

Introduction

We gathered together, a group of black students from Harvard law school, the day after our final examination period was completed. The examination for Property law had been a rigorous one, an eight-hour take-home. A young man announced, “I wouldn’t have been able to get through it without that Biggie.” In that particular group of hip hop heads, the logic of the statement was clear: The generated energy, the adrenaline rush, and the rhythm of the Biggie Smalls music he listened to while writing his exam all motivated him as he expressed his knowledge and skills of argumentation in text. Many of Biggie’s music videos celebrated the trappings of wealth, while scantily clad women surrounded men as testimonies to the latter’s affluence and charisma. There were lyrics of hustling and lyrics of sexual exploitation. But there were also lyric narratives of endurance, ones describing the alienation of the impoverished and the depression of marginalization. Regardless of the content, the poetry was lyrical and elegant and the beats were hot. To listen to hip hop is to enter a world of complexity and contradiction. In the midst of a consumer culture that glorifies violence and eschews intellectualism, hip hop has both spewed American vices on the airwaves and aggressively introduced progressive politics, compel-

ling artistic expression, emotion, and beauty into popular culture. It makes us uncomfortable, frustrated, and perhaps even confused that all of these contradictions should exist together in one musical form, sometimes in one artist. Yet hip hop has become a form reflecting both the beauty and the belly of the beast in American society, refracted through the lens of black American culture. As John Szwed has written of rap: “All those elements of black folk culture that had been denied by the elegance and pretense of the ballroom or the club came back with a vengeance on the avenues and in the parks. Performers were free again to talk that talk, to insert curses, blessings, and jokes into their raps, and to return to the funky, individually grained voices that disco had made to seem gauche.”¹

Hip hop is an iteration of black language, black music, black style, and black youth culture. Hip hop music, or rap, the subject of this book, is an art often culturally rich and economically impoverished, and, sometimes recently, artistically impoverished but backed by huge corporate dollars. At its best, it is compelling art and culture. It is at once the most lucrative and culturally oppositional musical force in the United States, and it demands a literary and musical criticism, a criticism in the tradition of Henry Louis Gates’s *Signifying Monkey*, which uses the vernacular as a theoretical foundation of its analysis.² The present book ventures to be such a critical enterprise, an analysis of the art, politics, and culture of hip hop lyrics and music as revealed by the words and gestures of what I call the “prophets of the hood.”

If the book title were lyrics, the double entendre would be obvious: prophet/profit. Textuality and orality bear a strained relationship. However, *Prophets of the Hood* aspires to use text to illuminate and examine an oral and auditory art form. Although written language can never fully explain other media, my efforts at theorization and elucidation will hopefully not be in vain. The homophones at play in the title constitute, for my purposes, a perfect idiosyncrasy of the English language and American culture. Hip hop artists are often self-proclaimed contemporary prophets, their work constructed of truth-revealing parables and pictures. That truth may be spiritual, cultural, personal, beautiful, and it may resonate with inspiration or tragedy. And even as the soul of the music resonates with marginalized people of various nationalities and ethnicities, in its American form, it is overwhelmingly and fundamentally black American—and expressive of that experience.³ Moreover the

black Americanism of the music forms part of its international appeal, given the resonant power of black music and culture globally. Recall the biblical quotation, “A prophet is without honor in his own country.”

Hip hop has, at various times, served as fodder for conservative and racially biased agendas, but it nonetheless continues to maintain a core of artistic integrity and has grown enormously as an art form over the years it has been under attack. Simultaneously, it is fraught with dilemmas and inundated with the crises of urbanity, consumerism, and late capitalism. Disney, McDonald’s, and numerous other global corporate entities have adopted the forms of rap as a marketing tool. Hip hop music sells clothes, fast food, soda, shoes, and films. The commodification and commercialization of hip hop has forever altered the art form, at times challenging its integrity. Nevertheless, it is far from a demented music produced by damaged people, nor is it, despite the frequent testimonies of political pundits, violence without art. This book will not read as an apologia for, or a crisis text about, the destructive forces in hip hop. Instead I attempt to justly treat the difficult political and cultural issues presented in hip hop, and to examine its artistic value as a style of music.

This work stands amid and relies on the body of scholarship already extant on hip hop: the distinguished and landmark examinations in book and article form by authors such as Michael Eric Dyson, Houston Baker, Tricia Rose, Robin Kelley, Mark Anthony Neal, and many others. Throughout *Prophets of the Hood*, readers will see references to their work and arguments, although my discussions of their work are not nearly exhaustive, and I encourage those interested in hip hop to read the growing body of academic literature treating the music. What is distinct about the present book is that it departs from the primacy of historical and sociological interpretations of hip hop and concentrates instead on the aesthetic, artistic, theoretical, and ideological aspects of the music, working from the premise that it has been undervalued as an art per se, even as its cultural influence has often been noted. While mine is certainly not the only work that concentrates on this theme, it is unique in its analytical framework of beginning with artistic and aesthetic analyses that then move into cultural inquiry. I am interested in exploring the artistic requirements for hip hop as an art, in understanding what philosophies and assumptions one finds in the spaces between the poetry of the lyrics and the music of the beats, and in examining what

philosophies interplay between the artists and an audience that receives the music as one deriving from its own community and experience, and what role record companies play in mediating this relationship. In this book I use lyrics which I have transcribed from recordings for purposes of explication and example. The process of transcription is humbling yet critical to providing nuanced interpretations of the music.

Reunion

And behold, the veil of the temple was rent
in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth
did quake, and the rocks rent.

—Matt. 27:51

Gospel in church and blues in juke joints. Rosa Parks and the unwed teenage mother, Claudette Colvin, who refused to move from her seat on the bus two weeks before her. Public oratory and the dirty dozens. Motown and the rougher, funkier Stax. The division between the respectable and funky stuff has existed throughout African American history. Most Americans rooted in African American cultural experience have sophisticated relationships with both the sacred and the profane, in black culture—or with their secular corollaries, the respectable and the rough. The division of the sacred and profane constituted an important civil rights strategy for a number of generations. “Clean” Negroes, in the black dialectic sense of being well-heeled and dressed sharply and neatly, but also in the sense of respectability served as civil rights models. Being impeccable, moral, and well-spoken stood as evidence of the unjustifiability of white American racism and brutality.

Recall many of the images of the civil rights movement: student activists at lunch counters, clean-cut, with clothes starched and hair trimmed. As models of respectability, they, in their impeccable presence, highlighted the brutality of the segregated South. Joseph Lowery, former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), stated in 1996 that in the civil rights era, black people had served as the moral conscience of the nation, and he lamented the fact that in the age of hip hop that was no longer the case.⁴ By “moral conscience” he meant that African Americans threw into sharp relief how the promises of the nation had been denied, and I would argue that we did so in part by

demonstrating models of respectability. For example, two weeks before Rosa Parks famously resisted the law of segregated public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama, Claudette Colvin had done the same. Colvin was certainly not the first to do so, but the activist community had been seeking an event that could serve as a rallying cry for a bus boycott, and it considered Colvin's gesture. Colvin was passed over, however, because she did not, as an unwed teenage mother, provide the respectable image that the civil rights establishment desired to make its point, and so Parks was ultimately selected as the symbol of the boycott.

But let's recall the music of that era as well: Harmonic ballads sung by suited men and cocktail dress-wearing women—neat, clean, and terribly respectable. But there was other music as well. Beside the nice image of Motown stood the funky rough sounding tunes of Stax. The divide between respectable music and funkier stuff was a long-standing one in black music, going back to the early divisions between spirituals and jook music, gospel and the blues. The division between the sacred and the secular transitioned into one between that presented as the face of respectability, often marketed to the mainstream, and that which was music for dark, smoky nightclubs. Again, this division in part served as a civil rights strategy; it was necessary to have a clearly demarcated space of respectability that could provide an unmarred example of the denial perfect citizens experienced in a racist society.⁵

The neat fades of the 1950s gave way to bushy afros, big jewelry, fatigues, and raised fists in the late 1960s, heralding the denial of the cults of sanctity and respectability as a political strategy for the post-civil rights generations. In what Mark Anthony Neal terms “the post soul” generation, the community of participants in hip hop culture, “the hip hop nation” has embraced a holism in music and culture in contrast to the earlier divisions. More than postmodern blending, it signals a novel culturo-political era in which the traditional dividing line between various forms of expression no longer appeals to the sensibilities and aspirations of vast numbers of young and black people.

Discourse

The signature element of the reunion in hip hop is the discursive space provided within the artistic and cultural community. Ideologically, hip hop allows for open discourse. Anything might be said, or, for that mat-

ter, contradicted. The juke joint has gone public. In the world of hip hop, holy and well-behaved gestures sit next to the rough and funky. Violence, sexuality, spirituality, viciousness, love, and countless other emotions and ideas all form part of the discursive space. Part and parcel of the refusal to serve as the moral conscience of the nation any longer has been the development of a music that allows for a wide range of expressions and positions, even within the music of one artist. For example, the slain hip hop artist Tupac Shakur, born of a mother who was a member of the Black Liberation Army, recited lyrics that alternately cherished and degraded women. This dynamic only has a logic in the context of a space where the high and low sit next to each other holistically, a space in which one can act a number of roles and play out intense moral and psychic dilemmas on wax. Battles, conversations, and competition all exist within hip hop. It hosts a marketplace of ideas, and it sometimes brings them together in a heteroglossic *mélange*. When emcees (mcs) critique each other, these critiques are more readily and better found in song than in interview form.

In contrast, generally speaking, the mainstream press categorizes and creates dichotomies of good and bad. It does not foster debate when it comes to hip hop, but rather encourages the censorship of ideological diversity through condemnation or praise. Mainstream media efforts at morality often appear more disingenuous and controlling than conscientious. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno defined art as a critique of praxis.⁶ Hip hop critiques the division of that characterized as clean and that characterized as dirty or evil as both social and artistic praxis. Hip hop calls for a radical honesty concerning the complexity of black communities and art, even in the public eye. While news media attempt to reinstitute the divide, trying to sift through the sea of mcs and searching for “good Negroes,” they face a difficult and inorganic task. None of hip hop exists in a vacuum; each artist provides but one orientation within a diverse community, to be understood within the context of that community.

The reunion marks a democratic space in which expression is more important than the monitoring of the acceptable, a space, rather, that suppresses the silencing impulse extant in various segments of American popular culture, both within and outside black communities, be it the silencing of certain politics, ideologies, sexual preferences, or some other matters of personal choice possibly verging on the taboo. Hip hop

may be democratic, but it is not, as a musical community, inherently liberatory. There are particular artists with liberatory agendas, who by their words protest racism, sexism, classism and thereby enlighten. But hip hop is not “liberation music.” The ideological democracy inherent in hip hop prevents the kind of coherent political framework necessary for it to be characterized as such. That is not to say that the music lacks conscience or is amoral. Rather, there is abundant space for moral expression as well as critique. When Posdonus of De La Soul said, “Fuck bein’ hard Posdonus is complicated!”⁷ he critiqued the popularity of thug narratives about how tough you could be, and how many guns you toted, and instead offered the idea that it was more important to be intellectually complex. In forming this critique within the context of the musical community, rather than in a mainstream media outlet, the author avoids the perception that he is begging to be differentiated from the “bad ones” under a mainstream moralistic gaze. He avoids the mediation between different sorts of mcs by the gaze of white America, instead offering the choice up to hip hop heads, whether the better argument exists for being hard or being complex.

I recall an interview with Snoop Doggy Dogg after he had signed with Death Row Records, in which he endearingly questioned why so many prominent black leaders critiquing his work went to the networks in order to castigate him, rather than speaking to him personally. In the interview he spoke highly of congresswoman Maxine Waters because she had done just that. He explained how she came to him personally to offer loving critique. Hip hop cherishes engaged discourse within the community and balks at being offered up for scapegoating, particularly by other black people, regardless of the good intentions behind that gesture.

And yet the combination of democracy (“speak your piece”) and meritocracy (“be the best mc”) that exists in hip hop is threatened at every turn. The manipulations of capital, media, and record company distribution, the ruthless promotion of some acts to the disadvantage of often musically superior ones, the commodification of black female bodies, and the grotesque marketing of racist images of black male violence threaten to completely overwhelm the public face of hip hop. Warning labels and lawsuits have forever altered the face of hip hop in the United States. In the late 1990s, it became possible for a hip hop artist to become rich and acclaimed with very little skill or participation

in the community discourse of hip hop, feeding from it, contributing to it, or being sustained by it. Maintaining the discourse-reunion community in the face of the categorization and manipulation that forms part of the recording industry and American consumer culture in general stands as one of hip hop's central challenges. The discourse continues, however, particularly among underground independent artists, but also on the part of many successful artists who maintain a dedication to urban, poor, and working class communities of color, the core hip hop community.

Moreover, hip hop still constitutes a form that can be referred to as a form, a specific kind of music defined by rhyming lyrics and a multi-textual collage-style composition. Despite its uniqueness, hip hop does exist on a continuum of black music forms and is indebted to several of them, most especially blues and jazz. However, hip hop has several features that appear to be particular, if not exclusive, to it in terms of content. Discussion of these features will appear throughout the *Prophets of the Hood*, but I would just to highlight a few here. First, there exist far fewer depictions of idealized romantic love, or even painful and deep romantic love, than in any other black music form. Conversely, there are far more explicit expressions of rage and more intimate expressions of psychological pain. Finally, detailed explications of the criminal underworld, and of interpersonal conflicts and dysfunction, are unique in their predominance in the musical form. The present book seeks to both analyze the music on an anesthetic level and as a site of cultural production with cultural consequences. The distinctive features of hip hop are products of both. Often these features distinguishing hip hop and its reunion ethos make it an uncomfortable music to listen to, yet it also allows for brilliant insights into human relationships and into existence in a society mired in difficult race and gender politics and often economically exploitative and exclusive.