

**FROM REAGANOMICS TO EBONICS: THE URBAN
CULTURAL DISSONANCE OF HIP-HOP**

By

Edward Jesse Weeks

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APPROVED:

**Elizabeth Clement
Supervisor**

**Rebecca Horn
Associate Chair, History**

**Megan Armstrong
Departmental Honors Adviser**

**Martha S. Bradley
Director, Honors Program**

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand the genesis of politically charged, or “conscious” hip-hop from a social, cultural, and political standpoint. It seeks to identify the convergent elements that fostered the development of hip-hop as an expression of urban black and Latino culture. It will place a special emphasis on the role poverty and economic conditions played in hip-hop’s birth, the course of its development, and its discursive reflections. However, the study points out a strand of hip-hop that transcended mere social realism to produce a political message and was often a direct response to the policy and agenda of the Reagan and Bush administrations. At the climax of a march toward conservatism in America, the Reagan-Bush years embodied policy changes that incorporated a more conservative philosophy, to which the concerns of urban blacks often stood at odds. This new conservatism sought to rescind the policies of the liberal state, a large benefactor for the urban poor.

Hip-hop developed into one of the few outlets for both cultural expression and political discourse for urban blacks and Latinos. Elements contained in various hip-hop songs directly respond to specific policies of the neo-conservative movement. Specific themes include crime, drugs, police repression, education, the military, and, most importantly, economics, which tends to be of overarching concern for all other themes. Together, specific messages contained in rap music produce a powerful dialectic that gives voice to many of those left by the wayside as the conservative political machine marched forward into the nineties, without much inclusion of black America. As urban blacks became more and more politically marginalized, rap gave voice to a generation that otherwise would not have had as loud a voice in American politics.

Today, hip-hop culture pervades American life, and occupies a central role in American culture. This study examines the era when hip-hop first made headlines not only in the cultural arena, but also the political arena. The convergence of these two theaters climaxed in the “culture wars” over the censorship of rap music, from which hip-hop survived intact to ascend to the prominent position it currently occupies in American society. Without the early contributions of artists that sought to defy America’s power structure, hip-hop may not have assumed such preeminence in mainstream (and underground) America.

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Introduction

Howard Zinn remarks in *A People's History of the United States* that, "in a society of complex controls, both crude and refined, secret thoughts can often be found in the arts, and so it was in black society."¹ His observation points to a long African American heritage of confronting oppression with cultural artistic resistance. From the first migration from Africa, slaves showed an uncanny ability to preserve their culture despite thorough attempts at subordination. Often maintaining cultural forms through syncretism, African American resistance has progressed from subtle slave chants, through jazz music and the blues, to the R&B, soul and funk of the 1970s. These cultural forms often emanated from the margins of society, overcoming race and class barriers to take their position in the artistic discourse of mainstream American society. Hip-hop built on this tradition of resistance and developed as a post-modern art form emanating from post-industrial urban society. Like its predecessors, hip-hop quickly became an agent for the transmission of powerful cultural dialectics and protest, aimed at America's power structure.

Hip-hop originated in the mid 1970s, but throughout that decade it remained relatively localized in parts of New York City, mainly the South Bronx. In the 1980s, however, hip-hop managed to achieve popularity and prominence outside of the New York ghettos as several small companies capitalized on its burgeoning popularity. The first widespread commercial hip-hop success is largely attributed to The Sugar Hill Gang's 1979 hit "Rapper's Delight," which sampled Chic's "Good Times," to create a funky, upbeat, party-like feel. This upbeat style predominated rap in its early years as an

¹ Zinn, Howard, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 443.

outgrowth of the disco genre and mimicked the carefree attitude prevalent among its audience and practitioners. As an outgrowth of reggae, R & B, funk, and soul, hip-hop remained associated with celebration, prevalent among revelers in dancehalls, house parties, and block parties; all attempts at escape and emotional outlet through elation. However, during the 1980s, the dark cloud of economic adversity that had been slowly accumulating over the urban ghettos darkened ever further. Recession cast a shadow over much of urban America, darkening the sonic outlook of many artists.

Artists began to focus on the stark realities associated with ghetto life that had reached a low point during the 1980s. As longtime music critic Nelson George argues, "it is no coincidence that hip-hop germinated in the economics of Ronald Reagan's America."² While urban conditions had been deteriorating for decades, a recession and Reagan's attack on "big government" exacerbated this decay, sending many of the urban underclass into deep poverty. Perhaps paradoxically, hip-hop grew out of this decay and demonstrated stunning vitality in confronting the issues that surrounded urban life. Cultural expression gained strength out of the void of the urban landscape. Hip-hop became a powerful cultural vessel for a message from the largely black and poor ghetto residents. This message confronted mainstream America and challenged the increasingly conservative national political discourse surrounding urban poverty and the politics of race.

Transcending mere economic conditions, hip-hop contained a prevalent Afrocentrist strain that drew upon earlier social and political movements. These movements included the Marcus Garvey "Back to Africa" movement, the Black Panthers, and the Nation of Islam. Each of these movements held great influence over the respective

² George, Nelson, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p. xii.

musical genres of reggae, R & B, and soul from which hip-hop began to draw inspiration. This Afro-centrist strain of political thought seeped into the younger generation, which confronted an ever-increasing flood of conservatism, reaching unprecedented heights during the Reagan-Bush era. Much of hip-hop's notoriety resulted from its positions concerning race, economics, and social order that contradicted the white, affluent conservative majority, especially that concerning the correlation between race and poverty. Hip-hop arose at a time when Reagan and other conservatives started rescinding many of the programs implemented in Lyndon Johnson's Great Society designed to achieve racial parity, largely affecting economic opportunity for the underclass.

Hip-hop was inspired partly by an Afro-centrist strain of thought, which drew upon a historical memory of four hundred years of oppression leading up to the present. Many artists saw vestiges of this tradition and continued evidence of systemic racism in the economic and political climate of the 1980s, the manifestations of which even led many to believe in a white conspiracy against the black race. Economic segregation of the races became latest form in a tradition of oppression. With a widening income gap and the influx of drugs and guns in the urban communities, many saw a pattern of oppression in the modern era, which began to intensify during the 1980s, as the efforts of liberalism had seemingly subsided. Much of the hip-hop expression derived from a focus on this seemingly deliberate oppression and began to raise consciousness about specific problems within the urban community and their roots in the political world. The ambient conditions of a growing underclass and decreased political participation led many hip-hop artists to react and challenge the rising tide of conservatism and rap about specific topics relevant to the policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations. Some policies

within the rising conservative tide held great significance for rap artists as most were maturing both personally and artistically in the era surrounding the Reagan and Bush years, namely those concerning drugs, crime, race, and perhaps the most significant, economics.

Birth of the Ghetto

“One hundred years have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons are not fully free... they are not yet freed from social and economic oppression.”

-John F. Kennedy, 1963

During the 1890s over ninety percent of African Americans lived below the Mason-Dixon line. However, an increasing number of blacks migrated north, seeking opportunity in industrialized cities. The combination of a mechanization of agriculture in the South and industrialization of northern economies compelled millions of blacks to settle in urban areas. This urbanization reached a fever pitch during World War I, as the vacant labor market drew over half a million blacks northward during the period from 1915 to 1920. Aspirations for opportunity drew another million blacks during the roaring 20s. The rapid urbanization led to the rise in segregated ghettos, as whites began fleeing areas that witnessed an influx of blacks. Like hopes for integration, economic opportunity also proved evanescent for blacks as capital largely accompanied whites departing for the suburbs. The wartime pattern of urbanization repeated itself during World War II, as industry relied on blacks to fill the void left by the masses of workers turned soldiers. However, as the wartime economy converted to one of peace, the economic machine left most blacks by the wayside, once again withdrawing employment opportunity to favor the returning white soldiers. The cycle of urban migration and the

retreat of wealth created urban ghettos largely consisting of impoverished blacks, augmented by a rise in migration of Puerto Ricans and other West Indians.³

As America moved into the 1960s, racial détente waned as blacks actively sought specific legal recognition of rights enshrined in the Constitution. Although initially a nonviolent movement, slow progress and aspirations for a piece of the American pie frustrated many of the younger civil rights activists to their breaking point. Within a few years, the smoke and flames of widespread racial rioting in the mid sixties engulfed and overshadowed the peaceful, legalistic approach advocated by SNCC, SCLC and the NAACP. Blacks shunned nonviolence as activists adopted more confrontational and militant tactics. As the tactics of the struggle for equality changed, its focus shifted from breaking down legal barriers to more nationalistic goals, such as defense and awareness within the community; the movement radicalized. This new focus emphasized the vast economic inequalities for blacks, especially in the growing urban ghettos. In his 1963 Civil Rights Speech, John F. Kennedy stated:

The Negro baby born in America today, regardless of the section or state in which he is born, has about one-half as much chance of completing high school as a white baby, born in the same place, on the same day; one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man; twice as much chance of becoming unemployed; about one-seventh as much chance of earning \$10,000 a year; a life expectancy which is seven years shorter and the prospects of earning only half as much.

Caste and class mutually reinforced the intransigence of poverty for blacks and the lack of wealth in the black community fostered deterioration in black inner-city communities. Frustration mounted with increased poverty and a slow in the progression of the Civil Rights movement. Complacency turned into unrest as cities across the country, including Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago and Newark, exploded into racial rioting. The uprisings

³ Goldberg, Robert A. *Lectures on American Social Movements*, given 10/01/02 and 10/29/02.

were set off by what the National Advisory Committee on Urban Disorders called the “explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II,” and pointed to the discrimination and segregation in housing, employment and education experienced by the “growing concentrations” of impoverished blacks.⁴ The riots changed the urban landscape, leaving it barren and increasingly devoid of wealth. When the smoke of the riots cleared, black communities found themselves even more embedded in poverty.

Vocal Grassroots

“1964 threatens to be a very explosive year on the racial front.”
-Malcolm X

While Malcolm X’s observation proved to be extremely prescient, the explosions did not generally come until 1965, the year of his death. Beginning with the Watts riots, 1965 saw an explosive growth of activism and chaos in the wake of Malcolm’s death, only to climax in the “long, hot summers” of 1966 through 1968, which brought the death of King and Bobby Kennedy. The radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement led to the recognition of a new brand of Afrocentrist leader, embodied early on by Malcolm X and later Huey Newton, Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panthers. Rather than integration, these leaders advocated separatism, or “black nationalism,” with calls for equal rights, namely that of self-defense “by any means necessary.” These new movements brought to light the hypocrisies within the government, namely concerning the use of violence juxtaposed between foreign and domestic settings. Malcolm X criticized the use of blacks in the military by a government that failed to protect them from violence domestically. In a 1963 speech he articulated, “if violence is wrong in

⁴ *Report of the National Advisory Committee on Urban Disorders*, quoted in Zinn, Howard, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999)

America, violence is wrong abroad. If it is wrong to be violent defending black women and children and black babies and black men, then it is wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her.”⁵ He made a case for the militant defense of the black community, which only grew more salient as both the conflict in Vietnam and government repression of black social movements intensified over the course of the decade. The Black Panthers adopted this sentiment, taking up arms and military style dress in “defense” of their community. The militant message arose amidst the chaos and flames of the urban riots, fortifying calls for greater implementation of the altruist directives enunciated in the Great Society program.

Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society program attempted to improve conditions, which many saw as a logical progression from the New Deal era to extend relief to those among the urban poor who were not emancipated from the lingering effects of segregation and structural barriers. Johnson successfully expanded the scope of public programs designed to incorporate blacks and other minorities into the mainstream of American society. This, however largely failed to provide substantial relief despite indirect, but diminished support throughout the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. With the reduced support, urban conditions generally wore away, with the exception of some increased employment in the public sector for blacks and other minorities.

Leading into the seventies, the discontent manifested by the riots and articulated by black political movements soon begat a new wave of artistic expression. Artists such as Marvin Gaye, Isaac Hayes, Gil Scott-Heron, Curtis Mayfield, and the Last Poets

⁵ Malcolm X, “A Message to the Grass Roots” in *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1965)

inherited the tradition of the African griot,⁶ or chronicler, and began to chronicle the black condition in the aftermath of the explosions and climax of liberalism.

The title of Marvin Gaye's soulful hit perhaps stated the problem best in asking, "What's Goin' On?" The song mentions poverty, crime, and ponders a general, and increasing degeneration within society. Gaye, Hayes, and Mayfield focused on articulating some of the chaos and confusion facing the black community through R & B and soul music. However, Gil Scott-Heron was one of the first to transcend the R & B and soul style so prevalent at the time to incorporate poetic vocal styles sometimes independent of musical harmony. With such tracks as "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" and "Whitey's On the Moon" Scott-Heron created an opus that incorporated his R & B and soul roots with a new "rap" lyrical style. The style marked a departure from earlier vocal styles with a cadence and rhythm that seemed independent of the musical harmony over which he orated. His vocal style sounded more like a poem or a speech that was superimposed over a background beat, making the listener focus on the message of the song, rather than a harmony or "hook." These tracks not only paved a new musical path, but also sought to include political commentary beyond the mere chronicling of society. "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" ushered in a vocal style reminiscent of the militant black leaders of the time in both style of delivery and message, forecasting a coming metamorphosis in society, with particular attention dedicated to rejection of the influence of the mass media over the black community. His themes and style, as will become evident, proliferated among black music and laid the groundwork for the explosion of rap music in the late 70s and early 80s.

⁶Smallwood, Andrew P. "At the Vanguard: African American Life as Seen Through the Music of Selected Rap and Jazz Artists," in Conyers Jr., James L. (ed.) *African American Jazz and Rap: Social and Philosophical Examinations of Black Expressive Behavior* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2001)

Scott-Heron offered more specific commentary than “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” on the inconsistencies of the liberal government with respect to economic priorities in “Whitey’s On the Moon.” With a musical accompaniment consisting solely of one percussionist producing a syncopated and aggressive beat on the bongo drums, Scott-Heron angrily begins by relating, “a rat done bit my sister Nell, with Whitey on the moon.” The correlation between conditions in the ghetto and aggressive government spending on defense is immediately established. The song then moves beyond the rats to describe similar facets affecting the ghetto followed by a repeat of their connection with “Whitey on the moon.” The last line of the song states: “Taxes takin’ my whole damn check, the junkies make me a nervous wreck, the price of food is goin’ up... with all that money I made last year, for Whitey on the moon, how come I ain’t got no money here? Hmm: Whitey’s on the moon.” The song produces a powerful dialectic about the allocation of resources in a society vocally committed to liberalism, but instead dedicates much of those resources to pursue a space program rather than provide decent living conditions for the traditionally neglected community of the urban poor.⁷

The Last Poets applied the same critique to the continued consumption of capital, both human and material, in the Vietnam War. With a lyrical style almost exclusively of the spoken “rap” kind, and a generally funkier musical accompaniment, the group also echoed calls by militant black leaders for consistency in the liberal intentions of the government. On their 1970 release *The Last Poets*, the group took on various aspects of racism and self-determination in the black community. Attention to the titles of their tracks alone reveals the subject matter and themes. In their track “Ho Chi Minh,” the

⁷ Scott-Heron, Gil “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” and “Whitey’s On the Moon,” from the LP *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, 1974 RCA Records.

group critiqued the U.S. government for its gratuitous involvement in Vietnam, contrary to the national aspirations of the Vietnamese. Its largely metaphorical lyrics juxtaposed the struggle of blacks in America to that of the Vietnamese as it likened the preemptory foreign policies of the government to its domestic policy. Another track, "White Man's Got a God Complex," manifested the undercurrents of anti-racist thought throughout the opus of the Last Poets. But more than just anti-racism, the Last Poets also attacked specifically the manner in which the government ignored the drug problem in the inner cities, namely the influx of heroin in the early seventies. Moreover, they critiqued the handling of the welfare system, "the line forms to the rear, lady, and I don't care if you never cash your checks, 'cause the white man's got a God complex." The commentary reflected a growing realization about the political and administrative limits of providing a safety net for disadvantaged citizens, many of whom were urban blacks and Latinos. Their comment implies a direct racism on the part of the government. At a time when minorities still lacked much representation in politics, the neglect of certain elements of society by others seemed to point to the continuation of endemic racism in the political system.

Reminiscent of the whole opus, the Last Poets infused a strong political and social critique over the existing trend of social realism in black music. Black music began to diversify and incorporate the rhetoric of the Black Nationalist movements. The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron prompted black music in the seventies to incorporate more specific dialectic critiques of systemic racism in American society. These artists built on the tradition of the militant black political leaders to challenge the figurehead of this racism, the government. This lyrical style marked a deviation from previous trends in

black music concerning vocal harmony to bring about a “rap,” or poetic style of delivery that complemented the often-aggressive messages and themes articulated. Scott-Heron and the Last Poets sought to paint a picture of discord and disharmony over the present direction of America that was embodied in their musical and lyrical style. These artists helped build the foundation for the later development of hip-hop, which moved beyond the mere “rap” lyrical style and incorporated other elements of urban culture. Hip-hop would be an amalgam of many cultural influences, but its lyrical and thematic style built on the work of Scott-Heron and the Last Poets especially, who themselves were products of contemporary urban America in the 1960s and 1970s. They artistically manifested the growing disillusionment in the black community about the social and political ambience that had developed in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the climax, and seeming failure of the Great Society.

The Reagan Revolution (Televised)

“The time has come for a new American Emancipation, a great national drive to tear down economic barriers and liberate the spirit of enterprise in the most distressed areas of our country.”
-Ronald Reagan, 1985 Inaugural Speech

Urban poverty intensified in the context of a rapidly deindustrializing economy as barriers and limits became a fact of life for many poor blacks. The deindustrialization process culminated in the 1980s with a shift in policy during the administration of Ronald Reagan. His new focus centered on revitalizing the slumping economy inherited from Jimmy Carter through tax cuts favoring supply side economics. By allowing more wealth to remain in the private sector, mainly in the upper echelons, spending would increase and wealth would “trickle down” to the masses. In his 1981 Inaugural Address, Reagan

declared: "this Administration's objective will be a healthy, vigorous, growing economy that provides equal opportunities for all Americans with no barriers born of bigotry or discrimination." Reagan hoped to fulfill this objective with a series of tax cuts lessening the burden on the upper and middle classes. The most significant measure, the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA) of 1981, reduced the top marginal rate from 70 percent to 50 percent.⁸ By 1984, after several years of lowered taxes, conservatives had claimed victory in achieving Reagan's objective while many liberals dissented, testifying to high unemployment, poverty and the increasing disparity in wealth across America.

During the election year of 1984, conservatives celebrated the Reagan revolution: its tax cuts, the war on welfare, and the end of the stagflation of the Carter era. They contended that Reagan had lifted the yoke of taxes and that Americans, namely those in his base of political support, were able to more freely enjoy their earnings. According to Reagan and other conservatives, America had become a "shining city on a hill," with opportunity present for anyone with an enterprising spirit. Conservatives portrayed Reagan as the savior of the American economy, his expanding base of support agreed, and he won re-election by a landslide. After his re-election, despite a continuing recession, he echoed his exuberant idealism in noting a distinct American harmony during his 1985 Inaugural Address. He spoke of this harmony, "it is the American sound: It is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic- daring, decent and fair. That's our heritage, that's our song. We sing it still." His ever-positive speeches painted a picture of a faultless society, with a focus on upholding a bountiful status quo, made possible by reduced government.

⁸ *Fairness and the Reagan Tax Cuts: Hearing Before the Joint Congressional Economic Committee*, June 12, 1984.

Re-election in 1984 seemed to offer a mandate from the American people in support of Reagan's brand of conservative ideology. America gladly indulged in Reagan's exuberant optimism while deficit spending and supply-side economics offered a change to the ineffectual direction of the Carter administration. The conservatives used their mandate to usher in a new wave of tax cuts with the Tax Reform Act of 1986. The cumulative effect resulted in the top marginal federal tax rate being cut to less than half its previous rate.⁹ While directing the country according to the conservative mandate, Reagan's policies prompted numerous polemics and polarized the country's political persona between the forces of conservatism and liberalism. Reagan hoped to galvanize support for both domestic and foreign policy with his Manichean worldview. Either one became a part of the harmony and resided in the "shining city," or one could flirt with liberalism, only a lighter shade of communism, and contribute to economic, moral, and military decline. The harmony Reagan sought appeared in his ability to create a cohesive conservative coalition, which he was then able to mold into an effective political and policy machine, unlike most of his predecessors, even appealing to those who would later become known as "Reagan Democrats." The conservative movement had finally matured under Reagan's leadership as a multifarious and formidable political group.

Many historians and political scientists have charged that Reagan's policies contained racial overtones, but packaged by Reagan as affable and prudent conservatism. As Thomas and Mary Edsall have observed in their work, *Chain Reaction*, Reagan managed to garner much support from working class whites, once stalwart Democrats. The neo-conservatives sought to reduce government intervention in everyday life, namely reducing the tax burden, appealing to the blue-collar sectors of society. They politically

⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

demonized much of the underclass by lambasting “welfare queens,” and many others receiving public assistance. Reagan implied that social welfare was directly detrimental to the tax burden bore by the working class. As much of the federal spending programs were designed for the urban poor, the issues of race and economic policy intersected. This anti-government sentiment propelled Reagan to two terms in the presidency, riding a wave of support that remained unresponsive to the needs of the black community. As John Brenkman argues, “as the Reagan years marched forward, the needs and interests of urban blacks were substantially excluded from political debate.”¹⁰ As Reagan’s coalition did not seek any black votes, issues important to the black community were shunned in favor of reducing government, which had become the largest employer of African Americans, as well as a guarantor of some standard of living through welfare and other social programs. Despite these traditional efforts of the federal government, conservatives believed they were not only ineffectual in meeting the challenges of providing support for the large underclass, but also responsible for exacerbating many of the same problems liberalism hoped to remedy.

Given the previous shortcomings of the federal government, reductions under Reagan would mean a drastic shortage of resources in meeting the social challenges liberalism had sought to undertake. Welfare, housing, and other federal programs fell under attack, most of which had been widely popular in the black community, as many urban blacks had been the beneficiaries of such programs. Thomas Edsall argues, “Republican ideological positions in favor of reduced taxes and curtailed government

¹⁰ Brenkman, John, “Race Publics,” *Transition*, Vol. 0, Issue 66, 1985 p 13.

spending place the GOP in a directly adversarial position to the black community.”¹¹ Urban blacks saw themselves shunned in national politics throughout Reagan’s success in garnering the support of the (white) working class. He appealed directly to taxpayers, pitting them against policies favoring tax recipients. Conservatives alluded to “economic barriers” that hindered American progress, the antithesis of the economic barriers that had been slowly building in front of many in the black community due to latent racism and generations of economic distress. Many in the black community saw Reagan’s policies as the embodiment of that latent racism, which had been validated by Reagan’s political success with working class whites. This political exclusion fostered extreme disillusionment, so much so that, “by 1986, fully 56 percent of blacks saw Reagan as racist.”¹² Reagan communicated a message to American liberals that only those who shared in his conservative vision could join in the harmony of the “shining city on the hill.” He articulated a picture of a lucent America that refused be soiled by the admission of an underclass.

Political opponents labeled Reagan’s images and rhetoric false representations of America, as Mario Cuomo referred to them at his keynote address at the 1984 Democratic National Convention, “smoke and mirrors... illusions.” In Reagan’s shortsightedness, he ignored the increasingly conspicuous underclass, whose numbers were growing rapidly. Cuomo also spoke of an emergent divide between Reagan’s shining city and “ghettos where thousands of young people, without an education or a job, give their lives away to drug dealers every day.”¹³ While conservatives championed

¹¹ Edsall, Thomas B., and Edsall, Mary D., *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992) p 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹³ Cuomo, Mario, keynote address at the 1984 Democratic National Convention, as

the Reagan revolution, economic data demonstrated growing poverty and income inequality. From 1984 to 1988, the wealth (measured in net worth: monies and assets minus debts) of the richest one-fifth of Americans increased 14 percent, while the rest of American households failed to experience a significant change in net worth.¹⁴ The trickle-down effect Reagan advisors had hoped for did generate some economic growth, but created a greater disparity of wealth as a side-effect. Or, as Historian Howard Zinn articulates, "corporate America became the greatest beneficiary of the Reagan-Bush years."¹⁵ Reagan's tax cuts meant a rise in wealth for the rich, with few benefits trickling down for the lower classes.

As benefits for the rich failed to remedy the continuing recession, poverty escalated. For the already marginalized poor in the inner city, recession pushed them further to the fringes of society, and further from climbing the hill to take their place in the "shining city." Poor black ghettos became a repository for millions in poverty. By 1990, the poverty rate for blacks stayed around 32 percent, over three times higher than that for whites, which hovered around 10 percent. The poverty rate was even higher for black children as 44 out of every 100 black children survived below the poverty line. Economic segregation between whites and blacks had been building over the decades and translated into physical segregation, as poor blacks and other minorities became concentrated in the inner city. Political scientist John Sloan discusses economic conditions during the Reagan Era:

Poverty has also become more entrenched and concentrated. The number of people living in concentrated poverty areas (where at least 40 percent of

¹⁴ Sloan, John W., *The Reagan Effect: Economics and Presidential Leadership* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999) p 251.

¹⁵ Zinn, Howard, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999) p 574.

the population is poor) grew from 3.7 million in 1970 to 5.6 million in 1980 to 10.4 million in 1990. Life in these subcultures is characterized by unemployment, female-headed households, welfare dependency, crime, and alcohol and drug abuse. The American dream is not likely to flourish here. Neither is equality of opportunity.

The urbanization trend continued for blacks from its roots in the early part of the century.

Physical de facto segregation intensified as poverty rates climbed and ghettos grew.

Poverty became an even greater influence in the ghettos than before due to the numbers of people subject to its ill effects.¹⁶

Conservatives were quick to deny relief to those being consumed by growing poverty. Reduced government, lower taxes, and an increased defense budget necessitated cuts in spending, with federal welfare programs one of the largest casualties. Through 1984, the Reagan administration had cut \$140 billion from social programs as part of his War on Welfare.¹⁷ Specifically, Reagan cut Medicaid by 5 percent, Aid to Families with Dependent Children by 13 percent, Food Stamp programs by 13 percent, child nutrition programs by 28 percent, unemployment insurance by 7 percent, housing assistance by 4 percent and low-income energy assistance by 8 percent.¹⁸ Economic conditions and cutbacks in relief frustrated millions of African Americans, especially the high percentage of female-headed households. As they faced deteriorating urban conditions and limited opportunity, many of the urban poor would consider themselves examples of the failure of Reagan's 1981 stated objectives.

The case of the Department of Housing and Urban Development under Reagan manifested his negligence for urban conditions. Between 1981 and 1987 Reagan slashed

¹⁶ Sloan, *The Reagan Effect*, p 254.

¹⁷ Zinn, *A People's History*, p 577.

¹⁸ Karaagac, John W., *Between Promise and Policy: Ronald Reagan and Conservative Reformism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), p. 135; Katz, Michael, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), p. 297.

the HUD budget from \$33 billion to \$14 billion. Its secretary, Sam Pierce was the only African American in Reagan's cabinet, whom Reagan once failed to recognize, calling him "Mr. Mayor." By most accounts, Pierce remained largely uninvolved and was eventually fired, leaving HUD to fall under the control of shifting appointees who awarded large building contracts to Republican supporters.¹⁹ Reagan's administration ignored housing and social problems and unwilling to remedy the decaying urban centers across America.

The urban deterioration appeared in many forms within the communities. Personal failure multiplied into community failure as unemployment rates soared and dropout rates remained high. Dropout rates accompanied the Reagan Revolution as the White House cut block education grants to the states, dropping from \$5.5 billion to \$1.5 billion.²⁰ As more children entered poverty than ever before, 13.7 million in 1983, cuts in education reduced the already small chance of escaping poverty's trap.²¹ Widespread conditions largely confined opportunity to the realm of the informal economy of crime and drugs. Reagan only managed to tear down economic barriers confronting certain segments of the population, meaning that many of the progeny of the civil rights activists, young urban blacks, saw themselves as victims of the national turn toward conservatism, and away from them. The coalition Reagan had built largely included the affluent and the white working class, with minorities and the poor shunned, both in policy and rhetoric.

¹⁹ Karaagac, *Between Promise*, pgs. 140-141.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.254.

²¹ Drogin, Bob, quoted in Katz, *In the Shadow*, p. 298.

Dissonance

"Rap music has warned the Bushes and Reagans and politicians,"
-Luther Campbell of 2 Live Crew, 1992

Economic frustration and urban decay discussed above became an all-encompassing environment for an entire generation of inner-city youth. As poverty swelled the ranks of ghetto dwellers, a new urban culture was born out of this environment of decay. Blacks coped with economic oppression much the same way they had in the past, with cultural expression in the arts, namely music. Initially, hip-hop displayed a general elation and positive escape from everyday drudgery as DJs played records at dance parties. The originators of hip-hop such as DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambataa, Grand Wizard Theodore, and the first commercial success, the Sugarhill Gang, used upbeat reggae, funk, and disco beats to liven up the party venues that featured hip-hop acts. The Master of Ceremonies, or MC, would simply pump the crowd up and act as a chorus for the DJ. Soon, MCs began to assume a more prominent role and would recite lines and rhymes over the music playing. Hip-hop began to assume its modern form as DJs perfected the art of looping a certain portion of a record to create what came to be known as a break beat. MCs could then have a steady beat over which to rhyme, exploring party themes in a rhythmical style. As vocals grew in importance relative to background music, MCs incorporated a wider variety of themes on which to wax lyrical. Expanding from the immediate surroundings of the party, lyricists soon incorporated themes relevant to the neighborhood, often spawning battles over whose neighborhood was best (i.e. the Bronx vs. Queens). But artists also transcended the differences in neighborhood to acknowledge a great similarity in the condition of urban neighborhoods everywhere.

Coterminous with the rise in prominence of the vocal style associated with hip-hop was the burgeoning of a huge recession. "Rap" style vocals soon proved the ideal conveyance for messages direct from the underground grassroots, and it proved only a matter of time before artists would draw on the tradition set forth by Gil Scott-Heron, the Last Poets and other members of the Black Arts movements. The urban condition that culminated during the Reagan era germinated the seeds of hip-hop to become a postmodern form of protest, as the 1980s spawned a new politically charged discourse emanating from the ghetto. During the 80s and 90s, poor black youths produced a large degree of dissonance to Reagan's 'American sound' through rap music, centered around the realities of life in the ghetto. Drawing on earlier soul, R & B, funk, and nascent hybrid "rap" styles, social reality figured prominently in the growing art form, which produced a powerful dialectical criticism of Reagan's American "shining city." Instead, hip-hop artists constructed an alternate aesthetic largely based on the young, urban, and black perspective.

As a product of urban decay and economic neglect, hip-hop reflected the environment from which it came. Moreover, as a reflective organic art form, it came to be both a product and a mimesis of the ambience of the 1980s. Hip-hop embodied an artistic response to the neglect of urban communities, namely educational, arts, and cultural programs. With education funding down considerably, arts programs were often the first to go, including music, visual arts and dance. Hip-hop supplied a street counterpart to these with its four main components of graffiti, breakdancing, DJ-ing (or turntablism), and MC-ing (or rapping). However, hip-hop came to connote much more than the music, it incorporated several artistic complements and became known as more

of a living dynamic lifestyle, inextricably linked to its urban practitioners. The complementary art forms, graffiti and breakdancing, constituted a direct response to the lack of artistic programs through which to develop talent and expression. Instead, artists used spray paint as a medium and buildings, subway cars, and playgrounds as canvases to color the cityscape with portrayals of urban life that draw on both the impressionist and expressionist schools of modern art. Graffiti style demonstrated an aesthetic sense that differed much from any previous art forms. It drew upon the Latino artistic tradition of murals, as many Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, and other Latinos provided much influence on the course of hip-hop's development. West Indian and Latino culture proved integral to the development of hip-hop as a cultural movement.

Breakdancing shared in this Latino heritage as an outlet for physical artistic expression. Largely a product of Afro-Latino communities, break dancing hoped to deconstruct the tradition of European upright dance steps, resembling Brazilian *capoeira* with its array of body positions and gyrations. Breakdancers sought to construct a stunning visual and rhythmic display, while (metaphorically) maintaining themselves grounded on the street surface, almost never jumping or leaping in the air. Breakdancers often placed linoleum or cardboard mats on street corners and created a new dance lexicon from the street vernacular by incorporating such moves as headspins, handspins, and robotics. While graffiti proliferated across New York's subways and street corners, and breakdancing challenged modern dance aesthetics, they were complementary to the most popular and exportable of the new cultural form, the beats and rhymes. The musical component of hip-hop surpassed these complementary elements in establishing a direct discourse on behalf of the urban underclass.

As Historian Tricia Rose states, "under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or unsuccessfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion."²² Hip-hop emerged during the relatively tranquil period that followed the severe repression of black militancy and uprising during the late 1960s. While the protests waned, the conditions blacks had protested proved intransigent, which left a receptive audience among the community. As most hip-hop artists were too young to experience the widespread repression associated with outward protest, their narratives describe a continued police repression. The arts served as an effective conveyance for discursive expression without eliciting unwanted attention to their protest. Over its course of development, the music began as a relatively subtle form of protest, at first reaching only that audience already receptive to rap. However, as hip-hop's commercial success grew, that message of social reality grew beyond the walls of the ghetto to become "black America's CNN," as Chuck D of Public Enemy labeled it.²³ It is here that Gil Scott-Heron's preoccupation about control of the media resurfaces in the younger generation. As the new dominant political machinery began to ignore black concerns, the mass media largely followed suit, until hip-hop exploded out of the ghetto with its own brand of social realism. It filled the void in the media to compensate for the lack of cultural exposure in mainstream America, for, as Chuck D observed "black life doesn't get the total spectrum of information through anything else."²⁴

²² Rose, Tricia, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 99.

²³ As quoted in Leland, J. "The Word on the Street is Heard in the Beat," *Newsweek* 5/11/92, Vol. 119, Issue 19, p 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The Message(s)

“It’s like a jungle sometimes I wonder how I keep from goin’ under.”
 -“The Message,” Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, 1981

From the first release of social realist rap, “The Message,” up through the “conscious” rap movements embodied by Public Enemy and KRS-One to the gangsta rap genre, much of hip-hop demonstrates recurring themes brought about by urban decay and the conditions of the 1980s. Most rappers have built on the tradition set in motion by Grandmaster Flash in detailing these themes. Crime, drugs, violence, and the pathogens associated with poverty prevail as the most common themes in rap lyrics as those conditions overshadowed much of the urban black experience. But much like the trend observed earlier in R & B and soul music, social realism turned into politicized discontent as many rap artists began to associate facets of life in the ghetto with exact planks of the conservative political platform emanating from the White House.

To heed the expressive stirrings of the urban poor, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released “The Message” in 1981. “The Message” quickly became hip-hop canon due to its change in course toward social awareness. As critic Shannita Williams declares, “‘The Message’ marked the beginning of social realism in rap music.”²⁵ The song was released as a single from Sugar Hill Records, the same company that had released the genre’s first large success outside the ghetto “Rapper’s Delight” and was integral to rap music’s entrance into pop culture. It “seethed against the everyday violence of disinvestments” and “struck the zeitgeist [of the era] like a bull’s-eye.”²⁶ The song begins with the chorus line, “it’s like a jungle sometimes I wonder how I keep from

²⁵ Williams, Shannita, from the liner notes to *The Best of Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel and the Furious Five*, 1994 Rhino Records.

²⁶ Chang, Jeff, “‘Stakes is High,’” *Nation*, 1/13/2003, Vol. 276 Issue 2, p. 17.

going under,” and moves quickly to an existential verse about the nausea surrounding urban decay. A sound effect of shattering glass signals the beginning of the verse, “broken glass everywhere, people pissin’ on the stairs ya’ know they just don’t care. I can’t take the smell, can’t take the noise. I got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice. The rats in the front room, roaches in the back, junkies in the alley with a baseball bat.”²⁷ The description of the environment transitions to an acknowledgement of effects of widespread recession and urban neglect on the personal level, continuing with, “got a bum education, double-digit inflation, can’t take the train to the job there’s a strike at the station.” The song ends with a fatalistic apostrophe to a hypothetical child about his course of action through the ghetto, lured on a path to destruction by the informal economy of the streets. It warns, “you’ll admire all the number book takers, thugs, pimps and pushers, the big money makers, drivin’ big cars, spendin’ 20s and 10s, and you’ll wanna grow up to be just like them.” The weary protagonist drops out of school because of insensitivity and inadequacy by the educational system, only to wind up in jail, typical of criminal avenues that lead to the elusive American dream. During the Reagan era, the American dream had collapsed for many in the urban ghetto; with jobs unavailable, the informal economy provided the only outlet for the private initiative the Reagan government so adamantly advocated. “The Message” first touched on the perception of opportunity in America from the urban perspective, striking a stark contrast to that espoused by Reagan.

Despite the added emphasis on repression, conditions in the ghetto did not stifle the creativity and private initiative in the artistic milieu, instead, it promoted self-assertion and a positive identity, in contrast to the hypocrisy of Reagan’s social and

²⁷ “The Message,” Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, 1981 Sugar Hill Records.

political theory. As Tricia Rose argues, "using the ghetto as a source of identity... undermines the stigma of poverty and social marginality."²⁸ This impetus compelled Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five to follow their success in the rap genre of social reality, and release "New York New York" in 1983. The song states, "I'm livin' in the land of plenty and many, but I'm damn sure poor and I don't know why."²⁹ For most living in the ghetto, Reagan's idealism did not extend to all Americans, instead following Mario Cuomo's model of a schism between Reagan's city and another less-mentioned side of America.

Using the ghetto as a source of identity became an important fulcrum on which much of the political message of rap came to rest. In the beginnings of hip-hop, many of the neighborhood rap concerts featured gangs as both sponsors and security. One in particular, the Black Spades, soon integrated itself into a hip-hop movement. Its leader, Afrika Bambaataa, changed the focus of the gang to include a platform of neighborhood unity and African Nationalism. Employing Jamaican influence reverent of Marcus Garvey's movement, Bambaataa founded the Zulu Nation as a movement dedicated to uniting the Bronx with social events generated under the auspices of hip-hop culture. The Zulu Nation would set up a sound system in neighborhood parks and throw block parties designed to encourage youth participation in hip-hop rather than in gang violence. One member of his group was Melle Mel, who, at Bambaataa's urging, worked with Grandmaster Flash to produce "The Message." The genesis of both local underground and commercial rap music occurred amidst a Black Nationalist influence encouraged by the Zulu Nation, which would accompany hip-hop throughout its rise to popularity. This

²⁸ Rose, *Black Noise*, p.12.

²⁹ "New York New York." Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, 1983 Sugar Hill Records.

nationalism would color much of the discourse surrounding hip-hop, and prompted much of the political message.³⁰

Bambataa was one of the first rappers to echo the sentiments of Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets about the misallocation of resources during the Reagan era. In doing so, he employed the political tradition of the civil rights movement in directly critiquing policy, adapting it under the nascent art form of hip-hop. He became the first to color hip-hop with both a politicized and a Black Nationalist sentiment, creating a fusion between these two ideas that has remained intact throughout the course of hip-hop. Moreover, he moved beyond describing conditions as in "the Message," and produced a dialectic focused on the rollback of the Great Society and the rising tide of conservatism. In his song "World Destruction," Bambataa critiques Reagan's defense spending, asking "nuclear war? What are you asking for?" His critique moves on to observe the many corporate beneficiaries of large military contracts, as well as the economic climate in general. He states, "the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer... we gonna drop the bomb on you."³¹ Bambataa creates the link between Reagan's defense spending and the economic hardships suffered by many in the community, launching the first assault of many coming from the urban ghetto. Bambataa's political message would soon proliferate across hip-hop, creating a powerful unity of defiance through coherence with fellow urban blacks.

Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambataa almost single-handedly established the major themes of hip-hop discourse throughout their work. In the "The Message," the group has laid out poverty as the ultimate influence, but already established the

³⁰Henderson, Errol A., "Black Nationalism and Rap Music," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, Issue 3 (Jan., 1996), 308-339.

³¹ "World Destruction," from the album

relationship between the informal economy and hip-hop. An examination of both artist biographies and subject matter reveals exactly how connected poverty and the informal economy are to hip-hop's development. Bambataa also lays out another major theme for later artists, articulating Black Nationalist political action and the concept of segregated community resources. Both of these themes would intersect with that of community oppression through direct authoritative force as well as indirectly through disinvestment and neglect. Later hip-hop artists would build on their work, and that of their R & B predecessors, to develop a more direct discourse addressing poverty, crime, drugs, and use of community resources. Artists such as Boogie Down Productions and Public Enemy immediately succeeded Bambataa and Flash during the mid-eighties in the genre of politicized rap, while refining that discourse and directing it at conservative America. The discourse emanating from hip-hop flowed from autobiographical stories to a powerful dialectic as hip-hop began to criticize certain policies of American politics, specifically the Reagan-Bush agenda. One of the immediate themes of hip-hop as a result of the urban condition was the informal economy, mainly drugs, and the government's concomitant attempt to control this facet of life in the ghetto.

The informal economy accompanied poverty and proved integral in the development of urban ghettos in the 1980s, as crime, mainly associated with the abundant urban drug trade, seemed the only area for black entrepreneurial spirit. The illegal drug trade heeded Reagan's calls, but at the same time Reagan policies limited resources and potential avenues in the inner city. Resulting from the abundance of crack, the conservative government declared a "War on Drugs" in response to their pervasive presence, especially as the drug problem spread beyond the cities to the suburbs, a

stronghold of Republican support. The "War on Drugs" launched its greatest offensive specifically to combat the proliferation of crack cocaine. Crack became prevalent in the early 1980s due to the abundance of powder cocaine, stemming from a decrease in price and an increase in purity. Crack cocaine spread through Colombia to the West Indies, where its widespread use was first noticed in the first years of the decade, from whence it soon spread to America. This new form offered cocaine in smaller and cheaper units, costing as low as a few dollars. Until this innovation, cocaine had remained in the hands of the wealthy as units sold for between \$80 and \$100 for about ten hits.³² Although the practice of freebasing (mixing cocaine with baking soda) began in the late 1970s, it was not until 1983 that crack use spread among the urban poor in America, reaching epidemic proportions about 1986, by which time drugs had reportedly spread to the suburbs.

Availability and low cost proliferated the substance among urban populations, primarily poor black and Latino communities. Two major results of this proliferation resulted that deeply impacted the urban community, as well as hip-hop music: one, the rise of the aforementioned informal economy, and two, the increased repression aimed at this nascent, but rapidly growing crack economy. As quickly as crack use burgeoned in the inner cities, politicians demonized the drug, especially within the Reagan and Bush administrations. The news media sensationalized the drug epidemic, prompting the government to bolster its efforts to combat crack. Between 1981 and 1992 the annual budget allocated for anti-drug programs rose from \$2 billion to \$12 billion, with funds for the Drug Enforcement Administration quadrupling. The Bush administration spent \$45

³² Reinerman, Craig and Levine, Harry G. *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) pp. 2-18.

billion alone, with the majority of the funds dedicated to law enforcement.³³ These spending figures indicate the propensity of the conservative movement to invest in social control rather than social and educational programs. The focus of the effort, rather than fighting the causes of drug abuse (mainly poverty and lack of education), tended to emphasize enforcement. Both administrations targeted users and urged social control rather than seeking to solve the addiction, viewing drug abuse as a personal choice, entirely independent of social setting. New sentencing guidelines evidenced this tendency toward social control, which imposed minimums from two to six times the punishment for crack possession versus equal amounts of cocaine.³⁴ Again, as crack use concentrated among the poor, sentencing disproportionately punished minorities as compared with the more affluent powder users.

The disparity in sentencing guidelines fell heavily on crack users as opposed to their wealthier powder-user counterparts. Blacks saw this disparity as a federal validation of the already unfair policing practices confronting black communities as compared with white communities. Since crack largely affected black communities, African Americans saw the increased enforcement against crack users rather than other drug forms as a validation of the already racist practices of urban police forces. In the song "White Lines" Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five detail the perception of the differences in the legal system between black and white defendants, "a street kid gets arrested, gonna do some time; he got out three years from now just to do more crime. A businessman gets caught, with twenty-four kilos; he's out on bail and out of jail, and that's the way it goes." Hip-hop detailed the rise in police repression against crack users,

³³ Reinerman and Levine. p. 21.

³⁴ Hatch, Orrin. *Hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Examining U.S. Sentencing Commission Recommendations for Cocaine Sentencing*. August 10, 1995. p. 2.

which many saw as an outgrowth of the racism of the legal system and the government in general. The conservative tendency toward repression naturally increased enforcement in the black community as a whole, which meant that many white police officers were patrolling black neighborhoods, as they traditionally had, but with a new aggressiveness against crack users and dealers. Numerous hip-hop artists, such as KRS-One with the song "Sound of da Police," comparing officers with 'overseers,' LL Cool J with "Illegal Search," detailing corrupt police practices, and Public Enemy with "Anti-Nigger Machine," rapping about general racist oppression, to name just a few early examples, speak about their experience with this increased aggression against young black men, victims of profiling that often presumed them to be crack dealers. Perhaps Oakland-based rapper Tupac Shakur best summed up the young, urban, and black perception of Reagan and Bush's drive for moral integrity in his song, "Words of Wisdom," in stating "the War on Drugs is a war on you and me."³⁵

With drugs such a prevalent fixture in urban America, hip-hop's development quickly intersected with the rise in the informal economy and the rise in repression against those involved. Many rappers viewed hip-hop, like the informal economy, as a means to an end, which led many rappers to begin their professional careers as drug dealers. Many artists were involved in the informal economy before they started rapping; KRS-One, Notorious B.I.G., Ice-T, Eazy-E, and Scarface (of the Geto Boys) all sold drugs either before their rap careers or as a method to finance them due to a lack of available capital. This sampling of artists also reflects the similarities in experience of black artists across the country, as the artists above have respective origins in New York

³⁵ Shakur, Tupac, "Words of Wisdom," from the LP *2pacalypse Now*, 1991 Jive Records.

City, Los Angeles, and Houston. All echo the integral part the informal economy played in the formation of their careers.

Through the connection to the informal economy, rap music became the avenue for reaffirmation of minority status and a postmodern deconstruction of Reagan's vision of mainstream America. Paradoxically, the informal economy both heeds and defies Reagan's vision, at once responding to the call for entrepreneurial spirit and negating his moral stance against drugs. KRS-One (whose name is an acronym for Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everybody) and Public Enemy as propagators of the "teacher" genre of rap, sought to raise awareness and appeal to reason, pointing out the dangers of both crack use and involvement in the crack economy. Public Enemy's "Night of the Living Baseheads" shouts, "the problem is this- we gotta fix it. Check out the justice- and how they run it, sellin', smellin', sniffin', riffin'. And brothers try to get swift an' sell to their own, rob a home, while some shrivel to the bone." They argued that crack comes "from a corner from a brother to keep another- below."³⁶ As the crack economy consumed large numbers of urban youth, it limited personal outcomes, landing those involved in jail or dead from the attached violence.

Urban conditions shaped the genesis of hip-hop artists as well as developed their discourse. Many hip-hop groups formed out of the bonds they made while dealing with poverty and the inner city, whether it was dealing drugs or living on the street. Boogie Down Productions, or BDP formed when KRS-One, then homeless, met DJ Scott LaRock, who was working as a youth counselor in the homeless shelter. Out of their humble beginning, they helped evolve the social consciousness style of hip-hop and gave

³⁶ "Night of the Living Baseheads," from the album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Public Enemy, 1988 Def Jam Records.

added voice to the hardships many urban youth faced growing up in an environment of decay. KRS-One echoes Grandmaster Flash and Public Enemy in rapping about the trap of the drug economy and its appeal to urban youth as a perceived avenue for quick advancement. In his song "Love's Gonna Get'cha," he states, "I look for work, I get dissed like a jerk. I do odd jobs and come home like a slob." He then turns to "Rob," the local drug dealer, who "gives him two hundred for a quick delivery." He begins running drugs, only to become consumed by the economy and enter the business for himself. Business does well and leads him to declare, "I pull about a 'G' a week; fuck school." His newfound success leads him to laugh at the "Just Say No" media campaign instituted by Nancy Reagan, musing that he's not concerned with "that bullshit." However, his elation soon turns to dismay as he begins warring with his former boss, which results in his brother, among others, falling victim to a spray of bullets.³⁷ His song attempts to deconstruct the message emanating from the federal government about the dangers of drugs. In doing so, he spins Reagan's "War on Drugs," and his stated political objective of entrepreneurial opportunity into a web of contradiction. For many ghetto residents, America under Reagan and Bush left them by the wayside, caught between the vision of harmonious enterprise and the realities of limited opportunity.

Reagan's emphasis on entrepreneurial spirit prompted a rise in the conspicuous consumption of the eighties (termed by Rolling Stone as the "Gimme Decade," and many others as the "Decade of Greed"). However, given the rising disparity of wealth, most saw the rich getting richer and sought a piece of the pie by any means necessary.

Participants in the informal economy also hoped for a share in the American Dream, but

³⁷ "Love's Gonna Get'cha (Material Love)," from the album *Edutainment*, Boogie Down Productions, 1990 Zomba Recording Company.

many in the ghetto ran into the increasing wall of police repression aimed at curtailing the informal avenue to success. Many rap songs from those already mentioned, through to artists like the Wu-Tang Clan and Ice Cube, share a common theme about attempts to seek employment in the formal economy, only ending in failure or insufficiency, which leaves the informal economy as the only viable alternative for a place close to Reagan's "shining city."

Notorious B.I.G. embodied this paradox between heeding private initiative and repression of the informal economic opportunity available in the ghetto. He constructed a fatalistic, yet prophetic and autobiographic set of images in 1993's *Ready to Die*, his first major record label release. The album cover featured a picture of a black infant, which, juxtaposed with its title, perhaps suggested a certain predestination at birth associated with ghetto life. The album constructed an urban aesthetic centered around his personal experience with the transition from innocence and good times to decay and chaos. The first musical track, "Things Done Changed," signaled this transition by painting a city with a youth population enjoying the somewhat more carefree times of the seventies, only to be consumed by poverty and the violence of the drug trade in the eighties. The album moves on with his descent into the chaos when he becomes a drug dealer and resorts to burglary to compensate for his lack of opportunity. He is resurrected after a stint in jail and rap proves to be his vehicle to achieve the American dream. This leads him to characterize opportunity in the ghetto as a "short stop, either ya' slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot."³⁸ This common perception of the informal economy as one of the few methods in achieving material success pervades rap music. At a time in American history when material success was lauded perhaps more so than any other,

³⁸ Notorious B.I.G., *Ready to Die*, 1994 Arista Records

societal values compelled many in the ghetto to desire a place of their own among those who had already succeeded, whose entrepreneurial spirit Reagan so vehemently adored.

For many, art mimicked reality as dealing drugs proved the only economic alternative available for the average ghetto resident. The emerging paradox between Reagan's emphasis on private initiative and his failure to provide avenues for advancement of this initiative in the ghetto became the impetus for much of the emerging dialectic of hip-hop. Drugs and the informal economy drive, as well as the government response, much of the narrative and aesthetic that hip-hop music hopes to construct. The economics of Reagan's America begat much of the informal economy, which tended to augment an emerging cycle of drugs, violence and decay. As Reagan placed emphasis on policing the ghetto, rather than educating its residents, hip-hop naturally reflected the chaos that ensued as a result of the increased repression. Fantasies of subversion and power over police officers reminiscent of those alluded to previously by Tricia Rose emerged out of this environment of repression propagated by the highest levels of government. Such songs as N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police" and Ice-T's "Cop Killer" highlight the violent emotive expression many young blacks felt against increased police scrutiny. KRS-One posited the difference between an officer and overseer in his song "Sound of Da Police," stating, "need a little clarity, check the similarity."³⁹ These common themes of rebellion against an often-repressive authority amplified the zeitgeist struck first by Grandmaster Flash, but this time, hip-hop etiology had identified the source of many of the urban ills, those that occupy all levels of the "Amerikkkan" (employing an old Black Muslim theme) power structure.

³⁹"Sound of Da Police," from the album *Return of the Boom Bap*, Boogie Down Productions, 1993 Zomba Recording Company

The Other Half

“Not fully American, but getting there very slowly”
 -“The Homeless,” KRS-One, 1989

Public Enemy, producing some of the most prominent politicized rap, followed in Bambataa’s and Grandmaster Flash’s footsteps to achieve prominence in pop culture through social realism with a nationalist slant. The group espoused doctrines of that focus both inward and outward, employing black power and disestablishmentarianism, and celebrated the teachings of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. They adopted the name “Public Enemy” and a logo depicting a rifle scope focused on a silhouetted Black Panther, to recall the tradition of resistance extending from the Panthers and the N.O.I. Through their lyrics they critiqued the vision of America Reagan hoped to construct. Public Enemy perhaps best incorporated the entire spectrum of poor urban (hip-hop) discourse into their opus, touching on themes from defense, budget, welfare, drugs, authority and racism. In “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” perhaps as a response to Reagan’s emphasis on defense, rapper Chuck D. reacts to a recruitment letter from the government urging him to join “their army or whatever.” The letter elicited his disgust and prompted him to react, “never! Here is a land that never gave a damn, about a brother like me and myself, because they never did.” Further declaring, “they could not understand that I’m a Black man, and I could never be a veteran.”⁴⁰ Chuck D. constructs a dissonant reality from Reagan’s American sound of unity. Much of his anger stems from the inability of blacks to participate in mainstream American culture and politics. Instead, the government hopes to conscript the black populace and use it to reinforce a military agenda. Like many of the dialectics contained in rap music, a critique of the

⁴⁰ “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” from Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation*.

military use of blacks seeks to question the political contradiction that arises when the government seeks blacks' service to an authority that often neglected the needs of their community.

The discourse of hip-hop spread throughout the conservative agenda, extending to defense, much like that of the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, creating a sharp chasm between Reagan's idealist foreign policy and the realities of domestic conditions at home. But resistance to the military was only part of a strong source of urban identity that Public Enemy hoped to politicize in its message, which became highly nationalistic under the influence of the Nation of Islam. The attachment of rap to the Nation of Islam helped raise the popularity of its brand of Black Nationalism, which had been in decline since the death of Malcolm X. Its defiant form had been elicited by the continued neglect of the issues of the black community by the largely white power structure. Many hip-hop artists used the art of sampling voice clips, which allowed them to move beyond merely recalling the tradition and message of civil rights leaders like Malcolm X speaking on issues such as the military use of blacks as Public Enemy does. The art of DJ-ing evolved to sample the actual recorded voice of Malcolm X, as in the case of Gang Starr's "Tonz a' Gunz" where DJ Premier includes a recorded sample of the aforementioned "Grassroots" speech. The art form allowed a blending of the past and present to create a continuity of message and experience that included much of the same themes that the civil rights activists of the sixties explored. Both thematically and artistically, hip-hop created an effortless fluidity with the civil rights movement, reinventing much of the message that many felt had yet to be acknowledged by the power structure.

In this way hip-hop drew strength from the nationalistic political platform of the Black Muslims, and drew upon the same concerns as the activists of the sixties. Similarly, as control of community resources, especially that of defense, was a preoccupation of the nationalist movement, so it entered the hip-hop realm. In addition to the contradiction in desiring the involvement of the Black Community in the military articulated by Public Enemy, which has its roots in the Black Muslim movement and was later advanced by the Last Poets, who employed a Black Muslim perspective. Groups other than Public Enemy showed allegiance to the Nation of Islam and its brand of Nationalist teachings. X-Clan, whose lyrics repeatedly claim protection by “the red, the black, and the green, with a key,” recalling the Garvey movement, uses its name to allude to the Black Muslim practice of replacing white surnames with an ‘X,’ also using lyrical style to construct a Nationalist aesthetic. Brand Nubian also employs a Black Muslim aesthetic, claiming in one song that they are going to “drop the bomb on the Yacub Crew,” alluding to the white power structure (Yacub Crew) using NOI terminology.⁴¹ Ice Cube uses the liner notes in his album to more clearly express his support, stating, “The best place for a young black male or female is the Nation of Islam.”⁴² This brand of Black Nationalism echoes throughout the hip-hop community, creating a continuity of struggle against the power structure in America. Much of this resurgent Black Muslim influence and the resurrection of similar themes occurred as direct response to Reagan’s rhetoric surrounding the importance of defense, while curtailing urban programs at the same time. Through these themes, hip-hop advances the concept of a separate nation, complete with separate resources and goals, which often stood at odds to that of the

⁴¹ Brand Nubian, “Drop the Bomb,” *Brand Nubian*

⁴² Ice Cube, liner notes to *Death Certificate*, (1991 Priority Records)

political mainstream. The Nation of Islam's message, transmitted through hip-hop, grew increasingly salient to a new generation of blacks who saw racist undercurrents in much of the policy emanating from Washington.

The themes of nationalism and defense intersected in an important way during the climax of the Gulf War. Black Muslim ideology concerning resources for community defense and the use of blacks in the military reached its full articulation through hip-hop in 1992 amidst the conflict. Many artists opposed the war for the same reasons as Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, claiming that blacks still could not participate in society and thus should not sacrifice their lives defending American interests that did not coincide with theirs. Artists like Tupac Shakur, whose mother Afeni was a Black Panther, and the Geto Boys reverberated this dissonance to the government's policy on defense and foreign policy. In his song, "I Don't Give a Fuck," Shakur shouts in response to urban neglect, "now they tryin' to ship me off to Kuwait, give me a brake, how much shit can a nigga take," later asking for "a 'fuck you' to the B-U-S-H."⁴³ The Geto Boys echo this sentiment, entitling their song "Fuck a War," and defiantly stating, "I ain't goin' to war for no shit-talking president," later incorporating an economic viewpoint, declaring "only the rich benefit."⁴⁴ In this manner, hip-hop wove the themes common to the Black Nationalist movements of the 1960s, uniting the movements to manifest a continuity of grievance about oppression. The resurgence of popularity for the Black Muslim message about resources came as a direct response to the economic policies of the Reagan government. Many artists correctly perceived their urban communities economically neglected in favor of defense spending, and as Chuck D had

⁴³ "I Don't Give a Fuck," from the album *2pacalypse Now*, Tupac Shakur, 1991 Jive Records.

⁴⁴ "Fuck a War," from the album *We Can't Be Stopped*, Geto Boys, 1991 Rap-a-Lot Records.

responded to his military recruitment letter, other hip-hop artists applied a similar critique to the Gulf War conflict. The alternate aesthetic created by Black Nationalism centered on government neglect that rendered black communities subject to economic and social decay, while also allocating domestic resources to defense spending around the globe. Emphasis on defense, as part of the conservative agenda, caused hip-hop artists to renew its defiance to mainstream politics, continuing to assess its identity within the larger American community and solidifying its political dissonance to the America Reagan and Bush sought under the banner of conservatism. Juxtaposing the issues of defense and community resources proved to be part of a multi-faceted discourse that hip-hop artists propelled into the national discourse about the urban poor.

Reverberation

“Blacks are too fuckin’ broke to be Republican”
-Ice Cube, 1991

Hip-hop’s reach quickly extended beyond the Bronx, and greater New York area, due to its infectious popularity. Across the country, the message of hip-hop struck a chord with many of the poor living in other metropolitan areas, especially on the West Coast. The descriptions of life in the ghettos of New York mirrored those offered by artists in Los Angeles, Oakland, Houston, and many other cities. The ambience of drugs, crime and poverty that predominated the hip-hop aesthetic both compelled artists to become rappers and provided subject matter for their artistic expression. Autobiographical and discursive expression from artists around the country manifested nearly identical experience with poverty and sentiments about police authority, urban neglect, and the general conservative agenda. Personal experiences documented through

hip-hop testify to the extremity of urban decay that many felt around the country. Hip-hop music served as one of the few vessels of communication for themes regarding urban poverty, and a closer examination of many artist biographies and expressions demonstrates the widespread effect of the conservative agenda during the Reagan-Bush years.

The artists outside of New York reverberated the same themes as many of their peers, including poverty, violence and urban decay. In addition to depicting the decaying cityscape, personal experience reflected the emerging reality of the post-industrial environment for a whole generation of African Americans. As rap emerged from areas outside of the Bronx, artists created a commonality of experience. Naughty by Nature, of the Newark, N.J. area, produced stories depicting similar pathogens and personal experience in dealing with them. One song in particular, "Ghetto Bastard," expressed the angst of a generation who had experienced more domestic breakdown than ever, and an increase in the feminization of poverty. The dramatic increase in female-headed household augmented the hardships of the record number of children living in poverty. The autobiographical song struck a chord with many experiencing similar conditions when it rhymed, "I was one who never had, and always mad, never knew my dad; mother fuck the fag." Again, poverty becomes the source of both frustration and inspiration as rapper Treach sings a song of sorrow, as he encountered unemployment and homelessness due to domestic breakdown. His experience with poverty provided the inspiration for many songs, with a certain nihilism that even caused him to repudiate liberal guilt, stating, "if you ain't livin' it, you couldn't feel it." He also warned that, "if you ain't from the ghetto, don't ever come to the ghetto, 'cause you wouldn't understand

the ghetto.”⁴⁵ This angst resonated across America, as many believed that the pathogens in urban America had progressed to epidemic levels, and government was both unwilling and unable to create a remedy. The chorus of dissonance emanated from all parts of the country, as well as intensified over the Reagan-Bush years. Journalists came to recognize what most politicians still refused to acknowledge, that rap music gave voice to a whole generation of young blacks. Alan Light, in an article in *Rolling Stone*, observes, “it is no coincidence that as the social policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations took hold, the voices of rap grew increasingly angry.”⁴⁶ As one of those voices summarized, that of Ice Cube, the alienation stirring across the country, meant that, “blacks are too fuckin’ broke to be Republican.”⁴⁷

Other artists such as the Wu-Tang Clan, Nas, EPMD, Run-D.M.C., and Ice-T who emerged out of the Reagan-Bush era echoed tales of poverty, violence, decay and crime while also bolstering hip-hop’s appeal among a widespread audience with songs about ghetto experience. Although not as politicized as the examples cited earlier, songs such as Nas’ “Life’s a Bitch,”⁴⁸ and The Wu-Tang Clan’s “Tearz,”⁴⁹ manifested a certain nihilism and despair as a result of growing up in poverty. Their respective albums quickly became hip-hop canon for their thorough depictions of the impact of the pathogens poverty on urban youth. Hip-hop mainly highlighted the black experience and ironically, poverty as a subject matter propelled many to financial and popular success. As the popularity of rap music increased, its discourse on urban poverty amplified,

⁴⁵ “Ghetto Bastard,” from the album *Naughty by Nature*, Naughty by Nature, 1991 Tommy Boy Music, Inc.

⁴⁶ Light, Alan, “Rappers Sounded Warning,” *Rolling Stone*, 7/9/92-7/23/92.

⁴⁷ “A Bird in the Hand,” from the album *Death Certificate*, Ice Cube, 1991 Priority Records.

⁴⁸ from the album *Illmatic*, 1994 Sony Music.

⁴⁹ from the album *Enter the Wu-Tang*, 1991 RCA.

carrying a message of neglect to the mainstream that largely fell on deaf ears in political circles.

Its recurring themes of homelessness, drugs, crime and domestic breakdown all center on poverty as the common thread through which artists have been able to weave a tapestry of urban decay. Violence often accompanied the nihilistic tone, with extensive descriptions of murder, drive-by shootings and other gang activity. N.W.A. (a self-titled 'gang') included numerous lyrics and sound bytes alluding to shootings, gang warfare and drug use in their major debut "Straight Outta Compton," including the aforementioned fantasies of subversion against police authority. The response from those in positions of power consisted mainly in attacking the excessively violent and immoral content, including descriptions of murders, gang activity, drug use and sexism. These lascivious elements, critics argued, manifested the moral breakdown in America, evidence for conservatives that they ought to bolster their crackdown on crime. Politicians sought to censor artists, citing abusive language and immoral depictions, rather than acknowledge the failure of the Reagan Revolution in instituting meaningful change and living up to his promise to create opportunity.

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⁵⁰ Light, Alan, "Rappers Sounded Warning," *Rolling Stone*, 7/19/92-7/23/92.

summarized the alienation stirring across the country, "blacks are too fuckin' broke to be Republican."⁵¹

During its later development, hip-hop fell into a state of decadence, as many artists altered their subject matter to highlight their material success and opulence. As many rappers finally took their place in Reagan's "Shining City," they didn't look back to their largely humble origins. Expensive brand names soon became signs of material success and rappers constructed a new vernacular of conspicuous consumption. But this does not detract from the initial strides rap music made in manifesting the angst and discontent of a generation of black youth. Among urban centers, hip-hop turned alienation and neglect into empowerment through cultural expression. This postmodern African American art form deconstructed the message trickling down from the government on issues such as economic recovery, opportunity and morality.

Rap succeeded in negating Reagan's assessment of individual initiative and entrepreneurship by exposing the widespread frustration and lack of economic opportunity. In postmodern fashion, rap also upheld Reagan's conservative vision of opportunity at the same time. Hip-hop constructed an alternate reality, where opportunity grew out of the failures of the post-industrial city, and concentrated itself in the realm of the informal economy. From the beginning of social realism in rap, artists hoped to create a discourse, or "Message" from the margins of society that conveyed the intransigence of poverty. Throughout the 1980s rap augmented this message with a wide array of artists harmonizing in dissonance to Reagan's American sound. Rap countered Reagan's idealism with nihilism and fatalism, instead emphasizing reality in sharp contrast to conditions mainstream America acknowledged.

⁵¹ "A Bird in the Hand," from the album *Death Certificate*, Ice Cube, (1991 Priority Records)

Rap also goes beyond mainstream conservative ideology to critique liberal ideology in general. As Tricia Rose articulates, "Rap music, more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, 'legitimate' (e.g., neoliberal) ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality."⁵² This articulation places rap ahead of other historical forms of artistic resistance to subordination. Hip-hop, through songs of protest and dissonance, has created a powerful legacy of resistance to dominant ideology. Hip-hop's vitality couldn't be undermined by cultural repression. It has proven an essential tool in constructing greater discursive and expressive power for marginalized African Americans and the urban poor. Today, hip-hop's soaring popularity has proliferated its message into the national consciousness, and created a voice for those who had been historically in need of one, the urban poor.

⁵² Rose, *Black Noise*, p.102.

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Name of Candidate: Edward Jesse Weeks

Birth Date: July 24, 1980

Birth Place: Salt Lake City, Utah

Address: 1485 Alta Circle
Salt Lake City, Utah, 84103