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"Not Dogmatically/It's All about Me": Ideological Conflict in a High School Rap Crew

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Although part of the attraction of social movements is that they embody systems of values that individuals can identify with, there is, paradoxically, rarely if ever a consensus on what those values are. Certainly, such movements as Christianity, liberalism, Marxism, and postmodernism, to mention but a few, have been consistently contested sites. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the meaning of hip-hop, a cultural movement that combines ideological with aesthetic components, should also be a matter of dispute (Rose, 1994; Norfleet, 1997; Weaver & Daspit, 2001). Weaver and Daspit, for instance, discern three different understandings held by observers, analysts, and critics:

- ◆ Hip-hop as *gangsta*, i.e., out-law, thug, a destructive amoral element.
- ◆ Hip-hop as *romance*, i.e., an aesthetic flowering in the "ghetto."
- ◆ Hip-hop as *resistance*, i.e., politically progressive mobilization of oppressed minorities.

These authors criticize those who would reduce hip-hop to one or more of these views, but it is important to remember that even within the community there can be controversy about hip-hop values. This study examines how divergent values associated with hip-hop are contested within a crew of underground (i.e., anti-commercial) rap artists by focusing on a specific literacy act, known as a cipher. Ciphers consist of round-robin freestylin' (improvisational rapping) with participants in a circle, all of whom must contribute.¹ Ciphers frequently begin with a focus on a theme that is thrown out by one person. The cipher in question, which dealt with violence, took place in an urban high school class in rap production and poetry, and it included two teachers and six male students.

Literacy Theory and Genres

I refer to ciphers as literacy acts, although, consisting as they do, of improvised rhyming, they are, by definition, oral. It is therefore necessary for me to explain why it is both possible and desirable to consider rap as literacy. To begin at the beginning, an important trend in literacy theory grew out of the attempts of linguists (e.g., Heath, 1982) and anthropologists (e.g., Street, 1984) mostly concerned with issues in education to explore pragmatic and cultural problems involved with the use of written language. The approach is roughly to relate features of texts — how they work as a system and the norms governing their use — to their social, practical, and cultural functions within a community.

The notion of genre has long been central to this pursuit. In Swales's (1990, p.9) words, "genres are classes of communicative events which typically possess features of stability, name recognition and so on." Note that on this view, genres are more than text types. As Cope and Kalantzis (1993, p. 7) put it, they "connect the different forms texts take with variations in social purpose." Literacy research thus frequently involves ethnography (e.g., Heath, 1983; Fisher, 1988; Herrington, 1984; Kulick & Stroud, 1993; Leki, 1995) in addition to textual analysis.

This approach has proved quite fruitful in addressing educational and intellectual concerns involved in reading and writing. For example, Heath (1982) famously reveals the cultural origin of a number of enigmatic barriers to success in early literacy education in non-mainstream groups. More recently, Scollon (1995), Pennycook (1996), and Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) discuss various norms of academic writing. They show how textual ownership, value of personal self-expression, and critique, far from being culturally neutral, reflect individualistic Western values. As such, they constitute obstacles to those whose cultures are more collectivist in nature.

However, while this type of analysis was developed for writing, it provides tools that can enlighten other forms of information encoding. Therefore in recent years, it has been expanded to study the "designs" or structuring (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2000) of all "socially made forms of representing and communicating" (Kress, 2000, p. 157). The notion of "design" refers both to the regularities that make genres predictable, and so understandable, and those that are (re)created by users as they construct texts that follow or modify generic norms. Since all communication depends on design, there is no reason for genre analysis to be limited to educational questions or to academic language any more than to writing. Hanauer (1998), for instance, uses genre analysis to show how Israeli graffiti mourning the assassination of Yitzak Rabin, is used to represent a secular, non-nationalist identity.

Nevertheless, explorations of vernacular genres as literacy are still quite rare, and neither rap nor any of the other three hip-hop expressive elements (i.e., DJing, graffiti art, and break dancing) have been examined as literacies. Instead, work on hip-hop has been done from the perspectives of Cultural Studies (Hall, 1992; Garofalo, 1994;

Rose, 1994; Boyd, 1994; Weaver & Daspit, 2001), Ethnomusicology (Keyes, 1996; Norfleet, 1997), Communication and Media Studies (McLeod, 1999), Education (Weaver & Daspit, 2001; Morgan, 2001) or Linguistics (Smitherman 1997; Yasin, 1997, 1999). Because of its fruitfulness in other areas, it seems worthwhile to add the perspective of literacy theory into this rich interdisciplinary mix. The present research therefore explores rap as literacy with a particular focus on the cipher. Questions to be explored include how the research participants express their values through rapping and how they respond to other, different, constructions of what it means to be a member of the Hip-Hop Nation.

Participants and Methods

The study is part of a larger on-going examination of the vernacular literacies and language used in an arts-oriented New York alternative public high school, which I call "Urban Arts Academy," located in the borough of Queens, New York. The student body is 50 percent Latino (of diverse origin), 20 percent African American, 10 percent Caribbean-American (of both African and South Asian diasporas), 10 percent European-American (mostly of Eastern European and Italian heritage), 8 percent mixed ethnicity, and 3 percent Asian. All students are English proficient. The vast majority are of working class origin and come from a typical mix of inner city backgrounds, ranging from stable two-parent households to group homes. Some 28 percent of students are of low enough incomes to qualify for free lunches. Most are from Queens, but some travel over an hour by public transport, attracted by the arts and technology programs and the reputation of the school for having a safe, relaxed, and welcoming environment. Indeed violence has never been a serious issue there, and the school has a cheerful modern interior, usually decorated by often remarkable student artwork.

The rap classes began in fall 1998 as part of an arts program that takes up one-half day per week. The teachers were two underground rap artists, who I will call David Star and Limitless.² As the students developed skills, a number began to consider themselves MCs (rap artists who can perform publicly and handle a crowd). They currently perform in the school, spontaneously at each other's houses, and at (usually) small public venues within the underground scene. Although they maintain their underground affiliations, they aspire to success in the music industry as performers or, if that dream does not work out, in another capacity.

The data for this study were gathered in May 2000. In addition to (passive) participant observation in the school and at the occasional show, I have conducted interviews with all core and most peripheral members of the crew. In fall 2000, a participant, referred to here as Kareem, was hired as a research assistant upon his matriculation to college, and he currently transcribes and records interviews, conversations, and rapping. He also functions as a key informant. I gained access to the group through the cooperation of the school where I was a former teacher.

Kareem was my student as a freshman in the school, as were two cipher participants, Gonzalo and Malcolm. During the cipher explored here, however, Kareem was still a senior, and although not present, he played a role in the events, as will be seen shortly.

Ethnically, membership of the crew is evenly divided between Blacks and Latinos. The Blacks are then split between Anglo Caribbeans and African Americans, and the Latinos are of various national origins. All were born in the U.S., except Kareem, who came before puberty. One teacher is of mixed race, and the other is European-American, as shown in Table 1.

The Background

The origin of the cipher was in a dispute over rights to studio space. The school administration had noticed that some students who were cutting class were spending time in the recording studio. As a result, they temporarily closed it during normal class periods, even for those students who did not have class then. After the prohibition was lifted, crew members were warned not to allow anyone who had class to be there, on pain of reimposition of the restrictions. Soon after, Kareem prevented a sophomore, Damien, who was cutting class, from entering, which infuriated the younger boy. During the next rap class, Jesse narrated what happened after school a few days later to his teachers:

Jesse: So on Monday, they were walking to the train station, and Damien comes sounding like he wants to fight Kareem, and Kareem doesn't want to fight. So whatever, they're walking to the train, and Damien was in front of him so he [Damien] stops and put up his hands like he was a hit him. Kareem is like, 'All right, he got a fight.'

Table 1
Core members of Squad Innumerable as of Spring 2000

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Pseudo rap name</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>In Cipher</i>
Alfred	Sidewinder	Puerto Rican- American	Yes
Daniel	Hatman	Dominican-American	Yes
Darryl	Cherub	Jamaican/African-American	No
Gonzalo	Topdog-G	Guatamalan-American	Yes
Jesse	Sega	Puerto Rican-American	Yes
Jorge	Tropics	Ecuadorian/Dominican-American	No
Kareem	Kaliph	Jamaican-American	No
Malcolm	Mal Co.	African-American	Yes
Pablo	Cherub	Dominican-American	Yes
Raoul	I-mation	Puerto Rican-American	Yes
Walter	Hilarius	Colombian-American	No
	David Star	Jewish-American	Yes
	Limitless	Euro.-American/African-American	Yes

The fight quickly ended when another student joined in by punching Damien. Nevertheless, what many might consider as fairly mundane adolescent melodrama — no weapons involved, no one seriously hurt — was deeply disturbing to Limitless. Rather than seeing it as an isolated incident, a case of "boys will be boys," or the fault of one or even all three protagonists, she saw it as symptomatic of a breakdown of a larger ethos of unity and harmony. She therefore felt the need to address less the incident itself than a perceived decline of solidarity within the class over the course of the past year. So she began to ask the students about the causes of the dissension. While not all the students believed that there really was a problem of that nature, the most cogent response, given by Malcolm, a senior, agreed with and elaborated on her assessment:

Malc: I think this year we kinda been like left on our own to do what we want. I mean last year, we had a lot of ciphers. Like every day, all of us, we were in a circle cipher, all of us. You all was conducting a cipher tellin' us to rhyme about like different types of things, and we was doing it constantly. When you all not there, let's tell it straight, kids are kids. They have different temptations or whatever. ... We shoulda gotten that consistent building of the peace and everything. I was giving it. Every time I was in the cipher I was giving peace, peace, peace and happiness. I remember that 'cuz we was all together. We were all making a beat; we were all rhyming together. ... But I think this year I think we didn't have enough ciphers. That's the only thing I can think of. That's the *only* thing I can think of.

Note the close rapport between teachers and students that first enabled one student to confide the story of a fight, something fairly unusual in high school, and another to provide this kind of constructive criticism. In addition, the explanation appeals to what might be termed one of the origin "myths" of the Hip-Hop Nation.³ Specifically, the role of rap in preventing violence is ascribed to the figure of Afrika Bambaata, a South Bronx gang leader in the 1970s (Norfleet, 1997). Bambaata is said to have steered youths into hip-hop as a way, on the one hand, of consciousness-raising and, on the other, of finding non-violent ways of playing out conflicts. For example, two parties to a dispute could *battle* each other verbally, as a sort of rhyming 'snaps' or 'dozens,' rather than fighting physically. As with snaps, there is a taboo in battling against responding physically to insults no matter how provocative and humiliating. Similarly, it is easy to see how a cipher, with its ritualistic circle format and requirement for the participation of all can function as way of promoting communion among participants.

The Cipher

After some further discussion, Limitless decided to begin a cipher around the idea of violence. Malcolm (aka Mal co), since it was his idea, "spit" first, but surprisingly, he did not stick to the theme, and in fact he had trouble "catching the flow," as it is put. The rapping is in *italics* with lines indicated by slashes:

Malc: *I flow too fast/I jump rope too fast. /I jump rope too fast. /I jump rope too fast /I jump rope too fast/I have to slow down my flow/to stay low /like do rags. /I can go/from hip-hop to folk/music to blue grass. /I spit the back draft /Yo my flows is so potent/I said that on the last CD. This year you're gonna have/matta fact fast /with me Gonzalo and Sega/we make tracks that kick that Sega/We scream in yo face like hater! / [laughs] alpha to omega /Yo, we the answer to, yo, we all Squad Innumerable crew. ...I lost it again, my track ... writes like a viper, cipher, hyper.*

In an attempt to nudge the cipher towards the topic, Limitless mentioned the neighborhood of Washington Heights, where there had recently been a shooting by the police and a subsequent minor riot. However, the next contributor, Alfred, did not take the bait and, in fact, stopped after a short couple of verses. Following that, both teachers made a second, this time explicit, attempt to direct the cipher, by providing the next rapper, Gonzalo (aka Topdog-G), with a direct question and suggested answers. I begin with Alfred's contribution:

Alfred: *Your cranium with another lyrical matter. /Rhyme shatter, /rhyme blaster, /comin' through harrassin' her/anybody get the mic about to get hyper/about jumpin' up and down /you like that/ jumpin' up and down*

David: *What is the meaning of violence? That's the question I have. /Where does violence come from /Where does it come from?*

Limitl: *Topdog-G, /what you got for me? /Mal co went already/what you beat? /B is on your hat. /We're talking about violence. /What do you say about that? /Where does come from? /From your own mental slums? /Economic slums? /Where does it come from? /Tell me about it, son.*

Gonzalo: *It comes from the street/but I still will defeat/ I don't have to use a gun/I use my lyrical tongue/yeah, comin' through from Rego Park /Topdog's art/I don't freestyle that good/but I write some acid/y'all-niggaz come through/I bite your head off with my lyrical skills/like that alligator in Lake Placid. [Others: laughs]*

According to Gonzalo's verses, rap becomes a way of channeling violence into verbal forms, another reference to the origin myth mentioned earlier. Yet in making this point, he pays only cursory attention to the question. In fact, he evades the view of violence as a symptom of social or mental pathology that Limitless assumes by depicting it as arising from the urban environment represented by "the street." Such a view does not look at social or mental causes but treats a rough environment as a given.

The two contrasting sets of assumptions crucially imply different resolutions. If violence is a symptom of social or mental pathology, it can be eliminated or at least reduced by treating its root causes. If, on the other hand, it is just a feature of the environment, then the individual must cope with it as best he or she can. It is because Gonzalo understands it in this second way that he can present himself, as a potential antagonist in "street" conflicts, but one who uses verbal rather than physical skills. In doing so, he presents a classic rap stock character, what Limitless in an interview called "the MC as warrior." Norfleet describes this figure in terms of braggadocio in

reference to the skills in "competition, showmanship, and agility in African-American communicative practices" that constitute successful MCing (Norfleet, 1997, p. 90). The idea is to announce to the world one's superiority at such skills using bellicose metaphors of annihilation of opponents either physically or verbally. It is an image that also appears in Malcolm's and Alfred's contributions shown above. The next MC to go was Jesse (aka Sega) generally recognized as one of the most talented, but he too had trouble keeping up.

Jesse: *Sega. Y'all yo /violence what's the real meaning of violence? /He seems hotta than the sonofa/with a silencia, /so silence all you rap sayers /an' wack sayers /comin' back wack phrases. /I'm in back goin' through down to your dungeon in layers / Can't you ah ooo .see me handcuffed to my man, Cherub/Damn man I can't even freestyle right now. I don't know somebody else freestyle, yo. I can't catch it, yo....*

He later told me that he "just didn't feel it," which he ascribed to a lack of energy in the room. He was followed by an equally fruitless intervention from Alfred, following which Limitless answered her own question,

Alfred: *Violence comes from your mouth, man/that situation every time the breeze is blowin' /where's my place? /Right here my own two feet /I'm standin' on I be right here/ you catch me right here/where my [indecipherable] yo neva catch the cops harrassin' me /cause I be on the r.o/Ooow.... Flow /is so blessin' /whoeva manafestin'.*

Limitl: *...I'm no clown/I understand how it goes around/It's systematic /an' tragic/ we young soldiers.... we still in the end/get put in our head/video games /mashin' our brains/like television games/make us all into soldiers/for their own gain/yo we gotta ride the bus back/guns an' crack/through your neighborhood/without jobs/to the young brothers who become hoods/it's all done/systematically/that's why I come here to help everybody/plan/the next generation watchin' the fan/yo, I put out my hand /to give a pound/'cuz, yo, that's how I get down*

It is curious how the entire cipher to this point resembles nothing so much as an unsuccessful class discussion sequence. As in those cases, the teacher tries to elicit a predetermined response or type of response but fails and ends up supplying the response herself. Additionally, as often happens in such a discussion, the interactions do begin to go in the desired direction after the answer is supplied.

Daniel: *I know David/I used to see/all this shit/all the blood/runnin' down my neck all the blood /'round the floors /or the crack in the stairs/that's why I always see / I was like/yo life /ain't fair. This is why it all about/the crack cocaine/put the gats on ice/Niggaz don't know how to fuck with their life/Yo, what's this all about?*

However, this direction is not consistently sustained. The next participant, Raoul, returns again to the theme of MC as warrior, although, finally, Alfred provides an image of violence as either the result of a kind of crime or as a crime in-and-of-itself. This allows Limitless to use his words as a springboard to direct the interchange into explicit depiction of social conditions that might give rise to violence.

"Not Dogmatically/It's All about Me"

Raoul: *Fuck violence/the toilet perspires/My lyrical combat is mortal/out the portal/death row comin' from the oral/cavity./It's like y'all bitch ass niggaz just can't handle me/It's like I inflict verbal fatality/an' end up in like animality/.... Ah, fuck this shit... [laughter]*

Alfred: *Yo, violence comes from crime, /not no blue collar crimes, /not no sellin' dimes/violence is like a big crime/Everybody get hit in their spine,*

Limit: *In a neighborhood with guns/take away the jobs what you think/It's violence, and it's like I said before that's my allegory /from the top down.*

At this point, Daniel, picks up on the theme of the moral repugnance of violence through a horrific story, but in doing so he subtly diverts the discussion away from the sociological analysis that had been developed so tortuously:

Daniel: *I was in Spanish Harlem the other day/I was walkin' the street, yo three little kids was about five/or seven. /They was robbin' these Chinese guys /for their chicken wings and french fries/there were three. I'm dead serious that ain't no joke/they had a bat/they slapped/him with it/they slapped in the head /almost broke his skull up/they almost leave him, toe up/you can even see his brain inside his skull/you can even see the nigga crawl in' on the floor. /Nobody helped him out an' nobody said nothin' /'cause in the streets nobody else be frontin' /or else nobody else/be snitchin' /'cuz there's no rat niggaz /'cuz if there's a rat your gonna get killed/just like bust of the steel/yo, that's what I saw, I'm telling you the truth, yo.*

Although Daniel assures his listeners that he is "telling you the truth," the story is clearly meant to be taken as fictional. Only the message is true. The mention of violent robbing of Chinese delivery men, a recent news story, constitutes a reference to the familiar stereotype of urban violence in which tremendous harm is done for trifling rewards. It is reinforced by the placing of the story in Harlem, a reference to America's ur-ghetto. The impossibly young ages of the attackers reinforce and exaggerate the actual case, in which a deliveryman was killed by teens. Finally, the moral at the end makes clear that it constitutes a kind of fable. The story effectively brings to the end the engagement of the group with the teacher's perspective on the origin of violence. It is followed by a short intervention by Raoul that actually brings a rhyming rebuke:

Raoul: *Its like...back to the three little kids in the street/they say/try to jump me/I kick that little bitch in his mouth/they like niggaz down south/like...aw, fuck, damn, fuckin' flow yo.*

Limit: *Yo why you comin' so hard /down the boulevard? /I don't abstract.*

Freed from the constraints of sociological analysis, Alfred acknowledges the idea of violence as useless but maintains a position whereby he will use it to respond to police brutality.

Alfred: *If you don't know/I flow so/remarkable cause I flow/like Mal co./Neva speak low no /I spit rhymes till I get amended /style never suspended /pretended /I don't*

think so/I blink once, blink twice, yo/I think y'all don't know/I'm bout to blow /up my status blow/to when y'all showed/up, man. I showed /up right behind/y'all kickin' that rhyme /right behind /y'all hit y'all /twice/man stars/I'm always in a brawl/but that violence leads to nothing but somebody dead/and the bloodshed/yo, I'm pretty humble/man, but if these cops try to mess with me, we gonna rumble/I just call my little peoples from around the way/we that little, they/big but we like to play.

It is worth reviewing what happened so far. The cipher was brought about through an initiative jointly constructed by teachers and students to address the presumed disharmony in the group after a fight. The teachers directed the cipher to focus on violence to explore the root causes, which were seen as a sociopolitical in nature. These assumptions, however, were at best only partly accepted by the students. Apart from Alfred's and Daniel's brief depictions, the hints and explanations regarding the origin of violence were ignored and then eventually subverted. Instead, the students put forward images of an inevitably tough environment in which they could avoid physical confrontation because they had skills that allowed them to fight verbally.

The clashing assumptions were incarnated by two opposing rhetorical devices. On the one hand is the image of the MC-as-warrior that appears in various guises in many of the students' interventions. On the other is the discourse of consciousness raising and political awareness that appears in the teachers' interventions and also briefly and incompletely in some of Daniel's and Alfred's rhymes. At first glance, these are hardly comparable since one is a stock character and the other a kind of discourse. Yet each can be seen as a generic feature because each creates its own set of contrasting intertextual references in the larger rap world. The warrior finds its most extreme incarnation in gangsta rap, where the violence can become real at times. However, this kind of boasting can also be found in the work of hard-edged rappers such as Jay-Z, Ludacris, and Eminem who are arguably not really gangsta. By contrast, the consciousness raising is associated with "message rap," in particular the works of Arrested Development, Public Enemy, De La Soul, KRS-One, and Ded Prez. The different intertextual references explain why they do not usually appear together, as would be the case if the warrior, say, fought for social justice, certainly a logical possibility.

It is also possible to see the opposition in how each side views the generic features of the other. Limitless does not condemn the warrior entirely. She said that there is a place for rappers such as Jay-Z, but she claimed that the warrior figure "is not going anywhere" and that we "can elevate beyond that." Almost in a mirror image, the MCs are not willing to condemn message rap, but they rarely listen to it. Of all the message rappers, only Ded Prez received positive reviews from them and not on the basis of politics but artistic merit. Their message is treated skeptically. For example, Walter described it as "socialist," which, he felt involved good ideals, but "wouldn't work." Jorge more severely said that, if you want to do politics, you should be a politician, not a rapper.

In fact, some of the MCs have occasionally engaged in political action both in music and by attending demonstrations, but this activity has been limited to issues of immediate and tangible concern, such as police brutality. For example, a number of the crew participated in protests of the killing by police officers of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed African immigrant who was shot multiple times as he reached for his wallet. Students and teachers participated in protests, and a number of students wrote rhymes that expressed their anger about this incident. While the students and teachers coincided in these efforts, the students' activism never extended to more general concerns about economic and social injustice. Quite the contrary, an examination of a number of generic features present in their work reveals ideological positions incompatible with message rap and the teachers' beliefs.

First, there are opposing constructions of gender. Political rap takes a feminist line. By contrast, the warrior figure lends itself to the construction of what Pujolar (2000) calls "simplified masculinity," that is, a traditional notion of male as aggressor, competitive, and aiming to dominate others. This aspect is somewhat muted in the cipher, but it can appear quite blatantly in songs and freestyles that take place outside of adult supervision. Take for example this excerpt of a song written by Jesse:

*You on top nigga? /Nah! Maybe when ya' fuckin'/You knew who to watch nigga?
/Nah! You could stay hiding and/ducking/rhyming or something? /While I'm wining
and dining /you wife/inside of her while she/still lies to her husband/decide or keep
frontin'*

A related feature of simplified masculinity is sexism and homophobia. These have certainly received their share of media, and some academic (Garafalo, 1994; Hall, 1994) condemnation in relation to commercial rap. They have also caused their share of problems in the class, because the MCs do spit homophobic and sexist lyrics, and they are sometimes reprimanded by the teachers for doing so. When the teachers are not around, not surprisingly, the use of slurs and sexist images increases exponentially. Even the word "feminine" is used as an insult. In the following extract of a freestyle done without adult presence, Jorge goes so far as to describe himself as a rapist but, in an original twist, of the devil himself:

*Jorge: This is a fatal ecstasy fantasy that you all can touch/ cause my telepathy matter
of fact /will come and attack/your brain in order for levels /'cuz I battled the Devil,
made Satan look like abyss /because did you know that he was really a bitch? /And
when I raped him and gave birth to his seven demons /did you know that my semen/
is flowin' through they whole body veins/Can't you see? I can't maintain/my brain
just computes all these thoughts in the level of matter refrain/ cuz I kill pressure points
in your vein.*

The homophobia also has equally ironic twists. For example, some MCs know that I am gay (from my time as a teacher) and treat it as a non-issue. More tellingly, none has ever harassed any of the five openly gay male students in the school.⁴ This paradox can be seen in Jorge's defense of Eminem's notoriously homophobic lyrics:

Jorge: Eminem... takes freedom of speech to the next level. I have nothing against it. I believe that that's great you know, sayin' what you feel 'cause a lotta rappers really, they go by how the system wants to work, how people want them to say this; people want them to say that. But that narrows down your creativity. You really can't do much, and don't take what Eminem says as something towards like offending someone. I just see it as his form of creativity, how he expresses his creativity. It does offend people, but if you listen to all his tracks, he's not out there saying, "I hate fags; I'm going to kill them." He's just, like "All right, I don't want nothin' to do with them." You know, what politics did, they just made him seem like this bad guy who hates fags, hates all this other stuff, wants to kill them, can't stand them. He kills his wife; he hates his wife. But if you think about it logically, that's all concept; it's nothing real.

In other words, as in his satanic rape, "art is not life" but expresses feelings, and all feelings are legitimate. Moreover, when asked about their homophobic slurs, all the MCs told me that they were less about sexual orientation than about being soft. In this way homosexuality is conflated with femininity, which in turn is conflated with weakness and subordination. Conversely, masculinity — realized especially through the penetration of others with one's ideas, words, style, or semen — equals strength, triumph, and dominance. Therefore, parables of sexual invasion abound in the lyrics, and yet a strong popular female rapper, such as Eve, can be respected.

Of course, art is not really entirely separate from life, and outside of rapping contexts, the simplified masculinity is lived out in a variety of ways. Most obviously, there are no girls in the crew and at least one female student has been the object of a disrespectful song about her. Also, challenges to other crew members, sometimes jocular, sometimes not, are constant, frequently in the form of a variety of insults that describe others as incompetent or subject to victimization. These slurs include *punk*, meaning weak,⁵ *faggot*, combining homosexuality with softness, *herb*, someone who is dominated by another, and *bitch*, someone, either male or female, who assumes a feminine/servant role. However, even here the targets of insults are exclusively other group members.

The challenges serve to maintain what Kareem describes as a "prison" pecking order, in the sense that those who do not defend themselves receive no mercy but more and more overt humiliation and lower prestige. Thus, Raoul, who had great problems freestylin', was subject to continual public degradation for over a year. He ended up doing the bidding of Jesse and Walter to the point of supplying equipment that ended up at different MCs' houses. He was also sent to do various tasks and was publicly referred to, by a girl no less, as Jesse's bitch to his face. This treatment is justified as a form of tough love. The theory is that by being verbally bullied, victims will be forced to defend themselves and so to learn to rap better. In fact, when Raoul had a family crisis and was forced out of his house, Walter offered to take him in, and both Walter and Jesse have celebrated his later growth, which they ascribe to their cruel-to-be-kind nurturing.

A second clash of ideologies relates to class and race. On the violence-as-pathology view, the students are victims, by virtue of their membership in inner-city minority communities, of the powerful oppressive forces. They can overcome that oppression definitively by instigating social change or at least mitigate it by resisting the impact of these forces on their day-to-day lives. In either case, awareness of this situation will promote positive, progressive change. On the "tough environment," view, by contrast, the students are individuals who are responsible for their own survival in an irremediably flawed and unfair world. By virtue of their minority and working class status, they may indeed have cards stacked against them, but the goal is not to end a system that produces winners and losers generally — an impractical aim — but to become a winner. The bottom line is that those who are strong win, and so, according to Kareem, coming up in "the ghetto" is a source of pride because it attests to an individual's strength. In a nutshell, one does not try to eliminate "the ghetto," one tries to become "ghetto fabulous," that is socially and economically successful within the parameters of ghetto culture.

On this point, it should also be evident that the young MCs are clashing not only with their teachers but with the understanding that predominates in the academic study of the humanities and to a large extent the social sciences. The notion of advancement towards a just society with an emphasis ending the hegemony of dominant social groups is clearly a characteristic of the "critical" view of the world that is deeply ingrained in these fields. Given the community-centered assumptions of social struggle that lie behind the critical perspective, it can be hard to see what the MCs gain by adopting these kinds of individualistic competitive goals. At best, their objective of becoming "ghetto fabulous" appears to embody a kind of musical "hoop dream," a long-shot at fabulous wealth. After all, they seem to be accepting a competition in a socioeconomic context that is almost hopelessly biased against them. They do not even accept a route out of the ghetto through assimilation into the values and practices of mainstream society, the most obvious (though admittedly culturally problematic) route to economic advancement.

The danger of this kind of critique of the MCs' perspective is that it risks falling into that perennial academic trap of being too clever by half. All the analysis misses how their individualism offers the MCs advantages that are at once culturally appropriate, of immediate utility, of value for the future, and intellectually coherent — if not entirely ethically attractive. For example, as Norfleet (1997) observes, competition is deeply engrained in African-American communicative practices, which reflect, naturally, more general cultural assumptions. In a world where competition is assumed and can and does become violent, hip-hop allows the individual to demonstrate strength and dominance in a virtual rather than physical arena. The result is an ability to express one's own personal identity fully and assertively without risking anyone's physical safety or personal freedom. No one is buried after lyrical death or goes to jail for verbal assault.

But more than the kind of avoidance of material consequences, the transfer of

conflict to a virtual realm makes particular sense in an age where physical strength and bravery are no longer important survival tools. In a world whose richest man is a ruthless geek, mental capacity and verbal aggressiveness make for much more intimidating qualities. In fact, according to Kareem, turning to violence is just a sign of weakness. In his view, once you resort to physical aggression, "even if you won, you lost" because you have implicitly admitted your verbal and mental incompetence. That is why it was perfectly feasible for him to evade Damien's physical challenge until it became unavoidable and for his friend to disrupt Damien's attempt at a classic schoolboy one-on-one duel. It was simply laughable that Damien might go around the school and charge Kareem with being physically cowardly, unable to defend himself on his own, and so on. No one whose opinion Kareem cared about would take Damien seriously.

The change of values from physical to verbal strength has obvious implications for the MCs' future. They have developed impressive vocabularies to the point that other students at the school have difficulty with some of the words used in their rhymes. Certainly, the concepts and vocabulary present in the excerpts shown so far would constitute impressive displays of linguistic muscularity even if they were not placed into improvised rhyming sequences. That they are in verse shows them to be intellectual tours de force, particularly since the authors are adolescent products of uneven schooling and homes in which the life of the mind was typically not the highest priority. At the same time, the poisonously low intellectual self-esteem that characterizes so many inner city minority teens is entirely absent from these rap artists.

Furthermore, while they attempt to "make it" in the music industry, they are aware that real commercial success is by no means a sure thing, and all have back-up plans of various kinds. Most plan to attend college, and/or see realistic possibilities for work in the business end of the recording industry. In fact, realism itself forms an aesthetic value for them, one that contrasts with the idealism entailed by a collectivist critical viewpoint.

Contrast, for instance, Limitless's idealistic goal of "elevating beyond" with Walter's realistically grounded assertion of the impracticality of socialism. Kareem has the same "get real" response to Limitless's critiques of the warrior figure. As Norfleet, (1997) and Morgan (1997, 2000) note, the notion of "keepin' it real" has become a cliché in rap discourse. It is certainly a value that appears time and again in this group in different ways. Jorge and Kareem, for example, criticize their neighborhood as "fake" since, they say, while it is quite stable and safe, a lot of their neighbors act as if it were pure ghetto. Similarly, they and the other MCs frequently criticize commercial rappers for not being as tough as the "thug" images that they try to project, a refrain also noted by Norfleet in her study of underground rap artists. While one politically engaged teacher, who came to work the following year, claimed that the youths confuse realism with ghetto hardness and violence, in fact, he had it exactly backwards. Daryl and Jorge claimed that they were "gangsta" because they did not rap about a violent life they did not lead. *Gangsta* has simply come to mean authentic.

Jorge's verbal rape of Satan and his defense of Eminem must be seen in this context. Both rap artists' violent verbalizations are what are known in Spanish as "esperpentos," meaning over-the-top grotesques that cannot be taken literally. By raping the prince of evil, Jorge gets to have his cake and eat it too. He asserts the most extreme alpha male qualities while at the same time avoiding the ethical condemnations that would have resulted from a more realistic portrayal. He also avoids criticism for being fake since, as a college-bound honor-roll student,⁶ he hardly fits the role of the "jiggy thug" in life.

Furthermore, although the figure of the warrior MC may seem fairly banal, the crew members have sometimes highly sophisticated artistic ambitions in songs they describe as "deep." Take this example by Raoul, who although he had difficulty freestylin', was recognized as a fine song writer:

I must confess I learned a lesson, /Tryin' to test, within the lair of despair/Chest contractin' out my last, /Breath of fresh air, gaspin' /Body and soul, trapped, with/ in a dead store. /Getting' steeper, and steeper/Dark passages get Deeper and Deeper/Finally on the right track to illness/Findin' myself face to face with the reaper/ Here's my chance/I spoke to him, receivin' his deadly glance, /From my stance, I asked steadily/What does life mean? /My rhymes gleam, but my purpose on/This earth is just something I can't dismiss, /He replied, the meaning of life, is/The true essence of ya realness, /So I said, if so I should live a life/Longer than the sun/You haven't eliminated the weapons/Therefore, it's ya time to come, /What weapons, /The one's holdin' down humanity/Piercin' Reality, /Coated with sugar and brutality/ God Damn, or Damn God, /The broken cries of/A fallen man, and then, /He reached out for my hand/procrastinated, but I/quickly pulled back my arm and accelerated,/ I can't believe I escaped Death/Cheated my last breath/But it's only a matter of time/ Upon exit, I heard him screamin' /It's always sweeter the second time/Death is always sweeter the second time./

In this song, the narrator becomes an Orpheus figure. What carries over from the warrior is the quality of heroic personal protagonism. By contrast, in message rap, as is true for leftist discourse in general, the values of solidarity and collective struggle are paramount.

Considering these analyses, it is predictable that references to personal strength and initiative should increase as the cipher progressed. In the final turn I present, Alfred replaced the problematization of violence with images similar to Raoul's. Violence becomes personified, and so a figure that the warrior can grapple with. As his coda, he uses a statement of philosophy so succinct and characteristically intellectual, that I "sampled" it in the title:

Alfred. Yo, man consider in my pocket/deep as I rocket. /Never stop it, /no stopping, yo working for deep, deep, we now/come through with my flows/it never gets coming through one yo/that nigga's gonna give it. /Someone is gonna hurt violence/Violence it never gets hurts like, yo/I leave it never bad blood come through nigga/I never said nothin' twice so /in the back of the head, that's life, man. [Limitless: laughs] Wow,

one I only like Breezy one four five six [some: woooooo] count to six, I got no competition /I just want a beat /I get hit just stop yo to be /right. I'm the mechanical /come through son, like a sentinel/I write my rhymes in pencil, /the matta comin' through yo. /My rhymes leave girls flattered yo /[Limitl: Way] Comin' through yo. /Not dogmatically. It's all about me. It's all about me. It's all about me.

With this excerpt, the students' perspective wins as the class, including Limitless, comes to appreciate Alfred's humor and verbal acrobatics.

Conclusion

The understanding of violence, at least the kind displayed in the fight between Kareem and Damien, as pathology would seem compatible with the view of "hip-hop as resistance" as described by Weaver and Daspit (2000). After all, such gratuitous conflicts among oppressed minorities can only be seen as detracting from the potential struggle against larger oppressive forces. At the same time, they can be seen as the inevitable symptoms of the conditions of poverty and lack of freedom that characterize minority working class life in America.

Nevertheless despite this match, the other two positions they have found in the literature, "hip-hop as romance" and "hip-hop as gangsta," do not seem to really characterize the MCs' opposing view. After all, their cult of realism and ironic style belie any romantic view of hip-hop that might be discerned in the taboo against violence or in the sophistication in the vocabulary, lyrics, and concepts employed. At the same time, the artistry and the "esperpentic" quality gainsay any claim that their work cultivates gratuitous violence, as assumed in the hip-hop as gangsta view.

Instead, these MCs' concept of hip-hop might astonish both the conservatives who assume the "gangsta" view or the progressives who would either like to harness hip-hop for social change or feel it to be romantic. The realism, the emphasis on personal protagonism in an inevitably flawed society, the competitiveness, the materialistic goals, the simplified masculinity, and the emphasis on unbridled free speech, are all elements associated with capitalist libertarianism. These values find their roots in European enlightenment and have been characteristic of an important trend of American political thought that goes back to the founding of the republic. More radical strains can be seen in 20th-century figures such as Ayn Rand and currently in institutions such as the Cato Institute.

It is hard to miss the irony here. After all, so many exponents of this philosophy have left themselves vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy, since they have subordinated their guiding meritocracy to community-based exclusions particularly directed against African-Americans. Such is the story of Thomas Jefferson's life, after all, and his contradiction has profoundly marked the American experience to this day. Yet here this individualism finds eloquent support in the words of youths who come from precisely the most excluded communities and who use a form of expression profoundly African diaspora in its roots and aesthetic. In doing so, they appropriate the

philosophy by flipping it (to use the rap term for the altering of sampled beat) to include those who it has historically made such efforts to exclude. In so doing, they have made it more coherent and honest.

Yet for all that, it would be wrong to claim, however, that this libertarian ideal is the true meaning of hip-hop. It is best seen as one of at least two — the other being the resistance view — that are authentically hop-hop, and, of course, there may be others not encountered here. Furthermore, despite the fundamental differences, there are also points of contact, which link both views. One is a strong anti-racist quality, which allows individuals of different ethnic communities to work together (Newman, 2001). Another is an opposition to the pressures of the recording industry that promotes the affiliation with the underground scene (Norfleet, 1997). The third is the respect for creativity and artistic integrity that allows both teachers and students to respect each other's work and artistic achievements. The final one is the intellectualism that contradicts all the clichés associated with both vernacular literacy and inner city youth.

Notes

- ¹ Norfleet (1997), in the most complete study of underground rap artists to date, observes that cipher participation is voluntary. However, in the group I studied, the right to "pass" could only be exercised by those staying out of the circle.
- ² All rap names have been changed to aid confidentiality. These changes have occasionally necessitated slight modifications in rapping to preserve rhyme sequences. I apologize in advance to the MCs for these alterations.
- ³ My use of the term *myth* is not meant to say anything about the veracity of the story, just that it is known to hip-hoppers and serves as reference point to explain characteristic phenomena.
- ⁴ I was so assured by all the gay boys, who are quite content about the atmosphere in the school.
- ⁵ In traditional African-American slang, *punk* refers to a receptive partner in anal sex, particularly in a prison context. However, the MCs were unaware of this etymological sense.
- ⁶ None of the rappers are particularly thuggish, although a few such as Daniel might appear that way in dress and demeanor. Also, despite their evident intellectualism (they actually use the word *intellectual* on occasion in raps), the level of academic interest varies considerably from Jorge's high grades to Daniel's probable non-graduation after five years of high school. It is interesting that none plan to join the military or the police, which is a popular option in this school, particularly for male students.

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The French Connection: Francophone Hip Hop as an Institution in Contemporary Postcolonial France

Rupa Huq

Liverpool, England, June 2001. It's a warm summer evening and I find myself in Concert Square in the city centre. I am watching a rap group perform at an open-air free concert. The stage looks pretty crowded — there must be approximately 14 people up there, but I keep losing count, as they are energetic sorts who refuse to stand still. The sonic mix of samples and quickfire repartee are going down a storm with an audience comprised of locals and a smattering of French-folk. The reason for this influx of les Français into a town better known for Beatlemania is the act onstage. This is no ordinary hip-hop crew; at least not by the standards of northwest England. Tonight's headline act is Saïan Supa Crew, from Paris, France, who have been flown in specially for La Fête de la Musique [National Music Day], a major yearly event in France. Oddly enough, witnessing SSC doing their "thang" in such modest surroundings is a sight of mild bemusement for the French audience members: Back in their native country, fans would find it difficult to view such a major group at such close range. Nevertheless, most of the English crowd are unaware of this and ignorant of any of the lyrical content delivered by the band before them. The "vibe" or atmosphere is what matters, and a good humoured atmosphere prevails. Just by being here, however, irrespective of their dazzling wordplay, Saïan Supa Crew are making a statement. They are here as cultural ambassadors, showing the English-speaking world that French music is a force to be reckoned with. With support from the French government, which has sponsored their appearance through the London Bureau Export de la Musique Français, this multi-cultural outfit is demonstrating the existence of Francophone hip-hop as an institution in contemporary post-colonial France.

France is well known for its pride in its long tradition of high French culture: opera, ballet, and literature in the sacred French language. In the English-speaking world, ridicule generally greeted media reports of the (ultimately unconstitutional) Loi Toubon, a piece of legislation designed to remove English words from the French