the world of video and film production. Before music video production for black musicians, these training grounds, however exploitive, were virtually inaccessible to black technicians. The explosion of music video production, especially black music video, has generated a pool of skilled young black workers in the behind-the-scenes nonunion crew (union membership is overwhelmingly white and male), who are beginning to have an impact on current black film production.

Shooting in the Ghetto: locating rap music video production
Rap video has also developed its own style and its own genre conventions. These conventions visualize hip hop style and usually affirm
the regional specificity of spatial, ethnic, temperate, and psychological facets of black marginality in Los Angeles, whereas Naughty by Nature's videos feature the ghetto specificity of East Orange, New Jersey."

Rappers' emphasis on poses and neighborhoods has brought the ghettos back into the public consciousness. It satisfies poor young black people's profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated. These are the street corners and neighborhoods that usually serve as local backdrops for street crimes on the nightly news. Few local people are given an opportunity to speak, and their points of view are always contained by expert testimony. In rap videos, young mostly male residents speak for themselves and for the community, they speak when and how they wish about subjects of their choosing. These local turf stories are not isolated voices; they are voices from a variety of social margins that are in dialogue with one another. As Bray points out, "If you have an artist from Detroit, the reason they want to shoot at least one video on their hometown is to make a connection with..." an East Coast New York rapper. "It's the dialogue. It's the dialogue between them about where they're from."

However, the return of the ghetto as central black popular narrative has also fulfilled national fantasies about the violence and danger that purportedly consume the poorest and most economically fragile communities of color. Some conservative critics such as George Will have affirmed the "reality" of some popular cultural ghetto narratives and used this praise as a springboard to call for more police presence and military invasion-like policies. In other cases, such as that of white rapper Vanilla Ice, the ghetto is a source of fabricated white authenticity. Controversy surrounding Ice, one of rap music's most commercially successful artists, highlights the significance of "ghetto blackness" as a model of "authenticity" and hipness in rap music. During the winter of 1989, Vanilla Ice summoned the wrath of the hip-hop community not only by successfully marketing himself as a white "rapper but also by "validating" his success with stories about his close ties to black poor neighborhoods, publicly sporting his battle scars from the black inner city. According to Village Voice columnist Rob Tannenbaum, Robert Van Winkle (aka Vanilla Ice) told Stephen Holden of the New York Times that "he grew up in the ghetto," comes from a broken home, hung around with black men while attending the same Miami high school as Luther Campbell of a Live Crew, and was nearly killed in a gang fight." Yet, in a copyrighted, front page story in the Dallas Morning News, Ken P. Perkins charges, among other things, that Mr. Van Winkle is instead a middle-class kid from...
Dallas, Texas.1 Vanilla Ice's desire to be a "white negro" (or, as some black and white hip hop fans say, a Wigger—a white nigger), to "be black" in order to validate his status as a rapper hints strongly at the degree to which ghetto-blackness is a critical code in rap music. Vanilla Ice not only pretended to be from the ghetto, but he also pretended to have produced the music for his mega-hit "Ice, Ice Baby." In keeping with his pretenses, he only partially credited—and paid no royalties to—black friend and producer Mario Johnson, aka Chocolate(1), who actually wrote the music for "Ice, Ice Baby" and a few other cuts from Vanilla's fifteen times platinum record To the Extreme. After a lengthy court battle, Chocolate is finally getting paid in full.2

Convergent forces are behind this resurgence of black ghetto symbol and representation. Most important, the ghetto exists for millions of young black and other people of color—it is a profoundly significant social location. Using the ghetto as a source of identity—as rapper Treach would say, if you're not from the ghetto, don't ever come to the ghetto—undermines the stigma of poverty and social marginality. At the same time, the ghetto is a protective shield against real unyielding and harsh social policies and physical environments. Experience also dictates that public attention is more easily drawn to acts, images, and threats of black male violence than to any other form of racial address. The ghetto produces a variety of meanings for diverse audiences, but this should not be interpreted to mean that intragroup black meanings and uses are less important than larger social receptions. Too often, white voyeuristic pleasure of black cultural imagery or such imagery's role in the performance of ghetto crisis for the news media, are interpreted as their primary value. Even though rappers are aware of the diversity of their audiences and the context for reception, their use of the ghetto and its symbolic significances is primarily directed at other black hip hop fans. If white teen and adult viewers were the preferred audience, then it wouldn't matter which ghetto corner framed images of Treach from rap group Naughty by Nature, especially as most white popular cultural depictions of ghetto life are drained of relevant detail, texture, and complexity. Quite to the contrary, rap's ghetto imagery is too often intensely specific and locally significant, making its preferred viewer someone who can read gemotextivity with ghetto sensitivity.

The fact that rappers' creative desires or location requests are frequently represented in music videos should not lead one to believe that rappers control the music video process. Music video production is a complex and highly mediated process dictated by the record company in what is sometimes a contentious dialogue with the artists' management, the chosen video director, and video producer. Even though the vast majority of the music video production budget is advanced from the artists' royalties (rap video budgets can range from a low $5,000 to an unusual $100,000 with an average video costing about $40,000), the artist has very little final decision-making control over the video process. Generally speaking, once the single is chosen, a group of music video directors are solicited by the record company, management, and artist to submit video ideas or treatments, and an estimated budget range is projected. After listening to the rapper's work, the video directors draft narrative treatments that usually draw on the rap artists' desires, strengths, lyrical focus, and the feel of the music while attempting to incorporate his or her own visual and technical strengths and preferred visual styles. Once a director is selected, the treatment and budget are refined, negotiated, and the video is cast and produced.3

In the first few years of rap video production, the record companies were less concerned about music video's creative process, leaving artists and directors more creative decision-making power. As rappers developed more financial viability, record companies became increasingly invasive at the editing stage, going even so far as to make demands about shot selection and sequencing. This intervention has been facilitated by record companies' increasing sophistication about the video production process. Recently, record companies have begun hiring ex-freelance video producers as video commissioners whose familiarity with the production process aids the record company in channeling and constraining directors, producers, and artist decisions. For veteran music video director Charles Stone, these commercial constraints define music video, in the final analysis, as a commercial product. "Commercial expectations are always an undercurrent. Questions like, does the artist look good, is the artist's image being represented—are always a part of your decision-making process. You have to learn how to protect yourself from excessive meddling, but some negotiation with record companies and artist management always takes place."4

With rap's genre and stylistic conventions and artists' desires flanking one side of the creative process and the record company's fiscal and artist management's marketing concerns skewing up the other, music video directors are left with a tight space within which to exercise their creativity. Still, video directors find imaginative ways to engage the musical and lyrical texts and enter into dialogue with the rappers' work. For Bray and other directors, the best videos have the capacity to offer new
interpretations after multiple viewings, they have the spontaneity and
interactivity of the music, and most importantly, as Bray describes,
the best videos are "sublime visual interpretations of the lyrics" which
work as another instrument in the musical arrangement, the music video is a
visual instrument." Sometimes this visual instrumentation is a thematic
improvisation on the historical point of reference suggested by the musical
samples. So, a cool jazz horn sample might evoke a contemporary
rehashing of a jazz club or cool jazz coloring or art direction. Stone
often relies on text and animation to produce creative interpretations of
musical works. "Using word overlay," Stone says, "is particularly com-
patible with rap's use of language. Both are candid and aggressive uses
of words; and both play with words' multiple meanings." His selective
and unconventional use of animation often makes rappers seem larger
than life and can visually emphasize the superhuman powers suggested
by rappers' lyrical delivery and performance.

Satisfying the record companies, artists, and managers is only half
the battle; MTV, the most powerful video outlet, has its own standards and
guidelines for airing videos. These guidelines, according to several frus-
trated directors, producers, and video commissioners, are inconsistent
and unwritten. The most consistent rule is the "absolutely not" list (that
some people claim has been subverted by powerful artists and record
companies). The "absolutely not" list includes certain acts of violence,
some kinds of nudity and sex, profanity and epithets (e.g., "nigger" or
"bitch" no matter how these words are being used). The list of censored
words and actions expands regularly.

Independent video producer Gina Marrell notes that the process of
establishing sitting boundaries takes place on a case-by-case basis. MTV
is frequently sent a rough cut for approval as part of the editing pro-
cess to determine if they will consider airing the video, and often, several
changes, such as visual reworkings, scene cuts, and lyrical rewrites, must
be made to accommodate their standards. "Afterwards, you wind up wish-
very little to work with. There is so much censorship now, and from the
other end, the record company's video commissioners are much more
exciting about what they want the end result to be. It has extended the
editing process and raised production costs. Basically, there are too
many cooks in the kitchen." There is, not surprisingly, special concern
over violence: "The top issue has really affected rap music video. You
can't show anybody in a video, you can hold up a gun, but you can't
always show who you're pointing at. So you can hold up a gun in one frame
and then cut to the person being shot in the next frame, but you can't

have a person shooting at another person in the same frame," even so,
many artists refuse to operate in a self-censoring fashion and continue
to push on these fluid boundaries by shooting footage that they expect
will be censored.

MTV's sex policies are equally vague. Although MTV has aired such
videos as Wreckx-N-Juke's "Rumpshaker," whose concept is a series of
close-ups and soft-focus magnified distortions of black women's bikini-
ded gyrating behinds and breasts, it refused to allow A Tribe Called
Quest to say the word promiscuity in the lyrical soundtrack for the video
"Bonita Applebum," a romantic and uncharacteristically emotionally
honest portrayal of love, desire and courtship. MTV denied Stone's re-
quest to show condoms in the video, even though the song's mild refer-
ces to sex and his video treatment were cast in safe sex language. Given
the power of cultural conservatives to "strike the fear of god" in music
industry corporations, most video producers and directors are biding
themselves for further restrictions.

Rap music and video have been wrongfully characterized as thor-
oughly sexist but rightfully lambasted for their sexism. I am thoroughly
frustrated but not surprised by the apparent need for some rappers to
craft elaborate and creative stories about the abuse and domination of
young black women. Perhaps these videos serve to protect young men
from the reality of female rejection; maybe more likely, tales of sexual
domination falsely rectify their lack of self-worth and limited ac-
cess to economic and social markers for heterosexual masculine power.
Certainly, they reflect the deep-seated sexism that pervades the structure
of American culture. Still, I have grown weary of rappers' stock retorts
when charged with sexism in rap: "There are 'bitches' or 'goldiggers' out
there, and that's what this rap is about," or "This is just a story, I don't
mean anything by it." I have also grown impatient with the cowardly
silence of rappers who know I find this aspect of rap troubling.

On the other hand, given the selective way in which the subject of
sexism occupies public dialogue, I am highly skeptical of the timing and
strategic deployment of outrage regarding rap's sexism. Some responses
to sexism in rap music adopt a tone that suggests that rappers have in-
fected an otherwise sexism-free society. These reactions to rap's sexism
deny the existence of a vast array of accepted sexist social practices and
make up adolescent male gender role modeling that results in social
norms for adult male behavior that are equally sexist, even though they
are usually expressed with less prurience. Few popular analyses of rap's
sexism seem willing to confront the fact that sexual and institutional
control over and abuse of women is a crucial component of developing a heterosexual masculine identity. In some instances, the music has become a scapegoat that diverts attention away from the more entrenched problem of refashioning the terms of heterosexual masculinity.

Rap's sexist lyrics are also part of a rampant and viciously normalized sexism that dominates the corporate culture of the music business. Not only do women face gross pay inequities, but also they face extraordinary day-to-day sexual harassment. Male executives expect to have sexual and social access to women at one of many job perks, and many women, especially black women, cannot establish authority with male coworkers or artists in the business unless they are backed up by male superiors. Independent video producers do not have this institutional backup and, therefore, face exceptionally oppressive work conditions. Harrell has left more than one position because of overt or explicit pressure to sleep with her superiors and find the video shoots an even more unpredictable offensive and frustrating environment.

For instance, during a meeting with Def Jam executives on a video shoot, a very famous rapper started lifting up my pant leg to rub my leg. I slapped his hand away several times. Later on he stood onstage sticking his tongue out at me in a sexually provocative way—everyone was aware of what he was doing, no one said a word. This happens quite a bit in the music business. Several years ago I had begun producing videos for a video director who made it clear that I could not continue to work with him unless I slept with him. I think that women are afraid to respond legally or aggressively, not only because many of us fear professional repercussions, but also because so many of us were conditioned when we were children. These experiences complicate our ability to define ourselves.

These instances are not exceptions to the rule—they are the rule, even for women near the very top of the corporate ladder. As Carmen Ashhurst-Watson, president of Rush Communications (a multimedia offshoot of Def Jam Records) relates: “The things that Anita Hill said she heard from Clarence Thomas over a four-year period, I might hear in a morning.”

Mass media outlets need to be challenged into opening dialogue about pervasive and oppressive sexual conditions in society and into facilitating more frank discussion about sexist gender practices and courtship rituals. The terms of sexual identities, sexual oppression, and their relationship to a variety of forms of social violence need unpacking and closer examination. Basically, we need more discussions about sex, sexism, and violence, not less.

MTV and the media access it affords is a complex and ever-changing facet of mass-mediated and corporation-controlled communication and culture. To refuse to participate in the manipulative process of gaining access to video, recording materials, and performing venues is to almost guarantee a negligible audience and marginal cultural impact. To participate is to try and manipulate the terms of mass-mediated culture is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways—it provides communication channels within and among largely disparate groups and requires compromise that often affirms the very structures much of rap's philosophy seems to undermine. MTV's acceptance and gatekeeping of rap music has dramatically increased rap artists' visibility to black, white, Asian, and Latino teenagers, but it has also contributed to rap censorship and fuels the media's fixation on rap and violence.

Commercial marketing of rap music represents a complex and contradictory aspect of the nature of popular expression in a corporation-dominated information society. Rap music has become a common ad campaign hook for McDonald's, Burger King, Coke, Pepsi, several athletic shoe companies, clothing chain stores, MTV, anti-drug campaigns, and other global corporate efforts ad nauseam. Rap music has grown into a multimillion-dollar record, magazine, and video industry with multimillion-dollar rewards for the most successful performers. Rap's musical and visual style have had a profound impact on all contemporary popular music. Rock artists have begun using sampling styles and techniques developed by rappers; highly visible artists, such as Madonna, Janet Jackson, and New Kids on the Block wear hip hop fashions, use hip hop dances in their stage shows and rap lyrics and slang words in their recordings.

Yet, rap music is also Black American TV's public and highly accessible place, where black meanings and perspectives—even as they are manipulated by corporate concerns—can be shared and validated among black people. Rap is dependent on technology and mass reproduction and distribution. As Andrew Ross has observed, popular music is capable of transmitting, disseminating, and rendering "visible" black meanings, precisely because of, and not in spite of, its industrial forms of production, distribution, and consumption. Such tensions between rap's highly personal, conversational intimacy and the massive institutional and technological apparatus on which rap's global voice depends are critical to hip hop, black culture, and popular cultures around the world.
the world in the late-twentieth century. Inside of these commercial constraints, rap offers alternative interpretations of key social events such as the Gulf War, the Los Angeles uprising, police brutality, censorship efforts, and community-based education. It is the central cultural vehicle for open social reflection on poverty, fear of adulthood, the desire for absent fathers, frustrations about black male sexist, female sexual desires, daily rituals of life as an unemployed teen hustler, safe sex, raw anger, violence, and childhood memories. It is also the hearth of innovative uses of style and language, hilariously funny carnivalesque and chilin-circuit-inspired dramatic skits, and ribald storytelling. In short, it is black America's most dynamic contemporary popular cultural, intellectual, and spiritual vessel.

Rap's ability to draw the attention of the nation, to attract crowds around the world in places where English is rarely spoken are fascinating elements of rap's social power. Unfortunately, some of this power is linked to U.S.-based cultural imperialism, in that rappers benefit from the disproportionate expense of U.S. artists around the world facilitated by music industry marketing muscle. However, rap also draws international audiences because it is a powerful conglomeration of voices from the margins of American society speaking about the terms of that position. Rap music, like many powerful black cultural forms before it, resists for people from vast and diverse backgrounds. The cries of pain, anger, sexual desire, and pleasure that rap as articulate as hip hop's vast fan base for different reasons. For some, rap offers symbolic power, a sense of black energy and creativity in the face of omnipresent oppressive forces; others listen to rap with an ear toward the hidden voices of the oppressed, hoping to understand America's large, angry, and "unfit" population. Some listen to the music's powerful and life-affirming rhythms, its plain beats and growing bass lines, reveling in its energy, seeking strength from its cathartic and electric presence. Rap's global industry-orchestrated (but not industry-created) presence illustrates the power of the language of rap and the salience of the stories of oppression and creative resistance as music and lyrics tell. The drawing power of rap is precisely in its musical and narrative commitment to black youth and cultural resistance, and nothing in rap's commercial position and cultural appeal contradicts this fact. Rap's margins (albeit) are represented in the contradictory reaction rap receives in mainstream American media and popular culture. It is at once part of the dominant text and, yet, always on the margins of this text; relying on and commenting on the text's center and always aware of its proximity to the border.

Rap music and hip hop culture are cultural, political, and commercial forms, and for many young people they are the primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic windows on the world. After the Los Angeles conflict, author Mike Davis attended an Inglewood Crip and Blood gang truce meeting in which gang members voiced empathetic testimonials and called for unity and political action. Describing their speeches, Davis said: "These guys were very eloquent, and they spoke in a rap rhythm and with rap..."
Notes

1. Voices from the Margins (pp. 5–20)


2. I.o.c., *Blue People*, p. 181.


5. At the last three annual New Music Seminars in New York, panels were devoted to the issue of bootlegged sales and their effect on rap music sales.

6. Although some evidence suggests that more adults are buying rap music, rap is still predominantly consumed by teenagers and young adults. See Janine McAdams and Deborah Russell, "Rap Stealing Through to Adult Market," *Hollywood Reporter*, 19 September 1991, pp. 4, 20. Chuck D and Ice-T have claimed that their teenagers consume approximately 50 to 70 percent of rap music. Ice-T states that "more than 50 percent of going to white kids. Black kids buy the records, but the white kids buy the cassette, the CD, the album, the tour jacket, the hats, everything. Black kids might just be buying the bootleg on the street. It's only due to economics." Alan Light, "Ice-T," *Rolling Stone*, 30 August 1991, p. 11-12, 40. My research has yielded no source for these statistics other than speculation. Furthermore, these figures may be specifically referring to their fan base; Ice-T and Public Enemy are both known for mixing rock and rap, making it more likely that white consumers would be drawn to their work.


9. Rose interview with Kevin Bray, 18 March 1991. Kevin Bray has directed
many rap videos, some of which are quite well-known and highly regarded, in-cluding "Sunset Light Honey" and "Flavor of the Mist" for Black Sheep, "All for One" for Brand Nubian, "Not Just Free" for The Coop, "The Crease" and "Mafia and the Soul Brothers" for Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth; "I’ve Got the Power" for Chali 2Na, and "I Got To Have It" for Ed O.G. and the Bulldogs.

10. of course, rap videos narrate other themes and situations in other settings and locations. Probably, the next most frequent rap music video theme features the objectification of young women’s bodies as a sign of male power. Some videographers tell stories about and make music videos about the struggle of women in the music video industry, and some offer a critique of the lyrics and issues present in rap music in their music videos. For example, "3's a Magic" by Foxy Brown features a strong female character who is strong and independent; "I’m Me" by Foxy Brown features a woman who is powerful and confident; and "Playa’s Pendulum" by Big Pun features a woman who is powerful and confident.

11. The concept of "home turf" is also important in African-American communities. Home turf is a term used to describe the area where an individual or group feels most comfortable and secure. It is often associated with a sense of ownership and control over the neighborhood, and it can be a source of pride and identity for those who live there. Home turf can be physical, such as a neighborhood or a city block, or it can be mental, such as a particular mindset or way of life. In the context of rap music videos, home turf often refers to the neighborhood or city block where the rapper grew up and where they still feel connected to.


13. Bob Cacozza, "Sack-r MC’s," Village Voice, 4 December 1990, p. 69. See Stephen Feldman’s "Pop Life" column, New York Times, 17 September 1990, p. C5, for a publicized edition of the fabricated biography. After the death rumor and story, others, like publicists, significantly outed the film, admitting that Vanilla Ice had actually grown up in both Miami and Dallas and had been identified as Luster Campbell. Although fabricated artist biographies are not uncommon, Vanilla Ice’s claims are particularly far from the truth and, as it transpired, points out, inviting to poor black communities.


15. Interview with Charles S. Stone III, 13 July 1991. Stone, who has been directing music videos, especially rap music videos, for several years is especially known for his creative use of animation and humor in his video visualization and concept. Some of his more prominent and well-received videos include "The Choice Is Yours" for Black Sheep (which won MTV’s and The Source’s best rap video award for 1991); "It’s a Joke" for Public Enemy; "Bonita Applebum" and "I Left My Wallet In El Segundo" for A Tribe Called Quest; "Rackman" for Tashiki, "Fanny Flu" for Living Color, and "Love" for Newt Cherry (featuring Guru).

17. Rose interview with Gina Harrell, March 20, 1993. Harrell is an experienced music video producer who has worked on dozens of major music videos, commercials, and other projects.

18. Ibid.


22. "All Aboard the Night Train" (pp. 26-60)


24. I have adopted Mollenkopf and Castells use of the term postindustrial as a means of characterizing the economic restructuring that has taken place in urban America over the past twenty-five years. By defining the contemporary period in urban economics as postindustrial, Mollenkopf and Castells are not suggesting that manufacturing output has disappeared, nor are they adopting Daniel Bell’s formulation that "knowledge has somehow replaced capital as the organizing principle of the economy." Rather, Mollenkopf and Castells claim that the rise of postindustrialism captures a crucial aspect of how large cities are being transformed: employment has almost completely moved away from manufacturing and toward corporate, public, and nonprofit services. Occupations have similarly shifted from manual labor to managers, professionals, secretaries, and service workers. John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells, eds., Dual City: Restructuring New York (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993), p. 8. Similarly, these new postindustrial trends are caused by rapid movement of capital, industry, and populations across the globe that have also been referred to as "post-Fordist" and "ational accumulation." See David Harvey, Social Justice and the City (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). For an elaboration of Bell’s initial use of the term, see Daniel Bell, The Coming of Post-Industrial Society (New York: Basic Books, 1973).


26. I have appropriated it here in the context of hip hop.

27. My arguments regarding Afro-American cultural formations in hip hop are relevant to African-American culture as well as Afro-American cultural formations in the English-speaking Caribbean, each of which has produced prominent and significant Afro-American cultural phenomena. Although rap music, particularly early rap, is dominated by English-speaking blacks, graffiti and breakdancing were heavily shaped and practiced by Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities that have substantial Afro-American diaspora. The emergence of Chicano rap took place in the late 1970s in Los Angeles. Consequently, my references to Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities should not be considered inconsistent with my larger Afro-American claims, particularly those that dominate future chapters devoted specifically to rap music. Subsequent work has illustrated the continued significance of African cultural practices in cultural production and cultural consumption in both English- and Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean. For example, see Herbert S. Klann, African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Fred W. van de Wetering, They Came Before Columbus (New York: Random House, 1976); and Robert Farris Thompson, Flash of the Spirit (New York: Random House, 1985).


29. In hip hop, the term moves both as a term of interest and as a term of creativity, or as a term of creativity and as a term of creativity. Big Daddy Kane says that he writes his best lyrics on the subway car on the way to his dinner, for example. But that is pretty much the opposite of what I would advise, for example. See Robert Crand加倍和Graff, "The Old Lady All over the Map," Village Voice, vol. 4, no. 19, Fall 1991, pp. 12-18.

30. Morphing is a computer-based tool that allows any image to transform into another apparent identity.