

- **making the strong survive:
the contours and**
- **contradictions of message
rap**
- **ernest allen, jr.**

Yes, I'm that kind of nigga that they can't stand
 The one that taught African how to say Black Man
 The one you can plainly see
 With nationalist colors of red, black and green
 The one who cut Tarzan's vine
 And ran his ass out of the jungle with his homboy swine.

XCLAN, "Fire and Earth"

I can't wait, time's quickly running out
 Call to arms, revolution's in the house
 Unforgettable, the words of wisdom
 Brought to life by the ten-point system
 Freedom and power to determine our destiny
 Full employment for the black community
 Fight the capitalist with a raised fist
 B-U-Y black and stack awareness . . .

**Black juries when our brothers are tried
 in court**

**And in addition to all this we want
 Land, bread, housing, and education
 To go with justice and peace for the
 black nation.**

Paris, "Escape from Babylon"

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Members of old-school generations venturesome enough to switch on their televisions these days are no doubt aware of the resurgence of a nationalism and political progressivism reminiscent of African American popular culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But in place of organizational structures such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party, or the Spirit House Movers, for example, the principal generative form of a reawakened black consciousness of the eighties and nineties has arrived, rather incredibly, via a poetic/musical form known as "rap." Sharing the stage with more entertainment-oriented rappers such as Hammer, Heavy D and the Boys, as well as many others, are Queen Mother Rage, Eric B. & Rakim, Isis, Poor Righteous Teachers, Public Enemy, Lakim Shabazz, Ed O. G. & Da Bulldogs, KMD, Two Kings in a Cypher, and A Tribe Called Quest—only some of the rap groups or single artists contributing to the message of the present era.

Although political rap, or message rap, as it is more commonly called, constitutes only a small segment of the genre, it exerts a powerful political and artistic influence on its youthful listeners as well as on rap artists in general. Today rap music has become one of the principle vehicles by which young African

icans.) Efforts on the part of many rap artists to reach the crossover dollars of a larger market have generally led to artistic and political compromises or distortions, if not wider acceptance of the “product,” leading to an intense and interesting struggle among rap artists themselves as to which expressions of rap are legitimate. Moreover, the medium’s comprehension of and message to the world remain literally fragmented by electronic audio/video “sampling,” its parameters determined primarily by artistic criteria. It is not uncommon to find, for example, repetitive soundbites from Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, or Louis Farrakhan strewn together behind God-knows-what “dope” rhyme, leaving even the most sophisticated listener to ponder the significance of it all—above and beyond a respect for its underlying, creative genius. However, celebrated as the innovative, African American contribution to postmodernism that rap is, such fragmentation also tends to retard the maturation of the mass political consciousness to which it initially gave birth. And, finally, the politics of message rap remain largely the captive of intersubjective approaches to social relations and social structure—a “politics of recognition” whose shortcomings I intend to make clear in this essay.

The emergence of message rap

Artistically speaking, the immediate roots of message rap are to be found, in part, in the black poetry movement of the sixties, its specific content traceable to the sociopolitical thought of African Americans from that period to the present.² As William Eric Perkins has noted, the ritualized verbal combat of inner-city “signifying” and the stylized “rap” of black radio DJs have also contributed heavily to the genre.³ Although most African American youth are probably unaware, except perhaps in a peripheral way, of the existence of such poets as Sonia Sanchez, Askia Muhammad Touré, June Jordan, Larry Neal, or even Amiri Baraka, to name but a few of the more illustrious black bards who emerged a generation ago, some will more likely be familiar with performing artists such as The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron—if only because the latter’s audio recordings have been sampled by rappers as well as recently been made available in their original form.⁴

Other essays in this volume cover the development of the rap form itself, and there is general agreement that the genre evolved in three waves.⁵ Although earlier manifestations can readily be cited, political message rap fundamentally belongs to the third period of the hip hop wave, which began on the “hard” side with the release of Public Enemy’s *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* in 1987. This was quickly followed by, for example, the softer sound of DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, as well as the strongly dance-oriented tunes of M.C. Hammer, both in 1988. With a few exceptions the emergence of white rappers such as Vanilla Ice and others tended to push the soft-core rap even softer; the polishing up of gangsta rap by NWA (Niggas with Attitude) and its successors, on the other hand, put an edge on hard-core rap that will never be surpassed—or more accurately, one “craves to understand” how it might be transcended in terms of its ni-

hilism. The third wave is also characterized by a black feminist response to negative characterizations of females by male rappers, and by attempts by female rappers to address the question of male/female as well as female/female relations in the African American community.

Political rap manifests in three relatively distinct though interrelated expressions: (1) the Islamic nationalist orientation of rappers such as Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth, Lakim Shabazz, Poor Righteous Teachers, Eric B. and Rakim, Brand Nubian, and many others; (2) the cultural-political nationalism of Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, Kool Moe Dee, XCLAN, Ed O. G. & Da Bulldogs, Paris, and the Jungle Brothers, for example; and (3) specific, message-oriented expressions embedded in the more earthy gangsta rap of NWA, Ice Cube, Ice-T, Criminal Nation, Schooly D, the Geto Boys, and the like.⁶

But where, specifically, do the messages of message rap come from? At its core, the social base of the rapper worldview is to be found among black urban youth—unemployed/underemployed, politically powerless. That is not to say, of course, that every successful rapper is a former gang member or potential gangster, or even that his or her social origins are necessarily to be found in the inner city—witness the suburban-raised, college-bred Public Enemy. My point is rather that, generally speaking, core values articulated in a given rap message, no matter the origin of individual rappers, tend to be socially rooted in the daily lives of marginalized African American youth—in contrast to, say, those of black industrial workers or of the educated black middle class.

Youth gangs and the gangsta mentality

For a look into the worldviews of marginalized youth, a brief history of Los Angeles youth gangs proves invaluable.⁷ The first such groups were formed in the early 1940s in L.A.'s Chicano community. By the 1950s and 1960s, a small number of African American youth gangs appeared, claiming names such as the Businessmen, the Gladiators, the Black Cobras, the Swamp Boys, the Boozies, the Slausons, and the Watts. "There were few shootings," however, "and crimes were relatively petty by today's standards." The August 1965 Los Angeles rebellion transformed the playing field altogether. Following that event, many gang members became politicized, joining the Black Panther Party or US organization; reflecting this constituency, the daily practices of the Black Panthers, especially on the West Coast, belied a tendency toward gangsterism. But in the wake of FBI-sponsored assassinations of BPP leaders Bunchy Carter and John Huggins by US-organization members George Stiner, Larry Stiner, and Claude Hubert in January 1969, L.A. youth-gang activity was rekindled, but with an unprecedented resort to weaponry that probably owed as much to the Panther "picking-up-the-gun" culture as it did to the paramilitary structure of Los Angeles's so-called law enforcement organizations. In the process there emerged a new generation of African American youth—highly cynical and largely depoliticized, but not com-

pletely so on either count. And central to this story was the emergence of a gang known as the Crips:

Accounts vary widely, but oral historians agree on one of the founders. He was Raymond Washington, a Fremont High School student who had been too young to be a Black Panther but had soaked up some of the Panther rhetoric about community control of neighborhoods.

After Washington was kicked out of Fremont, he wound up at Washington High, and something began to jell in the neighborhood where he lived, around 107th and Hoover streets. Whether it was simply a gang of street kids or an attempt to organize the neighborhood is not clear.⁸

Washington died in a state prison in the mid-1980s, but Crips and Bloods "sets" or "hoods, as gang-claimed neighborhoods were called, proliferated throughout Los Angeles, counting some twenty-four thousand members spread among 260 or so gangs.⁹ Rising permanent unemployment and the introduction of cheap crack cocaine in that same period hardened the economic underpinnings of gang activity, leading to homicides on an unprecedented scale.¹⁰ Out of the turmoil of poverty, drugs, and death emerged an African American youth worldview at considerable odds with those of the more stable black working and middle classes. In place of a tendency toward "mutual respect unless proved otherwise," the new youth culture demanded immediate "props," or proper respect, giving sanction to the elimination of those misfortunate enough to "diss," or disrespect, others, however unintentionally. Misogyny and homophobia, though always present to some degree in African American life, became principal vehicles in the formation of youthful black male identity. In lieu of the all-encompassing African American group identity forged during the 1950s and 1960s, the new youth culture offered the primacy of "turf," of neighborhood territoriality, as the basis of social identification. With diminished practical reinforcement of life-affirming values emerged a callous and resigned attitude toward violence and death. And, finally, on the moral plane, devotion to individuals rapidly overcame devotion to principle, with a concomitant repudiation of individual responsibility.

But the content of message rap draws upon not only the brutal realities of present-day urban life, but the more affirmative sacred and secular influences of the late sixties and early seventies as well. The cultural and political nationalist tendencies expressed by the message constitute a direct outgrowth of parallel trends manifested in the earlier era—absent the ideological tensions that may have formerly existed. (For example, take today's reductionist pairing of Malcolm and Martin, or the relatively peaceful coexistence of cultural nationalist and revolutionary viewpoints.) On the cultural side, following the identity-oriented expressions of the sixties' Black Arts movement, the Spirit House Movers, US organization, and the like, one finds a strong identification with Africa, an emphasis on a black social identity at the expense of an American one, and an extolling of black cultural heroes. On the political plane one sees an emphasis on the strug-

gle for African American human rights, resistance to the role of local police as occupying armies within black communities, and support for self-determination in one form or another. Here one rediscovers the secular legacies of the preceding generation: of Malcolm X in his role as political spokesman for African Americans; of the Black Power phase of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee; as well as those of the Panthers, the Black Liberation Army, and others. On the sacred side we find, principally, elements of the Islamic nationalism spawned by Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam or NOI (1930–1975) and its offshoots: since 1964, the Five Percenters and from 1978 onward, the reconstituted NOI itself, led by Louis Farrakhan.¹¹

Overall, the strength and appeal of visionary message rap for African American youth is that, in the absence of organized political life, it not only describes and explains the existing dismal state of affairs with varying degrees of success but also imposes a stable if not rigid sense of order upon a menacing universe, with prescribed solutions to all of its ills. But where the messages of gangsta rap are content to describe in a fatalistic way the world “as it is,” disclaiming any responsibility for the negativism to which gangsters themselves contribute, the nationalism of politically, culturally, or religiously oriented rappers tends toward a grand, often millennial, vision of how things might or ought to be. It is from the ranks of Islamic rappers that the sense of an ordered world—for better or for worse—remains the most elaborate, a factor which, above and beyond undeniable questions of artistry, helps to explain the popularity of this genre. By far the most potent and least-understood force in all of message rap, the Islamic connection requires particular elucidation.

Islamic nationalism: mecca and the soul brother/sister

From the 1920s onward, Islam's primary appeal to African Americans has come via its relatively color-blind approach to religious affairs.¹² Based only indirectly on Qur'anic teachings, two proto-Islamic heritages feed contemporary rap: on the one hand, that of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam and its direct descendant, the NOI of Louis Farrakhan; and on the other, an NOI spinoff, the Five Percenters—the greatest single influence in this vein. NOI ideology, launched in 1930 by the enigmatic W. D. Fard and elaborated by his eventual successor, Elijah Muhammad, from 1932 to 1975, is characterized by an apocalyptic and prophetic vision of the world. The doctrine holds that the African American, the “original” or “Asiatic” black man, fell into a state of social domination that began with slavery—a direct result of the machinations of an evil black scientist, Yakub, who grafted white people, also known as “devils,” from original black people some six thousand years ago. God granted whites six thousand years to rule the planet, after which time a fiery battle was to take place in the sky, where whites would suffer defeat, and the original sense of order would be restored to earth. The devils' rule was actually up in 1914, with an additional grace period

granted by Allah in order to allow the Nation of Islam to save and convert as many African Americans as possible to their true religion. A number of NOI doctrinal elements, notably those asserting a mythical Asiatic identity for African Americans, the notion that all black men are gods, that human beings create their own heaven and hell, and that Islam was the original religion of black people, were most likely extracted from Moorish Science teachings.¹³ But unlike the Moorish Science Temple, by the 1950s the doctrine of Lost/Found Islam actually drew upon the Holy Qur'an for inspiration—despite the Bible's role as an even more frequent source of quotes in the elucidations of NOI leaders.

In 1958 the Nation of Islam began a thoroughgoing internal process of modernizing and mainstreaming what had been, up to that time, little more than a small, inward-looking parochial order. The ensuing development of economic resources and projects was accompanied by an economic nationalism reminiscent of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association in the 1920s.¹⁴ This newly established economic orientation, linked to a subsequent organizational influx of substantial numbers of African American middle-class professionals as well as more formally educated Muslim ministers, permanently transformed the NOI's social character. It also produced considerable internal tensions in the process. NOI ideology itself became dichotomized along sacred/secular lines, with Elijah Muhammad remaining the NOI's overarching religious patriarch and Malcolm X becoming its secular spokesman. This dichotomy was furthered by Mr. Muhammad's hiring, from the outside, a group of black editors with affiliations to the Old Left, who transformed the organization's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, into the most powerful anticolonial and anti-imperialist voice on the North American continent. Its center pages, however, were properly reserved for the religious exegeses of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.¹⁵ By the early sixties the Nation of Islam had become a highly structured, hierarchical, and more secular-oriented association—a situation with which some of its followers may not have been entirely comfortable, even as they reaped the overall benefits of membership. Such, apparently, was the situation of Clarence Jowers Smith, otherwise known as Clarence 13X, who was reputedly expelled from the NOI's Harlem Temple No. 7 either for his gambling activities or for teaching, in an unqualified way, that “all black men are gods.”¹⁶ Although Elijah Muhammad had taught a similar truth, he also emphasized that, above all, there existed a supreme God, of which Mr. Muhammad himself was the Messenger. To affirm the godliness of all black men without qualification was to relativize divine authority, denying to any one individual the prerogative of spiritual command on earth. Inimical to the centralized leadership of Mr. Muhammad and his ministers, such thoughts would have hardly curried favor in the NOI's upper circles.¹⁷

But despite the unclarity surrounding the precise cause and timing of his organizational break with the NOI, we do know that when Clarence 13X left the organization, he carried with him its internally transmitted catechisms. These would provide the basis for the emergence of a new Islamic nationalist movement destined to take hold among scores of African American youth a quarter-century

later. By 1964 Clarence 13X had established an alternative, more loose-knit organization of Harlem street youth—some would say “gang”—known as the Five Percenters. Doctrinally rooted in the early, “secret” writings of NOI founder W. D. Fard but committed to a relativization of male divinity, the Five Percenters proffered additional metaphysical novelties in the form of a Supreme Alphabet and Supreme Mathematics.¹⁸ In the blink of a third eye the Five Percent founder was transformed into “Allah,” Harlem was renamed Mecca, and Brooklyn became Medina following “Allah’s” later relocation there. Women metamorphosed into Moons who basked in the luminous wisdom of male Suns. The counterparts of masculine Gods, females were also Earths who dutifully prepared their bodies for the implantation of divine seed. And “G,” the seventh letter of the Supreme Alphabet, which stood for God, became the appellation by which young black men would heartily greet one another on the street. Describing the group in these early years, an FBI informant noted: “The ‘Five Percenters,’ who are, on occasion, referred to as the ‘Brotherhood of Blackmen’ or the ‘Brotherhood of Allah,’ is a loosely knit group of Negro youth gangs in the Harlem section of New York City.”¹⁹ Another informant estimated the total number of members to be around 200: 125 in Harlem and an additional 75 spread throughout the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens boroughs, with the majority concentrated in the Fort Greene area of Brooklyn and the St. Mary’s Park section of the Bronx.

Like much of Five Percent doctrine, the original meaning of “five percent” itself was culled from Nation of Islam teachings—in this case a forty-question NOI catechism, “Lost Found Moslem Lesson No. 2,” written in 1934 by Nation of Islam founder W. D. Fard:

14. Question: Who is the 85%?

Answer: The uncivilized people, poison animal eaters, slaves from mental death and power.

People who do not know the living god or their origin in this world and they worship that they know not what, and who are easily led in the wrong direction but hard to lead into the right direction.

15. Question: Who is the 10%?

Answer: The rich, the slave makers of the poor, who teach the poor lies to believe that the almighty true and living god is a spook and cannot be seen with the physical eye. Otherwise known as the bloodsucker of the poor.

16. Question: Who is the 5% on this poor part of the earth?

Answer: They are the poor, righteous teachers who do not believe in the teaching of the 10% and are all wise and know who the living god is and teach that the living god is the Son of Man, the supreme being, the black man of Asia; and teach freedom, justice and equality to all the human families of the planet earth, otherwise known as civilized people, also is Moslem and Moslem sons.²⁰

A loosely structured crew, Five Percenters interpreted their organizational name in creatively ambiguous ways. For example, in the mid-1960s they reportedly described themselves as “the five percent of Muslims who smoke and drink.” Another version held that 85 percent of blacks were cattle, 10 percent were “Uncle Toms,” and the remaining 5 percent were the “poor righteous teachers”—the real leaders of black Americans.²¹ In yet another version—much closer to the original—Five Percenters held that 10 percent of the population were responsible for the suffering of all the rest. Five percent, however, were “poor, righteous teachers” fully cognizant of the situation, and willing to sacrifice their lives in order to bring about a new society. The remaining 85 percent were “deaf, dumb, and blind,” and needed the 5 percent in order to show them the way out of their suffering.²² In “The Lost Tribe of Shabazz,” from the title track of his 1991 album, Islamic rapper Lakim Shabazz runs down the Five Percent ethos:

My people were took from the motherland by the other man
Brought to the wilderness like a ventriloquist
Played my people like puppets by playing fear in their heart
Nowadays most of us don't know where to start.

Ten percent of us can help, but don't feel the need
They love greed, and this really bothers me
Eighty-five percent of us are totally ignorant
Walkin' around with a nigga mentality
Five percent of us are ready to die
for the cause, so pause, the source is Elijah.

The death of Elijah Muhammad in February 1975 wrought far-reaching changes to the original Nation of Islam. Muhammad's son and spiritual/political heir, Wallace Muhammad, dropped the NOI name and quickly propelled the organization toward more traditional Islamic moorings. Members dissatisfied with these changes eventually rallied behind Minister Louis Farrakhan, who formed a reconstituted Nation of Islam in 1978, adopting all the ideological tenets of the original association.²³ Like that of its parent organization, the attraction of the new NOI lay in a mythical vision of the world that explained that world's origins, established the identity and “place” of the African American in it, and foretold the coming of imminent, divine retribution; a promise of African American economic self-sufficiency; and a sense of personal “safety” and structure for those willing to submit to NOI ritual and discipline. Five Percenters, on the other hand, drew and still draw freely upon the NOI's creation mythology, millennial vision, and fictive Asiatic identity, but without having to subject themselves to its strict internal rules. Absent any consequent organizational structure or recognized leader of stature, its members continue to pay nominal respect to Louis Farrakhan and Elijah Muhammad as well, all the while preserving the memory of their group's founder, “Father Allah.”²⁴

Spreading from its 1960s New York City origins, the amorphous association is now well established in a number of urban areas throughout New Jersey, and beyond. In fact, today it is probably incorrect to refer to the Five Percenters as a single organization. This extraordinary growth of the Five Percent following Clarence 13X's assassination in June 1969 remains, for the most part, an undocumented process. And it is, of course, the followers of Five Percent Islam who make up the great majority of Islamic rappers today: Grand Puba, Poor Righteous Teachers, Lakim Shabazz, King Sun, Eric B. & Rakim, Movement X, KMD, Two Kings in a Cypher, A Tribe Called Quest, and many other lesser known groups and individuals.²⁵ Even Big Daddy Kane ("Pimping Ain't Easy") claims Five Percent allegiance.

While the principle alignment of most Islamic-based rappers lies with the Five Percenters, a few have gravitated toward the orbit of Farrakhan's Nation. Some, like NOI supporters Public Enemy and Professor Griff, former minister of information for PE, have remained outside the organization proper.²⁶ Others, like Chicago-based Prince Akeem, who, prior to Ice Cube's recent conversion, had been the only bona fide member of Farrakhan's NOI to achieve prominence as a rapper, have shown themselves willing to submit to a collective will. Listen as Prince Akeem throws down regarding the government plot against African Americans:

The government
 Is schemin' on the Black Man
 Disguisin' drugs, so he can
 Paint a picture of youth
 Slangin', gang bangin'
 Hangin', Cone is just black
 The plans at hand
 To destroy the Black Man
 I push on Bush because I can
 Lay out the plot, come on now
 Take ya for a ride
 The plan is this, they call it genocide.²⁷

The message: intersecting themes of resignation and resistance, raunch and redemption

The various themes of message rap are themselves defined by opposing tendencies, with message-bearing gangsta rappers tending to coalesce at one pole of the spectrum, and those holding more visionary spiritual or political outlooks commingling at the other. Here one encounters at least three predilections: a morality rooted in interpersonal loyalties on one side contrasted to one that is grounded in more universally applied principles; a shameless exploitation of negative African American stereotypes in the pursuit of crossover record sales on one hand, as op-

posed to the explicit rejection of such stereotypes and cultivation of positive black images on the other; and a fatalistic and cynical view of the world (“that’s just how things are”) at one end countered by one that leans toward visionary possibilities at the other (“here is how things might be”).²⁸ Where both visionary and gangsta rap may manifest an antisocial character with respect to the dominant society, gangsta rap is antisocial with respect to the black community itself. (One can flee from the police or the FBI for a wide variety of reasons, not all of them explicitly political.) And where gangsters seem to fall back on individualistic solutions to social problems, the vision oriented tend toward more collective ones.

Nonetheless, gangsta and visionary message rap are not as far apart as they may at first appear. For example, where gangsta males denigrate women in the worst way (“Bitch Better Have My Money”), and the more idealistic place them on pedestals (“Black Queen of the Universe”), both positions reinforce the subjugation of women. Indeed, masculine identity in either case is defined at the expense of women in general and gay men in particular (lesbians are virtually ignored). Today, in many ways, rap plays a role with respect to these two groups that D. W. Griffith’s infamous film *Birth of a Nation* enjoyed with respect to African Americans overall circa World War I: artistic innovation and creativity, to be sure, but with an antihumanist content.

The centrality of the rebel figure to both genres has already been noted. Moreover, the interconnections between gangsta and visionary rap are rendered even more concrete through the discovery that popular artists like KRS One and Ice Cube, for example, freely glide back and forth between the two categories. In fact, with the 1992 issue of *Sex and Violence*, KRS One/BDP came full circle, since “9mm Goes Bang” from their album *Criminal Minded* belongs to the pioneering ranks of gangsta rap.²⁹ Since his enlistment into the ranks of the Nation of Islam, on the other hand, Ice Cube has not so much left behind gangsterism as he has fused it with NOI eschatology, giving birth to a novel form that might properly be called “gangsta armageddon,” where apocalyptic vision is indistinguishable from negative, contemporary reality.³⁰

On the salutary side, virtually all manifestations of message rap bear witness to resistance against overt external oppression—especially that coming from occupying forces in blue. The role of the police all too often is, as Ice-T observes, “To serve, protect, and break a niggaz neck.” In “——— the Police,” from *Straight outta Compton* (1988), NWA condemn the unrelenting police harassment of young African Americans:

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.

Unleashing a torrent of words that falls somewhere between rapping and a jeremiad with a beat, Sister Souljah warns in the album *360 Degrees of Power* (1992) in “The Final Solution” that slavery’s back in effect’:

We are at war!
 That's what I told ya!
 I know you heard what the president said
 And if the nigger don't move, then he's dead
 It's time for us to take a stand
 Woman to woman and man to man
 Blood rushes through your veins, you feel the fear
 Who would've thought that this would happen here
 In the land of the free, home of the brave
 The year is '95, you're a slave.

And citing Boston's Charles Stuart case as an example, Ed O.G. runs down the racial disparities in the criminal justice system:

Here's the reason that I've been upset for a while
 Cause if you're black, you get life
 But if you're white, you're on trial.
 Ain't nothin' to it, just like that chump Charles Stuart
 They always claim that the devil made me do it.
 For insurance he killed his wife and his child
 And blamed it on a brother and the racists went buck wild.³¹

One observes as well the celebration of the rebel, political or otherwise, who dares to flaunt societal norms that operate to the detriment (and also benefit, as in the case of maintaining basic standards of civility) of African Americans as a whole. As rapper Tupac Shakur notes, "That's bullshit when a rapper says he don't want to be a role model. You become a role model 'cause what's the biggest role model? The rebel."³² Here both the gangster as well as the politically oriented conflate the role of gang banger or political fugitive, respectively, with that of rebellious rapper. For example, in the title track from *100 Miles and Runnin'* (1990) NWA boast of being

A nigga wit' nothin' to lose
 One of the few who's been accused and abused
 With the crime of poisonin' young minds
 But you don't know shit 'til you've been in my shoes.

Similarly, in Public Enemy's "Raise the Roof" from *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* (1987), the roles of communist, terrorist, fugitive, entrepreneur, and individual rapper are merged into one:

And for real it's the deal and the actual fact,
 Takes a nation of millions to hold me back
 Rejected and accepted as a communist
 Claimin' fame to my name as a terrorist
 Makin' money in corners that you'll never see
 Dodgin' judges and the lawyers and the third degree

Nothin' wrong with a song to make the strong survive
Realize gave me five cause I kept 'em alive.

Hardly confined to masculine expressions, the rebel is similarly celebrated in the rhymes of Sister Souljah as well as in the title track of Isis's *Rebel Soul* (1990):

The battle cry for freedom, shout aloud
And it gets sweat drops from the black crowd
The strong with the magic, I am the bearer
The rhythms of my words, my mind is your mirror
Let the war drums on the road
Stand brave and witness rebel soul.

Even more deadly than the police violence waged against African American communities is the internal warfare rooted in drug-related activities. With the rapid growth of inner-city youth gangs and the crack-cocaine trade in the 1980s, the social identities of African American youth in urban areas became increasingly tied to conspicuous commodity consumption: the wearing of expensive jumpsuits, sneakers, watches, rings, thick gold chains (known as "dookie" gold), and the like. Hip hop hairstyles with corporate logos carved in them (Gucci or Dom Perignon, for example) became avenues for youth identification with lifestyles of the rich and powerful. With a cheapening of life wrought by inner-city drug wars, the desire for flashy and costly items led to increasing numbers of murders of black youth by one another, and to the intensification of "black-on-black" crime in general.³³ While rappers tended to emulate and even promote such consumption during an earlier phase, the message rappers of the third wave—including some of the gangstas—have instead emphasized the need to halt interethnic black violence and organize for a safer community. In 1990 two major cultural undertakings by rappers to stem the wave of urban violence were registered on the East and West Coasts ("Stop the Violence" and "We're All in the Same Gang," respectively). Out of such efforts gangsta rappers Ren and Dr. Dre of NWA, for their part, invoke a nationalistic appeal in order to curb intracommunity warfare:

Bullets flyin', mothers dyin', brothers dyin'
Lyn' in the streets, that's why we're tryin'
To stop it from fallin' apart and goin' to waste
And keepin' a smile off a white face.³⁴

Included in the category of urgent messages are those of gangstas with second thoughts: the Lifer's Group of New Jersey's Rahway Prison.³⁵ Their basic admonitions to youth are that prison life is pure hell, and that one should lead a life away from any possible interaction with the criminal-justice system. Indeed, a casual hearing of the uncensored versions of "The Real Deal," "Belly of the Beast," and "Nightmare Man" are sufficient to convince most of us. From "Nightmare Man" on the album *Lifer's Group* (1991), a few of the more tranquil lines:

Here in Mr. Gilmore's house
 the house of pain, where you can go insane
 you'll meet me, your Nightmare Man, Crazy Chris
 I'll use you, abuse you, and cause you pain
 I'll teach you hate by goya, and plenty of paranoia.

Assessing the high cost of alcoholism on African American communities, not just in terms of alcohol-related diseases but also in incidences of drunken violence and consequent deaths, Public Enemy equates coroners' body bags with "1 Million Bottlebags." In "Night of the Living Baseheads" PE similarly examines the social expense of freebasing and crack smoking. The more specific theme of mothers on crack is carefully explored in Tupac Shakur's "Part Time Mutha" as well as in Yomo and Maulkey's "Mama Don't." And, finally, W.C. and the MAAD Circle pay homage to fathers everywhere in "Fuck My Daddy."³⁶

Escape into alcohol or other drugs does not necessarily mark the end of the search for inner peace in the inner city. For example, in a prayer rap called "Tennessee," on the album *3 Years, 5 Months, and 2 Days in the Life of . . .*, lead rapper Speech of Arrested Development expresses a sense of demoralization due to urban strife and searches for a quiet place in the countryside he called his boyhood home:

Lord I've really been real stressed
 Down and out, losin' ground
 Although I am black & proud
 Problems got me pessimistic
 Why does it have to be so tuff?
 I don't know where I could go
 To let these ghosts out of my skull
 My grandma passed, my bother's gone
 I never at once felt so all alone.

"Take me to another place," he pleads, "Take me to another land / Make me forget all that hurts me / Let me understand your plan."

Invoking "The Evil That Men Do" on *All Hail the Queen* (1989), Queen Latifah wants to know why money spent on personal entertainment cannot be channeled to the needy:

Tell me, don't you think it's a shame
 When someone can put a quarter in a video game
 But when a homeless person approaches you on the street
 You can't treat 'em the same?

In "Language of Violence" from the album *Hypocrisy Is the Greatest Luxury* (1992), on the other hand, the improbable team of Michael Franti (African American) and Rono Tse (Vietnamese), together known as Hiphoprissy, relates

the story of a young man presumed to be gay, who was brutally murdered by his schoolmates for that reason:

He knew the names that they would taunt him with
 faggot, sissy, punk, queen, queer
 although he'd never had sex in his fifteen years
 And when they harassed him
 it was for a reason
 And when they provoked him
 it became open season.

Further demonstrating the wide range of social concerns with which message rap is concerned, Yo-Yo's "Put a Lid on It" warns young women of the consequences of having babies out of wedlock. The more delicate subject of incest is openly explored in De La Soul's "Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa" as well as in Shakur's "Part Time Mutha."³⁷ In the latter selection, a female rapper relates the terror of living in an incestuous relationship with her stepfather while her mother, high on crack, remains oblivious to the world around her:

I grew up in a home where no one liked me
 Mom would hit the pipe and every night she would fight
 Papa was a nasty old man like the rest
 He's feeling on my chest with his hands on my dress. . . .

I want to tell mom, but when she's missed
 She's bound to be bitchin' and she hasn't got a fixin'.

In "Jimmy," on the album *By All Means Necessary* (1988), KRS One takes a positive lead in sounding the alarm against AIDS but stumbles into the ranks of the grossly misinformed when he cautions a need for condoms only in winter!

'Cause in winter AIDS attacks
 So run out and get your jimmy hats
 It costs so little for a pack of three
 Get jimmy hats for the winter attack.

"Droppin' science": visions of a more congruous order

Once we are beyond immediate issues of mental or physical survival, reflection at a more profound level kicks in. One of the first questions to arise is, How did we African Americans arrive at the wretched state in which we now find ourselves? Here there is a tendency to rely on the explanatory powers of mythology, as in the case of Islamic rappers discussed earlier; biological determinism, as suggested by Chuck D of Public Enemy,³⁸ a crude economic-determinist model based upon relations between procurers and prostitutes—more colloquially, "pimps and hos"—as elaborated by BDP's KRS One during his "humanist" phase;³⁹ or in the

moralistic terms of Queen Latifah, the “evil that men do.” Once we are satisfied as to the “cause” of the existing state of affairs, the next question concerns how things can once again be made righteous, in mind as well as in societal relations. For the Islamic (male) rappers especially, the issues that swing into play invoke strict orderings of social identity, gender relations, sexuality, and even eating practices, for these are aspects of one’s life over which one may more easily exercise direct and immediate control. But other rappers are no less concerned with exercising a revitalized sense of personal order. In “My Philosophy,” for example, KRS One extols the virtues of vegetarianism:

It’s about time one of y’all hear it
 First hand, from an intelligent brown man
 A vegetarian, no goat or ham
 Or chicken, or turkey, or hamburger
 ‘Cause to me that’s suicide, self-murder.⁴⁰

Gender identity / gender roles and relations

The gender roles and relations subscribed to by male rappers are of a highly conservative nature. Within NOI ideology, for example, one of the first steps toward returning to the “original” order resides in “re-establishing” the total subjugation of women to men. Justifying such action by the need to control rampant black female sexuality (and thereby maintain as well the presumed existence of “racial purity”), Elijah Muhammad once advised his followers:

But, still, go out there today—right now—and you will see every color out there looking at the Black woman. They want her! She’s the best walking in the Sun! We’re going to take her; we’re going to tie her up at home. We know she is the best. We’re going to tie her at home and set the bedsteads on her if necessary to keep her there! We’re not going to let her run rampant—not like wild animals. She is too good. She is too beautiful!⁴¹

The gender order envisioned by Five Percenter is also highly traditional. Within the Five Percent worldview, the counterpart of male divinity is female fecundity: black men are Gods, black women are Earths. Consequently, “F” in the Supreme Alphabet stands for “Father”: “one who is qualified to give life mentally as well as physically. FATHER means to FAT-HER with a true knowledge of herself so that she can show her EQUALITY by rearing the children properly.” Assigned to the letter “U,” “The UNIVERSE is everything; SUN-MAN, MOON-WOMAN, STARS-BABIES.”⁴² In “Mahogany,” from *Let the Rhythm Hit ‘Em* (1990), Rakim informs us of changes in the demeanor of his “tenderoni” Moon after exposing her to his self-generated solar activity:

She’s “live-er” and much more wiser
 From the light I shine and her brain cells spark
 Constantly, so she can glow in the dark

American females. But there are some who question the behaviors sanctioned in Yo-Yo's lyrics, such as drinking "Eight-Ball" (Old English 800 malt liquor) or threatening to "smoke" (shoot) any woman who protests Yo-Yo's enticing away her man.⁴⁵

National and civic identity

A profound ambivalence in the national and civic identities of African Americans can be traced back as far as the northern free black community of the early American republic.⁴⁶ The nationalist side is represented in a historically evolving Afrocentric cultural identity and an attitude toward the American state that has taken alternative as well as oppositional forms. With respect to cultural identity, an attempt to paint a more positive vision of Africa is what inspired Jungle Brothers to adopt their group's very name. In "Black Is Black" the group invokes the centrality of a pro-black identity for African Americans:

Black is black is black is black
 In America today, I have to regret to say
 Somethin', somethin' is not right, and it deals with black and white
 Tell me my G, is it me? naw, it's just society
 Propaganda, huh? why is it we meander, huh?
 In a zone with hateful beasts, all of this BS must cease
 All I am is one black man in a mighty big white hand
 Brother, brother, sister, sister, if you're miss or if you're mister
 Listen, please, to this fact: black is black is black is black.⁴⁷

The overriding character of African American identity and interests also motivates the lyrics of Sister Souljah's "Hate That Hate Produced" on *360 Degrees of Power*:

Souljah was not born to make white people feel comfortable
 I am African first, I am Black first
 I want what's good for me and my people first
 And if my survival means your total destruction, then so be it
 You built this wicked system
 They say two wrongs don't make it right
 But it damn sure makes it even.

To hard-core political rappers, the national symbols of U.S. civic identity have become a ready target. For example, the group Juvenile Delinquentz, in a cut by the same name on Terminator X's *In the Valley of the Jeep Beets* (1991), challenges a teacher's request to salute the American flag:

Why pledge allegiance if a nigga ain't patriotic?
 So you sent me to the dean, Marcello
 She filed a compliant and wrote up a fellow

'Cause I didn't put my right hand on my chest
 And fall victim to the next man's progress
 I got mad and kicked a crater in the wall
 Broke down shit with a stick like Walking Tall
 'Cause the African American got offended
 I slapped a dean and then got suspended
 By a bitch in a red, white, and blue dress
 I went home on a parental request.

Similarly, rapping at a time when the U.S. Supreme Court had just upheld flag burning as an expression of First Amendment rights, Yomo and Maulkey in "Glory" on *Are U Experienced?* (1991) tell their listeners:

By the dawn's early light
 America's situation is not right
 No matter how much they ignore me
 They can't, 'cause I can say "burn old glory."

And in response to George Bush's sending troops to the Persian Gulf in January 1991, the Geto Boys responded with "F——— a War" on *We Can't Be Stopped* (1991):

Motherfuck a war, that's how I feel
 Send a nigga to the desert to get killed
 Cause two suckers can't agree on something
 A thousand motherfuckers die for nothing
 You can't pay me to join an army camp
 Or any other military branch
 Of this united goddamned face of that bitch, America.

Before rushing to embrace the Geto Boys, however, pacifists should take note that the group's resistance to war is more an individualistic affair than a principled one. "Y'all lucky I ain't the president," they affirm (and we, no doubt, would agree), "Cause I'd push the motherfucking button and get it over with / Fuck all that waitin' and procrastinatin' / And all that goddamn negotiatin'."

Issues of African American national identity are central to two disputes in which message rappers are currently embroiled: the "humanism" of KRS One and Boogie Down Productions, and the market-crossover phenomenon. From the very beginning, KRS One appeared uncomfortable with the black identity label: "I'm not white or red or black, I'm brown," he informed us in his second album, *By All Means Necessary*, in 1988. With his launching of the H.E.A.L. (Human Education Against Lies) Project in 1991, KRS One affirmed his social identity as a human being first:

The H.E.A.L. Project simply says that before you are a race, a religion or an occupation, you are a human being. Once we begin to act human, we can act African correctly. If you're thinking African and not human,

you're not a correct African. You've got to think correctly, from the human aspect of yourself. Here I am a human being. I'm not Black, I'm brown, I'm not white, I'm beige. I'm not Jewish, I'm a human being.⁴⁸

This "humanistic" disposition immediately drew flack from more nationalist-oriented rappers such as XCLAN on their 1992 album *XODUS*, after which XCLAN's Professor X attempted to clarify the situation:

Politicians have differences in opinion and philosophies with each other, like Democrats and Republicans. But that does not stop them from having dinner and playing tennis and golf. We differ with KRS-One's philosophy—the humanist view in young Black people does not leave them focused on the real atrocities placed on their existence. Ours is a pro-Black view. We do not have any problem with KRS-One personally. When it comes time to fight I think KRS-One would be a person I would trust at my side. We're not mad at him man.⁴⁹

Unmollified as well as chastened by the low record sales of H.E.A.L.'s *Civilization vs. Technology* album, KRS One recently and angrily reaffirmed his particularity as a black man within a universally defined humanity: "I lecture and rap without rehearsal / I manifest as a black man but I'm universal."

Now what's this all about Chris and humanity?
 In my face you're happy but in private you're mad at me
 Yo! Pro-blackness is your solution
 But I really don't know about the style you're using
 Yo! Too many teachers in the class spoil school
 After a while, you've got blabberin', fuckin' fools
 This person is talking about sex
 It ain't enough to study Clarence 13X
 The white man ain't the devil, I promise
 If you want to see the devil take a look at Clarence Thomas
 Now you're sayin' "who?" like you're an owl
 Throw in the towel, the devil is Colin Powell.⁵⁰

The highly charged issue surrounding crossover record hits—that is, rap records whose content is deliberately diluted in order to appeal to the pop market, i.e. the white music mainstream—reached a new level of acuteness with the 1992 release of EPMD's deftly executed "Crossover."⁵¹ But the issue is more complex than it might first appear. Increasingly disenchanting with the quality of society pushed upon them by the radical Right over the past decade, white youth, and young white males in particular, are increasingly attracted to the socially rebellious stance of hip hop culture.⁵² In this way the crossover phenomenon may be seen, in part, as an unanticipated by-product of a black-oriented cultural activity. But when PE, for example, records "Bring the Noize" on *Apocalypse 91 . . . The Enemy Strikes Back* (1991) with the rock group Anthrax and subsequently

tours the country on the white rock circuit, one can be sure that they do so with crossover dollars in their eyes. What makes Public Enemy's approach so ingenious, however, is that the group manages to pull all of this off without any political dilution of its message.⁵³ For others, however, politics never once entered into the equation. When, for example, Ezy-E on the title cut from NWA's *Niggaz4Life* (1992) unleashes cynical lines like, "Why do I call myself a nigga so quick? / So I can reach in my drawers and pull out a bigger dick," thereby invoking hypersexual, stereotypical images of Bigger Thomas (and his judicial cousin, Clarence), one can rest assured that the marketing target lies squarely outside the African American community. With the release of *Body Count* (1992), Ice-T was added to the crossover ranks. While no one can accuse his album of having renegeed on the message side, it nonetheless tilts forcefully toward white audience appeal with its heavy-metal musical backing.⁵⁴ In openly and acerbically criticizing the crossover phenomenon, however, rappers and magazine pundits have generally ignored these particular manifestations.

Enmeshed in market relations of the larger society, imprinted with heavy borrowings from the dominant culture, the cultural crossover of rap music remains a fact of life. Black youth of the 1990s appropriate the peace symbol of the 1960s white youth counterculture as their own, and no one blinks an eye. For truly if, by some sleight of hand, the existence of black cultural purity might yet be claimed, it would arrive only at the expense of its own dynamism. Still, the struggle to maintain boundaries, however elusive or illusory, remains a critical issue. Whatever the pitfalls of national consciousness—and they are legion—African American liberation will eventually be won or lost around the question of how, precisely, black national identity is politically harnessed.

Putative solutions: education and community control

From the antebellum era onward, education has remained a major concern for African Americans. If message rap is any indication of the beliefs of contemporary black youth, concern with educational issues has lost little of the vigor of yesteryear.⁵⁵ What has changed, and probably for the worse, is how knowledge itself is defined. Most message rappers view *education*—one that specifically teaches one's "true" and "original" social identity—as the solution to the basic social ills of African Americans. For the Armageddon-inclined, the day of judgment marks that juncture where black people, having acquired self-knowledge, shall inherit a social identity and social structure no longer at odds with one another, and a just and lasting peace shall return once more to Planet Earth. For the somewhat more politically astute such as Sister Souljah or Public Enemy, on the other hand, the issue of *community control*—with the formation of powerful and dynamic black business enterprises at the core—constitutes the primary road to self-determination. By no means a reprise of the W.E.B. Du Bois/Booker T. Washington "debate" at the turn of the last century, there is, nonetheless, at least one parallel to be observed: Whether through education or economic entrepreneurialism,

the envisioned new “order,” as well as the means to that order advanced by the vast majority of rappers, remains distinctly conservative in political terms, notwithstanding frequent contemporary allusions to AK-47 rifles, military formations, or incendiary devices. Militant form, as old-school veterans know too well, should never be confused with revolutionary political content.

On the community-control side, Chuck D notes that “we got to take control of our community and it takes hardcore efforts—being hardcore and positive. We try to show that PE has a strong man and woman point of view, which means if you’re over 18, all that fun and games and baby shit got to be tucked away to the side. Business and responsibility has got to be number one and two.” But “business is family,” and “we ain’t got family the way it’s supposed to be. So I mean, we’ve got to go to a school or structure that can teach us family.”⁵⁶ Hence education and business are indissolubly linked.

In demanding reparations from U.S. corporations, Chuck D advances the argument traditionally used for small neighborhood businesses owned by community outsiders:

I have a song called “Shut-em Down,” about how they got businesses in our community that’s just gettin’ paid and we’re smokin’ so much money. I like Nike, but wait a minute—my neighborhood supports them, so they should put some money back in it. The corporations owe us, they got to give up the dough to my crew and my talent, or we got to shut-em down. The best way to boycott a business is not standin’ in front of them actin’ like monkeys and bangin’ on windows, tellin’ them to get out! No, you open up your own business and support your own. That’s the only way.⁵⁷

And, finally, despite its lack of a credible track record in the economic realm, the post-1975 Nation of Islam’s nationalistic quest for economic self-sufficiency appeals strongly to those rappers drawn to the world of petty capitalism—Chuck D and Ice Cube among them.⁵⁸ Describing his change in outlook following the birth of his son, Ice Cube recently remarked:

It opened my eyes. He’s not going to have to beg for a job. That’s what really made me get involved with the Nation [of Islam], because it’s like I don’t want him to have to go through the school system and beg for a job at the end. You know, just begging for crumbs from master’s table, the thing that Negroes are doing nowadays. I don’t want my son to have to fall into that. I want my son to be able to go into a Black business or start his own business, you know, to have something for ourselves.⁵⁹

Concerning the issue of education, in the world of message rap at least three spheres of knowledge are addressed: formal, street, and “scientific.” Generally speaking, the body of formal knowledge transmitted at the primary and secondary levels of the public school system is deemed irrelevant to the needs of African American youth. The “lie-bury” (library), moreover, is the place where white folks “bury their lies.” Rapper Wise Intelligent of Poor Righteous Teachers describes the situation of

sitting in the school all day in history, a must pass class, and they're telling you that George Washington cut down the cherry tree, Christopher Columbus discovered America, Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates are the fathers of philosophy. You're thinking what *did* black people do? Teach me black history. This school is dominated by black youth, why are we subjected to learning white or caucasian history? So I went outside of school and gained information that wasn't being presented to me.⁶⁰

The process of education consists of the transmission of a certain body of knowledge, values, and skills. Reading into Wise Intelligent's criticism of the formal process, what the curriculum lacks is knowledge about black people—an indication, as well, of the value assigned things Eurocentric. KRS One of Boogie Down Productions observes, moreover, that values transmitted in the classroom often assign greater weight to technological achievement than to the quality of human relations:

The educational system teaches people to feel that civilization is measured by the tools that a given society creates. In other words, just because we can go to the moon, we have fast cars, boats, planes, etc., etc. that does not make us civilized. The concept "civilization vs. technology" is basically the war of good and evil. Which basically is a war between the civilized and the technological, or should I say the civilized and the barbarian.⁶¹

Notwithstanding the very real weaknesses of public education, the danger, however, is that knowledge and skills necessary to functioning in a highly technical society will be rejected along with the Eurocentric orientation of the educational system. It is in this vein that Chuck D, in his inimitable way, sends a warning to black youth: "It's true, they're not teaching us our history at school. Those muthafuckas are sayin', 'I ain't supposed to.' They don't give a fuck. But you better get through high school, and whatever they teach, you better do your best to learn it. Spend less time drinkin' them damn 40's [bottles of forty-ounce malt liquor], spend less time on the corner and more time in them books."⁶²

Implicitly defined, for the most part, street knowledge is learnedness acquired from one's life experiences in a harsh urban setting, knowledge basically concerned with survival skills: how to avoid being taken advantage of while gaining greatest advantage for oneself.

The highest level of understanding, "scientific" knowledge, lies on the plane of wisdom, which usually denotes a metaphysics influenced in one way or another by astrology or numerology, both often filtered through Masonic teachings. Invoking "Funke Wisdom," the title cut on his 1991 album, *Funke, Funke Wisdom*, Kool Moe Dee believes that those who "live for the money" are worshipping pseudoscience, a "material math":

Mathematically it all adds up
 All people are equal, but equal to what?
 Once you understand that there's a spirit to math
 Add soul to the science and subtract the riff-raff

24-7-3-65, 'cause 9 to 5 ain't live, we're in no-drive
 Take the first power, elevate to the third
 Manifest the power of the spoken word
 Three hundred and sixty degrees of subliminal
 Fortify the book of forty-four minerals
 Four elements and four seasons
 Four corners of the world, it's all even
 Mother nature and father time
 Align with the nine planets and combine
 To influence the mind and control the whole system
 Knowledge ain't enough—you need funke, funke wisdom.

In the case of Five Percent NOI rappers, especially, wisdom resides in a metaphysics that filters the world through a Supreme Alphabet and Supreme Mathematics. The twenty-six categories of the Supreme Alphabet and the additional ten of the Supreme Mathematics furnish overarching guidance for everyday life. For example, in an exposition that might have baffled the Prophet Muhammad himself, the Supreme Alphabet's letter "I" stands for "ISLAM meaning I-SELF-LORD-AND-MASTER [and], in the case of men, I-SELF-LOVE-ALLAH'S-MATHEMATICS. ISLAM is the Black man, woman and child's true CULTURE meaning way of life." Similarly, the numerals one, two, and three in the Supreme Mathematics stand for KNOWLEDGE ("know the ledge"), WISDOM ("the manifestation of one's knowledge"), and UNDERSTANDING ("the clear picture drawn up in one's mind through knowledge and wisdom"), respectively. The sum of 1 + 2 (knowledge plus wisdom) yields 3 (understanding), thereby placing one's comprehension of the universe on a scientific foundation.⁶³

As "poor, righteous teachers," Islamic-oriented rappers are imbued with the duty to proselytize, to spread the truth as they understand it, to every corner of the 85 percent world. In fact, virtually all message rappers seem to consciously regard themselves as teachers with a mission to address the failings of the educational system as regards African American youth. In the opinion of Sister Souljah,

Hip-hop is a blessing because the [Poor] Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian and KRS-One have actually been *the* educational system for Black kids, in place of the so-called educational system that is entirely financed by the American government. And in the absence of the voice of young people in hip-hop, we would have even more chaos than we have today.⁶⁴

When not comporting himself in gangsta fashion, KRS One in "My Philosophy" on *By All Means Necessary* (1988) considers his role of teacher in a double way: as an instructor of how "dope" rhymes should be fashioned and as a philosopher contemplating how life should best be lived. "I am a teacher and Scott [La Rock] is a scholar / It ain't about money 'cause we all make dollars." "Teachers teach and do the world good." They also work to counter negative stereotypes:

But I don't walk this way to portray
Or reinforce stereotypes of today
Like all my brothers eatin' chicken and watermelon
Talk broken English and drug sellin'.

The political limits of message rap: defending the king holiday or jeffersonian burrwhish?

With respect to the visionary apostles of message rap, Nation of Islam ideology has proved to be the most extensively developed, presenting a cosmology that claims detailed knowledge of the origins of the universe as well as that of black oppression. Offering a transformed social identity—the lost/found “Asiatic black man”—unencumbered by the weight of recorded history, it envisions an ordering of male/female relations founded upon the suppression of women’s rights, a belief in millennial salvation, and a rigorous personal discipline reinforced by the vigilance of the Fruit of Islam. Drawing freely upon NOI doctrine, the worldview proffered by Five Percenters, on the other hand, is not much different. But the absence of hierarchical organizational structure and imposed discipline within the Five Percent has allowed for wide-ranging individual interpretations of doctrine, the notion that “all black men are gods” further serving to nullify the authority of male members over one another and thereby preserve individual autonomy.

The political limits of message rap have as much to do with its medium of propagation as with the absence of any current, widespread, grass-roots movement among African Americans for fundamental political change in the United States. Beset by a fragmentation and dilution of its content spurred by powerful market forces, message rap remains a strategic hostage of the audio/video recording industry whose charts it so assiduously rides in tactical terms. And hostage in another sense as well: to the selective and subtle censorship imposed by the corporate owners of the means of record production and distribution, its measures revealed at those precise moments when the political danger posed by African American militancy is deemed of greater consequence than “crazy dollars” to be squeezed from the message itself.⁶⁵ Moreover, in the absence of a mass-based social movement, message rap remains enmeshed in a “politics of recognition,” a captive of its own naive and youthful subjectivity—thereby (and contrary to all appearances) posing no particular threat to the political status quo. The video version of PE’s widely “cussed and discussed” single hit “By the Time I Get to Arizona” on the *Apocalypse 91* album provides a case in point. Rejected by voter referendum, the federal holiday honoring the birthdate of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., is not celebrated in Arizona. In PE’s “Arizona” video this disrespect to the memory of King, and to African Americans in general, is addressed in the symbolic assassination of Arizona’s governor. Although the command “Acknowledge our existence or we’ll blow you away symbolically” represents a collective advance over the

streetwise “Acknowledge my personal existence or I’ll blow you away in real life,” the overall genre remains trapped in a politics of recognition overdetermined, moreover, by the play of market forces. Substantive economic and political demands, alas, are held subservient to the demands of the collective ego.

With untold power to ignite the political imagination, soundbites and jump cuts seductively play upon our fascination with immediate surface reality, thereby hindering that process of intellectual cohesion that must take place if everyday life is to be grasped in its underlying, historical dimension. The problem appears to be a circular one: The artistic fragmentation of message-rap content provides a good measure of its appeal; paradoxically, a more continuous form and greater cohesiveness of content might well render the message less accessible, less palatable to hard-core listeners.

Growing out of an interpersonal orientation in an effort to “heal the conscience” of American society, the Civil Rights movement of the fifties and sixties matured and passed over into a Black Power phase that began to comprehend that society in terms of social structures, class divisions, and national questions. The collective wisdom of the past generation has not been transmitted to the new one. Where, for example, deconstructionists and other post-structuralists recognize only “objectivities” and structures abstracted from human sentiment, rappers tend to view social reality as subjective, with interpersonal experiences isolated from any consideration of institutional or societal structure. From a generational perspective, contemporary African American youth culture represents a collapse into the world of the personal and intersubjective: where general knowledge is equated with knowledge of self, but also a knowledge (“know the ledge”) often governed by mythology; where politics has become a politics of individual recognition; where popular culture is geared toward self-absorption and self-protection; where economics is translated as self-help entrepreneurialism and family business; where the rebel—aside from any consideration of social content—becomes hero; where, for the “hard core,” especially, every action, no matter how injurious to others, remains self-justified. The end result is symptomatic not only of the bankruptcy of corporate capitalism vis-à-vis its ability to meet the fundamental needs of basic masses of people, but also of the fundamental shortcomings of solutions and strategies proposed by both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements a generation ago. But while most rappers experience difficulty in seeing beyond the veil of interpersonal relations, a handful, including Speech of Arrested Development, comprehend that the enemy is a

system that oppresses. You know Thomas Jefferson said way back in his day that if the system doesn’t seem to be for the people, then that system needs to be bumrushed. That makes sense. If the system doesn’t seem to be for the people, why should the system stay? ⁶⁶

And why should it? All in favor of a “Jeffersonian bumrush” signify by saying “Yo!”

Word is bond
Peace-up.
-5000-

Postscript: The original draft of this essay was completed in early 1993. Since that time most of the artists mentioned in this study have disappeared from public view, attesting to the often fragile shelf life of individuals and groups in the music marketplace. Their absence, alas, has also transformed this very article into a colored museum piece of sorts. With message rap pushed off the charts, the rap genre today tends to be dominated by gangsta themes. But the results were predictable: Without an external mass political movement to serve as a guidepost, young message rappers, acting alone, proved incapable of probing deeper into the social content of their art. Moreover, an artistic movement that gave birth to African American political consciousness in the eighties has also served as an obstacle to its further development. Although innovations within rap certainly continue to take place, they have tended to do so on the artistic rather than the political plane.

Notes

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1. As Angela Davis remarked to Ice Cube: "We need to listen to what you are saying—as hard as it may be to hear it. And believe me, sometimes what I hear in your music thoroughly assaults my ears. It makes me feel as if much of the work we have done over the past decades to change our self-representation as African Americans means little or nothing to so many people in your generation. At the same time, it is exhilarating to hear your appeal to young people to stand up and to be proud of who they are." "Nappy Happy: A Conversation with Ice Cube and Angela Y. Davis," *Transition* 58 (1992):177.
2. See, for example, Clarence Major, comp., *The New Black Poetry* (New York: International Publishers, 1969); LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (New York: Morrow, 1968); and Larry Neal, *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989).
3. William Eric Perkins, "Nation of Islam Ideology in the Rap of Public Enemy," *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 5 (Spring 1991): 42.
4. See Todd "Ty" Williams, "Poetically Correct," *The Source* 32 (May 1992): 42–44, 59; Joe Walker, "The 'Last Poets' Explore New Art Form," *Muhammad Speaks*, March 14, 1969, 36; Bill Simmons, "The Last Poets," *Journal of Black Poetry* 1 (Fall 1968): 67–68.
5. Ronald Jemal Stephens, "The Three Waves of Contemporary Rap Music," *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 5 (Spring 1991): 25–40. Stephens's essay is insightful in many ways, but I have not found the names he assigned these "waves" to be particularly useful.

6. These are categories of convenience with a considerable overlap between them. For example, some of the more politically "righteous" rappers sometimes behave like gangstas in public, and some of the more gangsta oriented also have been known to invoke religious principles. Those who are nominally secular, on the other hand, may also claim allegiance to the programs of the Five Percenters or the Nation of Islam. And, perhaps even more important, the record albums of many rappers often contain a mix of message, entertainment-oriented, and gangsta-inspired rap in order to appeal to multiple market segments.
7. This section draws, in large part, on informative articles appearing in the *Los Angeles Times*: William Ellet and John Thurber, "Growing Violence in L.A.—A Heritage of Isolation and Hostility," July 23, 1972, G5; and "Modern Gangs Have Roots in Racial Turmoil of '60s," June 26, 1988, 28. See also Léon Bing, *Do or Die* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 148–156.
8. "Modern Gangs."
9. On the eve of the May 1992 Los Angeles rebellion, Crip strength was estimated at thirty thousand members, that of the Bloods at ten thousand. Gordon Witkin et al., "The Men Who Created Crack," *U.S. News and World Report*, August 19, 1991, 51.
10. See Jefferson Morley, "Contradictions of Cocaine Capitalism," *The Nation*, October 2, 1989, 341–347; and Witkin et al., "The Men Who Created Crack," 44–53.
11. For documentation of these tendencies, see Ernest Allen, Jr., and John H. Bracey, Jr., eds., *Unite or Perish: The Contours of Black Radical and Black Nationalist Thought, 1954–1975* (in progress).
12. See Richard Brent Turner, "Islam in the United States in the 1920's: The Quest for a New Vision in Afro-American Religion" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1986); Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); and St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There* (Los Angeles: CAAS and the University of California, 1990), vol. 2, chap. 5 especially.
13. For studies of NOI eschatology, see E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 2d ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1973). On Moorish Science, see *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America* (Chicago: 1927), chaps. II:18; X:22, 24; XII:8, 9; XLV:1; and XLVIII:8. The Moorish Science Temple was founded by Noble Drew Ali in Newark, New Jersey, in 1913. Contrary to virtually everything written about his so-called mysterious end, Drew Ali died at home on July 20, 1929, following a three-month illness officially ascribed to "tuberculosis broncho-pneumonia." He was buried six days later in Royal Oak Cemetery on Chicago's South Side. Although in the wake of the prophet's death, the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) lost its central authority forever, the organization continued to grow throughout the 1930s in membership as well as in the number of new temples established. See Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *Anyplace But Here* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1966), 205–208, the original written source of misinformation regarding Ali's death; Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults in the Urban North* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), 41–51; Peter Lanborn Wilson, "Shoot-Out at the Circle Seven Koran: Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple," *Gnosis* 12 (Summer 1989): 44–49; "Cult Leader Dies; Was in Murder Case," *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1929, sec. 2, p. 12; "Most Noble Drew Ali Is Laid to Rest," *Chicago Defender*, August 3, 1929, 1; and

- Standard Certificate of Death No. 22054, Timothy Drew, issued July 25, 1929, Office of Cook County Clerk, Cook County, Illinois.
14. See Ernest Allen, Jr., "The New Negro: Explorations in Identity and Social Consciousness, 1910–1922," in 1915: *The Cultural Moment*, ed. Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 48–68.
 15. See John Woodford, "Testing America's Promise of Free Speech: *Muhammad Speaks* in the 1960s, A Memoir," *Voices of the African Diaspora* (CAAS, University of Michigan) 7 (Fall 1991): 3–16; and Ernest Allen, Jr., "Religious Heterodoxy and Nationalist Tradition: The Continuing Evolution of the Nation of Islam," in *New Movements and Trends in the World of Islam*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (London: Curzon, forthcoming).
 16. "I am going to shoot dice until I die," claimed Clarence 13X, cited in Prince-A-Cuba, "Black Gods of the Inner City," *Gnosis* 25 (Fall 1992): 60. Born in Danville, Virginia, on February 22, 1928, the former Clarence Edward Smith, a decorated veteran of the Korean War, reportedly joined the NOI in April 1961. Legend has it that he was expelled from Harlem NOI Temple No. 7 by Malcolm X, which would place his departure prior to December 1963. Complicating the story, however, are FBI reports stating that Clarence 13X consistently attended New York City NOI affairs from 1963 through March 1965. See Charlie Ahearn, "The Five Percent Solution," *Spin* 6 (February 1991): 57; Prince-A-Cuba, "Black Gods of the Inner City," 60; Prince-A-Cuba, *Our Mecca Is Harlem: Clarence 13X (Allah) and the Five Percent* (Hampton, Va.: U.B. & U.S. Communications Systems, 1995); Anne Campbell, *The Girls in the Gang*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 216–217; Yusuf Nuruddin, "The Five Percenters: A Teenage Nation of Gods and Earths," in *Muslim Communities in North America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 109–132; SAC [Special Agent in Charge], New York to Director, FBI, June 1, 1965, FBI New York file 157-1489; SAC, New York to Director, FBI, September 17, 1965; SAC, St. Louis to Director, FBI, September 17, 1965, FBI St. Louis file 100-20019; SAC, St. Louis to Director, FBI, October 22, 1965. These and all subsequent FBI references are taken from the FBI's FOIA file on Clarence 13X and the Five Percenters. I am indebted to Muhammad Abdullah al-Ahari/Bektashi of the Institute of Islamic Information and Education for the Campbell reference and to Prince-A-Cuba for his clarifications of Five Percent history and doctrine.
 17. What was worse, Clarence 13X at some point proclaimed *himself* "Allah," thereby implicitly delegating Elijah Muhammad, Messenger of Allah, as his subordinate. The doctrinal relativization of spiritual authority may have contributed to a major MSTA organizational crisis in March 1929, when a recalcitrant official was assassinated by followers loyal to Noble Drew Ali, as well as to the failure of a consolidated leadership to emerge from within the MSTA following the prophet's death some four months later. Similarly, no single leader has been able to claim autonomy over the Five Percenters since the death of founder Clarence 13X in 1969. As rapper Lakim Shabazz noted, "I feel that Father Allah taught us we are all leaders unto ourselves." Cited in Ahearn, "Five Percent Solution," 57.
 18. The Five Percenters first came to the attention of the New York City media in 1964, following the murders of a Jewish shopkeeper and his wife in their 125th Street store; Five Percenters were arrested and charged with the slayings. By the summer of 1967,

- with the threat of a black urban rebellion hanging in the air, Mayor John Lindsay's Urban Task Force was scrambling to bring African American "militants" under its wing through various activities and programs. The results were peaceful Harlem nights, rapid growth of the Five Percent, and the eventual university matriculation of a handful of its young members. In the early morning hours of June 13, 1969, Clarence 13X Smith was assassinated in the lobby of Martin Luther King Towers, a Harlem housing project, by unknown assailants. [SAC?] New York to Director, FBI, June 1, 1965, FBI file 157-6-34; SAC, New York to Director, FBI, November 16, 1965, FBI file 100-444636; FBI Report, New York City, February 17, 1966; "Black Militant Slain in Harlem," *New York Times*, June 14, 1969, 30; Barry Gottehrer, *The Mayor's Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 87–108, 237–40; Campbell, *Girls in the Gang*, 177, 216–224. Campbell reports that in 1978 the Five Percenters accounted for 28 percent of all gang-member arrests in Brooklyn.
19. "Disturbance by Group Called 'Five Percenters,' Harlem, New York City, July 29, 1965, Racial Matters," memorandum, FBI file 157-6-34.
 20. Reprinted, in another format and under the title, "English C. Lesson #2 (Lost Found Muslim) (1–40)," in Issa Al Mahdi, *The Book of the Five Percenters* (Monticello, N.Y.: Original Tents of Kedar, 1991), 525–528. See also Campbell, *Girls in the Gang*, 218–219.
 21. "Disturbance by Group"; SAC, New York to Director, FBI, October 18, 1965, FBI New York file 157-1489.
 22. Lord Jamar of Brand Nubian explains it this way: "When the lessons were written, in 1934, 5% of the population of the Planet Earth had knowledge of self, 85% had no knowledge of themselves at all, and 10% were the preachers, and all of that, who knew that the true and living God was the original Black man, and was teaching Christianity, keeping them in mental slavery. That's where that term 5% comes from. 'Cause we a hundred percent, right and exact." Rakim, of Eric B. and Rakim, asserts that the 5 percent genuinely address the science if Islam; that the 10 percent, who are Muslims, know the science and submit to the will of Allah but are "bloodsuckers of the poor" because they sell, rather than freely distribute, works like the Holy Qur'an; and that the remaining 85 percent practice religions like Christianity and Buddhism—unlike Islam, which involves culture. Harry Allen, "Righteous Indignation," *The Source* 19 (March/April 1991): 52; "Rakim: The Five Percent Science," *Rap Sheet*, October 1992, 16. A creative example of the synthesis between elements of original NOI ideology and enhancements contributed by the Five Percent can be found in Grand Puba's "Soul Controller," *Reel to Reel* (Elektra, 1992) and Brand Nubian's "Allah U Akbar," "Ain't No Mystery," and "Meaning of the 5%" on *In God We Trust* (Elektra, 1992). See also L-O 7 Self, The Revelator, "Coming Full Circle on a Solo Tip: Grand Puba," *RapPages* 1 (December 1992): 31–35.
 23. See Lawrence Mamiya, "From Black Muslim to Bilalian: The Evolution of a Movement," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21, 2 (1982): 138–152; Clifton E. Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims: The Transition from Separatism to Islam, 1930–1980* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1984); and Steven Barboza, "A Divided Legacy," *Emergence* 3 (April 1992): 26–27, 30, 32.
 24. Related a Five Percent follower: "We the 5% do not teach Islam as a religion, but as a Divine way of life for the Blackman, but we do not separate ourselves from the Most Honorable Elijah, for we know that he is the last and greatest Messenger of ALLAH." Cited in Campbell, *Girls in the Gang*, 217.

25. See Ahearn, "Five Percent Solution," 55–57, 76, especially p. 57; and H. Allen, "Righteous Indignation," 48–53.
26. See Perkins, "Nation of Islam Ideology," 41–50. Support for Farrakhan can also be found in Professor Griff's *Pawns in the Game* (Skywalker, 1990) and Kao's *II Wiz*7*Dome* (Luke, 1991).
27. Prince Akeem, "Flush the Government," *Coming down Like Babylon* (BRC, 1991). See also James Muhammad, "Prince Akeem Takes Hip-Hop to New Level," *Final Call*, June 17, 1991, 6; and Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady, eds., *Nation Conscious Rap* (New York: PC International, 1991), 265–305.
28. Gangsta rappers tend to assert that what they describe is "like it is," claiming that they are simply articulating attitudes that already exist within African American communities and therefore have no responsibility themselves for disseminating them. ("I'm not a role model, therefore I have no responsibility to anyone except myself.") The same can be said at times for the reinforcement of antiblack stereotypes ("We're all niggaz because that's what 'society' says we are").
29. See David Mills, "The Gangster Rapper: Violent Hero or Negative Role Model?" *The Source* 16 (December 1990): 30–34, 36, 39–40. Having passed from an Afrocentric orientation in *By All Means Necessary* (Zomba, 1988) and *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop* (Zomba, 1989) to a more universalist stance in *Edutainment* (Zomba, 1990) and the multiartist H.E.A.L. album *Civilization vs. Technology* (Elektra, 1991), KRS One has more or less reverted to his origins with *Sex and Violence* (Zomba, 1992).
30. Divided into two parts, Ice Cube's recent *Death Certificate* (Priority, 1991) claims to embody a "death side, a mirrored image of where we are today," and a "life side, a vision of where we need to go." But both sides are filled with such pain and abomination that one seriously doubts the ability of most listeners to tell the difference between the two.
31. "Speak Up on It," *Life of a Kid in the Ghetto* (Polygram, 1991).
32. Tupac Amaru Shakur, "I'm Just One Black Man Standing Alone, but I Won't Sell Out," *RapPages* 1 (April 1992): 22. Providing a direct link from the militancy of the sixties to that of the present, Tupac Shakur's godfather, Geronimo Platt (now geronimo ji Jaga), was former minister of defense for the Black Panther Party. See James Bernard, "Doin' the Knowledge," *The Source* 16 (December 1990): 28–29.
33. See, for example, Rick Telander, "Your Sneakers or Your Life," *Sports Illustrated*, May 14, 1990.
34. West Coast Rap All-Stars, "We're All in the Same Gang," *We're All in the Same Gang* (Warner Brothers, 1990). Here recalcitrant fellow-NWA member Ezy-E warns that exposure to violence is one's own responsibility: "Yo, Ezy's no sellout / if you can't hang in the streets then get the hell out."
35. See *The Source* 21 (June 1991): 32–35.
36. Public Enemy, *Apocalypse 91 . . . The Enemy Strikes Black* (Def Jam, 1991); Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1988); Tupac Shakur, *2Pacalypse Now* (EastWest, 1991); Yomo and Maulkey, *Are U Experienced?* (Ruthless, 1991); W.C. and the MAAD Circle, "Fuck My Daddy," *Ain't a Damn Thing Changed* (Priority, 1991).
37. Yo-Yo, *Make Way for the Motherlode* (EastWest, 1991); De La Soul, *De La Soul Is Dead* (Tommy Boy, 1991); Tupac Shakur, *2Pacalypse Now* (EastWest, 1991).
38. "Chuck D All Over the Map: An Interview by Robert Christgau and Greg Tate," *Rock and Roll Quarterly* (Fall 1991): 15. Apparently the NOI's creation mythology

- lacks sufficient explanatory power for Chuck D, who has latched onto the equally chimerical musings of one of our more creative, semiskilled intellectuals, Frances Cress Welsing, author of *The Isis Papers* (Chicago: Third World, 1991). The "Cress Theory of Color Confrontation and Racism," which assigns to white racism a biologically determined origin, has been implicitly and historically refuted in the monumental two-volume final work of anthropologist St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There*.
39. The political economy of pimps and hos is defined thusly: "Capitalism is a 'pimp' and 'hoe' system. It is a system of pimps and hoes. You're either selling, or you're being sold. And if you can buy that means you were selling although you're being sold. Put it this way. The system is so great all of us have the opportunity to become pimps. That should make you feel real good. You usually start out as a hoe and work your way up. . . . In a system like that all men are slaves." KRS One, in Eure and Spady, *Nation Conscious Rap*, 178–179. See also D-Dub's interview with KRS One, "What We Left behind in Africa Was Greater Than What We've Gained Here," *RapPages* 1 (April 1992), 34–35.
 40. Boogie Down Productions, "My Philosophy," *By All Means Necessary* (Jive, 1988). Hear also A Tribe Called Quest, "Ham 'n' Eggs," *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* (Zomba, 1990).
 41. Elijah Muhammad, "The Knowledge of God Himself (Saviour's Day, February 26, 1969)," in *Our Saviour Has Arrived* (Chicago: Muhammad's Temple of Islam No. 2, 1974), 56.
 42. Issa Al Mahdi, *Book of the Five Percenters*, 354, 362.
 43. "Funke Wisdom," *Funke, Funke Wisdom* (Jive, 1991). For an examination of spirituality in Kool Moe Dee's raps, see Angela Spence, "Theology in the Hip-Hop of Public Enemy and Kool Moe Dee," *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 5 (Spring 1991): 51–59.
 44. See Michele Wallace, "When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music Is Rap," *New York Times*, July 29, 1990, H20.
 45. Yo-Yo, "You Can't Play with My Yo-Yo," *Make Way for the Motherlode* (EastWest, 1991). Hear also the expressive, if not "low-down," female/male exchanges between Yo-Yo and Ice Cube in the latter's "It's a Man's World," *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* (Priority, 1990) and continued in Yo-Yo, "What Can I Do?" *Make Way for the Motherlode*.
 46. See Ernest Allen, Jr., "Afro-American Identity: Reflections on the Pre-Civil War Era," *Contributions in Black Studies* 7 (1985–1986): 45–93.
 47. Jungle Brothers, "Black Is Black," *Straight out the Jungle* (Warlock, 1988). See also J The Sultan, "The Brothers Do the Nature Thing," *The Source* 2 (November/December 1989): 21.
 48. D-Dub, "What We Left Behind," 34–35.
 49. Louis Romain, "Roots & Boots," *The Source* 32 (May 1992): 36, 39. See also Have-lock Nelson, "X-Clan: Four Righteous Messengers from Flatbush," *RapPages* 1 (June 1992): 31–39.
 50. Boogie Down Productions, "Build and Destroy," *Sex and Violence* (Zomba, 1992). Interestingly, the number "8" in the Supreme Mathematics stands for "Build or Destroy."
 51. EPMD, "Crossover," *Business Never Personal* (Def Jam, 1992). A related issue concerns the role of white rappers within this overwhelmingly African American music idiom; see, for example, Reginald C. Dennis, "The Great White Hoax," *The Source* 25 (October 1991): 52–55.
 52. As Chuck D observes, "Heavy metal and rap music are both defiant forms of music. The white kids, they'll go for it, they'll respect you if you come out and say, 'This is

- who we are and what we like. Minister Farrakhan is who we support. Fuck it, that's how it is.' Their parents got a problem with it, but they don't." Cited in Ras Baraka, "Return of the Hard," *The Source* 25 (October 1991): 31–32.
53. One of the ways in which PE accomplishes this is through allusion and euphemism—for example, the substitution of "other man" for "white man" in its lyrics. The "other man" is then successfully counterposed to the "brother man," without generating the hostility from potential white fans that a straight nationalist appeal might.
 54. Having come under heavy attack for its antipolice lyrics, the album was subsequently re-released with one original selection, "Cop Killer," removed.
 55. Preoccupation with the subject of intellect also seems to be an important facet of rap culture. Check out, for example, the very "handles" of individual rappers such as Wise Intelligent, Intelligent Hoodlum, The Genius, or MC Brains; or note the name of Yo-Yo's Los Angeles-based organization, the Intelligent Black Women's Committee; or count the number of times Sister Souljah refers to herself as "intelligent" on the TV talk shows that she frequents.
 56. Dane Webb, "Black Is Back, and We're All In," *RapPages* 1 (February 1992): 34; "Chuck D All Over," 14, 16.
 57. Webb, "Black Is Back," 38.
 58. On NOI economics, see Playthell Benjamin, "The Attitude Is the Message: Louis Farrakhan Pursues the Middle Class," *Village Voice*, August 15, 1989, 23–31. Since the late 1980s Farrakhan family members and the organization itself have substantially increased their economic holdings. See *Chicago Tribune*, March 12, 1995, 1, 16–17.
 59. Cited in James Bernard, "Building a Nation," *The Source* 27 (December 1991): 34. Chuck D's business ideals are virtually identical: "So I don't make some statement like, yeah, I hope to make some money to send my daughter to college. I hope to make some businesses that she can run. And that's the fucking thing about capitalism—we as black people keep looking for fucking jobs, we ain't getting no jobs 'cause there's a tight rope on white business, and they definitely ain't giving a black face a fucking job because business is family." "Chuck D All Over," 16.
 60. Eure and Spady, *Nation Conscious Rap*, 63.
 61. Adario Strange, "Edutaining the Masses," *The Source* 25 (October 1991): 29.
 62. Webb, "Black Is Back," 35.
 63. Issa Al Mahdi, *Book of the Five Percenters*, 332–334, 356; Erik B. & Rakim make reference to "know the ledge" on "JUICE (Know the Ledge)," in *JUICE* (MCS, 1992).
 64. Sister Souljah, interviewed by Gordon Chambers, "Souljah's Mission," *Essence* (December 1991): 108.
 65. As Sister Souljah has recently learned, it is "legitimate" to publicly screen music videos with violent scenes, but when the violence depicted is that of African Americans taking the initiative against the state, censors draw a hard line. "For instance, they'll say, 'We can't play your video because there's blood,' but then they'll play Geto Boys, and there's blood. Or they'll say, 'We can't play your video because there's guns,' but then they'll play NWA, and there's guns. Then they'll say, 'Well, you can't show a gun being fired,' then they'll play NWA and you see the smoke coming out of the gun, you know? So, what I'm saying is I think that all of the policies, which these stations say they have, have been ignored in the case of my video because I'm a woman talking about race relations. Sister Souljah, interviewed by Sheena Lester, "Diggin' Deep: RapPages Talks to the Ladies," *RapPages* 1 (October 1992): 32.
 66. Cited in Sheena Lester, "Arrested Development Hits Home—And Takes Us There," *RapPages* 1 (December 1992): 51.