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"Fear of a Black Planet": Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s

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INTRODUCTION

Popular wisdom regarding rap's (or Hip Hop's) political development sustains that rap music was not always political. It began as an apolitical "party music" with limited social relevance. For many observers, the advent of the group Public Enemy (PE) marked the emergence of rap as a political cultural form; PE as a point of enlightenment, as it were. The success of their "A Nation of Millions" (1988), ushered in a new rap aesthetic: gold chains are out, African medallions in; pride in oneself is pride in Black unity. Rap fans still believe in the power of "boomin' systems" and "gettin' funky," but they have attended to PE rapper Chuck D's advice to "move somethin'" and "own somethin'," too.

Clearly, Public Enemy marked a significant break in rap's dominant discursive terrain. Prior to the emergence of group members Chuck D, Flavor Flav, Terminator X, Professor Griff, and the S1-Ws, party-oriented funkateers like Run DMC, The Fat Boys, and Whodini dominated the commercial rap scene. Even Run DMC's frustrated and renunciatory 1983 hit "It's Like That" is a far cry from Public Enemy's resistive and emancipatory 1989 anthem "Fight the Power." Lyrically, rap's thematic territory has grown more complex and direct. Public Enemy's success opened the door to more politically and racially explicit material, some of which has made important interventions while other material seems dedicated solely to its potential sales value.

While a shift in rap's political articulations did take place, confining the definition of the cultural politics of rap to lyrical content addresses only the most obvious and explicit facet of the politics of Black cultural expression. To dismiss rappers who do not choose so-called "political" subjects as "having no politically resistive meaning" requires ignoring the complex web of institutional policing to which all rappers are subject.

Rap's cultural politics lies not only in its lyrical expression but in the nature and character of its journey through the institutional and discursive territories of popular culture. As is the case for cultural production generally, the politics of rap music involves the contestation over public space, expressive meaning, interpretation, and cultural capital. In short, it is not just what one says, it is where one can say it, how others

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react to what one says, and whether one has the means with which to command public space. Cultural politics is not simply poetic politics, it is the struggle over context, meaning, and public space.

> [Cultural politics is] the complex process by which the whole domain in which people search to create meaning about their everyday lives is subject to politicization and struggle. . . .The central issue of such a cultural politics is the exercise of power in both institutional and ideological forms and the manner in which "cultural practices" relate to this context. (Angus & Jhally, 1989, p. 2)

Ideological power and resistance is exercised through signs and language. As Angus and Jhally point out, critical links exist between institutional and ideological power. Popular pleasure involves territorial struggles and Black pleasure involves a particularly thorny struggle. If a Black teenage performer can draw 10,000 Black, Brown, and White teenagers into a major urban arena and they leave shouting "My Addidas!," a significant moment in the politics of Black cultural production has occurred. Run DMC's cry, "My Addidas!," is the chorus for a rap that describes the style, attitude, and demeanor of a "B-boy" (Hip Hop fan). "My Addidas!" celebrates Hip Hop style and street attitude: shoelaces untied, (shoe) tongues raised up, and sneakers clean as a whistle. Yet, sneakers are understood to be the shoe of choice for athletes, teenagers, and street criminals. Black teenage males sporting sneakers and other Hip Hop gear are perceived as criminal equivalents. Loud, public celebration of an object that signifies one's alien status is an act of defiance and self-possession.

My central concern here is the exercise of institutional and ideological power over Hip Hop and the manner in which the Hip Hop community (e.g., fans and artists) relate and respond to this context. More specifically, I will try to untangle the complex relationships between the political economy of rap and the sociologically based crime discourse that frames it. This involves a close examination of the large venue's resistance to rap and the media interpretations of rap concerts and incidents of "violence" that have occurred at them.[1] As exercises of institutional and ideological power are often experienced personally as well as collectively, I have constructed a collage of cultural politics in which the experience of being "resisted by venues" and the dominant discursive explanations for such resistance are conterminous.

SHOW-STOPPERS

Picture this: Thousands of young Black folks milled around waiting to get into the large arena. The big rap summer tour was in town, and it was a prime night for one to show one's stuff. The pre-show show was in full effect. Folks were dressed in the latest "fly gear": bicycle shorts, high-top sneakers, chunk jewelry, baggy pants, and polka-dotted tops. The hair styles were a fashion show in themselves: high-top fade designs,

[1]Venues are clubs, theaters, and other performance spaces. I am concerned specifically with large venues, e.g., the Capital Center (near Washington, DC), Nassau (NY) Coliseum, and Madison Square Garden (New York City). Also, note that I am particularly interested in accounts of rap music in major newspapers; music periodicals are not the focus here.

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dreads, corkscrews, and braids. Crews of young women were checking out the brothers; posses of brothers were scoping out the sisters, each comparing styles among themselves. Some wide-eyed pre-teenyboppers were soaking in the teenage energy, thrilled to be out with the older kids.

As the lines for entering the arena began to form, dozens of mostly White private security guards dressed in red polyester v-neck sweaters and grey work pants began corralling the crowd through security checkpoints. The free-floating spirit started to sour, and a sense of hostility mixed with humiliation crystalized. Men and women were lined up separately in preparation for the weapons search. Coed groups dispersed and people moved toward their respective search lines. Each person had to submit to a full-body pat-down and a pocketbook, knapsack, and soul search. Generally, however, it appeared that the men were being treated with less respect and more hostility.

As I approached the female security guards, fear began to well up inside me. What if, I wondered to myself, they find something I was not allowed to bring inside? What is prohibited, anyway? I stopped to think: "All I have in my small purse is my wallet, eyeglasses, keys, and a notepad, nothing 'dangerous.' " The female security guard patted me down and scanned my body with an electronic scanner while anxiously keeping an eye on the other sisters in line to make sure no one slipped past her. She opened my purse and fumbled through it, pulling out a nail file. She stared at me as if to say, "Why did you bring this in here?" I did not answer her right away, hoping she would drop the file back into my purse and let me go through. She continued to stare at me, trying to size me up to see if I was there to cause trouble. By now, however, my attitude had turned foul; my childlike enthusiasm to see my favorite rappers had all but fizzled out. I did not know the file was in my purse, but the guard's accusatory posture rendered such innocent excuses moot. Finally, I replied tersely: "It's a nail file, what's the problem?" The guard handed it back to me, satisfied (I supposed) that I did not intend to use it as a weapon, and I proceeded into the arena. As I passed her, I thought bitterly to myself: "This arena is a public place and I am entitled to come here and bring a nail file if I want to." Yet, my words rang hollow in my head; the language of entitlement could not erase my sense of alienation. I felt harassed and unwanted: "This arena isn't mine, it is hostile, alien territory." An unspoken message hung in the air: "You're not wanted here, let's get this over with and then we'll just send you all back where you came from." By this point, I was glad I had brought the nail file. I mused: "At least if one of those guards harasses me I'll have something to fight back with."

I recount this incident for several reasons. First, incidents similar to it continue to take place when rap concerts are held. A hostile tenor, if not one of actual verbal abuse, is a regular part of the rap fan's contact with arena security and police. Second, I want to provide a depiction of the high-level anxiety and antagonism that confronts young Black rap fans who are often merely tolerated and regarded with heightened suspicion and hostility by concert security forces. Imagine now the level of frustration that might possibly well up in a young Black teenaged boy or

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girl faced with this kind of social antagonism on a consistent basis. Large arenas and other hostile institutions that treat young African Americans with suspicion and fear are themselves often the subject of rappers' lyrics. Indeed, Hip Hop artists articulate a range of counter-reactions to the range of institutional policing faced by many young African Americans:

I've been wonderin' why
Peoples livin' in fear
Of my shade
(Or my hi-top fade)
I'm not the one runnin'
But they got me on the run
Treat me like I have a gun. (Public Enemy, 1990)

Here we go, yo
I'm a Negro wit an ego, so
Don't tell me what I'm doin' is illegal, no
I resort to violence only when provoked
Contrary to rumors I ain't no joke. (Salt 'n Pepa, 1990)

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 the minority. (NWA, 1988)

Young African Americans are positioned in fundamentally antagonistic relationships to the institutions that most prominently frame and constrain their lives. The public school system, the police, and the popular media perceive and construct them as a dangerous internal element in urban America—an element that if allowed to roam about freely will threaten the social order, an element that must be policed. The social construction of rap and rap-related violence is fundamentally linked to the social discourse on Black containment and fears of a Black planet. In this light arena security forces are the metaphorical foot-soldiers in the war to contain African Americans' public presence and public pleasure. The paramilitary posture of concert guards is a surface manifestation of a complex network of ideological and economic processes that attempt to justify the policing of rap music, Black youth, and African Americans generally.

It is this ideological position regarding Black youth that frames media and institutional attacks on rap and separates resistance to rap from attacks sustained by rock-and-roll artists. Black expression is by no means the only expression under attack. Popular White expressions, especially heavy metal rock music has recently sustained increased sanction and assaults by politically and economically powerful organizations such as the Parent's Music Resource Center (PMRC), American Family Association (AFA), and Focus on the Family (FF). These organizations are not fringe groups; they are supported by major corporations, national school associations, and local police and municipal officials.[2] However, critical

[2]See *Rock and Roll Confidential* (RRC), especially their special pamphlet, "You've Got a Right To Rock: Don't Let Them Take It Away" (1990). This pamphlet is a detailed documentation of the censorship movements and their institutional bases and attacks. *RRC* is edited by David Marsh and can be subscribed to by writing to *RRC*, Dept. 7, Box 341305, Los Angeles, CA 90034.

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differences exist between the nature of the attacks made against Black youth expression and White youth expression. The terms of the assaults on rap music, for example, are part of a long-standing sociologically based discourse that positions Black influences as a cultural threat to American society.[3] Consequently, rappers, their fans, and Black youth in general are constructed as co-conspirators in the spread of Black aesthetic and discursive influence. Heavy metal rock music may be viewed as a threat to the fiber of American society by the anti-rock organizations, but the fans (e.g., "our children") are depicted as *victims* of its influence. Unlike heavy metal's victims, the majority of rap's fans are the youngest representatives of a Black presence whose cultural difference is an ongoing internal threat to America's cultural development. These differences between the ideological nature of sanctions against rap and heavy metal are of critical importance because they articulate the ways in which racial discourses deeply inform social control efforts in the United States.

According to Haring (1989), "venue availability [for rap tours] is down 33% because buildings are limiting rap shows."[4] The apparent genesis of arena owners' "growing concern" is the September 10, 1988, Nassau (NY) Coliseum rap show when the stabbing death of 19-year-old Julio Fuentes focussed national attention on rap concert-related "violence." As Haring notes:

> In the wake of that incident, TransAmerica [a major insurance company] cancelled blanket insurance coverage for shows produced by G Street Express in Washington D.C., the show's promoter. Although G Street has since obtained coverage, the fallout of that cancellation has cast a pall over rap shows, resulting in many venues imposing stringent conditions or refusing to host the shows at all. (p. 80)

That the experience was frightening and dangerous for those involved is incontestable; however, the incident was not the first to result in an arena death, nor was it the largest or most threatening. During the same weekend of the Fuentes stabbing, 1,500 people were hurt when a "crowd without tickets tried to pull down fences" during singer Michael Jackson's performance in Liverpool, England (Associated Press, 1988). Yet, the Associated Press article made no mention of insurance company cancellations, no similar pall was cast over Jackson's music or musical genre, nor was any particular group held accountable for the incident. What sparked the venue owners' panic in the Nassau event was a preexisting anxiety regarding rap's core audience, namely Black working-class youth. The growing popularity of rap music and the media's interpretation of the incident fed directly into those anxieties. The Nassau incident and the social control discourse that frames it provides justifica-

[3]Attacks on earlier popular Black expressions such as jazz and rock-and-roll were grounded in fears that White youth were deriving too much pleasure from Black expressions, and that these primitive, alien expressions were dangerous to young people's moral development (see Chapple & Garofalo, 1979; Erenberg, 1981; Jones, 1963; Ogren, 1989; Lipsitz, 1990).

[4]Obviously, Haring is referring to building owners. In my research on venues, writers and venue representatives consistently refer to the buildings as the point of power and not their owners. This language serves to render invisible the powerful people who control public space access and make discriminatory bureaucratic decisions.

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tion for a wide range of efforts to contain the Black teen presence while shielding these practices behind naturalized concerns over public safety.

The pall cast over rap shows was primarily facilitated by New York media coverage of the incident. The *New York Post* headline, "Rampaging Teen Gang Slays 'Rap' Fan" (Pelleck & Sussman, 1988) fed easily into White fears that Black teens need only a spark to start an uncontrollable urban forest fire. Fear of Black anger, lawlessness, and amorality were affirmed by the media's interpretation and description of this incident. Venue owners all over the country were anxious to learn about what happened that night in Nassau County, and press interpretations were a critical aid in constructing the event's official transcript. According to Haring (1989), Norm Smith, assistant general manager for the San Diego Sports Arena, "attributes the venue's caution to the influence of discussions building management has had with other arenas regarding problems at rap shows" (p. 80). These discussions between venue managers and owners are framed by incident reports that are documented by venue security staff and local police as well as next-day media coverage. Such self-referential reports are woven together into a hegemonic interpretation of arena "violence." According to the *New York Times* coverage of the Nassau incident, the stabbing was a byproduct of a "robbery spree" conducted by a dozen or so young men (Marriott, 1988); Fuentes was apparently stabbed while attempting to retrieve his girlfriend's stolen jewelry. Marriott notes that of the 10,000 concertgoers, this dirty dozen was solely responsible for the incident. While the race of the perpetrators was not mentioned in the text, a photo of a handcuffed Black male (sporting a Beverly Hills Polo Club sweatshirt!) and mention of the assailants' Bedford–Stuyvesant residences stereotypically positioned them as members of the inner-city Black poor. This portrait of wanton Black male aggressiveness was framed by an enlarged inset quote which read: "A detective said the thieves 'were in a frenzy, like sharks feeding.'" By contrast, my own conversations with people who attended the event revealed that many concertgoers had no idea the incident even took place until they read the newspapers the next day.

Thus described as Black predators seeking blood for sustenance, the twelve Black youth who were stealing jewelry for money were viciously dehumanized. Poor youths who commit street crimes do so to attain consumer goods. In a society in which quality and quantity of amassed consumer goods is equated with status and prowess, it should not be surprising that some of these teenagers, who have accurately assessed their unlikely chances for economic mobility, steal such goods from other people.[5] The *Times* article not only mischaracterized their motives but also set a tone of uncontrolled widespread violence in describing the entire concert. The event was framed exclusively by the perspective of the police; no quotes were included from other concert patrons or anyone other than Nassau County Police Commissioner Rozzi and a Detective

[5]See Messerschmidt (1986) for an important critique of the race, gender, and class factors in street crime reportage (see especially pp. 54–58).

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Nolan. In the Nassau Coliseum case, police reports and media coverage form a solitary text binding racist depictions of Blacks as animals to ostensibly objective, statistically based police documentation, thus rendering any other interpretation of the so-called night of rampage irrelevant. Ultimately, this reporting provides venue owners with perfect justification to significantly curtail or ban rap performances at their arenas. As Haring reports, according to the Nassau Coliseum's director of marketing Hilary Hartung, no rap shows have been held at the coliseum since the September 1988 stabbing incident. Hartung "suspects it's by mutual choice" and claims the following:

> The venue looks at every concert individually. We check with all arenas before a concert comes here to check incident reports for damage or unruly crowds. It could be [a] heavy metal concert or [a] rap concert. (p. 80)

The social construction of "violence," that is, when and how particular acts are defined as violent, is part of a larger process of labelling social phenomena.[6] Rap-related violence is one facet of the contemporary urban crisis that purportedly consists of a rampant drug "culture" and "wilding" gangs of Black and Hispanic youth. When the (New York City) *Daily News* headline reads, "L.I. [Long Island] Rap-Slayer Sought" (Kruggel & Roga, 1988) or a *Newsweek* story is dubbed "The Rap Attitude" (Gates, 1990), these labels are important because they assign a particular meaning to a phenomenon (or event) and locate it within a larger context. Labels are critical to the process of interpretation because they provide a context for social behavior. As Hall (1978) points out in *Policing the Crisis*, once a label is assigned, "thereafter the use of the label is likely to mobilize this whole referential context, with all its associated meaning and connotations" (p. 19). The question then is not "Is there really violence at rap concerts?" but rather "How are these crimes contextualized and labeled?" In what already existing categories, for example, was the pivotal Nassau Coliseum incident framed? Further, whose interests do these interpretive strategies serve, and what are the repercussions?

Venue owners may have the final word on booking decisions but they are not the only site of institutional gate keeping. Another major power broker, the insurance industry, can refuse to insure an act approved by venue management. By way of explanation, to gain access to a venue a touring band or group first hires a booking agent to negotiate the act's fee. The booking agent then hires a concert promoter who "purchases" the group's show and presents the show to both the insurance company and the venue managers. If an insurance company will not insure a show because they believe it represent an unprofitable risk,

[6]See Messerschmidt (1986), especially Chapter Three, "Powerless Men and Street Crime." In it, Messerschmidt notes that: "Public perception of what serious violent crime is—and who the violent criminals are—is determined first by what the state defines as violent and the types of violence it overlooks. . . .The criminal law defines only certain kinds of violence as criminal—namely, one-on-one forms of murder, assault, and robbery, which are the types of violence young marginalized minority males primarily engage in. The criminal law excludes certain types of avoidable killings, injuries and thefts engaged in by powerful white males, such as maintaining hazardous working conditions or producing unsafe products" (p. 52).

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then the venue owner will not book the show. Moreover, the insurance company and the venue owner reserve the right to charge whatever insurance or permit fees they deem reasonable on a case-by-case basis. For example, Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh (PA) recently tripled its normal $20,000 permit fee for the group The Grateful Dead. Those insurance companies that will insure rap concerts have raised their minimum coverage from about $500,000 to almost $5 million worth of coverage per show (Rose, 1990). Accordingly, several major arenas have made it almost impossible to book a rap show, and others have flatly refused to book rap acts at all.

During my interview with Richard Walters, a booking agent with the Famous Talent Agency (a major booking agency that books many prominent rap acts) I asked him if booking agents had responded to venue bans on rap music by leveling charges of racial discrimination against venue owners. His answer was stunning:

> These facilities are privately owned, [owners] can do anything they want. You say to them: "You won't let us in because you're discriminating against Black kids." They say to you, "Fuck you, who cares? Do whatever you got to do, but you're not coming in here. You, I don't need you, I don't want you. Don't come, don't bother me. I will book hockey, ice shows, basketball, country music and graduations. I still do all kinds of things 360 days out of the year. But I don't need you. I don't need fighting, shootings and stabbings." Why do they care? They have their image to maintain. (Rose, 1990)

Walter's imaginary conversation is a brutally candid description both of the scope of power venue owners have over access to large public urban spaces and the racially exclusionary silent code that governs booking policies. It is also an explicit articulation of the aura created by the red-and-grey suited arena security guard who inquired about the purpose of my nail file. Given this scenario the unfortunate death of Julio Fuentes was not seen as cause for despair over the unnecessary loss of life; rather, it became the source of an image problem for venue owners and a sign of invasion by an unwanted element with little political or social leverage.

Because rap has an especially strong urban following, freezing rap out of major metropolitan arenas has a dramatic impact on rap artists' profits and ability to reach their fan base via live performance. Rap groups such as Public Enemy and others rely heavily on live performance settings to address current social issues, media miscoverage, and other issues that especially concern Black America. Because Black youth are constructed as a permanent threat to social order, large public gatherings of them are viewed as dangerous events. Black youth, who are highly conscious of their alienated and marginalized lives, will continue to be hostile toward those institutions and environments that reaffirm this aspect of their reality.

The presence of a predominantly Black audience in a 15,000-person capacity arena, communicating with major Black cultural icons whose music, lyrics, and attitudes illuminate and affirm Black fears and grievances provokes within the larger society a fear of the consolidation of Black rage. For venue owners and insurance companies, broken chairs, injury claims, or Black fatalities apparently are not important in and of themselves; however, they are important in that they symbolize a loss of control which might involve challenges to the current social configura-

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tion. Such incidents suggest the possibility that Black rage can be directed at the people and institutions that support the containment and oppression of Black people. As rapper Ice Cube (1990) forebodes in his rap, "The Nigga You Love to Hate": "Just think if niggas decided to retaliate?"

Venue resistance to rap music is driven both by economic calculations and the hegemonic media interpretation of rap's fans, music, and concert-related violence. The relationship between real acts of violence, police incident reports, economic calculations, and media accounts is complex and interactive. Further, it has most often worked to reproduce readings of rap concert violence as examples of Black cultural disorder and sickness. This matrix masks the source of discursive and institutional power by directing attention away from blatant and active forces of discrimination and fueling racially motivated control efforts by the police and discriminatory insurance and booking policies. Media accounts of these rap-related incidents solidify these hegemonic interpretations of Black criminality. Gilroy's (1987) study of race and class in Britain, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, devotes considerable attention to deconstructing dominant images of Black criminality. Gilroy reveals several ideological similarities between dominant media and police interpretations of race and crime in the United States and Britain. His interpretation of the construction of Black criminality in Britain is appropriate here:

> . . .distinctions between the actual crimes which Blacks commit and the symbolism with which the representation of these crimes has become endowed is highly significant. . . .The manner in which anxiety about Black crime has provided hubs for the wheels of popular racism is an extraordinary process which is connected with the day to day struggle of police to maintain order and control at street level, and at a different point, to the political conflicts which mark Britain's move towards more authoritarian modes of government intervention and social regulation. (p. 110)

Deconstructing the media's ideological perspective on Black crime does not suggest that "real" acts of violence by and against Black youth do not take place. However, these real acts are not accessible to the public without critical mediation by hegemonic discourses. Angus and Jhally (1989) describe this dynamic in more general terms:

> . . .the distinction between "images" and "real life" can no longer be regarded as tenable. Social representations constitute social identities. The real is always mediated through images. (p. 6)

Consequently, real violence is always/already positioned as part of the prevailing images of Black violence and within the larger discourse on the Black urban threat. While violence at rap concerts can be interpreted as a visible instance of Black-on-Black crime, because it takes place in a White-dominated "safety zone" (i.e., public arena) it is widely interpreted as a loss of control on home territory. When rap concert-related violence takes place outside the invisible fence that surrounds poor Black communities it raises the threat factor.

The rap community is aware that the "violence at rap concerts" label is being used to contain Black mobility and rap music, not to diminish violence against Blacks. Rappers have re-articulated a long-standing awareness among African Americans that crimes against Blacks (especially Black-on-Black crimes), do not carry equal moral weight or political imperative. Ice Cube's (1990) "Endangered Species" captures a familiar reading of state-sanctioned violence against young Black males:

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

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

Since the Nassau Coliseum incident "violence" at rap concerts has continued to take place, and the media's assumed links between rap and disorder have grown more facile. The media's repetition of rap-related violence and the urban problematic that it conjures is not limited to the crime blotters: it also informs live performance critiques. In either circumstances the assumption made is that the significance of rap is its aesthetic and spatial disruptions, not its musical innovation and expressive capacity.[7] Consequently, the dominant media critiques of rap's aesthetic are conditioned by the omnipresent fears of Black influence—again, fears of a Black (aesthetic) planet.

In a particularly hostile *Los Angeles Times* review of Public Enemy's 1990 summer tour stop at the San Diego Sports Arena, newspaper critic John D'Agostino (1990) articulates a complex microcosm of social anxieties concerning Black youth, Black aesthetics, and rap music. D'Agostino's extensive next-day review column, entitled "Rap Concert Fails to Sizzle in San Diego," features a prominent caption: "Although it included a brawl, the Sports Arena concert seemed to lack steam and could not keep the under-sized capacity audience energized" (p. F-1). In the opening sentence D'Agostino confesses that "rap is not a critic's music; it is a disciple's music." This confession hints at its author's cultural illiteracy and is itself sufficient to render his subsequent critique irrelevant; yet D'Agostino continues, offering a description of the event which completely contradicts the article's title and caption. Despite the caption's suggestion of a slow and less than exciting event, the article's opening paragraph presents the audience as mindless and dangerous fanatics, mesmerized by rap's rhythms:

> For almost five hours, devotees of the Afros, Queen Latifah, Kid 'n Play, Digital Underground, Big Daddy Kane and headliners Public Enemy were jerked into spasmodic movement by what seemed little more than intermittent segments of a single rhythmic continuum. It was hypnotic in the way of sensory deprivation, a mind- and body-numbing marathon of monotony whose deafening, pre-recorded drum and bass tracks and roving klieg lights frequently turned the audience of 6,500 into a single-minded moveable beast. Funk meets Nuremberg Rally. (p. F-5)

Apparently, rap music is completely unintelligible to D'Agostino; moreover, his inability to interpret the sounds frightens him. This reading of the concert event, which makes explicit his fear and ignorance, condemns rap on precisely the grounds that make it compelling. For example, because the reviewer cannot explain why a series of bass or

[7]John Parales and Peter Watrous, two prominent popular music critics for the *New York Times*, have made noteworthy attempts to offer complex and interesting critiques of rap music. In many cases, however, a significant number of letters to the editor have appeared complaining about the appearance and content of their reviews and articles.

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drum tracks moved the crowd, the audience seemed "jerked into spasmodic movement" suggestive of an "automatic" or "involuntary" response. The coded familiarity of the rhythms and "hooks" that rap samples from other Black music (especially funk and soul music) carries with it the power of Black collective memory. These sounds are cultural markers, and responses to them are in a sense "automatic" because they immediately conjure collective Black experience, past and present (Lipsitz, 1990). D'Agostino, while he senses the rhythmic continuum, interprets it as "monotonous" and "mind- and body-numbing." The very pulse that fortified the audience in San Diego, left him feeling sensorially deprived; the rhythms that empowered and stimulated the crowd numbed him, body and mind. D'Agostino's subsequent description of the music as capable of moving the crowd as a "single-minded, moveable beast" further amplifies his confusion and anxiety regarding the power and meaning of the drums in Black musical culture. What he perceives as monotonous percussive rhythms is frightening to him precisely because that same pulse energized and empowered the mostly Black, youthful audience. Unable to negotiate the relationship between his fear of the audience and of the wall of sound that supported their pleasure yet pushed him to the margins, D'Agostino interprets Black pleasure as dangerous and automatic.

The sense of community rap facilitates (Pratt, 1989) and its privileging of Black aesthetics and cultural codes (Snead, 1986) displaces critics like D'Agostino and the hegemonic ideology to which they subscribe. By linking funk (rap) music to a Nazi rally, D'Agostino ultimately depicts Black youth as an aggressive, dangerous, fascist element whose behavior is sick, inexplicable, and orchestrated by rappers (whom he likens to hatemongering rally organizers). Rap, he suggests, is thus not even a disciples' music but rather a soundtrack for the celebration of Black fascist domination. Once this construction of Black fascism is in place, D'Agostino devotes the bulk of his review to the performances, describing them as "juvenile," "puerile," and, in the case of Public Enemy, an act that "relies on the controversy to maintain interest." In mid-review he describes a brawl that followed Digital Underground's performance:

> After the house lights were brought up following DU's exit, a fight broke out in front of the stage. Security guards, members of various rappers' entourages, and fans joined in the fray that grew to mob size and then pushed into a corner of the floor at one side of the stage. People rushed the area from all parts of the arena, but the scrapers were so tightly balled together that few serious punches could be thrown, and, in a few minutes, a tussle that threatened to become a small scale riot instead lost steam. (p. F-5)

My own mezzanine-level, stage-side seat afforded me a clear view of the stage at this concert. To me this tussle appeared nothing more than a small-scale scuffle. Fans did not rush from all areas, as D'Agostino purports, to participate in the fight, which was easily contained in fewer than five minutes. Indeed, few people even responded to the fight except to watch silently until the fracas fizzled out. Out of 6,500 people a group of 30, who were quickly surrounded by security guards, falls significantly short of a "mob." The melee that "threatened to become a small scale riot" was apparently only threatening in the reviewer's colonial imagination.

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D'Agostino concludes by suggesting that rap is fizzling out, that juvenile antics and staged controversy no longer hold audiences' attention and therefore signify the death of rap music. What happened to the "single-minded, moveable beast" that reared its ugly head in his introduction? How did Black fascism dissolve into harmless puerility in fewer than five hours? D'Agostino had to make that move; his distaste for rap music, coupled with his fear of Black youth, left him little alternative but to slay the single-minded beast by literally disconnecting its power source. Ultimately, his review sustains a fear of Black energy and passion while it simultaneously attempts to allay this fear by suggesting that rap is dying. The purported imminent death of rap music, however, is a myth that deliberately misconstrues Black rage as mere juvenile rebellion yet retains the necessary specter of Black violence to justify the social repression of rap music and Black youth alike. The concert that D'Agostino claims "failed to sizzle" was, in fact, too hot to handle.

Navigating the minefield of mass media misrepresentation and institutional policing has leavened rap's expressive potential. Media coverage regarding rap-related violence has had a significant impact on rappers' musical and lyrical content and presentation. The most explicit response to this has been the Hip Hop music industry-based Stop The Violence movement (STV), which was organized in direct response to the Nassau Coliseum incident. In the words of STV's primary organizer, Nelson George (1990), "it was time for rappers to define the problems and defend themselves" (p. 12). Thus, STV attempted to redefine the interpretation and meaning of rap-related violence and discourage Black-on-Black crime.

> The goals of the STV [were] for the rappers to raise public awareness of black on black crime and point out its real causes and social costs; to raise funds for a charitable organization already dealing with the problems of illiteracy and crime in the inner city; [and] to show that rap music is a viable tool for stimulating reading and writing skills among inner-city kids. (George, 1990, p. 12)

In January 1990 STV released a 12-inch single entitled "Self-Destruction" featuring several prominent rappers "dropping science" on the cost of Black-on-Black crime to African Americans, the desire for unity in the African American community, and the media's stereotypical depiction of rap fans as criminals:

> Well, today's topic, self-destruction,
> it really ain't the rap audience that's buggin'
> it's one or two suckas, ignorant brothers,
> tryin' to rob and steal from one another.
> You get caught in the mid.
> So to crush that stereotype, here's what we did.
> We got ourselves together so that you can unite,
> and fight for what's right;
> not negative, 'cause the way we live is positive.
> We don't kill our relatives.

In addition to producing the all-star single and its accompanying music video and organizing several public marches, STV published a photo-essay volume on the STV movement (George, 1990). *Stop The Violence: Overcoming Self-Destruction* offers a history of the STV, pages of Black crime statistics, and teens' testimonials on their experiences with Black-

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on-Black violence. The book targets young, urban African Americans to "educate and reform" them and help them avoid self-destructive behaviors. It was cosponsored by the National Urban League, which also serves as the beneficiary of all monies raised as a result of STV's efforts.

Unfortunately, in its reform-oriented response STV did not redefine the problem; instead, it accepted the sociologically based terms laid out in the dominant media's coverage. Uncritically employing the labels "Black-on-Black crime" and "self-destruction," STV's resulting self-help agenda fits comfortably into the discourse of social pathology that has long been used to explain rap-related violence. The movement's marginal attempts to position these acts of violence and crimes as symptoms of economic inequality are insufficient to compensate for the logic of cultural pathology that dominates its ideology. Pages of statistics documenting the number of Blacks killed by other Blacks reinforce the dominant construction of Black pathology while discussion of the economic, social, and institutional violence to which Blacks are subjected remain neutralized. Economically oppressed Black communities must contend with scarce and substandard housing and health services, minimal municipal services (as described in PE's rap, "911 is a Joke"), police harassment and brutality, and economic, racial, and sexual discrimination. These conditions are fundamentally linked to the "Black-on-Black crime" phenomena and to constructions of social violence.

The STV agenda should have retained a dialectical tension between Black self-destructive behavior and the immense institutional forces that foster such behaviors. Cries in the lyrics of "Self-Destruction" for Blacks to avoid walking the destructive path that has been laid out for them, to keep themselves in check, and to love themselves over-emphasize the autonomy of Black agency in the face of massive societal counterforces. An inherent dialectical tension exists between the desire to preserve personal agency and free will (e.g., "fight the power," "overcoming *self-destruction*") and the necessary acknowledgment of the structural forces that constrain agency (e.g., institutional racism, White supremacy, class oppression). The illusion that exercising Black agency can be severed from the racist and discriminatory context within which agency takes place ignores this dialectical tension. Once severed from social context, agency is easily translated into cultural pathology which blames the victim for his or her behavior and, therefore, his or her circumstances. This discursive tension is a critical element in contemporary Black cultural politics. The forces that constrain Black agency must be acknowledged while the spirit and reality of Black free will preserved. Agency and oppression must be acknowledged and addressed jointly, otherwise the incapacity to overcome self-destructive behavior is erroneously viewed as being disconnected to structures of oppression and easily equated with cultural pathology. STV did not successfully negotiate this tension, but it did garner significant financial resources and managed to mobilize a critical mass of Hip Hop representatives to speak out on behalf of social control in the name of Black free will.

The institutional policing of rap music is a complex and interactive process that has had a significant impact on rap's content, image, and reception. The Nassau Coliseum incident, which necessarily includes

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the social construction of the incident, the pre-existing discourse on Black urban crime, and fears of rap's political and social power served as catalysts for explicit and sanctioned efforts to contain rap's influence and public presence. That pivotal incident in New York allowed an already suspicious public to blame rap for encouraging urban violence, placed the Hip Hop community on the defensive, and effectively refocused attention *away* from the systemic reasons for such violence.

Rap music is fundamentally linked to larger social constructions of Black culture as an internal threat to dominant American culture and social order. According to Hooks (1991), rap's capacity as a form of testimony and an articulation of the young, Black, urban critical voice has profound potential as a language of liberation and social protest. Contestation over the meaning and significance of rap music, controversies regarding its ability to occupy public space, and struggles to retain its expressive freedom constitute critical aspects of contemporary Black cultural politics.

During the centuries-long period of Western slavery, elaborate rules and laws were designed to control slave populations. Constraining the mobility of slaves, especially at night and in groups, was of special concern because slave owners reasoned that revolts could be organized by Blacks who moved too freely and without surveillance (Davis, 1966). Whites were rightfully confident that Blacks had good reason to escape, revolt, and retaliate. Contemporary laws and practices that curtail and constrain Black mobility in urban America function in much the same way and for similar reasons. Likewise large groups of today's African Americans, especially teenagers, represent a modern threat to the social order of oppression. Albeit more sophisticated and more difficult to trace, contemporary policing of African Americans resonates with the legacy of slavery.

Rap's poetic voice is deeply political in content and spirit, but its hidden struggle—that of access to public space and community resources and the interpretation of Black expression—constitutes rap's hidden politics. Hegemonic discourses have rendered these institutional aspects of Black cultural politics invisible. Political interpretations of rap's explosive and resistive lyrics are critical to understanding contemporary Black cultural politics, yet they reflect only a part of the battle. Rap's hidden politics must also be revealed; otherwise, whether or not we "believe the hype" will not make any difference.

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