

Kickin' Some Knowledge: Rap and the Construction of Identity in the African-American Ghetto

Ralph H. Saunders

Abstract. Rap music and videos provide a potentially powerful lens through which to view inner-city neighborhoods and their residents. Rap also provides ghetto residents with a potentially powerful means with which to write their histories and forge their own identities. The dominant discourse on African Americans relegates them to the margins of historical action. Rap is explored as a kind of alternative public sphere, one in which blacks are reflecting on and challenging that discourse. This paper challenges the wholesale categorization of certain populations or groups as "other," and reaffirms the power of individuals and collectivities to make their own histories.

INTRODUCTION

To outsiders, "ghettos" manifest themselves in menace, as dangerous and depressing locales to be shunned. For residents, however, the ghetto is the unavoidable everyday. In the United States, the dominant discourse¹ reserves the tag "ghetto" for lower-income, inner-city neighborhoods inhabited predominantly by African Americans. Additionally, for many white Americans the notion of "blackness" conjures images of "the ghetto." Dominant discourses in the United States are constructed through history books, news reports, summary statistics, and television and Hollywood representations; they are produced, almost entirely, by people who are not black and who do not live in the inner city. According to these discourses, ghettos are marginal places inhabited by marginal people.

Through rap music and videos, many African Americans are challenging the dominant discourse on themselves and the inner-city places in which they live. Rappers reveal another dimension of the inner cities, namely, a human dimension. Through rap, many African-American youths are seizing the power to form their own identities and to project them, through the popular media, to a wide audience. Though mediated by the large, white-owned corporations that sponsor it (such as MTV and Time-Warner), this project has inherent revolutionary potential. Because its reach is extended by the communicative power of the media, it is likely to help shape the dominant discourse on blacks and the inner city. The critical questions are:

Do rappers really construct an alternative to the dominant discourse? And, if the images are symmetric, can rap still be seen as a revolutionary movement and a revolutionary analytical tool?

Rap is a term used, sometimes interchangeably with hip-hop, to describe a range of musical styles. Though originally associated with a specific New York City African-American subculture, rap's popularity has spread around the world. Today, "rap" is produced and consumed by whites, blacks, and Latinos alike. It is performed and heard in cities, suburbs, and small towns, in a multitude of languages by men and women from different economic classes and sociocultural experiences.

Even just among African-American rappers, style, content, and attitude range widely. Nor are individual rappers restricted to any particular aesthetic or theme throughout their work. On an album by Too Short, for example, the rapper on one track preaches redemption from the ignominy of the ghetto through righteous living, and on the very next track brags about his prowess as a rapper, his ability to "take out" challengers, and his power over women.²

The term "rap," like "rock," then, can only stand in a general and abstract way for a variety of musical production and performance styles. It does not necessarily imply any particular political stance or lyrical focus. Within this large and general category, however, are a number of raps and rappers whose focus is everyday life in the inner city and the forces structuring it. These rap "songs" constitute a powerful, new counter-discourse to the prevailing discourse on black people and the inner-city neighborhoods in which many of them live.

Rappers are deconstructing the ghetto—block by block, tenement by tenement, individual by individual. Their words and images, though often merely rhetorical, do depict hard realities. While not nullifying the dominant discourse, and in some cases graphically reinforcing aspects of it, rap humanizes a condition, a standard of living, and a social situation otherwise glossed over.

The three raps examined here—Too Short's "The Ghetto" (1990), Boogie Down Productions' (BDP's) "Love's Gonna Get-cha" (1990), and Niggers With Attitude's (N.W.A.'s) "One Hundred Miles and Runnin'" (1990)—address the issue and importance of place in the lives of ghetto youth. Each gives social context to the ghetto, showing not just where these rappers come from but the quality of life they experience there. They also demonstrate the extent to which some people in the inner city are grappling with and breaking from the stereotypes imposed upon them. In their songs and videos, Too Short, BDP, and N.W.A. dare residents to rethink their

own lives and relationships to the ghetto and force analysts to reconsider narrow interpretations of the African-American ghetto as a marginal place. The result is a potentially powerful lens through which to view inner-city neighborhoods and the people residing in them. It also provides ghetto residents with a potentially powerful means through which to write their own histories and forge their own identities.

These three videos illuminate aspects of life in the ghetto overlooked in most other popular and academic portrayals. They also reveal the diversity of attitudes toward and interpretations of these places within rap. Difference here goes beyond locale—Too Short is from Oakland, BDP are from New York, and N.W.A. are from Compton in Los Angeles. In his video, Too Short distances himself from the place he raps about, harshly criticizing black people and white governments alike for creating and perpetuating ghetto conditions. Rapper KRS-One of BDP locates himself in an inner-city neighborhood, soberly but passionately walking his audience through the day-to-day life of a young man trying to make for himself and his family the best life possible. Finally, N.W.A.'s rap video is a celebration of place that inverts stereotypes, seeking power in that which is cast as negative within the dominant discourse.

These three music videos represent only a sample of the voices of the ghetto. Nor do they constitute a definitive exploration of rap. Obviously, a complete inventory would have to include female rappers as well as the expressions of other, non-rapping, inner-city residents of various ages. The variety of experiences in these three videos underscores that there is no single voice within the ghetto. It also demonstrates the complexity of this emergent counter-discourse by and about black people and the places in which they live.

Anytime members of a group that has been excluded from participating in the creation of the dominant discourse about itself seize the power to shape that discourse, they are involved in an inherently revolutionary project. Many rappers are challenging the marginalization of black people and their neighborhoods. They are transforming social and political hostilities into harmonic and enlightening oral histories, and they demand a hearing.

"DIS-ING" THE NARRATIVE

Underlying the myth of the United States as unified and integrated is a complex network of people and places, styles, and manners, and occasionally concurring and frequently conflicting interests. Order has been imposed upon this diversity. While countless voices speak, few rise above the

din. The melting pot becomes convenient shorthand for cultural domination by people of European descent.³ Though not uncontested and always negotiated, Europeans and their descendents have established and extended their rule over all of the peoples of this country. To this day, with little variation, they continue to govern. Additionally, European Americans largely control the production and dissemination of public information. They own the major news media and publishing houses and have written the bulk of educational text books. Theirs are not the only voices, but they are the loudest. Among those voices less heeded are those of 30 million African Americans, 58 percent of whom, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, live in central cities (i.e., not in suburbs or rural areas).

Albert Memmi (1967) has noted that the tendency to classify people as "other" is rooted in colonialism. The "other," writes Memmi, is characterized by the colonizing (read European) elite as a negativity or void, everything the colonizer is not. This colonized "other" is an anonymous collectivity, lacking will and the power to create its own identity. White America tends to treat blacks as "others," relegates them to the margins, and, subsequently, fears them, ignores them, is annoyed by them, and, when engaging them, fetishizes them. This paper challenges the wholesale categorization of those less familiar as "other" and reaffirms the power of individuals and collectivities to make their own histories.

Margins of Difference

In recent years, as state and federal politicians have shifted their attention away from domestic issues, taking with them our limited public funds, inner-city neighborhoods have moved further onto the periphery. They remain physically and spiritually removed from the gentrification that has refortified the hearts of some cities, such as Boston. Often, in fact, they are displaced by it. These neighborhoods rim prosperity but do not share in it. Elsewhere, entire cities that once drove the U.S. economy have become places on the margin; the people living within these cities—Detroit, for instance—are equally marginalized.

Rob Shields (1991:31), who has analyzed places on the margins of various societies, argues that "spatial images...function as frameworks of cultural order." Both people living within a place and those with no direct contact with it—including many policy-makers—rely on value-laden projected images to make sense of reality. Marginalized places, because they are not fully integrated into the social and economic mainstream, are literal sites where hegemonic ideas are both reproduced and challenged. Their very marginality makes possible the persistence and creation of local modes of

expression, forms of being, and strategies of resistance—essentially an alternative form of popular memory.

Popular memory exists only in relation to a dominant or hegemonic consciousness (Popular Memory Group 1982:211). The dominant is depicted in textbooks, news reports, national archives, and the anecdotal historical references of politicians. Popular memory reveals itself through intimate cultural forms, among them autobiographies, oral histories, letters, novels, and rap music. These more personal media carve out a conceptual terrain of resistance, what Daniel Nugent (1988:vi) has termed alternative “political and cultural spaces.” Attention to popular historical texts celebrates diversity and liberates historical discourse from the illusory isomorphism of the “totalizing classificatory grid” (Anderson 1991:184).

The modernist project of state building masks internal diversity behind the guise of consensus. Postmodernists recognize that the logic of enumeration and classification was imposed by a modernist (i.e., white, male, and capitalist) elite to structure an inherently fragmented world. But contemporary society remains as internally diverse as ever (S. Nugent 1988). Coherence, postmodernists argue, is an illusion, a mask strategically superimposed upon subordinated groups to secure their cooperation in projects that may not benefit them. Gramsci called these subordinated peoples subaltern groups, those who “are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they do not realize it” (in Guha 1988:35). Subaltern groups constitute society’s masses but are politically and economically marginal. They are the workers driving the economy but not the profit-takers. Theirs is “an *alternative* history to the official one provided... by historians... [S]ubaltern history in literal fact is a narrative missing from the official story” (Said 1988:vi-vii, italics in original).

Gramsci’s work in subalternity has been furthered by a group of South Asian historiographers, anthropologists, and literary critics. Ranajit Guha (1988), for example, argues that subaltern historiography challenges the relationships of power that sustain conditions of subalternity. It attempts to wrest from the elite the power to construct identity and shape the past, present, and future. From a postmodern perspective, which remains sensitive to the diversity of voices within a society, subaltern studies complement and expand the prevailing discourse by redefining the world as complexly overdetermined.

In his foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Edward Said contends that subaltern and official histories “are different but overlapping and curiously interdependent territories” (1988:viii). Their interdependence pertains, in part, to the fact that each is a response to the same general set

of objective conditions, which is not to say that both parties had an equal hand in their creation. Additionally, their interdependence reflects the extent to which subaltern peoples reproduce the conditions of their subalternity. As Dirks (1987) and Cohn (1983) have noted, so-called native categories are often elite exports. Dirks (1989:7) writes that in India “[c]aste,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘custom’ to mention just some of the most obvious categories, were dramatically reconstructed by colonial rule.” Thus, examining insider-generated accounts can reveal discrepancies between these and outsider depictions, as well as the extent to which insiders reproduce their own marginalization.

As previously noted, the dominant or elitist discourse concerning the ghetto is shaped by people for whom this place is only an object of study—that is, by people who do not live there. There is, of course, no single such place as *The Ghetto*. Instead, there are many ghettos, each the product of a particular set of historical relations, those mediations between processes at various scales. The migration of blacks from the South was a regional process; the social conditions that forced them into urban ghettos were national; and the economic conditions that keep them trapped there increasingly are international in scope. The actual form of a ghetto—whether concentrated in high-rise public housing or large and loosely settled—is site-specific. Within this diversity of spaces resides a diverse population.

Rap presents a plurality of revolutionary voices, challenging ghetto residents to assume identities of empowerment and daring outsiders, to paraphrase *Dirty Harry*, to make their day. Music critic Jon Pareles (1991) calls the tales of ghetto violence related by former N.W.A. leader Ice Cube “front-line reports on the status of the young black male as an ‘endangered species.’” As bell hooks (1990:29) comments: “Part of our struggle for radical black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory.” Rap, she writes, is key to that struggle.

The Rap on Rappers

Rappers, male and female, are self-appointed spokes(wo)men for ghetto residents. Usually they center themselves in their narratives and videos, talking at their audience, proclaiming their privileged position. Too Short walks through “*The Ghetto*,” simultaneously part of it and beyond its reach. He looks at what is transpiring and comments. In the R&B-styled chorus section, the male singer—who seems to speak more generally for the masses of people in the ghetto—empowers the rapper to speak out: “Why

don't you tell everybody, Too Short." Later, Too Short tells us outright that he "always tell[s] the truth about things like this" and that "you'd better listen to [him]."

Hard-core rap is more than the men and women who rap. It is a role, a privileged position or vantage point through which the people of the ghetto are waging war on hegemonic institutions (one of these institutions being the music industry itself!). Rap, writes hooks, "has enabled underclass black youth to develop a critical voice...a common literacy" (1990:27). She believes that it and other elements of popular culture "may very well be *the* central future location of resistance struggle" (1990:31).

This is not to imply that all rappers are revolutionaries. KRS-One, on the liner notes of BDP's *Edutainment* album, warns that rap is full of "false prophets." These "frauds of the revolution...call themselves the teacher and in another breath they're gangster popstar pimps acting the way the government wants black people to act." Their false message, claims KRS-One, continues to racially divide people. But "[t]he enemy is not the masses of people worldwide, it's the masses of demonic governments worldwide." "The true revolution," he argues, "will unite humanity...all races."

To understand a rapper's message, one must recognize his or her intended audience. In "The Ghetto," Too Short admonishes other black ghetto-dwellers to follow his example in what he calls "getting out." Yet his plea is cold and contradictory. The overriding impression is that getting out is impossible. There are too many obstacles. From his privileged position as a commercially successful rapper, Too Short can afford to preach material redemption.

In BDP's "Love's Gonna Get-cha," rapper KRS-One focuses on another audience; yes, he is speaking to ghetto residents, but he also is addressing outsiders. He makes this obvious by translating insider lingo for us: "I give him a pound—oh, I mean I shake his hand." The resultant message intends to challenge both insider and outsider notions of the forces that shape inner-city social life.

BDP are self-proclaimed "Black revolutionaries, first for humanity, second for the upliftment of Africa." The form of their revolt is "edutainment." Their rhythmic mix of rap music, storytelling, and video imagery conspires to change how audiences think about the world. BDP recognize that this means hitting the airwaves. Like many of us, ghetto residents get their news and impressions of what is outside their world from television. Rappers are capturing this medium to offer ideas of their own, to "edutain" insiders and outsiders alike. Even MTV, that international producer of pop music tastes, cannot ignore these powerful voices any

longer; it belatedly began airing a show called "Yo! MTV Raps" that quickly became one of the cable station's most popular offerings.

EXEMPLARY MODERNISTS

Marshall Berman (1991), writing about the group Public Enemy, has called rappers "exemplary modernists." These "prophets of rage" carry a message of liberation. They tell it like it is while making clear "it" has to change. They have what Berman calls "a revolutionary orator's conviction that his words can shake people to make history." Modernist artists, according to Berman, are propagandists. They respond to the essential fragmentation of modern life by spinning an integrating myth of redemption and cultural regeneration. They represent a revolutionary avant garde. In some cases, modernist artists hearken a return to a mythical past (e.g., the Viennese fin-de-siècle architects Otto Wagner and Camillo Sitte, painter Caspar David Friedrich, and Gesamtkuntslers Richard Wagner). In others, they demand a radical break from the past through the liberating logic of reason (e.g., playwright Bertolt Brecht). Most African-American rappers fall into the latter category. Because black Americans have few so-called glory days to recall in the history of the United States, they have relatively little about which to feel nostalgic. Although some have turned to Africa—a mythic place far removed from their ghettos—most black rappers focus on the everyday world at hand.

Rappers commonly challenge black people's social and material subordination and the relations of power perpetuating them. In the struggle for personal as well as communal empowerment, rappers are seizing the everyday. "They have brought the noise of the streets and schoolyards and social clubs into the thick of modernist culture" (Berman 1991). Theirs is a reaction against the conditions of modernity that ensnare them, against the "cold traffic-swept modern city of the slide rule and the slum" (Schorske 1980:72). It is also an "insistence on the need to seek emancipatory forms which express rather than suppress differences denied...in the totalizing languages of the state" (Corrigan and Sayer 1991:219).

Berman sees rap's revolutionary challenge as all-embracing. He writes that "nobody and nothing in the world is safe from rap." Like hooks, Berman says that rappers question the very order of U.S. society and that rap is part of a plan to resist it. This includes a fundamental shift in how blacks define themselves. Rappers such as Too Short and KRS-One decry the negative connotations associated with the word "nigger" and insist that blacks "drop the 'N-word'." They admonish blacks to build an image of

power, claim territory as their own, and reclaim history by asserting for the descendents of Africa an active position as opposed to the reactive one allotted them in a European-dominated discourse. In short, the challenge of rap is to pull black people and the places in which they live into the center of historical action. This does not necessitate marginalizing the rest of the world. It does reject the relegation of black people to the periphery.

Yet, again, we must not assume that rappers speak with one voice or that the discourse they produce is either coherent or noncontradictory. Rappers are a diverse group with varied ambitions, both personal and for their people, as the three videos described below demonstrate.

Too Short: "The Ghetto"

The place Too Short describes is shabby, violent, and governed solely by the need to survive. It is a place ignored by those living elsewhere, particularly those with money and power. Its residents behave like prison lifers, "disrespecting" one another and the material world around them. Too Short describes his neighborhood: bumpy streets, burned out lights, a crack addict giving birth to a dead baby. Children are hungry, a man lies dying in the gutter, and gangs of police officers offer hassles instead of help. In a word, this place is a ghetto.

This ghetto is an end-of-the-road place. But not only society's losers roam here. Rather, it is a place to which Too Short's "people" were born; it is the "only place that [they] know," and, for most, there seems to be no place else to go. Getting out is the rap's message. The question is: How? Two sets of obstacles confound ghetto residents: systemic and personal/cultural.

Because of systemic obstacles, even if "you can pay your bills and not drink too much," you are not likely to get ahead, let alone get out. These obstacles include ineffective schools, police harassment, and housing authority red tape. (Too Short calls the Oakland Police Department and Housing Authority "gangs" sent by the mayor to put down him and his people.) Professional sports, too, are implicated; Too Short states that society confuses its priorities when "600 million [are spent] on the football team, and [a ghetto] baby dies just like a dope fiend."

More insidious, however, is racism—a personal and cultural obstacle. Much of Too Short's rap is a message of empowerment reminiscent of "black is beautiful." Too Short tells his audience, "never be ashamed of what you are, proud to be black, stand tall and hard." The rapper challenges African Americans not to reproduce the biases and sociocultural prejudices of their historic oppressor.

In particular, Too Short is critical of black people “running around here using the N-word,” behaving despicably and self-destructively. For Too Short, nothing is positive or empowering about the word “nigger.” Nowhere does he suggest that its usage by black people challenges its historically negative meanings. Instead, its usage demeans and implies acceptance of a subordinate status. Too Short invites those black people “using the N-word”—he calls them “niggers”—to die “so black folks can take over.”

Before resistance can occur, the reproduction of self-hatred and bigotry within the ghetto must be stopped. In other words, Too Short is not just blaming the system for the condition of the ghetto. Also culpable are his “sister” who smokes crack while pregnant, his “brother” who breaks into his house, and his “mama” who would rather spend money on drugs than on food for her children. In this rapper’s opinion, pride, respect, and intelligence are the keys to transforming or getting out of the ghetto.

The bleak portrait Too Short paints is echoed in BDP’s rap “Love’s Gonna Get-cha.” But BDP exhibit no optimism about the chances of leaving the ghetto. Their rap concentrates on the constraints separating young urban blacks from prosperity.

Boogie Down Productions: “Love’s Gonna Get-cha (Material Love)”

“Love’s Gonna Get-cha” is a first-person narrative of a young black man living in a New York housing project. The protagonist (let’s call him KRS-One, as he is the rapper telling the story and playing the role) does well in school, stays out of trouble, and loves his family. But life is hard and dangerous. After returning home from school one day, KRS-One hears gunfire: “Do my ears deceive me?” he raps. “No that’s the fourth time this week. Another fast brother shot dead in the street.” As the oldest of three children, he is compelled to find a way to earn money to help his hard-working, single mother support the household. He also covets money because he is ashamed of his poverty. Unable to find work, he encounters the neighborhood drug dealer: “So here comes Rob, his gold is shimmering. He gives me two hundred for a quick delivery. I do it once, I do it twice. Now there’s steak with the beans and rice.” Before long, he is set up full-time as a rival drug dealer. He is armed, drives a BMW, and has a complement of employees. When Rob wounds KRS-One’s brother in a drive-by shooting, KRS-One declares war. In the ensuing shoot-out, Rob, a cop, and several members of each side’s “crew” are shot. The story ends with KRS-One confronting the police. We must assume that he will be either arrested or killed, becoming just “another fast brother shot dead in

the street.” The video’s final shot shows KRS-One in a posture of contemplation as the words “This Is Edutainment” scroll across the bottom of the screen.

Like Too Short, BDP describe a ghetto torn by poverty, drugs, and violence. Their answer to the question—How do you get out of the ghetto?—is sobering. You don’t. The reason: little legitimate opportunity. But dealing drugs is no solution. The video implies that the real profiteers are not the local dealers warring over territory but someone on the outside. In addition, according to KRS-One, drug dealing is part of “the way the government wants black people to act.” In other words, drug dealing and its attendant violence perpetuate conditions that maintain the subalternity of people in the ghetto.

BDP challenge the myth that America’s poor, especially black people, are lazy and that only a willingness to work stands between them and middle-class security. Obviously, ghetto residents want to improve their lives. In “Love’s Gonna Get-cha,” KRS-One’s mother works long and hard to support her family. It is not enough. Eager to help but frustrated by his inability to find employment, KRS-One chooses the lucrative lifestyle of the outlaw. But, as the video shows, its benefits prove short term. BDP contest the idea that becoming a hoodlum is a viable career. In the long-run, “when you fall in love with a material item and you start scheming and carrying on for it...it’s gonna get-cha!” What, then, is left? Trapped between poverty and the grave, the rap’s young protagonist repeatedly asks his audience: “What the fuck am I supposed to do?”

N.W.A.: “One Hundred Miles and Runnin”

In Walter Hill’s movie *The Warriors*, a small band of street hoods is accused of assassinating the leader of New York’s most powerful gang during a citywide meeting somewhere uptown. The film follows this gang, the Warriors, as it tries to return to its home base in Brooklyn. The members encounter and do battle with a variety of vengeful gangs. The overriding sense is that all of underground New York is out for revenge.

N.W.A.’s video “One Hundred Miles and Runnin” explicitly retells this story. The action shows the all-male group running through Los Angeles, avoiding trickery, and fighting with the police as they try to return to their home base of Compton. N.W.A.’s is a paranoid vision of the world; everyone living outside of Compton is a “motherfucker,” an enemy out to trick them, get them, kill them. “One Hundred Miles and Runnin” is a defiant explication of their lives as well as a virulent attack on all the “motherfuckers” who get in their way or try to keep them down.

N.W.A. (which stands for Niggers With Attitude) strike the pose of violent revolutionaries: A “nigger with an attitude [is] a nigger with nothing left to lose.” Being a gangster is a way for those who have “been accused and abused” to fight back against those who “don’t know shit until [they] been in my shoes.” They are self-proclaimed outlaws, living on the edge of a society that considers them a terror, and so they terrorize it—“you want me to kill a motherfucker and I done it.” They are, in fact, so “bad” that the local police cannot stop them; in the video, the FBI must be called in. Like Too Short, N.W.A. perceive the system—whether the Oakland Police Department, the housing authority, or, in this case, the FBI—as rival gangs. In another borrowing from *The Warriors*, the video cuts to a black, female radio disk jockey who sardonically warns the gang of its impending capture. This has a double meaning; beyond her role in the narrative, she represents the disk jockeys who refuse to play N.W.A.’s music on the radio.⁴

This video is set almost entirely outside the ghetto. As an interesting foil to Too Short’s goal of fleeing the ghetto, this rap is about getting back in. It turns the core/periphery dichotomy on its head. The world outside of Compton is remote and hostile, one where there is “nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.” When they do get home, the whole tone of the video’s imagery changes. Whereas the previous scenes were shot in black and white and mostly at night, the final scene is in full, rich color and filmed in sunlight. The viewer is shifted from a mistrustful, antagonistic world to one of celebration. The group’s members are seen amid a mass of scantily clad young women, all apparently eager to have sex with them. For N.W.A., the ghetto represents much more than a safe haven and incontestable turf. It is also a fun, sex-soaked party. The message: If you are on top, Compton is a great place. But stray beyond its borders and be prepared to fight and run and kill for your life.

N.W.A. use the derisive stereotypes imposed upon black people—including the appellation “Nigger”—as vehicles of empowerment. They want to be white America’s worst nightmare. They turn the charge that blacks don’t want to get out of the ghetto, that they enjoy their life on the dole, into an understatement. For the members of this rap gang, life in Compton is positively glorious.

RAPPIN’ ABOUT A REVOLUTION

Perry Anderson has defined revolution as “the political overthrow from below of one state order, and its replacement by another” (Anderson 1984:112). To be revolutionary, then, is to engage in actions that intend or attempt to create that kind of change. State orders are more than systems

of government, more than armies and jails. State orders are also those sets of values, meanings, images, and language as derived from and informing everyday life that have been privileged and naturalized as "common sense" (Roseberry 1992). But there are always, everywhere, multiple common senses. These will sometimes overlap and sometimes conflict. State orders, therefore, in so far as they support and are supported by a network of discourses, are contested.

"The Ghetto," "Love's Gonna Get-cha," and "One Hundred Miles and Runnin'" all reinforce elements of the dominant discourse on blacks and the inner city and reveal specific challenges to it. These three videos demonstrate a number of the ways in which rap can be seen as revolutionary.

Many rappers are directly addressing the experience of life in America's inner cities. In doing so, they humanize a condition and a people otherwise demonized and objectified by the prevailing discourse. Rappers are voicing demands for dignity, and they are forging a space in which to achieve it. Rappers, as bell hooks has noted, are creating an arena for popular discussion, a kind of alternative public sphere within which inner-city blacks—among others—can communicate and develop a critical sensibility. (The meaning and appropriateness of the word "nigger," for example, is one such issue that is apparently being negotiated.) Rappers represent a previously silenced group that has seized a platform from which to comment on and shape the discourse about itself. In so doing, they are contesting the dominant order that had silenced them.

Rappers also are issuing a series of specific challenges to the dominant discourse and its supporters and to people living in "the ghetto." BDP have offered a critique of the notion that the urban poor need only a strong desire to succeed in order to improve their economic standing; N.W.A. have inverted a number of prevailing concepts and categories, finding power in the perceived fear of black men and safety in neighborhoods otherwise thought of as overrun by crime. Even when endorsing capitalist solutions to the problems of poverty—arguing, for example, that blacks need to make more money—rappers are challenging a fundamental aspect of the present state order, namely the historic position of African Americans (along with other subordinated groups) at the bottom of the social hierarchy. So, when Too Short shows himself and other members of his group wearing ostentatious gold jewelry and posing in front of Mercedes Benz sedans, he is positing an inversion of social norms. He is saying that it isn't necessary to "act white" in order to make it, and that blackness doesn't have to be about being poor.

Even if doomed to fail—whether by forceful repression as with the Black Panthers, or through cooptation as many expect in the case of rap—

a movement may still be revolutionary. To be revolutionary is to intend and work for fundamental social change. So, although revolution may be an event (Anderson 1984), revolutionary activity may remain a project, a stance, an alternative discourse. The people living in America's impoverished inner-city neighborhoods are talking to each other and the outside world through the popular media. Part of their message is a quest for personal and community empowerment through an affirmation of the power to construct their own identities, write their own histories, and shape their own futures. In this way, rappers are revolutionary voices.

These messages are increasingly difficult to ignore. Through the ubiquity of commercial media, rappers and their calls to action are being heard on inner-city streets and in suburban living rooms. Music television, such as MTV, sends video images into the homes of people who might otherwise have no contact with ghettos or black people. Rappers' in-your-face invectives have become almost unavoidable. In particular, young people—who quickly adopt styles popularized, in part, through these television channels—are increasing their awareness of the heterogeneity of voices speaking through popular culture. The images they form of the inner city, black people, and society in general increasingly reflect the cultural production of African Americans with first-hand knowledge of these places.

Adults today carry with them, however transformed by time, the popular cultural heritage of their youth. Rap music and videos will be part of the cultural heritage of the adults of tomorrow. For many people, rap will be the primary medium through which they form their image of and relationship to the inner city and black people. For black ghetto residents, rap offers a potentially powerful means through which to write their own histories and forge their own identities. Together with the products of an emergent generation of African-American filmmakers, rap is filling the airwaves and cinemas with the words, images, and messages of actual or at least purported insiders. It will be interesting to see the extent to which blacks who gain access to these platforms create a fully oppositional discourse. It will also be interesting to note the points at which their discourse intersects with or reproduces the dominant discourse it explicitly seeks to overturn.

NOTES

¹By "discourse" I mean a set of concepts, images, values, and practices—including language and speech—that define, inform, and justify a set of social relations (after Foucault 1971, 1972).

²The complex and conflicting relationship of rap and women is not explored in this paper. Rap is subject to the charge that male rappers are imagining a world that would be in no way liberating for women. Although I do not take up the task of a gendered analysis of rap music and videos, I recognize its importance and encourage such an effort.

³Clearly "European," like "white," is an overly broad category that masks its own internal differentiation. Without eliding the specific experiences of oppression of particular groups otherwise classified as European, it is not inaccurate to claim in a general way that European-Americans created the present state order and benefit, however differentially, the most from it.

⁴Few radio stations play N.W.A. raps, charging them with obscenity, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and homophobia.

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