

Rap's Unruly Body

The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage

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To be American is to flaunt what you got [...] and to try to have a little more than the next man.

—Ice Cube to Charlie Rose (1998)

On 14 April 1998, Ice Cube appeared on *The Charlie Rose Show* as a rapper,¹ actor, and director of his currently running film, *The Player's Club*. His statement on what it means to be “American” locates the foundation of American identity not only in what is conventionally seen as natural and healthy competition within the system of commodity capitalism, but in the proud *display* of one’s capital—the “flaunting” or performance of ownership, wealth, and material success. Reasserting Chuck D’s well-publicized position that the culture of hip hop² allows black artists to “use rap as our CNN,” a medium that fosters social communication in the absence of “formal networks,” Ice Cube reminds us that this communication has long included not just young African Americans but “even white” kids—any American youth who identifies with the culture of hip hop³—and that “It’s done in a storytelling, *theatrical* way” (1998; emphasis added).

In response to a question as to whether or not rap bears any “social message,” Ice Cube was careful to make a distinction between the occasions when rappers were “just having fun” and the times when they were performing a more serious “social message.” His distinction between informal “play” and more formal “message,” he argued, was apparent to the kids who could “tell the difference” even when their parents couldn’t. He defended rap music’s accountability for what is often seen as violent lyrics by comparing the violence of rap to the violence of film representation “[i]n movies like *Terminator* and *Heat*,” for example, “where the violence is *visually* represented.” Ice Cube’s defense implies that, similar to the violence in films, the *linguistic* violence in rap music should be taken as *representation*—performance, play, and perhaps even social message all at the same time; a “theatrical” rather than a supposedly

objective or mimetic CNN—and that the performance should not be confused with the performer.

The relationships that Ice Cube posits among hip hop culture, theatrical performance, and film focus on the unique subjectivity of rap *as* performance and a keen awareness of “being seen.” This awareness, evident in the music, films, and interviews of rappers such as Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, and the late Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smallz (aka the Notorious B.I.G.) grants these artists, as well as many others, a powerful place in the phenomenon of hip hop culture—in this case, more specifically “gansta rap” or “reality rap”—as self-conscious performers of the complexities and commodifications of black male identity in America. Tupac, for example, with revealing album titles such as *All Eyez on Me* (1996) and *Me Against the World* (1995), clearly exhibits this self-consciousness of the theatrical performer as well as an awareness of American culture’s capitalist focus on individualism and self-reliance. In his book *Hip Hop America* (1998), Nelson George observes that Tupac “spoke with an actor’s urgency and an actor’s sense of drama,” and reminds us of the rapper’s theatrical training in high school as well as his career in Hollywood film. (Ice Cube, of course, has likewise had a very successful acting career in films such as *Boyz in the Hood* [1991], *The Player’s Club* [1998], and *Barbershop* [2002].) George speaks of Biggie in a similarly theatrical manner, noting the rap star’s sense of costumed performance, as he “covered himself in layers of expensive clothing and the regal air that led him to be dubbed the ‘King of New York’ after the ‘90s gangsta film” (1998:48).

In my view, gangsta rap’s comfortable contradiction between self-conscious *role-playing* (or “performance”) in its aggressive display (of blackness, masculinity, wealth, subjectivity), and the centrality of *authenticity* (or “keeping it real”), is a point of intersection that makes its subversion keenly postmodern, and therefore difficult to locate and contain. The work of rappers as diverse as N.W.A., Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Easy E, and Rakim, as well as Tupac, Biggie, and Ice Cube, has been tagged gangsta rap on one occasion or another, glossing over genuine differences in style, subject matter, and artistic sophistication.

Is rap music merely reporting the “truth” of black culture as an alternative CNN (and let us keep in mind, of course, that CNN is a kind of performance in and of itself) or, more interestingly, is it self-consciously involved in the tricky business of postmodern representation, signaling the emergence of a new, socially relevant, yet simultaneously “playful,” American drama?

In her 1999 *Sourcebook of African-American Performance*, Annemarie Bean writes that “This book embraces the vision that African-American performance has a history based in continuum, not renaissances” and asks readers to “move beyond and between the limited vision with which African-American performance has been considered thus far” (1999:1–2). I maintain that hip hop/rap is part of this continuum of African American performance, and did not arise in a cultural vacuum outside of the tradition of theatre. Hip hop is only one of the more recent performative genres of African American cultural expression but has received so much attention over other theatrical art forms because it has managed to achieve mainstream popularity and generate capital as a multi-billion dollar industry. The rise of highly dramatic black art forms such as step shows or “stepping” in the 1940s and ’50s⁴ and the growth of hip hop/rap performance on the streets of New York City during the 1970s developed in direct reaction to the need for social expression that was suppressed in more mainstream and conservative theatre circles. Both step shows and hip hop draw on African American folk traditions and the personal and social tensions of black communities, and their efforts to create art forms that express

these dramatic tensions and explore the contradictions of identity. In a 1997 interview for *Newworld Renaissance: A Multicultural Magazine of the Arts*, August Wilson reminds us that “There are literally hundreds of playwrights, let’s say there’s five hundred Black playwrights. And there’s one Black theater [Crossroads Theater] of the 66 [members of the] League of Resident Theaters [...]” (in Bullins 1998:11–12).

One of the central reasons that hip hop artists, music, and culture as a whole have been criticized as “dangerous” lies in the power of the performing body to subvert traditional, hence safe, modes of representation in America, even as it embraces the commodity capitalism of the American Dream.

With so few opportunities still for legitimate, mainstream African American dramatic expression, theatre and performance scholars need to pay attention to the popularity of hip hop as a postmodern form of drama that draws on a long tradition of African American performance—incorporating, revising, and re-creating as it sees fit to serve more current social needs.

Although the category of “gangsta rap” is a suspect one, I am choosing to mainly, although not solely, focus on what has been categorized as gangsta rap during the late 1980s to 1990s precisely because the reductiveness of this label illustrates that it has been the most misunderstood by the American public at large, the most easily targeted by political conservatives, and yet, is arguably the most “theatrical” style of rap in terms of black masculine performativity within commodity capitalism and dominant power structures. In gangsta rap’s deliberately ironic performance of “the real,” I locate a postmodern gesture using contradictory constructions of black male identity in American culture in order to undermine them and expose their contradictions. Black America has always seen these contradictions, and gangsta rappers have used the culture of hip hop to comment on the place of black masculinity in the American value system, as well as to imagine alternative spaces where the power structures may be redefined.

One of the central reasons that hip hop artists, music, and culture as a whole have been criticized as “dangerous” lies in the power of the performing body to subvert traditional, hence safe, modes of representation in America, even as it embraces the commodity capitalism of the American Dream. In hip hop’s postmodern complexity of performance (of race, of gender, of sexuality, and finally, of capitalist America) lies the chaotic force that threatens to overthrow conservative power relations while simultaneously working within the system of commodity capitalism. As Ice Cube pointed out, rapping is *both* “just having fun” *and* delivering a “social message,” and hence, like the most effective kind of performance, confuses the boundaries between “innocent” entertainment and revolutionary impulse.⁵ This kind of subversive theatrical performance can be seen as an exposition of the black male rap artist as the disobedient “other” in relation to white patriarchal control. That is precisely where the social “danger” of rap lies.

Gangsta rap is even more specifically about redefining American identity by revealing identity and the power relations it generates not as something fixed in essentialist concepts such as race and gender, but as a performance which, like all things American, can be commodified and sold as “truth.” At the same

time, however, gangsta rap problematizes this paradigm by highlighting—rather than erasing—the power of race in the process of (re)constructing identity, placing on center stage and making visible what has traditionally been marginalized, hidden, and dismissed as “savage” and “unruly.”

Many cultural critics of rap music, such as Bakari Kitwana (*The Rap on Gangsta Rap: Who Run It?: Gangsta Rap and Visions of Black Violence*, 1994), as well as some current hip hop artists see gangsta rap as a destructive attempt by the cultural establishment to promote and commodify distorted images of black identity, and instead point to a style of politically “conscious rap” (the relatively recent music of Lauren Hill and Mos Def, for example) as the more “genuine” African American art form. These arguments certainly may be valid in terms of current sociopolitical issues facing African Americans. Conscious rap is defined by Kitwana as, among other things, “characterized by lyrics whose content is either Black conscious and/or politically conscious. [...] The emphasis is more on the collective rather than the individual” (1994:32). Kitwana’s claim, however, that rap music has been “altered,” “contaminated,” and “redefined” by commercialization at the expense of its “original definitions” (1994:11), is problematic in its implication that there exists an “unpolluted,” pure art form.

Regardless, there is, of course, a dialogue within hip hop culture itself; and, like any complex art form, varieties and disagreements abound. In her groundbreaking work on rap music and black culture, *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose articulates the complex contradictory positions embraced by critics and observers of hip hop culture:

Some analysts see hip hop as a quintessentially postmodern practice, and others view it as a present-day successor to premodern oral traditions. Some celebrate its critique of consumer capitalism, and others condemn it for its complicity with commercialism. To one enthusiastic group of critics, hip hop combines elements of speech and song, of dance and display, to call into being through performance new identities and subject positions. Yet, to another equally vociferous group, hip hop merely displays in phantasmagorical form the cultural logic of late capitalism. (1994:21–22)

Perhaps more in sympathy with those who see hip hop as a “quintessentially postmodern” form which “call[s] into being through performance new identities and subject positions,” I still want to reconcile these apparently contradictory positions by showing how gangsta rap focuses precisely on the negotiation of contradictory constructions of black male identity within American culture.

In the song “AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted” from the CD of the same title (1990), Ice Cube raps about how he used to get away with stealing while he was “robbin [his] own kind” in a world where “it’s all about survival of the fittest,” but “when he start robbin the white folks,” the police more aggressively hunted him down and now he’s “in the pen wit the soap-on-a-rope.” He describes theft as “the American way,” and brags of his former ability to tauntingly elude the police: “I’m slick as slippery./ [...] I’m the nigga that flaunt it.” Cornell West in *Race Matters* (1994) explains this type of “young black male style” as:

a form of self-identification and resistance in a hostile culture; it also is an insistence of machismo identity ready for violent encounters. Yet in a

patriarchal society, machismo identity is expected and even exalted—as with Rambo and Reagan. (1994:128)

West does not claim support for what he understands to be gangsta rap in media culture. Rather, he is in fact critical of what he sees as gangsta rap's relation with postmodern American culture in general: "Post-modern culture is more and more a market culture dominated by gangster mentalities and self-destructive wantonness" (1994:10). Still, West acknowledges the double standards surrounding issues of violence in America, citing the harsh condemnation of rapper Ice-T contrasted with the silent reaction to former Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl F. Gates's antiblack comments. West is, of course, aware of the pervasive myths of masculinity in American patriarchal, capitalist society. He reprimands the exaltation of violence embedded in these myths both within the context of a hypocritical American system of values, as well as its specific manifestations in African American culture. As George points out, "Like ex-football players during the exploitative '70s, hard-boiled rappers personify black hypermasculinity" (1998:110), which has always been both a seductive image and the ultimate threat to mainstream, conservative America.

Ice Cube's pride in "flaunting," both on "AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted" and in his Charlie Rose interview, is characteristic of the tendency in hip hop to boldly display signifiers of masculine power and wealth. Gold jewelry, expensive cars, guns, and women as objects of sexual conquest and pleasure have always been central to the patriarchal, capitalist American Dream. Mainstream America's hypocrisy resides in masking these signifiers in favor of a more muted Puritanical performance which sees display as gaudy. The American Dream dictates that one can and should obtain power and wealth, and that others must know that one has acquired these, but the signifiers of power and wealth—Ivy League college degrees, exorbitantly priced couture clothing, and "luxury" cars, for example—must not be ostentatious, must not be "flaunted." One's success must be veiled in earth-tone colors, controlled hair styles, and "simple," "elegant" jewelry from Tiffany's.

Disenfranchised black men, however, excluded both from the wealth and the knowledge of the signifiers employed by white America's most entitled groups, have no patience for these hypocrisies. These black men perform wealth in hip hop culture in ways that highlight their having "made it" in mainstream America. Their performances of success "ostentatiously" oppose the elitist cultural display codes, patently resisting the hegemonic dictates of the mainstream.

The celebration of immediate wealth and pleasure in videos that show copious gold jewelry, bright colors, fast cars, and scantily dressed women as objects is a complex comment on the contradictions of the American Dream for black men. And, to make matters more interesting, amid the excessive displays there is also often a self-conscious acknowledgement that the urban rappers have not lost their "roots." In Dr. Dre's video *Been There Done That* for instance, he performs several scenes where he exhibits massive wealth (planes, champagne, money, tuxedos), but at the end of the video we find that the whole scene has been a dream. Dre wakes up poor in a house in the 'hood. Similarly, the displays of black masculine power and violence in much of hip hop can be read both as a window into the "reality" of the pressures of economically disenfranchised urban black Americans and as a conscious unveiling of what these rappers see as the hypocrisies of the capitalist, patriarchal values of the mainstream American Dream.

Economically excluded white Americans resist this restrictive discourse of style as well. (The 2000 film *Erin Brockovich* and country-and-western videos

come to mind here.) But often these resistances are not as ironic or as obviously *aggressive* as the challenges enacted by hip hop artists (gold chains, gold teeth, etc.). George reads the hypocrisy of the American Dream in terms of hip hop culture, reminding us that “the values that underpin so much hip hop—materialism, brand consciousness, gun iconography, anti-intellectualism”—and to this I would add misogyny—“are very much byproducts of the larger American culture” (1998:xiii). bell hooks also calls attention to the fact that:

gangsta rap does not appear in a cultural vacuum but, rather, is expressive of the cultural crossing, mixing and engagement of black youth culture with the values, attitudes, and concerns of the white majority. [...] The sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and believing that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. (in Kitwana 1994:39)

hooks’s statement is not an apology, by any means, for the misogyny and violence in some rap, but simply the acknowledgement that, as Kitwana insists:

“Gangsta” rap is just one manifestation of the culture of violence that saturates American society as a whole. [...] here are very specific conditions in American society that nurture violent individual expression, and “gangsta” rap is a by-product of, not a prerequisite for, that violence. (1994:43)

Although George acknowledges the obvious problems with the “gory descriptions of self-genocide” in gangsta rap and states at the end of his book that by the time it was published in 1998 he was happy that the gangsta phase was receding (1998:215), he clearly understands its function as representation and opposes the reductive political targeting of it by such anti-rap activists as C. Dolores Tucker. N.W.A.’s “Fuck Tha Police” on the CD *Straight Outta Compton* (1988)—which put West Coast gangsta rap on the map—is a typical example of the kind of rap held up as violent, destructive, and dangerous. Obviously, the overt narrative of the song is disturbing, and I am in no way excusing or defending the violence of its lyrics. Hip hop artists themselves often speak out against violence directed toward their own communities and toward American social institutions such as the police force, even more so after the events of 9/11.

My discussion of gangsta rap, however, deals with another issue and another time. I consider N.W.A.’s performance as a theatrical *representation* of violence, one that addressed the growing pain and rage of disenfranchised American black males through language and rhythm instead of through actual physical violence. There is never any call in the song to translate discourse into action. Instead, there is a passionate expression of shared social anger that could lead to physical destruction if not acknowledged and dealt with. While the violent tone is unsettling, the fact that N.W.A. was using art rather than guns to express their frustrations is encouraging. N.W.A. gave rappers and former N.W.A. members Ice Cube and Dr. Dre the space to go on and become productive voices in African American culture.⁶ In this sense, rap music has been and continues to be a positive outlet for young male African Americans, and an effective alternative to the ongoing street violence of the ghetto.

N.W.A.'s song overtly dramatizes a courtroom fantasy that reverses the traditional power structures in America. It begins with a self-referential announcement that not only parodies a call to order, but introduces the key players, the individual members of N.W.A., as judge and attorneys:

Right about now, N.W.A. court is in full effect.
 Judge Dre presiding in the case of N.W.A. versus the police department.
 Prosecuting attorneys are MC Ren, Ice Cube, and Easy
 muthafuckin E.
 Order, order, order. Ice Cube, take the muthafuckin stand.
 Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth
 and nothin but the truth so help your black ass?
 (You're goddamn right!)
 Why don't you tell everybody what the fuck you gotta say?

Ice Cube's "testimony" includes both a claim of injustice, and a promise to resist and reverse any attempt to subdue him:

Fuck tha police
 Comin straight from the underground
 Young nigga got it bad cuz I'm brown
 And not the other color so police think
 They have the authority to kill a minority.

[...]

Ice Cube will swarm
 On any muthafucka in a blue uniform
 Just cuz I'm from the CPT, punk police are afraid of me

[...]

Yo Dre, I got somethin to say. (N.W.A. 1988)

What initially grabs the audience (as well as the critics of rap) is the violent tone and threatening language of the rapper's prose, and, of course, these problematic issues have incited much debate. However, beyond the threats there clearly exists the pain of exclusion, of having one's side of the story invalidated and silenced, and finally a dismissal of the legal system, an institution that was supposed to stand for protection and justice but is viewed instead as oppressive and abusive, inviting retaliation. The blatant self-referentiality of the lyrics, the reversal and even invisibility of whiteness as "the other color," the masculine pose of resistance and threat, and finally Ice Cube's declaration that he's "got somethin to say" (as well as the space which allows him that speech) signifies a *fictional* world where black voices are heard and black power is the standard.

But the narrative of "Fuck Tha Police" is based on a "real" experience of oppression: "Fuck Tha Police" is a performance that, like many rap numbers, ruptures the boundaries between representation and the real. This song is even broken up into "scenes" that dramatize how young black men experience the police. The "testimonies" in the song give voice to these victims so that their stories may be heard. Feeling rejected by the conventional justice system, silenced by the powers that be, and marginalized by American society at large, N.W.A. created their own arena of justice through performance. In their song, the drama of the courtroom is not only acknowledged, but also parodied. The

song also proposes a Utopia: a courtroom where everyone is heard and power is appropriated by the people.

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In “Performance Practice As a Site of Opposition” (1995), bell hooks discusses African American word-based performance as a democratic tool of struggle and liberation, stating that:

Throughout African-American history, performance has been crucial in the struggle for liberation, precisely because it has not required the material resources demanded by other art forms. The voice as instrument could be used by everyone, in any location. (1995:211)

The performative core of a poetic medium such as rap rests on the *action* of its language—the effects of statements *as* acts (in J.L. Austin’s sense)—and a self-conscious, reflexive awareness of the construction of identity as role-playing. Delivery, tone, and style are keys to understanding rap. Rappers consciously take on roles. They almost never use their birth names in their artistic lives. They invent theatrical names, simultaneously inhabiting “characters” (there’s even one rapper who names himself “Drama”) and reinventing their selves in the tradition of African American renaming as an empowering gesture that overcomes the disability inherent in accepting “slave names.” Renaming, in the context of hip hop, signifies both the inhabiting of a fictional character and, at the same time, an acknowledgement that, historically, even “real” black identity is a fiction. Rappers call for a reappropriation of the self. Ironically, Tupac Shakur, who didn’t change his name, enacts this theory perfectly. Tupac had no need to change his name, as he was already given a non-slave name signifying his African roots by his mother, Afeni Shakur, a notable revolutionary in her own right. By contrast, artists such as Sean Combs (Puff Daddy, Puffy, etc.), Christopher Wallace (Notorious B.I.G., or Biggie), and O’Shea Jackson (Ice Cube) created names for themselves in order to consciously resist the identities imposed on them by white, mainstream culture.

Of course, not only rap lyrics but also hip hop videos are crucial. Rap would never have reached its current level of popularity without music videos. But as slick as these videos are, rappers also appreciate and need to be connected to the spontaneous urban roots of hip hop culture in the life of the streets, the unfiltered experience of “the people,” and vernacular language. According to Sandra L. Richards, “The critical tradition within African-American literature locates ‘authentic’ cultural expression on the terrain of the folk, but the folk have articulated their presence most brilliantly in those realms with which literature is uncomfortable, namely in arenas centered in performance” (1995:65). Richards argues that “one of the fundamental challenges constituted by the folk insistence on performance and the literary inheritance of a written, hence seemingly stable text” (65) is to read the “absent potential” of

performance as an open space of meaning that rises out of contradiction. Performance is an absence that completes the incomplete written text, opening up possibilities of meaning beyond binary oppositions.

In “Hip Hop” from the CD *Black on Both Sides* (1999), Mos Def—who is associated with “conscious rap,” as opposed to “gangsta” or “reality” rap—is keenly aware that he is involved in the tricky dialectic of not simply reflecting, but *creating* reality with his rap:

Speech is my hammer, bang the world into shape
 Now let it fall... (Hung!!)
 My restlessness is my nemesis
 It's hard to really chill and sit still
 Committed to page, I write rhymes
 Sometimes won't finish for days
 Scrutinizing my literature, from the large to the miniature
 I mathematically add-minister
 Subtract the wack
 Selector, wheel it back, I'm feeling that
 (Ha ha ha) From the core to the perimeter black,
 You know the motto
 Stay fluid even in staccato. (Mos Def 1999)

Mos Def's self-conscious exposition of the pains of writing—of “banging” out his subjectivity—is coupled with his playful celebration of the freedom of being able to find and use his own black voice, free from restraint and oppression:

Shine so vibrantly that eyes squint to catch a glimpse
 Embrace the bass with my dark ink fingertips
 Used to speak the king's English
 But caught a rash on my lips
 So now my chat just like dis. (Mos Def 1999)

Nor has the theatrical power of rap been lost on playwrights, many of whom have incorporated rap's poetic style and themes. As early as 1980 Glenn Wright and Raul Santiago Sebazco's *The Crime* was performed entirely in rap. *The Crime* tells the story of a “Mugger” and his “Victim” who, during the course of a violent encounter, realize they are from the same neighborhood and had been friends in school. It was originally developed with disenfranchised Lower East Side youth at New York's Nuyorican Poets Cafe. It premiered at Princeton University to an enthusiastic audience, heralding the emergence and growing popularity of hip hop culture. *The Crime* begins with the Mugger rapping about “aggravation...humiliation...being treated like an idiot...being looked upon like some fool...even though you've been through fourteen years of school” (Wright and Sebazco 1997:284) and lamenting the lack of job prospects. The Mugger explains his life of crime as a result of racism and the lack of legitimate opportunities for success—a convincing position at the end of the economically depressed 1970s and the dawn of Reagan's America. The short play/rap/performance presents itself as a contemporary *Everyman* with a twist. At one level its moral is obvious and didactic, at the same time it resists simplification by playing with reified stereotypes and shattering the spectator's sense of “them” and “us.”

Similarly, Ishmael Reed's *The Preacher and the Rapper*, presented in the mid-1990s (during the heyday of gangsta rap) at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, is a

commentary on the hypocrisy of the institutions that wield power and the misunderstandings surrounding innovative art forms. It jumps back and forth between conventional dialogue and rapping. More recently, Danny Hoch's one-man show, *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip Hop* (1998), uses rap to highlight the pervasive influence and importance of hip hop in both black and white American youth culture. Hoch, a white man who grew up in a multiethnic Brooklyn neighborhood, performs character sketches that explore the ironies of representation as he experiments with the relationship of language to character.

In his introduction to *Colored Contradictions*, an anthology of contemporary African American plays, Harry J. Elam Jr. discusses the "concurrent and decidedly variant social, political, and economic concerns facing black America." Elam argues that for African Americans, "the contemporary social and cultural condition is one of paradox, complexity, despair, and contradiction" (1996:7). The plays in Elam's collection deal with stereotypes that intersect race, gender, sexuality, and history. Plays in this mode include Carlyle Brown's *The Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show* (1991), Keith Antar Mason's *for black boys who have considered homicide when the streets were too much* (1991), Pomo Afro Homos' *Fierce Love* (1991), Robert Alexander's *I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1992), and Breena Clarke and Glenda Dickerson's *Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* (1992). Like the hip hop artists I have been discussing, the plays in *Colored Contradictions* struggle to uncover (recover?) a new space where more inclusive and self-determining African American/American identities may be imagined and enacted.

In *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*, Robert Alexander uses hip hop to signify youthful rebellion and resistance. Harriet Beecher Stowe is put on trial for creating and perpetuating black stereotypes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. One of the novel's central characters, Topsy, is reconfigured as a slave who embraces hip hop/rap culture. She performs the contradictions of her own empowered identity while ironically rapping on command for her new "owner," Augustine St. Clare, who exclaims that he "couldn't resist buying her. I thought she was a rather funny specimen on the Jim Crow line. (*Smothering a laugh*)" (Alexander 1996:43). In the second act, Topsy "folds her arms like a 20th-century rapper" and does a "breakdown dance" after she's done rapping about her superior ability to pick cotton and her efficient usefulness as a slave:

I can pick as much cotton as any man/ And bag it all up with one hand/
I can milk all you cows 'fore the sun comes up/ And fit all my belongings
into a little tin cup/ No job is too big, no job is too small/ I'm
Topsy Turvy, I can do it all. Word. (43)

Topsy's next rap in act two is longer, violently revolutionary, more concerned with race than gender, and louder (it's printed in capital letters):

I'M TOPSY TURVY I'M WICKED AND I'M BLACK.
ALL YOU YELLOW-ASS NIGGERS BETTER WATCH YOUR
BACK.
I'M WICKED AND I'M SO SO MEAN.
I'M THE BADDEST BLACK NIGGER YOU EVER SEEN.
[...]
I AIN'T SPEAKING FOR THE HOUSE NIGGER
I'M TALKING FOR THE BLACK RACE
THE ONE'S OUT SWEATIN' IN THE FIELD AND FOR WHAT
SO A KNOW-NOTHIN' PECKERWOOD CAN SIT ON HIS BUTT
I DON'T CARE IF ALL THE WHITEYS DIED TODAY

WHITE PEOPLE ALWAYS GOT SOMETHIN' STUPID TO SAY
 [...]
 BUT REMEMBER, I'M TOPSY, I'M WICKED AND I'M BLACK
 I STAND HERE WITH MY EVIL ASS READY TO ATTACK
 I KEEP YELLING AND 'BELLING LIKE I DO IT
 'CAUSE THAT'S THE ONLY WAY I KNOW TO GET THROUGH
 IT. (49–50)

Proclaiming her empowered sense of self-deriving from her “blackness,” Topsy’s second rap is aggressively threatening. However, the contradiction between her traditional personality (as the “good colored girl”) and the violent rapper is not uncharacteristic of her as envisioned by Alexander. Topsy’s character has not been established as a person existing within the tradition of realism, but as a postmodern construction, someone capable of revising her story/history. Topsy is fluid, conflicted, and changeable. Even her name, “Topsy Turvy,” suggests a turning, a contradiction.

While there are certainly significant differences between the unruly feminine and hip hop, rap artists too display their “unruly bodies”—the threatening, half-naked, screaming, and sweating muscular body of the gangsta rapper. The gangsta rapper threatens the mainstream white authority that seeks to keep the “savage” in its (his) place.

By the end of the play, Topsy appears dressed like and adopting the style, dance, and lyrics of a rapper. Just as the play is ending, Topsy confronts the spectators aggressively, addressing them in Brechtian fashion: “Any volunteers to take Topsy? Ya’ll think she come from nowhere? Do ya ’spects she just growed?” (89–90). hooks discusses this historically rebellious aspect of African American performance, and points out that, “[a]ll performance practice has, for African-Americans, been central to the process of decolonization in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” and has historically been important because “it created a cultural context where one could transgress the boundaries of accepted speech, both in relationship to the dominant white culture, and to the decorum of African-American cultural mores” (1995:212). hooks goes on to explain the crucial role that performative expression has had in African American rebellion:

Although not talked about as much as it should be, the movement for racial uplift that had its roots in nineteenth-century black bourgeois culture placed such a premium on decorum and correct behaviour that it restricted speech and action. *Performance practice was one of the places where the boundaries created by the emphasis on proving that the black race was not uncivilised could be disrupted.* Radical ideas could be expressed in this arena. Indeed, the roots of black performative arts emerge from an early nineteenth century emphasis on oration and the recitation of poetry, [...and the] poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, like much of the fiction of that period, sought to reclaim vernacular speech as the voice of resistance. It did that through an insistence on the production of work that could be performed. (1995:212; emphasis added)

What Elin Diamond said about feminist theatre in 1997 is equally true of rap performance:

Theater itself may be understood as drama's unruly body, its material other, a site where the performer's and the spectator's desire may resignify elements of a constrictive social script. Theater may also be understood as a symptomatic cultural site that ruthlessly maps out normative spectatorial positions by occluding its own means of production.
(1997:iii)

Diamond points out that in Western theatre this "unruly body" has historically been the marginalized feminine put on display—the hysterical, chaotic, and desiring force that undermines patriarchal control and rationality. While there are certainly significant differences between the unruly feminine and hip hop, rap artists too display their "unruly bodies"—the threatening, half-naked, screaming, and sweating muscular body of the gangsta rapper. The gangsta rapper threatens the mainstream white authority that seeks to keep the "savage" in its (his) place. In their song "Fear of a Black Planet" on the CD of the same title (1990), Public Enemy's lyrics clearly state the white fear of the black male body, even as the song gestures toward defusing that fear:

Man you ain't gotta
Worry 'bout a thing
'Bout your daughter
Nah she ain't my type
(But supposin' she said she loved me)
Are you afraid of the mix of Black and White
We're livin' in a land where
The law say the mixing of race
Makes the blood impure
She's a woman I'm a man
But by the look on your face
See ya can't stand it

[...]

I've been wondering why
People livin' in fear
Of my shade
(Or my hi top fade)
I'm not the one that's runnin'
But they got me on the run
Treat me like I have a gun
All I got is genes and chromosomes
Consider me Black to the bone
All I want is peace and love
On this planet
(Ain't that how God planned it?) (Public Enemy 1990)

And George reminds us that "Tupac always seemed to have his shirt off, better to expose his six-pack abdominals, wiry body, and the words ['Thug Life'] tattooed across his belly" (1998:48). Rap surges forth, "infecting" youth culture, prompting young people—both white and black—to "resignify elements of a constrictive social script." Rap performance uses the black male

body as a space for the negotiation of cultural contradictions that cannot be addressed solely in poetic recitation.⁷

George argues that hip hop is a postmodern art “in that it shamelessly raids older forms of pop culture—kung fu movies, chitlin’ circuit comedy, ’70s funk, and other equally disparate sources—and reshapes the material to fit the personality of an individual artist and the taste of the times” (1998:viii). The “sampling” in rap recordings can be seen as simultaneously acknowledging a debt to African American music, history, and culture (MC Hammer’s sampling of Rick James’s “Superfreak” in “U Can’t Touch This” [1990] is one of the most notable examples), and incorporating culture(s) that have been closed off to African Americans. Rap sampling is an appropriation of the past in post-modern terms, rather than a shameless theft for capitalist gain or blatant lack of originality, as is often argued. For example, D.J. Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince’s sampling of a familiar piece of American nostalgia—the “I Dream of Jeannie” television show theme of the 1960s on their first hit, “Girls Ain’t Nothing But Trouble” (1987)—is an appropriation of television, a medium that is both enormously popular and which long excluded African Americans. The sampling calls the listener’s attention to this exclusion.

Hip hop’s emphasis on subjectivity—what George calls “The ‘I’ of Me”—has a very specific cultural context in terms of the black male experience in America. George locates the “essential swagger that underpins hip hop” (1998:51) as part of the performance of black male identity, and reads the self-consciousness of African American masculinity in terms of more mainstream American values—capitalism, pride, and arrogance. George goes on to cite both pride and arrogance as sources of “self-empowerment” for generations of disenfranchised black men, and claims that these two qualities are “essential” because:

On a planet where to demonize, demoralize, disdain, and dis black people is a long-standing preoccupation, this kind of extravagant pride is often a system of survival. [...] For African-American males, this pride can be an aggressive manifestation of identity. (1998:50)

Basically, this performing of rebellion and self-defense is what young Americans of varied ethnicities find in gangsta rap. In “Fuck Tha Police,” Easy E’s “testimony” of persecution clearly displays a self-conscious awareness that his “identity” is both essential—the black body wanted by the police and its metonymic connection with criminal violence speaks for itself—and yet at the same time he is offering a fluid performance of masculine “style,” the “gangsta pose.” The performance empowers him, giving him an identity centered in pride:

They put up my picture with silence
Cuz my identity by itself causes violence
The E with the criminal behavior
Yeah, I’m a gansta, but I still got flavor.

Without a gun and a badge, what do ya got?
A sucka in a uniform waiting to get shot,
By me, or another nigga. (N.W.A. 1988)

Here, Easy E clearly articulates his sense of the dramatic, his acknowledgement that even the police are playing a sponsored role: that without their “costumes” (the gun, the badge) they can’t represent power. In this way, the

playing field is leveled. Of course, despite the sense of empowerment, there are obvious problems with the “gangsta pose”—not the least of which involves violence as a solution to injustice, as well as the dissing of women in general, and black women in particular. We must remember, however, that misogyny and violence are not unique to hip hop but deeply embedded in many parts of American culture.

Although in hip hop women rappers have certainly gained ground, some, perhaps problematically, have succeeded by both resisting and incorporating the male gaze and selling themselves as aggressive objects of desire (Salt-N-Pepa, for example, during the 1990s, and Lil' Kim more recently). Others, such as Lauren Hill, represent themselves on their own terms. My focus, however, is on black male hip hop artists. In an article in the *New York Times* (3 February 1994) concerning the obscenity trial of 2 Live Crew's Luther Campbell, Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote that Campbell did not advocate sexual violence on his CD, *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, but rather that “It's a joke. It's parody, and parody is one of the most venerated forms of art” (1994:A13; quoted in Kitwana 1994:5). Kitwana, however, takes great issue with Gates's defense. Kitwana argues that:

[Gates's] rationalization breaks new ground. He infers that the use of sexist and misogynist language as a joke is a phenomenon of Black culture. Such belittling critiques of Black people from Black scholars, under the auspices of defending rap music, is just the tip of the iceberg. (1994:6)

While I would not necessarily agree with Kitwana's reading of Gates's defense, his sentiments are shared by many who are uncomfortable with the violence of gangsta rap.

Of course, one could argue that neither rappers such as Ice Cube, Tupac, and Dr. Dre nor their audiences are remotely aware of their masculinity as a postmodern mask—as *representation*—that they see their performances as natural, true, and correct, and I am sure that in many instances, this may be the case. However, Ice Cube's remarks on *The Charlie Rose Show* as well as the comments and lyrics of other rappers show a clear awareness of black masculinity as a performance. In conversations with my students I hear the same sort of awareness, often very eloquently stated. African American masculinity is often represented as a pose in the literature and popular culture by African Americans. In *Brothers and Keepers*, John Edgar Wideman describing the narrator's college experience of posing as someone marginalized and disenfranchised shows just how much African American performance can depend upon the audience. And while at some level this is certainly true of all social performance—not simply that of American black men—the exaggeration and self-consciousness of black male rappers clearly is something other than the performance of one's “true” self. For black men in America, the “true self” is layered and often concealed. Their ability to create an empowered self, full of style and dignity, and to live in multiple worlds, is a matter of social survival. Wideman:

College was a time of precipitous ups and downs. [...] I had no feelings apart from the series of roles and masquerades I found myself playing. [...] Away from school I worked hard at being the same old home boy everybody remembered, not because I identified with that mask but because I didn't want youall to discover I was a traitor. Even at home a part

of me stood outside, watching me perform. Even within the family. The watching part was unbearable. I hated it and depended on it. (1984:33)

To this, add Wideman's description of his brother posing in a photograph:

You. You are mugging. Your best side dramatically displayed. The profile shot you'd have demanded on your first album, the platinum million seller you'd never cut but knew you could because you had talent and brains and you could sing and mimic anybody. [...] Your stage would be the poolroom, the Saturday-night basement social, the hangout corner, the next chick's pad you swept into with all the elegance of Smokey Robinson and the Count of Monte Cristo, slowly unbuttoning your cape, inching off your kid gloves, everything pantomimed with gesture and eye flutters till your rap begins. [...] You're like that in the picture. Stylized, outrageous under your big country straw hat pushed back off your head. Acting. (1984:21)

West argues that:

For most young black men, power is acquired by stylizing their bodies over space and time in such a way that their bodies reflect their uniqueness and provoke fear in others. To be "bad" is good not simply because it subverts the language of the dominant white culture [The term "nigga" in hip hop culture works the same way, of course.] but also because it imposes a unique kind of order for young black men on their own distinctive chaos and solicits an attention that makes others pull back with some trepidation. (1994:128)

He adds that "people, especially degraded and oppressed people, are [...] hungry for identity, meaning, and self-worth" (1994:20) in a culture where "the implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply 'fit in'" (1994:7). It is this resistance to "fitting into" a definition of American identity and a desire to expand it which the culture of hip hop complexly articulates through its music, videos, and live concerts, exposing the contradictions implicit in American capitalist structures, while simultaneously working within them.

Notes

1. In *Hip Hop America*, Nelson George points out that The Sugar Hill Gang's hit "Rapper's Delight" in October 1979 first gave the New York uptown performers/DJs, who were originally called "MCs," the title "rappers," although many artists today continue to favor "MC" (1998:42). Since I am focusing on the performative nature of the "rap," or spoken word to music, I tend to favor the title "rapper."
2. The terms "hip hop" and "rap" are often used interchangeably, but there is, in fact, a difference. In an article for *Time* magazine (8 February 1999), rapper Chuck D. of Public Enemy fame distinguishes hip hop as "the term for urban-based creativity and expression of culture," whereas rap is "the style of rhythm-spoken words across a musical terrain" (66). In other words, hip hop signifies the culture at large, which included the b-boys and b-girls (the break dancers and graffiti artists who emerged in New York City during the mid-1970s and early 1980s; see underground filmmaker Charlie Ahearn's 1982 film *Wild Style*), as well as the fashion, commerce, film, television shows, music videos, and the general "style" that the culture embraces. Nelson George writes:

The b-boys—the dancers, graffiti writers, the kids just hanging out—who carried the hip hop attitude forth were reacting to disco, to funk, and to the chaotic

world of New York City in the '70s. These b-boys (and girls) were mostly black and Hispanic. They were hip hop's first generation. They were America's first post-soul kids. By that I mean they came of age in the aftermath of an era when many of the obvious barriers to the American Dream had fallen [...] but new, more subtle ones were waiting in that much heralded rainbow future. (1998:xi)

Rap, on the other hand, is often seen as the more specific style of poetic/musical expression. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose explains rap music as a:

black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America. Rap music is a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music. It began in the mid-1970s in the South Bronx in New York City as a part of hip hop, an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. (1994:2)

Bakari Kitwana, in *The Rap on Gangsta Rap: Who Run It? Gangsta Rap and Visions of Black Violence*, makes a similar distinction (1994:11–12). Still, yet another distinction that has emerged defines hip hop music as the more progressive “art,” which has remained true to its cultural heritage, while much of what is labeled as rap is seen as a more commodified and mainstream product (see Kitwana 1994:19–20, for example).

3. Of course, hip hop has become a popular phenomenon around the world, especially in Europe and Japan. Since I am dealing specifically with how it creates and reflects African American identity for Americans, however, redefining what it means to “be” American in performance, I am only addressing its relevance to youth culture in the United States. The relevance of how hip hop’s creation/reflection of American culture is consumed and re-interpreted abroad is a key question for another study that begs to be written. (See George 1998:201–07 for more on this topic.)
4. See Elizabeth C. Fine, “Stepping, Saluting, Cracking, and Freaking: The Cultural Politics of African-American Step Shows,” in Bean 1999:165. In her article (originally published in *TDR* in 1991), Fine describes the lesser-known practice of stepping, or “blocking,” as a popular performance tradition among African American fraternities and sororities that incorporates ritualized combinations of dancing, singing, chanting, and speaking, drawing on African American folk traditions and communication patterns as well as American popular culture.
5. In *Spectacular Vernaculars*, Russell Potter similarly insists that:

play—and not only in obvious forms, such as parody and satire—is potentially a powerful mode of resistance. Play can certainly be an idle distraction, but it can also be the mask for a potent mode of subversion, and indeed I argue in this book that hip-hop culture in particular, and African-American culture in general, is precisely such a form. (1995:2)

6. N.W.A. originally included Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, RIP Easy E, DJ Yella, Snoop Dog, and MC Ren, who joined later.
7. While white male rappers such as Vanilla Ice, the Beastie Boys, or Kid Rock seem at first to contradict this claim, I would argue that they too are performing black masculinity, albeit with their white bodies, which certainly alters the inscription. At some level, white male rappers even more blatantly expose “blackness” as a fluid performance of identity. (Eminem is another story altogether, and much too complex to address here, as he seems to be aggressively performing social class in addition to contradictions of race.) Female rappers, of course, also complexly play with inscriptions of race and gender, and I address this at some level later in the essay. My concern with gangsta rap, however, tends to lead me back to black men, the most prominent performers of the genre.

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