

Recognizing the Enemy: Rap Music in the Wake of the Los Angeles Riots

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The May 1992 riots in Los Angeles demonstrated more than anything in recent history that the inner cities are filled with despair, hopelessness, and anger. Some feel that rap music is responsible for both gangs and the lawlessness unleashed by the riots. This paper will seek to address this notion by looking at the rap lyrics of artists who have been considered the most radical and the most angry. By examining rap lyrics we can detect anger and frustration in the ghetto. Rap music did not cause rioting in Los Angeles but it effectively heralded measures taken by inner-city residents who are tired of governmental and societal neglect of their community, their homes, and their lives.

The Watts riots of 1965 shocked the nation and the world in their devastation and their intensity. And Watts was only the beginning: major riots broke out in Cleveland, Newark, and Detroit.¹ Today we are reeling from the aftershocks of yet another series of riots in Los Angeles and other major cities across the nation in May of 1992. The riots seem to be unnerving reruns of the early violence in Watts,² motivated by the same disillusionment with oppression and racism.³

Many sought causes for the rioting among the rioters—the poor area residents of South Central Los Angeles,⁴ citing a so-called “poverty of values”⁵ among the rioters. This is a disquieting echo of “riff-raff” theories that emerged after the ’60s rioting. Others have attempted to find different scapegoats, among them, rap music.⁶ In the aftermath of the Watts riots when Whites all across the country were blaming the rioting on the rioters, Black spokesmen responded. They said that “to blame the rioters would be like blaming the powder

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keg that exploded.”⁷ In the same way, this paper is an attempt to respond to those who blame rap music. It argues that blaming rap music is like blaming the messenger who brings the awful truth to light.

This paper is a response to the popular spate of “victim blaming”⁸ now pervading the country, specifically with regard to rap music. The author addresses those who look for the causes of rioting in “savages” and their “jungle music” instead of inner city poverty, institutional discrimination, and governmental neglect. Rap music lyrics are analyzed in an attempt to gain insight into this popular medium and its link to the urban unrest sparked off by the Rodney King incident. This work looks first at the theoretical linkages between the riots of the past and the riots of the present.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS OF RIOTING: PAST AND PRESENT

Many theorists have attempted to understand the reasoning behind urban unrest. Marx⁹ argued that the proletariat would necessarily rebel when they recognized that their life conditions were grossly unequal to those of the capitalist class even as society was growing and flourishing. De Tocqueville¹⁰ suggested that rebellion would emerge after people had lived for a long period of time in a degraded condition only to experience a brief weakening of the yoke of oppression. The rebellion, then, would occur due to the lightening of the burden of oppression and the promise engendered.

In the logic of Marx and De Tocqueville, Davies argued that people will rebel “when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal.”¹¹ These theorists converge on the notion of rebellion as it is related to social and economic unrest.

In the wake of the rioting of 1965, some argued, as noted previously, that ghetto “riff-raff” were responsible for the rioting in Watts. However, a body of research roundly refuted their view and pointed to social and economic unrest—an echo of past theorists—and the failed attempt of Civil Rights legislation to dole out more pieces of the American pie to altogether too many members of our society.¹² Gurr, for instance, asserted that it is only when people are deeply dissatisfied and angry that they will resort to violence. He argued that people will not rebel if they are given “constructive means to attain their social and material goals.”¹³ And, Tomlinson argued that “What produces riots is that most Negro Americans share a belief that their lot in life is unacceptable, and a significant minority feel that riots are a legitimate and productive mode of protest.”¹⁴ Tomlinson’s interviews with Blacks in the aftermath of the Watts riots demonstrated

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that these residents of Watts predicted or believed in the possibility of a second riot if conditions did not change.

In May of 1992 a second riot did occur. The nation was once again faced with violence in the streets of Los Angeles and other major cities—a situation which demonstrates clearly that once again there are people in our society suffering acutely. These Americans are no longer only Black Americans, but Chicanos, Samoans, Whites and other members of the disenfranchised in the Los Angeles inner city area.¹⁵ These ghetto residents have been forgotten and neglected in a profound and fundamental sense. Many suffer institutional and overt discrimination and oppression. It was no surprise to residents of South Central that Los Angeles police did not respond early during the riots.¹⁶ The police only felt it necessary to intervene when districts outside the ghetto were threatened, and made no move when the ghetto itself was going up in flames.

Some speculated that Gates, who is despised by the Black community, was deliberately holding his men back. “They want to us to burn ourselves out,” claimed a caller to KJLH, a black radio station that opened its airwaves to listeners after the city erupted.¹⁷

It is this author’s belief that the residents of Los Angeles’ inner city are feeling more than economic depression. They are also experiencing despair. The gangs are only a symptom, as is the drug abuse. As one nineteen-year-old gang member said to Leon Bing, Los Angeles is a “black-hole—the people here just get swallowed up by it.”¹⁸ Rap music and lyrics may provide a way of explaining the reasons for the rioting.

METHODS: RAP MUSIC AND RIOTING

“Popular culture is a viable and, if you will, a living and breathing phenomenon. It mirrors life in its extremity, its mediocrity, its absurdity, its distortion and in its profundity.”¹⁹ Music is an aspect of popular culture which can teach us much about what is happening in our communities and in our world on both a simplistic and a complex level.²⁰ “Moreover, music provides a window to the more private areas of experience, including the covert domains of cultural ethos, motivation, and meaning”.²¹ Music is rich in emotion expressing ideas and thoughts not normally expressed in spoken language.²²

Rap music is no exception. Having been on the American popular culture scene for only a decade²³—some argue that its roots are much

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older²⁴—it has already sparked much excitement, controversy, and speculation. It is music with energy and strength, and it is music with a lyrical message. This message can be flirtatious, blatantly sexual, comical, or absurd. It can also be serious, powerful and profoundly disturbing. “It is adored by millions in the streets and reviled by hundreds in the suites.”²⁵

The following analysis uses lyrics by: Public Enemy, NWA-Niggas With Attitude, Ice T, and Ice Cube. These rappers have been described as the most radical and outspoken “gangsta” rappers, who some have claimed predicted the rioting in Los Angeles.²⁶ This analysis focuses on the lyrics themselves as they reflect the emotions and experiences of the artists. It is, perhaps, this kind of examination which can render a real life picture of living conditions in the inner city, as this music reflects the experiences of those who live in the ghetto and the meanings attached to ghetto experiences. It is important to add that, as a sociologist, the author focuses this analysis on the lyrics, the texts, and not the musical component, that is, the complex of musical elements. These obviously require examination by those who are experts in the field of musicology.

By examining rap lyrics, the author hopes to demonstrate that rap music was not an instigator of the Los Angeles riots but was instead a herald of what was to come. Many themes emerge when rap music lyrics are examined. In the following section, these themes will be discussed and examples of each theme will be provided.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some of the themes which became apparent during the author's examination of rap lyrics were: distrust of and anger with the police in this country; distrust of a racist system and its genocidal plans for the Black race; disillusionment with the health care system for poor people; a desire to fight back at a system which has turned its back on poor people in the ghetto; and a need, almost a plea, to be heard and understood.

The Police. The attitude and credibility of the police are called into question in the rap lyrics. The songs speak of corrupt policemen who are more racist than interested in upholding the law. The police are people you learn to distrust in “Get the F__ Outta Dodge” by Public Enemy:

Sgt. Hawkes and I'm down wit' the cop scene
I'm a rookie and I'm rollin' wit' a swat team. . . .
Up against the wall don't gimme no lip son
A bank is robbed and you fit the description. . . .

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Keep your music down or you might get shot
This is a warning so watch your tail
Or I'm a have to put your ass in jail
I'm the Police and I'm in charge
You don't like it get the f _ _ _ outta Dodge²⁷

This song clearly implies that the only reason the young man was stopped was because he was Black.

In "F_ _ _ tha Police" by NWA (Niggas With Attitude), the lyrics are cold and cynical about the police as a whole. The lyrics reflect a glaring distrust of this authority and also reflect a belief that police are much more racist than the general public would like to believe.

F_ _ _ tha police, comin' straight from the under-
ground
A young nigga got it bad because I'm brown
And not the other color. Some police think
They have the authority to kill a minority²⁸

Corrupt System Planning Genocide. Many of the song lyrics reflected a belief that the establishment—the system—those in power were less than trustworthy. There are also lyrics which suggest that the establishment is planning the genocide of the Black race. In "1 Million Bottlebags"—note the obvious allusion to "body bags"—by Public Enemy, the lyrics clearly question the reasons for the many liquor stores in black neighborhoods. The authors believe that the "plan" is to rid the nation of the Black people.

But they don't sell the shit in the white neighbor-
hood
Exposin' the plan they get mad at me I understood. .
. .
Say I'm yellin' in fact
Genocide kickin' in yo back
How many times have you seen
A black fight a black
After drinkin' down a bottle²⁹

In "I Wanna Kill Sam" by Ice Cube, the lyrics reflect anger at racist Whites who brutally enslaved Blacks, bringing them to this country and forcing families to separate. The lyrics suggest that this brand of racism is alive and well, pushing the AIDS virus and crack as a double-edged attack on the Black race.

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And now the sneaky mother f_____ wanna ban rap
And put me under dirt or concrete
But God can see through a white sheet. . . .
Try to gimme the H.I.V.
So I can stop makin' babies like me
And you givin' dope to my people chump³⁰

Disillusionment with the Health Care System. The rap lyrics reflect a strong disillusionment with and dislike of the health care/emergency system. They demonstrate a strongly cynical approach to hospitals and a disturbing knowledge that the dispensation of health care in this country is not at all equal. In "911 is a Joke", Public Enemy cynically describe the health care/emergency system as one which does not cater to the needs of poor people.

Now I dialed 911 a long time ago. . . .
The doctors huddle up and call a flea flicker
The reason that I say that 'cause they
Flick you off like fleas
They be laughin' at ya while you're crawlin' on your
knees
And the strength so go the length
Thinkin' you are first when you really are tenth
You better wake up and smell the real flavor
'Cause 911 is a fake life saver³¹

Ice Cube echoes this sentiment in "Alive on Arrival" as he describes the hospital emergency room that caters to the poor.

On the way to MLK
That's the county hospital jack
Where niggas die over a little scratch. . . .
Nobody gettin' help since we poh
The hospital it moves slow. . . .
People steppin' over me just to get to the TV
Just like a piece of dog shit. . . .
They call my name and put me in I.C.U. . . .
No respect and handcuffed to the bed. . . .
Just to get looked at by a overworked physician³²

Action in the Face of Oppression. Many song lyrics reflect the need of the people to do something about the conditions spawned by over two hundred years of oppression and the racism ingrained in American society. Some call for organized action and this can mean

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violence.

In “I Wanna Kill Sam” by Ice Cube, the lyrics call for violent action against the system of injustice. The lyrics suggest that once the Black people recover from the drug taking in the ghetto, they will turn against their oppressor.

And you givin’ dope to my people chump
Just wait till we get over the hump
‘Cause yo ass is grass ‘cause I’m a blast
Can’t bury rap like you buried jazz
‘Cause we stopped being whores stopped doin’ floors
So bitch, you can fight your own wars
So if you see a man in red, white and blue
Gettin’ chased by the lench mob crew
It’s a man who deserves to buckle
I wanna kill SAM ‘cause he ain’t my mother f_____’
uncle³³

In “The Nigga Ya Love to Hate” by Ice Cube, the lyrics are brutally harsh. The song suggests that Blacks need to get angry and become hardcore in the world they inhabit. There is an eye-opening phrase in almost every line of this song, which Ice Cube believes will teach the world something about what it is like to live in the ghetto.

It ain’t wise to chastise and preach
Just open the eyes of each
‘Cause laws are meant to be broken up
What niggas need to do is start loc’ in’ up
And build, mold, fold themselves in the shape
of the nigga ya love to hate!
F- - - you, Ice Cube!
Yeaah! Ha-ha! It’s the nigga ya love to hate!
F- - - you, Ice Cube!
Yeaah! Ha-ha! It’s the nigga ya love to hate!³⁴

A Plea for Recognition. There is a definite plea for recognition—for someone to listen to the songs they are singing in rap music. This plea is like a lost cry of pain. In “Freedom of Speech” by Ice-T, the lyrics are an action in themselves—an impassioned plea for free speech. They suggest that a “rose-colored” picture is being displayed for the public to peruse; while the realities of the ghetto—the tales of the rap artists—are being ignored and growing increasingly worse:

“You have the right to remain silent. . . .”

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F_ _ _ that right
I want the right to talk
I want the right to speak. . . .
You can't hide the fact, Jack
There's violence in the streets every day. . . .
But you try to lie and lie
And say America's some mother f_ _ _ _ ' apple pie.
. . . .
PMRC, this is where the witchhunt starts. . . .
If you don't like what I'm sayin', fine
But don't close it—always keep an open mind
We only got one right left in the world today
Let me have it—or throw the Constitution away³⁵

From the above discussion it would seem glaringly apparent that rap music is a reflection of the lives of people who face the day to day struggle of life in the inner city. These are people who are leery of and angry about racist police; they fail to trust the government and fear a planned genocide; they are weary of an unresponsive health care system; they are living on the edge and with an anger so deep-seated that only a small match would be needed to ignite it. Yet, they are pleading to be heard.

These lyrics are uncannily related. They reflect the experience of general social unrest and economic hardship mentioned by earlier theory, and echo the findings of Tomlinson, who wrote in 1970 that ghetto residents had a major fear and distrust of the police, were disillusioned with the government, believed that discrimination still existed in major societal institutions, believed that rioting was a form of protest against injustice, and deeply desired social and economic change.³⁶

Rap music songs are voices against injustices, hoping that someone will pay them some attention. It is interesting to note that the FBI has sought to still the voice of NWA for the song "F_ _ _ the Police", arguing that this encourages violence against the police, when "millions of black kids all across the country applaud it as a kind of audio documentary of everyday police brutality in their communities."³⁷

CONCLUSIONS

You are now about to witness
The strength of street knowledge³⁸

This analysis was undertaken with the knowledge that many people would argue that rap music causes the kind of rioting that

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took place in Los Angeles. The dominant society would be much safer if it were true, because this would mean that nothing need change—institutional discrimination and structural disparity might go on unchecked with no break in the rhythm. After all, the rioters would be said to have some moral problems and these could be dealt with by dispensing a government bureaucrat who would promptly apply a bandaid solution.

However, this seems to be a questionable answer to a more deeply rooted problem. For the residents of the inner cities this is just the kind of attitude that leads to the rioting in the first place. Blaming rap music would only be tenable if the rioters had no other reason to create one of the largest civil disturbances since the founding of this country. This seems a spurious argument. The rap lyrics above should demonstrate to the reader that this music was not nor could it ever be created in a vacuum. The lyrics are there to see and to hear if the reader has the inclination.

These lyrics are an appalling reflection of what our society has created—slum areas so longstanding that decades have passed with little apparent change. The “bad” morals of the poor inner-city residents of South Central did not create these slums anymore than their “bad” morals created the Los Angeles riots. If “bad” morals are apparent, if young people are looking at the police more as an enemy than as the faithful neighborhood friend, then perhaps we should be looking at where this view originated.

This author would argue that rap music may serve profound functions within the Black community. It has certainly been a means of obtaining upward mobility for some Blacks in the ghetto where few opportunities exist.³⁹

At the same time, rap is a method of venting anger and rage at an unjust system. Certainly the rap music lyrics which were explored in this analysis reveal that rap emerges as a very angry popular cultural medium. And it is important to understand why rap has emerged so angry and so critical. As Michel Foucault argues, subjectivity is maintained in a discourse of domination—both in language and social structure.⁴⁰ And the core of rap music exists as a cultural form because of oppression.

However, this venting of anger at oppression that is so typical of rap can mobilize group action to promote social change. As professor and legal scholar Regina Austin asserts, rap can be “the paradigm for the praxis of a politics of identification”.⁴¹ A politics of identification, according to Austin, accepts the Black community in all its aspects—male and female, rich and poor, respectable and “deviant”—and must advocate on behalf of the Black community along a matrix of race, class and gender oppression. And Austin identifies rap as emblematic of what a politics of identification might accomplish.

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It has skirted the boundary between “the legal and illegal, the formal and informal, the socially acceptable and the socially despised”,⁴² and yet it has grown and thrived. It has flirted with the realities in the ghetto, voicing the silenced voices of the underclass to a strident rhythm. It has fostered a focus on real life issues and real life rhythm.

And unless we as a society also seek to work with the root of the problems that are reflected in rap music, the kind of violence we see today in the inner cities and the kind of violence unleashed on Los Angeles just this year may become part of our experience on a more regular basis. The roots of the problems in our inner cities are not found in the “bad” morals of individuals but in deep structural inequalities. The Los Angeles County Sheriff, Sherman Block, in an interview with Leon Bing stated

My feeling is that where we have failed—the collective ‘we,’ society, government in particular—is that we have not provided enough meaningful options and opportunities for young people in too many of these communities. . .⁴³

This is a telling and an interesting comment in the wake of the Los Angeles riots. Before the general public begins to blame rap music, it should know that the culture that surrounds them—and yes, the music—is only a reflection of what we the public have become. It is hoped that this is a sobering thought.

NOTES

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³“The Pathology of Deprivation: The Oppression and Racism that Sparked the Riots of 1968 are Alive and Perhaps Stronger than Ever,” *The Washington Post*, 3 May 1992.

⁴“Bush Denounces Rioting in L.A. as ‘Purely Criminal,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 May 1992. “More Moral Patronizing,” *The Washington Post*,

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⁶Interview with reporter Chad Booth for KSTU, Fox 13, A Fox Television Station and a Fox Broadcasting Company Affiliate. Salt Lake City. August 1992.

⁷John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (New York: Penguin, 1960), 176.

⁸See generally William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Random House, 1976).

⁹Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Wage Labour and Capital," in *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, Vol. 1, 1955).

¹⁰Alexis De Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. S. Gilbert (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

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¹³Gurr, 317.

¹⁴Tomlinson, 118.

¹⁵"Riots Put Focus on Economic Ills," *The New York Times*, 8 May 1992. "Disorder Puts Search for Answers to Urban Woes at Top of Agenda," *The Washington Post*, 8 May 1992.

¹⁶"Police are Slow to React As the Violence Spreads," *The New York Times*, 1 May 1992. "L.A. Lawless," *Time*, 11 May 1992.

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¹⁷"L.A. Lawless," 28.

¹⁸Leon Bing, *Do or Die* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), xvi.

¹⁹Thomas J. Burns and Theresa A. Martinez, "Pedagogy and Popular Culture," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 19 (1993): 111-123.

²⁰See generally Burns and Martinez.

²¹Jose Macias, "Informal Education, Sociocultural Expression, and Symbolic Meaning in Popular Immigration Music Text," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 14 (1991): 17.

²²Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 208.

²³See generally Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (New York: Ecco Press, 1990). See generally Janette Beckman and B. Adler, *Rap: Portraits and Lyrics of a Generation of Black Rockers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

²⁴Interview with Barry Howard, KUTE disc jockey, Radio Station of the University of Utah. Salt Lake City, Utah, May 1991.

²⁵Beckman and Adler, xv.

²⁶"For 'Gangsta' Style Rappers, Urban Explosion is No Surprise," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 May 1992.

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²⁸Dr. Dre, M.C. Ren and Ice Cube. "Fuck tha Police," in *Straight Outta Compton*, (Hollywood, California: Ruthless Attack Muzick/Priority Records, 1988).

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³²Ice Cube, "Alive on Arrival," in *Death Certificate*, (Hollywood, California: Priority Records, 1991).

³³Ice Cube, "I Wanna Kill Sam."

³⁴Ice Cube, "The Nigga Ya Love to Hate," in *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, (Hollywood, California: Priority Records, 1990).

³⁵Ice-T and Charles Andre Glenn, "Freedom of Speech," in *The Iceberg: Freedom of Speech, Just Watch What You Say*, (New York: Sire Records, 1991).

³⁶Theresa A. Martinez, "The Watts Riots of 1965 and the Los Angeles Riots of 1992: Examining Common Ground with Past Research," Unpublished manuscript.

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³⁹Regina Austin, "'The Black Community,' Its Lawbreakers, and a Politics of Identification," *Southern California Law Review*, 65(1992): 1812-14. See generally Costello and Wallace.

⁴⁰See generally Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

⁴¹Austin, 1813. See also Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 113. Collins discusses in her notes the writings of black theologian James Cone who asserts the unity and centrality of black music to understanding the experience of the black community.

⁴²Austin, 1817.

⁴³Bing, 271.